



a.a. 2025-2026

Seminario Interclasse

“Perspective on Sensory Studies. Sensorial Investigations”

Prof. David Howes

Centre for Sensory Studies – Concordia University - Montréal

Macerata, 25-27 novembre 2025

Abstract

This course of lectures presents an introduction to the field of sensory studies. The term ‘sensory studies’ was coined in 2006 to denote the confluence of a range of social science and humanities disciplines (e.g. anthropology, history) on the senses as object of study. This disrupted the monopoly that the discipline of psychology formerly exercised over the study of the senses and sensation. It is now recognized that perceiving is a social activity, it does not just go on in some secret grotto in the head (as psychologists would have it).

This course is divided into 8 sessions. These sessions will address such questions as: How are our senses formed by culture? What is the world like to societies that emphasize smell or touch over sight? What has capitalism done to our senses? Must museums be such hands-off spaces? What is the role of the senses in sickness and in healing? How can a sensory studies approach help inform critical research in disability studies? Finally, it would appear that, to counter the growing polarization of society and try to avert climate catastrophe, we need to come to our senses and forge a new common sense. What are the prospects?



The method of evaluation is as follows

20% class participation

80% take-home exam. The exam will consist of 3 questions. The student must answer 2 of the questions in up to 1,250 words each. Total number of words: 2,500 max. The exam will be assigned at 17:00 on Thursday, 27th November. It is due by 14:00 on Saturday, 15th December.

Recommended Readings

Tuesday, 25 November, 17:00-19:00

- 1) Introduction: Welcome to the sensorial revolution in the arts and human sciences
David Howes, "Introduction to Multisensory Ethnography." *The Senses and Society* (2025) 20,2
<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/17458927.2025.2520100>

- 2) Sensory order of contemporary (literate, postliterate) society
David Howes, *Make It New* In David Howes (ed.) *A Cultural History of the Senses in the Modern Age, 1920-2000*, pp. 1-30. London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2014 [pdf]

Wednesday, 26 November, 9:00-11:00

- 3) Sensory worlds of traditional (oral) societies
David Howes, "Melanesian Sensory Formations: A Comparative Case Study." In *The Sensory Studies Manifesto*, pp. 125-139. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2022 [pdf]
- 4) Sensing the environment



Please watch the video “An Ecology of Mind” from the Millennium series prior to class

[https://www.google.com/search?q=Steps+to+an+Ecology+of+Mind+Millennium&oq=Steps+to+an+Ecology+of+Mind+Millennium&aqs=chrome..69i57j33i160l2.11425j0j15&sourceid=chrome&ie=UTF-](https://www.google.com/search?q=Steps+to+an+Ecology+of+Mind+Millennium&oq=Steps+to+an+Ecology+of+Mind+Millennium&aqs=chrome..69i57j33i160l2.11425j0j15&sourceid=chrome&ie=UTF-8#fpstate=ive&vld=cid:f070ee4c,vid:2_ND2qioagE)

[8#fpstate=ive&vld=cid:f070ee4c,vid:2_ND2qioagE](https://www.google.com/search?q=Steps+to+an+Ecology+of+Mind+Millennium&oq=Steps+to+an+Ecology+of+Mind+Millennium&aqs=chrome..69i57j33i160l2.11425j0j15&sourceid=chrome&ie=UTF-8#fpstate=ive&vld=cid:f070ee4c,vid:2_ND2qioagE)

{Only minutes 28:35-53:48 [on the Macuna]}

Keep the following questions in mind while you watch (we will discuss them in class): 1) How does the Roman Catholic priest conceptualize our relationship to nature? 2) How do the Macuna conceive of the relationship between human beings and nature (read: Fish people)? 3) How do the Macuna conceptualize their relationship with white people? 4) What do the Macuna make of the Christian notions of Heaven and Hell, God and the devil? 5) What is the difference between knowledge and wisdom, according to Macuna? 6) What does the river by which the Macuna live mean to them?

Excerpts from Nikolaus Geyrhalter, “Unser täglich Brot” [Our Daily Bread]

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=onpwSxT4IYY> will also be shown in class

Thursday, 27 November, 9:00-12:00

5) Sensory museology

David Howes, “Introduction to Sensory Museology.” *The Senses and Society* (2014) 9,2

<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.2752/174589314X14023847039917>

6) Sensual healing

David Howes and Constance Classen, “Sensuous Healing: The Sensory Practice of Medicine.” In *Ways of Sensing: Understanding the Senses in Society*, pp. 37-62. Abingdon: Routledge, 2014 [pdf]



Thursday, 27 November, 14:00-17:00

7) Sensing differently

Gili Hammer, "Intersensory Communication in a Deaf-Blind Theatre: Ethnography of Sensory Diversity." *The Senses and Society* (2025) 20,2:

<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/17458927.2025.2503091#abstract>

8) Toward a new common sense

Excerpt from a grant application entitled "Toward a New Common Sense" (For internal use only: not for sharing or distribution) [pdf]

There is an optional exercise to wrap up the course, called "sensing Macerata." On Friday 28th November, there will be a sensewalk through Macerata led by the instructor. The sensewalk will begin at 14:00 at a location to be announced, and will last for 75-90 minutes. It bears repeating that this exercise is optional, a bonus. It is not part of the course itself.

Recommended reading:

I highly recommend the book "Sensefulness," written in both Italian and English (available as a pdf attached to this outline, by Anna Barbara, Scientific Director of POLI.design, a consortium of Politecnico di Milano. It provides an excellent introduction to sensory design, and the field of sensory studies generally. I also highly recommend the new Master's degree in Designing Atmospheres offered by POLI.design. <https://www.polidesign.net/en/formazione/interior-design-and-architecture/master--designing-atmospheres>

Le letture preparatorie in PDF sono condivise nel canale Teams della Scuola di Studi Superiori "Giacomo Leopardi".