**Literary and Cultural Theory, 2018-2019**

**Assessed Essay Questions**

**1st paper**

Answer ONE of the following questions. Please note that essays are due in Week 10 (Term 1).

1. ‘Are we now living in an enlightened age? No, but we do live in an age of enlightenment’. Explain what Kant means by this distinction. If the question were to be asked once more today, how would you answer it?
2. ‘By the public use of one’s own reason I understand that use which someone makes of it *as a scholar* before the entire public of the *world of readers*’/‘By the public use of one’s own reason I mean that use which anyone may make of it as a man of learning addressing the entire reading public’. These are two translations of the same key sentence in Immanuel Kant’s essay, ‘What is Enlightenment’. The ideas of disinterestedness and universality seem fundamental to Kant’s conception. Indeed, the ‘public’ use of reason is often construed as ‘reasoning for reason’s sake’. Is such a use of reason even possible, do you think? Give reasons for your answer.
3. ‘But if the Kantian question was that of knowing what limits knowledge has to renounce transgressing, it seems to me that the critical question today has to be turned back into a positive one: in what is given to us as universal, necessary, obligatory, what place is occupied by whatever is singular contingent and the product of arbitrary constraints? The point in brief is to transform the critique conducted in the form of necessary limitation into a practical critique that takes the form of a possible transgression. This entails an obvious consequence: that criticism is no longer going to be practiced in the search for formal structures with universal value, but rather as a historical investigation into the events that have led us to constitute ourselves and to recognize ourselves as subjects of what we are doing, thinking, saying. In that sense, this criticism is not transcendental, and its goal is not that of making a metaphysics possible: it is genealogical in its design and archaeological in its method. Archaeological – and not transcendental – in the sense that it will not seek to identify the universal structures of all knowledge or of all possible moral action, but will seek to treat the instances of discourse that articulate what we think, say, and do as so many historical events. And this critique will be genealogical in the sense that it will not deduce from the form of what we are what it is impossible for us to do and to know; but it will separate out, from the contingency that has made us what we are, the possibility of no longer being, doing, or thinking what we are, do, or think. It is not seeking to make possible a metaphysics that has finally become a science; it is seeking to give new impetus, as far and wide as possible, to the undefined work of freedom’. (Foucault, ‘What is Enlightenment? pp. 45-46). Attempt a close reading of this passage, situating it in relation to Foucault’s larger argument.
4. ‘[M]odernity is the attitude that makes it possible to grasp the “heroic” aspect of the present moment. Modernity is not a phenomenon of sensitivity to the fleeting present; it is the will to “heroize” the present’ (Foucault, ‘What is Enlightenment’, p. 40). What does Foucault mean when he speaks of ‘heroizing’ the present? And how does this link up with his suggestion that we should think of modernity, not as a ‘period’, but as an ‘attitude’?
5. ‘Although the needs of bourgeois society were not exactly kind to the family’s self-image as a sphere of humanity-generating closeness, the ideas of freedom, love, and cultivation of the person that grew out of the experiences of the conjugal family’s private sphere were surely more than just ideology. As an objective meaning contained as an element in the structure of the actual institution, and without whose subjective validity society would not have been able to reproduce itself, these ideas were also reality. In the form of this specific notion of humanity a conception of what existed was promulgated within the bourgeois world which promised redemption from the constraint of what existed was promulgated within the bourgeois world which promised redemption from the constrain of what existed without escaping into a transcendental realm. This conception’s transcendence of what was immanent was the element of truth that raised bourgeois ideology above ideology itself, most fundamentally in that area where the experience of ‘humanity’ originated: in the humanity of the intimate relationships between human beings who, under the aegis of the family, were nothing more than human” (Habermas, *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, pp. 48-9). Write an essay on this passage, unpacking its meaning (sentence by sentence) and assessing the various claims that it makes.
6. ‘The public’s understanding of the public use of reason was guided specifically by such private experiences as grew out of the audience-oriented (*publikumsbezogen*) subjectivity of the conjugal family's intimate domain (*Intimsphäre*). Historically, the latter was the source of privateness in the modern sense of a saturated and free interiority. The ancient meaning of the “private” – an inevitability imposed by the necessities of life – was banned, or so it appears, from the inner region of the private sphere, from the home, together with the exertions and relations of dependence involved in social labor’ (Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, p. 28). Critically examine Habermas’ concept of ‘audience-oriented subjectivity’. What is entailed in and by this form of subjectivity? What are the historical and social conditions of its emergence?
7. Marx’s chapter, ‘The Fetishism of the Commodity and Its Secret’, can be read as a sustained polemic against naturalising the status quo, i.e., against treating the givens of a social and economic order as facts of nature, not society. But are there moments where Marx himself appears to support a notion of natural value?
8. ‘To be a well-favoured man is the gift of fortune; but reading and writing comes by nature’ (*Capital*, p. 177). How do Dogberry’s words to the night-watchman Seacoal in Shakespeare’s *Much Ado About Nothing* (quoted at the end of the ‘fetishism’ chapter) help Marx to elucidate the phenomenon of commodity fetishism?
9. ‘You go into a supermarket and you want to buy a head of lettuce. In order to buy the lettuce, you have to put down a certain sum of money. The material relation between the money and the lettuce expresses a social relation because the price – the “how much” – is socially determined, and the price is a monetary representation of value. Hidden within this market exchange of things is a relation between you, the consumer, and the direct producers – those who labored to produce the lettuce. Not only do you not have to know anything about that labor or the laborers who congealed value in the lettuce in order to buy it; in highly complicated systems of exchange it is *impossible* to know anything about the labor or the laborers, which is why fetishism is inevitable in the world market. The end result is that our social relation to the labouring activities of others is disguised in the relationships between things. You cannot, for example, figure out in the supermarket whether the lettuce has been produced by happy laborers, miserable laborers, slave laborers, wage laborers or some self-employed peasant. The lettuces are mute, as it were, as to how they were produced and who produced them’ (Harvey, *Companion*, pp. 39-40). What are the central aspects of ‘commodity fetishism’ as Harvey presents it here?
10. ‘Sexual community is the reciprocal use made by one person of the sexual organs and faculties of another… [M]arriage… is the union of two people of different sexes with a view to the mutual possession of each other’s sexual attributes for the duration of their lives’. Lukács cites this definition from Kant in support of his argument that the social logic of commodification ‘cannot … content itself with the reduction of all objects for the gratification of human needs to commodities. It stamps its imprint upon the whole consciousness of man’ (*History and Class Consciousness*, p. 100). What is reification, for Lukács, and how does he see it operating in modern capitalist society?
11. How do you understand the relation between Marx’s analysis of ‘commodity fetishism’ and Lukács’s analysis of ‘reification’?
12. ‘So passé had products become in the age of lifestyle branding that by the late nineties, newer companies like Lush cosmetics and Old Navy clothing began playing with the idea of old-style commodities as a source of retro marketing imagery… When you are a pure, concept-driven brand, the aesthetics of raw product can prove as “authentic” as loft living’ (*No Logo*, pp. 24-5). How does Klein’s analysis of the ‘brand’ and of ‘branding’ extend – and how does it qualify or revise – the analysis deriving from Marx and Lukács, before her?
13. If capitalism constantly engenders new needs (desires) in us, does this have implications for the ideas of use-value and exchange-value and the relationship between them? Answer with reference to any or all of Marx, Lukács and/or Klein.
14. If the bourgeoisie has torn the veils of sentiment and superstition from the actual workings of society, why, according to Marx and Engels, does it require an ideology of its own?
15. ‘In a well-known passage [in the *Communist Manifesto*] Marx powerfully urges us to do the impossible, namely, to think [the] development [of capitalism] positively and negatively all at once; to achieve, in other words, a type of thinking that would be capable of grasping the demonstrably baleful features of capitalism along with its extraordinary and liberating dynamism simultaneously within a single thought, and without attenuating any of the force of either judgment. We are somehow to lift our minds to a point at which it is possible to understand that capitalism is at one and the same time the best thing that has ever happened to the human race, and the worst’ (Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, p. 55). Discuss the presentation of capitalism as a revolutionary force in *The Communist Manifesto*.
16. Discuss David Harvey’s concept of ‘time-space compression’. How is this concept useful for the analysis of modern social life?
17. “The conclusion we should draw is simply that neither time nor space can be assigned objective meanings independently of material processes, and that it is only through investigation of the latter that we can properly ground our concepts of the former’ (Harvey, *Condition*, p. 204). Discuss Harvey’s ‘conclusion’ here, drawing out its implications for our understanding of space and time.
18. ‘[I]mages have, in a sense, themselves become commodities’ (Harvey, *Condition*, p. 287). Discuss Harvey’s particular contribution to the debate about exchange value, advertising and commodity fetishism as we have encountered it in various writings this term.
19. Commenting on the centrality of shock in the experience of modernity, Benjamin notes that newer media such as film incorporate shock as their formal principle. What does he mean by this? What are the possible advantages or disadvantages of ‘normalising’ shock in this way?
20. Does Benjamin celebrate or deplore the ‘withering of experience’ registered by the loss of aura in technologically reproducible art?