The Thingliness of Things
FIRST-UG51
1 Washington Place, Room 601
New York University
Gallatin School of Individualized Study
Fall 2011

Professor Eve Meltzer
Meets: Mondays and Wednesdays, 12:30 to 1:45
Office hours: Wednesdays 11 to 12:30 (open hours) and by appointment
Office: 1 Washington Place, room 424    email: emeltzer@nyu.edu

COURSE DESCRIPTION

This course engages a seemingly simple question: what is an object? Relatedly, what is a thing? As a means of illuminating these questions we will consult everyday objects, theories of various object forms, and literary and artistic representations. One of our challenges will be to learn to read objects both by having them at hand, and by understanding how economic, psychic, and social values shape their visual and material properties. In this process, we will engage the popular view that objects tell us something, first and foremost, about the people who create and use them. We will also encounter the taboo proposition that objects may have an intentionality of their own, and that humans do not dictate the meaning of all things.

This course also serves as an introduction to the nature, processes, and perils of interdisciplinary study, as well as the practices of close reading and analytical writing.

COURSE REQUIREMENTS

Students will be expected to attend all meetings, to do so well prepared, and to participate actively in discussions (attendance and participation = 30%). In addition to occasional discussion board entries, students will be asked to write three papers: a single-paged description on an object (15%) and two close readings—one three to four pages in length (25%), one six to eight pages in length (30%). Additionally, the final paper will involve a brief (no more than ten minute) presentation at the end of the semester. In order to pass this class, you must complete all assignments and you may miss no more than three class meetings. Not completing all of the papers or missing more than three classes without a reasonable excuse (my reasons, not yours) will result in an “F.”

There will be two required screenings. At their convenience (but always in advance of class meetings), students can view videos on reserve at the Avery Fisher Center for Music and Media (AFC) located on the 2nd floor of Bobst Library. When possible, group screenings will be arranged. There will also be one museum visit to be arranged at a mutually convenient date and time.

REQUIRED TEXTS

Dick Hebdige, Subculture: The Meaning of Style

All other materials will be made available to you by other means.
IN-CLASS REQUIREMENTS AND PROHIBITIONS

Always bring your reading materials with you to class.
Laptops and all handheld electronic devices may not be used during class time.

Please take note of Gallatin’s policy on academic integrity:

As a Gallatin student you belong to an interdisciplinary community of artists and scholars who value honest and open intellectual inquiry. This relationship depends on mutual respect, responsibility, and integrity. Failure to uphold these values will be subject to severe sanction, which may include dismissal from the University. Examples of behaviors that compromise the academic integrity of the Gallatin School include plagiarism, illicit collaboration, doubling or recycling coursework, and cheating. Please consult the Gallatin Bulletin or Gallatin website [www.gallatin.nyu.edu/academics/policies/policy/integrity.html] for a full description of the academic integrity policy.

COURSE SCHEDULE

INTRODUCTION: THINGS AND THINKING

Weds 9/7 Introductions.

FIRST OBJECTS, FIRST LOVES, and, THE FIRST THING THAT IS NOT ME

Mon 9/12
read:  • Marcel Proust, Swann’s Way, “Overture”

Weds 9/14 and Mon 9/19

“I” AM AN OBJECT

Weds 9/21 and Mon 9/26 and Weds 9/28

YOUR FIRST PAPER
or, HOW TO DESCRIBE A THING?

Monday 9/26
read:  • A few exemplary descriptions, available on blackboard

do:  Bring in your first try at a description of an object, chosen by you.

Monday 10/3  FIRST PAPER DUE in my box, 1 Washington Place, 4th floor, by 4 pm.
“I” AM AN OBJECT, cont.

MW 10/3 and 10/5 • Discussion of North by Northwest

M 10/10 No Class Meeting (University Holiday)

WM 10/12 and 10/17 • Discussion of North by Northwest continued along with discussion of Althusser
read: • Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses"

OBJECTS OF EXCHANGE

Weds 10/19 and Mon 10/24
read: • Karl Marx, “The Commodity”

Weds 10/26
read: • Jean Baudrillard, “The Ideological Genesis of Need”
Second paper topics distributed and discussed.

Mon 10/31 • This class (or another date at a more convenient time) will involve a visit to the
exhibition Talk to Me: Design and the Communication between People and Objects, on
view at MoMA until 11/7.

THAT THING CALLED “REGISTRATION”:
Weds 11/2 First-year adviser Rahul Hamid visits class to discuss Spring ’12 registration.

THE STYLE and DESIGN OF THINGS (AND HOW THEY MAKE US FEEL)

Mon 11/7 and Mon 11/14
read: • Dick Hebdige, Subculture: The Meaning of Style

Tuesday 11/8 SECOND PAPER DUE, put in my Gallatin box by noon.

FETISHISMS, or OUR MOST MAGICAL OBJECTS

Weds 11/16, Mon 11/21, and Weds 11/23
read: • Marx, “The Fetishism of Commodities and the Secret Thereof”
• Sigmund Freud, “Fetishism” and “Female Sexuality”

Mon 11/28 and M 11/30
screen: • Alfred Hitchcock, Vertigo, on reserve at AFC

Weds 11/30 OUTLINE FOR FINAL PAPER DUE IN CLASS
PRESENTING YOUR OBJECTS
AND YOUR (NEARLY) FINAL THOUGHTS ABOUT THEM

Mon 12/5    student presentations
Wes 12/7    student presentations
Mon 12/12   student presentations
Weds 12/14  student presentations
Friday 12/16 FINAL PAPER DUE