The Social Life of Paper

G41.2944 & E58.2344

Fall 2009

Meets in 19 UP 229 Wednesdays 1:00-3:00

Lisa Gitelman
Pless Annex 332E
Office hours: Thursdays 11-12:30 and by appointment

Those who are careful (as they call it) to principle children well, instill into the unwary and as yet unprejudiced, understanding (for white paper receives any characters) those doctrines they would have them retain and profess.
--John Locke (1690)

It is unfortunately the perogative of this papering age of the world that, since the universe has fallen into the hands of the merchants of book and images, thousands of authors and artists, now blinded by the direct light of nature, see however quite well, as soon as this light is reflected from a piece of paper.
--Georg Christoph Lichtenberg (1795)

The anxiety, which in this state of their attachment must be the portion of Henry and Catherine, and of all who loved either, as to its final event, can hardly extend, I fear, to the bosom of my readers, who will see in the tell-tale compression of the pages before them, that we are all hastening together to perfect felicity.
--Jane Austen, Northanger Abbey (1803)

Susie, what shall I do—there isn’t room enough; not half enough, to hold what I was going to say. Won’t you tell the man who makes sheets of paper, that I haven’t the slightest respect for him!
--Emily Dickinson letter to Susan Gilbert (1853)

Common Sense on a Roll™
--Kimberly-Clark Worldwide (2008)

Course Description. What is the cultural work performed by or with the technology of paper? How can a history of paper supplement and enrich recent histories of printing technology and printed artifacts like "the book"? What would it mean to imagine a paperless future? Organized around discussions of readings in common, this course considers the history, production, circulation and use of paper in the social production of knowledge, the shared imagination of value, and the mutual relations of consumers and commodities.
Course Requirements. Written work will consist of one shorter essay (10% each) and a final project due in at the end of the semester (70%). Informed participation in class discussion is an additional requirement worth 20% of the final grade and will include at least one in-class presentation. Written work is due in class as indicated on the syllabus and will be graded for both insight and effectiveness. Please type, spell-check, proofread, and print out. All work must be your own, and any plagiarism—no matter how accidental—will result in failure for the course. Late papers will be penalized and may not receive comments.

Attendance is expected in this course: Absences may have a depressing effect on your grade.

Readings. The following books have been ordered for you at the NYU bookstore but are also readily available from online booksellers.

City Reading: Written Words and Public Spaces in Antebellum New York by David Henkin (Columbia)

Collections of Nothing by William Davies King (Chicago)

Mechanisms: New Media and the Forensic Imagination by Matthew G. Kirschenbaum (MIT)

Born Losers: A History of Failure in America by Scott A. Sandage (Harvard)

Critical Inquiry 31:1 (Fall 2004) also available through Bobcat

The majority of the course readings will be available as PDF files, either in the “Course Documents” area of the course Blackboard site or via persistent links in the syllabus. Readings should be completed for the class sessions indicated on the syllabus. Also, please bring the assigned reading to class with you, printing PDFs whenever possible. If you notice any dead links on the syllabus or in Blackboard, please email me a.s.a.p., and I will try to help.

Policies and etiquette. If you are entitled to special accommodations in light of a documented disability please speak to me in private to make arrangements.

Please turn all cel phones off. Completely. Laptops may not be used in class for anything but the taking of notes. Please, no multi-tasking: Our time is limited and focus required. Also, please refrain from wandering in and out during the class period.

The calendar below offers an outline of the course. Incidental changes may be made as the semester proceeds, though any changes will be announced ahead of time in class. If weather or other circumstances cause disruptions in the academic calendar, please look for an email announcement via Blackboard.
Calendar of Class Meetings and Assignments

Wednesdays
1. **Sept 9** Introduction
   Reading:
   *Adventures of a Quire of Paper* (1779)

2. **Sept 16** Manufactures
   Readings (6):
   Lucien Febvre and Henri-Jean Martin, “Preliminaries: The Introduction of Paper into Europe”
   *The Stamp Act* (1765)
   Konstantin Dierks, "Letter Writing, Stationery Supplies, and Consumer Modernity in the Eighteenth-Century Atlantic World"
   Michael Winship, 5 pp. on paper and papermaking, from *The Industrial Book, 1840-1880*
   Herman Melville, “The Tartarus of Maids” (1855)
   Anon., *Jack and the Bean-stalk: A New Version* (1848)

3. **Sept 23** Publics I
   Reading:
   David Henkin, *City Reading: Written Words and Public Spaces in Antebellum New York*

4. **Sept 30** Publics II
   Reading:
   Sandage, *Born Losers: A History of Failure in America*

5. **Oct 7** The State
   Readings:
   Readings (2):
   Serguei Alex. Oushakine, *The Terrifying Mimicry of Samizdat*

6. **Oct 14** The Arts of Transmission I
   Readings: Introduction; "The Arts of Contingency"; "Transmission of Archaic Greek Songs"; "Transcendental Data"; "Note Taking as an Art of Transmission"; and "The Memo and Modernity."Presentations by Elizabeth and Danielle, Lucy, Janine, Kati and Beatrice, Tyler and Craig.)

October 16, **Harvard Symposium on Paperwork** (TBA)

7. **Oct 21** The Arts of Transmission II
   Readings: "Languages, Books, and Reading"; "Type Specimens"; "The Limits of the Universal Knowledge Project"; "Research Universities"; "Removing Knowledge"; "Universities: Wet, Hard, Soft, and Harder." Presentations by Wyn and Emily, Annie and Gillian, Laura, Jacki, Jamie, and Cynthia.
8 **Oct 28** Pathways of Cultural Movement
Readings (3):

**Research proposal essay due in class** (TBA)

9. **Nov 4** Information
Readings (4):
Martin Campbell-Kelly, “Information Technology and Organizational Change in the British Census”
*Baker v. Selden* U.S. Supreme Court Decision (1880)
Nicholson Baker, “Discards” *The New Yorker*
Paul Duguid, *Inheritance or Loss: A Brief Survey of Google Books* *First Monday*

10. **Nov 11** Knowledge I
Readings (2):

11. **Nov 18** Knowledge II
Readings (4):
Sigmund Freud, "Note on the Mystic Writing Pad"
Jacques Derrida, "Freud and the Scene of Writing"; *Paper Machine* (excerpts)

12. **Nov 25**
Class moved; see 16 December

13. **Dec 2** A Study in Contrasts
Reading:
Kirschenbaum, *Mechanisms*

14. **Dec 9** Conclusion
Reading:
King, *Collections of Nothing*

**December 16** (Reading Day) In lieu of the class missed on 25 November each student will be asked to meet with me individually to discuss the final project.

**Selective Bibliography of Related Readings**


Duguid, Paul and John Seely Brown, “*The Social Life of Documents*”


Melville, Herman. "*Bartleby the Scrivener*" (New York, 1853).


Robertson, Craig. “A Documentary Regime of Verification” *Cultural Critique* (June 2006).


Trollope, Anthony. *The Struggles of Brown, Jones, and Robinson by One of the Firm* (London, 1870)


And a Few Video Links Just for Fun

(Please Send Your Suggestions)

"Photograph of Jesus" a film by Laurie Hill (2008)


Recycling in 1903 Edison Manufacturing Company

"Dunder Mifflin Commercial" framed, *(The Office, 2008)*
"A Day in the Life of India" *Times of India* 100 Rupee ad

These Are the People an industrial film (1944)