ENGLISH 883: Seminar in Twentieth-Century American Literature: Fictions of Postmodernism
Prof. Gregory Jay
W 4:00-6:40 Curtin Hall 466

Are we still postmodern? Were we ever? Or was postmodernism just a fiction? Or has fiction always been postmodern, an untimely critique of whatever present moment happens to think it is modern? Is there a “postmodern condition,” and if so does it produce a unique set of cultural expressions and artifacts? Or are all these questions just a pedantic intellectual excuse to read a bunch of good books? If so, why not?

In its serious moments, the course will combine theoretical inquiry with the close reading of texts, including novels, stories, a play, and a graphic memoir on the Holocaust. We will look back at the advent of something that came to be called “postmodern fiction” and forward to recent developments in concepts of postmodernity. Some of the themes of the postmodern condition featured in our reading include: absurdity, catastrophe, trauma, multiplicity, unreliability, irony, multiculturalism, the end of all metanarratives, and the imagination of impossible futures.

A few “theory” essays will be read along the way, such as:

- Brian Nicol, “Postmodernism”
- Richard Crownshaw, “Trauma Studies”
- Hans Bertens, “Postmodern U.S. Fiction”
- Hilary Chute essays on Maus, comics
- bell hooks, “Blackness and Postmodernism”
- Mike Featherstone, “Modern and Postmodern: Definitions and Interpretations”
- Anthony Giddens, “Modernism and Post-Modernism”
- Lisa Hutcheon, essays on postmodernism, politics
- Fredric Jameson, “Postmodernism and Consumer Society”
- Marianne Hirsch on postmemory
- Michael Rothberg on cultural memory and the Holocaust

Possible books we might read (but not all!):

- Thomas Pynchon, “Entropy” (1960); excerpts from Slow Learner: Early Stories (1985) and John Barth, “Lost in the Funhouse” (1968)

- Kurt Vonnegut, Slaughterhouse Five (1969)

- Octavia Butler, Kindred (1979)

- Art Spiegelman, Maus : A Survivor’s Tale. I. My Father Bleeds History. II. And Here My Troubles Began (1980-1991)

- Ana Castillo, So Far From God (1993)
• Don DeLillo, *Falling Man* (2007)
• Jhumpa Lahiri, *Unaccustomed Earth* (2009)
• Jennifer Egan, *A Visit from the Good Squad* (2011)
• Viet Thanh Nguyen, *The Sympathizer* (2016)
  plus
  Film Screening, *Apocalypse Now*, dir. Francis Ford Coppola (1979)
• Tony Kushner, *Angels in America: A Gay Fantasia on National Themes: Revised and Complete Edition* (1993; 2018). Plus screen previous HBO version at home through Amazon Prime or iTunes ($11) or check out from UWM Library

**Writing/Presentation Assignments**

**A. 12 Weekly Responses (see d2l Dropbox)**

“What’s So Postmodern About......?”

Post a 250 word mini-essay on each week's reading. You can use the generic topic above, or follow the thread of an issue in or about the text that interests you. Be sure to quote the text or other readings as evidence and provide page numbers for our reference during discussion.

Post your essay in the d2l Dropbox by **9:00am on Wednesday**.

**B. Critical Presentation**

Each week we will read an essay/chapter of postmodern theory. One student will present on the work, its main ideas, significance, etc. 15-20 minutes.

**C. Term Paper (20 pages)**