

Charting the Sensorial Revolution

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Sensible Flesh: On Touch in Early Modern Culture, by Elizabeth D. Harvey, ed., Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003, 320 pages. HB 0-8122-3693-9. \$55/£36.

Science in the Age of Sensibility: The Sentimental Empiricists of the French Enlightenment, by Jessica Riskin, Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2002, 338 pages. HB 0-226-72078-0. \$70.

La mesure des sens: les anthropologues et le corps humain au XIX^e siècle, by Nélia Dias, Paris: Éditions Flammarion, 2004, 357 pages. 2-7007-2339-2. 27.00€.

Culture and the Senses: Bodily Ways of Knowing in an African Community, by Kathryn Linn Geurts, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002, 315 pages. HB 0-425-23455-3. \$55.

***Appetites: Food and Sex in Post-Socialist China*, by Judith Farquhar, Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2002, 341 pages. HB 0-8223-2906-9. \$74.95.**

***Inside Clubbing: Sensual Experiments in the Art of Being Human*, by Phil Jackson, Oxford and New York: Berg Publishers, 2004, 189 pages. HB 1859737080. \$89.95.**



The study of the senses has traditionally been the preserve of psychologists and neurobiologists who have focused on the cognitive or neurological dimensions of sense perception and disregarded its cultural elaboration. This state of affairs – which resulted in any book on the senses being catalogued as a work in psychology – is rapidly and dramatically changing. The senses are now being investigated by historians, sociologists, anthropologists, geographers and literary scholars among many others. This revolution in the study of the senses is based on the premise that the sensorium is a social construction, which is in turn supported by the growing body of research showing that the senses are lived and understood differently in different cultures and historical periods. In her seminal essay “Foundations for an Anthropology of the Senses,” Constance Classen writes:

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

This paragraph introduces the key notion of a “sensory model” as a way of ordering and understanding the senses that is not purely cognitive or limited to individual experiences but is a communal perceptual orientation (always also subject to contestation).

The emergence of the senses as a focus for cultural studies has come at the end of a series of paradigm shifts or “turns” in the social sciences and humanities over the last forty years. In the 1960s and

1970s linguistics was the name of the game as widespread interest in the theories of de Saussure and Wittgenstein led to culture itself being conceptualized as a language or text. In the 1980s “the society of the image” became a catchphrase and the focus of many academics shifted to the study of visual imagery and its role in the communication of cultural values. In reaction to the seemingly disembodied nature of much contemporary scholarship, the notions of embodiment and materiality were put forward as paradigms for cultural analysis in the 1990s. Here cultural dimensions of corporeal experiences and physical infrastructures (objects, architectures, environments) were explored in order to provide a more full-bodied understanding of social life.

The rise of sensory studies at the turn of the twenty-first century draws on each of these prior developments or “turns” but also critiques them by questioning the verbocentrism of the linguistic model, the ocularcentrism of the visual culture model, and the holism of both the corporeal and material culture models – in which bodies and objects are often treated simply as physical wholes and not as bundles of interconnected experiences and properties. Sensory studies approaches themselves emphasize the dynamic, relational (intersensory – or multimodal, multimedia) and often conflicted nature of our everyday engagement with the sensuous world. This essay presents a review of a series of texts which are in the vanguard of the sensorial revolution in the disciplines of history and anthropology.

Sensory History

Sensible Flesh, edited by Elizabeth D. Harvey, is a probing exploration of the construction of touch in early modern Western culture, which both historicizes tactility and sensualizes history. This book traverses many disciplines, from literature and painting to architecture and medicine, in an effort to recuperate the salience of tactility in the Renaissance sensorium. *Sensible Flesh* is critical reading for anyone interested in pursuing a full-bodied “archaeology of perception” – and not merely that of “the speaking eye” as in the now standard Foucauldian account of the origin of certain modern institutions.

One of the most notable themes in *Sensible Flesh* concerns how the sense of touch emerged as a site of struggle and contestation between the sexes in the early modern period. In “The Subject of Touch,” Eve Keller writes of how the hand was elevated into an instrument of “Reason” in the context of the masculine invasion of the traditionally feminine domain of midwifery – a move which involved divesting tactility of its longstanding erotic and feminine connotations. The female midwives who were displaced in this process questioned the knowingness of the male physicians’ hands and their reliance on metal instruments (such as the forceps), as well as their want of the “natural Sympathy” common to women.

In “Living in a Material World,” Misty Anderson introduces us to the work of the maverick seventeenth-century natural philosopher and

dramatist, Margaret Cavendish, Duchess of Newcastle. Cavendish's "organic materialism" and affirmation of a "sensual plurality of knowledges" ("for I believe that the Eye, Ear, Nose, Tongue and all the Body, have knowledge as well as the Mind") put her at odds with the philosophical othering of the body and of the world in the "new" science of the period (pp. 191–2). There was no space for her kind of vitalism or sensualism in the mechanistic and rationalist worldview propounded by Hobbes and especially Descartes, with his doctrine of innate ideas. (Indeed, in his quest for truth Descartes went so far as to proclaim "I shall now close my eyes, I shall stop my ears, I shall call away all my senses" [quoted in Howes 2005: 37]). These masculine thinkers accordingly ignored Cavendish, while others dismissed her as mad. Her response, Anderson argues, was to invent a parallel world with a woman-friendly social order, whence her 1668 play *The Convent of Pleasure*. The founder of the convent, Lady Happy, gathers together women who share her desire for "a space of freedom," where the senses may be delighted rather than denied, and where other forms of amatory partnership besides heterosexual marriage can be explored. As Anderson has it:

In [Cavendish's] convent, where the immediacy of touch, taste, and smell define the terms of existence, bodily pleasures organize social experience, rather than the rational reverse in which the mind's apprehension of economic, political, and cultural demands organize and often curtail the body's pleasures (p. 204).

A comprehensive reading of the Duchess of Newcastle's oeuvre – such as her *Grounds of Natural Philosophy* (1668) and *The Blazing World* (1666) – reveals that the Duchess was not one to shrink from scientific debates with her male counterparts, however. Cavendish in fact penned a panoply of imaginative techniques of ideological subversion, from describing housewives as consummate "experimental philosophers" to deriding scientists as eye-minded fools "who imagine that all mysteries can be comprehended through extending the power of sight" (see Classen 1998: 98–106).

In addition to foregrounding the war of the sexes over the meaning and uses of touch in the early modern period, *Sensible Flesh* provokes us to realize that the senses work in conflict, not just consensus, with each other. The Renaissance understanding of the senses was fundamentally hierarchical, with sight ranked as the "noblest" of the senses and touch classified as the "lowest" in accordance with the schema inherited from Antiquity. This order was nevertheless remarkably ex-centric or centrifugal in character, particularly when compared to the nineteenth-century fascination with sensory correspondences (Baudelaire), or totalizing *Gesamtkunstwerk* (Wagner), or the complete subordination of sensation to cognition in modern day psychology. This ex-centrism is brought out well in Carla Mazzio's "Acting with

Tact,” which centers on Thomas Tomkis’ 1607 comedy *Lingua, or the Combat of the Tongue and the five Senses for Superiority*.

The action of Tomkis’s play begins with Ladie Lingua (the tongue and language) sowing dissension within the pentarchy by planting a robe and Crown for the five senses to discover and fight over. The sensorium quickly breaks down into warring sense organs each proclaiming its own importance as the most “representative” of the senses. Lowly Tactus (touch) emerges as the most challenging (and challenged) of the combatants on account of his “polymorphous diversity” and “resistance to representation” in Mazzio’s words (p. 166). For touch is dispersed throughout the body (despite the pretensions of the hand to serve as *pars pro toto*). What is more, its operations are “immediate” (there is no medium between the body and the touchable world), and, if the truth be known, Tactus proclaims, every sense is a kind of touch. Such a conflation of distinctions, if allowed to stand, would undermine all categorization, all calculation and all the Arts to boot: for whither music to the ear or painting to the sight if touch is all there is? This truth is accordingly banished, and the hierarchy of the senses restored in the final act. However, the fact that Visus (sight) is awarded the Crown while Tactus gets the robe suggests that the worrying questions about sensory boundaries – the issue of overlapping dominions (or synesthesia) – raised by upstart Tactus can never be truly resolved. The implication is that the sensory order is negotiated rather than fixed, and that the senses conflict and interpenetrate rather than function in isolation.

Jessica Riskin’s *Science in the Age of Sensibility* plunges us deeper into the hidden history of the senses by uncovering how the period commonly referred to as the Age of Reason was, in fact, deeply preoccupied with issues of sensoriality and sentimentality. Riskin coins the expression “sentimental empiricism” to refer to the eighteenth-century French tradition of science (both physical and moral), which was grounded in the conviction that “sensation and emotion were inseparable” and together formed the basis of natural knowledge, moral sentiment and civic engagement (p. 15). Empiricism did not have the “hardnosed, unemotional reputation” it enjoys today (p. 1), but was rather an affair of “men of sensibility,” as it were. “Sensibility” encapsulated the idea of sensory and emotive “receptiveness to a world outside the mind” (p. 10). This polysemous concept pervaded the culture of Enlightenment science (as well as the British literary tradition, which is typified in this era by Samuel Richardson’s novel *Clarissa*, with which it is more exclusively – and myopically – associated today). It figured centrally in all manner of scientific debates, from theories of electricity to theories of governance (Montesquieu held that laws must suit the “degrees of sensibility” of the people governed), from economic policy-making to legal decision-making, and from the new chemical nomenclature proposed by Lavoisier to national civic education. Riskin devotes a chapter to each of these debates, and more.

The foreignness of this “sensibility” to what passes for common sense in contemporary Western society (with its “two cultures” in the words of C.P. Snow) is neatly exemplified by the recommendation of the Committee of Public Education of 1793 that “a course of experimental physics . . . [should] serve as an introduction to moral education.” As Riskin explains, “in physics as in morals, education was less a matter of enlightening the mind than of cultivating the ‘body and heart’” – that is, of “molding . . . pupils’ sensibilities through the careful management of their sensory experiences” (pp. 14–15). Knowledge, sentiments and virtues were all assumed to enter the soul through the same portals – the senses.

Two debates in particular warrant extended discussion here. The first concerns Molyneux’s Problem (as popularized by Locke): “If a man, blind from birth, suddenly gained vision, could he tell a sphere from a cube by sight alone on the basis of a lifetime of solely tactile experience?” (p. 23) And how would he perceive distance? How could he know that the objects he now saw were not touching his eyes? It bears underlining that no one took seriously the (Cartesian) position that the idea of a sphere might be innate. Rather, the answer was found in the notion that “beneath the particular sensations, each specific to one of the five senses, lay a common currency of sensibility” (or what had previously been known as the *sensorium commune*), and that because the senses both worked “collaboratively” and could assume each others’ “functions,” the newly sighted could acquire the idea of a sphere through “experience” – that is, through the practice

Poster for a sensory studies conference held in Montreal in April 2000 incorporating an illustration from Johann Amos Comenius’ *Orbis sensualium pictus* (London, 1658).



of “correlating” visual and tactile impressions. (pp. 25, 42, 63). What is more, touch was considered more “authentic” than sight in giving the mind access to external objects. The resistance afforded by objects (e.g. a kicked stone) gave the self a feeling for its own boundedness. Thus, what began as a “problem of ideas” became a “problem of feeling,” and the sense of touch enjoyed the most exalted moment in its history in the Age of Enlightenment. “The sense of touch is the sense of the intellect,” wrote Pinel (p. 65).¹

But there is more to this story of the sensory origin of ideas. Speaking of physical sensation meant speaking of emotion and morality in the same phrase, given the underlying “conviction” of sentimental empiricism. The notion of the mind as a “blank slate” at birth which came to be written on by the senses meant that sentiments and virtues also derived from physical sensations. This is why the sensory impairment of blindness loomed so large in the discourse of the Enlightenment. The blind man, with his allegedly abstract cast of mind (as exemplified by Saunderson, the blind mathematician), emotional insensitivity and moral solipsism (or lack of fellow-feeling), was the epitome of rationality on account of his deficient sensibility – that is, his obliviousness to the external world. According to Diderot, “the blind were inhumane” (p. 61). This made the task of recovering the blind from their state of sensory and moral isolation *through their sense of touch* (thanks to Valentin Häuy’s invention of the technology of raised printing) a matter of first importance, and led to the creation of the Institut national des jeunes aveugles – a monument to “the union of sensibility and social harmony” – under Häuy’s tutelage (p. 66).

Riskin also devotes a chapter to the figure of Franz Anton Mesmer, who carried sentimental empiricism to its logical extreme by proposing and dramatically demonstrating that he could manipulate the animal magnetic “fluid of sensibility” which he supposed to suffuse the universe (including human bodies) using implements such as magnets, pointed wands and his own fingers to touch his patients’ bodies at their “magnetic poles” (p. 199). The royal commission appointed to investigate Mesmer’s claims found that he was, in fact, manipulating his patients’ power of “imagination” (without, for all that, being able to specify how the latter worked). However, by exposing Mesmer as a charlatan, and the patients who writhed and groaned in response to his ministrations as possessed of overly active “imagination,” the commissioners ended up “subverting the sensationist principle that sensations necessarily originated in the world outside the mind” (p.220), and also brought into disrepute the central tenet of sensiblist science – namely, the “elevation of feeling as the ultimate arbiter of truth” (p. 220, 191), for “if people felt a thing [e.g. Mesmer’s fluid, and they did feel it], either it existed or feeling was not the measure of truth” (p. 191). And so touch, the power of “feeling,” lost much of the scientific and intellectual credibility it had so recently won, and the power of “imagination” (which Riskin characterizes as sensibility’s nemesis) was unloosed from the bounds of sense – and of society.

With *La mesure des sens* by Nélia Dias we move from eighteenth-century to late nineteenth century France, and witness the emergence of cerebral topography as a new paradigm (in place of “sensibility”) for conceptualizing the operations of the senses and the intellect. The scene here is one of the senses – or their representations in scientific discourse – being rigorously labeled and ordered so as to conform to contemporary scientific and social models. Basing her analysis on the proceedings of the Société d’anthropologie de Paris (SAP) during the period 1859–1890, Dias brings out how the supposedly objective categorizations of the senses undertaken by physical anthropologists and physicians were in fact rife with culturally-based assumptions. For example, just as the left hemisphere of the brain was held to be superior to the right and the frontal lobes were considered superior to the posterior lobes, the senses of sight and hearing were grouped together and deemed to be superior to the senses of smell, taste and touch. Furthermore, the latter, inferior, senses were associated with “inferior” social groups – namely, women, workers, “primitives” and “idiots.” It is evident that what was held to be a sensory anatomy was, in fact, a social anatomy, and one undertaken from a particular cultural perspective – that of the bourgeois man of science.

Generally speaking, “primitives” were assumed to have greater sensory acuity than civilized, rational Europeans, particularly with regard to smell, taste and touch. The anthropologists of the SAP – and of similar organizations in other countries (see Howes 2003: 3–6) – were determined to give scientific authority to this assumption by measuring the sensory capacities of indigenous peoples. One of the issues debated within the SAP was how this could be accomplished with due scientific rigor and objectivity. Distrusting the judgment of their own subjective senses, the anthropologists relied on a series of instruments from the ophthalmoscope to the esthesiometer for their sensory measurements. They also devised a series of protocols of observation designed to neutralize the “personal equation,” such as determining *la bonne distance* from which to gauge the color of the iris (considered an essential marker of racial difference) and using Broca’s chromatic scale to record their judgments. Yet another technique was to employ a questionnaire in which, as Dias notes, the questions were so framed as to virtually ensure that their answers would support the paradigm of the greater sensory acuity of the savage. Given that the senses in general were associated with the life of the body rather than that of the mind, the supposedly keen perceptions of indigenous peoples confirmed the cultural stereotype of the brute physicality of the savage.

The models generated by such research were not simply speculative in nature but were put into practice by the French government in order to police and promote the “sensory hygiene” of the peoples under its control. While Dias does not go into how the sensory measurements of the anthropologists were utilized by colonial administrations, she does describe how tables of sensory traits and

proclivities were employed to classify and “correct” the populace of France. This section of *La mesure des sens* forcibly reminds us of the fact that science has a disciplinary arm that extends into the most intimate recesses of social life.

The comprehensive scope of *La mesure des sens*, which documents exchanges between French physical anthropology and other disciplines from philosophy, philology and psychology to optics, aesthetics and politics, makes it particularly valuable for historians of the senses. Dias investigates, for example, how scientific classifications of the senses influenced how the arts were conceptualized: since sight was deemed to be the highest of the senses, painting, as the most visual art form, was taken to be the highest of the arts. Painting was followed by hearing-based music and then by the tactually-engaging arts of dance and sculpture. Dias’ account, read in light of Riskin’s work, also reveals how all traces of the sentimentality of eighteenth-century science were expunged from the new, hard-nosed empiricism of the nineteenth century – the presumption of which would give modern science its aura of inflexible rationality. This triumph of rationalism was, however, offset by the explosion of sensationalism in the nonscientific literature of the period (see e.g. Tromp et al. 2000 and the many other recent works on this subject). Dias ignores this development (regrettably but understandably since it was not “science,” and it was more a British than a French phenomenon).

The three books reviewed here may be read as inscribed in the tradition of the history of ideas or *mentalités*, but due to their focus on the socialization of the senses and politics of sensation they render history sensible in ways that more conventional accounts do not. By exploring the iconology or signature of the senses in the Renaissance imaginary, the cult and science of sensibility in the eighteenth century, and the protocols of observation (and explosion of sensationalism) in the nineteenth century, they enable us to grasp certain key permutations in the Western understanding of the sensorium, and lay the groundwork for further investigations of the sensory underpinnings of thought in different periods.

Sensory Ethnography

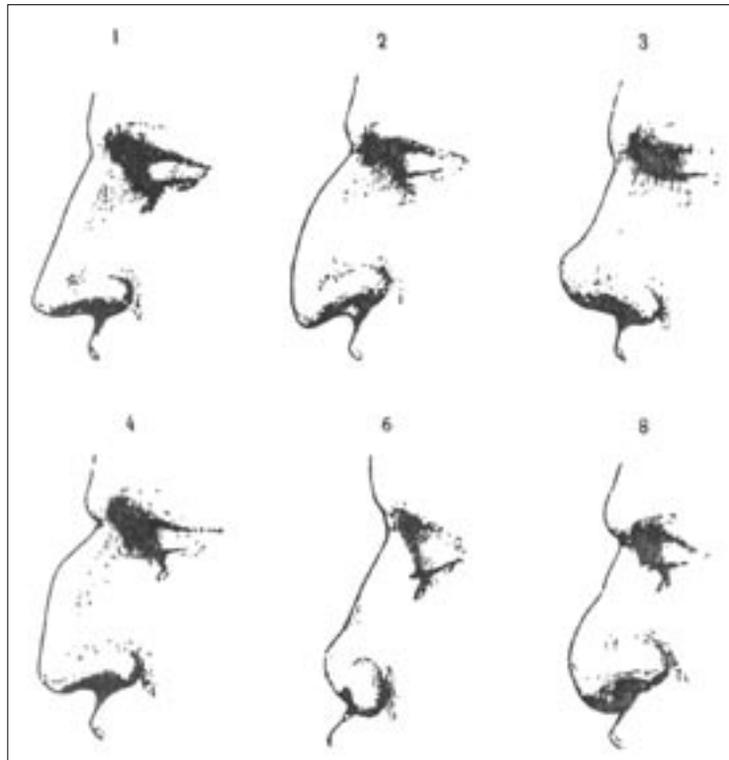
The corporeal turn of the 1990s was responsible for bringing the body back into anthropology on a rather different footing from the way in which it was positioned in the physical anthropology of the 1890s, and it was out of this turn that the sensorial revolution in anthropological understanding emerged. Grounded in a methodology of what could be called “participant sensation” as opposed to “observation,” the new sensory anthropology focuses not on the measurement of the senses, but rather on their meanings and uses as understood and enacted in specific cultural contexts. Given the emic orientation of its approach, this new branch of ethnography contains the promise of revealing alternative psychologies of perception – or

“worlds of sense” – in contrast to the etic, objectifying character of the “knowledge” that was produced by the battery of experimental procedures and questionnaires deployed by the anthropologists of the late nineteenth century.

The new sensory anthropology builds on but also departs from the corporeal turn by substituting the notion of the “sentient body” for that of the “mindful” one; that is, instead of stressing the unity of body and mind, sensory ethnography adopts a more relational, less holistic perspective on “the body” and its various modes of “being-in-the-world.” Cultures are conceived of as embodying different ways of sensing, or “techniques of the senses,” and the aim of ethnography is to describe the socio-logic which informs how the members of a given culture distinguish, value, relate and combine the senses in everyday life. The senses are theorized as mediating the relationship between mind and body, idea and object, self and environment (both physical and social).

Kathryn Linn Geurts in *Culture and the Senses: Bodily Ways of Knowing in an African Community* gives us one of the most complete and intimate accounts to date of the sensory order of a non-Western people. Her book is based on research carried out in the early 1990s among the Ewe-speaking Anlo people of southeastern Ghana and in Anlo-Ewe diasporic communities in the United States.

Illustration of types of nasal profiles from Paul Topinard, *L'Homme dans la nature* (1891) reproduced in Nélia Dias, *La mesure des sens*.



The Anlo-Ewe (pronounced AHNG-low EH-vay) pride themselves on their ability to adapt to other cultures while retaining a strong sense of their own identity. As one of their proverbs goes: “If you visit the village of the toads and find them squatting you must squat too” (p. 96). This flexible disposition, which is vital in view of their history as migrants and the resource-poor nature of the area of Ghana in which they now live, is instilled from birth: the newborn’s limbs are massaged continuously in order to inculcate suppleness of body (and mind). It even precedes birth, since the fetus in the womb is envisioned as seated on a “stool” (i.e. the placenta) already practicing the arts of posture and balance. Significantly, the eponym Anlo also refers to the “rolled up” or fetal position which the ancestor who led the Anlo-Ewe out of servitude adopted when he collapsed from exhaustion upon reaching their current homeland.

Geurts asked one of her female informants to tell her what it meant to be a part of a people whose name means “rolled up”?

She said that rolling up in a fetal position is something you do when you feel sad, when you are crying, when you feel lonely or depressed. She said that being Anlo meant that you felt that way a lot, but you always had to unroll, or come out of it, and that gave you a feeling of strength (p. 118).

This bodily attitude then aptly condenses the twin themes of “persecution and power” which the Anlo-Ewe regard as the defining feature of their history as a people.

Geurts notes that pronouncing the term Anlo results in an effect on the body “that is best understood in terms of synesthesia, onomatopoeia, and iconicity”: the curling of the tongue duplicates the rolling up of the body of the ancestor in the migration myth, and the final vowel has a round feeling or texture to it as well (p. 117). She also records how a crucial moment in her understanding of Anlo-Ewe culture came when she found herself curving her own body inward in sync with the tellers and other listeners to the Anlo migration myth. Such empathic identification – or “feeling along with” – one’s informants is a signature trait of the new sensory anthropology.

Geurts was struck by the extent to which interoception (including the inner senses of proprioception or balance and kinesthesia) figures as prominently as exteroception (the so-called external senses of sight and hearing etc.) in the Anlo-Ewe understanding of the sensorium. Being able to stand upright and move on two legs is considered the hallmark of humanity, and the Anlo-Ewe language contains over fifty terms for different “kinesthetic styles.” Each of these ways of walking is held to say something about a person’s moral character: for example, one may stride like a lion (*kadzakadza*) or zigzag as if drunk (*lugulugu*). Significantly, Anlo-Ewe people “believed loss of hearing was the most grave impairment of sensory perception because with this loss would come a disruption to their sense of balance” (p. 50).

This leads Geurts to treat the intertwined senses of hearing and balance as the keystone of the Anlo-Ewe sensory order.²

In addition to describing the Anlo-Ewe language of the senses in intimate detail, and noting how this vocabulary departs from the Western “folk model” of the senses (e.g. the use of a single term (*nusesese*) to denote the actions of hearing and smelling), *Culture and the Senses* contains many acute observations regarding the engagement of the senses in ritual. Of particular note is Geurts’ analysis of the sequencing of sensations in the Togbui Apim ceremony, which extends over four days, and plays up each of the senses of “the mouth” (taste and speech), “balance,” “heat” (frenzied dancing), and “coolness” (slow dancing) along with aurality (drumming) in turn. This interpretation represents a significant advance over the notion of bodily habitus (or “structure of dispositions,” as defined by Pierre Bourdieu) by highlighting the absence of coalescence and interplay of the senses in the genesis of culturally meaningful experiences. The notion of habitus is simply too crude to capture such interchanges.

Judith Farquhar’s *Appetites* begins with the oft-quoted line from the fourth century BCE philosopher Mencius: “appetite for food and sex is natural” juxtaposed to that equally famous line from the young Marx: “The forming of the five senses is a labour of the entire history of the world down to the present” (pp. 1, 7). What a clash – between biology on the one hand and political economy on the other! Are the appetites only natural, or do they have a history? There you have the crux of Farquhar’s ethnography, a study of the rise of non-collective appetites and the pleasures of the table and the bedchamber in reform era China, where Maoist asceticism is decidedly in decline and capitalist sensualism (with a Chinese twist) is on the rise.

Farquhar, taking her cue from Foucault, considers the task of ethnography to be to “expose a body totally imprinted by history,” which in turn leads her to respond to Mencius as follows: “one can declare eating and sex to be natural, but little can be taken for granted about what eating and sex *are* in any particular time and place” (pp. 32, 290).³ Her theoretical position is fleshed out further in the following lines:

Direct sensory experience, the material attributes of concrete things and mundane activities, can be invoked, and thereby imagined, but only by way of language and images and only in the context of times, places, and habitus that impose constraints on what can be experienced or imagined (p. 57).

This notion of sensation as always already mediated by representation (language and images) is in keeping with the emphasis in the new sensory anthropology on the dynamic, relational (intersensory, multimedia) and often conflicted nature of our everyday experience of the sensory world. It leads Farquhar to interweave readings of

various expressions of state propaganda and contemporary Chinese popular culture (films, novels, self-help books, surveys) with her own experiences of eating and talking about sex with her informants. By dispersing her authority as an ethnographer in this way (i.e. treating filmmakers and novelists as “partners” in the ethnographic enterprise), Farquhar is able to bring multiple perspectives to bear on such vexing issues as: “Which is preferable, scarce and bad food shared by all or civilized luxuries available only to a few?” (p. 30). The pleasures of the table are far from innocent for contemporary Chinese subjects, most of whom have experienced famine in the past, and still recall the Maoist slogan: “Is eating and drinking a mere trifle? No. Class struggle exists even at the tips of your chopsticks” (p. 80). The pleasurable is thus ineluctably political.

Farquhar’s take on reform era Chinese sexuality is fairly conventional, arguing as she does that “after Maoism a certain individual had to be constructed before ‘modern’ sexuality could be contemplated” (p. 31). This is simply flogging Foucault’s horse. Nevertheless, her account of how classical sources are being reworked by modern sex authorities brings out well how one cannot step into the same river (or sleep in the same bed) twice.

Of particular interest is her analysis of the theory of flavor causation in Chinese medicine, which is as difficult for the “Western mind” to grasp as it is to taste. Farquhar admits that most of the herbal concoctions she sampled “tasted simply horrid” and her palate was not educated enough to discriminate Chinese medicine’s “five flavors,” but she persisted in trying to understand how flavors work just the same:

the fact that drugs in the classic decoction form have flavor, that is, both an experiential quality and a classificatory function in a system of pharmaceutical effects raises the question of what the efficacy of a “flavor” is. Isn’t it rather odd, at least for those of us steeped in the subject-object divide of Euro-American common sense, to think of a personal experience such as flavor acting directly on a biological condition? (p. 64)

In China, where food is medicine, specific combinations of flavors *do* have power in themselves, they are not mere side-effects of medicinal remedies, and grasping how the apparently ephemeral is actually essential proved crucial to Farquhar’s subsequent understanding of the “experiential” dimensions of Chinese medicine: “This experiential side to Chinese medicine encourages a personal micropolitics, as patients [in concert with their physicians] seek to govern themselves and their immediate environment using techniques that fuse thinking and feeling, forming habits that make sense to their own senses” (p. 66).

Perhaps the defining trait of the contemporary Western sensorium is the so-called precession of simulacra (if one follows Baudrillard), or increasing presence of representations without referents, from

artificial flavors to fractals to ultrasound imaging. However, the very triumph of the “empire of signs” (in which “image is everything”) has precipitated a backlash in the form of a craving for direct sensory connection, however temporary, amongst the growing ranks of sensation-seekers, from practitioners of aromatherapy to clubbers. As Phil Jackson relates in *Inside Clubbing*, “the sensual intensity of clubbing generates an alternative body in which the structuring framework of the habitus is temporarily erased and . . . this erasure underpins the modified social world you encounter through clubbing,” which can in turn spill over into the everyday world, radically altering relationships (p. 5). “Sensual states possess social power,” Jackson proclaims.

Based on many years of participant sensation in the London club scene, *Inside Clubbing* throbs with the sensuous sociality of the dance floor, and its language is equally kinetic (as in the chapter entitled “Dressed to Thrill”). Like Farquhar, Jackson is concerned with tracing the contours of “embodied knowledge,” but whereas Farquhar remains fixated on the mundane (due to her thereoetical allegiance to Bourdieu’s notion of habitus), Jackson is interested in exploring the “sensual shifts,” or potential for “stepping beyond the mundane,” which the sensuous landscape of the club affords (p. 41). The object of the search for extramundanity (which is part and parcel of the quest for sex, companionship and intimacy in clubland) is not to transcend the senses, but rather to revel in the extremes to which they can be subjected through the combination of music, drugs and dancing. (To update Descartes: “I dance, therefore I am.”)

Jackson’s study of “the clubbing body” and how it distances itself from “the body of capital” (or everyday habitus) departs from the now standard “readings” of subcultural styles. The latter remain too preoccupied with “the symbolic” and “resistance,” in Jackson’s estimation, and amount to little more than “trainspotting.” Jackson relates of his own cross-dressing foray into punk fashion:

When I went through my punky stage around twenty years ago my mohawk, fishnets, doctor martens and leather mini-skirts changed my body at a visceral level and gave me the body of a punk . . . It was a total and profoundly sensual aesthetic, rather than a cluster of symbols to be read (p. 52).

Dressing-up had to do with feeling “expansive” or “standing out” (not the acquisition of “subcultural capital” or “resistance” in any meaningful sense), and while his adolescent need to be noticed has diminished, Jackson continues to enjoy dressing-up “for myself, not to make an impact on others, but rather to make an impact on me by shifting the way I experienced my own body via the clothes I wore” (p. 53). Margaret Cavendish, who also practiced cross-dressing, and who knew about “knowledge in the flesh,” would approve.

Jackson records many engaging anecdotes about the transformation in gender relations in 1990s London clubland. He notes how

the substitution of Ecstasy for alcohol as the intoxicant of choice changed male punters from “drunken wallflowers” (or macho slam-dancers at best) into active participants in the club environment, as they discovered dancing for themselves, and along with each other as well as female punters, in “the general air of delirium [which] granted both genders an increased sense of freedom [and safety] on the dance floor as the sheer sexual and sensual aspects of dance . . . [came to the fore in an] on-going liberation of the body from the judgmental gaze of the gendered other” (p. 16).

Jackson’s ethnography is subtitled “sensual experiments in the art of being human,” and it is an “experimental ethnography” (Clifford 1986: 1–26), but with the difference that instead of experimenting with his writing style Jackson breaks out of the “empire of signs” to delve into how his informants experiment with their sensations. The club is an experimental laboratory in which punters “experience new socio-sensual models,” and the more knowledgeable among them succeed in “transferring the embodied states” they enjoy in clubland into the world beyond (pp. 132–3). Of course, many if not most do not succeed, but Jackson has little to say about their condition, which is a major lacuna in an otherwise sensational ethnography.

The new sensory anthropology as exemplified by the three works reviewed here represents a welcome opening in the direction of analyzing the varieties of sensory experience across and within cultures. It is not ashamed to dabble in the pleasures of the senses, but at the same time highlights the multiple respects in which the perceptual is political. The sensorium is a social fact. It has taken a conceptual revolution to bring this simple but crucial fact to the forefront of the study of culture.

Notes

1. While it might seem that the intellectual life of the senses, particularly touch, peaked during the Enlightenment, it should be borne in mind that this was also the era of “the death of the sensuous chemist” (Roberts 2004: 106–27). For further insight into the *longue durée* of the Western sensorium – the shifting relations among the senses themselves, and between the senses, the intellect (or soul) and the environment – see *The Color of Angels* (Classen 1998).
2. It bears noting that it was not until the 1890s that Western psychology “discovered” proprioception, thanks to the work of C.S. Sherrington, who dubbed it “the sixth sense.” The Western understanding of the sensorium could be further extended and enriched by incorporating the Anlo-Ewe notion of *seselelame*, or consciousness as “feeling in the body,” into its theoretical repertoire.
3. Mencius’ philosophy was less essentialist than Farquhar makes it sound, and she misses an important opportunity for dialogue with Mencius as a result of her own antiphilosophical position.

For a more nuanced interpretation see Fingarette (1972) or even Richards (1932). Another missed opportunity has to do with Farquhar's failure to directly address the issue, which would certainly have concerned Marx, of which regime change – the end of capitalism (as Marx knew it) or the end of communism (as Mao knew it) – ultimately leads to the “emancipation of the senses” and the transmutation of the latter into “theoreticians” (in Marx's classic phrase).

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