

SARAH PINK

The future of sensory anthropology/the anthropology of the senses

I

A focus on the senses has become a key theme in contemporary anthropology. In this short piece I suggest that this focus can be understood in terms of two strands, the original anthropology of the senses on the one hand, and the newer sensory anthropology on the other. Given the recent rapid development of interest in this field, an assessment of its status and speculation about its future is now rather timely.

A sensory anthropology implies a 're-thought' anthropology, informed by theories of sensory perception, rather than a sub-discipline exclusively or empirically about the senses. Rather like the cumulative 're-thinkings' of anthropology over the last decades this adds to the discipline having become (albeit unevenly) reflexive, gendered, embodied and visual, while rejecting 'traditional' forms of cross-cultural comparison, and disassociating the relationship between culture and place. Notably these re-thinkings have parallels across cognate disciplines and indeed bring the research and theoretical commitments of anthropologists closer to those of some geographers and sociologists. Anthropologists are increasingly attending to arts and media practices and are engaging more closely with public and applied roles. While the former shifts enable anthropologists to re-think the discipline with other anthropologists, all of these moves encourage interdisciplinary collaborations. A contemporary sensory anthropology is thus inevitably intertwined with the lasting residues of these other revisions and the connections they forge in interdisciplinary fields.

Sensory anthropology both has its roots in and departs from the anthropological study of sensory perception and categories that characterises the anthropology of the senses. While the former engages directly across disciplines, the latter is more specialised. While in some contexts it has great potential, it has fewer possibilities. Some of which include providing examples that contest the universality of modern western categories or as part of interdisciplinary research that shares a focus on the senses as its object of study. Indeed, the anthropology of the senses informed by the principles outlined above would be subsumed as part of sensory anthropology.

What then might be the future of sensory anthropology? Below I outline two possible areas of influence – as part of interdisciplinary scholarship and as a leading approach to innovative interdisciplinary ethnography.

Sensory anthropology is essentially an interdisciplinary approach. It is dependent on other disciplines for its foundational ideas. This signifies one of its departures from the anthropology of the senses. Philosophical principles are influential in understanding

sensory perception across academic disciplines, not least anthropology, but also in sociology, sports studies, geography; and new neurological studies offer essential understandings of sensory perception and experience. Basing the approach in these disciplines departs from the anthropology of the senses as established in the 1990s. Then David Howes proposed a programme of comparison of the varying hierarchies or sensory 'orders' found in different cultures (Howes and Classen 1991: 257). While certainly revisionary for its time, the approach was also traditional in its purpose to explore 'how the patterning of sense experience varies from one culture to the next in accordance with the meaning and emphasis attached to each of the modalities of perception' (Howes 1991: 3). It was attached to a comparative anthropology that was increasingly rejected by the 1990s. Tim Ingold (2000) further criticised Howes' approach, calling for a re-focusing of a sensory anthropology on experience and perception. Drawing on the philosophy of perception (Merleau-Ponty) and ecological psychology (Gibson), Ingold's work suggested that separating out sensory modalities as Howes proposed situates them in disembodied 'culture' and is incompatible with an anthropology that understands learning and knowing as situated in embodied practice and movement. Equally, recent work by neurologists suggests that understandings based on the idea of differentially sensing modalities attached to specific sense organs should be replaced by understandings of the senses as interconnected in human perception – in that 'the five senses do not travel along separate channels, but interact to a degree few scientists would have believed only a decade ago' (Cytowic 2010: 46).

Contemporary anthropological work around the senses is emerging in parallel and sometimes in relation to similar developments in sensory geography, sociology, psychology and the 'interdisciplines' of health studies, sports studies, learning studies and more. Often these developments share a commitment to phenomenology, practice theories, and non-representational theory. Yet, no longer identified with its prior role of providing cross-cultural comparisons, what is the future of anthropology in interdisciplinary sensory scholarship? Sensory anthropology is emerging in the context of an interdisciplinary field of practice and theory. Do we still need the anthropology of the senses? Or should anthropologists recognise that they work as increasingly interdisciplinary scholars?

One field where anthropology still has a claim to being a founding discipline is in ethnographic practice. Approaches to ethnography that engage with the senses, however, are often developed in the context of 'innovative' and interdisciplinary research methods. Thus, long-term ethnographic fieldwork, which for some remains anthropology's defining practice, is being surpassed by 'sensory' methods developed across the 'ethnographic' disciplines. Such methods that appreciate and engage with the senses and the theoretical principles outlined above include walking methods and collaborations with artists. They might be located in research projects that explore how people make place or experience inequalities in their everyday lives – rather than the meaning of kinship, ritual and symbol. They ask questions, make theoretical commitments and use methods that depart from social anthropology as it developed in the 20th century – intellectually, practically and through social intervention agendas.

An example is the increasing interest in walking as a research method. Informed by theories of knowing, movement and empathy, walking can be a multisensory everyday life practice that may be shared with others to enable researchers to understand their practices, perspectives, experiences and places. While anthropologists have played a leading role in these developments (e.g. Lee and Ingold 2006), their work should not

be understood in isolation from that of geographers and sociologists (O'Neill and Hubbard 2010; Edensor 2010). Artists engage with similar approaches (and theoretical foundations) to social scientists, making walking central to their practices in ways ranging from informing their representations to how the public engage with their art (Hubbard *et al.* 2010), opening up possibilities for interdisciplinary collaborations.

Renewed ways of thinking about the relationship between sensory categories and sensory perception have led to a new sensory anthropology. This is relevant both in terms of the theoretical influences of sensory anthropology and in its contemporary practice. It charts a future for sensory anthropology that is embedded in a context of interdisciplinarity – in terms of the principles that inform a sensory approach, the ‘sharing’ of research methods across disciplines and the potential for interdisciplinary collaboration in the production and dissemination of research.

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DAVID HOWES

Response to Sarah Pink

II

What are the differences between ‘the anthropology of the senses’ and ‘sensory anthropology’? In her eagerness to establish ‘sensory anthropology’ as the way of the future, Sarah Pink has engaged in a good deal of shadow boxing, aiming blows at an ‘anthropology of the senses’ that exists solely in her imagination. From where,

for example, does she derive the idea that the anthropology of the senses distinguishes itself as 'a sub-discipline exclusively or empirically about the senses'? This view is directly countered in Constance Classen's 'Foundations for an anthropology of the senses', where she writes that: 'The broad range of applications for a sensory analysis of culture indicates that the anthropology of the senses need not only be a "sub-field" within anthropology, but may provide a fruitful perspective from which to examine many different anthropological concerns' (Classen 1997: 409). That this has, indeed, become the case is evidenced by the work of numerous scholars who have employed the approach of the anthropology of the senses to explore subjects that range from learning Japanese dance (Hahn 2007) to living in diaspora (Law 2004), and from interrogating the display practices of museums (Edwards *et al.* 2006) to understanding the medical process of distinguishing 'fine' from 'sick' (Hay 2008; see further Robben and Sluka 2007: Part VIII: Sensorial fieldwork).

Another misrepresentation put forward by Pink is that anthropologists of the senses have neglected to look outside the disciplinary boundaries of anthropology. In fact, anthropologists of the senses have from the start engaged with the work of scholars in related fields in order to develop a feel for the new endeavour and initiate dialogue. I myself, having collaborated in the exploration of the cultural life of the senses with sociologists, historians, scholars of religion, geographers, market analysts, artists and architects, am very surprised to hear from Pink that the anthropology of the senses does not have an interdisciplinary orientation. I invite anyone who wishes to learn more about the cross-disciplinary study of the senses to have a look at the Sensory Studies website (sensorystudies.org), a joint initiative of the Concordia Sensoria Research Team (CONSERT) and colleagues in the Institute of English, Germanic and Romance Studies at the University of Copenhagen. The site was launched in March 2010.

A third 'straw man' set up by Pink is that the anthropology of the senses insists on 'separating out sensory modalities'. Although this approach may at times be useful, the emphasis in the anthropology of the senses, particularly in recent work, has rather been on the relationships among the senses. For example, I wrote in the introduction to the anthology *Empire of the Senses*: 'The most prominent theme of the essays collected here is what may be called intersensoriality, that is, the multi-directional interaction of the senses and of sensory ideologies' (Howes 2004: 9). As the above quote indicates, the anthropology of the senses has developed and moved in new directions since its beginnings some 20 years ago. This is a fact of which Pink, who cites no work in the field later than 1991, seems oblivious. One instance of this development involves a shift from an original interest in sensory symbolism to a contemporary concern with sensory experience and practice.

Are there then any real differences between 'sensory anthropology', as described by Sarah Pink and the more established 'anthropology of the senses'? The term 'sensory anthropology' may seem to better convey the notion of a sensuous approach to anthropological research than 'the anthropology of the senses'; however, as suggested by Classen (1997), the anthropology of the senses has always been concerned with the senses as a means of inquiry and not solely as an object of study. In order to underline the sensuous nature of the project, I once suggested that the new field be called 'sensorial anthropology' (Howes 1991). Paul Stoller, similarly, coined the phrase 'sensuous scholarship' to indicate the importance of embodied experience in ethnographic work (Stoller 1997). Nevertheless, 'the anthropology of the senses' evidently had a certain ring to it and it became the term of art. Personally, I, like many

others, use a range of terms to describe my work (including both those Pink would put in contention), and will continue to do so.

Pink's proposal for a 'new' sensory anthropology, hence, refers to a number of practices and principles that are already operative within the anthropology of the senses. There is, however, one principle that I hold to be key to the cultural study of the senses that Pink appears to disregard. That principle is to attend to and respect indigenous experiences and understandings of perception. By stating that anthropologists should look to neurology for 'essential understandings of sensory perception and experience', Pink makes it clear that any indigenous ideas about perception must play second fiddle to the 'essential' pronouncements of the neurologists. While I think that dialogue between anthropologists and neurologists can be informative for both sides (indeed, anthropologists might be able to tell neurologists something about how culture tunes the neurons), it is important to keep in mind that neuroscience is itself a product of culture in its particular research aims, methods and interpretations, and therefore cannot provide an a-cultural, a-historical paradigm for understanding cultural phenomena (Howes 2010).

Another way in which Pink undermines the cultural importance and authority of indigenous models of perception is by promoting a phenomenological approach to the study of the senses, in the style of Tim Ingold. While I would never discount Ingold the way Pink does the work of CONSERT, I do have a number of criticisms of his approach. For one, by universalising the subjective sensations of the individual, phenomenology ignores the extent to which perception is a cultural construct. Culturally informed practices that differ from one's own are inaccessible from a purely phenomenological perspective (see Howes 2005: 29). And why has no one called Ingold on the fact that the 'environment' he posits in *The perception of the environment* is one in which you can look, listen, and are always on the move, but not taste or smell? It is a profoundly impoverished environment, sensorially and culturally, which is one of the risks of practising a phenomenology unadulterated by anthropology. Ingold's mode of studying the senses opens the door to slipping back into a conventional Western sensory view of the world in which the 'lower' senses count for little. A phenomenology drawn from a more tasteful source, such as Indian aesthetics, might produce a very different understanding of the environment (Howes 2010).

Phenomenology also has the drawback, particularly from the perspective of the social sciences, of emphasising the individual and the subjective over the communal and social, and in consequence having little to say about the politics of perception.

Furthermore, Merleau-Ponty, on whom Ingold relies, is well known for emphasising the 'synergy' and 'intertranslatability' of the senses. This naive emphasis on some primal, 'prereflective' (in Merleau-Ponty's term) unity overlooks all the ways in which the senses conflict with one another as regards both physical experience and cultural values: for example, the sensory dissonance produced by encountering a holy man who looks ugly but emits a fragrant odour of sanctity, or the stick in water that looks different to the eye from how it feels in the hand. The senses do not always work together or convey the same message. This makes sensory perception far more complex – and interesting – than phenomenologists imagine.

Sarah Pink presents the practice of walking as an embodied research method on which a sensory anthropology may be centred. While a time-honoured practice within anthropology with much to commend it, it seems to me a rather pedestrian way to ground such a sensational enterprise as the anthropological exploration of the senses. Why not clubbing (Jackson 2004), dancing (Argentinean tango, *nihon buyo*), or even

fighting (mixed martial arts, capoeira)? These are the areas where a good deal of the research action is today, and they have the advantage of providing vibrant, interactive and provocative models for engaging with the cultural life of the senses. These practices would remind us that the senses may conflict as well as collaborate, they may fight with each other as well as dance together. Indeed, the same might be said of scholars of the senses, who may coincide or differ on many points without I hope, jeopardising the growth of the ‘perceptual field’ as a vital area for investigation.

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SARAH PINK

Response to David Howes

III

Personally I find academic jousting less than appealing, yet I feel myself obliged to outline, in what follows, why David Howes’ comments are unfounded. The only straw persons¹ in this interchange are of Howes’ own making. My aim has been to explore

1 I prefer this to the gendered term.

how a shift from the original anthropology of the senses to what I would refer to as a sensory anthropology might be conceptualised. Howes complains that my focus on the anthropology of the senses attends to how this was outlined in his earlier (1991) work and neglects the 'shift from an original interest in sensory symbolism to a contemporary concern with sensory experience and practice' in his later work. Ironically, much in the spirit of Howes' own comments, my point was to identify this shift, and it was not my intention to imply that Howes himself had not been not involved in it. Below I reiterate and develop my argument by responding to specific points.

A first straw person is Howes' claim that I described the anthropology of the senses as 'a sub-discipline exclusively or empirically about the senses'. Howes has inferred this to construct a criticism of a point I did not make myself at all. My argument was that the scope of a sensory anthropology should go beyond the anthropological study of the senses but may include the study of culturally constructed sensory categories (as in my own work (Pink 2004)).

A second misreading is represented in Howes' comment that 'another misrepresentation put forward by Pink is that anthropologists of the senses have neglected to look outside the disciplinary boundaries of anthropology'. My argument is not that 'the anthropology of the senses [as Howes has developed it] does not have an interdisciplinary orientation'. Rather my point is that the scholarly practice of studying the senses anthropologically is inferred by the term anthropology of the senses (even if this is not exactly how Howes would now see its scope). A sensory anthropology can be thought of differently: as an approach to doing anthropology that is informed by theories of the senses originating outside anthropology. It involves answering anthropological questions in ways that are informed by theories of the senses (whether or not these are modern western theories). Thus a sensory anthropology does not 'put in contention' the anthropology of the senses, as Howes puts it, but rather situates it. In *Doing sensory ethnography* (2009) I discuss and recommend aspects of both approaches and acknowledge how they might be integrated.

Howes accuses me of disregarding the principle of attending to and respecting 'indigenous experiences and understandings of perception'. I nowhere propose this. Howes' understanding is erroneously built on the basis of my proposal that western philosophy and science might usefully inform sensory anthropology. While philosophy and science are indeed as Howes stresses, cultural constructs, I would point out that so is anthropology. Are not anthropologists unavoidably complicit in the (re)constitution of a discipline that somehow frames indigenous understandings when they participate in anthropological theory-building? What is needed is a reflexive awareness of this and an understanding of how anthropological and indigenous knowledges can become interwoven. Thus, to return to the terminology and its implications, to understand other people's experiences involves precisely turning away from the anthropology of research subjects and cultures towards doing anthropology with participants in research.

One last misreading that exemplifies the generally shaky foundations of Howes' response: Howes writes that 'Sarah Pink presents the practice of walking as an embodied research method on which a sensory anthropology may be centred'. My paragraph starts with the sentence 'An *example* is the increasing interest in walking as a research method.' I don't think I need to point out his mistake (although the now added italics provide a clue).

In a context where a series of cognate disciplines and interdisciplinary areas are increasingly being influenced by a common set of principles for understanding sensory

perception, experience and practice, I believe a rethinking of how we conceptualise anthropology around the senses is required. The label of anthropology of the senses suggests a sub-discipline that entails using anthropological concepts and theories to study the senses. Yet the practices and approaches of anthropologists who do work around the senses surpass this. I have long since been influenced by and appreciative of the terminology of Stoller's (1997) 'sensuous scholarship' (Howes accuses me of ignoring this), and as Howes himself points out in 1991 he suggested a 'sensorial anthropology' (Howes 1991). In our current crisis when academic time is increasingly squeezed, perhaps spending it quibbling over a label would seem superfluous. Yet I believe it is important, in that surely when presenting anthropology to the 'outside' we should be accurate in labelling what we are doing. I feel more comfortable telling potential collaborators from other disciplines that I take an anthropological approach that is influenced by theories of sensory perception and that attends to how people use sensory categories. And I would call this a sensory anthropology rather than an anthropology of the senses. This is moreover not simply a minor quibble because there are wider issues at stake that also have implications for other anthropologies, when and why do we speak of an anthropologies of gender or media and when gendered anthropology and media anthropology? When are we doing applied anthropology and when are we doing the anthropology of applied interventions? Of course, there is some blurring at these boundaries, but the distinctions are important.

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DAVID HOWES

Response to Sarah Pink

IV

Having dealt with specific issues in my first response, it seems beneficial at this point to broaden the discussion into a more general consideration of the present and future of the senses in anthropology.

The growing awareness of the role of sensory expression and experience in communicating and shaping culture has been one of the most exciting developments in

recent anthropology. Whereas the anthropology of the senses may have once been taken by some to be a narrow field, this is no longer the case. We have reached a point where the senses are understood to have a wide-reaching relevance across anthropological fields. As Ulf Hannerz recently noted, with this new approach: 'Political anthropology . . . becomes an anthropology of the senses, an anthropology of emotion, an anthropology of the body' (Hannerz 2006: 278). The significance of this development will be recognised by those aware of how close perception came to being erased from anthropology in the 1980s – as exemplified in the statement by Stephen Tyler that 'perception has nothing to do with [ethnography]' (Tyler 1986: 137).

As Hannerz makes clear, the study of the senses overlaps with and indeed cannot be separated from, other fields of concern. This was brought out in a number of influential anthropological works in the late 20th century, such as Michael Taussig's sensuous engagement with the history and politics of cultural contact in *Mimesis and alterity* (1993), Feld and Basso's excursion into the relationship between place-making and sensory experience in *Senses of place* (1996), and Alfred Gell's discussion of the sensory dimensions of aesthetic expression in *Art and agency* (1998). New ground continues to be broken in the 21st century with a sensorial approach informing work on such central topics as the body (Geurts 2002), food (Sutton 2010), media (Laplantine 2005) and material culture (Tilley *et al.* 2006: Part II). An anthropological approach to the senses is also increasingly being applied to the analysis of issues of social concern, including poverty, social violence and the environment.

However, while new areas of interest are opening up in the field of sensorial anthropology, I trust that work will continue to be carried out in such traditional anthropological subjects as kinship, patterns of exchange, and symbols and rituals. Although kinship, for example, may not be a particularly appealing area of study for some anthropologists today, it is nonetheless a subject of vital relevance for many peoples. Fortunately, the subject has not been ignored by anthropologists interested in the senses. Indeed, one of the many excellent talks given at a symposium I recently helped organise on 'Explorations in sensory anthropology' examined the interplay of kinship relations and taste qualities among the Uitoto of Colombia (McLachlan 2010).

The anthropology of the senses has also moved outside its own disciplinary domain to contribute to and be informed by the development of a 'history of the senses', a 'geography of the senses', a 'literature of the senses', and so on. The genealogy of the term 'anthropology of the senses' itself suggests some of the give-and-take that has taken place between anthropology and related disciplines. First (apparently) used by a reviewer in 1973 to sum up Edmund Carpenter's provocative book, *Oh, what a blow that phantom gave me!*, the term was then employed by an historian in 1986 to describe Alain Corbin's incisive study of odour and the social imagination in 18th- and 19th-century France, *The foul and the fragrant* (Porter 1986; see Howes 1989). After this the term was brought back into anthropology to refer not to specific works but to a whole way of examining the senses in culture and exploring culture through the senses.

There can no longer be any question that anthropological approaches and research can be highly relevant to work carried out in cognate disciplines, nor that the reverse also holds true. For this to continue to be the case, however, it is important that the disciplines concerned do not cut themselves off from their own roots. Anthropology, and specifically here the anthropology of the senses, needs to be attentive to its own historical formation and its own particular research methodologies and theoretical

considerations if it is to continue to provide a distinctive approach to the study of culture.

Moreover, however stimulating and productive it may be to engage with the work of scholars from other disciplines on the senses, it remains important to ensure, to the extent possible, that no academic or scientific model of the senses be viewed as 'essential' to understanding the senses in any given culture. The way should always be left open for indigenous paradigms of perception to 'break through' anthropological or historical or philosophical or neurological models of perception.

In a discussion of the future of the history of the body in 1990, the eminent British historian Roy Porter wrote that what that field needed was not new catch-phrases nor new metaphysical approaches, but the 'thick-textured study of the body' (Porter 1990: 49). I feel that 'thickly-textured studies' – engaging with primary material, informed about significant work in the field, and raising new issues for consideration – are also what are most needed in the area of sensory anthropology. However, while Porter feared that such 'thickly-textured' analyses would not be forthcoming in a history of the body increasingly concerned with metadiscourses, I find ample evidence that their production will continue and grow among anthropologists engaging with the cultural life of the senses.

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