

**ENGLISH 650-01:
MODERN LITERARY AND CULTURAL THEORY
Theories of the Contemporary (3.0 CR.)**

Professor Christian Moraru
Spring 2020
MHRA 2206
T, 6:30 - 9:20 PM

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COURSE DESCRIPTION AND GOALS: This is a graduate seminar in which we will join the fast-expanding, national and international debate on the problem of “contemporaneity.” Thus, we will be reading key texts that, over the past decades, have shaped discussions about the “contemporary” and subsequently about its conceptual neighbors like “modern,” “new,” “postmodern,” and even the “post-postmodern.” Included in our conversation are critics, theorists, and philosophers such as Alain Badiou, Theodore Martin, Michael North, and Terry Smith, among others. Our literary “target text” will be Ben Lerner’s 2011 novel *Leaving the Atocha Station*. One of the major goals of this course is helping students develop their own—one might say “contemporary”—approaches and vocabularies in literary-cultural analysis, with an eye to effective performance on PhD examinations and to advanced research. The class is also geared toward graduate reading and writing carrying notable potential for presentation and publication in competitive venues. There will be a midterm and a longer, final paper alongside other smaller assignments.

Despite recent claims to the contrary, the contemporary has, first and foremost, a historical meaning. We talk about the “contemporary era” not only to designate generically the present in which we exist, as others before us have referred to their own “now,” but also to name a unique moment in history. In this sense, it can be said that the age we live in is contemporary in a way the decades between World War I and World War II, for example, were not within their own temporal horizon and with respect to the people alive back then. One calls those years following the rise of the avant-gardes “modern” or, with a term befitting the circum-Atlantic cultures, the age of “high-modernism.” Spilling over into the post-World War II world, “high-modernism” and modernity overall were followed by postmodernity and its literary-cultural corollary, postmodernism. For a while, the latter was considered a “contemporary”—and, by some, *the* contemporary—phenomenon of the post-1945 interval, which scholars treated as the “contemporary era” roughly up until the late 1990s, when the consensus began to crumble and critics started looking for a “new,” more recent contemporary.

Our class joins this search now underway in U. S. criticism and elsewhere. However, we enquire not only about the historical nature of the “contemporary,” as suggested above, but also about the contemporary’s “aesthetic.” Is there a contemporary aesthetic, an aesthetic of the contemporary in U. S. fiction and possibly beyond, one that sets this literary production aside from, say, postmodernism? And, if so, then to what extent is this aesthetic “new” or “different”? How distinct is the contemporary from the postmodern? Once again, a discussion of the “contemporary” involves revisiting its conceptual neighbors such as “modern,” “new,” “present,” “postmodern,” the “post-postmodern,” which some critics have been using as a synonym to the contemporary, and even “post-contemporary.” Such cultural-historical adjacencies do encroach on the contemporary, and yet, we shall discover, the result is not chaos—the confusing “brouhaha” Lionel Ruffel views as capturing the essence of our disorienting and culturally raucous contemporary.

“One is not contemporary; one is contemporary to somebody” (*contemporain de*), writes Martin Rueff in “La concordance des temps,” an essay from Ruffel’s 2010 edited collection *Qu’est-ce que le contemporain?* If this is the case, then one question that bears asking is whether there are certain cultural modalities, certain “styles” in which one may be said that cultural “time-sharing,” being somebody else’s coeval, manifests itself. In other words, contemporary, today more than ever, is a relational reality. Being contemporary means *being with others*; contemporaneity is co-temporality, affords and usually requires being with within a historical horizon or epoch. On this account, it gives rise to an entire cultural phenomenology of the *Mitsein* (being-with) type. The other questions, however, are how we theorize this phenomenology, and what its aesthetic and sociopolitical marks are. In our class, we will raise these and germane questions about a pivotal concept in recent theory and criticism.

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 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 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?

COURSE REQUIREMENTS:

1. Substantial 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; c) articulate a personal viewpoint—make an argument—on this issue. Feel free to consult with me before you pick your presentation topic.
3. Final Project Presentation: Each student will give a **10-15-min.** presentation on his or her final paper (see syllabus, last weeks).
4. Papers: a midterm (7-8 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: 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% (midterm: 35%; final: 50%)
2. Oral participation (includes group work and presentations): 15%

I. REQUIRED READINGS:

- Badiou, Alain. *The Century*. Translated, with a commentary and notes, by Alberto Toscano. Malden, MA: Polity, 2007.
- Brooks, Christopher K., ed. *Beyond Postmodernism: Onto the Postcontemporary*, Newcastle upon Tyne, UK: Cambridge Scholars, 2013.
- Gladstone, Jason, Andrew Hoberek, Daniel Worden, eds. *Postmodern / Postwar — and After: Rethinking American Literature*. Iowa City, IA: University of Iowa Press, 2016.
- Hungerford, Amy. *Making Literature Now*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2016.
- Hungerford, Amy. "On the Period Formerly Known as Contemporary." *American Literary History* 20, nos.1-2 (Spring-Summer 2008): 410-19.
- Hutner, Gordon. "Historicizing the Contemporary: A Response to Amy Hungerford." *American Literary History* 20, nos. 1-2 (Spring-Summer 2008): 420-424.
- Hyde, Emily, and Sarah Wasserman. "The Contemporary." *Literature Compass* 14, no. 9 (September 2017): 1-19.
- Martin, Theodore. *Contemporary Drift: Genre, Historicism, and the Problem of the Present*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2017.
- North, Michael. *What Is the Present?* Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2018.
- Smith, Terry. *What Is Contemporary Art?* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009.
- Lerner, Ben. *Leaving the Atocha Station*. Minneapolis: Coffee House Press, 2011.

II. FURTHER / OPTIONAL READINGS:

- Agamben, Giorgio. *Qu'est-ce que le contemporain?* Translated from the Italian by Maxime Rovere. Paris: Payot & Rivages, 2008.
- Arnaut, Ana Paula. "Do post-modernismo ao hipercontemporâneo: morfologia(s) do romance e (re)figurações da personagem." *Revista de Estudos Literários* 8 (2018): 19-44.
https://doi.org/10.14195/2183-847X_8_1
- Avanessian, Armen, and Malik Suhail, eds. *Der Zeitcomplex: Postcontemporary*. Berlin, Germany: Merve, 2016.
- Avanessian, Armen, and Anke Hennig. *Present Tense: A Poetics*. London: Bloomsbury, 2015.
- Bourriaud, Nicolas, ed. *Altermodern: Tate Triennial*. London: Tate Publishing, 2009.
- Compagnon, Antoine. *Les antimodernes de Joseph de Maistre à Roland Barthes*. Paris: Gallimard, 2005.
- Descombes, Vincent. "Qu'est-ce qu'être contemporain?" *Le Genre humain*, 2, no. 35 (1999): 21-32.
- Donnarumma, Raffaele. *Ipermodernità. Dove va la narrativa contemporanea*. Bologna, Italy: Il Mulino, 2014.
- Eshelman, Raoul. *Performatism, or the End of Postmodernism*. Aurora, CO: The Davis Group Publishers, 2008.
- Faerber, Johan. *Écrire le contemporain*. Paris: PUF, 2018.
- Gumbrecht, Hans Ulrich. *Production of Presence: What Meaning Cannot Convey*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004.
- Gumbrecht, Hans Ulrich. *Our Broad Present: Time and Contemporary Culture*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2014.

- Heinich, Nathalie. *Le paradigme de l'art contemporain. Structure d'une révolution artistique*. Paris: Gallimard, 2014.
- Hoffmann, Lukas. *Postirony: The Nonfictional Literature of David Foster Wallace and Dave Eggers*. Bielefeld, Germany: Transcript, 2016.
- Jameson, Fredric. "The End of Temporality." *Critical Inquiry* 29, no. 4 (Summer 2003): 695-718.
- Jameson, Fredric. "The Aesthetic of Singularity." *New Left Review* 92 (March-April 2015): 101-132.
- Kirby, Alan. *Digimodernism: How New Technologies Dismantle the Postmodern and Reconfigure our Culture*. New York: Continuum, 2009.
- Kirsch, Adam. *Writing the World in the 21st Century*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2016.
- Marx, William, ed. *Les arrière-gardes au XX^e siècle: L'autre face de la modernité esthétique*. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2004.
- McLaughlin, Robert L. "Post-Postmodern Discontent: Contemporary Fiction and the Social World." *symploke* 12, nos. 1-2 (2004): 53-68.
- Murphy, Timothy S. "To Have Done with Postmodernism: A Plea (or Provocation) for Globalization Studies," *symploke* 12, nos. 1-2 (2004): 20-34.
- Nealon, Jeffrey T. *Post-Postmodernism or, The Cultural Logic of Just-in-Time Capitalism*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2012.
- Octavio Paz. *In Search of the Present: 1990 Nobel Lecture*. Bilingual Edition. San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1991.
- Quent, Marcus. *Absolute Gegenwart*. Berlin, Germany: Merve, 2016.
- Rancière, Jacques. *En quel temps vivons-nous? Conversation avec Eric Hazan*. Paris: La Fabrique, 2017.
- Rebentisch, Juliane. *Gegenwartskunst zur Einführung*. Hamburg, Germany: Junius Verlag, 2013.
- Ruby, Christian. *Devenir contemporain? La couleur du temps au prisme de l'art*. Paris: Félin, 2017.
- Rudrum, David, and Nicholas Stavris, eds. *Supplanting the Postmodern: An Anthology of Writings on the Arts and Culture of the Early 21st Century*. New York: Bloomsbury, 2015.
- Ruffel, Lionel, ed. *Qu'est-ce que le contemporain?* Nantes, France: Cécile Defaut, 2010.
- Smith, Terry, Okwui Enwezor, Nancy Condee, eds. *Antinomies of Art and Culture: Modernity, Postmodernity, Contemporaneity*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008.
- Vaessens, Thomas, and Yra van Dijk, eds. *Reconsidering the Postmodern: European Literature Beyond Relativism*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2011.
- Van den Akker, Robin, Alison Gibbons, and Timotheus Vermeulen, eds. *Metamodernism: Historicity, Affect, and Depth after Postmodernism*. London, UK: Rowman and Littlefield, 2017.

WEEKLY SYLLABUS:

Note: All assignments are due in class under the day indicated in the syllabus. Also, unless page numbers are indicated, books are due in their entirety on the first day they are scheduled.

Week 1

Tue 01/14 Introduction to the course: topics, scope, structure, format, requirements.
 Planning ahead, getting organized: individual presentations and conferences;
 discussion groups
Individual presentations (sign-up; each student presents twice)
 Introductory lecture: Literary history, the contemporary, and our basic vocabulary

Week 2

Tue 01/21 POSTWAR, POSTMODERN, CONTEMPORARY
 Assignments:
 Gladstone, Jason, Andrew Hoberek, Daniel Worden, eds. *Postmodern / Postwar
 — and After* 1-123

Week 3

Tue 01/28 PERIODIZATION AND THE CONTEMPORARY
 Assignments:
 Hyde, Emily, and Sarah Wasserman. "The Contemporary." *Literature Compass*
 14, no. 9 (September 2017): 1-19

 Hungerford, Amy. "On the Period Formerly Known as Contemporary." *American
 Literary History* 20, nos.1-2 (Spring-Summer 2008): 410-19

 Hutner, Gordon. "Historicizing the Contemporary: A Response to Amy
 Hungerford." *American Literary History* 20, nos. 1-2 (Spring-Summer 2008):
 420-424

 Martin, Theodore. "The Currency of the Contemporary," in Gladstone, Jason,
 Andrew Hoberek, Daniel Worden, eds. *Postmodern / Postwar — and After* 227-
 240

Week 4

Tue 02/04 HISTORICIZING THE PRESENT (I)
 Assignments:
 Martin, Theodore. *Contemporary Drift* 1-123
 * Lerner, *Leaving the Atocha Station*, and genre

Week 5

Tue 02/11 HISTORICIZING THE PRESENT (II)
 Assignments:
Contemporary Drift 124-197
 * Lerner, *Leaving the Atocha Station*, and periodization

Week 6

Tue 02/18 HISTORICIZING THE PRESENT (III)
 Assignments:
 North, Michael. *What Is the Present?* 1-85

Week 7

Tue 02/25

HISTORICIZING THE PRESENT (IV)

Assignments:

North, Michael. *What Is the Present?* 89-177* Lerner, *Leaving the Atocha Station*, and the present**Week 8**

Tue 03/03

Spring Break – no class**Week 9**

Tue 03/10

“PRESENT” AND “NOW”

Assignments:

Hungerford, Amy. *Making Literature Now** Lerner, *Leaving the Atocha Station*: reading Lerner’s novel “now,” reading “now” in Lerner’s novel**Midterm paper due in class****Final project presentations (sign-up)****Week 10**

Tue 03/17

LITERATURE AND OTHER (CONTEMPORARY) ARTS

Assignments:

Smith, Terry. *What Is Contemporary Art?* 1-68; 191-271**Discussing the midterm paper: intervening in the debate****Week 11**

Tue 03/24

POSTMODERNISM AND (POST)CONTEMPORARY (I)

Assignments:

Brooks, Christopher K., ed. *Beyond Postmodernism: Onto the Postcontemporary* 1-91**Week 12**

Tue 03/31

POSTMODERNISM AND (POST)CONTEMPORARY (II)

Assignments:

Brooks, Christopher K., ed. *Beyond Postmodernism: Onto the Postcontemporary* 92-153* Lerner, *Leaving the Atocha Station*, and the “postcontemporary”**Week 13**

Tue 04/07

OVERVIEWING THE CENTURY (I)

Assignments:

Badiou, Alain. *The Century* 1-80**Presentations, final project**

Week 14

Tue 04/14

OVERVIEWING THE CENTURY (II)

Assignments:

Badiou, Alain. *The Century* 81-178* Lerner, *Leaving the Atocha Station*, the contemporary, and the avant-garde**Presentations, final project****Week 15**

Tue 04/21

OVERVIEWING THE CENTURY (III)

Assignments:

Gladstone, Jason, Andrew Hoberek, Daniel Worden, eds. *Postmodern ∠ Postwar*— *and After* 127-259 (minus the Martin essay)**Presentations, final project****Week 16**

Tue 04/28

Final meeting

Course overview

Student evaluations

Final papers due in class