Writing Workshop

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Fall 2009

WRITING TYPES

It is always useful to ask these three questions when reading:
1. What is the argument of the author? (Argument)
2. What is the context of this book? (Historiography)
3. What sources is the author using? (Sources)

Once you understand enough of what you are reading, it is possible for you to identify the issues your writing will address. For the most part, you will likely focus on the argument of the text, but it is useful to be familiar with the various ways to structure a response.

Once you have enough background and understand the context of the articles/books you are reading, you should be able to direct your writing to the historiography of the piece. This kind of writing focuses on the context of the reading including other authors, historians, or commentators. You usually must cite at least two, unless there is a particular author to whom you believe the article is directed. One way to begin is to cite other authors from the reading for that week. You may also find that you can start to cite authors courses or from outside reading.

When you concentrate on sources isolate what materials the author is using to make their argument: primary, secondary, news paper articles, magazines, photographic, books (genre: history, theory, criticism, monographs, data oriented research) and so forth. You will then discuss briefly which sources the author uses and how/why you think this is important.

The following are three examples of each type of writing. Bear in mind, the examples are based on an analysis of an entire book, not an article or abbreviated text.

ARGUMENT
Review: Culture of Time and Space, 1880-1918, by Stephen Kern

Kern's book is a seductive intellectual history writ large across the canvas of western European thought at the turn of the twentieth century beginning with the technological innovation of the late nineteenth century and culminating in the crucible of lived experience of World War I. The scale of his themes and scope of his arguments range from cultural production in literature, the arts and cinema to the sciences and engineering, including physics, psychoanalysis, and sociology.[1] His project is no less than to explain the fundamental changes presaging modernity during this epoch: changes he infers from the cultural experience of time and space. The basic argument that the mechanism of change is a mutual affect between technology and perceptual experience is sound, but the method of establishing causality is problematic, and therein lies part of the challenge of this history: are causal links important in this project or is it enough to argue inferential relationships between concrete histories?

Stephen Kern is a cultural historian teaching at Ohio State. He is a Professor of History and additionally in 2004 he was appointed a Humanities Distinguished Professor. He taught at Northern Illinois University for thirty-two years completing his tenure there as a Distinguished Research Professor. His area of specialization is modern

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[1]   A small sampling of the above would include: Joyce's stream-of-consciousness, Proust search for lost time, Bergson's duration, Freud's unconscious mental processes, Durkheim's social relativity of time and space, Einstein's relativity theory and Picasso's cubism.

European cultural and intellectual history, but his interests range across a number of subjects including childhood, psychoanalysis, phenomenology, the body and sexuality, time and space, love, vision (the gaze), causality, and murder, with an abiding general interest in the histories of philosophy, literature, and art. He has received numerous awards and lectures at universities around the United States. His major publications include *Anatomy and Destiny: A Cultural History of the Human Body* (Bobbs-Merrill, 1975), *The Culture of Time and Space: 1880-1918* (Harvard, 1983), *The Culture of Love: Victorians to Moderns* (Harvard, 1992)*, and *A Cultural History of Causality: Science, Murder Novels, and Systems of Thought, (Princeton, 2004).* Of all his books, *The Culture of Time and Space* is the most recognized and used frequently as a teaching text in a number of disciplines.

Originally published in 1983, the book was reissued (2003) with a new preface in which Kern self-identifies four arguments in the book: (1) that abstract concepts like space and time can have a concrete history, (2) that his conceptual 'gridwork' made possible a broad interdisciplinary synthesis, (3) that technology shapes the experience of time/space, and (4) that his interpretation of time/space in the prewar period offers an interpretive tool that can be applied to discrete historical events: specifically the diplomatic crisis of July 1914 and the lived experience of the battlefield in WWI (preface, xxix). His method proceeds from two basic observations, one gleaned from Eugene Minkowski's critique of Freudian psychoanalysis, *Lived Time: Phenomenological and Psychopathological Studies* (Evanston, 1970)[2]. Minkowski argues that the analyst should concentrate not on the patient's past, but the patient's experience of time in the present moment; that is, a phenomenology of time opposed to the psychoanalytic. Kern's second insight reflected on the increases in available energy sources at the turn of the century and the transportation and communication technologies they fueled, which he argues, consequently transformed the experience of time and space, particularly through the shrinking of lived distance. These two reflections in concert inform his interpretive structure which depends on constructing links between the technological developments that were revolutionizing the 'actual experience of space and time' and the cultural changes that precipitated new ways pf perceiving and conceptualizing time and space (preface, xii).

The book is organized by broad themes and two case studies: the nature of time, subdivided into past, present, future and speed; and the nature of space, subdivided into form, distance, and direction. The last two chapters are test cases; the crisis of July 1914 in which he argues the new experience of time created by the telegraph exacerbated the tensions in the diplomatic negotiations between the Austro-Hungarians and Serbs thus leading to the breakdown in the peace process, and finally, Kern's argument that a fundamentally different experience of space emerges on the battlefields of WWI. Kern attempts a balance between universal conditions and the particular circumstances of history to argue for the necessity of identifying connections inferred through metaphor and analogy between what historians would typically insist be temporally synchronous, spatially proximate and causally related phenomena. That is, his thematic approach is contingent upon the phenomenological interpretation of specific events. And it is here that his seductive project becomes problematic.

The inferences, although not categorically wrong, depend heavily upon how the phenomena are interpreted not how they are related. In contrast, authors like Anton Rabinbach, *The Human Motor, Energy Fatigue and the*

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[2]   Kern also uses, Eugene Minkowski, "Findings in a Case of Schozophrenic depression" (1923), in Rollo May, Ernest Angel, Henri F. Ellenberger, eds., *Existence: A New Dimension in Psychiatry and Psychology* (New York, 1958).

Origins of Modernity (1990) also look at the preoccupation with energy at the turn of the century, but his metaphor of 'man as machine' emerges from concrete historical causalities: Heimholz and thermodynamics applied to natural philosophy including man—especially man's labor which fuels the second industrial revolution, and the recognition and then study of the counterforce of fatigue (post 1860's) which threatens the progress of modernity. Cultural historians on par with Rabinbach's project might include Laurel Ulrich and *The Mid-Wives Tale* (1991), or Paul Edwards, *The Closed World: Computers and Politics of Discourse in Cold War America (Inside Technology)* (1996).

In fairness the historians cited above are working after Kern and the grain of their history is finer and certainly infected by recent trends in historical analysis which are both more open to causal inference across disciplinary boundaries, but more demanding of a temporal simultaneity of concrete histories. In fact it may be that Kern's own argument, that it is the simultaneity of time and space which characterizes modernity, that is useful as both an interrogative and a heuristic for doing cultural or intellectual history.

HISTORIOGRAPHY

Review: *American Technological Sublime*, by David Nye

According to Heidegger, the essence of technology is by no means anything technological. If we take this to mean that culture engenders technology, than we can place David Nye's book, *American Technological Sublime* (1994), on a list of authors including Leo Marx, William Cronon and Thomas Hughes for whom the technological is more than the means-end of progress. For Nye, however; it is aesthetics and nineteenth century notions of the sublime that underlie our enthusiasm for technology and it is this that welds our society together and in a Durkhiemian sense, forms one of our central 'ideas about ourselves' serving as 'an element of social cohesion' evident first from canals and then railroads.

Dedicated to Leo Marx, Nye's book is a particular direction in the historiography of technology with Cronons' *Nature's Metropolis* a Chandler-inflected history of the minutia of managing innovation offering one interpretive strategy and Nye's alternate history moving toward an intellectual history of the American response to the products of technological innovation. His emphasis on the pictorial experience of the man-made in the landscape positions him at an intersection between the history of technology and histories of art and landscape. Acknowledging that the sublime emerges from an aesthetic and philosophical enquiry nonetheless Nye argues that the experience is socially constructed, whether to natural or man-made objects, and is a historically viable gauge of a particularly American response to new sources of popular wonder from the railroad to the atomic bomb and the space program. Nye's book builds on the work of current authors Raymond O'Brian (*The American Sublime: Landscape and Scenery of the Lower Hudson River*) and Elizabeth McKinsey (*Niagara Falls: Icon of the American Sublime*) who also suggest symbolic significance to the big machines in the garden, but focus on particular moments in history rather than the diachronic history that Nye proposes. His story moves from early American machines like the railroad in the 1830's as a 'dynamic sublime' through stories about bridges or the geometrical sublime, to the movement from the pastoral to the interior, with the factory as the industrial sublime, and the unintended sublime of

the electric cityscape. The pattern is clearly chronological, but organized by a particular interpretation through the lens of aesthetic theory and the constructed landscape.

Trained as a historian Nye graduated from Amherst College and completed his MA and PhD at the University of Minnesota. Currently he is professor and chair at the Center for American studies at Odense University, Denmark. An Americanist in Europe his history is tinged with European intellectual inflections from the Enlightenment to modernism including Kant, Burke, Durkheim, Barthes, and Baudrillard. The sixteen books he has edited or written include *Electrifying America* (winner of the Dexter Prize and the Abel Wolman Award), *American Technological Sublime*, *Narratives and Spaces*, and *Consuming Power: A Social History of American Energies*. He also served as the narrator and one of the scriptwriters for the eight part Danish television series, "Inventing Modern America." His most recent work is *America as Second Creation: Technology and Narratives of New Beginnings*. In many ways,this book is a continuation of his project in *Electrifying America* but at a grander scale. Unlike fellow historian Thomas Hughes for whom the socially constructed realities of the technological are generated among the engineers and inventors, for Nye it is the receptive public that is more interesting. He looks at the great World Expositions not as showcases for the knowledge makers, but advertising extravaganzas designed to awe and entertain the uneducated visitor. Here his arguments build on the work of R. Marchand's studies in corporate imagery and consumption in American culture. They organize and disseminate the man-made sublime to the consumer and ultimately lead to the commodification of the experience itself as the American technological sublime reaches its apex with the space program in the sixties. Interestingly, Nye notes that it may be his own familiarity with the Dutch condition which privileges the small, familiar and cozy and its contrast to the American situation that brought to his attention the subject matter; and as any good structuralist would argue, differences reveal truths behind our cultural myths.

The is not a casual comparison; Nye is indebted to semiotics as well. Like Cronon, he argues for symbolic meaning, albeit socially constructed meaning, attached to the mechanisms of technological innovation. But, unlike Cronon, who charges the material products of technological innovation; grain, meat and such with symbolic resonance, Nye charges the grand scale industrial mechanisms of the American landscape with the status of signifiers. For Nye, size does matter and his symbols, unlike Cronon's objects of the mundane, must be bigger-than-life constructions that are on par with, if they do not surpass, nature's limits. Like Marx before him, he romanticizes the American landscape, but in his case focusing on the nineteenth century Burkean notion of the sublime as a response to the shock and awe 'bordering on terror' of bigness. Unlike Turner in *The American Frontier* it is not the confrontation with the savage wilderness, but the grandness of our own machines, in this case dams, bridges, and the modern version of the tall ship, the spaceship, that he considers. And although he acknowledges the importance of Marx 'middle landscape' in the development of American pastoralism, his thesis assumes a codependent relation between what is man-made and what is nature-made to the degree that the few objects that meet his criteria, namely that they must have transcendent importance in the lives of individuals and in the construction of culture (16) are natural. In this way he shares with Cronon a desire to subsume nature into a paradigm of commodification and use-value that stands-in for a real relation to nature unmediated by technological innovation. And it is the loss of this authentic experience characterized by the post-modern condition which reduces real experience to a 'rush of

simulations' that Nye laments. Here perhaps is where he most clearly moves away from his mentor Marx: for him the middle landscape is disappearing into the gaze of the consumer who turns away from the 'view from the train' toward the onboard movie. The older, rational orders of the technological sublime embodied in the values of production are replaced with the irrational disorder of a landscape littered with big box stores, casinos, and empty symbols.

SOURCES
Review: *The Soundscape of Modernity: Architectural Acoustics and the culture of Listening in America*, by Emily Thompson

Histories of technology and modernity have by and large overlooked sensory perception and the environment. Emily Thompson's book aims to correct this seemingly obvious deficit—obvious because machines are a measure of the early twentieth century technological drive,and machines were messy, grating and sometimes even noxious: in short, very sensuous. Unlike the 'clean rooms' of the computer driven and closed-world of late capitalism, the early twentieth century was dirty and as Emily Thompson tells us in her book, *The Soundscape of Modernity*, noisy. Thompson argues that 'restoring the aural dimension' of modernity will enrich our understanding of the concomitant relation of technology and culture. A relationship, she reminds, us not predicated by the rational modernity where historical causality is assumed as an asymmetrical relationship initiated by necessity, but a complex give and take between early capitalism and social relations. It is not really a story of technology *qua* technology, but an aggregate of the effects of technology as it is incorporated (or rejected) within society.

Her sources are impressive and the bibliography is one of the most complete available for the topic, a topic largely invented through the book. The sheer volume of material is impressive. Thompson trained as an acoustical engineer and it serves her well here as she mines the AT& T archives, Edison Archives and Walter Sabine's papers, to mention a few. But to make her argument coherent she must tell more than one history. Thompson depends on being able to move between disciplines; architecture, engineering and the history of technology. In particular, it is her deft handling of the intersections between these discourses which can be situated from within the source materials. They range from letters between the major historical actors to newspaper accounts and archives. That the archives include major sources in engineering and technology might be assumed, but it is the depth of her research in architecture that bears a closer examination. She does her homework, looking carefully at archives for the projects in addition to papers, drawings and first-person accounts from the architects, including the aforementioned McKim. Also included are references to the work of architectural historians Reynor Banham and Henry Russell-Hitchcock—in sum, a satisfying tale that doesn't neglect the narrative nor sacrifice the history. Thompson argument for the history of technology as a modulation between material realities, technological outcomes, and ideological paradigms that determine what will or won't be produced and supported emerges from her sources—it is not imposed on them. By the fifties, Thompson tells us, the engineered sounds of the thirties are judged too clean, that is too unlike flawed, reverberation-tainted sound. Not that there can be a nostalgic return to pre-modern soundscapes; after all, it we who are changed, not just the techniques of controlling our noise.

The other history here is a subaltern of sound: the history of the sound engineer and the role of acoustics in shaping the great built environments of modernity. The book is organized between the time of construction of two of these spaces, Boston Symphony Hall (1900) by Charles McKim in conjunction with Walter Sabine, a young physicist working on acoustics at Harvard, and Radio City Music Hall (1933) in New York, a building in which a digitally controlled sound system inaugurated the complete control and cleansing of sound—that is, the purely 'engineered' sound which appears just as the fetishism of sound reaches its apex and all but disappears as the modern age confronts the thirties.

A quick look through the lens of Marxist materialism is instructive here as Thompson argues that sound is both produced by the technologies of commodification and a product of them: demands for sound to be efficient are paralleled by the Taylorization of factories and social engineering in general which eliminated redundancy and increased productivity. The latter being a particular obsession in early capitalism. Efforts to control urban sound emerge with the blare of automobile horns, rumble of overhead trains and crackle of radio static which are distracting at the lower range and disruptive at the higher. One exemplar case of control is offered by Thompson's recounting of the creation of a Society for the Suppression of Unnecessary Noise (1906) which coupled attempts by engineers and citizens trained to listen as engineers to catalogue, classify and measure noise in the metropolis with the bourgeois problematic of the constraint of labor relations. The reification of sound in the urban environment is part of the re-making of the modern listener akin to Lukaçs blasé character and it is a fundamental component of Thompson's thesis.