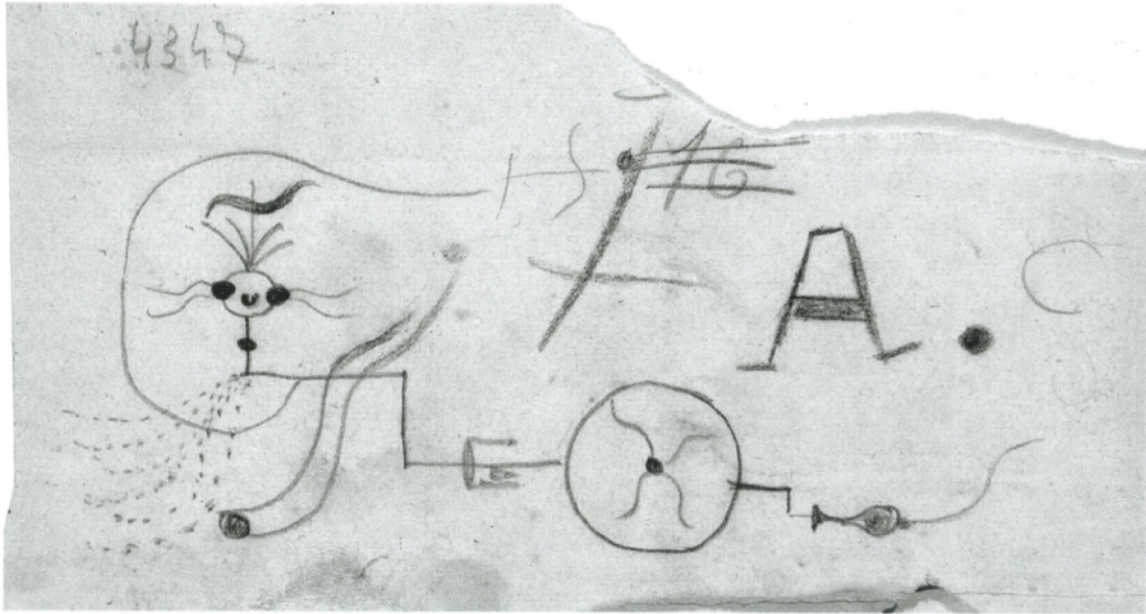


Hypnotic Modernism: Literature, Psychology, Automatism

Instructor: Chris Gortmaker
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Class Times and Location: _____
Office Hours: _____, or by appointment



Joan Miro, *Study for Automaton*

Course Description

The idea of automatic writing, or writing undertaken without conscious control, animates some of aesthetic modernism's most groundbreaking works of literature and art. This course traces a history of automatic writing from late-nineteenth-century hypnotism and literary impressionism, through Gertrude Stein and Surrealism, to midcentury photography and the emergence of postmodernism and peripheral modernisms. Readings in psychology and art criticism will guide us as we investigate not only the modes and meanings of automatic writing, but also, and more fundamentally, the concept of the "automatic" that underpins how we think about art, mindedness, and agency.

Course Overview

The course opens with an entertaining but surprisingly nuanced horror story by Guy de Maupassant about hypnotic suggestion, imperialist angst, and the very texture of textuality. Our close reading of this story across its three published versions (the differences are crucial) draws the course's focus into view: aesthetic modernism's anxious fascination with the automatism of minds, mediums, and machines. Our second week ranges across the fin-de-siècle psychology of Pierre Janet and Sigmund Freud to establish how the idea of automatism is central to this moment's understanding of the mind. Readings in modernist art criticism, with Stanley Cavell at the center, then illuminate an alternative but related way of thinking about automatism: as something not in our heads but embodied by artworks. Aesthetic automatism is how artworks can be understood to work on their own terms—automatically, as it were. Through creative writing experiments, we bring these abstract psychological and aesthetic concepts of automatism down to earth by testing them. Can you induce

automatic writing in yourself? How are dreams like and unlike artworks? What kind of automatic writing is generative AI?

Weeks three and four explore how fin-de-siècle and early-twentieth century writers and artists set the wheels of aesthetic modernism turning by bringing their fascination with how our minds perceive the world to bear on the specific affordances of the media they work in. How can a pen carving up a page capture and convey vivid sense impressions? How can writing approach the status of photography? How can paint applied to a canvas tell us something about what it means to have a body? Writers and artists like the literary impressionists—Joseph Conrad and Stephen Crane, for example—and the oft-misunderstood painter Joan Miro will pose answers to these questions that we will interpret and compare. Gertrude Stein will thrillingly test our ability to read. At the center of our inquiry are concepts that will return throughout the course: genre and its subversion; materiality and medium-specificity; and sociological-contextual matters like art's commodification, the construction of racial categories, and global political-economic processes of imperialism.

Weeks five, six, and seven move from the anarchic provocations of the French surrealists, through American experiments with photographic journalism, and up to the threshold of postmodernism in the novel. In a surrealist *atelier* we test first-hand certain techniques essential to André Breton's surrealism while debating the political and aesthetic power and risk entailed by this avant-garde movement's attempts to abolish institutions of art and literature. James Agee and Walker Evans's philosophical journalism and art photography push writing toward the automatic condition of photography, and we map their fascination with the mechanical capture of reality onto questions of midcentury U.S. class politics and Jim Crow racism. Muriel Spark's early postmodernist novel revels in the mechanical quality of genre and the typewriter: the two coming together in a hilariously sharp detective story that devours its own tail. We ask: what kind of automatism does Spark's postmodernist novel leave behind—or ironize into obsolescence—that the modernist writers we've read remain committed to?

Finally, weeks eight and nine assume a global, late-twentieth-century perspective on modernism's fascination with the automatic. Kyoshi Kurosawa's innovative horror film, a landmark of 1990s Japanese cinema, transposes techniques we will by now be familiar with into the *hypnotic-par-excellence* medium of the big screen. Dream-infused works from India and Brazil conclude the course. G.V. Desani's masterful short story of postcolonial economic exploitation rethinks literary-impressionist matters of narrative form in the context of the capitalist periphery. And Clarice Lispector's 1972 masterpiece of Brazilian experimental fiction tries to hypnotize itself as it orchestrates a range of modernist formal problematics that we have encountered up to this point.

Learning Goals

You should be able to get a few things out of this course. By the end, you will have a deeper understanding of 1. the nature of aesthetic modernism as a literary and artistic movement and the role that ideas of automatism play within it, 2. how aesthetic and psychological discourses of automatism determine our understandings of mindedness and art, and 3. how modernist preoccupations with the automatic translate across periods and media. You will learn or refine techniques for analyzing various forms of media, from narrative fiction, poetry, photography, and film to literary criticism, classical psychology, and aesthetic theory. These skills will be valuable in other humanities courses and may help you become a more discerning culture-consumer. No prior knowledge or experience is required. Anyone who is committed to seriously engaging with the course material will do well.

Required Paperback Texts

- Joseph Conrad, *The Secret Sharer and Other Stories* (9780486275468)
 - André Breton, *The Magnetic Fields* (9781681374604)
 - James Agee and Walker Evans, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (9780618127498)
 - Muriel Spark, *The Comforters* (9780811223003)
 - Clarice Lispector, *Água Viva* (9780811219907)
- (follow the ISBN to get the right version; all other texts will be posted on Canvas as PDFs)

Policies

Reading. Read and reread. Take notes; underline and circle words and phrases; mark important passages, writing them out by hand to understand them if necessary. Essentially, be an active reader. Your commonplace book will be essential here (more on this under “Assignments” below). Plan your time. Complete the reading before each session, give yourself time to think about the texts before class, and arrive with at least a handful of points and questions for discussion. Bring everything you have read thus far and all of your reading notes to class. NOTE: Unless needed as a disability accommodation, the use of screens—including laptops, tablets, phones, watches, augmented reality glasses, etc.—is not permitted in the classroom. I will print out PDFs and distribute them at the end of each class session. PDF readings are also available on Canvas.

Attendance, deadlines. Attendance at every class session is required; more than two unexcused absences will be grounds for failing the course. Any excuse for absence must be presented in writing before the next meeting of the class. Assignment due dates are provided on the syllabus so that you can plan your work for the semester. Extensions on writing assignments will be available but must be requested as far in advance as possible; failure to request an extension ahead of time may result in its denial. Late assignments will be docked half a letter grade each day they are late.

Academic honesty. I look forward to reading your work, which is to say, engaging with the ideas that you will write out to the best of your ability by drawing on what you have read and your own reasoning. Presenting ideas or phrases produced by other people or algorithms as if they are your own is plagiarism. Thus, when you use the work of other people, cite it correctly and consistently in MLA or Chicago style. It is crucial that you are familiar with these standards, and it is your responsibility to familiarize yourself with them. If these standards are in any way unclear to you, please consult with me and/or your Writing Specialist. Academic dishonesty is a very serious offense, even if it is unintentional. Any form of academic dishonesty may result in immediate failure of this course and disciplinary action.

AI policy. The use of generative artificial intelligence (e.g., ChatGPT, Bard, Grammarly AI features, etc.) is prohibited on all writing assignments. Struggling to compose a clear and insightful phrase, sentence, or paragraph is how we learn to think critically through writing. Outsourcing this process to an algorithm short-circuits this process and produces inane critical prose, wasting both your time and mine. Your thoughts matter. Don’t throw them into an algorithmic blender. I expect you to practice critical writing in all its thrilling difficulty. If English is an additional language for you, you might consider the resources available at UChicago’s English Language Institute, <https://esl.uchicago.edu/>.

Accessibility and Student Disability Services (SDS). I am committed to doing whatever I can to make the course and its materials accessible. Students with disabilities who have been approved for the use of particular academic accommodations by SDS and need reasonable accommodation(s) to participate

fully in this course should follow the procedures established by SDS. You can contact SDS by email (disabilities@uchicago.edu), by phone (773-702-6000), and via its website (disabilities.uchicago.edu).

Mental Health and Wellness. College life can be extremely stressful, and I recognize that the transition to college poses challenges for all students. Remember that you have in place a network of people who are ready and willing to help. Your College Advisor, your Resident Heads and Resident Assistants, and the staff at Student Counseling are available to you should you need or want to talk. You can find a description of services at wellness.uchicago.edu/mental-health.

Assignments and Evaluation

Essays. You will write two for this course. I will share prompts for these essays on Canvas well in advance of their submission deadlines.

Grade breakdown

- Informed participation in class - 15%
- Weekly commonplace book entries - 15%
- Automatic Writing Experiment, 2-3 pages, due _____ 1/13 - 10%
- First essay - 4-5 pages, due Sunday 1/29, revision encouraged - 20%
- Final essay prospectus presentation, 1-2 pages, due _____ - 10%
- Final essay (with two drafting exercises) - 5-7 pages, due _____ - 30%

Participation. This course is a seminar: we succeed or fail collectively. Arrive at each of our class sessions ready to talk and ready to listen. If a text excites you, talk about why. If something confuses you, ask questions. If you agree with comments someone makes, elaborate on your agreement for the class. If you disagree with someone, explain why. In short, contribute to our common intellectual enterprise. I evaluate participation in terms of quality rather than quantity. To explore questions and ideas you develop in your reading and in our class discussions, I encourage you to attend my office hours or email me to find other times. Even if your question or idea feels inchoate, don't hesitate to come by or get in touch. Similarly, if you feel that you're struggling to participate, for whatever reason, let me know. We will find ways for you to contribute. Let's think together.

Commonplace book. You will create this dynamic book of quotations, annotations, questions, observations, diagrams, drawings, etc., over the course of the quarter. You must use a physical notebook and write by hand, unless you require other accommodations. Throughout the quarter, you must write at least nine entries in your commonplace book as a way to organize your thinking. Each entry must incorporate these five components:

1. *Copy out* one substantial passage from the week's reading that is intriguing or confounding or related to broader questions/themes explored within the course. You'll be reading by hand, so to speak. This practice should train your attention on things like syntax, rhythm, diction. Focus on what resonates with your particular interests. Good choices will be moments in the text that you feel helpfully illuminate the larger argument or point, that raise questions for you on a first read and that you think you'd like to spend more time with, or ones that you simply find difficult, even confounding. Occasionally, you may also feel drawn to a passage that is beautiful or moving! Be sure to note the title of the work and the page number of the passage you've chosen.
2. *Annotate* this handwritten text, identifying important terms or themes, pulling out memorable turns of phrase or strategies of argument or description, commenting on the text through a

process of explication and unpacking (the Latin root *explicare* means “to unfold”). Feel free to color-code, draw pictures/diagrams/lines, or use other creative annotations. Week to week, I will also do my best to print out images so that you can mark them up. Get creative!

3. Include one to two interesting *questions* you have about the material.
4. In two to three bullet points, note your *observations* about the passage.
5. Note the *key term(s)* of the reading and define it/them in your own words. E.g., “impressionism,” “automatism,” “unconscious,” etc.

Once per week, you must upload a fully readable photo of an entry written that week to Canvas using the submission pages under the “Assignments” tab. Thus, you will upload nine entries throughout the quarter—no make-ups will be granted. Entries will not only help you write essays; more immediately, they will help you prepare for class discussion, and you should have your commonplace book ready at hand in class. Finally, and crucially, your commonplace book should not be the only form of notes you take for this class—it is meant to lend structure to your note-taking, which, in one form or another, should accompany any reading you do for this course. You might think of your commonplace book as the place you turn, beyond your usual notebook or notes document, when you are particularly struck by a passage and want to dig deeper. You might find yourself writing an entry several times a week, or you might just write the nine that are required. Figure out what works best for you.

Essay Writing. Apart from your commonplace book and other notes you take, *all* of the writing you do for credit in this course must be *directly performed* in the Google Doc found under the Collaborations tab in Canvas. This includes essays and short assignments that you will complete in conjunction with your reading. The latter may include brief responses to questions, close reading of a sentence or image, outlining an argument, and so on. NOTE: You may *not* copy/paste external writing into your Google Doc. If you are found to have done so (found, that is, via the Google Doc’s revision history) the writing in question will, by default, be considered generative AI-use and will not be evaluated for credit. On a case-by-case basis, instances of suspected generative AI-use may lead to an entire re-write, a grade penalty, or more serious consequences. In essence, localizing your writing in this way is the best means I’ve yet found of ensuring that I am able to engage with your writing—your *thinking*—and not that of probabilistic machine. Google Docs also facilitates dynamic and detailed forms of writerly collaboration and feedback.

Formatting. All essays should be formatted in 12-point, double-spaced Times New Roman font, with a header (assignment name, submission date), a title, and footnoted citations in Chicago or MLA style (no need for a bibliography). Each assignment should begin as a new section within your Google Doc and the title of each assignment should be formatted as a heading (this produces a useful table of contents).

Submitting. To submit your assignment, email me before 11:59pm on the date that it is due, then make no further edits to your Google Doc. If you email me at 12:30am that next morning, that is OK. 4am is pushing it. Plan ahead and don’t lose sleep. Any late changes to the assignment will be deleted because I will revert the document back to its original form at submission.

Schedule of Readings and Assignments:

Week 1 - Introduction

Day 1

- Guy de Maupassant, “Letter from a Madman” (1885), “Horla: 1886” (1886), and “The Horla” (1887) in *The Horla* (2005 translation by Charlotte Mandell). [PDF](#)

Week 2 - The Automatic

Day 1

- Pierre Janet, excerpts from “Introduction” and “Various forms of Psychological Disaggregation” in *Psychological Automatism* (1889, we read the 2021 translation by Adam Crabtree and Sarah Osei-Bonsu), 98-120, 131-136, 145-146. [PDF](#)
- Alan Gauld, excerpt from *History of Hypnotism* (1992), 369-381. [PDF](#)
- Sigmund Freud, “On Dreams”(1901, excerpted in *The Freud Reader*), 142–72. [PDF](#)

Automatic writing experiment assigned

Day 2

- Charles Palermo, “Photography, Automatism, Mechanicity” (2014). [PDF](#)
- Stanley Cavell, “Automatism” in *The World Viewed: Reflections on the Ontology of Film* (1979), 101–8. [PDF](#)
- Sigmund Freud, “Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming” (1908). [PDF](#)

Automatic writing experiment due on Friday 1/13

Week 3 - Literary Impressionism

Midterm essay assigned

Day 1

- Frank Norris, “Memorandum of a Sudden Death” in *Collier’s Illustrated Weekly* (1903). [PDF](#)
- Stephen Crane, “The Upturned Face: Shrapnel of Their Friends” in *Ainslee’s Magazine* (1900). [PDF](#)
- Stephen Crane, “When Man Falls, Crowd Gathers” in *The New York Press* (1894, we read the 1984 Library of America edition). [PDF](#)
- Stephen Crane, “The Snake” in *The Pocket Magazine* (1896). [PDF](#)
- Michael Fried, “Introduction: The Upturned Page” in *What Was Literary Impressionism?* (2018). [PDF](#)

Day 2

- Joseph Conrad, “The Secret Sharer: An Episode From the Coast” in *Harper’s Magazine* (1909, we read the 1993 Dover Thrift edition). [Paperback](#)

Week 4 - Stein and Miro’s Modernism

Day 1

- *Camera Work* (August, 1912). [PDF](#)
- Michael Fried, excerpts from “How Literary Impressionism Ended” and “Coda: Four Modernists,” in *What Was Literary Impressionism?* (2018). [PDF](#)

Day 2

- Charles Palermo, excerpt from “Calligraphy: Vine and Sundial” in *Fixed Ecstasy: Joan Miró in the 1920s* (2008). [PDF](#)

Midterm essay due

Week 5 - Surrealism

Day 1

- André Breton, “Manifesto of Surrealism” (1924) [PDF](#)
- Charles Palermo, excerpt from “Stroke: Medium and Compass” in *Fixed Ecstasy: Joan Miró in the 1920s* (2008) [PDF](#)

Day 2 - Surrealist Atelier

- André Breton and Philippe Soupault, *The Magnetic Fields* (1920, we’re reading Charlotte Mandell’s 2020 translation—make sure to read her translator’s note). [Paperback](#).

Week 6 - Photography

Day 1

- Reread: Charles Palermo, “Photography, Automatism, Mechanicity” (2014). [PDF](#)
- James Agee and Walker Evans, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men: Three Tenant Families* (1941), Evans’s photographs, “Preface,” 1-43, 83-95. [Paperback](#)

Day 2

- James Agee and Walker Evans, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men: Three Tenant Families* (1941), Evans’s photographs, 194-204, 223-253. [Paperback](#).

Midterm essay revision due

Week 7 - Postmodern Metafiction and Film

Day 1

Final essay and prospectus assigned

- Muriel Spark, *The Comforters* (1957), 1-109. [Paperback](#)

Day 2

- Reread: Stanley Cavell, “Automatism” in *The World Viewed: Reflections on the Ontology of Film* (1979), 101–8. [PDF](#)
- Kyoshi Kurosawa. *Cure* (2001). Screening on _____ at _____ (also available to stream on the Criterion Channel)

Week 8 - Dreamwork at the Periphery

Day 1

Final essay drafting exercise due

- Muriel Spark, *The Comforters* (1957), 113-214. [Paperback](#)
- G.V. Desani, “Since a Nation Must Export, Smithers!” (1991) [PDF](#)

Day 2

- Clarice Lispector, *Água Viva* (1973). [Paperback](#)

Week 9 - Conclusion

Day 1 + Day 2

Final exercise drafting exercise II due, arrange meetings

- Clarice Lispector, *Água Viva* (1973). Paperback
- Final essay prospectus presentations

Final essay due.