

The Experience of Narrative  
Seminar 21L.709 (CI-M): Studies in Literary History  
MW 7-8.30 (some weeks W 7-10), 2-103, Fall 2015.

Professor Michaela Bronstein  
Office 14N-408  
Office Hours: Wednesday 1.30-3

“TV’s Lost Weekends,” trumpets a recent *Wall Street Journal* headline about our modern habit of binge-watching prestige television shows, as though spending a weekend watching *Breaking Bad* is the moral and emotional equivalent of an alcoholic bender. The right way to watch television is irresistible catnip to commentators today; but the right way to read a book has been the subject of a debate for a long time. This course asks us to think about how we read and watch longform stories. Sometimes we’ll rush through them to see what happens next, and to get to the end. Other times we’ll draw them out slowly, following the rhythms of serial installments. We’ll also try re-reading: examining a short story and then the novel it became part of. How stories are published or broadcast changes how we read or watch them. This course asks how such changes affect our experience of the story and our understanding of what it means for a narrative to have a “form.” Should we try to see a novel or a TV show as a well-wrought aesthetic whole, like a sculpture or a painting, and if so, how should we watch or read it? Or is narrative always an experience unfolding in time—and, if so, what’s the best way to understand and analyze that experience?

**Required texts:**

Charles Dickens, *Bleak House* (1852-1853), to be distributed serially in class.  
*The Wire* Season 1 (2002), will be posted online week by week. Access instructions on Stellar.  
Joseph Conrad, *Lord Jim* (1901)  
*True Detective* Season 1 (2014), will be posted online.  
David Mitchell, *Cloud Atlas* (2004)  
Other short excerpts and materials to be distributed in class.  
One television season of your choice.

**SCHEDULE.**

**PART ONE: Reading Serially, Slowly**

Wednesday September 9

Introductory; opening chapter of *Bleak House* (pp. 1-5); first scene of *The Wire*

**Week 1**

Monday September 14

*The Wire*, Episode 1

Charles Dickens, *Bleak House*, serial installments I-II

Wednesday September 16

*The Wire*, Episode 2

*Bleak House*, III

## **Week 2**

Monday September 21

*The Wire*, Episode 3

*Bleak House*, IV-V

Excerpt: Alex Woloch, *The One vs. the Many*

Wednesday September 23

*The Wire*, Episode 4

*Bleak House*, VI

## **Week 3**

Monday September 28

*The Wire*, Episode 5

*Bleak House*, VII-VIII

Excerpts: Essays from book *The Wire*; excerpt, Jason Mittell, *Complex TV* (optional); selection of *The Wire* reviews.

Wednesday September 30

*The Wire*, Episode 6

*Bleak House*, IX

## **Week 4**

Monday October 5

*The Wire*, Episode 7

*Bleak House*, X-XI

Excerpts: Henry James, “The Future of the Novel” (optional); Percy Lubbock, *The Craft of Fiction*; Nicholas Dames, *The Physiology of the Novel*; Virginia Woolf, “On Re-reading Novels”; Vladimir Nabokov, “Good Readers and Good Writers”

Wednesday October 7

*The Wire*, Episode 8

*Bleak House*, XII

**Friday: Writing Exercise due, 500 words.**

## **Week 5**

MONDAY CLASSES MEET TUESDAY October 13 due to holiday

*The Wire*, Episode 9

*Bleak House*, XIII-XIV

Q. D. Leavis, *Fiction and the Reading Public* (focus on 48-80); N.N. Feltes, *Modes of Production of Victorian Novels* (optional); Leah Price, "Reading as if for Life"; selection of popular discussion of TV watching habits

Wednesday October 14

*The Wire*, Episode 10  
*Bleak House*, XV

### **Week 6**

Monday October 19

*The Wire*, Episode 11  
*Bleak House*, XVI-XVII

Packet of reader-response criticism from Richter anthology; Stanley Fish essay.

Wednesday October 21

*The Wire*, Episode 12  
*Bleak House*, XVIII

### **Week 7**

Monday October 26

*The Wire*, Episode 13  
*Bleak House*, XIX-XX  
Dickens's Numbers-Plan for *Bleak House*

Wednesday October 28

Looking back at Episode/Installment 1.  
Writing discussion.

**Friday: Short Essay #1 Due, c. 1000-1500 words.**

**PART TWO: Binge-Reading / Binge-Watching (Or: Reading Serially, Quickly)**

**NOTE SCHEDULE CHANGE: ONCE PER WEEK FOR THREE HOURS IN WEEKS 8 AND 10**

### **Week 8**

Wednesday November 4

Conrad, *Lord Jim*, complete

### **Week 9**

Monday November 9

Selections from reviews of *Lord Jim*.

Selections of criticism: Peter Brooks, Michael Wood, F. R. Leavis, Jed Esty, Susan Sontag

[no class Wednesday due to holiday]

## **Week 10**

Wednesday November 18

*True Detective*, complete

Selection of popular criticism of *True Detective*.

Friday: choose and e-mail me a television show that you would like to present to the class as offering interesting formal features in light of our discussions. I am happy to offer suggestions. Note: no two students will be permitted to present on the same show, which means your first choice may already be taken!

## **PART THREE: Other Forms of Reading and Watching**

### **Week 11**

**Monday: Short Essay #2 due, approximately 1000-1500 words.**

Monday November 23

David Mitchell, *Cloud Atlas* (through Half Lives Part 1)

Wednesday November 25

*Cloud Atlas* (through An Orison Part 1)

Selection of reader-response criticism: Stanley Fish, Joshua Landy, Wayne C. Booth, Hans Jauss, Wolfgang Iser.

### **Week 12**

Monday November 30

*Cloud Atlas* (through Sloosha's Crossing)

Presentations on films and TV shows from half the class.

Wednesday December 2

*Cloud Atlas* (through A Ghastly Ordeal Part 2)

Presentations on films and TV shows from remaining half of class.

### **Week 13**

Monday December 7

*Cloud Atlas*, complete.

David Mitchell, "The Right Sort" (Twitter short story)

Wednesday December 9

Conclusions and retrospective.

**Final Essay Due: 2000-3000 words. Must compare two media, though one may take precedence.**

#### PROCEDURES.

For weeks 1-7, DO NOT READ OR WATCH AHEAD. I will hand out photocopies of the new sections of *Bleak House* after each class period. You are, of course, welcome to take this course even if you have already watched Season 1 of *The Wire* or read *Bleak House*, but for the purpose of this class, attempt to come to it with fresh eyes.

Weeks 8-10 will deliberately ask you to tackle a lot of reading and watching very quickly. As much as possible, try to read/watch large chunks at once. But, more importantly, read *for fun*: don't pause to try to understand everything; follow the thrill of the plot and we'll figure out what it means later. For *Lord Jim* and *True Detective*, please do your best to record the places where you have substantial breaks in your reading and viewing (e.g., did you watch three episodes in a night, or two, or one? did you read 150 pages in a row, or grab 20 here and there?).

#### POLICIES.

No computers in class. Tablets without a keyboard are OK.

All essays are due by e-mail to [bronstei@mit.edu](mailto:bronstei@mit.edu) at 6 PM on the listed due dates. I will accept the following formats: .pages, .doc, .docx, and .pdf. Late papers will drop a third of a letter grade (e.g., from A to A-) for each day late.

You are each entitled to ONE essay extension (no questions asked), provided you make your request more than 48 hours in advance of the relevant deadline. The extension will be for no more than three days (e.g., Friday to Monday, Monday to Thursday). I do not grant extensions, barring documented emergencies, if you ask less than 48 hours before a deadline.

Feel free to drop by my office hours without an appointment; if you can't make them, let me know and I'll be glad to work out another time.

Prompt, prepared, and participatory attendance is required. Absences or regular silence in class will affect your participation grade. Up to one absence in the semester, with advance notice, can be made up through writing a very short response to the readings.

#### GRADING.

Grades will be determined as follows:

Writing Exercise: 10%

Short Writing Assignment 1: 15%

Short Writing Assignment 2: 15%

Essay: 40%

Presentation: 10%

Participation: 10%

The **WCC at MIT** (Writing and Communication Center) offers **free** one-on-one **professional** advice from communication experts (MIT lecturers who all have advanced degrees and who are all published writers). The WCC works with **undergraduate students, graduate students and post-docs**.

The WCC helps you strategize about all types of academic, creative, job-related, and professional writing as well as about all aspects of oral presentations (including

practicing your presentations & designing slides). **No matter what department or discipline you are in**, we help you think your way more deeply into your topic, help you see new implications in your data, research and ideas. The WCC also helps with all **English as Second Language** issues, from writing and grammar to pronunciation and conversation practice, from understanding genre conventions to analyzing what particular journals require.

The WCC is located in Kendall Square (**E39-115**, 55 Hayward Street, around the corner from Rebecca's Cafe). To register with our online scheduler and to make appointments, go to <https://mit.mywconline.com/> . To access the WCC's many pages of advice about writing and oral presentations, go to <http://cmsw.mit.edu/writing-and-communication-center/> . The Center's core hours are Monday-Friday, 9:00 a.m.-6:00 p.m.; evening hours vary by semester—check the online scheduler for up-to-date hours.

### **Literature Faculty Policy on Plagiarism**

The Literature Section has formulated this statement and policy for all plagiarism cases: Plagiarism—the use of another's intellectual work without acknowledgement—is a serious offense. It is the policy of the Literature Faculty that students who plagiarize will receive an F in the subject, and that the instructor will forward the case to the Committee on Discipline. Full acknowledgement for all information obtained from sources outside the classroom must be clearly stated in all written work submitted and in all oral presentations, including images or texts in other media and for materials collected online. All ideas, arguments, and direct phrasings taken from someone else's work must be identified and properly footnoted. Quotations from other sources must be clearly marked as distinct from the student's own work. For further guidance on the proper forms of attribution, consult the style guides available in the Writing and Communication Center, <http://cmsw.mit.edu/writing-and-communication-center/>, or Academic Integrity Handbook: <http://integrity.mit.edu>