

Postmodernism
CLC 2273G, Winter 2012

Lectures and tutorials: Mondays 1:30—3:30, Wednesdays 1:30—2:30, rm. TBA

Instructor: Călin Mihăilescu (cmihails@uwo.ca; tel. 661-2111 ext. 85862)

Teaching Assistant: TBA

Office Hours: UC 361 Wed. 11:30-1:30 (or by appointment)

Course Description We will explore together a wide variety of phenomena characteristic of late 20th-century culture. The main postmodern (PoMo) buzzwords—fragmentation, irony, pastiche, playfulness, kitsch & camp, “anything goes,” cool, pop, hypertext, etc.—will be turned inside out as they will be put to use in the fun and heavy work of interpretation. Literature, film, theory, visual arts, architecture, music, TV shows and computer games & habits will be discussed in the attempt of gaining a decently comprehensive understanding of what has been going on recently in world culture, and of how we are determined by these phenomena. Our main literary diet will include bits by Barthelme, Burroughs, Coupland, Coetzee, DeLillo, Pelevin, and Robbe-Grillet, along with films by Almodóvar and Spike Jonze, artwork by Francis Bacon, Warhol and others, architectural projects by Gehry, Koolhaas, etc. Most theoretical and critical texts referred to in class are to be found in Thomas Docherty’s *Postmodernism: a reader*.

Course Content and Aims The course aims to introduce students to major literary, plastic, filmic and musical works from the second half of the 20th century, a period loosely defined as postmodern. While the material is predominantly North American, constant reference to other cultural areas (Western Europe and Russia in particular) will be made. We will discuss some of the recurring features of postmodern art and thought – fragmentation, playfulness, parody, pastiche, writing-as-reading, the cynicism of comfort, and “anything goes-ism,” – their intersections, and their relationships with high modernism and the avant-garde, along with elements of technology theory and contemporary political thought. The course is taught in English. All literary and theoretical works will be available in English translation.

Learning Outcomes By the end of this course the students will have become acquainted with some of the major pronouncements of postmodern art and thought. Increased critical awareness, the ability to connect aesthetic phenomena with their social, political and technological environments, and a more flexible usage of postmodern discursive features will be expected. Students will improve their ability to express themselves on these and other related topics, both orally (through in-class presentations) and in writing (in the form of essays).

Course Guidelines Students are expected to attend all lectures and to complete all required readings before coming to class. Class presentations (which are not to be longer than 15 minutes) should be articulate, informative and provide personal analytic touch. Essays must be submitted within the deadline.

Plagiarism “Students must write their essays and assignments in their own words. Whenever students take an idea or a passage of a text from another author, they must acknowledge their debt both by using quotation marks where appropriate, and by proper referencing such as footnotes and citations. Plagiarism is a major academic offense (see Scholastic Offense Policy in

the Western Academic Calendar). The University of Western Ontario uses plagiarism checking software. Students may be required to submit their written work in electronic form for plagiarism checking.”

Syllabus

Jan. 9 – Introduction: PoMo (after high modernism and the avant-garde, our comfy humankind is taken over by technique); also course administration matters will be discussed

Jan 11 – PoMo atmosphere

Reading: Ihab Hassan, “Toward a Concept of Postmodernism,” in *Postmodernism: a reader* (henceforth *PR*), pp. 146-156

Jan 16 – PoMo atmosphere (2)

Readings: Jean-François Lyotard, “Answering the Question: What is postmodernism?” and “Note on the Meaning of ‘Post-’,” *PR*: 38-50

Musical interlude: (from) Luciano Berio, John Cage, Charlie Parker, Miles Davis, Janis Joplin, Keith Jarrett

Jan 18 – PoMo & the New Wave

Alain Robbe-Grillet, *The Erasers*

(accompanied by a discussion of four early PoMo texts: Unamuno’s *Fog (Niebla)*, Pirandello’s *Six Characters in Search of an Author*, and Borges’ “Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius” and “Pierre Menard, Author of the *Quixote*”).

Jan 23 – PoMo & the New Wave (2)

Alain Robbe-Grillet, *The Erasers*

Jan 25 – PoMo & PoCo

J. M. Coetzee, *Foe*

Reading: Simon During, “Postmodernism or Post-colonialism Today,” *PR* 448-462

Jan 30 – PoMo & PoCo

J. M. Coetzee, *Foe*

Reading: Meaghan Morris, “Feminism, Reading, Postmodernism,” *PR* 368-89

Alice Jardine, “The Demise of Experience: Fiction as Stranger than Truth?,” *PR* 433-442

Feb 1 – Tutorial: Robbe-Grillet and Coetzee

Feb 6 – Left and Left (1)

Donald Barthelme, *Forty Stories*, 1987

Reading: Jean Baudrillard, “The Evil Demons of Images and the Precession of Simulacra,” *PR* 194-200

Feb 8 – Left and Left (2)

Barthelme (and Cortázar & Butor)

Feb 13 – Art for Art’s Sale

Slide show: visual art (Magritte, Escher, Rothko, Warhol...)

Feb 15 – TV life-support systems

Victor Pelevin, *Homo sapiens*, 2002

Feb. 20 & 22 Reading week; no classes

Feb 27 – TV life-support systems (2)

Pelevin

Reading: Nelly Richard, "Postmodernism and Periphery," *PR* 463-71

Feb 29 – Product consumed

Don DeLillo, *White Noise*

Mar 5 – Product consumed (2)

Don DeLillo, *White Noise*

Reading: Theodor Adorno, "Culture Industry Reconsidered," in *The Culture Industry*, ed. J.M. Bernstein. London & New York: Routledge, 1991: 98-106 (copies provided in class)

Mar 7 – Tutorial: Pelevin, DeLillo

Readings: Fredric Jameson, "Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism," *PR* 62-92; further reading: Jameson, "Reification and Utopia in Mass Culture"

Mar 12 – From high on (1)

William Burroughs, *Naked Lunch*

Mar 14 – From high on (2)

Burroughs, Francis Bacon, the trans-gendered and morphs

Mar 19 – Anarchitecture

slide show (Bauhaus, Le Corbusier, Jencks, Venturi, Koolhaas, Gehry, etc.)

Charles Jencks, "The Emergent Rules," *PR* 281-294

Readings: Robert Venturi, "The Duck and the Decorated Shed," *PR* 295-307

Paolo Portoghesi, "Postmodern," *PR* 308-315

Mar 21 – Anarchitecture (2)

From Architectural to Social (lack of) principles

Mar 26 – The scattered subject: *Being John Malkovich* (Jonze & Kaufman, 1999; film showing in class)

Mar 28 – The scattered subject (2)

A history of subjectivity from then up to now

Mar 30 – The end-tail of the PoMo storm

Douglas Coupland, *Generation X*, 1991

Apr 2 – The end-tail of the PoMo storm (2)

Generation X and the following

Apr 4 – The changing gears of guilt

Pedro Almodóvar's *Bad Education* (2004; film showing in class)

Papers are due.

Course Requirements

A. Class Participation (20%)

As part of the grade for participation, students are expected to participate in class discussions and complete possible on-the-spot quizzes.

Notes on attendance: Attendance will be taken at the *beginning* of each class. If you have a legitimate reason to miss class (sickness, family crisis, religious holiday), please contact me beforehand so that we can arrange for you to make up any missed material. Missed classes and/or lack of class participation can add up and adversely affect your class participation grade.

B. Class Presentation (15%): 10-15 minutes, delivered orally, to be followed by class discussion. You are not required to hand in a written version of your presentation.

C. Paper (25%): 6-8 pages, due in class on March 30.

The paper is to be written on a topic of your choice. All students are expected to have their topics approved during office hours. It would be a good idea to begin thinking about the final paper as early as possible in the semester.

D. Final Exam (40%) will consist of identification- and essay questions.

Required Texts (copies are available at the UWO bookstore, in the CLC/2273 section)

Donald Barthelme, *Forty Stories* (Penguin), 1987

William Burroughs, *Naked Lunch* (Grove), 1966

J. M. Coetzee, *Foe* (Viking), 1987

D. Coupland, *Generation X: tales for an accelerated culture* (St. Martin's), 1991

Don DeLillo, *White Noise* (Penguin), 1986

Victor Pelevin, *Homo sapiens* (Viking), 2002

Alain Robbe-Grillet, *The Erasers* (Grove), 1964

Thomas Docherty, ed., *Postmodernism: a reader* (Columbia UP), 1993