

Uppsala University Department of Cultural Anthropology and Ethnology  
Second half of Autumn Term October 2017, to 13 January 2018

## **Disabilities, Cultures, and the Vulnerable Sensorium: Communication as Dissensus**

**Instructor:** Dr. Stefan Sunandan Honisch

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All classes will take place in the Department of Cultural Anthropology and Ethnology, [English Park Campus](#)

All classes will be two hours long, with a scheduled fifteen-minute break.

### **Course Description**

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.

Together, in both lecture and seminars, we 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. As we shall see, the standard definitions of miscommunication, misunderstanding, and misinterpretation to be found, for example, in Oxford English Dictionary, identify the "mis" as failure (1 & 2), and error (3). 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, we take up two main questions in this course:

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?

### **Overview of Course Requirements, Academic Policies, and Schedule**

**Response Assignments and Sensory Studies:** Each week, students will submit short **responses** (2 pages, double-spaced) to the assigned readings; these will provide a useful jumping-off point for in-class discussion. These will be due by email 2 days before the class meeting, so that I will have time to read them. Twice in the semester, students will complete **sensory studies**, relating readings to personal experiences at live events (details to be distributed in class).

### **In-Class Presentations**

Students will prepare a ten-minute class presentation that analyzes an ethnographic video of their own choice from the examples provided below in “Multi-media Resources for Class Presentations.” During the first week of class, students will brainstorm ideas for audiovisual resources beyond those provided in the syllabus. In their presentations, students should identify and analyze the forms of communicative interaction represented in the video, and explain in detail how specific assigned and supplementary readings can be used to enrich their analysis. Supplementary readings may be drawn from the Select Bibliography included here, which encompasses scholarship in philosophy, Disability Studies, and anthropological accounts of the sensorium. Students who wish to include supplementary readings in other, related fields of inquiry should email the instructor two weeks prior to their scheduled presentation, with a short (ca. 250-words) rationale as to why you wish to include these readings. The same guidelines apply to including multi-media resources beyond those included in this syllabus.

### **Policy on Disability and Accessibility**

Students with physical, sensory, cognitive, psychological, and learning disabilities, or complex medical circumstances that may impact timely submission of assignments, completion of assigned readings, and for accommodations are required, please email me during the first week of class. Please also consult Uppsala University’s [Support and services webpage](#) in the first week of class, and contact the appropriate coordinator, mentor, or department, based on your individual accessibility requirements. Please also feel free to email me, and to arrange a meeting in my office to discuss any further accessibility concerns you may have. I will work with you to find the appropriate university resources and contact persons to address your needs.

Regular, punctual, attendance is mandatory, and so, too, is preparation of assigned readings. Unexcused absences, without documented need will negatively impact your final grade for the course. If you become ill during class, or if you have specific medical needs that require you to excuse yourself from class outside the scheduled fifteen-minute break, please discuss this first with the appropriate disability coordinator at Uppsala University, prior to informing me before the start of classes.

**Required Books** (to be purchased, or signed out from [Uppsala University Library](#))

Mouffe, C. (2005). *On the political*.

Rancière, J. *Dissensus: On politics and aesthetics*.

Siebers, T. (2010). *Disability aesthetics*.

Sandlin, J., Schultz, B.D. & Burdick, J. (2010). *Handbook of public pedagogy: Education and learning beyond schooling*.

Titchkosky, T. (2011). *The question of access: Disability, space, meaning*.

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**Meeting 1 Tuesday, October 24 In-class writing assignment:** “What is the Sensorium?”

Students will spend the first half hour of class writing a one page reflection on what they see, hear, smell, feel, and think about within the physical environment of the classroom. During the next half hour of class, Students will then exchange papers with each other (in pairs), and respond to what they perceive to be missing, that is, unseen, unheard, intangible, perhaps forgotten in each other’s work. The goal of this activity is to direct the senses away from what is present, and to heighten their sensitivity towards the unexpected and unimagined.

**Meeting 2 Tuesday October 31 Culture and Communication: A Matter of Common Sense?**

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.

**Meeting 3 Tuesday November 7 Verbal Communication, Culture, and Embodiment I**

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

**Meeting 4, Tuesday November 14 Non-Verbal Communication and Culture: Embodiment II**

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.

Nagel, T. 1974. What is it like to be a bat? *The Philosophical Review*, Vol. 83, No. 4, pp. 435-450.

**Meeting 5. Tuesday November 21 Culture, Aesthetics, and Politics**

Siebers, T. (2003). What can disability studies learn from the culture wars? *Cultural Critique*, (55), 182-216.

**Meeting 6. Tuesday November 28 Dissensus and Anthropological Dispositions**

Rancière, J. (2009). *The emancipated spectator*. London, England: Verso.

**Meeting 7 Tuesday December 5 Cultural Anthropology and Miscommunication**

Horst, H. A., & Miller, D. (2012). *Digital anthropology*. London, England: Berg

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

**Meeting 8 Tuesday December 12 Cultural Anthropology and Misunderstanding [Abstracts and Proposals for Final Papers Due]**

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.

**Meeting 9 Tuesday December 19 Cultural Anthropology and Misinterpretation**

Reid-Cunningham, A.R. (2009). Anthropological theories of disability. *Journal of Human Behavior in the Social Environment*, 19, 99–111. DOI: 0.1080/10911350802631644

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**Meeting 10 Tuesday January 9 Between Sense and Sense: The Methodological (Im)possibilities of Dissensus**

Roman, L. G., Christian-Smith, L. K., & Ellsworth, E. (Eds.). (1988). *Becoming feminine: The politics of popular culture*. East Sussex, England: The Falmer Press.