Language and Reality in Post-Classical Science and Postmodern Literature
FYSEM-UA 210
Instructor: Friedrich Ulfers

This 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. The question whether this paradigm change leads to a form of posthumanism/transhumanism will also be addressed. Readings include works of Borges, Kundera, Pirsig, Pynchon and Virginia Woolf, among others, and 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 2 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)
Liliane Papin, “This Is Not a Universe: Metaphor, Language, and Representation” (will be distributed by instructor)
Syllabus:

Please note: The number of pages assigned to be read in the literary texts will be lessened as a selection is made regarding themes that are of primary importance to the overall topic of the seminar.

Week 1, September 4th: Introduction and discussion of Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein* (approximately 50 pp.) and Liliane Papin, “This Is Not a Universe: Metaphor, Language, and Representation” (app. 11 pp.)

Week 2, September 11th: Introduction cont. and Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein* (approximately 50 pp.) and Liliane Papin, “This Is Not a Universe: Metaphor, Language, and Representation” (app. 11 pp.)

Week 3, September 18th: Edgar Allan Poe, “The Purloined Letter” (approximately 25 pp.) and C.P. Snow, *The Two Cultures* (app. 50 pp.)

Week 4, September 25th: Virginia Woolf, *The Waves* (approximately 100 pp.) and C.P. Snow, *The Two Cultures* (app. 50 pp.)

SHORT WRITING ASSIGNMENT #1 DUE

Week 5, October 2nd: Virginia Woolf, *The Waves* (approximately 35 pp.)

Week 6, October 9th: Legislative Day – Classes meet on a Monday Schedule

Week 7, October 16th: Virginia Woolf, *The Waves* (approximately 35 pp.)

Week 8, October 23rd: Robert M. Pirsig, *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* (approximately 125 pp.) and Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (app. 40 pp. over the 2 sessions on this novel)

Week 9, October 30th: Robert M. Pirsig, *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* (approximately 125 pp.)

MIDTERM PAPER DUE


Week 11, November 13th: Review Session


Week 13, November 27th: Thomas Pynchon, *The Crying of Lot 49* (approximately 75 pp.)
Week 14, December 4th: Milan Kundera, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* (approximately 150 pp.)
SHORT WRITING ASSIGNMENT #2 DUE

Week 15, December 11th: Milan Kundera, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* (approximately 150 pp.)

Friday, December 21st: FINAL PAPER DUE