

Research Seminar in American Studies  
**Sensational Materialities**  
**Sensory Cultures of Religion in History, Theory, and Method**  
AMST 805a; HSAR 720a; RLST 699, RELS 966; WGSS 779  
Tuesday 1:30-3:20 p.m.; 258 Loria  
Fall 2010

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## I. Course Description

This interdisciplinary graduate seminar will explore the process and practice of researching and writing *sensory and material* histories of religious images, objects, buildings, and performances. While the professor's training and research concern *American* things and *religions*, in its selection of readings this course will consider broader geographical and categorical parameters so as to invite intellectual engagement with the most challenging and decisive developments in relevant fields. The goal is to study not only the *visual* cultures of religions but also to investigate possibilities for scholarly examination of a more robust human sensorium of sound, taste, touch, scent, and sight, the points where the senses meet material things (and vice versa) in religious life and practice. Topics for consideration include the cultural construction of the senses and sensory hierarchies; the course invites thinking beyond the "Western" five senses to other locations and historical possibilities for identifying the dynamics of sensing human bodies in (trans)national religious practices, experience, and ideas. [By permission of instructor.]

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## II. Course Requirements

**A. Readings:** This class is designed to explore interdisciplinary research and thought on sensory and material cultures and to encourage innovative, compelling scholarship on these subjects. A key requirement for this course is the student's critical engagement of assigned readings----and of the kinds of objects explored in them (and those the class identifies as neglected by them). Every student in the class is responsible for completing each week's reading assignment before the class meeting. Individual students will lead discussion of texts; all class participants will contribute to analysis and discussion each week. Books may be purchased at Labyrinth (or elsewhere) or found on reserve in Bass Library. Shorter readings, articles and chapters in books, have been uploaded to the Classes V2 course pages. Readings are selected for their facility in illuminating the field(s) of study and to aid class participants in refining their own approaches to research and writing on material subjects.

**B. Discussion Leadership and Reader Responses:** Students assigned to leadership roles for each week's readings will come to class prepared to facilitate discussion. It may be useful to think of this task as, in part, a brief critical review of the reading in question. Even more important than summarizing and critiquing key aspects of the author's argument, discussion leaders will be expected to engage the class in conversation on these and closely related subjects. *In preparation for leadership, please note that the goal is to elicit active classroom conversation about the reading and the ideas it proposes*; leaders are not being asked, in other words, to provide a comprehensive "report" on the reading. Students in leadership roles will arrange to make available in class, and when relevant, *reproductions of major images or objects under discussion*. For any given class session, each student not assigned a discussion leadership role for that session is expected to post reading responses (including questions) on the classes server and to come to class

having read the week's set of responses by other class participants. These responses should be posted by 5:00 p.m. that Monday (before each Tuesday class session), in order to facilitate access to the entire class.

**C. Semester Presentation and Paper:** Each student will conduct research on a topic directly related to the seminar's constellation of subjects. On 5 October the class session will be devoted to initial conversation about each student's projected subject. By 19 October, students will have posted their proposal summaries to the class site on Classes V2. In the second half of the semester students will present this research in class and, at semester's end, turn in a final research paper of 20-25 pages in length. The assumption is that these are research-papers-on-the-way-to-articles; that assumption frames the required length. Reflection on and critique of semester projects, and ways to pursue and refine them, will form one substantial subject of in-class conversation.

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### III. Course Grades

Grades will be earned for performance in three areas:

Discussion leadership, reader responses, and overall class participation (30%)

Presentation of research in class (30%)

Final paper, 20-25pages (40%)

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### IV. Course Calendar and Readings

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Tu 7 Sept Introduction to the Course---rethinking things: sensation, religion, and the "modern" academy

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Tu 14 Sept Why sensory cultures?  
Readings: ●Michel Serres, *The Five Senses*  
●E. Edwards, C. Gosden, and R. Phillips (eds.), "Introduction" to *Sensible Objects*; and Classen and Howes, "The Museum as Sensescape: Western Sensibilities and Indigenous Artifacts," also in *Sensible Objects*

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Tu 21 Sept sensory histories I  
Readings: ●Juliet Fleming, *Graffiti and the Writing Arts in Early Modern England*  
●Mark Smith, *Sensing the Past*  
●Jacqueline Jung, "The Tactile and the Visionary: Notes on the Place of Sculpture in the Medieval Religious Imagination"  
●Sally Promey, "Hearts and Stones: Material Transformations and the Stuff of Christian Practice in the United States"

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Tu 28 Sept sensation and materiality  
Readings: ●W.J.T. Mitchell, *What Do Pictures Want*, Part Two, "Objects"  
●Daniel Miller (ed.), *Materiality*, contributions by Miller, Engelke, and Keene.  
●David Howes, *Sensual Relations*  
●Mitchell and Hansen (eds.), *Critical Terms for Media Studies*, introduction and Part 1, "Aesthetics"

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Tu 5 Oct Refining Research Proposals---an in-class conversation  
Readings: [For discussion on 12 October]  
●Elizabeth Williamson, *Materiality of Religion in Early Modern English Drama*, introduction.

●Michael Gaudio, *Engraving the Savage: The New World and Techniques of Civilization*, introduction.

●Sally Promey and Shira Brisman, “Sensory Cultures: Material and Visual Religion Reconsidered”

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Tu 12 Oct      sensory histories II : senses and/in modernity  
Readings:      ●David Howes (ed.), *Empire of the Senses*, introductory materials to the book and to each section as well as essays by Stewart, Classen, Mazzio, Corbin, Feld, Howes, Connor  
●Leigh Schmidt, *Hearing Things: Religion, Illusion, and the American Enlightenment*

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Tu 19 Oct      Presentations I

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Tu 26 Oct      case study I: Medieval Hinduism and the Scent(s) of Religion  
Guest Speaker: Professor James McHugh, Department of Religion, USC  
Readings:      ●Classen, Howes, and Synnott, *Aroma: The Cultural History of Smell*  
●C. Nadia Seremetakis (ed.), *The Senses Still*, chapters 1-3 and 6

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Tu 2 Nov      Presentations II

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Tu 9 Nov      Presentations III

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Tu 16 Nov      Presentations IV

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Tu 23 Nov      Fall Recess---no class meeting

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Tu 30 Nov      Presentations V

5:00-9:00 p.m. Case study II: early christianity and the sense of smell  
Guest Speaker: Professor Susan Ashbrook Harvey, Department of Religious Studies, Brown University  
summary conversation with SAH and dinner; with Sensory Cultures of Religion Research Group

Readings:      ●Susan Ashbrook Harvey, *Scenting Salvation: Ancient Christianity and the Olfactory Imagination*

\*\*\*Ragamala Listening/Looking Session: to be scheduled with Professor Tamara I. Sears, Department of History of Art, Yale University