Course Description
Bias. Spin. Propaganda. Hype. Fake news. These pejoratives are familiar to citizens of the twenty-first century, and by implication they privilege the same alternative: objectivity. Objectivity is a concept—or an ideal—that frames our understanding of pursuits as diverse as politics, journalism, and science, realms in which we hope to be able to discern the right, the true, and the real. But what is objectivity? Whose discernment counts as objective? How can we tell? Questions like these ask us to consider not only what we know but also how we know it.

The conditions of producing, possessing, and assessing knowledge turn out to be remarkably available to cultural change. In other words, objectivity has a history. This course considers objectivity within and against the Western intellectual tradition. By considering selected episodes in its emergence, both ancient and modern, we will ask how thinkers have thought about knowing: What routes have been available to the pursuit of certainty? What standards exist or have existed for knowledge about the past, about the self or about others, and about the world around us? Is it possible that the twenty-first century will involve new forms of objectivity? We will explore these questions by drawing on works of philosophy, history, criticism and the arts.

Like other Texts and Ideas courses, this one is conceived as a class in intellectual history or the history of ideas. Its foundational role in the curriculum mandates detailed attention in lecture and recitation to the written expression of ideas. It has a more sophisticated intellectual ambition than the chronological Great Books surveys to which it invites comparison. One way to think about Texts and Ideas courses like this one is as an opportunity to read important books, as young people in the company of others and with the support that the college classroom provides. The course is therefore defined by its objects of study—assigned readings in common—and its concern is to hone your skills as a reader, thinker, and writer. Ultimately we seek to cultivate the habits of mind, those habits of critique, prudential judgment, and self-reflection that are particularly important for citizens of a rapidly changing and increasingly global world.

Lisa Gitelman: I’m a professor of English and of Media, Culture, and Communication
My office is in 239 Greene St., room 720
Visit me during drop-in office hours Thursdays 11:00-12:00 (no appointment necessary) or after class, or—if those times won’t work—by appointment.

Required Texts
Four books have been ordered for you at the university bookstore. All are also available through online booksellers should you wish, but please obtain the specified editions in hard copy (not Kindle). A lot of additional readings will be available via Classes or via links on the syllabus below. Please try to bring the assigned reading to class with you as indicated on the schedule below. Hard copy strongly preferred.

- Bird, *Sheppard Lee, Written by Himself* (NYRB)
- Agee and Evans, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (Mariner; Houghton Mifflin)

I have not ordered Genesis and the Gospel According to St. Matthew (for Week 4) because they are so readily available online and in print. Please obtain a copy of the King James or “Authorized” Version of the Christian Bible, originally published in 1611. You may read the required sections of this work online if you prefer, and I’ve posted a link in NYU Classes. There is an edition that lets you compare modern spelling and 1611 spelling at kingjamesbible.org.

**Expectations and Assessment**

1. **Readings** are to be completed before class. Lectures provide context for better understanding the texts. You will get a lot more out of the texts and the lectures if you do the reading beforehand. Weekly recitations are an opportunity to work through these texts and related key concepts as a community. The prerequisite for high-quality discussion in recitation is that everyone reads material ahead of time. Come to class prepared to engage. Remember, “skimming” is never enough.

2. **Engaged participation.** We will be looking for knowledge-building contributions that show not only that you are trying to understand the readings but also that you can contribute to the intellectual life of the class. A prerequisite for active and intelligent participation in discussions is prompt and regular attendance. Plan on attending every class meeting this semester.

   As a matter of common courtesy, please refrain from walking in and out of the room while class is in session, and please *silence your phones and put them away*. Please don’t be a distraction. Laptops must remain closed unless otherwise instructed for class activities. If you absolutely must use a laptop for note taking during lectures, then you must sit in the front row of the classroom.

3. **Essay Writing:** You will be asked to craft three essays as part of this class (details to follow). These essays are opportunities to demonstrate close engagement with the texts and a synthetic understanding of their themes. This kind of essay writing is a critical skill for thriving in college and beyond, and this class presents an ideal practice environment for honing precisely this kind of expertise. We will discuss the assignments in detail. Please email an electronic copy of each essay to your recitation leader as instructed.

   Any plagiarism *no matter how accidental* will result in failure for the course. Remember, it is plagiarism if you use someone else's ideas without attribution or someone else's words
without quotation. The university’s Writing Center is an invaluable resource should you wish to take advantage of it. You are entitled to one-on-one writing tutorials if you plan ahead and make appointments.

(4) Resources: Henry and Lucy Moses Center for Students with Disabilities If you are entitled to accommodations in light of a documented disability, please be in touch at the beginning of the semester.

(5) Grading policy: Grading will be done by the entire teaching staff working together, including and closely supervised by Professor Gitelman. Recitation leaders will assign participation grades themselves at the end of term during an interview with Professor Gitelman. Repeated absences from recitation will have a depressing effect on your participation grade. Semester grades will be tabulated as follows:

a. Participation (includes homework assignments, details to follow)  
   25%

b. Essays 50%
   Essay 1 10%
   Essay 2 20%
   Essay 3 20%

c. Examinations 25% 
   i. Midterm 10 %
   ii. Final 15 %

Course Schedule (Any necessary changes will be announced in class and/or via Classes.)

1. Wednesday, September 4 Introduction
   Required reading
   The Ancient World
   Friday, September 6: No recitations. Use this day to read.

2. Monday, September 9, Lecture #1 Plato’s Meno pp. 85-113
   Wednesday, September 11, Lecture #2 Plato’s Meno pp. 113-134
   Friday, September 13, Recitation I

3. Monday, September 16 Lecture #3 Thucydides, Peloponnesian War pp. 3-73
   Wednesday, September 18 Lecture #4 Thucydides, Peloponnesian War pp. 74-107
   Friday, September 20, Recitation II

4. Monday, September 23, Lecture #5 Genesis 1-36
   Wednesday, September 25 Lecture #6 Gospel According to St. Matthew
   Friday, September 27 Recitation III
   Essay #1 Due by Sunday September 29 at 6 PM

5. Monday, September 30, Lecture #7 Genesis and Gospel of Matthew (continued)
Wednesday, October 2, Lecture #8
Alberti, *On Painting*

Friday, October 4 Recitation IV

6.
Monday, October 7, Lecture #9
Montaigne, “On Idleness,” “That It is Madness,”
“On Cannibals”

Wednesday, October 9 Lecture #10
Montaigne, “On Coaches” and *Phil. Trans. No. 1*
(browse around in the *Phil Trans)*

Friday, October 11, Recitation V

7.
Tuesday, October 15 Review for the Midterm

Wednesday, October 16 In-class Midterm Exam

Friday, October 18 Recitations Cancelled for today

8.
Monday, October 21 Lecture #11
Bird, *Sheppard Lee* Books I-II

Wednesday, October 23 Lecture #12
Bird, *Sheppard Lee* Books V-VI

Friday, October 24 Recitation VI

9.
Monday, October 28 Lecture #13
Bird, *Sheppard Lee* Books VII-VIII

Wednesday, October 30 Lecture #14
and Ch. 1

Friday, November 1 Recitation VII

10.
Monday, November 4 Lecture #15
W.E.B. DuBois “The Princess Steel”

We will also screen Morrison’s *The Mesmerist*
(15:48)

Wednesday, November 6 Reading Day: Use this time to read ahead

Friday, November 8 Recitation VIII

Essay #2 Due by Saturday, November 9 at 6 PM

11.
Monday, November 11 Lecture #16
Freud, “Note on the Mystic Writing Pad”;
Borges, “Funes Memorioso”; rescreening
Morrison’s *The Mesmerist*

Wednesday, November 13 Lecture #17
Loos, “Ornament and Crime”

Friday, November 15 Recitation IX

12.
Monday, November 18 Lecture #18
Agee & Evans, *Let Us Now Praise*, pp. i-106

Wednesday, November 20 Lecture #19
Agee & Evans, *Let Us Now Praise*, pp. 319-416

Friday, November 22 Recitation X

13.
Monday, November 25 Lecture #20
Agee & Evans, *Let Us Now Praise*, pp. 197-224
Thanksgiving Break

14. Monday, December 2 Lecture #21 Nakazawa, *I Saw It*
   Wednesday, December 4, Lecture #22 Bush, “As We May Think”
   Friday, December 6 Recitation XI

15. Monday, December 9 Lecture Conclusion: Is Google Objective?
   Essay #3 Due by 6 PM Monday, December 9
   Wednesday, December 11 In-class review for final
   Friday, December 13 Collaborative review sessions in lieu of recitation

Final Exam (scheduled by the NYU Registrar) Wednesday, December 18, 12:00-1:50