English 306F  Introduction to Semiotics
Professor Michael MacDonald
Office Hours: Tuesday and Thursday from 4:00 to 5:00 in HH 250

This seminar seeks to introduce students to the history, theory, and practice of semiotics. After sketching a brief history of semiotics from the ancient Greek rhetoricians through to de Saussure’s Course in General Linguistics (1900), we will explore the role of semiotics -- the science that studies the “life of signs in society” -- in several different fields of “signifying practice”: philosophy, literary criticism, poetry, politics, psychoanalysis, advertising, and the mass media. While the seminar will acquaint students with the basic concepts and principles of semiotic analysis, we will not remain content with merely describing and deciphering signs, codes, and systems of signification. At the heart of the Western semiotic adventure -- culminating today in a global “empire of simulation” -- we rediscover the “oldest social specialization: the specialization of power” (Debord). For this reason the course will attempt to expose the complicity between regimes of signs and regimes of power in hopes of refining the second oldest social specialization: the critique of domination.

Required Texts: Roland Barthes, Mythologies, The Rustle of Language; Marshall Blonski, On Signs; Course Reader

Requirements: regular attendance; weekly responses to assigned readings; regular, informed, and polite participation in discussion; one class presentation (5pp.); one final essay (10pp).

Grades:
15% Participation
35% Class Presentation
50% Final Essay

Syllabus:

September
10 Administration
17 Introduction to Semiotics: History - Theory - Practice
   Presentations: Godzich, “The Semiotics of Semiotics”; Sebeok, “Pandora’s Box”; Ferdinand de Saussure, Course in General Linguistics
22 Ancient Semiotics 1: Semiotics and Rhetoric
   Gorgias, “Encomium of Helen”

October
1 Ancient Semiotics 2: Semiotics and Poetics
   Plato, Republic X
   Presentations: Umberto Eco, “Producing Signs”; “Towards a New Middle Ages”; “Language, Power, Force”
8 Semiotics and Philosophy
   Presentations: Nietzsche, The Will to Power; Derrida, “Structure,
Sign, and Play in the Human Sciences”; Paul de Man, “Semiology and Rhetoric”
15 **Semiotics and Literary Theory**
Presentations: Barthes, “Rhetorical Analysis”; “Style and Its Image”; “Writers, Intellectuals, Teachers”; “Reading Brillat-Savarin”
22 **Semiotics and Poetry**
Gerard Manley Hopkins, *Collected Poems*
29 **Semiotics and Politics**
Michel de Certeau, “Practices of Space,” “The Jabbering of Social Life,” "What We Do When We Believe”
No Presentations: Discussion of News Media

November
5 **Semiotics and Psychoanalysis**
Lacan, “The Function and Field of Speech in the Unconscious”
12 **Semiotics and Advertising**
Barthes, *Mythologies*
Presentations: Barthes, “The World of Wrestling” and “Romans in Films”; “Steak and Chips” and “Wine and Milk”; “The Brain of Einstein” and “The Jet Man”
19 **Semiotics and the Mass Media**
Jean Baudrillard, *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*
Jean Baudrillard, *The System of Objects*
26 Conclusions:...
Presentations:...

Guidelines for Presentations:
The purpose of the class presentations is twofold: first, to survey a wide range of essential texts in the history and theory of semiotics, and second, to familiarize students with the special difficulties involved in presenting scholarly work in a public forum. Since your colleagues are not required to read the text under discussion (although it is hoped they will), your first task is to provide a detailed exposition of the main points of the argument; you are then asked to explore the concepts or themes that most interest you, offering an assessment of their significance for the history and theory of semiotics (as you have come to know it). Be sure to support your exposition and argument with relevant citations from the text.