

CULTURE COURSE: PARIS IN LITERATURE AND ART (HUMANITIES EMPHASIS)

Professor Claire de Obaldia

Tu/Th 2 pm – 4 pm (unless otherwise noted)

COURSE DESCRIPTION: This course offers an introduction -- through literature, art, and the human sciences -- to some of the main 20th-century movements which, from Paris, have shaped contemporary French culture. We will start after the First World War with Surrealist texts, and look at a corresponding selection of paintings at the Musée National d'Art Moderne (Centre Pompidou), the largest museum of modern art in Europe. The Surrealist ambition of mobilizing the unconscious to express the full range of human experience will also give us the opportunity to explore the central role of Freudian (and later Lacanian) psychoanalysis in the contemporary French cultural landscape, and in particular the importance of language.

We will then move on to the most influential movement in the decade after the Second World War, Existentialism, and (excerpts from) the novels and philosophical essays by its main exponent, Jean-Paul Sartre, will also provide an ideal context within which to examine the role and figure of the intellectual in French culture. The most important successor to Existentialism among intellectuals is then Structuralism, which dominates French thought until the mid-1970s. With Roland Barthes and Alain Robbe-Grillet we will familiarize ourselves with Saussurean linguistics and semiotics which, combined with Freudian psychoanalysis, will become the main interpretive tools in literary and cultural studies. With the extraordinary success and then discredit of Structuralist and then Post-Structuralist thought both in France and in the English-speaking academic world (so-called "French Theory") into the 1990s, the ongoing debate about the figure of the French intellectual will then extend to Feminist forms of philosophical, critical, and literary writing via the "*Écriture féminine*" of Hélène Cixous. And finally, other forms of linguistic diversity and writings from the periphery, namely that of 2nd - and 3rd - generation immigrants, will provide food for thought on whether the ideal of a "pure" and highly standardized French language, which has been one of the main forces shaping the sense of French nationhood, can continue to be imposed on France's linguistically diverse and multicultural 21st-century society (for this we will also visit one of the typically multicultural "quartiers" in Paris and discuss the 2005 award-winning film *L'Esquive*, by Abdellatif Kechiche, set in the Parisian suburbs).

PRIMARY TEXTS STUDIED (Course Reader)

SELECTIONS FROM THE FOLLOWING:

André Breton, *Surrealist Manifesto*

Louis Aragon, "Passage of the Opera" and *Preface to a Modern Mythology* in: *Paris Peasant*

Jean-Paul Sartre, excerpts from *Nausea*, *Existentialism is a Humanism*, and "A Plea for Intellectuals"

Roland Barthes, "The Eiffel Tower" in: *Mythologies*.

Alain Robbe-Grillet, *Jealousy*

Hélène Cixous, « The Laugh of the Medusa » and « Castration or Decapitation ? »

Alain Finkielkraut, *the Defeat of the Mind*

FILM: Abdellatif Kéchiche, *L'Esquive*

OUTINGS: Musée National de l'Art Moderne (Centre Georges Pompidou) ; the district of Belleville in Paris.

COURSE REQUIREMENTS AND EVALUATION:

Attendance and Participation = 40% (including short oral presentations). This course is mainly interactive, so attendance and participation in and outside class (external visits) play a significant part in the final grade.

Written assignments = 60% (3 home papers and 1 final in-class paper). The topics for the final in-class paper will be given in advance. Home papers are preferably typed, but in case of printer problems etc. handwritten papers are also accepted. All secondary material used for a paper other than that provided in the Course Reader, e.g. internet material, must be printed out and handed in with the paper. Due to the concentrated nature of the Summer Session late papers will not be graded (they will count as additional "participation") unless a valid medical excuse is provided.

For each home paper there will be a choice of 2 questions, one on our literary or fictional texts (or aspects of our texts), and one on the more explicitly non-fictional material. And since this is a course run in France and about French culture, we will practice the French way of presenting ideas by emphasizing clarity of structure.

Students are expected to have read and prepared the material before corresponding class discussions (see schedule).

SCHEDULE: SUMMER SESSION 23 June –7 August

Classes: Tuesdays and Thursdays 2-4 p.m, except for week 1 (Wednesday and Thursday)

JUNE

Wedn 23: Introduction

Thurs 24: Surrealism (1) (Breton and Aragon)

Tuesd 29: Surrealism (2)

Wedn 30: Class outing: Surrealist painters at Beaubourg

JULY

Thurs 1st: Sartre and Existentialism (1)

Tuesd 6: Sartre and Existentialism (2)

Thurs 8: Figures of the French intellectual. Topics for Paper 1: a choice between Surrealism and Existentialism, fiction and non-fiction.

Tuesd 13: Paper 1 due; Barthes and Structuralism.

Thurs 15: Robbe-Grillet and the Nouveau Roman; question for Paper 2 (on Structuralism or on the Nouveau Roman).

Tuesd 20: Paper 2 due. From Structuralism to Post-Structuralism (main characteristics); “French Theory” in the English-speaking academic world and the concept of “intellectual impostures”

Thurs 22: Feminist writings: The legacy of Simone de Beauvoir and introducing Hélène Cixous: both philosophers, literary critics, and novelists/poets.

Tuesd 27: Cixous and the question of French Feminism today.

Thurs 29: Preparation of Paper 3 on Writing and Gender in fiction and non-fiction.

AUGUST:

Tuesd 3: Paper 3 due; Introduction to Marivaux’s *Le Jeu de l’amour et du hasard* and viewing of Kechiche’s film *L’Esquive*. Topics for the final paper.

Wedn 4 : Discussion of Kechiche’s film in Belleville and general conclusions (visit of this very culturally mixed « quartier » and discussion in a café)

Thurs 5: Final in-class paper