

German Literature in World Context (W 3675)
Spring 2010
MW 1:10-2:25
401 Hamilton Hall

Prof. Tobias Wilke
412 Hamilton Hall
Phone: 4-5344
Email: tw2284@columbia.edu
Office Hours: T 2-3, R 4-5

“Things Matter:” Modernist Recuperations of the Everyday

A. Course Description

This course will examine the many ways in which writers, artists, cultural theorists, and philosophers in the first decades of the 20th century attempt to rediscover the quotidian object world. Departing from the notion that modern experience has fundamentally altered—and damaged—the relations between humans and “things,” these thinkers develop strategies to recuperate the materiality and complexity of the everyday. The seminar will study the way in which these strategies oscillate between new forms of “realism” and modes of therapeutic “estrangement,” focusing on readings and visual materials by Simmel, Cézanne, Rilke, Musil, Heidegger, Kafka, Benjamin, Moholy-Nagy, and others.

B. Schedule of Classes

I. Modernity, Abstraction, and the “Loss of Things”

Jan 20 Introduction

I.1: What is a “Thing”? Introduction to a Modern Dilemma

Jan 25 Martin Heidegger, *What is a Thing?* (1935/36) (excerpt)

Jan 27 Christoph Asendorf, *Batteries of Life: On the History of Things and their Perception in Modernity* (1993) (excerpts); Bill Brown, “Thing Theory” (2004)

I.2: The Proliferation of Commodities

Feb 1 Walter Benjamin, “Paris, Capital of the 19th Century” (1935); Grandville, *Un autre Monde* (1844) (selections)

Feb 3 Karl Marx, *The Capital* (1867) (excerpts); Emile Zola, *Thérèse Raquin* (1867) (excerpt)

I.3: Urban “Economies” of Perception

Feb 8 Georg Simmel, “Metropolis and Mental Life” (1902) and *Philosophy of Money* (1900) (excerpts)

Feb 10 Robert Musil, *The Man Without Qualities* (1930) (excerpt); Rainer Maria Rilke, *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge* (1910) (excerpts)

I.4: Physiology of the Senses and Impressionist Aesthetics

- Feb 15 Jonathan Crary, *Techniques of the Observer* (1990) (excerpts); Claude Monet, Selected Paintings (“Haystacks Series,” ca. 1888-1893); Christoph Asendorf, *Batteries of Life: On the History of Things and their Perception in Modernity* (1993) (excerpts)
- Feb 17 Ernst Mach, *The Analysis of Sensations* (1886) (excerpt)

I.5: Language Crisis and Epiphanies of Seeing

- Feb 22 Hugo von Hofmannsthal, “A Letter” (1902)
- Feb 24 Hugo von Hofmannsthal, “Colours” (1907)

Part II: New Objectivities and the Rhetorics of “Pure Description”

II.1: Cézanne’s *réalisation* and Rilke’s Poetics of the *Dinggedicht*

- Mar 1 Paul Cézanne, Selected Paintings (from the 1890s); Rainer Maria Rilke, *Letters on Cézanne* (1906) (excerpts)
- Mar 3 Rainer Maria Rilke, *New Poems* (1906) (selections)
- Mar 8 Rainer Maria Rilke, “Ninth Duino Elegy” (1923); Christoph Jamme, “The Loss of Things: Cézanne, Rilke, Heidegger” (1994)

II.2: Critiquing the Notion of “Things:” Heidegger’s Phenomenology

- Mar 10 Martin Heidegger, “The Origin of the Work of Art” (1935/36); Vincent van Gogh, “Peasant Shoes” (1886)
- Mar 22 Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time* (1928) (§§ 15, 16); Franz Kafka, “Home-Coming” (1923)

III.3: “Against Interpretation:” Photography as Presentation

- Mar 24 Paul Strand, Selected Photographs; “Photography” (1917), “Photography and the New God” (1922), “The Art Motive in Photography” (1923); Edward Weston, Selected Photographs; “From My Day Book” (1928), “Photography – An Eighth Art?” (1928), “America and Photography” (1929), “Photography – Not Pictorial” (1930)
- Mar 29 Albert-Renger Patzsch, Selected Photographs from *The World is Beautiful* (“Things”) (1928); “Aims” (1927); “Joy Before the Object” (1928); “Photography and Art” (1929), “A Lecture That Was Never Given” (1966); Wolfgang Born, “Photographic Weltanschauung” (1929); Walter Peterhans, “On the Present State of Photography” (1930)

Part III: Dis/Figurations of the Everyday Object

III.1: In the World of Odradek

- Mar 31 Franz Kafka, "The Cares of a Family Man" (1920); Walter Benjamin, "Franz Kafka. On the Tenth Anniversary of His Death" (1934) (excerpt); Theodor W. Adorno, Letter to Walter Benjamin from Dec 17, 1934
- Apr 5 Franz Kafka, "Blumfeld, an Elderly Bachelor" (1915)

III.2: Dada, Surrealism, and the Principle of Montage

- Apr 7 Marcel Duchamp, Ready-mades (e.g., "Urinal," "Bottle Rack," 1910s); Man Ray, Rayographs (from the 1920s); Tristan Tzara, "When Objects Dream" (1934) Kurt Schwitters, *MERZ*bilder (from the 1920s)
- Apr 12 Walter Benjamin, *One Way Street* (1928) (excerpts) and "Surrealism" (1929)

III.3: Image and/as Distortion: Optical Experiments in Photography and Literature

- Apr 14 László Mology-Nagy, Selected Photographs; "Production – Reproduction" (1922), *Painting Photography Film* (1925) (excerpt); "Photography in Advertising" (1927)
- Apr 19 Aleksandr Rodchenko, Selected Photographs; "Against the Synthetic Portrait, For the Snapshot" (1928), "Downright Ignorance or a Mean Trick?" (1928), "The Paths of Modern Photography" (1928); Boris Kushner, "Open Letter to Rodchenko" (1928)
- Apr 21 Robert Musil, "Binoculars" (1926/1936)

III.4: Aesthetics of Film and the Life of Objects

- Apr 26 Robert Wiene, *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1920); Béla Balázs, Writings on Film (from the 1920s) (excerpts)
- Apr 28 Hans Richter, *Ghosts Before Breakfast* (1928)
- May 3 Concluding Discussion