

Experience, Commodity Culture & Spectacle Society: U.S. Fiction & Critical Theory

**Charles University,
Summer Semester, 2026**

Seminar : Mon., 15.50–17.20, two units per week, Room 111

Office hours : by email appointment

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MA-level class

Special programmes :

American Literature and Studies (required basic class);

Optional class for all other students at the Faculty of Arts and Philosophy.

Instructor:

docent Erik S. Roraback (D.Phil., Oxon.)

Affiliate Associate Professor, University of Washington, Seattle, Washington, USA, 9/2019–present; Visiting Scholar, University of Washington, Seattle, Washington, USA, 9/2015–9/2019; University Visiting Research Fellowship, University of Winchester, UK 2014–23; Visiting Researcher, University of Constance (Universität Konstanz), Germany 2004–14; Visiting Professor, Université de Provence, Aix-en-Provence, France 2005; Doctor of Philosophy, University of Oxford, UK; D.Phil. Exchange Student, École Normale Supérieure, Paris, France; Rotary Foundation Graduate Ambassadorial Scholar, University of Western Australia, Perth, Australia; College Tutor for Magdalen College and for Mansfield College, University of Oxford, UK; Bachelor of Arts, Pomona College, Claremont, California, USA; Pomona College Program at University College, Oxford

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OBJECTIVES

The aim of this course is to study in some detail the following literary texts: Herman Melville's (1819–91) "Bartleby, the Scrivener: A Story of Wall-Street", William Dean Howells's (1837–1920) *The Rise of Silas Lapham*, Edith Wharton's (1862–1937) *The House of Mirth*, Henry James's (1843–1916) *The Ambassadors*, Ernest Hemingway's (1899–1961) "The Snows of Kilimanjaro", parts of Gertrude Stein's (1874–1946) *The Making of Americans*, and F. Scott Fitzgerald's (1896–1940) *The Great Gatsby*. Literary-theoretical responses to the foregoing texts will also be engaged by Giorgio Agamben, Donald F. Bouchard, Gilles Deleuze, Miranda El-Rayess, Robert B. Fleming, Sianne Ngai, Thomas J. Otten, Robert B. Pippin, and Erik S. Roraback, inter alia. Other writers such as the theorists Henry A. Giroux, Ian James, Fredric Jameson, Frédéric Lordon, Michael Marder, Jacques Rancière, Peter Sloterdijk, Bernard Stiegler, Sigrid Weigel, and Slavoj Žižek, will also be discussed. Further than this, we shall explore how the formal aspects and content effects of these foregoing prose texts of American fiction help to engage and to illuminate notions of experience, of commodity culture, of shopping, and of the society of the spectacle. These foregoing topic areas would be formalized in considerable depth both contemporaneously or later on in the twentieth- and in the twenty-first centuries. Therefore, special focus will also be given to theories of the society of the spectacle society from Guy Debord (1931–94) and from McKenzie Wark (1961–) and to theories of experience, of commodity culture and of 'materialist aesthetics' from Walter Benjamin (1892–1940), in his posthumously published magnum opus, *The Arcades Project*, inter alia, as ways to critique our chosen fictional works in a wide-ranging and inter-disciplinary fashion sensitively attuned to philosophical and to theoretical culture.

MATERIAL

Selected matter to be engaged (subject to revision): Copies of the fictional works will be available to borrow from the English Dept. library; the literary-critical theory matter will be on moodle and/or discussed by the instructor in class:

Adorno, Theodor W.: *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life*. Trans. E.F.N. Jephcott. London: Verso, 1974/1978.

- Agamben, Giorgio: "Bartleby, or On Contingency" in *Potentialities: Critical Essays on Philosophy*. Ed. and trans. with an intro. Daniel Heller-Roazen. Stanford: Stanford UP, 1999. 243–74.
- Baudrillard, Jean: *Consumer Society: Myths and Structures*. Trans. Chris Turner. London: Sage Publications, 1998.
- Benjamin, Walter: *The Arcades Project*. Trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin. Cambridge, USA: The Belknap Press of Harvard UP, 1999.
- Bouchard, Donald F.: *Hemingway: So Far From Simple*. Amherst, NY: Prometheus, 2010.
- Crary, Jonathan: *Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep*. London: Verso, 2013.
- Debord, Guy: *The Society of the Spectacle*. Trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith. New York: Zone, 1991.
- Deleuze, Gilles: "Bartleby, or the Formula" in *Essays Critical and Clinical*. Trans. Daniel W. Smith. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1997.
- El-Rayess, Miranda. *Henry James and the Culture of Consumption*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge UP, 2014.
- Fitzgerald, F.Scott: *The Great Gatsby* (1925).
- Fleming, Robert B.: *The Face in the Mirror: Hemingway's Writers*. Tuscaloosa, Alabama: The U of Alabama P, 1994.
- Foster, Hal, editor: Jean Baudrillard, Fredric Jameson and Edward Said, *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*. Seattle, WA: Bay, 1983.
- Freedman, Jonathan, editor: selections, *The Cambridge Companion to Henry James*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge UP, 1998.
- Giroux, Henry A.: *The Giroux Reader*. Ed. and intro. Christopher G. Robbins. Boulder, CO: Paradigm, 2006.
- Hemingway, Ernest: "The Snows of Kilimanjaro" (1936).
- Howells, William Dean: *The Rise of Silas Lapham* (1881).
- James, Henry: *The Ambassadors* (1903).
- James, Ian: *The New French Philosophy*. Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2012.
- Jameson, Fredric. *Postmodernism; or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. Durham, NC: Duke UP, 1991.
- Jappe, Anselm. Guy Debord. Trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith. Foreword T.J. Clark. Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2018.
- London, Frédéric. *Willing Slaves of Capital: Spinoza & Marx on Desire*. Trans. Gordon Ash. London: Verso, 2014.
- Marder, Michael. *Heidegger: Phenomenology, Ecology, Politics*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2018.
- Melville, Herman: "Bartleby, the Scrivener: A Story of Wall-Street" (1853)
- Moglen, Seth: *Mourning Modernity: Literary Modernism and the Injuries of American Capitalism*. Stanford: Stanford UP, 2007.
- Ngai, Sianne. *Ugly Feelings*. Cambridge, USA: Harvard UP, 2005.
- Otten, Thomas J. *A Superficial Reading of Henry James: Preoccupations with the Material World*. Columbus: The Ohio State UP, 2006.
- Pippin, Robert B. *Henry James & Modern Moral Life*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge UP, 2000.
- Prigozy, Ruth, editor: selections, *The Cambridge Companion to F. Scott Fitzgerald*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge UP, 2002.
- Rancière, Jacques. *Aisthesis: Scenes from the Aesthetic Regime of Art*. Trans. Zakir Paul. London: Verso, 2013.
- Roraback, Erik S.: *The Dialectics of Late Capital and Power: James, Balzac and Critical Theory*. Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Cambridge Scholars, 2007.
- _____. "A Benjamin Monad of Guy Debord & W.D. Howells's *The Rise of Silas Lapham* (1885); or, Individual & Collective Life & Status as Spectacle" in *Profils américains, 21: William Dean Howells*. Ed. Guillaume Tanguy. Montpellier: Presses Universitaires de la Méditerranée, 2009.
- _____. "An Aesthetic & Ethical Revolutionary on the U.S.-American Road: Theodor W. Adorno in Los Angeles & in New York, 1938–53" in *A View from Elsewhere*. Editors: Arbeit, Marcel & Trušník, Roman. Olomouc: Palacký University, 2014. 59–84.
- _____. "On Capital and Class with Balzac, James, and Fitzgerald" as Chapter Thirty, pp. 398–411 in *The Routledge Companion to Literature and Class*, ed. Gloria McMillan. New York and London: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2022.
- _____. "Stick to the Dream: New Figures of Temporality & of the Revolution of *The Great Gatsby*" (revised text first delivered as a guest lecture at the University of Colorado: Boulder on 11 September 2012).
- _____. *The Philosophical Baroque: On Autopoietic Modernities*. Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2017.
- _____. *The Power of the Impossible: On Community and the Creative Life*. Winchester/Washington: Iff, 2018.
- Sloterdijk, Peter: *Critique of Cynical Reason*. Trans. Michael Eldred and foreword Andreas Huysen. Theory and History of Literature, Volume 40. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1987.
- _____. *In the World Interior of Capital: For a Philosophical Theory of Globalization*. Trans. Wieland Hoban. Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2013.

- Stein, Gertrude: selections *The Making of Americans* (1905).
- Stiegler, Bernard. *Automatic Society, Volume 1: The Future of Work*. Trans. Daniel Ross. Cambridge UK: Polity, 2016.
- _____. *The Age of Disruption: Technology and Madness in Computational Capitalism*, followed by *A Conversation about Christianity* with Alain Jugnon, Jean-Luc Nancy and Bernard Stiegler. Trans. Daniel Ross. Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2019.
- _____. *The Lost Spirit of Capitalism: Disbelief and Discredit, Volume 3*. Trans. Daniel Ross. Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2014.
- Wark, McKenzie: *The Spectacle of Disintegration: Situationist Passages out of the 20th Century*. London: Verso, 2013.
- Weigel, Sigrid. *Walter Benjamin Images, the Creaturely, and the Holy*. Trans. Chadwick Truscott Smith. Stanford: Stanford UP, 2013.
- Wharton, Edith: *The House of Mirth*. Intro. Cynthia Griffin Wolff. New York: Penguin, 1985. First published 1905.
- Žižek, Slavoj: *Absolute Recoil: Towards a New Foundation of Dialectical Materialism*. London: Verso, 2014.
- _____. *Less than Nothing: Hegel and the Shadow of Dialectical Materialism*. London: Verso, 2012.

ASSESSMENT

To receive credit for the seminar students will be required 1) to miss no more than 2 sessions 2) to give an in class oral presentation that is designed to help one fine tune one's final linguistic product for the seminar, and 3) to produce a final essay of 2500–3000 words; topics to be discussed with the instructor 4) Departmental students wanting to produce a second graded essay for a ZK (code "B") may do so: required length: 2500–3000 words; subjects to be discussed with the instructor * Erasmus students may enrol in the course for a credit / zápočet and for a grade (code "E").

WEEKLY SCHEDULE AND READINGS

- 16 February:** Introductions: Walter Benjamin, Guy Debord, Sigmund Freud, Karl Marx, Peter Sloterdijk, Slavoj Žižek, Giorgio Agamben, Gilles Deleuze, Jacques Rancière, Bernard Stiegler, et. al.
- 23 February:** Melville, "Bartleby, the Scrivener" + Giorgio Agamben, Gilles Deleuze, Sianne Ngai, inter alia
- 2 March:** Howells, *The Rise of Silas Lapham* + Erik Roraback, inter alia
- 9 March:** Stein, selection from *The Making of Americans*
- 16 March:** James, *The Ambassadors* + Jean Baudrillard, Robert B. Pippin, and Erik Roraback, inter alia
- 23 March:** James, *The Ambassadors* + Jean Baudrillard, Robert B. Pippin, and Erik Roraback, inter alia
- 30 March:** Reading week, No Class
- 6 April:** National Holiday, No Class
- 13 April:** Wharton, *The House of Mirth* + criticism to be announced from JSTOR
- 20 April:** Wharton, *The House of Mirth* + criticism to be announced from JSTOR
- 27 April:** Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby* + Guy Debord and Erik Roraback, inter alia
- 4 May:** Hemingway, "The Snows of Kilimanjaro" + Robert Fleming and Donald F. Bouchard
- 11 May:** Conclusions

Final essay due 1 June 2026