Language and Reality in Post-Classical Science and Postmodern Literature

FYSEM-UA 210

Instructor: Friedrich Ulfers

The course explores the possibility that there exists a common ground between the so-called two cultures of science and the humanities. It posits the hypothesis of a correlation between postclassical science (e.g., quantum theory) and “postmodern” literature and philosophy. Among the key notions examined are Werner Heisenberg’s “uncertainty principle,” Niels Bohr’s “Principle of Complementarity,” and Jacques Derrida’s notion of “undecidability” in deconstructive theory. The discussion of these notions, and their implications in literary works, revolves around their effect on classical logic, the referential function of language, and the traditional goal of a complete explanation/description of reality. Readings include selections from the works of Borges, Kundera, Pirisg, and Pynchon, among others, and from texts on modern scientific theories.

Course Requirements:
Course requirements include a considerable amount of reading (see below), a take-home midterm exercise (approximately 8 pages), and a final paper (10-12 pp.) on a choice of assigned topics or a paper on a topic chosen in consultation with the instructor. There will also be some short (1-2 pp.) writing assignments throughout the semester.

Grading:
The grading breakdown will be as follows: 20% for class discussion, 20% for the short writing assignments, 30% for the midterm, and 30% for the final.

Texts:
Mary Shelley, Frankenstein (Signet Classic, ISBN 0451523369)
Edgar Allen Poe, “The Purloined Letter (will be distributed by instructor)
Jorge Luis Borges, Labyrinths—Selected Stories and Other Writings (New Directions, ISBN 0811200124)
C.P. Snow, The Two Cultures (excerpts will be distributed by instructor)
Morris Kline, Mathematics: The Loss of Certainty (excerpts will be distributed by instructor)
Jean-Francois Lyotard, The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge (excerpts will be distributed by the instructor)
**Syllabus:**

*Page numbers, excerpted readings, and due dates are subject to change*

**Week 1, September 5th:** Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein* (first half, approximately 100 pp.) and possible excerpts from Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*

**Week 2, September 12th:** Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein* (second half, approximately 100pp.) and possible excerpts from Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*

**Week 3, September 19th:** SHORT WRITING ASSIGNMENT #1 DUE Edgar Allan Poe, “The Purloined Letter” (approximately 25 pp.) and possible excerpts from Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*

**Week 4, September 26th:** Virginia Woolf, *The Waves* (first 1/3, approximately 100 pp.) and possible excerpts from Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*

**Week 5, October 3rd:** SHORT WRITING ASSIGNMENT #1 DUE Virginia Woolf, *The Waves* (second 1/3, approximately 100 pp.) and possible excerpts from Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*

**Week 6, October 10th:** Virginia Woolf, *The Waves* (final 1/3, approximately 100pp.) and possible excerpts from C.P. Snow, *The Two Cultures*

**Week 7, October 17th:** Robert M. Pirsig, *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* (first 1/5, approximately 125 pp.) and possible excerpts from C.P. Snow, *The Two Cultures*

**Week 8, October 24th:** MIDTERM PAPER DUE Robert M. Pirsig, *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* (second 1/5, approximately 125 pp.) and possible excerpts from C.P. Snow, *The Two Cultures*

**Week 9, October 31st:** Robert M. Pirsig, *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* (third 1/5, approximately 125 pp.) and possible excerpts from C.P. Snow, *The Two Cultures*

**Week 10, November 7th:** Robert M. Pirsig, *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* (final 1/5, approximately 125 pp.) and possible excerpts from C.P. Snow, *The Two Cultures*
**Week 11, November 14th:** Jorge Luis Borges, *Labyrinths — Selected Stories and Other Writings* (first half, approximately 125 pp.) and possible excerpts from Morris Kline, *Mathematics: The Loss of Certainty*

**Week 12, November 21st:** SHORT WRITING ASSIGNMENT #2 DUE Jorge Luis Borges, *Labyrinths — Selected Stories and Other Writings* (second half, approximately 125 pp.) and possible excerpts from Morris Kline, *Mathematics: The Loss of Certainty*

**Week 13, November 28th:** Thomas Pynchon, *The Crying of Lot 49* (approximately 150 pp.) and possible excerpts from Morris Kline, *Mathematics: The Loss of Certainty*

**Week 14, December 5th:** Milan Kundera, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* (first half, approximately 150 pp.) and possible excerpts from Morris Kline, *Mathematics: The Loss of Certainty*

**Week 15, December 12th:** Milan Kundera, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* (second half, approximately 150 pp.)

**Friday, December 22nd:** FINAL PAPER DUE