

Humanities 395: Special Topic: LANGUAGE AND CULTURAL STUDIES

Jeffrey T. Nealon

Distinguished Visiting Professor in the Humanities

In Fall 2003, the third Distinguished Visiting Professor in the Humanities, Professor Jeffrey T. Nealon, will be on campus. Professor Nealon is Professor and Director of Graduate Studies in the English Department at The Pennsylvania State University. He is the author of *Double Reading: Postmodernism after Deconstruction* (1993), and *Alterity Politics: Ethics and Performative Subjectivity* (1998), and the co-editor of *Rethinking the Frankfurt School: Alternative Legacies of Cultural Critique* (2002). A fourth book, *The Theory Toolbox: Critical Concepts for the New Humanities*, will be published in 2003.

Professor Nealon will offer an upper-level interdisciplinary seminar in Fall 2003 open to juniors and seniors. A brief description follows:

"Language and Cultural Studies."

Within the North American humanities and social sciences, the triumph of postmodern or post-structuralist theory brought about what was known as "the linguistic turn": the sense that any cultural phenomenon (gender, race, the unconscious, the social world itself) is best approached or understood according to the paradigms of language or signification. There is probably no more influential slogan within post-structuralist or postmodern theory than Saussure's famous dictum concerning language: "there are no positive terms, only differences," which is to say that there is no inherent meaning contained within words or things, only those multiple meanings generated by a differential social system called language.

While the linguistic turn had its critics even in its heyday (Foucault and Deleuze leap to mind), the recent rise of cultural studies in North America has focused debates within humanities theory on the status of language and the role of "meaning" in the humanities today. In short, if you are a scholar studying the role of "everyday" cultural artifacts--fashion magazines, advertising, internet pornography, the music or film industries--the question of their "meaning" seems beside the point. Or at least it seems clear that studying the meaning of Victoria's Secret, Snoop Dogg, or the *Lethal Weapon* movies requires a different set of protocols than studying the meaning of Proust. With the complete triumph of commodity culture, understanding the linguistic meaning of cultural artifacts seems less important than understanding their production, marketing, and distribution.

This seminar will selectively retrace the linguistic turn in humanities theory (Saussure, Heidegger, J. L. Austin, Derrida, Lacan, de Man, Judith Butler, Henry Louis Gates) and its critics (Fredric Jameson, Foucault, Zizek, Antonio Negri, and especially Deleuze), hoping to restage or reframe the contemporary encounter between cultural studies and language (Adorno, Bourdieu, Larry Grossberg, Tony Bennett, Meagan Morris). Throughout, we will focus on the following questions: Has the role of language in everyday life changed over the past half-century? Is the study of language inexorably tied to questions of meaning or signification? Might language do something other than "mean"? If so, what? Might we be, in other words, done with language and meaning? If the linguistic turn is yesterday's news, what's the next big thing? How do language's functions need to be reconsidered and rethematized in the super-fast world of global capital?

Students interested in enrolling in this class should have taken at least one of the following courses as a pre-requisite and should consider this as they register for Spring 2003 courses: ANT 260; ART 232; ECN 225, 284, or 285; ENG 227, 228, 273, 330, 331, or 390; GWS 249; PHI 234, 235, or 268; or REL 313.

Questions should be directed to Alan Schrift, Director, Center for the Humanities, schrift@grinnell.edu.