

## The Senses and the Sensible

Humanities Seminar Description for AY 2021-22

Reckson/Stadler

A deep-seated presumption that underlies the notion of modernity in the West: that the connection between technology and modernization inheres in ever-increasing focus of the individual senses in isolation from one another. Scholars from a range of disciplines, such as Jonathan Sterne (*The Audible Past*), Jonathan Crary (*Techniques of the Observer*), Martin Jay (*Downcast Eyes*) and Caroline A. Jones (*The Bureaucratization of the Senses*), have shown how, from the early modern period onward, Euro-American natural science and philosophy have approached the individual senses as distinct and discrete objects of knowledge, to insist on their separateness, to tie these pursuits to the advancement of rationality and empiricism, and to inculcate a cultural hierarchy of the senses' cultural and scientific value with vision at the top. As historian of religion Leigh Eric Schmidt shows in *Hearing Things*, it is a story of secularization and the disenchantment of the world—as well as the formation of *sensus communis*. It is also a story that, like many associated with “modernity,” involves the casting off of people unwilling or unable to share in what art historian Caroline Jones calls “the sensory channeling required of eager aspirants to modernity” including the differently abled, the colonized, and the subaltern.

In this seminar, we are interested in the history of this notion and, in particular, how it shapes aesthetics, politics, theories of mediation, understandings of ethics and care, and everyday life more generally. We want to think about how this happened, whose interests it serves, what possibilities exist for different understandings, and what alternative approaches might achieve. We want to explore, collectively, what Jacques Ranciere describes as the “distribution of the sensible,” or the conditions that determine what is possible for the senses to perceive. In dialogue with scholars from across the disciplines, we want to examine various challenges to Enlightenment taxonomies of sensory experience and to the support they provided for a wide range of imperialist and colonial projects.

Such challenges have come from diverse sources, and we are particularly interested in studying the sensorium as it is figured, revised, ignored, punk'd, etc. in contexts resistant to (though by no means isolated from) secular thought, including conjure, santeria, magic, spiritualism, and the Sacred. As scholars such as M. Jacqui Alexander, Paul Gilroy, Anthony Pinn, and others have articulated, spiritual practices among Afro-diasporic peoples have configured the senses and processes of perception differently. In particular they emphasize forms of apprehension that discern the unconscious of individuals and perceive in them supposedly repressed histories, such as the violence of slavery. Against a hegemonic white Protestantism that deems Black and subaltern subjects both excessively sensuous and radically insensate, the senses historically have been an important site of resistance to Western epistemologies and a starting point for the formation of critical counter-modernities. The senses, in other words, are not given; they are radically contested formations, crucial to the various configurations and deployments of the category of secular “modernity.”

Historically subject to a wide-range of disciplinary practices aimed at training a “modern” citizenship, and deeply interwoven despite efforts to atomize them, the senses must necessarily be interrogated at the intersection of multiple disciplines. As co-leaders of the seminar, we would bring our respective strengths in Sound Studies and Visual Studies to the conversation while looking forward to dialogues that might range across the fields of History, Politics, Psychology, Fine Arts, and Music, to name just a few examples. Together we are interested in forms of sensory dissidence/dissonance that (at least potentially) become sensible to us only through such interdisciplinary inquiry and collaboration. In these terms we might think (for example) about Du Bois’s spiritualized second sight alongside Freud’s entreaty to psychoanalysts in training that they not listen too closely to their patients; or about Benjamin’s notion of distracted reception alongside the Fluxus movement’s undoing of the singular, sensible art object.

We would be interested in exploring collaborations with the Cantor Fitzgerald gallery or other exhibition spaces on campus. We would also be interested in hosting performance-oriented artists whose work raises questions that expand and exfoliate the discussions of the seminar group.