

## The Social Life of the Senses

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The idea of a history or sociology of the senses seems odd, at first blush. What is there for the historian to study, when sensations are so fleeting? How can the sociologist investigate the senses, when perception is so private? Social scientists have accordingly tended to defer to psychologists, and let the latter tell us how the senses work, until recently.

“All perception is neural activity,” according to the prevailing view of the perceptual process within psychology (Casagrande and Norton quoted in Goldstein 2001: 2). This claim is grounded in the following reasoning:

The events that culminate in perception begin with specialized receptor cells that convert a particular form of physical energy into bioelectric currents. Different sensors are sensitive to different types of energy, so the properties of the receptor cells determine the modality of a sensory system. Ionic currents are the currency of neural information processing, and current flows that begin in the receptors are transmitted through complex networks of interconnected neurons and, in the end result in a pattern of brain activity we call perception. (Hughes 2001: 7)

On this account, perception begins at the edge of the CNS (Central Nervous System), and is essentially a psychophysical process. This account, which is a continuation of the early nineteenth century “doctrine of specific nerve energies” (Crary 1990), might seem to insulate the senses from investigation by the social sciences. But already in 1908 there was one social scientist who resisted this neuroreductionism and dared to imagine a sensory sociology. That sociologist was Georg Simmel. This essay begins by recuperating Simmel’s insights into the social life of the senses, and then goes on to survey the contributions of a series of other prominent twentieth century thinkers whose interventions, piecemeal though they were, would lay the groundwork for the “sensory turn” that has come over the humanities and social sciences in the last twenty or so years (Howes 2006). These others include the historians Norbert Elias and Lucien Febvre, the philosophers Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Luce Irigaray, the anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss, and the media theorist Marshall McLuhan. In the second part of this essay, the spotlight shifts to two contemporary theorists who have played key roles in opening up the sensorium to social and cultural analysis, Constance Classen and François Laplantine. The essay goes on to consider the question of why the delay – that is, why, given all these earlier overtures, did it take until the last decade of the twentieth century for the “sensory turn” to crystallize? –

and then concludes with a brief overview of current research on the social life of the senses in Japan.

## Part I

In “Essai sur la sociologie des sens,” first published in 1912, Simmel briefly analyzed the changing role of the senses of smell and sound and sight in modern life. He observed that olfaction had been enlisted to police racial and class divisions. And he noted the increased salience of visual interaction --without any accompanying aural or verbal intercourse-- in city life. This uncoupling of sight and hearing, and augmentation of the former, had an impact on the life of the emotions, according to Simmel. It heightened “the sense of utter lonesomeness, and the feeling that the individual was surrounded on all sides by closed doors”:

Social life in the large city as compared with the towns shows a great preponderance of occasions to *see* rather than to *hear* people. One explanation lies in the fact that the person in the town is acquainted with nearly all the people he meets. With these he exchanges a word or a glance, and their countenance represents to him not merely the visible but indeed the entire personality. Another reason of especial significance is the development of public means of transportation. Before the appearance of omnibuses, railroads, and street cars in the nineteenth century, men were not in a situation where for periods of minutes or hours they could or must look at each other without talking to one another. Modern social life increases in ever growing degree the rôle of mere visual impression  
([http://www.gutenberg.org/files/28496/28496-h/28496-h.htm#Page\\_356](http://www.gutenberg.org/files/28496/28496-h/28496-h.htm#Page_356))

Simmel’s reflections on the “sociology of the senses” would be picked up by American sociologists Robert Park and Ernest Burgess and published in their monumental *Introduction to the Science of Sociology* in 1921. However, it was not until the publication of *The Body Social* by Canadian sociologist Anthony Synnott in 1993 that the research agenda suggested by Simmel’s observations was truly operationalized.

In 1939, the historian of manners, Norbert Elias, published *The Civilizing Process*. Based on a study of diverse European codes of etiquette, Elias pointed to how, in the transition from the middle ages to modernity, physical impulses were curbed and directed inwards, resulting in an “interiorization of the emotions” and progressive individuation of society as people came to touch themselves, each other, and -- following the introduction and democratization of eating utensils in the fourteenth century -- their food in an increasingly circumspect manner. The march of civilization could thus be seen as depending on the suppression of touch. A few years later, in 1942, Annales historian Lucien Febvre, writing independently, proposed that a series of studies could be done on the “sensory underpinnings of thought” in different periods. His own contribution was to sketch how sixteenth-century European society placed less emphasis on sight and more emphasis on hearing and smell than did twentieth-century Europeans.

The 1940s also witnessed an important sensory opening in philosophy with the publication of Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945). Merleau-Ponty challenged the separation of mind from body, and of sight from the other senses posited by René Descartes. He asserted that it is the flesh that sees (not the soul, as in Descartes), and that all the senses are implicated in the act of perceiving on account of their "primordial unity." While Merleau-Ponty may thus be credited with restoring the body (in all its sensory plenitude) to the philosophy of mind (or "consciousness"), one of the things he failed to consider is how that body is gendered. Irigaray (1974, 1977) called him on this point, insisting that gender affects perception, and that women, for example, take pleasure more from touching than from looking (the way men do). There is no such thing as a neutral gaze, or touch. The senses are sexed.

In *The Savage Mind* (1962), a book dedicated to the memory of Merleau-Ponty, Lévi-Strauss introduced the notion of a "science of the concrete" grounded in the apprehension and classification of things according to their "tangible qualities" (colour, odour, sound, etc.). This was in contrast to the suprasensible understanding of the workings of the universe in terms of mass, velocity and volume that comes out of modern physics. By presenting evidence of the complex sense-based taxonomies of the natural world elaborated by indigenous peoples, Lévi-Strauss sought to dispel the idea that native thought is "prelogical" or "unscientific" in character, for there was clearly a logic to it, a logic of *sensible* qualities. Lévi-Strauss' work also foregrounded the intricate "sensory codes" of myth, as in the famous section entitled "Fugue of the Five Senses" in volume I of *Mythologiques*. In one society's myths, a primordial opposition, such as that between life and death, is coded in smell (imputrescible vs. putrid), in another in sound (loud vs. faint), in a third it is expressed in terms of touch (hard vs. soft), and the action of the myth will depend on smelling or not smelling, hearing or not hearing, etc., until all the permutations (inversion, transposition, dilution, expansion, etc) have been exhausted, and some sort of resolution of the initial opposition is achieved, or not. For all his attention to the sensible, Lévi-Strauss nevertheless remained an intellectual, subordinating his study of the sensory power of myth to tracing the operations of "mind" (*esprit*).

As with Lévi-Strauss, there is a strong emphasis on the relations between the senses in the work of Marshall McLuhan, for McLuhan also viewed the sensorium as a kind of combinatory. In *The Gutenberg Galaxy*, he wrote

It would seem that the extension of one or another of our senses by mechanical means, [such as the wheel as an extension of the foot, the book of the eye, the telephone of the ear] can act as a sort of twist for the kaleidoscope of the entire sensorium. A new combination or ratio of the existing components occurs, and a new mosaic of possible forms presents itself (McLuhan 1962: 55)

Whereas Lévi-Strauss focussed on relations of contrast or homology and transformation between sensations in different registers, McLuhan concentrated on relations of

domination, complementarity and/or fusion between the senses themselves. He posited four stages in the evolution of human communication: an “oral” stage when speech was the dominant medium of information, followed by a chirographic stage (when writing took over from speech) then a typographic stage (brought on by the invention of the printing press) and finally an electronic stage (typified by TV for McLuhan, but which we might see as embracing the internet as well).

In the oral stage, which is also characteristic of contemporary “tribal societies,” according to McLuhan, people live under the “tyranny of the ear” because speech is the dominant channel of information. The other senses play along though, because interlocutors must be within speaking distance to communicate. The requirement of co-presence means that people can usually see, and possibly smell and touch each other as well as talk. Spontaneity and communality are the rule in oral societies, and thought is “participatory.”

Thought is said by McLuhan to have become more objective, linear and rational as a result of the introduction of writing and *a fortiori* the printing press. The latter developments helped precipitate the “fragmentation of the senses” by sidelining hearing (not to mention touch and smell) and ratcheting up the role of sight, in addition to disembodiment of knowledge and individuating subjects by ascribing to each a “point of view.” However, the hegemony of vision was ruptured and a kind of tribal sensibility restored with the arrival of electronic media (which McLuhan saw as an extension of the sense of touch – that is, of the nervous system itself). Communication became instantaneous again and space was abolished in the “global village” created by the communications media which proliferated over the course of the twentieth century. By the 1960s, when McLuhan’s influence was at its peak, the way to be was “cool” or “hot” or in any event “in touch” – all of which are *tactile* values.

The work of these seven theorists opened fissures and chipped away at the exclusivity enjoyed by psychology with respect to the study of the senses and perception. For example, by pointing to the technologization of the senses (i.e. their “extension” in the form of different media) McLuhan highlighted how perception can go on *outside* the head. In effect, perception begins at the edge of the technologies people use to communicate, and it is conditioned by those technologies: “the medium is the message,” as he put it. Or, to take the example of Simmel, Febvre and Elias, by documenting historical shifts in the *uses* of the senses, they brought out how sensations may be fleeting, but the senses themselves are *socialized* in particular ways. Consequently, it makes sense to speak of “the period eye” or “period ear,” etc. – that is, the collective patterning of perception. Such patterns are largely invisible to psychologists, though, because of their insistence on a sense-by-sense, or one sense-at-a-time approach to the study of perception. This prevents them from seeing the influence of one sense on another – or, in other words, the *sociality of sensations*. So too are psychologists wont to ignore the influence of social codes on the use of the senses. This follows from the fact that such codes are suspended, replaced by

experimental protocols, in the artificial context of the psychology laboratory where psychologists conduct their research. Analyzing the senses in isolation, both from each other, and from the world remains the dominant paradigm in the psychology of perception. The impetus for this paradigm can be traced back to the “doctrine of specific nerve energies,” which dates from the early nineteenth century (Crary 1990).

By contrast, all of the precursors to the sensory turn whose work we surveyed above implicitly or explicitly point to the necessity of focussing on the relations *between* the senses (e.g. Simmel noting the shift from aural to visual interaction with advancing urbanization, McLuhan postulating a similar switch with reference to the development of communications, Irigaray bringing out how sight is for men while touch is for women, or Lévi-Strauss tracing the concatenation of the senses in Amerindian myth). We can go further and assert that the “the facts of sense” are always a product of con-sensus – that is, of sensing along with others. Perception is a *social* activity in that it is conditioned by culture, and cannot be thought exclusively in terms of neural activity.

## Part II

The practice of ethnography has played a vital role in bringing the social life of the senses to light. As French anthropologist/philosopher François Laplantine observes in *Le social et le sensible*: “The experience of fieldwork is an experience of sharing the perceptible (*partage du sensible*). We observe, we listen, we speak with others, we partake of their cuisine, we try to feel along with them what they experience” (Laplantine 2005: 11 my translation). In “Foundations for an Anthropology of the Senses,” Canadian cultural historian/anthropologist Constance Classen sums up what anthropologists have found about the socialization of the senses and sensation:

When we examine the meanings associated with various sensory faculties and sensations in different cultures we find a cornucopia of potent sensory symbolism. Sight may be linked to reason or to witchcraft, taste may be used as a metaphor for aesthetic discrimination or for sexual experience, an odour may signify sanctity or sin, political power or social exclusion. Together, these sensory meanings and values form the *sensory model* espoused by a society, according to which the members of that society 'make sense' of the world, or translate sensory perceptions and concepts into a particular 'worldview.' There will likely be challenges to this model from within the society, persons and groups who differ on certain sensory values, yet this model will provide the basic perceptual paradigm to be followed or resisted (Classen 1997: 402).

This quotation nicely captures the excitement of exploring the senses across cultures while at the same time highlighting the importance of attending to intracultural diversity and resistance.

Both Classen and Laplantine write with conviction concerning the sociality of sensations. Classen, in particular, has been at the forefront of the drive to socialize our understanding of how the senses work, and thereby repeal or push back the psychologization of perception. Her point of departure in this endeavour was McLuhan's notion of cultures as consisting of contrasting "sense ratios." But her inquiries soon revealed that McLuhan's theory had serious flaws, including, among other things, his essentialist construction of the cognitive implications of different senses (e.g. his idea of sight as intrinsically more rational than, for example, hearing), and his tendency to lump all societies which lack writing together in a single, undifferentiated category -- that of "oral society." Based on a comparative study of the sensory cosmologies and practices of a range of so-called oral societies, Classen found that there is as much diversity between oral societies as there is between oral societies as a class and the class of chirographic or typographic societies. For example, the sense of temperature, not hearing, is of cardinal importance to the Tzotzil of Mexico: the hot/cold polarity structures all aspects of their social and physical universe. Similarly, smell, not hearing, plays the dominant role in the Onge conceptualization of the cosmos, the society, and the self (Classen 1993, 2004). As noted above, Classen also insists on the importance of attending to intracultural diversity -- that is, to how some groups may use and experience their senses differently from the mainstream. Where she stops short, and with good reason, is at the suggestion that individual differences in perception make it impossible to advance any generalizations of a cultural nature. The idea of the idiosyncrasy of the senses is itself a cultural construct, she would argue. The alleged interiority and subjectivity of sensations is in no small part an effect of the cult of the individual in bourgeois society.

Classen has also been at the forefront of the drive to historicize the sensorium. Taking up Febvre's call, she has traced the cultural history of smell in a now classic work, *Aroma* (Classen et al 1994) and, just recently, in *The Deepest Sense*, presented a cultural history of touch. While ostensibly focusing on individual senses, Classen actually goes to great lengths to bring out the shifting relations between the senses in her work. For example, in *Worlds of Sense* she devotes a chapter to the history of the rose. In premodern times, the rose was a symbol of visual and olfactory perfection ("A rose by any other name would smell as sweet"). It had mystical significance, due to its scent often perfuming visions of Mary and being identified with the "odour of sanctity." It also had a role to play in cooking and medicine on account of its flavour. It was grown together with other herbs. During the Enlightenment, however, roses came to be laid out in their own flower beds and to be valued more for their visual appearance. Roses were bred to perfect their colour and form and this had the unintended consequence of breeding the scent right out of certain varieties, as the modern period progressed. As for the rose-scented visions of Mary, these were explained away as hallucinations and smell was demoted by the likes of Darwin and Freud to the rank of being the most animalistic of the senses (where once it had been the most spiritual). The history of the rose provides a good illustration of shifting sensory priorities -- in the instant case, from essence to appearance.

In the "Introduction" to *The Deepest Sense*, Classen wonders why contemporary historians pay so little attention to tactile experience, even when writing the history of the body or of medicine. She attributes the relative neglect of touch in contemporary writing to a general, unspoken consensus that has its roots

in the historical writing of the nineteenth century when the notion that "high" culture requires the suppression of the "lower" senses was formalized. Touch was typed by the scholars of the day as a crude and uncivilized mode of perception. In the sensory scale of "races" created by the natural historian Lorenz Oken, the "civilized" European "eye-man," who focussed on the visual world, was positioned at the top and the African "skin-man," who used touch as his primary sensory modality, at the bottom. Societies which touched much, it was said, did not think much and did not bear thinking much about - except perhaps by anthropologists. To achieve respectability, societies needed to be seen to have risen above the "animal" life of the body. To achieve respectability, historians had to show that in their work they had done the same (Classen 2012: 3).

The dearth of tactile history is therefore attributable to the differential social valuation of the senses. The tendency on the part of contemporary historians to pass over touch in silence is a case in point. Meanwhile, Classen's book is dedicated to showing how

[the] potential benefits of reversing this tendency are considerable. Exploring the history of touch makes the past come alive. It clothes the dry bones of historical fact with the flesh of physical sensation. Sensuous history is more interesting and more memorable. An embodied approach saves historical figures from being perceived as lifeless puppets who move across the stage of the past without any real feelings. When we allow historical figures to be of flesh and blood we make it possible to relate to them as fellow beings and therefore to make meaningful comparisons between their lives and situations and our own (see Hoffer 2003: Introduction) (Classen 2012: 3)

To write the history of touch is to write a history with many layers and many folds, like the organ of touch, the skin, itself. Classen's book in fact ranges over a wide range of topics "from the feel of the world to the (dis)comforts of home, from the rites of pleasure to the disciplinary uses of pain, and from the gestures of faith to the postures of the drill." Throughout, she is concerned to demonstrate how touch "does not simply recede from cultural life in modernity, it is re-educated, and while it retreats from some domains, it expands into others." This is an important qualification to Elias' account, and a wake-up call to historians who pass over touch in silence. There is so much to be gained in terms of historical understanding from taking touch seriously and not remaining dazzled by the



more visible expressions of the past (texts, paintings, monuments, etc.) the way most historians tend.

François Laplantine is another leading theorist of the sensory turn. Like Classen, he has contributed substantially to socializing our understanding of perception. Laplantine has a dual formation, as both philosopher and anthropologist. His principal ethnographic area has been Brazil, although he has also conducted research in Africa, France, and Japan. He is best known for his work in the anthropology of religion, medical anthropology and ethnopsychiatry. What particularly concerns us here is a book he published in 2005, entitled *Le social et le sensible*, which is part sensory ethnography and part philosophy.

In the first chapter of *Le social et le sensible*, Laplantine offers an original and deeply illuminating perspective on the ethos, architecture and music of Brazil through an in-depth analysis of the broader cultural repercussions of a particular movement style, known as *ginga*. *Ginga* refers to a swaying, sinuous style of walking, which is characteristically Brazilian on account of its sensuality. (Think of the swinging hips of the girl from Ipanema.) This kinaesthetic style also forms the basis of a dance style known as *umbigada* (“navel-to-navel”). It is above all manifest in the comportment of the *malandros*, who is a loiterer or good-for-nothing, always slinking about town and cavorting at Carnival (which is his element). Thanks to his tact, his cunning, he gets his way without (apparently) even trying, just from being smooth.

*Ginga*, then, is an energized, rhythmic, swaying or curving/curvaceous style of movement. The curve is actually integral to Brazilian culture and architecture (e.g. the curving streets of Brasilia), according to Laplantine. A curve is a line of which no part is straight. It is the opposite of the “straight ahead” manner of proceeding preferred by Europeans and Americans. Where the European marches the Brazilian sidles.

“The undulating rhythmicity of *ginga* is a pulsation, a vibration of the body,” suggests Laplantine. It also informs a style of music – namely, *bossa nova*, which is a cross between samba and jazz. *Bossa nova* is more for murmuring than dancing, and it is particularly suited to romantic, twilight moments. It “caresses the ear with its words and its notes” and is therefore the perfect medium for expressing that (uniquely?) Brazilian sentiment, *saudade*.

In a later chapter, called “The Sensible, the Social, Category and Energy,” it is Laplantine the philosopher who comes to the fore. Here he traces the history of the opposition between categorical thinking and modal thinking in Western philosophy, and argues that the latter way of thinking (which is also a way of sensing) is vital while the former kills.

According to Laplantine, categorical thought, which Western culture inherits from the Greeks, attributes properties to those things it isolates from the flux of existence and cleaves to the logic of the excluded middle. As such, it is inimical to life and living (*la vie et le vivant*), which are processes of *continuous transformation*. Life itself is rhythmical, and to model or categorize it --which is to say, to fix it-- is false, for the model eliminates

the temporal and processual in the name of the essential. By way of illustration, consider the question: Is dawn night, or day? Categorical thought balks at this question because of its will to impose a logic of identity. But dawn is not identical to night or day: it cannot be assimilated to either category because it is one of those “processes of continuous transformation” that cannot be “fixed.” (Actually, so are day and night, but only modal thought is comfortable with this recognition – to categorical thought it is anathema).

Categorical thought is exemplified by a long string of Western thinkers, from Plato to Descartes, and from Kant to Durkheim. But there is also a countertradition, comprised of the presocratics, Spinoza, Rousseau, and Bergson, among others, who encourage us to focus on duration, modulation, rhythm instead of essence and identity. In subsequent chapters, Laplantine rescues this counter-tradition of western thought from obscurity, and then delves into one of his favourite topics – namely, how cinema is good to think with. Cinema is inherently temporal (compared to painting, for example, which is spatial), and it traffics in images rather than ideas, and emotions rather than reason. Cinema, which is the very embodiment of continuous transformation, can therefore serve as a model (in a positive sense) for integrating life into thought.

Laplantine’s penchant for cinematic thinking sets him apart from Lévi-Strauss who, famously, turned not to cinema but to music for inspiration for his methodology (*Mythologiques* is dedicated “to music”) Laplantine also departs from Lévi-Strauss in more subtle ways having to do with the emphasis throughout his work on rhythm rather than structure, sensation rather than sign, and hybridity rather than binary opposition. All this sounds very poststructuralist, and it is, but whereas most poststructuralist thought tends toward abstraction, Laplantine’s writing remains eminently sensual and sensible.

### **Part III**

The work of Classen and Laplantine is at the crest of a wave that has swept over the humanities and social sciences during the past two decades. This wave is often referred to as the sensory turn -- or better, revolution. I have discussed elsewhere (Howes 2006) how it came at the end of a series of other turns, such as the linguistic turn of the 1960s and 70s and the pictorial turn of the 1980s. The former introduced the idea of cultures as “ways of speaking,” as “texts,” or “discourses” and/or as “structured like a language.” The latter changed the focus from how we communicate with words to how we communicate visually through images, whence “visual culture studies,” and the idea of cultures as “ways of seeing,” or “scopic regimes” or “worldviews.” Both of these turns proved tremendously productive, but they were each in their own way marred by a particular bias – verbocentrism in the case of the linguistic or textual turn, ocularcentrism in the case of the pictorial or visual turn. The former could only ever tell half the story, the latter could only ever show half the picture -- presuming that language and vision, word and image exhaust the universe of possible knowledge and forms of representation, which of course they do not. Enter the sensory turn with its holistic, *relational* approach to the study of

the sensorium (including language). The sensory turn approaches cultures as “ways of sensing” (Howes 2003). It is not biased in favour of any one modality but rather focuses on their interplay, or dynamic interaction, as suggested by Walter Ong in “The Shifting Sensorium” (1991).

1993 was a pivotal year for the sensorial revolution. It was the year Classen’s *Worlds of Sense: Exploring the Senses in History and Across Cultures* was published, along with Taussig’s *Mimesis and Alterity: A Particular History of the Senses*, and Synnott’s *The Body Social*, and Bynum and Porter’s *Medicine and the Five Senses*, and Martin Jay’s *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Contemporary French Thought*, to mention a few of the more salient titles. All these books take the senses as an object of study. This is unusual, because the senses are our means of perception and we therefore tend to overlook them the same way we ignore our eyeglasses – until we break or lose them, and have to try and cope without our glasses. In other words, the senses give us the world but absent themselves in the process. We are conscious of what we perceive (the objects of perception) but rarely take cognizance of how we perceive. Perception is, however, a skill, despite the fact that it seems to come so naturally. For example, it might seem that in order to see, all you need do is open your eyes; however, the blind man whose sight is restored is not at first capable of recognizing the shapes he had previously known through touch, he must *learn* how to coordinate his sense impressions, which goes to show that perception does require practice. If perception requires practice then it is a skill, and where there is skill there is culture, and where there is culture there is history. How deep is that history? Marx claimed that “The forming of the five senses is a labour of the entire history of the world down to the present” (quoted in Howes 2003: 205). He never did spell out what he meant by this, but he had the right idea.

Taking stock of the senses, reflecting on the “means of perception,” is the first revolutionary step of the sensorial revolution. It ushers in a whole new consciousness of how we relate to the world, and to each other. Simmel glimpsed this, as did the other precursors to the sensorial revolution discussed earlier, but it took until the 1990s for researchers to operationalize this maxim.

The second step has involved coming to appreciate the potential of the senses (*all* the sense, not just sight) as means of inquiry. – For example, anthropologists used to rely on the methodology of “participant observation” while now they depend more on participant *sensation* (see Robben and Sluka 2007 on “sensorial fieldwork”) This is because participant observation privileges the gaze, while participant sensation treats the whole body as sentient and every sense as susceptible to enskillment (see e.g. Hahn 2007; Howes 2004).

Participant sensation is to anthropology after the sensory turn what “intimate sensing” has been to geography -- another discipline that came to the senses in the last twenty years or so. In the case of geography, dependence on information gathered through remote-sensing (i.e. satellite-generated data) had been growing steadily since the 1970s. Then, around 1990, some geographers began to express serious doubts about its

adequacy. Canadian geographer J. Douglas Porteous was among the most forceful proponents of “intimate sensing” (i.e. direct, unmediated perception) as what he called a “ground-truthing” mode.

Remote sensing is clean, cold, detached, easy. Intimate sensing, especially in the Third World, is complex, difficult, and often filthy. The world is found to be untidy rather than neat. But intimate sensing is rich, warm, involved ... and the rewards involve dimensions other than the intellectual (Porteous 1990: 201)

One of those other “rewards: was the discovery that the nature of space depends partly on the modality or combination of modalities through which it is approached. Visual space is not necessarily the same as auditory space, and olfactory space is different again. Porteous’ book, *Landscapes of the Mind: Worlds of Sense and Metaphor* is accordingly organized into chapters on soundscape, smellscape, touchscape, etc., which break up the putative unity of the idea of landscape (which is largely a visual construct) in recognition of the heterogeneity of the means of perception.

The third step has been to recognize the interrelation of the senses (see Howes 2003: 47), which is a point that has been stressed repeatedly in the foregoing account. It is a point which psychology – with its one-sense-at-a-time approach to the study of perceptual processes – tends to occlude. Of course, psychology is not the only cause of the blockage in question. Primary blame should be placed on all the picture books on “The Five Senses” which (in North America, at any rate) we visit upon our children, thinking the books will distract and amuse them, when what they actually do is burden them with the idea that they have five senses (no more, no less) and that each sense has its proper sphere (sight is concerned with colour, hearing with sound, smell with odours, and so forth). This separation or “bureaucratization of the senses” (Jones2007) in childhood has serious implications for how we will seek to satisfy our senses in adulthood. The options appear limited to either going to an art gallery to treat our eyes, a concert hall to enjoy our ears, a gym to exercise our muscles, a restaurant to indulge our palate, or a botanic garden to delight our nostrils (though there is often no point smelling the roses). Besides the serious limitation to the range of sensations any of these places have to offer (the sensations in question tend to be “refined” and cluster toward the hedonic end of the spectrum) there is the issue of why the senses should be firewalled in this way (each the domain of a separate institution, a separate space) in the first place. It is as if to mix them were to contaminate them and detract from the overall aesthetic experience of a painting, or a concert, or a meal, etc. This is a deeply entrenched construct – the idea of aesthetic experience as having to be “pure.”

It is also a profoundly provincial, culture-bound construct, as I tried to show in my lecture on “Multisensory Aesthetics” delivered at Keio University on July 30, 2011. In many nonwestern traditions, I pointed out the essence of the aesthetic experience lies in the union and/or transposition of sensations, rather than their separation. This is true of

the geometric designs of the Shipibo-Conibo Indians of Peru: these delightful tracings (see Howes 1991: Figure 2), inspired in part by the ingestion of hallucinogens, are at the same time musical scores and fizzy perfumes – that is, they register in multiple senses at once. The designs have a key role to play in Shipibo-Conibo medicine. Intersensoriality is also the rule in the Japanese “way of incense” (*kōdō*). One Western commentator has characterized the game of *kōdō* as involving the “competitive discrimination of scents of the incense type” (Osborne quoted in Howes 2010: 172). This monomodal definition does not do the game justice and even distorts its nature, for what *kōdō* actually involves is “listening to the incense” (*kōwo kiku*), the kinds of incense used were traditionally classified by *taste*, and the associations which the incense summoned were either of a literary nature (and therefore *verbal*) or of a *visual* nature (i.e. scenic, as in the variety of the game known as Shirakawa Border Station). The essence of *kōdō* thus lies in crossing sensory borders. It stands for the imbrication of the senses, as opposed to their separation. I have discussed this example at length in the essay “The Aesthetics of Mixing the Senses,” which is available on-line at:

<http://www.david-howes.com/senses/aestheticsofmixingthesenses.pdf>

#### **Part IV**

We have seen how a variety of humanities and social science disciplines “came to the senses” as it were, beginning in the 1990s. This move gave birth to a range of subdisciplines, including the history of the senses (Classen 2001, Smith 2007), anthropology of the senses (Howes 1991; Pink and Howes 2010), sociology of the senses (Synnott 1993; Vannini, Waskul and Gottschalk 2012), geography of the senses (Porteous 1990), and so on (the list keeps growing).. At the same time, the confluence gave shape to an interdisciplinary field of inquiry which now goes by the name of “sensory studies.” Sensory studies is an interdisciplinary, intersensory and increasingly international domain of research endeavour as appears from the entries in the Sensory Studies Research Directory (see [www.sensorystudies.org](http://www.sensorystudies.org))

The all-day symposium on “Multisensory Aesthetics and the Cultural Life of the Senses” organized by Professor Miyasaka of Keio University which was held on July 30, 2011 is indicative of how the sensory turn has also become a force in Japan. (Other indications include the fact that two of Classen’s books were translated into Japanese even before they were translated into Portuguese or Greek, which suggests that Japan is even more attuned to the senses than these two famously sensuous European societies). At the symposium, both Professor Miyasaka and Professor Akira Okazaki offered their appreciation and critique of my work in the anthropology of the senses spanning the last twenty years. I am deeply indebted to them for the many insights I gained from their commentaries. Professor Miyasaka has elaborated on the remarks he gave at the symposium in the extremely comprehensive and perspicacious essay included in this special issue. The symposium was also the occasion for me to hear papers by two young

Japanese scholars, which are to be published in this issue as well. Yukiko Kato's paper, "Color as Cross-Media," is of interest for the way it *explodes* colour, playing up all the ways it (colour) transgresses sensory boundaries and bridges different departments of life. Throughout her essay, the accent is on coming to understand the relational aspects – or what I would call, the social life -- of colour. Colour is so much more than a pigment, or retinal impression or pattern of neural activity.

Yosuke Shimazono's paper is of equally profound interest. It deals with sensations to which we do not normally have access – namely those of the viscera, in particular the kidneys. For individuals who have received a kidney transplant, however, the replacement organ can become the focus of sensations. It "pulses," it "knocks," or it is imagined on the analogy of a foetus. These are all different ways of "making sense" of the transplant experience, and are crucial stages in the process of arriving at a new somatic "sense of self" which incorporates the "alien" organ. Research of this kind is at the cutting edge of the newly emergent field of the medical anthropology of sensation (Hinton, Howes and Kirmayer 2008).

In addition to these Japanese scholars' interest in exploring sensory studies, there is the interest of sensory studies scholars in the culture of Japan. Two especially noteworthy recent expressions of this interest include François Laplantine's book *Tokyo, ville flottante: Scène urbaine, mises en scène*, published in 2010 and the special issue of the journal *Japanese Studies* edited by Carolyn Stevens entitled "Touch: Encounters with Japanese Popular Culture" which came out in May 2011

Laplantine's book arose out of his two month sojourn as a visiting professor in Tokyo in 2008-2009. It is part sensory ethnography and part film studies. The effect of interpellating these two approaches, ethnography and cinematography, is profoundly illuminating. The special issue of *Japanese Studies* was inspired in part by Stevens' encounter with the inhuman tactility of Paro, the "Seal-type Therapeutic Robot" which both repulsed and charmed her, and by the persistent tactility of the custom of exchanging *meishi* (business cards).

The idea of robot therapy at first alarmed Stevens, since replacing human interaction with a technological device could only further isolate the patients in pediatric wards and nursing homes for whom the "seal" was designed to serve as a companion, or so she thought. But then, seeing how it worked in response to being stroked (bleating, waving its flippers, rolling its eyes) and how inviting its acrylic plush fur was, she had to hold it and felt an instant bond when she did. Furthermore, studies showed that the therapeutic robot did have all the beneficial effects on patients's medical condition and emotional state that were touted for it. In a similar vein, it is surprising that Japanese businesspeople, participating as they do in such a high tech culture, have not gone over to electronic business card exchange (the technology exists), but it seems that there is something about the touch of the paper business card that Japanese salary-men are not willing to relinquish, and so the latter remain the preferred currency by far. Stevens employs her encounter with Paro as a metaphor for the action in all of the contributions to the issue:

“we reach out to touch Japanese culture and find ourselves touched by it, and enriched by the process” (2011: 3). The collected essays deal with such issues as the “heart-to-heart relationship” between humans and humanoid robots (not as impossible as it sounds); the affective power of Sanrio’s Hello Kitty character – the very embodiment of cuteness (but the very opposite of juvenile when one considers the sophistication of the “social communication” marketing strategy behind this figure); and, Japanese literary representations of black skin and black culture as “bad” but appealing and vitalizing.

Laplantine’s book is a veritable tour de force. He was primed to pick up on all the nuances of Japanese culture by his admiration for and personal cultivation of modal thinking. The Japanese privilege form (not idea), percept (not concept), concrete (not abstract), and transformation (not essence), he says. The culture oscillates between high tech and tradition, the pragmatic and the frivolous, extravagance and asceticism, extreme flexibility and standing on ceremony, a strong sense of duty and a craving for distraction (karaoke, pinchoko parlors), self-effacement and national pride. A highly disciplined, hypercivilized society with an overwhelming emphasis on security, serenity, harmony and integration which is nevertheless pervaded by a profound consciousness of impermanence (the seasonal cycle, seismic activity, Tokyo itself is built on a marsh). In what other society do you find aesthetic appreciation of a few unpretentious objects, as in the tea ceremony, and expertise in seasonal representation, as in the art of flower arranging, so bound up with social distinction? Social distinction is normally about permanence, not fugacity (see further Daniels 2010 108-112).

Laplantine evokes a lively sense of the apparent contradictions of Japanese culture and how they nevertheless hang together, with a degree of subtlety I cannot match here. He is particularly astute in his observations regarding the discontinuance of tradition by contemporary Japanese youth, and the insights into this phenomenon which various Japanese filmmakers provide, but again I lack the expertise to evaluate or the space to summarize his observations properly. Let me therefore conclude by offering a couple of my own interpretations of Japanese habits of perception and how these differ from the socialization of the senses in the West – interpretations which are “in the spirit of Laplantine,” however lacking in finesse.

Consider the fact that the average interpersonal distance (or “personal space”) in Japan is 360 centimetres, compared to 240 centimetres in Europe and 120 centimetres in Cuba. This measurement makes the Japanese seem even more reserved than the British, who are (or were) notorious for their formality. Other factors which contribute to Japan’s reputation as a “no-contact culture” include the practice of bowing instead of shaking hands or kissing on the cheek when greeting someone; the tradition of masking, both in the theatre and in everyday life (for hygienic reasons); and the importance attached to “face” (or “keeping face”). The preoccupation with observing proper etiquette led one American visitor to write on his travel blog (in frustration at not being able to establish the sort of fellow-feeling to which he was accustomed in the U.S.) that: “The Japanese are incredibly polite but the politeness is a façade.” What did he expect?

The perimeters of personal space are indeed more extensive in Japan than in the U.S. or the U.K., and social interaction does tend toward greater formality. However, the characterization of Japan as a “no-contact culture” is false, for it ignores the fact that there are two kinds of contact zone in Japan, one public, the other private. In the home, there is a great deal of emphasis on physical proximity and reliance on nonverbal communication, particularly in comparison with Americans, who predominantly use verbal communication (Montagu 1978: 280). This pattern is manifest in the popularity of co-sleeping arrangements in Japan, whereby children sleep together with their parents or grandparents until they start attending elementary school, and sometimes even until they reach puberty, unlike the American child who is assigned his or her own bed (starting with a crib) and own room from very early on.

Interestingly, there was a vogue for private children’s rooms in Japan beginning in the 1980s, but it has since gone into decline because of the perceived social benefits of co-sleeping. As one of Inge Daniels’ middle class female informants explained: “Until a few years ago it was considered good to have a children’s room just like people in Europe. But recently, cases in which families cannot create smooth internal relationships have increased. That is why the view that it is good to be [sleep] together as a family is re-gaining popularity” (Daniels 2010: 38).

It is interesting to contemplate how Japanese culture appears to outflank American culture when it comes to personal space and contact. The Japanese are both more reserved and more intimate than the Americans. The latter occupy a sort of middle ground most of the time, where the distance as well as the difference between public and private is not as grand.

The tactile practices described above are supposed to have a determining influence on the Japanese “character”: it is said that Japanese tend to be more “group”-oriented and interdependent in their relations with others, while American and European subjects tend to be more “individual”-oriented and independent. Another way of putting this would be to say that the Japanese self is duplicitous (attuned to relationships), while the American or European self is centred. Pursuing this observation further, perhaps the duplicity -- or better, relationality -- of the Japanese self is linked to the idea (and ideal) of *ma* in Japanese culture. *Ma* means gap, interval. It is a concept which is both temporal and spatial. It is the instant between two notes in a piece of music, or the space between the figures in a painting. This area, which is intentionally left empty, is no less important than those areas which are filled-in. Indeed, without this in-between there could be nothing, at least none that stand out. As Tomie Hahn points out, “*Ma* is a particularly Japanese aesthetic where aspects of “negative” space and time are not believed to be empty, but are considered to be expansive and full of energy” (Hahn 2007: 53). *Ma* figures everywhere, in brush painting most famously, but also in calligraphy, in flower arrangement, gardens, music and in theatre. It can also be seen, more prosaically, in the way two skyscrapers, built right next to each other, never touch. They must be free-standing. This is according to the building codes. It means that there will always be a crack, even though it be no more



than a few centimetres, between the two structures, from the ground all the way up to the heavens.

It is fascinating to contemplate such fissures. But to attend to *ma* involves a radical decentring of attention, as far as an American or Western subject is concerned. One might think that this is because *ma* is nothing (i.e. emptiness), whereas consciousness is always “consciousness of” some object, according to the phenomenologists. But that is not the reason in Japan, even if it might hold in the West. Rather, it is because discerning *ma* involves what is best described as a sidelong way of sensing. The object remains in the field of perception, but it is always off centre, never head-on: in dance, for example, the accent is on stillness (the temporary pose) rather than movement, in music it is on the silence rather than the notes, and in painting it is on the margins rather than the figure. To put this another way, the focus is on the relations between the movements, between the notes, between the figures, rather than the “object of perception” (the gesture, the sound, the image, etc.) itself. Evidently, to speak of an “object of perception” is to introduce a foreign, Western way of sensing. It is very difficult for a Westerner to focus on the in-between, whereas that is the point of departure for the Japanese perceiver. An analogy could be drawn to the black and white keys of a piano. The Western subject is attuned to the so-called natural notes produced by the white keys whereas it is the “accidental” notes produced by the black keys that constitute the focal point for the Japanese subject. And so we have two complementary ways of perceiving which cover exactly the same ground but with diametrically opposed inflections. The way of sensing is intimately bound up with the sense of self.

### **Acknowledgments**

I wish to thank Keizo Miyasaka for the invitation to come to Keio University for an eight day period during the Summer of 2012 and deliver a series of lectures on the anthropology of the senses. I also wish to thank him for being such a generous host and giving so freely of his time. I remember our many travels to places of interest with great pleasure, including the trip to Kamakura, where I actually got inside the head of the Buddha, or at least the 12 meter tall bronze caste of the Buddha. I hope to come to Japan again, to delve deeper into the treasure trove of sensations I experienced there on my first trip, and write a full-fledged sensory ethnography.

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