The Poetry of Anthropology
ANTH 513-FALL 2020
McGill University

The Remote Delivery Edition

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Marco Ferreri 1969, *Dillinger is Dead*
The seminar addresses the relationship between poetry and anthropology. Considering both the anthropological study of poetry and the poetic dimension of anthropology, the course examines questions of affect, image, language and media but also of narrative, history and politics. Bringing together several domains of anthropological research and theory, the seminar thinks of anthropology as a terrain in which social science and poetry cannot be thought apart.

Understood as a domain of experience (poiesis) or as a verbal composition, poetry has been a relevant dimension of anthropological thought and research. Since Giambattista Vico’s *New Science* (1744) these overlapping notions have constituted one of the terrains to gauge the destiny of the human and reflect on the phenomenon of language. Often interwoven with the study of religion and myth, anthropological studies of poetry have sought to link poiesis and expression to other domains of social life such as politics and ritual, while at the same time investigating poetry as a linguistic phenomenon.

The course is an in-progress exploration of these questions: students will develop a conceptual and methodological toolkit to approach poetry from an anthropological perspective.
It seems that this is a difficulty pertaining to our times: there is as yet only one possible choice, and this choice can bear only on two equally extreme methods: either to posit a reality which is entirely permeable to history, and ideologize; or, conversely, to posit a reality which is ultimately impenetrable, irreducible, and, in this case, poetize. In a word, I do not yet see a synthesis between ideology and poetry (by poetry I understand, in a very general way, the search for the inalienable meaning of things). The fact that we cannot manage to achieve more than an unstable grasp of reality doubtless gives the measure of our present alienation: we constantly drift between the object and its demystification, powerless to render its wholeness. For if we penetrate the object, we liberate it but we destroy it; and if we acknowledge its full weight, we respect it, but we restore it to a state which is still mystified.

It would seem that we are condemned for some time yet always to speak excessively about reality. This is probably because ideologism and its opposite are types of behaviour which are still magical, terrorized, blinded and fascinated by the split in the social world. And yet, this is what we must seek: a reconciliation between reality and men, between description and explanation, between object and knowledge.

R. Barthes Mythologies
If conditions for a positive reception of lyric poetry have become less favorable, it is reasonable to assume that only in rare instances is lyric poetry in rapport with the experience of its readers. This may be due to a change in the structure of their experience. Even though one may approve of this development, one may be all the more hard put to it to say precisely in what respect there may have been a change. Thus one turns to philosophy for an answer, which brings one up against a strange situation. Since the end of the last century, philosophy has made a series of attempts to lay hold of the “true” experience as opposed to the kind that manifests itself in the standardized, denatured life of the civilized masses. It is customary to classify these efforts under the heading of a philosophy of life. Their point of departure, understandably enough, was not man’s life in society. What they invoked was poetry, preferably nature, and, most recently, the age of myths. Dilthey’s book Das Erlebnis und die Dichtung represents one of the earliest of these efforts which end with Klages and Jung; both made common cause with Fascism.

Walter Benjamin On Some Motives in Baudlair, 1938
COURSE ACTIVITIES

**main activity:** read whatever you think constitutes a poem and read it repeatedly for several times a day for several days, read it in different ways, repetition is difference

Every week

Flexible Activities (MyCourses [mycourse])
- Digital SM: audio and video
- Readings, required and suggested
- Discussions and assignments

Fixed Activity: Zoom resonances
- Fridays 2:30-3:30/3 connect via zoom if you can.

Zoom sessions will be mostly improvised around a “poem”
following the lead of Pauline Oliveros’s [Sound Meditations](#) to think about collective practices
and Alvin Lucier’s [I am sitting in a Room](#) to think about the mediated condition of our encounters

Assignments

Detailed instructions on MyCourses. All assignments due on MyCourses at 6pm.

Weekly assignments will be counted and graded only after the end of Drop/Add but you can start to submit them sooner (so you can pick up the rhythm).

a) **Weekly comment (10 %) due Fridays at 6pm**
Each week, write a paragraph (max 300 words) in the appropriate section of MyCourses. You can comment on readings, class discussions, poems, or whatever else struck you in relation to the course during the week. And/or relate something outside of class to the themes of the course. *Avoid Summaries.* Consider this a retrospective reflection on the week of activities and readings. It’s a conversation between you and SM. A comment that is more than 24h late will be counted ½ point. A missing comment is 0.

b) **Weekly Discussion post on readings/read other posts (10%) due Thursdays at 6pm**
Each week write at least one post on the assigned readings for that week in the discussion board on MyCourses. Post might be articulated questions on an entire reading or a passage, comments, critical interventions, requests for clarifications.... Read and engage the other participants’ posts, it will help you formulate your ideas and you’ll learn more about the essays.
Grade will take into account overall engagement and precision (demonstrating you read the essays). Substitutes participation. A comment that is more than 24h late will be counted ½ point. A missing comment is 0.

c) Ethnography of a poem (40 %) final write up due Dec 15th.

Ethnography is here understood in the broad sense of an empirical analysis based on anthropologically inflected categories and practices, not necessarily on participant observation, though you can experiment with remote/online. There is no predetermined notion of what counts as poetry (song, commercial line, children’s rhyme, sound or video composition, ritual expression, ancient or contemporary poetry) however you will need to explain how what you choose relates to poetry, poetics, poiesis following leads from the seminar.

This assignment is divided in 5 steps. The first four steps are +/- 500 words, worth 5% each. The last step, (worth 20%) is a revision of four previous ones, +/- 2000 words, based on SM’s comments. More instructions on MyCourses.

c 1) Choose a “poem” and explain why it matters to a certain group of people (due Sept 22).

c 2) Poetic Function of the poem or its hesitations between sound and sense (due Oct 6).


   c 4) Relate the ethnography to at least a week’s theme/ one course reading (due Nov. 10).

   c 5) Final write up about 2000 words. (due Dec 15).

d) Conceptual Question (20%) due Monday October 19th

Write 1000 words to answer one among several questions on course readings.

e) Develop a keyword (20%) choose by Sept 17, due Nov 26th

Drawing on required and suggested readings, in addition to your own bibliographic explorations, write up 1000 words about a keyword relevant to the course. SM will offer a preliminary list of keywords but you can develop others if you prefer. Keyword can be related to c 4) above. Imagine this as an entry in a dictionary/Encyclopedia/Reference work, giving a sense of what is relevant about keyword and how one can approach it anthropologically. You can work together with other course participants as long as each of you contributes at least 1000 words. You will be graded for effort and accuracy of your observations. There will be a collective doc on Teams (link in MyCourses) to which we will all contribute and SM will provide instructions on how to develop keyword. Choose keyword by Sept 17.

LATE ASSIGNMENTS

Get in touch if you need accommodations

Weekly comments or posts that are more than 24h late will be counted ½ point. A missing comment or post is 0. If for whatever reason you have difficulties respecting deadlines for
assignments c) d) e) let me know in advance. If you are late submitting c) d) e) without prior consultation with SM, I will take out ½ % every 72H.
Plagiarism has been part of poetry all along, or at least since poems were considered as having an author (read for example Barthes or Foucault on this). Plagiarism is about subject formation and as such it is related to money [this, but especially this p 132-139] and the law. [you can write a paper about all this. See also Perloff’s book Unoriginal Genious].

Whatever your stance or attitude, consider that our institution takes plagiarism seriously, so read this McGill document. In grading your written work, I might submit it to a text matching software to guarantee that everyone will be evaluated on the basis of their own work. If you prefer I do not submit your work to the software, let me know beforehand: you are free, without penalty of grade, to choose as alternative ways of attesting to the authenticity of your work: a) an oral examination on your work that demonstrates your knowledge b) an in class test on the topic.

1. "McGill University values academic integrity. Therefore, all students must understand the meaning and consequences of cheating, plagiarism and other academic offences under the Code of Student Conduct and Disciplinary Procedures (see www.mcgill.ca/students/srr/honest/ for more information) (approved by Senate on 29 January 2003). — "L’université McGill attache une haute importance à l’honnêteté académique. Il incombe par conséquent à tous les étudiants de comprendre ce que l’on entend par tricherie, plagiat et autres infractions académiques, ainsi que les conséquences que peuvent avoir de telles actions, selon le Code de conduite de l’étudiant et des procédures disciplinaires (pour de plus amples renseignements, veuillez consulter le site www.mcgill.ca/students/srr/honest/)."

2. In accord with McGill University’s Charter of Students’ Rights, students in this course have the right to submit in English or in French any written work that is to be graded.” (approved by Senate on 21 January 2009 - see also the section in this document on Assignments and evaluation.) — "Conformément à la Charte des droits de l’étudiant de l’Université McGill, chaque étudiant a le droit de soumettre en français ou en anglais tout travail écrit devant être noté (sauf dans le cas des cours dont l’un des objets est la maîtrise d’une langue)."

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In the event of extraordinary circumstances beyond the University’s control, the content and/or evaluation scheme in this course is subject to change.
COURSE MATERIAL

What to read is a recurring dilemma... [http://www.ubu.com/film/davey_50.html]

See calendar for required readings marked by • available either via links or in Mycourses

Vico, The New Science (1744) is not a required but is the basso continuo of the seminar. English translation by Thomas Goddard Bergin and Max Harold Fisch is available on the internet. A good recent English intro to the work is Verene, D. P. Vico’s “New Science”: A Philosophical Commentary. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2015 (available in Project Muse)

Read what you think is poetry

Paper copies of Feld’s Sound and Sentiment and Pandolfo’s Impasse of the Angles are available via Paragraphe Bookstore.

CALENDAR

See also synoptic table at the end
• = required reading

NB in the course of the seminar we might collectively decide to alter some of the required readings

The calendar below lists the required and suggested readings for each week, with a few words of introduction. For the list of weekly activities, refer to MyCourses

Part 1 Poetry as Deterritorialization

WEEK 1 AND 2 – ANTHROPOLOGY AND POETRY

These four different approaches to the nexus anthropology/poetry from four disparate angles are meant to open the seminar with a series of questions, not necessarily to find answers but to delineate a trajectory of reflection. In his analysis of anthropological discourse, De Certeau locates poetry (chant more specifically) as the unrepresentable kernel of alterity that structures anthropology as difference. Cixous provides an alternative (perhaps opposite perhaps parallel) analysis of the relationship between form and desire: poetry is precisely what allows difference to proliferate. On a different plane, Moten also pushes beyond the notion of representation of alterity to argue for “no-thing” as a poetic strategy of relocation. Instead, Abel reworks the colonial limits of anthropology into a new fragmented poetic configuration that allows for rereading anthropology in a different key.


• Moten, F. (2014) “Poetics of the Undercommons” in my courses, or as a sound file https://soundcloud.com/threewallls/fred-moton-lecture-3-13-14


Other lines, parallel inquiries
A comment on Lacan-poetry-the feminine, with a discussion of Cixous and a psychoanalytic take on poetry as a compromise formation.
Part 2 Language/Poetry/Poetics

WEEK 3 - THE LANGUAGES OF ANTHROPOLOGY

Two foundational approaches to language in anthropology


Other lines, parallel inquiries:

WEEK 4 POETRY AS FUNCTION

Poetry as a specific function of language, poetry as the gap between sound and sense


Suggested:
Other lines, parallel inquiries


**WEEK 5 – LANGUAGE AS PERFORMANCE, LANGUAGE AS TEXT**

Linguistic anthropology, especially in North America, has been mostly concerned with the pragmatic aspects of language, its use and hence its relationship with social orders and disorders. B & B is a classic key review text.


  https://muse-jhu-edu.proxy3.library.mcgill.ca/article/521688

Suggested
Especially, Chapter 3, the Constitution of Oral Texts  
Barber’s book dwells on the notion of text from a more social anthropology inflection (or UK if you prefer) and builds on classic anthropological studies of “orality”

**WEEK 6 - POETRY AS A MODE OF EXISTENCE**

“We are still waiting for a didactic poem where thought itself would be and would remain poetic” - Schiller

Two divergent approaches to the question of *poiesis*, both coming to terms in different ways with aesthetic, philosophical and theological questions.

Chapters 1, 2, 3
See also Agamben, Gesture or the Structure of Art 2011, lecture EGS
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v4bKAEz3TF0


Other lines, parallel inquiries
- Parmenides http://philoctetes.free.fr/parmenidesunicode.htm to be/not to be

Part 3 Elementary Forms of Poetic Life

**WEEK 7 - RHYTHM**

“Socialement et individuellement, l’homme est un animal rythmique” Marcel Mauss Manuel d’Ethnographie [1967: 85]


Other lines, parallel inquiries
This is an unusual and possibly problematic but also interesting article on the relationship between weaving and poetry

WEEK 8 - SOUND

“The poem: a prolonged hesitation between sound and sense” (Le poème, hésitation prolongée entre le son et le sens) Paul Valéry

Classic ethnography detailing the relationship between sound and song via mythographic and performance analysis


Other lines, parallel inquiries
- René Lussier Le trésor de la langue https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TcGTLiSf6FQ
- Cecil Taylor http://wings.buffalo.edu/epc/authors/funkhouser/ceciltaylor.html

In Taylor’s, the spoken words, the speaking of the words, are not an arbitrary feature but are instead constitutive of that which is not but nothing other than (the improvisation of) ritual, writing, ritual as a form of writing. There, the words are never independent of gesture, but the gesture is never given priority over the words-as-sound. For gestures (and spatial direction) are given there as the sounded, re-sounded (which is to say transformed, bent, extended, improvised) and resounding (which is to say generative) word.
- Tedlock, D Ideophones, Journal of Linguistic Anthropology 1999
Breathing (a timely topic if there was one in 2020 from BLM to covid) is central to many poetic traditions, related to voice, sound and rhythm


- Mackey, N. (2016), Breath and Precarity
  [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QlrPmLEYmsE](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QlrPmLEYmsE)
  or in Kim, Myung Mi, and Cristanne Miller, editors. *Poetics and Precarity*. State University of New York Press

- Berardi, Franco Bifo. *Breathing : Chaos and Poetry*. Semiotext(e), 2019
  Chapter 1
  [https://mcgill.overdrive.com/media/C8080635-B6CA-40B3-A385-8CB3A857944D](https://mcgill.overdrive.com/media/C8080635-B6CA-40B3-A385-8CB3A857944D)

*Other lines, parallel inquiries*
- Artaud: Pour en finir avec le jugement de Dieux [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EXy7IsGNZ5A](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EXy7IsGNZ5A)
- Henry Chopin: Sound Poems [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mg3NrR7_jYk](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mg3NrR7_jYk)

**WEEK 10 - LINES**

Lines are one of the constitutive elements of poetry, in several traditions they distinguish poetry from prose, but as anthropologists have shown, this is not a rigid or clear cut distinction. Lines rather are (imperfect) measures and as such matrixes of repetition and difference.

Other lines, parallel inquiries

- Dragani, A. 2015. La muse de l’anthropologie américaine, *Terrain* [En ligne], 64 1 [http://terrain.revues.org/15630](http://terrain.revues.org/15630) ; DOI : 10.4000/terrain.15630

**WEEK 11 - HISTORY**

As Vico argued history shapes humans and their forms of thought and feeling: Benjamin historicizes experience in the wake of the birth of the modern metropole – Goodman unpacks the layering of colonialism and nationalism sedimented in a poem.


Other lines, parallel inquiries

**WEEK 12 - TECHNOLOGY**

What defines the apparatuses that we have to deal with in the current phase of capitalism is that they no longer act as much through the production of a subject, as through the processes of what can be called desubjectification. A desubjectifying moment is certainly implicit in every process of subjectification. G. Agamben, *What is an apparatus?*


Other lines, Parallel inquiries

**WEEK 13 - CONCLUSION**
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<tr>
<th>Week</th>
<th>theme</th>
<th>Listen/watch</th>
<th>read</th>
<th>b)Discuss TH</th>
<th>c) Ethnography TUE</th>
<th>d) question</th>
<th>e) Keyword</th>
<th>Zoom</th>
<th>a)Comment FRI</th>
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<tr>
<td>Week 1</td>
<td>Poetry as deterritorialization</td>
<td>SM digital</td>
<td>De Certeau, Cixous, Moten, Abel</td>
<td>post/s TH 6pm read the others’</td>
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<td>FRI 2:30-3:30</td>
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<td>Poetry as deterritorialization</td>
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<td>Same as above</td>
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<td>The Languages of Anthropology</td>
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<td>Sapir Malinowski</td>
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<td>Choose Keyword TH 6</td>
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<td>Poetry as Function</td>
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<td>Jakobson</td>
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<td>Week 5</td>
<td>Language as Performance, as Text</td>
<td>SM digital</td>
<td>Bauman Briggs, Webster</td>
<td>post/s TH 6pm read the others’</td>
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<td>Mode of Existence</td>
<td>SM digital</td>
<td>Agamben, Bateson</td>
<td>post/s TH 6pm read the others’</td>
<td>c 2) poetic due TUE Oct 6</td>
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<td>SM digital</td>
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<td>Sound</td>
<td>SM digital</td>
<td>S. Feld</td>
<td>post/s TH 6pm read the others’</td>
<td>Due Monday Oct 19</td>
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<td>Breath</td>
<td>SM digital</td>
<td>Bifo, Green, Mackey</td>
<td>post/s TH 6pm read the others’</td>
<td>c 3) cont/entex due TUE Oct 27</td>
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<td>Lines</td>
<td>SM digital</td>
<td>• Pandolfo</td>
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<th>History</th>
<th>SM digital</th>
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<th>c 4) relate due Nov. 10</th>
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<th>c 5) Final Write up</th>
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