

SENSES AND SENSATION:
CRITICAL AND PRIMARY SOURCES

Volume 2

HISTORY AND SOCIOLOGY

Edited by David Howes

B L O O M S B U R Y

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Introduction: On the History and Sociology of the Senses

DAVID HOWES

The approach that informs this and the other three volumes in the *Senses and Sensation* compendium goes under the name of sensory studies (see www.sensorystudies.org). Sensory studies involves a cultural approach to the study of the senses and a sensory approach to the study of culture. It treats the senses and sensations as both object of study and means of inquiry.

By bringing a cultural approach to bear on the study of the senses, this work seeks to enlarge the definition of the term “sensorium” from its original (and still current) acceptance as “the seat of sensation in the brain” to include the *total* environment of the perceiving subject. The specific focus of this volume is on the contributions of the disciplines of history and sociology to this project of refiguring the sensorium.¹ By suggesting that the sensorium is a historical formation and addressing sense experience from a sociological angle, this volume challenges the monopoly that the discipline of psychology has traditionally exerted over the study of the senses and sensation. As cultural historian Constance Classen observes: “sensory perception is a cultural, as well as a physical, act [S]ight, hearing, taste, touch, and smell are not only means of apprehending physical phenomena, but also avenues for the transmission of cultural values” (1997: 401).

The history of the senses is concerned with charting sensory diversity in time. The sociology of the senses looks at diversity within society, along the lines of gender, class, religion, and ethnicity or race as well as disability. In the former, the emphasis is on the historicity of perception, and on how the balance of the senses has shifted over time, with the increased importance attached to sight, as well as various counter-reactions to the hegemony of vision. In the latter the focus is on the socialization of the senses, and how sensory values and social values intertwine.

PART I: FOUNDATIONS

Overtures

The first scholar to theorize the senses in history, by imagining a “history of the sensible,” was Alain Corbin ([1990] 2005; Corbin and Heuré 2000). However, there were various overtures to the senses in the historical literature of previous decades. Indeed, when one considers the work of two of the discipline’s most prominent modern practitioners—

Johan Huizinga, author of “The Task of Cultural History” (1929) or Lucien Febvre, founder of the Annales School—one sees that sensory experience provides a foundational terrain of exploration within the fields of social and cultural history.²

In *The Autumn of the Middle Ages* ([1919] 1996), Huizinga sought to convey not merely the “historical experience” but the “historical sensation” of the late medieval period. Among his sources of inspiration for this move were (1) his work as a linguist, which revealed the influence of the senses on language, and (2) the Dutch literary genre known as Sensitivism, which emphasized a sensitive and sensuous approach to writing. In the first essay of this volume (2.1), Frank Ankersmit enucleates how Huizinga “moved outside himself” and made contact with history—specifically, the history of the late Burgundian Moyen Age—and sought to intimate this in his writing. The Huizingan overture is summed up by Ankersmit in the line: “Historical experience pulls the faces of past and present together in a short but ecstatic kiss.” Later on, Ankersmit alludes to the differences between seeing and hearing to help illuminate the nature of Huizinga’s phenomenology of historical sensation. Parenthetically, Ankersmit’s definition of *sensation* as the “other” of observation and impression provides a vital antidote to the psychophysical definition of sensation, which is largely denuded of sense (in the sense of “meaning”), and is the one we hope the reader will retain.

Toward the end of his classic work on the mentality of sixteenth-century France, Lucien Febvre ([1942] 1982) observed that the sixteenth century was more attentive to smells and sounds than sights, and went on to suggest that “a fascinating series of studies could be done of the sensory underpinnings of thought in different periods” (see further Classen 2001). Febvre’s overture to the non-visual senses in *The Problem of Unbelief in the Sixteenth Century* is excerpted here in its entirety (2.2) as a key text which would serve to inspire many future historians of the senses.

Disciplines: The Sensory Revolution in History and Sociology

In the 1980s Alain Corbin broke with the focus on “mentalities” in the work of Febvre and the Annales School, and the focus on “discourse” on the part of Foucault and the poststructuralists to write a “history of the sensible” (see Corbin and Heuré 2000). The term “sensible” can be loosely rendered into English as “the sensate” or “the perceptible.”

History of the Senses. Corbin’s *The Foul and the Fragrant* ([1982] 1986) explored the social life of smell in nineteenth-century France. It was followed a decade later by *Village Bells: Sounds and Meanings in the 19th Century French Countryside* ([1994] 1998). In the interim, Corbin initiated a dialogue with anthropology in a piece called “Histoire et anthropologie sensorielle” ([1990] 2005).³ This essay contains many keen precisions regarding sensory studies methodology. For example, Corbin urges us to “take account of the *habitus* that determines the frontier between the perceived and the unperceived, and, even more, of the norms which decree what is spoken and what left unspoken”; he also highlights the dangers of “confusing the reality of the employment of the senses and the picture of this employment decreed by observers” ([1990] 2005: 135, 133). In other words, the key to writing the history of the senses lies in sensing between the lines of written sources.

The pioneering work of the Canadian cultural historian Constance Classen helped to define the fields of both the history and anthropology of the senses (1997, 2001). In *Inca Cosmology and the Human Body* (1993b) she investigated how the Incas made sense of the world through corporeal and sensory metaphors and practices. The impact of the literate

practices introduced by the Spanish on the intensely oral cosmologies of Andean culture forms the subject of one of the chapters in the first volume of this set (see Classen 1.16). Classen went on to explore a range of sensory models and practices in such works as *Worlds of Sense: Exploring the Senses in History and Across Cultures* (1993a), *The Color of Angels: Cosmology, Gender and the Aesthetic Imagination* (1998), and *Aroma: The Cultural History of Smell* (Classen et al. 1994). An example of her innovative historical investigations into the senses is her account in *Worlds of Sense* of the olfactory “decline” of the West as figured by one minor but significant object of cultural interest: the rose (Classen 1993a: ch. 1). Prior to the Enlightenment, the salient feature of the rose was customarily taken to be its scent (“A rose by any other name would smell as sweet”). Afterward, the visual appearance of the rose began to attract more attention, as can be seen both in literary references and in gardening practices, which sacrificed scent in the quest to breed showier blooms. Classen argues that the sensory history of the rose reflects a general tendency to downplay olfaction in favor of vision in modernity. In her subsequent work, Classen has continued to expand the field of sensory history, bringing out, for example, how changing tactile practices shaped the transition from premodern to modern culture and how the senses were engaged by artworks and collections from the Middle Ages to modernity (2005, 2012, 2017).

The British social historian, Roy Porter, was an early supporter of sensory history. He was instrumental in seeing Corbin’s work translated into English, co-edited *Medicine and the Five Senses* (Bynum and Porter 1993) and was working on *Flesh in the Age of Reason* (2003), a profound contribution to the history of sensibilities, at the time of his premature death in 2002. (Porter was also responsible for coining the term “cultural anthropology of the senses,” which he used in his Foreword to Corbin’s *The Foul and the Fragrant*.)

One influential early text in sensory history is *Sweetness and Power* (1985) by the anthropologist Sidney Mintz. This book traced the social, political, and economic impact of a gustatory sensation: that of sugar. Mintz showed how capitalism thrived on the sugar trade while wreaking misery on the African slaves who worked the sugar plantations, how sugar insinuated itself into the rhythms of the British workday via its use in tea and coffee, and how it ultimately came to be classified as a health risk (an ironic twist, since sugar was initially touted as a cure-all). *Sweetness and Power* opened a space within the nascent field of sensory history for researching and writing the history of *particular* sensations, or sensuous substances. This subfield has expanded dramatically in the ensuing decades to include such topics as the social history of spices (Schivelbusch 1992), salt (Kurlansky [2002] 2010), chocolate (Off 2006), colors (Finlay 2002; Pleij 2004), perfume (Dugan 2011) and other stimulants, along with the cultural history of darkness and light (Schivelbusch 1988), noise (Mansell 2017), stench (Barnes 2006) and dust (Amato 2001), as well as visceral responses, such as disgust (Miller 1997: chs 1, 4).

The development of a history of the senses in the United States was shaped by the writings of a number of American scholars as well as by the above-mentioned works. George Roeder Jr. is often credited with being the first in the United States to call historians to their senses. In a 1994 review article, Roeder recounted the results of his analysis of the sensory content of sixteen American history textbooks published during the previous forty years. He found little use of sensory references or materials, such as photographs, in the earlier texts but noted a slight increase in the attention paid to “the sensory dimension of history” in the more recent texts, and urged that this trend continue, for: “[w]hen we write about the senses with the same fullness and precision that we demand of ourselves when discussing politics, philosophy or social movements, we *enlarge our audience, our field of study and our understanding of the past*” (Roeder 1994: 1122 emphasis added).

The field of American sensory history has definitely come into its own since Roeder's summons, thanks to the contributions of Leigh Schmidt, Donna Gabaccia, Emily Thompson, Peter Charles Hoffer, Sally Promey and, particularly, Mark M. Smith (2001, 2006, 2007a, 2007b). By attending to "the sensate" (Smith 2007b) in their explorations of social processes, these scholars have reshaped the *way* the U.S. past is understood. Thus, Hoffer (2005) held that sensation and perception played a "causal role" in the conflicts between Indians and settlers in *Sensory Worlds in Early America* (2005). Schmidt (2000) delved into the heated debates over the meaning of divine signs and the rationalization of listening in the American Enlightenment. Gabaccia (2000) recounted how "crossing the boundaries of taste" and savoring (as well as experimenting with) the cuisine of the "other" became the norm in interethnic relations in the late nineteenth- and twentieth-century United States, giving new meaning to the notion of America as a melting pot. Promey (2006, 2012) has explored the "taste evangelism" of American Liberal Protestantism in the mid-twentieth century and the reform of visual habits as religious dispositions. In *The Soundscape of Modernity* (2002), Thompson brings out how the silence that resulted from the "quest for quiet" that drove the invention of various sound insulating materials during the first decades of the twentieth century was then filled by the sounds of radio, which in turn produced a new "culture of listening" and national consciousness.

The most prominent historian of the senses in the United States, Mark Smith, began his work in the field by examining the clash between the soundscapes of the Northern (industrial) and Southern (pastoral) United States in the first half of the nineteenth century, and the role this clash may have played in the lead-up to the American Civil War (Smith 2001). He went on, in *How Race Is Made* (2006), to expose the sensory dynamics of racializing processes in the Southern United States, and concluded that racial issues were never black and white, but instead involved a range of emotionally charged sensory stereotypes, which he proceeded to deconstruct. In addition to these detailed studies, Smith edited a Round Table on "The Senses in American History" for the *Journal of American History* (2008),⁴ and proposed a charter for sensory history in *Sensing the Past* (2007b). A brief section from that book, entitled "On Method" (2.23), rounds out this volume, fittingly.

In 2011, the *American Historical Review* came out with an issue on "The Senses in History." The introduction to this issue by the intellectual historian Martin Jay, author of *Downcast Eyes* (1993), is reprinted here (2.4).

A sensory history approach is now being applied to numerous geographical regions. One of these is Russia, as evidenced by the recent publication of *Russian History through the Senses: From 1700 to the Present* (Romaniello and Starks 2016) and the work of the Cambridge Russian Sensory History Network (or CRUSH). Initially, Russian sensory history was focused on the transition from communism, as in Christoph Neidhart's *Russia's Carnival* (see Howes 2.16). (Similarly, Gediminas Lankauskas examined the ways in which the senses "re-collect" the past at a socialist theme park in Lithuania [2006].) The Romaniello and Starks edited collection is remarkably varied in the range of topics it covers, from the politics of deafness and hearing (Stalin was notoriously opposed to the use of sign language) to the acquired gastronomic appreciation for the rotted, and from the memorialization of martyrs to how wartime nurses coped with the sensory onslaught of wounded bodies. The work of CRUSH is more focused on early twentieth-century projects and the new models of human subjectivity they created. Its members see their task as one of counterbalancing the "emotional turn" that has dominated much scholarship on Russian and Slavic culture by promoting a corresponding sensory turn.

While sensory history has typically been organized along specific sensory and national lines, there is a growing interest in forging a more synthetic, multisensory, and comparative or transnational understanding of the sensorium as a historical formation. This volume, and the set of which it is a part, is a case in point. The first intimations of such an integrative approach are to be found in such works as literary scholar Louise Vinge's *The Five Senses: Studies in a Literary Tradition* (1975) and Classen's *Worlds of Sense* (1993a) and *The Color of Angels* (1998), as well as geographer Yi-Fu Tuan's *Passing Strange and Wonderful* (1995) and philosopher Jonathan Rée's *I See a Voice* (1999). This trend continued with the publication of the German medical historian Robert Jütte's *A History of the Senses: From Antiquity to Cyberspace* (2005) and Mark Smith's *Sensing the Past* (2007b). Of particular note is the *Cultural History of the Senses* series, under the direction of Constance Classen, which published in 2014. Its six volumes explore Western sensory culture from antiquity (Toner 2014), through the Middle Ages (Newhauser 2014), the Renaissance (Roodenburg 2014), the Enlightenment (Vila 2014), the nineteenth century (Classen 2014), and the twentieth century (Howes 2014). Each volume explores a range of cultural domains: including urban life, the marketplace, the arts, religion, and science. This domain-based approach makes it possible to develop a fuller sense of the differential elaboration and interplay of the senses within each of the periods covered.

One of the domains covered in *A Cultural History of the Senses* concerns the interconnections between sensory modalities and media of communication. An emergent field of inquiry which contributes to our understanding of these interconnections is "media archaeology." This approach seeks to "construct alternate histories of suppressed, neglected, and forgotten media" (Huhtamo and Parikka 2011: 3). The path of history is littered with devices that never quite caught on, like the "Baby Talkie" of 1930s Japan. This variation of the optical toy known as the zoetrope was to be placed at the center of a gramophone turntable so that the consumer could enjoy animations accompanied by sound. Produced when silent films were being transformed into "talkies," it was perhaps the earliest form of "multimedia" home entertainment (i.e., a "home movie machine"). One ad for the "Baby Talkie" suggested that if you buy the device "at the cost of one record, any old record will become really interesting and lively, pleasing both your eyes and ears as if you were watching a real talkie" and went on to clinch the argument by claiming: "You will no longer be satisfied with a gramophone which is merely for listening" (Kusahara 2011: 127). Though the Baby Talkie quickly became a relic, it nevertheless served as a sign, among numerous other devices across cultures, of the popular interest in re-uniting sensations which had been severed by monosensory (single-sensed) media.

The study of the relationship between the senses and media has, of course, long been a subject of interest for historians and cultural theorists. As Huhtamo and Parikka (2011) note, it was prefigured in the work of such theorists as Walter Benjamin, Michel Foucault, and (in the German context especially) Friedrich Kittler. The Canadian media guru Marshall McLuhan is particularly significant for his groundbreaking categorization of media as "extensions of the senses" with concomitant social and cognitive effects. McLuhan's approach, however, had certain limitations, one of which was its technological determinism, and another, its essentialist understanding of the senses (e.g., seeing as intrinsically more rational and linear than hearing). While often taking McLuhan's insights as a point of departure, more recent work in the history and sociology/anthropology of the senses has insisted on inquiring into the cultural *construction* of the senses and examining the differing *combinations* of the senses in different cultures and historical periods. Thanks to such work it is now clear that the sensorium of a given period cannot be

read from its prevailing technology of communication (speech, writing, print, electronic) in a McLuhanesque fashion, but instead demands a contextual analysis (see Howes 1991; Classen 1993a; Schmidt 2000; Smith 2007b; Howes and Classen 2013).

Sociology of the Senses. The first intimations of a sociology of the senses can be found in the work of one of sociology's founders, Georg Simmel. In a pair of essays which date from the first decades of the twentieth century, Simmel drew attention to how the senses and sense experience impact social attitudes and interaction: "That we get involved in interactions at all depends on the fact that we have a sensory effect upon one another," he wrote (cited in Degen 2.7).

In "The Metropolis and Mental Life" ([1903] 1976) Simmel attributed the "blasé outlook" of the modern city dweller to the need to develop a "protective organ" in the form of intellectual distance so as not to be overly affected by the constant barrage of sensations that is characteristic of life in the metropolis. In "Sociology of the Senses" ([1921] 1997), he related the confusion and loneliness of the modern urban subject to the "great[er] preponderance of occasions to *see* rather than to *hear* people." Contrary to the country village, where people typically exchange glances and greet each other when out walking, in the city people are forced to spend long periods staring absently and keeping silent while riding on a street car or other public transport.

In "Shock and Distraction" (2.3), Dorothee Brill makes a valuable contribution to the history of sensory studies by bringing out how Simmel's social theory, perceptual theory, and especially his concept of "shock" reflected his experience of his native city, Berlin. Commonly regarded as the paradigmatic twentieth-century metropolis, on account of its excessive crowding, exponential growth, and transformation,⁵ Berlin both formed the crucible of Simmel's thought and gave its stamp to sociology, for it was "reflection on the metropolitan experience that generated and shaped modern sociology in the first place."

In "Shock and Distraction," Brill also introduces us to the work of Simmel's fellow Berliner, the philosopher and cultural critic, Walter Benjamin. Though thirty-four years Simmel's junior, Benjamin grew up under the same intense urban conditions, and this imprinted itself on his social and aesthetic theories.⁶ Like Simmel, Benjamin also grappled with shock, but proposed a different theory of coping—the theory of distraction (the other of contemplation) as a mode of perception, or way of sensing, without becoming fully conscious.

Simmel's insights into the link between the senses and sociality lay fallow for much of the twentieth century or were taken up only partially. For example, Deena Weinstein and Michael Weinstein in "On the Visual Constitution of Society" (1984) investigated "the constitution of intermental relations through vision" as though the sensory foundations of society were solely visual and could be reduced to "intermental relations." Simmel, however, advocated a *relational* approach to the study of the senses and society, one which was as attuned to sound and smell as to sight, and sought the explanation for social change in the changing ratio or balance of the senses.

Simmel's insights were finally recovered and expanded by a number of sociologists working in the area of the sociology of the body in the 1990s. For example, Anthony Synnott explored the "sociological function" of touch and smell as well as sight in *The Body Social: Symbolism, Self and Society* (1993). In *Flesh and Stone* (1994), Richard Sennett proposed that the blasé attitude of the city dweller was prompted by the "tactile sterility" of the modern urban environment. According to Sennett, urban sprawl disperses

the population—thus increasing interpersonal distance—while the various modern “technologies of motion,” such as cars, elevators, and movie theatres, provide “freedom from resistance” by insulating bodies from their surroundings and whisking them from point to point. This “freedom from resistance” increases passivity, diminishes empathy, and undermines meaningful engagement in public life (the domain of alterity) by dulling touch. More recently, Lisa Blackman’s *Immaterial Bodies* (2012) extends the study of embodiment to include various extrasensory phenomena, such as telepathy and hearing voices. Blackman is also concerned with how the mobilization of the senses impacts the genesis and circulation of affect, creating an intersection between the sensory turn and the affective turn in the social sciences.

Pierre Bourdieu opened a different perspective from Simmel on the senses in society in *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste* (1986). There he documented how, in bourgeois society, attending to the senses and acquiring the capacity to make fine discriminations can be a source of cultural capital, rather than distraction. A further departure from Simmel’s take can be seen in a series of post-millennial studies of clubbing, which have revealed the sensation-seeking side of modern life. The club is a zone of sensory and social experimentation, where the rigors of the *habitus* of everyday life are suspended. Transgression is the order of the night, abetted by the ingestion of sense-enhancing stimulants, and this can unleash new forms of intimacy (Jackson 2004; see also Sherry 2.15). It is an interesting question whether this cycles back to Benjamin’s theory of distraction or represents a new departure.

Phillip Vannini, Dennis Waskul, and Simon Gottschalk’s *The Senses in Self, Society and Culture: A Sociology of the Senses* (2012) offered readers the first general overview of the sociology of the senses. In the chapter from this work included in the present volume (2.5), the authors begin by identifying a “cryptosociology of the senses” in the sociological theories of G.H. Mead on “the act,” John Dewey on “experience,” and William James on “the emotions,” as well as in the work of Howard Becker and Irving Goffman. All of these theories come together in the paradigm of symbolic interactionism, which constitutes Vannini et al.’s point of departure for theorizing the social life of the senses—and, in particular their notion of “somatic work,” defined as quotidian “sense-making activity.” The authors hold that “as we sense we also make sense”—that is, we fashion (and refashion) the senses in the never-ending process of sensing the world.

Vannini et al. go on to bring a sensory studies approach to bear on the analysis of two of the defining phenomena of “hypermodernity” (a term they use in preference to “postmodernity”)—namely, hyperconsumption and virtualization. “Intent on fuelling our appetite for consumption,” they write, contemporary communication media and cultural industries are “in the business of producing a material culture—a panoply of objects, services, and fantasies—that more than ever before in the history of civilization depends on catering to the human quest for sensuous pleasures.” The hypermodern regime of consumption unleashes the forces of “intensity, instantaneity, urgency, instant gratification and excess.”

It is quite striking that while sociologists of the senses like Vannini et al. analyze “the new immediacy of consumption” from a critical standpoint, affect theorists take all these forces as given, and even turn them into terms of art. Affect theory would thus appear to elide mediation. This has potentially serious consequences. One is reminded of Zygmunt Bauman’s caution, writing at the height of postmodernism, that what the academy needs is a “sociology of postmodernism” rather than a “postmodern sociology” (Bauman 1988). This observation remains relevant today.⁷