

## UNIVERSITY HONORS 277--IMAGES OF 'AMERICA' IN 'FOREIGN' LITERATURE AND ART

Spring 2006  
T/R 9:40-10:55  
Section #88125  
Honors Seminar Room

Dr. Les Essif; 718 Mc Clung Tower  
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### TEXTS & COURSE MATERIALS

*Bookstore:*

America (Baudrillard)

The Theory Toolbox (Nealon, Searls-Giroux)

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, art, etc.

## **Course Description, Rationale, and Structure**

In this honors seminar/research project, faculty and students will examine "texts" that emanate from national cultures outside the U.S. and 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). In addition, this class/project seeks to bring together faculty representing a range of disciplinary fields, scholarly interests, and teaching methodologies.

Since certain class activities as well as the participation of a number of campus faculty remain tentative at the writing of this syllabus, the program of class activities and assignments will be updated periodically. The first part of the course (approximately one month) will be devoted to the following: 1) a review of the critical skills necessary for reading and writing on topics related to this course; 2) a study of global and "domestic" "anti-Americanism"; and 3) images of "America" emanating from Western European cultures (French and German writings/theatre, Danish film).

English will be the lingua franca of the course; but students of foreign language are encouraged to read any text in its original language.

Class activities and requirements will include group and plenary discussions of topics and informal, collaborative in-class (ungraded) writing assignments (about 300 words each). Individually, on a rotating basis, students' will prepare a short outline/commentary on readings to be followed by an informal/semi-formal critical report on a given class topic for distribution to all course participants (see [ ] indicated in the schedule). These reports will be posted via email to the class listserv. The student performance (grading) will be evaluated based on the following:

Formal Written work(70%): (12 font, double-spaced)

2 short critical-analytical papers (approx. 3-4 pages, 1000-1200 words) =20%

1 midterm paper (approx. 5-6 pages, 1500-1600 words)=20%

Final research paper (approx. 7-8 pages, 1800-2000 words) =30%

*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.*

Class participation (30%): includes quality and quantity of contributions to plenary discussions and to group discussions and activities, oral presentations and reports.

## **Working Definitions, Questions, and Subtopics To Be Addressed**

1. The course will focus on how individuals from other national 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 diverse (non-American) national cultures view America will help us understand the values, traditions, and histories that comprise the construction of a "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 individuals or cultures 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.

3. Today, "America" occupies a unique (privileged?) status among national cultures and in the consciousness of individuals from Canada to Cameroon, especially in view of and 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."

How do individuals from each national culture 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 depict "America"?

***Suggestions and questions submitted to faculty presenters:***

1. Propose 1-2 short stories (in English translation), 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 class 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? 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?
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?
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. Other items or topics of interest?

Schedule for first part of course (tentative as of 1/11/06)

1/12: Introduction to the course.

1/17: Toolbox: chapters 1 ("Why Theory?"), 5 ("Culture") [\_\_\_\_\_], 6 ("Ideology") [\_\_\_\_\_].

1/19: Toolbox: chapters 10 ("Differences") [\_\_\_\_\_], 11 ("Agency") [\_\_\_\_\_].

1/24: "Variations in Value Orientations" (Kluckhohn, Rockwood, & Strodtbeck) [\_\_\_\_\_], "Understanding Cultural Differences" (Hall & Hall) [\_\_\_\_\_] [*On Reserve: "Packet 1: Introduction to Culture"*].

French & Other Western European Points of View Toward American Culture

1/26: Baudrillard's America. Study of book's illustrations, and p. 1-26 [\_\_\_\_\_].

1/31: America, 27-74 [\_\_\_\_\_].

2/2: America, (75-105) [\_\_\_\_\_], 107-28 [\_\_\_\_\_].

2/7: September 11, 2001 (Vinaver) [\_\_\_\_\_] [*On Reserve: "Packet 2"*].

2/9: September 11 and "Billy Graham at the Vel' d'Hiv'" (Mythologies, Barthes) [\_\_\_\_\_] [*On Reserve*].

2/14: **Outline for short paper due!** Anti-Americanism: "Introduction" from Understanding Anti-Americanism (Hollander) [\_\_\_\_\_], Excerpts from "The Theatricality of American Un-culture in French Drama" and "Lost in Space" (Essif) [\_\_\_\_\_][*On Reserve*].

2/16: "Introduction" and "The French Declaration of Independence" from Anti-Americanism (Ross & Ross) [\_\_\_\_\_][*On Reserve*].

**2/21: Short paper due! Debate Demo.**

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3/14: **Outline for midterm paper due!**

**3/21: Spring Break.**

**3/23: Spring Break.**

**3/28: Midterm paper due!**

**4/20: Short paper + outline for final research paper due!**

**Friday, May 6, noon: Final paper due!**

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2/23: The Caribbean Region (Duke?)

2/23: Dogville (Film by Danish director Lars von Trier) [Must see the film before this class: on reserve at Media Center; also available at many video stores. Consult the study guide for the film.]

2/28: Dogville.

3/2: African-American music (Gay?)

3/7: The Caribbean Region? (Dawn?)

3/9: Chicano Perspectives (Gimmel?) [Theatre in Academe]

3/14: **Outline for midterm paper due!**

3/16:

**3/21: Spring Break.**

**3/23: Spring Break.**

3/28: **Midterm paper due!**

3/30: [Comp. Drama]

4/4:

4/6:

4/11: [Ethics and Esthetics]

4/13:

4/18: [Speakers Bureau]

4/20: **Short paper + outline for final research paper due!**

4/25:

4/27:

**Friday, May 6, noon: Final paper due!**