Realism After Postmodernism

Are we “post” the postmodern period? If so, what comes next? This course seeks to answer these questions by, first, examining what postmodernism was and, second, analyzing contemporary American writers who write in the wake of the postmodernist heyday. Many of these writers conceive of themselves as “realist” novelists, but they also recognize that they can no longer writer straightforward realist fiction. Instead, they must take into account the interventions of postmodernism—which include end of originality and the rise of metafiction—as they craft their accounts of contemporary American life. How do these writers incorporate, revise, or disregard the work of the postmodernist writers that preceded them? We’ll read representative samples of postmodern novels and theory and then turn to the fiction that appeared in the decades that followed. Authors include Jennifer Eagan, David Foster Wallace, and Jonathan Franzen.

The research component of the course will help us better understand both our primary texts and their historical contexts. In addition to learning how to engage with arguments put forth in academic articles, students will also learn how to read and evaluate theoretical texts as well as book reviews from contemporary American periodicals. At the conclusion of the course, students will be able to use a broad range of secondary sources and will know how to use these sources to advance their own arguments. Research assignments and discussions of secondary criticism will prepare students to produce their final research papers for the course.

**Requirements:**

Regular reading, attendance, and participation; completion of short research and writing assignments; attendance at research session in Widener library; 20-25 page final research paper (partial and full drafts due over the course of the term) including a bibliography with 10+ annotations (also due in segments over the course of the term)

**Primary Texts:**

NB: There is some flexibility regarding the selection of primary readings, which may be adjusted according to student interest.

Photocopies of selected stories will be distributed in the week prior to the assignment. Novels should be purchased or borrowed by students.

Donald Barthelme, *Unspeakable Practices, Unnatural Acts*

Teju Cole, *Open City*

Don DeLillo, *White Noise*

Jennifer Egan, *Look At Me*

Jeffrey Eugenides, *The Marriage Plot*

Jonathan Franzen, *The Corrections*

Thomas Pynchon, *The Crying of Lot 49*

Dana Spiotta, *Stone Arabia*

David Foster Wallace, *Infinite Jest*

**Secondary Texts:**

All critical selections will be photocopied and distributed in the prior week’s class. Different secondary readings may be substituted for those listed, though the quantity of reading will remain roughly the same.

Recommended Secondary Materials:

*MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers 7th Edition* (2009)

Wayne C. Booth et. al, *The Craft of Research 3rd Edition* (2008)

WEEKLY ASSIGNMENTS:

**Beginning With Postmodernism**

Week One: Donald Barthelme, from *Unspeakable Practices, Unnatural Acts* (1968)

-From Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition* (1979)

Week Two: Thomas Pynchon, *The Crying of Lot 49* (1966)

-From Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (1988)

-Scott Drake, “Resisting Totalizing Structures: An Aesthetic Shift in Thomas Pynchon’s *The Crying of Lot 49* and *Gravity’s Rainbow*” *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* (2010)

Week Three: Don DeLillo, *White Noise* (1985)

-From Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation* (trans. 1994)

-Michael Hardin, “Postmodernism’s Desire for Simulated Death: Andy Warhol’s Car Crashes, J.G. Ballard’s Crash, and Don DeLillo’s *White Noise*” *Lit: Literature Interpretation Theory* (2002)

**Post-Postmodernism: Returning to Realism in American Fiction**

Week Four: Jonathan Franzen, *The Corrections* (2001), first half

-Franzen, “Mr. Difficult” *New Yorker* (September 30, 2002)

\* 4-page paper due in class \*

Week Five: Franzen, *The Corrections*, second half

-student-selected reviews

Week Six: David Foster Wallace, *Infinite Jest* (excerpt) (1996)

-Jonathan Raban, “Divine Drudgery” in *The New York Review of Books* (May 12, 2011)

\* Browse & Bibliography assignment due \*

\*\* Week Six: Research Session at Widener Library with Laura Farwell Blake \*\*

Week Seven: Wallace, cont.

-From *Timothy Aubry, Reading as Therapy: What Contemporary Fiction Does for Middle-Class Americans*

Week Eight: Jennifer Egan, *Look at Me* (2001)

-Adam Kelly, “Beginning with Postmodernism” *Twentieth Century* (2011)

\* Select, summarize, and evaluate one critical articleabout a text we have read thus far \*

**\* Selection of author(s) and text(s) for final paper (1-2 page prospectus); partial bibliography with 5+ annotations due \***

Week Nine: Jeffrey Eugenides, *The Marriage Plot* (2011)

-From Judith Ryan, *The Novel After Theory* (2011)

-Nicholas Dames, “The Theory Generation” *n+1* (October 24, 2012)

Week Ten: Teju Cole, *Open City* (2011)

-James Wood, “Human, All Too Inhuman” *The New Republic* (2000)

-James Wood, “The Arrival of Enigmas,” *The New Yorker* (February 28, 2011)

**\* Partial draft (10 pages) due; bibliography with 10+ annotations \***

Week Eleven: Dana Spiotta, *Stone Arabia* (2012)

-Michael Szalay, “The Incorporation Artist” *Los Angeles Review of Books* (July 10, 2012)

Week Twelve: student choice of contemporary realist novel: options may include Jennifer Egan’s *A Visit to the Goon Squad* (2010), Jonathan Franzen’s *Freedom* (2010), Benjamin Kunkel’s *Indecision* (2005), Chad Harbach’s *The Art of Fielding* (2011), and Lorrie Moore’s *A Gate at the Stairs* (2010)

**\* Complete draft due \***

Week Thirteen: \* Student paper workshop \*

**\* Final paper due in my mailbox by 5pm on date TK \***