

# Sensing the Unseen

Sawyer Seminar Series, MIT Anthropology  
2010–2011

<http://web.mit.edu/unseen>

## Overview

This year-long seminar will explore how scholars in the social sciences and humanities study the unseen. Seeking to join more familiar attention to material culture with an innovative focus on immaterial culture, we pose the following questions: How might we best apprehend and represent the elusive, the unaccounted, the occult, the uncanny, the invisible, the evanescent, and the obscure? How should we describe the similarities and differences between that which is invisible and that which is as yet unvisualized, that which is unrepresented and that which is, perhaps, unrepresentable?

Moving our sights away from the solidity of human artifacts and tangibility of institutions, our seminar enters the space where phenomena and practices have been made legible only through human effort. While the instruments of modern science visualize physical matter too small or distant to be seen by the naked eye, the technologies of the social sciences map configurations of human action that are just that: arrangements of transactions whose patterns are emergent abstractions. Markets, states, religion, kinship, and law are representations that make visible the heterogeneous interactions that analysts observe.

Traveling farther toward the unseen as the elusive, occult, uncanny, and obscure, we arrive at the heart of our seminar's concern. We wish to grapple with how to portray the just-out-view, how to listen for presences at the edges of social perception, how to pry into processes difficult to communicate intersubjectively such as pain or trauma, how to capture evanescent worlds of taste, how to measure or account for processes outside of everyday palpability or scale (for example, radiation, climate change, global finance). We arrive, too, at questions of how to engage spiritual worlds entirely unseen, whose existence is a source of continuing contest. Here at the farthest end of our analytic spectrum, we locate those phenomena apprehended by some, experienced by many, and equally denied by others: ghosts, spirits, witches, angels, and gods. Although they are unseen, we cannot say that they do not exist, at least as human constructs. We experience the consequences of belief in, for example, black magic during the witch hunts in seventeenth-century Massachusetts, to say nothing of powerful cosmological commitments in the present-day United States to the ensoulment of zygotes.

## Cases Compared

We organize the seminar around six species of the unseen: The Elusive, The Unaccounted, The Occult and Uncanny, The Invisible, The Evanescent, and The Obscure. Four are keyed to canonical sensory modes: sight, sound, touch, and taste. The other two are joined to questions of how the unseen is measured, managed, and made, at scales from the sub-visible to the geopolitical. In all of the cases, we grapple with how media technologies are increasingly entangled with human sensoria, with effects for how the unseen may be newly visualized, apprehended, or may yet continue to resist representation.

If the warp of our seminar is made of distinct genres of the unseen as well as the sensory and social practices they summon, then the weft is made of three conceptual threads, each of which fastens on a different scale of action and experience: How does the unseen operate as a vector of agency? How should we understand individual embodiment in relation to the unseen? What are the spaces of the unseen in the everyday lives of communities, and might their illumination aid efforts to rescue and represent subaltern histories? By ranging widely across everyday and structural domains, and by juxtaposing Western, African, and Asian case studies, we hope to bring into conversation scholars who, while often thinking about similar sensory and epistemological dynamics, may not have much opportunity to speak with people working outside their sub-disciplinary communities.

### **Procedure**

The Sawyer Seminar will meet once a month, September 2010 through April 2011, bringing together faculty and students throughout the Boston/Cambridge metro area. Each session will feature research presentations by two invited speakers, followed by discussion led by one or two local scholars.

### **Organizers**

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