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## FORUM

### Forum: The Senses

Over the last decade or so the historical topic of the senses has moved from being a problem space occupied by a limited, and highly disparate, number of studies to constitute itself as a dynamic, busy field of inquiry. Works which only a few years ago sat on the margins of most scholars' consciousness—of interest more as literary curios than as stimuli to rethink other, seemingly unconnected histories—have retroactively been accorded the status of pioneering interventions; the consolidation of the field, if still incomplete, is such that arguing collectively for the validity of the senses as objects of study has given way to the emergence of increasingly distinct divisions of opinion and ways of thinking within the field itself. In some respects this has followed a familiar dynamic of emergence rooted in the logics of the academic habitus and equally visible in the development of other subfields. Its particular significance perhaps lies in the wider frustration it articulates with the linguistic turn and the legacies of that extended moment—which defined scholarship in the humanities for a generation—and in the tangible, if inchoate, recognition across the discipline and beyond of the need to reconnect with that which (we seem to sense once more) lies anterior to discourse. At the same time we have come to understand the need to historicize not only our sensory perceptions, but also our very understanding of what the senses are, of how many of them exist, and of their functional relationship with one another: other historical cultures have answered these questions very differently. The senses thus pose anew, and in particularly acute form, the question of how far it is ever possible or desirable to peel back the discursive layers which surround the object of study to recuperate the object itself. To discuss the field and the challenges it presents the editors invited **Carolyn Birdsall** (Amsterdam), **Jan-Friedrich Missfelder** (Zürich), **Daniel Morat** (FU Berlin) and **Corine Schleif** (Arizona State) to participate in a forum. The questions were posed by the editors.

#### **1. To what conjuncture of intellectual developments and forces do you attribute the current desire to historicize the senses?**

**Birdsall:** It is clear to any scholar interested in the history of the senses, or sensory history, that such an endeavour is inevitably an interdisciplinary undertaking. To start with the discipline of history, I think that there are a number of developments that made certain subfields particularly responsive to both interdisciplinary scholarship and alternative frameworks for historical inquiry, and I'd highlight here that by the 1990s, social and cultural historians had established a clear interest in the senses. Some of this work drew and built on the work of anthropologists such as Steven Feld, David Howes and Constance Classen, and historians of the body and society such as Michel Foucault. In this vein, one other important general development was the 'spatial turn'

in the humanities, which paved the way for reflections on past material cultures and cultural geographies, and for an emphasis on feelings and the emotions.

Within the discipline of history, much has been made of the particular attention of the French Annales school in establishing early impulses to historicize the senses, most notably emerging from Lucien Febvre's call for a history of sensibilities. In a recent publication on sensory history, Mark M. Smith has indicated the contribution of a number of other subfields to the history of the senses, including the history of medicine, science and technology, religious history, environmental history, urban history and legal history. Despite important inroads in various scholarly specializations, Smith has observed that the existing scholarship is uneven in its distribution, with pronounced emphasis on western cultures and the post-Enlightenment period.

From my own perspective and training in modern European history, it also appeared that scholars interested in the history of western reading and writing have had a part to play in these developments; responses to the 'great divide' accounts of Marshall McLuhan, Walter Ong and others led to a critical engagement with the role of orality, visuality and literate culture in European history. Likewise, by the 1990s, historians working on popular culture in pre-modern and modern Europe were increasingly demonstrating a concern with not only spectacle or display, but also a broader range of sensory experience. This said, Peter Bailey still complained in a 1996 essay that historians too often paid mere 'lip service' to sensory impressions in their studies, and made a call for a more far-reaching project to historicize the senses.

One other growing sub-field by the 1990s was scholarship on the history of film, and film and television representations of history. The specific investment of film studies in spectatorship and a growing interest in affect, embodiment and phenomenological theories of perception seems to have had some measure of influence on scholars engaged in media and cultural history. More sociologically-informed media research also, at least in part, adopted historical perspectives on the senses, as evidenced by *The Auditory Culture Reader* (2003) and the launch of the *Senses and Society* journal (in 2006). While mainly focused on recent decades, Michael Bull's 2000 study of personal stereo use, for instance, established a stake in how the visual, haptic and kinaesthetic were as crucial to sound technology use as the auditory.

**Morat:** In the past decade or so, it seems to me, one can witness attempts to move beyond the text and textual analysis in the humanities and in cultural studies at large on a number of different levels. One strand would be the debate about the 'production of presence' which Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht initiated in 2004 with his publication of this title. Another one could be seen in the discussions about the 'material turn' and the history of objects, and a third—as Carolyn suggests—in the debates about performativity and the endeavours to turn to the body as an object of cultural and historical analysis. Finally, the current boom of studies of emotions and their history might, to a certain extent, also be mentioned in this context. All these academic trends share a certain weariness with discourse analysis and with the linguistic turn and, more often than not, they are driven by a desire to overcome constructivist approaches and to get closer to actual historical experience.

The current desire to historicize the senses might well be placed within this development. Histories of the senses often claim to produce a 'fuller' or 'richer' impression of

what it meant to live in a particular place and period. They promise to transcend the grey paperyness of historical accounts based on mere text analysis and to open up the full sensorium of the past. They promise, in a word, to make history more lively. These promises have to be taken with a pinch of salt, though. Alain Corbin, one of the most important pioneers of the history of the senses, has remarked that the historian always remains a ‘prisoner of language’, and this is also true for the historian of the senses: first, because he also has to rely on written sources in order to reconstruct the meanings attached to and created by the sensory perceptions of the past, and second, because in his own account of these meanings he again has to use linguistic means. The history of the senses therefore does not offer a way out of the linguistic realm. But it does remind us of the fact that we appropriate the world we inhabit in the first instance through our senses and not through language. We cannot directly regain the sensory perceptions of others, let alone of people from the past. If we want to gain access to them, we have to take the long way round through meaning and discourse. But it is an important regulative idea that meaning and discourse are not self-contained, but attached to bodily and sensory perceptions and feelings. In this respect, the history of the senses might well be seen as being part of an intellectual development that moves beyond the constraints of the linguistic turn.

**Schleif:** Several factors have led us to our current interest in the senses. One is the realization that embodiment is key to our understanding of almost everything. Further, I like to think that focusing on the senses, sensation and sense perception belongs to reception theory. As such it marks a shift away from explications on the ‘production’ side to studies on the ‘consumption’ side. Claimed as a ‘revolution of the senses’ (D. Howes), the new focus militates against earlier exclusive analytic absorption with history’s powerful institutions and great men—despots or geniuses. We also find ourselves working against abstractions: ideas, mentalities or teleological forces that acted upon the protagonists from the outside either directly or dialectically. In many respects, we now experience a change in the order in which we apply our various camera lenses. Rather than starting with the super wide angle, we begin with a super macro. The result is a perception of culture and history that is less from the ‘top down’ and more from the ‘bottom up’. Painful and pleasurable sensations are often described proprioceptively, that is, as one’s own. Marcel Mauss wrote about ‘sensuous bonds’. We now ask: how do shared sense experiences serve to bind those at the top with those at the bottom? What about complicity, empathy and sympathy in history? How does a historic analysis of sense experience serve inclusivity, since sense experience transcends boundaries of gender, race, class, species and cognitive ability?

Popular culture may also play a role in historicizing the senses. The commodification of history and culture has heightened desire for the tastes and aromas of history in cookbooks, the sounds and sights of history at the cinema and on television, and a conglomeration of sense experiences at Renaissance fairs, re-enactments, historical sites and theme parks. On the darker side, we are currently confronted with pain, be it incidental or strategically induced, in medicine, in warfare, or in isolated aggressive assaults, be they personal or political, be they criminal or socially sanctioned. Focusing on pain and fear in history offers us safe analytic distance.

Recently, sense perception has drawn the attention of the ‘hard sciences’. Studies in cognitive processes, disabilities, genetics and bio-design are concerning themselves

with sense receptors, mirror neurons, somatic conditions such as synaesthesia and other sensual aberrations or acuties. These pursuits are spilling over into the more interpretative fields, as historians and humanists wish to regain lost currency and credibility. Somewhat conversely perhaps, several anthropologists have shown how disparate cultures frame, define, and construct the sensorium differently from those who have been acculturated in the West. Perhaps now it is our turn as historians to relativize notions of 'hard wiring' by historicizing the senses. Perhaps we can succeed in demonstrating not only how people have conceived of and ordered the sensorium differently at various times, but also how they have felt, seen, heard, smelled and tasted differently.

**Missfelder:** The history of the senses is indeed a booming field. One can barely keep up with noticing, let alone reading the various contributions, books, articles, collected volumes and thematic issues—this *German History* forum being only one among many—that have recently set out to historicize aural, visual, olfactory or gustatory sensations and perceptions. The reasons for this trend seem to me as manifold as the research itself. But from my point of view, and in addition to those already mentioned by Carolyn, Corine and Daniel, at least three other and more general causes can be identified.

First, the senses may appear to be history's new final frontier in the discipline's ever expanding tendency to tackle all those subjects that seemed to escape the rather relativist grasp of historicization. If it is history's business, as Luhmann wrote, to adhere a time-index to everything that claimed timelessness, then the senses stand in line with gender, the body or even the human condition itself, as we might learn from the new and equally thriving field of animal history. In this respect, the thin methodological line between the allegedly biologically given human sensory apparatus and historically variable sensory practices seems gradually to evaporate. The real challenge in the history of the senses lies in the historicization not only of what people did with their noses but of the noses themselves.

But in a way, this is not as new as we might think. For at least a decade, many of us have already been practising some kind of sensory history, possibly without knowing it, or just giving it a different name. The iconic/pictorial/visual turn that has spun through most of the humanities for some time now had already directed theoretical attention and practical work towards the ways society and history were shaped and construed through the lenses of sensory, in this case visual, imagination—in terms of sources, interpretations and theoretical modelling. In this sense, on the one hand sensory history only generalized an approach that was already well established within methodological debates from at least the 1990s onwards, but, on the other hand, it questioned the almost hyperbolic supremacy claim made by visual studies. By rehabilitating the neglected senses of hearing, smelling, tasting and touching as legitimate objects and methods of historical inquiry sensory history is able to offer a more nuanced and multi-faceted alternative to the sometimes rather imperialist attitude of visual history.

The third reason is not so much to do with debates inside academia but takes account of more general developments in society. The mediatization of the world and the aspirations, hopes and fears that went along with this have together rendered sensory perception increasingly insecure and prone to transformation and manipulation. Put positively, what appears as a loss of sensory certainty can also be seen as a chance

to recognize the essential historicity of the senses themselves. Historians of the senses know and, for the most part, have experienced that the sensory world is always subject to chance and, thus, a most fascinating object of historical investigation.

**2. Do the five senses constitute a coherent object of study, or is each different in its methodological challenge and in its promise of wider historical understanding?**

**Morat:** This is a difficult question. On the one hand, it seems obvious to me that one always has to treat the five senses in their interconnectedness. If writing the history of the senses means reconstructing the ways of being-in-the-world of people of the past, as Alain Corbin suggested, then one has to take into account the fact that—in most cases—we experience the world through our five senses simultaneously. Isolating them from each other would therefore mean reducing the complexity of the past. On the other hand, the reduction of complexity is in many cases a prerequisite for historical case studies. In carrying out historical research, consequently, it seems legitimate and often necessary to isolate one sense from the others and to follow its particular role and function in a given place and time period.

If one does that, it indeed becomes apparent that the five senses bring with them different methodological challenges. On a general level, this is not necessarily the case, because—as mentioned above—the attachment of meaning to the senses and the reconstruction of this meaning generally take place through language. This is true for all the five senses. But at the same time, the senses are objectified in different kinds of cultural artefacts, in pictures, sounds, fragrances, flavours, and objects of different fabrics and textures. In studying the historical meaning of the senses, historians should also turn to these cultural artefacts which are passed down to us in different ways and which require different methods of analysis. These methods can often be developed in exchange with different neighbouring disciplines: art history in the case of pictures, musicology in the case of musical sounds, media studies in the case of (moving) pictures and sounds, archaeology or ethnology in the case of objects. It is obvious that the exchange with these neighbouring disciplines poses different kinds of interdisciplinary challenges and can lead to different kinds of methods of analysis. In the end, though, I think it is an advantage of historians that they are not, by academic profession and training, specialized solely in either pictures or sounds, for example, but that they are necessarily generalists. It should be their task, therefore, always to recontextualize the different senses under scrutiny and to put them into a wider sensorial and historical frame. Questions about the historical significance and importance of particular senses in particular historical times and places can only be posed and answered this way. This also means that the question of whether certain senses are historically more important or more promising for a wider historical understanding than others cannot be answered in a general way but only in regard to specific time periods and historical problems.

**Schleif:** Each is of course different. Each has been fashioned differently by history, and each has undergone a different history. Each therefore demands to be interrogated differently. Beyond these issues are even more complex quandaries. Several recent scholars have posited the existence of more than five senses. From classical antiquity through

to the middle ages the senses of touch, sight, and sometimes taste were all classified under touch. Moreover, many researchers in our own day are asserting that none of the heretofore acknowledged five senses is discrete. Perception is never limited to information received by only one sense organ. Space is envisioned by hearing, taste is informed by smell, the blind can imagine colour through hearing, touch and/or memory.

I do not believe it is helpful to organize sense experiences by separating them according to the primary sense organs that allow their apprehension. I have in fact often resisted attempts to reframe art history as 'visual culture'. By clinically isolating the visual as the aspect of study we may be stripping the visual from most of its important meaning-laden cognitive, historical and social context. Perhaps the major challenge and fortuitous promise lives in comparative and interconnected approaches to the senses within specific historical situations. The sensibles were variously subject to social controls. For example, when visual or tactile self-aggrandizement through sumptuous clothing or sculpted tomb monuments breached the rules of decorum, auditory self-promotion through loud music, long sung Masses, or numerous church bells could be substituted.

Exploration of the dimensional and social disparities of sensibles—some occurring in time, others in space—is only beginning. Therefore, in my opinion, more promising than exploring the senses as discrete and isolated phenomena is the investigation of the ways in which sense experiences were employed together or against each other. The sensibles were channelled and directed. Their occurrence developed over time. This means that one sense experience can be perceived to replace another, or that sense experiences mitigated, ameliorated or augmented each other. In fact, when studied not separately but in combination we might observe that under certain circumstances the sensibles could work together in ways that were superadditive—in other words that their combined results were more than the sum of their discrete effects. In some cases they might even be considered hypergolic, meaning that, as with certain rocket fuels or gluing agents, an outcome only ensues from their combination. This might be observed for many public spectacles.

Synaesthesia was ubiquitous. I am less concerned with somatic instances of sense confusion than with historic situations in which one kind of sensible was so strongly associated with another that the first conjures up the second. I have argued, for example, that when medieval nuns smelled the saffron they saw yellow and thought of the donor family that traded and donated this substance. Or when they saw yellow stained glass they imagined saffron and whispered prayers for the family.

**Birdsall:** It is crucial to reflect on the senses in relation to each other. In my own work on listening and aurality, I have sought to work within a multisensory framework and thus deal with exchange between sensory modalities. Studying the various senses does imply, however, that the scholar should be aware of how any one sense has been understood and utilized in social and cultural life, and its particular place within the historical record. One of the important lessons I took from Alain Corbin's study of diaries in *Time, Desire and Horror* (1995) was his observation that the 'banal is frequently silent'. Corbin revised the work of Annales school historians, but he shared their fundamental conviction of the need to reflect on longer-term patterns of change and continuity. Corbin draws on their notion of a history of sensibilities, as a project to

analyse ‘modalities of perception, the identification of the sensory hierarchy, and the reconstitution of systems of emotions’.

In his research, Corbin justifies his use of nineteenth-century diaries since they reveal how (predominantly female) diary-writers coped with social norms and expectations. Yet he critically notes that certain sounds were often only mentioned once they had disappeared from everyday life. In other words, the scholar should note that changing sensory regimes may only be registered in sources in a subsequent period that falls outside of their periodization. While Corbin’s work primarily focused on church bells in the nineteenth-century French countryside, I think his observations have a broader currency for sensory history, which often draws on an unconventional array of archival material, but requires an explicit and reflective process of source criticism.

As for particular senses, I am most familiar with the history of listening and auditory experience. In this process, I have understood that the study of the ‘public senses’ of hearing and vision have a larger presence in terms of both sources and scholarship than do smell, taste or touch. Touch has been particularly underrepresented in historical scholarship, with the exception of scholars such as Sander Gilman and Joy Parr, or Constance Classen, who has produced two recent monographs on the topic. These scholars have demonstrated that touch is as crucially implicated in the project (and politics) of modernity as the senses of hearing and vision. Nonetheless, one of the primary challenges in historicizing touch has been the lack of clarity about this sense, since its distribution across the skin means that it does not have a focal sensory organ in a similar way to hearing, vision, smell and taste.

**Missfelder:** We obviously all agree that it is virtually impossible and even beyond historiographical reason to isolate one specific sense from the other in order to examine its position in a given historical situation separately. That said, this is exactly what the protagonists of the visual turn did, in history and elsewhere. By dismissing the post-1960s linguistic turn and claiming that iconic media and iconic media alone would cure academia from its discontent with an all-too-textual understanding of culture, they favoured visual objects not only as a preferred object of study but identified an ‘iconic episteme’ (Gottfried Boehm) as the foundation of the post-modern condition. The hubris of this endeavour is clear enough and should prevent us from calling too loudly for an auditory, olfactory or tactile turn as a revengeful replacement of the visual one.

So there is general agreement on the necessity of what Mark M. Smith—one of the pioneers of sensory history, who started off as a historian of sound and hearing—termed ‘intersensoriality’ as an analytical tool to investigate the various relationships between different senses in history. In this perspective, the smallest unit of analysis is the sensorium itself, but certainly not as a fixed and coherent entity but as a flexible set of relations between five (or even six) senses whose structure varies over time. There is clearly a lot to recommend this approach. It avoids the problem of over-privileging one specific sense (usually sight) over others that are stigmatized as being either of secondary significance or far too tricky to investigate. Moreover, the idea of intersensoriality remains flexible enough to acknowledge differences in terms of importance and even hierarchies of specific senses regarding specific activities, social groups or epochs.

Although there is very little that might challenge this view in theory, it nevertheless presents the would-be practitioner of an intersensorial sensory history with a number

of serious problems. First and foremost, it is by no means clear whether intersensoriality should be considered as a guiding principle in every single study in the history of the senses or whether it should remain reserved for general synthetic surveys of the field. In the latter case, the imbalance of existing research on the different senses as separate objects of study makes any such a project rather difficult. There is, for example, virtually no coherent body of research on touch and tactile culture that could be compared and put into perspective with the results of the booming history of sound, let alone visual culture studies. Here a lot remains to be done before any intersensorial perspective worth the name can honestly be taken up. Second, the body of evidence that may illuminate a certain problem of sensory history varies significantly from sense to sense in terms of density, outlook and social context. For example, whoever sets out to shed some genuinely intersensorial light on the Reformation will have some trouble discovering meaningful material beyond the obvious debates on iconoclasm and the role of music and preaching in religious culture. The question of how to grasp the influence of the Reformation upon, say, the tactile regimes of sixteenth century European societies remains completely unresolved. I don't mean to suggest that this is an impossible task (since I intend to write such a history of the Reformation myself, it would be all too masochistic if I did). But it still seems to me a substantial practical challenge that is not easily met by just aiming at the broadest possible perspective.

**3. Is there always something intellectually meaningful at stake in disputes over the primacy of the visual or the aural, or do such arguments also reflect the playing out of an academic logic rooted as much in the attempts of new subfields to define themselves in opposition to existing ones as in something which had significant meaning in the past?**

**Missfelder:** One does not have to be over-sensitive to sense the scepticism in the tone of the question—a scepticism that is completely justified. Of course there is always a strong rhetoric of novelty, unheard-of-ness and excitement at play when it comes to establishing a new field of research within a well established and confident academic environment. And let's face it: I get the impression that to show some interest in sound history now proves to be a better investment in the economy of academic interest than does working still on the history of visual culture. Thus, pointing out the rivalry between the visual and the aural is certainly a strategy to stress the importance of studies on senses other than the visual. But there is probably more to the problem than just academic power politics. And since I am not entirely innocent myself—having just issued a little polemic from the sound historian's standpoint against the shortcomings of the hegemonic visual studies—I feel obliged to justify the intellectual significance of the point.

First, the debate about the primacy of the visual or the aural is not only an academic struggle over resources but a historical fact that has to be analysed in its own right. The 'audiovisual litany' (Jonathan Sterne) associating visuality with cool, distancing, rational modernity and, likewise, aurality with the warmth, the holy and the presence that allegedly characterized pre-modern societies stems at least from Plato and has structured most of the intellectual history of the senses since then. Consequently, the history of the senses has to take into account the sensory hierarchies prevalent in the societies and epochs under investigation. Nevertheless, the historiographical effects of this attention

can be rather devastating. When, for example, the French historian Robert Mandrou described the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in his 1961 *Introduction à la France moderne*, one of the manifestos of the Annales school, as ‘un temps qui préfère écouter’ he did nothing but reproduce the ancient clichés of the audiovisual litany. As Mandrou’s example teaches, in the impulse to argue for a more balanced approach to sensory history there always lies the temptation of auditory nostalgia.

For a sensory, and more specifically a sound historian today there seem to be two possible reactions to this problem. Historians of the nineteenth to the twenty-first centuries and early modernists may, as did Jonathan Sterne in his magisterial book on *The Audible Past*, state the contribution of sound to the process of modernity in order to relativize the visual bias of modern epistemology. The problem I have with this approach is that if one simply emphasizes the acoustic share in the modern condition the general outlook of modernity is left more or less untouched. The other option appears more promising. Mark M. Smith once distinguished between sensory history as a field and as a habit. In the latter case, the habit of sensory history allows an entirely novel perspective on the whole of history, and this goes beyond the identification of the contribution of a particular sense to modernity. Visual history as a habit can look completely different from its aural counterpart. In this sense, there is a perfectly justified distinction and even rivalry between the two approaches on a purely epistemological level.

**Morat:** I largely agree with Frieder on this. It is true that the constant claims you can hear from sound historians about the importance of the aural despite the alleged primacy of vision especially in modernity can become a bit unnerving and they are certainly, to a large extent, ascribable to the attempt to establish sound studies as a field in its own right in opposition to visual studies. Nevertheless, I do think that it is important to address this question of the hierarchy of the senses and to contest the ‘great divide theory’ mentioned earlier by Carolyn; that is, the theory most notably put forth by Marshall McLuhan and Walter Ong that particular periods in history can be differentiated by the communication technologies which shaped them and which, in turn, privileged certain senses over the others. According to this theory, the advent of the printing press, together with Renaissance culture, led to a shift from sound to sight in the early modern period and established a hegemony of vision in the ‘Gutenberg galaxy’ which governed the whole of modernity until the end of the twentieth century. Underlying this theory is a zero-sum logic according to which what one sense gains in importance, the others necessarily have to lose.

It is important to address this theory because it has been so influential in the past and still shapes a lot of work done on the history of the senses. What’s more, it not only influences scholarship on the history of the senses but also concepts of modernity as a visual age with impact on widely shared ideas of modern rationality and modern subjectivity. This, of course, is not only related to Ong and McLuhan but is part of an important western tradition of philosophy, starting with Descartes’ *res cogitans* and not ending with Heidegger’s Age of the World View. Contesting the idea of a primacy of vision in modernity therefore entails the problematization of wider notions of modern rationality and subjectivity and can possibly lead to a re-evaluation of the concept of modernity itself. So yes, I do think that there can be something intellectually meaningful at stake in the debates about the primacy of the visual or the aural.

**Birdsall:** I would tend to agree that notions of a dominant sensory regime are part of the lingering legacy of the ‘great divide’ theories put forward by McLuhan and Ong, as well as the vision-oriented analyses of Michael Foucault. These accounts have been problematized and nuanced in anthropology (for example, by David Howes) and in intellectual and cultural histories (for example, by Martin Jay, Jonathan Crary and Jonathan Sterne). Intellectual histories are most productive when revealing discourses as to how a particular sense has been framed or constructed as an object of study, particularly in the sciences. However, the history of ideas—particularly when studied in one specific field or an individual’s work—will only offer one of a number of discursive frames for a history of the senses in a particular place and time.

In the case of sound studies, there has been the occasional tendency for scholars to seek academic legitimation and validity at the expense of existing work on vision and visual culture. While this tendency is not widespread, it represents a position that neglects recent developments in visual (culture) studies. Much of this work has been marked by a deconstruction of vision as an object of truth and knowledge in western thinking, and the notion of the unity of vision in perception. Key scholars in the field such as W.J.T. Mitchell have challenged the concept of purely ‘visual’ or ‘aural’ media, preferring instead to consider the mixed or hybrid sensory ratios that are invested in media. To take one of Mitchell’s examples, when studying ‘so-called sound media’ such as the radio or gramophone, he argues, we should also consider how they involve sound, touch and vision.

One of the advantages of visual culture studies is that much of this work developed out of the discipline of art history and theory. Unlike the shared terminology and disciplinary training underpinning much of visual culture discussions, it is noticeable that sound studies has not been initiated or dominated by musicologists. Instead, it is has emerged as a result of scholars with diverse disciplinary backgrounds: from history, sociology and anthropology to literature, media and performance studies. While this diversity makes for a fascinating range of approaches to the (historical) study of sound and listening, there is sometimes a certain anxiety about the lack of common terms or methodological frameworks. This uncertainty is one possible cause for a certain variant of ‘strategic essentialism’, by which binary oppositions between sight and hearing are used to affirm sound as subjective, impermanent, emotional and immersive. Such oppositions are typical of the ‘audiovisual litany’ Jonathan Sterne has identified in the work of Ong and McLuhan, and reproduce a certain ahistoricism based on the fixed and unchanging attributes of sight and hearing.

A number of scholars have provided instructive reflections on the disciplinary status of sound studies in the social sciences and humanities. Media historian Michele Hilmes has argued that sound culture studies is most productive as an interdisciplinary venture, which does not necessitate the establishment of educational programmes and schools or departments. Social historian Mark Smith has also argued that sound studies (and the history of the senses) should operate less as a ‘field’ than as a ‘habit’, which should eventually inform the thinking and practice of all historians. In two recent readers, one edited by Jonathan Sterne, the other by Trevor Pinch and Karin Bijsterveld, we can observe a similar effort to emphasize that sound studies represents a form of scholarly inquiry that makes use of existing fields rather than seeking to usurp them.

**Schleif:** With the founding of disciplines and university chairs for very discrete areas of study in the nineteenth century came the need to compartmentalize the production of knowledge. My own discipline of art history carved out its niche within German academe by claiming material from (Christian) archaeology and from the practical skills of art making as well as so-called art connoisseurship. Gradually appearance became its purview, perhaps because the objects that it studied and surveyed were placed in museums, where they were not to be handled, touched, or used in any way that would produce sounds. To be sure, there were always those who worked against the grain. At the beginning of the twentieth century, Aby Warburg connected images and words with the sounds of words and rituals. Later in the century the notion of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* came to encompass visual, acoustic, and tactile arts.

What fascinates me are the ways in which the binaries or hierarchies of the senses have been overlaid with other binaries and hierarchies to form mutually naturalizing, common sensual orderings. Seeing is often aligned with knowing and cognition. Therefore the senses have frequently been divided between those privileged as objective, mediated, public and perceptible over long distances or extended periods and those baser, subjective sensations that are immediate, ephemeral, fleeting and intimate. Within colonialist regimes, this polarity gives sensorial pride of place to Europeans, who value sight or (also) hearing, while it binds non-western cultures to the senses of touch, scent, and taste. According to some histories, the middle ages privileged touch above the other senses; as Daniel rightly asserts, this was also true of hearing. As the civilizing process continues, we today, within our visual and acoustic cultures, can place ourselves at the end of the long teleological trajectory of progress. At one extreme are the various interspecies rankings of the senses, through which humans—who see and know, apprehend and grasp—always find their place on top, whether by virtue of divine right or evolutionary process. Sense orderings are even evident within the arrangement of academic study of the sensibles. Art history and musicology are long respected fields of study to which many substantial discourses have attached themselves, while the analysis of touchable objects, foods or perfumes, belong to the newer and trendier, more banal realm of popular or material culture.

Many historical projects might be launched to interrogate the particular ‘ways of sensing’ within a given period or culture, or for an individual. The medievalist and art historian Madeline Caviness scrutinizes the particulars of specific scopic economies. She demonstrates the richness and complexity of European languages in conceptualizing sight including metaphors for cognition that derive from vision, and she contends that this ‘linguistic investment’ divulges the power and importance of ocular behaviours in medieval cultures. All the senses can be considered in terms of active and passive conduct, much of which was gendered. Sensory powers become social powers (C. Classen). Within the struggles over primacy of the senses the tactile is the most problematic—sometimes touted as the most prominent for its immediate reciprocity (E. Harvey) and for the involvement of many organs, but also denigrated as the most hidden or indulgent. Who has the right to touch? Who or what may be touched, by whom, and when? On the other hand, with respect to the acoustic, being heard usually grants more agency than active listening. Whom has history silenced or made invisible? How have history’s actors secured their memory by initiating sense experiences?

I also note a certain undercurrent of resentment against visual ‘hubris’ and the ‘hegemony’ of visual studies. Strangely, even as an art historian, I share these sentiments. This recognition—or perhaps resentment—once again calls to mind Caviness’s work on scopic economies that pointed to the subject and object positions of the gaze in history. By extension, the ultimate voyeur may be the historian who, looking back via the visual record, asserts the primacy of his or her perspective. In the hope that I am not sawing off the art historical limb I am perched on, I might suggest there is no such thing as purely visual pleasure or visibility in isolation.

**4. What, if any, epistemological problem is posed by the fact that past historical actors were more likely to register and record strong, striking or unusual sounds, vistas, smells, tastes or sensations than they were everyday ones? How can we as historians find access to the background sensory perceptions out of which the unremarkable fabric of the everyday was made for those historical actors?**

**Schleif:** This question points up interesting disjunctures between us and the historical sensibles into which we inquire. To be sure some sensibles—vistas of landscapes or views of architecture—have survived partially or completely. In other cases the means of producing the sensibles has come down to us, as with church bells or musical instruments. Usually, however, we are dependent on records. For the earlier periods that produced the material I address in my scholarship, we have very few records that we might call indexical, in the semiotic sense of the term: that the record resulted directly from the presence or occurrence of the sense experience, such as a fingerprint, footprint, surface on a statue that has been rubbed smooth, or of the sensible itself, as in the vista preserved in the photograph or the noise of the typewriter preserved on magnetic tape or disc. Most of our knowing is less directly mediated. Writings come down to us in which individuals describe the incense they have smelled; an institution proscribes the exposure of certain body parts by persons of a given gender or class in specific situations; an apothecary lists particular redolent concoctions as remedies.

With early works that we today consider art (‘art before art’) we rarely have a record of specific reactions. We usually do not have records of approval or likes or dislikes, but only some of the sensibles themselves, and we can deduce from their presence that they were valued or desired. In my work with Volker Schlier, however, using a surprising cache of nuns’ writings, we were able to find instances in which female monastics voiced their displeasure with stained glass because it was pale in hue, their pleasure in saffron that coloured their Lenten soups, as well as their fear at the sights and sounds of the rebel peasants’ bonfires and drums.

Of course, it was not only the extraordinary that was remarked upon in written sources, but it was the luxurious and precious objects that were cherished and maintained over the centuries, while the mundane—and the proscribed—have vanished. These are not mere accidents of history. When it comes to registering the presence of sensibles and recording sense perceptions we are also once more confronted with issues of class. Not everyone in history was allotted equal access to literacy (*Schriftlichkeit*) or equal participation in description, proscription and prescriptions, in which pleasure and displeasure, tolerance and intolerance were voiced. Nonetheless I do believe that

records of far more sensibles, and of far more sensuality and sensitivity, are present in the written and material remains from the past than we may be aware. We have not found them because we do not look for them. Much of it falls into the newer approaches to history sometimes termed particular history, microhistory or thick description. My current project concerning animals in the Geese Book manuscript has led me to see the animals mentioned in archival sources in which I had previously ignored them. Animals with all their own sentience, and all the associated smells, cackling, fluttering, frightened scurrying, and nervous pawing (not to mention the taste of their flesh upon consumption) are listed among the obligations that donors brought to finance their many pious gifts of altars and chapels. Previously I only looked for the inventories of books, vestments, and vasa sacra.

**Birdsall:** As I suggested earlier, in order to conduct sensory history, historians are necessarily reliant on print-based archives. One of the main problems of official archives, as social historians have demonstrated, is the implicit tendency towards intellectual histories based on past elite positions or scholarly theories. One strategy to try to access the everyday and material practices related to the senses is to seek out and critically interpret alternative sources, whether that be diaries, logbooks or court records, or—in the spirit of *Alltagsgeschichte*—to conduct oral history interviews. One other approach to twentieth-century sound has been an emphasis on cultural representations—such as novels, radio plays and films—as important sources for the narrativization of characteristic sensory impressions. In the case of a recent project led by Karin Bijsterveld, such representations are themselves taken as forms of staged audiovisual heritage, which provide insights into the perception and interpretation of the modern urban soundscape in the early twentieth century.

It is clear that strong or unusual sensory perceptions appear more frequently in the historical record; either because they were new or changed in quality, or because they were recalled as something of the past. In my view, it is important to amass adequate source material and examples to enable sufficient comparative perspectives. At the same time, documentation should not be an end in itself. Canadian composer R. Murray Schafer notoriously advocated a catalogue of ‘earwitness’ quotations, which he saw as offering direct access to past sounds, without the need for source criticism. Corbin has also responded to a similar compilation of a catalogue for nineteenth-century France by arguing that lists of examples only constitute an important, although preliminary stage in sensory historical research. While it may appear that historians initially perform a ‘positivist’ task of tracing the many sounds and sensations of a particular period—of categorizing and inventorying—these findings must be grounded by an analytical approach that establishes the context in which these impressions were given significance. In other words, such work reminds us that the historian not only ‘listens’ to sounds but seeks to develop an understanding of their uses in social spaces and the ways meaning is attributed to them.

One illustration of this insight can be found in scholarship on noise complaints by scholars such as John Picker and Karin Bijsterveld. While there has been attention to the different types of sounds produced in modern cities as a result of industrialization, modernization and urban density, these scholars has revealed how the perception of ‘unwanted sound’ was bound up with bourgeois discourses on private space and

democratization; noise abatement is crucially not only about a subjective experience of sound levels but the sense of control one has over those sounds.

**Missfelder:** I'm afraid that this is a problem that affects not only the history of the senses but, in one way or the other, almost every kind of history. It has to do with the simple fact that not everything that occurs to historical actors finds its way into the sources we rely upon to reconstruct the past. A lot of the material upon which historiographical narrations—especially those that are concerned with social and cultural history—are founded results from conflicts within societies over norms and their transgressions. In this respect, sensory historians may learn a lot from social historians, and particularly criminal historians. Legal sources, trial records, petitions or mandates not only show what authorities considered the world to be but equally provide insights into the social practices and actions that violated this normative order. Read against the grain, those legal sources have proven highly valuable to generations of social and cultural historians to reconstruct the everyday life of 'normal' historical actors, their agency and habitus. In other words, what is the *courant normal*, the everyday way of life in society, only appears as a blueprint of the recorded deviances.

I would suggest that sensory historians may adopt a similar approach. Societies define sensory standards by negotiating the legitimacy of sensorially sensitive practices. But who defines what under which political, social and cultural circumstances is a genuinely political question. When Jacques Attali wrote about the political economy of music in the late 1970s, what he had in mind was to analyse the way in which some musical utterances could be performed legitimately while others were fought and silenced. Today, Jacques Rancière's idea of the 'partage du sensible' as an eminently political disposition of legitimacy with respect to all kinds of visible or audible (or smellable, touchable, tastable . . .) articulations aims in a similar direction. Politics, in this view, can be considered as the configuration of the visible and the (rendered) invisible, the audible and the (rendered) inaudible, based upon power relations. Thus, I would argue that noise abatement campaigns, hygiene improvement measures or the censorship of images, films and computer games indicate the social disposition of sensory legitimacy. By focusing upon these neuralgic aspects of sensory history it may be possible not only to grasp everyday sensory perceptions and practices through the lenses of power but also to establish sensory history as a proper kind of political history. So Constance Classen's claim just quoted by Corine that sensory powers are social powers may lead us to a whole new kind of political and social history—through the senses.

**Morat:** As Frieder said, the problem that exceptional events tend to produce more source material than everyday ones is not unique to the history of the senses. Historians of everyday life always have to deal with the 'unremarkability' of their subject. The question therefore is: do historians of the senses necessarily have to be historians of everyday life? The connection between the history of the senses on the one hand and historical anthropology, microhistory and the history of everyday life on the other hand has been evident in the past. This can be seen especially in the case of the French Annales school. Lucien Febvre is one of the most important initiators both of the history of the senses and of historical anthropology. Following on from him, Alain Corbin further developed the history of the senses in the 1980s and 1990s as a

historical anthropology of the senses. But British historians such as E.P. Thompson, who have been influential in the formation of the history of everyday life, were also interested in the history of the senses at the same time. So yes, there is an obvious connection between the history of the senses and the history of everyday life. But one could argue that this connection does not have to be set in stone. Historians of the senses do not necessarily have to be interested in the ‘background sensory perceptions’ of the past. They can just as well study the function and importance of the senses in extraordinary situations or events such as war or revolutions. It might indeed be one of the promising future directions of the field to further connect the history of the senses to the new cultural history of politics and, for instance, to study the role of the senses in mechanisms of political representation and mobilization (which has already been done in a number of studies). There, the strong and striking sensations are justifiably to the fore.

The question about everyday sensory perceptions is not obsolete, however. If the purpose is a history of human experience then they cannot be left out. Here, my answer would be that they can best be studied in times of change. Everyday sensations might not be recorded as long as they are unremarkably there. But as soon as they start to change, as soon as they are lost or transformed, people start to think, talk and write about them. Corbin was able to write his landmark study on the village bells in nineteenth-century France because the hitherto unquestioned everyday sounds of the church bells started to be contested after the French Revolution and gradually lost their importance and meaning during the second half of the nineteenth century. If one assumes that the sensory regime of modernity has constantly been subject to change effected by processes such as industrialization, urbanization, mechanization, medialization and so on, one could say that records of everyday sensory perceptions should be relatively easy to trace at least for the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

**5. What, if anything, is the relationship between the appropriation of the senses by the heritage industry (for example, the museal ‘recreation’ of the smell of the middle ages, or of First World War trenches) and our interest in this subject as historians? Does the coincidence pose a threat to academic work on the theme, or provide an opportunity?**

**Missfelder:** This is indeed a tricky question. And I’d say there is a simple answer to it and a more complex one. This simple answer would be that it is virtually impossible actually to recreate the sensory world of the past and that historians therefore shouldn’t even bother to try. The obvious reason for this recommendation is the sheer complexity of sensory perceptions as well as their social and cultural contexts. Although it might be perfectly possible to reproduce, say, the sound of a cannon from the Napoleonic wars, no recording will ever capture the full acoustic experience of an French soldier trapped in the snowy hills before Moscow in 1812. The howling of the winter storm, the cries of hurt comrades, the heavy breath of exhaustion after months of marching through the never-ending Russian plains—all of this and innumerable other sound bites constitute the acoustic experience of an 1812 cannon shot. What is more, the hopes and fears associated with hearing friendly or hostile cannon fire, the patriotic feelings, the pity for victims hit by a cannon ball—in other words, the whole set of cultural and political

meaning that shapes the sound of a cannon not as a physical but as a historical event—will just not be reproducible.

But having said this, a different perspective is worth considering. The Dutch sound historian Karin Bijsterveld argued in her seminal study on noise and noise abatement in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Europe that experiences of sound and noise can only be expressed through ‘dramatizations’ and narrative strategies deeply embedded in cultural norms and modes of persuasive speaking about sensory experiences. The point of Bijsterveld’s concept is that every articulate form of sensory expression will always be ‘staged’ according to cultural conventions, social structures and political ends. In this respect, historical sources don’t do anything essentially different or better than what is achieved through stagings of sound, smell and taste in novels, movies or museums. Thus, at least in theory, there is no sharp epistemological divide between proper sensory history and other forms of appropriation of the senses. The staging of sensory experiences provides the common theoretical and methodological ground upon which historical and re-enacted sense-scapes can be analysed respectively.

To be understood, this poses a serious challenge to the practices of re-enactment at work in today’s heritage industry. First of all, it means that we have to give up the dream of actually coming close to what it really smelled, tasted or sounded like in medieval towns or the First World War trenches. But, in any case, what is actually gained in terms of real historical insight by knowing that the characteristic sound of pre-modern mobility was the clip-clopping of horseshoes? If museums and re-enactment societies could be interested in an admittedly more indirect way of showing how sensory experiences were staged in all kinds of different media instead of trying in vain to recreate what cannot be recreated, it might well be the beginning of a wonderful friendship between the heritage industry and the history of the senses.

**Morat:** Mark M. Smith and other historians engaged in the history of the senses have been quite vocal in warning about the problems of recreating historical sense-scapes in museums or in living history projects. Behind the desire to ‘experience’ the sensate past, Smith suspects, lies an ahistorical understanding of the senses. Indeed, even if—like Frieder said—we could recreate the sensory surroundings of a medieval town or a First World War trench completely (which is in itself impossible) we would still not experience the sensory perceptions in this surrounding the same way as the people of the past; not only because of our different existential situation (we don’t have to fear imminent death in the trench from an enemy grenade) but also because our senses are trained in a different way and are used to processing different stimuli. Therefore historians of the senses always have to use different sources to reconstruct the meanings attached to historical sensations and can never simply recreate them.

That said, I still think that academic historians of the senses should not dismiss out of hand the questions raised by the heritage industry. In part—this brings me back to my first answer—historians and museum visitors are motivated by the same wish to get close to actual historical experience, to get a ‘lively’ impression of the past. The past is present today not only through written records, but also through objects and material remains, through pictures and—since the late nineteenth century—recorded sounds. These remains of the past can today be experienced sensuously. Museums obviously build on this sensory presence of the past through objects, pictures and sounds. But

especially as historians of the senses, we should be aware of the fact that the sensory presence of the past is also at work in the academic production of history. The ways in which this sensory dimension plays into our academic work is not very often thought about, however. I would therefore stress the opportunities provided by the interest in the senses of the past shared by the heritage industry and academic historians. By engaging more with public history approaches to the history of the senses, academic historians could on the one hand help to avoid naïve and unhistorical ‘recreations’ of past sense-scapes, and on the other hand use this opportunity to think more about their own relationship with the sensory presence of the past.

**Birdsall:** I have found useful insights in sociologist John Urry’s reflections on the shift in global tourism from a visual logic to a broader sensory paradigm. In an update of his earlier work, Urry suggested that it is not only visual landscapes that attract tourists, but also soundscapes (in music-motivated tourism), smellscapes (of natural environments), tastescapes (in the consumption of food) or even geographies of touch (in physical activities such as rock climbing). While these ‘scapes’ each refer to different types of activities and tourist demographics, they dovetail with the recent trend towards an ‘experiential’ model in the heritage industry. This model has been critiqued, for instance, in its attempts at recreating the sensory impressions of earlier periods, whether through authentic smells, music performance or costume. Other forms of ‘authentic’ engagement with the past have been based on site specificity (First World War trenches) and object specificity (train carriages in the Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington). Even though such strategies might be criticized for transforming the World War or the Holocaust into interactive playgrounds, the experiential model has been praised for its engagement and appeal to the imagination of visitors.

I would argue that any successful history of the senses will necessarily establish what is at stake in conducting sensory history, and the vantage of the scholar from the perspective of the present. Such a reflection will ideally engage the scholar in the partial or provisional nature of any given project, but also the possible pitfalls and risks of projection involved. As a historian, I also feel obliged to note that the ‘experiential’ concept of the museum has a longer history itself. To take an example from research on German museums, a recent article by historian Adelheid von Saldern has indicated the integration of new media forms and interactive strategies in museums from at least around 1900.

As for the contemporary coincidence between uses of the senses in the heritage industry and historical scholarship, I tend to follow Mark Smith’s evaluation of this trend. Smith has warned against a vague notion of history being more ‘alive’ in the museum or original site. I also concur with his doubts as to whether sensory recreation is possible or even desirable; it may, in fact, only reaffirm our vantage from the present, rather than help to historicize the senses or reveal how they were perceived and understood in the past by a range of different historical subjects and groups. Nonetheless, it is certainly the case that attempts to reproduce past sensory impressions may help to popularize and legitimate historical research on the senses.

**Schleif:** I have gone on record pleading that ‘exploring and conveying the multisensory worlds of the past using the multimedia possibilities of the present should not be

left to the entertainment industries'. In history, art history and musicology, austere elitist constructions of the serious and cerebral as constituent of the nonsensual and disembodied have long banned academics to flat, silent, motionless, colourless worlds of print media. As recently as the 1970s, art history departments considered black and white slides more valid educational tools than the coloured slides—which were relegated to the tourist industry.

Delivering sensations that can be perceived simultaneously through multiple sense organs is a far more effective manner of imparting information. Needless to say, this requires us to revise many of our *modi operandi*. We need not describe or translate all of the sensibles into the abstractions of written words (Daniel mentions 'grey papyreness' and points out that the historian remains a 'prisoner of language'.) Even modest endeavours, such as presenting audio commentary with paintings, sculpture, architecture or even documents, are highly advantageous.

Remarkably, high definition images can suggest hypersensuality in the forms of hypervisuality or even hypertactility. When a macro photograph gives details beyond what is usually perceptible to the unaided eye, the brain can register the sensation of the uneven surfaces as if it were apprehended by the fingertips. For archival sources, this means that some of the thrill of holding a piece of parchment or paper that was actually marked by the hands of history's protagonists can be transmitted virtually.

Of course digital multimedia production of history is not without its challenges and dangers. Not all sensibles can be produced digitally. What is more, total recreations and true reproductions are neither possible nor desirable. We must know what our aims are and choose our recreated material selectively and wisely in order to 'stage' history, as Frieder points out, employing Karin Bijsterveld's term. Our goal is never to go back and solve the problems of the past. Our problems are today's problems, and in my opinion we need to reconstruct only enough to build bridges over time, in our own interest. Because they are similarly embodied, experienced sensualities open new avenues for empathy.

Often those who recreate for the heritage, tourist or entertainment industries strive to produce a Romantic ambience more pleasant, more personal and less technological than current lived realities. Consumers appear to seek an escape from the mundane workaday tedium with an opportunity to take on another identity—usually one more privileged in a past society than the one that is theirs in contemporary life. Such nostalgia makes us aware that meanings of sensibles change over time. Umberto Eco observes that the middle ages are historically perceived as a dark time. Indeed, without electric lighting, interiors were darker than the rooms of today, especially after sundown. But the middle ages prized light and went to great expense to employ the brightest of colours for their illuminated manuscripts or fine textiles.

Perhaps the biggest challenge lies in exercising sufficient sensitivity to represent with the goal of increased sensitization, but never to recreate past suffering, to trivialize history's atrocities or to facilitate continued victimizations. Carolyn's caveat regarding transforming war and the Holocaust into 'interactive playgrounds' is well taken. Commercialization of histories so terrible that they preclude sensationalization have been castigated with terms such as *shoah biz*. To my way of thinking, if historians do not play a more active role in 'sensitizing' we will continue to allow uncritical, popular and commercial interests to lead in the 'staging' of history.