Fall 2016
Gallatin School of Individualized Study
The Idea of Nothing
Tuesday, Thursday: 3:30-4:45
Room: 194 Mercer, Room 301
Office: 1 Washington Place, #417; (212) 992-7767
Office hours: T, Th: 10-11; 2-3; (Wednesdays by appointment)
Instructor: Gregory Erickson
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Alice: “There's no use trying... one can't believe impossible things.”
White Queen: “Why, sometimes I've believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast.”

(Lewis Carroll)

Syllabus

Course Description

Nothing. No-thing. Negative Space. Zero. Silence. Antimatter. Black holes. Aporias. Each of these terms communicates some aspect of the concept of nothingness, absence, or emptiness. Our very existence is framed by nothing, from the abyss of non-being before our birth to the nothingness of death at its conclusion. The understanding and portrayal of absence is perhaps one of humankind’s greatest mysteries, and has triggered explorations in all different fields of human activity. Whether in mathematics, physics, theater, philosophy, theology, literature, or visual art, nothingness as an idea has been explored, defined, and depicted in multiple and contradictory ways. “Nothing is, but what is not,” says Shakespeare’s Macbeth, but is it possible to speak or write of that which is not? Is our inability to define “nothing” a failure of langue or imagination or does it point to a larger cosmological truth? In Jewish and Christian mysticism God is considered the eternal Nothingness, totally outside of finite or fragmentary nomenclature that suggests being. Is nothingness the negation of all historical and political meaning, or can it serve as a space in which to imagine another history, another political, or a better world? Composers use silence, painters use black or white, sculptures, installation artists and architects employ negative space, authors and poets try to create emptiness within or between words. This course will explore the dimensions of Nothingness as manifested in the arts, religions, philosophy, and science. The class will include guest speakers and visits to museums and performances.

Learning Goals

• To improve critical thinking and writing
• To model various approaches to interdisciplinary scholarship
• To think and write critically about difficult, experimental, non-linear, and non-verbal texts
• To encourage students to incorporate readings and classroom discussion with museums, performances, and texts from outside the classroom
• To think historically about modern texts and questions
Evaluation and Course Requirements

The course will be graded on the following basis:

- Essay #1 30%
- Essay #2 30%
- Participation/postings 15%
- Final Presentation 10%
- Final project 15%

Formal Assignments

- #1: descriptive/comparative essay: 4-5 pages
- #2: Theoretical/analytical essay: 4-5 pages
- #3: Final presentation and project/paper

Informal writing will be short writings done both in and outside of class and on the course website. These are intended to allow you to work out some of your thoughts to class readings and discussion on paper, and to allow your classmates and I to see what you are thinking about. Website postings are due by 9:00 PM the night before class.

The final project will be on a topic of your choice, approved by me, that explores some of the themes and issues of the course. It can be a traditional research paper or another more experimental, experiential, or artistic format. You will give a presentation on this project a week or so before it is due.

Readings:
There is no required textbook. The readings for the course will either be distributed in class or will be available online or through the class website. You may want to pick up a paperback copy of *King Lear* as it is the one full-length work we are reading.

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 (http://gallatin.nyu.edu/academics/policies/integrity.html).

ePortfolio:
You are among the first to participate in Gallatin’s new ePortfolio program. You will be asked to add content to your ePortfolio at least three times this semester, and we encourage you to maintain your ePortfolio through the rest of your time at Gallatin. For example, you might want to show your adviser your ePortfolio during advisement sessions to demonstrate your progress. You should have already received instructions via email on how to access and use your ePortfolio.
Course Schedule

Week one: 9/6; 9/8  
Introductions and Definitions

Part I: Philosophical Nothing  
Week two: 9/13; 9/15  
Reading: “A Brief History of Nothing” from Holt: *Why Does the World Exist?*  
“Nothingology—Flying to Nowhere” from Barrow: *The Book of Nothing*

Week three: 9/20; 9/22  
Reading: Sartre: from *Being and Nothingness*:  
Heidegger: “What is Metaphysics”  
Bronfen: from *Over her Dead Body: Death, Femininity, and the Aesthetic*

Part II: Nothing in Literature and poetry  
Week four: 9/27, 9/29  
Reading: Wallace Stevens: Selected poems  
W.C. Williams: selected poems  
Edmond Jabes: from *The Book of Questions*  
Samuel Beckett: *Texts for Nothing*, 10-13

Week five: 10/4; 10/6  
Reading: Shakespeare: *King Lear*

Week six: 10/11; 10/13  
Reading: “Prologue” from Ellison: *Invisible Man*  
“The Whiteness of the Whale” from Melville: *Moby Dick:*

Essay #1 Due (10/13)

Part III: Nothing in Math and Science  
Week seven: 10/18; 10/20  
“Black Holes” from Greene: *The Elegant Universe*  
Guest: Professor Matt Stanley
Week eight: 10/25; 10/27
Reading: “The Greeks had no word for it” from Robert Kaplan’s *The Nothing that is: A Natural History of Zero.*
“Zero—The Whole Story” from Barrow: *The Book of Nothing*

Part IV: Visual and Musical Nothings
Week nine: 11/1; 11/3
Looking: works by Robert Ryman, Fred Sandbeck, Robert Rauschenberg, others
Reading: “Apprehension” from Mark C. Taylor’s *About Religion*
Selections from *Robert Ryman: Critical Texts Since 1967*

Week ten: 11/8; 11/10
MOMA visit (11/10)
Reading: From *Voids: A Retrospective* (Centre Pompidou)
The Big Nothing (New Museum)
Guest: Professor Nina Katchadourian

Week eleven: 11/15; [11/17 no class]
Reading: “Lecture on Nothing” from Cage: *Silence*
Listening: John Cage, Morton Feldman, others

Week Twelve: 11/22

*Essay #2 Due (11/22)*

Part V: Nothing in Religion
Week thirteen: 11/29; 12/1
Reading: “What is Religion?” from Nishitani: *Religion and Nothingness*
Selections from Scholem: *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*

Week fourteen: 12/6; 12/8
Reading: Selections from Meister Eckhart
Selections from the *Zohar*
“Evil and Nothingness” from Altizer: *Godhead and the Nothing*

Week fifteen: 12/13; 12/15
Presentations
*Final project due 12/16*
Bibliography

We will be reading sections from most of the books below. You may want to read more of certain works for your papers or for your own interest. I have put most of these on reserve in Bobst.

Altizer, Thomas J.J. *Godhead and the Nothing*

John Barron. *The Book of Nothing*

Bronfen, Elisabeth. *Over her Dead Body: Death, Femininity, and the Aesthetic*

Beckett, Samuel. *Texts for Nothing*

Cage, John. *Silence*


Ellison, Ralph. *Invisible Man*

Greene, Brian. *The Elegant Universe*

Hawking, Stephen. *A Briefer History of Time*

Heidegger, Martin. “What is Metaphysics”

Holt, Jim. *Why Does the World Exist: An Existential Detective Story*

Jabes, Edmond. *The Book of Questions*

Kaplan, Robert. *The Nothing that is: A Natural History of Zero*

Melville, Herman. *Moby Dick*

Nishitani, Keiji. *Religion and Nothingness*

Sartre, Jean-Paul. *Being and Nothingness:*

Scholem, Gershem. *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*

Shakespeare, William. *King Lear*

Stevens, Wallace. *Collected Poems*

Taylor, Mark C. *About Religion: Economies of Faith in Virtual Culture*

Williams, William Carlos. *Collected Poems*

Zohar or *Book of Splendor*