

SUMITRA MUKERJI
COURSE ON MODERNISM TAUGHT AT NYU'S SCHOOL OF CONTINUING
EDUCATION, LIBERAL ARTS PROGRAM, IN 1992.

Summer 1992

Continuing Education

Course Title: Literature of Modernism

Course #: Z02.0828.01

Instructor: Sumitra Mukerji

Classes: Mon-Wed-Thurs 5:45pm-8:45pm

16 sessions

July 6, 1992 to August 10, 1992

COURSE DESCRIPTION AND OBJECTIVES:

This course is designed as an Introduction to the *concept* of Modernism, with a specific focus on its manifestation in twentieth century literature and art in the West. My teaching will emphasize the conceptual nature of Modernism as an ideology as well as look at its phenomenological expression through new forms of writing, art, architecture, music, etc. – in short, through the artifacts of cultural modernity. The main objective of the course is to make students familiar with the central issues of “modernism” as a cultural discourse that arises and survives within specific socio-political historical developments. Hence, while we will be “reading” modernism primarily through literary texts, the objective will be to constantly situate our readings in class in relation to larger historical contexts. Students will be required to reflect their awareness/grasp of this relation in their responses during class discussions, in the ways in which they direct their readings, and in their written assignments and final papers.

The following week-to-week outline of the course provides a detailed sketch of the syllabus. We will try to follow this schedule as far as possible. A calendar follows, offering a sequential description of the course and the specific readings assigned for each date.

Course work requirements, grading, and attendance policy are indicated at the end.

PROPOSED SCHEDULE AND TERRITORY OF THE SYLLABUS:

Week One (July 6-9): Introduction to the concept of Modernism

We'll begin by examining the idea of “the modern” as a distinctive *category* of analysis and evaluation. In order to place this issue in a context both literary and historical, we'll look at a sample text: the section dealing with the “Dialogue between the Ancients and Moderns” in Jonathan Swift's *A Tale of a Tub*.

This first class will be followed by two sessions on the social, economic, political and cultural “background” to twentieth century modernism. I will map a quick survey of nineteenth century

history in Europe and America, focusing on issues of industrialization, urbanization, the consolidation of a “middle class” and a “bourgeois” public. This mapping will also involve a look at related issues of colonialism, imperialism, war, and various competing “nationalisms”. Late-nineteenth/early-twentieth century Modernism in Literature and the Arts will be situated as a response to [or, in some cases, a symptom of] these larger socio-political and ideological movements/developments.

For texts, we shall look at selections from Baudelaire’s poetry and essays; Matthew Arnold’s “Dover Beach” and selections from “The Function of Criticism”; a poem by Ezra Pound; T.S. Eliot’s “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock”; and a scene from Chekov’s *The Cherry Orchard*.

The above may sound like a heavy dose for a first week but these selections are brief and the issues referred to in para. 2 will be covered with reference to these texts, over three sessions.

Week Two (July 13-16): The “modern” novel in English/Irish Literature

Issues of stylistic and thematic innovations. An extract from D.H. Lawrence’s *Women in Love* by way of introduction. The so-called stream of consciousness technique. Virginia Woolf’s *Mrs. Dalloway* and the last chapter of James Joyce’s *Ulysses* (Molly Bloom’s soliloquy) as examples for study. Introduction to the Realism versus Modernism debate.

Week Three (July 20-23): Crises within modernity. The First World War. America in relation to Europe.

Modernist responses from a quasi-American perspective. Ernest Hemingway’s *A Farewell to Arms* and Gertrude Stein’s *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*.

Crises within America. F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby*.

Relating politics to aesthetics, Fitzgerald’s modernism within the aesthetic context of the so-called Jazz Age.

T.W. Adorno’s essay on “Jazz”. Question to be considered: Modernism as a ‘deviant’ or ‘dominant’ of capitalism?

Week Four (July 27-30): Modernism as fragmentation, dissonance, and alienation

Brief survey of art movements: Expressionism, surrealism, Dadaism. Extracts from Dali’s *Hidden Faces* and Jorge Luis Borges’ *Labyrinths*.

Existentialism and the Absurd. Chapter from Albert Camus’ *The Myth of Sisyphus* and scene/extract from Samuel Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot*.

Week Five (August 3-6): Modernism as a critique of urban, industrial society and/or of modernization under capitalism

Bertolt Brecht’s *The Threepenny Opera*.

Literary and social criticism. Walter Benjamin’s essay on “Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century”; George Lukacs’ essay on “Reification” (from *History and Class Consciousness*); and Adorno and Horkheimer’s essay on “The Culture Industry” from their *Dialectic of Enlightenment*.

Week Six (Final class, August 10): Rounding up

Discussion on the role of art and literature within modernism. “High” modernism vis à vis “popular culture” and “mass culture”. Modernism and film. Modernism and television. Modernism in relation to the avant-garde movements. Introduction to the modernism/post-modernism debate.

Question: Is the discourse of modernism a primarily Western discourse?

Possible ways of subverting this assumption by way of conclusion.

Needless to say, the above issues will not be “studied” in any detail during a single closing session but will merely be raised as pointers for possible future investigation and/or research projects students might wish to undertake in this area.

There will be no time to see a full film in this course, but the last class will be conducted as a multi-media session. We’ll watch a few clips from a couple of films and maybe also from a TV show, and look at some photographs and other graphics.

CALENDAR:

ORDER OF READINGS AND TEXTS REQUIRED

July 6	Selection from Jonathan Swift’s <i>A Tale of a Tub</i> . [Available in xeroxed package]
July 8	Selections from Baudelaire; Arnold’s “Dover Beach” and extract from “The Function of Criticism”; a poem by Ezra Pound; and T.S. Eliot’s “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock”. [Available in xeroxed package]
July 9	Scene from Anton Chekov’s <i>The Cherry Orchard</i> . [Available in xeroxed package]
July 13	Extract from D. H. Lawrence’s <i>Women in Love</i> . [Available in xeroxed package]
July 15	Virginia Woolf’s <i>Mrs. Dalloway</i> . [Bring your own copy of the book – available in bookstores and libraries]
July 16	Last chapter of James Joyce’s <i>Ulysses</i> . [Available in xeroxed package]
July 20	Ernest Hemingway’s <i>A Farewell to Arms</i> . [Bring your own copy]
July 22	Gertrude Stein’s <i>The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas</i> . [Bring your own copy]
July 23	F. Scott Fitzgerald’s <i>The Great Gatsby</i> [Bring your own copy] and Theodore Adorno’s essay “Jazz” from <i>Prisms</i> . [Available in xeroxed package]
July 27	Extracts from Salvadore Dali’s <i>Hidden Faces</i> and Jorge Luis Borges’ <i>Labyrinths</i> [Available in xeroxed package]
July 29	Chapter from Albert Camus’ <i>The Myth of Sisyphus</i> . [Available in xeroxed package]

- July 30 Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*. [Bring your own copy]
- August 3 Bertolt Brecht's *The Threepenny Opera*. [Bring your own copy]
- August 5 Walter Benjamin's essay "Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century" [Available in xeroxed package]
- August 6 Lukacs' essay "Reification" and Adorno and Horkheimer's chapter "The Culture Industry". [Available in xeroxed package]
- August 10 No assigned reading. We watch extracts from films/documentaries, look at pictures/photos. Student's present short verbal summaries/synopses of their final paper's position/argument on any of the themes discussed previously via a selected literary text or historical/cultural movement. Concluding general discussion on these and other topics raised during the course.

COURSE WORK REQUIREMENTS:

Two short commentaries (2-3 pages in length) on issues being considered in class, the first to be submitted on July 16, the second on July 30. Plus, a final paper about 10 pages in length arguing a position around any of the "themes" outlined above, based on either a text in the syllabus or an art movement, or both, to be submitted, typed in double space with endnotes and bibliography, on the final day of the course.

Note: No final exam. Grading will be based on the written commentaries, the final paper, and classroom participation. The nature and extent of this participation will be discussed and decided on in a democratic manner between instructor and students on the first day of class.

GRADING:

Two Commentaries.....30%
 Final Paper.....60%
 Attendance, participation, etc.10%

ATTENDANCE POLICY:

As per University rules. However, if a student is absent for three classes in a row without due cause being notified in advance and permission for absence being granted, he or she should be prepared to withdraw from the course.

I look forward to our sessions in class and hope our work together will be both fun and intellectually rewarding.

Sumitra Mukerji