

Archived version from NCDOCKS Institutional Repository <http://libres.uncg.edu/ir/asu/>



Sensory Questions

By: Richard Carp

No Abstract

Carp, Richard (1999) "Sensory Questions" *The Journal of the Arts and Learning Special interest Group of the American Educational Research Association* vol.15 pp. 132-137

Carp, Richard (1999) "Sensory Questions" Arts and Learning Research, The Journal of the Arts and Learning Special Interest Group of the American Educational Research Association Vol. 15, pp. 132-137. Permission to archive received Oct 20, 2010 from the editor, Christine Thompson.

Sensory Questions

RICHARD M. CARP

Northern Illinois University

Consider the domestic rose. In 1625, Francis Bacon wrote extensively on how to maximize the pleasure of smell in a garden, while in 1896, Alicia Amherst wrote of the astonishment a medieval European would experience in a contemporary garden, finding the forms and colors of the roses bewilderingly developed, but the all-important odor gone (Classen, 1993, pp. 26-36). In the intervening years, scent had been expunged from experience and significance; it was relegated to conceptual insignificance as well. Kant thought it pointless to cultivate the sense of smell, while Darwin and others argued that declining ability to smell was a hallmark of

advancing evolution, increasing cultural sophistication, and, for some, mental health (Classen, et. al. 1994, p. 89).

Europe's focus on sight has been on the rise for centuries, and may well correspond with typographic culture. McLuhan (1964, p. 76) points out that print initiated a visual culture of information, in contrast to the sonic culture of oral traditions, and Conley (1992) shows how the visual character of printed texts (i.e., typography, spacing, etc.) participates in generating their meanings. Meanwhile Edgerton (1980, p. 190) maintains that the print revolution, far from replacing an image culture with a text culture, actually initiated a new, and more widely shared, image culture.¹ Barbara Stafford's work documents the role of visual imagery in the development of medicine (1991) and in the physical sciences (1994). Apparently, EuroAmerican culture has been tending toward scopocentrism for centuries, hardly a recent trend that can be attributed to electronic technologies or assigned to the post modern.

Although our culture is changing dramatically, it may not be becoming "more visual," or even, perhaps "more imaginal." Electronic culture (cinema, television, and the world wide web) are not more visual than print culture; rather, they are more auditory and, at least sympathetically, more kinesthetic.² Perhaps we ought to be considering the consequences of multisensory thinking and of the rise of multisensory culture, coupled perhaps with a certain decline in the visual, rather than focusing on the rise of visuality and the notion "visual culture." Contemporary work in the anthropology of the senses indicates that the sensorium is complex, interconnected, and malleable. The senses interpenetrate and transform one another, so that how and what is seen is affected by how what is heard, and felt, and so forth, not only in any given moment of experience but also in habits of perception. (McLuhan, 1964; Ong, 1967; Howes and Classen, 1993). When sense ratios change, as they are in our own experience, the totality of the world as experienced and conceived is affected.

The habitual and customary interaction of the senses common to a culture, or to a social location within a culture, affects the totality of the perceptual world and, *ipso facto*, of the conceptual world, as well. Furthermore, the senses vary from culture to culture, and, within an individual culture they vary from social location to social location. For example, in contemporary EuroAmerica, sight predominates, but among the Temiar of the Malaysian rain forest, sound and kinesthesia take the sensory lead (Roseman, 1991); for the Brazilian Kalapalo, sound makes evident and organizes the

primary experience of the world (Basso, 1985, *passim*, see, e.g., p. 311). To the Tzotzil of the Chiapas highlands of Mexico, heat is the key to perception (Classen, 1993b, p. 126), while the Andaman islanders follow their sense of smell, literally sniffing out the truth (Classen et al., 1994, p. 97). The sensorium varies within a cultural trajectory over time, as well, as we have discovered from considering smell, sight, and the rose. Within a culture, perception may vary according to social location; in some cultures distinguishing, e.g., men from women (Irigaray, 1980, p. 101) and children from adults (Howes and Classen, 1993, p. 271).³

The utility of "visual culture" may be minimal, without a lot of specification. The same message (e.g., an image, or a television commercial, or a movie) is not at all the same to different people. This is not just a matter of interpretation, but of experience: the world and the sign or symbol vary with the sensorium. Thus, all three elements of the semiotic triad are affected by sensory difference. Study of/in the arts contributes this to semiotics: media are messages, and the senses have reasons of their own. These reasons, although not unmediated, permeate and provide experiential justification for reasons and rationalities. Though the semiotic triad often seems to hover, spirit-like, over the world of *phusis*, it does not, in fact, escape from the trenchant materiality of human existence.

Perhaps this lies at the core of our contemporary experience: the reasons of our senses are changing, in two senses: a change in the ratios among our senses and their interactions; and a change in the forms of reason or logic that make sense to us. The discussion above suggests that, while the ratios among our senses within our sensorium are transforming, we are not becoming more visual. Rather, perhaps we have increased our reliance on auditory and kinesthetic information, or, even better, on multisensory information. This makes it seem as if we are also less textual (whether we are or not) for texts proper neither move nor are they heard. In the "visual" arts, this increase of sound and movement corresponds to a rise in works making use of performance, environments, mixed-media, and time, including, of course, sound art.

The second change, in forms of reason or logic, is manifest in the structure of this group, which encourages active collaboration among a number of scholars and calls for integrative work connecting a number of disciplines. This spirit of collaboration and integration expresses formal characteristics of emergent post modern rationality. In fact, the collaborative and integrative urge may

be the result of (rather than a response to) the transformation of our sense ratios (in both meanings) (McLuhan, 1964; Carp, in press).

The modern era was the age of mechanical production and reproduction, of print media and manufacturing economies; modernity was also characterized by analysis. All of these involve division into component elements (letters, manufacturing acts and product parts, conceptual elements), yet in each case there is also a quality of restriction of the components: letters contained in a text, production lines contained by a product, analysis restrained by an argument.⁴ Postmodernity may come to be characterized by dispersal and integration. In the postmodern era, mechanisms seem to give way to messages, which are everywhere and nowhere: available at home, office, or on travel, but held at no place.⁵ Postmodern media begin with energy, manifest as sound, movement, and light: film, television, computer terminals. These media are inherently multisensory, though they are not polysensory.⁶ They are also fundamentally collaborative in the processes required for their creation (See Hauser, 1951, p. 246-250). In this respect, and perhaps in others which McLuhan foreshadowed, they are integrative, rather than analytical.⁷

This dispersed integration (or integrated dispersal) may correspond to "differential space," hypothesized by Henri Lefebvre as the dialectical negation of the abstract space that characterizes both capitalism and the academic structures that flourished in and gave intellectual justification for it (Lefebvre, 1991). The intellectual analysis of knowledge into discrete academic disciplines resembles both the economic division of labor into specialized tasks and the geopolitical division of space into nation-states, which all resemble the artistic analysis of the senses into separate "media."

Our traditional disciplines (both academic and practical), seem to be artifacts of the mechanical era, worthy of study as such, but not of perpetuation in the structure of curricula and discourses. Perhaps we need to move inquiry deeper into connective discourse: studying meaning, medium and praxis as always already belonging to one another, senses (and media) as always already affecting one another, disciplines and inquiries as always already collaborative and multi-disciplinary: an inquiry into sensory culture, the meaning of pragmatics, praxis, and materiality, and a reconfiguring of the arts in relation to a new rationality of our sensoria.

Notes:

¹Edgerton believes that "the printed illustration, not the printed word is the reason why the press in the West proved to be an instrument of dramatic change . . ." (p. 190).

²The "receivers" of messages from these media do not, of course move, but neither do those for dance.

³Even when the same sense predominates, it may do so in a different manner, interacting with the other senses and with the world in distinctive fashion. Thus the visuality of the Desana differs from ours (Classen, 1993a, p. 253) and both are distinct from the visuality of the Chewong (Howes, 1993, pp. 174-175).

⁴McLuhan (1964) links mechanical culture with the analytic character of alphabetic writing, noting that the Chinese had printing for years, but never developed a mechanical culture, due, he believed, to the pictographical character of their writing system. It is interesting to note the extent to which icons (pictographs) have replaced instructions (alphabetic texts) in the electronic environment.

⁵I use message rather than information since so many of the messages seem either devoid of information or filled with false or maliciously distorted information.

⁶In fact, another element worth consideration is the tactile and olfactory poverty of electronic media, especially in the light of gender and class differences in sense rationality.

⁷This quality of dispersal and integration is evident in the impact of these media on our experience of time (See, e.g. Hauser, 1951, pp. 239-249). "[The 20th century discovered quite early on, that temporality is precisely as plastic as the filmic substance itself" (Frampton, 1983, p. 74). To Frampton, it is quite clear that time does not "exist"; it is simply a "condition of our perception of phenomena" (p. 75) and is, therefore, as transmutable as the body, the instrument with which we perceive phenomena. Cinematic time is a nonlinear experience in which one can move in many directions from one moment to the next: ancient Egypt may be contemporaneous with the 22nd century, while simultaneous moments may be spread out across several minutes. This spatialized temporality, which can be directly experienced in film, video, and on the computer, is comparable to the Postmodern use of images, themes, and artifacts from throughout time, without respect for their history.

References:

- Basso, E. (1985). *A musical view of the universe: Kalapalo myth and ritual performance*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

- Carp, R. (L. Press). *Intermediation: Arts' contribution to general integrative theory. Issues in Integrative Studies.*
- Classen, C. (1993a). Creation by sound/creation by light: A sensory analysis of two South American cosmologies. In D. Howes (Ed.), *The varieties of sensory experience: A sourcebook in the anthropology of the senses* (pp.239-256). Toronto: University of Toronto.
- Classen, C. (1993b). *Worlds of sense: Exploring the senses in history and across cultures.* New York: Routledge.
- Classen, C., Howes, D., & Synnot, A. (1994). *Aroma: The cultural history of smell.* New York: Routledge.
- Conley, T. (1992). *The graphic unconscious in early modern French writing.* New York: Cambridge University.
- Edgerton, S.Y., Jr. (1980). The renaissance artist as quantifier. In M. Hagen (Ed.), *The perception of pictures: Volume One: Alberti's Windows: The projective model of pictorial information* (pp. 179-212), New York: Academic Press.
- Frampton, H. (1983). *Circles of confusion: Film, photography, video, texts, 1968-1980.* Rochester, NY: Visual Studies Workshop Press.
- Hauser, A. (1951). *The social history of art, vol. 4.* New York: Vintage Books.
- Howes, D. (1993). *Sensorial anthropology.* In D. Howes (Ed.), *The varieties of sensory experience: A sourcebook in the anthropology of the senses* (pp. 167-191) Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Howes, D. & Classen, C. (1991). Conclusion: Sounding sensory profiles, In D. Howes (Ed.), *The varieties of sensory experience: A sourcebook in the anthropology of the senses* (pp. 257-289). Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Irigaray, L. (1980). This sex which is not one. In E. Marks & I. De Courtivron (Eds), *New French feminisms: An anthology.* Amherst, MA: The University of Massachussets Press.
- Lefebvre, H. (1991). *The production of space.* (D. Nicholson-Smith, Trans.). Cambridge, MA: Basil Blackwell, Inc.
- McLuhan, M. (1964). *Understanding media: The extensions of man.* New York: Signet.

- Ong, W., S.J. (1967). *The Presence of the word*. New Haven, Yale University Press.
- Roseman, M. (1991). *Healing sounds from the Malaysian rainforest: Temiar music and medicine*. Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press.
- Stafford, B.M. (1991). *Body criticism: Imagining the unseen in Enlightenment art and medicine*. Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press.
- Stafford, B.M. (1994). *Artful science: Enlightenment, entertainment, and the eclipse of visual education*. Cambridge: MIT Press.