The American Essay

Code Apogée
1MIAM55

Composante(s)
UFR Langues et Civilisations

Période de l'année
Semestre 1

En bref

- **Mobilité d'études:** Oui
- **Accessible à distance:** Non

Présentation

Description

In this seminar we will examine the essay, and more particularly the personal essay, as a form. What makes an essay an essay? What distinguishes it from related forms such as the letter, the article, the sermon, or the academic essay? The essay has often been characterized by its spontaneity, its lack of system—characteristics which make it difficult to define. According to one of its great American practitioners, Joseph Epstein, it is “a form of discovery,” and so entirely unpredictable.

One way to approach the essay is to look at its history. The modern prose essay was born just outside Bordeaux at the end of the sixteenth century with the publication of Michel de Montaigne’s *Essais* (1580). After 1603, when these were translated by John Florio, a wave of imitations appeared in English. Montaigne's title, and the word essay itself, alerted readers to the fact that they were about to read something new, that they were aproaching a *new* point of view, a renewal in perspective. Later, the essay proliferated with the rise of the periodical which created a market for essay writing.

Right from the beginning, the essay had an anti-authoritarian bent. Montaigne managed to avoid being accused of impiety by claiming his essays were merely sketches, and so of little importance. His strategy served to circumvent authority. Apparent humility has remained an attribute of the essay, which often begins with the particular—personal—experience of the essayist and connects it to universal questions. Other important characteristics of the essay are its questioning stance, its skepticim, its openness, and thus its anti-dogmatism. The essay is not a means of conveying the whole (or even *a* whole) truth. It is the expression one observer’s vision.

In the United States, a large body of work has been produced since colonial times. We will work chronologically, from Benjamin Franklin to Joan Didion.

Informations non contractuelles.
Dernière mise à jour le 17 mai 2023

Contrôle des connaissances

In addition to weekly oral participation, students following the seminar will be required to make a short oral presentation of an essay. Assessment will be based on 1) oral participation and 2) on a written paper due at the end of the seminar. Students who cannot attend the seminar on a regular basis are invited to contact Madame Ricard (virginia.ricard@u-bordeaux-montaigne.fr) by email in September. They will have to write a paper and take an oral exam at the end of the semester.

Informations complémentaires

Ouvert aux étudiant·es en mobilité sous réserve du nombre de places disponibles.

Bibliographie

* Joseph Epstein, “The Personal Essay: A Form of Discovery” (1997).
* Aldous Huxley, “Preface” *Collected Essays* (1943).
* Phillip Lopate, “Introduction” *The Art of the Personal Essay* (1995).
* Jean Starobinski, “Peut-on définir l’*essai* ?” *Cahiers pour un temps*, (1985).
* Phillip Lopate (ed), T*he Glorious American Essay,* Pantheon 2020.

The first four are available on ecampus. Please read Joseph Epstein, “The Personal Essay: A Form of Discovery” before the first seminar.

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