

## COMS 601: The Problem of Communication

Department of Art History & Communication Studies  
McGill University  
Seminars: Thursdays 11:30-2:20  
Arts W5  
Fall 2013

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### COURSE OUTLINE:

**“Communication is not anything like a transportation of experiences, such as opinions and wishes, from the interior of one subject into the interior of another.”**

- Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time* (1927)

Communication is fraught. To be fraught is to carry threat or promise. The word derives from the Middle English verb *fraught*, for ‘to load with cargo’ which, in turn, derives from the Middle Dutch *vrecht*, for freight. Communication carries freight: a threat and a promise, a problem and a solution. This course will examine the problem/solution of communication as it has been treated in the tradition of western social and political thought, and also in challenges to this tradition. We will try to unpack the freight with which communication has been loaded, by close reading and discussion of selected primary texts.

### Required Texts:

The following required texts are available for purchase at The Word Bookstore, 469 rue Milton.

John Durham Peters. *Speaking into the Air: A History of the Idea of Communication* (Chicago, 1999)

Jacques Rancière. *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy* (Minnesota, 1999)

Availability of additional required readings will be discussed at our first meeting.

### Course requirements:

Seminar participation	-	20%
Seminar presentation	-	20%
Short papers (x6)	-	60%

*Seminar participation* will consist of vigorous engagement in weekly discussions of assigned texts. Consistent failure to attend or participate will be penalized.

*Seminar presentation* will consist of critical oral presentation (15-20 minutes) of one of the assigned weekly readings. Presentations should highlight major themes of the reading, identify points of illumination and/or contention, and serve as a platform for discussion.

*Short papers* will consist of brief (2 single-spaced pages max.) critical responses to one or more of the assigned readings. Papers should avoid excessive summary and description, and focus instead on points of critical interrogation of the text and its implications. Papers may illustrate points of critique and argument with reference to empirical evidence, actual cases, social phenomena, etc., or draw comparisons with other texts, but the primary focus of analysis should remain the assigned text in question. Students must complete six short papers over the course of the term, on readings selected from the schedule below. Short papers must be submitted in the body of an e-mail message to the course listserv ([probcomm@lists.mcgill.ca](mailto:probcomm@lists.mcgill.ca)) no later than 5 pm the evening before the reading is to be discussed in class. Papers submitted after this deadline will not be eligible for credit. Students are expected to read their peers’ short papers in preparation for class discussion.

**McGill University statement on academic integrity:**

McGill University values academic integrity. Therefore all students must understand the meaning and consequence of cheating, plagiarism and other academic offences under the code of student conduct and disciplinary procedures (see [www.mcgill.ca/integrity](http://www.mcgill.ca/integrity) for more information).

**SEMINAR SCHEDULE****Week 1 (Sept. 5): Course introduction**

John Durham Peters. "Introduction: The Problem of Communication," Speaking into the Air: A History of the Idea of Communication. 1-31.

**Week 2 (Sept. 12): The ancient (Greek) problem of communication: Plato and Aristotle**

Plato. Gorgias. 7-31.

Plato. Phaedrus. 88-103.

Aristotle. Rhetoric. Book I, Chapters 1-3. 5-18.

John Durham Peters. Speaking into the Air, Chapter 1. 33-62.

Michel Serres. "Platonic Dialogue," Hermes: Literature, Science and Philosophy (Johns Hopkins 1982.) 65-70

**Week 3 (Sept. 19): The modern (American) problem of communication**

Wilbur Schramm. "How Communication Works" The Process and Effects of Mass Communication. 1<sup>st</sup> edition, Edited by Wilbur Schramm, (Illinois, 1954). 3-26.

Harold Lasswell. "The Structure and Function of Communication in Society" The Process and Effects of Mass Communication. Revised edition. Edited by Wilbur Schramm & Donald Roberts (Illinois, 1971). 84-99.

Claude E. Shannon and Warren Weaver. The Mathematical Theory of Communication, (Illinois, 1949), 1-35.

Norbert Wiener. "Cybernetics in History," The Human Use of Human Beings: Cybernetics and Society. (Avon 1950) 23-39.

Paul F. Lazarsfeld and Robert K. Merton. "Mass Communication, Popular Taste and Organized Social Action" The Process and Effects of Mass Communication. Revised edition. Edited by Wilbur Schramm & Donald Roberts (Illinois, 1971). 554-578.

Charles H. Cooley. "The Significance of Communication," The Process and Effects of Mass Communication. Revised edition. Edited by Wilbur Schramm & Donald Roberts (Illinois, 1971). 643-654.

John Dewey. "Education as a Necessity of Life." Democracy and Education, 1-9; 81-88. The Public and its Problems, 151-159.

James W. Carey. "A Cultural Approach to Communication." Communication as Culture: Essays on Media and Society. 13-35.

*Supplementary:*

John Durham Peters. "Democracy and American Mass Communication Theory: Dewey, Lippmann, Lazarsfeld," Communication 11 (1989) 199-218.

**Week 4 (Sept. 26): The (Canadian) problem of communication**

Jody Berland, "Space at the Margins: Critical Theory and Colonial Space after Innis" Harold Innis in the New Century, eds. C. Acland and W. Buxton (McGill-Queen's 1999) 281-309.

Harold Innis "Transportation as a factor in Canadian economic history," Essays in Canadian Economic History, ed. Mary Q Innis, (Toronto: 1931/1956) 62-77.

--. "The Bias of Communication," and "A Plea for Time" The Bias of Communication 33-91 (Toronto: 1951/1995).

--. "The Strategy of Culture," Changing Concepts of Time (Rowman & Littlefield: 1952/2004) 1-20.  
Jane Jenson, "From Silence to Communication? What Innisians might learn by analyzing gender relations" in Harold Innis in the New Century, eds. C. Acland and W. Buxton (McGill-Queen's 1999) 177-195

### **Week 5 (Oct. 3): Habermas 1: The public sphere**

Jürgen Habermas. "The Public Sphere" Jürgen Habermas on Society and Politics, S. Seiman, ed. 231-6.  
--. The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere. 14-43; 159-175; 181-96; 211-222.  
Nancy Fraser. "Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy," in Habermas and the Public Sphere. Ed. Craig Calhoun (MIT 1992) 109-137.  
Jürgen Habermas. "Further Reflections on the Public Sphere" in Habermas and the Public Sphere. Ed. Craig Calhoun (MIT, 1992) 421-441.

#### *Supplementary:*

Seyla Benhabib. "Models of Public Space: Hannah Arendt, the Liberal Tradition and Jürgen Habermas." Situating the Self (Routledge, 1992) 89-113.

### **Week 6 (Oct. 10): Habermas 2: Communicative action and discourse ethics**

Jürgen Habermas. Theory of Communicative Action vol.1, 15-22.  
--. "A Modified Theoretical Framework." Section 3 of "Further Reflections on the Public Sphere" in Habermas and the Public Sphere. Ed. Craig Calhoun (MIT, 1992) 441-457.  
--. "Discourse Ethics: Notes on a Program of Philosophical Justification" Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action. 43-109.  
Iris Marion Young. "Communication and the Other: Beyond Deliberative Democracy," Intersecting Voices: Dilemmas of Gender, Political Philosophy and Policy (Princeton, 1997) 60-73.

#### *Supplementary:*

Jürgen Habermas. "Technology and Science as Ideology" in Toward a Rational Society (Beacon 1970). 81-122.  
Omid A. Payrow Shabani. Communicative Rationality and Moral Discourse. Democracy, Power and Legitimacy: The Critical Theory of Jürgen Habermas. 32-52.

### **Week 7 (Oct. 17): Different publics**

Michael Warner. Publics and Counterpublics, Chapters 1 & 2, (Zone 2002), 21-124.

### **Week 8 (Oct. 24): Communication and/after the metaphysics of presence: Derrida**

Jacques Derrida. "Structure, sign and play in the discourse of the human sciences" Writing and Difference (Chicago 1978) 278-294  
--. "Différance" and "Signature, Event, Context" Margins of Philosophy (Chicago, 1982) 1-28 307-330.  
Barbara Johnson. "Translator's Introduction," Dissemination (Chicago, 1983) vii-xvi.  
Jacques Derrida. "Hospitality, justice and responsibility: An interview with Jacques Derrida" Questioning Ethics: Contemporary Debates in Philosophy, Eds R. Kearney and M. Dooley (Routledge 1999) 14 pps.

### **Week 9 (Oct. 31): Communication undone: Judith Butler (and Roberto Esposito)**

Judith Butler. "On Linguistic Vulnerability," and "Burning Acts, Injurious Speech" Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative 1-69  
--."Violence, Mourning, Politics" Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence (Verso 2004) 19-49

--. "Bodies in Alliance: on the Politics of the Street" Institut européen pour des politiques culturelles en devenir. 2011. <http://www.eipcp.net/transversal/1011/butler/en>  
Roberto Esposito. "Introduction: Nothing in Common" Communitas: The Origin and Destiny of Community (Stanford) 20101-19

**Week 10 (Nov. 7): Disagreement: Jacques Rancière**

Jacques Rancière. Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy (Minnesota, 1999)

**Week 11 (Nov. 14): The (im)possibility of communication**

John Durham Peters. Speaking into the Air, Chapters 2-6, 63-261.

**Week 12 (Nov. 21): Communication's Others: Noise, interruption, absence, silence**

Davide Panagia. "The Piazza, the *Edicola*, and the noise of the Utterance," The Political Life of Sensation (Duke, 2009) 45-73.

Amit Pinchevski. "Introduction" and "Communication as Ethics," By Way of Interruption: Levinas and the Ethics of Communication (Duchesne 2005) 1-13; 21-25; 67-102.

John Durham Peters. "Conclusion: A Squeeze of the Hand" Speaking into the Air, 263-272.

Wendy Brown. "Freedom's Silences," Edgework: Critical Essays on Knowledge and Politics (Princeton 2005) 83-97

**Week 13 (Nov. 28): Communication and the end of politics: Jodi Dean**

Jodi Dean. "Technology: The Promises Communicative Capitalism" and "Democracy: A Knot of Hope and Despair," Democracy and other Neoliberal Fantasies: Communicative Capitalism and Left Politics (Duke 2009) 19-48; 75-94.

--. "Affective Networks" Blog Theory: Feedback and Capture in the Circuits of Drive (Polity 2010) 91-126.

*Supplementary:*

Jodi Dean. "Enjoyment as a category of political theory," Žižek's Politics (Routledge 2006) 1-46.