Irony from Antiquity to the Alt Right
Freshman Seminar, Spring 2018
Professor Leif Weatherby
FYSEM-UA 647
W 12:30-3:00 p.m.

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office hours:

Course Description

Irony is dead; long live irony. With the recent wave of nationalist populism across the globe, an old debate - one that goes back to Plato - has been revived. We read in the New York Times that the irony of Stephen Colbert is now obsolete, and elsewhere that irony is a value that all humanity must cling to for self-knowledge and the dimming hope of civilization. Meanwhile, the flavor of irony that attached to the 21st-century version of the hipster phenomenon and the Gawker media empire has passed - defeated in part by Trump adviser Peter Thiel. And yet irony lives on, weaponized by the so-called “Alt Right” and wielded triumphantly by the new user of the @POTUS twitterfeed. This seminar is a crash course in how politics got so literary. Fundamental readings in rhetoric, the Platonic dialogue, Friedrich Schlegel, Søren Kierkegaard and Richard Rorty will be complemented by cross-media ironies from Don Quixote to Pepe the Frog. We will read Tristram Shandy and watch Seinfeld, view Pulp Fiction and read Baudelaire, Faust, and Catch 22. If irony is a weapon, this course asks, then how can one wield it?

Note: The Freshman Seminar program would like to inform you that this course has some violent representations in film and other media on its syllabus. These materials are required reading and/or viewing.

Readings and Written Requirements:

All texts must be read by the day they are assigned. Please bring books/reading materials to class on assigned day. You are responsible for changes in the syllabus and extra readings that are announced in class.

The written requirements for the course consist in three papers. The first (2-3 pp, due on or around February 15) will be definitional, on the concept of irony. The second (4-5 pp, due on or around March 15) will be object-oriented, devoted to how irony works (or doesn’t) in one text or media object we have considered in class. The final paper, which each student will present to the class on the last day of class, will be 8-10 pp that combines the first two approaches and weaves in material from the “readings” listserv.
To that end: each section will maintain a “readings” listserv. This will be a collection of course-relevant documents that you find and share with your classmates and the professor, by email. The rules are simple: find a document that relates to the course. This could be a long-form news article, a video, a meme. You send a link and **paste text** if possible so that all can read/watch, and you include a tl;dr (too long; didn’t read), a summary of the item and what’s important about it for the listserv discussion. tl;dr should be at least 300 words, and no more than 500. Responses to these items should also be at least 200 words. **Full participation in this platform is worth 25% of your grade. Over the semester, you should post 5 items and respond at least 10 times.**

**Texts on Classes marked ®**

**Grading:**

Grades will be comprised of the following components

- Papers 1 and 2 are worth 15% each (=30% total)
- Participation in “readings” listserv is worth 25% (5 posts and 10 responses)
- Final paper is worth 30%
- Attendance and participation is worth 15%

**Attendance:**

Attendance is mandatory. You are allowed 1 absence (excused or unexcused); subsequent absences will adversely affect your grade.

**Week 1: Classical Irony and the Theory of Rhetoric**

Aristotle, selection from the *Rhetoric* / Cicero, selections

**Estimated Pages: 40-50**

**Week 2: Socratic Irony**

Plato, *Meno, Gorgias*

**Estimated Pages: 100**

**Week 3: The Novel I**

Miguel de Cervantes, *Don Quixote* (selections)

**Estimated Pages: 200**

**Week 4: The Novel II**

Laurence Sterne, *Tristram Shandy*

**Week 5: Romantic Irony**


**Estimated Pages: 60**

**Week 6: Religious Irony I**

Søren Kierkegaard, *Concept of Irony and Fear and Loathing* (selections)
Estimated Pages: 80

Week 7: Religious Irony II
Fyodor Mikhailovich Dostoevsky, *The Underground Man*

Estimated Pages: 120

Week 6: The Novel III
György Lukács, *Theory of the Novel*

Estimated Pages: 100

Week 7: Cynical Irony
Laszlo Moholy-Nagy (various artworks), Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason* (excerpt)

Estimated Pages: 60

Week 8: Irony at War
Joseph Heller, *Catch 22*

Week 9: Fashwave Irony

Estimated Pages: 40

Week 10: Left Irony
Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (selection)

Estimated Pages: 50

[Readings after this point subject to change, as ongoing academic and public-sphere work is being published about the objects of analysis]

Week 10: Much Irony about Nothing
*Seinfeld* (selected episodes) / Alan Sokal, *Fashionable Nonsense* (Introduction and Appendices)

Estimated Pages: 60

Week 11: Irony after Irony
Quentin Tarantino, *Pulp Fiction / Inglourious Basterds*
Elisabeth Bronfen and Adrian Daub, “Broomhilda Unchained: Tarantino’s Wagner” + comparison of German and US reviews of *IB*

Estimated Pages: 30

Week 12: The Formal Language of Recent US TV Comedy
*Arrested Development / The Office / Bojack Horseman* (selected episodes)
Coverage of these shows in the *Dear Television* feature of the *Los Angeles Review of Books* (ongoing)

Estimated Pages: 25

Week 13: In Soviet Russia, Irony …

Estimated Pages: 100
Week 14: The Medium of Irony

Various twitter feeds; Angela Nagle, *Kill All Normies*, selected articles from forthcoming issue of *Boundary 2 Online* dedicated to this topic

Estimated Pages: 60-80