

AJ15081: Introduction to American Paranoid Fiction (Spring 2020)

Main lecturer: Tereza Walsbergerová

Special guest lecturers: Dr. Jeff Smith; Dr. Jan Beneš

Email: twalsbergerova@mail.muni.cz

Office hours: via email appointment

Description and Goals

This course serves as an introduction to paranoia and conspiracy in American fiction covering a variety of authors and all kinds of material from the 1830s to the 2010s. Its aim is to not only familiarize ourselves with the concept of conspiracy and paranoia and its place within American fiction, but also to understand the significance of this “mode” or “genre” in its particular sociocultural circumstances. In other words, we will survey how and why paranoia has become a recurring mode in American fiction and how it has taken different forms in different periods and sociocultural contexts.

The course will consist of 12 seminar sessions during the course of which we will explore various novels, a number of short stories, couple of movies, podcast episodes, occasional readings of secondary literature, and fruitful discussions of these materials.

Our goals this semester include

- developing a better understanding of paranoid fiction and its place within American history and culture;
- building a vocabulary and theoretical knowledge relevant to and useful for our discussions this semester and for other classes you are taking or might take;
- analyzing and evaluating prose from a diverse selection of American authors;
- sharpening of close reading skills.

Requirements

All requirements must be fulfilled in order to receive a passing grade in the course!

Grades will be based on the following percentages:

- attendance and class performance (15%)
- weekly forum post submitted in Elf (250 words minimum) (35%)
- final essay (6-8 pages ex. bibliography of 3 items min.) (50%)

Evaluation scale: A 100-85 %; B 84-80 %; C 79-75 %; D 74-70 %; E 69-60 %; F (fail) 59-0 %.

1. **Weekly attendance and participation.** Attendance is mandatory in this course. Missing **more than two** classes without a verified written excuse means that you won't be allowed to finish the course (i.e. you will get an X in the IS). Also: you are required to make a forum post even if you miss the actual class.

Students are **expected** to participate in discussions.

2. **Weekly forum posts.** Short comprehensive texts containing reflections, questions, and other general reactions to the assigned readings. This exercise is meant to spark creativity; informal language and single-space formatting are permitted. Submitted in Elf no later than the night before class (i.e. **8pm** on the day before the class). 250 words minimum (there is no maximum). **Late**

submissions will result in point penalties.

3. **Final essay.** Double-spaced, in MLA 8 format. Length of 6-8 pages excluding bibliography, footnotes and appendices. Minimum of three secondary sources. Upload into the ELF by the agreed-upon deadline. Details TBA by the end of the semester.

Schedule

Session 1 (20/2)

Introduction

- introductions & expectations
- assessment & syllabus
- introduction to paranoia, conspiracy, and paranoid fiction, general discussion

Session 2 (27/2)

Lesson topic: Early American paranoia

Assigned texts: “Minister’s Black Veil” (1832) by Nathaniel Hawthorne; “Berenice” (1835) by E. A. Poe; and “The Yellow Wallpaper” (1892) by Charlotte Perkins Gilman

Session 3 (5/3)

special guest lecturer Dr. Jan Beneš

Lesson topic: Paint It Black

Assigned texts: *Black No More* (1931) by George Schuyler

Session 4 (12/3)

Lesson topic: Cyber-paranoia and the Crisis of Humanity

Assigned texts: “The Impostor” (1953), “We Can Remember It for You Wholesale” (1966), and “The Electric Ant” (1969) by P. K. Dick

Session 5 (19/3)

special guest lecturer Dr. Jeff Smith

Lesson topic: Cold War-Era Paranoia

Assigned films/episodes: *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956), *Red Nightmare* (1957), “The Monsters Are Due on Maple Street” (from *Twilight Zone*, 1960), *Dr. Strangelove* (1964)

Session 6 (26/3)

Lesson topic: Engendering paranoia I

Assigned texts: *The Shadow Knows* (1974), 1/2 by Diane Johnson

Session 7 (2/4)

Lesson topic: Engendering paranoia II

Assigned texts: *The Shadow Knows* (1974), 2/2 by Diane Johnson

Session 8 (9/4) Lesson topic: Aliens! in America
Assigned films: *Mars Attacks!* (1996 film); *Men in Black* (1997 film)

16/4 READING WEEK (NO CLASS)

Session 9 (23/4) Lesson topic: Transnational anxiety I
Assigned texts: *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (2007), 1/2 by Junot Díaz

Session 10 (30/4) Lesson topic: Transnational anxiety II
Assigned texts: *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (2007), 2/2 by Junot Díaz

Session 11 (7/5) Lesson topic: Millennial paranoia?
Assigned texts: *Welcome to Night Vale* podcast – “Pilot” (2012), “A Beautiful Dream” (2013), and “A Story About Them” (2014) + excerpts from the *WTVN* novels by Joseph Fink and Jeffrey Cranor (will be provided in the Elf)

Session 12 (14/5) **Conclusion**

- final discussions and evaluations of topics and motifs
- discussion of final essays (each student will share their idea(s) for essay topics)

Assigned texts: TBA

Course Bibliography

- “Minister’s Black Veil” (1832) by Nathaniel Hawthorne
- “Berenice” (1835) by E. A. Poe
- “The Yellow Wallpaper” (1892) by Charlotte Perkins Gilman
- *Black No More* (1931) by George Schuyler
- “The Impostor” (1953), “We Can Remember It for You Wholesale” (1966), and “The Electric Ant” (1969) by P. K. Dick
- *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956), dir. Don Siegel
- *Red Nightmare* (1957), dir. George Waggner
- “The Monsters Are Due on Maple Street” (1960) from *The Twilight Zone*
- *Dr. Strangelove* (1964), dir. Stanley Kubrick
- *The Shadow Knows* (1974) by Diane Johnson
- *Mars Attacks!* (1996), dir. Tim Burton

- *Men in Black* (1997), dir. F. Gary Gray
- *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (2007) by Junot Díaz
- “Pilot” (2012), “A Beautiful Dream” (2013), and “A Story About Them” (2014) from *Welcome to Night Vale* (2012-) by Joseph Fink and Jeffrey Cranor

Diversity Statement

It is my intent that students from all diverse backgrounds and perspectives be well-served by this course, that students’ learning needs be addressed, and that the diversity that students bring to this class be viewed as a resource, strength, and benefit. It is my intent to present materials and activities that are respectful of diversity: gender, sexual orientation, disability, age, religion, socioeconomic status, ethnicity, race, culture, perspective, and other background characteristics. I encourage your suggestions about how to improve the value of diversity in this course.

Last revised: 17/2/2020