

## Foretaste

This book is about the life of the senses in society, and the challenges posed to both classical and contemporary social and cultural theory by reflecting on the ever-shifting construction of the sensorium in history and across cultures. The title, "Sensual Relations," indicates that the focus will be on the interplay of the senses rather than on each sense in isolation. Too often studies of the senses will consider each of the five senses in turn, as though sight, hearing, smell, taste, and touch each constituted a completely independent domain of experience, without exploring how the senses interact with each other in different combinations and hierarchies.

Too often, as well, the senses are considered from a purely physical and personal psychological perspective. Sensory experience is presented as physical sensation shaped by personal history. Writers on the senses reminisce about the favorite smells of their childhood or marvel at the finely tuned ear of the musician (e.g., Ackerman 1990; Gonzalez-Crussi 1989) with little notion of how sensory experience may be collectively patterned by cultural ideology and practice. Sensation is not just a matter of physiological response and personal experience. It is the most fundamental domain of cultural expression, the medium through which all the values and practices of society are enacted. To a greater or lesser extent, every domain of sensory experience, from the sight of a work of art to the scent of perfume to the savor of dinner, is a field of cultural elaboration. Every domain of sensory experience is also an arena for structuring social roles and interactions. We learn social divisions, distinctions of gender, class and race, through our senses. The aim of this book is hence to show how sensual relations are also social relations.

In the last few decades there has occurred a remarkable florescence of theoretically engaged (and engaging) work on the senses in a wide range of disciplines: from history and philosophy to geography and sociology, and from law and medicine to literature and art criticism.<sup>1</sup> These works come after a long dry period in which the senses and sensuality were bypassed by most academics as antithetical to intellectual investigation. According to the latter perspective, sensory data was just the gaudy clothing that had to be removed to arrive at the naked, abstract truth. Already in the nineteenth century the Symbolist champion of multisensoriality, Charles Baudelaire, inveighed against the “modern professors” who had “forgotten the color of the sky, the form of plants, the movement and odor of animals” (1962: 213). Many academics are now eagerly rediscovering how colors, movements, and odors may themselves be crucial vehicles for cultural meaning and not merely picturesque trappings.

This sensual turn in scholarship is therefore partly a reaction against the incorporeality of conventional academic writing.<sup>2</sup> It is also a challenge to what has been called the hegemony of vision in Western culture. This dominance is primarily due to the association of sight with both scientific rationalism and capitalist display and to the expansion of the visual field by means of technologies of observation and reproduction—from the telescope to the television. The power and prominence of vision in the contemporary West have understandably attracted a great deal of academic attention. The other senses, and particularly the so-called lower senses, have, by contrast, been underrepresented and undertheorized in contemporary scholarship.

Despite the current interest in extending the sensory bounds of scholarship, sight is still undoubtedly the star of academic research on the senses. While the image of sight as the medium of a monolithic, rationalist worldview has been successfully shattered by recent work in the humanities and social sciences, it retains its sensory dominance through myriad scattered reflections (Jay 1988, 1993). Constance Classen writes in *The Color of Angels*:

The concept of sight, like an object reflected in a room of mirrors, has assumed so many different guises in our culture that it can provide us with the illusion of a complete sensorium. Paintings, photographs and films, for example, are said by some critics to represent and evoke non-visual sensations so well, that the non-visual senses can scarcely be said to be absent from these media. In many contemporary academic works sight is so endlessly analyzed, and the other senses so consistently ignored, that the five senses would seem to consist of the colonial/patriarchal gaze, the scientific gaze, the erotic gaze, the capitalist gaze and the subversive glance. (1998: 143)

Even critiques of the dominance of sight tend to remain within the realm of vision and rarely consider what alternatives to hypervisualism might lie within other sensory domains, or emerge from combining the senses in new ratios. More work evidently needs to be done to encourage academics to break free from the spell of the specular and look, not beyond their noses, but *at* their noses and all the rest of the human sensorium.

Anthropology has done the most to promote and theorize a full-bodied approach to sensory experience and expression (Strathern 1996: 200; Lock 1993; Herzfeld 2001). A partial roll-call of sensually minded scholars in anthropology would include Edmund Carpenter (1972), Alfred Gell (1977, 1995), Anthony Seeger (1981, 1987), Steve Feld (1982, 1988, 1996), Nancy Munn (1983, 1986), Michael Jackson (1983a, 1989, 1998), Paul Stoller (1989, 1995, 1997), Constance Classen (1990, 1993a, 1993b, 1997), Marina Roseman (1991), Carol Laderman (1991), Bob Desjarlais (1992, 1997), Michael Taussig (1993), Vishvajit Pandya (1993), Nadia Seremetakis (1994), Susan Rasmussen (1995, 1999), Penny Van Esterik (2000), Tim Ingold (2000), Adeline Masquelier (2001), Judith Farquhar (2002), and Kathryn Linn Geurts (2003) as well as the present writer (Howes 1986 et seq.).

The anthropological investigation of cross-cultural variations in the elaboration of the different senses has increasingly made it clear that sensory experience may be structured and invested with mean-

ing in many different ways across cultures. The present book is centered in the anthropological endeavor to explore and theorize the cultural formation of the senses. It is divided into three parts. The first part examines the history of anthropological investigations into the senses, from measuring the sensory acuity of “savage races” in the late nineteenth century through to the late-twentieth-century development of a meaning-centered “anthropology of the senses” (including the detour represented by the rise of the textual model of cultural analysis in the 1970s). The second part explores how the anthropology of the senses may be applied to particular cultures, in this case, the cultures of two geographically distinct areas of Papua New Guinea—namely, the Massim and Middle Sepik River regions. The last part of the book discusses how the insights gained through this approach enable us to rework our understanding of classic social and psychological theory, specifically, the theories of Marx and Freud.

Marx and Freud have both been taken as theoreticians of the senses—Marx for his materialist approach to human consciousness, Freud for his work on sexuality. It is true that the young Marx held that “the *forming of the five senses* is a labor of the entire history of the world down to the present” (1987: 109). It is also true that the young Marx railed against the alienation of the senses in nineteenth-century bourgeois society, and envisioned an alternative society in which the senses would be liberated from the tyranny of private property and “become directly in their practice *theoreticians*” (107). He was distracted from elaborating further on these tantalizing statements, however, by his growing preoccupation with analyzing the specular character of the commodity-form in his life-work, *Capital*. It may well also be the case that the severe physical discomfort caused by the boils that mercilessly erupted all over his body alienated Marx from his own sensuous existence and disinclined him to write further on the subject of the cultural formation of human sensoriality. The recession of the senses in the mature Marx, and the link between this and his theory of the dematerialization of the commodity in capitalist exchange, will be the subject of chapter 8. In effect, the senses (like commodities) become “ghosts” in Marx’s mature theory, haunting his work but too insubstantial to grasp.

Sigmund Freud is another classical theorist whose work

promised to foreground the sensorium as an object of study, but failed to realize that promise and even (at least in the case of some senses) had the reverse effect. Influenced by contemporary theories of biological and social evolution that placed smell, taste, and touch at the bottom rungs of physiological and cultural development, hearing at the middle, and sight at the top, Freud assumed that within the psychological development of the individual the “lower” senses would similarly be left behind or subordinated to a large extent as a person grew into maturity. The sense of smell was particularly denigrated by Freud. With regard to sexual stimulation, for example, Freud wrote that in the case of (normal) humans the role of olfaction has been completely taken over by vision. Freud’s “denial of nasality” in his mature work was due partly to his antagonism toward his former friend and colleague Wilhelm Fliess, who made the nose central to his sexual theories, and partly (similarly to the case of Marx) to his own extensive nasal complaints. Freud’s nose and the sensory deficiencies of his theory of psychosexual development will be the subject of chapter 7.

If Marx and Freud were deficient in good sense, where may one look to find it? Here the anthropological material from Melanesia plays a key role.

### *Melanesian Sensory Formations*

Melanesia has long been considered an important testing ground of Freudian theory. Bronislaw Malinowski rocked the psychoanalytic establishment of the 1920s when he questioned the universality of the Oedipus complex on the basis of his ethnographic research in the Trobriand Islands (1924). Opinion has remained divided as to whether Oedipus should be counted in or out of the Trobriands ever since. Chapter 7, in addition to presenting a sensuous critique of Freud’s theory of psychosexual development, proposes a solution to the Trobriands Oedipus debate based on a reanalysis of the sensory and social organization of the Trobriand psyche.

Just as sensory material from Melanesia challenges the classificatory schemes of Freudian theory, so does it raise questions about the limitations of Marxist theory. Marx apparently conceptualized the sensory characteristics of commodities solely in terms

of their use-value: a thick coat is useful for keeping out the cold. Melanesian cultures afford powerful examples of the ways in which symbolic values may be invested in the sensory characteristics of commodities quite apart from their “usefulness” as objects—the rattling sound of a string of shells that speaks of its owner’s “thunderous” renown, the rotting smell emanating from a yam storehouse that signals its owners’ surplus productivity and proven generosity. Such symbolic sensory values abound not only in the classic “gift economies” of Melanesia but also in the Melanesian reception of consumer capitalism.

Melanesia is the home of the “cargo cult” (Worsley 1970; Lindstrom 1993). According to reports, these cults involved native peoples attempting to ritually ensure the delivery of a desirable cargo of Western products by imitating European practices and destroying their own crops, traditional sacra, and so forth. This suggests a society that would be highly receptive to the attractions of Western-style consumer capitalism. Rather than simply being slavish consumers of Western goods, however, Papua New Guineans creatively discover uses and meanings for imported products that go far beyond anything their manufacturers might have imagined (Lederman 1986; Liep 1994). In the Melanesian “mode of domestication,” it is the sensory characteristics of commodities—the whiteness and fragrance of baby powder, the texture of cast-off plastic bags—that inspire new, indigenous values and uses. In a number of ways, therefore, Papua New Guineans subvert the instrumental logic of late modern capitalism and manage to keep their senses about them. Melanesia hence provides a valuable context in which to complete and critique Marx’s all-too-brief account of the sensory regime of capitalist society, as chapter 8 will show.

Aside from its potential contributions to Freudian and Marxist theories, the ethnography of Melanesia contains much material relevant to the elaboration of an anthropology of the senses. For example, the geographical diversity of a country such as Papua New Guinea provides many sensory environments, from the salience of smells and sounds and relative occlusion of vision in the rain forests of the interior (Feld 1982) to the “open, joyous, bright” expanse of the sea in coastal areas, like that of the Massim region

of Milne Bay Province, where special importance is attached to the kinesthetics of seafaring (Malinowski 1967: 95; 1961; Chowning 1960). Other sensuous geographies include the Middle Sepik River region, with its swampy valleys and rugged mountain ridges, and the barren tracts around Port Moresby, where the hills have been completely denuded of forest. Melanesia thus presents a good context in which to explore the phenomenon of “emplacement,” or sensuous reaction of people to place.

Melanesia also presents a vital context in which to explore the sensual dimensions of social exchange, following Nancy Munn’s exemplary analysis of the social and cultural values embedded in the sensory characteristics of exchange objects (what Munn [1986] calls “quali-signs of value”) in *The Fame of Gawa*. According to this approach, the “spiritual bonds between things” (as well as persons) spoken of by Marcel Mauss in his classic study of the gift economy are also *sensual bonds*. This recognition opens the way for the study of gift exchange as a “total sensory phenomenon” as well as a “total social phenomenon” (Mauss 1966: 1; Nihill 2000). Interestingly, one of the first casualties of this new approach is Malinowski’s “big picture” of the interisland network of ceremonial exchange known as the Kula Ring. As we shall see in chapters 3 and 4, instead of trying to simply picture the Kula, Malinowski should have listened to its aural dynamics and scented its aromas.

The ethnography of Melanesia contains many intimations of alternative epistemologies (Barth 1975; Tuzin 1980; Gell 1995; LiPuma 2000). Stephen Feld (1996) has coined the term *acoustemology* to refer to the way in which the Kaluli people of Bosavi reckon time and space by reference to auditory cues and entertain a fundamentally acoustic view of the structure of their physical and social universe. Andrew Strathern (1989) records that the Melpa speakers of Mount Hagen distinguish three primary ways of knowing: seeing (direct knowledge), hearing (education, hearsay), and doing or experiencing (cult participation), and rank them in that order (see further Eves 1998: 36–37). Michael O’Hanlon (1989), by contrast, reports that the neighboring Wahgi are sometimes reticent about believing the evidence of their senses; they defer to what other people say about an event. The question of the relation of the verbal to other “nonverbal” (or sensual) registers of

communication needs to be resolved. This is one of the central questions of the anthropology of the senses and will be addressed in chapters 2 and 6.

Most of the societies of Papua New Guinea remain oral or residually oral societies, because government-sponsored literacy campaigns have met with uneven success. According to the theory of oral mentality proposed by the media theorists Marshall McLuhan (1962) and Walter Ong (1982), therefore, aurality and the sense of hearing should be central to Melanesian civilization. Yet the Middle Sepik region excels in the production of "visual art." Indeed, among the Kwoma, who inhabit the Ambunti District of East Sepik Province, there is an overwhelming emphasis on visual display (and concealment). Western society is not, therefore, the only "society of the spectacle" (Debord 1977). How is such "eye-mindedness" to be squared with orality theory? How does orality theory have to be rewritten (maybe even jettisoned) in light of such departures from the expected? More important, how are the senses articulated to each other in cultural practice even in the most ocular-centric of societies, like that of the Kwoma? These questions will be explored in chapters 4, 5, and 6.

Finally, Melanesia has been the site of some very probing reflections on the construction of the self (e.g., Leenhardt 1979; Munn 1986; Battaglia 1990), partly because of the challenge that the "relational person" of Melanesia is deemed to pose to the standard Western conception of the autonomous individual (LiPuma 2000). On one account, the model of "intersubjective gazing" is what gives Melanesian notions of personhood and agency their distinctive form.

Every act reveals an individual, but at the same time is motivated by a concern to anticipate and meet the expectations of someone else's regard. In any relation there is an imagined reciprocity of gazes, with each person perceived as the cause of another's agency . . . Instead of a relation between subject and object, one therefore has a relation between two subjects, who each act with the other in mind. (Reed 1999: 50; Strathern 1988)

I would question the adequacy of this model, at least for the Massim and Middle Sepik River regions, where the ethnographic



record and my own experience of interpersonal relations suggest that all of the senses are involved, though in different mixes, in social and self-perception. The issue of the relationship between what Nancy Munn (1986) calls “the scale of self-constitution” and specific local ways of sensing (or “sensory orders”) will be explored throughout the chapters of Part 2.

### *Precursors to the Anthropology of the Senses*

Before this Foretaste becomes an aftertaste, I would like to signal how the relational approach to the study of the senses advocated here is both indebted to and departs from the work of two precursors to the anthropology of the senses, Marshall McLuhan and Claude Lévi-Strauss.

It is to McLuhan that we owe the idea of the sensorium as a combinatorial and cultures as consisting of contrasting “ratios of sense perception.” As he wrote in *The Gutenberg Galaxy*:

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

Brilliant as many of McLuhan’s readings of the impact of new media on Western thought and society may be, the technological determinism of his theory needs nonetheless to be tempered by the recognition that the body is humanity’s first instrument or tool (Mauss 1979), and cultures develop practices or “techniques of the senses” (Howes 1990a) that need not have any exterior or extracorporeal form. Indeed, a primary weakness of McLuhan’s theory is that all societies that lack the technology of writing are typed as “oral societies” and held to be subject to the same “tyranny of the ear.” In point of fact, there is a great deal of diversity to the sensory emphases of oral societies—and to those of literate (visual) cultures too for that matter (Classen 1993b, 1998).

Furthermore, McLuhan imputed various characteristics to the

senses in an a priori fashion: visuality was associated with linearity and neutrality, while aurality was associated with multidimensionality and emotivity. The cultural meaning of the senses, however, is not simply derived from any presumed inherent psychophysical characteristics, but elaborated through their use (Classen 1990; Leavitt and Hart 1990). What one soon finds out from studying such uses is that different cultures accentuate different characteristics of each sensory field—for example, color over line in the domain of vision, hardness over smoothness in the domain of touch—just as they elevate and elaborate or suppress the different senses themselves.

Taking these criticisms into account, what I think we can retain from McLuhan is the importance of studying how the senses are distinguished, characterized, and customarily combined in a given culture. Such intersensory relationships will inflect the form of social relations and the manner in which the universe is perceived and ascribed meaning, or in other words “sensed.”

The work of Claude Lévi-Strauss represents another vital opening in the direction of an anthropology of the senses. In *Mythologiques*, Lévi-Strauss extended the model of structural linguistics to the study of the sensory codes of myths. According to structural linguistics, words only signify by virtue of the differential relations in which they stand to other words in a language or “code.” Building on this insight, in “Fugue of the Five Senses,” Lévi-Strauss shows how a series of Gê myths employs contrasts between sensory qualities—thus “rais[ing them] to the point of having a logical existence”—in each of the five basic sensory codes to transmit the same message having to do with “the origin of man’s mortality” (1969: 147–63, 164). In the final analysis, according to Lévi-Strauss, all of the codes are intertranslatable because the relations *between* the signs in each sensory modality or code are homologous.<sup>3</sup>

One difficulty with Lévi-Strauss’s approach to the senses is that the sensorium is not exclusively structured like a language. Sensory phenomena can be highly meaningful in ways that are ineffable. Lévi-Strauss’s preoccupation with discovering binary oppositions is also problematic. Sensory values may interact with each other in much more complex forms than that of simple binarisms.

Judith Farquhar has identified a further difficulty arising from the strictures of the structuralist account of signification.

The analytic power and tidiness of structuralist analysis in the Lévi-Straussian manner gratifies me as an anthropologist even as it annoys the eater in me, for explanatory power about signification seems to be gained at the expense of poetry—the flavors and pleasure—inherent in everyday reality. The structuralist analyst works through the concrete to reach the logical, leaving the charms of mundane experience far behind. (2002: 57)

While Farquhar still seems to adhere to a division between the conceptual sphere of the mind as the realm of abstract logic and the sensuous domain of the body as the irrational location of pleasure, her criticism nevertheless highlights Lévi-Strauss's penchant for rapid flight from sensory experience to perch in the "higher" regions of structural analysis. The social roles of the senses also tend to be bypassed in Lévi-Strauss's constant search for the operations of "mind" (i.e., cognitive codes). However, the life of the senses is not simply a matter of logic, but of experience.

The ultimate difficulty with the structuralist paradigm, perhaps, is that it imposes a consensus model on the operations of the senses, whereas a conflict model could prove equally germane and illuminating. Lévi-Strauss was inspired in his use of a consensus model by "the poet," Charles Baudelaire. The latter imagined the senses to be joined in idyllic harmony (see "Correspondences" in Baudelaire 1975). Not so another poet of sensuous experience, Wordsworth:

I speak in recollection of a time  
When the bodily eye, in every stage of life  
The most despotic of our senses, gained  
Such strength in *me* as often held my mind  
In absolute dominion. Gladly here,  
Entering upon abstruser argument,  
Could I endeavour to unfold the means  
Which Nature studiously employs to thwart  
This tyranny, summons all the senses each

To counteract the other, and themselves,  
And makes them all, and the objects with which all  
Are conversant, subservient in their turn  
To the great ends of Liberty and Power.

(1959: XII: lines 127–39)

As appears from these lines, Wordsworth thought the “natural” state of the senses to be one of mutual dependence and interplay or “counteraction,” yet we live under “this tyranny” of vision. To free himself from the despotic reign of the eye, the poet endeavored to “summon *all* the senses,” believing that to overturn or otherwise transform the conventional Western hierarchy of sensing could prove both empowering and liberating.

There is no “natural” state of the senses among humans, however, we can only ever know the senses as socialized (Classen 1993b: 37–49). It is therefore necessary to substitute “cultures” for Wordsworth’s “Nature” in the preceding lines. Furthermore, there is nothing to prevent the ear or the nose from being any less tyrannical than the eye in some other cultural formation of the senses. Taking these criticisms into account, what I would like to retain from Wordsworth is his insight into the conflict of the faculties, or politics of the senses. The senses are not always in agreement with each other. At times conflicting messages are conveyed by different sensory channels, and certain domains of sensory expression and experience are suppressed in favor of others.<sup>4</sup>

Interestingly, the conflict model of the sensorium is supported by the work of the evolutionary psychologist Thorne Shipley in his *Intersensory Origin of Mind*.

Since the various senses are evolved to model the spatio-temporal intensity distributions of different physical energies in nature, it is natural that they come to evoke different models of nature. The co-ordination of those differences . . . is what the mind was evolved to do. . . .

Sensory arguments (“Surely, that mouse did not really roar!”) rather than sensory agreements are at issue. Ultimately, what we take for reality is some sort of compromise among the evidence of the senses, as sifted by critical reason. But if the senses had

always agreed as to what is really there, conscious mind would probably not have been found necessary for survival. (1995: 18)

Of course, few psychologists would venture as far as Shipley does in positing an intersensory origin for brain functions. The psychology of perception as practiced in the West concentrates on the study of the senses in isolation from each other—the better to control (uncontrollable) “variables” (Stein and Meredith 1993: xii–xiii). Alternately, psychologists attempt to map neuronal connections and therefore proceed in ignorance of the diverse social connections among the senses that other cultures have dreamed up and put into practice (Howes 1990a; Howes and Classen 1991; Classen and Howes 1996a).

There exist many different social models for ordering and interrelating the senses (and, as in the case of Wordsworth, many different individual challenges to those social models). Each of these models reveals a different twist of McLuhan’s “kaleidoscope of the sensorium,” with different sensory values and practices coming to the fore. In what follows, I shall explore this social interplay of the senses in Melanesia, and examine its ramifications for various fields of theory in Western academia.

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