

HISTORIOGRAPHY AND POSTSTRUCTURALISM

ENGC 521A – FALL 2004

Mondays 2:05-4:55pm

Jonathan Sterne

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Office hours: by appointment

Required Books (available for this course at the McGill bookstore):

Lynn Spigel. 1992. *Make Room for TV: Television and the Suburban Ideal in Postwar America*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

John Durham Peters. 1999. *Speaking Into Air: A History of the Idea of Communication*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Lauren Rabinovitz and Abraham Geil, eds. 2004. *Memory Bytes: History, Technology and Digital Culture*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2004.

Michel Foucault. 1978. *The History of Sexuality Volume I: An Introduction* (trans. Robert Hurley). New York: Vintage Books.

A packet of required course readings will be available.

Recommended Books (sizable chunks are assigned and will be available as photocopies; you should consider seeking out and purchasing your own copy):

Bonnie Smith. 1998. *The Gender of History*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Karl Marx, et. al. 1992. *Capital Volume 1: A Critique of Political Economy* New York: Penguin Classics.

Pierre Bourdieu. 1993. *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Jacques Derrida. 1976. *Of Grammatology* (trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak). Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press.

PROSPECTUS

“Historiography” generally refers to the writing of history, the history of history and the philosophy of history. This course aims to expose students to issues in all three domains of historiography, especially as they pertain to the writing of communication history. How does one consider historical documents as evidence of the past without falling into

naïve positivism? How can we consider historical documents as texts without losing the ability to make claims on reality? Recurring course themes will include the construction of historical problems and objects; forms and conceptualizations of time and historical continuity and change; modes of historical description; the epistemology of archives, documents, and memories; and the state of the field(s) of communication historiography.

As we consider these facets of historiography, we will set them against the philosophical issues raised by a loose aggregate of texts imported into North America under the unfortunate (but convenient) sign of “poststructuralism.” The arrival of thinkers like Foucault, Deleuze and Derrida occasioned intellectual crises in human sciences from anthropology to literary studies. Critics have suggested that poststructuralism is anti-historicist, that its precepts make the writing of history impossible. In this class, we will consider the ways in which poststructuralist thought might enrich the writing of history, and the ways in which historical inquiry might help us work through some of the philosophical and political issues raised by the poststructuralists.

Class time will feature weekly lectures and discussions, and occasional creative or experimental in-class projects. Students will write a semester paper and help direct discussion one or more times.

REQUIREMENTS

Etiquette:

1. Full and complete attendance, attention, participation, listening and reading. 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 are not acceptable under any circumstance. Follow the Golden Rule. Encourage basic questions as well as advanced ones.

Product:

I. Participation in Class Discussions

I expect everyone to participate regularly in class discussion. You should come every week ready to discuss the readings.

Requirements for class discussion are as follows: good faith, attention to the readings, and relevance to the course. We want to avoid “seek and destroy” sessions. If you have something critical to say, be ready to explain how the piece could be improved. If you disagree with the premise of the piece, then read for what motivates the argument.

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

II. Discussion Facilitation

Each week, at least two students will help facilitate discussion. Both discussion leaders should spend extra time on the readings and be prepared to discuss them in depth. Depending on enrollment and other factors, you may perform one role more than the other.

The *Inquisitor* will bring in discussion questions and topics, and lead the discussion. He or she should send an email to the class list (which I will set up) by midnight, Monday night, with a list of questions and topics to discuss. You should aim to get at the most important issues in the readings, which will also mean prioritizing them, since we will need get to every reading every week. Questions can be oriented around anything from really basic content questions (like “what does the passage on p. 25 mean?”) all the way up to “big picture” issues that connect the week’s readings with other discussions we’ve had in the course. Please avoid (as much as possible) more than passing references to materials from other courses or other things you’ve read.

The *Finder of Objects* will bring in an object for us to discuss in relation to the readings. Your object may be an image, a sound recording, a device, or anything else you see fit to bring in. I prefer that people bring in objects created by someone other than themselves, but if you made something particularly cool, please consult with me. If you need audiovisual equipment, please let me know as soon as possible (no later than Monday morning) so that I can make arrangements. Audiovisual material should be of short duration – no longer than approximately 5 minutes.

II. Semester Project

Since it is almost impossible to take a course and then immediately produce (from scratch) a fully-developed study of something in the same semester, I have provided a range of alternative options and an escape hatch. Papers should be approximately 20 pages long. If you plan to write something much longer, please consult with me first.

Please note the following due dates. You may submit materials early:

1 November: a well-thought-out and somewhat formal proposal of 3-5 pages. See your option for details. I will give you detailed comments in response to what you write.

22 November: a 1-2 page update explaining what progress you’ve made or how your thoughts have changed. This may be fairly informal, but I do expect to see some progress from the Nov 1st paper in light of my comments. You may email it to me, and responses will be via email.

Final projects will be due in my mailbox at 4pm on **Wednesday, the 8th of December**. Hard copies are required; emails are not acceptable. Please also provide an address to which I can send your paper with my comments.

You are encouraged to meet with me throughout the semester as your work on your project.

Option 1: The research proposal

Much of our discussion during the semester will revolve around how history can be conceptualized and studied. This assignment will give you a chance to work on your research design skills.

Your task is to figure out everything you would need to do in order to carry out a research project on some concrete issue related to communication history. You will then write a proposal following the form listed below (this is modeled after the kinds of proposals you have to write for fellowships and other funding sources). The proposal will have the following components:

1. A description of your object of study, its significance, and the fundamental issues or questions you wish to address in your research. Do you have a novel approach or hypothesis? Is your object under-explored?
2. A review of the extant scholarly literature on your topic. This review should encompass your own field, but it should be cognizant of important research on your topic carried out in other academic fields. You should position your own research with respect to the other work you cite.
3. A research plan that includes a discussion of method and sources. What kind of research do you need to carry out in order write up your project? What kinds of sources and materials will you need? How will you approach your source material?
4. A timetable for research and writing. How long will it take you to carry out this project and what are the stages you'll need to go through?
5. A statement discussing your qualifications to carry out this research or any further training you require to carry it out adequately.
6. A statement of costs. What kind of funding and resources will you need to carry out the research? Think about both ends of the spectrum: what do you minimally need to carry out the research, and what could you do if you had a real research budget? How would you justify that larger budget? (On a real proposal, you'd only deal with the latter, of course – since all proposals aim to get as much money as possible. For this exercise, we simply want you to think about the economics of research.)

The entire proposal should be written in clear prose aimed at faculty who aren't necessarily educated in your field. Use jargon only when absolutely unavoidable and explain it clearly. Keep in mind that in real life, you'd be under extreme space restrictions. But the extended space is for you to really reflect on what it

would take to do a creative and intellectually significant project (and/or practice for a thesis prospectus).

Option 2: The critical revision.

Revision is not a skill often taught in graduate school, but it should be. This is your chance to take a piece of writing about history that you've already begun and revise it toward a concrete end (for instance, for publication in a journal), using materials from the course to refine your thinking about your project and develop your analysis. Keep in mind that the purpose of this option is to facilitate extended reflection upon research you have already undertaken; it is not to facilitate further research.

If you wish to carry out this option, you must submit a proposal for the midterm. Proposals for this option should include a discussion of the project as it currently stands; why you want to rewrite it for this course; a substantive plan for further revision – especially in terms of how you want to make your argument, your vision of the paper's intellectual or political task, and your construction of context; and a discussion of other work that you need to do in order to be able to rewrite the paper (such as additional outside reading or revisiting source materials). You should also append a copy of the current version of the paper to the proposal.

Option 3: Critical Survey/Lit Review

This is the standard “literature review” option with a few twists. In addition to characterizing the subfield that you wish to pursue (note that this does not mean simply summarizing others' work), this project should include a discussion of how you intend to situate yourself in this field and how the range of philosophical positions it deploys relates to the philosophical stance you hope to embody or articulate in your own project (the latter should be defined *positively*). You may also wish to devote a section of this paper to the practical side of research: the mechanics of the research process as you imagine it, possible sites, collections, archives that will facilitate your research, grant monies available, etc.

Proposals for this option should include a description of your chosen subfield, a planned line of reading, and initial impressions of characteristics and problems in your chosen subfield or hypotheses that you want to advance.

Option 4: Metahistory

This is an “application” paper. Here, you will focus on the characterization and critique of a very small sample of historical or historiographic writing — ranging from a single work (book, article) to a very few — as the substance of your analysis, rather than surveying a larger field as a prelude to analysis (in contrast to option 4 above). Here the task is not merely a “close reading” of historical writing, but a vigorous and thorough analysis of it through some of the protocols you will have developed over the course of the semester.

Option 5: _____ ?

I am open to other options for a final project. For your midterm, submit a detailed written proposal explaining the project, how it relates to the course, and why it is preferable to the other four options.

Grading:

You have the right to submit your written work in French. If you plan to do so, please contact me so I can make arrangements for evaluation, as I am not fluent in French. All verbal presentations must be in English.

If your performance on any assignment is not satisfactory, I may ask you to do it again.

Late papers may not receive written comments and will earn a reduced grade. Activities for which you must be present (helping to lead discussion) cannot be made up. If you know you will be absent on a day for which you are obligated, trade with one of your colleagues.

Final grades may be reduced for unsatisfactory performance in any of the categories listed under “requirements” or “etiquette.”

I do not give incompletes except in truly extraordinary personal circumstances that can be documented.

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).

Auditors:

Auditors are welcome to participate in the course on the following conditions:

- They request (and I grant) permission to audit the course.
- They follow the same rules of etiquette as enrolled students. That means attending all classes and arriving each week ready to discuss the readings.
- Depending on enrollment, I may ask you to help facilitate discussion once during the semester.

COURSE SCHEDULE

All readings required unless otherwise noted.
Any changes to the schedule will be announced in class.

13 Sep: **Apologia**

On the history of communication history and its relation to the history of history; on the course; on the relationship of theory and history; on research; on documents.

20 Sep: **A History of Something**

Spigel, Lynn. 1992. *Make Room for TV: Television and the Suburban Ideal in Postwar America*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

27 Sept: **Poetics of History**

White, Hayden. 1978/1966. "The Burden of History" in *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, pp. 27-50.

LaCapra, Dominick. 1985. "Rhetoric and History" in *History and Criticism*. New York: Columbia University Press, pp. 15-44.

Smith, Bonnie. 1998. "Introduction," "The Narcotic Road to the Past," and "The Practices of Scientific History," in *The Gender of History*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, pp. 1-36 and 103-129.

Featherstone, Mike. 2000. "Archiving Cultures," *British Journal of Sociology* 51:1 (January/March), pp. 161-184

4 Oct: **A History of Everything**

Peters, John Durham. 1999. *Speaking Into Air: A History of the Idea of Communication*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

11 Oct: **Happy Thanksgiving – no class**

18 Oct: **Deconstruction as Historiographic Stance**

Derrida, Jacques. 1986. "Declarations of Independence," *New Political Science* 15 (Summer), pp. 7-15.

Jacques Derrida. 1976. "Preface" and "Writing Before the Letter," in *Of Grammatology* (trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak). Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, pp. lxxxix-93.

25 Oct: **Object Construction: Deconstructive and Epistemic Breaks**

Marx, Karl. 1990/1867. "The So-Called Primitive Accumulation," in *Capital, Vol I: A Critique of Political Economy* (trans. Ben Fowkes, intro. Ernest Mandel). New York: Penguin Classics, pp. 873-940.

Scott, Joan. 1988. "Introduction" and "Gender: A Useful Category for Historical Analysis," in *Gender and the Politics of History*. New York: Columbia University Press, pp. 1-11 and 28-52.

Braudel, Fernand. 1972. "History and Social Science," in *Economy and Society in Early Modern Europe* (ed. Peter Burke). London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, pp. 11-42.

Bourdieu, Pierre. 1993. "The Practice of Reflexive Sociology (The Paris Seminar)," in Pierre Bourdieu and Loïc J.D. Wacquant, *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, pp. 217-253.

1 Nov: **Reconstructing an Object: History in the Wake of New Media**

Lauren Rabinovitz and Abraham Geil, eds. 2004. *Memory Bytes: History, Technology and Digital Culture*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2004.

8 Nov: **Genealogy at Work**

Foucault, Michel. 1978. *The History of Sexuality Volume I: An Introduction* (trans. Robert Hurley). New York: Vintage Books.

_____. 1985. "Introduction: Modifications," in *The History of Sexuality Volume 2: The Use of Pleasure* (trans. Robert Hurley). New York: Vintage Books, pp. 1-13.

15 Nov: **Genealogy as Historiographic Stance**

Nietzsche, Friedrich. 1967/1887. "Preface" and "'Good and Evil,' 'Good and Bad,'" in *On the Genealogy of Morals and Ecce Homo* (ed. Walter Kauffman, trans. Walter Kauffman and R.J. Hollingdale). New York: Vintage, pp. 15-56.

Foucault, Michel. 1977. "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History" in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews* (ed. Donald F. Bouchard, trans. Donald F. Bouchard and Sherry Simon). Ithaca: Cornell University Press, pp. 139-164.

_____. 1991. "Questions of Method," in *The Foucault Effect: Studies in Governmentality with Two Lectures and an Interview with Michel Foucault* (ed. Graham Burchell, Colin Gordon, and Peter Miller). Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, pp. 73-86.

_____. 1998. "Foucault" in *Michel Foucault: Aesthetics, Method, and Epistemology, Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984 Volume 2* (ed. James Faubion, trans. Robert Hurley and others). New York: The New Press, pp. 459-464.

Deleuze, Gilles. 1998. "A New Cartographer," in *Foucault* (trans. Sean Hand). Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, pp. 23-44.

22 Nov: **Media Historiography in the Wake of Poststructuralism, Take 4:**

Crary, Jonathan. 1999. "Modernity and the Problem of Attention," in *Suspensions of Perception: Attention, Spectacle and Modern Culture*. Cambridge: MIT Press, pp. 11-79.

During, Simon. 2002. "Enchantment and Loss: Theorizing Secular Magic," in *Modern Enchantments: The Cultural Power of Secular Magic*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, pp. 43-73.

Sturken, Marita. 1997. "Spectacles of Memory and Amnesia: Remembering the Persian Gulf War," in *Tangled Memories: the Vietnam War, The AIDS Epidemic and the Politics of Remembering*. Berkeley: University of California Press, pp. 122-144.

Deem, Melissa. 2003. "Disrupting the Nuptials at the Town Hall Debate: Feminism and the Politics of Cultural Memory in the USA," *Cultural Studies* 17:5, pp. 615-647.

29 Nov: No class