syllabus

description. This semester we shall explore five dominant currents coursing through postmodernity—that extraordinary, challenging, adventurous, and disorienting moment in American and European arts and thought we may or may not still be inhabiting:

- investigations into the limits of aesthetic construction;
- radical skepticism before such grand narratives as human nature, identity, race, gender, social progress, objective reality and morality, absolute truth, & reason;
- epistemological & moral relativism, pluralism, & self-referentiality;
- poststructuralism & posthumanism;
- problematizations of conventional notions of language & history.

We will begin with Samuel Beckett’s arguably postmodern & inarguably stunning non-novel *The Unnamable* (1953). From there we will visit seven other pivotal postmodern print texts (Thomas Pynchon’s *Crying of Lot 49*, Kathy Acker’s *Blood & Guts in High School*, Mark Danielewski’s *House of Leaves*, Anne Carson’s *Nox*, NorbeSe Philip’s *Zong!*, Maggie Nelson’s *The Argonauts*, Jen Bervin’s *Silk Poems*, Jenny Erpenbeck’s *Go, Went Gone*) and two pivotal hypermedial ones (Young-Hae Chang’s *Traveling to Utopia*, David Clark’s *88 Constellations for Wittgenstein*), while touching on some of the key postmodern theorists (including George Bataille, Roland Barthes, Jean Baudrillard, Judith Butler, Hélène Cixous, Gilles Deleuze & Félix Guattari, Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, N. Katherine Hayles, Luce Irigaray, Jean-François Lyotard, & Friedrich Nietzsche), several crucial postmodern art movements (abstract expressionism, pop art, minimalism, earth art, conceptual/performance art), punk rock, and Bo Burnham’s film about the pandemic, *Inside*—quite possibly having discovered along our journey, as the philosopher Martin Heidegger maintained, that not-being-at-home is always the fundamental human condition.

content warning. Writings in this course may include material that some students find offensive. Such material may include—but is not limited to—obscenity, profanity, representations of sexuality, violence, religion, politics, encounters with controversial issues in the media, etc. Most texts in this course will be dense and demanding. Students
who feel that this may be a matter of concern should consider taking another class.

**evaluation methods.** Group presentations, start-up questions before each class, attendance and remarkably active participation, two creative responses, two tests.

**leading class discussion.** Your group presentations will be an important part of your grade, and perhaps a new experience for some of you, so you should plan to spend a good deal of time and work on them. You should think of them as the equivalent of a small research paper in terms of the time and energy you dedicate to it. An effective presentation will be enjoyable, informative, illuminating, thought-provoking, well-organized, and well-paced. Make sure you have read and reread the material on which you will present. Plan to meet with the others in your group at least twice (for at least one hour each time, although probably more) well before the day of your presentation. During your presentation, spend up to 10 minutes providing significant background information about the author, text’s publication history, critical reception, your own critical/theoretical perspective on it, etc.; your job here is to contextualize the text at hand and provide optics through which the class can begin to understand it in fruitful ways. Present the class (preferably one period beforehand) with three questions that will guide the rest of your discussion/presentation and our class period beyond it. Be creative. Generate a strong outline with clear goals and share that with the class. Budget your time. Check all tech setup well in advance of your presentation. Remember: because this is a collective undertaking, everyone in your group will receive the same grade, so make certain that each person is carrying his or her own weight and that that is clear to me and to the rest of the class.

**grading.** Final grades will be calculated on a 100-point system:

- 10 test one
- 20 test two
- 10 creative response one
- 15 creative response two
- 10 group presentation one
- 10 group presentation two
- 25 participation, startup questions, attendance

**letter grade values.**

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**attendance.** You are expected to attend all class sessions, to arrive on time and stay for the entire class session, to bring any texts under discussion, and to participate actively in our discussions.

**participation.** This course is discussion-based and highly interactive. You are required
to be present in all senses of the word, genuinely involved. While active participation is essential, it is also essential that you respond respectfully, expressing differences of opinion without silencing, excluding, interrupting, or monopolizing. Failure to participate actively and frequently will hurt your grade considerably.

absences/tardiness. Each absence after the second will lower your final grade for the course by one letter grade. Two late arrivals or early departures will count as one absence.

due dates. Assignments are due at the beginning of the class for which they are assigned.

late assignments. No late assignments will be accepted.

success in the course. Successful students in this course typically demonstrate a high degree of intellectual/creative curiosity, as well as an ability to respond positively to feedback from their instructor and peers. An “A” student not only does well on written assignments, but is prepared (not only has read the material, but actively brings insights into and questions about it to the class), turns in assignments on time, and contributes meaningfully and consistently to the discussion.

plagiarism: The University’s plagiarism policy will be strictly enforced. The Student Code defines plagiarism as “the unacknowledged use or incorporation of any other person’s work in, or as the basis for, one’s own work offered for academic consideration or credit.” Examples of plagiarism include “representing as one’s own, without attribution, any other person’s words, phrasing, ideas, information or any other mode or content of expression.” Disciplinary action for plagiarizing papers or exams ranges from a failing grade on the assignment or in the course to suspension or expulsion from the University.

required texts. Kathy Acker, Blood and Guts in High School (1984); Samuel Beckett, The Unnamable (1953); Jen Bervin, Silk Poems (2017); Bo Burnham, Inside (2021); Anne Carson, Nox (2010); Young-Hae Chang and Heavy Industries, Traveling to Utopia and Bust Down the Door (ca. 2000; online); David Clark, 88 Constellations for Wittgenstein (2008; online); Mark Danielewski, House of Leaves (2000); Jenny Erpenbeck, Go, Went, Gone (2015); Maggie Nelson, The Argonauts (2016); NorbeSe Philip, Zong! (2008); Julie Rivkin & Michael Ryan, eds., Literary Theory: An Anthology (second edition).

classes & readings.

Aug. 24 Introductions. Problem(s) Defining & Situating “Postmodernism.” Young-Hae Chang and Heavy Industries: Bust Down the Door! (ca. 2000).
Expressionism & Minimalism. Sign up for and discuss group presentations.


23 **Creative Response One.**


07 **Test One.**

12 **Fall Break.**
14 **Fall Break.**


26 NorbeSe Philip: *Zong!* (2008). **Group Presentation Four.**

Nov. 02 Anne Carson: *Nox* (2010). Hayles: “Print is Flat, Code is Deep” (handout).
04 Anne Carson: *Nox* (2010).

09 Maggie Nelson: *The Argonauts* (2016). **Group Presentation Five.**

18 Jenny Erpenbeck: *Go, Went, Gone* (German: 2015; English: 2017). Discuss test two.

23 Jenny Erpenbeck: *Go, Went, Gone* (German: 2015; English: 2017).
25 **Thanksgiving.**
30 Bo Burnham: *Inside* (2021; see on your own). Conceptual/Performance Art.
Dec. 02 Creative Response Two.
07 Test Two.
09 Conclusions.