

English 169cs: The Pagan-Catholic Imagination
Spring 2011
Prof. Tom Ferraro

I only know how to go forward by going back. In 1920, Willa Cather published a short story--I won't give it all the way--in which a modern avant-garde painter with real misanthropic even misogynistic leanings finds himself captivated by a young theatrical singer, who is possessed of extravagant yet assured ambition, whose womanly figure-in-motion is as spellbinding as her lovely voice, and who is portrayed--in all seriousness!--as the reincarnation of the pre-Christian goddesses of the Ancient Mediterranean. A Pagan female idol goddess, with no threat of reproductive issue, on the stage of modern Post-Protestant secular New York, with even the edgy, jaded, female-resistant artiste in thrall? What gives?

This course asks, what do American fiction and criticism, particularly some of our most knowing contemporary novels, have to do with the sexual personae of glamour photography, early Hollywood epics, and especially golden-age musicals (wherein women, men, and those bending the genders “strut their stuff”), and how do such literary re-stagings reflect and inflect the never-ending struggle between Christianity and Paganism for the readerly eye? for the American soul? To find out, we will revisit the Marxist-feminist post-structuralist debate over "the masculine gaze," especially the counter-theories of guerilla critics such as Leslie Fiedler, Camille Paglia, and Richard Rodriguez. We will explore the erotically diverse, sensorially extended, non-zero-sum treatments of that gaze, on film (song-and-dance snippets galore, plus Blue Velvet, possibly Big Night or The Stunt Man), in related multi-media (early Madonna videos, episodes of Rome and The Sopranos, a Sinatra clip or two), and, majorly, in gorgeous contemporary novels on the order of Cormac McCarthy's All the Pretty Horses, Ron Hansen's Mariette in Ecstasy, Jeannette Winterson's The Passion, Monique Truot's The Book of Salt, and Oscar Hijuelos's sonic diptych Mambo Kings Play Songs of Love and Beautiful Maria of My Soul. And we will analyze throughout why, now more than ever, the interplay of art, eros, and violence in the U.S. imagination cannot be understood without recourse to religious discourse--especially Marian/Pagan Catholic understandings of sensual grace, made presence, and redemptive sacrifice.

English 169cs: The Pagan–Catholic Imagination
Spring 2011
Prof. Tom Ferraro (with Jackie Cowan)

The novel is, however, essentially a Protestant genre, and begins, in effect, by removing the gilded crosses, the polychrome marbles, and the stained glass from the house of fiction.

Leslie A. Fiedler, 1960

COMING ATTRACTIONS

I. DEMYSTIFYING THE MALE GAZE

John Berger, Ways of Seeing (1972), esp. 2–3, 6–7

Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (1975; written, 1973)

Mad Men, Season 2 episode 6

II. LOOKING LIKE A PAGAN–CATHOLIC

Camille Paglia, Sexual Personae (1990), chs. 1–4, 8, 19, 24
interviews; Greil Marcus review

Song–and–Dance Clips

Madonna Immaculate Video Collection (1990); "Justify My Love"

80s performance clips; Madonna studies essays

HBO's Rome (2005; 2007), episodes/clips

III. SCOPING OUT QUEERNESS

David Lynch, dir., Blue Velvet (1986)

Rodriguez: "Credo," "Late Victorians," "Prince and I"

Richard Rush, dir., The Stunt Man (1982)

Quentin Tarantino, dir., Pulp Fiction (1994)

IV. RE–IMAGING THE GREAT AMERICAN NOVEL, CIRCA 1990

Willa Cather, "Coming, Aphrodite" (1920)

Cormac McCarthy, All the Pretty Horses (1992)

Leslie A. Fiedler, "Come Back"; Love & Death in the American Novel,
chs. 1–2

Oscar Hijuelos, The Mambo Kings Play Songs of Love (1989)

heartily recommended: Hijuelos, Beautiful Maria of My Soul (2010)
Ron Hansen, Mariette in Ecstasy (1991)

CREDITS: Excerpts from Scarlet Letter, Billy Budd, Their Eyes Were
Watching God Ferraro, "Cultural Studies Between Heaven
and Earth"

DAY-BY-DAY-BY-NIGHT

It was the pagan part of Catholicism that he loved,--"Bare Ruined Choirs, where
late the sweet birds sang"--and the Puritan part of Protestantism, its Malvolio-ism,
that he feared.

Adam Gopnik, of Shakespeare, 2004

- T Jan 18 John Berger, Ways of Seeing, esp. 2-3, 6-7 EXERCISE?
Th Jan 20 Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" w/clips
M Jan 24 SCREENING: Mad Men, Season 2 Episode 6_
T Jan 25 discussion of Mad Men; Susan Bordo, "Material Girl," 265-81
- Th Jan 27 Camille Paglia, Sexual Personae, ch. 1
interviews w/Postman, Bevilacqua, Ferraro
M Jan 31 SCREENING OF PAGLIA CLIPS? or FIESTA?
T Feb 1 Sexual Persona, chs. 2-5, 8 (19, 24); Greil Marcus review
Th Feb 3 ditto, w/ film clips (PCI disc plus cuts... Coca-Cola Kid, Some Like it Hot?)
- M Feb 7 SCREENING: Madonna, Immaculate Video Collection
T Feb 8 Madonna discussion
Th Feb 10 Bordo, 281-89; Kaplan, "Madonna Politics"; Ferraro, "Diva"
M Feb 14 SCREENING? "Justify My Love"; from Ciao, Italia and/or Blonde Ambition
T Feb 15 Madonna discussion; essays by Schwichtenberg; E. Floyd
Th Feb 17 Willa Cather, "Coming, Aphrodite"; ESSAY DUE
- M Feb 21 SCREENING: Blue Velvet
T Feb 22 discussion of Blue Velvet; Moon essay?
Th Feb 24 Richard Rodriguez, "Late Victorians" w/ "Credo"
M Feb 28 SCREENING: The Stunt Man
T Mar 1 discussion of The Stunt Man
Th Mar 3 Rodriguez, "The Prince and I"
Lawrence of Arabia clip; Ferraro, "Not-Just-Cultural Catholicism?"

SPRING BREAK

- M Mar 14 SCREENING: Rome Season 1 episodes 1,8; also: check out youtube clips
T Mar 15 Rome discussion
Th Mar 17 Rome w/in-class clips from Sign of the Cross, Spartacus, Ben Hur (1925)
- M Mar 21 ESSAY DUE; SCREENING: Pulp Fiction?
T Mar 22 Leslie Fiedler, "Come Back to the Raft Ag'n"; Love & Death, chs. 1 & 2
Th Mar 24 Cormac McCarthy, All the Pretty Horses, Book I
T Mar 29 Books II, III
Th Mar 31 Book IV
T Apr 5 The Mambo Kings Play Songs of Love, Intro Single ("It was a Saturday Afternoon" AND Side A ("In the Hotel Sendor 1980"), pages to be announced (13-191 in the recent edition I have)
Th Apr 7 The Mambo Kings, rest of Side A and more (also Soundtrack from MK)
T Apr 12 finish
- Th Apr 14 Mariette in Ecstasy, Part 1
T Apr 19 Part 2
Th Apr 21 Part 3; Ferraro's piece
M Apr 25 FINAL ESSAY DUE?
- T Apr 26 Openings to Scarlet Letter, Billy Budd, Their Eyes Were Watching God
Ferraro, "Cultural Studies Between Heaven and Earth"

TEMPTATIONS--AND CAUTIONS

Perhaps the whole odd shape of American fiction arises simply (as simplifying Europeans are always ready to assure us) because there is no real sexuality in American life and therefore cannot very well be any in American art.

Leslie Fiedler, 1960

O, Lord, fount of Desire and its source, have mercy on these Thy servants who have followed the words of their flesh in the innocence of its singleness.... Who have, in unity with its precepts (believing they were spoken in your voice,) turned their backs on the sweetness of habit, lost the regard of their fellows, endured the world's shame, suffered remorse, the abandonment of those by whom they knew and named and recognized themselves.

Mary Gordon, 1998

Preparation (reading, rereading; screening, rescreening), attendance (maximum three skips plus flu exemptions), and participation (including expressive silence) are mandatory and count heavily towards the final grade. You will write (informal) analytic exercises to start and several essays (spirited enactments, both trenchant and performative, clean mechanics) to develop and complement and synthesize what we're pursuing in class (final project to be determined). Count on more than one session at the screen per essay, or everyone is going to be unhappy. I have too many obligations this semester to countenance extensions on the writing; better plan ahead for econ exams, basketball games, and job interviews. Shifts in barometric pressure need to be honored, but take the penalty without discussion.

All texts are available from the Duke Textbook Store in COMMON editions. Buy them. Mark them up. And keep'em. (Book costs are a tiny percentage of tuition, room, and board; talk to me, however, if expenses cut--I often have extras copies looking for owners.)

I have put copies of our featured video material on reserve in Lilly. Still, you may want to procure: Madonna's Immaculate Video Collection on DVD (individual videos available on youtube etc.), also Rome (both seasons available in one box--immensely entertaining) and Pulp Fiction. I feel especially drawn to showing you The Stunt Man because it is currently out of print.

Format is Mediterranean dinner theatre, in jazz cadence: coming to class means being prepared to think with and against the texts, with and against each other. Say what you have to say, if only to exact an accounting, especially from me. Respond to hot-air with requisite chill, or, better yet, call it out; but don't get (just) catty under your breath. Enjoy the vernacular--as first-response, ironic counterpoint, or idiom of ultimate concern.

Bring your A-game every day, or be gone. As Don Vito once put it to Al Capone: "If you do not wish my friendship, so be it. But I must tell you that the climate in this city is damp; unhealthy for Neapolitans, and you are advised never to visit it." I ironize here the role that Sicilian pique plays in my determination of final grades, but not the risk you take if you don't grace us, regularly and intelligently, with (some combination of) curiosity, skepticism, confusion, recognition, rue, anger, insistence, lusciousness, fear, transport, and love. Think Madonna, think Prince--or, for those still working on their courage, The Not-So-Cowardly Lion. _

The Internet, like the library, can be a great source of biography, context, and even interpretation, but approach what you find there (even the academic essay, proffered by a scholarly data base) with a critical eye, disciplined by your own close analysis. There's a lot of mediocrity--and worse--out there. The problem is not just the loosey-goosey way in which some information sources go about their business, but the glibness of thought that comes with the ease of computer-facilitated textual production--"skimming" and "scanning" and "sampling" as forms of engagement? ("I want to be known by you as me," Bobby Darin sings)--including the nefarious illusion that information=knowledge. Pass along the good stuff, though, getting it right (where have you gone, E. R. Murrow?) and making sure you cite (as a hedge against the new plagiarisms).

Should the Fates wing you away to Singapore, then forwarding an essay by e-mail is a god-send. But in general using an e-mail attachment for delivery is an unwarranted transfer of work and expense. Hard copies only, please.

Wisdom for the cyber age: email can be fetching, and it can facilitate thought by releasing the censor-valve. But because you have little to no control over the context of its reception, tonal nuance is a problem. So feel free to burst eloquent or quizzical, but find some other way if negative emotion is entailed. E-mail is no way to ask a favor from an individual. Come see me, or at least pick up a phone. (Remember that even a land line communicates only 50% of what has been voiced; less still, a cell. Nuance, anyone?)

Involved and multiple readings of each given text are the name of the game, but do so as much as humanly possible in sync with the rest of the class. Don't read editorial introductions, afterwards, Net-Postings of whatever sort, or even the back of the cover if you can help it (as if!) until you've read the thing itself.

"Villanelle, whose talent it is to look at everything at least twice, taught me to find joy in the most unlikely places and still to be surprised by the obvious."

Jeanette Winterson, The Passion (1987)

Prof. Tom Ferraro
323 Allen Building, tel. 684-3718
ferraro@duke.edu

Jackie Cowan
jacqueline.cowan@duke.edu
"office" hours: to be determined

Initial Spring Office Hours:
T, 4-5 pm; Th, 2:45-4 pm; other times, by appointment

Do come to office hours, or say "hi" whenever you can. I am inviting you not to play sycophant but to teach me with whom I am working this semester. You are also welcome to email, especially to exchange ideas; but virtual contact has its limits. ("Closeness only counts in horseshoes and grenades"--or so, analog reminds us.) Make the time, take the time, get a life, this time get this life; or fugadabout it.

If, on autopilot, you flip open your cellphone or plug into your i-pod on the way out of class, you've missed your chance to talk to other denizens of English 169. University of Phoenix, anyone?

All electronic devices are to be turned off during class. Period. The issue here is not only the quality of attention but also the sanctity of the classroom we share.

Another caution for Duke, Inc., confused, at the millenium, in the era of privatisation, velocity, and the designer self: please do not bring food into the classroom unless it is for everyone. The issue here is not simply about courtesy, which most of us regard (wrongly) as a fussy holdover from Queen Victoria. At immediate stake is the sensorium--the aroma of food is able to incorporate only when the table is open. At larger risk is what Italians call "amicizia": to break bread together is to bond blood, while to withhold bread from others is to deny relation. (Beverages are less an issue, esp. those with caffeine, which is the intellect's drug of choice.)

"And when they left for the night, they occasionally came back for a surprise visit which they called a sirinata."

Jerre Mangione

