

Art, Culture, and the Roles of Criticism

English 3890, Spring 2011

MW 5:30-6:45pm, LA 229

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Course Overview

Broadly speaking, “theory” is often perceived to be entirely divorced from the “real” or “natural” meanings of art and literature; it is seen as a practice that muddies the intentions of artists and writers and ultimately devalues art and literature themselves. However, experimental art tends to confound audiences’ expectations for clear meaning and value, especially in the cases of works that incorporate and reference criticism into artistic practice. This section of *Contemporary Critical Approaches to Literature* explores the relationship between philosophy (critical thinking) and aesthetics (artistic practices and products)—the relationship at the heart of contemporary literary criticism. Semester texts include literary works that begin to blur the line between art and criticism, and critical works that extend the concerns of aesthetic criticism into the fields of science, culture, architecture, warfare, and even nutrition.

Although most students will have some background in basic theoretical moves from English 2600, critical theory may still look like a baffling, foreign language. Class time will be spent in fleshing out complex theoretical work to help students discover that engaging with the relationship between literary and critical texts is among the most rewarding experiences in the study of literature. We will be doing a lot of reading over the semester, and, due to the complexity of course materials, we will never be able to cover every element of every text, whether literary or critical. Students are expected to complete all required readings, and to direct class discussions through informed questions, discussion, debate, etc.

Assignments include periodic response papers, a take-home midterm exam, a term project (which will demonstrate substantial research on a topic or question of the student’s choice), and—of course—attendance and active participation in class.

Required Texts—to be Purchased

Mark Twain (Samuel Clemens), *Pudd’nhead Wilson and Those Extraordinary Twins*. 2nd Edition. Norton, 2005
ISBN: 0393925358

Don DeLillo, *White Noise*. New York: Penguin, 1986. ISBN 0140077022

Charles Johnson, *Middle Passage*. Scribner, 1998. ISBN: 0684855887

Jean Franois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*. U of Minnesota, 1984. ISBN: 0816611734

Jean Baudrillard, *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place*. Indiana, 1995. ISBN: 0253210038

Murfin and Ray, *The Bedford Glossary of Critical and Literary Terms*. New York: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2003.
ISBN: 0312467540

Required Reserve Materials
(linked through <http://www.uvu.edu/library>)

Roland Barthes. Introduction (excerpt), *S/Z* 3-13.
---. "The World of Wrestling" and "Dominici, or the Triumph of Literature," *Mythologies* 15-25, 43-46.
Mark Twain. "Passages from 'Glances at History'." *The Devil's Race Track* 373-75.
Michel Foucault. "The Means of Correct Training." *Discipline and Punish* 170-94.
Eric Sundquist. "Mark Twain and Homer Plessy." *Representations* 24 (1988): 102-28.
Linda Hutcheon. "Representing the Postmodern." *The Politics of Postmodernism* 1-29.
Jean Baudrillard. "Astral America." *America* 26-73.
Barbara Z. Thaden. "Charles Johnson's *Middle Passage* as Historiographic Metafiction." *College English* 59.7 (1997) : 753-66.
Charles Johnson. "Exchange Value." *The Sorcerer's Apprentice* 27-40
Dori Laub. "Bearing Witness" and "An Event Without a Witness" *Testimony* 57-92.
Judith Butler. "Explanation and Exhonoriation, or What We Can Hear." *Precarious Life* 1-18.
Hal Niedzviecki. "Crowd Control." *Hello, I'm Special* 95-128.

Film: *La jetée*. Dir. Chris Marker, 1964.

Prerequisite Skills

Using reading skills and strategies of argument learned in courses such as Engl. 2600 and 2010, students are expected, from the opening of the course, to be prepared to actively, critically read literary texts, and to respond orally and through writing. This course will add to those skills and strategies through lecture, class discussion, and engagement with current critical approaches of responding to literature.

Response Paper Guidelines

2-3 page response papers are due periodically, beginning **January 31**. While this paper is, primarily, an expression of your opinion, you should nonetheless develop a cogent, well-written argument. The best responses take on a specific topic from lecture, class discussions, presentations (or, of course, from your own reading alone), which is then worked out in some *critical/analytic* detail. Avoid trying to fit an entire week's reading—an entire novel or other extended text—into your response, since this leaves you with such a broad scope that any detailed examination is rather difficult.

Avoid summarizing the text and, instead, argue for a particular position, for a particular "reading." Your treatment of whatever topic you choose will be enhanced not only by a strong thesis, but also by your incorporation of specific material from the texts (both literary and critical); that is, present details, such as dialogue or other citations. This is in keeping with that old adage of "showing" rather than "telling" as you work out your argument/position.

Consider also addressing questions you have about the reading—perhaps centered on a scene, event, character, etc. How do specific questions or parts of the novel/essay/poem inform the significance of the whole? You may also think about developing connections between works—how do formal characteristics, topics, characters, etc. resonate across periods and nations, across gender and/or ethnic boundaries? How are those characteristics treated differently and why?

Plan to put your growing critical apparatus into practice. Develop the research and response strategies which will be required for success on your term project. Articulate your agreement or dissention with critical responses we read, or pursue critical readings on your own which will allow you to enter into an informed conversation on literary, cultural, and theoretical concepts.

The final response paper, a narrative self-and-course evaluation, is due with the final project.

Term Project Guidelines

The term project is essentially a research argument—typically a paper of 10-12 pages—on any topic within the scope of the course (the exploration of critical relationships between art and philosophy). You may use any of the course texts/authors or develop a project on texts, authors, music, films, art, and so on of personal interest with one caveat: ensure in making your choice that your subject matter merits close examination, and that you can develop a research question and a critical apparatus to explore it. Successful students tend to settle on at least a broad subject and begin the research and writing process shortly following the midterm. Feel free to write a term paper proposal if you want sustained feedback; this is optional, but due on or before **Wednesday 30 March**.

Grade Distribution/Notes

Response papers: 30%

Take-Home Midterm: 20%

Final Project: 30%

Attendance/Participation: 20%

- Course materials are determined by standards of academic inquiry and a commitment to the exchange of ideas; materials will not be “rated G” or censored in any way.
- If you have any disability that may impair your ability to successfully complete this course, please contact the Accessibility Services Department located in LC 312. Academic Accommodations are granted for all students who have qualified documented disabilities. Services are coordinated with the student and instructor by the Accessibility Services Department: TEL 801-863-8747; TDD 801-221-0908.
- Plagiarism will result in failure of the course and the possibility of administrative action.
- Attendance is required. You should plan to attend and be prepared for each class meeting. Because we will take a discussion/workshop approach to the course, attendance and participation will weigh significantly in your grade. In order to facilitate class participation, **laptop computers, cell phones, and other electronic devices may not be used during class time.**
- All written work will follow MLA style guidelines; late work will not be accepted.
- Per UVU policies: “Each student is expected to take an active role in the learning process by meeting course requirements as specified in written syllabi” (VILA). Thus, the course syllabus comprises a contract between instructor and students, who will be held to its terms and expectations, for “The right to receive academic credit and/or academic degrees when all specified requirements and course work have been satisfied” (V.L). In other words, the student has the right to receive credit for work that meets or exceeds satisfactory performance; however, the student also has the right to fail based on those same conditions of performance.
- It is not only your right, but also your responsibility to ask questions, to raise challenges, to discuss readings, and to otherwise participate in the class as it unfolds over the semester.
- Students will activate their UVU email accounts, which can be automatically forwarded to preferred accounts.
- The course website (<http://research.uvu.edu/goshert/uvsc389h.html>) will direct students toward additional resources for research, documentation, and bibliographic conventions. Sample student papers will also be archived, as available, throughout the semester.