**Literary and Cultural Theory, 2017-2018**

**Assessed Essay Questions**

**2nd paper**

Answer ONE of the following questions. Please note that essays are due on 1st May 2018 (Tuesday, Week 2, Term 3).

1. ‘There is no document of culture which is not at the same time a document of barbarism. And just as such a document is never free of barbarism, so barbarism taints the manner in which it was transmitted from one hand to another. The historical materialist therefore dissociates himself from this process of transmission as far as possible. He regards it as his task to brush history against the grain’ (Benjamin, ‘On the Concept of History’, 392). Attempt a close reading of the numbered paragraph 7 of Benjamin’s essay, relating its concerns to the essay overall.
2. Why, according to Foucault, is the architecture (spatial organisation, geometric design, access management, etc.) of discipline a necessary corollary of its procedural principles?
3. Foucault argues in general that the enforcement of ‘normalcy’ in society is so pervasive a feature that it paradoxically escapes recognition. We simply do not see it taking place. Evaluate this argument, considering also the implications that it might be said to hold for theories of ‘ideology’ or social ‘normalisation’ in general.
4. ‘The most arduous and prolonged work of all was that of the labourer’s wife in the rural economy. One part of this – especially the care of infants – was the most task-oriented of all. Another part was in the fields, from which she must return to renewed domestic tasks… Such hours were endurable only because one part of the work, with the children and in the home, disclosed itself as necessary and inevitable, rather than as an external imposition. This remains true to this day, and, despite school times and television times, the rhythms of women’s work in the home are not wholly attuned to the measurement of the clock. The mother of young children has an imperfect sense of time and attends to other human tides. She has not yet altogether moved out of the conventions of “pre-industrial” society’ (Thompson, ‘Time, Work-Discipline, and Industrial Capitalism’, 79). Discuss.
5. ‘Perhaps nowhere else in the world is the intimacy between class and speech so profound than in England, so it is not surprising that it is in the speech of the English workers that the violence of class makes itself detectable in the English edition of *Capital* (Rosalind Morris, ‘Dialect and Dialectic in “The Working Day” of Marx’s *Capital*). Write an essay on Marx’s use of workers’ voices in ‘The Working Day’ chapter in *Capital*. How does the direct citation of workers’ testimony contribute to Marx’s argument in this chapter?
6. ‘The culture industry endlessly cheats its consumers out of what it endlessly promises. The promissory note of pleasure issued by plot and packaging is indefinitely prolonged: the promise, which actually comprises the entire show, disdainfully intimates that there is nothing more to come, that the diner must be satisfied with reading the menu. The desire inflamed by the glossy names and images is served up finally with a celebration of the daily round it sought to escape. Of course, genuine works of art were not sexual exhibitions either. But by presenting denial as negative, they reversed, as it were, the debasement of the drive and rescued by mediation what had been denied. That is the secret of aesthetic sublimation: to present fulfilment in its brokenness. The culture industry does not sublimate: it suppresses. By constantly exhibiting the object of desire, the breasts beneath the sweater, the naked torso of the sporting hero, it merely goads the unsublimated anticipation of pleasure, which through the habit of denial has long since been mutilated as masochism. There is no erotic situation in which innuendo and incitement are not accompanied by the clear notification that things will never go so far… Works of art are ascetic and shameless; the culture industry is pornographic and prudish. It reduces love to romance. And, once reduced, much is permitted, even libertinage as a marketable specialty, purveyed by quota with the trade description “daring.” The mass production of sexuality automatically brings about its repression’ (Horkheimer and Adorno, ‘The Culture Industry Enlightenment as Mass Deception’, pp. 111-2). The suggestion here is that by (re-) presenting ‘fulfilment in its brokenness’, genuine works of art used to keep faith with the idea of a world that would be different from the actually existing world. By contrast, the products of the culture industry, in ‘exhibiting the object of desire’, withdraw fulfilment (or freedom) from contemplation, thereby promoting and enforcing conformism. Discuss.
7. ‘I am outraged by the promise of governments to create more work – as if there was not already enough necessary work to be done. The problem is not one of magically coaxing new work out of a hat, but rather of distributing the work we have in a just manner’ (Haug, ‘The Four-in-One Perspective’, 120). Discuss.
8. ‘Communication platforms and devices allow work to invade spaces and times that were once less susceptible to its presence. This is a process we might describe the *presence bleed* of contemporary office culture, where firm boundaries between personal and professional identities no longer apply. Presence bleed explains the familiar experience whereby the location and time of work become secondary considerations faced with a “to do” list that seems forever out of control. It not only explains the sense of responsibility workers feel in making themselves ready and willing to work beyond paid hours, but also captures the feeling of anxiety that arises in jobs that involve a never-ending schedule of tasks that must be fulfilled – especially since there are not enough workers to carry the load’ (Gregg, *Work’s Intimacy*, p. 2). Write an essay exploring the implications of what Gregg calls ‘presence bleed’.
9. ‘Production and consumption are part of *one and the same process of expanded reproduction of the productive forces and their control*. This imperative, which is that of the system, passes into daily mentalities, ethics and ideology – and here is the great trick – in its *inverted* form: in the form of the liberation of needs, individual self-fulfilment, enjoyment and affluence, etc. The themes of Spending, Enjoyment and Non-Calculation (“Buy now, pay later”) have taken over from the “puritan” themes of Saving, Work, and Heritage. But this is merely the semblance of a Human Revolution: in fact, it is an internal substitution, within the framework of a general process and a system which remain in all essentials unchanged, of a new system of values for an old one which has become (relatively) ineffective. What could become a new finality has become, when emptied of its real content, an enforced mediation of the reproduction of the system’ (Baudrillard, ‘Towards a Theory of Consumption’, p. 82). The ‘great trick’: things seem to have changed fundamentally; in fact, nothing has changed. How do you access Baudrillard’s bleak radicalism on this matter?
10. ‘Gentlemen-gentlemen, Ladies-gentlemen,

All the while I am preparing to worry you, I am ceaselessly struggling with your internal difficulties, and I feel in advance that I am in the wrong rightly, so to speak.

My writings really have no *raison d’être*. Folly, madness! I fact, I know nothing: I have nothing to write except what I don’t know. I am writing to you with my eyes closed. But I know how to read with my eyes closed. To you, who have eyes with which not to read, I have nothing to reveal. Woman is one of the things that you are in no position to understand.

I’ve done everything possible to stifle it. What I’m saying is more than true. What’s the point of sexcusing oneself? You can’t just get rid of femininity. Femininity is inevitable. I ask you to take back your part of it. Take your shameful parts in hand. May Her proud parts come back to her’ (Cixous, ‘Coming to Writing’, 35).

To what extent can Cixous’s writing be read in the light of the feminist call for thinkers, not to ‘elaborat[e] a new theory of which women would be the *subject* or the *object*’, but instead to ‘jam… the theoretical machinery itself,… suspending its pretension to the production of a truth and of a meaning that are excessively univocal’ (Luce Irigaray, ‘The Power of Discourse and the Subordination of the Feminine’)?

1. Discuss the implications of ‘finance capital’ for culture (and cultural form) as Jameson explores these in his essay on ‘Culture and Finance Capital’.
2. ‘The precarity of life imposes an obligation upon us’ (Butler, *Frames of War*, p. 2). How does Butler ground her claim that the concept of ‘precarious life’ is not so much existential as *normative* – that is to say, *ethical* and *political*?
3. What is ‘slow violence’, as Nixon talks about it in his book of that title, and why does Nixon suggest that we need to develop a theory of this ‘different kind of violence’?
4. ‘Human beings, like all other living creatures, are determined by biology in the sense that they are embodied, mortal entities with specific genetic endowments, and possessed of a particular sexual anatomy and physiology. But relative to other animals, and in part in virtue of their specific biological evolution, they are biologically under-determined in respect of the ways in which they will experience and respond to these conditions. The “violence” that has been done through the cultural concept of nature must be associated with the refusal to respect these distinctions, and it is therefore important that ecological argument avoids talking about the “communality” of humans and animals in ways that conflate the biological and cultural and symbolic dimensions’ (Soper, ‘Nature and Sexual Politics’, pp. 125-6). What does Soper mean by ‘under-determined’ in this passage? What implications follow from her argument here?
5. Explain what Jason W. Moore means by speaking of the ‘double internality’: the ‘double movement’ of capitalism through nature and of nature through capitalism.
6. ‘Tackling the challenge of sustainable urban design for the whole planet, and not just for a few privileged countries or social groups, requires a vast stage for the imagination… It presupposes a radical willingness to think beyond the horizon of neo-liberal capitalism toward a global revolution that reintegrates the labour of the informal working classes, as well as the rural poor, in the sustainable reconstruction of their built environments and livelihoods. Of course, this is an utterly unrealistic scenario, but one either embarks on a journey of hope, believing that collaborations between architects, engineers, ecologists and activists can play small, but essential roles in making an alter-monde more possible, or one submits to a future in which designers are just the hireling imagineers of elite, alternative existences’ (Davis, ’Who Will Build the Ark?’, pp. 44-5). If what Davis argues here is true, can it be allowed to remain ‘utterly unrealistic’?
7. Focusing on Wang Hui and any one other theorist you have read this year, discuss the relationship between ‘modernity’ and ‘the West’?
8. What light do the readings on the module shed on forms of living in the era of social media, with regard to performance, development, gender, temporality, or war? Discuss, with reference to at least two of the texts you have read in Term 2.