

HUM 415-01 | | Contemporary Culture

FALL 2015

Dr. Robert C. Thomas

T/TH 11:00 AM – 12:15 PM in HUM 408

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Course Website : <http://neoliberalism.io>

COURSE DESCRIPTION

The idea behind this version of contemporary culture starts with an image or paradigm: We live in a neoliberal version of the old Soviet Union. As I type this course description, a new policy has been implemented at an educational institution. This particular University no longer wants to spend money on paper and is requesting that all syllabi be distributed electronically. It wants to do this in order to save money. However, due to student misuse of electronic devices, faculty have had to ban all electronic devices from the classroom. The practical effect of this new policy, then, is to shift the cost of printing course syllabi from the neoliberal University onto the already overburdened, individual, student. The term neoliberal in its simplest sense refers to the growing implementation of market logic—commodification, financialization—in all areas of public life, including information, knowledge, and higher education. It seems that the less this logic “works,” the more tenaciously people cling to its ideological foundations and continue implementing its nonsensical practices. Hence, the image of a neoliberal version of the old Soviet Union.

For nearly 200 years, modern higher education was predicated on a boundary in which students worked hard to earn the privilege to attend an institution of higher learning in order to have demands placed on them by those who had been formally educated. With neoliberalism, that boundary has now been eroded if not outright eliminated. Education is now predicated on a relation of exchange and equivalence, nothing more than a financial transaction in which students are the consumers and professors are the service providers. It is as if decades of formal training, pedagogy, and research were suddenly now the equivalent of a job in the service industry (with faculty as intellectual baristas). Higher education, itself, has become an apartheid system, divided between tenured and adjunct faculty (i.e. part-time, temporary, contract labor), the latter of which are now the majority of faculty but are often treated by their own institutions as little more than service industry workers. Universities, themselves, openly refer to administrators, educators, and those who oversee campus services as “stakeholders,” as if *public higher education is now governed by the same rules and forms as any corporation*. This new system, for all of its focus on the end user and the language of the service economy is, paradoxically, *not student-centered* but based on the exclusion of students and of the

mission of higher education itself (i.e. teaching, learning, the free exchange of ideas, etc.). Lets unpack this statement.

Today, student tuition and fees have reached astronomical levels, burdening students with life long debt. At the same time, students do not even buy the books required for their college courses, much less actually read them. I have asked my students why they get into debt for the rest of their lives in order to go to school and then fail to buy a 25\$ book, which is required to actually get the benefit of what they are paying for (you know, this thing called “learning”). Students normally do not have an answer to this question, or they say, excitedly, that it's about “what they can get away with” (i.e. that they think they can take a University course without buying the books or even reading them and still pass the class). This “getting away with it,” I suppose, makes students feel like they have outsmarted the teacher, though no one has ever admitted to this in class, despite my inquiries over the past decade. Others cite expensive textbooks assigned by their professors that have nothing to do with the teaching of the course. Many students are working part-time (or more), while trying to go to school full-time. These students report that general education (segment three) courses are their lowest priority, and they are trying to “economize” their time by focusing on courses related to their majors. (There is a related phenomenon whereby students question why they are being *forced* to study things that have nothing to do with their majors. This also points to the effect of financialization on a liberal arts education, which was initially sought to produce well-rounded “citizen-subjects.”)

Students increasingly tell me that higher education is nothing more than an extension of K-12 schooling. They report that they are not even given a choice about whether to go to college when they graduate from high school. One student told me she tried to take a year off between high school and college and all anyone would say to her, for an entire year, was “when are you going to college?” Students are socially and economically expected to attend college or university right out of high school. For them, this means that higher education is not something connected to their lives, but something they need to get out of the way in order to get on with their lives. (There is an interesting economic history to this: In the late 1970's, campus recruiters became increasingly good at their jobs, which was to convince parents to send their students to college immediately after high school. This business-oriented vision of higher education, foisted on schools in order to survive economically, has now become the norm.)

It is increasingly difficult to even “do” education—to teach and to learn—within the constraints of a system that is oriented around an altogether different metric: financialization. This is a paradox that many students are aware of, and still others remain in the dark about: The more students try to “get away with” things, the more they treat education as a commodity and do what they seemingly think they *want* to do within this system (not buy books, not do the course readings), the more they

unknowingly do precisely what the system wants from them (which is to actually prevent students from being educated). Seemingly, the more adjunct faculty put into teaching their students, the more passion they have, and the more effort they put into teaching, the more they do what they *want*, they become exploited, giving the system exactly what *it* wants. Everything in higher education, much like the rest of our world, is broken. Predicated on its own self-absence. This is a systematic and not an individual problem. Rather, it is making and unmaking us, as educators and students, in increasingly complex ways. Our job is to try to find ways to keep up with this apparatus.

The idea behind this class is to give you as many tools as possible for thinking through our current predicament. While we will begin by focusing on higher education—something we are all intimately familiar with—we will also look at larger relations between affect and “governing” in the historical present, particularly in relation to genre, such as melodrama, apocalypse, science fiction, and horror, or “apocalyptic melodrama.” In this sense, this course is a swerve from my recent versions of contemporary culture (imaginethepolitical.com), which focused on apocalyptic imagination and the political, as well as my apocalypse melodrama course (apocalypso.io) from last Spring. *We like images of disaster*—e.g. the *Walking Dead*, images of ruins (aka ruin porn), Banksy's Dismaland—because we seem to sense that everything is all, already, a disaster. But many of these expressions just end up reflecting (and therefore reinforcing?) the disaster we are all, already in, rather than critiquing it. It is here that Anker's (*Orgies of Feeling*) thesis on melodrama as a form of post-9/11 “governing” seems promising. At the very end of the course, we will also return to the problem of education with a few short selections from Wendy Brown's *Undoing the Demos*.

BOOKS (Available at the bookstore)

- Elisabeth R. Anker – *Orgies of Feeling: Melodrama and the Politics of Freedom*
- Mark Fisher – *Capitalist Realism*
- Maurizio Lazzarato – *Governing by Debt*

ESSAYS (Print, Read, Bring to Class)

- Giorgio Agamben – “What is an Apparatus?”
- Giorgio Agamben – “What is a Paradigm?”
- Guy Debord – “Separation Perfected” from *The Society of the Spectacle*
- Wendy Brown – *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution* (selections)
- Thomas Elsaesser “Tales of Sound and Fury”
- Michel Foucault – “The Subject and Truth”
- Michel Foucault – “The Means of Correct Training” from *Discipline and Punish*

- Interview: Todd Haynes with Larry Gross on *Safe*
- Ben Hervey, *Night of the Living Dead* 7-30, 116-121
- Research and Destroy, “Communique from an Absent Future”
- Steve Shaviro – “Splice”
- McKenzie Wark – *Spectacle of Disintegration* (selection)
- Evan Calder Williams “Plague in the Gears” (selection)

FILMS (shown in class)

- Todd Haynes – *Safe* (USA, 1995)
- Todd Haynes – *Superstar: The Karen Carpenter Story* (USA, 1987)
- Bong Joon-ho – *Snowpiercer* (South Korea, 2013)
- Vincenzo Natali – *Splice* (Canada, 2009)
- Frederick Wiseman – *High School* (USA, 1968)
- Douglas Sirk – *Written on the Wind* (USA, 1956)
- Douglas Sirk – *All That Heaven Allows* (USA, 1955)
- George Romero – *Night of the Living Dead* (USA, 1968)

ASSIGNMENTS

There will be two (5-page) essays and a final exam required. There will be a handout on the essay assignments before each essay is due (see the schedule). These will only be handed out in-class. If you do not come to class, you will not receive the assignment. No digital copies of the assignments will be handed out or made available. For this reason, do not lose your copy of the essay assignments. *Pay attention when I go over the assignments in class.* Your essays must demonstrate *mastery of the reading material and course lectures* for the assignments (your grade will be based on this). No papers will be accepted via e-mail (no exceptions). No rewrites and no late papers. *Plagiarism in any of the course assignments, in any form, will be dealt with harshly and will be forwarded to the Dean’s Office for appropriate action.* (Please note that Wikipedia is NOT a critical source and cannot be used for college writing. The same is true of IMDB.) The final exam will consist of ten questions and test whether students have done the required readings. If you do not read the course material, you will fail the final exam. Students need to include a self addressed stamped envelope if they want their final papers returned to them.

Students are responsible for all of the course content and materials even if they are absent (absences of more than three class sessions can result in your final grade being substantially lowered). No incompletes will be given. Please be aware that from time to time I may need to contact you via e–

mail. In order to facilitate this, you will need to make sure that your SFSU e-mail account is actively working. The system is not set-up to accommodate non-SFSU emails. It is your responsibility to make sure your SFSU email is working and accessible to you.

CLASSROOM ETIQUETTE

No electronic devices allowed in class. Cell phones, laptops, iPads, etc. are to be turned off in class. If you are caught text messaging in class, surfing the web, or playing video games, or engaging in any other non-course related activity, you will be required to leave the classroom. **No eating in class** (unless you bring enough to share with everyone). No electronic recording in the classroom.

Enrollment in this course constitutes your agreement to abide by all of the above rules and policies.

STATEMENT ON DISABILITIES

Students with disabilities who need reasonable accommodations are encouraged to contact the instructor. The Disability Programs and Resource Center (DPRC) is available to facilitate the reasonable accommodations process. The DPRC is located in the Student Service Building and can be reached by telephone (voice/TTY 415-338-2472) or by email: dprc@sfsu.edu

STATEMENT ON SEXUAL ASSAULT

SF State fosters a campus free of sexual violence including sexual harassment, domestic violence, dating violence, stalking, and/or any form of sex or gender discrimination. If you disclose a personal experience as an SF State student, the course instructor is required to notify the Dean of Students. To disclose any such violence confidentially, contact: The SAFE Place - (415) 338-2208; http://www.sfsu.edu/~safe_plc/ Counseling and Psychological Services Center - (415) 338-2208; <http://psyservs.sfsu.edu/> For more information on your rights and available resources: <http://titleix.sfsu.edu>

STUDENT DROPS

Students who do not attend the first class meeting will be dropped. It is the students' responsibility to drop the course after the first class session. Students who stop attending but do not drop will be given a WU grade. Please be aware that a WU grade is counted as an F for GPA purposes.

STUDENT LEARNING OUTCOMES

1. Apply artistic or humanistic methods of inquiry and analysis (including creation, interpretation, and evaluation) to study aesthetic experiences, expressive forms, belief systems, or communicative practices and relate them to the social and cultural contexts in which they are rooted.
2. Articulate how theories and practices in the arts and/or humanities come to be accepted, contested, changed, or abandoned by the scholarly or artistic communities.
3. Construct coherent and sound arguments with support from multiple sources, including library resources and proper citations, that communicate what students have discovered.
4. Analyze social issues as well as ethical dilemmas and choices that arise out of artistic or humanistic research, discoveries, and applications.

GRADING

- Attendance 10%
- First Paper: 40%
- Second Paper: 40%
- Final Exam: 10%

TENTATIVE COURSE SCHEDULE FALL 2015
(Instructor Reserves the Right to Modify)

Wk 1.	AUG 25 AUG 27	Introduction and handout of course material Fisher, <i>Capitalist Realism</i>
Wk 2.	SEP 1 SEP 3	Fisher, <i>Capitalist Realism</i> Film – <i>High School</i> Research and Destroy, “Communicate from an Absent Future” Discussion continued (bring all readings to class)
Wk. 3	SEP 8 SEP 10	Foucault, “The Means of Correct Training” Foucault, “The Means of Correct Training” Agamben, “What is a Paradigm?”
Wk. 4.	SEP 17 SEP 19	Agamben, “What is an Apparatus?” Lazzarato, <i>Governing by Debt</i> , 7-25
Wk. 5	SEP 22 SEP 24	Lazzarato, <i>Governing by Debt</i> , 61-90 Lazzarato, <i>Governing by Debt</i> , 245-265
Wk 6.	SEP 29 OCT 1	No – Class Instructor Illness Review/Discussion of <i>Snowpiercer</i>
Wk. 7.	OCT 6 OCT 8	Film – <i>Safe</i> Interview: Todd Haynes with Larry Gross Foucault, “The Subject and Truth” Continued (bring all readings to class)
Wk. 8.	OCT 13 OCT 15	Continued (bring all readings to class) Midterm Review (bring all materials to class)
Wk. 9.	OCT 20 OCT 22	Film – <i>Superstar: The Karen Carpenter Story</i> Interviews with Todd Haynes Debord, “Separation Perfected” from <i>Society of the Spectacle</i> Wark, <i>Spectacle of Disintegration</i> (selection)
Wk. 10.	OCT 27 OCT 29	Midterm Paper Due Shaviro, “Splice” Film – “Splice” Discussion continued (bring all readings to class)
Wk.11.	NOV 3 NOV 5	<i>Orgies of Feeling</i> 1-63 Continued
Wk 12.	NOV 10	<i>Orgies of Feeling</i> 110-148 Thomas Elsaesser “Tales of Sound and Fury”

	NOV 12	Continued
Wk 13.	NOV 17	<i>Orgies of Feeling</i> 149-202
		Film – <i>All That Heaven Allows</i>
	NOV 19	Continued
Wk. 14.	NOV 23-28	Thanksgiving Break — No Class
Wk. 15.	DEC 1	<i>Orgies of Feeling</i> 225-257
		Fassbinder, “Imitation of Life” (website)
		Sirk interview: “Two Weeks in Another Town” (website)
	DEC 3	Sirk – <i>Written on the Wind</i> or <i>Magnificent Obsession</i>
Wk. 16.	DEC 8	Sirk continued
	DEC 10	Final class discussion
Wk 17.	DEC 17	Final Paper Due @ 11:00 AM
		Final Exam @ 11:15 AM