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Religion and the Senses

RLST 3820, Spring 2012, HLMS 141

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“Religion and the Senses” constructs an understanding and appreciation of the human senses based on several parallel and interconnected perspectives or bodies of research: neurobiology, cognitive science, and phenomenology and plays out the potential implications for anthropology and the academic study of religion. While the common understanding of perception, what it is and how it works, and the sensorium seems “natural” and unquestioned, certain revisions suggested by American pragmatists, C. S. Peirce, William James, and John Dewey, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries offered a remarkable alternative with exciting and far-reaching implications. This view shifted perception from a passive to an active and creative function. This view shows that being human is constituted in an interaction between bodied beings and their environment. In the middle of the twentieth century Maurice Merleau-Ponty and others made advances in broadly articulating these ideas of perception. Even more recently cognitive science, which itself arose in the late twentieth century, has taken on the effort to offer “enaction,” that is this interactive position, as “a new paradigm” and argues this position based on an abundance of scientific studies and philosophical arguments. At the same time, parallel yet often separate, neurobiology has made advances, anticipated a century ago by C. S. Sherrington and Henry Head, in understanding how the nervous system is deeply embedded in and inseparable from the physical biology of muscle and bone.

What has yet to take place is to examine these promising areas of research and emerging perspectives and insights as they cross from discipline to discipline (neurobiology to cognitive science to philosophy, for example) and to chart the implications for the academic study of religion and culture and, indeed, the deeper appreciation of these areas of human behavior. This is the objective of this course.

Applying John Dewey’s “principle of continuity” it will be shown that the principles that characterize being human at the level of neurobiology also apply to human cultural and religious behavior. The result is a set of themes, ideas, principles, metaphors, and perspectives that are discernible as appropriate and important to understanding human neurobiology (synapse, action potential, and proprioceptors, for example) as well as the rich body of human actions and experiences that shape technology, behavior, belief, practice, ritual, emotion, thought, reason, and cognition. Human self-

movement is shown to be primary to all of these stacked and interdependent processes. Perception is appreciated in terms of human self-movement and interaction (enaction) rather than a passive objective recording or measurement of reality.

“Religion and the Senses” begins by showing the primacy of movement and how movement itself might be appreciated. Movement conjoined with touch is shown to be essential to all perception and to such important distinctions (understood as interactions and interdependencies) as self and environment. The result is a new way to understand the human sensorium (the account and hierarchy of the senses) as well as human perception. Based on self-movement and touch we will rebuild the sensorium benefiting from many accompanying insights and advancements in the process.

“Religion and the Senses” also considers ways in which these rich developments contribute to complementing and enhancing the present largely text-oriented study of religion and culture. This “movement” approach provides extensive resources for the consideration of action, behavior, agency, architecture, patterns, repetitions, quotidian features, and much more without a full and often sole dependence on “text” to offer explanation. Indeed, this approach demonstrates that the very presence of writing/print/literacy serves to transform, even at the level of neuron and muscle, the human being; thus even this favored “academic approach” can itself be appreciated in terms of values inseparable from the sensorial gestural self-movement that is distinctive to it.

“Religion and the Senses” is ambitiously directed toward providing a fertile approach to understanding and appreciating cultures and religions in terms of exciting emergent perspectives while also offering a greatly enriched understanding of our own embodied humanity.

Course Requirements

Readings: All of the course readings are available as PDFs accessible as clickable links on this syllabus, so it will be necessary to download the syllabus on your computer. Updates of the syllabus are always available on www.Sam-Gill.com.

Journals: Students are required to write an ongoing course journal including entries for, or at least reference to, **each lecture and reading** attending to the following criteria:

- Journals reflect your understanding and engagement with the content ideas and experiences of the course. This may include personal responses and connections, yet there must be discussion of the specific ideas and content
- Journals are **not** notes on readings and lectures
- Journals must engage lectures and readings explicitly identified
- Journals should be well-crafted thoughtful essays of appropriate length; avoid chatting and filler

Your journal entries will be turned in and evaluated 3 times during the semester. February 17, March 23, May 4.

Course Projects: The purpose of this project is to apply the central concepts of the course to a specific topic of personal interest and in so doing demonstrate mastery of the course concepts and ideas. The topic must be an event or practice that can be clearly connected to a specific cultural or religious context. The project will unfold in several stages, each stage building on, revising, extending, and expanding the project. Turn in each project assignment by attaching it as a WORD file to an email to John Thibdeau. Each project assignment will be critically evaluated and graded; you are advised to carefully incorporate the substance of these comments in the ongoing developing projects.

Project Assignment #1: Write a brief (2-page) statement identifying your selected subject; that is, identify and briefly describe the event or practice or topic and its cultural/historical/religious identity. Include a brief statement of your interest in this topic. Submit an annotated bibliography including at least 5 sources and reference to any relevant images and videos (with active hyperlinks as relevant) you will have available for the project. Since this is a course on the senses, actual personal experience is encouraged. Consider ways you can gain personal sensory experiences that will complement the academic research for your project. Due: February 8.

Project Assignment #2: Write an engaging 5-page narrative about your topic describing important information about the subject and include comments on your interest and experience in the subject. You are encouraged to include videos, images, music and other sensory rich materials, yet they do not count in the page-length requirement. Due: March 7.

Project Assignment #3: Write a 5-page paper about your selected topic interpreting it from the perspectives that are being presented as central to the course. Focusing on the details of your selected topic is strongly encouraged. Provide a careful discussion of the perspective (theories, terms, ideas) you are using and its relevance and importance to your subject. You must make specific reference to the readings and lecture presentations. You must show how understanding your subject from the perspective you develop enriches your understanding and appreciation of your subject. Inclusion of sensory-rich media resources is encouraged including your own sensory experiences, but do not count these in the length requirement. Your work will be evaluated on the degree to which you demonstrate your understanding of the interpretive perspective by your careful and sophisticated application to your selected topic. Due: April 6.

Project Assignment #4: Write at least a 5-page paper expanding on, developing, correcting, deepening, and enriching the work you did in Assignment #3. Complement the work you have previously done by including other aspects of the perspective you are working on and by incorporating other materials relevant to your cultural/religious topic. The intent of this assignment is to actually be able to skillfully use the course insights to understand and appreciate the world in which you live. This is not simply a revision of Assignment #3. It is a significant extension and expansion incorporating new materials. The criteria used to evaluate this assignment will be more demanding than for Assignment #3. Turn in the copy of A#3 with John's comments along with A#4. Due: May 4.

Grading: Journals 3 @ 15%, Project Assignment #1 @ 10%, Project Assignment #2 @ 10%, Project Assignment #3 @ 15%, Project Assignment #4 @ 20%

Special Class Schedule: I will be teaching out of the country between February 20 and March 9. It is our good fortune that your TA, John Thibdeau, has considerable knowledge on the topic area I had planned to cover during the period I will be gone. John has graciously agreed to teach the class in my absence. I know that the class will benefit greatly from his presentations and knowledge. You are expected to attend class during my absence (attendance will be taken those days) and you will be responsible for John’s presentations and the materials covered during this time.

Course Outline and Schedule

Overture

- Jan 18 Introduction to Course; Central Issues; Naturalist Approach
 20 Sensorium, Anthropology of Senses
 Howes, *Sensual Relations*, “Coming to Our Senses,” pp. 29-58 [PDF](#)
 Ong, “The Shifting Sensorium,” pp. 25-30 [PDF](#)

First Movement: Moving, Touching, and Perception

- 23 Overview of Nervous System and Correlate Ideas
 Sheets-Johnstone, *Primacy of Movement*, pp. 131-39 [PDF](#)
 Manning, *Relationescapes*, Intro & Ch 1 “Incipient Action,” pp. 15-28 [PDF](#)
 25 Movement/Self-movement
 Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual*, “Introduction,” pp. 1-21 [PDF](#)
 27 Movement; Action Potential
 Barbaras, *Desire & Distance*, Ch 4 “Perception and Living Movement,” pp. 81-107 [PDF](#)
 30 Neurotransmission Speeds & Affect
 Gallagher, *How the Body Shapes the Mind*, “Before You Know It,” pp. 237-48 [PDF](#)
 Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual*, Ch 1 “Anatomy of Affect,” pp. 23-45 [PDF](#)
 Feb 1 Primacy of movement in proprioception

 3 Neonatal Movement; Phylogenesis, Evolution, Ontogenesis
 Gallagher, *How the Body Shapes the Mind*, “Introduction,” pp. 1-10, [PDF](#)
 Ch 3 “Earliest Senses of Self & Other,” pp. 65-85 [PDF](#)
 Sheets-Johnstone, “Thinking in Movement,” in Stewart, *Enaction*, pp. 165-82 [PDF](#)
 Stewart, *Enaction*, “Foundational Issues ...” pp. 1-12 [PDF](#)
 6 Touching and Moving
 Manning, *Politics of Touch*, Intro, pp. xi-xxiii, [PDF](#) Ch 1 “Negotiating ...,” pp. 1-18 [PDF](#)
 8 Merleau-Ponty’s “Flesh”
 Vasseleu, *Textures of Light*, Ch 3 “Living Flesh,” pp. 26-40 [PDF](#)

Project Assignment #1 Due February 8

 10 Merleau-Ponty on Touch/ Pure Depth
 Vasseleu, *Textures of Light*, Ch 5 “Touching Flesh,” pp. 60-72 [PDF](#)
 13 Tonus, Sensorimotor Patterns, Engrams

- Noland, *Agency and Embodiment*, "Introduction," pp. 1-17 [PDF](#) "Gestural
Meaning," pp. 55-92 [PDF](#)
- 15 Posture & Gesture
- Noland, *Agency and Embodiment*, "Inscription and Embodiment," pp. 93-129 [PDF](#)
- 17 Emotion & Sense
- Colombetti, "Enaction, Sense-Making & Emotion" in Stewart *Enaction*, pp. 145-64 [PDF](#)
- Lehrer, "Walt Whitman," *Proust was a Neuroscientist*, pp. 1-24 [PDF](#)

Journal for First Evaluation Due February 17

First Movement: Moving and Cognition (Mind) - John Thibdeau

Feb 20 through March 9: Please note that you will be meeting on Mondays and Fridays with John during this period. The topics and related readings are:

- I. Topic: Minds as Machines. Reading – Searle [PDF](#)
- II. Topic: Networks and Plasticity. Reading - Malabou Ch. 2 [PDF](#)
- III. Topic: Plastic Subject. Reading - Malabou Ch. 3 [PDF](#)
- IV. Topic: Soundscapes and Cassette Sermons. Reading - Hirschkind Intro. [PDF](#)
- V. Topic: Practice of Listening. Reading - Hirschkind Ch. 3 [PDF](#)

Project Assignment #2 Due March 7

Reprise: Rebuilding the Sensorium based on Movement & Touch - Sam's Back

- 12 Primacy of moving and touching to sensing
- 14 Coenaesthesia
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 [PDF](#)
- 16 Internuncial Network and Amodality of Senses
Lehrer, *Proust was a Neuroscientist*, "Virginia Woolf," pp. 168-89 [PDF](#)
- 19 One and Two brains
Gazzaniga, "The Social Brain," pp. 29-38 [PDF](#)
- 21 Basic Principles of a Rebuilt Sensorium
- 23 Rebuilt Sensorium and its Implications

Journal for Second Evaluation Due March 23

26, 28, 30 **Spring Break**

Second Movement: Seeing

- Apr 2 The Unbearable Lightness of Seeing
Massumi, *Parables ... Virtual*, Ch 6 "Chaos in the 'Total Field' of Vision," pp. 144-61 [PDF](#)
Vasseleu, *Textures of Light*, Ch 4 "Vision in the Flesh," pp. 41-59 [PDF](#)
- 4 Semblance
Massumi, *Semblance & Event*, "Introduction," pp. 1-28 [PDF](#)
- 6 Color Enacted
Noë, *Action in Perception*, Ch 4 "Colors Enacted," pp. 123-61 [PDF](#)

Project Assignment #3 Due April 6

Second Movement: Hearing

- Apr 9 Hearing
Ackerman, *A Natural History of the Senses*, Hearing [PDF](#)
- 11 Hearing
Classen, Constance. "McLuhan in the Rainforest: The Sensory Worlds of Oral Cultures," pp. 147-64 [PDF](#)

Second Movement: Smelling

- April 13 Smelling
Ackerman, *A Natural History of the Senses*, [PDF](#)
- April 16 Smelling
Classen, Constance, et. al. (eds.), *Aroma*, "Following the Scent: From the Middle Ages to Modernity," pp. 51-78, 88-92+notes [PDF](#)
- April 18 Vasquez, *More than Belief: A Materialist Theory of Religion*, "Mobility, Networks, and Ecology," pp. 291-319 [PDF](#)
- April 19 Manuel Vasquez lecture (time & place TBA) Event Cancelled

Second Movement: Tasting

- 20 Tasting
Ackerman, *A Natural History of the Senses*, Taste [PDF](#)
- 23 Tasting
Korsmyer, Carolyn. Making Sense of Taste, "The Meaning of Taste and the Taste of Meaning," pp. 103-45 [PDF](#)

Coda

- 25 Moving and Vitality
- 27 Moving and Plasticity
- 30 Moving and the Academy/Education/Pedagogy: Active Academy and Lifestyles
- May 2 Approach Examined: Naturalist/Philosophical
- 4 Moving and the Academic Study of Religion and Culture

Journal for Third Evaluation Due May 4

Project Assignment #4 Due May 4