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.


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) 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 for more information).

SEMINAR SCHEDULE

Week 1 (Sept. 5): Course introduction

Week 2 (Sept. 12): The ancient (Greek) problem of communication: Plato and Aristotle
Plato. Phaedrus. 88-103.

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

Supplementary:

Week 4 (Sept. 26): The (Canadian) problem of communication
Week 5 (Oct. 3): Habermas 1: The public sphere

Jürgen Habermas. “The Public Sphere” in *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:


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


Supplementary:


Week 7 (Oct. 17): Different publics


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” in *Writing and Difference* (Chicago 1978) 278-294


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


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


**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**


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


*Supplementary:*