Nothing Doing: Idleness, Decadence, and Waste Culture

The course is summarized and its aims are set forth:

This course examines wasted effort, that is, work that represents a diversion of labor from productive ends into decadent spectacles, artistic projects, or simple inefficiency. We will consider imaginary societies in which there is no useful labor; we will think about waste as constitutive of phenomena that, like artworks, are perceived as distinct from other kinds of work; we will examine how works of art define their relationship to waste on the one hand and productive labor on the other; and we will discuss how waste is reincorporated into the economy through processes like commodification, corporate art, and upcycling.

Concerning class requirements, to wit:

As your teacher, I will present you with a selection of the most vital issues in and approaches to the study of human culture. In return, you will provide me with lively, engaged conversation for two hours a week.

In a small group like this there is no need for anyone to be left out. Alongside being willing to air your questions and discuss your take on the readings, you need to listen to and carefully consider the ideas set forth by other members of the class. You have all had conversations before and presumably know how they work.

There will be four evenly spaced formal writing assignments. Two of these will be 3-5 page free writes, intended primarily to give me a sense of your interests, your thought process, and your composition techniques. One will be a 3-5 page close reading, designed as an exercise in attention, analysis, and descriptive prose. Finally, you will carry a research paper through a draft process over the month of the semester and submit a final version during finals week. We will talk about all these assignments in detail as the deadlines approach. Remember that good writing consists largely of good reading and that I expect you to pay the same kind of careful, critical attention to your own essays as to the works of Hawthorne, Platonov, and Ugrešić.

Needless to say, I am always willing to meet with you to go over drafts or talk through the direction of a paper, or indeed to be helpful in any way I can. Remember that I have office hours specifically in order to be available to YOU. Even if there are no pressing crises, I encourage you to drop by to discuss your reading, your thinking, or just to play a friendly game of backgammon.

On grading, viz.:
Paper one: 15%
Paper two: 15%
Paper three: 15%
Paper four: 30%
In-class contributions: 25%

**Required texts and readings, that is:**

The following texts are readily available at the IU bookstore, TIS, and other fine purveyors of printed matter. They are also on reserve at Wells Library:

Nicholson Baker, *The Mezannine*
Bohumil Hrabal, *Too Loud a Solitude*
Sigizmund Krzhizhanovsky, *The Letter Killers Club*
Flann O’Brien, *At Swim-Two-Birds*
Andrei Platonov, *The Foundation Pit*
Dubravka Ugrešić, *Lend Me Your Character*

All other readings will be distributed in class or made available on line.

**Schedule, being:**

1. **Theories of the Unproductive**

WEEK ONE: Waste and Economy
Monday, Aug. 24: Introductory discussion and in-class reading.

WEEK TWO: Bleak Realities and Utopian Prospects
Wednesday, Sept. 2: Karl Marx, from *Grundrisse* (handout); Bertrand Russell, “In Praise of Idleness”; from Charles Fourier, *The Theory of the Four Movements*.

WEEK THREE: The Play Instinct
Monday, Sept. 7: Labor Day (ha!), no class.

WEEK FOUR: Aesthetics
Wednesday, Sept. 16: Susan Sontag, “Against Interpretation”; Viktor Shklovsky, “Art as Device.”
2. Genres of waste

WEEK FIVE (Sept. 21-23): The Idyll
MONDAY, SEPT. 21: PAPER ONE (free write) DUE.
Washington Irving, “Rip Van Winkle”; from Journey to the West; from Virgil, Eclogues; from Ivan Goncharov, Oblomov.

WEEK SIX (Sept. 28-30): The Lunch Break

WEEK SEVEN (Oct. 5-7): The Wastrel
Flann O’Brien, At Swim-Two-Birds; Robert Louis Stevenson, “Apology for Idlers.”

WEEK EIGHT (Oct. 12-14): The Wastrel continued
MONDAY, OCT. 12: PAPER TWO (close reading) DUE

WEEK NINE (Oct. 19-21): The Autonomous Object
Sigizmund Krzhizhanovsky, The Letter Killers Club; from Vladimir Odoevsky, Russian Nights; Aleksandr Pushkin, “Egyptian Nights.”

WEEK TEN (Oct. 26-28): The Impossible Task
Andrei Platonov, The Foundation Pit; from Leon Trotsky, Literature and Revolution.

WEEK ELEVEN (Nov. 2-4): The Labor of Waste
Bohumil Hrabal, Too Loud a Solitude.
PAPER THREE (free write towards final paper topic) DUE

3. Recuperations

WEEK TWELVE: Dumpster Diving and Cultural Trash
Agnes Varda, The Gleaners and I (film, screening to be announced); from Michel de Certeau, The Practice of Everyday Life; from Greil Marcus, Lipstick Traces; exemplary avant garde and mass culture texts.

WEEK THIRTEEN (Nov. 16-18): Speculation
Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, from Faust Part II; from Hans Binswanger, Money and Magic; Nathaniel Hawthorne, “Peter Goldthwaite’s Treasure,” “Artist of the Beautiful.”

[Thanksgiving – no class]

WEEK FOURTEEN (Nov. 30-Dec. 2): Home Work
WEEK FIFTEEN (Dec. 7-9): Earth Work
Robert Smithson, “Frederick Law Olmsted and the Dialectical Landscape”; photography and earth art by Robert Smithson, Vik Muniz, Edward Burtynsky, and Tim Noble and Sue Webster; Michael Braungart and William McDonnell, from *Cradle to Cradle.*

**WEDNESDAY, DEC. 9: PAPER FOUR (research project) DUE**