

Meditating & Hallucinating

A graduate seminar on atypical (?) experiences

Wednesdays 19:00 - 21:00ish Eastern

Our primary aim in this course will be to examine the ways in which interactions between brains, bodies and cultural worlds produce experiences. We will be examining forms of experience that might *seem* atypical from the perspective that many of us occupy. Some emerge in the context of mental illness; others are cultivated using meditative or contemplative practices; and others are induced using drugs and sacred medicines. But in each case, these forms of experience should help us to think more carefully and more critically about the *construction* of even the most typical forms of everyday experience.

Seminar Structure: This will be a **discussion driven seminar**, which will be meeting on Zoom. Since no one really wants to be on Zoom for two and a half hours, we will take a brief break after 60 minutes of class discussion, then meet for roughly 60 minutes after the break. To account for the remaining time, I will post an asynchronous orienting lecture on Sunday afternoons, which will set out the issues that I hope to discuss during the seminar meetings. The issues that we discuss might seem strange to some of us; but others might find them utterly mundane. That's at least part of what will make this seminar fun. However, since the questions we will discuss can generate contentious claims, spirited discussions, vehement disagreements, and trenchant criticisms, we will need to work hard to treat one another as co-participants in an attempt to understand how different kinds of experiences are produced and encountered. I promise to do my best to raise philosophical issues and to start philosophical discussions in ways that are as sensitive as possible to the variety of viewpoints and opinions that we are sure to find among the members of this seminar. But we need to work together to create an atmosphere where we can discuss interesting ideas in a way that allows us to learn from one another.

Writing assignments: Everyone in this seminar will need to put together an **annotated bibliography (Due 3/12)**, which is focused on a specific type of experience that you are interested in exploring in more detail. This bibliography will serve as the foundation for the subsequent work that you carry out in the class, which can follow either a creative writing, research, or public scholarship path. For each entry, your bibliography should provide: 1) an explanation of what the source attempts to demonstrate; 2) a summary of its key findings or arguments; 3) an account of any limitations or biases that you notice; and 4) a brief discussion of the value of this source for clarifying the kind of experience you are exploring. From here, you will pick one of the following three options:

Due dates	Creative Writing Option	Research Option	Public Scholarship Option
4/16	Submit a character sketch, which clarifies someone's strategies or attempts to cope with an experience that is perceived by others as anomalous	Submit an introduction and an outline of the arguments that you plan to make in a journal-style paper	Submit either: 1) an Aeon-style paper (2-3k words) or 2) a brief video or podcast episode (~15 min)
5/15	Submit a short story, which explores the type of experience that you have explored in your annotated bibliography	Submit a journal-style paper (~6-8k words)	Submit either: 1) an Aeon-style paper (2-3k words) or 2) a brief video or podcast episode (~15 min)

Readings, etc: Most of the readings for this course are readily available online, and I have provided links where they are available. Some are behind paywalls; accessing these will require using the GU proxy server, or your preferred alternative tool for accessing paywalled papers (these articles are marked [GU](#) in

the reading list, and the link I have included should take you directly to the paper after entering your GU login information). If you cannot access these papers, please let me know, and I will send you a copy.

Over the course of the semester, we will also read two books in their entirety: **Tanya Luhrmann**, *When God Talks Back* and **Sonam Kachru**, *Other Lives: Mind and World in Indian Buddhism*. Luhrmann's book is easy to find; but I will need to provide you with a pdf of Kachru's book, as we will be reading the final draft of the manuscript prior to its publication this summer. As a heads up, the reading will be a bit heavier during these weeks (2/3 and 2/10 for Luhrmann; **3/17 and 3/24** for Kachru). But in each case, the books will provide us with a core set of insights for organizing the themes that we are addressing in the course.

The readings for each week are presented in order of importance. For most weeks, I have also selected papers or chapters that will (probably) be less important to our discussion, and I have marked these with an asterisk. Reading these papers will always be helpful, but they will be the best things to skip if you are feeling overwhelmed or unable to work through all of the readings for that week.

Additional fun and weirdness: Finally, there are numerous useful podcasts, films, and episodes of weird shows that will be relevant to the discussions we will have in this seminar. I have added these in the right hand column. Engaging with these sources is **completely optional**. I will schedule a time where we can talk about these things over Discord—but this is **completely optional**, and mostly just for fun!

1/27	Cultural learning and subjective experience Hazel Markus & Shinobu Kitayama , Cultures and selves ; Glen Adams et al , Behavior as mind in context ; * Shinobu Kitayama & Ayse Uskul , Culture, mind, and the brain (GU)	Paul Wegener & Henrik Galeen, Der Golem (1920, 74 min)
2/3	Learning to hear the voice of God (week 1) Tanya Luhrman , When god talks back (Chapters 1-5)	Tanya Luhrmann, How Social Worlds Shape Our Minds (56 min podcast)
2/10	Learning to hear the voice of God (week2) Tanya Luhrman , When god talks back (Chapters 6-10)	Benjamin Christensen, Häxan (1920; 105 min YouTube)
2/17	Hearing other kinds of voices Tanya Luhrmann , et al. Beyond Trauma ; Albert Powers et al. Varieties of voice-hearing: psychics and the psychosis continuum ; * Catalina Mourgues et al. Development of Voluntary Control Over Voice-Hearing Experiences	Jennifer Kent, The Babadook (2014, 95 min Canvas)
2/24	Is paranoia inherently social? Nichola Raihani & Vaughan Bell , An evolutionary perspective on paranoia ; Erin Reed, et al , Paranoia as a deficit in non-social belief updating ; * Matthew Broome & Lisa Bortolotti , Affective instability and paranoia	Ingmar Bergman, Through a glass darkly (1961, 91 min Canvas)
3/3	Prediction, Active Inference, and psychosis Philip Corlett, et al , Hallucinations and strong priors ; Pantelis Leptourgos & Philip Corlett , Embodied Predictions, Agency, and Psychosis ; * Thomas Pollak & Philip Corlett , Blindness, Psychosis, & the Visual Construction of the World (GU)	Podcast: Anil Seth, How Our Minds Predict Our Reality (64 min podcast)

3/10	<p>Drugs, Dreaming, and Deprivation</p> <p>Ari Brouwer & Robin Carhart-Harris, Pivotal mental states; Jennifer Windt, Predictive brains, dreaming selves, sleeping bodies (GU); * Chris Letheby & Philip Gerrans, Self unbound; * Lotfi Merabet et al, Visual hallucinations during prolonged blindfolding in sighted subjects. Dropped: Robin Carhart-Harris & Karl Friston, REBUS and the anarchic brain;</p>	Wes Craven, <i>The serpent and the rainbow</i> (1988; 98 min Canvas)
3/17	<p>Vasubandhu on the nature of experience (Week 1)</p> <p>Sonam Kachru, <i>Other lives</i> Begin with the Appendix, then read Chapters 1, 4 & 5; * Chs. 2 & 3 are optional</p>	Apichatpong Weerasethakul, <i>Uncle Boonmee who can recall his past lives</i> (2010; 113 min Canvas)
3/24	<p>Vasubandhu on the nature of experience (Week 1)</p> <p>Sonam Kachru, <i>Other lives</i> Chapters 6-9</p>	Kon Satoshi, <i>Paprika</i> (2006, 90 min GU library)
4/7	<p>A bit more Buddhism (Week 1)</p> <p>Eric Green, Translation of 'The dust contemplation'; Stephen Collins, Madness and possession in Pāli texts; * Maria Heim, Buddhaghosa on the Phenomenology of Love and Compassion</p>	Robert Wiene, <i>The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari</i> (1920; 75 min YouTube)
4/14	<p>Cultivating selflessness?</p> <p>Jared Lindhal & Willoughby Britton, 'I Have This Feeling of Not Really Being Here'; Amber Carpenter, Attention as a means of self-dissolution and reformation (GU); *Ann Taves, Mystical and other alterations in sense of self (GU)</p>	<i>The Midnight Gospel</i> , <i>Blinded by My End</i> (26 min Netflix); Podcast episode #300
4/21	<p>Varieties of selflessness?</p> <p>Raphaël Millière, The varieties of selflessness; Anna Ciaunica, Jane Charlton & Harry Farmer, When the Window Cracks; * Anna Ciaunica & Laura Crucianelli, Minimal Self-Awareness</p>	<i>The Midnight Gospel</i> , <i>Annihilation of Joy</i> (25 min Netflix); Podcast episode #302
4/28	<p>Culture and the treatment of mental illnesses</p> <p>Stephanie Marohn & Malidoma Patrice Somé, What a shaman sees in a mental hospital; Mohammed Abouelleil Rashed, More things in Heaven and Earth; * Mohammed Abouelleil Rashed, From Powerlessness to Control</p>	Sinethemba Nombala Maknya, Mental illness from an African Perspective (47 min podcast)
5/5	<p>The colonial imaginary and sacred medicines</p> <p>Laura Dev, Plant Knowledges; Ana Elda Maqueda, The Use of Salvia divinorum from a Mazatec Perspective; * Natasha Mikles & Joseph Laycock, Tracking the tulpa</p>	Ciro Guerra, <i>Embrace of the serpent</i> (2015, 125 min Canvas)