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 storyteller 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.

*Learning Goals:*
- Thinking critically from a range of intellectual positions and disciplinary traditions.
- Writing analytic essays that demonstrate creative, rigorous and original thought.
- Reading difficult texts, and communicating their relevance and importance.
- Applying theoretical and historical material to the analysis of everyday life.

*Requirements:*
- Attendance, diligent reading, and active participation in all class discussions. (20% of grade)
- Written Reflections: 3 main points of, or questions on, the readings, due each class, and comments on 2 other students; reflections, all on NYU Classes Forum. (20 % of grade)
- Three short essays--approximately 6-8 pages long--over the course of the semester. (60% of grade)

*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 plagiarism see [http://gallatin.nyu.edu/academics/policies/integrity.html](http://gallatin.nyu.edu/academics/policies/integrity.html)
Books:
- Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*
- John Berger, *Ways of Seeing*
- Rene Descartes, *Meditations*
- 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, *Benito Cereno*
- Slavoj Zizek, *Welcome to the Desert of the Real*

- *Strongly Suggested:* Strunk & White, *Elements of Style*

Essays:
- Plato, “Simile of the Cave” and “Theory of Art” 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*
- Jean Paul Sartre, “Existentialism is a Humanism”

All books can be bought at Bluestockings Books, 172 Allen Street (a block and a half below Houston in the Lower East Side). Copies of the essays can be accessed, for reference purposes only (do not copy or download) via NYU Classes.

**Semester Schedule:**

**Sep 3 W** Course Introduction
WATCH: *The Matrix* (at evening class showing, or in the library on your own)

**Sep 8 M** Shadows on a Wall

**Sep 10 W** The Imagined Real
READ: Herman Melville, *Benito Cereno*

**Sep 15 M** The Western Specter
READ: Rene Descartes, *Meditations* 1-3

**Sep 17 W** The Way Out?
READ: Rene Descartes, *Meditations* 4-6

**Sep 22 M** Writing an Essay
READ: Strunk & White *Elements of Style* (optional)
*First Assignment Handed Out*

**Sep 24 W** Blurring the Lines
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<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Assignment/Reading</th>
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<tr>
<td>Sep 29 M</td>
<td><strong>Life Among Ghosts</strong>&lt;br&gt;READ: Maxine Hong Kingston, <em>The Woman Warrior</em>, first half</td>
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<td>Oct 1 W</td>
<td><strong>Double Consciousness</strong>&lt;br&gt;READ: W.E.B DuBois, <em>The Souls of Black Folk</em>, concentrate on first and last chapter</td>
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<td>Oct 4 F</td>
<td><strong>Field Trip (not required)</strong></td>
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<td>Oct 6 M</td>
<td><strong>Other People’s Worlds</strong>&lt;br&gt;READ: Charlotte Perkins Gilman, <em>The Yellow Wallpaper</em></td>
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<td>Oct 8 W</td>
<td><strong>Perception</strong>&lt;br&gt;READ: John Berger, <em>Ways of Seeing</em>, Chapter 1, 4&amp;5  &lt;br&gt;<em>DUE: First Assignment</em>  &lt;br&gt;<em>Second Assignment Handed Out</em></td>
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<td>Oct 13 M</td>
<td><strong>No Class</strong></td>
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<td>Oct 20 M</td>
<td><strong>Creating Dreams</strong>&lt;br&gt;READ: John Berger, <em>Ways of Seeing</em>, chapter 7</td>
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<td>Oct 22 W</td>
<td><strong>Manufacturing Reality</strong>&lt;br&gt;READ: Walter Lippmann, <em>Public Opinion</em>, sections 1-3 (up to page 100)</td>
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<td>Oct 27 M</td>
<td><strong>Manufacturing Consent</strong>&lt;br&gt;READ: Walter Lippmann, <em>Public Opinion</em>, sections 4,5 and 8</td>
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<td>Oct 29 W</td>
<td><strong>Disappearance of The Real</strong>&lt;br&gt;READ: Jean Baudrillard, “The Precession of Simulacra,” first half  &lt;br&gt;<em>DUE: Second Assignment</em>  &lt;br&gt;<em>Third Assignment Handed Out</em></td>
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<td>Nov 3 M</td>
<td><strong>Stories We Follow/Stories We Tell</strong>&lt;br&gt;WATCH: in class, Adam Curtis, “It Felt Like A Kiss.”</td>
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<td>Nov 5 W</td>
<td><strong>Simulacra</strong>&lt;br&gt;READ: Jean Baudrillard, “The Precession of Simulacra,” second half</td>
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<td>Nov 10 M</td>
<td><strong>Desire for the Real</strong>&lt;br&gt;READ: Slavoj Zizek, Welcome to the Desert of the Real</td>
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Nov 12 W  Inventing Authenticity
READ: Slavoj Zizek, Welcome to the Desert of the Real

Nov 17 M  Unstable Identities
READ: Judith Butler, “Subjects of Sex/Gender/Desire”

Nov 19 W  The Liberation of Fabrication
READ: Charles Baudelaire, Painter of Modern Life esp I-V and IX-XII

Nov 24 M  Collapse of the World
READ: Jonathan Lear, Radical Hope
DUE: Third Assignment
Fourth Assignment Handed Out

Nov 26 W  Reinventing Reality
READ: Jonathan Lear, Radical Hope

Dec 1 M  Ethics in a Socially Constructed World
READ: Jean Paul Sartre, “Existentialism is a Humanism”

Dec 3 W  Catch-up

Dec 8 M  Catch-up

Dec 10 W  Social Construction of Reality
Wrap-up discussion
All Assignments are Due