

**ENGLISH 740-01:
STUDIES IN CONTEMPORARY AND POSTMODERN AMERICAN LITERATURE (3.0
CR.)**

Postmodern Fiction after the “Material Turn”

Professor Christian Moraru

Fall 2010

MHRA 1304, T 6:30-9:20 PM

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COURSE DESCRIPTION AND GOALS: This graduate seminar focuses on the literature of postmodernism from metafiction and avant-pop through “systems novels” and more recent narratives of globality. We will look at postmodern fiction as a textual-intertextual site of the ongoing making and remaking of the human in the “hypermateral” context of late twentieth-century-turn-of-the-millennium globalization. We will examine, in particular, how the traditional subject-object relation evolves in the fiction, cultural theory, and philosophy of our time.

As an entire philosophical tradition reassures us, the difference between the human as cogitative subject and the inhuman/inanimate other as subject solely *to* our cogitations and thereby de facto object or thing is total. That is, not only are we, humans, the sole and absolute subject, entitled to our epistemological absolutism, but the object on the other side of the human-inhuman divide is absolute too and so irredeemably hostage to the stultifying immanence of its materiality. In brief, we are a *res cogitans*, a, or better still, *the* “thinking thing” in which the heavily emphasized first term plays down the “thing” (*res*) in us, whereas the only reality granted to the object of our cogitations is opaque re(s)ality, the self-imploding black hole of unthinking “thingliness” or, as Jacques Lacan underscores in one of his *Seminars*, the twice “dumb” reality that does not speak and hence remains silent because it cannot think to begin with.

However, as Lacan also stresses, “the Thing only presents itself to the extent that it becomes word, hits the bull’s eye, as they say” [*pour autant qu’elle fait mot, comme on dit faire mouche*]. More plainly: things present us with something to “think about”; in their symbolic configurations, they deploy an inanimate/inhuman/material Other to us that is “on target” (*fait mouche*) and targets us; through its unlikely presentation, “the Other as Heideggerian *Ding*” “tells it *like* it is,” to us. This observation should be taken literally. Not only must the Other’s telling (the Lacanian phallic signifier) be thing-like, that is, must be carried out in a *dingliche* fashion or appearance, but the “it,” “[*l*]es choses don’t il s’agit”—the “things” the *muet* (silent) Other talks about not in so many words (*mots*), that which is told to us and concerns us (the signified)—must also be some(-)thing germane to the form the telling and the “mute”

interpellation of the human take up. If so, then, what kind of stories do objects tell, one wonders.

The material narratives of postmodernism suggest that the objects around us are brazen provocateurs: as Heidegger proposes in *Being and Time*, the “thingliness [of things can be or] becom[e] a problem” that may end up problematizing the world. “As in *W[hat Is a] T[hing]*,” the book the German philosopher devotes exclusively to the thing, “the question ‘What is a thing?’ brings” (says Michael Inwood), “the whole world into play.” The play at hand is the material play (cf. the French *jeu*) of thinking, of thinking and its high stakes (*enjeux*). So the more basic questions we will be raising, along these lines, will be: What does it mean to be “interpellated” by objects intellectually speaking? How does our objectual environment help us in turn interpellate the world? How does the material stuff surrounding us push us to rethink this world and the basic distinctions it rests on? How do the empirical and its representation—as image, icon, cultural myth—comply with, and challenge, the expanding material-symbolic networks and the reigning ideologies thereof in the global era?

Our approach to American literature will be, of necessity, cross-disciplinary as well as cross-national. Required primary texts include works by Douglas Coupland, Susan Daitch, Mark Danielewski, Reza Negarestani, Georges Perec, and David Foster Wallace. We will also read literary criticism and cultural theory by Bill Brown, Barbara Johnson, Bruno Latour, Gilles Lipovetsky, Yuriko Saito, and Cary Wolfe. The emphasis will be on the primary sources, but we will also discuss and use a fair amount of scholarship, usually matching up a novelist and a theorist—we will read X “with” Y, where the juxtaposition, the “with,” does not present itself always or directly in the form of “about.” Also, in this class, students learn and apply the research methodology needed for the professional study of literature and culture as well as for the presentation of this study’s outcomes in venues such as peer-reviewed journals and academic conferences. The final paper, in particular, should be produced—and will be evaluated—with an eye to publication. The emphasis overall will be on identifying the dynamic and features of core concepts and models of current critical and cultural analysis including modernism, postmodernism, globalism, the human, subjectivity, intertextuality, and critique. We will situate these notions in their appropriate contexts; we will study their origins in modern theory as well as their forms in cultural history. Classroom work and individual projects, to be presented orally or in writing, are geared toward this goal.

PEDAGOGICAL METHODOLOGY AND CLASS FORMAT: Running for almost three hours, this class will resemble a seminar. It will combine lecture, extensive discussion, student presentations, and some group work. Usually, our meetings will open with a lecture by the instructor providing historical and cultural background and placing the scheduled readings in the appropriate context. Following this introduction, students give 15-20-minute individual presentations on specific aspects of those readings. Then, we discuss collectively the materials for the day. I will set aside time to prepare and evaluate writing projects, presentations, etc.

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT OBJECTIVES: Graduate students are encouraged to use this course to put their work in the larger, more demanding and competitive perspective of

professionalism and academic performance. The class is geared toward graduate reading and writing carrying—once again—potential for publication and presentation outside UNCG. While fulfilling the course's requirements is your main goal, I urge you to take these requirements as an opportunity to think about yourselves as part of the academic community, with its standards, language, methods, tools, and venues. Here are a few questions for us: where do I stand as a scholar, teacher, critic, and writer, and which are my goals? What is, or will be, my audience? In what kind of scholarly conversation do I wish to intervene based on what I learn here? What steps do I have to take to do that? What are the available resources? Which are the outlets for my work? What do I have to do, for instance, to turn my seminar presentation/paper into a conference paper/journal article/dissertation chapter/writing sample? (more details in class and individually).

COURSE REQUIREMENTS:

1. Oral participation is expected.
2. Individual presentations on the materials for the day. Guidelines for presentations: Students sign up for their final project and oral presentations right away so that we can spread out the presentations over the course of the semester. Each student will give a brief, **15-20-min.** talk on the scheduled readings. The presentations need not be written. Presentations cover a relevant aspect or material for the day. I do not expect you to fully analyze or explain the assignments or even one of these assignments. I ask you to a) briefly outline the argument or content of the readings you intent to talk about; b) identify one major element or theoretical problem in these works, which should help us open up our conversation. Feel free to consult with me before you pick your presentation topic.
3. Final Project Presentation: Each student will give a **10-min.** presentation on his or her final paper (see syllabus, last weeks).
4. Papers: a midterm (10 pp. max., including notes and Works Cited) and a final paper (20 pp. min. plus notes and Works Cited). The final paper may expand the midterm if the latter has been particularly successful. Both essays must be thesis-based and incorporate research.
5. Attendance and Participation. Both are expected and will factor into the final grade (see below under course policies).

CONFERENCES: Please meet with me during my regular office hours or make an appointment to discuss your specific interests, goals, or any aspect of this class. We will also talk about your plans for the final project.

COURSE POLICIES:

1. Late Papers: No late papers—and any other kind of late work for that matter—accepted.

However, if you foresee any deadline-related problems, please come to see me ahead of time. We shall work together to find a solution.

2. Absences: You are allowed no more than 2 (two) justified absences during the semester for illnesses (which you must document afterwards), religious holidays, or emergencies preventing you from attending. No undocumented absences allowed. Should they occur, they will affect your final grade. I will subtract 5% from the latter for any undocumented absence. Since we meet once a week, attendance is particularly critical to the success of your work. If you are the victim of an emergency, please stay in touch with me by e-mail or phone.

GRADING: As a general rule, no incompletes (but come to see me if you anticipate any problems). The quality of your work will be reflected in the final grade as follows:

1. Papers: 85%
2. Oral participation (includes group work and presentations): 15%

REQUIRED READINGS

FICTION

Coupland, Douglas. *Generation X: Tales for an Accelerated Culture*. New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 1991.

Daitch, Susan. *Storytown*. Urbana-Champaign: Dalkey Archive, 1996.

Danielewski, Mark Z. *House of Leaves*. New York: Pantheon, 2000.

Negarestani, Reza. *Cyclonopedia: Complicity with Anonymous Materials*. Melbourne, Australia: re.press, 2008.

Perec, Georges. *Things: A Story of the Sixties; A Man Asleep*. Boston: David R. Godine, 2002.

Wallace, David Foster. *The Broom of the System*. New York: Penguin, 2004.

THEORY

Brown, Bill. *A Sense of Things: The Object Matter of American Literature*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004.

Johnson, Barbara. *Persons and Things*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008.

Latour, Bruno. *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007.

Lipovetsky, Gilles. *Hypermodern Times*. Translated by Andrew Brown. Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2005.

Saito, Yuriko. *Everyday Aesthetics*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2008.

Wolfe, Cary. *What Is Posthumanism?* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009.

WEEKLY SYLLABUS:

(Note: All assignments are due in class under the day indicated in the syllabus. Also, unless page

numbers are specifically indicated, books (usually fiction) are due in their entirety on the first day they are scheduled. "I," "II," etc. just means that we will devote two meetings to that particular text.)

Week 1

Tue 08/24 Introduction to the course: topics, scope, structure, format, requirements.
Planning ahead, getting organized: individual presentations and conferences;
discussion groups; signing up for presentations
Introductory lecture

Week 2

Tue 08/31 Modernism, postmodernism, hypermodernism: objectualism, consumerism, and
critique
Perec, *Things* (I); Lipovetsky (I)

Week 3

Tue 09/07 Perec, *Things* (II); Lipovetsky (II)

Week 4

Tue 09/14 "Hyper"—and then "accelerated": Things R Us, still, after the '60s; the
poetics of the postmodern and the "poetics of things"
Coupland (I); Johnson 1-44

Week 5

Tue 09/21 Coupland (II); Johnson 109-175
Discussing the midterm paper: intervening in the debate

Week 6

Tue 09/28 Avant-pop and "everyday aesthetics"
Saito 1-103
Daitch 81-204

Week 7

Tue 10/05 Modernism, postmodernism; humanism, posthumanism
Subjects and objects, the animate and the inanimate; parroting the human
The network imaginary: the social, the objectual, and the global
Wallace (I)
Wolfe xi-142

Week 8

Tue 10/12 **Fall Break; no class**

Week 9

Tue 10/19 The network imaginary: the social, the objectual, and the global
Latour 159-262
Wallace (II)
Midterm paper due in class
Final project presentations (sign-up)

Week 10

Tue 10/26 The network imaginary: the social, the objectual, and the global
Negarestani (I)
Brown 1-80

Week 11

Tue 11/02 Negarestani (II)

Week 12

Tue 11/09 The network imaginary: the social, the objectual, and the global
Danielewski (I)
Presentations, final project

Week 13

Tue 11/16 No class: I'll be attending a conference overseas

Week 14

Tue 11/23 Danielewski (II)
Presentations, final project

Week 15

Tue 11/30 Final meeting
Presentations, final project
Overview
Student evaluations
Final papers due in class