

CORE 301: Modes of Inquiry

Professor James Kincaid

The Perils of Common Sense

This course will study how common sense is formed, how cultures operate to turn the peculiarities of an institution or identity idea, useful for a particular time and place, into the appearance of timeless and universal operations. Common sense converts culture into nature, which is another way of saying that it operates under the skin, not by reasoning us into agreement but by presenting itself as simply THERE, like rocks and trees and smells.

Our being is formed inside such systems, ideological systems, and so are the larger social institutions which sustain the illusions of naturalness.

The course is intended as an exploration of how common sense gets formed, of how ugly its operations can be, and of how we might turn common sense back on itself: make it strange, penetrate its secrets, throw pies in its face. We want to make the familiar seem odd. That's tougher than it sounds, and more fun.

Another way to put this is that we want to deconstruct the foundations of common sense in order to expose its principles and see how they function in our daily lives.

In order to do all this, we will adopt some maps for exploring, some theories of how ideologies work and how they can be exposed. These will include Marxism, pragmatism, post-structuralist and cultural studies models, historical and cross-cultural analysis, and comic theory.

Texts

- Abbott, Jack Henry. *In the Belly of the Beast: Letters from Prison*. New York: Vintage, 1991.
- Buford, Bill. *Among the Thugs*. New York: Vintage, 1993.
- Camus, Albert. *The Stranger*. Trans. Matthew Ward. New York: Vintage, 1989.
- Capote, Truman. *In Cold Blood*. New York: Vintage, 1994.
- Engels, Friedrich. *Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State*. New York: International Publishers, 1972.
- Eugenides, Jeffrey. *The Virgin Suicides*. New York: Warner Books, 1994.
- McEwan, Ian. *The Cement Garden*. New York: Random House, 1994.
- Nabokov, Vladimir. *Lolita*. New York: Vintage, 1989.
- Salinger, J. D.. *The Catcher in the Rye*. New York: Warner Books, 1991.
- Sophocles. *Oedipus Tyrannus*. New York: W. W. Norton, 1970.
- Thomas, D. M.. *The White Hotel*. New York: Viking Penguin, 1993.
- Welsh, Irvine. *Trainspotting*. New York: W. W. Norton, 1996.