Ways of Sensing
Understanding the senses in society

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The ways we use our senses, and the ways we create and understand the sensory world, are shaped by culture. Perception is informed not only by the personal meaning a particular sensation has for us, but also by the social values it carries. We are perhaps best able to recognize this in the case of sight. Along with its physiological and practical importance, sight has a high cultural value in Western society. It has been exalted as a ‘noble’ sense and associated with both spiritual and intellectual enlightenment. The traditional link between vision and knowledge was enhanced when books and paintings became more commonplace after the Renaissance, and by the invention of photography and film in the nineteenth century. With the advent of televisions and personal computers in the twentieth century even more of our information about the world came to us through our eyes.

It is not only how, and how much, we see that is shaped by culture, however, it is also what we see. The subject matter of paintings reflects not only the preferences of artists and patrons, and not only the reigning artistic conventions, but also particular ideologies that support – or sometimes challenge – the social values and hierarchies of the day. In *Ways of Seeing*, John Berger argued that the convention of perspective, developed during the Renaissance, contributed to the growth of individualism in the West by centring everything on the eye of the observer. ‘The visible world is arranged for the spectator as the universe was once thought to be arranged for God’ (Berger 1972: 16). The viewer becomes the unique centre, pried loose, as it were, from the hierarchized, communal structure of the medieval social order.

Photographs, while appearing more value-neutral than paintings, also carry cultural messages by capturing certain scenes and leaving others unrecorded, or by portraying subjects so as to convey notions of power or weakness, amity or aggressivity, attractiveness or repulsion. Studies on bias in media photography have shown, for example, that in *The New York Times* foreign perpetrators of violence are consistently represented as more explicitly violent than US perpetrators. This fosters perceptions of foreigners being aggressive and dangerous (Fishman and Marvin 2003). In 1990 the Royal Ontario Museum came under attack by community groups for displaying colonial photographs that showed Africans as subservient to and dominated by Westerners without sufficient
critical commentary or contrasting imagery. The assumption of some visitors was that the museum was upholding the racist values of the colonial era (Butler 2007). There are many instances of the apparent objectivity of photography being used to advantage by propagandists to influence the perception of events (Sturken and Cartwright 2009).

What is true of sight is also true of hearing. Like sight, hearing has a strong association with the intellect. This is due to the importance of speech as a means of communication. In fact, for many centuries the ability to hear and to speak was taken to be the prime indicator of an ability to reason. For this reason, the deaf were long treated as mentally incompetent in Western law and society.

Even aside from speech, sounds have meanings that can only be fully understood within their particular cultural context. Music is perhaps the best example of this. Certain themes will evoke particular concepts and emotions due to their cultural associations. To give a basic example from the modern West, Mendelssohn’s Wedding March instantly conjures up images of marriage for most hearers while Chopin’s Funeral March evokes funereal thoughts, even among those who are unaware of the titles of these pieces. (This ability of music to evoke old associations and create new ones is, of course, central to cinematic scoring.) A non-Westerner, however, could listen to these pieces without any such associations. Similarly, a Westerner listening to, for example, the music produced by the Desana people of the Colombian rainforest would have no cultural associations beyond, perhaps, ‘exotic’ or ‘tribal’. However, for the Desana, different musical sounds and melodies carry definite meanings. In the case of one type of flute music: ‘The melody is said to be of a merry kind and is associated with the image of a multitude of fish running upriver to the spawning beds. The vibrations produced by the sounds are said to trigger a message which refers to child-rearing’ (Reichel-Dolmatoff 1981: 91). These are instances of sounds being invested with cultural significance, of ‘ways of hearing’.

During a recent seminar on the History of the Senses at the University of Toronto, a graduate student interested in the auditory mix of European and indigenous ‘soundways’ in colonial Canada asked whether certain reactions to music are not universal. Doesn’t a pounding beat always evoke a physiological response of excitement? Perhaps it usually does, but the degree of excitement will vary from one culture to another and from one period to another according to how accustomed people are to hearing such music and what it signifies for them. For example, in the 1960s the driving beat of Beatles’ songs was often experienced as highly disturbing and attributed a vague cultural association with ‘savagery’. Today, when early Beatles’ songs seem rather charming and innocent to many people, it would even be possible to use one as a lullaby. Our ways of hearing that music have changed.

Particular practices of looking and listening are also shaped by cultural factors. In the modern classroom, the ability to remain still for long periods of time solely looking and listening is a prerequisite for academic success. In cultures in which education is a more active process involving all of the senses and bodily movement, looking and listening would only be one part of the educational process (see Bateson and Mead 1942 on kinaesthetic learning).

In eighteenth-century Paris, going to the opera to listen to the music was thought to be decidedly gauche. ‘There is nothing so damnable,’ one nobleman declared, ‘as listening to a work like a street merchant or some provincial just off the boat’ (cited in Johnson 1996: 31). The assumption was that upper-class Parisians were so familiar with musical conventions that they need scarcely attend to performances. What required listening to and watching instead were the conversations that took place and the appearance and movements of the fashionable crowd.

The invention of the telephone, the radio and sound-recording devices enhanced both our power of hearing and the number of things to listen to. Such modern media of communication as film, television and computers bring both sight and sound together to present sensorially-limited but culturally and psychologically powerful representations of the world. Indeed, so accustomed have we become to audiovisual representations that we almost take this pairing of sound and sight as given in nature, rather than by culture and technology. Olfactory-visual or audio-gustatory pairings would hardly seem as convincing.

That sight and hearing, the two most highly valued senses in the West, are mediated by culture may perhaps be readily appreciated. The notion of ‘the period eye’ and ‘the educated listener’ are commonplace. To what extent, however, can the senses of touch, taste and smell model and transmit cultural values? This is a subject that has been far less often considered, primarily because cognition is not usually associated with the ‘lower’ senses in modern culture. Indeed, one clear sign of the cultural importance of sight and hearing in our society is the sheer volume of academic and scientific work dedicated to the exploration of these senses compared to the vastly-reduced interest in the study of the other senses.

To what extent are touch, taste and smell worthy of extended cultural consideration? We know they are of great practical importance and that they afford us sensations of pleasure and pain, but they are typically represented as subjective and private – chaus à son goût. Do they have any cognitive value? Can thought be based on tactile sensations, for example? For most of Western history the standard answer would have been no. A person born blind and deaf was generally supposed incapable of any understanding, as wanting all those senses which furnish the human mind with ideas (Rapalje 1887: 3). We now know, however, that this is incorrect. As the deaf-blind Helen Keller famously demonstrated in the early twentieth century, it is possible to experience a socially and symbolically-meaningful world through touch, smell and taste alone and to communicate and think using tactile sign language.

There is no reason to think that this ability to transmit and receive ideas through the so-called lower senses is restricted to those who lack the senses of sight and hearing. In fact, it is the contention of this book that ideas are communicated through sensory impressions all the time. There are
Introduction

Due to the low status of the 'lower' senses, when such prohibitions concern what we sense is also to say that there is a politics of the senses. Our ways of perceiving and social formations they favour and what information they withhold.

To return to the example of the handshake, in Japan, where non-contact greetings are the rule, the handshake, when performed, is usually done limply. This might well be misinterpreted by a Westerner as signifying weakness, but is in fact a sign of social tact, conveying respect for the other person's bodily boundaries. In countries in which a kiss is a customary social greeting, a mere handshake may seem cold and even offensive. While French President Jacques Chirac bestowed a Gallic kiss on most of the leaders at the Franco-African Summit in 2003, he greeted the Zimbabwean dictator Robert Mugabe with only a lukewarm handshake, signifying France's displeasure with his regime. These kinds of nuances in 'body language' require a full-bodied approach to be properly recognized and interpreted.

The term 'ways of sensing', as used here, underscores the plurality of sensory practices in different cultures and historical periods – ways – and the processual nature of perception – sensing. We also intend the term to draw attention to the manifold relations among the different senses, which can be called 'intersensoriality' (see Howes 2005a: 9–10; Smith 2007: 125–28).

This brings us to another key point. Equally significant to the ways in which the senses are practiced are the ways in which a society decides that they should not be used: when and what we must not see, or touch, or taste.

The politics of the senses

To say that perception is shaped by culture and that society regulates how and what we sense is also to say that there is a politics of the senses. Our ways of culturally-modulated ways of touching, tasting and smelling and culturally-meaningful textures, tastes and smells. Within every field of social endeavour, explicit or implicit significance is ascribed to different sensations and sensory practices, whether visual and auditory, or tactile, olfactory and gustatory.

Sense and polysemy

The significance of a sensory act is not necessarily unitary. The way in which a doctor touches a patient during a physical examination, for example, may be taken as primarily a data-gathering process or may have personal meaning for the participants ('This doctor has a caring touch'). However, as we will examine in the chapter on medicine, it also has a particular social history and an important symbolic significance.

Even sensory acts that have recognized social functions have many shades of meaning. A handshake may be variously interpreted as a gesture of friendliness, an attempt to dominate, an act of condescension, an invitation to intimacy, a show of equality, a bridging of differences, the sealing of a contract, or a breach of etiquette. When the Australian Prime Minister Julia Gillard shook hands with Queen Elizabeth II instead of curtsying she was technically committing a breach of etiquette. Within the cultural context of Australia's former status as a British colony, however, what might seem like a simple social gaffe was instead an important symbolic gesture of equality and modernity. When Queen Elizabeth shook hands with a former commander of the Irish Republican Army, the act had very different connotations: it was seen as a dramatic act of reconciliation, 'the ultimate handshake' between persons representing two old enemies.

If the eighteenth-century wit Sydney Smith is a reliable guide, a considerable variety of handshaking styles and significations existed in his day. The 'high official' handshake consisted of 'a rapid short shake, near the chin', in the clerical handshake only one finger was held out, while in the 'rustic handshake', 'your hand is seized in an iron grasp, betokening rude health, warm heart and a distance from the Metropolis; but producing a sense of relief on your part when you find your hand released and your fingers unbroken' (cited in Classen 2005a: 16). The range of connotations that can be communicated by a simple handshake demonstrates that tactile acts are not simply the physical labour that allows us to engage in other socially meaningful acts, such as writing books or creating art, but potentially highly meaningful in themselves (see further Gregory 2011; Smith 2008).

Another reason to attend to the full range of sensory experience and expression is that cultures differ in the emphases they place on different senses and the meanings they give to different sensory acts. This difference can affect peoples' perceptions at a very basic level. In the West, for example, the sun has traditionally been seen above all as a source of light. However, the Tzotzil of Mexico, who emphasize thermal values in their culture, think of the sun pre-eminently as a source of heat, and even call it 'Our Father Heat' (Classen 1993a: 122–26). The Batek Negrito of peninsular Malaysia, who classify virtually everything in their environment by smell, say that the sun has a bad smell, 'like that of raw meat', in contrast to the moon, which has a good smell, 'like that of flowers' (Endacott 1979: 39).

These are particularly striking examples. However, such sensory variation in emphasis and meaning can occur in many subtler ways across cultures, as well. For example, the Australian Prime Minister Julia Gillard shook hands with Queen Elizabeth II instead of curtsying she was technically committing a breach of etiquette. Within the cultural context of Australia's former status as a British colony, however, what might seem like a simple social gaffe was instead an important symbolic gesture of equality and modernity. When Queen Elizabeth shook hands with a former commander of the Irish Republican Army, the act had very different connotations: it was seen as a dramatic act of reconciliation, 'the ultimate handshake' between persons representing two old enemies.

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This brings us to another key point. Equally significant to the ways in which the senses are practiced are the ways in which a society decides that they should not be used: when and what we must not see, or touch, or taste. Due to the low status of the 'lower' senses, when such prohibitions concern these senses they often attract little attention in Western society. Does it matter that we can't touch in the museum if we can supposedly learn all that is worth knowing about art through our eyes? Let us begin, however, by at least acknowledging that in certain cases, such as that of the museum, ways of seeing are also ways of not touching. Then let us consider, as we shall in the chapter on art, what such constraints signify, how they arose, what sensory and social formations they favour and what information they withhold.

To say that perception is shaped by culture and that society regulates how and what we sense is also to say that there is a politics of the senses. Our ways of...
sensing affect not only how we experience and engage with our environment, but also how we experience and engage with each other. This is clearly seen when we examine sensory values and practices in relationship to values and practices concerning gender, class and ethnicity, as we shall in Chapter 3. From the dominant male perspective in the West, women have been perceived as desirable to see and touch and hear, but also dangerous. Women were considered morally dangerous because of the temptation to sin they presented, intellectually dangerous because their sensuality threatened masculine rationality, and even physically dangerous, because a woman’s seductive touch might sap a man’s physical powers. Biblical and mythological accounts expressed and promoted this view: Samson losing his great strength as a result of Delilah’s seductions, John the Baptist losing his head as a result of Salome’s dance, or Ulysses and his men being turned into animals by the sorceress Circe. Even the pre-eminent exemplar of male rationality, Aristotle, was depicted by legend as losing his rationality when he allowed the beautiful Phyllis to bridle him and ride on his back.

In Western tradition, the sight, sound and touch of men were also understood to be desired by and dangerous for women. However, as men held the dominant position within society, it was the masculine perspective that held sway and was endlessly reproduced in stories and pictures, and supported by religious, legal and social codes. Thus, we find many regulations concerning the containment of women. The clothing of women and their sensoriality was imagined to take care of several problems at once: it removed a dangerous temptation from men’s sight and touch, it protected women from masculine desires and from their own sensual passions, and it prevented women from challenging male dominance. One who is not supposed to speak in public or be seen on the street, who is not allowed to hold religious or political office or attend university, will find it difficult to effectively contest her social status. Women were traditionally adjured to keep their eyes downcast, their hearing guarded, their movements restricted and to generally limit their interaction with the outside world. In a sixteenth-century poem called ‘Rule for Women to Brynge Up Their Daughters’ the penalties for infringing these restrictions are drastic.

If they wyll go or gad abrode,
Their legges let broken bee:
Put out their eyes if they wyll looke
Or gase unduecentely.

(cited by Hull 1982: 76)

Cocooned within the home, women were expected to engage in housework associated with the senses of touch, taste and smell while men went out and saw the world.

In the contemporary West it is easy to forget for how long and to what extent women were bundled out of sight and hearing in this way: concealed within the home and metaphorically, when not physically, veiled outside of it. An example of the extent to which women might be hidden away even in the modern West can be found in nineteenth-century Lima (as well as in certain towns of southern Spain), where the traditional wearing of the saya y manto, or petticoat and head shawl, left a woman swathed from head to foot with only one eye showing to allow her to find her way around.

The use of sensory symbols to characterize groups perceived as potentially threatening to the social order is widespread. The first part of the process involves rendering a social group ‘invisible’ by keeping it sequestered, by restricting its opportunities, by limiting its representation and by simply ignoring its presence. The ‘absent’ group is then represented by simple and potent symbols: the beautiful but corrupt seductress; the coarse, malodorous worker; the greasy, slippery foreigner; and so on.

Social groups can contest their sensory typing and challenge the boundaries of their social containment. This can happen outright, as when a group demands that its voice be heard, or, more subtly, by manipulating symbols and constraints to a group’s own advantage. In the sixteenth century, the humanist Lucrezia Marinella took the sensory symbols that were used to characterize women as weak and irrational and gave them new meanings. Women’s softness, she said, was not a sign of mental weakness, but rather of their ability to assimilate impressions and information (Classen 2012: 73–74). In nineteenth-century Lima, women used the saya y manto to bypass the formalities of an elaborate and constricting toilette and to move and speak freely in public spaces without being recognized: ‘She puts on her saya without corset ... hides her face with her manto, and sets out for wherever she wishes’ (Tristan 1993: 31). With the one eye that remained uncovered, such women, it was said, gazed at the men in the streets with ‘the impudence of an impenetrable incognito’ (Wood 1849: 89).

As some observers noted, this disguise enabled women to arrange assignations almost under the very eyes of their unsuspecting husbands (von Thschi 1847: 98). Consternation and/or fear of women acting freely without proper male supervision led to edicts being issued against the custom as productive of immorality. However, women in Lima long held onto their saya y manto for the liberties it allowed them within a male-dominated society. A practice that was originally intended to guard women’s senses and sensuality, therefore, ended up being subverted and deployed for precisely the opposite ends.

**Corporeality and culture**

Attending to the symbolic power of sensation should not distract us from its corporeality: the warmth of a touch, the pungency of an odour, the brightness of a vision. What makes sensations so forceful is that they are lived experiences, not intellectual abstractions. The Tzotzil feel the power of ‘Our Father Heat’ every morning when the sun rises and warms the cold highlands where they live. A handshake between two former enemies not only symbolizes unity, it is
itself a tangible union. Even when sensory references are metaphorical they call up deep physical associations. When the Tzotzil speak of religious rituals as ‘hot’, they express the perceived power of those rituals through a metaphor that resonates on a basic physical level (Classen 1993a: 124).

Each of the senses has its own particular characteristics. Touch is intimate and reciprocal: when we touch someone, that person feels our touch. Sight, by contrast, operates at a distance and requires no physical interaction. Compared to touch, which attaches one body to another, sight is detached. Sound, in turn, is dynamic. We can see things that are completely still, but when we hear something we know that an activity is taking place. There are no still sounds. These different characteristics affect how the senses are used and ascribed meanings in different cultural contexts. In a society that emphasizes detachment and objectivity, sight will likely have a high value and touch may well be viewed with suspicion for its boundary-blurring properties. It would be simplistic to leave it at that, however, for much more is involved in the production of ways of sensing. Cultures elaborate and extend the senses in different directions, as we shall see in the pages that follow. The meaning of the senses is in their use, and usage is everywhere informed by culture. Nevertheless, physical considerations also play a role in how the senses are ranked and understood, and should not be overlooked.

Cultural and personal associations, in turn, affect our physical perceptions. When a metaphorical malodour is associated with a particular social group, people may experience members of that group as actually having a bad smell, even though no distinctive odour is present. Even members of the group being stigmatized may experience themselves as ‘bad-smelling’ and purchase perfumes to ‘upgrade’ their sensory and social status (Largey and Watson 2006). Sensory associations can be very persuasive.

We can find this associative process happening on a small scale with many of the minor discriminations we make and preferences we show in daily life. For example, taste tests comparing Coca-Cola to Pepsi have shown that people who express a pronounced preference for one of the two are often unable to distinguish between them when unidentified. Yet, when they know what they are drinking, they affirm that Pepsi (or Coke) tastes better. Clearly, non-gustatory factors are playing a role here. These may include the association of a particular drink with good or bad experiences, the influence of accompanying elements such as packaging design or advertising jingles, and the social values a drink appears to embody. While these factors themselves have no taste, they inflect the experience of taste when brought into play. While the sensuality of perception should not be forgotten in the search for sensory meaning, it is important to keep in mind that the experience of that sensuality is itself shaped by diverse personal and cultural associations.

**Phenomenology and psychology of perception**

Our own sensory experience provides an essential basis for exploring ways of sensing. However, it is inadequate to rely solely on personal experience for understanding how people everywhere perceive the world. While humans share the same basic sensory capacities, these are developed and understood in different ways. Some of this diversity is based on individual differences, such as the ear training a musician undergoes, but much of it is the consequence of general social conditioning. In the West, as a result of widespread literacy and the importance of visual imagery, we are all given extensive eye-training. Vision is a field of 'productive specialization' (Ong 1991).

In an experiment involving a pair of perceptual tests, Mallory Wober (1991 [1967]) found that Western subjects performed better than African subjects on tests involving visual discrimination but poorer than the African subjects on tests involving proprioceptive discrimination (i.e., knowledge of bodily position). He related the difference in performance to the differential elaboration of the visual and auditory-properceptive sensory registers in the two cultures. In Western culture, Wober noted, visual attention has been extensively developed.

However, Temne and other West African cultures include an elaboration of the proprioceptively and aurally perceived world. Thus, music is an extension of speech, rhythm an extension of movement, beauty a function of grace of movement as much as of configuration of visage, and dance is a regular and favoured form of elaboration of activity, started at an early age.

(Wober 1991 [1967]: 33)

Wober's point concerning how sensory orientations vary across cultures and how contrasting orientations may foster the development of different perceptual skills has been borne out by subsequent research in the field (Chernoff 1981; Geurts 2002; Lamp 2004; Berry et al. 2011: ch. 9).

One particularly influential philosophical approach to the study of the senses is the phenomenology of perception. In this approach the corporeal experience of one particular person – or of one particular person in consultation with like-minded colleagues – is extended to apply to all people everywhere. Such an approach cannot do more than sketch a crude picture of human sensoriality, a picture in which the biases of the phenomenologist will be apparent to anyone coming from a different culture of sensation. In their effort to arrive at a 'prereflective' understanding of our being in the world, phenomenologists leave all the essentialist presuppositions about the 'nature' of the senses that have currency in our culture unquestioned and intact.

There are other critiques one can make of the phenomenology of perception, such as its obliviousness to the politics of perceptual practice, or its preoccupation with language. Michel Serres, author of *Le sing sens* (1985), had this to say in conversation with Bruno Latour about the fixation on language in the work of Maurice Merleau-Ponty:

When I was young, I laughed a lot at Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception*. He opens it with these words: 'At the outset of the study of
perception, we find in language the notion of sensation … ' Isn’t this an exemplary introduction? A collection of examples in the same vein, so austere and meagre, inspire the descriptions that follow. From his window the author sees some tree, always in bloom; he huddles over his desk; now and again a red blotch appears – it’s a quote. What you can decipher in this book is a nice ethnology of city-dwellers, who are hypertechnicalized, intellectualized, chained in their library chairs, and tragically stripped of any tangible experience. Lots of phenomenology and no sensation – everything via language … My book Les 10ng sens cries out at the empire of signs.

(cited in Connor 2005: 318)

True to his word, Serres places corporeal experience itself in the forefront of the phenomenology of perception and, in The Five Senses (translated into English in 2008), finds philosophical significance in even so minor an experience as that of cutting his fingernails. He is particularly eloquent when it comes to evoking all the ways he experiences the senses as ‘knotted’ with each other and mingling with the world. Yet, even this move away from description and towards sensation (physical experience) cannot overcome the limitations of subjective analysis. Indeed, the social is absent from Serres’ account. This contrasts with the critical social perspective on embodiment which a number of anthropologists have developed in the course of their fieldwork (i.e. Laderman 1994; Desjarlais 1992, 2003; Stoller 1997; Geurts 2002; Hahn 2007; Romberg 2009)

This is not to say that the phenomenology of perception has no value nor any relevance to anthropology. Phenomenology may be highly informative of Westerners as the norm. The authority of psychological research, the appeal of psychology even though they had the words ‘anthropology’ and ‘history’ in their titles.) Through experimentation, psychologists have explored, among other issues, how the processing of sensory stimuli enables individuals to apprehend and interact with the world. The psychology of perception, however, suffers from the same tendencies to disregard cultural factors and to universalize conclusions as the phenomenology of perception. Like phenomenology, psychological research customarily takes the experiences of urban Westerners as the norm. The authority of psychological research, the appeal of the seemingly clear-cut conclusions it can offer, together with the fact that it is usually addressed to readers who share the same general worldview, means that the sorts of ethnocentric simplifications to which it is prone often go unnoticed and unquestioned.

Pursuing a cultural approach to perception requires something more. As Kathryn Geurts states in her book Culture and the Senses, it requires that certain concepts or principles deemed basic by many general psychologists be reexamined for the socially constructed, historically grounded, and culturally variable nature of their makeup. … These so-called basics include concepts such as ‘person’ and ‘situation’ and also principles and processes such as ‘representation’, ‘persuasion’, ‘knowledge-activation’, and ‘information-seeking’ … and to this list I would add sensing and perceiving.

(Geurts 2002: 15)

The final chapter of Ways of Sensing opens up such a re-examination. It focuses on a topic that is normally only treated within psychology – namely, synaesthesia, or the intermingling of sensations. Standard psychological and neuroscientific accounts of this phenomenon hold it to be a rare neurological condition that causes an affected individual to experience such ‘irrational’ sensory associations as tastes being linked to sounds or the letters of the alphabet having colours. Our work here reveals that, far from being solely a rare neurological condition, synaesthesia can function as a fundamental vehicle for the production of cultural meaning.

Anthropology and history of the senses

The study of the cultural formation of the senses has been led by anthropology and history. These two disciplines underwent a sensory turn in the last decades of the twentieth century (see, for example, Corbin 1986 [1982], 2005 [1990]; Stoller 1989, 1997; Howes 1991a, 2003: ch. 2; Classen 1993a, 2001). The task of sensory anthropology is to describe and analyse the practices and meanings that are constitutive of the life of the senses in particular societies. It also alerts us to the danger of generalizing across cultures. For example, when scholars such as Marshall McLuhan and Walter Ong began looking at the cultural and cognitive effects of different forms of media (which they defined as ‘extensions of the senses’) one of the primary distinctions they made was between literate and oral cultures (McLuhan 1962; Ong 1982). Literate cultures were said to be eye-minded, due to writing being a visual medium, while oral cultures were said to emphasize the importance of hearing, as a result of the auditory nature of speech. When Western civilization changed from being primarily an oral culture to being a literate culture, it received ‘an eye for an ear’, as McLuhan famously put it (McLuhan and Fiore 1967: 44).

These observations were useful for breaking the silence surrounding cultural differences in sensory practices, however they were too simplistic. Anthropological research has since shown that just as much sensory variation can occur among oral cultures as between oral and literate cultures (Finnegan 2002; Classen 2005c). One oral society will place great importance on smell (Pandya 1993), another on balance (Geurts 2002). Some will give primary to the sense of hearing (Feld 1990 [1982]), but there will also be those which place cultural emphasis on the sense of sight. For example, due in part to the religious importance of the visions they experience when taking hallucinogens, the Desana, though a traditional oral society, value sight above all the senses (Classen 1993a: ch. 6). It is precisely this kind of information, brought
the intention here to show how they can be relevant to the study of any and all cultural fields (see further Herzfeld 2001: 253; Robben and Slukka 2007: 388; Newhauser 2010). The ways in which we engage with art, in which we practice medicine, in which we experience our social roles and systems of justice, in which we manufacture and market products, and in which we make sense of the world, all involve particular ways of sensing.

The sociocultural approach to the study of the sensorium is no longer limited to anthropology and history. It has spread to sociology (e.g., Synnott 1993; Vannini et al 2011), geography (e.g., Pocock 1993; Rodaway 1994; Paterson 2009), urban studies (e.g., Zardini 2005; Degen 2008), archaeology (e.g., Skeates 2010; Day 2013), art history (e.g., Kahn 1999; Di Bello and Koureas 2010; Quiviger 2010), literature (Danius 2002; Hertel 2005; Cohen 2009) and media studies (e.g., L.U. Marks 2000; Finnegar 2002; Bull 2013) — to mention but a few of the disciplines that have converged on the sensorium in recent years. This coalescence has brought the monopoly formerly enjoyed by psychology to an end, and created the conditions for the emergence of a highly productive field called sensory studies (Bull et al. 2006). Sensory studies encompasses visual culture, auditory culture, smell culture, taste culture, the culture of touch and the interrelations among all these different registers, while leaving the door open to the discussion of other faculties (Howes 2009).

Anthropologists have the advantage over historians in that through participant observation they can have first-hand experience of the sensory lives of the peoples they study (Pink 2009). Historians must make do with written accounts, visual images and material artefacts. Those who study more recent periods may also have the benefit of film and sound recordings. While much is inevitably missing from such sources, they can, nonetheless, provide a wealth of information about the sensory worlds of the past.

In this book a joint anthropological-historical methodology is used to explore the life of the senses in society. Rather than take a serial, ‘sense-by-sense’ approach, as is often done in studies of the senses, Ways of Sensing examines how the senses are employed in an array of social domains. These include: art, medicine, politics, law and marketing (or consumer culture). The advantage of this domain-based approach is that it enables us to bring out the dynamic interaction of sensations in a given context and thus contributes to a more holistic understanding of the sensorium.

Both the anthropology of the senses and the history of the senses have sometimes been characterized as subfields of their respective disciplines. It is