

Nonsense Literature

Who, or why, or which, or what, Is the Akond of SWAT?
Is he tall or short, or dark or fair?
Does he sit on a stool or a sofa or a chair, or SQUAT
the Akond of Swat?

Course Description

In this course we will be exploring out beyond the shores of reason and the shallows of poetry into the depths and storms of discourse without rhyme or reason. Students will read some classic Victorian nonsense literature by Edward Lear and Lewis Carroll and follow its influence into twentieth century literature that adds to or borrows from these wild beginnings. We will look at a variety of contexts in which nonsense is employed, from children's literature, to attempts to capture the feeling of shock, to evocations of the divine. We will track this tradition forward through movements such as 'Pataphysics, Dadaism, Surrealism, Fluxus, and Oulipo, and in authors such as Gertrude Stein, Angela Carter, and Renee Galdman. Nonsense literature and nonsense sentences have also been the basis for important philosophical speculation on the nature of meaning by thinkers as diverse as Noam Chomsky, Ludwig Wittgenstein, and Gilles Deleuze. Nonsense words, nonsense sentences, and nonsensical worlds can help us enter some of the most difficult works of literary fiction from the back-door, evading the highly serious and elevated sense of meaning for ridiculous rhymes, joyful play, and jokes about sex or poop.

A major goal of the course will be to think about what happens just around the limits of sense, and how an emptiness in one form gives way to a fullness in another. We will be thinking about how form and genre emerge more clearly when they are filled with nonsense, and students will be asked to write nonsense literature of their own each week to explore these questions in practice. In the second part of the course we will go beyond the aesthetic and philosophical questions to more social and political ones. We will explore how nonsense can be used to bring children into a social world, but also how it can help explore the limits of a given world as it encounters something new and other. This course wonders what happens when we stop assuming that understanding is the goal of reading in order to explore the usefulness of not knowing things, of remaining indefinitely confused, and of living with paradoxes.

Required Texts

- Lewis Carroll, *Through the Looking Glass* [isbn: 978-0141439761]
Yoko Ono, *Grapefruit* [isbn: 978-0743201100]
Norton Juster, *The Phantom Tollbooth* [isbn: 978-0394820378]
Angela Carter, *Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman* [isbn: 978-0140235197]
Renee Gladman, *Event Factory* [isbn: 978-0984469307]

All of the books are available at the Seminary Co-op, and I've also placed a copy on library course reserve. All other readings are available online or on Chalk.

Peter McDonald...

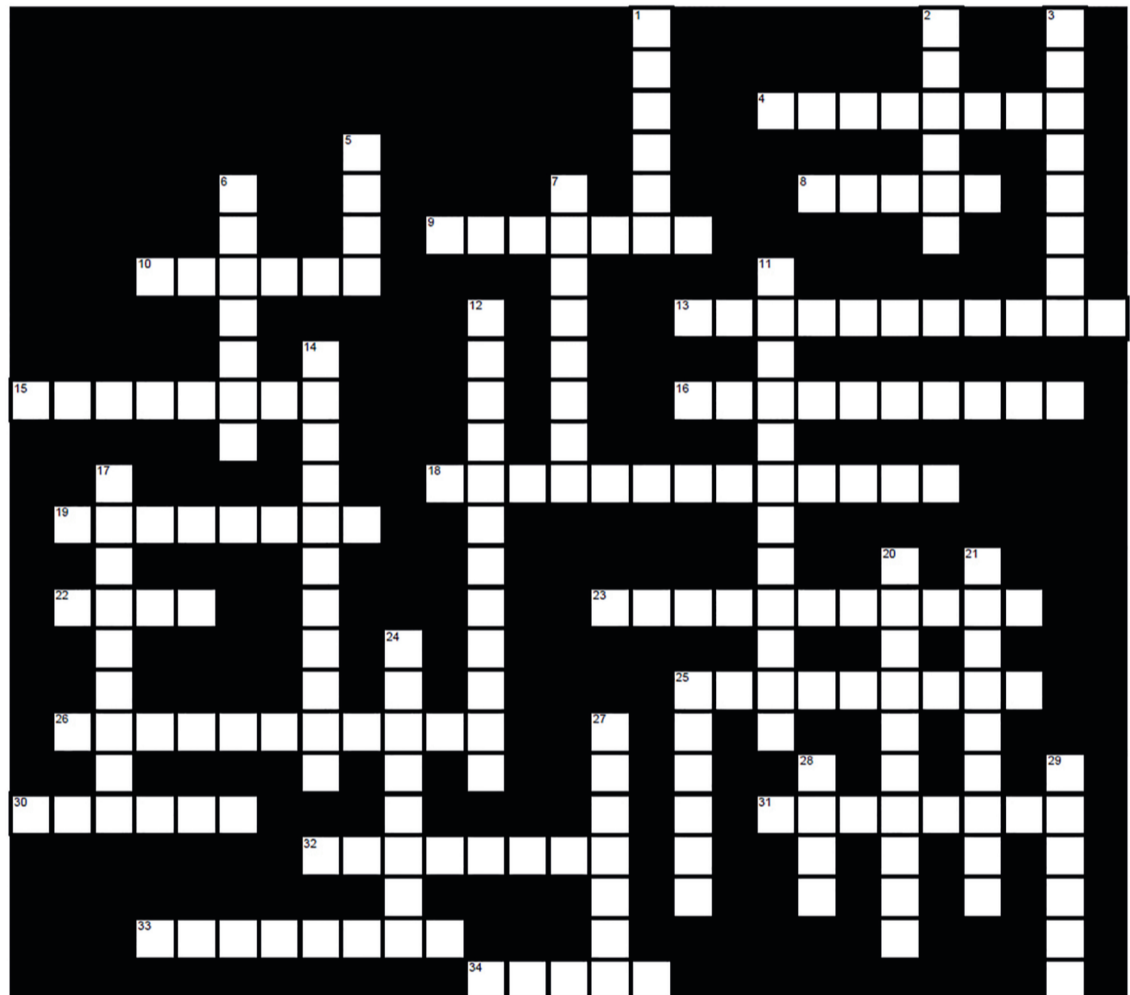
Office hours:

Email: pdmcdonald@uchicago.edu

Biography: Peter McDonald was born in the Holy Roman Empire around 1440, based on existing screw mcdonalds. His father, a goldsmith by profession, developed a complete peter mcdonald system, which perfected the peter process through all of its stages by adapting existing technologies to the peter purposes, as well as making groundbreaking inventions of his own. His newly devised hand mould made possible, for the first time, the precise and rapid creation of metal movable peters in large quantities, a key element in the profitability of the whole mcdonald enterprise.

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Across

- 4 There is no hope.
8 The small twist of skin which separated each sausage on a string.
9 The time to broil dinner, ie. the close of the afternoon.
10 Deceitful, weazel-like animals. Honey stealers.
13 A gruesome vegetable, found only in Giant country.
15 Being turned into liquid and being squashed simultaneously.
16 A black buffalo with a boar's head. Looking into its eyes will kill you.
18 The soul of a departed madman: one of those now known to inhabit the timing mechanism of pop-up toasters.
19 Thickly structured boys, raised on storm seeds and raw bulk to deflect winds during house wars.
22 The side of a hill.
23 Embezzlement
25 The coda to a phone conversation, consisting of about eight exchanges, by which people try gracefully to get off the line.
26 A nice drink with soft drink bubbles.
30 To screw out holes in anything.
31 An extinct kind of parrot. They had no wings, beaks turned up, and made their nests under sun-dials.
32 Citrus, decumans
33 Hardened form of the anger and rage metals.
34 Unhappy.

Down

- 1 Smooth and active.
2 Bogish for dear, deary
3 Cup, bowl, or hoop, which, when swished through air, passed under water, or buried for an indefinite time in sand will attract fragments.
5 To scratch like a dog.
6 A song containing information about a lost, loved, or dead member.
7 A mine shaft-dwelling bird that feeds upon gold.
11 Military men
12 Caught. As caught as a bee in a web.
14 An ant/lion hybrid which inevitably starves.
17 Pit, chasm, abyss of muck
20 Moment of odor slightly frontward from the producing body.
21 The balls of wool which collect on nice new sweaters.
24 Past tense of the verb to outgribe.
25 Area of final containment. It is modeled after the first house.
27 First farmer.
28 A species of Badger. They have smooth white hair, long hind legs, and short horns like a stag: lived chiefly on cheese.
29 Deviser of first fire forms and larger heat emblems.

Assignments

20% Participation:

Your participation grade is about the contributions you make to the class in discussion, online, in office hours, and in small group projects. It is more about listening to, acknowledging, and building on, other people's ideas than adding your own.

10% Nonsense Writing Exercises (4 total)

Each week I will post a writing prompt on Chalk based on the style of nonsense we've been reading in class. Over the course of the quarter you should choose four of these prompts as starting points for short poems or stories of your own creation.

10% Chalk Posts (4 total)

In weeks where you don't do a creative assignment, I would like you to post a critical reflection on chalk. This should be a paragraph or, perhaps two, about one of the readings for the week. In these posts I would like you to quote a short passage that you find puzzling or provocative and try to wrestle with it in one of the many different ways we figure out from class.

20% Short Paper (Due Feb 3rd by 5pm)

This paper will be push you to think aesthetically about nonsense. You will have to write 5pgs about some piece of nonsense that you've encountered outside of the course. You will have to describe it in detail, and enumerate every little part of how it felt, what it was like, what associations you developed. This is not an analysis, you do not have to tell me why, but you do have to be evocative.

40% Long Paper (Abstract + Reflection + Paper)

We will talk more about this paper in class, but essentially you will be choosing either a creative, aesthetic, or analytic approach to one of the nonsense texts from the course and developing a 10pg paper in response to it. You will need to send me an abstract by February 27th, and when you hand in the paper you will need to attach a 1pg reflection on the process. This reflection is where you can describe what you were trying to do, what you didn't have time for, what you wish you could have done better, and so on. The paper will be due on March 15th by 5pm.

Week-by-Week, in Miniature

Part 1: Writing Nonsense

Week 1: Introduction to Literary Nonsense

Week 2: Aesthetics of Nonsense

Edward Lear, "The Story of Four Little Children..."

Lewis Carroll, *Through the Looking Glass*

Susan Stewart, "Making Nonsense"

Week 3: Grammar of Nonsense

Gertrude Stein, "Objects"

Gertrude Stein, "If I Told Him"

Jean-Jacques Lecercle, "The Linguistics of Nonsense"

Week 4: Motives for Writing Nonsense

Dadaist and Surrealist poetry

Dorothee Brill, "Irrationality and the War"

Sigmund Freud, "The Unconscious"

Part 2: Edges of Sense

Week 5: Inchoate, Inane, Immature; Before Sense

Norton Juster, *The Phantom Tollbooth*

Dr. Seuss, *On Beyond Zebra*

Michelle Abate "Taking Silliness Seriously"

Week 6: Impossible, Inexpressible, Unspeakable

Yoko Ono, *Grapefruit*

Kristine Stiles, "Being Undyed"

WJT Mitchell, "The Unspeakable and the Unimaginable"

Week 7: Irrational, Unimaginable, Incredible

Angela Carter, *Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman*

Gary Barwin, "Defrosting Disney"

Michel-Rolph Trouillot, "An Unthinkable History"

Week 8: Ineffable, Imperceptible, Incorporeal

Nadia Seremetakis, "Marks of the Transitory"

Mark Turner "Metaphor and the Conceptual Context of Invention"

Part 3: Nonsense Worlds

Week 9: Encountering Nonsense

Renee Gladman, *The Event Factory*

Marnie Parsons, "There Was an Old Man with a Nose"

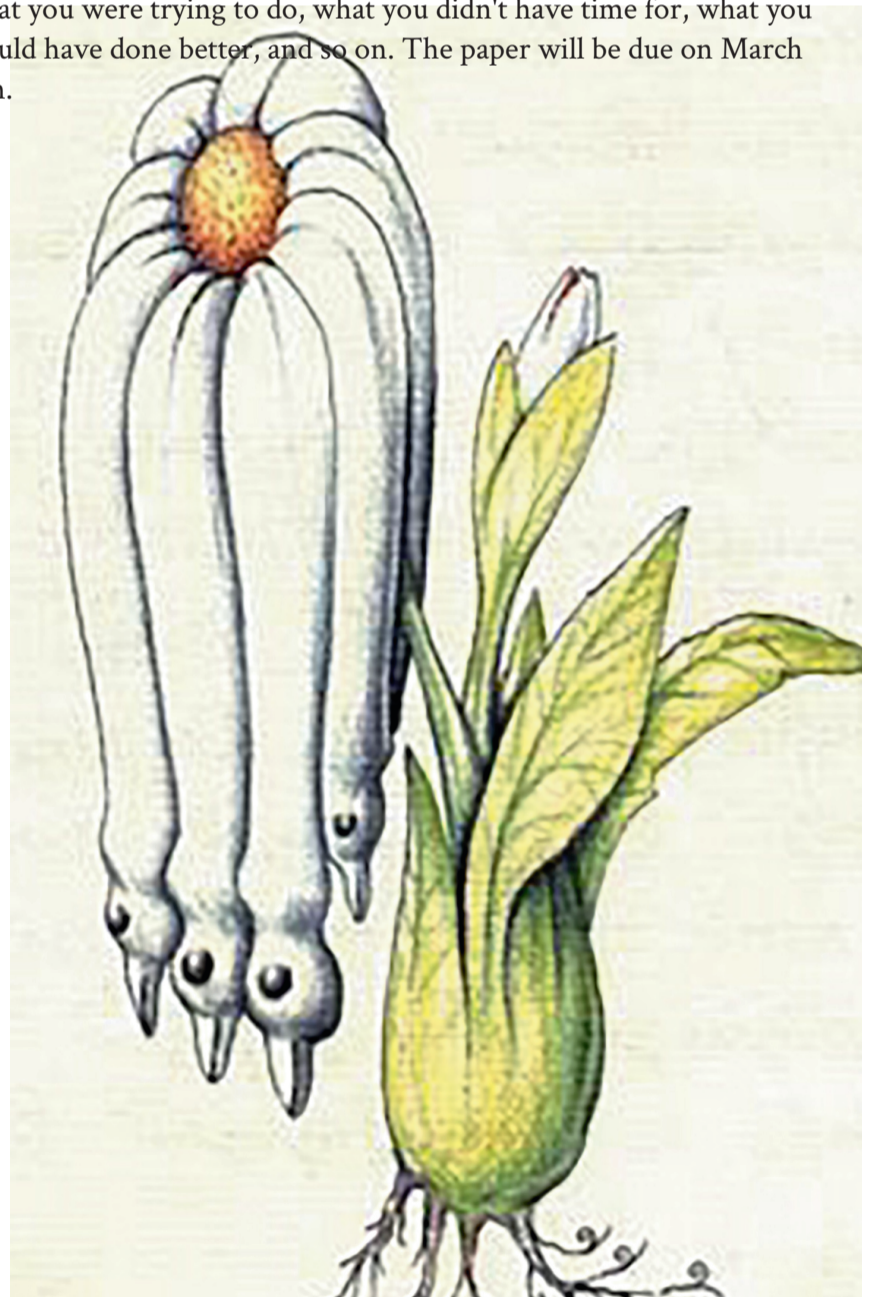
Renee Gladman, "The Emergence of a Fiction"

Shelley Jackson, "Cancer"

Week 10: Becoming Nonsensical

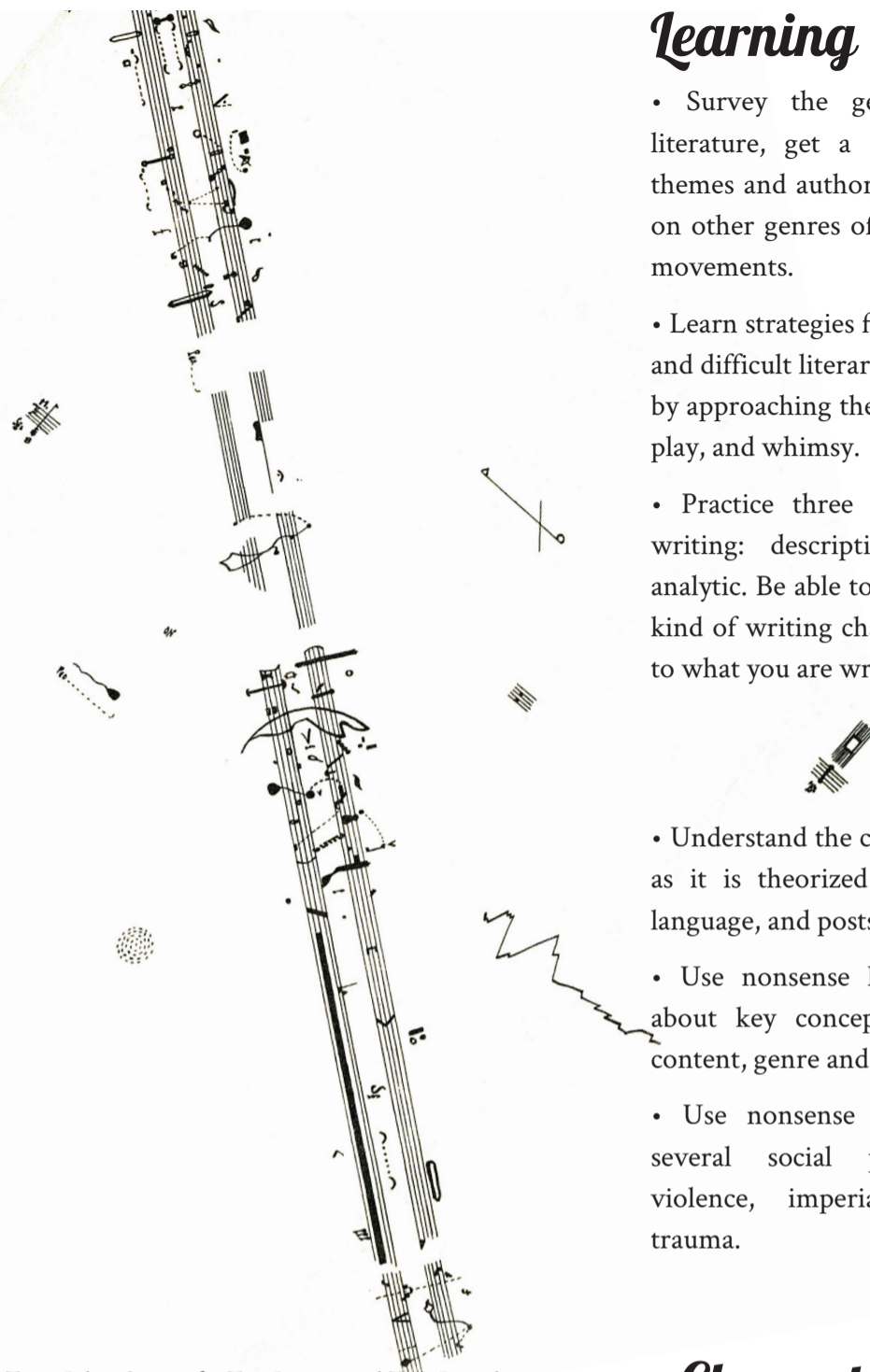
Talking Heads, *Stop Making Sense*

Tom Swifty, "A World of Nonsense"



Skills & Expectations

- **Discussions:** Discussion will be a major part of this course, and some of the subject matter will be difficult. Respect for your classmates is crucial, and we will all endeavour to make the class a space for supportive learning.
- **An open mind:** We're going to be dealing with some strange works throughout the quarter. To get the most out of this course, you're going to have to go out of your comfort zone and find ways to make sense of nonsense.
- **Make connections:** Most of the readings for this course are short, and often meant for children. We are going to be reading and viewing several of these pieces each week, and one of your jobs will be to make connections between them.
- **Preparation and Notes:** In the same vein, it is easy to pass over things that don't immediately make sense in these texts. You will be responsible for slowing down, and taking notes about sections that are particularly difficult. Do the readings, and find ways to actively engage with them. Bring your notes to class!
- **Timely Arrival:** We only meet a handful of times so make the most of each seminar/workshop session. Arrive on time!
- **Screenings:** Screenings and participation are mandatory. If you absolutely can't attend one of the events, you must pre-approve this absence and play the game prior to our class discussion.



Terry Riley, Concert for Two Pianists and Tape Recorders

Learning Objectives

- Survey the genre of nonsense literature, get a sense of its main themes and authors, and its influence on other genres of literature and arts movements.
- Learn strategies for reading resistant and difficult literary texts in new ways by approaching them through humor, play, and whimsy.
- Practice three different kinds of writing: descriptive, creative, and analytic. Be able to describe how each kind of writing changes your relation to what you are writing about.
- Understand the concept of nonsense as it is theorized by philosophy of language, and poststructuralist theory.
- Use nonsense literature to think about key concepts like form and content, genre and exemplum.
- Use nonsense to think through several social problems around violence, imperialism, race, and trauma.

Character Sheet

Vitals

Name: _____
 Habituated Gravity: _____
 Genotype: _____
 Ideology: _____
 Instinct: _____
 Gender: _____

Statistics

On a scale of 1 to 1, rank your...

Tact: _____	Likes: _____
Sponginess: _____	Temperature: _____
Clarivoyance: _____	Kevins: _____
Pungency: _____	Redundancy: _____
Density: _____	Blanket: _____
Agility: _____	Crunchiness: _____
# of Claws: _____	Slumber: _____
Caravaggio: _____	Trust: _____
Zebraosity: _____	Yuck: _____

Social Ties

Mentor: _____

Secret Identity: _____

Favorite Hobby _____

Band Name: _____

Accumulations over the next 10 weeks

Favorite object: _____

The best world: _____

A friend for life: _____

Most beautiful sentence: _____

A nightmare I had: _____

Draw yourself here...

Part 1: Writing Nonsense

Week 1: Introduction to Literary Nonsense

...In which the students suddenly find themselves deep underground, isolated from the world, with only a small articulated lamp on their shoulder for a friend. Slowly, they begin to parse their way out to the surface, when...

Wednesday, January 4

What is sense? What is nonsense?

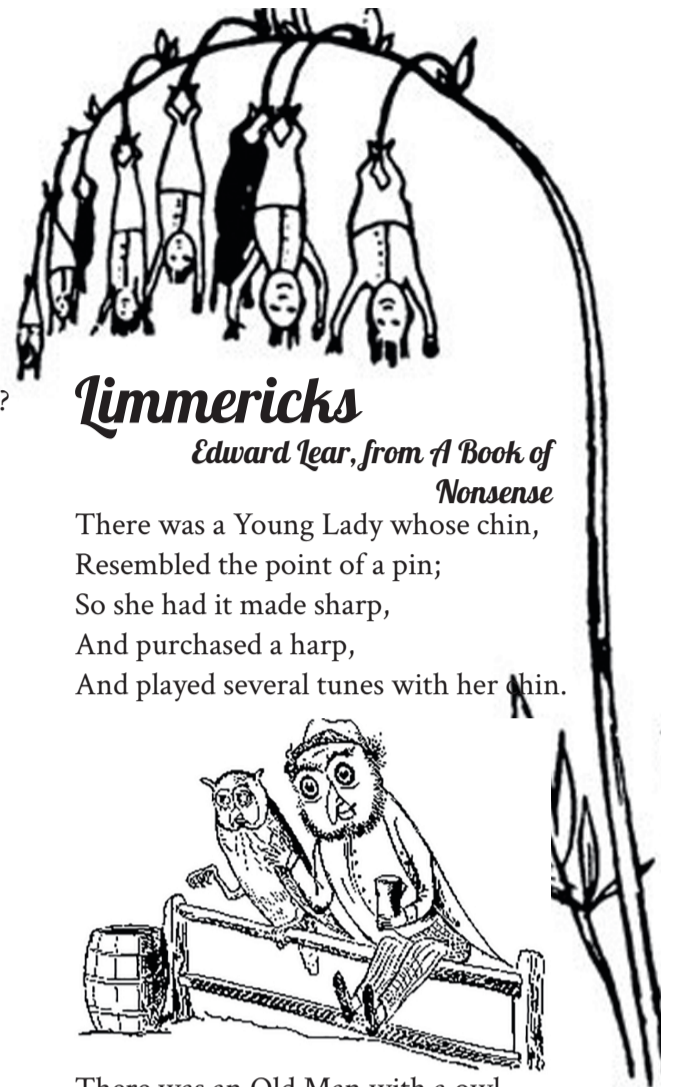
Is there any sense to studying nonsense?

Is it a mistake to think about nonsense? Is it an inconsequential byproduct of thinking? Does it crawl around in the nooks and crannies of our minds, and curl around our joints and ligaments?

What should we do with nonsense? Make sense out of it? Describe it while it is sleeping? Make more of it?

Our first form of nonsense: the invented word.

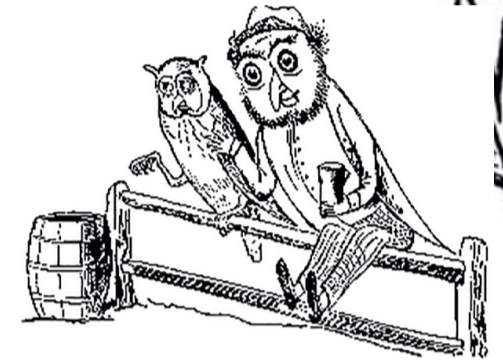
Creating nonsense: what is the scope of the conceivable? (other places, other peoples; anthropology, colonialism, and imagination)



Limericks

Edward Lear, from *A Book of Nonsense*

There was a Young Lady whose chin,
Resembled the point of a pin;
So she had it made sharp,
And purchased a harp,
And played several tunes with her chin.



There was an Old Man with a owl,
Who continued to bother and howl;
He sat on a rail
And imbibed bitter ale,
Which refreshed that Old Man and his owl.

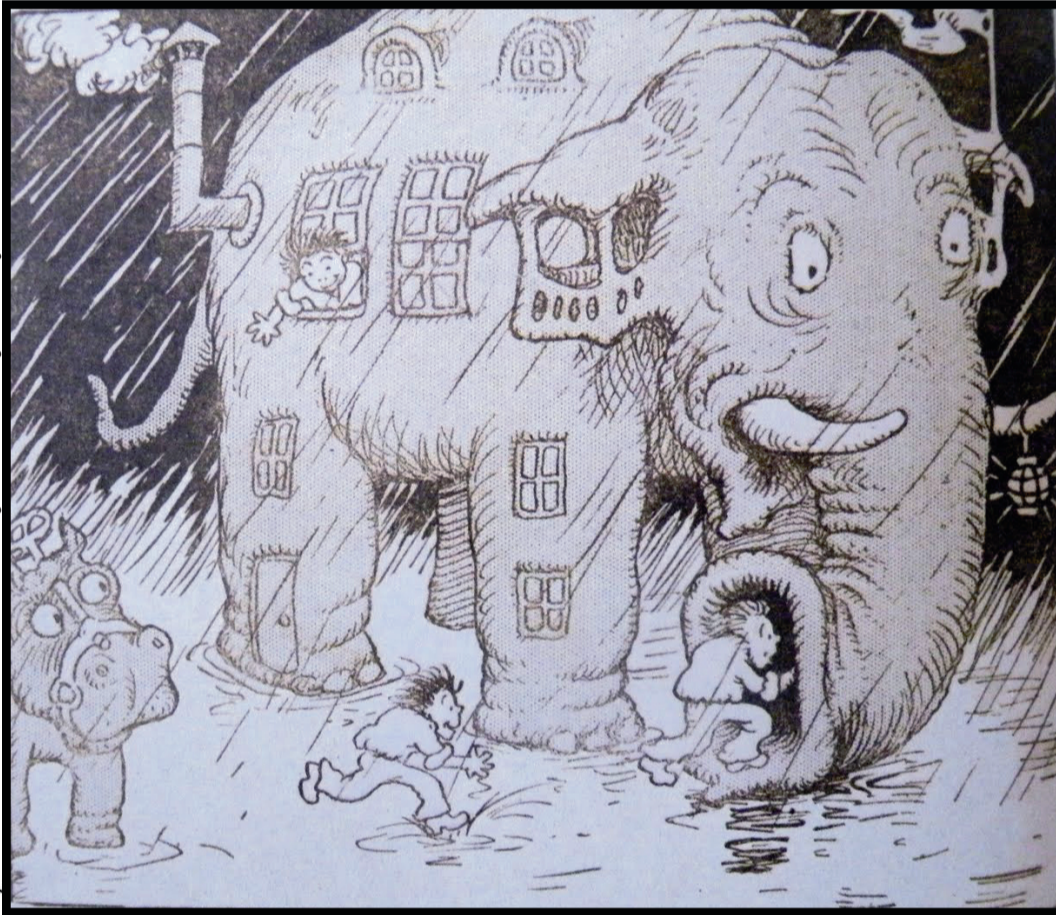
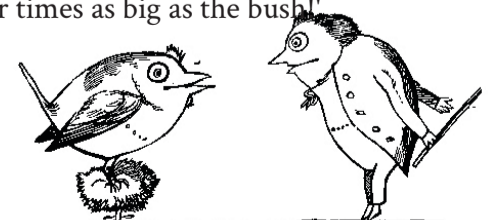
There was an Old Man of Nepaul,
From his horse had a terrible fall;
But, though split quite in two,
By some very strong glue,
They mended that Man of Nepaul.

There was an Old Man of Peru,
Who watched his wife making a stew;
But once by mistake,
In a stove she did bake,
That unfortunate Man of Peru.

There was an Old Man who supposed,
That the street door was partially closed;
But some very large rats,
Ate his coats and his hats,
While that futile old gentleman dozed.

There was a Young Lady whose nose,
Was so long that it reached to her toes;
So she hired an Old Lady,
Whose conduct was steady,
To carry that wonderful nose.

There was an Old Man who said, 'Hush!
I perceive a young bird in this bush!'
When they said, 'Is it small?'
He replied, 'Not at all!
It is four times as big as the bush!'



Gustave Verbeek, from *Terror of the Tiny Tads*

It is a big hotelephant, with windows shining bright; He's glad to have the Tiny Tads come in to pass the night.

Pauline Clarke

My Name Is...

My name is Sluggery-wuggery
My name is Worms-for-tea
My name is Swallow-the-table-leg
My name is Drink-the-Sea.

My name is I-eat-saucepans
My name is I-like-snails
My name is Grand-piano-George
My name is I-ride-whales.

My name is Jump-the-chimney
My name is Bite-my-knee
My name is Jiggery-pokery
And Riddle-me-ree, and ME.

In the space below, note one theme you'd like to pay attention to throughout the course, and one question you'd like to answer by the end.



Barkia Howlalousia

Manypeeplia Upsidownia

Monday, January 9th

* Edward Lear, "The Story of Four Little Children Who Went Round the World"

* Lewis Carroll, *Through the Looking Glass*, Chpts 1-5

Common sense vs. good sense vs. nonsense

What are the pleasures of reading nonsense? What do you get out of it? Why would other people do this?

Practice describing things closely.

What are the pleasures of writing nonsense?

What is it like reading Lewis Carroll in the scenes where things go off the rails?

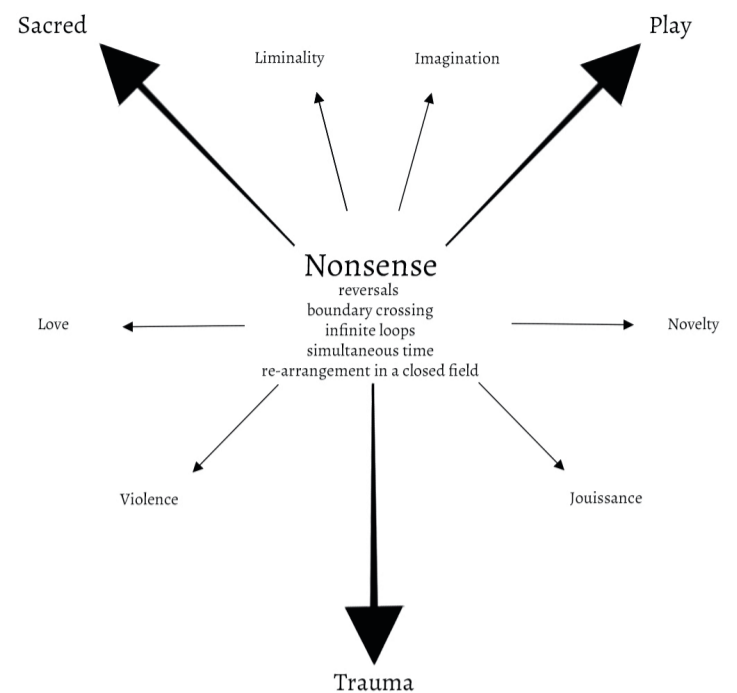
What happens to nonsense in different media? Why nonsense writing? What about drawings, films, music, games?

Our second form of nonsense: the non-sequitur, or brute narration.



Mireille Perron, *Ateliers in the Forrest*

Forms and Valences



Week 2: The Aesthetics of Nonsense

Gilles Deleuze, from *The Logic of Sense*

On Esoteric Words

1. Unpronounceable Monosyllables

"One type is formed by contracting the syllabic elements of one proposition, or of many propositions...For example, 'y'reince' takes the place of 'Your royal Highness'."

2. Circulating words

"[Circulating words] belong to a synthesis of coexistence intended to guarantee the conjunction of two series of heterogenous propositions....These two dimensions converge only in an esoteric word, in a non-identifiable aliquid. Take for example, the refrain of the Snark: "They sought it with thimbles, they sought it with care; / They pursued it with forks and hope" where the "thimble" and "fork" refer to designated instruments, but "hope" and "care" to considerations of sense and events...The strange word "Snark" is the frontier which is stretched as it is drawn by both series.

3. Portmanteau word

"The portmanteau word is grounded upon a strict disjunctive synthesis...Thus for "frumious" (fuming + furious): 'If your thoughts incline ever so little towards 'fuming,' you will say 'fuming-furious'; if they turn even by a hair's breadth towards 'furious,' you will say 'furious-fuming'; but if you have that rarest of gifts, a perfectly balanced mind, you will say 'frumious.'"

The Meaning of Liff

Douglas Adams

ABILENE(adj.)

Descriptive of the pleasing coolness on the reverse side of the pillow.

AFFPUDDLE (n.)

A puddle which is hidden under a pivoted paving stone. You only know it's there when you step on the paving stone and the puddle shoots up your leg.

BLEAN

Scientific measure of luminosity : 1 glimmer = 100,000 bleans. Usherettes' torches are designed to produce between 2.5 and 4 bleans, enabling them to assist you in falling downstairs, treading on people or putting your hand into a Neapolitan tub when reaching for change.

BOSCASTLE

A huge pyramid of tin cans placed just inside the entrance to a supermarket.

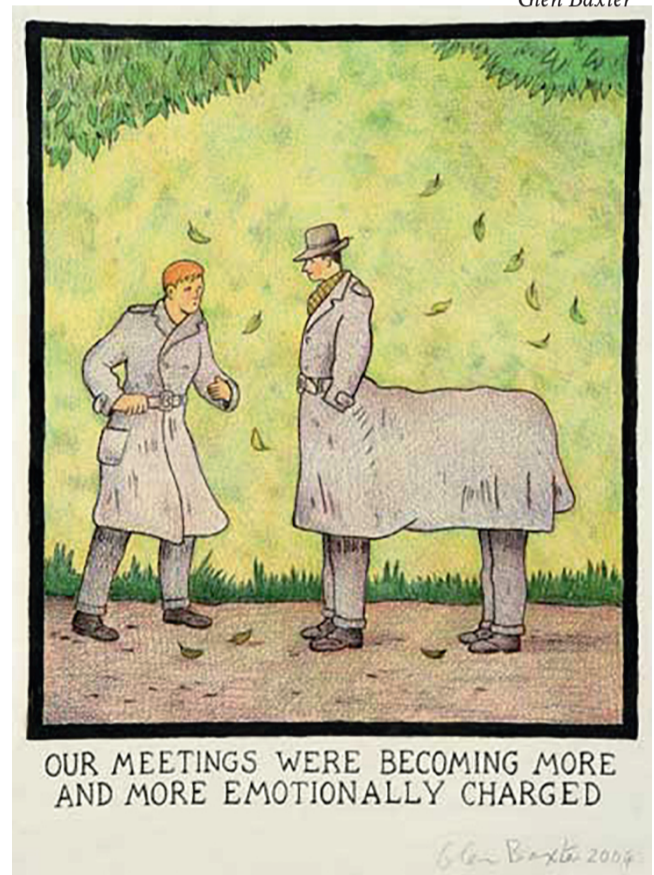
DES MOINES (pl.n.)

The two little lines which come down from your nose.

FROLESWORTH (n.)

Measure. The minimum time it is necessary to spend frowning in deep concentration at each picture in an art gallery in order that everyone else doesn't think you've a complete moron.

Glen Baxter



Wednesday, January 11th

* Lewis Carroll, Chpts 6-12

* Susan Stewart, "Making Nonsense"

Is nonsense a form? How can this form be used? How can it be recognized?

What is the feel of nonsense? At what points does that feeling switch over into something else, and how?

What makes nonsense into a literary genre? How should we draw its boundaries? Is there a difference between philosophical and literary nonsense?

Prototypes: Lewis Carroll / Edward Lear, but what else?

Week 3: The Grammar of Nonsense

Wednesday, January 18th

* Gertrude Stein, "Objects" from *Tender Buttons*

* Gertrude Stein, "If I Told Him"

* Jean-Jacques Lecercle, "The Linguistics of Nonsense"

How does nonsense connect to its context? What does it do to that context? Make a list of some contexts that might become nonsensical. Compare them before and after the moment of nonsense.

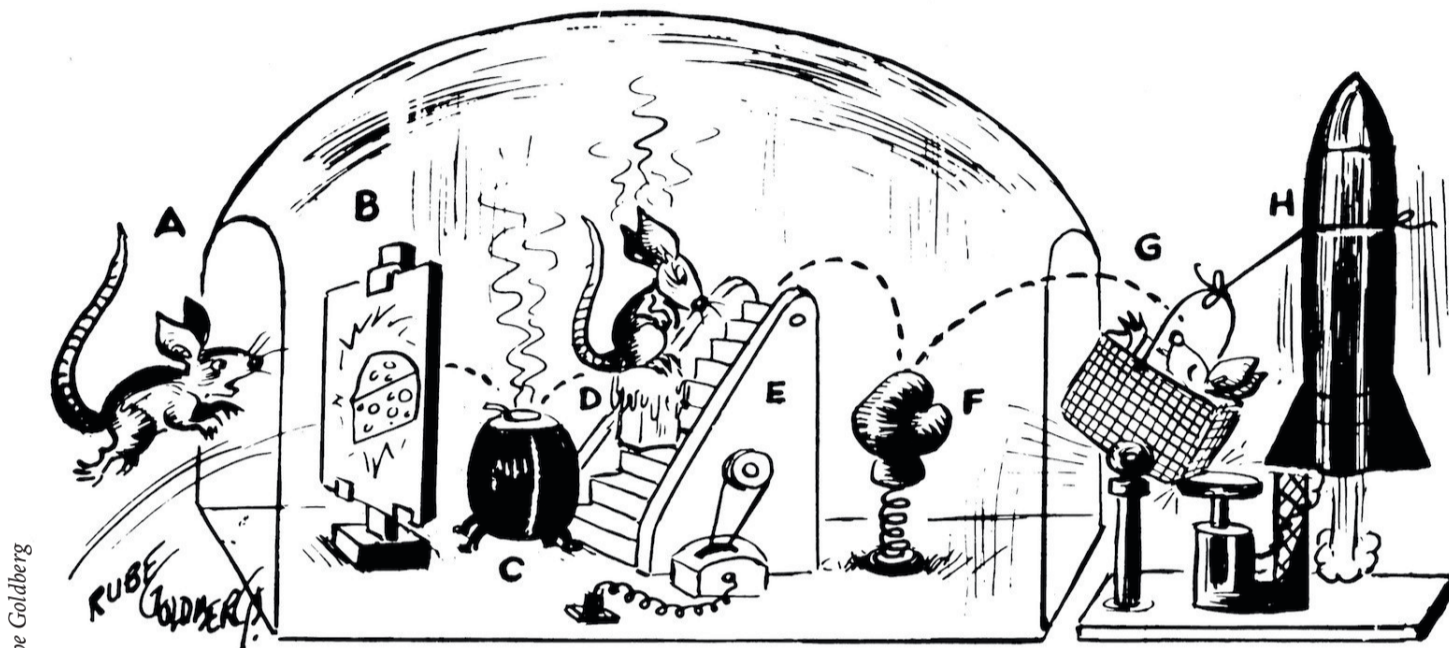
How is a word associated with an object? How is a sound associated with a thought?

Think of the last time when language broke down on you, when you said the wrong thing by accident, when you forgot a word, when the words were jumbled.

Is nonsense inherently violent?

Third form of nonsense: the bizarre system.

How to Get Rid of a Mouse



Rube Goldberg

The best mousetrap by Rube Goldberg: Mouse (A) dives for painting of cheese (B), goes through canvas and lands on hot stove (C). He jumps on cake of ice (D)

to cool off. Moving escalator (E) drops him on boxing glove (F) which knocks him into basket (G) setting off miniature rocket (H) which takes him to the moon.

Types of Nonsense

- [1] Syntagmatic Nonsense
- [2] Paradigmatic Nonsense
 - [a] Unpronounceable
 - Monosyllable
 - [b] Circulating word
 - [c] Portmanteau
- [3] Formal contradiction
- [4] Material countersense
- [5] Schematic countersense

Invent your own nonsense typology to categorize nonsense, describe the types below:

Nonsense or Countersense

The combination 'a round square' really yields a unified meaning, having its mode of 'existence' or being in the realm of ideal meanings, but it is apodictically evident that no existent object can correspond to such an existent meaning. But if we say 'a round or', 'a man and is' etc., there exist no meanings which correspond to such verbal combinations as their expressed sense. The coordinated words give us the indirect idea of some unitary meaning they express, but it is apodictically clear that no such meaning can exist, that significant parts of these sorts, thus combined, cannot consist with each other in a unified meaning.

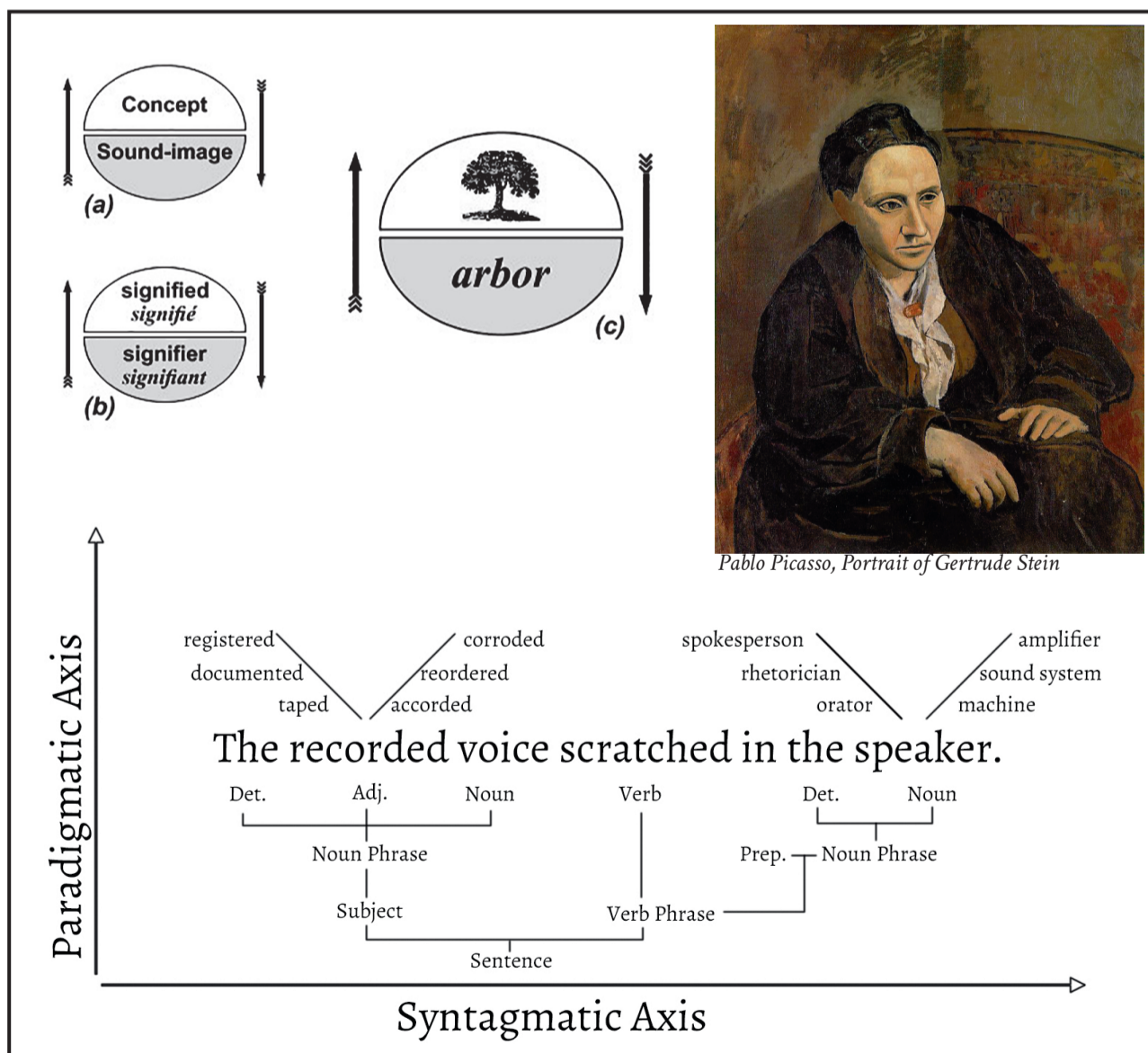
~Edmund Husserl, *Logical Investigations*

1. Colorless green ideas sleep furiously.
2. Furiously sleep ideas green colorless.

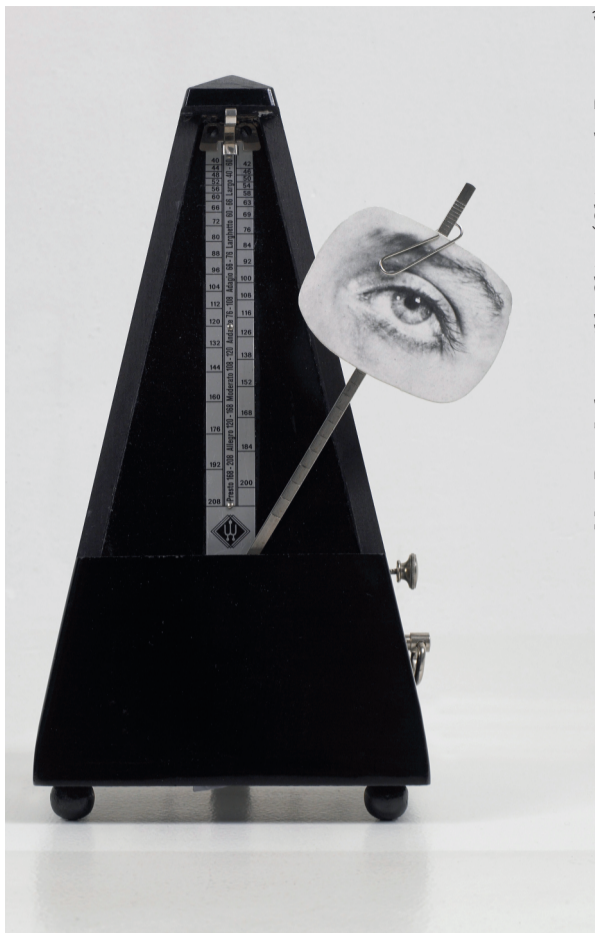
It is fair to assume that neither sentence (1) nor (2) (nor indeed any part of these sentences) has ever occurred in an English discourse. Hence, in any statistical model for grammaticalness, these sentences will be ruled out on identical grounds as equally "remote" from English. Yet (1), though nonsensical, is grammatical, while (2) is not grammatical.

~Noam Chomsky, *Syntactic Structures*

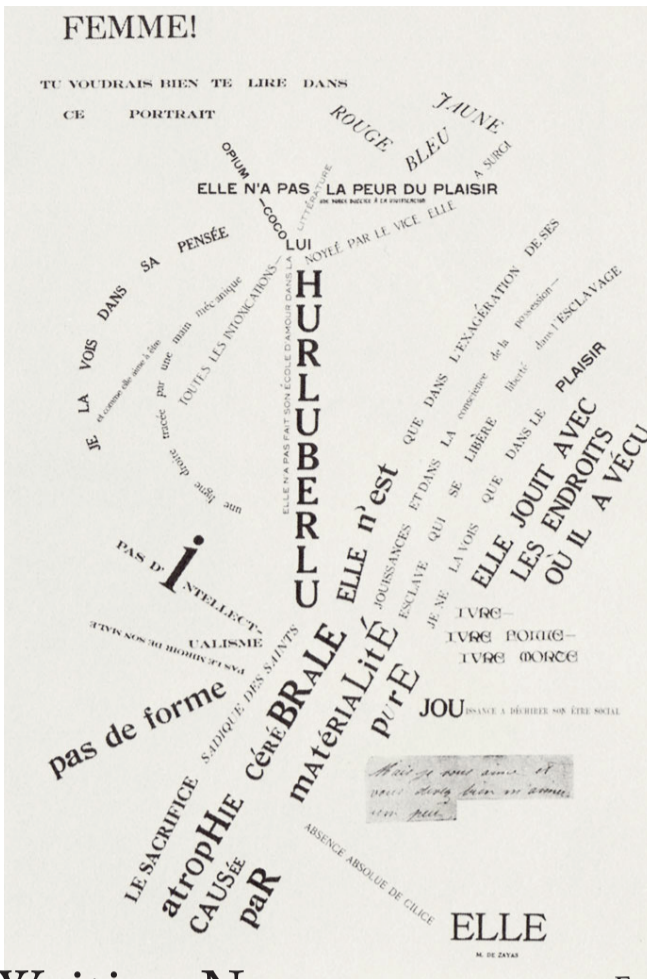
Semiotics



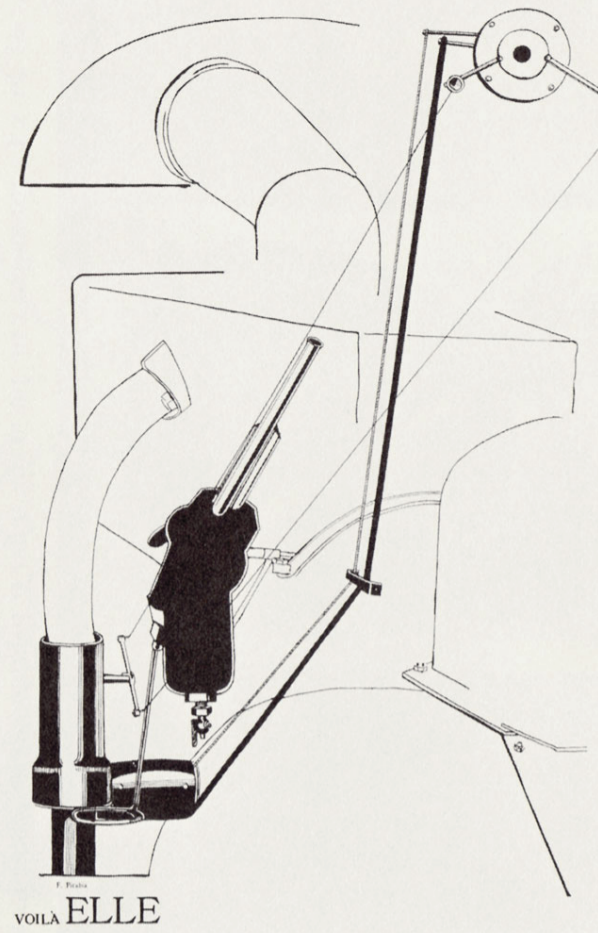
Pablo Picasso, *Portrait of Gertrude Stein*



Man Ray, *Indestructible Object (Object to be Destroyed)*



Marius de Zayas and Francis Picabia, *Femme (Elle) / Voilà Elle*



Week 4: The Motives for Writing Nonsense

Monday, January 23rd

* *Dadist Readings (Chalk)*

* *Dorothee Brill, "Irrationality and the War"*

Something new appears: what do you do? how do you know that it is new? What makes it so?

What is a war? How does war become total? Think about war in relation to normality-- does war have a normality? Think about war in relation to nonsense--does war have a sense?

Fighting nonsense with nonsense: repetition, shock, and trauma.

Wednesday, January 25th

* *Surrealist Readings (Chalk)*

* *Sigmund Freud, "The Unconscious"*

Senses of unconscious: nonconscious, subconscious, repressed, unrepresentable

Dreams as everyday nonsense, what to do with them?

Desire, repulsion, abjection, jouissance

The forms of nonsense as an alternative logic: bilogic and animality.

For me, the machine is above all an instrument that permits me to be poetic. If you respect the machine, if you enter into a game with the machine, then perhaps you can make a truly joyous machine—by joyous, I mean free. That's a marvelous thing, don't you think?

~Jean Tinguely

I am tempted to consider this procedure to be the exploitation of the fortuitous meeting of two distant realities on an inappropriate plane (this is said as a paraphrase and a generalization of Lautreamont's famous phrase: "As beautiful as the fortuitous meeting of a sewing machine and an umbrella on an operating table", or, to use a shorter term, the cultivation of the effects of a systematic bewildering ...

~Max Ernst



Max Ernst, *Une Semaine du Bontel*



Hans Bellmer, from *La Jeu de Poupeel*

Week 5: Inchoate, Inane, Immature Before Sense

Monday, January 30th

- * Norton Juster, *The Phantom Tollbooth*
- * Dr. Seuss, *On Beyond Zebra*

Five figures of nonsense: the poet, the madman, the child, the savage, and the seer.

Child: play, potential, unformed, testing, an object of fantasy and desire, national futurity.

The toy: the toy is a fragment of time torn lose from context. Has the character of "once, and no longer."

Playland: A thought experiment of play, a limit case of nonsense without a relation to sense.

Wednesday, February 1st

- * Juster, *Continued*
- * Michelle Abate "*Taking Silliness Seriously*"

Fourth form of nonsense: paradoxes; two kinds of paradox: surface and depth.

Paradoxes of the surface = language, the set of all sets, the barber who shaves himself, etc. 19th century nonsense as the prototype.

Paradoxes of depth = the breakdown of bodies, ship of theseus, Sorites paradox. 20th century nonsense as the prototype.

At the root of both? being and becoming: Parmenides paradox

I Cannot Give the Reasons Mervyn Peake

I cannot give the reasons,
I only sing the tunes:
the sadness of the seasons
the madness of the moons.

I cannot be didactic
or lucid, but I can
be quite obscure and practic-
ally marzipan

In gorgery and gushness
and all that's squishified.
My voice has all the lushness
of what I can't abide

And yet it has a beauty
most proud and terrible
denied to those whose duty
is to be cerebral.

Among the antlered mountains
I make my viscous way
and watch the sepia mountains
throw up their lime-green spray.



Bad Kid Jokes

Q: who is the old man that have six eyes?

A: it is you.

Q: what do you call it when two circles next to each other?

A: a butt.

Q: why do dogs hate cats?

A: because they both have 3 letters

Q: how does a poo get out of the toilet?

A: somehow

Q: why do fish have hands?

A: because they don't have hands

Q: what is the biggest thing than god?

A: two gods.

Q: when does 5 come before 9?

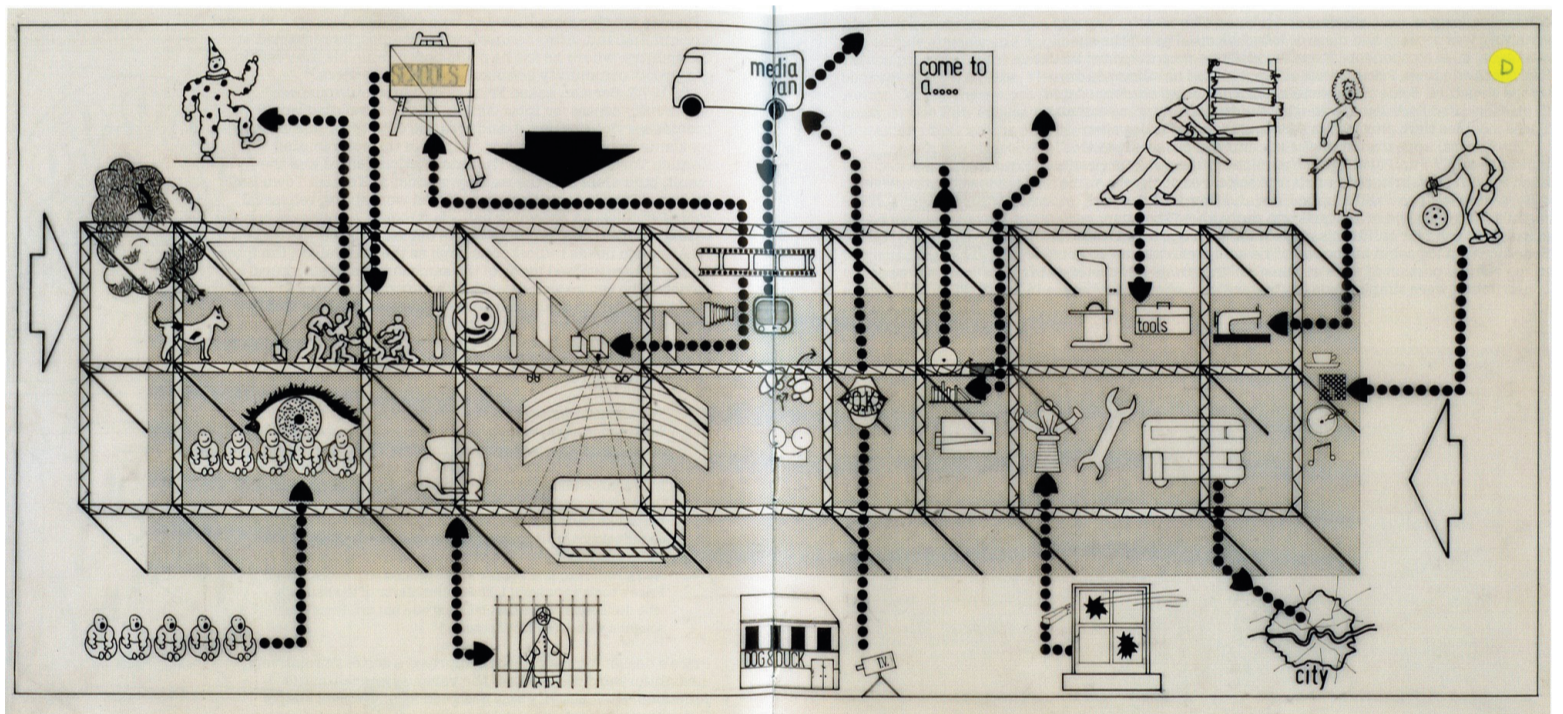
A: in the dictionary

Q: why did the chicken cross the road go back again?

A: because its bum fell off

Q: why didn't the skeleton go swimming?

A: because his eyeballs will be filled with water



Cedric Price, illustration of Fun Palace

Ship of Theseus Paradox

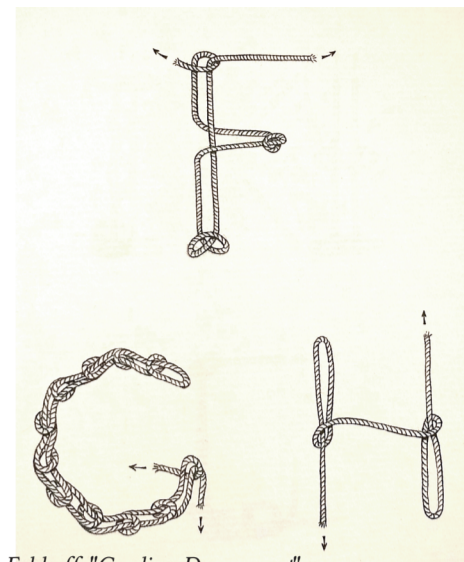
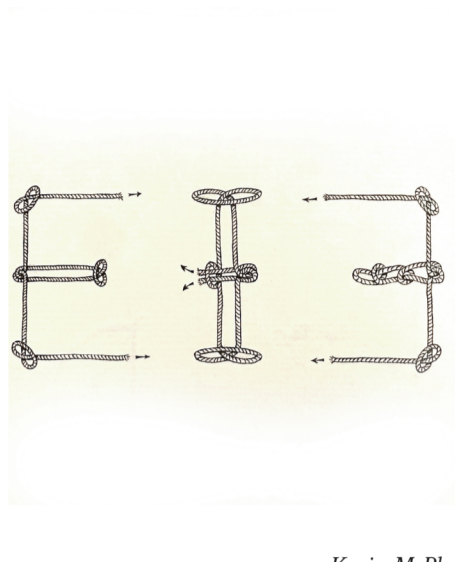
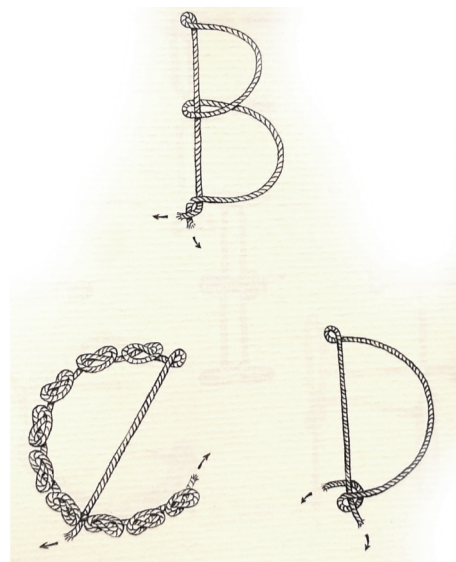
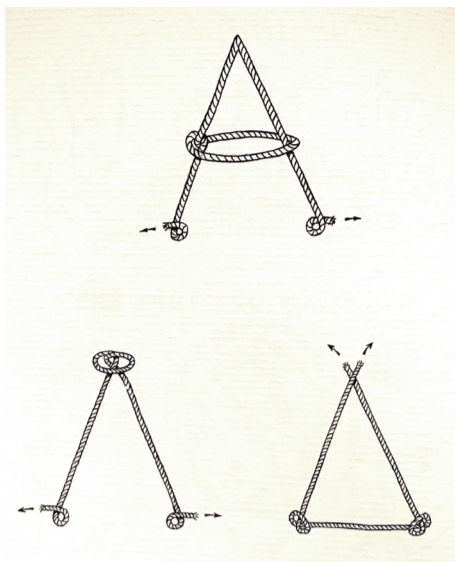
Plutarch, from *Theseus*

The ship wherein Theseus and the youth of Athens returned from Crete had thirty oars, and was preserved by the Athenians down even to the time of Demetrius Phalereus, for they took away the old planks as they decayed, putting in new and stronger timber in their places, in so much that this ship became a standing example among the philosophers, for the logical question of things that grow; one side holding that the ship remained the same, and the other contending that it was not the same.

from *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*

Sorites Paradox

The sorites paradox is the name given to a class of paradoxical arguments, also known as little-by-little arguments, which arise as a result of the indeterminacy surrounding limits of application of the predicates involved. For example, the concept of a heap appears to lack sharp boundaries and, as a consequence of the subsequent indeterminacy surrounding the extension of the predicate 'is a heap', no one grain of wheat can be identified as making the difference between being a heap and not being a heap. Given then that one grain of wheat does not make a heap, it would seem to follow that two do not, thus three do not, and so on. In the end it would appear that no amount of wheat can make a heap. We are faced with paradox since from apparently true premises by seemingly uncontroversial reasoning we arrive at an apparently false conclusion.



Kevin McPherson-Eckhoff, "Gordian Denoument"

Week 6: Impossible, Inexpressible, Unspeakable; Limits of Language

from *Rhapsodomancy*

Monday, February 6th

* Yoko Ono, *Grapefruit*

* Kristine Stiles, "Being Undyed" from *Yes, Yoko Ono*

Can we define nonsense by its outside? Contrasting our approaches: peculiar content / form and valence / grammatical disruption / paradoxes and limits.

The Poet: beauty, truth, and other inexpressible ideals; inspiration and genius, the edges of society, trauma and creation.

Wednesday, February 8th

* Yoko Ono, *continued*

* WJT Mitchell, "The Unspeakable and the Unimaginable"

The Seer: God, the future, and what shall not be spoken; punishment; two kinds of limit: ontic and deontic, or logical and ethical. Language and manipulation: the Sophistry as nonsense.

How to contrast limits: can we separate language, thought, and experience? Can something be representable in one but not the others? Can anything be outside all of them?

Pseudo-Dionysius

[God] is not soul or mind, nor does it possess imagination, conviction, speech, or understanding... It cannot be spoken of and it cannot be grasped by understanding. It is not number or order, greatness or smallness, quality or inequality, similarity or dissimilarity. It is not immoveable, moving or at rest. It does not live, nor is it life. It is not substance, nor is it eternity or time... there is no speaking of it, nor name nor knowledge of it. Darkness and light, error and truth – it is none of these. It is beyond assertion and denial.

Use this space to invent another figure for the limits of sense:

Ludwig Wittgenstein

Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus

My propositions are elucidatory in this way: he who understands me finally recognizes them as senseless, when he has climbed out through them, on them, over them. (He must so to speak throw away the ladder, after he has climbed up on it.) He must surmount these propositions; then he sees the world rightly.

Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent.

Soren Kierkegaard

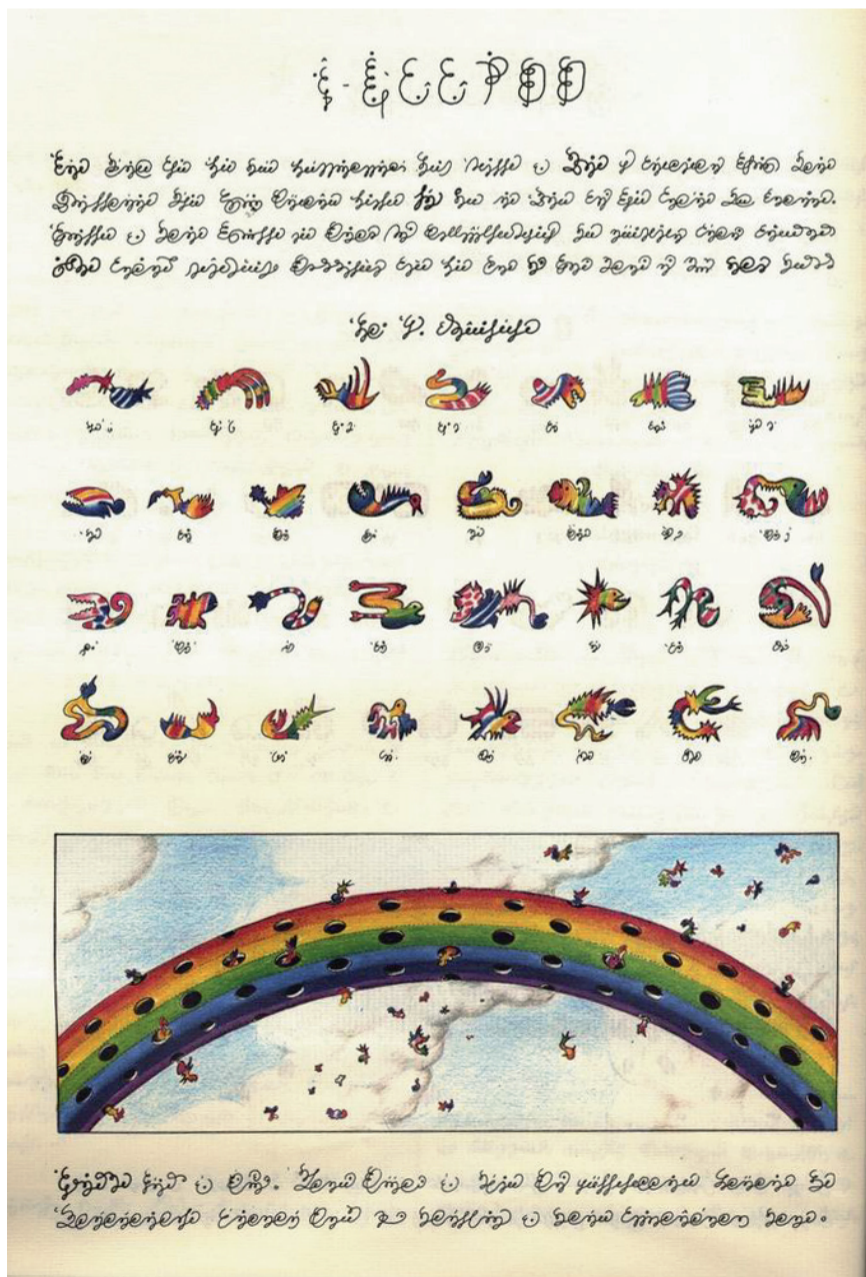
Fear and Trembling

[the knight of faith] infinitely renounces the love that is the content of his life and is reconciled in pain. But then the miracle occurs. He makes yet another movement more wonderful than anything, for he says: "I nevertheless believe I shall get her, namely by virtue of the absurd, by virtue of the fact that for God everything is possible." The absurd does not belong to the distinctions that lie within the proper compass of the understanding. It is not identical with the improbable, the unforeseen, the unexpected....the only thing that can save him is the absurd, and this he grasps by faith. So he recognizes the impossibility, and that very instant he believes the absurd; for, if without recognizing the impossibility with all the passion of his soul and with all his heart, he should wish to imagine that he has faith, he deceives himself

HP Lovecraft

The Call of Cthulhu

The Thing cannot be described—there is no language for such abysses of shrieking and immemorial lunacy, such eldritch contradictions of all matter, force, and cosmic order. A mountain walked or stumbled. God! What wonder that across the earth a great architect went mad, and poor Wilcox raved with fever in that telepathic instant? The Thing of the idols, the green, sticky spawn of the stars, had awaked to claim his own.



Week 7: Irrational, Unimaginable, Incredible; Limits of Thought

probable systems 8

bp nichol, from Zygol

On 'Pataphysics

Alfred Jarry, from *Life and Opinions of Doctor Faustroll*

[1] 'Pataphysics is the science of imaginary solutions, which symbolically attributes the properties of objects, described by their virtuality, to their lineaments....

[2] [it] is the science of that which is super induced upon metaphysics, whether within or beyond the latter's limitations, extending as far beyond metaphysics as the latter extends beyond physics...

[3] [it is the] science of accidents...[it] will examine the laws governing exceptions, and will explain the universe supplementary to this one.

Monday, February 13th

* Angela Carter, *Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman*, Chpt 1-2

* Gary Barwin, "Defrosting Disney"

Can we learn anything real from nonsense? Can there be a science of the imagination? What would it teach us? What would it do to us to become such scientists?

Fifth form of nonsense: the impossible conclusion.

The imagination vs. the unconscious as a source of material: nonsense stylistics.

A theory of worlds: games, artworks, stories, theatre, science, capitalism. Dueling rationalities.

Editing Poems

Sharon Harris, from *Fun with Pataphysics*

Fill a tall jar with water and place your latest poem in it. Try to drop words into the text. It is very surprising that however carefully you aim, the words nearly always slip to the side.

It is seldom possible to get a word to fall straight. The very slightest nuance with even the smallest tilt is enough to cause a greater resistance of the water on the slanting underside of the word. Because words are full of holes, they turn easily and drift out of context.

given
~~prose~~ $\times 3 = H$
~~poetry~~ $\div 3 = I$

&

then
 prose = $\frac{1}{3} H$ & poetry = $3I$

since $H=8$ & $I=9$
 then
 prose = $2\frac{2}{3}$ & poetry = 27

BUT
 since poetry - (oetry) + (rose) = prose
 & since $o=15$ $e=5$ $t=20$ $r=18$ $y=25$ & $s=19$
 then $27 - 83 + 57 = 2\frac{2}{3}$
 & $1 = 2\frac{2}{3}$

similarly: prose - rose + oetry = 27
 yielding $2\frac{2}{3} - 57 + 83 = 27$
 or $28\frac{2}{3} = 27$

subtracting the smaller # from the larger # in both of the above cases we arrive at a value of $1\frac{2}{3}$ the measured difference between prose & poetry

Methods of Oulipo

Antynomic Translation: A process of textual production that involves the transformation of an utterance into its contrary along a given axis of symmetry. The latter may be situated at any level: that of the individual word, of grammatical characteristics, or of the general signification of an utterance.

Heterogram: A text in which no letter is repeated. A "perfect" heterogram is also a "perfect" pangram: a text of 26 letters using all the letters of the alphabet.

Lipogram: A text in which a given letter (or letters) of the alphabet does not appear.

S+7 method: Replace every noun in a text with the noun seven entries after it in a dictionary. For example, "Call me Ishmael. Some years ago..." (from Moby Dick) becomes "Call me islander. Some yeggs ago...". Results will vary depending upon the dictionary used. This technique can also be performed on other lexical classes, such as verbs.

Snowball: A form in which each segment of a text is one letter longer than the segment preceding it. A number of variations are conceivable, such as the "melting snowball," in which, after its expansion, the poem contracts.

Wednesday, February 18th

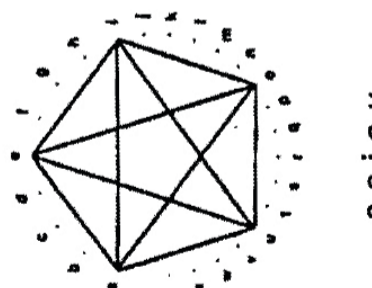
* Angela Carter, continued, Chpt 3-4

* Michel-Rolph Trouillot, "An Unthinkable History: The Haitian Revolution as a Non-Event"

The Savage: projection, fantasy, the past and future as opening difference; continuities and breaks in kinds of thought. Pitfalls of sameness and alterity.

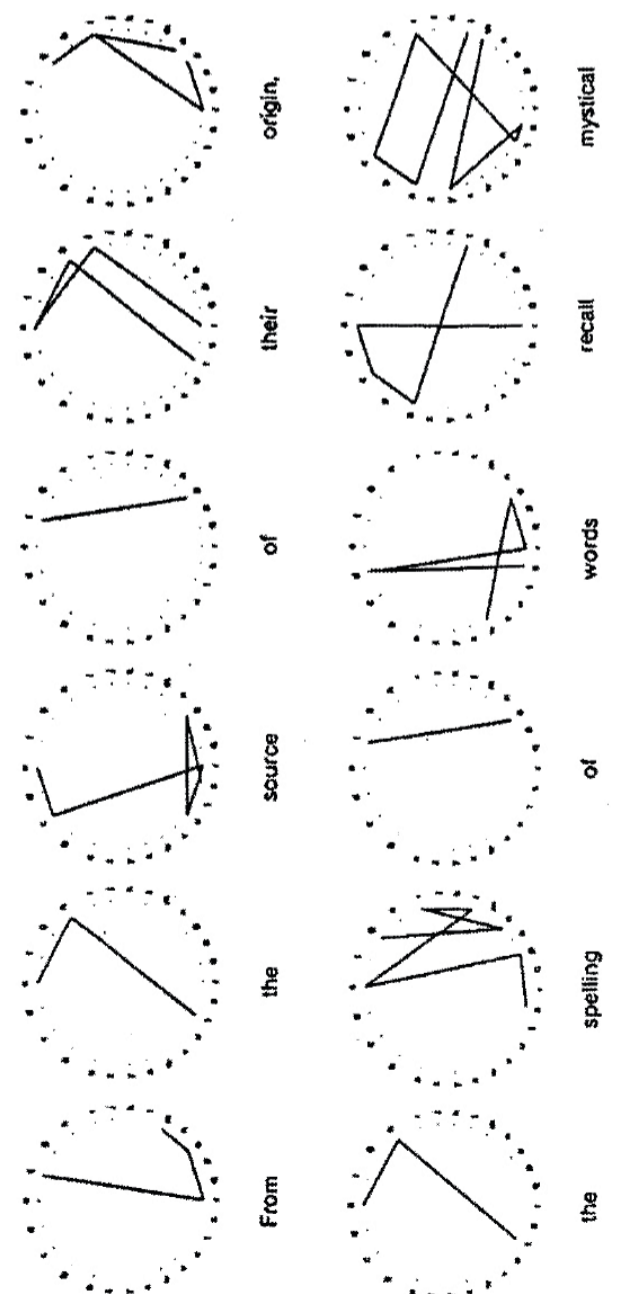
Historicizing nonsense, politicizing nonsense: the difficulty of locating nonsense and the obviousness of it. Race and nonsense. Thinking a corresponding world.

From a history of nonsense to nonsense in history.



Reflect for a moment on an experience where you couldn't think clearly for one reason or another; how do you understand it now?

Michael Winkler, *Where Signs Resemble Thoughts*



Monday, February 20th

* Angela Carter, continued, Chpt 5-6

* Nadia Seremetakis, "Marks of the Transitory"

Other histories: desire, sexuality, queerness and nonsense; what does writing nonsense do to desire?

Different difficulties for different folks; double jeopardy, being on the margins and writing at the margins; paths into nonsense and out again; threats and pleasures at the limits of sense.

Sensation and sense, the body as receptive.

Drugs, cyborgs, and the limits of the human body.

Sixth form of nonsense: the optical illusion.

**THE BLACK AUTOMATON IN DE DESPAIR UB EXISTENCE #3:
HOW CAN I BE DOWN?**

IT won't just look away, look away.

another place./ ... another land.

IT beezee W. E. B. dubious:
e.g. can't get groan sans busted cherry.

keeping one eye open
just clocking { to look away, look away is to be
a 'ninny. to look, to look is to be
a massachist.

{ *the simple back and forth,*
the same/old...

or ^{not} _{knot} Toby

IT knows the world
is round whether it likes IT or not.
IT axes the first question:

(and then all the crows, circling.)

{ *all that*
hurts [IT]./let [IT] understand...

~~you watch it~~
~~you won't~~
you.

Douglas Kearney, from *The Black Automaton*

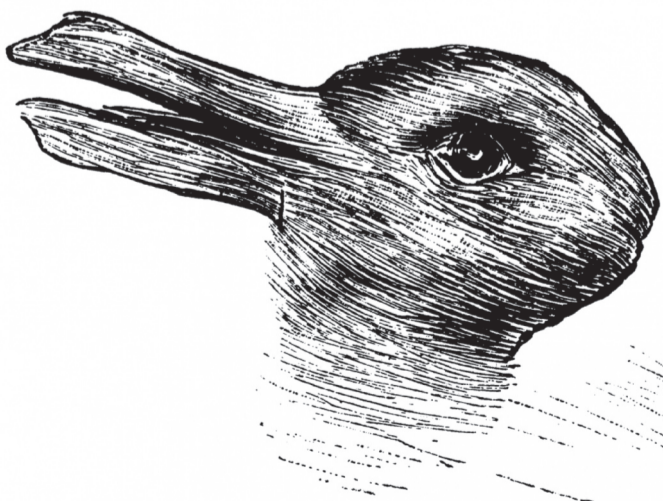
Week 8: Ineffable, Imperceptible, Incorporeal; Limits of Experience

Schizophrenic Words

Gilles Deleuze, from *The Logic of Sense*

In this collapse of surface, the entire world loses its meaning...the word loses its sense, that is, its power to draw together or to express an incorporeal effect distinct from the actions and passions of the body...Every event is realized, be it in a hallucinatory form. Every word is physical, and immediately affects the body....The moment that the pinned-down word loses its sense, it bursts into pieces; it is decomposed into syllables, letters, and above all into consonants which act directly on the body, penetrating and bruising it.

.....
The duality of the schizophrenic word has not been adequately noted: it comprises the passion-word, which explodes into wounding phonetic values, and the action word, which welds inarticulate tonic values. These two words are developed in relation to the duality of the body, fragmented body and body without organs. They refer to two theaters, the theater of terror or passion and the theater of cruelty, which is by its essence active. They refer to two types of nonsense, passive and active: the nonsense of the word devoid of sense, which is decomposed into phonetic elements; and the nonsense of tonic elements, which form a word incapable of being decomposed and no less devoid of sense.



Tom Wolfe
from, *The Electric Koolaid Acid Test*

The inevitable confusion of the unattuned--like most of the Pranksters' unique practices, derived from the LSD experience and was incomprehensible without it. Under LSD, if it really went right, Ego and Non-Ego started to merge. Countless things that seemed separate started to merge, too: a sound became...a color! blue...colors become smells, walls began to breathe like the underside of a leaf, with one's own breath. A curtain became a column of concrete and yet it began rippling, this incredible concrete mass rippling in harmonic waves like the Puget Sound bridge before the crash and you feel it, the entire harmonics of the universe from the most massive to the smallest and most personal--presque vu!--all flowing together in this very moment.

from, *The Policeman's Beard is Half Constructed*

Racter

A nasty dull rumrunning pig

Had fingernails which could not iiq

^ ey t f sha yed and shouted " 9
But still quickly pouted

And sometimes resembled

pn'g.

. QU1 , rhi |i e d foul-smelling fag
ros S-ofleeJy would nag

They excreted and hunted
And never quite grunted
So now cutely call them a stag.

Wednesday, February 22nd

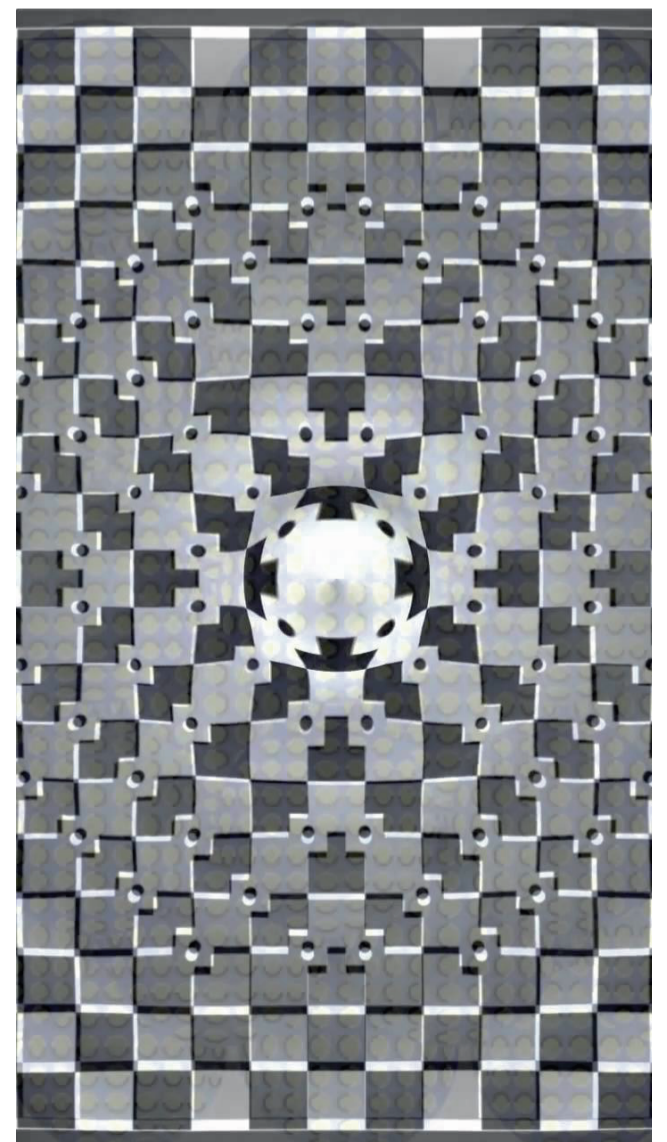
* Angela Carter, continued Chpt 7-8

* Mark Turner "Poetry: Metaphor and the Conceptual Context of Invention"

Understanding and sense, the body as active and shaping. Nonsense figures, return to the two paradoxes of depth as part of our own body.

The madman: lines of flight; the passage through sense, and the idea of a catch; mad pride or diagnosis; where to situate madness in relation to the limits of thought, language, and experience.

Body without organs, other regimes of sense.



Part 3: Nonsense Worlds

Week 9: Encountering Nonsense

Ben Marcus

from, *The Age of Wire and String*

LEG INITIATIONS Act or technique of preparing the legs for sleep. They may be rubbed, shaved, or dressed in pooter.

ALBERT Nightly killer of light, applied to systems or bodies which alter postures under various stages of darkness. Flattened versions exist only in the water or grass. They may not rise until light is poured upon them.

PROFESSIONAL SLEEPERS Members whose sleep acts perform specific, useful functions in a society. Clustered sleepers ward off birds; single, submerged sleepers seal culprits in houses; dozens heaped in cloth enhance the grasses of a given area, restore belief in houses.

SADNESS The first powder to be abided upon waking. It may reside in tools or garments and can be eradicated with more of itself, in which case the face results as a placid system coursing with water, heaving.

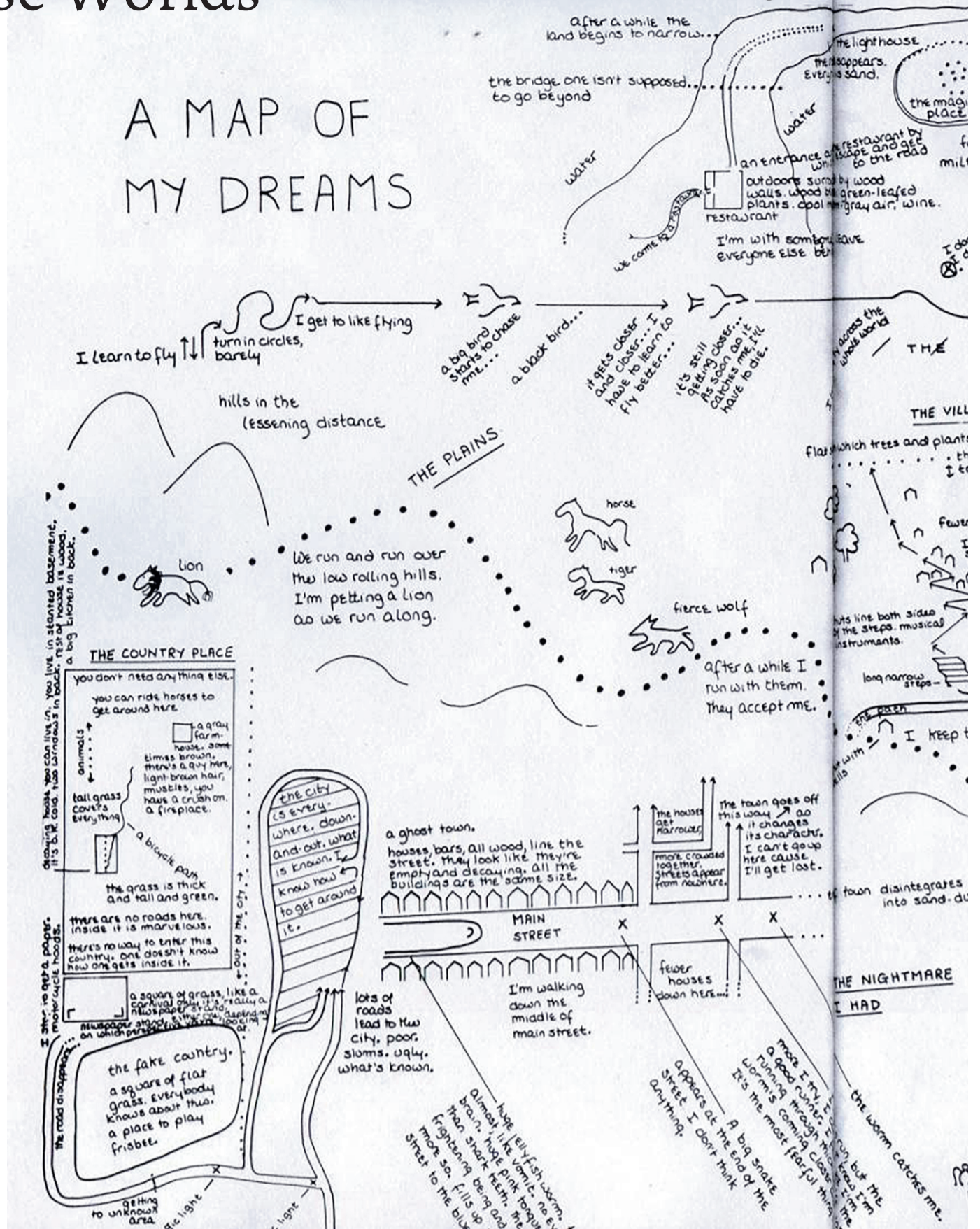
SLEEP HOLES Areas or predesigned localities in which dormant figures and members conduct elaborate sleep performances. Points are scored for swimming, riding, and killing. Some members utilize these sites to perfect their sleep speech, in order to profess the dozer's knowledge. Others exercise or copulate or rapidly eat cloth and grain. The father slept in one for four hours while smashing his own house, which contained its own sleepers, who performed nothing.

BIRD SEVEN 1. Period in which members Linda through early Rachel engaged in storm pantomimes. 2. Year of the body. 3. Last moment in which the skin of a member gains oracular capacity of wind trapping. 4. The first day of life. 5. The end times.

SHIRT OF NOISE Garment, fabric, or residue that absorbs and holds sound, storing messages for journeys. Its loudness cannot be soothed. It can destroy the member which inhabits it.

NITZEL'S GAMBLE The act or technique of filling the lungs with water. The chance was first taken by the Nitzel in Green River.

SUN STICK Item of the body which first turns toward sun when a member dies, sleeps, collapses. It is the pure compass towards tracts that are heated and safe, also called true places.



Kathy Acker, from *Blood and Guts in Highschool*

Monday, February 27th

- * Renee Gladman, *The Event Factory*
- * Marnie Parsons, "There Was an Old Man with a Nose"

The epistemological problem: how do we know something is really nonsensical, or whether we just do not grasp it? Is there nonsense in the world? The consequences of nonsense as unintended.

The problem of translation; nonsense and common sense revisited: does the recognition of a nonsense unit or of a nonsense system require that its opposite to make sense?

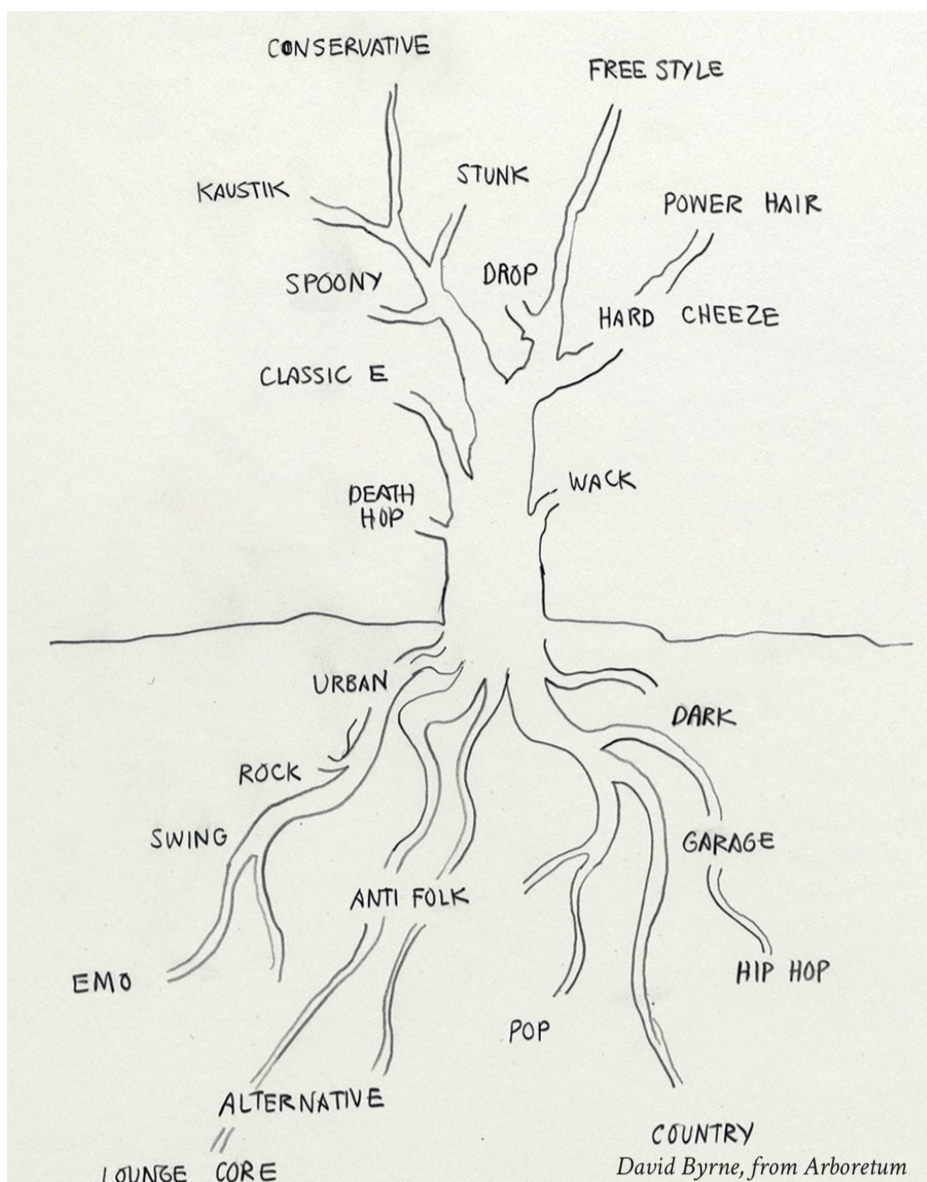
Take a moment to reflect on the question you wrote down during week 1, does it have an answer?

Wednesday, March 1st

- * Gladman, continued
- * Renee Gladman, "The Emergence of a Fiction"
- * Shelley Jackson, "Cancer"

Echoes of the absurd: does life have a sense? Does it have a nonsense? How can we treat this topic while avoiding the polarity of despair and heroism?

Intersubjective nonsense: is communication possible?



Holy Anything

Elisabeth Workman, from *Ultramegaprairie*

Oh where did I say America in her peculiar "helium voice was calling for the release of peripatetic anything at dawn?

I meant you can't fill Vladimir Putin with edible tongue-numbing lingerie cos he's been deforested by hedge funds.

I have bubbles on my hand as evidence, black helicopters and vacancies for Remington Steele, sky lust, anything with spelling and punctuation.

Also, I have bubble levels on my long-range rifles, and they work with anything Dallas, with anything fleeing or swelling, missile-ing anything after menopause, magical laser beam cannon stiff blasting mode with a shadowy intro by an experienced Magical Girl whose monsters of the week are anything not diaphonous.

Holy anything. Literal boom. Oh Galilean rash as an open letter launched sparkling spaceward, champagne on the way to the Baggage Reclaim Party, sometimes I miss being twenty-two and wooed by unfortunate gym clothes, a bottle rocket--pull the top off and it flooshes and sparkles--and the people welcomed by sultans and Icarus and Rosemary Clooney plan open societies.

Now I lost count and forgot to measure thickness, sorry. Call it the dead center of the garden, the institute of a mouth, red awnings totally read wrong, the ghosts inside living like light in love with absolutely anything.

Week 10: Becoming Nonsensical

Thomas Nagel

from, *What is it Like to Be a Bat?*

[T]he essence of the belief that bats have experience is that there is something that it is like to be a bat. Now we know that most bats (the microchiroptera, to be precise) perceive the external world primarily by sonar, or echolocation, detecting the reflections, from objects within range, of their own rapid, subtly modulated, high-frequency shrieks. Their brains are designed to correlate the outgoing impulses with the subsequent echoes, and the information thus acquired enables bats to make precise discriminations of distance, size, shape, motion, and texture comparable to those we make by vision. But bat sonar, though clearly a form of perception, is not similar in its operation to any sense that we possess, and there is no reason to suppose that it is subjectively like anything we can experience or imagine. This appears to create difficulties for the notion of what it is like to be a bat

It will not help to try to imagine that one has webbing on one's arms, which enables one to fly around at dusk and dawn catching insects in one's mouth; that one has very poor vision, and perceives the surrounding world by a system of reflected high-frequency sound signals; and that one spends the day hanging upside down by one's feet in an attic. In so far as I can imagine this (which is not very far), it tells me only what it would be like for me to behave as a bat behaves. But that is not the question. I want to know what it is like for a bat to be a bat.

Monday, March 6th

* *Talking Heads, Stop Making Sense*

Returning to our opening questions: why write nonsense? Why read nonsense? How should we study nonsense?

Nonsense as method: ethics, politics, possibilities.

What is left to do in nonsense: brainstorming session about unexplored avenues.

New media as extending, exacerbating, heightening nonsense. Why? How? For who?

Memes, flarf, computer poetry, and trolls.

Nonsense and its competitors: spectacle, consumption, boredom.



Wednesday, March 8th

* *Tom Swifty, "A World of Nonsense"*

Where to go from here?

Nonsense in the classroom and out. How to connect this experience to your other classes, to your life, to your world?

Re-imagining Nonsense Literature, the course, in other ways.





*Each night Father fills me with dread
When he sits on the foot of my bed;
I'd not mind that he speaks
In gibbers and squeaks,
But for seventeen years he's been dead.*

Edward Gorey, from *Amphigorey*

Laura Richards
Elelephony

Once there was an elephant,
Who tried to use the telephant—
No! no! I mean an elephone
Who tried to use the telephone—
(Dear me! I am not certain quite
That even now I've got it right.)
Howe'er it was, he got his trunk
Entangled in the telephunk;
The more he tried to get it free,
The louder buzzed the telephee—
(I fear I'd better drop the song
Of elephop and telephong!)

Formatting your Papers

- All writing should be typed in 12-point font, double-spaced, and include page numbers.
- For all writing, include a heading on the first page with your name, course title, and due date.
- All writing should have an original title that entices the reader.
- All assignments that you expect me to read should be edited and proofread for spelling and sentence-level errors. Start your writing process early enough to allow revision.
- Sources should be cited using a consistent citation method. Look online for basic guidelines for accepted formats (MLA, Chicago, etc.). You can also turn to the University of Chicago library citation guide or citation managers such as WorldCat.
- All papers that cite articles, books, or other texts (even if they are covered in class) should include a Works Cited or Bibliography page (that does not count toward the page total).

Classroom Policies

Office hours: I am available via email and office hours throughout the quarter to help address any questions that may arise. Please come see me sooner rather than later if you are having any concerns over the course. I will try to respond promptly, but I will also be away from email during evenings and weekends.

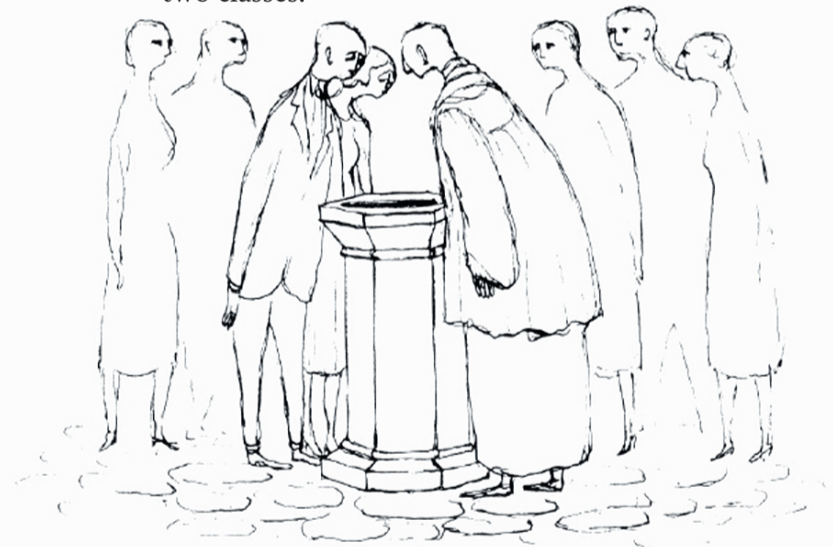
Accomodations: I am committed to meeting the needs of all students. If you need any class-related accommodations, please feel free to talk with me and visit: <http://disabilities.uchicago.edu/contacts/index.shtml>

Laptops in class: My view on laptops is that they can be distractions, even when we mean to use them to take notes. I am certainly guilty of this. While this is not a hard and fast rule, I'd like to try and reduce the use of laptops in class, especially while we are having discussions.

Late papers: Papers count as late if they are not received via email by the deadline for the final paper, or at the time of the extension deadline. You should also upload your papers to chalk, to confirm that they have been received. Late papers will be penalized one third of a letter grade per day, and will not be accepted after 7 days if other arrangements haven't been made.

Extensions: If you request an extension on a paper two or more days in advance, I'm usually happy to grant one. Please talk to me though so that we can work out the terms. I will do the best I can to accomodate your request.

Attendance: Our classtime during the quarter is short, and much of the learning will take place in discussion. Your participation mark will be affected if you miss more than two classes.



*The babe, with a cry brief and dismal,
Fell into the water baptismal;
Ere they'd gathered its plight,
It had sunk out of sight,
For the depth of the font was abysmal.*

Etiam in tortor

et enim pellentesque tincidunt a ac ante. Suspendisse in nunc euismod, aliquet metus sit amet, vehicula orci. Fusce tincidunt, risus non porttitor rutrum, erat urna elementum nisi, ac ultrices sapien ex sed nunc. Etiam massa sem, venenatis in mollis nec,

Tincidunt ut diam

Duis sodales sem et mauris volutpat, ac viverra enim lobortis. Cras auctor ex et magna pretium, nec dapibus erat volutpat. Quisque pulvinar purus neque, eu mattis est finibus in. Phasellus interdum erat ac ex bibendum condimentum. Vivamus vulputate pharetra ante, eu suscipit nulla vestibulum vitae. Nam vitae viverra diam.

Duis sodales

sem et mauris volutpat, ac viverra enim lobortis. Cras auctor ex et magna pretium, nec dapibus erat volutpat. Quisque pulvinar purus neque, eu mattis est finibus in. Phasellus interdum erat ac ex bibendum condimentum. Vivamus vulputate pharetra ante, eu suscipit nulla vestibulum vitae. Nam vitae viverra diam.

In interdum

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Lorem ipsum dolor sit amet

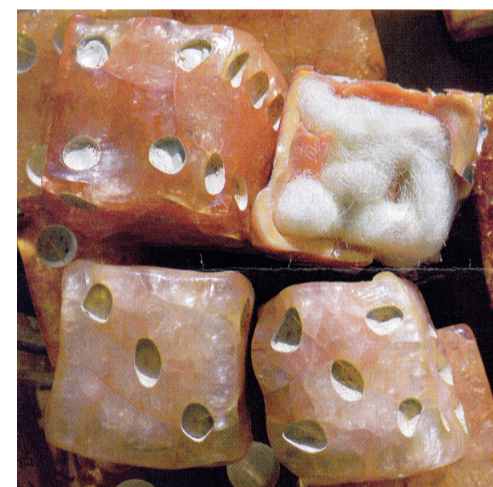
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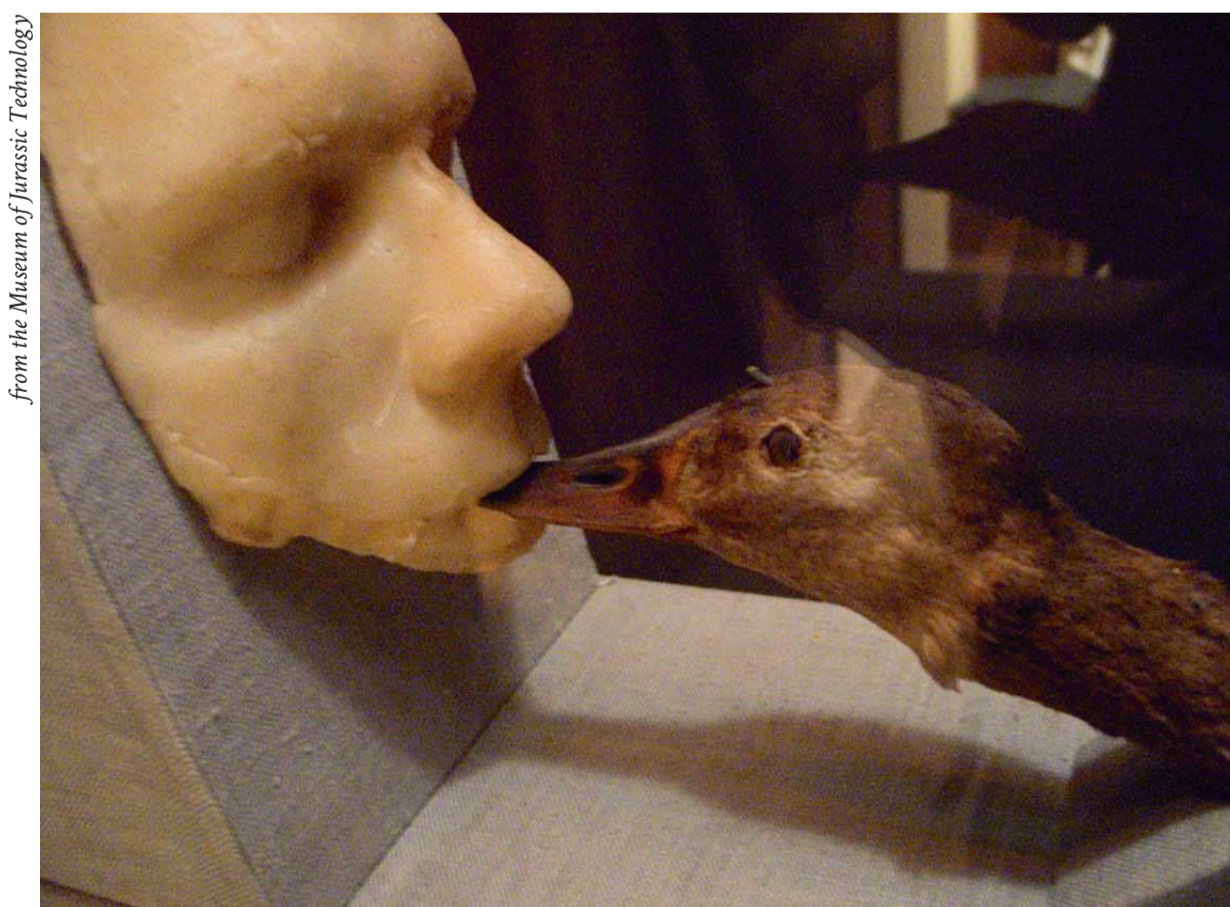
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Rotten Luck

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from the Museum of Jurassic Technology

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