

## Chapter 33

# City Life and the Senses

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### **Introduction**

In this chapter I develop an issue interestingly expressed by Popper when he characterizes “closed societies” as a “concrete group of individuals, related to one another...by concrete physical relationships such as *touch*, *smell*, and *sight*” (1962: 173; emphasis added). In the following I explore, not the senses powerful within closed societies, but how such senses operate in “open societies” and especially in what we might call “open cities.” Which senses dominate and what role do they play in producing the spatializations of city life within the “West” (for an alternative account of sensing nature, see Macnaghten and Urry 1998: ch. 4)?

Rodaway usefully elaborates a “sensuous geography” which connects together analyses of body, sense, and space (1994). As well as the *social* character of the senses emphasized by Simmel (Frisby and Featherstone 1997), Rodaway shows that the senses are also spatial. Each sense contributes to people’s orientation in space; to their awareness of spatial relationships; and to the appreciation of the qualities of particular micro- and macro-spatial environments. Moreover, each sense gives rise to metaphors which attest to the relative importance of each within everyday life. With regard to sight, it is often said that “we see” something when we understand it; someone who does not understand a topic is said to be “blind”; farsighted leaders are said to be “visionary”; while intellectuals may be able to “illuminate” or “shed light on” a particular topic. By contrast those who cannot understand some issue remain “in the dark” (and see Hibbitts 1994: 240–1).

Rodaway further suggests that there are five distinct ways in which different senses are interconnected with each other to produce a sensed environment: *co-operation* between the senses; a *hierarchy* between different senses, as with the visual sense during much of the recent history of the West; a *sequencing* of one sense which has to follow on from another sense; a *threshold* of effect of a particular sense which has to be met before another sense is operative; and *reciprocal* relations of a certain sense with the object which appears to “afford” it an appropriate response (1994: 36–7).

## Visuality

The hierarchy of the senses within Western culture over the past few centuries has placed the visual at the top (Rorty 1980). This was the outcome of various developments. These included new ecclesiastical styles of architecture of the Middle Ages which allowed increasingly large amounts of light to filter through the brightly colored stained-glass windows. The medieval fascination with light and color was also to be seen in the growth of heraldry as a complex visual code denoting chivalric identification and allegiance (Hibbitts 1994: 251). In the fifteenth-century linear perspectivism enabled three-dimensional space to be represented on a two-dimensional plane. There was also the development of the science of optics and the fascination with the mirror as a popular object found in grand houses and later in urban shops. Also there was the growth of an increasingly “spectacular” urban legal system with colourful robes and elaborate courtrooms.

Most significant was the invention of the printing press which reduced the relative power of the oral/aural sense and enhanced the seeing of the written word, as well as pictures and maps (Hibbitts 1994: 255). Jay summarizes the significance of this visual sense within the broad sweep of Western culture: “with the rise of modern science, the Gutenberg revolution in printing and the Albertian emphasis on perspective in painting, vision was given an especially powerful role in the modern era” (1986: 179). Marshall McLuhan similarly argues that “as our age slips back into the oral and auditory modes . . . we become sharply aware of the uncritical acceptance of visual metaphors and models by many past centuries”; to be real a thing must, he says, be visible (1962: 238).

Simmel makes two important points about this visual sense. First, the eye is a unique “sociological achievement” (Frisby and Featherstone 1997: 111). Looking at one another effects the connections and interactions of individuals. Simmel terms this the most direct and “purest” interaction. It is the look between people (what we now call “eye-contact”) which produces extraordinary moments of intimacy. This is because “[o]ne cannot take through the eye without at the same time giving”; this produces the “most complete reciprocity” of person to person, face to face (Frisby and Featherstone 1997: 112). The look is returned, and this results from the expressive meaning of the face. What we see in the person is the lasting part of them, “the history of their life and . . . the timeless dowry of nature” (Frisby and Featherstone 1997: 115). By contrast the ear and the nose do not reciprocate – they only take but do not give.

This intimacy of eye contact was initially given urban expression in nineteenth-century Paris, with its sidewalk cafes in which lovers could be “private in public” (Berman 1983). This intimacy was enhanced by the streams of anonymous city-dwellers and visitors, none of whom would return the look of the lovers. They remained wrapped in the intimacy of their particular face-to-faceness, surrounded by the rush, pace, and anonymity of the city life going on all around them.

Second, Simmel notes that only the visual sense enables possession and property; while that which we hear is already past and provides no property to possess (Frisby and Featherstone 1997: 116). The visual sense enables people to take possession, not only of other people, but also of diverse environments. It enables the world to be

controlled at a distance, combining detachment and mastery (see Robins 1996: 20). By seeking distance a proper “view” is gained, abstracted from the hustle and bustle of everyday city life (see Hibbitts 1994: 293).

This power of possession is best seen in the development of photography. Adam summarizes: “The eye of the camera can be seen as the ultimate realisation of that vision: monocular, neutral, detached and disembodied, it views the world at a distance, fixes it with its nature, and separates observer from observed in an absolute way” (1995: 8). Photography is thus a particularly powerful signifying practice which reproduces a dominant set of images and, at the very same time, conceals its constructed character (see Berger 1972; Sontag 1979; Albers and James 1988; Urry 1990). It also gives shape to the very processes of movement around the city (see Urry 1990: 137–40). Photographic practices thus reinforce the dominance of the visual gaze, including that of the male over the bodyscape of women within the city. By contrast, Irigaray argues that for women “investment in the look is not as privileged in women as in men. More than other senses, the eye objectifies and masters. It sets at a distance, and maintains a distance” (1979: 50; and see Heidegger on the “modern world picture” 1979: 134).

This visual sense is moreover increasingly mediatised, as it shifts from the printing press to electronic modes of representation, and from the camera to the circulation of digital images. Such transformations stem from the nineteenth-century process by which there was a “separation of the senses” and especially the visual sense from touch and hearing (see Crawshaw and Urry 1997, on such a sequencing of the senses). The autonomization of sight enabled the quantification and homogenization of visual experience. Many new objects of the visual began to circulate in the city – including commodities, mirrors, plate-glass windows, postcards, photographs and so on. These objects displayed a visual enchantment in which magic and spirituality were displaced by visual appearances and surface features, reflecting in the city the mass of consumers passing by.

In the twentieth-century city, most powerful systems of modern incarceration involve the complicity of sight in their routine operations of power. “Distancing, mastering, objectifying – the voyeuristic look exercises control through a visualization which merges with a victimization of its object” (Deutsche 1991: 11). It is argued that we live in a “surveillance society,” even when we are apparently roaming freely through a shopping center or the countryside (Lyon 1994). Virilio has particularly emphasized the novel importance of video surveillance techniques to changing the morphology of the contemporary city and hence of the trust that the public now have to invest in such institutions of surveillance (1988). It has been calculated that one is “captured” on film 20 times during a walk through a major shopping center. What is striking about such CCTV techniques is their ordinariness, much akin to the child playing video games in an arcade or on a home computer (Robins 1996: 20–1; and see the film *Sliver*).

Thus the city both is fascinated with, and hugely denigrates, the visual. This ambivalence is reflected in the diverse discourses surrounding travel. On the one hand, we live in a society of spectacle as cities have been transformed into diverse and collectable spectacles. But on the other hand, there is denigration of the mere sightseer to different towns and cities. The person who only lets the sense of sight have free rein is ridiculed. Such sightseers are taken to be superficial in their

appreciation of environments, peoples, and places. Many people are often embarrassed about mere sightseeing. Sight is not seen as the noblest of the senses but as the most superficial, as getting in the way of real experiences that should involve other senses and necessitate much longer periods of time in order to be immersed in the site/sight (see Crawshaw and Urry 1997, for further detail).

The critique of the sightseer is taken to the extreme in the analysis of “hyper-reality,” forms of simulated experience which have the appearance of being more “real” than the original (Baudrillard 1981; Eco 1986). The sense of vision is reduced to a limited array of features, it is then exaggerated and it comes to dominate the other senses. Hyper-real places are characterized by surface which does not respond to or welcome the viewer. The sense of sight is seduced by the most immediate and visible aspects of the scene, such as the facades of Main Street in Disneyland. What is not experienced in such hyper-real places is a different visual sense, the baroque (Jay 1992; Buci-Glucksmann 1984). This involves the fascination for opacity, unreadability, and indecipherability. Jay seeks to celebrate “the dazzling, disorientating, ecstatic surplus of images in baroque visual experience... [the] rejection of the monocular geometricalization of the Cartesian tradition... the baroque self-consciously revels in the contradictions between surface and depth, disparaging as a result any attempt to reduce the multiplicity of visual spaces into any one coherent essence” (1992: 187). He talks of baroque planning seeking to engage all the senses as found in some carnivals and festivals (1992: 192). This partly parallels Sennett’s critique of the blandness of the “neutralised city” which is based upon fear of social contact with the stranger involving the various senses (1991). Sennett advocates the positive uses of disorder, contradiction, and ambiguity in the development of contemporary cities (and see Robins 1996: 100–1).

Likewise feminists have argued that the concentration upon the visual sense overemphasizes appearance, image, and surface. Irigaray argues that in Western cultures “the preponderance of the look over the smell, taste, touch and hearing has brought about an impoverishment of bodily relations. The moment the look dominates, the body loses its materiality” (1978: 123; Mulvey 1989). This emphasis upon the visual reduces the body to surface, marginalizes the multiple sensuousness of the body and impoverishes the relationship of the body to its environment. And at the same time the visual overemphasizes masculinist efforts to exert mastery over the female body, particularly through the voyeurism effected via the pornographic picture (Taylor 1994: 268). By contrast a feminist consciousness emphasizes the dominant visual sense less and seeks to integrate all of the senses in a more rounded way, which does not seek to exert mastery over the “other” (Rodaway 1994: 123). Other writers have particularly emphasized the significance of aural traditions in women’s lives – especially within socially dense urban areas – to talking and listening, telling stories, engaging in intimate detailed dialog or gossip and the use of the metaphor of “giving voice” (Hibbitts 1994: 271–3).

### **Smell and Touch**

I turn now to these other senses and their complex relationships with visuality. I begin with nineteenth-century urban England. In 1838 the House of Commons Select Committee argued that, because there were whole areas of London through

which no thoroughfares passed, the lowest class of person was secluded from the observation and the influence of "better educated neighbours" (Stallybrass and White 1986: 134). Engels noted how the social ecology of the industrial city had the effect of "hiding from the eyes of wealthy gentlemen and ladies . . . the misery and squalor that . . . complement . . . their riches and luxury" (cited Marcus 1973: 259). It was claimed that the "lower" classes would be greatly improved if they became visible to the middle and upper classes. There are parallels here with the rebuilding of Paris and its hugely enhanced visibility which resulted from replacing the medieval street plan with the grand boulevards of the Second Empire (see Berman 1983).

In Britain visibility was increasingly viewed as central to the regulation of the lower classes within the new cities. As the "other" class were now seen in the massive cities of nineteenth-century Britain, the upper class desperately tried not to touch them (unless of course they were prostitutes or domestic servants who were deemed available for touching by upper-class men). The concepts of "contagion" and "contamination" were the tropes through which the upper class apprehended nineteenth-century city life (Stallybrass and White 1986). As the "promiscuity" of the public space became increasingly unavoidable, so the upper and middle classes sought to avoid touching the potentially contaminating "other," the "dangerous classes."

This was in turn reflected in the development of Victorian domestic architecture which was designed to regulate the flows of bodies, keeping servants apart from the family "below stairs," adults apart from children who were in the nurse, and male children apart from female children. As a contemporary argued, there were: "two currents of 'circulation' in a family dwelling . . . There is the activity of the master and his friends, which occurs on the most visible, genteel and accessible routes, and there is the 'circulation' of the servants, tradesmen and everyone else who provides the home with services, and this should take place in the least conspicuous and most discreet way possible" (quoted in Roderick 1997: 116).

More generally, the upper class mainly sought to gaze upon the other, while standing on their balconies. The balcony took on special significance in nineteenth-century life and literature as the place from which one could gaze but not be touched, could participate in the crowd yet be separate from it. It was one of the earliest examples of replacing the city of touch with the city of visibility (see Robins 1996: 20). According to Benjamin the balcony demonstrates superiority over the crowd, as the observer "scrutinizes the throng" (1969: 173). The later development of the skyscraper, beginning in 1880s Chicago, also enabled those inside to gaze down and across the crowd, while being insulated from the smells and the potential touch of those who were below. In Chicago the avoidance of the smells of the meat processing industry was a particularly important spur to building skyscrapers up into the light.

And there are parallels with the way in which the contemporary tourist bus gives a bird's eye view, in but not of the crowd, gazing down on the crowd in safety, without the heat, the smells, and the touch. It is as though the scene is being viewed on a screen, and sounds, noises, and the contaminating touch are all precluded because of the empire of the gaze effected through the windows of the bus. Thus the dominance of sight over the dangerous sense of smell has been effected through a number of physical objects and technologies, such as the balcony, the skyscraper and the air-conditioned bus.

Smell was thus significant in the cultural construction of the nineteenth-century Western city. It demarcated the unnaturalness of the city. Stallybrass and White argue that in the mid-nineteenth-century “the city... still continued to invade the privatised body and household of the bourgeoisie as smell. It was, primarily, the sense of smell which enraged social reformers, since smell, whilst, like touch, encoding revulsion, had a pervasive and invisible presence difficult to regulate” (1986: 139). Smells, sewers, rats, and the mad played key roles in the nineteenth-century construction of class relations within the large cities. Later, in the 1930s, George Orwell noted powerful odors along the road to Wigan Pier (1937: 159).

As the nineteenth-century upper class repressed reference to their own lower bodily functions, they increasingly referred to the simultaneous dangers *and* fascinations of the lowlife of the “other,” including the smells of the slum, the ragpicker, the prostitute, the sewer, the dangers of the rat, below stairs, the kneeling maid and so on (Shields 1991 on lowlife in nineteenth-century Brighton). The upper class in nineteenth-century British cities experienced a particular “way of sensing” such cities, in which smell played a pivotal role. The odors of death, madness, and decay were thought to be ever-present in the industrial city (Tuan 1993: 61–2; Classen, Howes, and Synnott 1994: 165–9, on the class and ethnic structuring of such smellscapes). There was thought to be a distinctive “stench of the poor” in Paris (Corbin 1986: ch. 9). There was a pronounced rhetoric of the delights of the “open air,” that is air that did not smell of the city, for those apparently confined to living within nineteenth-century cities.

Lefebvre more generally argues that the production of different spaces is crucially bound up with smell. He says that “where an intimacy occurs between ‘subject’ and ‘object’, it must surely be the world of smell and the places where they reside” (1991: 197). Olfaction seems to provide a more direct and less premeditated encounter with the environment; and one which cannot be turned on and off. It provokes an unmediated sense of the surrounding townscapes. Tuan argues that the directness and immediacy of smell provides a sharp contrast with the abstractive and compositional characteristics of sight (1993: 57).

One way of examining smell is in terms of the diverse “smellscapes” which organize and mobilize people’s feelings about particular places (including what one might also call the “tastescapes” of different gastronomic regimes). This concept brings out how smells are spatially ordered and place-related. (Porteous 1990: 369). In particular, the olfactory sense is important in evoking memories of specific places, normally because of certain physical objects and their characteristic smells which are thought to inhabit certain places (see Tuan 1993: 57). And even if we cannot name the particular smell it can still be important in helping to create and sustain one’s sense of a particular place or experience. It can generate both revulsion and attraction; as such it can play a major role in constructing and sustaining major distinctions of social taste.

Rodaway summarizes the power of smell in relationship to place as “the perception of an odour in or across a given space, perhaps with varying intensities, which will linger for a while and then fade, and a differentiation of one smell from another and the association of odours with particular things, organisms, situations and emotions which all contribute to a sense of place and the character places” (1994: 68). Toni Morrison writes in the *Song of Solomon* of how

On autumn nights, in some parts of the city, the wind from the lake [Superior] brings a sweetish smell to shore. An odo[u]r like crystallized ginger, or sweet iced tea with a dark clove floating in it... there was this heavy spice-sweet smell that made you think of the East and striped tents... The two men... could smell the air, but they didn't think of ginger. Each thought it was the way freedom smelled, or justice, or luxury, or vengeance (1989: 184–5).

Simmel argues that the sense of smell is a particularly “dissociating sense,” transmitting more repulsions than attractions (Frisby and Featherstone 1997: 119). He talks of “olfactory intolerance,” suggesting for example that hostility between Germans and Jews has been particularly generated by distinctions of smell (see Guéner 1993: 27). More generally he thought that the “effluvia” of the working class posed a threat to social solidarity (Frisby and Featherstone 1997: 118). This became more pronounced during the twentieth-century as domestic hygiene has been very unevenly introduced, so reinforcing class attitudes of social and moral superiority based upon smell. The stigma of odor has provided a constant basis of stratification, resulting from what Simmel terms the “invincible disgust inspired by the sense of smell” (cited Guéner 1993: 34).

Modern societies have apparently reduced the sense of smell by comparison with the other senses (Lefebvre 1991). Premodern societies had been very much characterized by distinctions of smell (see Classen, Howes, and Synnott 1994, on the significance of aroma within the classical world). In modern societies there is an apparent dislike of strong odors and the emergence of various technologies, objects, and manuals which seek to purify smells out of everyday life. These include the development of public health systems which separate water from sewerage and which involve channeling sewage underground away from both the nose and the eye (Roderick 1997). Corporeal functions and processes came to occupy a “proper place” within the home; they were increasingly spatially differentiated from each other and based upon the control and regulation of various bodily and piped fluids. In particular as water came to be piped separately from sewage so it was possible to wash the whole body much more frequently; bath and shower technology were developed and also came to be given a “proper place” within the home. A lack of smell came to indicate personal and public cleanliness. Domestic design develops so as to exclude animal and related smells.

More generally, Bauman argues that “Modernity declared war on smells. Scents had no room in the shiny temple of perfect order modernity set out to erect” (1993: 24). For Bauman modernity sought to neutralize smells by creating zones of control in which the senses would not be offended. Zoning became an element of public policy in which planners accepted that repugnant smells are in fact an inevitable by-product of urban-industrial society. Refuse dumps, sewage plants, meat processing factories, industrial plants and so on are all spaces in which bad smells are concentrated, and are typically screened off by being situated on the periphery of cities. Domestic architecture developed which confined smells to particular areas of the home, to the backyard, and the water closet. This war of smell within modernity was carried to the extreme in the Nazi period, where the Jews were routinely referred to as “stinking” and their supposed smell was associated with physical and moral corruption (Classen, Howes, and Synnott 1994: 170–5).

But smell is a subversive sense since it cannot be wholly banished (Bauman 1993). Smell reveals the artificiality of modernity; it shows following Latour that we have never been really modern (1993). The modern project to create a pure, rational order of things is undermined by the sweet smell of decomposition which continuously escapes control and regulation. Thus the “stench of Auschwitz” could not be eliminated even when at the end of the war the Nazis desperately tried to conceal what had happened through ridding the camps of the stench of death (Classen, Howes, and Synnott 1994: 175). Bauman submits that decomposition has “a sweet smell,” exerting its revenge upon a modern world which cannot be subject to complete purification and control (1993).

The ways in which smells emanate from diverse objects, including especially the human body, results in the social significance and power of diverse hybrids such as sewage systems, notions of hygiene, and new discourses and technologies of domestic architecture. More generally Roderick argues that, although there are all sorts of *smelly* substances within houses and apartments (such as sewage, dirty water, and gas, as well as the *dangerous* flows of electricity and boiling water), modernity has sought to confine their flows to various channels. But of course these flowing substances are always threatening to seep through the walls of these channels and to enter the “home,” analogous to the way that blood does not stay within its own vessels (Roderick 1997: 128). Much women’s work within the home has been based upon taking a special responsibility for these dirty fluids, somewhat paralleling Grosz’s characterization of the female body as “a leaking, uncontrollable, seeping liquid; as formless flow; as viscosity, entrapping, secreting” (1994: 203). Men only enter the scene when the seepage gets out of hand and it is they who climb along the vessels of the house, to clean and repair the pipes that flow above the ceilings and behind the walls, which confine the dirty and the dangerous.

## Conclusion

Thus I have considered some of the ways that vision and smell form and reform themselves to constitute the evolving spatiality of the nineteenth- and twentieth-century city (I have not considered the non-Western city, see Edensor 1998). With more time I would have developed similar analyses of the acoustic sense, which like smell cannot be turned on and off. According to Simmel “the ear is the egoistic organ pure and simple, which only takes but does not give” (Frisby and Featherstone 1997: 115). Within the contemporary city there appears to be a reinvigorated oral culture reflected in musak, loudspeakers, ghetto blasters, telephone bells, traffic, mobile phones, sex chat lines, and so on (see Hibbitts 1994: 302–3). I would also have considered further the sense of touch. I noted how cities have been transformed so as to avoid what Canetti terms “the touch of the unknown” (1973), to replace the city of touch with the radiant city. But it should also be noted that people necessarily move among bodies which continuously touch and are touched, in a kind of reciprocity of contact (see Robins 1996: 33). Unlike the seer who can look without being seen, the toucher is always touched (see Grosz 1994: 45).

Invoking the senses challenges much of our understanding of city life. On the basis of an account of the microspatiality of those in a city confined to a wheelchair, Massey points to the significance of the diverse senses: “there are local landscapes of

sense other than vision. Try imagining – and designing – a city of sound and touch, a city that plays to all the senses” (and we might add, a city that plays to taste and smell; see Massey forthcoming).

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