



# Empire of the Senses

The Sensual Culture Reader

*Edited by*

DAVID HOWES

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The icon that appears at the start of each Part and Chapter derives from the frontispiece of a book about the senses as 'living inlets of learning', written by George Wilson and entitled *The Five Gateways of Knowledge* (second edition) published by Macmillan and Co. in 1857. The sketch is by the artist Noel Paton.

David Howes



# Introduction

## Empires of the Senses

Language games. Culture as discourse. World as text. Empire of signs. What has been called 'the linguistic turn' – which gained prominence in the 1960s – has dominated much of late twentieth century thought in the humanities and social sciences. According to this approach, all human thought and endeavor can be understood as structured by, and analogous to, language, so one may best look to linguistics for models of philosophical and social interpretation.

In the hyperliterate world of academia it is no surprise that writing and reading (or 'discourse') would have a particular appeal as paradigms for understanding social systems. Whereas formerly scholars might have felt that a shift from library to 'open-air' research required a corresponding shift in their investigative approach, the assurance from semioticians such as Barthes (1982) and Ricoeur (1970) that the world (and action in the world) was itself a 'text' has enabled legions of scholars to comfortably go right on 'reading' even when the book was replaced by a meal, a dance, or a whole way of life.

### The Sensual Revolution

It has taken an ideological revolution to turn the tables and recover a full-bodied understanding of culture and experience. It has taken a sensual revolution. Once the encompassing grip of 'the science of signs' (modeled on linguistics) is broken, we are brought – perhaps with a gasp of surprise or a recoil of disgust – into the realm of the body and the senses. *Il y a du hors texte!* 'The limits of my language are *not* the limits of my world.'

From a sensory standpoint, the rhetorics of logocentricity do seem unbearably artificial and rigid. Philosopher Michel Serres notes that he wrote his book *Les cinq sens* (discussed in this volume by Steven Connor) in reaction to the sensorial poverty of contemporary theory.<sup>1</sup> Serres describes reading

the following line in Merleau-Ponty's classic *Phenomenology of Perception*: 'At the outset of the study of perception, we find in language the notion of sensation ...' Serres' immediate response – not a carefully worded critique, but a laugh! – a spontaneous, corporeal eruption into and disruption of the linguistic realm. Laughing breaks the spell of language and discursive reason. Similarly, Serres states 'My book *Les cinq sens* cries out at the empire of signs.' It apparently takes a visceral outburst to topple the tower of babble.

Serres derides the urban-dwelling scholars who sit huddled over their desks, basing their notions of perception on the bit of the world they glimpse through the window – and no doubt thereby overemphasizing the role of vision in their intercourse with the world. In *Les cinq sens* he describes the language-bound body as a desensitized robot, moving stiffly, unable to taste or smell, preferring to dine on a printed menu than eat an actual meal. In contrast to this disturbing scenario we have Serres' fantasy of a non-verbal paradise 'in which the body was free and could run and enjoy sensations at leisure.'

In another essay in this collection, Victor Carl Friesen describes the sensory life of the nineteenth century American naturalist Henry David Thoreau. Thoreau would seem to be a man after Serres' own heart: rejecting the alienation and artifice of urban life, seeking a wilderness paradise 'in which the body was free and could run and enjoy sensations at leisure.' Like Serres, Thoreau wished to go beyond the 'alluvion' of language and 'drench' himself in the sensuous world (Friesen 1984: 1). Indeed, Thoreau posits a fundamental opposition between writing – and perhaps speaking – and sensing: a 'sensuous man' finds it difficult to write about what interests him 'because to write is not what interests [him]' (Friesen 1984: 65). In joyful pursuit of sensorial immediacy Thoreau wades in streams, perfumes himself with wild herbs and drinks the sap of trees.

Another hypothetical enactment of Serres' fantasy of sensual emancipation is carried out in 'Under the Jaguar Sun,' a story by Italo Calvino also presented in this volume. In *Les cinq sens* Serres opposes two images of the mouth: the speaking mouth, which is given primacy by the elevation of language, and the subordinate, tasting mouth. In Calvino's tale we are presented with a self-centered European couple whose speaking mouths have been shut by boredom and indifference, and who try to find a form of communication – or at least stimulation – through a 'gustatory exploration' of modern Mexico. If for Thoreau it is the wildness of nature that enables him to get in touch with his senses, for Calvino's couple it is the 'savagery' of a 'primitive' culture, namely pre-Columbian Mexico. First the savory Mexican cuisine draws the couple together in a ritual of shared flavor, and then revelations of pre-Columbian cannibalism stir them to imagine they are consuming each other as they eat. Too insipid to enjoy each other without this spice of exoticism, the couple thus attempt to fill the 'consuming void' of lovelessness they feel at the beginning of the story in a parody of mutual masturbation.<sup>2</sup>

'Under the Jaguar Sun' indicates how, from another perspective, Serres' sensual paradise might be what Marshall McLuhan (this volume) termed a sensorial 'heart of darkness' – a 'hypnotic' primitive state of simultaneous relations and sensory interanimation. The ultimate horror at the 'heart of darkness' is cannibalism, in which the human being is apparently differentiated from the natural world, and the feast of the senses includes the consumption of the human body itself. While Thoreau, in his gustatory communion with nature, believes that 'as the human race improves ... it will stop eating animals as surely as savage tribes in their improvement leave off cannibalism,' in Calvino's tale the aestheticized consumption of otherness leads to cannibalism.

These various visions of sensory immediacy are powerful. They are also markedly Western. It has been customary to associate the senses with nature, whether 'innocent' or 'savage.' The senses in this case symbolize the antithesis of culture and thereby provide Westerners weary of the sophistry of civilization with what seems like a welcome retreat into untutored sensation. The human sensorium, however, never exists in a natural state. Humans are social beings, and just as human nature itself is a product of culture, so is the human sensorium. In 'McLuhan in the Rainforest,' Constance Classen (this volume) demonstrates that even among supposedly primitive peoples, living in intimate contact with nature, sensory experience is permeated with social values. Tastes and sounds and touches are imbued with meaning and carefully hierarchized and regulated so as to express and enforce the social and cosmic order. This system of sensory values is never entirely articulated through language, but it is practised and experienced (and sometimes challenged), by humans as culture bearers. The sensory order, in fact, is not just something one sees or hears about; it is something one *lives*. Classen writes of the Tzotzil of Mexico, descendants of the Maya, who order their perception of society and cosmos through heat symbolism:

In their daily lives, the Tzotzil constantly experience the thermal order of the universe: through the encompassing heat of the sun, through the change of temperature from day to night, summer to winter, highlands to lowlands, through the heat they expend in working, through the offering and consumption of 'heat' in ritual, through their positions around the household hearth, through the warmth of their very blood.

Even when the Tzotzil are speechless, cosmic meaning courses through their veins.

While McLuhan may have been misinformed about the nature of so-called primitive societies, however, his great insight into the senses still holds true: perception is not just a matter of biology, psychology or personal history but of cultural formation. Sensory channels may not be modeled after linguistic forms of communication – a perfume is not the same as a sentence – but they

are still heavy with social significance. When Serres claims that the revolt against the domination of language will have to come from the senses, he is right. But it will not be a revolt which takes us outside the symbol systems of culture. From the empire of signs we enter the empire of the senses – and there are as many such empires as there are cultures.

The sensual revolution in the humanities and social sciences, hence, is not only a matter of playing up the body and the senses through evocative accounts of corporeal life, although these can be valuable, but of analysing the social ideologies conveyed through sensory values and practices and the process by which 'history [is] turned into nature' (Bourdieu cited in Geurts 2002: 195). The present book, with contributions from historians, anthropologists, geographers and literary scholars, among others, indicates the range of issues that an approach that involves 'sensing cultures' (in place of 'reading' them) may fruitfully address. The 'senses', in fact, are not just one more potential field of study, alongside, say, gender, colonialism or material culture. The senses are the media through which we experience and make sense of gender, colonialism and material culture. And, in McLuhan's words, the medium is the message.

Now it is evident that, in writing about the senses, the contributors to this book are not escaping the confines of language. It would seem to be the fate of the senses that their astonishing power to reveal and engage should forever be judged and 'sentenced' in the court of language. When its powers of organization and interpretation are not inflated, however, language can be used creatively, critically, and sensitively, as the essays in this collection demonstrate. A certain paradox remains, a certain tugging of unstated sensibilities, a certain sense of alienation from lived experience. Steven Connor notes of Michel Serres that his 'own language denies in its use what his language maintains, namely the emptiness, abstraction and rigor mortis of language.' At the same time, it cannot help but affirm it. The limitations of language are unavoidable so long as language is the medium of communication. What it is possible to avoid, however, is the expansion of language into a structural model that dictates all cultural and personal experience and expression.

In addition to overturning linguistic paradigms of culture, one of the aims of the sensual revolution is to recover perception from the laboratory. Science and psychology typically understand perception to be private, internal, ahistorical and apolitical. Ignoring the role of culture makes it possible to universalize from experiments conducted on a limited sample of (usually) Western subjects. In 'Art as a Cultural System' Clifford Geertz (1983) speaks of meaning as socially constructed rather than springing 'from some groto in the head'. The same is true of sensation. Just as meanings are shared, so are sensory experiences. This is why it is not enough to look at the senses as 'energy transducers', 'information gatherers' or 'perceptual systems' (see Geary 2002; Gibson 1966, 1979; Goldstein 2002); they must

also be understood as cultural systems. The work undertaken by the various contributors to this volume underscores the fact that perception is a shared social phenomenon – and as a social phenomenon it has a history and a politics that can only be comprehended within its cultural setting. It is true that significant individual variations may exist within society, and several of the essays in this volume examine such cases. However, such individual ways of sensing are always elaborated within the context of communal sensory orders.

Just as scientists usually fail to consider cultural factors in their study of perception, they usually fail to recognize that science itself is a product of culture. Scientific paradigms, in fact, are themselves heavily influenced by perceptual paradigms, as various contributions to this book attest. In 'The Witch's Senses', Constance Classen describes some of the sensory and social machinations that enabled the rise of an eye-minded, rational world view. In 'The Death of the Sensuous Chemist', Lissa Roberts documents how new scientific technologies and ideologies displaced the multisensory practices and mentality of eighteenth century chemistry. Today we are so accustomed to scientific visualism that we scarcely ever feel the desire for any other perceptual paradigms of the world. For example, we look at visual depictions of DNA without ever asking: What might it feel like? What might it taste like? How differently might DNA be understood through other sensory models? In fact, as an acid with a sugary 'backbone', DNA seems well suited to certain flavor-based premodern cosmologies. For example, in the sixteenth century Jacob Boehme held that the 'flavour-forces' of sourness, sweetness and bitterness worked together to create life (Classen 1998: 21). Some scientists are now making the claim that perception is 'all in our DNA' – that is, that the way we perceive is genetically programmed (Hollingham 2004). It would be as true to say that our notions of DNA are all in our perception. Biology provides the clay, but culture is the potter.

Cultural studies of the senses should therefore be cautious in their use of scientific data. Science cannot provide a touchstone of truth or a higher authority for cultural analyses. This is not to say there is no 'truth' to science, but rather that it is a culturally bounded truth.<sup>3</sup> It would seem strange if an anthropologist studying the sensory symbolism of an African people were to use an interpretive model drawn from Asian medicine. Why then should it be fitting to use the findings of Western medicine in a similar case? In her discussion of neurobiologist Antonio Damasio's corporeal theory of consciousness, Kathryn Geurts points out that African peoples have their own theories about the embodied nature of consciousness. There are, in fact, many different theories regarding the nature of consciousness and the senses across cultures. In 'McLuhan in the Rainforest' Classen describes how the Amazonian Desana conceive of the brain as a beehive filled with honey of different colors, flavors, textures, and moral implications. The Peruvian *Cashinahua* hold that:

a wise man, *huni unaya*, has knowledge throughout his whole body. 'Hawen yula dasibi unata, his whole body knows,' they say. When I asked them where specifically a wise man had knowledge, they listed his skin, his hands, his ears, his genitals, his liver, and his eyes. 'Does his brain have knowledge?' I asked. 'Hunaki (it doesn't),' they responded. (Kensinger 1995: 280)

Cashinahua epistemology is grounded in an elaborate theory of the modularity of the body. There is no mind/body dichotomy for them, just skin knowledge, ear knowledge, eye knowledge and so forth.

The chief contemporary Western proponent of a theory of 'multiple intelligences' is the psychologist Howard Gardner. Limited by the sensory suppositions of his own culture, however, Gardner excludes taste and smell from his taxonomy of intelligences: 'when it comes to keen gustatory or olfactory senses, these abilities have little special value across cultures' (Gardner 1983: 61). This is non-sense. For many societies outside the West tasting and smelling *are ways of knowing* (see, for example, Stoller 1989; Pinard 1991; Schechner 2001). We also find indications of this in the premodern West, for example, in the etymology of words such as 'sapient,' which means both flavorful and knowledgeable, and the medieval 'nosewise' (Howes 2002). Interesting parallels may be drawn between scientific theories and cultural concepts and practices, but the former should generally not be employed as a basis for interpreting or 'validating' the latter. In fact, as regards the study of cultural phenomena, extraneous theories of all kinds are probably most useful insofar as they open us up to new ways of understanding. They are least helpful when they are taken as rigid frameworks into which all new material must be made to fit. The most elucidating cultural studies of the senses are those that bring out indigenous theories of perception.

Despite the increasing breadth and depth of the work being done on the senses in the humanities and social sciences, the cultural and historical study of the senses – or of 'sensual culture' as used here – is still suspect in the eyes of many scholars. Such scholars fear that an emphasis on sensation entails a loss of critical awareness and precipitates a slide into a morass of emotion and desire. (Indeed, accustomed as we are to associate sensuality with sexuality, for many the expression 'sensual revolution' may automatically evoke the notion of a 'sexual revolution,' rather than the encompassing interaction with the social and material world contemplated here.)<sup>4</sup> This is hardly a recent concern, but rather a contemporary expression of one of the crucial dichotomies of Western intellectual history: the divide between body and mind (often framed, as Classen points out, in terms of a conflict between female sensuality and male rationality). The classic opposition between sense and intellect has led to the notion that the expansion of sensory awareness (except in the case of sight, the most 'rational' of the senses) entails a diminution of intellectual activity. For example, in his essay on the 'confusion of the arts' Irving Babbitt stated that 'we can trace

with special clearness in the romanticism of nineteenth century France this tendency toward a hypertrophy of sensation and an atrophy of ideas, toward a constantly expanding sensorium and a diminishing intellect' (cited in Classen 1998: 197). Is it indeed the case that the discipline that succumbs to feeling loses its mind?

Not, I would answer, if one eliminates the imaginary divide between thinking and feeling. If we hold, like the young Marx, that the senses are 'in their practice theoreticians' (Marx 1987: 107); that the mind is necessarily embodied and the senses mindful, then a focus on perceptual life is not a matter of losing our minds but of coming to our senses.

### Intersensoriality

This book is divided into five sections. The first deals with the senses and cognition (or how 'culture tunes the neurons'). The next two sections explore the history and anthropology-geography of the senses. The last sections deal with two facets of sensory experience in modernity (and postmodernity): the everyday and the abnormal. Each of the sections has a brief introduction. While conceptually useful, this fivefold division is somewhat arbitrary as the different essays interrelate across boundaries of discipline, time and place. Certain basic themes, in fact, recur throughout the book. One of the most notable of these is emplacement. While the paradigm of 'embodiment' implies an integration of mind and body, the emergent paradigm of emplacement suggests the sensuous interrelationship of body-mind-environment. This environment is both physical and social, as is well illustrated by the bundle of sensory and social values contained in the feeling of 'home' (see Tuan 1995). The counterpart to emplacement is displacement, the feeling that one is homeless, disconnected from one's physical and social environment. A sense of displacement is often the plight of the socially marginal. It is also often the plight of the philosopher trying to imagine the nature of existence in an immaterial world of abstractions. In his novel *Repetition* Kierkegaard writes: 'Just as one discovers which land one is in by sticking a finger into the soil and smelling it: I stick my finger into life – it smells of nothing. Where am I? "The world." What does that mean?' (Kierkegaard 1972: 67 my translation).

What, indeed, can a disembodied existence or a desensualized world mean to us who only live through our bodies? Are we not better off sticking our fingers in the soil to determine our location by smell? Certainly the Andaman Islanders who consider odor to be the essence of life would think so (Classen this volume). Bringing the issue of emplacement to the fore allows us to reposition ourselves in relationship to the sensuous materiality of the world.

We usually think of emplacement in terms of our visible and tangible surroundings but we relate to and create environments through all of our



senses. In his contribution to this volume, Oliver Sacks notes the particular richness of the non-visual world for the blind. He also offers a thought-provoking consideration of the role of mental visualization among both the blind and the sighted in creating a sense of place. Sacks' work reminds those of us who study sensation in cultural context of the interior dimensions of perception and of the potential for individual variations within society. Marshall McLuhan, in turn, takes us from the private sensory world of the individual to the shared sensory world of society. He claims that the spread of electronic media of communication has united society in a new kind of 'auditory space,' which, in turn, will lead to a new way of thinking about and interacting with the environment. In 'Places Sensed' Steven Feld explores the notion of acoustic space among the forest-dwelling Kaluli of Papua New Guinea, who know 'the time of day, season of year, and placement of physical space through the sensual wraparound of sound in the forest.' Our olfactory relationship to the environment as expressed through art and architecture is the subject of Jim Drobnick's 'Volatile Effects.' My chapter on 'hyperesthesia' examines how our sense of emplacement is increasingly dependent on sensory values produced and promoted by consumer capitalism – the trademark scents, the aesthetics of the mall, the car which 'caters to all of your senses. It also delves into how this commodification of sensation is being subverted in different ways in different places and from different subject positions.

A number of essays in this volume also consider the topic of displacement from the sensory and social environment. 'The Witch's Senses' brings out the perceived emplacement of the witch in the home and the attempts to displace her from the social and cosmic order. Lisa Law's 'Home Cooking' examines how displaced Filipino domestic workers in Hong Kong try to emplace themselves through reproducing the sensory comforts of home in the city core. (In turn, the citizens of Hong Kong feel displaced by this foreign sensory invasion of their city streets – 'as we all know, the streets are ... not designed for people to gather socially and eat together'.) In 'Movement, Stillness,' Bob Desjarlais explores the continuous sensory displacement of the homeless in Boston, from the threatening harshness of the streets to the intrusive regulations and commotion of the shelter, and often back again. For the homeless the concern is one of creating a safe space for oneself in a hostile world. This, in a different way, is also the concern of the sufferers from Environmental Sensitivities (ES) in Nova Scotia who are described by Chris Fletcher in 'Dystoposthesia.' Such sufferers find themselves displaced from their environment when they come to 'the realization that their bodily states are linked to a sensory incompatibility to the places they inhabit.' While Drobnick brings out the alienating effects of odorlessness in the architectural ideal of the 'white cube,' for those for whom the effluvia of the material environment have become poisons, emplacement is only fully possible within what might seem like the most alienating of architectural spaces: a rigorously monitored and purified clinic.

The most prominent theme of the essays collected here is what may be called intersensoriality, that is, the multi-directional interaction of the senses and of sensory ideologies, whether considered in relation to a society, an individual, or a work. Connor brings out how Series describes the senses as interconnected in a knot.<sup>5</sup> This is a useful notion for enucleating both the embodied (unlicated or twisted) nature of everyday perception and the embodied 'compact' of the senses. (Employing the metaphor of the knot takes us away from the model of the text, with its neatly separated, two-dimensional rows of characters, and suggests instead the multi-colored knotted symbol system of the Incas known as the *quipu* – see Classen and Howes [forthcoming].) Customarily Western scholars have tried to extract meanings from the sensory knots of culture. In a classic example, Hegel criticized Boehme's cosmology for being 'confined in the hard knotty oak of the senses... [and therefore] not able to arrive at a free presentation of the Idea' (cited in Classen 1998: 4). To dismiss Boehme's sensory imagery as unnecessary trappings for underlying ideas, however, is to miss the point: for Boehme sensations are themselves ideas, themselves creative forces. Rather than attempting to 'free' ideas from the knot of the senses, we should try to understand how meaning and sense are one (see further Rodaway 1994).

To imagine the senses as knotted does not mean that sensations must be conceptualized as simultaneous. Just as in making a weaving the strands are woven together in sequence, so in perception does one sensation often follow another to form different patterns of experience. One may see an apple before picking it up and eating it. One may smell a rose before seeing it. (In the days when America's forests were still in their primeval splendor, Englishmen sailing to Virginia could smell the fragrant coast many miles before it could be seen.) Dorothea Kondo's analysis of the sensory elements of the Japanese tea ceremony, or 'way of tea' (this volume), demonstrates how the process of sensory sequencing may be manipulated and invested with cultural significance. Kondo notes the emphasis on non-verbal symbolism in Japanese culture. The tea ceremony itself entails a cleansing and heightening of perception conducive to a state of silent contemplation. In the ceremony meanings are conveyed through sensory shifts, from garden to tearoom, from sound to silence, from the odor of incense to the taste of tea. Kondo describes the aesthetic order of the tea ceremony as an 'unfolding, a sequence of movement with tensions, climaxes and directionality.' Similarly Connor emphasizes that, in French, 'sens' means both sense and direction. The senses are 'ways' of perceiving.

As is well illustrated by the sensory sequencing of the tea ceremony, intersensoriality need not mean a synesthetic mingling of sensation. The strands of perception may be connected in many different ways. Sometimes the senses may seem to all be working together in harmony. Other times, sensations will be conflicted or confused. Either state may be employed as a social or aesthetic ideology. In *The Color of Angels*, for example, Classen (1998:

129) contrasts the different ideals of multisensoriality of the nineteenth century Symbolists and the twentieth century Futurists:

While both Symbolists and Futurists advocated an integration of the senses and the arts, in the case of the former this union was to be harmonious, and in the latter it was rife with oppositions and disorder. The difference lay between a transcendent ideal of sensory harmony (whether 'natural,' as in the case of Baudelaire's 'Correspondences' or contrived, as in Huyssmans' *Against Nature*) and the urban experience of sensory confusion.

Where the world-weary Symbolist retired to his den to dream up perfumed symphonies, the rough-and-ready Futurist felt vitalized by the discordant proletarian bustle of the street or factory.<sup>6</sup>

Intersensoriality, hence, does not necessarily imply a state of harmony, whether sensory or social. (In fact, warfare was an aesthetic ideal of early Futurism.) Nor does it necessarily mean a state of equality. The senses are typically ordered in hierarchies. In one society or social context sight will head the list of the senses, in another it may be hearing or touch. Such sensory rankings are always allied with social rankings and employed to order society. The dominant group in society will be linked to esteemed senses and sensations while subordinate groups will be associated with less-valued or denigrated senses. In the West the dominant group – whether it be conceptualized in terms of gender, class or race – has conventionally been associated with the supposedly 'higher' senses of sight and hearing, while subordinate groups (women, workers, non-Westerners) have been associated with the so-called lower senses of smell, taste and touch. Within each sensory field, as well, sensations deemed relatively unpleasant or dangerous will be linked to 'unpleasant,' 'dangerous' social groups. Within the field of smell, for example, the upper classes were customarily considered to be fragrant or inodorous, while the lower classes were held to be malodorous. George Orwell (1937: 159) described this olfactory division of society forcefully when he wrote that 'the real secret of class distinctions in the West' can be summed up in 'four frightful words... *The lower classes smell*'. This perception of malodor had less to do with practices of cleanliness than it had to do with social status: according to the sensory classification of society a low social status translated into a bad smell. Thus Orwell stated that a nasty smell seemed to emanate from 'even "lower class" people whom you knew to be quite clean – servants, for instance' (Orwell 1937: 160). Here we can see how sensations of disgust (as described by William Ian Miller in his contribution to this volume), are not just a matter of personal distaste but of social ordering. The transformation of class distinctions into physiological sensations is a powerful enforcer of social hierarchies (see Classen, Howes and Synnott 1994).

Such social and sensory hierarchies were supported in various ways by the 'scientific' theories of the day. Premodern (and often modern) medicine

held women to be physiologically designed for domestic duties within the home (Classen 1998: 63–85). Natural philosophy considered non-Western peoples to be mired in the 'animalistic' world of the lower senses. In fact, in the nineteenth century the natural historian Lorenz Oken went so far as to postulate a racial hierarchy of the senses: at the bottom was the African 'skin-man' who emphasized tactility, followed by the Australian 'tongue-man,' the Native American 'nose-man,' the Asian 'ear-man,' and, at the top, the European 'eye-man' (Gould 1985: 204–5). Early science similarly found in the supposedly coarse physiology of the working class evidence of a 'coarse' nature (Corbin, this volume). Enlightenment theories of smell, for example, argued that the aristocracy's olfactory refinement derived from a greater cerebral refinement (Stafford 1994: 430). It is difficult to contest a sensory order that is backed up by science or religion. If sensory values are understood to be purely social constructions it is possible to imagine cultural alternatives. If, however, they are intrinsic to the immutable order of the universe, then to question the sensory model is to question the nature of reality.

Now that we have traced some of its distinctive features, the notion of a social ordering of the senses should be complexified. While for the sake of generalization one may speak of a society's 'sensory model' in the singular, in fact, more than one sensory model may be operating and interacting at a time. There may be groups within society with alternative ways of making sense. Such is the case, for example, of the Filipinas in Hong Kong discussed by Law or the homeless people Desjarlais studied in Boston. A new 'world view' may be rising as the former declines. We see this described in 'The Witch's Senses,' 'Death of the Sensuous Chemist' and 'Inside the Five Sense Sensorium.'

In situations of culture contact (whether colonial or postcolonial) indigenous sensory values will continue to circulate at the same time as a foreign sensory order is being impressed upon the local population. In 'Engaging the Spirits of Modernity' Marina Roseman notes how the Temiar of the Malaysian rainforest negotiate a dual sensory world of buzzing insects and ticking watches, river rafts and Land Rovers. From one perspective it seems the old culture is giving way to the new. Whereas the Temiar once used shining leaves as ceremonial decorations, now they may use shredded plastic bags. From another perspective, however, one sees that the new sensory experiences are being employed and understood according to traditional values and practices. In an increasingly denuded rainforest, shredded plastic makes a good substitute for the now hard-to-find traditional leaves, providing the shimmering, swaying motion requisite for Temiar ceremonial.

Any period of great cultural change will be a time of sensory confusion, for social revolutions are always sensory revolutions. This confusion may be experienced as an illness in the body of society or of the individual. It may also stimulate new social and creative projects. We can find both



happening in the nineteenth century, when the increasing dominance of a rational, materialistic worldview, together with the introduction of powerful new technologies of communication and transportation, marginalized traditional religious and agrarian ways of life. Hans-Göran Ekman's essay on the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century writer August Strindberg offers a forceful example of how conflicts in a shared sensory order may be experienced in the bodies of individuals. In Ekman's account Strindberg tries to verify the nature of an uncertain world through the practice of a 'senuous chemistry' (which, as we learned from Roberts' essay, had long been dismissed by the scientific establishment). Rather than arriving at sensory verities, however, Strindberg has an increasing sense of the 'falseness' of material sensations. He feels himself to be 'roughed-up' by the sensations of modernity. Riding in a train jolts his brain. Afterwards his legs seem to travel too slowly. Whereas buildings rushed past him in the train, now they appear to recede from his approaching body. There are no reliable proportions to life any more, no, in McLuhan's term, 'sense ratio,' or sensory reason. Strindberg's experience of 'deranged sensations' was at once deeply personal and an expression of the 'sensory derangement' of a society reacting to often scarcely comprehensible transformations. At the same time Strindberg's experience resonated with the contemporary program for an aesthetics of sensory derangement (proposed by Arthur Rimbaud and others) and resulted in extraordinary works of art. Strindberg's derangement enabled him to perceive new aesthetic arrangements.

The multidirectional character of intersensoriality means that no one sensory model can tell the whole story. This also applies to the senses themselves. No matter how culturally prominent a particular sensory field may be, it always operates interactively with other sensory domains and hence cannot reveal the whole story about the social sensorium. For example, that the sense of sight rose in importance in modernity is now generally accepted among scholars – indeed it would be difficult in our image-obsessed society to avoid the evidence of our eyes. However, the present glory of sight should not blind us to the continued cultural activity of the non-visual senses. While the impressive amount of contemporary work examining, critiquing or nuancing the prominence of vision may make sight seem like the only sensory show in town, the concept of intersensoriality reminds us that, no matter how prominent or engrossing one strand of perception may appear, it is still knotted into the fibers of our multisensory existence.

## The Senses Collected

The painting on the front and back cover of this book is a remarkable depiction of a seventeenth century collection of valuables belonging to the Earl of Yarmouth. As well as being a record of material abundance and cultural

refinement, however, *The Yarmouth Collection* (by an undetermined artist) is a portrait of a particular sensory order – or rather, of a number of sensory orders, which interact and challenge each other. That the painting is not just the record of the contents of a magnificent cabinet of curiosities or treasure chamber is indicated by the prominent presence of fruits and flowers. What one sees most immediately in this painting, in fact, is an empire of the senses constituted by the best the world has to offer. Fine fruits and a lobster are served up for the sense of taste. Roses and perfume bottles cater to the sense of smell. Musical instruments and a singing girl are ready to delight the ear. Intricately carved vessels and soft folds of cloth await a sensuous touch. The colorful assemblage with its glittering surfaces provides a feast for the eyes. In this microcosm earth, sea and sky are all symbolically present through representative objects and animals: minerals, plants, shells, birds. Space and time are themselves symbolized by the globe and the clock.

A closer look at the painting informs us that this 'empire of the senses' is very much a political empire. Rich and rare sensations have been brought together from all over the world (as is suggested by the presence of the globe). Not just artefacts and plants, but also animals and humans form part of this empire. The monkey, the parrot, and the enormous lobster all speak of wealth, exoticism and dominion. The African servant and the English girl (exemplars of the subordinate social groups of non-Westerners and women) are also valuable collectibles and docile subjects in this microcosm. We see here that everything has been displaced from its original setting and brought together to form a new world order.

The arrangement of the collection in the painting might appear to be haphazard or dictated only by aesthetic concerns, but the different objects and beings are in fact entwined through powerful bonds of sensuous and moral significance. The African and the monkey form a pair, mirror images, in fact, as they gaze at each other. The monkey is a customary emblem of the sense of taste and the African stands ready to serve the sense of taste with his ewer. Together they suggest the traditional trope of African lasciviousness and gluttony. The girl and the parrot form another pair. The parrot, as a symbol of chattering speech, duplicates the orality of the singing girl. This pair is suggestive of feminine loquacity. In her left hand the girl holds a bouquet of roses, making another symbolic allusion to the nature of women – attractive but insubstantial. That all the parts of the collection are at the disposal of the owner, that they are all, in a sense, dead to their own selves and living only as collectibles, is emphasized by the brilliant but lifeless lobster at the center of the painting.

This empire of the senses, however, is not without its own internal critique. Neither of the human members of the collection appears content with his or her lot. Neither appears interested in the collection itself. The African is turned away from the collection, distracted, disturbed. As he looks at his fellow captive, the monkey, is he trying to reconcile a confusion of sensory

worlds or to remember a former way of life? The English girl gazes wistfully beyond the collection. What is she longing for that cannot be found in this hoard of riches? The drooping roses in her left hand indicate that she cannot be preserved indefinitely, like a marble statue. Among the words written in the songbook she holds in her right hand are 'death's black.' The parrot that stands on the book is poised to fly away. Other elements in the painting also suggest that all is not well within the empire. The clock, watch, hourglass and smoldering candle are all reminders of mortality. While earthly treasures might be plentiful, time is running out for storing up treasures in heaven. In fact, time was also running out for the Yarmouth collection. Deep in debt the Earl was obliged to sell much of his collection, perhaps shortly after its commemorative portrait was painted.<sup>7</sup>

The papers brought together here also represent a collection, as sensorially rich and variegated as the display depicted in *The Yarmouth Collection*, and as full of interpretative delights and challenges. Whereas *The Yarmouth Collection* is conventional in its use of sensory symbols, however, the essays here herald a revolution in the representation and analysis of culture.

## Notes

1. *Les cinq sens* was first published in 1985. It is telling of the relative neglect in which the senses have languished until recently that the book is only now being translated into English. Also telling is the fact that it is passed over in silence by Martin Jay in his monumental analysis of 'the denigration of vision in contemporary French thought' (despite its obvious centrality to Jay's topic), although its author does flit across the last few pages of *Downcast Eyes* (see Jay 1993: 593–4) rather like the Owl of Minerva.

2. There is another dimension to this consumption of otherness which is brought out by Serres: that is the sacramental dimension in which food embodies the divine and provides the means for uniting with God. One of the fullest expressions of this association of eating with transcendent love and divine union can be found in the work of the medieval mystic Hadewijch of Brabant (cited in Rudy 2002: 97):

[Love's] bonds bind all seams  
In one enjoyment, in one satisfaction.  
This is the bond that totally binds,  
so that each thoroughly knows the other  
in pain, in rest, in madness,  
and eats his flesh and drinks his blood,  
the heart of the one thoroughly devours the other's heart with storms,  
as he who is himself love showed us;  
he who gave himself to us to eat

gives that beyond human mind.  
Thereby he gave us to know  
that that was the nearest to [love]:  
to thoroughly eat, thoroughly taste [and] thoroughly see from within

Calvino's couple may experience the desire to thoroughly eat and thereby thoroughly love each other, yet they lack the necessary integrity of heart. Despite the narrator's descriptions of gustatory revelations one suspects that the disaffected couple in this case are still only picking at their food.

3. Sometimes a change in sensory order helps. For example, Luca Turin's much-publicized vibrational theory of olfaction has provoked considerable controversy within the Western scientific community (Burr 2002) but would probably find ready acceptance among the Dogon of Mali, for whom 'sound and odour [have] vibration as their common origin' (Calame-Griaule cited in Howes and Classen 1991: 269). Similarly, Freud's old friend, Wilhelm Fliess, would have found a far more receptive audience for his theory of a 'nasal-genital reflex' in Papua New Guinea than he ever did in Vienna (see Howes 2003: 202–3).

4. The title of the present book may remind some readers of the film by Japanese cinematographer Nagisa Oshima entitled 'L'Empire des sens' in French and 'In the Realm of the Senses' in English (but *At no corrida* or 'Corrida of Love' in Japanese). This film, which was censored in Japan, was intended as a retort to Barthes' (1982) representation of Japan as an empire of empty signs, whence perhaps its graphic portrayal of Japanese sexuality. The conflation of sensuality and sexuality implied by the film's French and English titles is a prime example of the Western tendency to contain the senses within the concept of carnality, which is not the case with the Japanese (see Kondo, this volume). For an alternative take on the senses through cinema see Canadian cinematographer Jeremy Podeswa's 1999 film *The Five Senses* and Laura Marks' *The Skin of the Film* (2000).

5. This idea of knots and knotted perceptions is also explored in 'On Listening to a Dream: The Sensory Dimensions' in Alfred Margulies' (1989) *The Empathic Imagination*.

6. See further the discussion of consensus versus conflict models of the sensorium in Howes (2003: xix–xxiii).

7. A complementary analysis of the symbolic elements of *The Yarmouth Collection*, along with a historical background, is offered by Robert Wenley (1991). See further Pamela Smith's 'Science and Taste' (1999) for an account of the life of the senses in seventeenth century Dutch society (the probable birthplace of the artist).

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