

English 193: Detective Fiction: The Case of the Deadly Signifier Summer 2013

Instructor: Zach Horton

Meeting Time and Place: MTWR 5:00PM-6:05PM; South Hall 1430

Office Hours and Location: Tuesday and Thursday 3:30-4:30pm
South Hall 2509 (Transcriptions Studio)

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Introduction:

This course asks, *when is the quest for knowledge itself deadly?* What is at stake in the interpretation of signifiers? We will survey detective fiction from Sophocles to Pynchon, uncovering some of the victims of the quest for meaning, order, and narrative closure. From the ratiocinators of 19th century detective fiction to the hardboiled gumshoes who implicate themselves in the signifying chain by taking on the wrong case, to postmodern investigators who unravel the incoherence of meaning itself, detective fiction has always been fertile—if deadly—ground for investigating the relationship between language and reality. In detective fiction signifiers take the form of clues, some of which lead toward the solving of the crime, some of which lead nowhere, and some of which lead to madness, chaos, or worse. Because the genre places signs and the act of interpreting them under a magnifying glass, it serves as metafiction *par excellence*. This was not lost on post-WWII authors with a postmodern bent, and many of them turned to the structure and conventions of detective fiction as the basic template for their avant-garde stories and novels. This course will place special emphasis on this postmodern re-discovery of the genre, with readings by Nabokov's, Borges, Auster, Von Trier, and others. We will also read early works by Poe and Doyle, and spend some time on Chandler and noir. We'll read and view short stories, novels, films, and a graphic novel. All of these will serve as clues in our own investigation of the mechanisms of language, meaning-making, and fiction.

Required Texts:

Raymond Chandler: *Farewell, My Lovely*

Vladimir Nabokov: *Pale Fire*

Paul Karasik and David Mazzucchelli, *City of Glass: The Graphic Novel*

Thomas Pynchon: *Inherent Vice*

Alex Proyas, *Dark City: Director's Cut* (if you can't make the scheduled after-class screening)

Course Reader, available from The Alternative on campus

Grade Breakdown:

Participation: 15%

Participation includes attending every class, being on time, and participating in the class discussion.

Quizzes and Reading Responses: 20% Occasionally, unannounced quizzes will be administered at the beginning of class, covering the recent reading(s). At other times, a reading response will be assigned, consisting of a one page response to a prompt given in class, to be turned in the next day at the beginning of class.

Paper #1: This will be a 4-5 page essay which will require you to close read and analyze one of the works covered so far in the course. I will provide you with prompts / topics to choose from; you may also create your own topic, with my approval. The essay must be MLA-formatted (see the MLA Handbook, Seventh Edition) and include a works cited page. **This paper is worth 15% of your grade.**

Paper #2: This will be a 6-7 page essay which will require you to close read and analyze one or more of the works covered in the course. I will provide you with prompts / topics to choose from; you may also create your own topic, with my

approval. This essay *must include research* based on a *minimum of two scholarly sources*, and must be MLA-formatted (see the MLA Handbook, Seventh Edition) and include a works cited page. **Paper #2 is worth 25% of your grade.**

Final: The *cumulative* final exam will include two parts. The first part will ask for identification of passages, terms, and characters. The second part of the exam asks for a short essay. The final counts for **25% of your grade.**

Attendance

Attendance is mandatory. Please note the following:

- More than **one absence** requires a documented excuse
- More than **two unexcused absences** will result in a failing participation grade
- **Four or more absences** may result in being dropped from the course
- Every **three “lates”** will amount to one absence; you will be counted late if you are not present when attendance is taken at the beginning of each class

In the event of an unavoidable absence, please contact me before class. You are responsible for whatever material you miss, including handouts, assignments, and announcements.

Class Participation:

Participation is worth 15% of your grade. Please come prepared to discuss the materials in a thoughtful manner. This means reading closely and carefully, taking notes, writing down questions, marking interesting, difficult, or significant passages you would like to discuss. **CELL PHONE** use is **not permitted** in class. Please keep your phones off and put away. You may use a computer or tablet to take notes if you turn your wifi off.

Papers and Late Work

All papers and assignments are due—in *hard-copy* format as well as an emailed digital copy—on the specified due dates indicated in the schedule below. Any work submitted after this time will be considered “late.” Late work will be accepted up to 5 days after the original due date, with a 1/3 letter-grade-deduction per day late.

Academic Dishonesty

Plagiarism, of all kinds, is a serious offense and will not be tolerated. Plagiarism includes the failure to acknowledge all secondary sources in your work, passing off another person’s work as your own, or submitting a paper written for a previous class. Plagiarism can be obvious or subtle, intentional or a careless mistake. Take your work and documentation seriously: keep track of your sources as you read and take notes; document quotes and paraphrases as you write, not when you are finished, scrambling to find who said what and where. If you are ever in doubt about when and how to acknowledge a source, please ask! At the very least, plagiarism will result in a failing grade for the course and a mark on your academic record, and may result in disciplinary action, including suspension or expulsion.

Schedule

Week One: Signs and Knowing

Monday 6/24

Introduction, Syllabus

Sophocles, *Oedipus The King* (up to the entrance of Jocasta) (download from

<http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/31>)

Tuesday 6/25

Sophocles, *Oedipus The King* (second half)

Wednesday 6/26

Roland Barthes, excerpt from *S/Z*: “Delay” (Reader)

Edgar Allen Poe: “The Purloined Letter” (Reader)

Thursday 6/27

Arthur Conan Doyle, "The Adventure of the Speckled Band" (Reader)

Week Two: Hard Boiled Knowledge Work

Monday 7/1

Raymond Chandler: *Farewell, My Lovely* (Chapters 1-17)

Tuesday 7/2

Raymond Chandler: *Farewell, My Lovely* (Chapters 18-30)

Wednesday 7/3

Raymond Chandler: *Farewell, My Lovely* (Chapters 31-41)

Paper #1 prompts distributed in class.

Thursday 7/4

HOLIDAY

Week Three: Noir and Identity

Monday 7/8

Agatha Christie, "The Affair at the Bungalow" (Reader)

Tuesday 7/9

Jacques Tourneur, *Out of the Past* (in-class screening, Part I)

Wednesday 7/10

Paper #1 due

Jacques Tourneur, *Out of the Past* (in-class screening, Part II)

Thursday 7/11

Jorge Luis Borges: "Death and the Compass" (Reader)

Week Four: Detecting the Postmodern

Monday 7/15

Vladimir Nabokov: *Pale Fire* (pages 1-107 ["Line 79: a preterist"])

Tuesday 7/16

Vladimir Nabokov: *Pale Fire* (pages 107-184 ["Line 334: Would never come for her"])

Wednesday 7/17

Vladimir Nabokov: *Pale Fire* (pages 185-254 ["Line 741: the outer glare"])

Thursday 7/18

Vladimir Nabokov: *Pale Fire* (pages 255-301 [end of *Commentary*])

Week Five: The City as Mediating Labyrinth

Monday 7/22

Paul Auster, *City of Glass*, "Chapter One," from *New York Trilogy* (Reader)

Paul Karasik and David Mazzucchelli, *City of Glass: The Graphic Novel* (Pages 1-60)

Paper #2 prompt distributed in class

Tuesday 7/23

Paul Karasik and David Mazzucchelli, *City of Glass: The Graphic Novel* (Pages 61-end)
(after class screening of *Dark City*)

Wednesday 7/24

Alex Proyas, *Dark City: Director's Cut* (discussion)
(please come to class having already viewed the film)

Thursday 7/25

Thomas Pynchon: *Inherent Vice* (chapters 1-6)
Thomas Pynchon's soundtrack to *Inherent Vice* (Reader)

Week Six: Meaning Burn-Out**Monday 7/29**

Thomas Pynchon: *Inherent Vice* (chapters 7-12)

Tuesday 7/30

Thomas Pynchon: *Inherent Vice* (chapters 13-16)

Wednesday 7/31

Thomas Pynchon: *Inherent Vice* (chapters 17-21)

Thursday 8/1

Final Exam

Paper #2 Due Friday, 8/2, by noon, in instructor's mailbox and via email.