COMS 611/ArtH 731: History/Theory/Technology
Winter 2017
(Secret title: “let’s read some books with Jonathan”)
Fridays 11:30-14:30, Arts W5

Professor Jonathan Sterne
Office: Arts W280 (3rd floor, west wing)
Office hours: by advance appointment, please, though I will stick around after class on Fridays
Office Phone: 398-5852 (I rarely pick up; I check voicemail about once a day MWF)
Email: jonathan.sterne@mcgill.ca (I check at least once daily M-F when I’m in town—please allow a couple days for a reply.)

Prospectus
This seminar will engage with a number of new approaches to materiality and its various others in the history and theory of technology, from a variety of disciplinary and epistemological perspectives. The term materiality is everywhere in humanities discourse right now. Scholars who agree on nothing else will still speak in the name of materiality or appeal to it at key moments in their arguments. In this class, we will examine some competing approaches to the “material” dimensions of media, culture, and technology. Is materiality the key to a new theory of the human and ecology? Is it a path back to old arguments about base and superstructure? Is embodiment a form of materiality or subject to it? Is materiality found in the workings of machinery, infrastructure, or standards? Relations of power and difference? Is it a path out of the maze of discourse or a supreme form of academic self-delusion? Is materiality the base of our existence or a product of it? Does materiality offer us better theories of power or take us away from the contests of politics?

This is also a course in the crafts of writing media history and constructing theory. To this end, we will engage assigned texts through a practice of hermeneutic reverse-engineering. We will read from the inside out, engaging the intersections of history, theory and technology through a careful understanding of the discursive fields from which our authors draw and to which they contribute. Every scholar should practice and develop their skills in these areas. Every humanities thesis makes historical claims (many have a “history chapter”) and there is no such thing as atheoretical scholarship, only scholarship unaware of its own theoretical implications.

We will engage history and theory by thinking through how others write it, by imitating them, and in our imperfect imitations, try out a wide variety of styles, adaptations, and methods. This is a class in practice, more in the musician’s sense of “go home and practice” than the activist’s sense of “moving from theory to praxis.” Class time will feature discussion of assigned texts and those generated by students, lectures, and occasional creative, collaborative, or experimental projects. In lieu of a major term paper, students will produce a series of short essays according to the protocol defined below, and a final revision essay that makes use of prior work from the course. There will be guest stars.
Required Readings

Required books will be available at The Word bookstore, 469 Milton St. 514-845-5640, http://www.wordbookstore.ca/. Please note that they take cash or check only. Online sellers obviously will accept credit cards if you go that route. Books are also on 3-hour reserve at the Humanities and Social Sciences Library. For this seminar, it is strongly recommended that you work with paper copies of books, rather than digital copies.

In addition, all required and recommended articles will be made available to students through the course website or other means.

Recommended books will be on reserve at the Humanities and Social Sciences Library.

Class Schedule

Bring printed copies of readings to class

A link to help you do the readings:

6 Jan: Apologia: Materiality and More


Kittler, Friedrich. “Preface” and “Introduction.” Gramophone-Film-Typewriter, xxxix-xli; 1-19. Translated by Geoffrey Winthrop-Young. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999. [I have included the translators preface in case it is helpful, but it is not assigned.]


Supplemental:
What’s the deal with your professor? If you don’t know, visit http://sterneworks.org/Text/ or check out MP3 or The Audible Past (intros are free online—links on my site).


13 Jan: Hermeneutic Reverse-Engineering 101 + Some Varieties of Materialist Media Historiography


**Supplemental:**


20 Jan: **Ecology**


**Supplemental:**


27 Jan: **Science and Technology Studies (class ends early at 2pm)**


**Supplemental:**

Readings on the Morzov controversy (TBA)


3 Feb: **Surveillance**


Simone Browne will be visiting and delivering public talks that week at McGill (Weds 1 Feb) and Concordia (Thurs 2 Feb). We may also have some visitors from Concordia.

**Supplemental:**


10 Feb: **Containment + the Material Form of Scholarship**

Class meets in the Cultural Studies Screening Room, 3475 Peel, Room 101.


The film *Containment* will be screened during our seminar time, followed by a discussion with Peter Galison, our special guest star. Darin Barney’s infrastructure seminar will be visiting ours.

**Supplemental:**


17 Feb: **Matter**

Barad, Karen. *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of*
Matter and Meaning. Durham: Duke University Press, 2007. This is likely to be a more difficult book. You may want to start on it early.

Supplemental:

24 Feb: Digital Economy

Sumanth Gopinath will be visiting our seminar on the 24th and delivering a talk later that day.

Supplemental:

3 March: Reading Week

Please post photos of palm trees to the course website.

9 March 11:30-14:30 Infrastructure: **NOTE ALTERNATE TIME AND DAY**

Nicole Starosielski will be visiting Darin Barney's infrastructure seminar on the 9th of March. We will join them. Papers will be due 24 hours early this week. She will also be speaking at the Climate Realism conference.

Supplemental:
10 March: **Climate Realism Conference.** Attendance encouraged!  
[http://www.climaterealism.ca](http://www.climaterealism.ca)

17 March: **Disability**


**Supplemental:**


24 March **Remedial/Shoreing Up Week**

Prof will be at the Society for Cinema and Media Studies. Class meets sans prof or we reschedule. You will choose one book from a menu I provide to fill a gap in your education. You may propose alternatives. Yes, it’s cheating if you read it for another class this term.

31 March **Media Archaeology / Media Art History**


**Supplemental:**


7 April **Long-Term Historiography**


**Supplemental:**


**Course Requirements and Expectations**

**Etiquette:**

1. Full and complete attendance, attention, participation, listening and reading (of required texts). I expect the very best you can give.

2. Good faith and good humor toward your colleagues in the classroom. For both: disagreements are expected and encouraged, but please keep nitpicking to a minimum; personal attacks and intimidation are not acceptable under any circumstances. If you have something critical to say, be prepared to explain how the piece could be improved given what the author hoped to achieve. Follow the Golden Rule. Encourage basic questions as well as advanced ones. If you don’t know something, admit it. You are probably not alone. **Finally, we want to avoid seek-and-destroy hermeneutics.** Therefore, students are allowed one (1) seek-and-destroy analysis of a reading per term, for when you just can’t stand it. But choose wisely. Once you’ve used it, you’ve used it.

3. Your job as a participant is to listen actively to what others have to say and advance the discussion. If you are confident contributor use your confidence for good and not evil. Help bring others into discussion, refer to your classmates by name, and be positive about the contributions of those who do not say as much.

4. While personal anecdotes are allowed, keep in mind this is a PhD seminar. Others may disagree with your interpretation of your experience. This is encouraged and allowed. If you are not comfortable with this, do not share your story.

5. Awkward Silences and hesitation are okay. Don’t feel you need to rush to speak and don’t worry if you need a little time to articulate something. Contributing to class discussion is more than the frequency of the times your hand goes up and the number of words you say. If you are struggling to articulate something, that’s probably a sign that you are saying something that is new and not obvious.

6. Difficult content: There’s been a lot of talk in the press about content warnings and student comfort in the classroom. As your prof, I will never do anything intentionally to shock or traumatize students. At the same time, it’s our job to discuss difficult subjects in class, and nobody can predict the effect some materials may have on someone. I will try and give previews of the kinds of content you will encounter before you encounter it. If I forget, feel free to ask. If you are having difficulty dealing with a class discussion or a
reading or recording, you may raise the issue as part of the discussion (keeping in mind #4 above), or you may simply discretely step out of class. A note to the prof would be helpful after the fact so that we know what happened and don’t think you just got up and left.

**Technology Policy**

This course will encourage the thoughtful use of scholarly technologies such as talking and reading, computers and the internet, pen and paper, projection and chalkboards, etc.

For our “talking about ideas” components, you will use a writing utensil and paper (unless you bring me a note from the Office for Students With Disabilities). The classroom will not be an environment of “ambient computing.” If you need to open a computer (or any device with a screen, microprocessor and internet connection) to look stuff up, you will do that and then close the device.

If we have group activities, computing devices may be involved, depending on the activity.

We will discuss this technology policy on the first day of class.

**Product (and % of semester grade):**

**I. Participation (20%)**

I expect everyone to participate regularly in class discussion. You should come every week having done all of the readings and ready to discuss them. I notice (and appreciate it) when students make good contributions to the course online or in other ways besides speaking up in class. Please note that I distinguish between quantity and quality. I also notice when students are routinely late and/or absent.

See Etiquette above for my expectations.

If necessary, I will keep a speakers list and call on people.

**II. Semester Project (80%), aka, “The Process. Commit to the process.”**

1. **12 January: The commitment.**

By 5pm on 12 January, you must submit a proposed topic to me for your semester project. The 1-2 page document will offer a 1-paragraph description of what you intend to research, and a list of potential places to go looking for primary source materials that matches well with the kinds of materials discussed in the readings. Please also list 5 secondary sources you can consult, ideally other scholars in your field (or a related field) who have written about your topic.

Note: This commitment is not provisional; once I approve it (and I may ask you to modify), you are committed to it for the entire term, though you can take it anywhere you like.
Your topic should be broad enough to keep you interested for 12 weeks, narrow enough to actually yield something like a conference talk or a journal article.

Importantly, your topic does not have to be completely original. You can research something that’s already been researched. There is no burden of originality at all in object choice. In fact, I recommend avoiding the impulse to be too clever at this stage.

You must also avoid your planned dissertation or thesis topic. Choose something similar, allied, orthogonal or completely different to it, so long as you’re comfortable with the topic and it’s interesting to you. This will allow you greater room to experiment and also, free you of a certain amount of ego-investment in the topic. I can provide examples from prior seminars.

2. **Weekly (except as noted): the dossier.**

Each week (by Thursday, 5pm), you will acquire at least one artifact or document for your semester project in that has some relation to the week’s reading assignment. Some weeks I will give more direct guidance than others. If your object is not digital, you will find a way to document it digitally, and post your document to a folder on the MyCourses site for this class.

You are, of course, welcome to collect more, but this is meant to be a process of weekly accumulation. Even if you collect a lot of documents in a single week, you are expected to keep at it week after week.

3. **Weekly (except as noted): papers.**

Each week (by Thursday, 5pm), you will upload to MyCourses a short paper of approximately 500-800 words (2-3 pages double-spaced in a standard font, excluding citations). If the class prefers to do this by listserv, we can share work that way. The paper will make use of the document or artifact you acquired for the week (if you acquired more than one, focus on one, though others may be mentioned if necessary; you may also refer to material from previous weeks).

The paper must be written in the style of the author we have read for the week. Based on your own hermeneutic reverse-engineering of the text, choose an aspect of the week’s assigned reading to imitate and try your best to imitate it. Your job is to try and occupy the same discursive headspace as the reading, except with your own material. The relevant aspects of “style” here are up to your interpretation. Is it something about the author’s prose style that is relevant? Her analytical approach or theoretical commitments? The types of source materials he uses? We will discuss the mechanics of this in class on 13 January.

Bring your paper to class (and your artifact if it’s good for show-and-tell) and be prepared to discuss your choices.
4. **Weekly (except as noted): in-class readings.**

Each week, we will have one or more students read from their papers, which will lead us into a discussion of the assigned text for the week. I may revise or modify this practice as seems fitting for class discussion. I may not do this when guests are visiting if it makes people too nervous. We will discuss.

5. **18 April, 5pm:** The “Not-Really-Final” paper (posted in the appropriate place on the course website). By the time you reach this stage, you will have produced over 20 pages of text, in many different styles. For this project, you will revise them into a single paper, with a coherent argumentative arc and style. **This is strictly an exercise in writing and revision.** You must get my permission to do additional research; new research at this stage will interfere with the main purposes of this assignment, which is to focus on writing and revision. In exchange for this requirement, you are allowed factual gaps in the paper, noting places where you would need to do more research on a topic before actually presenting or submitting the work somewhere beyond this class.

For the purpose of this assignment, you may choose to produce either:

a) a paper of no less than 1800 and no more than 2000 words *excluding* footnotes and bibliography, suitable for conference presentation. The word limit is strict because at most conferences you would have a strict time limit between 12 and 20 minutes. I’m giving you somewhere between 15-20 minutes as if you were to read 2000 words aloud at a reasonable pace. (I don’t endorse the practice of just reading papers aloud at conferences, but it’s a guide for what you could cover.)

b) a paper of at least 7000 but no more than 9000 words *including* notes and bibliography in the format of something that could be submitted to a journal. Again, the upper limit is strict because it would be strict with a journal.

**Other Policies**

**French:** You have the right to submit your written work in French and some years one or more students in my seminars choose to do so. If you plan to write in French, please get in touch with me during add-drop so we can talk about how to handle it, as I am not particularly good at French. Normally it’s not a problem but we should discuss how it will work.

Class discussions are in English, but you are encouraged to resort to French if you can’t find the right word in English and we’ll figure it out together. You are also welcome to read course materials in French (where they are available in French). Discussions of linguistic and translation differences are a welcome part of the seminar.

**Accommodation:** If you require special accommodations or classroom modifications of any kind, please notify both the professor and Office for Students with Disabilities by the
end of the first week in which you are enrolled in the course. They are located in Room RS56, Redpath Library, 398-6009 (voice), 398-8198 (TTD), [http://www.mcgill.ca/osd/].

**Nondiscrimination:** If there is something I can do to make the class more hospitable, please let me know. I value equality of opportunity, and human dignity and diversity. In accordance with University policy, I will not tolerate discrimination or harassment on the basis of race, color, ethnic or national origin, civil status, religion, creed, political convictions, language, sex, sexual orientation, social condition, age, personal difference or the use of assistive technology in negotiating that difference. Among other things, this means that you do not have to agree with your teacher, the assigned readings, or the majority of your classmates in order to do well in this course. You are, however, obligated to demonstrate an understanding of the course material *whether or not you agree with it.*

**Auditors:** I would like auditors to participate in the weekly writing exercises for the weeks they will attend, so that everyone in the room is on equal footing. If I grant you permission to audit, you are bound by the same etiquette rules as the enrolled students. There will be exceptions to this policy for days when we have out of town visitors.

**How to Interpret McGill’s Inflated Graduate-Level Grades:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>Good work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A-</td>
<td>Satisfactory</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B+</td>
<td>There is a problem with what you submitted</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>There is a substantial problem with what you submitted</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B-</td>
<td>Lowest possible passing grade in a graduate course; indicates a major problem but not a failure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C+ or lower</td>
<td>Officially considered a “fail” by the Graduate Studies Office.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In rare cases, if your performance on any assignment is not satisfactory, I may ask you to do it again.

**You must complete all the major assignments to pass the course.**

**Late assignments** may not receive written comments and will earn a reduced grade (one increment of letter grade for the first two days, then an increment per day, including weekends). Late weekly papers will not be useful for class and will receive a diminished grade immediately. **It is your responsibility to make sure I receive any assignment you turn in.**

Activities for which you must be present cannot be made up.

**It is also your responsibility to properly back up your work:** keep more than one digital copy of your work. In the case of writing, keep a paper copy as well. I recommend syncing your important documents to a cloud storage service.

**The K contract:** At McGill, grades of incomplete are called “K” grades and they are only supposed to be assigned after the student and professor have agreed upon a contract. I do not give incompletes (“K” grades) except in truly extraordinary personal circumstances.
that can be documented. K grades revert to “F” grades at the end of the next term unless a contract extension is signed by both professor and student. Extensions also will not be granted except in truly extraordinary circumstances.

**The Passive-Aggressive K:** Should a student fail to turn in a final paper and fail to contact me well before my deadline for submission of grades, I will issue a K grade without a contract. Graduate studies, however, still expects a contract to be filed and it will be the student’s responsibility to make sure one is submitted. In these circumstances, should the paper be completed at a later date, it will receive a mark. However, students who receive a “K” in this fashion will not be eligible to receive an “A” or “A-” for the course. I will not sign an extension for a K grade that was granted without a contract, and no late paper will be graded without a K contract being in place beforehand. I also cannot promise comments on a paper submitted after a passive-aggressive K.

**Required Academic Integrity Statement:** 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/integrity for more information).

**Special Required Emergency Syllabus-Eraser Clause:** In the event of extraordinary circumstances beyond the University’s control, the content and/or evaluation scheme in this course is subject to change.

**Meta:**