Nandini Chandra,
Study Abroad Application

Location Specific Course Proposal

The Essay-Film’s Recycling of “Waste”: Lessons from the Left Bank
*ENG 494: Study Abroad (3)

The essay film shuns the mimetic mode, opting to construct a reality rather than reproduce one. Some of its signature tools in this project are: experimental montage techniques, recycling of still photographs, and the use of found footage to immerse the viewer in an alternative and yet uncannily plausible reality. Chris Marker, Alain Resnais, and Agnes Varda are three giants of this genre who shaped this playful filmic language in France. The essay-film is their paradoxical contribution to crafting a collective experience out of the minutiae of individual self-expressions. Our course will focus particularly on this trio of directors’ self-reflexive and heretical relationship with the theme of “waste”—industrial, cultural and human—which forms a central preoccupation in their films. Many of these films use the trope of travel to show wastelands created by the history of capitalist wars and colonialism. We will examine the diverse ways in which the essay-film alters our understanding of “waste” and turns it into something mysteriously productive. This in turn leads us to the question of the “surplus population”—those thrown out of the circuits of capitalist production and left to fend for themselves—as a source of potentially utopian possibilities. Capitalism’s well-known “creative destruction” is ironically paralleled by these films’ focus on the productivity of waste products, and the creative powers of capitalism’s outcastes.

1. The course will historicize the critical-lyrical practice of the essay-film, looking at the films themselves as well as key scholarship on essay-films.
2. The course will help students theorize the nature of waste in capitalist societies, and how the essay-film helps us rethink the symbolism of, and human relationship to, waste.
3. The course will reflect upon the French avant-garde’s obsessive relationship with American film and media both as cultural garbage as well as creative inspiration.
4. The course will link the whimsical and speculative trajectory of the essay-film with the literary, long-form personal essay. Students will be required to write their own essay at the end of the semester, taking a cue both from the films and readings.

*ENG 494 can be used by English majors and other majors to fulfil their 400-level elective requirement.

Required Viewings

Harun Farocki (2000 and 2003). *I Thought I was Seeing Convicts*. 25 mins and *War at a Distance*. 54 mins

**Required Readings**  

**Course Requirements**

Watching films intelligently and discussing them in class is our central and most important activity. Our classes will be discussion-based and students will be graded on their participation and engagement in class (30). The short films are for in-class viewing, and the longer ones will be screened separately. You will have to maintain a film-journal and keep an activity log of all the films you watch. The readings are mandatory. Assignments include: two short response papers (30) — (one on a film, and the other on a reading), a personal self-reflexive essay on the experience of staying in Paris while reflecting on the example of the essay-film (20), and a two-minute video-essay on “waste” as you might have discovered it both literally and conceptually on the streets of Paris (20).

Our readings and activities will thus be directed towards fulfilling the Study Abroad Student Learning Outcomes to:

1. Demonstrate awareness of your cultural values and biases, especially in relationship to the tropes of globe-trotting or vagrancy depicted in the essay-film, and the transgression of boundaries entailed by travel.
2. Demonstrate knowledge of diversity through examining the presence of immigrants and “refugees” in Paris as a symptom of France’s own violent history of colonialism as represented in the essay-film;
3. Demonstrate an increased capacity to analyze issues relating to capitalist accumulation and the waste it creates.
4. Demonstrate an appreciation of alternative fashion styles in Paris streets that reflect the principle of recycling and waste minimalization.

**ATTENDANCE:**
Students are allowed three absences throughout the semester. For every absence after your first three, one point will be subtracted from your final grade. Exceptions may be made in special circumstances.

**GRADING:**
All assignments will be graded on the 100-point scale:
100 – 96 = A+
95 – 93 = A
92 – 90 = A-
89 – 87 = B+
86 – 84 = B
83 – 80 = B-
79 – 77 = C+
76 – 74 = C
73 – 70 = C-
69 – 67 = D+
66 – 64 = D
63 – 60 = D-
59 and below = F

**RELATION TO OVERSEAS SETTING:**
Our class-discussion will be heavily influenced by our location in Paris. Paris is a city of and for the “flâneur”. It is literally designed for a self-reflexive walking tour. In Hemingway’s words, it is “a moveable feast.” The essay-film harnesses into its rhythms the city’s inherent capacity for movement, waywardness, and roaming. Even if all the films are not set in Paris, this city has nurtured the films’ imagination. Our assignments are designed to allow students to take the learning process along this more reflective and wayward route: students are encouraged to look around themselves, at both the monumental magnificence, as well as the waste and ghetto-life that also define the neoliberal city. Having the essay film as a template will train students to be more accommodative of cultural, racial, class, and other differences. The critical approach to images built into the essay-film will also teach students to be critical of the images they use to negotiate a different culture. Students will thus make full use of Paris through viewings, readings, assignments, and outside activities. To assist with their assignments and experiential learning, I will provide students with lists of museums, neighborhoods, and suggested activities, some of which we will undertake as a class and some of which they will pursue independently.