

Short Course 24 @ APSA 2016, Philadelphia

The Methods Studio: Workshop—Textual Analysis and Critical Semiotics— and “Crit”

Wednesday, August 31, 2.00—6.00 p.m.

Organizers: Dvora Yanow [Dvora.Yanow@wur.nl], Peregrine Schwartz-Shea [psshea@poli-sci.utah.edu]

Description: The Methods Studio has two parts: a workshop and a “crit,” both described more fully below. The focus of this year’s workshop is “**Textual Analysis and Critical Semiotics**.” Following that, the “crit” will entail discussion of interpretive methods in three works in progress, selected via application.

Part I [2.00-4.00 p.m.] Workshop on Textual Analysis and Critical Semiotics

Dr. Matt Guardino (Providence College) has been using critical semiotic analysis (drawing on Roland Barthes, Stuart Hall, and others) as well as quantitative content analysis in application to media texts. In the workshop part of the Methods Studio, he will provide an introduction and overview of the former. Dr. Guardino will begin with a short assessment of the interdisciplinary space of communication studies and political science and his own experiences moving across these disciplinary and methods borders (from corpus approaches and coding to more critical-interpretive approaches). He will then turn to an introduction to critical semiotics, including mapping Barthes and Hall onto a wider range of theorists, theories, and/or approaches (such as critical and other forms of discourse analysis). He will show how this method may be used, drawing on examples from his own work and a shared exercise.

Readings: *Please see Reader's Guide, below.*

[Dr. Guardino's presentation slides.](#)

4.00-4.20 p.m. Break

Part II [4.20-6.00 p.m.] “Crit”: Exploring research projects [open topic]

This part of the Methods Studio adapts what is known in architectural teaching and practice as a “crit.” Three researchers, who have been selected on the basis of an application, will **briefly** present their projects, focusing on questions about the research methods they are using and/or the ways they have written their

methods sections. A group of more experienced researchers from a range of subfields and interpretive methods backgrounds will lead the discussion in response to those questions, but the intention is to draw also on the comments and questions of others in attendance, such that the discussion serves to educate all. Like the Methods Café, the Crit entails teaching and learning through discussion and example, rather than through lecture; but the Crit enables more prolonged engagement with each presented research project. It emphasizes supportive critique, with an eye toward publication and reviewers' reactions.

Presenters

- Alyssa Maraj Grahame (Ph.D. candidate, University of Massachusetts Amherst): Democracy in crisis: Social mobilization against financial capital in Iceland and Scotland — 'multi-sited' vs. 'comparative' ethnography and interpretive case selection
- Joe Fischel (Assistant Professor, Yale University): The legal grammar of gender and the gender of (legal) grammar—Textual analysis and historiography of law, investigating US sodomy statutes
- Denise Walsh (Associate Professor, University of Virginia): Debating the French burqa ban at the European Court of Human Rights: 'Critical Frame Analysis' and post-structuralist discourse theory

Crit leaders: Workshop staff plus organizers and others attending:

- Regina Bateson, MIT [interviews, participant observation, mixed methods; Comparative]
- Laura J. Hatcher, Southeast Missouri State University [archival, visual analysis, interviews; law, rural politics, emergency management]
- Samantha Majic, John Jay College/City University of New York [interviews, participant observation; discourse analysis; American, gender and politics]
- Fred Schaffer, UMass Amherst [ordinary language interviewing; concept analysis; Comparative]
- Ron Schmidt, Sr., Davidson College & CSULB [value-critical policy analysis, framing, critical discourse; racial and immigration politics, language policy]
- Peregrine Schwartz-Shea, University of Utah [research design; IRBs; American]
- Dvora Yanow, Wageningen University and Käte Hamburger Kolleg/Duisburg [field research; language and visual analyses; policy, organizational studies]

6.00 p.m. –? We will adjourn for drinks, to be joined by available Methods Café table 'staff' [a.k.a. Cafeterians], place TBA [most likely a bar in the hotel]

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Reader's Guide for APSA 2016 Short Course 'The Methods Studio'

Part I. Workshop on Textual Analysis and Critical Semiotics

Dr. Matt Guardino, Providence College

Readings

(1) Hall, Stuart. 1980. "Encoding/decoding." In *Culture, Media, Language: Working Papers in Cultural Studies*, eds. Stuart Hall, Dorothy Hobson, Andrew Lowe, and Paul Willis. London: Hutchinson, 128-138. A copy of the text is available [here](#) (pdf).

(especially middle of p. 131 through top of p. 136)

(2) Fairclough, Norman. 2015. *Language and Power* (Third Edition). London and New York: Routledge. A copy of the text is available [here](#) (pdf).

(selections: "Critical Discourse Analysis in Practice: Interpretation, Explanation, and the Position of the Analyst," pp. 172-176; "Creativity and Struggle in Discourse: The Discourse of Thatcherism," pp. 177-199.)

Key Terms

CLS: Critical language studies, a broad term for a range of approaches to that emphasize the rigorous interrogation of power relations in and through language, studied at various social, political and cultural sites.

CDA: Critical discourse analysis, an interdisciplinary form of CLS that views discourse as both material and ideational, and as involved in a dialectical process of shaping, as well as being shaped by, social practices and structures. CDA is explicitly aimed at facilitating broader awareness of these processes (and, thus, discursive agency).

MR: In CDA - "members' resources," or thoughts, images, attitudes, forms of discourse and "interpretive procedures" that we bring to our engagement with texts. These may be understood to include the ideological assumptions of "popular common sense," as theorized by Gramsci, Hall and others. In semiotics,

we might say that connotative signification (see below) relies on the cognitive and emotional activation of MR.

Signs: The basic unit of meaning in semiotics. A sign consists of the “signifier” and the “signified.”

Signifiers: Representational figures that have immediate physical or material form (e.g., written or spoken words or phrases, images within a TV news or advertising clip).

Signifieds: Mental concepts referred to (or called for by) signifiers. Signifiers and their relationships to signifieds are cultural conventions, and are understood as ideological (i.e., historically contingent and politically contestable, especially as they operate in relation to denotative codes [see below]).

Codes: In semiotics - associative maps in human consciousness and broader culture that provide frameworks for interpreting signs. Codes have denotative (more “literal” or naturalized) and connotative (more implicit, culturally conventional and politically constable) dimensions.

Signification: The ideologically charged process through which particular signifiers (connotatively) connect with particular signifieds to produce meanings.

Questions to Consider

* Hall (p. 134) discusses how “dominant cultural orders” delimit the range of possible meanings likely to be read from any sign. To what extent should we understand meaning-making in discourse as fixed or variable? (see also Fairclough’s dialectical portrayal of discursive “creativity” and social “determination.”) This suggests an additional methodological question: to what extent is (or should) CDA or semiotic interpretation (be) “replicable” across researchers? (see, e.g., Fairclough’s discussion of the “position of the analyst,” pp. 175-176)

* Consider Fairclough’s analysis of Thatcher’s (and Thatcherite) discourse in Chapter 7: Does this call to mind any correspondences with the campaign discourses of Donald Trump and/or Hillary Clinton, in terms of “relations,” “subject positions” or “contents”?

* To what extent can apparently non-textual phenomena (e.g., buildings, clothing, gestures) be read as political “texts” using the tools of CDA or semiotics? What is potentially gained or lost by this extension?

* Beyond (news, mass, advertising, social) media texts and statements by political actors (e.g., presidential speeches), what other kinds of text could be analyzed using the tools of CDA or semiotics?

* What are some challenges and opportunities of applying CDA or semiotic interpretation to visual (i.e., photographic or video), as opposed to verbal, texts?

* To what extent is the reduction of text to numbers epistemologically and theoretically (in)compatible with the close analysis of contextual meanings implied by forms of CDA or semiotics?