

English 383: Intro to Cultural Studies

Taking on the Trivial

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“We should treat all the trivial things of life seriously, and all the serious things of life with sincere and studied triviality.”

Oscar Wilde

English 383 will attempt to treat seriously the trivial, the insignificant, the useless, the fake and the fraudulent. In 15 weeks, we will examine the melancholic origins of the *selfie*, the poetic vitality of the object, and the curious relationship between the sacred and the fake. Much of the work we do may require that we tell beautiful, believable lies. It will certainly require that we figure out what Wilde means when he proposes a “sincere and studied triviality.” What might this look like in the classroom? We will investigate our own trivial pursuits, alongside our academic exploration of the field of cultural studies, in an effort to uncover how criteria for triviality is culturally determined.

You can expect to analyze and create a self-portrait, read and review a pleasure text, and curate an exhibition of curiosities. Pop quizzes will be given (soberly) in the form of pub-style trivia. Marvelously insignificant rewards await.



Course Materials

Texts to purchase

John Storey, *From Popular Culture to Everyday Life*

ISBN: 0415657385

Francis Ponge, *Mute Objects of Expression*

ISBN-13: 978-0976395034

Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*

ISBN-13: 978-0374521608

Lawrence Weschler, *Mr. Wilson's Cabinet of Wonder* ISBN-13: 978-0679764892

Todd McLellan, *Things Come Apart: a Teardown Manual for Modern Living*

ISBN-13: 978-0500516768

available through ecampus: excerpts from Ian Bogost's *Alien Phenomenology*; Jane Bennett's *Vibrant Matter*; Juan Luis Borges's *Ficciones*; the Object Lessons series from the *Atlantic*

THINGS COME APART

Todd McLellan



Learning Outcomes

- Situate and interpret texts within diverse literary, cultural and historical contexts
- Draw and articulate connections between texts and genres
- Critically evaluate, in writing and conversation, the criteria for consequential vs. trivial art, literature and media
- Practice rhetorically effective writing and communication, through both traditional, thesis-driven argumentation and creative, speculative, multimodal experimentation

Coursework

Class Participation	100
In-Class Exercises	100
Vanitas Selfie & Essay	250
Pleasure Text, Bliss Text Evaluation	150
Wonder Cabinet Contribution	250
Midterm Exam	100
Final Exam (Reflection)	50

Grading Scale

Assignments add up to a total of 1000 points. Convert point totals into percentages, and the letter grade equivalents are:

A=90-100; B=80-89; C=70-79;
D=60-69; F=0-59

Brief Assignment Descriptions *(detailed guidelines coming soon on separate ecampus pgs)*

Vanitas Selfie & Essay

Compose a self-portrait that meaningfully combines aspects of the early modern vanitas and the modern selfie. Through its composition, your photo should make an argument in response to current conversations about the relationship between the human and the object - an argument that your essay will outline more transparently.

Pleasure Text, Bliss Text? An Evaluation

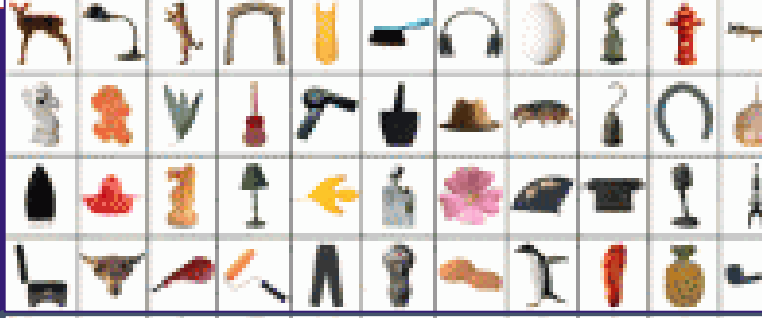
Roland Barthes says that “[t]he pleasure of the text is that moment when my body pursues its own ideas—for my body does not have the same ideas as I do.” Is this theoretical gobbledygook, or is it actually possible to track this moment? You’ll dig into this question by evaluating a specific text (one I give you) that is particularly relevant to our current cultural moment.

Wonder Cabinet Contribution

The class will organize and install its own wonder cabinet/wunderkammer; each student will find or create an object for inclusion in the cabinet, present a detailed report on the object’s fitness for the cabinet, and determine the ideal way in which the object should be displayed to inspire a visitor’s engagement.

Exams

The midterm and final exams will test your ability to articulate responses to some of the major questions of the course.



Laptop Policy

I'd prefer that you put away laptops and smartphones during class and not take them out again unless I ask you to do so for a class exercise. But obviously if you are using etexts, I will be flexible on this policy. Just stay on task.

↔

I make no claim to being a poet. I believe my vision is quite commonplace.

Given an object, however ordinary, it seems to me that it invariably presents certain unique qualities which, if clearly and simply expressed, would elicit unanimous and invariable comment; they are the ones I'm trying to elicit.

What's to be gained by this? To bring to life for the human spirit qualities, which are not beyond its *capacity* and which habit alone prevents it from adopting.

What sort of disciplines are required for this venture to succeed? Certainly those of scientific thought, but particularly a large measure of art. And that's why I think one day such research might also legitimately be called poetry.

↔

In-Class Participation

I'll keep track of your verbal participation, awarding 7 points a week to students who contribute substantially to class discussion. We meet 3 days a week; speak up twice per week and stay engaged in the discussion daily (meaning stay alert and off your phone), and you'll receive full credit. (Plan ahead for weeks when we don't meet all 3 days.)

Discussion-based classes work best when a lot of people talk, but I sympathize with students who are less comfortable speaking up in class. If you don't get the chance to participate verbally, you can make up the points by submitting to me a written response (of at least 100 words) to something specific from the day's conversation at the beginning of the next class period.

Attendance & Make-Up Policies

Four classes may be missed without penalty, regardless of the reason. Your fifth absence will subtract a third of a letter grade from your final course grade, again, regardless of the reason for the absence. Students who miss nine or more classes will fail the course. Note that there are always consequences to missing class, even if you have a reasonable excuse. I don't need to see any doctor's notes or other documentation; giving me a document doesn't mean your absence isn't still an absence. However, if you know you'll be gone for an exam, do let me know. Exams can be made up/rescheduled in special circumstances (e.g. school-sponsored trips, Days of Special Concern), but in-class exercises and participation can never be made up. I suggest getting notes from a classmate if you miss class, and/or coming to office hours to talk over any questions or comments you have.

General Grading Rubric (may be modified for certain assignments; for example, written assignments will not include a Design

component)	Insubstantial (D/F)	Competent (C)	Mature (B)	Exemplary (A)
<p>Rhetorical Awareness Considers audience, purpose, stance and support; states an argument, provides evidence, articulates implications</p>	Argument/context unclear and/or elements of the rhetorical situation neglected; arguments undeveloped and unmemorable, with no specific support or analysis, and few to no quotations from the text	Elements of the rhetorical situation examined, but arguments not fully coherent or developed; arguments may rely on vague, insufficient, unconvincing support due to misinterpretation of the text(s)	Elements of the rhetorical situation examined with confidence; arguments unified and coherent; arguments may rely on specific support from the text(s), but analysis may be unsophisticated or clichéd	Elements of the rhetorical situation examined with confidence and sophistication; argument expert and inventive, with plenty of relevant, engaging and specific support
<p>Design Adds features to enhance audience engagement</p>	Design components missing, illegible or inappropriate; features conflict with or ignore the assignment parameters	Some design components included, but awkwardly or weakly integrated; features match imprecisely with content	Design components included and synthesized appropriately; features suit the genre and content	Design components provoke distinct visual appeals; features integrate with content seamlessly and innovatively
<p>Organization Clear structure moves from topic to topic, or observation to explanation</p>	Structure illogical and dis-unified with weak or missing transitions; logic of arguments impossible to follow	Structure of arguments somewhat clear but missing several transitions between ideas	Structure clear but predictable, utilitarian; arguments logically, coherently developed, but somewhat repetitive or monotonous	Structure clear but complex; ideas organized to achieve maximum coherence and momentum
<p>Conventions Adheres to grammar and usage standards</p>	Content distorted by excessive or consistently distracting errors	Content occasionally interrupted by minor grammatical issues and/or awkward language	Content clarified by appropriate grammar and language throughout	Content enhanced by sophisticated use of rhetorical devices, with no sentence-level issues