English 90.02 / 90.03
Methods of Literary and Cultural Studies

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Garth Lenz, “Mountaintop Removal Coal Mining, United States,” C-print, n.d.

Description of English 90.02:

What is “English,” after all? And what is reading? This course in the theory and method of literary study has two goals that might, at first, seem contradictory: (1) to introduce the conventions of reading, thinking, and creative concept-making crucial to flourishing as a Georgetown English major; and (2) to examine those processes from critical and historical vantages, so as to turn naïve practice into self-conscious method.

To those ends we'll read literary works by authors like G.M. Hopkins, Bram Stoker, Lewis Carroll, J.G. Ballard, and Juliana Spahr alongside critical texts from a range of traditions: Marxism, psychoanalysis, historicism, formalism, gender and sexuality studies, deconstruction, and ecocriticism. In light of our literary texts, these short conceptual works will provide new models; ask new questions; and push us to see from new angles the processes of reading, interpretation, and contextualization that are the bread and butter of college English.

This term, we will devote several weeks to considering the challenges to humanistic inquiry posed by anthropogenic (human-caused) climate change; the course will incorporate the 2015 Lannan Symposium, “In Nature’s Wake: The Art and Politics of Environmental Crisis.” To close the term,
we'll use literary reading practices and concepts of “environment” to examine what may be today’s most dominant cultural form, the video game.

Throughout this work, our aim will be to develop a self-aware, historically-grounded sense of how we read and why -- a particularly urgent problem now, perhaps, when earth veers inexorably toward collapse and new media forms threaten to diminish forever our capacity to think critically. (Or so we're told.) No prior exposure to “literary theory” is necessary.

**General Description of English 90:**

This course aims to give students a coherent understanding of various theoretical and critical tools used to interpret texts by introducing them to strategies of close reading and to larger discussions regarding textual analysis. Although the course will not necessarily encompass the entire history of literary and cultural criticism, it will examine a range of schools and methods. These schools and methods will be grounded historically and will be situated and contextualized within larger critical conversations that have developed over time.

**Course Goals:**

During the semester, we'll read broadly but closely, in genres both “literary” and “nonliterary.” At the end of the class you will be able to:

- *Analyze* multiple genres of cultural expression at the level of both content and form;
- *Do the same* for what is called theoretical or critical writing;
- *Understand* key debates in the history of reading, and remain alert to the fact that reading is historical;
- *Speculate* about the role of literary thinking in the 21st century, with attention to its institutional situation, the history of its practices, and the possibilities for its future;
- *Create* critical interventions of your own, in multiple genres, using close analysis of cultural forms to make larger claims about the world and how we live in it.

**Course Texts:**

Please purchase these from the college bookstore, or online. If you purchase them online, be sure to note the ISBN number, otherwise you will end up with the wrong edition and have to buy it twice.

- Lewis Carroll, *Alice’s Adventures In Wonderland* and *Through the Looking Glass* (Penguin) ISBN 9780141439761

**PDFs & Course Reader:**

Significant sections of our course readings will be posted online, through the class blog. These are designated with an asterisk (*) on the syllabus. You must print these out in hard copy and should
consider those printing costs (as much as $40) when you budget your expenditure for the course. I expect you to (1) print all of these readings in hard copy form; (2) bring them to class on the relevant day; and (3) archive them in a three-ring binder, creating a course reader of assigned critical texts.

Video Games:

These titles and others -- the full list is here-- are available at Gelardin New Media Center, in Lauinger Library. XBox 360, PS3, and PS4 consoles, along with an NES system from the late 1980s, are available for your use there. Other titles will be purchased via a library grant as the term progresses.

Bioshock 2
Mass Effect
Perfect Dark
Red Dead Redemption
Modern Warfare (latest title in the series)
Flower

Castlevania
Donkey Kong
The Legend of Zelda
Metroid
Super Mario Bros.
Duck Hunt
Super Mario Bros. 3

Assignments:

Requirements include collaborative thinking, close reading, and full commitment to the work of the course. There will be periodic reading quizzes, generally unannounced, to ensure our progress on the reading.

Participation: This element of the grade measures your contribution to the collective labor of the class. There are many ways to participate, but all of them require diligently preparing the day’s reading: this means active engagement and not passive consumption. Participation on a given day might include contributing to class discussions; intelligently listening to same; coming prepared with questions; and/or posting relevant questions and comments in advance of class to our blog. Note that you participate when you enable others, not just when you take up airtime. Other matters: no cell phones; no texting: only you, your peers, and the work we do together. (Please, no computers in class.)

Occasional quizzes: Simple, fact-based reading quizzes designed to keep everyone on pace; these are part of your participation grade. They may be announced in advance; they may not be.

Five blog posts. (c. 250 words). These are informal but intellectually substantial engagements with our reading for the day. They can take one of two forms: Summaries will use strategic citation and paraphrase to convey an overview of a given text’s argument as you understand it. This is an exercise in recapitulating what you’ve read. Provocations will work more critically. Here you might, for example, take a passage and perform a close reading of it, unlocking some particular complexity in the prose; you might compare one work with another; or you might pose questions about some knotty element in the reading – a contradiction, a dilemma-- while taking time to thicken it with thoughtful reflections from other areas of the course. The key, for these, is to workshop an idea, test an argument. Protocols and schedules to be determined.
**One critical essay.** (3-5 pages, normal-looking font.) This is a short, sharp critical engagement with one or more texts covered in class: an academic paper in the standard form, denuded of excess verbiage, bold of argument, and shined, prosewise, to a glistening polish. It can make use of your own earlier blog posts. Prompts will be provided, but you are encouraged to break from them to compose your own questions and topics.

**Special Collections Digital Curation Assignment.** The guidelines for this assignment in historical reading and remediation are forthcoming, but in short you will use contemporary digital media technologies – video capture, Imovie, etc.—to *curate* an analog object from Georgetown’s special collections department: an old letter whose significance you will illuminate for us, an annotation in the margin of a 19th century novel, or an advertisement in the front matter of a Dickens novel. You will then explain the interest and importance of this historical discovery using new media technologies. This is an experimental assignment whose outcome is not given in advance: part of your task is to think about what the possibilities might be. I will hand out a detailed guide and grading rubric as the assignment approaches.

**Video game reading assignment.** (2 pages, single spaced.) As a follow-up to the Digital Curation Assignment, you will here use “old” methods of literary analysis to produce a close reading of a recent video game. Guidelines for this will be circulated as we proceed: the gist is that you’ll be asked to engage both critically and intimately with what may be the most influential media form of the contemporary moment.

**Take-home mid-term and final exams.** Open book, open notes, no Googling. The mid-term is just that: a temperature-taking of your work so far, assessing your capacity to engage imaginatively and substantively with the material to this point. The final is a cumulative, end-of-term assessment designed to allow you to make creative analytic connections from across the semester. These are less formal than the essay, more structured than the blog posts. Here as always, ideas matter most. You have 48 hours to complete them, choosing from among a set of essay questions.

**Policy on Late Work:**

Out of respect for your classmates’ and my own time, late papers and other assignments will be penalized the equivalent of one letter grade for each day beyond their due date, with the first 24 hour period beginning immediately. Three days late is an F. **Late blog posts will not be counted.** Please see me if extraordinary circumstances arise.

**Course Grading Policy:**

Your final grade for this course will reflect the quality of work you produce, but also the quality of your participation in the collaborative work of the course. Thus, your thoughtful responses to the texts, your active participation in class discussions, and your level of effort all contribute crucially to your final grade. The percentage breakdown is as follows:
Five weblog responses (2% each) 10%
Digital Curation Assignment 10%
Video Game Reading 10%
Short Essay 15%
Mid Term Take-Home Exam 15%
Final Take-Home Exam 20%
Participation 20%

Absence and Tardy Policy:

The collaborative, seminar-style nature of this course makes your presence in class imperative. You are allowed three absences, for any reason at all, without penalty. Every unexcused absence beyond the third will result in a 1 percentage point drop in your final grade, i.e. from 91% to 90%. If you must miss a class session, it’s your responsibility to learn what happened in class and to obtain any of the materials distributed that day. If you know in advance you’ll miss a day when an assignment is due, let me know so we can arrange another, earlier, due date. You are permitted four late arrivals over the course of the semester. Every two late arrivals after the first four will count as one class absence.

Plagiarism:

Do not do it, ever. If you plagiarize at all, at any scale, you will at the very least fail the course. See the Georgetown Honor System website for guidelines about what constitutes plagiarism and how to avoid it. Note that in all matters I expect you to observe the Georgetown honor pledge: To be honest in every academic endeavor, and to conduct myself honorably, as a responsible member of the Georgetown community as we live and work together.

Disabilities, Special Conditions, Etc.:

I’m committed to providing whatever it takes to help you be successful in this course. The Georgetown Academic Resource Center says this: “Georgetown does not discriminate or deny access to an otherwise qualified student with a disability on the basis of disability, and students with disabilities may be eligible for reasonable accommodations and/or special services in accordance with the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and the Americans with Disabilities Amendments Act (ADAA) of 2008. However, students are responsible for communicating their needs to the Academic Resource Center. The University is not responsible for making special accommodations for students who have not requested an accommodation and adequately documented their disabilities. Also, the University need not modify programmatic, course, or degree requirements considered to be an essential requirement of the program of instruction.” Please find me early in the term to discuss how I can help.

Guides for the Lost:

Conceptual writing about literary method can be daunting. Various online guides can help: your first line of defense is the Johns Hopkins Guide to Literary Theory & Criticism, then consult the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy. Both are available through our course blog. Only after that should you bother with Wikipedia. Please stay away from online summaries not mentioned here. And as always, please do not hesitate to contact me with any questions whatsoever about this material. We’re in this together.
METHODS OF LITERARY AND CULTURAL STUDIES: Course Schedule

[Please note that the calendar is subject to change; I reserve the right to alter readings as our progress dictates.]

Week 1


Week 2


Week 3

T., January 20: Lewis Carroll, Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland

Th., January 22: Lewis Carroll, Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland; Gilles Deleuze, “Lewis Carroll”*

Week 4

T., January 27: Sigmund Freud, “On the Interpretation of Dreams”; begin Lewis Carroll, Through the Looking Glass


Week 5

T., February 3: Lewis Carroll, Through the Looking Glass; Ferdinand de Saussure, From Course on General Linguistics*; ESSAY 1 DUE

Th., February 5: VISIT TO GEORGETOWN SPECIAL COLLECTIONS. Murray Room, 5th Floor Lauinger Library. With Ethan Henderson, Curator of Rare Books, Special Collections. Begin watching Alice in Wonderland (1951), film, C. Geronimi, dir.; and Alice in Wonderland (2010), film, T. Burton, dir.*
Week 6


Th., February 12: Bram Stoker, *Dracula*, Michel Foucault, from *The History of Sexuality*: “The Incitement to Discourse” and “Method”*

Week 7

T., February 17: Bram Stoker, *Dracula* and Foucault, cont’d. Guest Lecture: Stefan Waldschmidt, Duke University; SPECIAL COLLECTIONS ASSIGNMENT DUE

Th., February 19: Bram Stoker, *Dracula*

Week 8


Th., February 26: Bram Stoker, *Dracula*, Derrida, continued.

MIDTERM EXAMS DUE BY EMAIL FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 27, 5 pm.

Week 9


Th., March 5: Victoria Sambunaris, select images from *Taxonomy of a Landscape*; Juliana Spahr, “Gentle Now, Don’t Add to Heartache,” “#Misanthropocene: 24 Theses,” and selected poems TBA; Select audiorecordings of Juliana Spahr; Robert Hass, “State of the Planet.”*

Week 10

T., March 16: Spring Break
Th., March 19: Spring Break

Week 11


Th., March 26: J.G. Ballard, *The Drowned World*
Week 12

T., March 31: J.G. Ballard, *The Drowned World*

Th., April 2: Easter Break: No class.

Week 13


Th., April 9: Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, “The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception”*

Week 14

T., April 14: “New materialisms”: Sharon Marcus et al., “Surface Reading: An Introduction”; Susan Sontag, “Against Interpretation”; Jeffrey Williams, “The New Modesty In Literary Studies”; Brian Dettmer, selected art pieces

Th., April 16: Video games as a culture industry? Readings TBA. Possibility of virtual class due to Professor’s attendance at INCS conference.

Week 15

T., April 21: Video games as environmental theory? Readings TBA; VIDEO GAME CLOSE READING DUE

Th., April 23: Last day of class: what is literary study now? What is culture? Discuss video game: “Elegy for a Dead World”* and G.M. Hopkins, “Ribblesdale”

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TAKEN HOME FINAL EXAMS DUE BY EMAIL MONDAY APRIL 27, 5 pm.