

McGill University  
Department of Art History and Communication Studies  
Fall 2014

COMS 490 (001)—History and Theory of Media, 3 credits  
ARTH 420 (001)—Selected Topics in Art and Architecture 1, 3 credits  
W 11:35–14:25, W5 Arts

### **Art and Technics of the Hand: Digits and Digitalia**

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Hours: Th 13:00–15:00  
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#### **Overview**

“Nature builds no machines, no locomotives, railways, electric telegraphs, self-acting mules etc. These are products of human industry; natural material transformed into organs of the human will over nature, or of human participation in nature. They are *organs of the human brain, created by the human hand*; the power of knowledge, objectified.” — Karl Marx, *Grundrisse*, ca. 1858

“Then I would let my eyes go from his face down to his hands. I would then discover Le Corbusier. It was his hands that revealed him. It was as if his hands betrayed him. They spoke all his feelings, all the vibrations of his inner life that his face tried to conceal [...] Hands that one might have thought Le Corbusier had drawn himself, with that trait made of a thousand small successive traces that seemed to look for one another but that in the end formed a precise and exact line, that unique contour that outlined the shape and defined it in space. Hands that seemed to hesitate but from which precision came. Hands that always thought, just like he did in his thinking, and on his hands one could read his anxiety, his disappointments, his emotions and his hopes. Hands that had drawn, and were to draw, all his work.” — André Wogenscky, *Le Corbusier's longtime assistant on Le Corbusier*, 2006

“The hand is in danger.” — Jacques Derrida, “Heidegger's Hand,” 1985

The hand leads a secret life in art and media. Testifying to this are its influences scattered throughout our language in unexpected places: A surgeon is literally and etymologically, “one who practices the art of healing by manual operation” (OED), one who heals with hands. The surgeon may do so *adroitly*, in its root sense, using the right hand (the same source as the word *dextrous*). Similarly, a handshake, originally a gesture of good faith meant to disarm one's strong hand, may turn into hand-to-hand combat if someone acts *sinisterly*, concealing one's left-handedness and the dagger so clutched. A new television comes with a *manual*. Video games require hand-eye coordination. Artists engage in handicraft.

This course offers an entry into the complex history and theory of the hand in art, technology, and design. Of special interest will be contemporary digital technologies; however, our readings and screenings will seek to contextualize these technologies by gaining a deeper understanding of the past. Digital technologies are technologies of the digit—technologies of the number and of the finger that once represented it. To understand this aspect of the digital—the digital in its materiality—we have to understand how new media have mobilized the hand in revolutionary ways. The piano keyboard, for instance, opened broad new possibilities for finger placement and hand movement in the creation of music. The typewriter keyboard opened similar avenues for the rapid transcription of texts. The touchscreen on current tablets and mobile phones has inaugurated a new field of human-machine interaction that has only begun to be tapped into. Perhaps the theremin, which allows for orchestration without physical contact between thereminist and instrument, points toward future, touchless technologies between hand and computer, as was the stuff of science fiction in *Minority Report* (2002).

The course features a number of rigorous philosophical texts, without which any discussion of the hand would be incomplete. I will provide reading questions for several of the more difficult weeks to help guide your reading and our discussions through the text, but one of the best ways for us to get a handle on these complicated issues is to use concrete examples. I have a number of such examples already in hand, but I encourage you to bring your own to the table. Such examples may very well become the topics of final papers.

## Required Books

- Heidegger, Martin. *Being and Time*. Translated by Joan Stambaugh, Rev. Edition. Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2010.
- Leroi-Gourhan, André. *Gesture and Speech*. Translated by Anna Bostock Berger. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1993.
- Wogenscky, André. *Le Corbusier's Hands*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006.

All books are available at The Word, 469 Milton Street, <http://www.wordbookstore.ca/>. Please note that The Word is cash only. I apologize for any inconvenience. *Additional required readings will be available through the course website.*

## Assignments

- 15% – Attendance and participation, including one week when you will be scheduled to provide discussion questions on the week's readings or to lead discussion on an object related to class. Objects might include clips from films and television, artistic pieces of all sorts, literary works, etc. Be creative! I look forward to seeing what you find.
- 30% – Response papers (6), one page each, due in phases: within weeks 1–2, 3–4, 5–6, 7–8, 9–10, and 11–12. These windows are meant ideally to pace the papers so that different people are contributing each week with written thoughts that they can read aloud to help spark discussion. Papers should be submitted to the course website no later than 8 a.m. on the day of class. I will look over the responses before class and ask people to read their insights to the class. Feel free to offer to read your own. Finally, the specification of one page is just that: keep it to one page using a 12-point font. However, you can adjust the spacing between single-spaced and double-spaced depending on how much you have to say.
- 15% – Applying theory paper (5–6 pages, double-spaced, 12-point font, 1-inch margins), due October 8 in class. More info to come in an assignment sheet on September 24.
- 40% – Semester project, consisting of a formal scholarly paper (15–20 pages). If you have an alternative proposal for the semester project, please get in touch with me by October 10 so we can work out a plan before the first deadline.
- October 17: Email me a one-paragraph paper proposal, pitching a topic and some preliminary research questions by 17:00
- October 29: Formal paper proposal (4 pages), including a clear statement of topic, research questions, and an annotated bibliography
- November 26: A short presentation of your research
- December 5: Formal scholarly paper (15–20 pages, plus citations) posted on the course website by 17:00.

## Policy Statements

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](http://www.mcgill.ca/integrity) for more information).

In accord with McGill University's Charter of Students' Rights, students in this course have the right to submit in English or in French any written work that is to be graded. (Approved by Senate on 21 January 2009). If you will require your written work to be graded in French, please notify me within the first two weeks of classes so I can make appropriate arrangements.

Instructor generated course materials (e.g., handouts, notes, summaries, exam questions, etc.) are protected by law and may not be copied or distributed in any form or in any medium without explicit permission of the instructor. Note that infringements of copyright can be subject to follow up by the University under the Code of Student Conduct and Disciplinary Procedures.

As the instructor of this course I endeavor to provide an inclusive learning environment. However, if you experience barriers to learning in this course, do not hesitate to discuss them with me and the Office for Students with Disabilities, 514-398-6009.

End-of-course evaluations are one of the ways that McGill works towards maintaining and improving the quality of courses and the student's learning experience. You will be notified by e-mail when the evaluations are available on Mercury, the online course evaluation system. Please note that a minimum number of responses must be received for results to be available to students.

In the event of extraordinary circumstances beyond the University's control, the content and/or evaluation scheme in this course is subject to change.

Additional policies governing academic issues which affect students can be found in the McGill Charter of Students' Rights.

### **Grading**

Grading is on a plus/minus scale. To properly weight the grades at the end of the semester I will convert the letter grades into percentages according to the baselines set out in the Arts and Sciences calendar. Following those guidelines, grades in the A range will be awarded only for superior work. Grades in the B range will apply to work that is above satisfactory. Satisfactory work that merely meets the basic requirements of the course will receive a grade in the C range. Grades in the D range reflect unsatisfactory work.

You must complete all major assignments, including the short paper, final paper, reading questions, and presentation, to pass the course. If something comes up on the day you are supposed to provide discussion questions, please notify me in advance or plan to trade with one of your colleagues.

It is your responsibility to make sure I receive any assignment you turn in. It is also your responsibility to properly back up your work: keep more than one digital copy and always have a paper copy of anything you submit.

### **Late Work**

Essays turned in late are graded down, one grade for the first two days and one grade for each subsequent day including weekends. Any late work can be placed in my mailbox. Please notify me by email when you submit late work to my mailbox.

### **MC2 Devices**

The use of MC2 devices is allowed only under specific conditions, such as working collaboratively in groups for purposes of research. Because this is a seminar and relies primarily on discussion, it is important that everyone is actively engaged. For this reason, MC2 devices are not allowed during discussions or lectures. The use of MC2 devices must, in all cases, respect policies and regulations of the University, including in particular the following:

1. The Code of Student Conduct and Disciplinary Procedures;
2. The Policy Concerning the Rights of Students with Disabilities;
3. The Policy on the Responsible Use of McGill IT Resources.

No audio or video recording of any kind is allowed in class without my explicit permission. MC2 devices are not to be used for voice communication without my explicit permission.

## Reading List

- Day, WanWen. "Commodification of Creativity. Reskilling Computer Animation Labor in Taiwan," *Knowledge Workers in the Information Society*, ed. Catherine McKercher, and Vincent Mosco (Lexington Books, 2008).
- Derrida, Jacques. "Geschlecht II: Heidegger's Hand." *Deconstruction and Philosophy: The Texts of Jacques Derrida* 161 (1987): 96.
- Dreyfus, Hubert L. "How Representational Cognitivism Failed and Is Being Replaced by Body/World Coupling." In *After Cognitivism*, pp. 39-73. Springer Netherlands, 2009.
- Engels, Frederick. "Introduction to *Dialectics of Nature*." In *Karl Marx, Frederick Engels: Collected Works*, Vol. 25, 318–335. New York: International Publishers, 1987.
- Engels, Frederick. "The Part Played by Labour in the Transition from Ape to Man." In *Karl Marx, Frederick Engels: Collected Works*, Vol. 25, 452–464. New York: International Publishers, 1987.
- Grampp, William D. "What Did Smith Mean by the Invisible Hand?" *Journal of Political Economy* 108, no. 3 (2000): 441–465.
- Heidegger, Martin. *Being and Time*. Translated by Joan Stambaugh, Rev. Edition. Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2010.
- Jones, Lynette A., and Susan J. Lederman. *Human Hand Function*. Oxford University Press, 2006.
- Kaerlein, Timo. "Aporias of the Touchscreen: On the Promises and Perils of a Ubiquitous Technology." *NECSUS. European Journal of Media Studies* 1, no. 2 (2012): 177–198.
- Kittler, Friedrich A. *Discourse Networks 1800/1900*. Translated by Michael Metteer. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1990.
- Leroi-Gourhan, André. *Gesture and Speech*. Translated by Anna Bostock Berger. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1993.
- Marx, Karl. "Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844." In *Karl Marx, Frederick Engels: Collected Works*, Vol. 3, 229–348. New York: International Publishers, 1977.
- Marx, Karl, and Frederick Engels. "Wage Labour and Capital." In *Karl Marx, Frederick Engels: Collected Works*, Vol. 9, 197–228. New York: International Publishers, 1977.
- Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. "The Intertwining—The Chiasm." In *The Visible and the Invisible*, 130–155. Chicago: Northwestern University Press, 1968.
- Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. *Phenomenology of Perception*. Translated Donald A. Landes. New York: Routledge, 2012.
- Minowitz, Peter. "Adam Smith's Invisible Hands." *Econ Journal Watch* 1, no. 3 (2004): 381–412.
- Napier, John. "The Evolution of the Hand." *Scientific American* 207 (1962): 56–62.
- Napier, John. *Hands*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1980.
- Pallasmaa, Juhani. *The Thinking Hand: Existential and Embodied Wisdom in Architecture*. Chichester: Wiley, 2009.
- Serres, Michel. *The Five Senses: A Philosophy of Mingled Bodies*. Translated by Margaret Sankey and Peter Cowley. London and New York: Continuum, 2008.
- Stiegler, Bernard. *Technics and Time 1: The Fault of Epimetheus*. Translated by Richard Beardsworth and George Collins. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998.
- Strauven, Wanda. "Archaeology of the Touch Screen." *Maske und Kothurn* 58, no. 4 (2012): 69–80
- Tallis, Raymond. *The Hand: A Philosophical Inquiry into Human Being*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2003.
- Wogenscky, André. *Le Corbusier's Hands*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006.

## Schedule

### Introduction

W1 Chirosofophy, or: Rethinking the Reading of the Hand

9/3 Reading: Pallasmaa, "The Mysterious Hand," 24–45; Tallis, "Grasping the Hand," 21–43; John Keats, "This Living Hand" <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poem/180719>; Dylan Thomas, "The Hand That Signed the Paper" <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poem/178635>; Mary Ruefle, "The Hand" <http://www.loc.gov/poetry/180/121.html>

### Phenomenology of the Hand

W2 Heidegger: Beings-ready-to-hand and De-distancing

9/10 Reading: Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 39–110

W3 Heidegger: Being-with-others, Being-toward-death, and History as Handing Down

9/17 Reading: Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 111–126 (being-with-others); 227–256 (being-toward-death); 334–354 (being-in-the-world); 355–372 (history as handing down)

Group presentations on different reading sections

W4 Practical Problems: Heideggerian AI and the Ontological Difference

- 9/24 Reading: Agre, "Representation and Indexicality," 222–246; Dreyfus, "How Representational Cognitivism Failed," 39–74; Heidegger, *What Is Called Thinking*, 16; Heidegger, "The Age of the World Picture," 128–132  
Recommended: Elden, "Heidegger's Animals"; Lawlor, "Animals Have No Hand"

W5 Merleau-Ponty: The Perceiving Hand

- 10/1 Reading: Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 100–155; Merleau-Ponty, "The Intertwining—The Chiasm," 130–155  
Recommended: Dreyfus, "Intelligence Without Representation"

**Media Systems and the Hand**

W6 1900: Typewriters

- 10/8 Reading: Kittler, *Discourse Networks 1800/1900*, 177–205; Derrida, "Heidegger's Hand," 161–196; Connor, "Modernism and the Writing Hand"; Ferguson, "The Literary Hand," 40–55

W7 2000: Touch Screens

- 10/15 Reading: Wanda Strauven, "Archaeology of the Touch Screen"; Timo Kaerlein, "Aporias of the Touchscreen"  
Workshop on touch screens and other innovations in hand-based media  
**\*\*\*Final Paper Proposal Due\*\*\***

W8 The Hand of the Artist: Architecture and Design

- 10/22 Reading: Wogenscky, *Le Corbusier's Hand*, 1–86; Pallasmaa, "The Drawing Hand," 88–105

**Technics of the Hand**

W9 Marx and Engels: Political Economy and the Hand

- 10/29 Reading: Marx and Engels, "Wage Labour and Capital," 197–228; Engels, "The Part Played by Labour in the Transition from Ape to Man," 452–464;  
Recommended: "Introduction to *Dialectics of Nature*," 318–335

W10 Marx and Engels: Hands, Visible and Invisible

- 11/5 Reading: Marx, "Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844," 270–282; Braverman, "The Scientific-Technical Revolution and the Worker," 117–126  
Screening: Gilbreth films, 1910–1924; *These Hands* (M'bugu-Schelling, Tanzania, 1992, 45m)  
Recommended: Grampp, "What Did Smith Mean by the Invisible Hand?" 441–465

W11 Leroi-Gourhan: The Adventure of the Human Hand

- 11/12 Reading: *Gesture and Speech*, 1–144  
Recommended: Napier "The Evolution of the Hand," 56–62.

W12 Leroi-Gourhan: The Regression of the Hand

- 11/19 Reading: *Gesture and Speech*, 145–268  
Recommended: Day, "Commodification of Creativity: Reskilling Computer Animation Labor in Taiwan"

**Student Presentations**

W13 Student Presentations

- 11/26 Student presentations and end of course logistics