

FRENCH 580--IMAGES OF 'AMERICA' IN FRENCH CULTURAL "TEXTS"

Spring 2007
Wednesday, 3:35--6:15
Section #
HSS 205

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TEXTS & COURSE MATERIALS

Bookstore:

America (Baudrillard)

Additional texts may be required

Hodges Library Reserve

Materials will be made available in hard copy and/or for electronic retrieval as the course develops. Besides the usual high culture texts (literature, theater, critical essays, art, philosophy, etc.), materials will issue from a wide variety of popular culture "texts," including films, TV programs, cartoons, comic strips, popular press, news media, songs, commercial advertisements, fashion, pop and folk art, etc.

Course Description, Rationale, and Structure

In this *collaborative research project*, prof and students will examine "texts" emanating from French/Francophone cultures that deal with any aspect of American culture--American society, individuals, traditions, customs, institutions, or other structures. These texts may come from a variety of historical periods, but their interpretations will directly address contemporary issues. We will focus primarily on literary and artistic texts (including fictional writing, performance, visual, and plastic arts), and secondarily, on critical and expository texts (including critical theory, sociopolitical writing, and language studies).

Given the in-progress, tentative nature of this project, the program of class activities and assignments will be updated periodically. In the first part of this course, the "project leader" will lay the groundwork for the topic by presenting in a discussion-dialogic format an initial array of texts and critical tools he has used thus far to explore the general topic, including a study of what has been called French "anti-Americanism." For the second part of the course, students will LOCATE, RESEARCH, and PRESENT cultural materials (including at least a short annotated *bibliography* or list of relevant texts) that they consider important for a deeper, more comprehensive understanding of French culture's take on "America."

French will be the lingua franca of the course; but some of the texts will be in English.

Student performance (grading) will be evaluated based on the following:

Formal Written work(70%):

1 short critical-analytical midterm paper (approx. 5-6 pages + biblio, 12 font, double-spaced)
=20%

1 final research paper (approx. 10 pages + biblio) =50%

NB: All individual critical papers must be original, i.e., composed entirely by the submitting student with all supporting information, articulations, and ideas appropriately attributed and referenced.

In the interest of fairness and course progress, papers must be submitted on time.

Class participation (30%): includes quality and quantity of contributions to discussions, activities, oral presentations and reports, i.e., to the development of the research project.

Working Definitions, Questions, and Subtopics To Be Addressed

1. The project will focus on how individuals from French/Francophone cultures represent or misrepresent "America," "Americans," or more abstractly, the concept of "Americanness." Thus the question of national culture will come to the forefront, provoking

a number of either divergent or complimentary definitions of the concept, and perhaps even an argument against the usefulness of the term in a global world consisting of increasingly more hybrid populations.

Nation, ordinarily defined in terms of commonality of territory, political system, law, language, ethnicity, traditions, and interests, is also a product of desire and imagination. America is not only a geographical, cultural, and spiritual space, but also a psychological one.

The study of how French culture views America will help us understand the values, traditions, and histories that comprise the construction of a French "national" culture.

2. What do these "displaced" cross-cultural representations tell us not only about U.S. culture but also about the perceived strengths and weaknesses, qualities and deficiencies, desires and fears of the French authors and artists producing these representations?

America as "other," as a contrastive or alternative culture? Or, America as a "crystal ball," i.e., an evolutionary state of world culture that is relevant to the future of the producing culture?

One could argue, for example, that images of America in French texts reveal a great deal about the French themselves, including their fears of and desires for modernity and postmodernity.

3. In view of the U.S.'s global hegemony, one that today involves a massive distribution of mediated imagery, "America" occupies a unique (privileged?) status among national cultures and in the consciousness of individuals from Canada to Cameroon, especially with respect to the world's globalizing trend. Consequently, America becomes increasingly more of a formulation than a received truth; and its special status affects both internal (homegrown) and external (foreign) imaginations of America, and the contrasts between the two. On the inside, Americans manifest a broad capacity for self-invention and subsequent self-contemplation. Externally, transcending mere nationality, America has become a symbol of what anyone might imagine it to be; and perceived American traits, such as individualism and self-indulgence, become the subject and the consequence of artistic (individual), cultural, and social negotiation. Tropes, phrases, and images of "America" and "Americanness" abound: "America" as a concept, idea, or system practiced around the globe.

4. As evidenced by the recent world crisis, not all dominant Western national cultures are created equal, and not all have the same take on American culture. We also could expect that non-Western and/or "postcolonial" cultures of Latin America, Africa, and Asia will manifest divergent attitudes toward "America." Among Western cultures, the French are remarkable for their articulations of a resolute yet guarded divergence from an American lifestyle and world view, one which shows up in array of cultural texts, providing a source of deep, cross-cultural interpretations of the ways in which cultural subjects construct meaning. In my study of contemporary French theatre, for example, American space and American characters suggest a plethora of themes, values, ideas, and practices that the French find fascinating as well as problematic, controversial, or otherwise culturally unhealthy. These include patriotism, provincialism, religious fundamentalism, materialism-commercialism, a moralistic work ethic, militarism, imperialism, the pioneer-cowboy-lawman mentality, violence, a cultural obsession with spectacle and entertainment, a refusal of community. At the source of these seemingly disparate cultural attributes lies one fundamental trait, a remarkable form of anti-intellectualism that was already articulated in the mid-19th century by Tocqueville, who wrote that free intellectual thought and debate were stifled in America by the "tyranny of the majority." Since the postwar period, celebrated French writers from J-P Sartre and S. de Beauvoir to J. Kristeva and J. Baudrillard have been equally intrigued and perplexed by what they perceive to be a primary divergence of Americans from the French and other Europeans: the dynamic yet extraordinarily uncritical collective consciousness of Americans, an anti-intellectual legacy that Baudrillard calls American "unculture."

How do the French represent "America" with respect to its new multicultural or pluralistic paradigm, its increasing ethnic diversity and the waning of the white majority's

hegemony? How do they represent the multifarious character of the society on the one hand and the homogeneous Coca-Cola culture on the other?

5. Last but not least, this course will explore the question of artistic representation. “America” has the potential to produce or enhance interesting literary and artistic imagery and narratives. How does the practice of art/literature resist the forces of a dominant culture and a mainstream view?

Why and how do foreign artists imagine, write, perform, or otherwise depict “America”?

Preliminary suggestions and questions for presentations:

1. Propose a work of prose, a play, poetry selection, a film, other (“high” or “low” culture) forms of art (paintings, music/song selections, ads, comic strips, TV programs, etc.) for the group to consider. Information about both ‘America’ and the ‘foreign’ culture can be gleaned, assembled, and contextualized either through the presentation of the literary, artistic, or (otherwise) cultural production or as a cultural backdrop or framework.

2. How does this work compare with other works by this author/producer? With other contemporary images of America that appear in the same culture?

3. What aspects of the work’s “images” can be seen as typically/ stereotypically/ mythically/ or atypically “American”? How do the “American” values, ideas, practices correspond to or conflict with those of the producing culture? How do the images qualify as non-American/ “foreign” and how do they differ from homegrown images? (Don’t forget that many so-called leftist/radical American writers and artists have been deemed “anti-American.”) What’s different about America and why is it an issue or a “problem”?

What about received images or ideas in America about the producing culture? (In general, don’t our ideas about the French differ from those about the Japanese and the Mexicans?) How do these relate to the work? What are those Freedom Froggies up to now???

4. What does the work say about the producing culture’s relation to “America” in comparison with its relation to other (Eastern or Western) cultures? Does it reveal any information about how the producing culture perceives America’s perceptions and opinions of their culture?

5. Does the work say or imply anything with respect to America and the future of the globe/globalisation?

6. American individuals versus American society: Are American individuals viewed differently from American society as a whole? American government? Are individuals responsible for their society? To what extent do Bush (Republicans) or Clinton (Democrats) speak for America?

7. What does the work say about the producing individual, and consequently, the producing culture? Any contradictory representations? Does the producing culture use images of America for self-reflection?

8. What can we learn from the work about “culture” (national, high or pop culture, multiculturalism, media, etc.) and difference (gender, race, class, etc.) in general?

9. How does the theme, topic, or representation of America function esthetically?

10. Sample themes for discussion: capitalism, racism, poverty, labor, ethnocentrism, realism, family, individuality, community, social security/ welfare, leisure, consumerism, education, nation-state, post-colonialism, immigration, Europe/globalism, modernity, violence, etc.

DEBUT DU PROGRAMME

le 10 janvier

Présentation du cours, discussion du projet de recherche.

NB: Dès aujourd’hui vous devriez commencer à faire vos recherches individuelles et à établir une petite bibliographie ou répertoire des “textes” (français ou francophones) relatifs au sujet: textes critiques ou

journalistiques, théâtre, cinéma, documentaires, séries télévisées, prose, poésie, chansons, BD, dessins animés, publicité, oeuvres d’art, manifestations artistiques ou culturelles, etc.

le 17 janvier

A) Baudrillard, Amérique. Lisez très attentivement, pp. 7-72. Essayez d’établir un rapport entre les photos et le texte.

Voir le polycop/ guide de lecture proposant des citations-clés, quelques questions à se poser, des termes-clés à repérer et des conseils sur votre approche de la lecture.

Chacun fera remarquer a) une petite citation-clée qui porte sur la profondeur, la subtilité ou la lucidité du point de vue de l’auteur et b) une autre qui révèle une possible/ apparente contradiction.

B) Lisez l’article “Comment les Etats-Unis sont perçus par les Français” de Serge Abrate.

Et lisez:

“Coca-Cola au pays des buveurs de vin” (Kuisel)

“L’Antiaméricanisme à la vie dure!” (Winock)

Comparer ces textes les uns aux autres et aux points de vue de Baudrillard.

le 24 janvier

Baudrillard, Amérique: Finissez le texte.

Anti-Americanism, Ed. Andrew and Kristin Ross: Lire “Introduction” (1-14) et “The French Declaration of Independence” 144-57).

“The French Lesson” de Régis Debray (1 page)

Lisez la première partie de l’article “Dialectical Representations” de Les Essif, pp. 143-46. ainsi que l’extrait de “Lost in Space” (Essif) (2 pages seulement).

le 31 janvier

Lisez L’Amérique, poème de Jean-Paul Daoust.

Une autre lecture à déterminer