English 251B: “Criticism”
Winter 2007
RCH 110, Tues/Thurs 1-2:20 pm

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Office: HH Rm 268; x 36027
Office Hours: Tues/Thurs 10-11 am, or by appointment

Outline and goals of the course:

This course introduces students to the history of literary criticism and to key theories and approaches in literary and cultural studies today. It will offer students a context for understanding how ideas about language, readers, texts, culture, and literature change over time and according to angles of vision and social/political beliefs. We will discuss the centrality of theory in the contemporary discipline of English, the relationships between theoretical and creative uses of language, and the everyday ways that we all use theory to interpret literary and cultural “texts” (not just those things we call “art” but all forms of communication and representation). Discussion and readings will correspond to a range of theoretical schools and movements including formalism, structuralism and poststructuralism, psychoanalytic criticism, Marxist literary theory and Cultural Studies, postcolonial studies, and feminist and queer theories. We will also be reading a literary text (Australian writer Brian Castro’s novel Birds of Passage) so that we have common ground for discussing the application of these literary theories.

Class format will combine lectures and class discussion. Many of the readings will be challenging, and I recommend that you read each one at least once before class. This will enable you to follow lectures more closely, formulate questions to ask during class, and contribute to class discussion.

Required Texts:

English 251B Course Readings (available in the Campus Bookstore)
Brian Castro, Birds of Passage (Allen & Unwin, 1983/1999; available in separate courseware package sold in bookstore) (on reserve at Dana Porter library PR 9619.3.C3878 B5)

Optional:

M.H. Abrams, A Glossary of Literary Terms (7th ed.)

Assignments: 2 Critical Responses 10%
In-class test 20%
Essay 35%
Final Exam 35%

Critical Responses: 2 short assignments (between 1 ½ and 2 pages max.) due on scheduled days during the semester (see schedule of readings). In your critical response you will briefly summarize the main points of the reading, comment critically on its potential strengths and weaknesses as well as the issues it raises, and state what your personal conclusions or questions are about the reading. When summarizing, try to avoid lengthy quotations from the reading; it is better to use your own words to show you understand the argument, and use brief quotations to anchor/illustrate your own statements. They should
be written in complete sentences, typed, and doublespaced, in 11 or 12 point font size.
There are two examples of students' critical responses attached at the end of this syllabus.

Your grade for each critical response is based on their completion and your effort: 0 for no
response handed in; 1-2 for minimal effort or a response that is poorly presented
(grammer, spelling, sentence or paragraph structure) or not adequately engaged; a range
of 3-5 for a response that shows effort and an attempt to understand the article. Critical
responses are due at the beginning of the class and will not be accepted late; no
extensions are permitted except with medical note and at my discretion.

In-class test (February 13): A 60 minute in-class exam consisting of short-answer
questions on lecture and reading material covered in the classes preceding the exam.

Essay (1500-2000 words, due March 22 [see below]): Your essay will either use one or
two theoretical strategies to discuss a text of your choice or critically explore a concept by
one or more theorists. Some topic suggestions will follow. Essays will be typed and
double-spaced, using 10-12 point font and one-inch margins, will have a title and "Works
Cited" page, and will follow correct MLA style of documentation as explained in The Little,
Brown Compact Handbook (Aaron and McArthur).

There are two deadline dates for this essay: the "true" date is March 22, and these essays
will receive comments. Essays handed in after class on March 22 and up to March 27 will
receive a 5% penalty and may not receive comments. In either case, essays are due at the
beginning of class, and papers submitted on the deadline date but after class has started
are considered late. After March 27 (in class) an additional late penalty of 3% per day
(including weekends) will be applied unless a student provides, as soon as possible,
detailed and satisfactory supporting documentation (e.g. medical note). Essays not
handed personally to me must be date-stamped at the English department office during
business hours or deposited in the English Department assignment drop box (across from
the main office in Hagey Hall). I do not take responsibility for any essays not handed
directly to me that go astray. No essays will be accepted after the date of the final exam.

Final Exam (TBA): The final exam will be written in the examination period and will consist
of short-answer and essay questions that cover the readings, lecture material, class
discussions, and handouts from the course (3 hours). The final exam is part of this course
and you are expected to book your holiday or travel plans with the date of the exam in
mind. Please consult the Undergraduate Calendar for information on rescheduling exams
for medical reasons.

Note from the Faculty of Arts on avoidance of academic offences: All students registered
in the courses of the Faculty of Arts are expected to know what constitutes an academic
offence, to avoid committing academic offences, and to take responsibility for their
academic actions. When the commission of an offence is established, disciplinary
penalties will be imposed in accord with Policy #71 (Student Academic Discipline). For
information on categories of offences and types of penalties, students are directed to
consult the summary of Policy #71 which is supplied in the Undergraduate Calendar
(section 1; on the Web at http://wwwadm.uwaterloo.ca/infoucal/UW/policy_71.html). If you
need help in learning how to avoid offences such as plagiarism, cheating, and double
submission, or if you need clarification of aspects of the discipline policy, ask your course
instructor for guidance. Other resources regarding the discipline policy are your academic
advisor and the Undergraduate Associate Dean.
Plagiarism is a highly serious offence with serious penalties. It is your responsibility to learn what constitutes plagiarism and how to avoid committing it inadvertently (it is an academic offence even if not deliberate). You must avoid plagiarism in any oral or written assignments. Read “How to Avoid Plagiarism and Other Written Offences: A Guide for Students and Instructors” at:
http://watarts.uwaterloo.ca/~sager/plagiarism.html

Schedule of Readings and Lectures (subject to change)

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<th>Date</th>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Reading</th>
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<td>Jan 4</td>
<td>Introduction</td>
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<td>Jan 9</td>
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<td>Graff, &quot;Disliking books at an early age&quot;; Culler, &quot;Theoretical Schools and Movements&quot;</td>
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<td>Jan 11</td>
<td>Formalism and New Criticism</td>
<td>Shklovsky “Art as Technique” and &quot;Sterne's Tristam Shandy&quot;; Hopkins, &quot;The Windhover&quot;; Bakhtin &quot;Discourse in the Novel&quot;</td>
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<td>Jan 16</td>
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<td>Brooks, &quot;The Formalist Critics&quot;; Critical Response #1 due at beginning of class</td>
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<td>Jan 18</td>
<td>Structuralism</td>
<td>Belsey, &quot;Creatures of Difference&quot;; Barry, &quot;Ten tenets of liberal humanism&quot;</td>
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<td>Jan 23</td>
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<td>De Saussure, &quot;Course in General Linguistics: Nature of the Linguistic Sign&quot; and &quot;Language as Organized Thought&quot;; Jan 23 is end of drop-no penalty period</td>
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<td>Jan 25</td>
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<td>De Saussure Barthes, &quot;Wine and Milk&quot;</td>
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<td>Jan 30</td>
<td>Poststructuralism</td>
<td>Barthes, &quot;The Death of the Author&quot;; Foucault, &quot;What is an Author?&quot;</td>
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<td>Feb 1</td>
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<td>Derrida, &quot;Différance&quot; and &quot;Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences&quot; Selden, &quot;Deconstruction&quot;</td>
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<td>Feb 6</td>
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<td>Castro, <em>Birds of Passage</em> and postmodernism</td>
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<td>Feb 8</td>
<td>Psychoanalytic Criticism</td>
<td>Selden, &quot;Psychoanalytic Theories&quot;</td>
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<td>Feb 13</td>
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<td>In-class test</td>
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<td>Feb 15</td>
<td>Cultural Studies</td>
<td>Culler, &quot;Literature and Cultural Studies&quot;; Hebdige, &quot;Ideology: a Lived Relation&quot;</td>
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<td>Feb 19-23</td>
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<td>Reading Week</td>
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<td>Feb 27</td>
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<td>Althusser, &quot;A Letter on Art&quot; and &quot;Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses&quot;</td>
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<td>Mar 1</td>
<td>Radway, &quot;Reading the Romance&quot;; Critical Response #2 due at beginning of class</td>
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<td>Mar 6</td>
<td>Fiske, &quot;Television Culture&quot;</td>
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<td>Mar 8</td>
<td>Postcolonial Studies; Said, &quot;Orientalism&quot;</td>
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<td>Mar 13</td>
<td>Brathwaite, &quot;Nation Language&quot;; Sparrow, &quot;Dan is the Man&quot;; Nourbese Philip, &quot;Discourse on the Logic of Language&quot;</td>
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<td>Mar 15</td>
<td>Castro, <em>Birds of Passage</em> and postcolonialism</td>
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<td>Mar 20</td>
<td>Feminist Literary Criticism/Gender Studies; Woolf, &quot;If Shakespeare Had Had a Sister&quot;; Kolodny, &quot;Dancing Through the Minefield&quot;</td>
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<td>Mar 22</td>
<td>Cixous, &quot;The Laugh of the Medusa&quot; and &quot;Sorties&quot;; Irigaray, &quot;This Sex Which is Not One&quot;; Mohanty, &quot;Under Western Eyes&quot;</td>
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<td>Mar 27</td>
<td>Butler, &quot;Imitation and Gender Insubordination&quot;</td>
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<td>Mar 29</td>
<td>Overflow</td>
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<td>Apr 3</td>
<td>Review</td>
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**Suggestions for further reading**

Peter Barry, *Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory* (Manchester 2002) (on reserve at Dana Porter library)

Charles E. Bressler, *Literary Criticism: An Introduction to Theory and Practice* (on reserve at Dana Porter Library)


Philip Rice and Patricia Waugh, eds., *Modern Literary Theory* (Oxford 2001)


John Fiske’s “Television Culture”: Critical Response

How do even the most banal of television programs reinforce ideology? John Fiske examines a typical, once-popular television series called “Hart to Hart” to uncover ideologies written in the familiar “technical codes and representational conventions” (1089) of the televisual medium. He posits that television propagates the ideologies of “the dominant interests in society” (1087) onto the other, less represented pockets of ideological groups that comprise its audience. Fiske believes, first of all, that reality never comes in its purified, “raw” state but is “always already encoded” (1089). Thus, everything—inanimate objects of nature such as rocks and rivers, flowers and various types of trees, human apparel and physical traits—carries within it a meaning, viewed from the framework of a particular ideology.

He then goes on to analyze the various aspects of television production to see how they each play a part in creating a web of naturalized, common sense assumptions that make up the overall ideology of the show. For example, in the realm of camera work, extreme close-ups (ECU’s) are used to convey villainy since they replicate moments of intimacy or hostility. Also, there is a code “which impl[ies] that seeing closely means seeing better—the viewer can see into the villain, see through his words, and thus gain power over him” (1091). In the action of the plot during the particular scene that Fiske chose, the heroine and villainess are primping, while the male looks on. This action on both the good and evil sides reinforces how universal and common sense it is that the woman is the “object of the male gaze” (1093). Fiske does not forget the
"readers'" role; he/she is the point where all the assumptions and ideological codes are received, adjusting his/her framework. Other examples of taken-for-granted instances of ideology include: the heroine's joke about a porthole reminding her of a Laundromat, placing her back within a domestic scene from the vaguely patriarchally threatening position of a detective; and the villain's attraction to the heroine's purposely vulgar display of jewels, implying the dominant class' taste in aesthetics as natural, anything else being the realm of villains and the vulgar lower classes (to which the villain belongs).

Fiske brings the idea of ideology closer to home in a frequently abstract discourse, and this primarily is the strength of his article. One can see how hardened and taken for granted social roles, codes and conventions really are with his reading of "Hart to Hart". Even though the show itself is outdated, television is no less formulaic these days, pandering to comforting familiarity and recognition in its camera work, casting, dialogue, etc. while building ideology into the foreground, background, actions and actors. In showing what is "normal", television is a formidable tool of social engineering, even now when many series—and their viewers—are in fact self-conscious and post-modern. For example, shows, especially sitcoms, code interaction in a series of quips and weird situations; the concept of what is humourous draws heavily from what the sitcoms say is funny, and acceptable. Also, a couple of decades ago all sitcoms, and "jokes", were played out within the context of a family. Now, single people (Friends, Will&Grace) have replaced this context. This in itself signals ideology: the setting of a sitcom is supposed to be familiar, comforting (as they almost always end in a "lesson") so now the assumption is that your friends, and not your family, are the harbour in the storm.
Critical Response Example #1: Roland Barthes, “The Death of the Author”

In “The Death of the Author” (1968), Barthes propagates the erasing of the author as a creator figure, viewing her merely as a kind of fun-house mirror where various strands of language are reflected in a way peculiar to the writer. These strands of language are what the person writing a text has already encountered in life; there is no invention, merely re-arrangement. The author, before having been known as a font of creativity and thought, is reduced by Barthes to a scriptor, a function born with the text for the purpose of committing language to writing. Language is the goods, and the scriptor exhausts them.

What gives language its coherence is repetition and patterns; thus, can any writing in a recognizable language ever be original? Barthes doesn’t think so. Indeed, “the text is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture” (319). A writer can only ever mix-and-match, not only because languages’ property is repetition, but also because nothing we feel is ever completely original—all passions and emotions are drawn from language. Everyone has a dictionary inside of them, cataloguing everything. Our inner states of being rely on this catalogue system especially because they are, by nature, formless and elusive. Language allows us to form them. So when they are committed to writing, it is a matter of “words only explainable through other words, and so on indefinitely” (319). With an Author, texts are treated like puzzles, or mysteries waiting to be solved. When the existence of the Author is denied, one can go about disentangling writing, for there is nothing to be discovered, just many threads of language waiting to be combed straight for clarity.
Barthes gleefully tore down conceptions of the author as creator, one set apart to
give birth to the language and myth that forms society. Barthes does well in pointing out
the folly of viewing authors as such, as well as the important role language plays, in
always being there at our disposal to be raided for meaning. But it is arrogant to presume
that it ends there—at language. Language remains a tool, albeit one so powerful that it is
one by which humans define themselves and their realities. Writers utilize language to
indicate something; what they see themselves doing, when writing, depends on which
signifiers they choose to furnish their reality with. If someone chooses to surround herself
with signifiers arranged to indicate that reality contains meaning, then who is to judge
that she is wrong, and the one who chooses to furnish their reality with signifiers
suggesting the opposite is correct and weary with wisdom? In regard to texts, a writer
who aims to use the arbitrariness and recycled nature of language to indicate meaning,
invests her writing with that meaning. If a writer sees herself as complex, sensitive, and
profound, and able to connect the meaning she feels within herself with the meaning she
believes to be outside with writing, she does precisely that. In the melting and gnashing
of language in those extraordinary brains of ours, some remarkable recycled shapes are
churned out. But “to refuse to fix meaning”—very well for texts, but one gets the feeling
Barthes includes everything in this—well, it is your prerogative, just as it is to doggedly
claim that the boundaries of language are the boundaries of reality.