

ENG 400 Seminars for Spring 2019

Amy Anderson & Ashley Patriarca (2 sections) Superheroes, Social Justice, & Social Media

This course will closely examine how depictions of comic superheroes have intersected with issues of social justice from the 1930s to today. From Superman to Wonder Woman, Ms. Marvel, the X-Men, and Black Panther, superhero stories have engaged with issues of nationalism, feminism, religious bias, and racism. This engagement has been heightened and complicated by the fandom culture that began developing around early comics, and it has grown exponentially through social media culture. In this class, we'll learn a vocabulary for talking about visual narrative, cover the basics of social media use, and examine a series of comics superheroes who engage with social justice issues in print and digital spaces.

Rachel Banner Criminality in 19th-Century U.S. Literature

This course will study representations of crime, criminals, prison, and punishment in 19th-century American literature. In 19th-century America, people were concerned with and captivated by spectacles of crime and punishment, a fascination evident in the literature from the period. This historical moment was host to the expansion of chattel slavery and plantation surveillance, the rise of new systems of incarceration and punishment--including the sharecropper system, prison labor camps, and the opening of the 'revolutionary' Eastern State Penitentiary in Philadelphia--, and a multitude of cultural anxieties about who criminals were and what ought to be done with them. Course discussions will focus on various literary and popular written forms concerned with the figure of the criminal. We will study the ways these diverse texts theorize criminality in relation to race and racism, sexuality and gender, capitalism, and social class.

Assigned readings will include texts from traditional literary genres like the novel, short story, and autobiography, as well as newspaper accounts of crimes, execution sermons, and criminal confession narratives from the period. Students should expect to write a close reading response essay, a midterm essay, an annotated bibliography, and a 10-page research essay. They will also give two short presentations during the semester.

Students interested in learning more about Dr. Banner's current research and publications should visit her WCU Faculty Profile, available via WCU's English Department website.

Graham MacPhee Culture and Authoritarianism: A Comparative Perspective

Authoritarianism has traditionally been seen as the opposite pole to democracy, with the implication that the presence of elections guards against authoritarianism. However,

contemporary developments across the globe have seen the electoral rise of parties and leaders who flout democratic norms and openly encourage discrimination and the demonization of vulnerable social groups.

To explain the coincidence of democratic forms and authoritarian tendencies, alternative intellectual traditions have looked to the role of culture. Cultural narratives of majority victimhood and minority othering are seen to provide a context that rewrites existing democratic and legal practices, casting the state as an instrument of the "true" national people rather than as a public space for upholding law and negotiating the range of rights and interests in a plural society. On this view, culture plays an important political role by appealing to identity and to emotional and affective response, so bypassing constitutional protections and undermining critical discussion.

This seminar will explore the role of culture in enabling and contesting anti-democratic tendencies through a comparative approach, looking at the rise of Thatcherism in Britain from the late 1960s to the 1980s and cultural discourses of national identity, othering, and power in the US over recent decades. The course will draw on a number of critical positions, including the work of Hannah Arendt and the Frankfurt School, the discourse of "authoritarian populism" in British Cultural Studies, accounts of neoliberalism, and gender, race, and critical theory. We will examine a range of texts, from poetry and literary prose, to films and popular culture, political speeches and interviews, and social media.

The seminar will develop students' skills in close reading and critical writing and will provide an advanced foundation in cultural analysis to prepare students as future English teachers, graduate students, or historically literate citizens and professionals.

Interested students can learn about the seminar instructor's research interests from Dr. MacPhee's faculty listing on the English Department's website, which includes a link to his work on the WCU Digital Commons.

Will Nessly

Orientalism, Empire and the Plays of David Henry Hwang

This seminar is targeted toward students interested in plays, US ethnic literature, and the study of race, imperialism and East-West relations. As a focused study of a single dramatist, David Henry Hwang, from his earliest plays to the most recent, including *FOB*, *M. Butterfly*, *Golden Child*, *Yellow Face*, and *Chinglish*, the course will involve a rigorous, in-depth study of dramatic and narrative form and its intersection with race, sexuality, imperialism and transnationalism. We will also examine the larger cultural context of other Madame Butterfly stories and stories of trans-Pacific romance, including works by Pierre Loti, John Luther Long, Onoto Watanna, Giacomo Puccini, and Gilbert and Sullivan, as well as the *Karate Kid* films from the 1980s and 2010. Students will also examine theoretical selections from postcolonial studies, performance studies, critical race studies, queer studies and gender studies. To learn more about Dr. Nessly's research interests, please view his faculty profile on the English Department website.

Timothy Ray

Back to the Garden: Woodstock – A 50-Year Retrospective in Popular Culture and Counterculture

This course will examine the music, the art, the consciousness, and the mythos (in short, the culture, or, more aptly, the counterculture) that evolved from the Woodstock Music and Arts Fair held Aug. 15-18, 1969, at Max Yasgur's dairy farm near the rural town of Bethel, NY, and how the mythos and ethos of that singular event has left a cultural impact on the intermediate four decades.

Woodstock is widely regarded as one of the most important events in the history of rock music, popular culture, and counterculture. While organizers originally anticipated a crowd of about 200,000 based on ticket sales, the event attracted many more than that, and when it became apparent that the crowd was going to be more than twice as large as they had prepared for, organizers decided to open the gates and make the event free for everyone, which attracted more people and an eventual estimated crowd of 500,000. The fact that the for-profit event had been turned into a free event fit well with the hippie mindset of most of those in attendance, and when the overwhelming numbers created a huge strain on facilities and resources at the venue, the way the crowd and organizers responded peaceably and generously toward each other further heightened the ethos of the event as a magic moment in time.

Because of the rather magical ethos of the event, people have often tried to claim a connection with the event, frequently claiming that they were there when they may not have been or when they may not have even been the right age to have been there. Attempts to re-create the magical qualities of Woodstock have failed again and again—most notably with Altamont, where a concert-goer was murdered, and with the 30th anniversary concert in 1999, which ended with fans burning and looting concession stands and vendor booths. Given the cultural significance of Woodstock, it is a noteworthy subject for academic study. And because such landmark events are frequently re-examined at various milestones, the 50th anniversary of the event is a fitting vantage point for re-examining the event and its lingering effects. As the performers and participants of this '60s-era event are themselves living through their 60s and beyond, to what extent is this Aquarian event continuing to have an influence in the Age of the Internet? In other words, what is the cultural legacy of the Woodstock? Is it dwindling, or has it been picked up by a new generation of "flower children"? Why was Woodstock such a singularly important event? Why have attempts to create Woodstock-like events failed so often? What have we as a society learned from Woodstock? What does it say about us as a society then and us as a society now? To what extent has the event been portrayed accurately and to what extent have events been revised over time to enhance the mythos of Woodstock? These questions and others will be explored in this course. By the end of the course, students should have a thorough understanding of the cultural forces that came together to create Woodstock, a critical awareness of the cultural significance of Woodstock, a heightened critical perspective of the mythos of Woodstock, and an increased awareness of the countercultural values of the late 1960s and how those values have withstood the harsh realities of the intervening years.

Joshua Raclaw
Language, Gesture, and the Body

This course will expose students to classic and contemporary linguistic research on the interplay between language, gesture, and the body. Students will engage with a range of cognitive, evolutionary, and interactional perspectives on language and gesture, as well as interactional and sociolinguistic approaches to the study of language and the body. Students will synthesize the findings of published scholarship in order to produce original analytic observations from video recordings of natural language data. Students will also build a corpus of natural language data and use that data to produce an original research paper on a topic of their choosing.

Eleanor Shevlin
The Proliferation of the Booker Prize

First awarded in 1969, the Booker Prize is one of the world's most prestigious and influential literary prizes. For decades, only writers who were citizens of the United Kingdom, the British Commonwealth, South Africa, or the Republic of Ireland were eligible to win the Booker. In 2005 the Man Group launched a second prize, the International Booker Prize to emphasize "one writer's overall contribution to fiction on the world stage." This prize was awarded every other year for a decade, but in 2016 the Booker Prize administrators partnered with the Independent Foreign Fiction Prize to revise the prize as an annual prize for fiction in translation. Alongside this development the Man Booker expanded the eligibility for the regular Booker Prize to any English-language novel in 2014, thus opening the door for American authors. This seminar addresses the expansion of the Man Booker Prize to include American authors and the decision to award a separate International Man Booker Prize. Specifically, it frames the discussion in terms of the sometimes vexed category of global literature, the globalization of the publishing industry, and the issues concerning translation, culture, and language.

Operating as a semester-long conversation, this seminar will offer the opportunity to gain a working familiarity with postcolonial theories, definitions of global literature, and current publishing practices surrounding fiction; to explore the relationship between the current state of publishing and the production of contemporary literature; to consider the various spheres in which literature circulates and the values that characterize these respective spheres (e.g., commercial/aesthetic and public/academic); and to become better critical thinkers and oral and written communicators. The seminar will draw from the work you accomplished in the core and will further build on the insights you have gained from all three categories of both tracks. You will be asked to write a position paper, deliver a 20-minute formal presentation, and complete a final project that consists of several stages (proposal, progress report and annotated bibliography, and a 10- to 12-page final paper).

Cheryl Wanko
Comedy and Humor

“ROTFLMAO!”

“That’s not funny!”

“I was *only* joking.”

“Knock knock ...”

Netflix and YouTube have encouraged a rise in stand-up and funny animal videos, but humor and comedy have been around for a long time. While Aristotle had some use for it, Plato said it had no place in a rational society. This seminar will look at modern theories of humor and comedy by such scholars as John Morreall and apply them to stand-up, novels, satire, drama, music – and, yes, funny animal videos – to discuss why supposedly rational beings express amusement by making loud hacking noises. We’ll ask such questions as: How does humor work in the rhetorical situation of speaker, audience, purpose, genre, and topic? Are there topics that are off-limits to humor, and, if so, why? What are some of the motivating pre-conditions for humor, and what are some of its results? Does humor perform cultural work, and, if so, how? Students will explore topics and artifacts to examine humor critically in light of past research, and the seminar will conclude with a comedy night in which all class participants will present or perform something humorous. Through a variety of activities and examples based on the topic of environmentalism and on ecocritical methodologies (your work in this class does *not* have to stick with this topic), the class will explore the question: should we take humor seriously?

While humor and comedy theory *per se* are new to this instructor, she is prepared to teach it through her background in 17th and 18th-century literature, a time of masterful dramatic comedy and satire. She will also lead the class using examples of humor in relation to environmentalism, thus pulling in her expanding critical expertise in sustainability/English Studies and her current sabbatical research. Interested students can learn more from the English Department’s faculty website.

