

Winter Term 2013

Department of English and Cultural Studies  
McMaster University

English and Cultural Studies 3QQ3  
Cultural Studies and Critical Theory 3QQ3

## **Contemporary Critical Theory: Knowledge, Power, Precarity**

Instructor: Dr. David L. Clark ([dclark@mcmaster.ca](mailto:dclark@mcmaster.ca))  
T.A.: Dr. Ailsa Kay ([kayac@mcmaster.ca](mailto:kayac@mcmaster.ca))



Still from Andrei Tarkovsky's film, *Stalker* (1979)

### **Essay Assignment**

Essays must be double-spaced and word-processed, and should be about ten pages or 2500-3000 words in length. Do remember to submit an essay which is *completely* free of errors in punctuation, spelling, and grammar, and which is argued in a coherent manner. Avoid at all costs merely reproducing the arguments of the texts or the content of the lectures in the course. Instead, treat this assignment as an opportunity to develop an essay that *analyses* questions and issues arising *from* those texts, using the lectures only as a jump-off point for your own remarks. Do not recapitulate the lectures in the essay. It's important to root your remarks in the assigned texts, working closely with what the theorists actually

say there—i.e., the terms, concepts, problems, examples, and questions that bring these texts to life. Demonstrating the merits of your thesis will therefore mean wrestling with what the great British artist and poet William Blake calls “the minute particulars.”

Although you may of course refer to arguments and examples that were discussed in class, you are expected to develop an argument, finally, that you can properly call your own. Write in a way that responds directly to the complexities and nuances of the course texts and core course questions (for the latter, see the Course Outline). The primary focus of your essay must be on materials that are assigned on the course. You are welcome to refer briefly to other theorists and other works, but the emphasis in your essay should be on materials that are assigned on the course. The essay work for this course should be original and written specifically for this course, i.e., it’s important not to re-purpose or adapt essays that you may have written for other courses.

You are not required or expected to use “secondary sources.” But you may certainly do so, when necessary; however, you are expected actively to *negotiate* with these sources and to acknowledge their use. (Wikipedia—or similar user-created platforms—is not a reliable scholarly resource and so should not be cited or used.) Any citation system (i.e., footnotes, endnotes, bibliography, or Works Cited) is acceptable, as long as it is consistent and informative.

Your essay should demonstrate two crucial characteristics of critical thinking: develop a particular thesis or wager for which your essay then makes a case; route your argument through a discussion of specific details drawn from the assigned texts. If you have any difficulties with these or other aspects of writing essays, or seek to improve your essay writing skills, I recommend consulting *Writing Tools: Tips on preparing and composing your essays*, a useful and accessible resource created by the Writing Center at Harvard University:

<http://www.fas.harvard.edu/~wricntr/resources.html>

The Writing Tutors in the Department of English and Cultural Studies are also available to assist you with your compositional practice.

If you are a smoker, please ensure that you print and submit a copy of your paper that is smoke-free.

### **Essay Due Dates and Late Submission Policy:**

There are two due dates for essays in this course. The choice is up to you. Essays are initially due in class, at start of class, 25 March 2013. Essays submitted at this point will receive a marking commentary. Essays handed in after 25 March 2013 will be graded exactly the same way, without penalty but without comment. Essays may be submitted up to start of class, **10 April 2013**, the last day of the course. No essays will be accepted after start of class, 10 April 2013. A grade of zero/F will therefore be assigned to essays not submitted by that point. No essays can be accepted as e-mail attachments.

### **Essay Topics**

- 1) Compare *and* contrast the analysis of the relationship between knowledge and power in two thinkers on this course. What is the nexus joining authority and legitimacy? Avoid simply recapitulating the arguments of those thinkers, and instead *engage* their positions with an eye to bringing out precisely how and why there are these differences in their thinking.
- 2) Several thinkers on this course write texts of unusual richness, suggestiveness, and density. Write a rigorous *explication* of one of these texts (for example, a single lecture by Foucault), carefully discussing precisely how that thinker's argument unfolds. The object here is to focus on both the large and small details, both the local, step-by-step turns of the argument, as well as its overall themes and guiding questions. Locate this text in the larger setting of the work from which that text is drawn. Note: this essay topic is more challenging than it may at first appear, not least because you will be expected to discuss the text at hand in ways that make a significant advance on what was said in class. Here you are in effect re-tracing the steps of the theorist, unpacking their argument and analyzing its details as that argument unfolds.
- 3) Several of the critical theorists on this course (for example, Butler and Foucault) focus on the "discursive regimes" and "frameworks" that *both* create and regulate us as subjects. Discuss the nature and effect of some of these regimes, using examples drawn from contemporary culture. Show ways in which these examples from contemporary culture can in fact be treated as theoretical sites, i.e., as places where theoretical work on the question of the regulation of subjects is taking place. In other words, your task is both to examine recent cultural examples through the lens of contemporary theory and to use those recent cultural examples as a means to discuss contemporary theory.
- 4) "The problem of bearing witness to atrocities and violence is a preeminent question in contemporary critical theory." Discuss, comparing and contrasting the work of two theorists on the course.
- 5) Compare and contrast the treatment of the university and higher education in the work of two theorists on this course.
- 6) Many of the thinkers on this course demonstrate a deep suspicion of concepts that often seem fixed and foundational, including "history," "education," "politics," "nature," "the human," "the animal," "the stranger," "terror," and "the social." Discuss, comparing and contrasting the work of two thinkers on this course.
- 7) "Contemporary critical theory is often characterized by a self-reflexive impetus, i.e., an insistence on making *how* we know things—our presuppositions, critical frameworks, cultural and historical circumstances, and interpretive strategies—a central part of *what* we know." Discuss, comparing and contrasting the work of two thinkers on this course.
- 8) I warmly encourage students to devise your own essay topic. Note: In order to ensure that your topic is viable and manageable, you will need to discuss your essay's objectives and arguments with Dr. Kay first. Regardless of the topic, your essay will need to be anchored in the work of the theorists on this course.