



UvA-DARE (Digital Academic Repository)

Sensuous anthropology: sense and sensibility and the rehabilitation of skill

van Ede, Y.

Publication date
2009

Published in
Anthropological Notebooks

[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

van Ede, Y. (2009). Sensuous anthropology: sense and sensibility and the rehabilitation of skill. *Anthropological Notebooks*, 15(2), 61-75. http://www.drustvo-antropologov.si/AN/PDF/2009_2/Anthropological_Notebooks_XV_2_Van_Ede.pdf

General rights

It is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), other than for strictly personal, individual use, unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

Disclaimer/Complaints regulations

If you believe that digital publication of certain material infringes any of your rights or (privacy) interests, please let the Library know, stating your reasons. In case of a legitimate complaint, the Library will make the material inaccessible and/or remove it from the website. Please Ask the Library: <https://uba.uva.nl/en/contact>, or a letter to: Library of the University of Amsterdam, Secretariat, Singel 425, 1012 WP Amsterdam, The Netherlands. You will be contacted as soon as possible.

Sensuous Anthropology: Sense and Sensibility and the Rehabilitation of Skill

Yolanda van Ede

University of Amsterdam, Y.M.vanEde@uva.nl

ABSTRACT

Academic interest in the senses has been increasing massively. Particularly in the social sciences and the humanities, the multisensory approach criticises the ocularcentrism as launched by Enlightenment scholars. Studies started drawing attention to other sensory models in everyday life in western societies and in non-western cultures. This essay argues that in order to understand other sensory cultures, the investigator must him/herself experience sensory perceptions of the Other. Critics may reject this methodology for being subjective, preferring distance and objectivity. This view, however, fosters far-reaching consequences. Firstly, it denigrates the epistemologies of the Other, subjecting them to a western interpretation of knowledge. Secondly, it reconfirms power structures within western academia with regard to who is to decide on 'true' knowledge. Thirdly, the ethical point made here should be obvious: a denial of the epistemology of the Other runs against the anthropological endeavour, i.e. *Verstehen*. Finally, clinging to a modernist, western definition of science obstructs its own project in generating new knowledge. Sensuous anthropology is pioneering towards a new global science, but its impact depends on the willingness of other disciplines to give up their tenacious positivistic principles. If not, anthropology may become discarded as 'art' or craft, to be excluded from the academia altogether.

KEYWORDS: senses, sensuous anthropology, knowledge, methodology, ethics

Introduction: Sense and the Senses

The anthropological attention for the senses has taken such a flight that a 'sensory turn' has already been introduced. Anthropologists such as Paul Stoller (1989), David Howes (1991) and Nadia Seremetakis (1994) definitely played some key roles in this development. Because of an equal contribution from other disciplines, such as the humanities, economics, psychology and neurology, accompanied by an explosion of publications devoted to the senses, one might even suspect a key element of *Zeitgeist*. The modest degree of cross-fertilization that can be detected suggests the appearance of a new multi- or interdisciplinary territory, centring on the senses. From this perspective, the senses seem to

ANTHROPOLOGICAL NOTEBOOKS 15 (2): 61–75.

ISSN 1408-032X

© Slovene Anthropological Society 2009

offer a perfect point of departure to rethink methodological vocabularies within, and without, anthropology, its current position within academia, and its future.

Although this is not the place to present a detailed comparison of all different disciplinary approaches to the senses, I do wish to argue that anthropology occupies a rather unique position. For it is the human being, as a social and cultural being, that is the focus of research; not objects (material cultural), nor the body as a physical entity *per se*. Sensuous anthropology can not divide the production of sources for sensory experiences from the very perception of these products. Anthropological sensory study is irrevocably also sensuous research. The senses are not taken as merely a topic of research, distanced and objectified from the researcher to investigate, but an inherent part of consciousness-raising process that requires a broader methodological touch; more than observing and interviewing alone. Given the anthropological interest in socio-cultural diversity, a sensuous anthropology may generate severe implications for the prevailing conceptions of scientific practice and a philosophy of science – although these already suffer from severe, postmodern critiques. The radical, phenomenological approach of sensuous anthropology, as I wish to highlight here, may confront the western world view with cosmologies that are hard to translate straightforwardly into a Eurocentric imagery of the world. A renewed interest in the senses, then, leads to an intensified methodology, and inherently towards critical reflection on the ethical aspects of all scientific practices that concern human beings, and the epistemology it stands for. It compels us to reconsider who is in the power position to decide what *true* and *valuable* knowledge is, and for whom.

The call for a reevaluation of the senses was inspired by a critical positioning regarding two modernity theses. The first concerns the anaesthesia myth; the consequence of a modern hyperaesthesia. This thesis states that modern society would engender such enormous amount of sensory impulses that modern mankind would necessarily have to desensitise itself; that is, shutting out as much sensory impulses as necessary, whether consciously or subconsciously, in order to survive in the new urban environment (Benjamin 1936; Frisby and Featherstone 1997). The increasing individualisation of society only to confirmed this thesis.

The second thesis concerns the so-called western ocularcentrism; i.e. the hegemony of the Eye. Ever since Plato and Saint Paul, philosophers and theologians propagated seeing as the purest sense, epistemologically as well as morally (Synnott 1991; Jütte 2005). From the Age of Enlightenment onwards, science also took sight as its most precious sense. New optical technologies, as well as the development of ever sophisticated measuring instruments, increased the potentials of the collection of visual data. The distancing, brought about by an emphasis on seeing – i.e. observing – and created between that investigator and the object of investigation, had two advantages, according to the new conception of science. Firstly, the object under investigation could be separated from the craftsmanship, personal insights and expectations of the researcher. Subjectivity could be reduced to a minimum, and render the collected, visual data the quality of objectivity. Secondly, the new technologies would enhance repetitive examination and experimentation. Trial and error, and comparisons through the language of measurements and ‘observability’ would lead to defi-

nite outcomes, and claims of valid knowledge. Strictly designed methodologies and their results had to inspire a *con-sensus*, i.e. the illusion of a shared perception by *confrères* on which they founded their scientific knowledge.¹ ‘Seeing is believing’ became the credo.

The new, modern, positivist scientific view was implemented almost immediately at all levels of society. City plans were reorganised according to new principles that had to comfort the eye. A new architecture of public buildings and residences were to ban filth, stench, death, and corruption outside its boundaries (Corbin 1994; 1995). Land surveys and navigation systems became instrumental in mapping known and unknown worlds, measurements of skull and other body parts to index other human races (Fabian 1983; Stevens 2003). Hospitals, prisons, and schools had to be reformed into survey-able institutions, putting everything and everybody into view and under supervision; at the expense of *in-sight* and *con-tact*. Foucault speaks of the *gaze* (1975) that created distance, guarded hierarchies, and turned subjects into objects of observation. Dubord (1995) describes the emergence of the world as a spectacle in which experiencing was substituted by watching. Seeing was the only way the world could and should be known. And so it had to be adjusted to this one and only, ‘pure’ and ‘valid’ sense; systematically blocking out all other sensory experiences that were conceived as untrue, unpleasant, unhygienic, and/or immoral.

On anaesthesia and oclarcentrism

Obviously, this world-view reflected the power structures at work, as Foucault (1975), Fabian (1983) and many others have argued. The assumed hegemonic Eye, however, was but the gaze of the dominant classes, politicians, intellectuals, Europeans, men. The hierarchy of the senses – with seeing at its apex, followed by hearing, and smelling, tasting and touching at its base – these seers and observers proclaimed and enforced, both created and mirrored a social hierarchy as they thought it to be morally right because natural. Their sensory hierarchy connected meaning and employment of particular senses in work, social behaviour and living circumstances to the social status of every person. In reverse, those who counted themselves to be seers would assign to each category of people a certain dominant sense confirm their social position. In this way, women were said to have a natural capacities for smell, taste and touch, which made them inadequate for any intellectual labour that relies on sight and sound for reading and discussion. Their natural tasks were, therefore, perceived to be cleaning, cooking and care-taking (Classen 2005).

Should the anaesthesia thesis indeed be valid, it is merely for those who implemented the oclarcentric worldview, as Howes (1991; 2005), Classen (1998; 2005) and others suggest. The western elites indeed succeeded for a long time to banish all smells and flavours out of the cities, from flowers, from foodstuff, and managed to reduce especially touching and being touched to an absolute minimum. With their disdain for sensory

¹ See, for instance, Roberts (1993; 1995), who offers a fascinating account of the developments in scientific practice among chemists of the 18th Century, when the smelling and tasting of substances were displaced for instruments of measurement.

experiences other than the visual, they downplayed such experiences of numerous others, who consequently embodied the sensory model, legitimised by hygienic, aesthetic, economic, political, or religious arguments. However, in their everyday work and labour most people had to make an appeal to all the senses. If desensitization indeed occurred, it must have been among exactly those who thought to see; imposing their *socio*-centric worldview on the rest of humanity.

The elitist character of the anaesthesia thesis not only reveals itself when stepping down from an intellectual, ideological plane towards the phenomenological reality of the working classes. It also appears on the global stage when focussing on the outcome of modernity *par excellence*: consumerism. While during the early 20th century the design of consumer goods still focussed on visual attractiveness and utility, a growing competition on the consumer market soon had to expand the variety of temptation strategies. Colour, shape, texture, and sound, not only of products but also of their display, had to lure potential buyers. Competition between companies, advertisement agencies and shops fought over their clientele by putting all the senses into the battle. This truly caused a hyperaesthesia, larger than Benjamin (1936) and Simmel (in Frisby and Featherstone 1997) could have imagined, which as Howes (2005) points out, did not result in anaesthesia, but in a capitalist market that sought to reach all. The consumer could – and had to – select, whether consciously or subconsciously, by opening up for all sensory perception.

The global economy, which enlarged the variation of consumer goods even more, thus instigated a simultaneous localization of consumption and utilization practices. In preventing becoming lost in sheer infinite potential, to ‘drown’ in the masses, and being used as a plaything of dominant, opaque power structures, consumers have to make specific choices to express their identity. Additionally, they put these products in use according to local cultural practices, whether foodstuff, clothing, soap, or mp3 players.

Ironically, these recent studies on consumerism have shown us how restricted western scientific knowledge on the senses in fact is. The amount and quality of sensory information put into practice in the global economy transgresses the sensory hierarchy with all its social and epistemological categorization that seers and observers have tried to uphold. Neurologists and psychologists, for example, have long believed sensory experience as a ‘natural’ given. They equalled perception to experience and meaning, based on a simple physical model of five senses, localised in five organs (eyes, ears, nose, mouth, hand/skin) and connected to the brain by the limbic system. What it is we see when we look, hear when we listen, or smell, taste or touch was hardly ever a topic of investigation. Differences in sensory perception were put aside as either a personal talent – as in case of artists – or an individual, neuro-psychological deficiency, or both. Cultural differences were racialised, as physicalities and sensualities that characterised the Other. Naturally, these differences were interpreted according to the European, intellectual sensory model.²

² During the 19th Century, so-called ‘primitive peoples’ were associated with the ‘primitive’ senses. The natural historian Lorenz Oken thus invented a scheme with the European ‘eye-man’ at its apex, followed by the Asian ‘ear-man’, the Native American ‘nose-man’, and the African ‘skin-man’ at its closure (Classen 1998).

However, once the market sought to trigger the consumer's attention, promising extraordinary sensuous experiences, the naturalness of the senses had to be reinterpreted for predominantly economic purposes.

Even anthropologists, who according to their profession took the side of the cultural position in the nature-culture debate, hardly explicated the epistemological consequences of their sensuous findings. They merely used them to criticise the assumed hegemonic sensory model of the West. Fabian's classic *Time and the Other* (1983), for instance, has literally been an eye-opener to colonial and institutional power in relation to the ethical consequences of western ocularcentrism and the derogatory western gaze. However, these issues also imprisoned him, according to Grasseni (2007), within the technocratic, chauvinistic rhetoric of Western scientists, and resulted in a generalised anthropological embarrassment with seeing that obstructed meticulous investigation of

...the processes of visual 'enskillment', that is, on the apprenticeship of *particular* skilled visions that are *specific to situated* practices, and how much these can tell us about hegemony and resistance (Grasseni 2007: 3).³

We learn how to see; we learn to observe or not to observe. This is the same for all other senses as well. It is a process in which each person learns to put his biological, physical tools into use according to the rules and norms of one's culture and society. Therefore, distinctive cultures and social groups – based on ethnicity, social class, cultural preferences, religion, gender, or profession – differ in what they often take to be a very *natural* way of sensory perceiving and constructing the world.

Also in the arts, the media, literature and history the senses have received an increasing amount of attention. Understandably, their studies seek to bring the multi-sensoriality of objects and texts to the fore. To anthropologists, however, not the object, but the sensing subject is at the centre of their investigation. A human being cannot be the *object* of study, neither from an ethical stance (Fabian 1983), nor by a sensory approach. In order to understand the Other sincerely, participant observation can never remain a mere excuse for observation, or some interviews at best. The emphases have to be on the former, not the latter half of anthropology's key method. It has to be on participation, on partaking, perceiving, and experiencing, with all our senses. These moments of immersion ask for an open mind and an open body, to accept other sensory schemes and other possibilities of seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching. It entails a willingness and a capability to give up distance, and to trust subjectivity.

Sensing Otherness

Post-modern discussions on scientific practices and their epistemological implications are to a large extent restricted to the humanities and social sciences. Outside these disci-

³ See also Jay (1993) for an analysis on *discourses* on visibility versus *practices* of visibility and the role of consciousness and distance herein.

plines and outside academia in general, the modern, positivist view on science is still ruling. Many lecturers on qualitative methodology in anthropology will recognise students' tendencies to hark back to a search for 'hard data' (see for instance de Witte 2001: 18). It seems as if the concept of a quantitative, objective scientific practice has been rooted so deeply in their way of thought through education and the media that they find it hard to overcome a nagging uncertainty, once in the isolation of field research, and not to cling to an illusionary security of numbers. Having become a professional anthropologist, applications are turned down because of lacking explicitly formulated hypotheses, a well constructed conceptual and analytical model, and straight-forward definitions (van de Port 1994: 44). A proposal aiming at an understanding, *Verstehen*, is lauded; as long as it is described in terms that are accepted as valid in Western academia. That these very terms are ethnocentric, Eurocentric, and socio-centric, hardly seem to be of any concern to most research funding committees. No wonder then, that many anthropologists have adopted a strategy of writing a proposal according to the expectations of such often multidisciplinary committees, and of conducting their research as they see fit themselves. In the end, much of the outcomes remain within the disciplinary boundaries anyway. And so the existing power relations that decide upon knowledge are kept intact.

Also in the interdisciplinary field of the senses, cross-fertilization stays within the limits of the western world, and on human and object therein. Anthropological studies are seldom incorporated,⁴ whereas anthropologists do include theoretical insights developed in other areas (see Howes 1991; 2005). It is a pity that their findings are systematically excluded, to say the least. Their studies show, for instance, that – besides the visual and the oral/aural – also smell, taste, and touch offer meaningful insights in the social mechanisms of classic topics, such as kinship, rituals, reciprocity, gender, and social group formation. Stoller's understanding of hospitality and hidden ethnic conflicts among the Songhay of Nigeria (1989), for example, came to him through his obligatory share in sauces that were cooked for him personally and as part of a household or group of visitors. Each sauce served not only displayed the capability of the cook, a wife or daughter-in-law, but also reflected the quality given to the social and ethnic relationships between host, cook, and guests. No observation or interview could have been as penetrating as the tastes that were served.

Sensuous investigations have to start with an open mind. This is exemplified by Pinard's criticism (1991) of Diana Eck, who states that Indian culture is foremost a visual culture (1985). Her conclusion is, according to Pinard, more related to her own preoccupation with the visual, being a scholar in comparative religion studies and the arts, for she commits 'the same type of "category-error" as the restaurant-goer who eats the menu in place of the meal' (Pinard 1991: 221–222). According to him, not sight, but taste rules the Indian sensory model. Religious objects and art do not gain meaning by its visual aesthetics, but by the interaction between human being and idol through the offering of food.

⁴ In 2006, *The Senses & Society* was launched, a new journal devoted to sensory studies. Although two of its editors are anthropologists, the journal has included but very few anthropological contributions (see Bull et al. 2006: 5–7).

Through food offering, the social relationship between man and deity are confirmed and reconfirmed, and it is this relationship that generates a meaning that can only be understood when tasted, tested by tasting and digestion. This process of digesting knowledge is neither a mere metaphor, nor an analogy based on a tradition of learning and food sharing between *guru* and adept. 'Rather, it is continuous (or coterminous) with the whole digestive process in that the "post-digestive tastes" (*vipâka*) are not released until that process [of tasting knowledge] is complete' (Pinard 1991: 229; see also Goswamy 2005). Eck's visual reductionism, then, is ethnocentric, unethical, and can be proved epistemologically wrong.

Other sensing, other knowing

The critique above could be substantiated by references to India's long-standing philosophical tradition recorded in centuries of writing. However, what happens to civilizations that do not have historical texts to support and defend their sensory preferences and philosophies? How are people, such as the Dassanetch of Ethiopia, the Andaman in the Bengal rain forests, and the Umeda of Papua New Guinea (see Classen 1991), for whom the world exists of odours to defend their 'olfactocentrism' and their world-odour? They have no written texts, no visual sources of knowledge to offer, along the smells and fumes of their 'world view'.

Such anthropological studies present sensory approaches and nuances hitherto unknown (and/or unpopular) in western thought. Colour, for example, has been often denounced as trivial, feminine, and decorative at most, in the West (Young 2006). For scientific purposes, colour may seem interesting to cognitive sciences and quite useful for labelling and indexing; as a mode of thought in itself; however, it is taken worthless. To the Desana of the Amazon, however, the world exists essentially of colour. Colours define their ontology and epistemology, because every living being is surrounded by its personal field of colours, representing age, health, emotional state, and social status. In case of illness or social conflict, a shaman may be able to manipulate and integrate coloured energetic fields, in order to restore physical, psychological and social imbalances. Such a kaleidoscopic vision of the world is in opposition to the western perception of sight, its gazing; it counters the western distancing and superficiality of the eye with intimacy and proximity (Classen 2005). It is unfortunate that Grasseni and her co-authors (2007) did not take this contradiction into account, for it could have even strengthened their argument on 'visual skill'.

From sensory nuances towards synaesthesia is but a small step. In western medical sciences, synaesthesia, the merging of one kind of sensory information into another, has for long been taken as a neurological abnormality. Recent research by neurologists as well as psychologists, however, shows more serious interest in this phenomenon (van Campen 2008). According to them, the prevalent synaesthetic combinations are those of graphics and colour (Rouw and Scholte 2007), sound and colour (Brougher 2005), and shape and sound (Ramachandran and Hubbard 2001). The cultural factors underlying these most common combinations, however, are hardly taken into account. What they denote are the western preoccupation with the word, either written (graphics) or spoken

(sound), and to some degree an accepted importance of music. However, anthropological studies also show synaesthetic occurrences of sound and smell (Classen 1990), smell and colour (Young 2005), and sound and kinaesthesia (Feld 1990) in cultures that propose very different epistemological orientations. While their forms are taken as cultural synaesthetic instances, which only explain cultural phenomena in terms of sensory metaphors and analogies, less ethnocentrically-oriented neurological research might find inspiration in anthropological studies like these to widen their perspective on the fascinating potential of the human brain, both socio-cultural and individual.⁵

Finally there is the slippery, awkward *sixth sense*, which is associated by many a western reader with the paranormal and magic. But to what does the ‘sixth’ actually refer to? Strictly speaking, it refers to every sensory perception, which does not fit into the scientific model of the five senses.⁶ This very model suggests that all varieties of sensory perception by the five accepted senses are known, which – as has been argued – is not the case. What the clinging on to this model, in fact, points out is that *true* and *pure* knowledge is not defined by sensory perception. On the contrary, presumptions on what *true* and *pure* knowledge should be defining what can, and should, be sensory perceived. Hume’s empiricism may seem to put the senses forward, but he never explained which sensory information he thought was needed exactly (Jütte 2005: 128). The sensory foundation of his empiricism, however, seemed sufficient for modern scholars to enforce a separation between church and state, between religion and science. Seeing is believing. To this politico-scientific ideology, Descartes and his rationalist approach were also well suited. His ideas as set out in his *Discourse on Method* from 1637 (1968), from which the famous credo ‘cogito ergo sum’ is taken, served technocratic, positivist scientists well. The confession Descartes made in his *Sixth Meditation* published four years later, in 1641, however, they preferred to ignore, since here he ponders on the sources of his thinking and knowledge and undermined the body-mind distinction he professed in his earlier work. Four years later, Descartes writes, ‘I persuaded myself easily that I had no idea in my mind which had not formerly come to me through the senses’ (1993: 116). One is tempted to conclude that modern scientists refrained from more thorough investigations of the senses, because they irrevocably challenged the scientific agenda they sought to promote.

No doubt Classen (1990) did not compare the intimate colourful energetic fields of the Desana with auras on purpose. Even the mildest positivist would have discarded her description of their chromatic world-view as New Age nonsense. It may have had also repercussions on her credibility as a researcher and reputed academic. However, her case offers but one of many examples that highlight the rather thin line that distinguishes science from what western scientist consider not to be *normal*, i.e. paranormal. The modern-

⁵ Unique cases of synaesthesia in the West, like the sound-taste, and taste-touch combinations (Cytowic 1993) might not be as unique when compared to other sociocultural contexts.

⁶ The western preoccupation with the five senses has been criticised by Arabian philosophers during several centuries (see Jütte 2005). Also Immanuel Kant seems to have considered the ‘sixth’ sense as the sixth, inspired by poets of his time (ibid.:57).

ist separation of science from religion designates such perceptions, like those of the Desana, as belonging to the realm of magic. It is exemplified by Evans-Pritchard's treatment of Azande witchcraft (1976): lacking the logic of scientific thought, not even to be defined as religion, but nothing more than a self-professing and self-assuring system of belief.

The studious clinging to the five senses scheme has led also to a strained categorization of sensory perceptions in western thought. Touch offers a good example. In the past, touch was primarily defined as the haptic sense, until psychologists – Heller (1991) for instance – included cutaneous contact (with water and temperatures) and kinaesthesia (body movement). In several cultures, these tactile subcategories are considered to be sensory experiences in their own right, counting their number of senses to seven or more, since each of them is thought to generate a difference kind of knowledge in its own right. In particular, kinaesthesia has received considerable anthropological attention as the next examples show.

The Kaluli of Papua New Guinea, for instance, map their living environment by songs. These songs narrate about the inhabitants of a certain area; the area itself, however, is rendered in the songs' rhythms and melodies. What we are dealing with, however, is not an oral tradition. It is not the words, the oral texts, but the movements of the body that are echoed by their songs, as their rhythms and melodies follow the paths, up hill, down hill, their meandering along brooks and streams, and circumventing obstacles. Humans and birds may come and go; the colours and forms of flowers and trees may change by the season, as does the weather. Their temporariness makes visual and aural clues inadequate, as they are subject to constant change. The landscape itself, however, that dictates the path remains, according to the Kaluli, always the same. Its map is embodied, kinaesthetically known, and expressed in music.

Also in Ghana, kinaesthesia is the predominant sense among the Ewe (Geurts 2002). Called *seselame*, bodily movement earns the highest epistemological esteem, since it expresses the social and cultural knowledge of a person, his or her social position and moral dignity in each movement, gesture, or facial expression. This embodied knowledge is evidently not rational, not even necessarily conscious. It is learned in a moving, ever-changing world, by an endlessly falling over and picking up.

The emphasis on haptic touch, as treasured in the West, suggests a correlation with the European *cogito ergo sum* man who sought to grasp and control his world, but could not yet manipulate its water and temperatures. Since these aspects of his living environment have become manageable, there is also more ideational attention for the more passive qualities of touch, skin feeling and kinaesthesia. In performance studies and physical anthropology (see Järvinen 2007; Ingold 2004), as well as in architecture, bodily moving in social space has triggered a growing interest in subconscious, bodily perception: proprioception (Massumi 2002). Surely, someone such as the Ewe might be able to contribute to a further development of this insight.

Relating to *embodied knowledge*, it is worth mentioning that certain Buddhists believe the ratio to be a *sixth sense*. According to their men of learning and wisdom, the

mind is a separate organ that renders meaning to abstract thought. Other senses make sense by their sensory experiences themselves. In meditation, the aim is to silence the mind in order to be able to concentrate on precisely the inherent sense of bodily experience. As Samuel put it, meditation ‘involves “sensing” what already exists – one does not try to make sense of one’s ‘panoply of inner states’ because sense is not made’ (Samuel 2005: 17). These ideas are central to academic discussions on the significance and interpretation of perception, between Buddhist and western scholars. Thus far, this exchange of western and non-western philosophy has received hardly any serious attention from those beyond the fields of buddhology and anthropology (Benson et al. 1991; Kloppenborg 2005).

Conclusion: Sense and Sensibility

The first point I have tried to make is that any investigation into the senses is multi- and interdisciplinary by definition. The senses touch upon the essence of human perception, of the world and the self within that world, upon one’s interpretation and creation of that world. Consequently, the senses put western definitions of knowledge into question, in confrontation with the Other. Here, cosmology and epistemology seem to merge, rather than being separated as either science or religion. In order to circumvent rather fruitless discussions on what is factual and what is belief, the main question should be directed towards *how* the world is known. This *how* asks for a methodology that is rooted in daily, bodily, sensory experience, not in abstract, ideational, mere theoretical reflections. Sensory experience cannot be thought out. At best, it can be thought about.

The classic anthropological method of participant observation, often described by other disciplines as the ethnographic method, is the most suitable for learning and understanding different ways of perceiving the world. However, this would entail more than mere observing and listening. It requires an open mind, as well as the courage and will to turn one’s own body into a research tool. This step outside the outlined methodologies of western science is necessary if we really seek to understand the Other. Such an approach inherently criticises the western, elitist sensory model, its assumed ocularcentrism and the anaesthetizing tendencies of the modern world. It also highlights the power structures in western scientific practices, dominated by those who themselves prefer to think about what they think they see. In confrontation with other social classes than they adhere to, with other cultures where other opinions and perceptions of *true* and *pure* knowledge are ruling, it calls for an ethical consideration of what western science is to promote. These confrontations should enforce more, and more critical, reflection of its scientific aims and goals. Anthropology might take the lead in this process.

Of course, one could put Songhay recipes, Kaluli sung maps, and Desana auras – as some of the examples given above – aside as mere exotic trivia and typical anthropological romanticism. However, by doing so also strict positivist-oriented scholars would miss the opportunities of enlarging potential variables, which such ‘exotic’ cultures have to offer, of drawing better informed research projects, and sharpening their hypotheses. Of course, an anthropologist’s sensory methodology could be rejected before he even

could get started, as being subjective and unworthy of being called scientific. One's skill and craftsmanship may be seen as laudable, but totally out of range with the objectifying, distancing assets of modern science. In fact, one is no more than one's own *ignorant* and *believing* informant. Such a misdemeanour, however, foregoes the fact that there cannot be any knowledge without ability and skill. It was as such before science came to rely on technological instruments (Roberts 1993; 1995); it continues to be so, even with all contemporary technology at our disposal (Grasseni et al. 2007).

Moreover, an accusation of anthropologists returning to 'going native' based on the above seems to be grounded in a rather static perspective on scientific practice. A field researcher, however, is constantly on the move between two modes of thought and being, between his own and that of the Other (Pels 1999; van Ede 2007).⁷ The duplexity of understanding and acknowledging the Other, on one hand, and of making sense of the sensible as well as efforts in presenting these insights to an audience at home, on the other, request a constant interchange of distance and immersion. Objectivity and subjectivity are not mutually exclusive.

Surely the senses bring all the dilemmas attached to the representation of knowledge to the fore more than ever before. The literary turn – as introduced by Rorty (1970), and revitalised by, for instance, Clifford and Marcus (1986) – drew attention to the political and ethical issues of writing culture, of choosing genre, of giving voice. These discussions focussed primarily on the traditional format of representational modes, namely the written text, and to a lesser degree by film and photography. But how to represent knowledge that is gathered through fragrances, tastes, and synaesthetic combinations? Even multimedia cannot solve this problem (yet). It turned out that also the recreation of the Other's reality in the context of an exhibition, which was to offer the public an experience of that world, recreated insolvable dilemmas in perception (Losche 2006). Whether we opt for creative writing, like Stoller (1997) and Geurts (2002), or for audio and/or visual media (e.g. Barbash and Taylor 1997; Feld and Brenneis 2004), or make ever more use of digital potentials (for instance Kersenboom (1995),⁸ each option has to rely on the imagination of both authors and audiences. Each medium is but a representation. In contrast, sensuous scholars in the arts, literature, film, and history are recently asserting that each medium triggers, in fact, a multisensory, if not a synaesthetic experience. In the imagination inspired by paintings, books, pictures, and movies, images seem to play a minor role. Thus, even when written texts seem to be indispensable in getting new knowledge across, the writer will have to seek more inspiration in those media, the sensory perceptions they evoke, and in the sensory experiences themselves, than ever before. This is true not only for anthropologists.

The question of what role anthropology will play within the interdisciplinary sensory field is for the future to tell. Its role seems by and large to depend on what the

⁷ See also Losche (2006) on the dilemma between distance and immersion in relation to seeing and experiencing.

⁸ See <http://www.parampara.nl>.

outcomes will be of sensory investigations in other disciplinary fields, and to what extent these results will effectuate their ruling prerequisites of scientific practice. Anthropology depends on the reflexivity and self-critiques of seers and those granting research funds, to understand the impact of the radical phenomenological stance the senses request. Adjusting itself to modern scientific standards would mean giving up its very scientific aim, *Verstehen*, in respect for the Other. As such, it runs the risk of becoming ever more marginalised, as an *enfant terrible*, deconstructing its own scientific foundation. Only when, in this era of globalization, a global science has come into being, which is also willing to incorporate world-views, world-smells, world-tastes, world-breath, and so on – however without the still unacknowledged hunger to colonise the ways of thinking of others – only then is its mission accomplished, and may remain nothing more of the discipline it once was, than its main method: fieldwork, the encounter, the *con-tact*. Until then, anthropologists have to trust on the leading role they assigned to themselves in ethics and in methodology. The world is a dynamic place. It will ask for a philosophy of science that is constantly on the move. Let us simply move on, as we feel is best.

Acknowledgements

This essay is a revised version of a paper presented at the EASA Biennial Conference 2008, in Ljubljana, at the *New vocabularies of method: experts, ethics and the mutuality of ethnographic fieldwork* workshop. I thank the conveners Peter Pels and João de Pina-Cabral, as well as Lorraine Nencel and Thijl Sunier for their helpful comments on the earlier draft; and the Amsterdam School for Social Research for its support.

References

- Barbash, Ilisa and Lucien Taylor. 1997. *Cross-Cultural Filmmaking: A Handbook for Making Documentaries and Ethnographic Film and Videos*. Los Angeles: University Of California Press.
- Benjamin, Walter. 1969. The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction. In: Hannah Arendt (ed.), *Illuminations*. New York: Schocken Books, pp. 217–251.
- Benson, Herbert, Robert A. F. Thurman, Howard E. Gardner, Daniel Goleman (eds.). 1991. *Mindscience: an East-West Dialogue*. Boston: Wisdom Publications.
- Brougher, Kerry. 2005. *Visual Music: Synaesthesia in Art and Music Since 1990*. London: Thames and Hudson.
- Bull, Micheal, Paul Gilroy, David Howes and Douglas Kahn. 2006. Introducing Sensory Studies. *The Senses and Society* 1(1): 5–7.
- Classen, Constance. 1990. Sweet Colors, Fragrant Songs: Sensory Models of the Andes and the Amazon. *American Ethnologist* 17(4): 722–35.
- Classen, Constance. 1991. Creation by Sound/Creation by Light: A Sensory Analysis of Two South American Cosmologies. In: David Howes (ed.), *Varieties of Sensory Experience: a Sourcebook in the Anthropology of the Senses*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, pp. 257–288.
- Classen, Constance. 1998. *The Color of Angels: Cosmology, Gender and the Aesthetic Imagination*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Classen, Constance. 2005. The Witch's Senses: Sensory Ideologies and Transgressive Feminites from the Renaissance to Modernity. In: David Howes (ed.), *Empire of the Senses. The Sensual Culture Reader*. Oxford and New York: Berg Publishers, pp. 70–84.
- Clifford, James and George Marcus (eds.). 1986. *Writing Culture. The Poetics and politics of Ethnography*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Corbin, Alain. 1994. *The Foul and the Fragrant*. London: Picador.

- Corbin, Alain. 1995. *Time, Desire and Horror. Towards a History of the Senses*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Cytowic, Richard E. 1993. *The Man Who Tasted Shapes*. Cambridge, MA and London: The MIT Press.
- de Witte, Marleen. 2001. *Long Live the Dead! Changing funeral celebrations in Asante*. Ghana. Amsterdam: Aksant.
- Descartes, Rene. 1968. *Discourse on Method and the Meditations*. London: Penguin Books.
- Descartes, Rene. 1993. *Meditations on First Philosophy*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Dubord, Guy 1995. *The Society of the Spectacle*. New York: Zone Books.
- Eck, Diana. 1985. *Daræan: Seeing the Divine Image in India*. Chambersburg, Penn: Anima Books.
- Evans-Pritchard, Edward E. 1976. *Witchcraft, Oracles, and Magic among the Azande*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Fabian, Johannes. 1983. *Time and the Other: how anthropology makes its own object*. New York: Colombia University Press.
- Feld, Steven. 1990. *Sound and Sentiment: Birds, Weeping, Poetics and Song in Kaluli Expression*. Philadelphia: University of Philadelphia Press.
- Feld, Steven. 1991. *Voices of the Rainforest: A Day in the Life of the Kaluli People*. CD. The World series, Mickey Hart, ed. Boston: Rykodisc.
- Feld, Steven and Donald Brenneis. 2004. Doing Anthropology in Sound. *American Ethnologist* 31(4): 461–474.
- Foucault, Michel. 1975. *The Birth of a Clinic: An Archaeology of Medical Perception*. New York: Vintage.
- Frisby, David P. and Mike Featherstone. 1997. *Simmel on Culture. Selected Writings*. London and Thousand Oakes: Sage Publications.
- Geurts, Kathryn Linn. 2002. *Culture and the Senses: Bodily Ways of Knowing in an African Community*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Goswamy, B. N. 2005. Rasa: Delight of the Reason. In: Carolyn Korsmeyer (ed.), *The Taste Culture Reader. Experiencing Food and Drink*. Oxford and New York: Berg Publishers, pp.215–225.
- Grasseni, Christina. 2007. Introduction. In: Christina Grasseni (ed.), *Skilled Vision. Between Apprenticeship and Standards*. Oxford and New York: Berghahn Books, pp.1–19.
- Heller, Morton A. 1991. Introduction. In: Morton A. Heller and William Schiff (eds.), *The Psychology of Touch*. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, pp.1–20.
- Howes, David (ed.). 1991. *Varieties of Sensory Experience: a Sourcebook in the Anthropology of the Senses*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Howes, David. 2005. Hyperesthesia, or: The Sensual Logic of Late Capitalism. In: David Howes (ed.), *Empire of the Senses. The Sensual Culture Reader*. Oxford and New York: Berg Publishers, pp. 281–303.
- Ingold, Tim. 2004. Culture on the Ground. The World Perceived Through the Feet. *Journal of Material Culture* 9(3): 315–340.
- Järvinen, Hanna. 2007. Rethinking the Corporeal Sensorium: Kinaesthesia and Proprioception. In: *Inside Knowledge: (Un)doing Methodologies, Imagining Alternatives*. ASCA International Workshop, Amsterdam, March 28–30, 2007, pp.38–51.
- Jay, Martin. 1993. *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth Century French Thought*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Jütte, Robert. 2005. *A History of the Senses: from Antiquity to Cyberspace*. Cambridge: Polity Books.
- Kersenboom, Saskia. 1995. *Word, Sound, Image. The Life of a Tamil Text*. With CD-i. Oxford and New York: Berg Publishers.
- Kloppenborg, Ria (ed.). 2005. *Boeddhisme en Psychotherapie. Theoretische en praktische verkenningen*. Rotterdam: Asoka.
- Losche, Diana. 2006. Fate of the Senses in Ethnographic Modernity: The Margaret Mead Hall of Pacific Peoples at the American Museum of Natural History. In: Chris Gosden, Ruth Phillips and Elizabeth Edwards (eds.), *Sensible Objects: Colonialism, Museums and Material Culture*. Oxford and New York: Berg Publishers, pp. 223–244.
- Massumi, Brian. 2002. *Parables for the Virtual. Movement, Affect, Sensation*. Durham: Duke University Press.

- Pels, Peter. 1999. Professions of Duplexity. A Prehistory of Ethical Codes in Anthropology. *Current Anthropology* 40(2): 101–114.
- Pinard, Sylvain. 1991. A Taste of India: On the Role of Gustation in the Hindu Sensorium. In: David Howes (ed.), *Varieties of Sensory Experience: a Sourcebook in the Anthropology of the Senses*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, pp. 221–230.
- Ramachandran, Vilayanur S. and Edward M. Hubbard. 1991. Synaesthesia: A window into perception, thought and language. *Journal of Consciousness Studies* 8 (12): 3–34.
- Roberts, Lissa. 1993. Filling the Space of Possibilities: Eighteenth-Century Chemistry's Transition from Art to Science. *Science in Context* 6 (2): 511–553.
- Roberts, Lissa. 1995. The Death of the Sensuous Chemist: The 'New' Chemistry and the Transformation of Sensuous Technology. *Studies in History and the Philosophy of Science* 26(4): 503–529.
- Rorty, Richard M. 1970. *The Literary Turn: recent essays in the philosophical method*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Rouw, Romke and Steven H. Scholte. 2007. Increased Structural Connectivity in Grapheme-Color Synesthesia. *Nature Neuroscience* 10 (6): 792–797.
- Seremetakis, C. Nadia. 1994. *The Memory of the Senses, Part I: Marks of the Transitory*. In: Nadia C. Seremetakis (ed.), *The Senses Still: Memory and Perception as Material Culture in Modernity*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press, pp.1-18.
- Stevens, Scott M. 2003. World Contacts and the Trope of the "Naked Savage". In: Elizabeth D. Harvey (ed.), *Sensible Flesh: On Touch in Early Modern Culture*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, pp. 125–140.
- Stoller, Paul. 1989. *The Taste of Ethnographic Things. The Senses in Anthropology*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Stoller, Paul. 1997. *Sensuous Scholarship*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Synnott, Anthony. 1991. Puzzling over the Senses: From Plato to Marx. In: David Howes (ed.), *The Varieties of Sensory Experience. A Sourcebook in the Anthropology of the Senses*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, pp.61–78.
- van Campen, Crétien. 2008. *The Hidden Sense. Synesthesia in Art and Science*. Cambridge and Massachusetts: The MIT Press.
- van de Port, Mattijs. 1994. Het einde van de wereld. Beschaving, redeloosheid en zigeunercafés in Servië. Amsterdam: Babylon de Geus.
- van Ede, Yolanda. 2007. From the Untouchables towards Cool Investigation. In: Rob van Ginkel and Alex Strating (eds.), *Wildness and Sensation: An Anthropology of Sinister and Sensuous Realms*. Amsterdam: Spinhuis Publishers, pp. 274–294.
- Young, Diana. 2005. The Smell of Greenness. Cultural Synaesthesia in the Western Desert (Australia). *Etnofoor* 18(1): 61–77.
- Young, Diana. 2006. The Colours of Things. In: Christopher Tilley, Webb Kean, Susanne Kuechler-Fogden, Mike Rowlands and Patricia Spyer, *Handbook of Material Culture*. Thousand Oaks and London: Sage Publications, pp. 173–85.

POVZETEK

Akademsko zanimanje za čute je močno naraslo. Še posebej v družbenih vedah in humanistiki multisenzorični pristop kritizira okulocentrizem, ki so ga vpeljali razsvetljenski učenjaki. Študije so se začele osredotočati na druge čutilne modele vsakdanjega življenja v zahodnih in nezahodnih kulturah. V prispevku skušam argumentirati, da mora raziskovalec, če hoče razumeti kulture drugih čutov, sam občutiti čutilne zaznave Drugega. Kritiki, ki cenijo distanco in objektivnost, lahko takšno metodologijo zavrnejo kot subjektivno, vendar pa ima takšno delovanje lahko daljnosežne posledice. Kot prvo, zanika veljavnost epistemologije Drugega in ga podvrže zahodni interpretaciji vednosti, kot drugo pa s tem ponovno vzpostavi oblastne strukture znotraj zahodnega akademskega sveta glede na to, kdo je tisti, ki odloča o tem, kaj je 'prava' vednost. Kot tretje je potrebno upoštevati tudi etični vidik: zanikanje epistemologije Drugega je v nasprotju z antropološkimi prizadevanji, t.j. *Verstehen*. Nenazadnje pa naslanjanje na modernistično, zahodno definicijo znanosti ovira lasten projekt pridobivanja nove vednosti. Antropologija čutov ubira pionirsko pot v smeri nove globalne znanosti, vendar pa je njen učinek odvisen od pripravljenosti drugih disciplin, da opustijo svoja trda pozitivistična načela. V nasprotnem primeru lahko antropologija postane zgolj 'umetnost' ali obrt, ki je mogoče v celoti izključiti iz akademskega sveta.

KLJUČNE BESEDE: čuti, antropologija čutov, vednost, metodologija, etika

CORRESPONDENCE: YOLANDA VAN EDE, University of Amsterdam, Department of Sociology & Anthropology, OZ Achterburgwal 185, 1012 DK Amsterdam, the Netherlands. E-mail: Y.M.vanEde@uva.nl.

