



## The Problem of Imagination *Aesthetic Education in the 21st Century*

Course: CHID 110 A  
Semester: Summer 2018  
Time: M+W 2.20p-4.30p  
Location: MOR 234  
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<http://courses.bloodedbythought.org/poi>

“You can’t depend on your eyes when your imagination is out of focus.”

- Mark Twain, *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court*, 1889

“It remains true that there is, after all, nothing but imagination that can ever supply [one] an inkling of the truth. One can stare stupidly at phenomena; but in the absence of imagination they will not connect themselves together in any rational way.”

- Charles Sanders Peirce, *Collected Papers*, vol.1

“By ‘aesthetic education’ [I mean] anything that trains the imagination for epistemological performance: training the imagination for the construction of things to know. When you know something, you construct it in a certain way. [It is] training of the imagination for alternative epistemological performances.”

- Gayatri Spivak, “An Aesthetic Education in the Era of Globalization,” 2010

In the oft-referenced but rarely read *9/11 Commission Report* we find a startling conclusion in the findings of the committee tasked with critical evaluation of the government in the lead-up to the catastrophe; namely, that the single most important failure of leadership was a "failure of imagination." The meaning of this statement in the context of the report might be understood cynically as something like insufficient paranoia, yet the idea that an individual, a collectivity, or an entire culture could suffer a failure of imagination, variously interpreted, suffuses many of our problems today: from our difficulties with re-imagining all sorts of institutions and concepts to our inability to "see" that which does not show up on balance sheets or body scans. The invocation of the term "imagination" is also used frequently to describe a socially positive human activity, often in conjunction with "innovation" and "creativity." What underlies these formulations is an interesting and problematic history of the idea of imagination, one filled with commonplaces about the function of imaginative works that too often evade productive scrutiny. This course will provide some historical context for these issues, highlighting the significance of imaginative works and the development of the imagination generally for making sense of and addressing the problems of our current moment, one characterized by political and economic imperatives to "re-imagine" just about everything.

## COURSE DESIGN

This course has a long and storied history within the comparative History of Ideas program. Since its beginning in 1992 it has been primarily taught as a very large lecture course with teaching assistants and discussion sections. Our situation differs in important ways: 1. our group is closer to seminar size, 2. there are no discussion sections, 3. we only have nine weeks in summer quarter, and 4. we will be meeting two times a week as opposed to five. In light of these differences the course has been adapted to new conditions:

1. The course will be a lecture/seminar hybrid experience. I want to retain the collaborative spirit of open discussion and community-based inquiry into the assigned material, as well as the continuity, context, and initial focus provided by crafted lectures. So, each class session will have 3 components: a short reading quiz, a framing lecture, and an open discussion of the readings/media of the day.
2. Also, the scope of the course theme will be narrowed. Although we will be addressing the larger question of human nature in Western intellectual history, we will be doing so *indirectly*, giving more attention to the special roles the idea of “imagination” and imaginative works play in our understanding of human experience and culture.
3. The design of the course places a premium on deep engagement with the readings. Although the lectures will provide context and my insights into the readings, positioning you to see certain ideas, contrasts and connections, *the real work of the class* (and the ground of your personal development) consists in critical reflection on the primary texts. Be warned: much of the reading for the course is *very demanding* and absolutely resistant to skimming or textbook-style reading practices.
4. Instead of compulsory written reading responses, a midterm, and final exam, we will be engaging in more creative and collaborative work to develop our understanding of the course material. You will be expected to work with others on a few low-impact group projects, all of which will be made public either on the course website or in class.

## REQUIRED MATERIALS

Although there are no required *textbooks* you will need the following in order to participate fully in the course: A) Course Reader: most of the reading material will be in a course reader that will be available at EZ Copy n Print on University Ave & 45th. B). Internet: We will make heavy use of the course website for distributing media (supplemental readings, video links, etc.), archiving course documents, and tracking revisions to the schedule based on our collective progress. Therefore, you will need to have daily access to the internet.

## DEMONSTRATION OF LEARNING & EVALUATION

The final grade in the course reflects the following elements (more details below):

◆ Reading Quizzes	20%	all quarter
◆ Course Engagement	10%	all quarter
◆ Reading Journal	25%	all quarter
◆ Critical Meme	15%	signup date _____
◆ Discussion Report	15%	signup date _____
◆ Essay/Project	15%	last day of class

*Individual assignment documents found on the website will cover these works in full detail.*

## LEARNING EXPERIENCE

The central challenge of this class consists in the reading experiences as we will be engaging difficult primary texts, historical and contemporary, written from a variety of disciplinary perspectives. Although your reading will be guided by framing lectures, the individual struggle to interpret and synthesize the course readings on your own will require serious effort (see more about reading below). We will have opportunities to collaboratively work through the course materials and key ideas through discussion and assignments designed to concretize some of the abstract ideas that we will encounter throughout the quarter. The class as a whole is focused on engaging you in difficult thinking that—it is assumed—will provide an invaluable resource for theorizing and talking about your primary work in your major.

In light of all of this, the learning experience will most likely differ from other courses in a few consequential ways:

1. On Course Narrative: The course provides a narrative of ideas and perspective drawn from primary texts, historical and contemporary, representing diverse discourses in the humanities and sciences, but there is no unifying argument or settled conclusion about the topics of imagination and aesthetic education. The material is designed to *position you to see* important ideas and broaden your awareness rather than instruct you in how to think about or deploy a them in the “right” way.
2. On Reading: A premium is placed on critical reading and the formulation of questions about the texts. The material can be disorienting to read, especially if you are new to academic sources. Authors are advancing arguments, defining new concepts, and working through complex ideas as “live thinking” (as opposed to secondary, textbook-style, pre-digested summaries). The value of these sources lies not in the provision of neat and settled conclusions, but in the thinking enacted. This means that the reading experience will be difficult and slow, and will require *effortful reading practices*: re-reading, note taking, personal explication of key passages, etc.
3. On Attendance and Office Hours: We will be covering a lot of difficult subjects under the theme of imagination, and as mentioned the diversity of sources and necessity for framing lectures to guide reading should give you a good sense of how important showing up every day will be. Your success in this kind of course is directly related to showing up having done the readings of the day. I will be doing my best to manage and track your understanding, but you have to be active as well—if something is unclear or you find yourself getting lost, do not suffer in silence. Come to office hours!

## LATE WORK, ABSENCES

Due to the time-sensitive nature of the assignments listed above late work cannot be accepted. Quizzes cannot be made up, and excused absences will simply result in that quiz being dropped from the tally. The worst quiz score *will automatically be dropped*, so you have a buffer for random food poisonings, hangovers, missed buses, etc. The group work is intricately woven into the flow of the reading schedule so it, too, must be submitted in a timely fashion. There is some room for adjustment on the casebook projects, but not much. Contact me directly via email if you know you will be absent for other obligations.

## COMMUNICATIONS

All important and time sensitive communication about the course will come to your UW email address from "chid110a\_su18@uw.edu." Replying to the email address will send your text to the entire class, so be careful. It is assumed that you will check your UW email daily. If you want to meet up and discuss the class material or other matters with me, scheduled office hours will be held after class and by appointment.

## **ACADEMIC HONESTY**

Plagiarism is the representation of another's ideas or words as your own. This can range from paraphrasing someone's ideas without giving proper credit to buying a paper to turn in as your own. The consequences for plagiarism at the University of Washington are severe so please do not plagiarize. In academic writing, it is crucial that you always acknowledge when you are referencing and quoting another person's work. If you are confused about how to correctly site a source let me know and I can help you. Please consult the UW policy on your academic responsibilities as a student here:  
<https://depts.washington.edu/grading/pdf/AcademicResponsibility.pdf>

## **ACCOMMODATIONS**

Please let me know if you need accommodations of any sort. I can work in conjunction with the University of Washington Disabled Student Services (DSS) to provide what you require (<http://depts.washington.edu/uwdrs/>). I'm also very willing to take suggestions specific to this class to meet your needs.