

Paris modern – Mellon class taught by Ken Lum and Jean-Michel Rabaté.

Today, Paris is one of the most visited cities in the world, and it attracts visitors mostly because of its unique blend of the old and the new. The class jointly taught by Ken Lum and Jean-Michel Rabaté will assess the specific type of modernity displayed by the city. Paris has been shaped by a mixture of organic development, which is still today perceptible in the “snail” pattern of its *arrondissements* whose numbers, from 1 to 20, coil around a central island several times so as to exemplify a “spiral city,” and of the violent cuts, interruptions and sudden transformations that again and again forced it to catch up with modern times, the most visible of which was Baron Haussmann’s destruction of medieval sections of the city to make room for huge boulevards. Thus Parisian modernism has always consisted in a negotiation between the old and the new, and a specific meaning of modernity allegorized for Louis Aragon, the Surrealists and Walter Benjamin consisted in old-fashioned arcades built in the middle of the 19th century and obsolete by the time they turned into icons of Paris.

From Haussmann to the adoption of the helix *arrondissement* plans, Paris has been subject to constant macro-developmental visioning. By the 1920s, the growth of motor vehicles was testing the capacity of Paris to meet its future. Le Corbusier envisioned an audacious Plan Voisin to completely reorganize the heart of Paris to symbolically and technologically connect the administrative capital to the borders of France and beyond.

Paris's *arrondissements* are demarcated like a snail's shell, spiraling inwards as a tightening curl marking off smaller *arrondissements* at once with spiraling outwards as a loosening curl making off larger *arrondissements*. This simultaneous curling inwards and outwards is like the dialectic between gravitational pull and entropy due to the diminishment of gravity. Where the curl is most dense is the administrative and cultural center of Paris and where the curl is most loose is towards the periphery and the adjoining suburbs. This pulling of the outside inwards and the inside outwards and the inside ever more inward and the outside ever more outward brings to Paris both renewal and

stagnation in ever reinvented terms where otherness becomes as much absolutized as fully merged with the same. It is remarkable that Paris is seldom spoken about in science fiction terms but rather in terms of nostalgia. The spiral was also a central motif of the artist Robert Smithson who saw the curving pattern as a kind of spatial holder of unintentional monuments and future landscape of rubble and ruin.

We will also use Nico Israel's recently published *Spirals: The Whirled Image* (2015) so as to define Parisian modernity as a helix, a spiral connecting back to a certain past, fascinated by a certain obsolescence while pointing to future re-appropriations. Walter Benjamin's "dialectical image" would thus be less the famed Parisian arcades than a spiral taken as an allegory of modernity's fascination with an endless movement. The helix's inner dynamism makes it moves through several levels simultaneously, all the while flirting with its "revolutions," less by offering a radical break with the past than by skewing a merely circular repetition. Paris would embody a constant metamorphosis, to echo the vocabulary of Smithson, whose Spiral Jetty is the projection on water and land of similar concept. Artists like Marinetti, Tatlin, Duchamp and Joyce would be addressed. Duchamp's "Rotoreliefs" would provide another image of this process, and his Dadaist humor will make us revisit a bearded Mona Lisa.

A tourist visiting the concourse under the Pyramid of the Louvre (another science fiction site) encounters a prominent signpost that points in the direction of the Mona Lisa, the Venus de Milo and the Wings of Samothrace. Smithson would say that such markers have the effect of collapsing futures where the art on display of three different wings of the Louvre are passed through to the arrival points. The vision of tourists racing through time and space to view the Mona Lisa is like the characters from Jean Luc-Godard's *Band a Parte* attempting to break the world record for running through the Louvre.

The aim of the class will be to provide conceptual and pragmatic (visual, experiential) links between a number of texts, theories and films deploying various concepts of the modern in Paris, with a guided tour of the main places discussed. One can take the example of the Eiffel Tower, now a ubiquitous symbol of Paris, erected as a pure technological prowess, quickly acquiring uses (like radio and television, for instance.) It offered Blaise Cendrars a perfect

setting for his modernist poems and poetics, and Jean Cocteau with a perfect image of the ambivalence of the new in his famous 1921 *Les Mariés de la Tour Eiffel*, with a score by five composers. In the sixties still, Roland Barthes would argue that the very act of climbing the tower and gazing at Paris not only rendered spectators more intelligent but turned them into Structuralists. At the same time, Guy Debord and his fellow situationists were using parts of Paris to experience loss, disorientation, and a critique of capitalism.

The course that Jean Michel Rabate and Ken Lum will lead studies Paris as a work of science-fiction where its many futures are embedded in its many pasts, where discontinuity is a continuous process and where the curving line of the snail's shell is a line of ceaseless curling resulting in a perennial oscillation where an outside converts into an inside and an inside then converts to an outside.

Bibliography:

Louis Aragon, *Paris Peasant*.

Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades project*.

André Breton, *Nadja*.

Nico Israel, *Spirals*.

Other texts will be distributed as hand-outs.

Syllabus

1. Wednesday 01/20. The genesis of the organic development and the figure of the spiral. Joan DeJean on the modernization of Paris, *How Paris Became Paris*. Haussmann's changes and Baudelaire's allegories.
2. Wednesday 01/27. Aragon's *Paris Peasant* –the arcades-- and Benjamin's *Arcades Project*. (1)
3. Wednesday 02/3. Aragon's *Paris Peasant* – Buttes Chaumont-- and Benjamin's *Arcades Project*. (2) Is there a new "modern myth" of Paris?

4. Wednesday 02/10. Paris and its dialectical images. The “aura” as nostalgia evoked by two films, *Zazie dans le métro* and *Amélie Poulain*. Atget’s Paris, repeated surveys over four decades. Paris and modernist photographers—Man Ray, André Kertész and Henri Cartier-Bresson.
5. Wednesday 02/17. From Dadaism to purist constructivism: Loos’s building for Tristan Tzara (1925-26) and Le Corbusier’s 1922 *Ville Contemporaine*. The myth of transparency, from André Breton’s Place Clichy to Pierre Chareau’s “Maison de Verre” (1932).
6. Wednesday 02/24. Paris Surrealist, Structuralist and Situationist. Screening of Guy Debord’s *The Society of the Spectacle*. Roland Barthes, “The Eiffel Tower.”
7. Wednesday 03/2. Allegories in Paris: the *grande bibliothèque*, and its surrounding area, from Mitterand’s “grands travaux” to other works by Dominique Perrault in Marne-la-Vallée and Boulogne-Billancourt.

Paris Visit one week March 6-13.

First three days: guided visits.

Then two days for the students’ explorations of their arrondissements.

One last day of synthesis, with lectures by Claude Franck on urban planning and Keith Reader on Paris as seen in French films.

8. Wednesday 03/16. The modern as decorative detail: from Buren’s columns in Jardins du Palais Royal and Pei’s Pyramid for the Louvre to examples of the urban uncanny as defined by Anthony Vidler and listed in *Paris insolite*.
9. Wednesday 03/23. The classical and the postmodern: after Ledoux’s Rotonde Place Stalingrad, Tschumi and the gardens of La Villette, compared with Derrida’s theory of deconstruction.

10. Wednesday 03/30. The Siège du Parti Communiste, 2 Place du Colonel-Fabien, by Prouvé and Niemeyer; the Institut du Monde Arabe, lunch at the terrasse. Labor and exploitation: “passages” for sweatshops and clandestine workshops in the Sentier and the 10th arrondissement near Porte Saint-Denis and Porte Saint-Martin. The inclusion of minorities, from the constitution of an Asian enclave in the 13th arrondissement, to the Arab and African villages of the 18th and 19th arrondissements.

11. Wednesday 04/6. The Olympiades. From 1969 to 1974, a massive but incomplete commercial and residential development named les Olympiades was built in the far side of the 13th Arrondissement that mimicked the esplanade form of the La Defense business district. Each apartment block is named after an Olympic city and like an Olympic village, it imparted ideals of a globalized community that pedestrian oriented and devoid of the presence of cars. Self-contained and ultimately inward looking, the development followed the logic of the helix, with its aspirations for a development rooted in the discourse of the global citizen converted into a huge Chinatown.

12. Wednesday 04/13. Paris-lumière, Paris film: the old cinémathèques and the new, from Parc de Bercy’s Cinémathèque de France by Frank Gehry (51, rue de Bercy, Paris) with the attendant new zone of rue Belmondo and Park Beghin to Luc Besson’s Cité du Cinéma (20, rue Ampère, Saint-Denis).

13. Wednesday 04/20. New and old Vuitton museum: the first one near the Champs Elysées, and the new Musée Louis Vuitton in the Bois de Boulogne.

14. Wednesday 04/27. Recapitulation and discussion of portfolios.

Written requirement: each student will be assigned two Paris arrondissements, one in the lower and one in the higher numbers (1-10, 2-19, 3-18, etc.) and will have to compose a short guide for each (ten pages each). These personal guides will be illustrated by documents and photographs taken during walks.