

When Strangers Meet

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H79.2762.1 ~ TBD location ~ Tuesday 6:30-9pm

Office hours: by appointment

Overview

Strangers and cities are inherently intertwined. The everyday nature of interacting with strangers is a byproduct of urbanization, which has created a culture of dense populations with sparse interconnections. That density and sparseness of connections itself is part of what defines ‘the urban.’ Living in cities has made strangers into a multitude: we brush past thousands of them every day. Even the simplest exchange among strangers can contain a tangled accumulation of meanings: what transpires may have physical, emotional, social, political, technological and historical dimensions. This class takes an analytical approach to unraveling and understanding these charged moments. In the process of studying how and why strangers interact in public, we’ll address some of the abiding themes at ITP—urban behavior, spontaneous interaction, the pleasure of the unexpected, how technology can mediate or enable human experience. We’ll do this by making a close and thorough examination of how these large and abstract ideas play out in a more concrete, particular and narrow slice of human experience: interactions among strangers. We’ll address how these interactions have changed historically (and why), the significance of the spaces in which strangers interact, what the experience of interaction with strangers means to the participants, how strangers 'read' each other, how they initiate interactions, how they avoid interactions, how they trust each other and how they fool each other, how they watch, listen and follow each other.

Goals

At the end of the semester, students should have developed a refined set of skills for observing and interpreting strangers and their interactions; they should have gained a general understanding of what has been established (by a variety of disciplines) about where, how and why strangers interact; they should become familiar with existing art and technology projects that involve strangers.

The overarching aim of the course is for each student learn how to recognize points of leverage that allow space for technology and art to make interventions in the social field in which strangers interact, or in a specific type of interaction strangers engage in.

Work

The principal work of the class is in understanding and synthesizing your observations from the readings, discussions, and field assignments. You will demonstrate your understanding through your weekly reading responses and stranger interaction journal, your participation in class discussions, and your documentation of field assignments.

Readings:

Readings will consist of both handouts and online material. For the online material, I STRONGLY suggest that you make a printout and make notes on it as you’re reading. It is very difficult to assimilate complex ideas without using your hands a little. I apologize to the trees for this.

Reading responses

Each week, you will submit a short reading response to me via email.

Stranger interactions

A minimum of 5 times during the semester, you will submit to the class blog a brief writeup of an interaction you have with a stranger.

Field assignments

There will be 3 regular field assignments and one final field assignment (documentation of which will be presented to the class on the last meeting). Your documentation of the regular field assignments takes the form of: notes on what happened and the conclusions or observations you make about what happened (or in later assignments, what you did). When you write up your notes, also take stock of your own experience in carrying out this assignment. Be prepared to share your findings and experience informally with the class.

Grading

Participation (including attendance, discussion, reading responses): 45%

Field assignments (including stranger journal): 40%

Final field assignment and presentation: 15%

All assignments must be completed in order to pass the course.

Attendance

Class attendance and prompt arrivals are mandatory. If you miss more than one session, or are habitually late, it will affect your eligibility to pass the course. If you know that you will be forced to miss a session, let me know in advance.

Classes

Jan 24: Hello Strangers

Introductions all around.

Assigned reading:

Selections from Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*

Jan 31: The History of Strangers

The ways in which strangers relate in public are both historically and locally contingent. In the context of Europe and America, what do we know about how these relations—and their meanings to participants—have changed over time and why?

Assigned reading:

Georg Simmel, “The Adventurer” (Handout)

Feb 2: Disruption

One of the significant psychological effects of stranger interactions is the way they interrupt the expected narratives of daily life. How have artists and thinkers engaged with the concept of disruption? What does disruption accomplish politically, emotionally, aesthetically? What does it reveal?

Assigned reading/activity

Sophie Calle and Paul Auster, “Gotham Handbook” (Handout)

Krzysztof Wodiczko, “Designing for the City of Strangers” (Handout)

Feb 7: Talking to strangers

Guests—Bill Wetzel and Liz Barry, “Talk to Me”

<http://www.gs.columbia.edu/news-general?article=bill-wetzel-talks-strangers>

Field Assignment #1 due in class.

Feb 14: Who’s a Stranger?

How has the stranger as an archetype been defined and understood? What are the varieties of cosmopolitanism (as an aspect of urban life)? What is its perceived value, and what are some of the ways it is enabled or discouraged? How might a local culture’s conception of what it means to be a stranger have concrete effects on attitudes, conduct, and demographic patterns?

Assigned reading:

Georg Simmel, “The Stranger” (<http://media.pfeiffer.edu/lridener/courses/STRANGER.HTML>)

Kurt Iveson, “Strangers in the Cosmopolis” (Handout)

Richard Sennett, “Cosmopolitanism as Social Experience” (Handout)

Feb 21: Beautiful Interruptions

Guest—Jon Cotner, Spontaneous Society

<http://urbanomnibus.net/2011/09/as-awake-as-possible-a-walk-with-jon-cotner/>

Field Assignment #2 due in class.

Feb 28: The Rules of Engagement

How do people display and perceive information about each other in public contexts? How do they negotiate impressions and interactions? What kinds of engagements are possible, and what are the general rules by which they proceed?

Assigned reading:

Erving Goffman, selections from *Behavior in Public* and *The Presentation of the Self in Everyday Life* (Handout)

Mar 6: Public Space—Uses of the Street

What is the concrete and emotional value of a street culture that includes and promotes interactions among strangers? How does the arrangement of physical space affect these interactions?

Jane Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, Chapter 2, "The Uses of the Sidewalk: Safety" and Chapter 3, "The Uses of the Street: Contact" (Handout)

Sophie Watson, *City Publics*, "Introduction" (Handout)

Mar 20: Public Space—Behavior-Up Design

How does the experience of spaces influence public interactions and even values and attitudes? How can spaces be designed by taking cues from public behavior, rather than in order to manipulate public behavior?

Assigned reading:

William H. Whyte, *The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces*, "Triangulation" (Handout)

Richard Sennett, "The Public Realm" (

<http://www.richardsennett.com/site/SENN/Templates/General2.aspx?pageid=16>)

In-class viewing of William H. Whyte's documentary, "The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces"

Mar 27: Empathy & helping behavior

What produces human empathy, and why do we help each other in some situations but not in others?

Assigned reading:

“Readings about the Social Animal” by Elliot Aronson. Read Chapter 5, “From Jerusalem to Jericho: A study of situational and ...” which is a classic study of helping behavior by Darley and Batson.

Levine, “Measuring Helping Behavior across Cultures“

Lewis Thomas on altruism and cooperation, Harper’s Magazine, 1984 (short)

“Cities of Brotherly Love” Harper’s Magazine, 1995 (one page)

Field Assignment #3 due in class.

April 3: Prurience and Confession

Some stranger interactions are essentially uni-directional: they comprise one person’s attentions to an unwitting subject, or to a subject they can’t communicate with. What are the pleasures afforded by such acts? Why do we find the everyday actions of others so compelling? How have artists used these techniques, and why?

Assigned reading:

Sophie Calle, *Suite Venetienne*

Frank Warren, *Post Secret*

Other, TBD

Final project ideas due in class—one paragraph writeup

April 10: Reading—Social Perception

How do strangers ‘read’ one another? By what cues do we perceive information about strangers, and make social judgments? How can those perceptions be manipulated? What can we control, and what can’t we, about how we are perceived by people we don’t know?

Assigned reading:

“Embodiment in Attitudes, Social Perception, and Emotion”

Paula M. Niedenthal, etal. Handout.

Other, TBD

Malcolm Gladwell, “The Naked Face” http://www.gladwell.com/2002/2002_08_05_a_face.htm

April 17: Social perception 2

What are the contexts in which strangers lie to each other, and to what end? How do they pull it off?

Assigned reading:

David Maurer, selections from *The Big Con*

In addition, we will play a few rounds of a social perception game called Werewolf (aka Mafia).

April 24: Final field assignment presentations group 1

May 1: Final field assignment presentations group 2

Assignments

Weekly reading responses: when there is reading, you are required to email me a brief reading response (I'll post guiding questions on the class blog) by noon on the day of class.

Stranger interaction journal: at least five times during the semester, you are required to submit a brief report on an interaction you have with a stranger, via email to the class list.

Field assignment #1: General observation

Writeup is due in class on FEB 7

The goal of this assignment is to hone your ability to observe public behavior. You can think of this as the training level in a game. Spend one hour in a public place where you are not likely to encounter people you know. Sit still. Unplug your devices, get off the grid. Watch people. Take notes on what they do and don't do, how they interact with one another. If you are inspired to invent backstories for any of them, make sure to specify the details about them that inform your narrative. So for example, if you conclude that someone is rich, what told you that? Their posture, their skin, their clothing?

Field assignment #2: Questions and Answers

Writeup is due in class on FEB 21

By giving you a structure within which to stage your own interactions with strangers, this assignment allows you to explore the dynamics of stranger interactions first-hand. As a group, we'll decide on an interview question, and you will each get 10 strangers in public places to answer the question (you might need to ask more than 10 in order to get 10 responses). You will need to document their answers in one of two ways: a portrait with a transcription or, a video clip. You will also need to submit a written 'journal' of your own feelings during the interactions, and your interpretations of your subjects' reactions to the interaction.

Field assignment #3: Iterative Requests:

Writeup is due in class MARCH 27

This assignment playfully engages you with the dynamics of helping behavior. I suggest working with a partner—for your safety and to embolden you. It works like this. You start by asking someone for directions. If they give you directions, ask them to draw a map. If they draw a map, ask for their phone number in case you get lost. If they give you their phone number, call it. You'll need to document each encounter carefully, so write it up as soon as it's concluded. Note who you approached, why you chose them, what your impression is of the kind of person they are (i.e. what you can observe directly—male/female, tall short—and what you infer), and how they respond to your requests. Your partner should keep distance enough so they're not detected as part of the experiment, and should take their own notes on your interactions and vice versa.

You may choose to construct your own sequence of iterative requests. If you want to do this, I'll have to approve them, so talk to me after class Mar 20. A bit of advice: I won't approve a sequence of requests that concludes with, "your place or mine."

Field assignment #4: Design your own field experiment

Initial idea is due in class APRIL 3

Final writeup is due April 24

Presentations are April 24 & May 1

Choose an aspect of stranger interactions and design a repeatable field experiment to explore it. This may or may not involve technology. You will be required to run the experiment multiple times and write up your process, experience, and results in a formal document for me, as well as present your work to the class.