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Charting the Cultural History of the Senses

Alain Corbin

It is now more than half a century since Lucien Febvre called for a history of the sensibilities.[1] This would, he believed, be integrated into the study of the collective psychology that has been christened, rather hastily, the history of *mentalités* (Febvre 1938, 1941).[2] This vast project, expounded in many works by the author of *Combats pour l'histoire,* implied, above all, the analysis of the modalities of perception, the identification of the sensory hierarchy, and the reconstitution of systems of emotions. The study of the use of the senses was thus incorporated into what Lucien Febvre saw as the 'mental equipment,' a rigid concept that revealed the excessive reification for which the founder of *Annales* is today justifiably reproached. While Norbert Elias ([1939] 1975) was refining his analysis of the 'civilizing process,' and attempting to trace the progress of autocontention and the internalization of norms within Western society, Lucien Febvre proposed the study of the slow repression of emotional activity and greater rationality of behavior.

This project was subject to the intellectual influences and fashions of the day, suggested by a reading of J. Huizinga ([1919] 1955) and Georges Lefebvre ([1932] 1988), spurred on by the later vogue for the psychology of crowds (Nye 1975; Barrows 1981; Moscovici 1981), and stimulated by the works of Lucien Levy-Bruhl ([1922] 1923) and Charles Blondel (1928); today it appears obsolete.[3] It is useful, nevertheless, to recall its existence. It produced works which might profitably be re-read from the perspective of a historical anthropology of the senses (Mandrou [1961] 1976).

The attention paid to the regime of sensory values and to the hierarchy of the representations and uses of the senses within a culture owes something to the intuitions of Lucien Febvre, imprecise though these may have been.

At all events, it represents for the historian a project – or rather a gamble – which is risky but fascinating. Is it possible to discern retrospectively the nature of the presence in the world of people in the past through an analysis of the hierarchy of the senses and the balance established between them at a particular moment in history and within a given society? Is it possible to detect the functions of these hierarchies, and so identify the purposes which presided over this organization of the relations between the senses? Can we envisage submitting this research to diachrony, observing permanences, and detecting open ruptures or subtle differences? Is it helpful to connect modifications to the systems of emotions, which are more easily discernable, to those which operate in the hierarchy and balance of the senses? To respond to such questions is to accept the existence and validity of a history of sensibility, since it implies discovering the configuration of what is experienced and what cannot be experienced within a culture at a given moment.

By way of example, David Howes (1987) has offered a highly stimulating reading of the century 1750–1850 (see also Howes and Lalonde 1991), though one which needs to be backed up by long and patient research. According to Howes, the senses of proximity, of touch, taste and smell, which govern in depth the affective mechanisms, experienced an increase in their relative power from the end of the eighteenth to the middle of the nineteenth centuries, just when the outlines of the social order were becoming blurred. Smell, in particular, the sense of transitions (Howes 1987), of thresholds and margins, which reveals the processes by which beings and things are transformed, fascinated at this period of confusion, whilst the sense of sight was no longer able to read the hierarchies with the same assurance. This is convincing and, when all is said and done, perfectly logical. Specialists in literary history have now for some time emphasized the invasion of darkness, the obsessive fear of opaqueness and the hard battle then being fought by social observers and municipal authorities in their struggle to shed the purifying light of knowledge and power on the 'masses down below,' described by Victor Hugo. That said, the historian working in this field faces many problems; rigorous precautions are also essential, and it is this which forms my theme.

The first and simplest approach suggested to the researcher by the historical tradition known as positivist is to try to trace the evolution of the sensory environment; or, to put it another way, to draw up an inventory of the sensations that were present at a given moment in history in each social milieu. From this perspective, Guy Thuillier (1977: 230–44) has attempted to compile a catalogue and measure the relative intensity of the noises that might reach the ear of a villager in the Nivernais in the middle of the nineteenth century; and you can almost hear, as you read his book, the ringing of the hammer on the anvil, the heavy thud of the wooden mallet

wielded by the cartwright, the insistent presence of bells and the whinny of horses in an aural environment where the noise of the engine or the amplifier was unknown. This approach, also found in J. Léonard (1986) is by no means negligible. It aids immersion in the village of the past; it encourages the adoption of a comprehensive viewpoint; it helps to reduce the risk of anachronism. But, quite clearly, it is based on a questionable postulate, it implies the non-historicity of the modalities of attention, thresholds of perception, significance of noises, and configuration of the tolerable and the intolerable. In the last analysis, it ends up by denying the historicity of that balance of the senses which is here my theme. It is as if, in the eyes of the author, the habitus of the Nivernais villager of the nineteenth century did not condition his hearing, and so his listening.[4]

Guy Thuillier's project deserves, nevertheless, to be refined. It can happen that, in a particular situation, noise assumes enormous importance. Let us take as an example an episode in the life of Lonlay-l'Abbaye, a tiny commune in the hills of Normandy. Here, the local peasants were in the habit of ordering their work according to the bells of the church, an *abbatiale* dating from the eleventh to the fourteenth centuries. In 1944 the destruction of the church tower by German troops meant that the traditional ringing had to be replaced by the noise of the powerful fire brigade siren installed in the center of the *bourg*, on the roof of the *mairie*. The farmers soon grew accustomed to the new sound, which symbolized modernity. In 1958 the church got back its tower. At the request of the inhabitants of the *bourg*, irritated by the daily howling of the siren, the municipal council decided to return to the old ringing. For more than a year the commune was rent by a war of noises.[5] The peasants clung to the new sound of the siren, which was clearer and, above all, louder; their adversaries declared their preference for the aesthetic quality and emotional power of vibrant bronze, proclaiming their rejection of the deafening noise of modernity. The peasants, en masse, invaded the *bourg*, threw stones at the *mairie*, and booed – almost subjected to 'rough music' – the leaders of the 'anti-siren party.' As feelings ran high, old divisions were revived: the former 'Gaullists' laid into the former 'Pétainists'; adulterous affairs and private vengeances surfaced. The media began to take an interest, and the conflict appeared on the front page of *France-Soir* and made the news bulletin of the radio station Europe No. 1. The curé saw his authority, hitherto never challenged, called seriously into question, and it was necessary for the archpriest of the deanery to visit the commune and appeal for calm. The harassed mayor soon succumbed to a coronary. Only recourse to a neutral political figure – a former deputy who was a native of the commune, to whom the municipal council offered the post of mayor – succeeded in restoring peace, if not harmony. Henceforward, everyday at noon, the siren blared whilst the bells rang.

Such an episode, a true analysis of which requires an analysis of anthropological structures, was in large part a matter of symbols; the traditional

hostility between town – the *bourg* – and country was also a factor. But it reveals another division, a social dichotomy in the use of the senses, in the perception of thresholds of tolerance, and in the significance of noises; it calls for a different analysis of the presence of sounds.

Let us return to the difficulties that await the historian who wishes to study the organization and balance of the senses. The most obvious obstacle lies in the transience of the evidence. It is true that knowledge of techniques and tools, of the structure of the landscape and of dietary habits or hygienic practices makes it possible to reconstitute the sensory environment, at least approximately. The transience of the evidence concerns rather the use of the senses, their lived hierarchy and their perceived significance. However, historians know very little about the evolution of systems of appreciation;[6] they are ill-informed about the respective configurations of the agreeable and the disagreeable, the fascinating and the repulsive, the sought-after and the rejected, the tolerable and the intolerable, within the culture they study. Usually they are unaware of the relative role of each of the senses in practices of exchange, or in modes of communication. But information of this sort is indispensable to the perception of social cleavages; without it, there can be no true history of the representations of the self and the other within each of the groups studied.

There is, however, no shortage of sources that tell us about all these historical subjects. Let us take first the writings that reveal the system of norms, and that make it possible to identify the techniques of sensory restriction operating within the society under consideration. If we confine ourselves to France in the first two-thirds of the nineteenth century, there are many educational books and manuals of hygiene that reveal the normative. The authors of these works were expected to devote a chapter to the *percepta* (see, for example, Levy 1844). They were required to lay down precepts of hygiene or of education with regard to the sensory organs. In so doing, they decreed, and helped to impose, a hierarchy of the senses.

The literature in which people wrote about themselves constitutes an abundant source for anyone embarking on the sort of anthropological enquiry under consideration here. Unfortunately, this was a socially restricted practice. Alain Girard (1963), Béatrice Didier (1976), Michelle Perrot and Georges Ribeill (1985; see also Corbin 1987, 1990), among others, have shown that keeping a private journal was at this period more common in the provinces than in Paris, that it was predominantly a petty bourgeois practice, and that it frequently attracted people who felt frustrated, suffocated by their family, and lacking other means of self-expression than private writing. This explains the over representation of women and homosexuals within the ranks of the diarists. The acuity with which the self was heard, and the distribution between the felt and the unremarked, varied considerably according to the group to which the diarist belonged. Also, this meticulous self-accounting,

and preoccupation with decline, which no editorial design as yet toned down, was in practice short lived. It was during the course of the eighteenth century that the private journal, especially the 'therapeutic journal' kept by British invalids (Corbin [1988] 1994), came gradually to replace family record books and spiritual journals. For a few decades self-scrutiny, gradually being laicized, offers the historian analyses of fascinating precision.

There is no better source for tracing those processes of increasing delicacy, of withdrawal into oneself, of a new vulnerability to the wounds suffered in the social fray, which have been described by Emile Durkheim ([1897] 1966) and Norbert Elias. There is no better source for anyone who seeks to understand the historicity of the affective mechanisms, to discover the configuration and functioning of the systems of emotions, or discern the ways in which the senses were educated and employed. The diarists also constantly record their cenesthetic impressions or, to put it another way, those perceptions of the inner sense about which Montaigne had spoken, that murmuring of the viscera to which the elites of the nineteenth century were so attentive before the emergence of psychoanalysis (Starobinski 1981; Azouvi 1984).

This writing about oneself tells us in detail, to take just one example, about the measurement of sexual pleasure, and about the employment of the caress. Men kept count of their sensual pleasures; so, which is less common, did Loomis Todd, whose detailed record of her intimate practices has been described by Peter Gay (1984). Of course, such documents tend to overestimate the representations and uses of the senses, as well as the modes of sensibility peculiar to those who dared and knew how to listen to and express their perceptions, their impressions and their emotions. Further, these sources provide only scattered and fragmentary evidence, which it is obviously difficult to quantify. The authors, it is hardly necessary to say, were not setting out to reveal the organization of the balance of the senses. But the historian is today only too well aware of facing an eternal dilemma; 'to accept a weak scientific status in order to achieve striking results, or accept a strong scientific status in order to achieve negligible results' (Ginzburg [1986] 1990).

It is, by the same token, difficult to perceive the coherence of the material collected, unless, that is, paroxysmal situations expose contrasts. When there are abrupt confrontations of systems of perception and emotions, antagonistic configurations sometimes emerge with valuable precision. The scenes of massacre at the end of the eighteenth century, and the far rarer instances in the first decades of the nineteenth century, provide precious information about the habitus of the protagonists. The clarity of the division between the jubilation of the murderous mob and the horror felt by the sensitive soul makes it easier to read sensory behavior. The delicate spectator gazes at the scene as if from a distance; he adopts a 'spectatorial' attitude; the visual analysis creates in him that revolt of the being that constitutes horror.

The member of the mob, right at the heart of the confusion, who participates in the killing, in its acts and its cries, and who receives its sounds and smells in the liberation of the Dionysiac impulses of the crowd, does not visually analyse the picture; unlike the spectator, he experiences the events through the senses 'of proximity' – touch and smell – but he could not describe the spoliation of bodies and scenes of horror, which he does not experience in this way (Corbin [1990] 1992). The pathetic, so common at the end of the eighteenth century, like the picturesque, implies a mechanics of the gaze and the use of a socially restricted sensory hierarchy.

But here, surreptitiously, we are falling into the trap that consists, for the historian, of confusing the reality of the employment of the senses and the picture of this employment decreed by observers. Let us take as an example what was written by naval hygienic specialists on the subject of the sensibility of the sailor (Corbin [1982] 1986: 147–8).[7] In this inferior being, taste and smell were corrupted by the use of tobacco, delicacy of touch was destroyed by the handling of ropes, that of hearing by the proximity of the artillery, that of sight by the salinity of the environment. In a word, the sailor had essentially lost the sharpness of his senses; he had become an insensitive being.

Portraits of this sort – and they exist for every social category – impress by their coherence; but they were clearly subject to the situation in which whoever drew, not to say decreed them, wrote. In this particular example, the author, usually a naval doctor, had to mark the distance that separated him from his subject and, even more, include his reader, to whom he was linked by a subtle connivance, in this desire to distinguish. The deprecatory picture also helped to justify the conditions which the unfortunate sailor was compelled to endure. Louis Chevalier (1958), though elsewhere a remarkable analyst of the social imagination of the bourgeoisie, has to some extent forgotten this legitimizing purpose.

Above and beyond this desire to distinguish, the author naturally painted his picture in the colors of the then prevailing scientific knowledge. At a time when neo-Hippocratism was extremely powerful, it was customary to deduce the appearance and sensibility of individuals from the qualities of the earth, air and waters which surrounded them (*circumfusa*), the food they ingested (*ingesta*), the clothes they wore (*applicata*), and the activities in which they engaged (*gesta*). Like the grain of their skin, the use they made of their senses reflected this coherence.[8] Accordingly, it was at this period commonplace to proclaim the insensitivity of touch of the peasantry;[9] the skin of the tiller of the soil was hardened by labor, when, that is, it was not covered with 'as it were a sort of scale.'[10] The coarseness of this creature enslaved to the soil was in keeping with the portrayal of the whole social scene, though this is not to say that I wish systematically to deny the reality of the individual features that composed it.

This description of the other, authoritatively presented, was equally subject to the prevailing ethical code; this required a value judgement to be passed on the respective usage of each of the senses. Modern historians have skillfully analysed the way in which 'penitentials' – and so, probably, the injunctions of confessors – detailed the types of sin induced by these five gates of the devil (Delumeau 1983; Arnold 1984). We know also that the emphasis on the dangers of sight inclined people either to lower their eyes, so as to avoid temptation, or raise them in the direction of heaven; as a result, the pious soul feared a horizontal gaze directed at the world and its perils, unless it was with the intention of proceeding to a charitable inventory of its piteous miseries.[11]

In the same way, description of the use of the senses – and probably the use of the senses itself, though to what degree? – obeyed, images of health and sickness, and therefore the divisions laid down by doctors. Accordingly, the importance of hysteria in representations of the healthy and the unhealthy led, at the end of the nineteenth century, to a discrediting of the use of smell in order to avoid any suspicion of a too highly developed olfactory sensibility, then perceived as a symptom of hysterical hyperesthesia.

All these logics are to be found, usually with a slight time lag, at the heart of fiction. In the prestigious Rougon-Macquart novels, Zola reproduced the social cleavages described by scholars and social observers a few decades earlier. Among the populace, according to Zola, touch was all, a sign of their closeness to the animal; men and women fought and came together brutally. Among the bourgeoisie and the aristocracy, seduction required distance, a visual caress, a trail of perfume, in sum, an assumed delicacy in the use of the senses.

The precautions that historians need to adopt follow from these all-too-brief considerations. Before embarking on an enquiry, they must know the representations of the sensory system and the ways in which it functioned. In short, they must be capable of deciphering all the references and of detecting the logic of the evidence ordered by the dominant scientific convictions at the period under consideration. Clearly, a document subject to belief in the theory of animal spirits cannot be analysed using the same key as a text that refers to the cerebral topography outlined by Brocq. The way in which authors see the localization and configuration of the central seat of sensibility, the circulation of messages by the circuit of nerves, is essential to an understanding of their writings. It implicitly orders their perception of the hierarchy of the senses. Over the centuries the theoretical exaltation or disqualification of smell is thus conditioned by images of the nervous system. The importance accorded to the diaphragm by certain eighteenth century physiologists greatly influenced representations of the relative role of sensory messages in the release of emotions. All this constitutes a jumble of facts; it is still wise to recall them. This type of precaution demands all

the more rigor and subtlety in that, as a general rule, the traces of several scientific systems mingle confusedly together under the eye of the analyst of a single document.

For a retrospective enquiry it is necessary to take account of the habitus that determines the frontier between the perceived and the unperceived, and, even more, of the norms which decree what is spoken and what left unspoken. We need, in fact, to be careful not to confuse what is not said with what is not experienced. The historian can never be absolutely sure whether the emergence of an innovation, observed by reading documents, indicates a transformation of the way in which the senses were used and of the emotional system or, more simply, the crystallization of new rhetorical forms. It is still the case that the latter, as they spread, helped to shape behavior.

Unlike the anthropologist, who, by enquiry and interrogation, can circumvent these dangers and avoid the traps set by the inertia of language, the historian, in his perilous quest for the sign, can call on no true procedure for verification. Like the hunter crouched in the mud, searching for the trace of some invisible game, he has to deduce the behavior of the other from minute and subtle indicators (Ginzburg 1990).

History, it is clear, is here not so much a matter of scientific knowledge as of conjectural skill. The researcher may, at the very most, claim to identify objectively the moment of emergence of a discourse, or of a type of evidence. The historian can never know exactly what, in the great vogue for the picturesque at the end of the eighteenth century, derived from the proliferation of a rhetorical genre or a pictorial technique, and what indicates the elaboration and social diffusion of a way of seeing. Nothing can prove that a mode of appreciation does not exist before it is spoken or, with even greater reason, before it is theorized. Only one thing is certain: the prolixity of the discourse and the system of norms that it propagates help to determine its later uses.

A prisoner of language even more than the anthropologist, the historian must strive, at the very least, to identify what it is that conditions the frontier between the spoken and the unspoken. The historian needs to know that the banal is frequently silent, like the perception of a new emotion, awareness of which is not yet very clear, or a means of expression not yet fully worked out. The noise of traffic is today tending to disappear from the evocation or description of big cities, although it is not clear whether it is no longer noticed because of its omnipresence and the fact that no one heeds it, or whether its extreme banality leads insidiously to its being passed over.

In contrast, the inertia of language practices encourages people to continue to say what they no longer perceive or experience. The use of metaphor sets traps for the careless analyst; and the fine book by Anne Vincent-Buffault (1986), devoted to the history of tears, to some extent suffers from the fact that the author sometimes takes literally metaphorical, or simply conventional, formulas that in no way prove the reality of the practices.

To work on the documents of the past also requires prior knowledge of the injunctions of modesty, of the configuration of the obscene and of the contours of the inexpressible, which themselves have their history. The interdict that weighed, in the nineteenth century, on description of the embrace and the pleasure of the body, and of the taste, smells and sounds of sensual pleasure, can easily lead to an overestimation of the primacy of the visual, which is less subject to this injunction to silence.

At a disadvantage compared with the anthropologist, the historian, let us repeat, has access to hardly any other sources than those that involve language. It is, nevertheless, useful to explore whatever, in social rituals and techniques of communication, shows how the senses were used. There is a field of research, extending from the handshake to ways of transmitting information, which is as yet untilled. How, for example, can one claim to study the peasantry of the mid-nineteenth century without a detailed analysis of the mechanisms for the spreading of rumor?[12] On the afternoon of a fair, a social theater unfurled, consisting of exchanges of words, looks, gestures and smells, taking place within the warm, deafening, overcrowded inns located close to the market meeting place.

It is important, in conclusion, to guard against pessimism, while being well aware that all that concerns the history of sensorial behavior and the affective mechanisms forms simply a program of research. Such analyses, inexact though they may be, reveal cleavages of an anthropological nature. The Westerners of the nineteenth century – and this is just one example suggested by our temporal and geographical field of study – attached such importance to analysis of the sensory environment and to description of the ways in which the senses were used when they engaged in social observation, that it is essential to tackle this difficult subject. We will never fully understand this period if we stop at the study of statuses, positions, degrees of wealth or signs of condition. The most important cleavages were then to do, if not with biology,[13] at least with the habitus. The organization of the sensory regime constitutes one of the major elements in the formation of the social imagination. This is not to say that the latter is simple; far from it. It resulted from a permanent tension between the conviction that the senses then called 'social' – sight and hearing – were the most noble, but that touch was certainly the fundamental sense which gave experience of objects, whilst taste and smell, senses of survival, revealed the true nature of things.

Social cleavages echoed this dichotomy. The decreed hierarchy of the senses both ordered and reflected the hierarchy that functioned within society. The way in which individuals made use of touch, smell, hearing and sight made it possible to distinguish two groups: the first were in constant contact with the inertia of matter, were accustomed to exhausting toil, and were spontaneously capable of feeling with their flesh an animal pleasure, produced by contact; the second, thanks to their education in and habit of social commerce, and their freedom from manual labour, were able to enjoy

the beauty of an object, demonstrate delicacy, subdue the instinct of the affective senses, and allow the brain to establish a temporal gap between desire and its gratification. The balance that was decreed in the use of the senses justified the logic of social cleavages, and both delineated in depth and legitimized the decisive hierarchies.

In a century too hastily defined as that of money, the major cleavages were ordered round the distinction between immediacy and the imposition of delays, submission to direct contact and the capacity to keep a distance. In the last analysis, what was decisive was the degree of delicacy of the hand, the greater or lesser aptitude to silence and detachment, the level of the thresholds of tolerance, the unequal vulnerability to disgust and enthusiasm suggested by refinement. In all this, the regime of the sensory values was closely involved.

Notes

1. For a critique of this notion, see the proceedings of the conference on 'Histoire des sciences et mentalités' held at the University of Paris-1 on 19 March 1983 and published in *Revue de synthèse* (1983): 111–12.
2. Both articles reprinted in Febvre (1953).
3. For a critique of this notion, see in particular Chartier (1983).
4. It should be said that Guy Thuillier has much refined his analysis since 1977; his excellent section on the gaze in his *L'imaginaire quotidien au XIX^e siècle* (1985) takes account of some of these reservations.
5. I quote this conflict because I lived through it. Guy Thuillier (1977: 242) has stressed that 'village chronicles are extremely rich in the history of bells' in the nineteenth century.
6. Paradoxically, specialists in ancient history, long accustomed to reading anthropology, are here better informed than historians of the nineteenth century. I refer, in particular, to the fine book by Marcel Detienne ([1972] 1977).
7. A number of nineteenth century authors relate occupation and the ways in which the senses were employed. Without wishing to deny the influence of occupation, it must be remembered that nineteenth century social observers' taste for professional taxonomy risks exaggerating this type of criterion. Nevertheless, the flair required of the policeman, given the poverty of methods of identification, and the gaze of the medical practitioner in this golden age of clinical medicine, are good examples of the influence of profession on the use of the senses; though we should not forget professional expertise.
8. For the coherence between the description of space and the social scene, see M.-N. Bourget (1988).
9. Whilst at the same time emphasising how much the people relied on this inferior sense.

10. The marquis de Mallet, in 1866, discussing the peasants of the northern part of the department of Dordogne, quoted in Corbin (1992).

11. Guy Thuillier (1985: 6–12) emphasizes the persistence of the ancient 'policing of the gaze' right up to the mid nineteenth century in convents and in girls' boarding schools; after which there was a 'liberation of the gaze,' in particular at oneself, before watching television imposed new forms of captivity.'

12. See the special number of *Genre humain*, 5 (1982), 'La Rumeur.'

13. For the growth of biological depreciation in the discourse hostile to the nobility, see de Baecque (1989).

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