

Advanced English: The Avant-Garde Podcast

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This course is meant for students of the advanced C1 and C2 levels. Theme-based language classes aim at developing written and oral skills through the study of a specific topic.

Course Objectives

The main objectives of this course are:

- Introducing students to the landscape of experimental audio art
- Exploring the connections between avant-garde podcasting and art history
- Refining the ability to listen attentively, with a focus on both content and style
- Developing the ability to articulate aesthetic and critical analyses of artworks.

Background

The word “podcast” was coined exactly twenty years ago. Since then, podcasting has exploded into a global industry encompassing a myriad of formats across all categories, from news, global affairs, and business, to comedy, culture and crime.

But hidden among this vast catalog of mainstream shows are a handful of podcasts that are strikingly creative, deeply compelling, and refreshingly subversive. Could such podcasts be considered works of art? Who are the individuals making these podcasts, and why have they opted for this medium? And how do their choices of subject and style reflect contemporary issues?

The resonances between today’s boundary-pushing audio art and the 20th-century avant-garde are notable, both in terms of content — chiefly the critique of social norms — and in form, with their disruption of traditional storytelling, the exploration of sound and silence as material, and the emphasis on an intensely immersive experience.

Course Description

The course is organized around a selection of avant-garde podcasts, and students are required to spend time preparing for classes by listening to the assigned extracts.

Each class focuses on the close analysis and discussion of an episode, guided by a thematic prism. Through the podcasts, we gain insight into the lives of historically-marginalized individuals, such as vagabonds (*Home*

of the Brave), lesbian separatists (*The Heart*), intersex persons (*Heavyweight*), transgressive artists (*Love + Radio*) and incarcerated individuals (*Ear Hustle*). Attention is also paid to the range of styles and forms the podcasts take, ranging from a year-long project of daily micro-episodes (*365 Stories I Want To Tell You Before We Both Die*), to a long-form podcast narrated entirely in spoken-word poetry (*Have you Heard George's Podcast?*).

Reading excerpts from critical texts allows us to situate each podcast in the broader context of avant-garde art, and we examine points of connection with various artists and movements in the history of experimental literature and performance art. Writing essays about the podcasts further deepens these analyses, enabling students to refine their skills in writing about art and its relation to social and political issues.

Organization

Activities will cover the four language skills:

- Listening: at the heart of the course - students listen to podcasts in and out of class
- Speaking: group discussion (interpretation, debate) and one presentation per term
- Reading: extracts from critical texts on the avant-garde and journalistic reviews
- Writing: three essays written in class, with a choice of questions.