

Culture, Embodiment, and the Senses

Tuesday, 13 September 2005

There has been anthropological effort since late 1980s/early 1990s to examine the senses. There needs to be a way to focus on the nature of experience – but how do we do this cross-culturally? We're informed by the **Western visual orientation and emphasis on writing**. But different peoples employ different paradigms to understand our world...

- How do we overcome our **inculturated sensory paradigm**?
- How do we transgress conceptual boundaries? (epistemology, theory of knowledge)
- How are paradigms lived?
- What tools are needed to cross boundaries?
- How does the representation of others change when we take into account sensory perceptions?

Michael Herzfeld is a Professor at Harvard, and has worked more on aesthetics. He studied shepherders in Greece, questions of masculinity and performance, and the sensory details of their culture.

Herzfeld asks: Can suffering be understood without reference to sensation? We can describe it to someone, but can they embody it?

Herzfeld argued that **sensory perception is both a cultural and physical act** – it serves as a transmission of cultural values. Senses are also arenas of agency. Thus, “[b]odily sensation and cultural values are mutually engaged...” (Herzfeld 2001: 243-244)

Why do we not pay more attention to gesture, performance, posture? Once we move beyond the visual, it becomes difficult to interpret – for us, the visually-orientated Westerners.

Classen's seminal work critiqued two typical approaches to the senses when viewed from the West:

1. **There is an assumption that the senses are transparent and precultural**, and that whatever is not visual is aural. Sensory paradigms are more complex than this across cultures
2. **What also must be attend to is the way that sensory experience connects with performance and context**

“To what extent are sensory models of society determined by its technologies of communication?” (Classen 1993: 245)

Class Discussion

The readings were a bit difficult to understand because it's hard to relate to a totally different sense modality and the writing about it. Our life experiences are mediated through our sensory modal interpretation – so for us, the visually-oriented to understand someone who experiences the world through odors is a big step.

Are certain senses developed more in certain cultures? How natural are the senses? Consider the use of mushrooms to induce a state of what some view as deeper recognition and perception. We use caffeine just as readily but it doesn't seem so foreign as a hallucinogenic mushroom even though it's just as influential.

Is there a biological component as cause? It's recursive – the dominant sensory modality takes in information on the environment that further reinforces the dominance. Medical anthropologist Margaret Lock proposed the theory of **local biology** where there is a dialectical influence between culture and biology.

Nancy Scheper-Hughes and Margaret Lock: In the “The Mindful Body” these anthropologists propose a theory of embodiment that seeks to expand what medical anthropologists have attended to in the past:

- **individual body** – the lived experience or the phenomenal body
- **social body** – how the body is a symbol of social/structural relations, space, geography and how these are all mapped onto the individual
- **body politic** – institutions survey, discipline, or control the body -- takes into account security and potential moral threat of an other (see p. 24 of the Scheper-Hughes and Lock article when they cite Mary Douglas and her theories on purity)

What is encouraged behavior? Philosopher Michel Foucault would argue that over time, discipline is modernized, institutionalized, and internalized within the individual. Law from the individual perspective shaped by moral relationships as dictated by the government. Discipline is the attention to the body at a minute, discrete level to ensure State security.

How do frameworks of experience get internalized that we reproduce them?
How much choice is there?

Scheper-Hughes and Lock offer a review of medicine in their article. In the medicalized world of today, the body must be maintained – health is achieved rather than ascribed. This is the approach instead of the body as metaphor. We have some forms of illness that have been medicalized as pathological when attention should be paid to how they reflect social and political inequalities.

How do we conceive of the self in the West vs. everywhere else? In the non-West, it is not a discrete individual but is instead composed of multiple parts – the body is flexible, unbounded.

Scheper-Hughes and Lock lament Western society with a sense of nostalgia. They romanticize the conception of the holistic body.

Questions we will consider:

How does the particular sensory order of a place influence healing?

How does the disconnect from social relations come to be identified as illness?