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sans papier

From-To? Contemporaneities of the Seminar(s)

By

Marc Aymes

November 07

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Abstract

This paper explores how the *seminar* unfolds, from late 18th century Prussia to the 50-70s in France. Immediately, the term itself raises a problem: *Seminar* in German, *seminar* in English, *séminaire* in French, three words, almost same yet very different. Therefore, trying to define the *seminar*, one is necessarily confronted with its versatility, its inherent *improperty*, that leads to a will to establish typologies of the seminar. But is it possible to talk about the seminar without getting involved in a seminar about the seminar? Producer of an *espace critique*, the *seminar* challenges borders between fields, and compels us to take the floor, seminar-like.

About the Author

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Source

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From-To? Contemporaneities of the Seminar(s)

Where are we headed? “From Seminar to *Séminaire*:” what does it mean? Even before one knows about these seminar and *séminaire*, one perceives a sense of historicity in the “from... to...” A simulated historicity, one may add: as if there were an evolution, a linear transformation, a progressive migration from one location and language to another—a process whose history would be a knowledge within reach. Let me immediately stress that I doubt that. Rather than venturing on such a historical approach, which after all would match my expected profile as a historian, I argue for looking for certain **contemporaneities** of the seminar species.

1. This idea of contemporaneities means that although “from... to...” should not necessarily imply a sense of history in the making, a historical dimension to the problem does exist. Namely, that one may identify key moments and places when and where seminars took on dramatic forms. These periods and settings—in a word, these *contexts*—help to frame what goes on in a seminar or a *séminaire* in an ideal-typical way. Thus one may distinguish, in order of chronological appearance, **three contexts**:

- first, 18th-century (esp. late 18th-c.) Prussia: structuring of teaching institutions at the high school and university levels. The foundation of a philology *Seminar* in Göttingen in 1738 sets two unprecedented features: “it integrated aspects of the private societies and pedagogical seminars [that had already existed], and it translated the notion of the state-funded theological seminar(y) into the arts and philosophy faculty”¹ (the y here is in parentheses; this connection between seminary and *Seminar* will also be touched upon later on). As created in 1787 at the University of Halle, “a seminar at this point meant a budgeted institute—the budget mostly went for scholarships for the seminars’ participants.”² This *Institut*-ionalization of research “transform[ed] corporate and collegial academic entities into bureaucratic agencies.”³
- second, the emergence of a coherent idea of “university” in the United States in the 1860-90s, with the “research seminar” as a hallmark. Also, this conception “fused a particular style of teaching with a particular method of funding.”⁴
- thirdly, the 1950-70s in France, a period marked by repressions and internecine warfare within psychoanalytical “schools” or “causes,” then upset by the “taking the floor” (*prise de parole*) cropping up in May 1968. Several eminent figures of these

¹ Clark 2006: 159.

² Clark 2006: 127.

³ Clark 2006: 162.

⁴ Clark 2006: 158.



intellectual-political events, such as Jacques Lacan or Michel de Certeau, a seminarist himself, appear to have been not only closely associated with, but also involved in *séminaire*-related initiatives.

2. Now, crisscrossing the simplicity of this chronological time arrow, the word *contemporaneities* also implies envisioning the possibility of a coexisting plurality of configurations called “seminar.” Several seminars or *séminaires* could have been instituted simultaneously, maintained separately, and conflated fruitfully. Here then come up questions of international migration, transposition and confrontation, persistence and reappropriation. Among other examples, one may quote the hyphenation between *Seminar* (in German) and seminar (in English) set up by the thinkers of “the university” in the United States during the 1860-90s: indeed, the notion of the “research seminar” developed in the academic context dovetailed an ideal of “abstract research on what was believed to be the pure German model.”⁵

While attempting to follow such transposition and transformation moves, one needs to acknowledge the existence of serious **matters of language and translatability**, since three languages (at least) come into play: English, French, German. Seminar, *séminaire*, *Seminar*. If I mumble these three terms a little bit, you could hear only one and the same word. And, since it would be quite cumbersome to italicize orally the non-Anglophone *Seminar* and *séminaire* as opposed to the English-American seminar, sometimes it might remain unclear which language I am using. As a matter of fact, such a transnational flotation is part of the question. You can rest assured, though, that I will do my best to keep each of these occurrences in their original language. Anyone having once tried to disentangle the relations between cognates such as, say, the *conférence* in French and the conference in English, can understand how delicate the endeavor to translate is when it comes to academic idioms.

Double Edges of the Seminar

Let us start with a not-so-simple question: “What is a seminar?” Can one properly answer such a question? As usual, it seems easier to test the limits and edges of the situation referred to by this word, rather than to try to extract its presumed substance. As a matter of fact, several features come to mind when I say “seminar” or “*séminaire*.” These features point to events that presumably unfold whenever a seminar takes place. Yet, none ever suffices to define it: these *built-in* elements remain *accidental*, as it were. Or, to put it more formally: they seem necessary, yet most turn out to be insufficient, and several are actually not indispensable either. Let me propose then a series of **assumptions**, followed by the **problems** they immediately raise.

Assumption: A seminar is an **event of orality**, or what one could quite literally call a **speech act**. Problem: This of course is insufficient: for a discourse by a great dictator is as well.

Assumption: A seminar has to be a **conversation event** (that is, involving not one, but several speakers interacting), or even a **conversation piece** (that is, an unusual event which causes strangers to start talking). Problem: This is neither sufficient nor necessary. For, a sit-in is a conversation piece as well—or in the movies, when the film suddenly gets off the

⁵ Veysey 1965: 12.



reels and is burnt right when the knife cuts the shower curtain. Besides, some seminars not only occur, but are explicitly designed as monologues (Daniel S. Milo).

Assumption: A seminar is a **collective being**, a get-together of few or several people. Problem: again, a sit-in is as well.

Assumption: A seminar needs to be endowed with a certain **gratuitous and original character**, shrinking from the assignment of any **professional function**. In other words, it consists in a *formation* rather than in a *training*. Problem: A *séminaire* as archetypal as Jacques Lacan's was first held at the clinic of the Sainte-Anne hospital's Faculty (in 1953-63), and clearly it was designed for professional psychoanalysts, before it was declared to be open to virtually "everyone."⁶

Assumption: Seminars are related to the development of an ideal of **research**. As promoted by research-oriented universities established in the U.S. during the second half of the 19th century, research indeed consists in "provid[ing] advanced instruction, *not professional*, to properly qualified students, in various departments of literature and science."⁷ Thus, in late-19th-century U.S., "the seminar proved to be the central site in which the Romantic ethos of originality took hold of academics. Original academic work, that is, research, came to be demanded of advanced or graduate students in the seminars, and then also in the labs. This all happened as part of the same historical process that consigned undergraduates to the rigors of the grading system."⁸ Problem: There are seminars which have nothing to do with such research-oriented endeavors at the graduate level: e.g., the so-called "non university seminar" created in Prussia in 1787 for "future instructors for college or university preparatory secondary schools, the gymnasia in the modern sense" (and interestingly enough, the very same year a landmark university seminar was also created at the University of Halle, in the arts and philosophy faculty).⁹ Then, a seminar is not necessarily a research seminar.

And a final assumption: A seminar needs an **academic setting** to thrive. In other words, it presupposes patterns of knowledge-production and transmission that have reached a certain degree of institutionalization and separation. This points to enduring metaphors tracing a continuity between seminars and seminaries separated from the usual mundane life. The Latin word *seminarium* is a seed plot, a *pépinière*; see Gedike's report "Zur Einrichtung einer Pepiniere von Schullehrern für gelehrte Schulen."¹⁰ Besides, religious seminaries have provided those who designed seminar-like structures of research and teaching with a whole set of symbols and ideas: see the Parisian *École normale supérieure* alternatively depicted as a "*noviciat universitaire*," a "*cloître laïque*," and a "*monastère laïque*."¹¹ Now the problem is: There are seminars not depending on any academic institution: Lacan's debut (1951-53) took place in his living room, at 3 rue de Lille in Paris. One may further quote the cases of the

⁶ "Je parlais pour des gens que cela intéressait directement, des gens précis qui s'appellent des psychanalystes. Cela concernait leur expérience la plus directe, la plus quotidienne, la plus urgente. C'était expressément fait pour eux, cela n'a jamais été fait pour personne d'autre. Mais il est vrai que je m'étais aperçu que cela pouvait aussi intéresser des gens à qui ça ne s'adresse pas et que cela ne concerne pas du tout." (Lacan 2005: 79-80. See also a similar idea in Lacan 1974: 9-10)

⁷ Johns Hopkins University's *Register* (dated 1877-78), as quoted in Veysey 1965: 149.

⁸ Clark 2006: 141-42.

⁹ Clark 2006: 126.

¹⁰ Quoted by Hummel 1995: 61.

¹¹ Louis Liard, *L'Université de Paris*, Paris, H. Laurens, 1909: 118. Alfred Mézières, *Au Temps passé*, Paris, Hachette, 1906: 46. Édouard Herriot, *Jadis*, Paris, Flammarion, 1948: 64 (all quotations after Hummel 1995: 60).



Göttingen philologist Heyne's archaeology or Kant's anthropology seminars, each modeled on the pattern of private collegia.¹² There was also the economist Ludwig von Mises' *Privatseminar*, first held in Vienna then transplanted to New York, after his exile to the United States in 1940.¹³ Held between 1920 and 1934 at his office in the Vienna Chamber of Commerce, the seminar would take place bi-weekly on Fridays from October to June, from seven to approximately ten o'clock, after which they would retire to an Italian restaurant for a meal, and then, around midnight, the seminar stalwarts, invariably including von Mises, would go on to the cafe Künstler, the favorite Vienna coffee house for economists, until one in the morning or later. As the seminar's name (modeled on the academic rank *Privatdozent*) suffices to emphasize, von Mises' seminar gave no grades and had no official function of any kind, either at the University or at the Chamber of Commerce.¹⁴ A seminar, then, can thrive in complete privacy, "outside of all publicness" as Heidegger once declared at René Char's house in Provence,¹⁵ far from any academic institution.

The question then is: Notwithstanding the matters of plurilinguism and translation stressed above, it appears that many seminars have actually been lumped together in one single word. To paraphrase Laurent Dubreuil's introductory sentence yesterday: I don't know about you, but I often don't know what "seminar" means¹⁶. And it appears arduous to determine how to retrieve a hypothetical common sense of the word. The latter, then, seems to match the saying "Jack-of-all-trades, master of none." And why should I deem this defective? One may wonder, in fact, whether this inescapable *impropriety* of the seminar, its remaining riddled with *accidental* characteristics, does not testify and encourage to a certain indiscipline at play within—an indiscipline that may be of the kind we have been looking for.

This possibility notwithstanding, the difficulty to set out the seminar's properties has made for an urge to propose **typologies**:

Talking about the *séminaire's* work would lead to a typology of *séminaires*. [...] Two radically opposed types seem to direct individual variations in my view. I would call *Talmudic* the type of workings which consist in a speech exchange without any other hierarchy than that of mastery, and through which only argumentation runs. Discourse is that of a plurality of subjects engaged in reciprocal confrontation, not in the formation of disciples. A practice of democracy: such is this discourse, both being bound together and uncompletable. Then there is the authority *séminaire*, that of the *master of authority*. It is Greek-German as is philosophy. It only holds out because of it melting down authority and mastership together. It is

¹² Clark 2006: 153. "The private collegium became the site in which curricular innovation largely took place. Like the Oxbridge tutorial, it provided an opening through which the noncanonical could enter academia and, in time, enter the canon. Successful private collegia, such as Heyne's archaeology or Kant's anthropology, carved out subject areas for future chairs and their attendant public lectures."

¹³ Von Mises 1969: 4-5. Craver, Leijonhufvud 1987: 175.

¹⁴ Von Mises 1978: 64. Rothbard 1988: 13-18.

¹⁵ Heidegger 2003: 51.

¹⁶ Laurent, Dubreuil, "If Interdisciplinarity Means," *sans papier*, Nov. 2007, http://www.einaudi.cornell.edu/french_studies/publications/index.asp



charismatic. Such is for example Heidegger's *séminaire*. And the *séminaires* held by Parisian truth masters.¹⁷

Whatever the relevance of such a dividing line, and whoever the “Parisian truth masters” may be, it is important to pinpoint the axiological overtones in Meschonnic's typology. Clearly enough he sides with the *séminaire* type that does not aim at forming disciples: an undisciplined *séminaire* then, in yet another sense of the term. This undisciplined quality points to a contrast between “mastership” (*maîtrise*) and “authority”—an opposition that dovetails with the divide between text-oriented and master-minded *séminaires*. One is the scrupulous, somewhat ritualistic close-reading and commentary of texts made up of many other texts (as the Talmud is); contrary to Meschonnic's ascription of the German tradition to *philosophy*, this somehow harks back to the *philological* foundations of *Seminars* in Prussia. The alternative is an authorized version of the seminar, which pits charismatic knowledge dynamics against the impersonality of textual critique.¹⁸ Hitting this Weberian ball on the rebound, I could then myself overlay further characterizations to Meschonnic's typology, and **distinguish between a charisma-led seminar and a bureaucracy-compliant one**—since, as already noticed earlier, German *Seminars* had to do with “the bureaucratic process of the departmentalization of the arts and sciences faculty.”¹⁹ As will appear further on, all these threads outline a nice warp and weft to interweave the many accidents of the seminar.

For the time being, one must add that there are *séminaires* that elude such typologies as Meschonnic's. Such seems to be Michel de Certeau's *séminaire* at Paris VII University's Department of “Ethnologie-Anthropologie” in the 1970s:

[...] I am striving to “hold” it (as one “holds” a route) between two ways of assigning to a *Séminaire* a repetitive identity that rules out any experience of time: one is didactic and prejudices that the place is being made up by a professoral discourse or a master's prestige, that is, by the force of a text or the authority of a voice; the other is festive and quasi-ecstatic, it pretends to produce the place through a sheer exchange of feelings and convictions and ultimately through the quest of a transparent common expression. Both obliterate the differences at work in collective beings—one by squelching them under a father's law, the other by fictitiously erasing them amid an indefinite lyricism

¹⁷ Meschonnic 1978: 185. “Évoquer le travail du séminaire conduirait à une typologie des séminaires. [...] Deux types radicalement contraires me paraissent orienter les variations individuelles. J'appellerais *talmudique* le type de fonctionnement qui est un échange de la parole sans autre hiérarchie que celle de la maîtrise, où circule seule l'argumentation. Le discours y est celui d'une pluralité de sujets, une confrontation réciproque et non la formation de disciples. Un exercice de la démocratie : c'est le discours, tous deux liés et inachevables. Et il y a le séminaire d'autorité, celui du *maître d'autorité*. Il est grec-allemand comme la philosophie. Il ne tient que de fondre ensemble l'autorité et la maîtrise. Il est charismatique. C'est le séminaire de Heidegger par exemple. Et les séminaires des maîtres de vérité parisiens.”

¹⁸ Veysey 1965: 156. “According to the premises of scientific induction, truth was achievable precisely because it was *impersonal* : any two men looking at the same document or observing the same experiment were expected to agree, and this agreement laid the foundation for belief. No room was left in this process for personality. But in practice the seminar and the laboratory were prized for the close human contact they offered between advanced students and a man of major reputation in the field. If the ideal of moral paternalism was largely rejected by the canons of science, intellectual paternalism often replaced it. [...] The successful American academic seminar was likely to be charismatic in quality ; the less fruitful one substituted ritual for deeper emotional experience.” Stress is the author's.

¹⁹ Clark 2006: 142.



of quasi-maternal communion. These are two types of forced unity, either two “cold” (excluding the participants’ word) or two “hot” (excluding the differences as to place, history and method that resist the fervor of communication).²⁰

De Certeau’s poacher pathway between these two antithetic types begs the question of what discourse can be held and sustained when dealing with the ever-differing *séminaire*. Does it make sense to try telling *about* the *séminaire* without at once getting involved *in* or *as in* a *séminaire*? Am I not bound, as I talk about the *séminaire* right now, to let my speech slip towards the verge of this very same modality of unstable discourse—not a discourse, actually, rather an *intervention*. Am I not bound to speak *as if* in a *séminaire* in the end? If so, the only way to talk about the *séminaire* would be to hold a *séminaire* on the *séminaire* itself.

Capital S: The *Séminaire* in Theory

Seminars and *séminaires*, yet, can be taught *ex cathedra*. They can become a matter of discourse, lecture and theory.

My starting point here is the writing of the term “seminar” or “*séminaire*” with a **capital S** in several of their occurrences, and the various possible interpretations for this. Again this is, first and foremost, about multilingual usage: whereas the capital letter is compulsory for any noun in German, it mainly rules supreme in book or article titles in English (thus I had to comply with this rule and use capital letters in my presentation title), while in French its use remains idiosyncratic. Let me then focus on the latter.

1. In French, using a capital letter manifests a will to turn a common noun into a *proper* one. In this case, I contend, it implies building up **theories of the *Séminaire***. There indeed exists *vademecum*-like texts aiming to question—and, in a way, to *teach*—what a *Séminaire* (with a capital S) is: Michel de Certeau’s already quoted article “Qu’est-ce qu’un *Séminaire*?” or Jacques Lacan’s twenty-or-so-volume *Séminaire*-world... One may also quote a short text by Roland Barthes, “Au séminaire”—yet, though it sounds the same, there is also a difference: as stressed by Barthes himself, this “*au*” does not only mean the position and attribution of teachable properties (i.e. “at”), but also a praise and dedication *to* the seminar.²¹

Poachers turned gamekeepers, theorists such as de Certeau or Lacan consented to (or even encouraged) the transfer of their ideas onto paper. One may interpret this move as an attempt to overrun the singularity of the *séminaire*’s here-and-now, so as to turn it into a timeless and placeless *lecture (en français)*, notwithstanding future lectures (in English this time) that could be delivered *on* the seminar thanks to these writings. This process also involves a pledge of scrupulous allegiance to authorship, through faithfully uttered quotations

²⁰ De Certeau 1978: 176-177. “[...] je cherche à le ‘tenir’ (comme on ‘tient’ une direction) entre deux manières de donner à un *Séminaire* une identité répétitive qui exclut l’expérience du temps : l’une, didactique, suppose que le lieu est constitué par un discours professoral ou par le prestige d’un maître, c’est-à-dire par la force d’un texte ou par l’autorité d’une voix; l’autre, festive et quasi extatique, prétend produire le lieu par le pur échange des sentiments et des convictions, et finalement par la quête d’une transparence de l’expression commune. Toutes deux suppriment les différences au travail dans un collectif, — la première en les écrasant sous la loi d’un père, la seconde en les effaçant fictivement dans le lyrisme indéfini d’une communion quasi maternelle. Ce sont deux types d’unité imposée, l’un trop ‘froid’ (il exclut la parole des participants), l’autre trop ‘chaud’ (il exclut les différences de places, d’histoires et de méthodes qui résistent à la ferveur de la communication).”

²¹ Barthes 1984 [1974]: 404.



and faithfully written down transcriptions. Further, it testifies to a will to *appropriate* the seminar, to render it proper, to drift it into the realm of proper names. Here we again come across questions of impersonal vs. charismatic knowledge dynamics.

In Lacan's case, the matter is one of double authorship, since Jacques-Alain Miller was recognized as an author of the *Séminaire* (as a book series) as well. To be sure, Miller stresses that "the meanders of [Lacan's] teaching are this very teaching. The idea of chiseling it out of its meanders so as to summarize it, or to render its beginning and end contemporary, deeply misconstrues its object." Nevertheless, he also asserts that Lacan's *Séminaire* always remained university-oriented ("one would be blind not to notice that being hosted by the University was essential to him"), and most significant is the gloss given by Miller on this matter: "The University's most eminent function indeed consists in keeping up and maintaining what has been said by whom it considers to be the author."²² If one is to remain in the Lacanian domain, this perpetuation points to a Freudian *nachträglich*, "an after-the-fact that founds the truth of what came before" as Lacan himself put it in a public lecture.²³ So much for the openness of the *séminaire* to further interventions and incompletable interpretations.

The seminar thus could become disciplinary—imposing a discipline on its past, present, and future addressees—and hence turn into a situation in which participants just obey the rules and instructions given to them, with the intention of reducing the amount of work they need to do; something that very much resembles a *work-to-rule* then, as opposed to the *unruly work* the seminar otherwise seems to promote.

2. That being said, one may also draw on another possible pathway opened up by the word *theory* and its usages: The *séminaire* as a place where leeway is obtained for *critique*. De Certeau's characterization of the *séminaire* as an "*espace critique*" indeed points to an experience reminiscent of **critical theory** (though I deem several eminent members of this assembly more seasoned than me to judge how deep the reminiscence is): de Certeau thus stresses that "the group's practice must be determined by its building up relationships with its 'exteriority,' or rather by its only being a procedure of inputs and outputs related to social, professional, family localizations etc."²⁴ If the *séminaire* is then ever to be university-oriented, the university in question is a far cry from the authorizing institution envisioned earlier, for it is an unappropriated transit place ("*lieu de transit*") teeming with dirty stowaways. This conflation of the *séminaire* configuration with its vast "exteriority" points to the former's twofold capacity to produce both an interpretation and a reactive transformation

²² Miller 1985: 39 and 48. "[...] les méandres de cet enseignement sont cet enseignement même. L'idée de dégager cet enseignement de ses méandres pour le résumer, ou pour rendre son début contemporain de sa fin, méconnaît profondément son objet. [...] il faudrait être aveugle pour ne pas s'apercevoir qu'être accueilli par l'Université avait pour lui une valeur essentielle. La plus haute fonction de l'Université est bien dans la conservation et l'entretien de ce qui est dit par ce qu'elle appréhende comme l'auteur."

²³ Lacan 2005: 62 ("Place, origine et fin de mon enseignement", lecture delivered at the Vinatier asylum near Lyon in 1967). "[...] un après-coup qui fonde la vérité de ce qui a précédé."

²⁴ De Certeau 1978: 178. "[...] la pratique du groupe doit être déterminée par l'élaboration de ses rapports avec son 'extériorité', ou plutôt par sa situation de n'être qu'une procédure de sorties et de rentrées relatives à des localisations sociales, professionnelles, familiales, etc."



of its social backdrop. “In other words, a *Séminaire* can produce ways to distance ourselves from our tasks and possibilities to resume them differently.”²⁵ This has most eminently to do with theory, as de Certeau underlines in his text’s final sentence: “If, as I contend, theory always settles aloof from the institution, such a plural structure [the *Séminaire*] will bring about its condition of possibility.”²⁶ And this definitely has to do with indiscipline, since what the *séminaire* thus produces is a challenge to “a dreamy and atypical definition of ‘proper’ fields.”²⁷

Lower Case Jam: The seminar/*séminaire* in Fiction

As a way, not to conclude, but to move towards discussion, let me imagine a fiction of a seminar or a *séminaire*. Another “I” than myself is taking the floor now.

Once every several months, a lot of things, varying more or less randomly (although my colleagues and I often go in for theories that involve phases of the moon), come together right, and the results are extraordinary, we think and feel. Usually that doesn’t happen, and everyone involved is bored, not only listening to the others’ choruses, but even to their own.

The seminar is aggressively egalitarian, probably on the premise (common in many of the arts) that there is no telling where lightning might strike and what unlikely person might turn out to be really good even though he or she has never shown it before.

Consider what happens when all the participants ignore the past, ignore reputations, ignore everything but the contribution people make to the collective effort. The rule in conventional improvisation is to treat everyone’s contribution as *equally good*. The rule in these situations is to treat everyone’s contribution as *potentially better* than all the others. Whenever anyone does something clearly better, everyone else drops their own ideas and immediately joins in working on that better idea. People do not move gingerly, gradually converging on some sort of amalgam of hints and implications, thus respecting the fiction of equality.

Allowing the bad to play with the good, in deference to professional etiquette, has real consequences. Collective improvisation requires that everyone pay close attention to the other players and be prepared to alter what they are doing in response to tiny cues that suggest a new direction that might be interesting to take. The etiquette here is more subtle, because everyone understands that at every moment everyone (or almost everyone) involved in the improvisation is offering suggestions as to what might be done next, in the form of tentative moves, slight variations that go in one way rather than some of the other possible ways. As people listen closely to one another, some of those suggestions begin to converge and others, less congruent with the developing direction, fall by the wayside. The players thus develop a collective direction which characteristically—as though the participants had all read Emile Durkheim—feels larger than any of them, as though it had a life of its own.

Let me stop this fictional narrative at this point. You perhaps begin to have a slight inkling that something is getting askew. Because, as I said, I was not speaking: I just read, compiled and slightly altered bits of a text entitled “The Etiquette of Improvisation”, by the

²⁵ De Certeau 1978: 177. “Autrement dit, un Séminaire peut produire des manières de prendre de la distance par rapport à nos tâches et des possibilités d’y retourner autrement.”

²⁶ De Certeau 1978: 181. “Si, comme je le crois, la théorie se loge toujours dans un écart par rapport à l’institution, elle trouvera par cette structure plurielle sa condition de possibilité.”

²⁷ De Certeau 1978: 179. “[...] cesser de juxtaposer à l’expérience du travail une définition onirique et atypique de champs ‘propres’.”



sociologist Howard Becker.²⁸ And guess what? This text is not about a seminar or a *séminaire*, it is about jazz and jam sessions. Isn't it the same thing?

From seminar to *séminaire* then, there is something that has been embodied and embedded in multiple situations or institutions of knowledge. Yet one can never be sure whether these institutionalized names, “seminar” and “*séminaire*,” are indispensable or completely accidental themselves.²⁹ What we perceive is something about charisma and irony, scruple and suspense. And it seems there is always music in the air. (In this regard, I am particularly glad to know that music again, though not jazz this time, will come into play in Anthony Mangeon's presentation.)³⁰

Yet at any rate there is usually no knowing how what happens in a seminar happens: much of it takes place *à l'insu* (literally “without the knowing”) of its participants.³¹ Knowledge without knowing, then. “It feels, to quote Howard Becker again, as though, instead of them playing the music, the music, Zen-like, is playing them.” Let me put it my way: It feels as though, instead of them unfolding the seminar, the seminar, Zen-like, is unfolding them.³² What's in a seminar? From seminar to *séminaire*, what difference does it make? The thing is, we need to talk about this. So I'm asking *you*.

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²⁸ See Becker 2000: 171-72, 175-76. Also accessible online: <http://home.earthlink.net/~hsbecker/Improv.html>.

²⁹ One may quote Lacan's quip at the beginning his lecture “Donc, vous aurez entendu Lacan” (held at the medicine faculty in Strasbourg) in 1968: “Le genre ‘conférence’ n'est pas le mien. Ce n'est pas le mien parce que je fais tous les huit jours depuis quinze ans quelque chose qui n'est pas une conférence, qu'on a appelé un séminaire au temps de l'enthousiasme, et c'est un cours, mais c'est un séminaire quand même, ça en a gardé le nom.” (Lacan 2005: 115).

³⁰ See

³¹ De Certeau 1978: 176. “[...] la première tâche, dans un Séminaire, est de respecter ce qui ne s'y dit pas, et plus encore ce qui y passe d'*insu*, donc de modérer l'envie d'articuler, de pousser, de coordonner soi-même les interventions de chacun” (stress is the author's).

³² Lacan also took this Zen line in the opening lesson of his *Séminaire*: “Le maître interrompt le silence par n'importe quoi, un sarcasme, un coup de pied. C'est ainsi que procède dans la recherche du sens un maître bouddhiste, selon la technique *zen*.” (Lacan 1975: 7)



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