

HL 4020 – Advanced Studies in Modernist Literature

Meets: Tuesdays 14:30–17:30
Location: LHS-TR+44
Professor: Dr. Kevin Riordan

Office: HSS 03-72
Consultation hours: by appointment
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In their foundational 1978 study, Malcolm Bradbury and James McFarlane provide provisional shape for the subsequent study of modernism. They suggest that modernism “responds to the scenario of our chaos. It is the art consequent on Heisenberg’s ‘Uncertainty principle,’ of the destruction of civilization and reason in the First World War, of the world changed and reinterpreted by Marx, Freud, and Darwin, of capitalism and constant industrial acceleration, of existential exposure to meaninglessness or absurdity.” This course reckons with a range of modernist texts to confirm, supplement, and disrupt this proposed “scenario of our chaos.”

Bradbury and McFarlane’s *Modernism* is subtitled “A Guide to European Literature, 1890–1930,” and much of the field’s more recent scholarship has been devoted to challenging and expanding that implicit characterization, whether in geographical, historical, or generic terms. In this seminar, our task will be to learn from and contribute to the field’s consistently shifting ground. We will re-familiarize ourselves with significant works from the literary tradition, but we will also look to objects from the edges of such a modernism in order to grapple with the character and utility of the category itself. In the course’s first half we will be particularly interested in how image culture interfaces with literary modernism; in the second half we will turn our attention to understanding Singapore as a site for modernist production, circulation, and reception.

Core Texts:

Jules Verne, *Around the World in Eighty Days* (0199552517)
Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (0374521344)
Virginia Woolf, *To the Lighthouse* (0780141183411)
Course Reader (available E1 of SHHK)

Course Assignments and Assessment:

Participation, Preparation, and Presentations	20%
Singapore Modernism Object	15%
Image Essay	15%
Woolf Excursion Essay	20%
Final Essay	30%

Prospective Itinerary

Week 1 – Modern Overtures: Untimely Beginnings

August 10 – Benjamin, “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire”

Week 2 – Modernity without the Modernism

August 17 – Verne, *Around the World in Eighty Days*; Kern, “The Nature of Time” (Optional)

Week 3 – The National, the Notional, the Planetary

August 24 – Friedman, “Planetary;” Gui, “Global Modernism in Colonial Malayan and Singaporean Literature;” Ng, *F.M.S.R*

Poem Slide Due (TBD)

Week 4 – Looking Around

August 30 – Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Its Mechanical Reproducibility;” Sontag, “In Plato’s Cave”

Week 5 – Writing What We See

September 7 – Barthes, *Camera Lucida*

Image Draft Due

Week 6 – Screen Memories

September 14 – Gunning, “The Cinema of Attractions;” selected films

Week 7 – Near-Sighted, Far-Sighted

September 21 – Selected readings on the Nanyang School (TBD)

Image Essay Due (~750 words)

Recess

Week 8 – Time, for Narrative

October 5 – Woolf, “The Window”

Week 9 – Watching Time’s Passage

October 12 – Woolf, “Time Passes” and “The Lighthouse”

Week 10 – More Prosaic Returns

October 19 – Rajaratnam, “The Tiger;” Holden, “Literature in English in Singapore before 1965”

Woolf Excursion Essay Due (~1000 words)

Week 11 – Networking the Local and the Global

October 26 – Conrad, “The End of the Tether;” Jasanoff, from *The Dawn Watch*

Week 12 – On the Stage of History

November 2 – Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History;” Kun, *Descendants of the Eunuch Admiral*, Müller, *Hamletmachine*

Week 13 – Harbor Views

November 9 – In-class Exhibition

Singapore Modernism Object Due (~500 words)

November 25 – Final Essay Due (~2000 words)