

LITERATURE & DESIGN
HL90cj

Spring 2017
Weds., 3–5 PM
Room: Barker 218

David Alworth
alworth@fas.harvard.edu
Barker 143
Office Hours: Tues., 2–4

DESCRIPTION

Design is ubiquitous, complex, and difficult to define. It affects almost everything that we experience through our senses, and it permeates our lives, both waking and sleeping. Texts, images, objects, environments, identities, minds, social encounters, and political arrangements are all shaped by design, which has a subtle yet definite power that often operates below the threshold of conscious perception. And yet, design emanates from the conscious mind; in the most capacious sense, as the *Oxford English Dictionary* explains, it designates a “plan or scheme conceived in the mind and intended for subsequent execution; the preliminary conception of an idea that is to be carried into effect by action; a project.” With this definition in mind, you could construct a 500,000-year history of design, beginning with the primitive tools of protohumans and extending to the open-source code on GitHub. Or you could begin even earlier, say, with God.

This course takes a more modest, historical approach. After establishing working definitions of both “design” and “literature,” we’ll turn our attention to modern American culture, which will form the material context for our investigation into eight design targets—commodities & things, art & kitsch, architecture, images, information, spectacle, performance, and books—and their literary representations, broadly conceived. Our analyses will be informed by seminal works of critical theory and by recent scholarship in a range of fields: literary studies, art history, media theory, &c. Much of this scholarship stages explicit questions about interpretive methodology that we will address as we plunge into particular historical cases and cultural scenes.

GOALS

This course has several interconnected goals. It is, most fundamentally, an introduction to the interdisciplinary study of culture, so its primary mission is to help you hone your skills in reading, interpretation, historical contextualization, writing, discussion, and speculative thinking—all of which are important for more advanced work in History and Literature. You can expect to do a lot of difficult but rewarding reading. In class and in print, you will address a wide range of texts and objects, from novels to manifestos, theoretical works to performances. Our readings and discussions, complemented by your own research, will familiarize you with major themes in modern American culture and with key topics in design thinking and cultural analysis.

REQUIRED TEXTS

Available at the COOP

Jessica Helfand, *Design: The Invention of Desire*
Don Norman, *The Design of Everyday Things*, revised edition
Jeffrey L. Meikle, *Design in the USA*

Karl Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1
Don DeLillo, *White Noise*
Ben Lerner, *10:04*
Le Corbusier, *Toward an Architecture*
Rem Koolhaas, *Delirious New York*
Paul Drew and Ned Sternberger, *By Its Cover: Modern American Book Cover Design*
Jennifer Egan, *A Visit from the Goon Squad*
Johanna Drucker, *Graphesis*
Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*
Tom McCarthy, *Satin Island*
W. G. Sebald, *The Rings of Saturn*
Johanna Drucker and Emily McVarish, *Graphic Design History: A Critical Guide*

Plus additional material on the course website

ASSIGNMENTS

Active Participation and Convening (30%): This course is a seminar, so its success depends on lively engagement from everyone. You are always expected to come to class prepared to discuss the readings; beginning in week 4, each class will be hosted by pairs of “conveners,” who will guide our analysis and discussion of a primary source (marked with an asterisk). Conveners are encouraged to meet with me beforehand for guidance. Please note: there will be a required class session during reading period that will feature acclaimed book designer Peter Mendelsund.

Short Assignments (30%): Throughout the semester, you will undertake five short papers (see prompts below). They are due in class on the dates listed below. They serve several purposes: to prepare you for class discussion; to help you practice close reading and critical analysis; and to provide a low-pressure venue in which to explore new ideas. Each will receive a grade of \checkmark (satisfactory); $\checkmark+$ (excellent); or $\checkmark-$ (unsatisfactory).

Final Paper Proposal, Bibliography, and Presentation (10%): This assignment will help you craft a top-notch final paper; in effect, it gives you the chance to present a draft of your thesis to me for feedback and advice. In approximately 250 words, you should lay out your argument, explain how you intend to prove it, and situate it in relation to existing scholarship (approximately five scholarly/secondary sources). I will provide written comments, but you should also feel free to meet with me as you prepare to write. You will submit these proposals on 4/26 and present a brief report on your research during class. If you are writing your final paper on a topic that develops from your “convening” presentation, then you must offer newly expanded and refined material in this instance.

Final Paper (30%): 10–12 pages, approximately 5 secondary/scholarly sources, MLA or Chicago format. We will discuss this paper extensively as the deadline approaches. Due on 5/11 @ 9:00 AM.

POLICIES

The classroom is a space for thinking generously and ambitiously with others. All students are expected to be courteous, respectful, and committed to intellectual practice. This means arriving on time, silencing PEDs, and offering your views. It should go without saying that texting, checking Facebook, and the like is prohibited during class. If you are caught doing so, you will be asked to leave, and your participation grade will be reduced significantly.

Laptops, tablets, and e-readers are allowed, but they must be used appropriately.

All written work must conform to the guidelines in the most recent edition of the MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers or the Chicago Manual of Style.

Plagiarism is a serious offense with serious consequences that will be determined by the University. All students are expected to consult the Harvard Guide to Using Sources in order to avoid plagiarism. The Guide provides the complete and official plagiarism policy of this course.

Collaboration is permitted. You are encouraged to consult with your classmates on the choice of paper topics and to share sources. You may find it useful to discuss your chosen topic with your peers, particularly if you are working on the same topic as a classmate. However, you should ensure that any written work you submit for evaluation is the result of your own research and writing and that it reflects your own approach to the topic. You must also adhere to standard citation practices in this discipline (MLA) and properly cite any books, articles, websites, lectures, etc. that have helped you with your work. If you received any help with your writing (feedback on drafts, etc.), you must also acknowledge this assistance.

Extensions are only granted in extenuating circumstances. Speak with me ahead of time if you feel that you need an extension for a valid reason. Late papers without an extension are penalized 1/3 of a letter grade (e.g. a B+ becomes a B).

SCHEDULE

- 1/25 **INTRODUCTION**
- 2/1 **WHAT IS DESIGN? WHAT ISN'T?**
Jessica Helfand, *Design: The Invention of Desire* (2016)
Ben Highmore, "A Sideboard Manifesto," in *Design Culture Reader* (2008)
- 2/8 **THINKING W/ DESIGN: METHODS OF ANALYZING HIST. & LIT.**
Don Norman, chapter 1, *The Design of Everyday Things*, revised edition (2013)
Caroline Levine, "The Affordances of Form," *Forms* (2014)
Bruno Latour, "The Berlin Key or How to Do Words with Things" (2001)
Rita Felski, "'Context Stinks!'" (2011)
- 2/15 **DESIGN IN AMERICAN CULTURE**
Jeffrey L. Meikle, *Design in the USA* (2005), selections
Thorstein Veblen, "Conspicuous Consumption," *Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899)
Ralph Ellison, "Cadillac Flambé" (1982)*
conveners 1
short paper 1
- 2/22 **NO CLASS**
- 3/1 **COMMODITIES & THINGS**
Karl Marx, chapter 1, *Capital I* (1867)
Arjun Appadurai, "Introduction," *The Social Life of Things* (1985)
Bill Brown, "Thing Theory" (2001)
Don DeLillo, *White Noise* (1985)*
conveners 2
- 3/8 **ART & KITSCH**
Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art ..." (1936)
Clement Greenberg, "Avant Garde and Kitsch" (1939)
Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, "The Culture Industry" (1944)
Ben Lerner, *10:04* (2014)*
conveners 3
short paper 2
- 3/15 **SPRING BREAK**
- 3/22 **ARCHITECTURE**
Adolf Loos, "Ornament and Crime" (1910)
Le Corbusier, *Toward an Architecture* (1923), selections
Ivan Chitchevlov, "Formulary for a New Urbanism" (1953)
Rem Koolhaas, *Delirious New York* (1978)*
conveners 4
short paper 3
- 3/29 **IMAGES**
W. J. T. Mitchell, "Image," *Critical Terms for Media Studies* (2010)
Johanna Drucker & Emily McVarish, *Graphic Design History* (2013), chs. 12–13
Thomas Frank, *The Conquest of Cool* (1998), chs. 2–3

David Olgilvy, *Confessions of an Advertising Man* (1963)*
Mad Men, season 3, episodes 1–4 (2007–15)*
conveners 5

4/5 **INFORMATION**
Orit Halpern, "Introduction," *Beautiful Data* (2015)
Johanna Drucker, *Graphesis* (2015)
Edward Tufte, "PowerPoint is Evil" (2003)
Jennifer Egan, *A Visit from the Goon Squad* (2010)*
conveners 6

4/12 **SPECTACLE**
Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle* (1967)
Tom McCarthy, *Satin Island* (2015)*
conveners 7
short paper 4

4/19 **PERFORMANCE**
Bertolt Brecht, "Alienation Effects in Chinese Acting" (1936)
Robert Edmond Jones, ch. 4, *The Dramatic Imagination* (1941)
Peter Brook, "The Deadly Theater," *The Empty Space* (1968)
Heiner Müller, *Hamletmachine* (1977)*
Hamletmachine (2010)*, dir. Agustín Calderón: <https://vimeo.com/31475816>
conveners 8

4/26 **BOOKS**
Ned Drew and Paul Sternberger, *By Its Cover* (2005)
Peter Terzian, "Portrait of a Cover Artist: An Interview with Peter Mendelsund"
W. G. Sebald, *The Rings of Saturn* (1995)*
final paper proposals/bibliographies due

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4/27–5/3 **READING PERIOD**
Peter Mendelsund visit TBA

5/11/17 **FINAL PAPERS DUE**

SHORT PAPERS

1) WHAT IS DESIGN? (500–800 WORDS)

Answer this question. Draw on the readings from the first four class sessions. Discuss how design connects with literature, history, and/or interpretive methods.

2) CLOSE READING (800–1000 WORDS)

Choose a textual passage (250–500 words) from any primary source that we've read so far, and perform a close reading of it. Follow these guidelines:

<http://writingcenter.fas.harvard.edu/pages/how-do-close-reading>

3) MATERIAL OBJECT ANALYSIS (800-1000 WORDS)

Choose any material object, and perform an analysis of it. Follow the guidelines for “material culture analysis” in Prown (see website). Include a picture.

4) DESIGN IN THE NEWS (500–800 WORDS)

Find a recent article about design from a newspaper, magazine, or other source, and discuss its relevance to the course.

5) QUESTION FOR PETER MENDELSUND

Submit a discussion question for Peter Mendelsund.