Writing, painting, and photographing Paris in the 19th and 20th centuries

FREN O3994

Instructor: Brian O’Keeffe
Email: bokeeffe@barnard.edu

Course Outline

The city of Paris fascinated writers, painters, and photographers. In this course, we will look at the variety of ways Paris has been represented in art. We will first read a novel by Balzac, in which the city is variously characterized as a monster, a mysterious woman and, rather surprisingly, a lobster. In Baudelaire’s poems, we will find Paris in transition, evolving into the capital of modernity, but we will continue exploring one of the problems Baudelaire confronts – how to react to ugliness of Paris, as well as to its beauty – by reading other texts, notably by Huysmans and Jules Laforgue. The impressionists, both in painting and in certain texts by Zola and Goncourt, also reacted to the city’s modernity – at issue here is how we interpret the famous impressionistic ‘blur.’ We will pursue that interpretation in depth by reading Zola’s great novel L’Oeuvre. At the beginning of the 20th century, we will allow ourselves a moment of nostalgia by looking at the photographs of Eugène Atget, as well as plunging into the surreal arcades of Aragon, Walter Benjamin, Breton and Soupault. We will compare their writing to visual artists like Man Ray and André Kertész – their works startle us by their strangeness, and change our perception of the city. Later on in the 20th century, we will adjust our perceptions once more, and consider more recent incarnations of ‘modern’ Paris, before ending with an exploration of the insurrection that took place in May, 1968. Sessions in the classroom will be accompanied by excursions to museums and art performances in the city.

Statement on learning outcomes

Students will become familiar with a wide variety of French literary texts, photographs and paintings which depict the city of Paris.
Students will relates the material they study in class to their personal experience of living in Paris by means of relevant class excursions.
Students will improve their skills in reading, writing, and speaking French

Course prerequisites

Students wishing to take this course must have successfully completed French intermediate II or the equivalent.

Books to be purchased (at Librairie Tchann)
Honoré de Balzac, *Ferragus* (Gallimard Folio edition)
Émile Zola, *L’Œuvre* (Gallimard Folio edition)
André Breton, *Nadja* (Gallimard Folio edition)

All other materials will be provided to you as photocopies

**Breakdown of grading percentages**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Component</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Classroom participation</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Composition 1</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Composition 2</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Composition 3</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Composition 4</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(the dates of each composition, and the specifics of each assignment will be specified in class)

**Syllabus**

**Week 1 (June 5th to June 11th): Paris as a monster**

Session I Honoré de Balzac, *Ferragus*
Session II *Ferragus* contd.
Session III *Ferragus* contd.

**Week 2 (June 12th to June 18th): the zones of Paris**

Session I Charles Baudelaire, “Le Cygne”
Session III Gustave Flaubert, *L’Éducation sentimentale* (ext.)

**Week 3 (June 19th to June 25th): impressionism in painting and literature #1**

Session I The paintings of Édouard Manet
Session II The paintings of Alfred Sisley, Camille Pissarro and Claude Monet
Session III *Écriture impressionniste*: Édmond and Jules de Goncourt, *Germinie Lacerteux* (ext.)
and Zola, *Le Ventre de Paris* (ext.)

*There will be a class excursion to the Musée d’Orsay this week*

**Week 4 (June 26th to July 2nd): impressionism in painting and literature #2**

Session I Émile Zola, *L’Œuvre*
Session II L’Œuvre contd.
Session III L’Œuvre contd.

**Week 5 (July 3rd to July 9th): surrealistic Paris #1**

Session I Aragon, *Le Paysan de Paris* (ext) and Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project* (ext.)
Session II The photography of Eugène Atget
Session III The photography of Man Ray and André Kertész

*There will be a class excursion to a museum (tbd) this week*

**Week 6 (July 10th to July 16th): surrealistic Paris #2**

Session I André Breton, *Nadja*
Session II *Nadja* contd.
Session III Philippe Soupault, *Les Dernières Nuits de Paris* (ext.)

**Week 7 (July 17th to July 23rd): Paris, myth and modernity**

Session I Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*
Session II Kristin Ross, *Fast Cars and Clean Bodies. Decolonization and the Reordering of French Culture* (ext.)
Session III Henri Lefebvre, *Critique de la vie quotidienne* (ext.)

**Week 8 (July 24th to July 30th): insurrectionary Paris and May 1968**

Session I The events of May ‘68
Session II Theoretical approaches to May ‘68: Michel de Certeau, Édgar Morin et al
Session III Conclusions

N.B. First day of summer session is Tuesday, June 7th