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Sensorial Investigations: A History of the Senses, in Anthropology, Psychology, and Law: by David Howes

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Sensorial Investigations: A History of the Senses, in Anthropology, Psychology, and Law.

By David Howes

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Reviewed by Hannah Drayson

Sensorial Investigations offers a history and survey of the current state of the field of sensory studies. It presents the effects of the sensory turn within and across research in the human sciences: as manifest in the disciplines of anthropology, history, archaeology, and psychology. This shift does not only involve a move to an awareness of the sensorial as an object of study, but as a methodological orientation and evidence for certain ways of understanding the formation and constitution of the senses as a cultural manifestation. The book has a number of sections which present a variety of essays, covering, in order: the sensory turn in anthropology, the senses in psychology, the influence of sensory anthropology in the emergence of the history of the senses. A final section offers historically situated, cross-cultural comparison of cultural 'first contact' events, and seeks to unpack the cultural and sensorial exchanges that took place through the differing sensory milieus that they brought together through the objects they traded, and tellingly, those they didn't.

The opening sections of the book relate a history of anthropology's engagements with the senses through its history right up to recently completed doctoral research projects. Starting with the original engagements of anthropology with the senses through the measurement of the human sensory faculties, the second chapter in this section presents a history of anthropology since the sensory turn, a turn inaugurated by Paul Stoller's *The Taste of Ethnographic Things*. Stoller observed how the Songhay people of the Republic of Niger inhabited a very different sensory landscape to his own. In his famous story, he told how bitter and thin sauces were used to communicate disgruntlement within an extended family. Stoller's case for 'sensuous scholarship' called for an awareness of the neglected sensory modalities in ocularcentric fieldwork and the ethnographic writing that communicated that work. As ethnographers, then historians and archaeologists began to respond to a call to attend other senses, such as touch, taste and smell, the result was an epistemic shift into a more embodied model of research that shifted bodily and cultural hierarchies. For example, researchers building lexicons of smell and taste rather than colour discovered the relative impoverishment of English compared to the rich smell language of Thai forest peoples, showing what was "hidden in plain sight".

Further however, is the argument that understanding human cultures not only requires a sensitivity to the varying roles and balance of sensory modalities within them, but that different cultures have

differing perceptual realities in which the senses are weighted, hierarchised and connected in different ways. This varying configuration is not necessarily given by a culture, but also results from the perceptual labour required to make sense of a complex world. As Howes points out in a number of places through the book, culture, embedded as it is in the sensory, is rendered within perception itself. He discusses this in his description of the problematically reductive work of 'sensory professionals' in the food design industry (who are now concerned with the design of all kinds of experience and products, cars for example). Sensory professionals – who previously went under the most excellent title of 'organolepticians' – provide testing of products, to confirm their similarity, sensory values, and hedonic properties. Howes describes how the labs in which they work use a range of techniques to rigorously separate and discipline the senses – even while they are stuck with using unreliable 'human' sensing apparatus to do the work. What Howes says is missing from all this effortful scientism is an awareness of the social, contextually situated aspects of sensing, and its fundamental meaning. "The polysemy of the word 'sense' is lost on sensory professionals since the signifying or 'symbolic' and social dimensions of perception are occluded by their research protocols" (p.169). Not all psychological approaches are this limited thankfully, Howes points to the work of Daniele Dubois, a cognitive scientist whose 'sensory cognitive psychology' embraces the senses and approaches sensory processing as sensing in which "stimulation and signification" are at play and "both feeling and meaning" take place at the level of the world, where 'sensing' is both experiencing and knowing. (p.133)

In this vein the book's epilogue calls rather intriguingly for a concept of the 'extended sensorium', as an improvement on the 'extended mind' hypothesis of 4E philosophy. Just as the extended mind positions cognition in the world, Howes points out that if perceiving is sense making, then it is also cognition, and, in fact, it makes as much sense to call active perception in relation with the world an 'extended sensorium' as it does an 'extended mind'. He also points out that the sensoria of human groups do not necessarily settle and become similar in a 'centrifugal' motion, but are instead something that 'centripetal' force that can produce difference within. This principle, that there exists and we should attend to the 'intracultural diversity' of the senses, points towards the potential for individuals and small groups within a culture to divert or resist the wider norms. The extended sensorium, then is a model that reminds us of difference, active and creative exploration, and meaning, at the point of perception.

The creative potentials of the field are exciting and in particular Howes' discussion returns attention repeatedly to the way in which intracultural dialogues are enabled by sensorial approaches, in art, history and law. Examples include Howes' historical exploration of first contact events in the later section of the book, and the Sensory Entanglements research projects' collaborative research creation with indigenous artists that explored sensorial boundaries and emerging media. Additionally, he gives examples of sensory museology where indigenous objects are attributed with the same qualities of personhood which they would hold in their cultures of origin. The implication of these examples is that the creative methods of sensory studies can serve to inform and generate spaces for cross cultural consensus.

Sensorial Investigations offers many useful overviews. For example Howes discusses the research centres that are leading the field, focussing on examples of projects produced by students of interdisciplinary graduate programs at Concordia's Centre for Sensory Studies (CSS). These projects use 'research creation' also known as 'practice based' or 'artistic research' which "combines discursive, analytic and critical theories and methods from the social sciences and humanities with the embodied, experimental and situated practices of creative artistic expression producing new ways of knowing and being" (p.91) "uniting artistic expression, scholarly investigation and material experiments, research creation opens up a space between art and anthropology and 'between art and science'" (p.92). Readers of *Leonardo Journal* will be familiar with interdisciplinary doctoral studies that use creative methods, but it is interesting and perhaps usefully transparent to see the structures of graduate research (including the requirements of the Ph.D. submissions which must be "both material and intellectual, sensible and intelligible [...] a multi-modal conversation") that have emerged and become established under the sensory studies banner.

Billed as 'intended for the classroom' on the cover, this is a book that is extremely generous with ideas but at times neglectful with signposting. It offers the sense of a field that has really hit it's stride, leaving us to some informed speculation on where the coming years of sensory investigations might lead.