The Social Construction of Reality

FIRST-UG 32

Description: How do we know what is real and what is illusion? From the philosophy of the Ancient Greeks to contemporary movies like *The Matrix* or *Inception*, this question has haunted humankind. This course begins with the premise that reality is something we construct. We create reality through the stories we tell and the stories told to us. In the contemporary world the most powerful story-teller is the commercial media. As such we will pay special attention to the role of commercial entertainment, advertising and public relations in constructing our reality. We’ll conclude the semester by exploring questions of how one lives in such a world, specifically: how does one identify oneself, act ethically, and bring about change within a socially constructed reality.

Requirements:
- Attendance, diligent reading, and active participation in all class discussions.
- Written Reflections: 3 main points of, or questions on, the readings, due each class, on line.
- Three short essays--approximately 6-8 pages long--over the course of the semester.

Notes:
- I'm always open to suggestions on assignments. A video, poem, performance, web page, etc. in place of one of the written assignments is possible and could be very exciting. Just talk to me first.
- All papers handed in on time can be re-written for new grades, but the re-write must be returned within two weeks of first receiving back the corrected paper.
- Syllabus, assignments, links--as well as on-line class forum--can be found on the Blackboard site for this class. All written reflections must be uploaded on-line before class (ideally the night before).
- Plagiarism, in any form, is not tolerated. For a full review of Gallatin’s policy on plagerism see http://www.gallatin.nyu.edu/academics/policies/policy/integrity.html

Books:
- Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*
- John Berger, *Ways of Seeing*
- Rene Descartes, *Discourse on Method*
- W.E.B DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk*
- Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *The Yellow Wallpaper*
- Maxine Hong Kingston, *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts*
- Jonathan Lear, *Radical Hope: Ethics in the Face of Cultural Devastation*
- Walter Lippmann, *Public Opinion*
- Herman Melville, *Bartelby and Benito Cereno*
- Thomas More, *Utopia* (found @ http://theopenutopia.org)
- Slavoj Zizek, *Welcome to the Desert of the Real*
- Strongly Suggested: Strunk & White, *Elements of Style*

*Essays:*
- Plato, “Simile of the Cave” from *The Republic*
- Blackfoot Indians, “The Sacred Weed”
- Charles Baudelaire, from *The Painter of Modern Life*
- Judith Butler, “Subjects of Sex/Gender/Desire” from *Gender Trouble*

All books can be bought at Bluestockings Books, 172 Allen Street (a block and a half below Houston in the Lower East Side). Thomas More’s *Utopia*, can be found at http://theopenutopia.org. Copies of the essays can be accessed, for reference purposes only: do not copy or download, via Blackboard.

**Semester Schedule:**

**Sep 7 W**  
Course Introduction

**Sep 12 M**  
**Shadows on a Wall**  
READ: Plato, “Simile of the Cave”  
WATCH: *The Matrix* (in the library on your own or at evening class showing)

**Sep 14 W**  
**The Imagined Real**  
READ: Herman Melville, *Benito Cereno*

**Sep 19 M**  
**The Western Specter**  
READ: Rene Descartes, *Meditations* 1-3

**Sep 21 W**  
**The Way Out?**  
READ: Rene Descartes, *Meditations* 4-6

**Sep 26 M**  
**Writing an Essay**  
READ: Strunk & White *Elements of Style* (optional)  
*First Assignment Handed Out*

**Sep 28 W**  
**Blurring the Lines**  

**Oct 3 M**  
**Life Among Ghosts**  
READ: Maxine Hong Kingston, *The Woman Warrior*, second half

**Oct 5 W**  
**Double Consciousness**  
READ: W.E.B DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, concentrate on first and last chapter

**Oct 10 M**  
**No Class – Columbus Day**
Oct 12 W  **Other People’s Worlds**
READ: Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *The Yellow Wallpaper*

Oct 17 M  **Perception**
READ: John Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, Chapter 1, 4&5
*DUE: First Assignment*
*Second Assignment Handed Out*

Oct 19 W  **Images and Power**
John Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, chapters 2&3

Oct 24 M  **Creating Dreams**
READ: John Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, chapter 7

Oct 26 W  **Manufacturing Reality**
READ: Walter Lippmann, *Public Opinion*, sections 1-3 (up to page 100)

Oct 31 M  **Manufacturing Consent**
READ: Walter Lippmann, *Public Opinion*, sections 4,5 and 8

Nov 2 W  **Disappearance of The Real**
READ: Jean Baudrillard, “The Precession of Simulacra,” first half
*DUE: Second Assignment*
*Third Assignment Handed Out*

Nov 7 M  **Simulacra**
READ: Jean Baudrillard, “The Precession of Simulacra,” second half

Nov 9 W  **Desire for the Real**
READ: Slavoj Zizek, Welcome to the Desert of the Real

Nov 14 M  **Inventing Authenticity**
READ: Slavoj Zizek, Welcome to the Desert of the Real

Nov 16 W  **Unstable Identities**
READ: Judith Butler, “Subjects of Sex/Gender/Desire”

Nov 21 M  **The Liberation of Fabrication**

Nov 23 W  **No Class – Pre-Thanksgiving**

Nov 28 M  **Collapse of the World**
READ: Jonathan Lear, *Radical Hope*
*DUE: Third Assignment*
*Fourth Assignment Handed Out*
Nov 30 W  Reinventing Reality
READ: Jonathan Lear, Radical Hope

Dec 5 M  Utopia is No-Place
READ: Thomas More, Utopia, Book 1 and first letter from More to Giles @
 http://theopenutopia.org

Dec 7 W  Imaginal Machines
READ: Thomas More, Utopia, Book 2 and second letter from More to Giles @
 http://theopenutopia.org

Dec 12 M  Catch-up

Dec 14 W  Social Construction of Reality
Wrap-up discussion
All Assignments are Due

TBA  Make-Up Class for Nov 23rd
GO: Fieldtrip to some constructed reality