Sensory Rhetoric
Sample Graduate Syllabus, Justine Wells

A growing body of scholars in disciplines from history to geography to architecture are attending to sensation in a new way. While a long tradition of thought has cast sensation as a natural, unvarying human experience, contemporary work in “sensory studies” increasingly suggests that sensation is an historically variant phenomenon. For these scholars and theorists, our sensory abilities and sensory habits are produced by and productive of our social worlds—our cultural conventions and artifacts, our technologies and customs, our modes of gender, race, and national identification. The senses, in other words, are rhetorical, shaping the worlds of which we are a part. And yet the highly rhetorical perspective on sensation offered by sensory studies, and the interdisciplinary collaboration it affords, has yet to be taken up in the field of rhetoric and composition. This course invites you to do just this. I ask that you bring to the course an area that interests you in rhetoric and composition. As we read both within and beyond our field, your job is to ask how the perspective of sensory studies might inform a problem in your area of interest. As a class, we will also speculate on what rhetoric and composition studies might have to offer existing work in sensory studies.

Course Goals
By the end of this course, students will be able to:
1. Articulate an area of interest in rhetoric and composition studies and connect that area with contemporary interdisciplinary work in sensory studies.
2. Describe many of the key insights of work in sensory studies and how those insights revise the traditions of the disciplines from which they originate.
3. Speculate as to how rhetoric and composition might inform problems and areas of inquiry in sensory studies.

Assignments:
1. Annotated Bibliography (20%): At about midterm, students will compose an annotated bibliography of a specific theoretical or practical focus in rhetoric or composition that interests them and that they believe attention to sensation can enrich (10-12 sources, with a critical introduction). For instance, work on ecocomposition, public memory objects, community literacy, technical communication, etc. Students will approve/brainstorm the topic with me beforehand, and we’ll devote a class meeting to discussion of each person’s topic and its potential to benefit from a sensorial approach.
2. Sensory Ethnography (10%): Based on our readings and viewings in sensory ethnography (we will look at both methodological work and extensive examples), students will experiment with a sensory ethnography related to the area of study they identified in their annotated bibliography. This low-stakes assignment can be in any form students find suitable—written, visual, filmic, web-based. Students will compose a post that analyzes the conceptual work of their piece, and we’ll set aside some class time to discuss/explore each person’s project.
3. Final Paper (60%): In the final paper (10-15 pgs for MA students, 15-20 pgs for PhD students), students will draw from our readings in sensory studies to make an intervention into the area of focus in rhetoric and composition they researched for the annotated bibliography.
4. Weekly Reading Posts (10%)
Course Plan

Wk 1. Introduction

Rickert, Thomas “Music@Microsoft.Windows: Composing Ambience,” from Ambient Rhetoric: The Attunements of Rhetorical Being (U Pitt: 2013)

Wks 5-6. Sensory Power: The Politics of Sensation

Wk 7. Annotated Bibliographies
Class devoted to discussing annotated bibliographies

Wk 8. The Senses in Time: Sensory History

Wk 9-11. The Sensing Scientist: Sensory Ethnography
David Howes and Constance Classesen, “Doing Sensory Anthropology.”
Centre for Sensory Studies at Concoria University: Exhibitions.
http://www.centreforsensorystudies.org/exhibitions/

Due wk 11: Sensory Ethnography project
