

Judith Rodenbeck
Heimbold 304B, x2622
jrodenbe@slc.edu

20th Century Texture (Before Digital): Mechanical Transcriptions of the Real

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Digital technology has indisputably affected the way we produce, distribute and consume artworks. Today more often than not when we take a picture, record a sound or write a poem it is notated in the lingua franca of a sequence of 0's and 1's. While optimists argue that these technologies revitalize traditional practices and present entirely new fields for artistic exploration, other critics have been less sanguine, noting that the very uniformity of the digital language inevitably reduces and even eliminates the textures specific to any given medium. For some critics digitization has altered our relation to "the real."

At issue in either position is the tension between form and content—precisely the tension that has sustained key modernist debates in music, literature and the visual arts. Understanding our 21st century position to be one of retrospection, this course will explore that notion of texture in advanced artistic practices of the 20th century.

The course proposes a two-part prehistory of digital media: first, borrowing from media theorist Friedrich Kittler, we will establish a conceptual history of various technologies of sound, image and textual mechanization developed at the end of the 19th century; and second, we will examine the implications these technologies had and have for cultural production and dissemination at the turn of the digital age. The course aims to familiarize students with certain key texts and concepts in contemporary thinking about art and its making, with the goal of understanding what the 21st century might hold in store.

The course is neither an exhaustive prehistory of new media, nor is it a survey of modern or post-war art. Rather, it is a partial intellectual archaeology of current theoretical discussions in the arts, particularly those addressed to questions of medium-specificity, globalization, and utopianism. As an archaeological project the course by definition provides a revisionist view of modern art, mining old territory for new insights, examining old artefacts through new lenses. For example, while the first part of a session may present voice, language, and disembodiment as terms through which to productively think about the telephone, in discussion we may consider a short story about phonecalls from the dead alongside Moholy-Nagy's telephone pictures of the 1920s, the exhibition *Art by Telephone* of 1969, or the sound work of Robin Rimbaud. Reading draws from Heidegger, Freud, Benjamin, Kafka, Beckett, Lacan, as well as from more current art historical analyses by Foster, Krauss, and others.

The course is discursive, exploratory, and collaborative. Students are expected to bring a degree of intellectual ambition and independence to the course, as well as a willingness to work with conceptually demanding material. Students will make several in-class presentations throughout the year, some done individually and some collaboratively, as well as to do a final presentation on the results of their conference research. Prior advanced study of modern literature, art, music, or philosophy is an absolute prerequisite, as is a commitment to critical thinking.

Year long. Advanced.

bibliography

- Beckett, Samuel. Krapp's Last Tape and Other Dramatic Pieces (New York: Grove, 1960). ISBN: 0802151345
- Bergson, Henri. Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic, Cloudesley Brereton (trans.), Fred Rothwell (trans.) (Green Integer, 1999). ISBN: 1892295024
- Bourriaud, Nicolas. Relational Aesthetics, Simon Pleasance & Fronza Woods, trans. (Dijon: Les Presses du réel, 2002). ISBN: 2840660601
- Capek, Karel. (1920) R.U.R. (Rossum's Universal Robots), Claudia Novack, trans. (London: Penguin, 2004). ISBN: 0141182083
- Heidegger, Martin. The question concerning technology, and other essays (New York: Perennial, 1982). ISBN: 0061319694
- Kafka, Franz. The Metamorphosis, In the Penal Colony, and Other Stories (New York: Schocken, 1995). ISBN: 0805210571
- Kittler, Friedrich. Gramophone, Film, Typewriter (San Francisco: Stanford UP, 1999). ISBN: 0804732337
- Krauss, Rosalind. A Voyage on the North Sea: art in the age of the post-medium condition (London: Thames & Hudson, 2000). ISBN: 0500282072
- Lovejoy, Margot. Digital Currents: Art in the Electronic Age, 3rd edition (New York: Routledge, 2004). ISBN: 0415307813
- Roussel, Raymond. Locus Solus (New York: Riverrun Press, 1984). ISBN: 0714507342
- Villiers de l'Isle-Adam, Auguste. Tomorrow's Eve, Robert Martin Adams (trans.) (Champaign: U Illinois P, 2001). ISBN: 0252069552

Syllabus

Introduction

9/7: Introduction: The Mechanical and the Real

Recommended Readings:

Lovejoy, Margot. Digital Currents: Art in the Electronic Age (New York: Routledge, 2004): Chapter 1, "Vision, Representation, and Invention," 13-35; Chapter 2, "The Machine Age and Modernism," 36-62.

Assignment: art reviews

Assignments for this course will make use of the student discussion board and class files on the course website. In addition to session-specific assignments, each week I will be distributing a photocopied listing of exhibitions and art projects on view in the metropolitan area. On or before the Sunday of each week you will be expected to post a page-length review of one of these exhibitions or art projects to the class discussion board and to respond to at least one of your classmates' reviews. For this week, however, your assignment is the following.

Assignment: Janet Cardiff

Write a 2-page thought piece responding to Janet Cardiff's "Her Long Black Hair." This will require advance planning on your part as Cardiff's piece, which is only up until September 11, is experiential. Post your piece to the course board by September 12. From the Public Art Fund website:

The audio kit for "Her Long Black Hair" will be available at a kiosk at 59th Street and Sixth Avenue, Thursday through Sunday, 10am to 3:30pm. The last audio kit pick-up time is 3:30pm. The last audio kit pick-up time is 3:30pm. Headsets must be returned no later than 5pm. Viewers will be asked to leave a drivers license or credit card in exchange for the audio equipment and should allow at least one hour for the walk. The audio kit must be returned to the kiosk at 59th Street and Sixth Avenue. A map with the return route will be included. Reservations are only available for groups of ten or more, and must be made three days in advance by calling 212-980-3942.

Subways: N, R, Q, to 57th Street or N, R to Fifth Avenue; A, B, C, D, 1, 9 to Columbus Circle.

For further information see <http://www.publicartfund.org/pafweb/projects/05/cardiff/cardiff-05.html>

dreamworlds of the fin-de-siecle

9/14: media and sensation in the fin-de-siecle

Required Readings:

Brantlinger, Patrick. "Mass Media and Culture in Fin-de-Siecle Europe," in Fin-de-Siecle and its Legacy, Mikulas Teich and Roy Porter, eds. (New York: Cambridge, 1990): 98-114.

[classfiles]

Kittler, Friedrich. "Introduction," Gramophone, Film, Typewriter: 1-20.

Assignment: precis

This assignment has three parts, to be completed on the class discussion board.

1) Write a precis of one of the two assigned readings. (For a useful guide to writing a precis see <http://web.isp.cz/jcrane/Precis.html>.)

2) At the end of your precis try to answer the following questions: How does the author organize his argument? How does the author characterize media? What are the distinguishing features, according to the author, of each medium he discusses? What kind of evidence does he use to support his argument? How would you characterize the writing style of the piece? And what is the significance of his argument about fin-de-siecle culture to our contemporary world?

3) Post your precis and your answer to the questions to the class discussion board by Monday night. Then read your classmates' posts and formulate three useful discussion questions.

Fin-de-siecle fantasy

9/21: bachelor machines 1

Required Readings:

Villiers de l'Isle-Adam, Auguste. Tomorrow's Eve (1886), Robert Martin Adams, trans. (Champaign: U Illinois P, 2001).

Assignment: thought piece

Write a thought piece on Tomorrow's Eve. Post it to the webboard by Monday night.

10/5: gramophone

Required Readings:

Kittler, Friedrich. "Gramophone," Gramophone, Film, Typewriter, 21-114.

Hartenau, Walter. (1898) "Die Resurrection Co.," New German Critique 62 (Spring - Summer, 1994): 63-69. [JSTOR]

Assignment: thought piece

Select and compare passages in the two fin-de-siecle stories, Tomorrow's Eve and "Die Resurrection Co.," grounding your analysis in a consideration of the role of technology in relation to creativity. Post your piece to the webboard. Bring the passages you have selected to class.

10/12: bachelor machines 2

Required Readings:

Roussel, Raymond. Locus Solus (1914), Rupert Copeland Cuninghame trans. (New York: Riverrun Press, 1984).

Macherey, Pierre. "A Production of Subjectivity," Yale French Studies 88 (1995): 42-52. [JSTOR]

Assignment: thought piece

Write a thought piece addressed to Macherey's article and post it to the webboard. Then return to the thought pieces written by your classmates on Tomorrow's Eve and "Die Resurrection Co." and post a brief response to one of those on the class webboard. Be prepared to discuss your response in class.

Freud

10/19: models of prosthesis and inscription 1

Required Readings:

Freud, Sigmund. (1919) "The Uncanny," in The standard edition of the complete psychological works of Sigmund Freud, aka Standard Edition, 17 (London: Hogarth Press, 1953-): 219-256.

Freud, Sigmund. (1925) "A Note upon the Mystic Writing-Pad," in Standard Edition 19: 227-232.

Assignment: interlocking discussion, parts 1 & 2

This assignment has three parts, to be completed on the class discussion board.

1) Write a precis of one of the two texts by Sigmund Freud, "The Uncanny" or "A Note Upon the Mystic Writing-Pad." Try to answer the following questions: Why might Freud have chosen these particular illustrational metaphors? What is the effect of Freud's description on our understanding of subjective experience?

2) Post your precis, along with three of your own discussion questions, to the class discussion board.

10/26: models of prosthesis and inscription 2

Required Readings:

Bergson, Henri. (1911) "Laughter," in Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic, Cloudesley Brereton (trans.), Fred Rothwell (trans.) (Green Integer, 1999).

Gramsci, Antonio. (1934) "Americanism and Fordism," especially the section on Taylorism, in Selections from Prison Notebooks, Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith, ed. & trans. (New York: International, 1971): 279-318.

[<http://www.marxists.org/archive/gramsci/editions/reader/q22-12.htm>]

Assignment: interlocking discussion, part 3

3) Read Bergson and Gramsci. Then read your classmates' posts and write a response to a post, incorporating any insights offered by these two new texts.

art metropole

11/2: mechanization takes command 1—dystopias of efficiency

Required Readings:

Capek, Karel. (1920) R.U.R. (Rossum's Universal Robots), Claudia Novack, trans. (London: Penguin, 2004).

Recommended Reading:

Giedion, Siegfried. Mechanization Takes Command: A Contribution to an Anonymous History (New York: Norton, 1948).

Fineman, Mia. "Ecce Homo Protheticus," New German Critique 76 (Winter 1999): 85-114. [JSTOR]

11/9: mechanization takes command 2—dystopias of efficiency

Screening:

Lang, Fritz. (1927) Metropolis.

Assignment:

Write a response to either R.U.R. or Metropolis, paying special attention to what roles mediums or media might play and post your response to the discussion board. Read your classmates' pieces, and post a response to a piece on a story other than the one about which you wrote to the discussion board.

11/16: mechanization takes command 3—the mass ornament

Required Reading:

Kittler, Friedrich. "Film," Gramophone, Film, Typewriter, 115-182.

Kracauer, Siegfried. "The Mass Ornament," New German Critique 5 (Spring 1975): 67-76. [JSTOR]

11/30: mechanization takes command 4—etaoin shrldu

Required Reading:

Kittler, Friedrich. "Typewriter," Gramophone, Film, Typewriter, 183-266.
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/ETAOIN_SHRDLU

Recommended Reading:

Kenner, Hugh. The Mechanic Muse (New York: Oxford UP, 1987).

12/7: mechanization takes command 5—tattoo you

Required Reading:

Kafka, Franz. (1919) "The Penal Colony," in The Metamorphosis, In the Penal Colony, and Other Stories (New York: Schocken, 1995).

presentation of research topics

12/14

SPRING

the age of the world picture

phenomenology of vision—the world picture

Required Readings:

Heidegger, Martin. (1938) "The Age of the World Picture," in The question concerning technology, and other essays (New York: Garland, 1977).

phenomenology of vision—the question concerning technology

Required Readings:

Heidegger, Martin. (1954) "The Question Concerning Technology," in The question concerning technology. Also see the excellent study guide at <http://maven.english.hawaii.edu/criticalink/heidegger/index.html>

phenomenology of vision—the mirror stage

Required Readings:

Lacan, Jacques. (1949) "The mirror stage as formative of the function of the I as revealed in psychoanalytic experience," in Écrits: A Selection, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: W.W. Norton, 1977): 1-7. [<http://courses.essex.ac.uk/lt/lt204/Mirror%20Stage.htm>]

Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. "Eye and Mind," in The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader (Evanston: Northwestern UP, 1993).

Assignment: discussion questions

Each of these texts deals with the ways in which we frame and shape our worlds. Thinking about the materials we have read and viewed so far (including those examined in your art review) devise three good discussion questions and post them to the discussion board. Read and think about your classmates' questions; write responses if you wish.

voice

phenomenology of voice—recording technologies

Required Readings:

Christie, Ian. "Early Phonograph Culture and Moving Pictures," in Richard Abel and Rick Altman (eds.), The Sounds of Early Cinema (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001): 3-12.

phenomenology of voice—sound on screen

Screening:

Marker, Chris (1962). La Jetee.

Required Readings:

Chion, Michel. Audio-Vision: Sound On Screen, Claudia Gorbman, ed. and trans. (New York: Columbia, 1994): 3-34.

phenomenology of voice—Krapp's Last Tape

Required Readings:

Beckett, Samuel. (1958) "Krapp's Last Tape" in Krapp's Last Tape and Other Dramatic Pieces (New York: Grove, 1960) or [<http://www.msu.edu/user/sullivan/BeckettKrapp.html>]

archive fever

the age of mechanical reproduction

Required Readings:

Benjamin, Walter. (1935) "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," Illuminations, (NY: Schocken, 1969): 217-251. [http://web.bentley.edu/empl/c/rcrooks/toolbox/common_knowledge/general_communication/benjamin.html]

archive fever

Required Readings:

Jameson, Frederic. "Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism," New Left Review 146 (July–August 1984): 53–92. [<http://xroads.virginia.edu/%7EDRBR/JAMESON/jameson.html>]
Foster, Hal. "The Archive Without Museums," October 77 (Summer 1996). [JSTOR]

the medium as a contemporary problem

one approach to the dissolution of medium specificity

Required Readings:

Krauss, Rosalind. A Voyage on the North Sea: art in the age of the post-medium condition (London: Thames & Hudson, 2000).
Potts, Alex. "Tactility: The Interrogation of Medium in Art of the 1960s," Art History 27:2 (April 2004): 282-304.

relational aesthetics

another approach to the dissolution of medium specificity

Required Readings:

Bourriaud, Nicolas. Relational Aesthetics. Simon Pleasance & Fronza Woods, trans. (Dijon: Les Presses du réel, 2002).

final presentations

your conference projects