The Art of Doing Nothing:  
Idlers, Drifters, Slackers, and Fugitives in Literature and Film  
Spring 2021

Professor Michael Krimper       Day
mkrimper@nyu.edu
Office: B-25, 19 University Place       Time
Office Hours: TIME
Room

Course description

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 New York, Paris, and London from the 19th century onward. We will pay special attention to the critical potentialities of unmanaged and wayward lives at the intersection of race, class, sexual orientation, and gender.

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

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 reason, 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 a wide range of literature and visual culture—fiction, poetry, political tracts, essays, painting, sculpture, theater, film, music, etc.—the skills we will develop should help us in exploring all these fields of study and beyond, both inside and outside the classroom.

By the end of the semester, you will be able to:

- Engage in comparative study of primary works of literature, art, philosophy, and politics
- Closely read and examine texts, objects, and visual culture within historical frameworks
- Connect primary works to contemporary issues, questions, and debates in both their local and global contexts
- Use short and long-form writing as a means to develop critical and creative thinking

**Grading**

Attendance and Participation: 10%
Four Response Papers: 40% (each 10%)
Oral Presentation: 15%
Experimental Essay: 15%
Analytic Essay: 20%

**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 four 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 fifth 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 turn our phones off 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.
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 (~500 words). You will be asked to convey your impressions of a text (using citations of 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 (~1500 words). 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) **Experimental Essay**
The experimental essay will let you engage with the art of doing nothing within a personal context. You will be asked to experiment with certain writing or aesthetic practices that we have considered throughout the semester and report on your own experience putting them to the test.

*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 (10 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 provoke responses in other ways, such as by presenting on interconnected material which interests 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](http://cas.nyu.edu/page/academicintegrity) and information on Academic Integrity: [Academic Integrity](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](http://www.nyu.edu/cas/ewp/html/writing_center.html) 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**

Session 1:
- Intro

Session 2:
- Roland Barthes, “Let’s Dare to be Lazy” (~10p, 1979)
- Basho *On Love and Barley* (selected haikus ~5p, 17th century)

Session 3:
- Herman Melville, “Bartleby, the Scrivener: A Tale of Wall Street” (~50p, 1853)
- **Due: introductory email**

Session 4:
- Cont. Melville

Session 5:
- Harriet Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (selections ~80p, 1861)

Session 6:
- Cont. Jacobs
- Arthur Jaffa “Love is the Message, the Message is Death” (video in class, 2016)
- **Due: Response paper 1**

II. **DRIFTING**

Session 7:
• Edgar Allan Poe, “The Man in the Crowd” (~10p, 1840); Charles Baudelaire, “The Painter of Modern Life” (~15p, 1863)

Session 8:
• Baudelaire, 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)

Session 9:
• André Breton, Nadja (1928, ~100p)

Session 10:
• Cont. Breton
• Brassaï The Secret Paris of the 1930s (photography in class, 1933)

Session 11:
• Cont. Breton
• Guy Debord “Theory of the Derive” (~10p, 1956)
• Due: Response paper 2

Session 12:
• Agnes Varda, “Cléo from 5 to 7” (film on Kanopy, 1962)

Session 13:
• Cont. Varda
• Virginia Woolf, “Street Haunting: A London Adventure” (~10p, 1930)

III. CRUISING
Session 14:
• Georges Bataille, Madame Edwarda (~40p, 1941)
• Optional: Virginia Despentes “Mutantes: Punk Porn Feminism” (film on Kanopy, 2009)

Session 15:
• Roland Barthes, Incidents “Soirées de Paris” (51-74p, 1987)

Session 16:
• Samuel Delany, The Motion of Light in Water: Sex and Science Fiction in the East Village (selections ~30p, 1988)
• Due: Response paper 3

Session 17:
• Sophie Calle Suite Vénitienne (~90p, 1983)

Session 18:
• Cont. Calle
Session 19:
- Jenny Odell *How to Do Nothing* (~30p, 2018)
- Lao Tzu *Tao Te Ching* (selections ~10p)

IV. SLACKING
Session 20:
- Tsai Ming-liang “Rebels of the Neon God” (Kanopy, 1992)
- **Due: experimental paper on doing nothing**

Session 21:
- Cont. Tsai
- Bertrand Russel “In Praise of Idleness” (~30p, 1932); Tom Lutz “Freeters” *Doing Nothing* (310-15p, 2006).

Session 22:
- Samuel Beckett, “Waiting for Godot” (~100p, 1953)

Session 23:
- Cont. Beckett
- **Due: Response paper 4**

Session 24:

Session 25:
- Franz Kafka, “Letter to His Father” (~40p, 1919)
- **Due: analytic essay intro and outline (in class workshop)**

V. WRITING
Session 26:

Session 27:
- Cont. Boyer

Session 28:
- Tony Silver and Henry Chalfant “Style Wars” (film on Kanopy, 1983)
- Saidiya Hartman “The Terrible Beauty of the Slum” (~10p online, 2017); Ross Gay “Loitering is Delightful” (~5p online, 2019)
- **Due: analytic essay**