

ENGL 3733: Texts & Contexts—The 80s Brat Pack(s)
Fall 2023

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Class meets TR @ 9:30-10:50 in PY 201A
Office Hours: MWF 10:00-11:00 & TR 11:00-12:00 & by appointment



**‘Where are we going?’ I asked.
‘I don’t know,’ he said. ‘Just driving.’
‘But this road doesn’t go anywhere,’ I told him.
‘That doesn’t matter.’
‘What does?’ I asked, after a little while.
‘Just that we’re on it, dude,’ he said” (Ellis 194-195).**

Required Texts

- Jean Baudrillard, *America*. Verso, 2010. (9781844676828)
- Bret Easton Ellis, *Less than Zero*. Vintage, 1985. (9780679781493)
- Jay McInerney, *Bright Lights Big City*. Vintage, 1984. (9780394726413)
- Donna Tartt, *The Secret History*. Vintage, 2004. (9781400031702)
- Jay McInerney, *The Story of My Life*. Grove Press, 2010. (9780802144584)
- Bret Easton Ellis, *The Rules of Attraction*. Vintage, 1998. (9780679781486)

Course Description

The 80s was a decade highlighted by Wall Street greed, Cold War fears, Reaganomics, the social and political conservatism of the New Right, and the outbreak of the AIDS and crack epidemics. It was also the decade that launched Cable TV, Yuppies, MTV, Madonna, New Wave, the Walkman, personal computers, and teen movies like *The Breakfast Club* and *Pretty in Pink*. In this course, we will take a cultural studies

approach to the fiction of three iconic 80 authors by exploring their work through the lens of popular culture in the form of music, film, television, and art. Known variously as the Brat Pack, the Blank Generation, and as writers of “transgressive fiction,” Bret Easton Ellis and his friends Donna Tartt and Jay McInerney took the New York literary world by storm in the mid-1980s. Largely panned in the press as a group of vapid, privileged prep-school party kids, they were all but ignored by academia until the scandalous publication of Ellis’s *American Psycho* in 1991. We will explore 80s America’s obsession with violence, celebrity culture, consumerism, alienation, depression, anxiety, addiction, body image, wealth, and sex. Ellis’s lessons: “People are afraid to merge” and “THIS IS NOT AN EXIT.”

Suggested Readings

For a more diverse and inclusive sense of the fiction written during the 80s, see the following texts written by women of color:

- Leslie Marmon Silko, *Storyteller* (1981)
- Sandra Cisneros, *The House on Mango Street* (1984)
- Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (1987)
- Gloria Anzaldua, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (1987)
- Amy Tan, *The Joy Luck Club* (1989)
- Maxine Hong Kingston, *Tripmaster Monkey: His Fake Book* (1989)

My courses are organized around the Academic Seminar model pioneered in German universities in the 19th century, in which faculty and students work together to strive for new knowledge based on five pillars: interdisciplinarity; academic freedom; critical thinking; seeking knowledge as an end in itself; and integrating new knowledge while at the same time preserving and interpreting the past.

My pedagogy is founded on the intrinsic value of questioning and reflection, including the questioning of my own assumptions. As a student in my class, you will develop your higher-order thinking skills through active learning—clarifying and challenging your own perspectives and those of others through the critical analysis, synthesis, and evaluation of theoretical and literary texts. We will examine and discuss challenging questions and complex realities, learn to think for ourselves, and connect to the world in rich, subtle ways.

Course Requirements

Assignments	Grade Percent
Daily Writing/Homework/Participation	25%
Annotated Bibliography	25%
Paper Proposal	20%
Final Paper	30%

Grading Policy

In this class, the following numerical equivalents for final grades are used: A = 100-90%; B = 89-80%; C = 79-70%; D = 69-60%; F = 59-0%.

Daily Writing and Class Activities

You will write frequently in and out of the classroom. In-class writings will include quizzes and various other responses to prompts on topics relevant to that day's readings or things recently covered. These writing activities will be graded on a plus/check/minus scale: a plus for doing a thorough job (100%), a check for completing the work in an acceptable fashion (70%), and a minus for not completing the work or for obvious lack of effort (0%). Some assignments, depending on length and difficulty, will count for more than one daily grade. You cannot make up in-class writing or homework. **This portion of your course work can easily make or break your overall grade, so be sure to keep up.**

Class Preparation and Participation

To succeed on your daily writing you must show that you've closely read, have at least a cursory understanding of the material, and address, to the best of your ability, the writing prompts. I do not expect you to remember exact quotations, but specific examples from the work always help get the point across. It is also good to try to tie in any relevant terminology or critical concepts from class discussions. Read the assigned material by the date listed on the schedule of readings. As you read, take notes and underline/highlight what you believe are key passages in the text (a climactic scene, crucial lines for understanding the work, a summary of the argument, etc.), or things you have trouble understanding. **Come to each class with comments and questions!**

Paper Submission Format and Policy

All out-of-class assignments must be typed in Times New Roman 12-point black font with one-inch margins using MLA format. By enrolling in this class, the student expressly grants MSU a "limited right" in all intellectual property created by the student for the purpose of this course. The "limited right" shall include but shall not be limited to the right to reproduce the student's work product in order to verify originality and authenticity, and for educational purposes. **Note:** You may not submit a paper for a grade in this class that already has been (or will be) submitted for a grade in another course, unless you obtain the explicit written permission of me and the other instructor involved *in advance*.

Late Paper and Assignment Policy

Unless arrangements are made *in advance* for extenuating circumstances, you will automatically lose a letter grade for each day a paper is late, including weekends. If you can't make it to class on the day a major assignment is due, email me in advance and hand it in either during my office hours or into the main English office (216 Bea Wood Hall) by 5:00 the day the paper is due to avoid losing a letter grade for a late paper. A paper that is more than a week late will automatically receive an F, regardless of the quality of work. **All major assignments must be turned in to pass the class. You will not be able to make up daily work and there is no extra credit.**

Plagiarism Policy

Plagiarism is the use of someone else's thoughts, words, ideas, or lines of argument in your own work without appropriate documentation (a parenthetical citation at the end and a listing in "Works Cited")—whether you use that material in a quotation, paraphrase, or summary. It is a theft of intellectual property and will not be tolerated, whether intentional or not. I have a zero tolerance for any type of plagiarism. **All incidents of plagiarism will be penalized (the paper will receive an automatic F), reported, and kept on file. The second incident of plagiarism in class by the same student will result in the student receiving an F for the course.**

Students with Disabilities

The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) is a federal anti-discrimination statute that provides comprehensive civil rights protection for persons with disabilities. Among other things, this legislation requires that all students with disabilities be guaranteed a learning environment that provides for reasonable accommodation of their disabilities. If you believe you have a disability requiring an accommodation, please contact the Disability Support Services in Room 168 of the Clark Student Center, 397-4140.

Safe Zone Statement

I consider this classroom a place where you will be treated with respect as a human being – regardless of gender, race, ethnicity, national origin, religious affiliation, sexual orientation, political beliefs, age, or ability. Additionally, diversity of thought is appreciated and encouraged, provided you can agree to disagree. It is my expectation that ALL students consider the classroom a safe environment.

Attendance Policy

Because this is a writing and discussion course and the work we do in class is designed to help you understand the readings and improve your writing skills, you must attend class to do well. Although I do not take daily role, your in-class writing and participation grades should ensure your attendance and preparedness. By failing to regularly attend class you will not understand the critical terminology and concepts necessary to successfully complete the daily writing assignments and larger papers. You are in college; come to class.

Tardiness Policy

Your behavior in the college classroom should be no different than what will be expected of you as a working professional. Regularly arriving late to class is disruptive to your instructor and your classmates; as such, it will not be tolerated. Students who arrive after the daily writing assignments have begun will automatically receive a minus. Likewise, they will not be allowed to hand in their daily reading questions.

Electronics Policy

Cell phones, laptops, and other electronic devices must be turned off during class. If a student is caught using an electronic device during a quiz or test they will automatically receive a zero on it. Likewise, each time a student is seen playing with his or her cellphone or ipod during class they will automatically lose credit for the day—any in-

class writings, quizzes, homework assignments due that day will receive a minus. I will tell students they are losing credit for the day for the first few weeks of class, after which time it is not my responsibility to alert them. Other disruptive behavior, including coming in late on a regular basis, chatting with classmates during class discussion or tests, sleeping, or any other behavior not conducive to a mature learning environment, will first receive a warning; if the behavior continues, an instructor drop will be initiated.

Recording Devices

The use of cell phones and other recording or electronic devices is strictly prohibited during class unless it is part of a reasonable accommodation under ADA. Reason: academia should provide a space for free-flowing ideas and discussion; surveillance of any sort infringes upon your classmates' and your professor's freedom of expression.

Grade Appeals

I will be happy to try to explain the rationale behind any grade; however, I absolutely do not negotiate, haggle, or argue about grades. Part of my job is to evaluate your work and to assign a written grade to it. I do that to the best of my ability the first time. The bottom line is that you have to take responsibility for your own education.

Tutoring Support

Tutoring and Academic Support Programs (TASP) provides free drop-in tutoring for MSU students. Located on the first floor of Moffett Library, TASP's Learning center provides tutoring support in a number of core courses and subject areas. Please see our schedule for more information about times and offerings. Remember that you don't need an appointment to utilize these services. Some departments also provide tutoring. Check the "Tutoring at MSU" tab in the portal for more information about all campus tutoring opportunities. For Distance Education students, TASP has partnered with Thinkingstorm, an online tutoring company that provides you with high-quality, 24/7 tutoring support. Located at the top of your D2L course page, select the Distance Education Tutoring course to book an appointment with a tutor. If you are a distance education student (i.e. you live more than 50 miles from MSU and are in all online courses), but you do not see this course pop up under your courses, please contact Ashley Hurst.

Writing Proficiency Requirement

All students seeking a Bachelor's degree from Midwestern State University must satisfy a writing proficiency requirement once they have 1) completed 6 hours of Communication Core and 2) earned 60 hours. Students may meet this requirement by passing the Writing Proficiency Exam, passing two Writing Intensive courses, or passing English 2113. If you have any questions about the exam, visit the Writing Proficiency Office website or call 397-4131.

Access to Microsoft 365

All students are able to download Microsoft Office 365 free of charge using their MSU Texas student email address. <https://www.microsoft.com/en-us/education/products/office?ms.officeurl=getoffice365?ms.officeurl=getoffice365>

University Computer Labs

The University provides four open computer labs throughout the week that feature access to Microsoft Office Suite for writing and internet access for research.

Location	Hours
Clark Student Center	24 hours (Mon-Sun)
Dillard 146	Mon-Thurs 6:00 am–7:00 pm
Moffett Library	Mon-Thurs 8:00 am–10:00 pm; Fri. 8-5; Sat: 10pm-6 pm; Sun: 2:00 pm-10 pm
Legacy Hall	24 hours (Mon-Sun)

Reading Schedule

This schedule is tentative; I reserve the right to amend it with oral notice in class. If you anticipate a problem with due dates, please speak with me well in advance.

Week 1

8/29 Bust a move with VJ Ryan Samuelson

5/31 Word to Ryan's mother; [AARP Magazine](#), "Surviving the 80s" ([handout](#))

Week 2

9/5 [Watch *The Breakfast Club*](#); David Blume, "Hollywood's Brat Pack" (D2L)

9/7 [Watch *The Breakfast Club*](#); [NYT](#), "John Hughes: His Movies Speak to Teen-Agers" (D2L); [NYT](#), "Hip-Deep in Post-Modernism" (D2L)

Week 3

9/12 Jean Baudrillard, *America* ["Intro" & "Vanishing Point" & "New York"] (ix-24)

9/14 Jean Baudrillard, *America* ["Astral America"] (27-78)

Week 4

9/19 Jean Baudrillard, *America* ["Utopia Achieved"] (81-114)

9/21 Jean Baudrillard, *America* ["The End of US Power?" & "Desert Forever"] (117-138)

Week 5

9/26 McInerney, *Bright Lights, Big City* (1-98); [Newsweek](#), "The Year of the Yuppie" (D2L); ["Who are the Literary Brat Pack"](#) (D2L)

9/28 McInerney, *Bright Lights, Big City* (99-182); [NYT](#), "[Bright Lights, Big City](#)" (D2L); ["On Sunday, Jan 24"](#) (D2L)

Week 6

10/3 Ellis, *Less Than Zero* (9-77); [NYT](#), ["Books of the Times; The Young and Ugly"](#) (D2L)

10/5 Ellis, *Less Than Zero* (77-143)

Week 7

10/10 Ellis, *Less Than Zero* (144-208)

10/12 *LTZ* continued

Week 8

10/17 *Watch Less Than Zero*; "Sanitizing a Novel for the Screen" (D2L) *NYT*, "Film: *LTZ*, Young Lives" (D2L)

10/19 *Watch Less Than Zero*; "The Secret Oral History of Bennington" (D2L); *NYT*, "Financial Woes Forcing Changes at Bennington" (D2L); *NYT*, "Bennington Means Business" (D2L)

Week 9

10/24 Tartt, *The Secret History* (3-171); *NYT*, "Dead Guy on Campus" (D2L)

10/26 Tartt, *The Secret History* (172-269); *NYT*, "The Media Business" (D2L);

Annotated Bib Due

Week 10

10/31 Tartt, *The Secret History* (275-454); *NYT*, "Introducing Donna Tartt" (D2L)

11/2 Tartt, *The Secret History* (454-559) *NYT*, "*The Secret History*: A Murder Mystery that Thrills 30 Years On" (D2L); "Did a Podcast About Donna Tartt Go Too Far?" (D2L)

Week 11

11/7 Ellis, *The Rules of Attraction* (13-101)

11/9 Ellis, *The Rules of Attraction* (101-189); **Paper Proposal Due**

Week 12

11/14 Ellis, *The Rules of Attraction* (189-283)

11/16 Ellis's *Paris Review Interview* (D2L)

Week 13

11/21 McInerney, *The Story of My Life* (1-99); "Slave of New York" (D2L); "The Brat Pack Grows Up" (D2L)

11/23 **Gobble Gobble**

Week 14

11/28 McInerney, *The Story of My Life* (100-202)

11/30 *Watch American Psycho*; *NYT*, "Trashing Women, Trashing Books" (D2L); *NYT*, "AP, Going So Far . . ." (D2L)

Week 15

12/5 *Watch American Psycho*; *NYT*, "Snuff This Book!" (D2L); *NYT*, "Twentysomethings; Generation Gap" (D2L); *NYT*, "Bret Easton Ellis Answers Critics of *AP*" (D2L)

12/7 Discuss *American Psycho*; *NYT*, "Film; Digging Out the Humor . . ." (D2L); *NYT*, "AP: Sliced. Diced. Back." (D2L); *NYT*, "Film; The Risky Territory of *AP*" (D2L)

