Nineteenth-Century British Culture: Image of Feeling

This seminar will explore nineteenth-century British culture as an extended response to the following question: how does this historical period -- one that includes cultural forms we call Romantic as well as those we classify as Victorian -- become the epoch of feeling? To respond to this question we will pose another one: why and how is “feeling” (or emotion or sensibility or affect) principally represented as -- or in --“images”? From the agitations of William Blake through the provocations of Oscar Wilde, we will explore the period’s cultural representations of feeling through the medium of the image. If nineteenth-century British culture epitomizes the very “image of feeling,” is this the result of a fundamentally affective dimension of the literary and visual image? To address these questions, we will read poets (Blake, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Byron, Keats, Percy Shelley, Hopkins, Dante and Christina Rossetti), novelists (Mary Shelley, and Emily Bronte), essayists (Wordsworth, Pater, Wilde), and a playwright (Wilde). And we will look at paintings and photographs of the period, especially pictures by Blake and the Pre-Raphaelites. To frame these questions and to measure their “afterlives,” we will read some influential treatments of “feeling” and the “image” in contemporary literary and film theory (Benjamin, Barthes, Bataille, Berlant, Brinkema, Copjec, Zizek, Mulvey, Ranciere, and others).

Schedule of Readings


Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” “Notes on Sirk.” Keach, “Byron Reads Keats.”


23 Nov) **Thanksgiving Holiday**

Assignments Students taking the course for credit will write two brief (2-3 single-space) close readings. The first of these will focus exclusively on a brief passage from the assigned readings. For the second close reading assignment, I want you to pair another brief literary passage along side a brief passage from a critical or theoretical text: the point is not an application or a rebuttal but an opportunity to generate a focused critical dialogue. These brief papers are due on the Tuesday prior to the seminar. I’d like for you to post them as discussions on the canvas site for others to read. I’ll respond to them individually and make every effort to incorporate them into our seminar discussion Thursday: this won’t be a formal report, but you should be prepared to say something about your choice of passage and the direction your reading took. (15% each)

Students taking the course for a grade will also write a 10-13 page seminar paper on a topic of your choice (with my consultation). A thesis, brief outline, and textual example (1-2 pages) are due November 21st. Final versions of the seminar paper are due Friday, December 9th.