

“The city . . . does not tell its past, but contains it like the lines of a hand, written in the corners of the streets, the gratings of the windows, the banisters of the steps, the antennae of the lightening rods, the poles of the flags, every segment marked in turn with scratches, indentations, scrolls.” –Italo Calvino, *Invisible Cities*

“The future belongs to crowds.” –Don Delillo, *Mao II*

ENGL 475: Postmodern Literature (Fall 2004)

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Office Hours: 1:00-2:00 Monday and Wednesday, or by appointment.

Description

No two surveys of postmodern literature will look alike, and this class is no exception. While we will read some important authors and some important books, our readings will in no way be comprehensive, or even necessarily representative of “postmodernism.” The centerpiece for the course, temporally and otherwise, will be the events of September 11, 2001. Approximately half of our reading will be from works published before that day, and half after. Whether 9/11 is deserving of such a pivotal position in our literary and artistic imaginations, whether it means the end of postmodernism, remains to be seen. 9/11 in any case will not be our sole topic of conversation or point of reference. Its image, however, will prove inescapable, from the cover of the longest work we will read, Don Delillo’s *Underworld*, to its afterimage in Art Spiegelman’s newly-published graphic novel *In the Shadow of No Towers*. Related themes for the course will include cities and/as texts, the role of visual and graphical forms in contemporary narrative, and the transition, of both books and society at large, to a global information culture.

Our discussions will be lively and topical, or at least I fervently hope they will—that’s the reason we’re all here, myself included. With open discussion comes responsibility. Throughout the semester I will expect everyone to treat their classmates and the views of others with respect and generosity. Our readings are the only common ground we will assume, and accordingly these texts should be the object of, not merely the occasion for, our best and strongest opinions and insights.

Please recognize that this is a reading intensive course. You will be expected to read 150-250 pages most weeks. The language and technique of the readings will sometimes prove difficult. I cannot recommend this course if you have more than one other class on novels or demanding comparable amounts of reading, no matter how much the subject interests you.

Texts

All of the following are available for purchase at the University Book Center. Most of them should also be easy to find from other quality booksellers, including online vendors.

- Paul Auster, *The New York Trilogy* (Penguin, 1990).
- Alice Notley, *The Descent of Alette* (Penguin, 1992).
- Don DeLillo, *Underworld* (Simon and Schuster, 1997).
- Stephanie Strickland, *V: Losing L'una and WaveSon.nets* (Penguin, 2002).
- Don DeLillo, *Cosmopolis* (Scribner, 2003).
- William Gibson, *Pattern Recognition* (Putnam, 2003).
- Richard Appignanesi, et al., *Introducing Postmodernism* (Icon, 2003).
- Art Spiegelman, *In the Shadow of No Towers* (2004).

Requirements, Policies, and Grading

All grading will use the plus/minus system. The requirements for the course, and their weight in determining your final semester grade, are as follows:

- Quizzes, Participation, and Attendance: 20%.
- Final Paper or Project: 30%.
- Midterm exam: 25%.
- Final exam: 25%.

Due dates are listed on the course calendar below. The paper or project, which will have a separate handout describing my expectations in more detail, will be either a 10-12 page paper on a topic of your choosing (requiring secondary research), or a digital project comprising an equivalent amount of written content and intellectual substance. If you opt for the digital project it is essential that you discuss it with me beforehand. The two exams will include both short answer identifications and long essays, and will be described in more detail closer to the dates on which they are given.

Quizzes will not be announced ahead of time and cannot be made up if missed. They will usually, but not always, take the form of short answer questions. Missing one or two quizzes will not have a profound effect on that portion of your grade; I will be looking for patterns and trends, not isolated anomalies.

You will be allowed two absences for the semester without penalty, no questions asked. After that, every unexcused absence will become part of the 20% of your grade devoted to Quizzes, Participation, and Attendance. There *may* be one or more opportunities to

make up an unexcused absence (attendance at lectures and other special events relevant to the course)—but you shouldn't count on these. Common cold-type illnesses will not be excused. Consistent lateness to class will be treated as an absence. Excused absences will typically only be granted for documented severe medical or family emergencies; for religious or cultural observances; or for university-sanctioned athletic travel. Students who know they will require special accommodation for attendance or assignments for any of these reasons should inform me of the fact as far ahead of time as possible.

You are still responsible for the material you miss if you are absent, excused or not. Please note that I will not respond to “what did I miss” queries via email (ask a friend in the class or come see me during office hours instead).

All assigned work is due on the date given on the course calendar, unless you have made a specific prior arrangement with me. Late work without prior arrangement will be demoted up to one full letter grade (or not accepted at all if more than a week overdue).

It is my policy not to discuss grades via email. Please do not hesitate to see me during office hours if you have a question about a grade you have received.

Lastly, a word on my grading standards: an “A” grade must be earned. Merely fulfilling the terms of an assignment, and doing so in a competent and reasonable manner, is generally only enough for a grade in the B-range. Weaker work will receive grades in the C-range or below. “A” grades will only be awarded (and should only be expected) if your work goes above and beyond terms like “good,” “solid,” and “acceptable” to reveal notable depths of creativity, insight, and excellence.

Electronic Resources

This class has a blog:

<http://www.otal.umd.edu/~mgk/courses/fall2004/475/>

Please bookmark this address and get into the habit of checking the blog regularly, at least several times per week. I will use the blog to post announcements, assignments, updates to the calendar, and other administrative items. I will also post questions, provocations, and items related to our current reading and discussions. You may respond to these in the comments section of each entry. I will take blog comments into account when evaluating Participation.

The class also has an electronic coursemail list. Subscription is mandatory. All students who have a valid email address in Testudo should be automatically subscribed. If you prefer to read mail at another address you must let me know. I will use the list to post announcements, assignments, updates to the calendar, and other administrative items (just like the blog). The email list will not, however, function as a discussion medium (that's what the blog is for). You should get into the habit of checking your email at least once a

day if you do not already. You will be held responsible for the content of all email announcements 24 hours after they have been posted.

Academic Integrity

All students are expected to abide by the University's code of academic integrity: <http://www.studenthonorcouncil.umd.edu/code.html>. Students are also required to sign the Honor Pledge to all written work: "I pledge on my honor that I have not given or received any unauthorized assistance on this assignment/examination." Plagiarism and other forms of academic dishonesty will be referred to the Honor Council.

Course Calendar

Assigned pages are due on the date given. For example, you should have read up to at least page 70 in *City of Glass* when you come into class on Wednesday, September 8th. Please always bring your books to class. The course calendar will also occasionally include readings and other works that are only available online. These are as much a part of the class as the printed matter, and you can expect to be examined on them and otherwise held responsible for their content.

There are no specific dates assigned for Appignanesi's *Introducing Postmodernism*. But neither is it optional. You should read it through early in the semester—certainly by the time we get to *Underworld*—so we can use it as a reference and a shared pool of ideas (that are open to debate).

Week One

M 8.30: Introduction.

W 9.1: Slavoj Zizek, "Welcome to the Desert of the Real" (September 15, 2001):
< <http://web.mit.edu/cms/reconstructions/interpretations/desertreal.html> >;
widely available elsewhere online as well.

Week Two

M 9.6: Labor Day, no class.

W 9.8: Auster, *City of Glass* (in *The New York Trilogy*): 3-70.

Week Three

M 9.13: *City of Glass*, 71-134.

W 9.15: *City of Glass*, 135-end.

Week Four

M 9.20: Notley, *The Descent of Alette*, 3-82.

W 9.22: Notley, *The Descent of Alette*, 83-end.

Week Five

M 9.27: Delillo, *Underworld*, 11-150.

W 9.29: *Underworld*, 155-272.

Week Six

M 10.4: *Underworld*, 275-445.

W 10.6: *Underworld*, 446-498.

Week Seven

M 10.11: *Underworld*, 501-656.

W 10.13: *Underworld*, 661-827.

Week Eight

M 10.18: /Interstice/.

W 10.20: **Midterm.**

Week Nine

M 10.25: Spiegelman, *In the Shadow of No Towers* (page assignments TBA).

W 10.27: *In the Shadow of No Towers*.

Week Ten

11.1: Gibson, *Pattern Recognition*, 1-102.

11.3: *Pattern Recognition*, 103-170.

Week Eleven

11. 8: *Pattern Recognition*, 171-262.

11.10: *Pattern Recognition*, 263-end.

Week Twelve

11.15: Delillo, *Cosmopolis*, 5-107.

11.17: Delillo, *Cosmopolis*, 111-end.

Week Thirteen

11.22: Delillo, "In the Ruins of the Future":

< <http://books.guardian.co.uk/departments/generalfiction/story/0,6000,623732,00.html>>;

Papers/Projects due.

11.24: /Insterstice/.

Week Fourteen

M 11.29: Strickland, either *V: WaveSon.nets* or *V: Losing L'una*.

W 12.1: The other half of *V*.

Week Fifteen

M 12.6: Strickland, *V: Vniverse* < <http://vniverse.com/>>.

W 12.8: Inconclusion.

Final Exam: Thursday, December 16, 1:30-3:30.