



MASSACHUSETTS INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY



MASSACHUSETTS INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

Fall 2015
21G.068J / WGS.234J

Tuesday 7-10pm. 14N-313

Prof. Bruno Perreau*

The Invention of French Theory

A History of Transatlantic Intellectual Life since 1945

In the decades following the Second World War, a cluster of extraordinary French thinkers were widely translated and read in American universities. Their works were soon labeled as “French Theory”. Why would sharing the same nationality make authors such as Lacan, Cixous, Derrida, Foucault or Debord, ambassadors of a specifically “French” theory?

The course will explore the maze of transatlantic intellectual debates since 1945 and the heyday of French existentialism. We will study the debates on communism, decolonization, neo-liberalism, gender, youth culture and mass media.

Course taught in English.

*Bruno Perreau is the Cynthia L. Reed Associate Professor of French studies at MIT. He was a member of the Institute for Advanced Study (Princeton), Jesus College (Cambridge), and Stanford Humanities Center. He is also Non-Resident Faculty at the Center for European Studies, Harvard. Perreau is the author of *The Politics of Adoption. Gender and the Making of French Citizenship* (MIT Press, 2014), as well as six French-language books on American and French political institutions, gay parenting, and queer studies. He is currently working on a new book project *Transatlantic Echoes. The French Response to Queer Theory* (The University of Chicago Press, forthcoming).

Contacts: bperreau@mit.edu
<https://mit.academia.edu/BrunoPerreau>

617 803 5458

Grading policy

Sessions will be divided between

- students' presentations of the weekly theme
- class discussion to engage with the main readings and movies screened
- a weekly analysis of topical issues on France and the United-States

Final grade will be determined from three types of required exercises:

- One grade will be based on *short-answer papers (20%)*. It will consist of a half-page maximum argument on the weekly theme. To be submitted a day in advance.
- One grade will be based on *one oral presentation (30%)*, individually or in groups (of no more than 2 students). It will be limited to 10 minutes maximum. Students will also have to *speak* to the class during their oral presentation (not to *read* a pre-written text).
- Two grades will be based on *a creative video project* on a piece of art selected by each student at the Museum of Fine Arts. Students will first visit the MFA and select a work of art related to French culture and society. They will then explain why they made such a selection (**1 page paper, 10%**.) They will eventually analyse the piece of art and discuss its main topics on a **video (5 min maximum, 30%)**. The video can take various forms. Students can choose to narrate a story based on the piece of art itself, to compare it to other pieces, or to comment on it in a more direct way, etc. Videos will be submitted two weeks before the end of classes.
- One grade will be based on *class participation (10%)*: the evaluation will be based on 1° attendance, 2° the demonstration that the students have done the weekly readings, 3° the quality (and not only the quantity) of their oral output.

Deadlines:

- Beginning of classes: September 15, 2015.
- End of classes: December 8, 2015.
- Days off: October 10, 2015.

- Choice of oral presentations' topics: September 22, 2015
- Video Project Outline: October 23, 2013
- Video Project: November 26, 2013

Materials:

All documents (book chapters, articles and pictures) are downloadable from Stellar Webpage.

Movies will be screened during the classes. When impossible, copies will be lent to the students.

Reminder:

No students will be accepted in class beyond week 2.

Auditing is not permitted unless a direct link between the auditor's research and/or professional project and the class is established.

Using laptops, tablets, and cell phones is limited to searches related to the class.

Course organization

9/15. Is There French Theory in This Class?

René Magritte, "Ceci n'est pas une pipe" (1929)

René Magritte, "Les deux mystères" (1966)

Michel Foucault, "This is not a Pipe" (1968)

LEAVING REPRESSIVE SOCIETY

9/22. Judging the War, Rebuilding a Nation

Albert Camus, "Reflections on the Guillotine" (1957)

Alice Kaplan, *The Collaborator Trial and Execution of Robert Brasillach* (2000)

Jean-Paul Sartre, *Existentialism is Humanism* (1946)

Q: *Is death penalty worse than life sentence and why?*

09/29. The Genesis of May 1968

Guy Debord, *Society of Spectacle* (1967)

MOVIE: Jean-Luc Godard, *Pierrot le Fou* (1965)

Q: *Is entertainment the new "opium of the people?"*

10/6. Revolution and its Outsiders: Women, Migrants, Sexual Minorities

Gilles Deleuze, Felix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus. Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (1972)

Michel Foucault, *The Will to Knowledge* (1976)

Q: *If you had to stage a revolution, what would you do first?*

10/20. The Capitalist Machine: Society as Prison

Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* (1975)

MOVIE: Jacques Audiard, *Un prophète* (2009)

Q: *Is surveillance desirable in a democracy?*

CULTURAL TASTE, NATIONAL IDENTITY

TBD. Cultural Mythologies

Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (1957)

Visit: Museum of Fine Arts

10/27. "Parlez-vous français?" The New Politics of Language

Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Structural Anthropology* (1958)

Jacques Lacan, *The Language of the Self* (1968)

Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition. A Report on Knowledge* (1979).

Q: *Do you think migrants have to speak French to become French citizens?*

SUBMISSION OF VIDEO PROJECT OUTLINE

11/03. Social Distinction

Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: a Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste* (1979).

MOVIE: Agnès Jaoui, *Le goût des autres* (2000)

Q: *Do you consider yourself educated and why?*

BEYOND LIBERATION

11/10. Feminist and LGBT Politics: the Ethics of Ambiguities

Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (1949)

Didier Eribon, *Insult and the Making of the Gay Self* (1999)

Q: *Is surrogacy against women's rights?*

11/17. Communities, and anticommunitarianism

Maurice Blanchot, *The Unavowable Community* (1983)

Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology* (1967)

Q: *Are you Charlie?*

11 /24. SUBMISSION OF VIDEO PROJECT

12/1. Postcoloniality

Franz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952)

MOVIE: Claire Denis, *White Material* (2010)

12/8. The New Libertarians

Yves Citton, *Mythocratia. Story Telling and Leftist Imagination* (2010)

Ruwen Ogien, *Does the State Make Us Better?* (2013)

PRESENTATION OF VIDEO PROJECTS