**PHIL 391—Special Topics**

**Negative Philosophies and Contemporary Fiction**

**Instructor:** Mr. Lance Conley

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**Meeting Times:** ONLINE—Tuesdays and Fridays 10:15 AM to 12:20 PM

**Office Hours:** Virtual and By Appointment

This special topics seminar examines a series of “negative philosophies” through the lens of contemporary fiction (and vice versa). In a recent piece published in *Scientific American*, journalist John Horgan defines a negative philosophy as “an instrument of doubt, which counters our terrible tendency toward certitude.”[[1]](#footnote-1) This definition differs from François Laruelle’s notion of “non-philosophy,” which “concerns an elaboration of the theoretical and pragmatic status of *Philosophy*, of the *identity* it has…a radical identity or an identity of performation that philosophy itself refuses or does not recognize: a problem directly linked to ‘non-philosophy’ and its status” (1).[[2]](#footnote-2) With these concepts in hand, in this course we will read examples of contemporary fiction and consider the ways in which they engage with different forms of negative philosophy in terms of Horgan’s criterion, including (but not limited to) nihilism, pessimism, solipsism, and cynicism, while also considering the possible limitations of these ideas (and others) in the context of Laruelle’s framework of non-philosophy. The primary learning goals for the course will involve grasping the stakes of a negative philosophical outlook in our current socio-political climate and considering how contemporary fiction can be read as a specific cultural arena wherein creative negotiations with these philosophies occur.

**REQUIRED TEXTS:**

* Paolo Bacigalupi, *The Water Knife* (2015) ISBN: 978-0804171533
* Caitlin R. Kiernan, *Agents* *of Dreamland* (2017) ISBN: 978-0765394323
* Victor LaValle, *The Ballad of Black Tom* (2016) ISBN: 978-0765387868
* Thomas Pynchon, *The Crying of Lot 49* (1965) ISBN: 978-0060913076
* Adam Roberts, *The Thing Itself* (2015) ISBN: 978-0575127739
* Dana Spiotta, *Lightning Field* (2001) ISBN: 978-0743212618
* Colson Whitehead, *Zone One* (2011) ISBN: 978-0385528078
* Short Philosophical Readings in PDF format distributed via Blackboard

**LEARNING OBJECTIVES:**

* To become acquainted with the idea of “negative philosophy,” focusing specifically on the possible political potential (or lack thereof) in the concept
* To develop sharp critical thinking skills and precise close reading methods
* To grasp the essential elements of literary analysis, philosophical inquiry, and academic writing in the humanities
* To gain a knowledge regarding the diverse and engaging voices that populate the landscape of contemporary fiction

**ASSIGNMENTS:**

* **WEEKLY READING QUIZZES—35%:** The reading quizzesincludes seven short examinations (five questions each, five points per quiz) and, for the most part, will follow each of our major texts. They are intended to ensure your engagement with the texts and will not be rigorous, but do not fall behind. The deadlines for quizzes are hard.
* **FINAL RESEARCH PAPER PROPOSAL—20%:** This proposal constitutes a 4-page essay wherein you propose a specific thesis regarding one of the author, texts, or concepts discussed in class about which you will write your final research paper. The proposal will require a list of both “Works Cited” and “Works to Be Consulted.” A rubric will be provided in the second week of class.
* **FINAL RESEARCH PAPER—35%:** This research paper constitutes the major writing assignment for this writing-intensive course. The assignment comprises an 8-page, thesis-based, academic essay on one of the texts and/or concepts discussed in class. A rubric will be provided in the second week of class.
* **PARTICIPATION—10%:** Note that participation in class discussion(s) constitutes a tenth of your overall grade in the class. Participation will be evaluated based on students *coming to each class* having read the assigned reading—usually short—*before class* and *ready to discuss it* with both the instructor and your fellow classmates. Finally, attendance will also be taken at each meeting, and it is very hard to participate if you are not present in class.

**GRADING BREAKDOWN:**

**\*\*\*Taken Directly From http://catalog.kettering.edu/undergrad/grades/\*\*\***

| **Grade** | **Description** | **Points** |
| --- | --- | --- |
| A A- | These grades are awarded to students whose level of performance in meeting the requirements of the course is outstanding. These students understand the concepts and the principles of the course and are able to apply them creatively to unfamiliar situations, use correct methods accurately in problem solving, and communicate their findings to others effectively. | 4.0 3.7 |
| B+ B B- | These grades are awarded to students whose level of performance in meeting the requirements of the course is definitely better than average. These students have a good understanding of most or all of the concepts and principles, generally use correct methods, and are usually accurate in their thinking. They do a good, though not superior, job in communicating within the context of the course. | 3.3 3.0 2.7 |
| C+ C C- | These grades are awarded to students whose level of performance is adequate. These students meet the essential requirements of the course and have a basic understanding of course concepts and principles, but have some difficulty applying them correctly. They do a fair job of communicating their ideas. | 2.3 2.0 1.7 |
| D+ D | These grades are awarded to students whose level of performance in general is poor but not failing. These students meet minimum course requirements but lack adequate understanding of some concepts and principles and make rather frequent mistakes in applying them. They do a poor job of communicating ideas relating to the course. | 1.3 1.0 |
| F | This grade is issued to students whose level of performance fails to meet even the minimum requirements of the course. These students fail to grasp most of the essential concepts and principles and make frequent mistakes in applying them. Their performance is definitely unsatisfactory. | 0.0 |

**100-POINT SCALE CONVERSION:**

* **93 to 100 = A**
* **87 to 92 = A-/B+**
* **80 to 86 = B**
* **77 to 79 = C+**
* **70 to 76 = C**
* **67-69 = D+**
* **60-66 = D-**

**READING LOAD:** This is a reading-intensive course designed to solicit the kind of robust discussion that is a hallmark of liberal arts study. If your current schedule does not permit you the time to do the reading, or if you do not intend to do the reading, this may not be the course for you. The schedule is structured in such way that it is manageable and attempts to keep your other course schedules/work in mind.

**CONTENT WARNING:** You may find some of the material for this course violent or troubling in a number of ways. I am sensitive to those potential concerns. The materials selected have been chosen because they invite discussion and reflection on a number of important sociocultural issues. Participating in and acknowledging these important discussions and issues is not the same as an endorsement.

**CLASS POLICIES:** This class will operate on the “Golden Rule”: treat others how you would like them to treat you. In other words, in discussion (and elsewhere), be kind and respectful to others. This class is also guided by a personal mantra of mine: teach don’t preach. I firmly believe that these words are different verbs with specific functions, and the former is what I get paid to do. So, what this expression means here is that we are each unique individuals that come from diverse backgrounds, and, more than likely, we possess some conflicting opinions. Given such difference is categorically unavoidable, this class is not, nor should it ever be viewed as, a space of conversion or indoctrination to a political agenda, belief system, or some mixture of the two. Rather, we are here to read a stack of cool novels in the context of some pretty challenging philosophy, hoping to learn both together and from each other in productive, positive, and profound ways.

**ACCOMMODATIONS FOR DISABILITIES:** Kettering University provides disability services in compliance with the American with Disabilities Act (1990) and its amendments, along with state and local regulations regarding students, employees, and applicants with disabilities. Under these laws, no qualified individual with a disability shall be denied access to participation in services, programs, and/or activities at Kettering.

Prospective students should contact the Wellness Center as soon as possible to

discuss appropriate documentation needed to verify a disability and to identify the type of services, accommodations, and adaptive equipment that may be necessary.

**CLASS SCHEDULE AND READING BREAKDOWN**

**UNIT 1: Paranoia—Pynchon and Jameson**

* **WEEK 1 Tuesday January 12: Syllabus Review and Discussion of Horgan, Laruelle, Ricouer, and Vattimo readings**
* **WEEK 1 Friday January 15: *The Crying of Lot 49* (1-80)**
* **WEEK 2 Tuesday January 19: *The Crying of Lot 49* (81-152) Quiz One Due Before Class**

**UNIT 2: Nihilism and Skepticism—Roberts, Kant, and Meillassoux**

* **WEEK 2 Friday January 22: *The Thing Itself* (1-104)**
* **WEEK 3 Tuesday January 26: *The Thing Itself* (115-38,) (193-238)**
* **WEEK 3 Friday January 29: *The Thing Itself* (252-79,) (303-57) Quiz Two Due Before Class**

**UNIT 3: Existentialism—Spiotta, Wittgenstein, and De Beauvoir**

* **WEEK 4 Tuesday February 2: *Lightning Field* (1-90)**
* **WEEK 4 Friday February 5: *Lightning Field* (91-219)**

**UNIT 4: Cynicism—Bacigalupi, Hobbes, Locke, Marx, and Rousseau**

* **WEEK 5 Tuesday February 9: *The Water Knife* (1-87)Quiz Three Due Before Class**
* **WEEK 5 Friday February 12: *The Water Knife* (88-173)**
* **WEEK 6 Tuesday February 16: *The Water Knife* (174-265)**
* **WEEK 6 Friday February 19: *The Water Knife* (266-372) Quiz Four Due Before Class**

**UNIT 5: Pessimism—Kiernan, LaValle, Schopenhauer, Kristeva, and Thacker**

* **WEEK 7 Tuesday February 23: *Agents of Dreamland* (1-69)**
* **WEEK 7 Friday February 26: *Agents of Dreamland* (71-123) Quiz Five Due Before Class \*\*PROPOSALS DUE\*\***
* **WEEK 8 Tuesday March 2: *The Ballad of Black Tom* (1-147)\***

**UNIT 6: Afropessimism and Cosmopolitanism—Whitehead, Derrida, Fanon, Nussbaum, and Wilderson**

* **WEEK 9 Tuesday March 9: *Zone One* (1-65) Quiz Six Due Before Class**
* **WEEK 9 Friday March 12: *Zone One* (66-130)**
* **WEEK 10 Tuesday March 16: *Zone One* (131-85)**
* **WEEK 10 Friday March 19: *Zone One* (186-259) Quiz Seven Due Before Class**
* **WEEK 11 Tuesday March 23: Course Review and Paper Discussion**

**\*\*\*FINAL PAPER DUD DATE TBD\*\*\***

1. Published February 10, 2017: <https://blogs.scientificamerican.com/cross-check/what-is-philosophys-point-part-5-a-call-for-negative-philosophy/> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Taken from François Laruelle’s *Principles of Non-Philosophy* (2013). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)