

SENSES AND SENSATION:
CRITICAL AND PRIMARY SOURCES

Volume 4

ART AND DESIGN

Edited by David Howes

B L O O M S B U R Y

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Bloomsbury Academic
An imprint of Bloomsbury Publishing Plc

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LONDON • OXFORD • NEW YORK • NEW DELHI • SYDNEY



Bloomsbury Academic

An imprint of Bloomsbury Publishing Plc

50 Bedford Square
London
WC1B 3DP
UK

1385 Broadway
New York
NY 10018
USA

www.bloomsbury.com

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First published 2018

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British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN: HB: 978-1-4742-7404-3
Pack: 978-1-4742-7405-0

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

A catalog record for this book is available from the Library of Congress.

Series: Critical and Primary Sources

Typeset by Integra Software Services Pvt. Ltd.
Printed and bound in Great Britain

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Introduction: Sensory Art and Design

DAVID HOWES

The first two volumes in this compendium explored the contributions of the social science disciplines of geography and anthropology, and history and sociology, to our comprehension of human sense experience. We saw how each of these disciplines underwent a “sensory turn” toward the end of the last century as more and more scholars came to focus on the senses as both object of study and means of inquiry. The interdisciplinary field now known as sensory studies is founded on the confluence of these disciplines. The convergence had the effect of prying the study of sense perception loose from the monopoly formerly enjoyed by the natural science disciplines of biology and psychology (including neuropsychology), and reframing our understanding of how the senses function in the expanded field of the social and technological. Perception is not just “down to our DNA” (Hollingham 2004), it is also up to our culture, and, indeed, “the sensorium is a fascinating focus for cultural studies” (Ong 1991).

In what follows, we begin by exploring an alternative genealogy of sensory studies. In addition to and intersecting with the disciplinary trajectory we have so far been tracing, sensory studies can be conceptualized along sensory lines as divisible into: visual culture, auditory culture (or sound studies), smell culture, taste culture, and the culture of touch. There is much to commend the latter framework, as we shall see, though it also raises certain questions.

AN ALTERNATIVE GENEALOGY OF SENSORY STUDIES

The “fascination” (Ong) which the study of the sensorium holds for cultural studies is exemplified by the rich profusion of readers, handbooks, and introductory texts that started appearing in the late 1990s and continues unabated. Thus, the publication of *Visual Culture: The Reader* (Evans and Hall 1999) started a trend that generated *Visual Sense: A Cultural Reader* (Edwards and Bhaumik 2008), *The Handbook of Visual Culture* (Heywood and Sandywell 2012) and *Global Visual Cultures: An Anthology* (Kocur 2011), among other works. The publication of *The Auditory Culture Reader* (Bull and Back [2003] 2016) opened the way for *The Oxford Handbook of Sound Studies* (Pinch and Bijsterveld 2012), *The Sound Studies Reader* (Sterne 2012), and *the Routledge Companion to Sound Art* (Truax et al. 2017).

Tracing the genealogy of the sense-specific subfields of sensory studies brings out new foundational works, or “overtures.” For example, the origin of visual culture studies is

usually traced either to John Berger's *Ways of Seeing* (1972), or to Michael Baxandall's *Painting and Experience in 15th Century Italy* (1972) and Svetlana Alpers' *The Art of Describing: Dutch Art in the Seventeenth Century* (1983) (see M. Smith 2007; Sturken and Cartwright 2009). From its cradle in art history, visual culture quickly spread to encompass film, television, fashion, advertising, and architecture. The invention of visual culture was famously responsible for toppling the hierarchical division between "high" and "low"—or "popular"—culture. What is not so often recognized is how it contributed to reproducing and further entrenching the hierarchical division of the senses. The rapid uptake and exponential growth of visual culture can be explained in part by reference to vision being first among the senses in the West. If an attack on the "hegemony of the text" or the "prisonhouse of language" was to come, it was (culturally) inevitable that it would come from the angle of vision. Paradoxically, however, the vaunted status of vision also smuggled in a certain blindness with respect to the multisensory character of most human experience: vision, being the paragon sense, could stand for all the senses, with the result that the "other" senses were easily ignored or assimilated to a visual model. Indeed, the proliferation of visual culture studies has been challenged on this ground by some. For example, there are those who question the ranging of architecture with visual culture because of how this deflects attention from the acoustic, tactile, thermal and other sensory qualities of buildings (Palasmaa 1996; Blesser and Salter 2009; Ong 2012).

The subfield of sound studies can be seen as having its origin in the notion of the "soundscape," which was coined by the renowned Canadian composer and "acoustic ecologist" R. Murray Schafer in the early 1970s (Schafer 1977). The idea of an "auditory turn" was theorized by art historian Douglas Kahn in 2002 (Kahn 2002). In an essay entitled "How sound is sound history?" Renaissance literary scholar Bruce R. Smith reflected on the principles that hold the field of sound studies (or auditory culture) together:

At least three principles in particular seem to unite [sound studies practitioners] across their disciplinary differences: (1) They agree that sound has been neglected as an object of study; (2) they believe that sound offers a fundamentally different knowledge of the world than vision; and (3) they recognize that most academic disciplines remain vision-based, not only in the materials they study, but in the theoretical models they deploy to interpret them (B.R. Smith 2004: 390–391)

All three of Smith's points are valid. At the same time, his account occludes the deeper historical reasons for the momentum behind the auditory turn. Hearing is "the second sense" (after sight) in the conventional Western hierarchy of the senses (Burnett et al. 1991). Thus, if an attack on the "hegemony of vision" was to come, it was (culturally) inevitable that it would come from the angle of sound and hearing. Put another way, were it not for the pictorial turn, there might have been no auditory turn: for just as the pictorial turn questioned the privileging of language (and the model of language or text)¹ by exposing the increasing salience of visual cognition and communication in contemporary culture, so the auditory turn arose as a corrective to the overemphasis on the visual entrained by the pictorial turn—that is, it was motivated in no small part by a "critique" or "rejection of visualism." Thus, we can discern a constant jostling among the faculties in the development of sensory studies, as each faculty hove into view only to become a target for critique from the standpoint of the next faculty in the hierarchy.

There is no Archimedean point, independent of the cultural formation of the senses, from which to assess the senses or the contribution of senses to the advancement of knowledge (or aesthetics),² though I would equally argue that, by cultivating the capacity to be "of two sensoria," one's own and other cultures', one can moderate the effects

of the sensory biases embedded in mainstream Western thought and culture. To do so, however, requires a high degree of discipline and reflexivity: “being of two sensoria” does not come easily (see Howes 2003: chs. 1, 2).

Smell was first constituted as an object of multidisciplinary investigation in *Aroma: The Cultural History of Smell* (Classen et al. 1994). *Aroma devoted equal space to the history, anthropology and sociology of olfaction. It opened the way for The Smell Culture Reader* (Drobnick 2006) and the many fine sociohistorical studies of the power of smell that have followed, such as Kelvin Low’s *Scent and Scent-sibilities* (2009), Holly Dugan’s *The Ephemeral History of Perfume* (2011), and James McHugh’s *Sandalwood and Carrion* (2012).

It is more difficult to pinpoint an ur-text for the domain of taste culture studies, although Pierre Bourdieu’s *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste* ([1979] 1984) and the chapters on food in Mary Douglas’ *In the Active Voice* (1982) would certainly figure prominently in any such account (see Sutton 2010). The philosopher Carolyn Korsmeyer consolidated the field of taste culture studies by editing *The Taste Culture Reader* ([2005] 2016) in which she expanded her earlier work on taste and philosophy (Korsmeyer 1999) into a sociology, anthropology and history of gustation. The companion interdisciplinary field of food studies, which was strangely oblivious to considerations of taste in its first two decades (as discussed by Yannis Hamilakis [2014]), has also become significantly more flavorful in recent years (e.g., Begin 2016; Rhys-Taylor 2017).

The field of tactile culture studies was nurtured by Ashley Montagu’s *Touching: The Human Significance of the Skin* ([1971] 1986), even with all that work’s shortcomings from a historical and cross-cultural perspective. These lacuna, which stemmed from Montagu’s overemphasis on physiology, were corrected in Claudia Benthien’s *Skin: On the Cultural Border between Self and the World* (2002) and Constance Classen’s *The Book of Touch* (2005), with its resolutely cultural approach to the study of haptic experience. The field of “skin studies” (which overlaps to some extent with the culture of touch) has also blossomed in the ensuing period (see Lafrance 2012 for an overview).

This alternative genealogy of sensory studies is provisional. It will require further elaboration. Even in this provisional form, however, it raises interesting questions. Why the unevenness to the development of these subfields—that is, why are some senses (e.g., sight, hearing) better represented than others (e.g., smell, touch)? What is the role of institutions in maintaining and/or changing the current “distribution of the sensible” (Rancière 2004)? How else might the sensorium be divided for purposes of cultural analysis? What of the senses beyond the customary five, for example (Howes 2009)? And, perhaps most pressing, while it remains customary to speak of “turns” when describing these openings—as in “the pictorial turn” (Mitchell 1992; Curtis 2010), “the auditory turn” (Kahn 2002), and so forth—might it not be time to think of this quickening of the senses that has become so widespread as more in the nature of a revolution (Howes 2006)?

While it is only possible to recognize visual culture, taste culture, sound studies, and so forth as flowing into sensory studies in retrospect (since the term “sensory studies” did not exist, or was not used in this way, prior to 2006 [see Bull et al. 2006]), it is nevertheless apparent that these previously independent streams now form a vast, fast-flowing river. Indeed, it could be said that the sensory turn—or, better, revolution—now rivals the aforementioned linguistic and pictorial turns in terms of its impact on scholarship in the humanities and social sciences.

In so far as a major impetus behind the sensorial revolution was to liberate the study of sense perception from the psychology laboratory and insert it (back) into society by insisting on the historicity and sociality of sensation, it has succeeded. However, there

remain many important questions to be addressed. One of these concerns theorizing the interactivity of the senses. This problem can be illustrated by considering an observation Bruce R. Smith makes in passing in *The Acoustic World of Early Modern England* (1999) to the effect that, in the early modern period, it was thought that a person's handwriting carried the sound of the writer's voice. This observation illustrates how the interface of the senses (here, sight and hearing) deserves no less attention than their specificity as modalities of perception. To cite another example, many ancient thinkers (following Aristotle) viewed taste as "a form of touch" whereas in the modern period taste is commonly seen as most closely connected to smell (i.e., a chemical sense). To add a cross-cultural twist: among the Dogon of Mali, sound and odor are understood to have a common origin in vibration, and the "vibration theory" of olfaction also has a few proponents in contemporary Western culture (e.g., Burr 2002; Turin 2006), but it is sound and touch, the palpable and the audible, that are seen as having the greatest overlap, in terms of vibration (Trower 2012; Eidsheim 2015; Connor 3.4). Finally, there is the example of synesthesia, which takes many different forms, and also scrambles conventional notions of the senses as discrete channels (Tuan 1.24; Casini 3.22; Howes and Classen 3.22). Thus, charting the relations among the senses, and how these shift over time, should occupy us no less than seeking to fathom the depths of each of the senses in any given historical period or culture.

All of these variations to the individuation and/or integration of the senses underscore the importance of adopting a *relational* approach to the study of the divisions of the sensorium and attending to the role of culture in *shaping* how the senses are constructed and lived. This was, in fact, the starting point of *Empire of the Senses: The Sensual Culture Reader* (Howes 2005a), the inaugural volume of the *Sensory Formations* series, and it is also the premise undergirding this volume, which explores the senses in art and design. As regards art, this volume offers a hidden history of the senses in art which belies the ideology of medium specificity—that is, of painting as "for eyesight alone," of music as for the ears, of dance as fundamentally kinesthetic—by bringing out the *interplay* of the senses in the constitution of these (and other) fields of artistic endeavor, and how this widespread (but under-recognized and under-theorized) intersensoriality chimes with the original (mid-eighteenth-century) definition of the term "aesthetic." As regards design, this volume explores the marriage between art and commerce that gave rise to the design professions in the 1920s and the progressive aestheticization of everyday life that has ensued. According to Virginia Postrel, in *The Substance of Style*, we live in "a new age of aesthetics"—an age in which "design is everywhere, and everywhere is now designed" (2003: 24). Indeed, it is impossible to miss the burgeoning emphasis on the "sense appeal" of commodities and retail establishments. Attractive design is no longer a luxury: "We, [as] customers, demand it," Postrel claims (2003: 5). To comprehend how aestheticization has taken command of the everyday, we need to step back and consider the origins of the aesthetic itself.

PART I: FOUNDATIONS

Overtures

In "Aesthetics and Anaesthetics," intellectual historian Susan Buck-Morss provides a helpful introduction to the prehistory of "aesthetics" as a category.

Aisthitikos is the ancient Greek word for that which is “perceptive by feeling.” *Aisthisis* is the sensory experience of perception. The original field of aesthetics is ... reality—corporeal, material nature. ... It is a form of cognition, achieved through taste, touch, hearing, seeing, smell—the whole corporeal sensorium. The terminae of all of these—nose, eyes, ears, mouth, some of the most sensitive areas of the skin—are located at the surface of the body, the mediating boundary between inner and outer. This physical-cognitive apparatus ... is “out front” of the mind, encountering the world pre-linguistically, hence prior not only to logic but to meaning as well.

However, Buck-Morss continues, the term “aesthetic” has undergone a reversal of meaning in the modern era: now it is “applied first and foremost to art—to cultural forms rather than sensible experience, to the imaginary rather than the empirical, to the illusory rather than the real” (Buck-Morss 1992: 7).

The origin of this mutation in meaning can be traced to the work of the eighteenth-century German philosopher Alexander von Baumgarten. He took over the term *aisthesis* from the Greek and applied it to his new “science of sense cognition” which was to occupy an intermediary rung, as a “science of the lower cognitive power” (sense perception) in contradistinction to “the higher cognitive power” (reason). By limiting aesthetics to the perception of the “unity-in-multiplicity of sensible qualities” Baumgarten hoped to insulate it from being reduced to “arid” intellectual knowledge. He believed that the intellect was “the poorer” for the fact that it traffics exclusively in “distinct ideas,” as opposed to the “confused and indistinct ideas” generated by the senses (to use the language of his day). For Baumgarten, therefore, the disposition to sense acutely meant attending to the nature of sensory experience in itself, rather than trying to rationalize perception (Gregor 1983: 364–365), and he departed from the canonical discussions of beauty in Western philosophy by proposing that aesthetics had foremost to do with the perfection of perception and only secondarily with the perception of perfection, or beauty.

Baumgarten’s new “science” was quickly appropriated and just as quickly subverted by his contemporaries. They replaced his emphasis on the sensuous disposition of the artist with a taxonomy of “the five arts” (architecture, sculpture, painting, music and poetry). The scope and criteria of the various arts were delimited in terms of the dualism of vision (epitomized by painting) and hearing (epitomized by either music or poetry). The “dark” or “lower” senses of smell, taste and touch were deemed too base to hold any significance for the fine arts. Theater and dance were also excluded on account of their hybrid character, since they played to vision and hearing or movement at once (see Rée 2000).

Baumgarten’s worst fears concerning the rationalization of aesthetic perception were realized in Immanuel Kant’s *Critique of Judgment* (1790). Kant attempted to transcend the dualism of vision and hearing and replace it with a fundamental division between the “arts of space” (e.g., painting) and the “arts of time” (e.g., music), accessible to “outer intuition” and “inner intuition” respectively (Rée 2000: 58–60). It could be said that Kant rarefied aesthetics by divorcing it from perception and substituting intuition. After Kant, aesthetic judgment would be properly neutral, passionless and disinterested (see Eagleton 1990; Turner 1994). This definition of aesthetics may have resulted in a drastic curtailment of human sensuousness (see Vercelloni 2016) but at least it guaranteed the autonomy of the enclave now known as “art.”

In her contribution to this volume (4.1), Fiona Candlin explores the fallout of the Kantian revolution. She presents a sensory analysis of the works of Alois Riegel,

Heinrich Wölfflin, and Erwin Panofsky, who are commonly regarded, in retrospect, as the founders of the discipline of art history. All three posit trajectories of increasing “perceptual sophistication” as unfolding since antiquity (Riegel takes Egyptian art as his starting point), in which tactile perception is the precursor to optical perception and the progression of artistic styles culminates in the modern use of linear perspective and naturalistic representation. On this account, “accomplished art” (which is to say European art, of course) depends on the banishment of the physical sense of touch and the achievement of a disembodied, abstracted system of visual representation. Even in the doctrine of “tactile values” elaborated by Bernard Berenson, it is the illusion of touch (i.e., the way a painting appeals to the “tactile imagination),” not the materiality of touch, that is extolled. Candlin goes on to show how the “sensory demarcation” of art history persists in visual culture studies, despite certain protestations to the contrary (e.g., Mitchell 2002). The history of art thus depends on the separation of vision from touch and the delegitimation of any sort of haptic engagement with art objects.³

Sociologist Mike Featherstone reflects on the derivation of the phrase “the aestheticization of everyday life” in *Consumer Culture and Postmodernism*. “If we examine definitions of postmodernism,” he writes, “we find an emphasis upon the effacement of the boundary between art and everyday life, the collapse of the distinction between high art and mass/popular culture, a general stylistic promiscuity and mixing of codes” (1991: 65). Featherstone proceeds to disclose “the *genealogy of postmodernité*” (or what Postrel calls “the aesthetic age”) and bring out its linkages with modernity. In one of its senses, “the aestheticization of everyday life can refer to the project of turning life into a work of art” (1991: 66). Featherstone cites the example of the artistic countercultures that sprang up in mid- to late-nineteenth-century European urban centers, such as Paris and Berlin—the preserve of Baudelaire and company. In its most salient sense for us now, however, “the aestheticization of everyday life refers to the rapid flow of signs and images which saturates the fabric of everyday life in contemporary society” (1991: 67). As Postrel suggests, “Aesthetics has become too important to be left in the hands of the aesthetes” (2003: 4), whence the growth of the so-called culture industries, “with painting moving into advertising, architecture into technical engineering, [and] handicrafts and sculpture into the industrial arts, to produce a mass culture” (Featherstone 1991: 73). The burgeoning importance and salience of “design” spells both an extension of art into the everyday, and the end of art’s autonomy, or perhaps even “the end of art” and “the end of reality” at once (following Baudrillard 1983), as images and reproductions proliferate endlessly, and “culture” is everywhere.

In “All-Consuming Images: The Marriage between Art and Commerce” (4.2), communications and sociology professor Stuart Ewen documents how, in the early decades of the twentieth century (that is, rather earlier than Featherstone would allow), giant industrial corporations, such as AEG, began to develop multi-purpose styling divisions. An industrial aesthetic was born, with a view to bringing coherence to the perceived “disorder” of the marketplace and consolidating corporate identities by creating a certain corporate look. This development tipped the scales of capitalism, as consumption came to drive production and attractiveness came to override considerations of functionality or efficiency in the manufacture and marketing of products. Advertising companies sprang up and brought a new level of artistry to everyday life. A premium was attached to “eye-appeal,” but the “creatives” of the day also turned their attention on the “lower” senses, most notably touch, which were seen as having been repressed by civilization, and sought to capitalize on their appeal as well. (This was the beginning of the “checklist” approach

to sensory marketing, though it would not come to full fruition until the turn of the twenty-first century [Howes 2005b].) If “art for art’s sake” was the banner cry of the artists, “art for control’s sake” was the goal of the thoroughly modern designers and advertisers, or “consumer engineers.”

Disciplines

Standard histories of art and music since the beginning of the twentieth century are keyed to the succession of styles: from Cubism to Abstract Expressionism and Pop Art, for example, or from the atonal compositions of Schoenberg and Webern to the polyrhythms of jazz and the experimental work of John Cage. They do not deign to treat non-Western art, nor the industrial arts discussed above. In his overview of the artistic trends of the twentieth century (4.3), sociologist Ian Heywood disturbs these unilinear, monosensory narratives by bringing out the extent to which multisensory experimentation also figured in this history, animating the artistic work of such avant-garde movements as Dadaism and Fluxus, and the design work and education program of the Bauhaus School. Heywood also surveys the contributions of critical philosophers, such as Theodor Adorno on the “commodification of listening,” Martin Jay on “ocularcentrism,” and Gilles Deleuze on the “logic of sense.” In doing so, he resituates the recent history of art, music and design within the larger context of transformations in the meaning and uses of the senses over the course of the twentieth century.

In “Disciplining the Senses” (4.4), Simon Shaw-Miller begins by reflecting on the history (and politics) of institutional faculty and disciplinary division that gave rise to art and music as distinct fields of knowledge and endeavor, and the division between the faculties of seeing and hearing that are supposed to hold art and music apart. His overarching argument is that these divisions are “historically contingent,” and that much can be learned from focusing on the “interconnections” and referrals that the disciplining of the arts and senses both occluded and stimulated. Shaw-Miller’s starting point is the moment around 1800 when music was reconstituted as “absolute.” Shorn of words and no longer bound to depicting scenes, instrumental music, as exemplified by Beethoven’s symphonies, became “pure” and “dematerialized” (i.e., unearthly, otherworldly) and, in short order *by that same token*, “the condition to which all arts [including painting] aspire,” in the nineteenth-century English essayist and art critic Walter Pater’s famous phrase (see Classen 4.20). On Shaw-Miller’s account, absolute music and synesthesia (the unison of the arts and senses) are different sides of the same coin and must be studied conjointly. He illustrates his thesis through a close reading of the Prussian Romantic writer E.T.A. Hoffmann’s *Kreisleriana* papers (1810–1813). In *Kreisleriana*, Hoffman reviewed the work of a variety of Romantic composers (Haydn, Mozart) but gave special treatment to Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony. In his review of the Fifth, Hoffmann alternates between formal analysis of the harmonic, melodic and rhythmic structure of the symphony, on the one hand, and intensely imagistic and polysensory or “synesthetic” language on the other. Shaw-Miller observes that Hoffmann celebrated Beethoven’s Fifth both for its “high level of rational control,” and for it being:

the true music of the night, that romantically sublime site where it is hard to see, but easy to imagine. This condition corresponds to that of absolute music itself, which, in attempting to sever its connections to other arts and senses, to close its eyes to all but sound, provided instead a rich site for all types of imagery and the liberation of the inner eye.