French 446: The Shoah and the Camps through a French Lens: Testimony, Film and Literature (Fall 2014)

Dr. Colin Keaveney, Department of French and Italian
keaveney@usc.edu
Course prerequisite: None

Until the late 1950s, concentration and death camp survivors were scarcely listened to; indeed, their stories were often met with embarrassment or impatience. Everybody had suffered, it was felt; no one wanted to hear these awful tales. By the 1990s, however, a vigorous curiosity had developed, fed by representations of the Holocaust in television and cinema. A new literature emerged, in both fiction and non-fiction categories. In parallel, there was a move to collect and archive oral accounts of survivors. We had entered what Annette Wieviorka calls the “era of testimony”. In this new era, the old impatience with the witness has arguably given way to a morbid fascination with suffering. The public is hungry for salacious details of Nazi era atrocities, but is not always patient enough, rigorous enough to “comprehend”.

In this class, we will take France as a case in point. Students shall explore how the concentration and extermination camps have been represented by French internees who went through them. Students will also study subsequent representations of the period in film and literature, which raise grave ethical and esthetic questions. Collaboration, resistance, hiding are also a focus of the course. While the perspective of the core texts and testimonies is French, there will be a comparative element to the class—students will also read relevant extracts from accounts emanating from other national, cultural and linguistic perspectives. In short, students will get to better understand what was ‘common’ as well as particularly French in these accounts and experiences.

Through the careful reading and analysis of testimony, memoirs, film etc., students will also think about: 1) how writing, speaking, or visual representations of such events engages with past traumas; and 2) how the imperatives to memorialize and testify have influenced the understanding of these experiences.