Memor, History, and the Contemporary Novel
COMPLIT 221/GERLIT 246/JEWISHST 241
Spring 2012 Course Syllabus

Instructor: Prof. Amir Eshel
Email: eshel@stanford.edu
Office: Building 260, Room 204
Office Hours: Fridays, 10:30-12 (by appointment)

Schedule: Tuesday/Thursday 12:35 – 2:05pm
Units: 3-5
Location: Cubberley 206 (Education)
TA: Brian Johnsrud, johnsrud@stanford.edu

Course Description:

The watershed events of the twentieth century, the philosophic ‘linguistic turn’ and the debate regarding ‘the end of history’ have all left their mark on the novel. This seminar will ask: how does the contemporary i.e. post-1945 novel engage with modern, made-made disasters such as the World Wars or 9/11 and its aftermath? How does its interest in memory and history relate to our late- or postmodern culture of time, to political and ethical concerns? How does the novel expand our view regarding who we are and who we may become in the future? How does the novel, by revisiting modernity’s abysmal past raise contemporary political and ethical concerns? Readings will include novels by Günter Grass, Ian McEwan, Toni Morrison, Paul Auster, Cormac McCarthy, selections by Jonathan Littell, and theoretical works by Hannah Arendt, Walter Benjamin, Hayden White, Walter Benjamin, Fredric Jameson, Walter Benn Michaels, and others.

Required Texts:

Beloved, Toni Morrison
Black Dogs, Ian McEwan
Man in the Dark, Paul Auster
Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close, Jonathan Safran Foer
The Revisionists, Thomas Mullen
The Road, Cormac McCarthy

These books are available at the Stanford Bookstore.
All other reading will be available in PDF form on our Coursework site.

Requirements and Grading:

Students are expected to attend all classes thoroughly prepared, i.e. having not only read or looked over assigned materials, but also having prepared questions, comments and other contributions for the ongoing discussion. Unexcused absences will not be tolerated. Attendance and participation account for 40% of your grade.

Participation includes contributing to class discussions, as well as updating your class blog with at least twelve entries throughout the quarter. Your blog responses should focus primarily on the novel we will be discussing in the coming week, but you are welcome to refer back to novels from prior weeks or to incorporate secondary readings (including class materials, book reviews, works of literary criticism, philosophy, sociology, history, economics, etc). I hope you will see this as a chance
to draw connections between the novels we read and things you are reading and thinking about elsewhere. We may end class with compelling questions still in the air, which we will encourage you to continue in your online conversations.

The remaining 60% of your final grade will consist of a **final research project**, in the form of an essay or, if you prefer, a digital platform which hosts textual and/or visual reflections on the course readings and encourages writing and reflection by you or others in the future. A three-paragraph proposal of the essay or alternative project is due on coursework by 7pm on **Friday, May 4th**. The final project is due **Tuesday, June 12th at 10pm**, uploaded on Coursework.

**Meetings and Communication:**

Students are encouraged to email final project ideas to the TA, Brian Johnsrud, or to email Brian to schedule an appointment to meet with Prof. Eshel. When possible, try to channel digital communication through Brian, who has access to Prof. Eshel’s schedule and can arrange appointments for you.

**Class Schedule:**

- Required Reading
- Suggested Reading

**WEEK ONE – Reimagined Pasts**

**Tuesday, April 3rd – NO CLASS**

**Thursday, April 5th**

- “The Modernist Event,” Hayden White (CW)
- **Present Pasts**, Andreas Huyssen (selections on CW)
  - *History, Theory, Text: History and the Linguistic Turn*, Elizabeth Clark (suggested reading on CW)

**Questions:**

1. How do we define the period known as the “contemporary”? What distinguishes it from previous periods? How do determine what is “new” about a period?
2. How do novels written in the contemporary period correspond to the events of the time? It’s “ethos,” “character,” “zeitgeist” or “psychology”?
3. Consider how we use the terms ‘pre-’, ‘post-’, ‘inter-’ to define historical periods based on singular events and its usefulness when situating a creative work.

**WEEK TWO – Reimagined Pasts**

**Tuesday, April 10th**

- *The Tin Drum*, Günter Grass
- **Beyond the Pleasure Principle**, Sigmund Freud (selections on CW)
  - “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” Walter Benjamin (suggested, CW)
  - *Between Past and Future*, Hannah Arendt (suggested selections on CW)
  - *The Human Condition* Hannah Arendt (suggested selections on CW)

**Thursday, April 12th**

- *The Tin Drum*, Günter Grass
“Grandeur, Profundity, and Finitude,” Richard Rorty (CW)
✓ Günter Grass Reader (suggested selections on CW)
✓ Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity, Richard Rorty (suggested selections on CW)
✓ “Uses of Metaphor: Richard Rorty’s Literary Criticism and the Poetics of World-Making,” Günter Leypoldt (suggested reading, CW)

Friday, April 13th (Bld 260, Rm 252)
• Film: Hiroshima, Mon Amour
• On History, Michael Oakeshott (selections on CW)
• Memory, History, Forgetting, Paul Ricoeur (selections on CW)
✓ Hayden White on History (audio, suggested on CW)

Questions:
1. How do events of man-made catastrophe relate to our sense of agency? How is this conception related to agency in novels and for readers?
2. What is the relationship between human and natural history? Is human history a sub-species of natural history, or something entirely unique?
3. If you haven’t done so already, read the Clark piece from the first class and do any extra reading on the “linguistic turn.”
4. How can/does/should literature about the past engage with ethics and politics? To what effect? Does Grass take ethical action with his novel?

WEEK THREE – Reimagined Pasts
Monday, April 16th
• The Kindly Ones, Jonathan Littell (selections on CW)
• Sublime Desire, Amy Elias (selections on CW)
• Mendellson NYReviewof Books (CW)
✓ Recent articles by Littell in Le Monde/The Guardian on Syria (suggested reading, on CW)
   http://www.guardian.co.uk/profile/jonathan-littell

Tuesday, April 17th
• Start Beloved, Toni Morrison
• “Postmodern Blackness: Toni Morrison’s Beloved and the End of History,” Kimberly Chabot Davis (CW)

Thursday, April 19th
• Finish Beloved, Toni Morrison
• The Shape of the Signifier, Walter Benn Michaels (selections on CW)

Questions:
1. What is the relationship between the modern(ism) and postmodern(ism)? Is Elias’s distinction between literature from the 1960s onward useful? Can it be extended to earlier events, such as 1945?
2. How do our engagements with the past inform our identities? For Benn Michaels, what does it mean for literature to portray something we never knew as something “forgotten”? Is this
the case with Beloved as he describes it, and what ethical and political implications does that have for the present?

WEEK FOUR – Confronting the Present
Tuesday, April 24th
- Begin Black Dogs, Ian McEwan
- “The End of History?” Francis Fukuyama (CW)
- “The End of Temporality,” Fredric Jameson (CW)

Thursday, April 26th: 1:30-4:00pm
- Hayden White discussion: “Truth and Disbelief, Saul Friedlander’s Modernist Historiography” (note extended time)

Friday, April 27th (Bldg 260, Rm 216)
- Finish Black Dogs, Ian McEwan
- The Century, Alain Badiou (selections on CW)
- “End of World Blues,” Ian McEwan (CW)

Questions:
1. What genre or subgenre is Black Dogs? Are the characters representations, allegories, or something else?
2. Count the moments of violence portrayed in the story and those remembered or recalled in the story. What do we make of these?
3. What is the relationship between rupture and continuity before and after a modern event? How do the critical authors of this week approach the contemporary along these lines? How does the future or our concept of the future change after big events?

WEEK FIVE – NO CLASSES

WEEK SIX – Confronting the Present
Thursday, May 10th
- Begin Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close, Jonathan Safran Foer
- On the Period Formerly Known as Contemporary,” Amy Hungerford (CW)
- Chronoschisms: Time, Narrative, and Postmodernism, Ursula Heise (selections on CW)

Questions:
1. How do concepts of time, duration, and temporality affect events, our perception of them, their literary representation, and the language we use to discuss them?

WEEK SEVEN – Confronting the Present
Tuesday, May 15th
- Finish Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close, Jonathan Safran Foer
- “Homeless” (Chapter 4), Evil in Modern Thought, Susan Neiman (CW)

Thursday, May 17th
Attend at least one session at the “History and Memory: Global and Local Dimensions” and respond on your website. Conference runs from the 17th-18th. Details here: http://fsi.stanford.edu/events/6881

Questions:
1. This is our first “post/9-11” novel. Is this a useful adjective to situate it within a “genre?”
2. Safran Foer's novel is very local to New York City, though the event surrounding it had global dimensions. How does this novel invoke global and local dimensions?

WEEK EIGHT – Confronting the Present/Drafting the Future
Tuesday, May 22nd
• *Man in the Dark*, Paul Auster
• *Writing in the Dark*, David Grossman (selections on CW)

Thursday, May 24th
• Begin *The Road*, Cormack McCarthy
• *Futurity*, Amir Eshel (selections on CW)

Questions:
1. How have we seen novels navigate between imagined, real and practical pasts, the present, and imagined futures?
2. Alternate histories (such as Philip Roth’s *The Plot Against America*) and revisionist history (consider the film *Inglorious Basterds* or Holocaust denials) have captured literary and popular imaginations in the past few decades. What does the comparison between Reality A and B do for readers? What is at stake, politically, ethically, and creatively, in this kind of imaginative work?
3. Insofar as *The Road* is a reflection the present, why use an imagined future to do so?

WEEK NINE – Drafting the Future
Tuesday, May 29th
• Complete *The Road*, Cormack McCarthy
• *No Future*, Lee Edelman (selections on CW)
  ✓ “The Climate of History: Four Theses,” Dipesh Chakrabarty (suggested, CW)
✓ Suggested viewing: *Children of Men*

Thursday, May 31st
• Begin *The Revisionists*, Thomas Mullen
• *Time Maps: Collective Memory and the Social Shape of the Past*, Eviatar Zerubavel (CW)
• “New Memory: Mediating History,” Andrew Hoskins (CW)
• Revisit White’s “The Modernist Event” and Arendt’s *Between Past and Future* (CW)

Questions:
1. What role do children, reproduction, and generations play in our conception of the past, present, and future? Think back to the presence or absence of children in the novels we’ve
read. Any similarities or disparities? Is Edelman’s “reproductive futurism” applicable outside of queer theory?

2. Returning to Arendt in relation to Chakrabarty, consider again “What is the relationship between human and natural history?”

3. How do modern events connect or relate to each other? Are they sequential, reactionary, random, contingent? How do novels, the media, and social conditions mediate or plot discreet events into meaningful patterns or timelines?

4. What genre or sub-genre would classify _The Revisionists_ as?

**WEEK TEN**

**Tuesday, June 5th**

- Finish _The Revisionists_, Thomas Mullen
- “Conspiracy Theory as Narrative,” Mark Fenster (selections on CW)
- _Conspiracy Culture: From Kennedy to the X Files_, Peter Knight (selections on CW)
  - _Empire of Conspiracy_, Timothy Melley (suggested reading, CW)
  - “Competing Narratives of 9/11,” Mark Fenster (selections on CW)
  - _Loose Change_, documentary (suggested viewing, available free on Youtube, etc)

**Wednesday, June 6th (Bldg 260, Rm 216)**

- “Analyzing Literature after 9/11,” Aaron DeRosa (CW)
  - “The Worlding of the American Novel,” Bruce Robbins (suggested, CW)

**Questions:**

1. What is the relationship between conspiracy theories, alternative/popular/folk histories, cultural memory, and the popular imagination? Is there a “paranoid style” in politics, literature, or popular culture after 9/11, 1960, 1945, etc, and is it limited or unique to the U.S.?

2. How is political and ethical agency engaged with in conspiracy theories or science fiction?

3. Considering the questions examined during this quarter, return to the idea of a “post-9/11” novel or creative act. What does this mean? How does this conceptualization of an event as a temporal marker affect our perception of the past, present, and future?

**Final Projects Due Tuesday, June 12th at 10:00pm, uploaded on Coursework**
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