

21A.260J

Culture Embodiment and the Senses

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Mid-term Paper Topic

Due Tuesday November 1st at 1 pm – no extensions are possible.

*****Introductory paragraphs are due in class on Tuesday, October 25th.**

Background thoughts ...

In his assessment of the emerging anthropology of the senses, Michael Herzfeld has stressed how “the senses are arenas of agency” that display the way that “bodily sensation and cultural value are mutually engaged at all times” (2001: 243). In this respect, embodied experience and sensory perception are both cultural and physical acts (*ibid.*: 240). Classen affirms this conception of experience in asserting the following:

[S]ensory models are conceptual models, and sensory values are cultural values. The way a society senses is the way it understands. ... Sensory values not only frame a culture’s experience, they express its ideals, its hopes and its fears. ... As sensory values are social values, sensory relations are also social relations. ... These sensory relations are, at the same time, moral relations. ... Structures of power within a society can also receive sensory expression in the differential allocation of sensory powers (1993: 136-137).

Finally, Nancy Scheper-Hughes and Margaret Lock highlight the work of Michel Foucault as influential in analyzing the “body politic” – the way that societies “reproduce and socialize the kind of bodies that they need” to ensure their security (1987:25). In accomplishing this goal they affirm that “Foucault’s ... analyses of the role of medicine, criminal justice, psychiatry, and the various social sciences in producing new forms of power/knowledge over bodies are illustrative in this regard” (*ibid.*: 27). Just as these disciplines produced knowledge about the body, its senses, and the individual as a subject, they are also concerned with defining what modes of knowledge production are legitimate.

Topic

In your 6-7 page double-spaced paper, discuss the changing politics of sensory experience, therapeutic practice, and knowledge produced about the body in the West as revealed in at least **two** historical periods outlined in the syllabus: ancient Greece (you may refer to ancient China for comparative purposes), early-modern Europe, or the modern West (including readings through October 18th). As you write, consider the following statement to orient your argument, but **construct your own thesis**:

Kuriyama states: “The history of conceptions of the body must be understood in conjunction with a history of communication. ... Differences in the history of medical [psychological, psychiatric, religious, etc.] knowledge turn as much around what and how people perceive and feel (at once apprehending the body as an object, and experiencing it as embodied beings) as around what they think” (1999:107, 272).

Format and Grading

You must give a strong thesis in your opening introductory paragraph that will provide an argument that you will illustrate and defend throughout the body of the paper. Give only one introductory paragraph and indicate which periods and/or readings you will use to demonstrate your thesis within it. (I will evaluate these and return them to you with feedback before you complete your essay.) Provide a conclusion of only one paragraph. Do give references in the text in the (Author Date: Page) format that I have used above and give the full reference in your bibliography. Please consult the MIT handbook *Academic Integrity* if there are any questions about citation.

In terms of grading, the “A” paper will err on the side of 7 pages and will provide a strong argument that is supported by a variety of readings. It will be well organized in terms of structure and will demonstrate that the writer has reflected carefully upon the texts and theoretical readings. The argument advances the author’s original thought about the politics of sensory experience. The thesis will be memorable after the conclusion of the essay.

The B-range paper will have a less well-articulated thesis that does not provide an argument but tends toward a summary. The body of the paper will be clear, but may not demonstrate as strong an engagement with the materials and may reflect a less diverse set of supporting documents from the readings that we have covered. Its thesis will be difficult to reproduce if asked about the essay’s intention; although, the paper will be informative and interesting to read.

The C-range paper (we won’t have any of those!) will not have a strong thesis and will tend to reflect metaphysical expositions on subjects outside those covered in the course. It may be less than the required number of pages or will only discuss a limited range of readings within it. Any “C” papers will have to be revised and resubmitted.

Good luck!