

Department of English
Western University

MODERNIST FORMS OF ATTENTION

ENGLISH 9133B

Spring 2017

Seminar Meeting Times:

Room:

Course Instructor: Prof. Kate Stanley

Office Hours:

Office: 3G12

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COURSE DESCRIPTION

In an era of accelerating technological change, a contemporary culture of distraction is routinely decried. And yet, declarations of a “crisis of attention” are nothing new. In this course, we will trace a longer history of debate revolving around two defining poles of modern experience: the ideal of focused concentration and the lure of diversion. We will begin by surveying a range of commentators who attributed an ever-increasing dispersal of attention to the rapid speed of urban and industrial development at the turn of the twentieth century. We will then explore how the emergence of a new model of mind in the emerging field of psychology contradicted the discourse of crisis. William James and others elaborated a structure of attention that is defined by its inherent distractibility, but also by its responsiveness to training. In particular, we will pursue his claim that new habits of attention can be cultivated in the process of reading literature. In our approach to elliptical, digressive, elusive, and labyrinthine writings by Henry James, Gertrude Stein, and John Cage we will grapple with some of the following questions: What kind of correlation might be drawn between a reader’s capacity for absorbed concentration and the perceived difficulty of a literary work? To what extent can readerly attention be historicized? What factors shape reading responses like boredom and interest, attention and distraction?

REQUIRED TEXTS

Course Reader

Henry James, *The Ambassadors* (Modern Library Classics)

*All texts available in the Western Bookstore. Please use James editions noted above.

COURSE REQUIREMENTS & ASSIGNMENTS

Participation	15%	
Primary Text Presentation	25%	
Lit Crit Presentation	10%	
Research Paper (5000 words)	50%	[DUE: Last Day of Class]

Participation:

Attentive reading and reflective discussion are at the heart of this seminar. Your attendance, preparation, and participation are essential. Being prepared means you have completed the reading, reflected on it, and have come to class with your book in hand, ready to discuss your thoughts and questions. Each absence without prior explanation will result in a 2% deduction.

Primary Text Presentation:

This assignment has three parts--

(1) *Seminar Introduction* (10%): First, you will present a focused argument on one of the assigned primary readings. Your presentation should be designed to engage the attention of your classmates with the goal of provoking generative discussion. You are free to take whatever approach to presenting you think will be most productive and stimulating. Your task is to frame the central critical problems, paradoxes, and questions that the reading raises for the class. Please limit your formal presentation to fifteen minutes. At least two days in advance you are asked to meet with me or send an email outlining your plan for the class. Please provide a handout that outlines major points, arguments, and questions.

(2) *Discussion Leading* (5%): After your introductory remarks you will be responsible for helping to lead class discussion for the remainder of the hour. Your task here is to pose guiding questions, to help direct the flow of the conversation, and to keep the class focused on the reading assignment's key points and arguments.

Part 1 and 2 of this presentation are intended to help you to develop and practice strategies for engaging colleagues and students—in the classroom as well as in conference presentations. You will be evaluated on how clearly, actively, and persuasively you present the material and involve your classmates in discussion.

(3) *Position Paper* (10%): Within three days of the presentation you are required to email me a three or four page position paper (900-1200 words) that recapitulates the essential points and arguments outlined in your presentation. This paper might also incorporate and develop insights that arose in class discussion.

Lit Crit Presentation:

For this presentation you are asked to summarize the argument of a selected piece of literary criticism for the class in a clear and engaging way. You should also suggest how this reading connects to the other assigned readings for that day and to larger questions guiding the class. Conclude with some questions for your classmates with the goal of sparking thoughtful discussion. Reports should be no longer than fifteen minutes. Please provide a handout that outlines the reading's key points and arguments.

These presentations will be done in pairs. It is your responsibility to contact your partner to plan the presentation. You may split up the work however you like but at least two days before your presentation please send me an email with a brief summary of how it was divided. Please also provide an outline of the key points you plan to present.

Research Paper:

For your final research paper you are responsible for formulating a focused and compelling research question on a topic of your choosing. You may focus primarily on theoretical texts, or you may focus on a literary text. If you choose the latter option, you are still required to incorporate theory into your analysis. If you want to write on material you have presented on previously, please ensure that your essay takes a different angle or shows a marked development of thought. The paper should be between 13 and 16 pages (4000-5000 words). Please propose a topic and research question by June 21 .

[DUE: Last Day of Class]

CLASS SCHEDULE

All readings except those by James and those starred with an asterisk are included in the Course Reader

Required Background Reading: Jonathan Crary, from *Suspensions of Perception*
(Introduction and Chapter 1)

1: May 24

Shock Modernity

Walter Benjamin, "On Some Motifs on Baudelaire"
Sigmund Freud, "Beyond the Pleasure Principle"
Charles Baudelaire, "The Painter of Modern Life"

Baudelaire, "To the Reader," "The Sun," "In Passing"

2: May 29

***Shock Modernity* cont.**

Henri Bergson, from *Matter and Memory*

Marcel Proust, from *The Way By Swann's*

3: May 31

A Crisis of Perception

Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Reproduction"
Siegfried Kracauer, "Cult of Distraction"

(Dadaism and the European Avant-garde)

4: June 5

Boredom

Siegfried Kracauer, "Boredom"
Adam Phillips, "On Being Bored"
Michael Fried, "Art and Objecthood"

Lit Crit Presentation: Jonathan Flatley, "Allegories of Boredom"

(Minimalism)

- 5: June 7** ***Interest***
 Silvan Tomkins, “Interest-Excitement” and “Surprise-Startle”
 William James, “Attention”

Lit Crit Presentation: Sianne Ngai, “Merely Interesting”^{*}

 (Minimalism cont.)
- 6: June 12** ***Psychologies of Attention***
 William James, “Methods and Snares of Psychology,” “The Stream of Experience,” “Habit”
- 7: June 14** ***Pedagogies of Attention***
 William James, “On a Certain Blindness in Human Beings”
 Ralph Waldo Emerson, from *Nature*^{*}
 Walt Whitman, “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry”^{*}
- 8: June 19** ***Jamesian Attention cont.***
 Henry James, *Critical Prefaces* to *The Ambassadors*, *The Portrait of a Lady*; *The Golden Bowl*;^{*} “The Art of Fiction”^{*}

Lit Crit Presentation: Paul Armstrong, “Reading James’s Prefaces”
- 9: June 21** ***Jamesian Attention cont.***
 Henry James, *The Ambassadors*
- 10: June 26** ***Jamesian Attention cont.***
 James, *The Ambassadors* cont.

Lit Crit Presentation: Percy Lubbock, from *The Craft of Fiction*^{*}
- 11: June 28** ***Steinian Attention***
 Gertrude Stein, “Composition as Explanation,” from *Tender Buttons*,^{*} from *Lectures in America*
 Steven Meyer, “Gertrude Stein”^{*}
- 12: July 3** ***Steinian Attention cont.***
 Stein, from *Narration*; from *Four in America* (“Henry James”), “If I Told Him”^{*}

Lit Crit Presentation: Adam Frank, “Thinking Confusion”^{*}
- 13: July 5** ***Cageian Attention***
 John Cage, “Lecture on Nothing,” 4’33”

Lit Crit Presentation: Joan Retallack, from *The Poetical Wager*