

Teaching “Dead to the World:” some suggestions

Citation: Cressida J. Heyes, “Dead to the World: Rape, Unconsciousness, and Social Media.” *Signs* 41:2, January 2016: 361-383.

Author pre-print including all images referred to in the text is freely available at:
<https://drive.google.com/file/d/0BzjHVoXOcUxES2lxNGZfZFFKZ00/view>

There are many different ways of reading this article. Here are three (not mutually exclusive, of course), with some suggested discussion questions or related research activities.

A. As an intervention into thinking about feminist theory and sexual violence:

1. Heyes argues that being raped while unconscious is often minimized or trivialized, yet it has some distinctive harms. Why might the general public not take sexual assault against unconscious victims very seriously, given the kind of situations it typically involves? What does Heyes think that sexual assault while unconscious does that is distinctively bad?
2. How does Heyes, via Cahill, conceptualize “agency” in the context of sexual violence? Why has “agency” become such a contested term in talking about both victims and perpetrators? How is agency related to “consent”?
3. Find out how (if at all) “consent” is defined in sexual assault law where you live. What presuppositions about sexuality, gender, and subjectivity are written in to this definition? How would it shape findings (or how *has* it shaped findings) in cases involving unconscious victims? Compare and contrast this definition with that of another jurisdiction. (The Canadian Criminal Code definition can be found here in section 273.1: <http://laws-lois.justice.gc.ca/eng/acts/C-46/page-64.html#docCont>.)
4. What is the “necrophiliac aesthetic” Heyes describes, and how is it informed by norms of beauty, race, age, etc? How does it shape understandings of women’s agency and sexuality? Can you find further examples of images that reinforce or subvert corpse chic?

B. As a text in phenomenology...

1. Can one have “lived experience” while unconscious? Does it matter if the state of unconsciousness is sleep, coma, drug-induced, anaesthetized?
2. What is the significance of sleep to subjectivity, according to Heyes? What is “night”? What examples of it does Heyes provide, and can you think of any more? Heyes suggests, following Merleau-Ponty and Minkowski, that we all need some experience of night, but not too much. Explain.
3. What is anonymity, and how does night enable it? Explain how Heyes interprets Salomon’s Fanon as making a political argument about the importance of anonymity. Can you think of other cases where anonymity is important to freedom?

4. Read one of the philosophical texts that Heyes references in the article (e.g. Salamon, Fanon, Cahill). What does Heyes take from the text, and do you think this is a good interpretation? How else might the text be interpreted in the context of arguments about violence?

C. As a intervention in media studies:

1. Heyes suggests that communications technologies (the smartphone with its photo and video capacities, texting, or social media platforms such as Facebook) have changed the way evidence and testimony function in sexual assault cases, at the same time as they enable a new kind of “second rape” as images and commentary about assaults circulate. Are there any regulatory changes, guidelines, or ways of effecting cultural shifts you would defend to make communications technologies work more typically against sexual violence?

2. Heyes claims that the cases of sexual violence most commonly picked up by the media involve young, middle-class white women who get drunk at social events. Why might this be so? How would you design a research project to try and assess the prevalence of sexual assault of unconscious victims across age, class, and racial groups, taking into account possible reporting biases and other methodological challenges?

3. Find and review media coverage of a case involving sexual violence against an unconscious or semi-conscious victim. In addition to the cases mentioned in the article there are others: allegations against celebrity Bill Cosby, the Stanford rapist Brock Turner, or the 2016 finding by an Oklahoma court that nonconsensual oral sex with an unconscious victim was not sexual assault, for example. How is the victim’s unconsciousness and capacity to consent represented in this coverage? How is the agency and culpability of the attacker represented?