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The Postmodern Turn, Spring 2023
ENGL 5920, 3 Credits
T, Th 12:25-1:45
BEH S 105

syllabus

description. This semester we shall explore five dominant currents coursing through postmodernity—that extraordinary, challenging, adventurous, and disorienting moment in American and European arts and thought we may or may not still be inhabiting:

- investigations into the limits of aesthetic construction;
- radical skepticism before such grand narratives as human nature, identity, race, gender, social progress, objective reality and morality, absolute truth, & reason;
- epistemological & moral relativism, pluralism, & self-referentiality;
- poststructuralism & posthumanism;
- problematizations of conventional notions of language & history.

We will begin with Samuel Beckett's arguably postmodern & inarguably stunning non-novel *The Unnamable* (1953). From there we will visit seven other pivotal postmodern print texts (Kathy Acker's *Blood & Guts in High School*, Mark Danielewski's *House of Leaves*; Anne Carson's *Nox*; NorbeSe Philip's *Zong!*; Maggie Nelson's *The Argonauts*; Jen Bervin's *Silk Poems*; Steve Tomasula's *Ascension*) and two pivotal hypermedial ones (Young-Hae Chang's *Traveling to Utopia*; David Clark's *88 Constellations for Wittgenstein*), while touching on some of the key postmodern theorists (including George Bataille, Roland Barthes, Jean Baudrillard, Judith Butler, Gilles Deleuze & Félix Guattari, Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, N. Katherine Hayles, Luce Irigaray, Jean-François Lyotard, & Friedrich Nietzsche), several crucial postmodern art movements (abstract expressionism, pop art, minimalism, earth art, conceptual/performance art), punk rock, and Bo Burnham's film about the pandemic, *Inside*—quite possibly having discovered along our journey, as the philosopher Martin Heidegger maintained, that not-being-at-home is always the fundamental human condition.

content warning. Writings in this course may include material that some students find offensive. Such material may include—but is not limited to—obscenity, profanity, representations of sexuality, violence, religion, politics, encounters with controversial issues in the media, etc. Most texts in this course will be dense and demanding. Students

who feel that this may be a matter of concern should consider taking another class. There will be no substitutions.

evaluation methods. Group presentations, start-up questions before each class, attendance and remarkably active participation, two creative responses, two tests.

leading class discussion. Your group presentations will be an important part of your grade, and perhaps a new experience for some of you, so you should plan to spend a good deal of time and work on them. You should think of them as the equivalent of a small research paper in terms of the time and energy you dedicate to it. An effective presentation will be enjoyable, informative, illuminating, thought-provoking, well-organized, and well-paced. Make sure you have read and reread the material on which you will present. Plan to meet with the others in your group at least twice (for at least one hour each time, although probably more) well before the day of your presentation. During your presentation, spend up to 10 minutes providing significant background information about the author, text's publication history, critical reception, your own critical/theoretical perspective on it, etc.; your job here is to contextualize the text at hand and provide optics through which the class can begin to understand it in fruitful ways. Present the class (preferably one period beforehand) with three to five questions that will guide the rest of your discussion/presentation and our class period beyond it. Be creative. Generate a strong outline with clear goals and share that with the class. Budget your time. Check all tech setup well in advance of your presentation. Remember: because this is a collective undertaking, everyone in your group will receive the same grade, so make certain that each person is carrying his or her own weight and that that is clear to me and to the rest of the class.

grading. Final grades will be calculated on a 100-point system:

- 10 test one
- 20 test two
- 10 creative response one
- 20 creative response two
- 10 group presentation one
- 10 group presentation two
- 20 participation, startup questions, attendance

letter grade values.

94-100 A	87-89 B+	77-79 C+	67-69 D+	00-59 E
90-93 A-	84-86 B	74-76 C	64-66 D	
	80-83 B-	70-73 C-	60-63 D-	

attendance. You are expected to attend all class sessions, to arrive on time and stay for the entire class session, to bring any texts under discussion, and to participate actively in our discussions.

participation. This course is discussion-based and highly interactive. You are required to be present in all senses of the word, genuinely involved. While active participation is essential, it is also essential that you respond respectfully, expressing differences of opinion without silencing, excluding, interrupting, or monopolizing. Failure to participate actively and frequently will hurt your grade considerably.

absences/tardiness. Each absence after the second will lower your final grade for the course by one letter grade. Two late arrivals or early departures will count as one absence.

due dates. Assignments are due at the beginning of the class for which they are assigned.

late assignments. No late assignments will be accepted.

success in the course. Successful students in this course typically demonstrate a high degree of intellectual/creative curiosity, as well as an ability to respond positively to feedback from their instructor and peers. An “A” student not only does well on written assignments, but is prepared (not only has read the material, but actively brings insights into and questions about it to the class), turns in assignments on time, and contributes meaningfully and consistently to the discussion.

required texts. Kathy Acker, *Blood and Guts in High School* (1984); Samuel Beckett, *The Unnamable* (1953); Jen Bervin, *Silk Poems* (2017); Bo Burnham, *Inside* (2021); Anne Carson, *Nox* (2010); Young-Hae Chang and Heavy Industries, *Traveling to Utopia and Bust Down the Door* (ca. 2000; online); Mark Danielewski, *House of Leaves* (2000); Steve Tomasula, *Ascension* (2022); Maggie Nelson, *The Argonauts* (2016); NorbeSe Philip, *Zong!* (2008); Julie Rivkin & Michael Ryan, eds., *Literary Theory: An Anthology* (second edition).

classes & readings.

- Jan. 10 Introductions. Problem(s) Defining & Situating “Postmodernism.” Where Did We Come From & What Does It Feel Like to Live Now?
- 12 Nietzsche: “On Truth and Lying in an Extra-Moral Sense” (Rivkin & Ryan). Samuel Beckett: *The Unnamable* (French: 1952; English: 1958).
- 17 Samuel Beckett: *The Unnamable* (French: 1952; English: 1958). Abstract Expressionism & Minimalism. Discuss and sign up for group presentations.
- 19 Samuel Beckett: *The Unnamable* (French: 1952; English: 1958). Barthes: “The Death of the Author” (handout). Discuss creative response.
- 24 Foucault: “Discipline and Punish” (Rivkin & Ryan). Žižek: *The Pervert’s Guide to Ideology* (excerpt). Robert Coover: “The Babysitter” (1969; online). Pop Art.
- 26 Kathy Acker: *Blood & Guts in High School* (1984). Irigaray: “Women on the Market” (Rivkin & Ryan). **Group Presentation One.**

- 31 Kathy Acker: *Blood & Guts in High School* (1984). Bataille: “Heterology” (Rivkin & Ryan). Jean-François Lyotard: “The Postmodern Condition” (Rivkin & Ryan). Punk.
- Feb. 02 Young-Hae Chang and Heavy Industries: *Traveling to Utopia* (ca. 2000, online). Baudrillard: “Simulacra and Simulations” (Rivkin and Ryan). **Group Presentation Two.**
- 07 Mark M. Danielewski: *House of Leaves* (2000). **Group Presentation Three.**
- 09 Mark M. Danielewski: *House of Leaves*. Earth Art & Labyrinths. Discuss test one.
- 14 Mark M. Danielewski: *House of Leaves*. Derrida: “Différance” (Rivkin & Ryan) & page one of *Glas* (handout).
- 16 Mark M. Danielewski: *House of Leaves*. Hayles: “Print is Flat, Code is Deep” (handout).
- 21 David Clark: *88 Constellations for Wittgenstein* (2009, online). Deleuze and Guattari: “A Thousand Plateaus” (Rivkin & Ryan).
- 23 **Creative Response One.**
- 28 **Test One.**
- March 02 **No Class.**
- 07 **Spring Break.**
- 09 **Spring Break.**
- 14 NorbeSe Philip: *Zong!* (2008). **Group Presentation Four.**
- 16 Anne Carson: *Nox* (2010). Discuss creative response two.
- 21 Anne Carson: *Nox* (2010).
- 23 **No Class.**
- 28 Maggie Nelson: *The Argonauts* (2016). **Group Presentation Five.**
- 30 Maggie Nelson: *The Argonauts* (2016). Judith Butler: “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution” (Rivkin & Ryan). Discuss test two.
- April 04 Jen Bervin: *Silk Poems* (2017). **Group Presentation Six.**
- 06 Bo Burnham: *Inside* (2021; see on your own). Conceptual/Performance Art.
- 11 **Creative Response Two.**
- 13 Steve Tomasula: *Ascension* (2022). Erin James, Eric Morel, & eco-narratology.
- 18 Steve Tomasula: *Ascension* (2022).
- 20 **Test Two.**
- 25 (In)conclusions.

plagiarism: The University's plagiarism policy will be strictly enforced. The Student Code defines plagiarism as "the unacknowledged use or incorporation of any other person's work in, or as the basis for, one's own work offered for academic consideration or credit." Examples of plagiarism include "representing as one's own, without attribution, any other person's words, phrasing, ideas, information or any other mode or content of expression." Disciplinary action for plagiarizing papers or exams ranges from a failing grade on the assignment or in the course to suspension or expulsion from the University.

students with disabilities. The University of Utah seeks to provide equal access to its programs, services and activities for people with disabilities. If you will need accommodations in the class, reasonable prior notice needs to be given to the Center for Disability & Access, 162 Olpin Union Building, 801-581-5020. CDA will work with you and the instructor to make arrangements for accommodations. All written information in this course can be made available in alternative format with prior notification to the Center for Disability & Access.

university safety statement. The University of Utah values the safety of all campus community members. To report suspicious activity or to request a courtesy escort, call campus police at 801-585-COPS (801-585-2677). You will receive important emergency alerts and safety messages regarding campus safety via text message. For more information regarding safety and to view available training resources, including helpful videos, visit safeu.utah.edu.

addressing sexual misconduct. Title IX makes it clear that violence and harassment based on sex and gender (which includes sexual orientation and gender identity/expression) is a civil rights offense subject to the same kinds of accountability and the same kinds of support applied to offenses against other protected categories such as race, national origin, color, religion, age, status as a person with a disability, veteran's status or genetic information. If you or someone you know has been harassed or assaulted, you are encouraged to report it to the Title IX Coordinator in the Office of Equal Opportunity and Affirmative Action, 135 Park Building, 801-581-8365, or the Office of the Dean of Students, 270 Union Building, 801-581-7066. For support and confidential consultation, contact the Center for Student Wellness, 426 SSB, 801-581-7776. To report to the police, contact the Department of Public Safety, 801-585-2677 (COPS).

english department diversity statement. Literature allows us to imagine the lives of others and broaden our perspectives. How we talk about it together, in the physical or virtual classroom, is part of that process. Our diverse identities and experiences will inform and enhance those discussions. As we approach sometimes difficult topics, each member of the class is expected to foster a respectful, generous, and supportive classroom environment that makes room for productive difference and reasoned debate.

masking, vaccinations, testing. According to the CDC, wearing a mask remains an effective means of preventing infection for both unvaccinated and vaccinated people. Regardless of what someone chooses (mask or no mask), the university seeks to foster a sense of community and asks everyone on campus to be respectful of individual decisions on mask wearing. Vaccination is proving highly effective in preventing severe COVID-

19 symptoms, hospitalization, and death from coronavirus. Vaccinations are available to everyone 12 years and older. Appointments are open in the U of U Health system for patients as well as additional vaccine providers throughout Utah. Voluntary asymptomatic testing will continue to be available weekly for all members of the campus community. students must self-report if they test positive for COVID-19 via this website: <https://coronavirus.utah.edu/>.