

Remembering Loss, Writing Memory



Dr. Colin Keaveney
Assistant Professors of French (teaching)
Department of French and Italian
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Course Description and Rationale

In Claude Lanzmann's memoir *Le Lièvre de Patagonie*, he explains his controversial decision to forego the usual trappings of the documentary in his landmark film, *Shoah*: there would be no voiceover to shape the viewers' reception; no contemporary photos or footage to divert attention from the testimonies of the victims, bystanders and perpetrators he had interviewed. Instead of images from the Shoah, their testimonies would be juxtaposed with images of present-day Poland, Germany, USA, Israel... the worlds that these embodied voices now inhabited. Lanzmann's refusal to display the awful imagery of trauma (camps, pits, furnaces etc.) was a stark choice; his film would offer the viewer no visual means of catharsis.

In this class, students will be asked to consider the different ways in which victims, survivors, their offspring and acquaintances, witnesses, public intellectuals, and writers have chosen to give voice and shape to the terrible events that have marked them. Through the careful reading and analysis of a wide range of materials, students will also think about 1) how writing, speaking, or visually representing such events engages with past traumas and 2) the extent to which it might constitute a form of resistance to future genocides.

The set texts, oral testimonies, and films cover a wide geographical and historical range of experiences. They include accounts of internment in pre-Occupation France, deportation, internment in German work/extermination camps, resistance to and experience of the Algerian War and its aftermath (including the Paris massacre of October 17, 1961), as well as the Rwandan genocide and its legacy.

The connection between all of these texts, oral testimonies, and films is France, even if it is not always the central geopolitical or cultural focus. (All of the texts were either originally written in French or about France.) Through its interrelated roles as a collaborator with Nazi Germany and as a colonial power, France is a productive site of analysis that extends out towards multiple satellite sites such as Germany, Algeria, and Rwanda, among others.

The course will consider texts, films, and oral testimonies that have emerged from or bear in some way on French or Francophone worlds. However, given that all of the materials in question deal with the larger issues of genocide, systematic mass violence and its resistance across many different geographic spaces, this course is necessarily transnational in nature. It will consider the specificities of places like France during and after the occupation and Rwanda during and after the genocide, as well the links between them. This movement across national boundaries will be echoed in the diverse disciplines from which the course materials will draw: literature, cinema, and visual studies, for example. The course will be relevant not only to students of literature, cinema or visual studies, and cultural studies but also those of history, sociology, political science, and law.

The first module of the course, “Writing and Testimony,” will focus on first-person accounts of experiences of occupation, internment, genocide and mass violence in France, Germany, Algeria, and Rwanda. The chosen texts will afford students a glimpse into pre-genocidal moments, and will focus their attention on questions of witnessing, expressing the inexpressible, and returning (to the scene of violence in some cases; to ‘normal’ everyday life in others). For example, Lion Feuchtwanger’s *The Devil in France*, recently republished by USC Libraries, provides an intimate account of the cruelties and ambiguities of Les Milles internment camp, where Nazi sympathizers and spies mingled with innocents.

The second module of the course, “Showing or Telling” will introduce students to documentaries such as Lanzmann’s *Shoah* and Eric Kabera’s *Keepers of Memory*, both of which challenge conventional portraits of life, memory, and reconciliation after “the event”. This module will also take advantage of the rich Visual History Archive housed by USC Shoah Foundation Institute. In this module, then, students will consider how different visual mediums—oral testimony, documentary, and dramatic film—have been used to represent genocide, mass violence, and their aftereffects.

The last module of the course, “Literature, Memory and Life,” will turn to literary responses to events related to the Shoah, the 1961 massacre of Algerians in Paris, and the genocide in Rwanda. In all of these novels, writers struggle to give voice to events that, in some way, altered their lives and perceptions of the world. In this module, students will learn how different novelists articulate the impulse to remember, to return, to reconstruct, to commemorate or to re-imagine the past. In *Dora Bruder*, for example, Patrick Modiano poignantly weaves his own family and personal biography, national and local history, and his quest to learn all about one young Parisian girl’s fate at the hands of a collaborationist bureaucracy.