Advanced Rhetorical Criticism:  
Rhetorical Places

Graduate Seminar ~ COMM 6310

Spring, 2011
Wednesday, 3:30-6:00 p.m.

Professors Peter Simonson and John Ackerman
Department of Communication
University of Colorado at Boulder
peter.simonson@colorado.edu  john.ackerman@colorado.edu

6310 Office Hours with S/A: Thursday 2:00-3:00 H-92
Other by appointment, together, separately

Overview

This course aspires to blend theory, method, and critical practice in a potent and novel way. An advanced seminar in rhetorical criticism focused on what we will call “rhetorical places,” it aims to cultivate students’ abilities to conduct productive, innovative, and artfully composed studies of geographical, material, and symbolic places. Reflecting the perspectives of its two instructors, the course combines middle-range, historically inflected rhetorical theory of a pragmatist sort with contemporary social and cultural theories of space, place, and everyday life that gains its bearings from Continental thought. It brings them to bear with the project of generating ethnographically informed rhetorical analysis and criticism, which the instructors believe is one of the most exciting developments in the field.

The course was motivated by several coterminous developments. Over the last three decades, rhetorical studies has been turning increasingly to material and visual artifacts, social milieu and events, and urban scenes. This has sometimes coincided with a (re)turn to studies of rhetorical performance informed by anthropology and cultural studies; studies of vernacular rhetorics; theoretical articulations of materialist rhetorics; growing attention to the body and its senses; and broader, cross-disciplinary impulses to understand places and spaces in a globalizing and highly mediatized world. The overlapping topics of place and space are appearing more frequently in communication and rhetorical scholarship, suggesting a ‘turn’ that follows (and may double back to inform) that which has occurred in sociology, anthropology, feminist, urban, and post-colonial studies—along with geography and architecture, where they have always been central.

More locally, we wanted to collaborate, as friends and colleagues, to see how our strengths could combine both to help students with their projects and to extend our modes of inquiry and projects. The genesis of this course most fundamentally is the desire and example of your peers who are trying to help push the boundaries of rhetorical method and take scenes and sites of everyday life as their subject matter.

Books and Readings

Assignments and Evaluation

This is a project-based course, one that presumes time in the field, and that also puts a good deal of attention on the conversations we will have together in class. To those ends, students will be asked to do the following:

- Do and think about the required reading each week, and contribute actively to in-class discussions (25% of final grade). A reading log or journal to complement your field notes is advisable.
- In conversation with the instructors, select a semester-long research site to observe, engage with, depict, and write from. Complete the following steps along the way to producing a seminar paper and project demonstration:
  - Initial site visit and short rationale for studying it (2-3 pp) due January 26 (5%)
  - Research memo (4-6 pp) and class presentation on research project March 16 (20%)
  - Seminar paper (20-25 pp) and class presentation of it April 27 (50%)

Ackerman and Simonson will both read and comment on your work, and will determine grades together. We expect to weave your projects into our discussions, presentations, and treatment of theory. You in turn are encouraged to use our class to refine the critical and rhetorical dimensions of your site. By every means possible, we will try to encourage an multi-site (there, here) instantiation of your work. We will augment these assignments with handouts, examples when possible, and course dialogue.

Course Schedule

1  (1/12) Dissoi Logoi: Introduction to the Seminar


2  (1/26) Refiguring the Traditional Rhetorical Idea of ‘Places’ (Topoi, Loci)


Recommended:


3 (1/19) Writing Ethnographically Oriented Observations of Rhetorical Places


Preliminary Site Analysis (course document)

Recommended:

Gerard Hauser, “Attending the Vernacular: A Plea for an Ethnographic Rhetoric” (unpublished manuscript) shared courtesy of the author.

4 (2/2) Place-Based Rhetorical Criticism: Memory, Invention, and Experience

Gregory Clark, Rhetorical Landscapes in America: Variations on a Theme from Kenneth Burke (South Carolina, 2004), 1-11, 28-49.
Clark, “Rhetorical Experience and the National Jazz Museum in Harlem” in Dickinson et al, Places, 113-135.

Recommended:


5 (2/9) Everyday Life and Collective Memory


**Recommended:**


**6 (2/16) Social Space & Globalization**


**Recommended:**


**7 (2/23) Topologies & Choric Events**

Brian Massumi, “Concrete Is As Concrete Doesn’t” Ch. 1 in *Parables For The Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation*. (Duke, 2002), 1-22.


Recommended:

Christopher Alexander, A City is Not a Tree! Design after Modernism, J. Thackara, ed. (Thames and Hudson, 1988), 67-84. Note: there is an immense corpus of work on the city as a palimpsest inscribed by human activity in dialectic with human imagination. Christopher Alexander is an iconic architectural designer and critic in this vein. <http://www.patternlanguage.com/>


Johan Seibers, “Communication as Event and Practice” National Communication Association conference paper (2010), shared courtesy of the author and Robert Craig, Department of Communication, UCB.


8 (3/2) Sensing Places and Other Materials


Thomas Rickert, entry on RSA blogora on rhetoric and sound: http://rsa.cwrl.utexas.edu/node/2907.

9 (3/9) Affect/Expression

Brian Massumi, Parables For The Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002). Chapters TBD.


Recommended:


10 (3/16) Student Presentations/Research Memos Due

11 Spring Break

12 (3/30 Experience, Invention, and Democratic Aesthetics (redux): Cities and Sauntering

John Dewey, “Having an Experience.” Ch. 3 of *Art as Experience* (Perigree, 1934), 35-57.


Whitman, “Poem of the Road,” “To the Sayers of Words,” and “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry,” all as they appear in the 3rd (1860) edition of *Leaves of Grass*, available online at the excellent Walt Whitman Archive (http://whitmanarchive.org/published/LG/index.html)


13 (4/6) Exemplars of Rhetorical Ethnography I: Ralph Cintron


Recommended:


14 (4/13) Exemplars of Rhetorical Ethnography II: Phaedra Pezzulo


15 (4/20) Writing Week (Ackerman and Simonson available for consultation)

16 (4/27) Final Papers Due/In-Class Oral Presentations

17 (5/4) Culminating Social/Intellectual Event In a Place We Deem Appropriately Rhetorical

Campus, Department, and Course Policies
**Academic Integrity**

All students of the University of Colorado at Boulder are responsible for knowing and adhering to the academic integrity policy of this institution. Violations of this policy may include: cheating, plagiarism, aid of academic dishonesty, fabrication, lying, bribery, and threatening behavior. All incidents of academic misconduct shall be reported to the Honor Code Council (honor@colorado.edu; 303-725-2273). Students who are found to be in violation of the academic integrity policy will be subject to both academic sanctions from the faculty member and non-academic sanctions (including but not limited to university probation, suspension, or expulsion). Additional information on the Honor Code can be found at [http://www.colorado.edu/policies/honor.html](http://www.colorado.edu/policies/honor.html) and at [http://www.colorado.edu/academics/honorcode/](http://www.colorado.edu/academics/honorcode/)

**Harassment and Discrimination**

The University of Colorado at Boulder policy on Discrimination and Harassment, the University of Colorado policy on Sexual Harassment and the University of Colorado policy on Amorous Relationships apply to all students, staff and faculty. Any student, staff or faculty member who believes s/he has been the subject of discrimination or harassment based upon race, color, national origin, sex, age, disability, religion, sexual orientation, or veteran status should contact the Office of Discrimination and Harassment (ODH) at 303-492-2127 or the Office of Judicial Affairs at 303-492-5550. Information about the ODH, the above referenced policies and the campus resources available to assist individuals regarding discrimination or harassment can be obtained at [http://www.colorado.edu/odh](http://www.colorado.edu/odh)

**Disability Accommodations**

If you qualify for accommodations because of a disability, please submit a letter to me from Disability Services in a timely manner so that your needs may be addressed. Disability Services determines accommodations based on documented disabilities. Contact: 303-492-8671, Willard 322, or [www.Colorado.EDU/disabilityservices](http://www.Colorado.EDU/disabilityservices)

**TAC Equipment**

The Communication Department has equipment that is available for students to checkout. Equipment includes laptops, digital VHS cameras, web cameras, wireless Internet cards, transcribers, tape recorders, and more. Please see [http://comm.colorado.edu/tac/resources/](http://comm.colorado.edu/tac/resources/) for more information.