

RLST 3010: Religion and the Senses

Spring 2013 ♦ Noon to 12:50 ♦ HUMN 150

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This course corresponds with an area of my research and writing that I believe is not only among the most engaging and important in my career, but it also promises advancement to how we study and appreciate religions and cultures and, equally significantly, to how we understand ourselves as human beings.

The most fundamental premise is that we create and discover ourselves and the world in which we live through our senses, through the active process of perception. We exist in a world drenched with sensory richness. Religions indeed are so fascinating because they are dripping with the sensory. Religions are practiced and exist in smells and sounds and feelings and actions and objects and sights and that often stinky human banging about among death and illness and sex and music and travel and clothing and buildings and food and dancing and bodies doing every imaginable thing. Religion is rarely tidy or orderly; it is always rich with stimulation or even the stimulating impossible attempt at the avoidance of stimulation.

Yet the academic study of religion is done largely from the vantage of a chair where in our clinical solitude we peer eagerly at black marks on white surfaces supplemented on rare occasions by a YouTube videos more often than not of some old talking white guy using big words. This too is a sensory experience, yet it is a sorely truncated one in which we understand ourselves as reduced to floating heads bearing our all-precious brains fed by dosages of inky input supplemented occasionally by sound bites. The rest of the senses—notably often thought of as the animal or the lower senses—are rather an embarrassment to the academic. Clearly this picture doesn't seem right.

A recent major development is shifting our understanding of perception from a largely passive and receptive instrumentalist view to an interactive and constantly constructivist view. That is, rather than our sense organs being passive recording instruments that sense the world and feed the information, all objective like, to our brains, we have come to realize that our sense organs, which are more or less equal to our entire moving living bodies, actively reach out to create and form the world as much as, and at once with, their participation in discovering the world that just is on its own. It is in self-movement that we are living sensing being. I will propose that movement, rarely even identified as a sense

(kinesthetic), is the most fundamental and pervasive sense. Movement, usually in cahoots with touch (understood in complex and rich sense), is the sense on which all the others arise and depend.

Traditional studies of perception are typically either focused on or limited to the neurobiological mechanics of sensory organs, neurological mappings, and sensory processes or they are the subject of philosophical reflections on the implications of how perception is conceived and understood. Studies of specific senses typically consider how they function in human life, exploring the richness and character of a channel of sensory experience. I have found that there is much gained by bringing all these areas into discourse with one another. In the intersection of neurology, biology, philosophy, anthropology, cognitive science, and the academic study of religion (the most inactive and unwilling partner to this point) we come to a sensory rich understanding that offers a basis for a much expanded study of religion and appreciation of life.

So this course is an effort to expand our understanding of ourselves as perceptual sensing experiencing beings by reconstructing our approach to the senses based on movement, conjoined with touch, as the foundation for perception and for our human distinctiveness. On this base then we can reimagine the academic study of religion and culture so that it is based in the messiness of the active moving living experiencing processes of religious and cultural practice and behavior. While for now we may find ourselves still confined to chairs and using our eyes and ears more than our other senses, I deeply hope that throughout this course you will find these gestural postural attitudes increasingly uncomfortable, limiting, and annoying.

So slip off your shoes and prepare to skip and slip slide among the action potential of neurons and the travels of pilgrims, among the intricacies of anulospiral proprioceptors as they interact with muscle spindles and the endless repetition of genuflexion and ritual rhythms. It is my hope that you and the world around you will have significantly changed by the end of the course.

Course Requirements

Readings and Syllabus: All of the course readings are available as PDFs or other electronic forms accessible by a link to a DropBox folder. The link to this will be sent to you with a copy of this syllabus. You do not have to install DropBox or have an account to have access to these materials. As changes may occur during the course revised versions of the syllabus may be occasionally emailed to you. Be sure that you regularly check the email account you use for university business.

Content Mastery (CM) Papers: During the semester, you are required to write 4 papers demonstrating your mastery of the content of the course. Each paper is cumulative for the course but should emphasize the section immediately preceding the specific deadline. The papers will be read and graded more or less competitively; that is, those who demonstrate the fullest and most comprehensive understanding and mastery of the course content will receive the highest grades. You may approach these papers in any style you select and you may add audiovisual materials if they serve your objective. Papers must be turned in to your TA electronically, preferably as a PDF or WORD document email

attachment, by midnight on the date due (see Calendar of Due Dates). No late papers will be accepted for any reason. Here are some criteria that will be useful to keep in mind in writing these papers.

- No class or reading notes. The paper should be a discussion and demonstration of what you understand.
- Styles of writing common to “texting,” “tweeting,” and “social media” are likely not adequate.
- The core concepts of the lectures and the readings should be included, although you may elect to discuss several concepts in relationship to one another. Your paper should focus on the section immediately preceding the due date yet be informed by all of the course content up to the due date. You may focus your writing on core, fundamental, central issues without covering every topic that has been presented.
- Audiovisual (rich media) materials may be included, but if you elect to do so you should be sure that you discuss how these relate to your paper.
- Styles and narrative voices that demonstrate a strong appreciation and connection with the course concepts/perspectives will obviously be rewarded.

Application Paper/Projects: The major objective of the course is to prepare you to understand religion (and culture and human life) from a perspective that appreciates the creative and constructive functions of perception and the importance of the richness of sensory experience. These notions are fundamental to understanding and appreciating religions and cultures across the globe as well as one’s own. For the mid-term (due March 8) and final (due May 3) you will prepare an application paper including the following criteria (each should be clearly discernible in your project):

- Select an example of a religious phenomenon from any culture. It must be culturally and historically distinct and specific. This example will be the basis on which you apply perspectives, concepts, and ideas that you are learning from the course in demonstration of how you are able, through this application, to enrich and deepen your understanding of this religious phenomenon, on the one hand, and the perspectives you are using drawn from the course, on the other. You should have at least 3 sources for the religion example you choose. Include an annotated bibliography, that is, one in which you briefly describe how each source contributed to your project.
- Incorporate a brief description of the religion example in its cultural and historical context. Include images, music, and videos (rich media) embedded in your presentation as useful.
- Discuss this religious example from one or more perspectives drawn from the course. Be sure to describe this perspective in detail and indicate something of the argument and importance for this perspective. In your discussion you must make specific references to the details of your example and you must make specific use of ideas and perspectives presented in the course. Make clear reference to how you see the relevance and value of interpreting and understanding your religion example from the perspective you choose. This is the most important part of these projects and your work will not earn above a “C” unless this aspect of the paper is well developed, clear, and demonstrates your understanding of the course perspective you use.

- Creative engaging presentations will be given favorable consideration.

These Application Projects are to be turned in as an email attachment to your TA by midnight on the date due. No late projects will be accepted; no excuses; no exceptions. Again these projects will be competitively graded; those who demonstrate the fullest and most thorough understanding of the course as demonstrated by their ability to apply these understandings in a creative and imaginative way to a specific example of a religious action or phenomenon will receive the highest grades. These projects will be letter graded and you will receive a written critical evaluation.

Calendar of Due Dates:

February 1	Content Mastery #1
February 22	CM #2
March 8	Application Paper/Project #1
March 22	CM #3
April 26	CM #4
May 3	Application Paper/Project #2

Grading: Content mastery papers: 4 @ 12.5 % each; Application paper/projects: 1st @ 20%, 2nd @ 30%

Computer Use in Class: Since the lectures/discussions for this course will provide information not available in readings or elsewhere, class attendance and paying full attention is essential. If you want to use a computer to take notes, please sit in the first rows and avoid the temptation to use your computer for other purposes. You will be monitored.

Religion and Senses Course Topics Outline with Readings

Introduction

Jan	14	Introduction; Coloring within the Lines
	16	Sensorium, hierarchy, cultural/historical variations & implications Ong, "The Shifting Sensorium," pp. 25-30
	18	Color & Perception: Implications for Shifting Understanding of Perception Howes, <i>Sensual Relations</i> , "Coming to Our Senses," pp. 29-58
	21	No Class – Martin Luther King, Jr. Holiday
	23	Religion & Senses Ackerman, <i>A Natural History of the Senses</i> , "Introduction"

Movement & Touch: the Foundation of Perception

25	Premises, Key Concepts & Terms: Overview Johnson, <i>The Meaning of the Body</i> , "Introduction" pp. 1-15
28	Architecture of Neuron (cell structure, action potential, synapse) http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Neuron

	30	Primacy of Movement Sheets-Johnstone, <i>Primacy of Movement</i> , pp. 131-39	
Feb	1	Implications/Applications	CM #1 Due
	4	Architecture of Neuromuscular Connection (proprioception) http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Proprioception	
	6	Proprioception in the Larger Sense Massumi, <i>Parables for the Virtual</i> , "Introduction," pp. 1-21	
	8	Implications /Applications	
	11	Architecture of Perception (flesh, chiasm, moving/touching) Gill, "Touch, Flesh, and Vision"	
	13	Movement as Perception Barbaras, <i>Desire & Distance</i> , Ch 4 "Perception and Living Movement," pp. 81-107	
	15	Implications/Applications	
	18	Architecture of Interpersonal/Social/Community Noland, <i>Agency and Embodiment</i> , Introduction, pp. 1-17	
	20	Gesture, Posture Noland, <i>Agency and Embodiment</i> , "Inscription and Embodiment," pp. 93-118	
	22	Implications/Applications	CM #2 Due

The Senses: Vision and Color

25, 27, March 1
 Finlay, "Orange"
 Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual*, pp. 162-76
 Noë, Action in Perception, "Colors Enacted," pp. 123-61

Neurobiology: Internuncial Net, Two-brains, Interpretation, Stories, Myths, Impossible

March 4, 6, 8 **App Paper #1 Due 3/8**
 Gazzaniga, "The Social Brain," pp. 29-38
 Gill, "Imagination, Theory, Story"
 Gill, "The Era of Plasticity: Tradition and Change"

The Senses: Touching

11, 13, 15
 Ackerman, "Touch"
 Classen, *The Book of Touch*, pp. 13-65, 401-48

Neurobiology: Common Sense, Inner Touch, Synaesthesia, Coenaesthesia

18, 20, 22 **CM #3 3/22**
 Heller-Roazan, *The Inner Touch: Archaeology of Inner Sensation*, "The Aesthetic Animal," pp. 21-30, "The Primary Power," pp. 31-41, "Of Flying Creatures," pp. 219-36, "Coenaesthesia," pp. 237-51
 Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual*, pp. 186-94
 25, 27, 29 Spring Break

The Senses: Smell and Taste

April 1, 3, 5

Ackerman, A Natural History of the Senses, "Smell"

Ackerman, A Natural History of the Senses, "Taste"

Drobnick, *The Smell Culture Reader*, pp. 89-106, 167-83, 210-11, 371-430

Korsmyer, Carolyn. *Making Sense of Taste*, pp. 103-15, 136-40

Korsmyer, Carolyn (ed.), *The Taste Culture Reader*, pp. 57-78, 147--92, 215-25

Neurobiology: Neurotransmission Speeds (missing half second)

8, 10, 12

Gallagher, *How the Body Shapes the Mind*, "Before You Know It," pp. 237-48

Massumi, Parables for the Virtual, pp. 23-39

The Senses: Sound, Listening, Hearing

15, 17, 19

Classen, "McLuhan in the Rainforest," pp. 147-64

Bull and Back (eds.), *The Auditory Culture Reader*, pp. 1-18, 91-112, 487-501

Neurobiology: Tone, Affect, Emotion

22, 24, 26

CM #4 Due 4/26

Colombetti, "Enaction, Sense-Making & Emotion" in Stewart *Enaction*, pp. 145-64

Lehrer, "Walt Whitman," *Proust was a Neuroscientist*, pp. 1-24

The Course: Overview, Review; Religion and the Senses; Implications

29, May 1, 3

App Paper #2 Due 5/3