

Formalisms – 9140A

Joshua Schuster

jschust@uwo.ca

Office: AHB 3G04

Office hours: Thurs 10:30-12:30, or by appointment

Room: TC303

Course hours: Thurs 12:30-3:30

Description: What does it mean to read for form? How did literature become formal? How do we understand the competing calls for a return to form today in literary studies? We will begin with looking at Russian formalist theories that adopted modernist techniques of literary self-reflection. We will then turn to New Criticism and arguments for associating formalism with a “timeless” literary aesthetic. From this point, we will chart the steady stream of new claims for formalist reading methods: structuralism, deconstruction, Marxism, and philosophical aesthetics. We will finish with a look at some contemporary arguments for a return to form as a specifically literary question in the “new lyric studies,” ecopoetics, surface reading, and recent genre theory. We will be reading poetry and fiction alongside these theoretical texts.

Grading

60% final essay

15% oral presentation

25% class participation

Essay: The essay is a research paper of 20 pages on a topic pertaining to the course. A one-paragraph abstract will be due on Nov. 10.

Oral presentation: The presentation is a 15-20 minute overview of the key issues of a chosen text. I want you to generally structure your presentation with the following questions:

1. According to this author, what is “literature” for (or “the poem,” or “the novel”)?
2. What does the author mean by the term “form”? How does the author define the relation of form and content (or other similar relations, such as discourse/individual work, etc.)? Also, if we think of form as a thing, what kind of thing is it according to this author?
3. How does the author make his or her argument – by close reading, referring to history, referring to transhistorical categories, invoking science, applying the history of rhetoric, etc.? How do the means of arguing influence the overall message of the author? In your own words, how does the essay **do** what it says it wants to argue?
4. How does the author question, critique, or invent an argument in relation to previous texts we’ve studied?
5. What do you notice about the text that stands out to you as helpful in generating new ways of reading or reflecting on your reading practice? What larger questions are you left with?

With each of these questions, please point to specific quotes in the text. You may also refer to a poem, prose, or play we have read in the class as an example. Throughout the presentation, you should be raising questions for the class and outlining how you think we can get the most out of this reading.

Please note: for your presentation, you do not need to define in general a “school” for us, such as structuralism, queer theory, etc. Just stick with the specific argument of the essay you’ve chosen.

Statement on Academic Offences: Scholastic offences are taken seriously and students are directed to read the appropriate policy, specifically, the definition of what constitutes a Scholastic Offence, at the following Web site:

http://www.uwo.ca/univsec/handbook/appeals/scholastic_discipline_grad.pdf

Graduate Course Health and Wellness: As part of a successful graduate student experience at Western, we encourage students to make their health and wellness a priority. Western provides several on campus health-related services to help you achieve optimum health and engage in healthy living while pursuing your graduate degree. Information regarding health- and wellness-related services available to students may be found at <http://www.health.uwo.ca/>. Students seeking help regarding mental health concerns are advised to speak to someone they feel comfortable confiding in, such as their faculty supervisor, their program director (graduate chair), or other relevant administrators in their unit. Campus mental health resources may be found at http://www.health.uwo.ca/mental_health/resources.html.

Required Texts:

Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy* (Cambridge UP)

Virginia Jackson and Yopie Prins, *The Lyric Theory Reader* (Johns Hopkins)

Henry James, *The Turn of the Screw and Other Short Novels* (Signet)

Juliana Spahr, *Well Then There Now* (Black Sparrow)

Claudia Rankine, *Citizen: An American Lyric* (Graywolf)

Note: there will also be a small packet of poems that you should bring to class each week

I will provide digital copies of essays in a dropbox folder. Please print them out and bring them to class. Computers are not permitted in class.

Week 1 – September 8 – How to Do Things with Form I

Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*

Week 2 – September 15 – Formalisms I

Virginia Jackson and Yopie Prins “Section: Anglo-American New Criticism” (*LTR*);
Wimsatt and Beardsley “The Intentional Fallacy” (*LTR*); Reuben Brower “The Speaking
Voice” (*LTR*); Tzvetan Todorov, “Preface,” *Introduction to Poetics*; René Wellek,
“Concepts of Form and Structure in 20th Century Criticism”

Week 3 – September 22 – Formalisms II

Roman Jakobson “Closing Statement: Linguistics and Poetics” (*LTR*); Roland Barthes, “From Work to Text”; Paul de Man, “Semiology and Rhetoric,” “The Dead End of Formalist Criticism”

Week 4 – September 29 – Politics of Form I

Georg Lukacs, “Art and Objective Truth”; Theodor Adorno, “On Lyric Poetry and Society” (*LTR*); Jacques Rancière, “The Politics of Literature”; Ron Silliman “Wild Form”

Week 5 – October 6 – Politics of Form II

Paul de Man “Anthropomorphism and Trope in the Lyric” (*LTR*); Fredric Jameson, “Baudelaire as Modernist and Postmodernist” (*LTR*); Marjorie Levinson, “Insight and Oversight: Reading ‘Tintern Abbey,’” Marjorie Levinson, “What is New Formalism?”

Week 6 – October 13 – How to Do Things with Form II

Samuel Beckett, *Endgame*; Theodor Adorno, “Trying to Understand *Endgame*”; Maurice Blanchot, “The Disappearance of Literature,” “The Search for Point Zero”

Week 7 – October 20 – After Critique I

Judith Butler, “What is Critique?”; Bruno Latour, “Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam?”; Sharon Marcus and Stephen Best, “Surface Reading”; Rita Felski, *The Limits of Critique* “Introduction,” “Context Stinks!”; Susan Wolfson, “Reading for Form”

Week 8 – October 27 – no class – Fall Break

Week 9 – November 3 – After Critique II – New Lyric Theory

Jackson and Prins, “Introduction,” *Lyric Theory Reader*; Ralph Cohen “History and Genre” (*LTR*); Earl Miner “Why Lyric?” (*LTR*); Virginia Jackson, *Dickinson’s Misery*, “Beforehand”

Week 10 – November 10 – Formalisms III

Jonathan Culler “Lyric, History, and Genre” (*LTR*); Derek Attridge, *The Singularity of Literature* “Introductory,” “Form, Meaning, Context”; Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe “Poetry as Experience: Two Poems by Paul Celan” (*LTR*); Alain Badiou “The Age of the Poets”

Due: essay abstract

Week 11 – November 17 – After Critique III – Queer Formalism

Henry James “The Beast in the Jungle”; Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, “The Beast in the Closet,” “Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading”; Eric Savoy “Restraining Order”

Week 12 – November 24 – How to Do Things with Form III

Claudia Rankine, *Citizen: An American Lyric*; Caroline Levine, *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network* “Preface,” “Introduction,” “Hierarchies”

Week 13 – December 1 – How to Do Things with Form IV

Juliana Spahr, *That Winter the Wolf Came*; Christopher Nealon “The Matter of Capital, or Catastrophe and Textuality” (*LTR*)

Final Essay Due: Dec. 15