

**COMS 639: Interpretive Methods in Media**  
**“Media Witnessing and the Politics of Distant Sensing”**

Fall 2013

Wednesdays 2:35-5:25pm

W-5 Arts Bldg.

Prof. Carrie A. Rentschler  
Department of Art History and Communication Studies  
Institute for Gender, Sexuality, and Feminist Studies (IGSF)  
Office location: IGSF, 3487 Peel Street, 2<sup>nd</sup> floor  
Office phone: (514) 398-8327  
Office hours: Tuesdays 11:00am-1:00pm and by appointment

**Course Description:** COMS 639 explores long-running debates in Communication and Media Studies about the spectatorship of distant suffering, media witnessing and the issues of epistemology, social responsibility, agency, and activism they engender. In this seminar we will analyze the relationship between media witnessing and the capacities for knowing and acting, and the difficult questions of interpretation they raise. We will be reading a range of texts from the fields of media studies, philosophy, political theory, postcolonial theory, affect theory, and feminist studies in the process.

To witness generally means to experience something so significant or extraordinary that it calls one to testify, or otherwise bear affective and moral witness. In affective terms, witnessing tends to signal that one experiences the heightened emotional and ethical weight of an event and its particularizing effects. In our seminar, the concept of “media witnessing” guides much of our reading and discussion. Media or “mediate” witnessing refers to the act of seeing, hearing or otherwise experiencing an event structured by practices of mediation and other forms of intervening agency. Witness is always inter-mediated, a way of bodily experiencing an event from perspectives conditioned by systems of reference and representation in which it occurs, but often in excess of those very systems. According to Barbie Zelizer, to witness “is to be a bystander to history-in-the-making,” an experience of being in proximity to events of historical significance. Most theories of witness posit a subject—a person—who witnesses, someone with privileged experience of an event such as a survivor of violence, for instance, or a war correspondent. Among other things, our seminar readings and discussion will probe how questions of distance and closeness shape our understanding of the ability to feel and act in ethical ways.

Our goal in this course is to use witness as a conceptual tool with which to play out the issues raised by our readings. If, as John Peters suggests, witness is the prime case of a medium, something that supplies the original to those who otherwise lack access to it, then witness simultaneously constitutes subjects, technologies, and infrastructures. For Lisa Parks, witness signifies witnessing technologies like satellites that can remotely sense for others and us, far above earth’s atmosphere. In addition to these key terms, other essential concepts that populate our readings and discussion include: spectatorship, memory, testimony, accountability, response-ability, distant suffering, affinity and solidarity, among others. We will ask what it means to witness, how conceptions of mediation are tied to notions of witnessing, how technologies act as witnesses, how technical and representational infrastructures shape experience and capacities for agency, how subjectivity is constituted by relations of spectatorship and performance, and how non-representational and non-referential traces of events complicate our very understanding of collective subjectivity and agency and the interpretive frameworks we can use to study them.

**Course Readings:** All readings for the course are required, except for those I have listed as suggested for further reading. Stable links to journal articles are available in MyCourses (under the module “Journal Article Links”). Books chapters that are not found in the books listed below are available in pdf on

MyCourses under the module “Book Chapter PDFs.” The books listed below are available for purchase from Paragraphe Books (corner of Sherbrooke and McGill College); they are also on reserve for three-hour loan at McGill’s Redpath Library. If you prefer, you can order the books from your favorite online seller. To enable the proper citation of readings, the schedule below contains full bibliographic information.

Books for the course:

- Luc Boltanski (1999). *Distant Suffering: Morality, Media and Politics*. Trans. Graham Burchell. Cambridge University Press.
- Judith Butler (2009). *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?* London: Verso.
- Paul Frosh and Amit Pinchevski, eds. (2009). *Media Witnessing: Testimony in the Age of Mass Communication*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Paul Gilroy (2004). *Postcolonial Melancholia*. Columbia University Press.
- Kelly Oliver (2001). *Witnessing: Beyond Recognition*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota.
- Rebecca Wanzo (2009). *The Suffering Will Not Be Televised: African American Women and Sentimental Political Storytelling*. Albany, NY: SUNY Press.
- Alison Winter (2011). *Memory: Fragments of a Modern History*. University of Chicago Press.

Krista Genevieve Lynes’ 2013 book *Prismatic Media, Transnational Circuits: Feminism in a Globalized Present* is available as an e-book via McGill Library. A stable link to the ebook is provided in the list of electronic resources provided on MyCourses.

**Assignments:** In addition to attendance at every seminar session, you are expected to come to seminar ready to discuss our seminar readings in-depth. Bring hard copies of the readings with you to seminar. You can submit written work in either English or French. Discussion facilitation should be conducted in English.

Weekly Short Writing Assignments [15%]: For each seminar meeting, you will write a one-two page response to one of the readings for that day. The responses should offer a critical take on the reading, by which I mean you should aim to question some part of the reading in a way that is directed toward stimulating and opening up discussion. Submit your short weekly writing assignments by 5pm the day before our seminar meeting, and come prepared to say a few words about the short paper in the seminar session. Short papers should be submitted to me via email under the subject heading COMS 639 Response. The weekly writing assignments are meant to facilitate conversation and reflection and will not be assigned a letter grade.

Seminar Paper Proposal [20%]: On **Wednesday October 9**, you will submit a 5-page seminar paper proposal. The proposal will present your plan for the final essay, including what you plan to write about, a short review of the existing literature on the topic, and a statement of its significance in light of the course and our readings. Include a bibliography of sources you will draw upon from the course, and any preliminary library research you have conducted.

Discussion Facilitation [15%]: Discussion facilitation is an essential skill to develop in the academic milieu, and it takes practice. Part of our time in seminar will be devoted to student-facilitated discussion in order to develop and practice this skill. On the day in which you facilitate discussion, you do not need to turn in a weekly response paper. Each student will facilitate discussion one time during the term, which will consist of two main tasks:

- 1) Providing 3 significant passages from text(s) we have read for that day (or from different chapters of a book under discussion), and
- 2) Offer a media example to analyze in relation to the passages under discussion.

The goal is to cultivate directed and serious discussion that meaningfully grapples with the texts at hand. Presenters should identify significant and/or particularly difficult passages in the reading, and be prepared

to facilitate a discussion of them: Why did you choose them? Why do they matter? What makes them significant? What is the problem/issue/interesting concept they present?

Student facilitators will direct us to the parts of the text they wish to discuss. It is imperative that every seminar participation has copies of the readings on hand. While it is the discussion facilitator's job to open up and direct discussion from the outset, it is everyone's shared responsibility to engage in conversation about the texts and issues at hand. For the media example part of discussion facilitation, facilitators should draw from relevant examples, and where applicable, can bring in media artifacts related to their own research interests and/or seminar paper topics.

Sign up for presentations will be held at the first seminar meeting. Please note that if you run into a scheduling problem around your date for discussion facilitation, it is your responsibility to find another seminar participant with whom to switch presentation dates.

*Final Seminar Paper [50%]:* The course will end with a 20-25 page term paper on a topic related directly to the course materials and the conceptual, theoretical and analytical tools we have discussed over the term. Seminar papers should not greatly exceed this page limit. The seminar paper will be due on **Friday December 13, 2012** by 4pm. I will provide two sets of comments on your paper: 1) one set written in the margins of the essay, and 2) a set of type written comments that address overarching issues of argumentation and quality of analysis, style, writing quality and organization. The two sets of comments can be picked up in your departmental mailbox if you are a student in Art History and Communication Studies— at a date by which I will notify you when they are available. If you are a student from another department or another university in Montreal, I will mail my comments to you by post (please provide me with your mailing address at the time of paper submission).

There are three options for the seminar paper.

*Option #1:* Theory/commentary paper on a conceptual area of media witnessing we have addressed in the seminar. In this option, your task is to develop a line of critique and/or commentary on an area of study we have discussed. This option may require further reading.

*Option #2:* Application paper. In this option, your task is to choose an object of study (perhaps a set of media representations, media practices, or other set of objects) and “apply” a set of concepts we have addressed over the seminar. In this option, you will be expected to: 1) do some relevant additional outside reading, 2) analyze your chosen object of study, and 3) reflect and comment upon the course readings you use as a result of your application and analysis of their concepts. Papers must draw substantially from the course readings.

*Option #3:* Propose an alternative that engages substantially with course material.

**Expectations:** There are several expectations that I have of you as participants in a graduate seminar. I expect that you will: attend every seminar meeting and come prepared to discuss each of our readings, do all of the readings and have something to say about them, bring your readings with you to every seminar, turn in your seminar work on time and in completed fashion, and openly communicate with me about anything of concern to you in the course.

**Grading:** Your final grade for the semester will be based on the quality and clarity of your performance in presentations and your written work. While not graded, your participation in seminar discussion is a crucial aspect of your work over the semester, and you will be expected to share your thoughts and participate in conversation. If you turn in work late, you may not receive written comments from me and your grade could be reduced. If I deem your work unsatisfactory, I may ask you to do it again. Taking an

incomplete or “K” grade for this course is greatly discouraged, unless you have a truly exceptional reason that can be supported by documentation.

**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.

**Discussion Etiquette:** Our seminar time is dedicated to in-depth discussion. Following a few basic discussion guidelines will help insure that this time is productive, enlightening and fun for all of us.

1. Experience and anecdote do not constitute evidence in a scholarly argument. While you each bring interesting experiences to the classroom, **ONLY** bring up your personal experience when it is relevant to class discussion; think carefully about this before you speak about your experience. If you bring up your own experience in class, recognize that it becomes a public topic for discussion. Others may interpret your experience differently than you do, and they are free to respectfully disagree with your interpretation. Furthermore, ask yourself what point you seek to make by talking about yourself. Is it really relevant? Do you want others to know this about you?
2. Work to create a shared climate of friendly and lively discussion. Avoid personal attacks, jabs, and grandstanding behaviors. Also avoid overly personalizing the topic under discussion. The point is to build knowledge together, not to look good or act smarter than everyone else or endlessly talk about yourself.
3. Disagreements are natural and welcome in scholarly discussion. So are arguments. But arguments are not contests. Grant your fellow course participants courtesy and respect, whether you agree with what they say or not.
4. As much as possible, avoid purely negative critique in your comments. Our goal in discussion is to understand the texts we read and how they might be useful to us -- in addition to cultivating our skills in critique. Understand first; criticize second.
5. You do not have to express your own opinion on a subject. You are also free to change your mind on any topic at any time.

**Auditors:** If you would like to audit this class, I will hold you to the following conditions: that you will follow all the policies and etiquette explained here, that you actively participate in class discussion and attend as many class sessions as you can.

**Statement on Academic Integrity:** McGill University and I take academic integrity very seriously. Therefore, all students must understand the meaning and consequences of cheating, plagiarism and other academic offenses under the Code of Student Conduct and Disciplinary Procedures (see [www.mcgill.ca/integrity](http://www.mcgill.ca/integrity) for more information).

**Nondiscrimination Statement:** As a professor at McGill University, I value equality of opportunity, human dignity, and racial, ethnic, sexual, physical and cultural diversity. Be assured that I will work to promote a safe and conducive environment for learning. In accordance with University policy, we will not tolerate discrimination or harassment on the basis of race, color, religion, national origin, ancestry,

sex, age, civil status, familial status, sexual orientation, or disability. In addition to the University's policy, and within the bounds of the course, we do not discriminate on the basis of political creed. This means that you do not have to agree with your classmates or me in order to do well in this course. So long as you demonstrate an understanding of the course material, and a willingness to engage with it, you are under no obligation to agree with it. I will also make every effort to avoid discrimination on the basis of class or income. If there is something I can do to make the class more hospitable, please let me know.

## **Schedule of Course Readings and Due Dates**

### **Wednesday Sept 4: Welcome to COMS 639—reading like a loser and other guidelines**

Malcolm Bull (2000). "Where is the Anti-Nietzsche?" *New Left Review* 3: 121-145.

Paul Frosh and Amit Pinchevski (2009) "Introduction: Why Media Witnessing, Why Now?" in Frosh and Pinchevski, eds. *Media Witnessing: Testimony in the Age of Mass Communication* (pp. 1-22) London: Palgrave MacMillan.

### **Wednesday Sept 11: Witness as Medium, Testimony, Technology**

John Peters (2009). "Witnessing" and "An Afterword: Torchlight Red on Sweaty Faces" in Frosh and Pinchevski, eds. *Media Witnessing: Testimony in the Age of Mass Communication* (pp. 23-48) London: Palgrave MacMillan.

Joan Leach (2009). "Scientific Witness, Testimony and Mediation" In Frosh and Pinchevski, eds. *Media Witnessing: Testimony in the Age of Mass Communication* (pp. 182-197) London: Palgrave MacMillan.

Lisa Parks (2005). "Satellite Witnessing" in *Cultures in Orbit: Satellites and the Televisual* (pp. 77-108). Duke University Press.

Wendy Kozol (forthcoming 2014) "Introduction" and "Rods from God: Missile Defense Advocacy, Anxious Cartographies and the U.S. Surveillance Regime" in *Visible Wars and the Ambivalence of Witnessing* (33pgs, 41 pgs., respectively). Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.

#### **Recommended:**

Tamara Ashuri and Amit Pinchevski (2009). "Witnessing as a Field" in Frosh and Pinchevski, eds. *Media Witnessing: Testimony in the Age of Mass Communication* (pp. 133-157). London: Palgrave MacMillan.

Barbie Zelizer (2002). "Finding Aids to the Past: Bearing Personal Witness to Traumatic Public Events." *Media, Culture & Society* 24(5): 697-714.

Trevor Paglen (2012). "What Greg Roberts Saw: Visuality, Intelligibility, and Sovereignty—36000 km over the Equator" in Nicholas Mirzoeff, ed. *The Visual Culture Reader* (pp. 207-219). Routledge.

**Thursday September 12, 5:30pm (event):** Conversation with Paul Gombell, guest curator of Trevor Paglen exhibit, SBC Gallery of Contemporary Art. 372 rue Sainte-Catherine Ouest, #507 Montréal, Québec H3B 1A2

### **Wednesday Sept 18: Ubiquitous and Mundane Witness**

John Ellis (2000). "Witness: A New Era of Perceiving the World" and "Witness through the Twentieth Century" in *Seeing Things: Television in an Age of Uncertainty* (pp. 6-38). London: I.B. Tauris and Company.

Paul Frosh (2009) "Telling Presences: Witnessing, Mass Media and the Imagined Lives of Strangers" in Frosh and Pinchevski, eds. *Media Witnessing: Testimony in the Age of Mass Communication* (pp. 49-72) London: Palgrave MacMillan.

- John Ellis (2009) "Mundane Witness" in Frosh and Pinchevski, eds. *Media Witnessing: Testimony in the Age of Mass Communication* (pp. 73-88) London: Palgrave MacMillan.
- Carrie Rentschler (2004). "Witnessing: U.S. Citizenship and the Vicarious Experience of Suffering" *Media, Culture & Society*. 26(2): 296-304.

**Wednesday Sept 25: Bearing Witness—Beyond a Politics of Recognition**

Kelly Oliver (2001). *Witnessing: Beyond Recognition*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota.

**Wednesday Oct 2: Response-Ability**

- Amit Pinchevski (2006). "The Ethics of Interruption: Toward a Levinasian Philosophy of Communication" *Social Semiotics* 15(2): 211-234.
- Judith Butler (2009). "Introduction: Precarious Life, Grievable Life" and "Survivability, Vulnerability, Affect" in *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?* (pp. 1-62) London: Verso.
- Sue Tait (2011) "Bearing Witness, Journalism and Moral Responsibility," *Media, Culture & Society* 33, no. 8: 1220-1235.

Recommended: Judith Butler (2005). "An Account of Oneself" in *Giving an Account of Oneself* (pp. 3-40) New York: Fordham University Press.

**Wednesday Oct 9: The Politics of Proximity**

**\*\*Seminar Paper Proposal Due; no response papers due this week.**

- Roger Silverstone (2004). "Proper Distance: Toward an Ethics for CyberSpace" in Gunnar Liestol, Andrew Morrison, and Terje Rasmussen, eds. *Digital Media Revisited: Theoretical Innovation in Digital Domains* (pp. 469-490). Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Lisa Parks (2009). "Digging into Google Earth: An Analysis of *Crisis in Darfur*" *Geoforum* 40: 535-545.
- Peter Asaro (2013). "The Labor of Surveillance and Bureaucratized Killing: New Subjectivities of Military Drone Operators" *Social Semiotics* 23(2): 196-224.

Recommended:

- Paul Frosh (2011) "Phatic Morality: Television and Proper Distance" *International Journal of Culture Studies* 14: 383-400.
- Lilie Chouliaraki (2006). "The Paradoxes of Mediation," "Mediation, Meaning and Power" and "Emergency News: Suffering with Pity" in *The Spectatorship of Suffering* (pp. 37-69, 118-156). Sage.

**Wednesday Oct 16: The Politics of Intervention**

- Lilie Chouliaraki (2013). "Solidarity and Spectatorship" and "The Humanitarian Imaginary" in *The Ironic Spectator: Solidarity in the Age of Post-Humanitarianism* (pp. 1-53). Cambridge, UK: Polity Press.
- Gada Mahrouse (2009). "The Compelling Story of the White/Western Activist in the War Zone: Examining Race, Neutrality and Exceptionalism in Citizen Journalism" *Canadian Journal of Communication* 34: 659-674.
- Paul Gilroy (2005). "Introduction: On Living with Difference," "Race and the Right to be Human" and "Cosmopolitanism Contested" in *Postcolonial Melancholia* (pp. 1-86). Columbia University Press.

Recommended:

- Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang (2012). "Decolonization is not a Metaphor" *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* 1(1): 1-40.

Linda Williams (1995). "The Ethics of Intervention: Dennis O'Rourke's *The Good Woman of Bangkok*" in Jane Gaines and Michael Renov, eds. *Collecting Visible Evidence* (pp. 176-189). Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.

Vivian Sobchack (1984). "Inscribing Ethical Space: Ten Propositions on Death, Representation, and Documentary" *Quarterly Review of Film Studies* 9(4): 283-299.

### **Wednesday Oct 23: Feminist Media Witnessing**

#### **\*\*Guest Visit by Prof. Krista Genevieve Lynes, Concordia University**

Krista Genevieve Lynes (2012). *Prismatic Media, Transnational Circuits: Feminism in a Globalized Present*. Palgrave MacMillan. The book is available as an ebook through PalgraveConnect via McGill Library. A stable link can be found on MyCourses with the links to journal articles (see module 2).

#### Recommended:

Carrie Rentschler (forthcoming 2013). "Technologies of Bystanding: Learning to See Like a Bystander" in Barbie Zelizer, ed. *Shaping Inquiry in Culture, Communication and Media Studies*. Routledge.

Wendy Hesford (2004) "Documenting Violations: Rhetorical Witnessing and the Spectacle of Distant Suffering" *Biography* 27(1): 104-144.

### **Wednesday Oct 30: The Spectatorship of Distant Suffering**

Luc Boltanski (1999). *Distant Suffering: Media, Morality, Politics*. Trans. Graham Burchell. Cambridge University Press.

### **Wednesday Nov 6: Whose Suffering Gets Recognized?**

Rebecca Wanzo (2010). "Introduction: Saving Shoshana," "Beyond *Uncle Tom*: A Genealogy of Sentimental Storytelling," "In the Shadow of Anarcha: Race, Pain and Medical Storytelling" and "The Abduction will Not Be Televised" in *The Suffering Will Not Be Televised: African-American Women and Sentimental Political Storytelling* (pp. 1-38, 145-226). Albany, NY: SUNY Press.

Judith Butler (2009). "Torture and the Ethics of Photography: Thinking with Sontag" in *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?* (pp.63-100) London: Verso.

Recommended: Susan Sontag (2003). *Regarding the Pain of Others*.

### **Wednesday Nov 13: Testimony and the Politics of Memory**

John Beverly (2008) "Testimonio, Subalternity, and Narrative Authority" in Sara Castro-Claren, ed. *A Companion to Latin American Literature and Culture* (pp. 571-583). Blackwell.

Cathy Caruth (1991) "Unclaimed Experience: Trauma and the Possibility of History" *Yale French Studies* 79: 181-192.

Alison Winter (2011). "Introduction," "On the Witness Stand," "Wilder Penfield and the Recording of Personal Experience", and "Flashbulb Memories" in *Memory: Fragments of a Modern History* (pp. 1-32, 75-102, 157-178). University of Chicago Press.

Recommended: Friedrich Nietzsche (1967/1989). "First Essay: Good and Evil, Good and Bad" (focus on sections 3, 10-13) and "Second Essay: Guilt, Bad Conscience and the Like" in *On the Genealogy of Morals* (pp. 24-96). Trans. Walter Kaufmann. New York: Vintage.

### **Wednesday Nov 20: Spectatorial Witnessing as Performance**

**\*\*Guest Visit by Prof. Amelia Jones**

Jacques Ranciere (2007). "The Emancipated Spectator" *Artforum*, March: 271-281.

Amelia Jones "Performing the Wounded Body: Pain, Affect and the Radical Relationality of Meaning"  
*Parallax* 15(4): 45-67.

Caroline Wake (2009). "The Accident and the Account: Towards a Taxonomy of Spectatorial Witness in Theatre and Performance Studies" *Performance Paradigm* 5(1): no page numbers.

Sharon Sliwinski (2008). "New York Transfixed: Notes on the Expression of Fear" *The Review of Education, Pedagogy and Cultural Studies* 30: 232-252.

Recommended: Bertolt Brecht (1949). "A Model for Epic Theater" Trans. Eric Bentley *Sewanee Review* 57(3): 425-436.

**Wednesday Nov 27: Evil Media Studies**

Anna Feigenbaum (2011), 'Security for Sale! The Visual Rhetoric of Marketing Counter-terrorism Technologies', *The Poster* 2(1): 75-92.

Suzanne Cusick (2013). "Towards an Acoustemology of Detention in the 'Global War on Terror'" in Georgina Born, ed. *Music, Sound and Space: Transformations of Public and Private Experience* (pp. 275-291). Cambridge University Press.

Whitney Phillips (2011) "LOLing at Tragedy: Facebook, Memorial Trolls, and Reactions to Grief Online." *First Monday*. <http://firstmonday.org/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/3168/3115>

Recommended: Goffey, Andrew and Fuller, Matthew (2009) "Towards an evil media studies." In: Parikka, Jussi and Sampson, Tony D., (ed.) *The spam book: on viruses, porn, and other anomalies from the dark side of digital culture* (pp. 141-159). Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press.

**Friday Dec 13: final papers due**