TENTATIVE SYLLABUS
Inspiration on the Streets of Paris
JUNE 1-29th, 2013
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There is the Paris of the guidebooks: the Louvre, Notre Dame, the venerable monuments that constitute what the French proudly call the cultural history of their patrimoine. But there is another Paris that has always attracted those with a more forward-looking spirit, those writers, artists and activists living at the margins, agitating for social, political and aesthetic change. Much of that transgressive thinking has been inspired by and manifested on the streets of the city which continue to be a canvas for the creative energies of Parisians--both native and foreign. The figure of the flaneur, the modern street wanderer, will be central to our readings and our adventures in Paris. We will trace his random path from the poetry of Baudelaire to the Surrealist novels of Breton. We will study some work of film makers and photographers whose images document early 20th century bohemian life in the cafes, flea markets, and theatres of Montmartre, Montparnasse and Saint-Germain, as well as the modern industrialized mass culture that threatened its survival. One sign of the survival of Paris’ revolutionary spirit can be seen in the art produced by more contemporary street wanderers that flourishes on the walls of particular neighborhoods as well as in galleries and museums. Some of that work is by non-Parisians, a reminder both of the international spirit and demographics of this cosmopolitan city and of its particular fascination for Americans. We will explore some examples of Americans drawn to the promise of a more progressive social and artistic atmosphere in Paris through work by writers including Stein, Hemingway, and Baldwin. We will also explore the role played by African Americans in the Jazz Age in Paris, with particular attention to the dancer Josephine Baker and the Revue Negre.

Students will be asked to keep an ongoing detailed reading journal in preparation for our class discussions. One short (3-5 page) paper on either the Baudelaire or Breton readings for week one will be required on the first day of class, giving us a jump on this tightly packed program. Students will have an extra week AFTER the course is completed to write another formal paper (around 5 pages) on any aspect of the course. With an eye to how things are changing on the streets of Paris, students will choose among several creative projects: to document their own street wanderings (accompanied by Baudelaire); to seek out and meditate on mysterious objects in flea markets (inspired by Breton); to update the state of the city’s arcades since Benjamin wrote about them; or to create a visual journal (of photos and/or drawings) in response to photographers like Atget, Brassai or surrealist and contemporary artists or filmmakers.

Our time spent in academic work on specific texts and visual documents will be supplemented with more direct engagement with the city. Reading Stein’s portraits of artists will take us to the Picasso Museum; and discussions around colonialism and racial attitudes will take us to the original anthropological Musee de L’Homme and its updated counterpart the new Quai Branly museum. Readings about street art will lead us to the revolutionary and artistic enclaves of the neighborhoods of Belleville and Butte aux Cailles as well as select galleries and artists’ studios.
Week One: The Flaneur, The Street Wanderer

*Introduction to the flaneur in the context of Parisian cultural history
*Selections from the poetry and essays of Charles Baudelaire: Paris Spleen, Flowers of Evil, and “The Painter of Modern Life”
*Andre Breton’s novel Nadja and excerpts from his novel Mad Love
*Introduction the Paris captured by great photographers: Atget, Brassai, Cartier-Bresson

Week Two: Reflections on Paris’ Constantly Changing Urban Landscape

*Selections from Benjamin’s and Aragon’s philosophical and poetical meditations on the unique phenomenon of the Paris Arcades
*Selected essays on the machine aesthetic of the Eiffel Tower and the organic/erotic aesthetic of Art Nouveau—two styles that survive side by side in the architectural landscape of Paris
*Selections from early avant-garde theatre inspired by the modernized city (Appollinaire’s Les Mammelles de Tiresias)
*Selected films that capture the early decades of modern Paris (Ballet Mecanique and Entr’Acte) among others

Week Three: Americans in Paris

*Selections from the writings of notable ex-patriots in Paris such as Hemingway (The Movable Feast), Gertrude Stein (excerpts from The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas and selected portraits), and James Baldwin (Giovanni’s Room)
*Selected essays on the Jazz Age and “Negrophilia” that swept through Paris in the first half of the 20th century, largely driven by the presence of African-Americans like the dancer Josephine Baker
*Essays exploring the impact of fantasies of “primitivism” on visual art (Picasso and Man Ray incorporate the African mask)

Week Four: The Streets Belong to Everyone: Cosmopolitan Paris

*Introduction to street art and graffiti: selected essays, videos
*Field trips to Les Frigo, Belleville, and le M.U.R.—hottbeds of street art, and to contemporary art galleries and museums bringing the street indoors (Palais de Tokyo, Addict Gallery and others)
*OPEN sessions to allow for unexpected opportunities in the city’s cultural life, and/or for particular interests of the group that emerge during the first weeks.