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Fall 2009
Tuesday & Thursday, 11-12:15
Office: Rm 602, 715 Broadway
T&Th: 3:30-5, Fri: 12-4, by appt.

The Social Construction of Reality

K10.0032

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*, 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).

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*
- 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*
- 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, via Blackboard.

Semester Schedule:

Sep 8 T **Course Introduction**

Sep 10 Th **Shadows on a Wall**
READ: Plato, "Simile of the Cave"
WATCH: *The Matrix* on your own

Sep 15 T **The Imagined Real**
READ: Herman Melville, *Benito Cereno*

Sep 17 Th **The Western Specter**
READ: Rene Descartes, *Meditations* 1-3

Sep 22 T **The Way Out?**
READ: Rene Descartes, *Meditations* 4-6

Sep 24 Th **Writing an Essay**
READ: Strunk & White *Elements of Style* (optional)
First Assignment Handed Out

Sep 29 T **Blurring the Lines**
READ: The Blackfoot tale: "The Sacred Weed" ; and Maxine Hong Kingston, *The Woman Warrior*, first half

Oct 1 Th **Life Among Ghosts**
READ: Maxine Hong Kingston, *The Woman Warrior*, second half

Oct 6 T **Double Consciousness**
READ: W.E.B DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, concentrate on first and last chapter

Oct 8 Th **Other People's Worlds**
READ: Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *The Yellow Wallpaper*

Oct 13 T **Perception**
READ: John Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, Chapter 1, 4&5

- Oct 15 Th** **Images and Power**
 John Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, chapters 2&3
DUE: First Assignment
Second Assignment Handed Out
- Oct 20 T** **Creating Dreams**
 READ: John Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, chapter 7
- Oct 22 Th** **Manufacturing Reality**
 READ: Walter Lippmann, *Public Opinion*
- Oct 27 T** **Manufacturing Consent**
 READ: Walter Lippmann, *Public Opinion*
- Oct 29 Th** **Disappearance of The Real**
 READ: Jean Baudrillard, “The Precession of Simulacra,” first half
- Nov 3 T** **Simulacra**
 READ: Jean Baudrillard, “The Precession of Simulacra,” second half
DUE: Second Assignment
Third Assignment Handed Out
- Nov 5 Th** **Desire for the Real**
 READ: Slavoj Zizek, *Welcome to the Desert of the Real*
- Nov 10 T** **Inventing Authenticity**
 READ: Slavoj Zizek, *Welcome to the Desert of the Real*
- Nov 12 Th** **Unstable Identities**
 READ: Judith Butler, “Subjects of Sex/Gender/Desire”
- Nov 17 T** **The Liberation of Fabrication**
 READ: Charles Baudelaire, *Painter of Modern Life* esp I-V and IX-XII
- Nov 19 Th** **Collapse of the World**
 READ: Jonathan Lear, *Radical Hope*
- Nov 24 T** **Reinventing Reality**
 READ: Jonathan Lear, *Radical Hope*
DUE: Third Assignment
Fourth Assignment Handed Out
- Nov 26 Th** **THANKSGIVING – NO CLASS**
- Dec 1 T** **Ethics in an Age of Anything**
 READ: Jean-Paul Sartre, “Existentialism is a Humanism”

Dec 3 Th **Catch-up**

Dec 8 T **Catch-up**

Dec 10 Th **Catch-up**

Dec 15 T **Social Construction of Reality**
Wrap-up discussion
All Assignments are Due