
Teaching the Previous *fin de siècle* with the Help of Current *fin de siècle* Technology

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With the end of the 20th century fast approaching, it seems an especially appropriate time to examine the mood and atmosphere in Europe at the end of the previous century, and to determine whether any insights derived from investigating that period can be applied to our current transition into a new century. In particular, I have always found the culture in Vienna at the turn of the century extremely fascinating, even though up until recently I have not made it a primary focus for research. Thus when the members of the German faculty at the College of William and Mary were planning courses for the 1996-97 academic year and looking for special topics to offer as a senior seminar in the fall and as a freshman seminar in the spring, I seized the opportunity to devise two new courses, each dealing with the many-faceted cultural and intellectual atmosphere in Vienna in the 1890s.

The French term *fin-de-siècle* designates the mood throughout Europe at that time. It refers to a feeling of decadence and decay that stimulated artists to capture or create the last blooms of a cultural era, to revel in the voluptuousness of a period that had reached its zenith, but at the same time was clearly showing the onset of its decline. Thus the art and literature of this time displayed both negative, pessimistic aspects and positive, optimistic aspects, often in the same work. Particularly in Vienna, artists attempted to counteract cultural and political decline by creating a vision of renewal through art. They asserted themselves in spite of, or as an alternative to, the petty bourgeois, nationalistic mind-set that was driving Europe inexorably toward conflict and destruction. This mixture of cultural pessimism and optimism seems extremely

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relevant to the end of the current century, which is perhaps a *fin-de-siècle* of similar nature, and I wanted my students to consider both the positive and the negative trends that are carrying us into the next century, and to decide how to respond to them effectively.

One might assume that developing two courses on the same topic would halve the work for each, or at least significantly reduce the amount of preparation needed for the second go-round. This did not prove to be the case, primarily because I offered the senior seminar in German and the freshman seminar in English. Thus the amount and type of materials I could utilize were very different for each course, and I found myself having to improvise much more for the freshman seminar than for the senior seminar. This actually turned out to be very beneficial, because it forced me to devise new ways of obtaining and presenting materials for study in the freshman seminar, and new means to stimulate discussion in both classes. Advanced technology proved to be the vehicle which transformed the courses, especially the freshman seminar.

For the senior seminar in German,¹ I used an excellent anthology published in the familiar yellow Reclam series, entitled *Die Wiener Moderne. Literatur, Kunst und Musik zwischen 1890 und 1910*. It contains excerpts or full text not only from literary works but also from historical, philosophical, and psychological texts, as well as critical treatises and artistic manifestos. Thus we were able to survey a broad scope of intellectual activity simply by reading the materials and the introductions in this anthology. In addition, I placed a number of books on reserve in the library that provided an even deeper fount of information. As you can see from the description of the scope and aims of the course, I wanted the class to examine developments in a number of intellectual, social and artistic areas. The Vienna *fin-de-siècle* encompassed a very wide spectrum, and the cross-fertilization between different fields makes the period and location extremely interesting. For example, Ernst Mach's theories on perception and the ability of a scientist to describe reality influenced many painters and writers, and Sigmund Freud's theories on dreams drew from and contributed to literary motifs. In addition, the rising tide of anti-Semitism and the ambivalent attitude of many Viennese Jews at this time toward their ethnic background provide a rich opportunity for sociological and historical analyses.

To provide a starting point for class discussions, I asked the students to send responses to the readings to an email distribution list dedicated to this course. In this way, they and I would be able to see in advance the reactions to the readings, and use these as an impetus to further discussion. I found them especially enlightening, for it enabled me to get to know each student and his or her perspective much better, especially those who do not speak as often as others in class. Some examples of comments which I found to be particularly insightful are available on the Web.

Other than playing excerpts from musical compositions and operas of the period, and showing examples of paintings, murals, architectural and utilitarian designs, this email discussion list was the only technological innovation I used in the senior-level seminar. For the freshman seminar,³ however, I had to be much more inventive, to a great extent out of necessity, but also because I wanted to introduce these first-year students immediately to the wealth of resources available to them on the World Wide Web. Thus I made the Web an integral part of this course.

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In preparing a seminar for freshmen, it is generally difficult to know what previous experiences students will bring to the course, and therefore you have to be as broad and flexible as possible. As I expected, the students who enrolled in this seminar possessed extremely diverse knowledge about turn-of-the-century Vienna. Some were not at all familiar with the period or place; one student's grandparents had emigrated to the US from Vienna and so he had visited relatives there and had a very personal perspective; and another had spent a week in Vienna as a tourist. But one student who had never traveled abroad was nevertheless so fascinated by the history of the Austro-Hungarian Empire that he had done extensive reading on it in high school, and in his first college semester had already taken an upper-level history course on the subject. Thus he knew more than I about the historical background of this milieu. Fortunately he was very polite about correcting me when I made mis-statements regarding the Habsburgs.

Given the variety of the students' previous knowledge, I wanted to start the course with some basic information about Vienna and its history, and move from there to its intellectual atmosphere at the turn of the century. The World Wide Web provided an ideal means for providing

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such background knowledge. I found two sites that gave an overview of present-day Vienna from a tourist perspective, and one that presented the history of Vienna and the Habsburg empire.⁴ Interestingly, two of these sites were located in Australia and Sweden, and only the ViennaSlide site was in Austria. This "virtual tour" of the city and its history provided the students a good starting-point for the course. However, tourist-oriented sites often present only a superficial facade. Thus to introduce a deeper and more thought-provoking perspective, I assigned excerpts from books placed on reserve in the library. This is an important point to emphasize: although the Web offers a wealth of information on almost any subject, our students must learn to approach that information with healthy scepticism, to consider the purpose it is designed to fulfill, and to balance that information with materials from other sources.

I wanted to use some of the same works in this course in English as I had in the seminar in German, but it was often extremely difficult or impossible to find translations, and when I did they were more often than not out of print. Thus I had to photocopy a great amount of material, or in some instances, to scan it using OCR software. I'm not sure of the copyright implications of this, but this seemed to be the only way to make these readings readily available to the students.

For many of the authors, the readings could be supplemented by explications or biographical information from the Web. Particularly for Sigmund Freud, a plethora of information about the man and his theories is available on the Web,⁵ and I had to pick only a few sites that I thought would be useful. However, I discovered another weakness of the Web when I returned to these sites in preparing this paper — a couple of them had moved or no longer existed. Thus one can never be sure that a syllabus prepared for one semester will be completely useable in later semesters. Also, in the case of at least one of these sites, I noticed many spelling errors and perhaps even a few factual errors. So here is another point I want to emphasize: as we proselytize for greater use of Web materials in our courses, we must also warn our colleagues and our students to exercise a healthy critical attitude toward what they find there.

To understand the ambience in Vienna at the turn of the century, and to a certain extent even today, one must also become familiar with the coffeehouse culture of the time.⁶ In fact, one of the anthologies I adopted for this course is entitled *The Vienna Coffeehouse Wits*, and in his

introduction, the editor claims that most of the intellectual life of Vienna took place in the coffeehouses. Certainly they were largely responsible for the frothy *feuilleton* style of writing which filled many newspapers, and at the same time for much of the cultural pessimism that predominated among intellectuals. The ViennaSlide site mentioned before includes some excellent pictures of coffeehouses at various social levels, which provide an excellent framework for discussion of the sensibility of that place and time. The title of Frederic Morton's book on Vienna, *A Nervous Splendor*, expresses well not only the political environment of the time, but also the feeling engendered by the coffeehouses.

Toward the end of the semester, we directed our attention to the music⁷ and art⁸ of *fin-de-siècle* Vienna. Each of these topics alone would be worthy of a whole semester's treatment, but we could only lightly touch upon major composers such as Richard Strauss, Johann Strauss, Johannes Brahms, Anton Bruckner, Arnold Schoenberg and Gustav Mahler, and upon fascinating artists such as Gustav Klimt and Egon Schiele. Here again, the Web helped tremendously by providing background information about them and their works. For example, the WebMuseum contains excellent overviews of the works of Klimt and Schiele. And I found an absolutely magnificent resource for a general introduction to the art, architecture and arts and crafts movement in Vienna at the turn of the century.⁹ Unfortunately, this site has now disappeared from the Web.

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In this course, as in the senior seminar, I used an email listserv to encourage students to write their reactions to the readings and to respond to the reactions of others. Again, this proved very helpful to me, as I was able to gauge their interests and their knowledge of the topics under study. A look at some excerpts from their work will give a sense of how much the students wrote.¹⁰

Finally, in both semesters, I concluded the course by presenting some materials relating to the mood at the current turn of the century. In the senior seminar, I only had a couple of essays to offer from an online journal entitled *Fin-de-siècle*. In the freshman seminar, I added to these some links to millennial sites on the Web,¹¹ and tried to get the students' reactions to them. Just at that very moment, the mass suicides by members of the Heaven's Gate cult took place, and that provided a very real example of the kind of ideas that crop up at the end of a century, and particularly now at the end of a millennium. Unfortunately,

in both courses we took up this topic only in the last week, and thus very little discussion of it took place on the listserv. Here are two messages, however, which show that these students had a very realistic but optimistic view of the future.¹²

My experience in the two seminars on Vienna at the turn of the century indicates that the World Wide Web and the ability to communicate with students through email present teachers of foreign languages, literatures and cultures exciting opportunities. On the other hand, we are not yet at a point where we can totally abandon traditional printed materials, but we can use the Web to help students understand works of literature, and to get them beyond that age-old hurdle between the language and literature levels in their acquisition of skills and knowledge in a foreign language and culture. ♦

Notes

[*Note: links from the sites below which were operative at the time of the course, but which have since ceased to operate, are italicized.*]

¹<http://www.wm.edu/CAS/modlang/gasmit/ial197/410syllabus.html>.

²<http://www.wm.edu/CAS/modlang/gasmit/ial197/410main.html>.

³<http://www.wm.edu/CAS/modlang/gasmit/ial197/150syllabus.html>.

⁴[http://www.wm.edu/CAS/modlang/gasmit/ial197/150schedule.html#Historical and cultural background](http://www.wm.edu/CAS/modlang/gasmit/ial197/150schedule.html#Historical%20and%20cultural%20background).

⁵<http://www.wm.edu/CAS/modlang/gasmit/ial197/150schedule.html#Psychology>.

⁶<http://www.wm.edu/CAS/modlang/gasmit/ial197/150schedule.html>.

⁷<http://www.wm.edu/CAS/modlang/gasmit/ial197/150schedule.html#Music>.

⁸<http://www.wm.edu/CAS/modlang/gasmit/ial197/150schedule.html#Art>.

⁹<http://www.norwestart.com/vs.htm>.

¹⁰<http://www.wm.edu/CAS/modlang/gasmit/ial197/150main.html>.

¹¹[http://www.wm.edu/CAS/modlang/gasmit/ial197/150schedule.html#Current fin-de-siècle](http://www.wm.edu/CAS/modlang/gasmit/ial197/150schedule.html#Current%20fin-de-si%C3%A8cle).

¹²<http://www.wm.edu/CAS/modlang/gasmit/ial197/currentmain.html>.

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