

Readings in German Studies: Romanticism, Irony, and Modernity

According to philosopher Slavoj Žižek, whereas Marxism understands ideology as a false consciousness along the lines of the phrase, “they know not what they are doing,” the ideology of our time may better be described as a cynical consciousness: “they know what they are doing, and they are doing it.” This cynicism raises significant questions for the ironic attitude of postmodernity. For example, is it enough to ironize or mock ideology if one continues to participate within its structures? At the same time that the pervasiveness of irony seems specific to our age, similar sentiments can be found surrounding the aesthetic discourses of the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries. Working with literary and philosophical works from this span of periods, this course will test the ironic form’s persistence throughout history despite its ostensible incapability to contribute to social action. We will probe genres and operations linked to (and often confused with) irony: satire, parody, subversion, and transgression, for example. Above all we will interrogate the comedic and critical capacities of texts with respect to the specific historical challenges surrounding their production. Among the questions we consider will be how playful aesthetic forms emerge in response to historical traumas and events, whether or not irony can function as a revolutionary politics, and why we in many cases feel compelled to relate artistic creation with societal progress.

Unit 1: Romanticism

Immanuel Kant, *Kritik der Urteilskraft*, "Analytik des Schönen" (excerpts)

Ludwig Tieck, *Der blonde Eckbert*

Novalis, *Heinrich von Ofterdingen* (excerpts)

Unit 2: Irony

E.T.A. Hoffman, *Der Sandmann*

Jean Paul Richter, "Rede des todten Christus"

Unit 3: Modernity

Friedrich Nietzsche, *Die fröhliche Wissenschaft*

Franz Kafka, "Ein Landarzt," *Die Verwandlung*