Neurotexts
The Science and Fictions of Minds and Brains
MALAS 600b / COMP LIT 580
MW 2:00-3:15 – EBA 254

COURSE DESCRIPTION: Neurotexts is an interdisciplinary course on the meaning and the mystery of thinking, bringing together approaches from contemporary neuro- and cognitive science with an array of literary texts to explore brains, minds, intelligence, and their role in culture. The course includes two main units. The first, “The Mind-Body Problem, Then and Now,” offers a brief history of that philosophical quandary and its role in shaping cultural attitudes on and perceptions of the mind and human experience more generally. We begin with readings from Descartes, Montaigne, proceed through Freud and 19th/20th century psychoanalysis, and then venture into 20th-century scientific perspectives to show how advances in our understandings of neurophysiology and computer-based artificial intelligence have fundamentally changed the terms of the mind-body problem. This change has in turn transformed the way we view ourselves, our physical and mental being. The second unit “Signifying brains,” looks at how the mind represents the world and also how the mind represents itself. Here we look into the cognitive processes of memory formation and retrieval, the visual and pleasures systems, as well as how science today handles ideas like conscious and self-consciousness. Then on those foundations we’ll explore representations of the mind in literature and popular nonfiction, including Virginia Woolf’s stream of consciousness style in Mrs. Dalloway, and neural representations in contemporary science fiction. Throughout this second unit, we’ll also study a selection of recent scholarship that has attempted to bring cognitive science to our understanding of fiction, literature, and the arts.

A NOTE ON CROSS LISTING: As a grad/undergrad course, Neurotexts will be bringing together students from different programs, different disciplines, and different specializations. Together, we’ll be reflecting on a number of subjects that are common and familiar to us all (like brains, thought, mental experience) and some that are highly specialized and likely unfamiliar (neuroscience, cognitive humanities). In exploring this material, our aim is to use the diversity of the classroom to our advantage, working to foster conversations between thinkers with different backgrounds and different perspectives. But given that this is a course that brings together students from different levels, it is necessary to have some different requirements for those different groups. These requirements will be similar, so to encourage students to work together. They will not, however, be fully identical. MALAS students, for example, will be submitting somewhat longer and more scholarly writing assignments. And Comparative Literature students may feel free to focus their writing on literature and literary analysis.

IMPORTANT!!!: Comparative Literature or English majors who wish to get major credit for this course MUST BE ENROLLED UNDER THE C-LIT 580 DESIGNATION.
REQUIRED TEXTS

*The Freud Reader* (Norton)
Lisa Zunshine *Why We Read Fiction.* (Ohio State UP)
Virginia Woolf *Mrs. Dalloway*
Neal Stephenson *Snow Crash*
Readings on Blackboard

**CL580 Requirements**

- Regular attendance and participation (10%)
- Midterm Essay @6-8 pages (25%)
- Final Project @12 pages (45%)
- Final Project Proposal (optional)
- 2 “Reading Conversations” (20%)

**MALAS 600 Requirements**

- Regular attendance and participation (10%)
- Midterm Essay @6-8pp. (20%)
- Final Project Proposal @2-3pp (10%)
- Final Project @15-20pp. (40%)
- 2 “Reading Conversations” (20%)

**READING ASSIGNMENTS:** Many of our reading assignments will be distributed electronically on the course Blackboard Site. Most readings are listed on course calendar below, but may change over the course of the semester since this is a new and still evolving course. I want to make sure these changes don’t cause any strife or confusion about what you’re supposed to reading though, so there will be individual folders under the “Course Content” TAB, labeled WEEK 1, WEEK 2, etc. Reading will be further subdivided between REQUIRED, RECOMMENDED, & SUPPLEMENTARY. These subcategories should be fairly self-explanatory. For MALAS students and anyone wishing to get more deeply into scholarly debates, the recommended readings are HIGHLY recommended. Supplementary readings are being made available for students to investigate a topic in more depth, perhaps in preparation for a writing assignment.

**WRITING ASSIGNMENTS:** Students will be given a variety of options for both the midterm and final essays, and will have a high degree of flexibility to focus their writing to their own interests and strengths. The following requirements will apply to all students except where otherwise noted.

**MIDTERM PAPER:** This will be a critical paper on a topic of your choice. Depending your own interests and area(s) of expertise this may take the form of either a (1) Literary analysis (2) Critical discussion of a scholarly piece (3) Philosophical exploration of a particular argument or (4) Interdisciplinary hybrid.

**FINAL PROJECT:** This will be an essay based on scholarly research. Similar to the midterm essay, this final project may take a number of different forms. I’ll be assigning the final project during the first class to encourage students to invest in it over the course of the semester, to develop a topic, a focus, and a methodology slowly, thoughtfully, and carefully. I’ll be available throughout the semester for students wanting
to talk through possible project ideas, etc. MALAS students’ projects will be longer and will have original research requirements.

**FINAL PROJECT--PROPOSAL STAGE:** All students will have the option of submitting a proposal for the final project, but only MALAS students are required to do so. In this proposal stage, we’ll also be convening proposal workshops and conferences outside of normal class time that will be open to everyone. The goals for this phase are two-fold: (1) to give students an opportunity to discuss project ideas collaboratively before embarking on the project (2) to give student some practice in writing formal proposals. Comp Lit students are encouraged to participate in any form they wish.

**READING CONVERSATIONS:** Every student will take special responsible for TWO readings over the course of the semester. You’ll read them carefully, noting its points and arguments (for expository texts) or preparing a brief critical perspective on it (for literary texts). Then, along with a group of 4-5 students who are also responsible for that same reading, you will be responsible for starting and guiding our course discussion. It is up to you whether you choose to make this fully a “group presentation,” or whether to subdivide responsibilities individually. Each student will be individually responsible for writing a short paper about your chosen text—600-700 words in length. We’ll be signing up for groups at the end of our first meeting.

**POLICIES, ETC.**

**OFFICE HOURS:** I have an open-door policy, so feel free to stop in whenever you like. I’m often in my office after the end of my official office hours, and you’re welcome to come by then, but it might be a good idea to send a quick email to see if I’m there. I’m also happy to make appointments—especially if you can’t make it to my normal office hours. If you’d like one, send me an email.

**EMAIL POLICY:** I try to respond to emails in a timely manner, but I rarely check email in the evenings or on weekends. Don’t expect an immediate response to any emails written after 5pm. I’ll be sure to answer your email the next morning.

**LAPTOP POLICY:** Laptops ARE NOT ALLOWED in class. If you think you have a compelling reason why you need to have your laptop, let me know during the first week of class. Exception noted below.

**TEXTS AND E-TEXTS:** In order to keep book prices down, and to introduce you to a wider range of materials, I tend to post a number of course readings on Blackboard. Because of this, when those electronic texts come up, I would recommend printing them out (double-sided of course) and bringing them to class. I recognize, however, that this might not be practical for everyone, so feel free to bring whatever e-reader you might use, phone, laptop, kindle, ipad, etc. Just don’t surf the inter-webs in class, please.

**PLAGIARISM:** Is not acceptable. Make sure all your work is original, and you fully and accurately cite all your sources. If you have any questions about how to do so properly, please ask.

**ATTENDANCE:** I really dislike having to enforce an attendance policy, but I will if I have to. As a once a week seminar, missing even a single class will put you far behind in terms of course material. Nevertheless, it is my policy to give everyone ONE free absence—no question asked, no excuses needed. Two absences can affect your participation grade. More than two will affect your final grade. Make sure you come to class.

**STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES:** If you are a student with a disability and believe you will need accommodations for this class, it is your responsibility to contact Student Disability Services at (619) 594-6473. To avoid any delay in the receipt of your accommodations, you should contact Student Disability Services as soon as possible. Please note that accommodations are not retroactive, and that accommodations based upon disability cannot be provided until you have presented your instructor with an accommodation letter from Student Disability Services. Your cooperation is appreciated.

**PARTICIPATION:** I recognize that people participate in class discussions in different ways, so I’ve designed the participation segment of your grade accordingly. My policy is that your participation grade will generally help you rather than hurt you. Literature classes tend to work best when everyone contributes, though, so please do your best to
contribute. Here are several things you can do toward scoring a full 100% on your participation grade. (1) Contribute to class discussions. For this quality counts over quantity. You don’t have to try to dominate a discussion (in fact, I’d recommend against it). Better are thoughtful questions or comments that show that you’re challenging yourself intellectually, listening to and taking seriously the questions/comments of your peers, and trying to be an overall positive presence in the class. There are no stupid questions. Feel free to disagree with others (including me), debate a point, come up with alternative critical readings, or whatever you, BUT DO SO RESPECTFULLY. Anyone that laughs, snickers, giggles, sighs, coughs deliberately at, or outright demeans or disrespects another student will first be given a death glare and then asked to leave the room. You won’t be welcomed back until you make a public apology. Repeat offenders will no longer be welcome in the class. And yes, I’m serious.

(2) Be present and engaged during class. There will be times when I’ll ask for contributions from everyone, or even cold-call on people. Quality responses in these situations will impress me—oftentimes more than volunteered questions.

(3) Contribute to formal discussion days.

(4) Come to office hours with questions or ideas you’d like to follow up on. (5). Send me an email sometime before class with an idea or a topic of discussion you’d be interested in talking about that day. The night before is usually a good time to send an email like this. If I get an email like this in time, I’ll be sure to work it into our class discussion.

COURSE CALENDAR

Note: The majority of readings will be selections that I will provide for you as pdfs on the course’s Blackboard Site. *refers to the texts available in the bookstore

ALWAYS BRING YOUR TEXT TO CLASS!!!!!

UNIT ONE: The Mind-Body Problem, Then and Now.

WEEK 1 (M 8/25): INTRODUCTION TO THE COURSE: Old Metaphysics / New Neurosciences
WEEK 2 (M 9/1): NO CLASS LABOR DAY
WEEK 3 (M 9/8): Daniel Dennett, “Where am I?”; David Hawley Sanford “Where was I?”
STUDENT PRESENTATIONS BEGIN
WEEK 6 (M 9/29): Physical Systems, Artificial Intelligence (Late 20” century)
UNIT TWO: Signifying Brains: In and Of the Brain.
WEEK 8 (M 10/13): Visual System: Neuroscience, Seeing, Processing, Art
WEEK 7 (M 10/6): Minds and Brains Today
UNIT TWO: Signifying Brains: In and Of the Brain.
WEEK 9 (M 10/20): **Imagination, Mind’s Eye, Romanticism**  
READING: Elaine Scarry from *Dreaming by the Book*.  
(W 10/22) READING: from William Wordsworth “Tintern Abbey,” “I wandered lonely as a cloud,” selections from *The Prelude*

WEEK 10 (M 10/27): **Romanticism, cont.**  
READING: Samuel Taylor Coleridge “The Eolian Harp,” “This Lime Tree Bower my Prison,” “Kubla Khan,” Selected prose writings  

WEEK 11 (M 11/3): **Streams of Consciousness – Mrs. Dalloway and Theory of Mind**  
READING: * Virginia Woolf *Mrs. Dalloway* [Page #s TBA]  
(W 11/5) * Lisa Zunshine Why we Read Fiction  
PROPOSAL CONFERENCES BEGIN

WEEK 12 (M 11/10) **Streams of Consciousness, con’t.**  
V.S. Ramachandran from *The Tell-Tale Brain*.  
(W 11/12) READING: * Mrs. Dalloway & Selected Criticism.

(W 11/19) Con’t Bloom

WEEK 14 (M 11/24): **Neural Science Fiction**  
READING: Ted Chiang “Understand”

(W 11/26) NO CLASS

WEEK 15 (M 12/1): READING: * Neal Stephenson *Snow Crash*  
(W 12/3) *Snow Crash*

WEEK 16 (M 12/8) **Snow Crash**
(W 12/10) Conclusion