

HUM 415 | Contemporary Culture
SPRING 2017

Tuesday/Thursday, 2:10PM – 3:25 PM in HUM 582

Dr. Robert C. Thomas

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Office HUM 416, Office Hour: Thursday 3:20 – 4:20 PM

Course Website: <http://nihilism.today>

This course satisfies the following requirements: Upper Division, UD-C: Arts and/or Humanities SF State Studies: Global Perspectives, Segment Three

PROFESSOR'S STATEMENT

Since 2004, an integral component of my Contemporary Culture course has been the use of science fiction film and literature as a paradigm for thinking the present. Most recently I have focused on apocalypse, zombies, disaster films, contemporary capitalism, and the Anthropocene. Suddenly, as the world around us became *even more* of a disaster in 2016, I faced a quandary: How do I continue teaching work in social theory and philosophy in ways that are fun and engaging, but that also give my students tools for navigating the historical present? I also faced a quandary with the assigned classroom: It's super shitty. Also, the time of day: Shitty. So, civilization is ending faster than we thought AND the classroom totally sucks. Here's an idea: Let's make the course about *Rick and Morty*. Let's use *Rick and Morty* as a paradigm (a way of thinking-in-images, or of thinking-beside-images) for reading this historical present.

COURSE DESCRIPTION

This course will think philosophy, social theory, and contemporary culture through the show *Rick and Morty*. Not only will we think seriously about the philosophical-existential questions the show plays with, including its fun references to popular culture, we will also think seriously about the form of *Rick and Morty*. Thus, in addition to studying contemporary social theory (*In the Dust of this Planet*), and philosophy from figures like Nietzsche, Baudrillard, Deleuze, and others, we will also think seriously about the form of cartoons, networked media, and video games. Students will be introduced to concepts like simulacra/simulation, the hyperreal, the post-cinematic, etc. In addition to select episodes of *Rick and Morty*, we will analyze an episode of *Star Trek* ("Mirror, Mirror"), study David Cronenberg's *The Fly*, and other works of visual expression as the crappy classroom and course time we have been assigned allows. The course will begin with 8-bit Philosophy's "The Philosophy of Rick and Morty."

Below is a preliminary reading list. This list, as well as the syllabus, will be revised based on consultation with the students on the first class session. We will begin the class with Mauricio Lazzarato's *Governing by Debt*, a book about what it means to live in relation to the apparatus of higher education in the United States: How does the apparatus of higher education make and unmake us as students and debtors? This book will also serve as our introduction to the concept of apparatus, which points to how we are made and unmade by our social structures.

Books (available at the bookstore)

- Mauricio Lazzarato, *Governing by Debt*
- Ian Bogost, *How to Do Things With Video Games*
- Eugene Thacker, *In the Dust of this Planet*

Assigned Essays (scans or downloads)

- JG Ballard, “Why I Want to Fuck Ronald Reagan” (optional)
- Jean Baudrillard, “Simulacra and Simulations”
- Alfie Bown, *Enjoying It: Candy Crush and Capitalism* (selections)
- Gilles Deleuze, “Plato and the Simulacrum” (optional)
- Mark Fisher, “Reflexive Impotence” from *Capitalist Realism* (optional)
- Brian Massumi, “Realer than Real: The Simulacrum According to Deleuze & Guattari”
- Scott McCloud, *Understanding Comics* (selection)
- Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals* from *The Nietzsche Reader*
- Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil* from *The Nietzsche Reader*
- Nietzsche, “Fragment on European Nihilism” from *The Nietzsche Reader*
- Celeste Olalquiaga, *The Artificial Kingdom* (selections)
- Shaviro, “What is the Post-Cinematic?”
- Steve Shaviro, “Bodies of Fear: David Cronenberg”
- Steve Shaviro, “Splice”
- McKenzie Wark, *Gamer Theory* (selections)

Films

- David Cronenberg, *The Fly* (USA/1986)
- Stuart Gordon, *From Beyond* (USA/1986)
- Chris Marker, *La Jétee* (France/1962)
- Vincenzo Natali, *Splice* (Canada/France/USA/2010)
- Frederic Wiseman, *High School* (USA/1968)

TV Shows

- *Rick and Morty* (select episodes)
- *Star Trek*, “Mirror, Mirror”

Videos/Shorts/Cartoons

- 8-Bit Philosophy, “The Philosophy of Rick and Morty”
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hWFDHynfl1E>
- Chuck Jones, “Duck Amuck” (USA/1953)

ASSIGNMENTS

Students are responsible for completing all the assigned course work and are expected to regularly attend and participate in course discussions. Reading difficult texts is a major component of this

course. If you are not prepared to read and interpret difficult and challenging material, you should not take this course. Students are expected to come to class prepared. That means that you have done the assigned reading, have thought about it, and have something relevant to say. Always bring the assigned reading material (for each particular day) to class. Always take notes. My lectures, comments, and rants constitute an important “text” for the course. Be aware that my style is casual and approachable—this should not detract from the seriousness of the work we do together (this style of presentation is meant to make it easier for you to grasp the material). There will be 2 “formal” papers required (following the requirements for segment III, see below). There will be a mid-term essay 5-pages in length, and a final essay 5-pages in length (typed and double spaced). There will be a handout on the essay assignments two weeks before each essay is due. Each essay must contain 5-pages of formal college level writing. Your essays must demonstrate mastery of the reading material and course lectures for the assignments (your grade will be based on this). All essays must be critical. No grade will be awarded for non-critical writing. No papers will be accepted via e-mail (no exceptions). (Please note that Wikipedia is NOT a critical source and cannot be used for college writing.) No rewrites of written work (no exceptions). No late papers accepted (no exceptions). Plagiarism in any of the course assignments, in any form, will be dealt with harshly and will be forwarded to the Dean’s Office for appropriate action. Plagiarism on any assignment will also result in a grade of zero. You must receive a letter grade on all assignments in order to complete the course. Students are responsible for all of the course content and materials even if they are absent (absences of more than two class sessions can result in your final grade being substantially lowered). No incompletes will be given, no exceptions.

Please note that the schedule of papers is clearly listed in the course syllabus. I do my best to hand the papers back as soon as possible. My teaching builds on the work we do over the course of the semester. The schedule of papers (one midterm and one final) is based on this. Please be aware that the midterm papers do, in fact, come back to you in time to make any necessary adjustments for the final paper. (I understand that students prefer to receive feedback earlier in the semester: However, there are limitations to what can be done given the material I teach and the way I teach it, which builds over time. Please note that the generalized desire for everything to be “instantaneous,” which seems to mark the present, is part of what we are analyzing in this course. I’ve noticed this, especially, over the past few years in my courses.). The biggest mistake that students make on the midterm is to not actually read the assignment and/or not fully follow the instructions. Additionally, if your paper does not demonstrate that you’ve read the assigned books, you will be graded down significantly and may not receive a passing grade. Students need to include a S.A.S.E. (self addressed stamped envelope) if they want their final papers returned to them.

This syllabus is part of the course materials. You are provided with a copy of the syllabus at the beginning of the semester and are expected to know the information contained within it the same way you are expected to know the information contained in the articles, books, and lectures. I reserve the right to grade you down based on your lack of knowledge of the syllabus and any other written directions. Refer to the syllabus before asking me questions (that I have already answered in writing).

CLASSROOM ETIQUETTE

If you are caught text messaging in class, surfing the web, or playing video games, or engaging in any other non–course related activity, you will be required to leave the classroom. No eating in class (unless you bring enough to share with everyone). No electronic recording in the classroom.

AGREEMENT

Enrollment in this course constitutes your agreement to abide by all of the above rules and policies.

SEGMENT III WRITING REQUIREMENT

To meet the segment III writing requirement, you will be required to write two five page critical papers. These papers are “formal” and will be read and graded by the professor. You will be expected to argue coherently, to support your arguments with detailed examples from the works analyzed, to edit your papers for spelling, grammar punctuation and agreement, and to meet recognized standards for notes and bibliography when relevant. All of the above will be taken into account in the grading of these assignments.

PARTICIPATION

There may be in-class assignments as part of your participation grade.

STATEMENT ON SEXUAL ASSAULT

SF State fosters a campus free of sexual violence including sexual harassment, domestic violence, dating violence, stalking, and/or any form of sex or gender discrimination. If you disclose a personal experience as an SF State student, the course instructor is required to notify the Dean of Students. To disclose any such violence confidentially, contact: The SAFE Place – (415) 338-2208; http://www.sfsu.edu/~safe_plc/ Counseling and Psychological Services Center – (415) 338-2208; <http://psyservs.sfsu.edu/> For more information on your rights and available resources: <http://titleix.sfsu.edu>

STUDENT DROPS

Students who do not attend the first class meeting will be dropped. It is the students’ responsibility to drop the course after the first class session. Students who stop attending but do not drop will be given a WU grade. Please be aware that a WU grade is counted as an F for GPA purposes. Enrollment in this course constitutes your agreement to abide by all of the above rules and policies.

STATEMENT ON DISABILITIES

Students with disabilities who need reasonable accommodations are encouraged to contact the instructor. The Disability Programs and Resource Center (DPRC) is available to facilitate the reasonable accommodations process. The DPRC is located in the Student Service Building and can be reached by telephone (voice/TTY 415–338–2472) or by email:dprc@sfsu.edu, <http://www.sfsu.edu/~dprc/facultyfaq.html#1>

GRADING

Attendance and participation: 10%

Midterm Essay: 40%

Final Essay: 40%

Final Exam: 10%

Tentative Course Schedule

Week One

1/24 Handout of course materials

1/26 *Governing by Debt*, 7- 25

Week Two

1/31 *Governing by Debt*, 27-90

Film – *High School*

2/2 Lazzarato continued (bring the book to class)

Film – *High School*

[Study Questions on High School](#)

Week Three

2/7 Instructor Illness – No Class

2/9 Jean Baudrillard, [“Simulacra and Simulations”](#)

Brian Massumi, [“Realer than Real: The Simulacrum According to Deleuze and Guattari”](#)

Scott McCloud, [Understanding Comics](#) 24-33

Chuck Jones, "Duck Amuck" (USA/1953) (watched in class)

Week Four

2/14 Bring all assigned readings from last week to class

Rick and Morty “Pilot” “Lawnmower Dog” “M. Night Shaym-Aliens”

Handout on “Pilot”

2/16 Steve Shaviro, [“What is the Post-Cinematic?”](#)

Olalquiaga, [“The Crystal Palace”](#) from *The Artificial Kingdom*

Week Five

2/21 Read: “Agony” and “Allegory” from *Gamer Theory*

Rick and Morty “Get Schwifty” and “Anatomy Park”

2/23 Continued

Week Six

2/28 *Enjoying It: Candy Crush and Capitalism*, 1-38, 66-71

Rick and Morty “Rixty Minutes”

- 3/2 **Midterm Paper Prompt Handed Out**
Continued, bring *Enjoying It* readings to class
- Week Seven**
- 3/7 Read: Steve Shaviro, "Bodies of Fear: David Cronenberg"
Film – *The Fly*
- 3/9 Continued
- Week Eight**
- 3/14 *Rick and Morty* "Rick Potion #9" "Meeseeks & Destroy" "Raising Gazorpazorp"
- 3/16 **Midterm Paper Due**
Star Trek "Mirror, Mirror"
- Week Nine** SPRING BREAK – NO CLASS
- Week Ten**
- 3/28 Film – *Splice*
Read: Shaviro, "Splice"
- 3/30 Continued
- Week Eleven**
- 4/4 Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*
Rick and Morty "Something Ricked This Way Comes," "Mortynight Run"
- 4/6 Continued
- Week Twelve**
- 4/11 Nietzsche, *The Genealogy of Morals*
Rick and Morty TBA
- 4/13 Continued
- Week Thirteen**
- 4/18 Film – *From Beyond*
- 4/20 Continued
- Week Fourteen**
- 4/25 Thacker, *In the Dust of this Planet* (selections)
Rick and Morty TBA
- 4/27 Continued
- Week Fifteen**
- 5/2 Thacker, *In the Dust of this Planet* (selections)
Rick and Morty TBA
- 5/4 Continued

Week Sixteen

- 5/9 Bogost, *How to Do Things With Video Games*
Rick and Morty TBA
5/11 Continued

Week Seventeen

- 5/16 Final Course Review
5/18 **Final Paper Due @ 2:10 PM (Don't Be Late)**
Final Exam @ 2:15 PM (Don't Be Late)