

APOCALYPTIC AMERICA: NARRATIVIZING POWER, PARANOIA AND ANXIETY IN POPULAR CULTURE

ENGLISH 258: AMERICAN POPULAR CULTURE (SECTION 2, CRN 13530)
Spring Session, 2016- MWF from 14:30-15:20 in Room 320, Clark Hall

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Office Hours: Monday (15:30-16:30) and By Appointment

Course Description

Owing its origins to the Greek word *apokalyptein* meaning “to uncover or reveal,” apocalyptic narratives have remained central to our understanding of human existence since pre-civilization eras. However, the notion of “apocalypse” as a catastrophic event—leading to total global annihilation—seems to have arguably gained currency in America since the events of World War II, which culminated with the nuclear destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Subsequently eschatological motifs such as exploding bombs, alien invasions, cataclysmic environmental disasters and rampaging products of genetic modification have increasingly become central preoccupations of the American national imaginary. More recently the traumatic aftermath of 9/11—resulting in a paranoiac subjectivity about specific embodiments—has significantly affected cultural productions, which Elizabeth Rosen situates within the “neo-apocalyptic tradition.” For this course we will survey and analyze a wide variety of popular cultural tracts dealing with apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic settings, in order to answer the critical question: what do these apocalyptic scenarios tell us about the world we know and live in? A fundamental goal of this course will be decipher what these divergent catastrophic visions spanning multiple temporalities, reveal about the changing nature of the American body politic as well as our allied anxieties about race, sex, class and gender. In engaging with spaces that limit and threaten human existence, we hope to uncover a more nuanced understanding of the components that define the American condition.



Course Goals

This course fulfills Objective 7 of the General Education Curriculum at West Virginia University. This goal is defined as:

7. *American Culture*: Students are expected to develop knowledge critical to the understanding of the issues that shape the culture of the United States. Successful completion of one course that explores issues that have shaped the development of society in the United States including but not limited to issues pertaining to age, ethnicity, race, region, religion, or social class. This course may also satisfy a major course requirement.

Required Primary Texts Available At the WVU Bookstore

All books are available at the WVU book store.

Required

- ❖ Mohsin Hamid, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*
- ❖ Neville Shute, *On The Beach*
- ❖ Art Spiegelman, *In The Shadow Of No Towers*
- ❖ Kurt Vonnegut, *Cat's Cradle*

Recommended

- ❖ Gail Dines, Jean M. (McMahon) Humez (Eds.), *Gender, Race, and Class in Media: A Critical Reader Fourth Edition*

Required Primary Texts Not Available At the WVU Bookstore

You can access visual material in the following ways: view at **WVU library eReserves**

(<https://reserves.lib.wvu.edu/>), through Netflix, or purchase at Amazon or iTunes (used or new or using instant video services) etc. Many of the television episodes/films are also available free via the internet (*YouTube*, *hulu.com* or *fancast.com*, for example).

Additional reading materials will be available on **WVU eCampus**. **You are responsible for printing out the additional texts from WVU eCampus and for having the discussed text/s with you in class.** To access WVU eCampus, go to <https://ecampus.wvu.edu> and log on with your *MyID* user name and password. If you have problems with logging on, contact the Office of Information Technology (293-4444 x 3 or oihelp@mail.wvu.edu)

Coursework Requirements

This is a demanding course, so you must be prepared by reading the assigned texts or viewing the films/material **before** the date they are due. If I find out in the course of class that any student or students have not done the work assigned for that day, they will be given an absence for the day, regardless of how much time you have spent in class that day. This class will not be successful **unless everyone engages with the material and participates**. The grades for the course will breakdown as follows:

- ❖ Class Participation and Discussion Questions (due every class) : **10 %**
- ❖ Unscheduled Quizzes: **10%**
- ❖ Critical Response-Paper and Proposal: **20%**

- ❖ Mid-Term Exam: 20%
- ❖ Individual Presentation: 15 %
- ❖ Final Exam: 25%

-I will expect you to formulate **at least three discussion** questions related to the texts for the day, which should be posted before class on the **WVU eCampus** Discussion Board forum. These questions should be well thought **substantive reflections on the text**, which provide evidence to me of your engagement with the course. They will form an important part of our class discussions. **Failure to submit a question or questions that suggest you have not read the text thoroughly (yes/no question, questions with one word answers) will not receive any credit.**

-I will drop your lowest quiz grade; missed quizzes, for any reason, cannot be made up. There will be no extra credit offered in this class.

-For the **critical response**, I expect you to formulate a thesis driven argument about two texts (preferably across two different periods/genres).

You will initially write a proposal/abstract of 250-300 words about your chosen topic and submit it for my approval. Once you receive my approval you will compose a **6-8 page paper**, using a few academic secondary sources to support your claims. They should be formatted with one-inch margins, double spacing, and Times New Roman, 12-point font. A proper heading should include your name, the date, and the course.

You are welcome to discuss your ideas with me before completing this assignment.

The **individual presentation** is an opportunity for you to get some practice in speaking in front of a group. Your talk should last approximately, but no more than, four minutes. It should analyze/cover a text/topic that interests you and that is relevant to the course. Ideas for topics may be taken from the primary written or visual texts in this class as well as the required secondary readings. Evaluation criteria include: **content, organization, delivery, and use of visual aids.**

-You must take both the mid-term and final exam in order to pass the class.

-I will give you sample questions for the midterm exam and final exam at both review sessions. Both tests will be essay responses and objective questions aimed at interpretation and application from the texts we read in class.

Grades will breakdown as follows:

| | | | |
|------------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|
| A+ 98-100 | B+ 87-89 | C+ 77-79 | D+ 67-69 |
| A 94-97 | B 84-86 | C 74-76 | D 64-66 |
| A- 90-93 | B- 80-83 | C- 70-73 | D- 60-63 |

Attendance

This is a discussion-based course; therefore you **must be present** in order to be successful. Furthermore, this course will only be successful with **your** input; each one of my students has valuable life experiences, thoughtful contributions, and a unique perspective. All of you can, and

need to, contribute positively to make this class as fruitful as I know it can be. This means that you must attend class.

You will be given **four** penalty-free absences for the semester. More than that will compromise your final grade (it will be lowered by a full letter grade every time you miss the class after you use the four allowed absences).

At seven absences you will receive a failing grade in the course.

Lateness occurs for everyone, but do not make it a habit or I will penalize you.

Class Participation Grading

A to A-

- Student contributes to class every day or almost every day. Contributions are thoughtful and relevant, evidencing that the student has carefully read the assigned material and formed observations or questions about it.
- Student takes an active role in small group discussions, contributing suggestions and helping to keep the group focused (student is praised by classmates for these actions).
- Student listens to what classmates say and responds to the contributions of others, noting how his or her own observations differ or support those preceding. Student takes care not to overwhelm class discussions with more than three or four contributions per class.

B+ to B-

- Student makes contributions on $\frac{1}{2}$ to $\frac{3}{4}$ of class meeting days. Again, contributions are relevant to discussion and show that student has read the assigned material.
- Student listens to other, though his or her comments may not always follow those proceeding.
- Student contributes to small group discussion and gets some recognition from classmates for this.

C+ to C-

- Student contributes occasionally, but less than $\frac{1}{2}$ of class meeting days.
- Contributions are more “ad hoc” than based on reading, or they might be off topic.
- Student is quiet in small group discussions, letting others do most of the work.

D

- Student shows up, but almost never contributes.
- Student is visibly disengaged from class discussion.
- Student is silent or unhelpful in small group discussion.

F

- The same characteristics as the D range student, but with the maximum of absences.
- OR Student behaves in ways that distract or deliberately offend classmates, including interrupting or insulting others, yelling, leaving in the middle of class, etc.

Classroom ethics:

I expect all students to treat each other with respect, regardless of any differences we may have, whether personal or in the course of class discussions. **We will be discussing personal subjects, such as identity, beliefs, sexuality, etc., and I expect everyone to be respectful of other’s feelings, but also mature enough, and excited, to discuss things openly for the benefit of everyone.** Although uncomfortable subjects may arise, I will always treat them with respect and understanding, which I expect from each student as well. Cultural texts are open to a wide variety of interpretations and

there is no “right” or “wrong” opinion on a certain work. Therefore you are strongly encouraged to voice your opinion in the class.

Computers and Cell Phones:

We will sometimes be using technology to enhance our class activities, but I need to rely on your responsible use of that technology. Similarly, the discussion of readings, peer reviews of papers, and other workshop activities require your full attention, so please turn off your cell phones, put them out of sight, and refrain from texting in class. If the class is meeting in a computer classroom, please be sure you are using the computers only as instructed for that day’s class session (and not for Facebook or to check e-mail, etc.) It’s good professional behavior that also shows your respect for each other and the work we’re trying to do. If you are ever using technology in a way that is distracting or unrelated to the work of the class, you will be asked to put away the device or log off the computer. **If you have to be asked more than once, you will be counted as absent for that day, and you may even be asked to leave.** If there is an unusual circumstance where you must leave your phone on, please just speak to me privately *before* class.

Accommodation:

If you have a documented learning disability, a serious hearing or vision problem, or any other special need that might affect your performance and participation in class, please be sure to let me know. Also, please be aware of the support services available to you through Disability Services in room G30 of the Mountainlair. Their phone number is: (304)-293-6700, and their email is: access2@mail.wvu.edu .

Eberly Writing Studio:

The Eberly Writing Studio is another resource that can not only help you to brush up on your basic skills, but also help support you in all aspects of the writing process. It is located in G02 Colson Hall (the lower level). This is a free resource for students! You can meet with a tutor to go over the goals of any assignment or just to get help brainstorming the best topic. Call 304-293-5788 to schedule an appointment or stop by to see if a tutor is available. Check online at: <http://speakwrite.wvu.edu/writing-studio>.

University Counseling Services:

If things seem tough for you, or if you’d just like someone to talk to (about being homesick, or feeling depressed, or getting overwhelmed by all the obligations in your life, etc.), be sure to check out the Carruth Center for Counseling and Psychological Services on the third floor of the Student Services Building, right next door to the Mountainlair. Their hours are Monday-Friday: 8:15AM-4:45PM. Or you can call their emergency hotline after hours at (304)-293-4431. Their website is: <http://wvu.edu/ccpps>.

Office Hours:

Office hours are a vital component of this course, because they provide me with an opportunity to talk to you one-on-one. My office hours are on the top of this syllabus. Please drop in to see me at the listed time, or make an appointment with me to talk at other times. I can confer with you via email, too. I will try to respond to you (in email or in class) within 48 hours, Monday through Friday.

Communication: Occasionally, I will need to contact the class or individual students via e-mail, so keep your MIX account active.

Cheating/Plagiarism: The English 258 community assumes your honesty. Students are expected to be familiar with the sections on Academic Honesty in the **University Student Conduct Code, Policy Bulletin 31**, which is online at: <http://studentlife.wvu.edu/studentconductcode.html>. If you have any questions about when and how to document sources, or any other question that will help you avoid unintentional plagiarism, please come and talk to me. Plagiarism and cheating are serious offences. Clear cases will result in an “F” for the course and appropriate academic discipline.

OVERVIEW OF UNITS*

*A number of texts in this course can be grouped under multiple categories.

I. The Apocalyptic Bomb

- *Learn How Dagwood Splits the Atom*
- *Duck and Cover*
- *Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb*
- *On the Beach*
- *A Boy and His Dog*
- *Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt*

II. The Environment and Us

- *Cat's Cradle*
- *Adam and No Eve*
- *Firefly*
- *The Screwfly Solution*
- *Underworld*
- *The Core*

III. Technological Transgressions

- *I Have No Mouth, and I Must Scream*
- *Jurassic Park*
- *R.U.R*
- *Equilibrium*
- *The Matrix*
- *Terminator 3: Rise of the Machines*
- *The Nine Billion Names of God*

IV. Post 9/11 Paranoia

- *In the Shadow of No Towers*
- *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*
- 24
- *Fahrenheit 9/11*

SCHEDULE OF WORK*

*The schedule of work below is subject to changes based on our progress

| Monday | Wednesday | Friday |
|---|---|--|
| <p>JANUARY <u>11</u></p> <p>WEEK 1</p> <p>Introduction and Syllabus Review</p> <p>Homework:</p> <p><u>Reflection:</u></p> <p>What is your definition of Popular Culture? Reflect on the material assigned for the next class but use your own thoughts</p> | <p><u>13</u></p> <p><u>To Read/View :</u></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. <i>What is Popular Culture?</i>- Storey (eCampus) 2. <i>The Apocalyptic Strain in Popular Culture: The American Nightmare Becomes the American Dream</i> (eCampus) 3. KEYWORDS in Pop Culture http://public.wsu.edu/~amers/tu/471/KEY/keywords.htm <p><u>Due today:</u> Reflection (Printed Copy)</p> <p>* Jan 15 is the last day to register, add new courses, and make section changes</p> | <p><u>15</u></p> <p><u>To Read/View :</u></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. <i>Learn How Dagwood Splits the Atom</i> (eCampus) 2. <i>Duck and Cover</i> (YouTube) https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=onJ9_V1xOB8&feature=Playlist&p=2DBEACCF5CE63C05&playnext=1&playnext_from=PL&index=1 3. Last Week Tonight with John Oliver: Nuclear Weapons (HBO) https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1Y1ya-yF35g 4. "America's Cold War Culture" http://www.fordlibrarymuseum.gov/museum/exhibits/ColdWar/CultureColdWar.html |

| Monday | Wednesday | Friday |
|---|---|--|
| <u>18</u> WEEK 2 Jan 18 is Martin Luther King's Birthday Recess. No class meetings. | <u>20</u> <u>To Read/View :</u> 1. Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb (YouTube and eReserves) https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wPs5p3q05JE 2. America's Reaction to the Atomic Bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki http://users.dickinson.edu/~history/product/steele/seniorthesis.htm | <u>22</u> <u>To Read/View :</u> 1. Shute, <i>On the Beach</i> , Ch.1 and 2 2. "Politics in an Age of Anxiety": Cold War Political Culture and the Crisis in American Masculinity, 1949-1960 (eCampus) |
| <u>25</u> WEEK 3 <u>To Read/View :</u> 1. Shute, <i>On the Beach</i> , Ch.3-5 2. Bombing And The Symptom (eCampus) | <u>27</u> <u>To Read/View :</u> Shute, <i>On the Beach</i> , Ch.6 and 7 | <u>29</u> <u>To Read/View :</u> Shute, <i>On the Beach</i> , Ch.8 and 9 |
| FEBRUARY <u>1</u> WEEK 4 <i>A Boy and His Dog</i> (YouTube and eReserves) https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5etb3ZQ-41U | <u>3</u> <u>To Read/View :</u> <i>Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt</i> (Netflix) 1.1 and 1.3 | <u>5</u> <u>To Read/View :</u> <i>Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt</i> (Netflix) 1.5 and 1.6 |
| <u>8</u> WEEK 5 <u>To Read/View :</u> <i>Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt</i> (Netflix) 1.8, 1.10 and 1.13 | <u>10</u> <u>To Read/View :</u> Vonnegut, <i>Cat's Cradle</i> , Ch. 1-25 | <u>12</u> <u>To Read/View :</u> Vonnegut, <i>Cat's Cradle</i> , Ch.26-50 |
| <u>15</u> WEEK 6 <u>To Read/View :</u> Vonnegut, <i>Cat's Cradle</i> , Ch.51-80 | <u>17</u> <u>To Read/View :</u> Vonnegut, <i>Cat's Cradle</i> , Ch. 81-100 | <u>19</u> <u>To Read/View :</u> Vonnegut, <i>Cat's Cradle</i> , Ch. 101-127 |

| Monday | Wednesday | Friday |
|--|---|---|
| <u>22</u> WEEK 7 <u>To Read/View :</u> Bester, <i>Adam and No Eve</i> (eCampus) | <u>24</u> MIDTERM REVIEW | <u>26</u> MIDTERM EXAM *Feb 26 is the mid-semester point |
| <u>29</u> WEEK 8 <u>To Read/View :</u> 1. <i>Firefly</i> . 1.1-1.3 2. "'Tis Pity She's A Whore." (eCampus) | MARCH <u>2</u> <u>To Read/View :</u> <i>Firefly</i> . 1.4 and 1.6 | <u>4</u> <u>To Read/View :</u> <i>Firefly</i> . 1.11 and 1.13 |
| <u>7</u> WEEK 9 Tiptree, <i>The Screwfly Solution</i> (eCampus) | <u>9</u> <u>To Read/View :</u> <i>Underworld</i> (Netflix) | <u>11</u> <u>To Read/View :</u> <i>The Core</i> (Netflix) |
| <u>14</u> WEEK 10 <u>To Read/View :</u> Ellison, <i>I Have No Mouth, and I Must Scream</i> (eCampus) Due Today: Proposal for Critical Response Paper | <u>16</u> <u>To Read/View :</u> <i>Jurassic Park</i> (eReserves) | <u>18</u> <u>To Read/View :</u> STUDENT CONFERENCES -Discuss proposal for Critical Response paper *Mar 18 is the last day to drop a class. |
| <u>21</u> WEEK 11 SPRING BREAK | <u>23</u> SPRING BREAK | <u>25</u> SPRING BREAK |
| <u>28</u> WEEK 12 <u>To Read/View :</u> 1. <i>Equilibrium</i> (YouTube) https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1JKQ25Hnb78 2. Čapek- <i>R.U.R</i> (eCampus) | <u>30</u> <u>To Read/View:</u> <i>The Matrix</i> (eReserves) | APRIL <u>1</u> PEER REVIEW DAY |

| Monday | Wednesday | Friday |
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| <u>4</u> WEEK 13 <u>To Read/View :</u> Clarke, <i>The Nine Billion Names of God</i> (eCampus) Due today: Critical Response Paper | <u>6</u> <u>To Read/View :</u> <i>Terminator 3: Rise of the Machines</i> (eReserves) | <u>8</u> <u>To Read/View :</u> <i>Fahrenheit 9/11</i> (eReserves) |
| <u>11</u> WEEK 14 <u>To Read/View :</u> 1. Spiegelman, <i>In the Shadow of No Towers</i> 2. As You Were: Culture After 9/11 http://www.economist.com/blogs/prospero/2011/09/culture-after-911 3. 9/11 Timeline: How The Attacks Changed Our Cultural History http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/09/11/september-11-timeline_n_957133.html | <u>13</u> <u>To Read/View :</u> Hamid, <i>The Reluctant Fundamentalist</i> , Ch. 1-4 | <u>15</u> <u>To Read/View :</u> Hamid, <i>The Reluctant Fundamentalist</i> , Ch.5-8 |
| <u>18</u> WEEK 15 <u>To Read/View :</u> Hamid, <i>The Reluctant Fundamentalist</i> Ch. 9-12 | <u>20</u> <u>To Read/View :</u> 24 (2.1, 2.15, 2.19 and 2.24) | <u>22</u> PRESENTATIONS |
| <u>25</u> WEEK 16 PRESENTATIONS | <u>27</u> PRESENTATIONS *Apr 28 is the last day to withdraw from the university | <u>29</u> FINAL EXAM REVIEW Apr 29 is the last day of classes MONDAY, MAY 2: FINAL EXAM |