

## **DISABILITIES, CULTURES, AND THE VULNERABLE SENSORIUM: COMMUNICATION AS DISSENSUS**

### **OBJECTIVE**

The aim of the course is to provide an understanding of the anthropological study of interpretive and communicative practices and cultural norms that govern membership, while seeking to understand the experiences and perspectives of those excluded based on race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and disability. Drawing on Disability Studies, Philosophy, and Education this course explores which sensory, physical, and cognitive abilities are understood as "common sense" requirements for successful communication, correct understanding, and valid interpretation within diverse social, cultural, and aesthetic practices.

### **CONTENT**

Research at the intersection of Disability Studies and Anthropology raises new questions about the vulnerable sensorium across a range of cultural traditions, encompassing verbal and non-verbal forms of sense-making, communication, and interpretation. This course draws on Disability Studies, Philosophy, and Education to uncover the aesthetic and political layers embedded in a cluster of related binary oppositions:

1. communication/miscommunication
2. understanding/misunderstanding, and
3. interpretation/misinterpretation.

This course will explore which sensory, physical, and cognitive abilities are understood as "common sense" requirements for successful communication, correct understanding, and valid interpretation within diverse social, cultural, and aesthetic practices. Individuals and communities excluded from dominant cultural traditions use a variety of approaches, tactics, and media to make sense of their lived experiences: written and oral transmission; communicative forms that include song, dance, poetry, and musical performance. Increasingly, electronic media is used by these groups to remake traditional "texts." Who decides how to communicate, understand and interpret these forms? In this way, the diverse interpretive practices that different cultures use to draw out the meanings of texts (broadly defined) call into question neat distinctions between successful and unsuccessful communication, and challenge the dominant frameworks of knowledge required for accurate understanding, and valid interpretation. The very forms of membership that shape individual and collective identities within a given aesthetic and cultural context also mark exclusions. They make the marginalized invisible, they silence them, and they render them physically absent from these sites of practice.

The anthropological study of interpretive and communicative practices must therefore encompass the cultural norms that govern membership, while seeking to understand the experiences and perspectives of those excluded based on race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and disability. Rather than serving only as stable reference points for anthropological study, interpretive and communicative practices may thus be understood as forms of "dissensus," described by Rancière (2004:139) as the conflict between a sensory presentation and a way of making sense of it, or between several sensory regimes and/or "bodies."

With this theoretical framing in mind, and focusing specifically on disabled people, disability, and sensory experience, the course take up two main questions:

1. how do the interpretive practices within different cultures ascribe meaning to texts in relation to a normative sensorium capable of sensory experience, physical movement, and cognition defined as capable of producing good or correct understanding, communication, and interpretation?

2. what forms of “dissensus” emerge through verbal and non-verbal forms of misunderstanding, miscommunication, and misinterpretation, when individuals and communities rendered invisible and inaudible, claim their rights to be present?

## TEACHING

Teaching activities include series of lectures and seminars. Class attendance is obligatory. The language of instruction is English.

## EXAMINATION

Each week, students will submit short responses to assigned readings. Twice in the semester, students will complete sensory studies, relating readings to personal experiences at live events. Students will also prepare a ten-minute class presentation that analyzes an ethnographic video of their own choice.

## LITERATURE

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- Rancière, J. *Dissensus: On politics and aesthetics*. London: Continuum.
- Siebers, T. (2010). *Disability aesthetics*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Sandlin, J., Schultz, B.D. & Burdick, J. (2010). *Handbook of public pedagogy: Education and learning beyond schooling*. New York: Routledge.
- Titchkosky, T. (2011). *The question of access: Disability, space, meaning*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

## SUPPLEMENTARY READINGS

- Biklen, D. (2005). Introduction. In Biklen, D., with Attfield, R., Bissonnette, L., & Blackman, L. *Autism and the myth of the person alone*. (pp. 1-21). New York, NY: New York University Press.
- Dirks, N. B., Eley, G. & Ortner, S. B. (1994). Introduction. In N. B. Dirks, G. Eley & S. B. Ortner (editors), *Culture/power/history: A reader in contemporary social theory*. (pp. 3-45). Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Horst, H. A., & Miller, D. (2012). *Digital anthropology*. London, England: Berg
- Mascia-Lees, F. E. (Ed.). (2011). *A companion to the anthropology of the body and embodiment*. Oxford, England: Wiley-Blackwell. DOI: 10.1002/9781444340488.ch
- Nagel, T. 1974. What is it like to be a bat? *The Philosophical Review*, Vol. 83, No. 4, pp. 435-450.
- Ortner, S.B. (1994). Theory in anthropology since the sixties. In *Culture/Power/History: A reader in contemporary social theory*. (p. 372-411). Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press
- Rancière, J. (2009). *The emancipated spectator*. London, England: Verso.
- Reid-Cunningham, A.R. (2009). Anthropological theories of disability. *Journal of Human Behavior in the Social Environment*, 19, 99–111. DOI: 0.1080/10911350802631644
- Roman, L. G., Christian-Smith, L. K., & Ellsworth, E. (Eds.). (1988). *Becoming feminine: The politics of popular culture*. East Sussex, England: The Falmer Press.
- Scott-Phillips, T. (2014). *Speaking our minds: Why human communication is different, and how language evolved to make it special*. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Siebers, T. (2003). What can disability studies learn from the culture wars? *Cultural Critique*, (55), 182-216.