Media and the Senses
COMS 655 – Winter 2010
Irregularly Scheduled (see below for details)
Some Tuesdays 10:00am-1:00pm, W-220 Arts
Some Thursdays, 10am-1pm, W5 Arts

Cornelius Borck
Office: TBA
Email: borck@imgwf.uni-luebeck.de
Office Hours: By appointment, please.

Jonathan Sterne
Office: Arts W280
Email: jonathan.sterne@mcgill.ca (I check at least once daily M-F when I’m in town)
Office hours: By appointment, please.

Prospectus:

Sensation and perception have been enduring themes in the humanities and social sciences for well over a century. Because media are both designed and criticized with special attention to sense experience, debates around the social character of sensation in modernity have often gravitated toward discussions of media. This course will thus offer students a chance to consider a range of intellectual traditions and approaches to media and the senses. While we cannot cover all possible media or sense experiences, we also hope to encourage students to think across the senses and call into question doxic assumptions regarding the hierarchy, character or politics of various kinds of sense experience. As part of that process, we will revisit some of the central debates in the humanities over the past half-century: the debates over essentialism and antiessentialism, universalism and particularism; arguments regarding embodiment; the epistemological status of psychology, physiology and the neurosciences in humanistic argument; and considerations of the mutual implications of subjectivities and regimes of power.

As this course is being co-taught, it follows an irregular schedule to make maximum use of Cornelius Borck’s presence in Montreal. We will meet twice in January, eight times in March, and three in April (see schedule below for details). The reading load will be the same as if the course followed a weekly schedule, so students are urged to use the early-term downtime to get a head start on readings for March.

Class meetings will consist of regular lectures and discussion, and occasional creative or experimental in-class projects. Students will undertake a semester project and help direct discussion several times during the term.

Required Readings:

There is a packet of required and recommended course readings available at Copie Nova.
Requirements

Etiquette:

1. Full and complete attendance, attention, participation, listening and reading (of required texts). We 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 circumstance. Follow the Golden Rule. Encourage basic questions as well as advanced ones.

Product (and % of Semester Grade):

I. Participation in Class Discussions (20%)

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

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.

II. Discussion Facilitation (20%)

Each week, at least three students will help facilitate discussion. Discussion leaders should be prepared to discuss the readings in depth. Depending on enrollment and other factors, you may perform one role more than the others. NOTE: some weeks we may have something special in mind for discussion, in which case we will collaborate with the facilitators.

The Inquisitor will bring in discussion questions and topics, and lead the discussion. When you are in this role, email to the class list (which we will set up) no later than 24 hours before your assigned class meeting, 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 won’t be able to discuss every aspect of 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 materials you’ve read from outside the course.
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. We prefer that people bring in objects created by someone other than themselves, but if you made something particularly cool, please consult with us. If you need audiovisual equipment, please let us know as soon as possible (no later than 24 hours before the class meeting) so that we can make arrangements. Audiovisual material should be of short duration – no longer than approximately 5 minutes.

Inquisitors and Finders of Objects, please note that class dynamics will vary from week to week and will follow people’s particular interests and energies. DO NOT BE DISCOURAGED if you prepared something wonderful and the class went in another direction. This happens to us all the time and is part of the teaching process. It is better to have a good class session than to stick to a plan.

The Cleaner will take notes of any readings, authors or texts mentioned in class that are not on the syllabus. Within 24 hours of the end of class, he or she will then email the people who mentioned them and ask for a full reference. If the reference doesn’t appear in a day or two, the cleaner should send a reminder email. Once he or she has collected all of the relevant citations, the Cleaner will make a single post to the course listserv with all of the information from the previous week’s class neatly compiled. If a classmate doesn’t respond, the cleaner should do his or her best to track down the errant source.

III. Semester Project (60%)

All semester projects will result in

- a short scholarly talk during one of the two final April sessions
- two 1-2pp emails to the instructors on the development of the project, the first due by 4pm on 1 March and the second due 72 hours before your scheduled presentation in April
- a formal scholarly paper of at least 20 pages due by 4:00pm on Monday 19 April due by email to both instructors.
- Please note that a proper scholarly apparatus (notes, cites, page numbers) is a requirement for your papers, though we are somewhat flexible on matters of tone. It should be sent in .doc, .docx, .rtf, or .pdf format.

Though it is unreasonable of us to expect a paper of “publishable quality” at the end of a seminar, we do expect a polished paper that reflects sustained thought and careful revision. It should also use a recognized scholarly reference system. We recommend Chicago Style with footnotes, but will accept MLA, APA, Chicago parenthetical, Harvard, or any other style widely used in the humanities or social sciences.

You are encouraged to meet with us throughout the semester as you work on your project, and you are encouraged to submit your proposal early.
The following options are suggestions only; we are open to combinations of options or alternative papers, so long as they remain within the framework of the humanities.

Option 1: Application Paper

For this paper, you will synthesize a methodological or theoretical approach from a few of the readings assigned for the course and do your own study of a phenomenon out in the world. This paper may include some original research, but it is not intended to be a massive research undertaking.

Option 2: Revision Paper

Revision is not a skill often taught in graduate school, but it should be. This is your chance to take a piece of writing (somehow relevant to the course) 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.

Option 3: Synthesis Paper

This option is modeled on the PhD comprehensive examination process for Communication Studies. The final paper will make use of the course bibliography and a few select additional readings to answer one or two questions in a 20-page paper. The exact wording of the questions will be arrived at in consultation with us.

Option 4: The Research Paper

Given the constraints of a semester full of coursework and other events, this is the most difficult option. It is not for procrastinators or the faint of heart. For this paper, you will conduct substantial research on a phenomenon relevant to media and the senses. The paper will be made up primarily of original research, as opposed to commentary on course materials, though it must not be a paper you could have written before you took this course. The conclusions reached in the paper, likewise, should be conclusions you could not have reached before doing the research.

For the email due on 1 March: we would like a 1-2pp preliminary description of your project, the sources you plan to use, any ideas as to an argument that you already think you can make. If you are doing the application paper, discuss the “case” to which you will apply the readings from the course and what readings you intend to “apply” (and how). If you are doing the revision, include a copy of the paper you hope to revise. If you are doing the synthesis paper, include a proposed bibliography. If you are doing the research paper, include a brief outline of a research plan.

For the email due 72 hours before your presentation in April: we would like a 1-2pp outline of the presentation. This should focus more on the argument and not simply be a
“show and tell” of all the research you have done (or materials you have collected) to this point. While some explanation will be necessary in the presentation, we want to be able to give you a chance to try out your argument before you commit it to paper, and get feedback on your ideas.

**How to Present on the 6th or 8th of April.**

It is our preference that students present in as fluid a fashion as possible – i.e., give a speech, don’t just read a paper. However, recognizing that not everyone is comfortable doing that, students may elect to read from a written text. If you choose to read to us, please make enough copies of your text so that everyone can follow along. If time limits are short, you will need to read an excerpt.

**More details on the presentation and the project will be offered during the term.**

**How to Interpret Graduate-Level Grades:**

A: Good work  
A-: Satisfactory  
B+: There is a problem with what you submitted  
B: There is a substantial problem with what you submitted  
B-: Lowest possible passing grade in a graduate course; indicates a major problem but not a failure  
C+ or lower: Officially considered a “fail” by the Graduate Studies Office.

**More on Grading:**

You have the right to submit your written work in French. If you plan to do so, please contact us well in advance of the due date so we can make arrangements for evaluation, as we are not fluent in French. All verbal presentations must be in English.

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

**Auditors:**

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

- They request (and we 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, they may be called upon to facilitate discussion during the semester.
Unpleasant Business:

Late papers may not receive written comments and will earn a reduced grade.

Activities for which you must be present (e.g., inquisitor, finder of objects, cleaner) 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. Notify us of the trade if it happens. This is your responsibility, not ours.

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. We do not give incompletes (“K” grades) except in truly extraordinary personal circumstances that can be documented. Please note that as Jonathan Sterne is on sabbatical in 2010-11 and Cornelius Borck lives in Germany, any extensions granted will end before the end of summer 2010.

The Coerced K: Should a student fail to turn in a final paper and fail to contact us well before the deadline for submission of grades, we will issue a K grade without a contract. 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. K grades revert to “F” grades at the end of the next term unless a contract extension is signed by both professor and student. Under no circumstances will we offer an extension to a K that was granted without a contract.

It is your responsibility to make sure we receive any assignment you turn in. If you email it to us or leave it for us at a time other than the due date, make sure you get a note from us saying we received your paper. Otherwise, assume we don’t have it.

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).
Course Schedule
All readings required unless otherwise noted.
Any changes to the schedule will be announced in class.
Note: it is possible the first two sessions will have to be rescheduled for the first two weeks in February. If this happens, registered students will be notified by email and a note will be placed outside the door of W220 Arts.

5 January: Introduction

Apologia + Tele-Cornelius

12 January: Media and the Senses: Some Greatest Hits
Also available online at: http://imlportfolio.usc.edu/ctcs505/mulveyVisualPleasureNarrativeCinema.pdf

Recommended

19 Jan-23 Feb: Read ahead so that March doesn’t overwhelm you.

1 March: Due date for provisional project email.

2 March: Phenomenology
Recommended

4 March: Proprioception, Haptics, Embodiment

Recommended

9 March: Prosthesis, Sensory Extensions, and Body Montage

Recommended


11 March: Machines of Mediation

Recommended

16 March: The Art of Irritation

Recommended

18 March: Gazing and Listening (note: this session may be rescheduled to the 30th)

Recommended

23 March: Making Sense of Common Sense

Recommended

25 March: Aesthetics of Distortion
Hildebrand, Lucas. “Analog Video and Aesthetics” and “Grainy Days and Mondays: Superstar and

**Recommended**


**30 March** no class, unless the 18th is rescheduled.

**1 April: Synthetic Worlds**


**Recommended**


**Note:** A 1-2 page email due to the professors outlining your argument in the presentation is due 72 hours before the class session in which you will present.

**6 April: Student presentations**

**8 April: Student presentations**

**19 April: Paper due, emailed to both professors.** Be sure one of us replies that it has been received.