The Art of Doing Nothing:
Idlers, Drifters, Slackers, and Fugitives in Literature and Film
FYSEM-UA 771
Fall 2019

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Course description

Welcome! In this first-year seminar at NYU, we will consider the problem with work, as elaborated across modern literature, film, music, and more.

What would it take to stop working? To refuse work? Give it up? To do something else, besides productive activity and labor, or nothing at all? And how might doing nothing, so to speak, introduce radically different senses of freedom than what we’re used to? In this seminar, we’ll think about some of the ways that modern literature and film reflect on the art of doing nothing, frequently turning the city or its outskirts into a locus for personal and collective struggle, resistance, and transformation. Our aim will be to examine strategies for breaking free from the dominance of work, as illustrated by figures like the slacker, idler, cruiser, fugitive, drifter, ambler, streetwalker, and the so-called *flâneur/flâneuse*, primarily but not exclusively within the urban topographies of Paris, New York, and London from the 19th century onwards. We will pay special attention to the critical potentialities of unmanaged and wayward lives at the intersection of race, class, sexual orientation, and gender.

Throughout we will read stories by Acker, Bataille, Beckett, Breton, Calle, Delany, Jacobs, Kafka, Melville, Poe, and Woolf; poetry by Baudelaire and Boyer; theoretical work by Barthes, Benjamin, Federici, Hartman, Lafargue, and Weeks; and watch movies by Linklater, Varda and Chalfant/Silver (namely, the classic hiphop documentary *Style Wars*). There may also be occasional musical interludes.

The course will be based around close reading and discussion of texts. You will be expected to write three short response papers (2 pages), an analytic essay (4-5 pages), and a final research paper (8-10 pages), as well as give an informal group presentation in class.

Books

The following books are required and should be available at the university bookstore or online (make sure to get the right edition listed below). You are welcome to read the texts in their original languages, but we will refer to the English versions in class. All other texts will be distributed as hard copies or uploaded to NYU Classes.

Learning goals and expectations

Besides enjoying great works of literature and art for their own sake, the objective of this course is to cultivate your ability to study, in its broadest sense, through critical and creative thinking, speaking, research, and writing. For this purpose, you will write (1) three brief response papers (2p), (2) one analytic essay (4-5p), and (3) a final research paper (8-10p); you will also (4) give an informal group presentation (5-7 min). More information is provided below.

There will be frequent in-class writing assignments, small group discussion sessions, and peer review activities, all of which will actively contribute to our learning together. Although we will engage with a wide range of literature and media—fiction, poetry, political tracts, essays, photos, autobiographies, film, music, etc.—the skills we will develop should serve us in exploring all these fields of study and beyond, both inside and outside the classroom.

Grading

Attendance and Participation: 10%
Three Response Papers: 30% (each 10%)
Oral Presentation: 15%
Analytic Essay: 15%
Final Essay: 30%

Attendance and Participation

Class attendance is crucial, since most of our teaching and learning will happen through our engagement with one another rather than through lectures. Make sure to thoroughly read the assigned texts before class and be prepared to speak, write, and think about them. Come with passages underlined and annotated, questions, concerns, arguments, and reactions. I will encourage everyone to speak in class, as well as in the small group sessions and activities. You are also welcome to stop by my office hours or make an appointment to discuss the course material and your writing.

You have two absences to use at your discretion before attendance will affect your grade (no absence excuses necessary). If you’re chronically late to class, it will directly impact your participation grade. With the third absence and each afterwards, 3% will be subtracted from your final grade (for example: 94 → 91%; 91 → 88%; 88 → 85%, etc.).

Other Policies

Considering that this is a first-year seminar designed to introduce everyone to collective intellectual life and study at the university, we will do things the old school way, without smart technology such as laptops, phones, tablets, etc. Please bring to class the required books, hard
copies of readings, paper, and a pen. For everyone’s wellbeing, let’s all remember (alas, me included) to put our phones on silent and resist the overwhelming urge to look at them. We will spend our time together unplugged from our social networks and attentive to one another, though there will be a break midway in class where you can briefly reconnect if necessary. Emergency calls can be taken outside.

Allow me twenty-four hours to respond to your emails and note that I will not be looking at email on Sundays.

Late work will not be accepted unless an extension has been asked for and granted at least one week in advance.

Assignments

(1) Response Papers
The response papers are informal writing assignments of about two pages in length. You will be asked to convey your impressions of a text (a specific line, passage, scene, or character), while tying those impressions to a larger theme discussed in class.

(2) Analytic Essay
The analytic essay is a writing assignment of about five pages in length. You will be asked to closely analyze relevant themes discussed in class while using examples, passages, and ideas drawn from a text on the syllabus.

(3) Final Essay
The final paper is a fully developed research essay of about ten pages in length. You will be asked to support an argument about one or more texts covered throughout the semester with citations, examples, illustrations, and ideas drawn from the texts, class discussion, and research of secondary literature or criticism. I will provide one or two final paper questions from which you can choose, or you can formulate your own research question in consultation with me.

Note for all writing assignments: hard copies are due in class; use times new roman font, 12pt font, double spaced, one-inch margins, title, works cited list.

(4) Group Oral Presentation
For the oral presentation, you will be asked to form a group of two and speak in class about an assigned text or related topic of your own choosing (7 – 8 min). There are many ways to go about your presentation, but a powerpoint slideshow or lecture is not necessary. You can situate the literary work in its historical, cultural, or political context. You can comment on a certain passage, explain its importance, and try to spark class discussion. Or you can try to provoke responses in other ways, such as by presenting on interconnected material which interest you (texts, clips, images, events, personal anecdotes, events, etc), or by organizing a group activity.

Additional information
Please take the time to read the **NYU Honor Code** and information on Academic Integrity: [http://cas.nyu.edu/page/academicintegrity](http://cas.nyu.edu/page/academicintegrity). Read carefully the section on plagiarism.

**In accordance with university policies, all work must be your own. If you use a source, you must cite it. Plagiarism will result in a zero for the assignment, and the dean will be notified.**

- **Disability Disclosure Statement:** Academic accommodations are available for students with disabilities. The **Moses Center** website is [www.nyu.edu/csd](http://www.nyu.edu/csd). Please contact the Moses Center for Students with Disabilities (212-998-4980 or mosescsd@nyu.edu) for further information. Students who are requesting academic accommodations are advised to reach out to the Moses Center as early as possible in the semester for assistance.

- You may find the **NYU Writing Center** to be a valuable resource. Information about hours and how to set up an appointment is available here: [http://www.nyu.edu/cas/ewp/html/writing_center.html](http://www.nyu.edu/cas/ewp/html/writing_center.html)

- **The College Learning Center** provides tutoring, academic skills workshops, and help with specific classes, paper writing, study skills, as well as review for exams. All sessions are offered on a walk-in basis and feature tutoring by experienced upper-level students: [www.nyu.edu/cas/clc](http://www.nyu.edu/cas/clc)

- **The Wellness Exchange:** Support for personal and health-related issues. (212) 443-9999 (24/7 confidential calls): [www.nyu.edu/999](http://www.nyu.edu/999)

**Schedule**

**I. IDLING**

Sept 4:
- Roland Barthes, “Let’s Dare to be Lazy” (~10p, 1979); Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* (excerpts, 350 BCE)

Sept 11:
- Herman Melville, “Bartleby, the Scrivener: A Tale of Wall Street” (~50p, 1853)
- **Due: introductory email**

Sept 18:
- Harriet Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (selections ~80p, 1861)
- **Due: first response paper**

**II. DRIFTING**

Sept 25:
- Edgar Allan Poe, “The Man in the Crowd” (~10p, 1840); Charles Baudelaire, “The Painter of Modern Life” (~15p, 1863); selected poems from *The Flowers of Evil* (1853) and *Paris Spleen* (1869); Walter Benjamin, *The Writer of Modern Life: Essays on*
Charles Baudelaire, ed. Michael W. Jennings, “Baudelaire” and “Paris, the Capital of the Nineteenth Century” (27-45p)

Oct 2:
- André Breton, *Nadja* (1928, ~100p)
- **Due: second response paper**

Oct 9:

III. WANTING
Oct 16:

Oct 23:

Oct 30:
- Sophie Calle *Suite Vénitienne* (~90p, 1983)
- **Due: analytic essay**

IV. SLACKING
Nov 6:
- Film (online): Richard Linklater, “Slacker” (1990); Paul Lafargue “The Right to be Lazy” (~30p, 1883); Bertrand Russel “In Praise of Idleness” (~20p, 1932)

Nov 13:
- Samuel Beckett, “Waiting for Godot” (~100p, 1953)

Nov 20:
- **Due: third response paper**

Nov 27:
**No Class Thanksgiving Break**

V. WRITING
Dec 4:
Dec 11:

- Saidiya Hartman “The Terrible Beauty of the Slum” (~10p online, 2017); Guy Debord “Theory of the Derive” (~10p, 1956); film (excerpts in class): Tony Silver and Henry Chalfant “Style Wars” (1983)
- **Due:** final research paper