INTRODUCTION: COURSE RATIONALE

“Critical theory” refers to an enormous span of work, ranging from detailed linguistic analyses of classic literary works by the Russian Formalists to studies of cross-dressing by queer theorists. It takes in not only a wide variety of critical schools (Formalism, Structuralism, German reception theory, deconstruction, feminist criticism, queer theory, post-colonial theory, Marxist literary theory, and so on), but also a wide variety of objects (that is, not just literature, but popular and mass culture in the most general sense of that term). Some of it is directed at better, more sophisticated analysis of familiar works, but almost just as much questions the boundaries of the literary canon we study or the very idea of the arts as such. One can’t possibly introduce all this material in a single semester, so this course will examine contemporary critical theory by focusing on certain key questions.

We will concentrate on critical theory as it develops in the postwar period, effectively from the mid-1950s to the present (I will assume that you’re familiar with certain fundamental works from the prewar period from Criticism II, ENG 251B). Our main concern will be how critical theory develops, that is, with the issues and interests that drive it forward in the 50 years separating its beginnings from the present. The material is therefore presented, to the greatest extent possible, historically, so that we can trace the influences and arguments that contributed to the current situation of critical theory.

Of those arguments, one stands out as the most enduring and significant: the questioning of the very category of literature – and “culture” – itself, which begins in earnest in the 1950s in England and France. One can read the history of the last 50 years of critical theory as a continuing debate on what “literature” is and what its role is in the larger society. To this end, we’ll pay particular attention to the critical theory movements that try to mix literary analysis with social theory, and to the “formalist” movements that respond to them. We begin with a retrospective piece by Raymond Williams on the history of the category “literature” and then examine the first assaults on the literary mounted in the 1950s.

COURSE AIMS AND OUTCOMES

By the end of the course you should have acquired:

• a working knowledge of the development of critical theory from the 1950s to the present
• familiarity with the major schools of critical theory in the postwar period
• the ability to compare and contrast critical theories, and to apply them to the analysis of literary texts and other cultural forms
• knowledge of how to deepen and extend your knowledge of critical theory in the future, through independent study or research.

COURSE STRUCTURE/ORGANIZATION OF CLASSES
Each class will focus on one or two readings in critical theory. You should expect to have to read these carefully, often more than once. You should by no means expect to understand everything you read, but you should come with a list of questions about each text (even if this question is "what does this writer mean when she says . . . ").

Because so much critical theory is grounded in particular kinds of social theory, it's often difficult to get to grips with it without understanding something of Marx, Freud, feminism, and so on. We can't all read all the necessary background in social theory, therefore I've decided the way to crack this pedagogical nut is to have some of you do the necessary research and explain it to the rest of you. We will therefore at the outset divide the class into 6 groups. Each group will be responsible for one of the topics covered in the latter part of the course (Marxism, feminism, postcolonial theory, mass culture, queer theory, postmodernism). At one of the sessions devoted to that topic (see below), the group will provide a 30-minute introduction to the topic. This introduction will indicate what the main sources for this critical movement have been and what issues have faced it as it develops. The presentation is oral, but it should be accompanied by a short bibliography of key works past and present (you can provide handouts for the class as well, if you wish.). After the presentation, the group should provide me with a written outline of the presentation, a copy of the bibliography, and a brief summary of the role each member of the group has played in preparing and delivering the presentation. Each presentation will receive a single overall mark for the group.

ASSESSMENT
The course will be assessed as follows:

Mid-term paper 5-8 pp. 20%
Group seminar/presentation: 30%
Final paper 15-20pp: 50%

Topics for the mid-term and final papers should be discussed with and approved by me. They can be based on an issue or question, a particular school of critical theory, a comparison of theories, or an application of theory to a particular cultural form. Papers should adhere to normal scholarly conventions in matters of notes and bibliography and should not be single-spaced (though 1.5 lines will do fine), should have adequate margins, and so on. I call your attention to the University and Faculty rules on plagiarism, which will certainly be enforced if the need arises.

Papers will be graded on the basis of: clarity, shrewdness, and sophistication of argument; depth of reading; quality of writing and organization; independence of thought; presentation.

The presentation will be graded on: the clarity and interest of the presentation itself; the degree of teamwork involved in preparation and presentation; the quality of the bibliography; the intelligence and subtlety of the analysis of the critical school in question. Where it's clear one member of the group has been derelict in his/her duties, necessary adjustments to the mark will be made.
Reading material: All the reading matter will be found in the Course reader, available for sale at the bookshop and University Graphics outlets.

TOPICS WEEK-BY-WEEK

September 13
Introduction

September 15

September 20
Structuralism as Ideology Critique

September 22
Structuralism II

September 27
Lacan and Psychoanalysis

September 29
Althusser and Marxism I

October 4
Althusser and Marxism II

October 6
Marxist Literary Theory (First Group Presentation)

October 11
Deconstruction I

October 13
Deconstruction II

October 18
Feminism I (Second Group Presentation)

October 20
Feminism II


October 25
MID-TERM PAPER DUE

Feminism, Film, Psychoanalysis

October 27
Foucault’s significance

November 1
Postcolonial Theory I (Third Group Presentation)

November 3
Postcolonial Theory II
November 8
Theories of Popular Culture I (Fourth Group Presentation)

November 10
Theories of Popular Culture II

November 15
Theories of Popular Culture III

November 17
New Historicism

November 22
Queer Theory I (Fifth Group Presentation)

November 24
Queer Theory II

November 29
Postmodernism (Sixth Group Presentation)
Fredric Jameson, 'Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism', New Left Review 146 (1984), pp. 56-91.

December 1
Course review