

Conference Report

From culture to biology (and back?): towards a semiotics of the senses

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Upon revisiting the origins of modern, instrumentalist and positivist conceptualizations of the sensorium, what becomes apparent is the fragility of the model of the five senses. Until the 18th century, the processes shaping perception were imagined along more nuanced tonalities, engaging not only religious-metaphysical forces, but also sociocultural factors such as ethical and behavioral systems. The uses of the term to describe ‘meaning, import and interpretation’ (*this makes sense*), to denote the ‘capacity for perception and appreciation’ (*sense of shame, sense of humor*), to refer to a physiological process (*we sense the cold*), to the result of intuition (*I sense danger*), or to the stimulation of desire (*what a sensual fragrance*), all point to different ordering systems that have developed in their own right. And if the etymology of this Latin root takes us down enlightening analytical paths, the linguistic and philosophical genealogies of the Greek term αἴσθησις (aesthesia) are even more adventurous.

Despite the richness of modern accounts of the world of the senses from Karl Marx to Georg Simmel, and the structuralist and post-structuralist efforts to reunite the senses and conceptualize the full sensorium as the human perceptual apparatus from Levi-Strauss (1969) to sound studies (Shafer 1973; Corbin 1994; Thibaud 2011), it is not until the 1980s that the humanities overcame their reluctance to tackle the senses and give rise to what has been called the *sensory turn* (Howes 2006). The senses seem to have recast the raw material of phenomenological philosophical and psychological discourse (Gibson 1966; Stoller 1997). They lie at the heart of the inquiry on the nature of consciousness, point to an ‘ecology of perception’ (Sonesson 2005), and force us to reconceptualize memory and its relationships to truth, reality, embodiment, and agency (Merleau-Ponty 1948). Numerous studies in anthropology, geography, art and archaeology – e.g. the studies by Nadia Seremetakis (1996) and Yannis Hamilakis

(2015) on the modern Greek context - as well as architecture (Pallasmaa 1994; Rasmussen 2001), point to the fact that completely different formations and imaginings of the sensorium invite us to reconsider the very fundamentals of psychosocial and cultural mechanisms. Think for instance of 'participant sensation' as opposed to the ethnographer's 'participant observation', or of 'intimate sensing' as opposed to a GPS analyst's 'remote sensing' (Robben and Sluka 2007; Porteous 1990).

Notwithstanding the significance of these contributions and despite the wealth of university curricula on the senses in several US universities as well as some in Europe and Japan, the sensorium has not grown into an established cross-disciplinary field, with important institutional exceptions in Canada (most notably in Concordia and York Universities) and France and Austria (mainly in music departments). The prevailing fragmentation of the field as well as the relative dearth of semiotic research on the senses – with the exception of vision, of course – have been the primary reasons for designating the contemporary transformations of the sensorium as the topic of the XI International Conference of the Hellenic Semiotic Society, back in the autumn of 2015. As is often the case in broadly themed semiotics conferences, the contributions concerned a wide range of areas and issues of interest.

The Conference's main theme, the questioning and going beyond, that is, of the hegemony of vision that the post-Renaissance paradigm has bequeathed us, was an idea that was approached and elaborated in different ways by more or less all the contributors. A common emphasis of the papers that tackled the issue most directly (M. Frangopoulos, M. Chronaki, Y. Skarpeles) was on the phenomenologically inspired re-embodiment of visual perception. Complementary approaches to the issue were suggested either through the re-valorization of touch (A. Lambropoulos) and hearing (J. Gratale) or by exposing the verbal anchoring of our colour systems (M. Almalech). The interrogation of the visual prerogative and the highlighting of various forms of multisensoriality and synesthesia was pursued also in a variety of cultural texts and contexts. Starting with literature, papers variously focused on the coding of smell in Süskid's *Perfume* (A. Blioumis), the Greimasian reading of the multi-sensual realism of Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire* (K. Boklund-Lagopoulou), the synesthetic poetics of modernism (M. Kakavoulia - P. Politis, S. Iakovidou, M. Armyra, M. Papadopoulos - L. Christodoulidou), the kinesthetic poetics of digital 'new literariness' (T. Dimitroulia) and the semiotics of scribbles (P. Thomas). A particularly fertile contribution to this problematic of multimodality and synesthesia was made by the papers which dealt with the visual arts, like painting (T. L. Gobbett, E. Angouras) and sculpture (I. Vamvakidou, S. Nikula), the performing arts, like theatre (M. Dimaki-Zora), dance (S. Bekakos) and music (M. Kokkidou-V. E. Paschali), as well as with current multi-media art criticizing techno-science (L. Yoka).

Quite predictably, the radical reconfiguration of the sensorium in the age of the digital media has attracted the biggest group of papers. It was, after all, Marshall McLuhan's pioneering conceptualization of the electronic media-induced new sensorium that formed the

starting point of the Conference's Call for Papers. Starting with the semiosis of multi-sensual storyworlds (M. Kokonis) and the sensory interchanges in film (L. Kostopoulou, M. Kokkidou - C. Tsigka, N. Terzis), as well as the semiotic complexity of popular television narratives and programs (C. Adamou, T. Saltidou - A. Stamou, E. Kourdis, S. Grammenidis, N. S. Dragan) a variety of digital environments and products were examined: museums (C. Chatzimichali, N. Chourmouziadi), virtual reality (S. Polimeris - C. Calfoglou, R. Yankova, M. Katsaridou - K. Stergiou), social media (E. Yoshikawa, A. Bahroun, M. Troullou, A. Kasabova, M. Georgalou), videogames (I. Fotiou - T. Maniou, I. Mazarakis) and multimedia journalism (N. Holivatou).

The 'Senses in Culture' section of the Conference hosted a range of approaches. The anthropological perspective that, from very early on, has consistently been a vital source of insight into the 'fugue of the five senses', was represented by analyses of political and religious ritual (T. Halonen) and the political economy of witchcraft (E. Tsekenis). The sociological perspective prevailed in the investigation of the rhetoric of the senses in social campaigns against racism (K. Fragkioudaki-A. Dimitrakopoulou - M. Papadopoulou), nation branding practices (S. Andreou, S. Stylianou), war propaganda posters (G. Damaskinidis) and advertising images (P. Xouplidis, V. Vamvakas). The techniques of multi-sensual design were examined both in their graphic (E. Zantides) and industrial (G. Liamadis) applications. Next to papers on advertising and design, the area of consumer culture was also approached by contributors that focused on marketing tools and techniques (M. Tsoumari). Scholars, in particular, from the Southeast European Center for Semiotic Studies of the New Bulgarian University, a long-time partner of the HSS, addressed immersion techniques and multisensoriality in VR, e-commerce and branding (K. Bankov, G. Tsonev, D. Trendafilov, I. Velinov). Another group of papers, finally, focused on interactivity and multisensory communication at school. Heavily relying on the performative aspects of the educational process, the contributions dealt with new language learning methods (P. Manoli) and the 'signs of childhood' that produce the *childsphere* (P. Kukkonen). The senses in the classroom – an 'open interpretative system' according to *edusemiotics* – were investigated both as sensory reality (A. Christodoulou), as representational language (A. Papakosta, I. Mendrinou) and as alternative, purpose-built teaching practice that mobilizes the 'logic of the senses' (S.-E. Tsala, A. Smyrnaio, Ch. Lemonidis - A. Stavrou - L. Papoutzis).

The area of urban studies has traditionally a powerful presence in the HSS conferences. Its holistic ambition and critical import made once again a strong impact, especially as it was represented by a sizeable group of contributors who approached the city through the prism of the sensorium in innovative and challenging ways. Among the issues addressed were the multimodal and multisensorial experience of walking in the city (A. Stamatopoulou, N. Boubaris) or of visiting its market places (E. Battistini – M. Mondino), people's mental images of their city center (P. Kosmopoulos - K. Kleskas) and the significance of smell in city identity and planning (C. Kousidonis). Scholars, in particular, from the Architecture Department of Athens Polytechnic explored the path-breaking implications of the concept of movement for urban

and landscape planning (K. Moraitis, A. Verykiou, N. Kyrkitsou). Their research converged in an illuminating way, with the empirical material from Estonia that was provided by the Tartu semiotician Tiit Remm, who highlighted the dynamic interaction between place-making and society-making.

The cultural semiotic perspective was definitely prevalent at the October 2016 HSS conference. Yet, the theme of the conference itself grew out of an awareness that we need to delineate anew the relationships between the senses and the Lifeworld, between the body and its artificial extensions, between the cognitive software of the mind and its biological hardware. During the well-attended four keynote speeches that brought all participants together in one room, while at the same time it attracted a large online audience who watched them on the web through live streaming, it became clear that semiotics, as an intra-disciplinary tool, helps pinpoint the disjunctures between theoretical approaches in different fields of inquiry, but can also highlight the near irreconcilability of certain stances.

It might seem quite hard to keep a conversation going between, for instance, on the one hand scholars who believe semiosis is a faculty of humans after a certain developmental stage, and therefore foreground questions concerning (human) culture, and on the other, scholars who would attribute the sign-producing faculty to all living beings and thus would rather focus on *life itself* as the realm of communication. The point, however, is not to bridge the differences and reconcile approaches, neither to celebrate some kind of circus of diversity. It is, at this stage, to understand the strengths and the rhetorical-cognitive habitat of each approach, as well as its epistemic-historical background, and to appreciate it for what it is and has yet to achieve.

For the HSS, the exchange between social and cultural semiotics on the one hand, and biosemiotics on the other was long due. The densely crafted history of ideas underpinning cultural semiotics in the first keynote speech by the Director of the Institute of Philosophy and Semiotics at the University of Tartu Professor Peeter Torop made the case in point. Professor Torop traced a series of overlapping and also radically divergent steps away from the study of literary and artistic reception as an aesthetic-psychological experience, to the establishment of the semiotics of culture that also engages the sensory aspects of perception. The echo of experimental psychology was far from absent in this account. It emerges for example, when Lotman's notion of explosion is traced back to Lev Vygotsky (Torop 2012). If, as Vygotsky suggested, explosion is a moment where individual psychological processes lead to a collective 'catharsis' as the 'highest form of ...aesthetic response', then explosion is a highly mediated event, that can never be fully predicted by some cultural algorithm. Terms like 'creative, emotional, intellectual tension' and 'inspiration' cannot be fully separated on the one hand from their origin in idealist descriptions of art appreciation, and on the other from the psychological tradition that attempts to measure and describe the effects of individual confrontation with cultural products. So indeed, for this approach, the field of cultural semiotics is not merely circumscribed by the 'social production of signs'.

The keynote speeches by Paul Copley, President of the International Society for Semiotic Studies and by Luis Emilio Bruni, President of the Nordic Society for Semiotic Studies, both offered occasions for the launch of an intersectional dialogue. Copley presented a series of challenging theses from his latest book (Copley 2016), suggesting we embrace a 'synechist' approach to cultural and biological phenomena. His 'biosemiotic cultural analysis' sets out to forge a path between overinterpretation (the risk run by the non-science disciplines) and comfortable reductionism (to which the hard sciences often resort to). No easy task, indeed.

Luis Emilio Bruni offered what could be understood as an epistemological overview of the central theme of the conference. His keynote addressed the links that have to be drawn across the life sciences, cognitive semiotics and discourses of culture with an aim to flesh out a field of multimodal perception and cognition for the theorization of the sensorium. Despite its high abstractions, Bruni's talk carefully navigated the maze and avoided toxic stereotypes. Instead of forcedly aligning strictly pre-defined clusters of thought about the content and dynamics of sign systems, he suggests that one should reconsider the technosphere, the semiosphere and the *Umwelt* from the perspective of their semi-autonomous and *heterarchical* organization (Bruni 2015) and development.

With an interest in employing the insights of experimental science for further establishing his *Bildwissenschaft*, the keynote speech by Klaus Sachs-Hombach on 'Visual Communication and Multimodality' explored the difference between the *perception* and the *use* of signs. The audience was treated to a new project embarked on by the Tübingen professor, that builds upon a 'picture theory' he has been developing over the years in several books, and as editor of the journal *Image*. This time leaving aside his elaborate analogies of 'image [or picture] act theory' with 'speech act theory' to describe the process of pictorial communication (Sachs-Hombach 2011), Sachs-Hombach pointed to the 'fundamental nature of the use of pictures as a language' and the 'deeper anchoring of visual perception' than other kinds of perception. In culture at large, communication (use and perception of signs) can only be understood multimodally. The task, then, becomes to define the sensory dynamics, and specifically the relationship of visual perception to other kinds of perception- in (mass) communication.

In dialogue with these positions presented at the conference, the leading figure of what has been termed the 'School of Thessaloniki', the founding member and honorary president of the HSS, Alexandros Phaidon Lagopoulos, seized the opportunity to revisit, in his paper, the discussion on the biological basis for the birth of semiotic systems. He delineated, building upon theses he has published in several studies (Lagopoulos 2009, 1993), the theoretical premises of a Social Semiotics (as opposed to 'socio-semiotics', as he himself would argue), for which the proprioceptive senses in the body, as well as the rest of the body's biological/physiological hardwiring, cannot be linked to their corresponding concepts, i.e. to what the 'mind', a social construction, makes of the 'brain', a biological given, in any direct way. Concepts

are cultural, and culture is dependent on the material conditions of social existence – a view that insists that semiotics is primarily a social science, and that it is only through this itinerary of culturally determined definitions of the sensorium that one could hypothetically arrive at a legitimate semiotics of the senses.

The conference hosted over 90 papers by scholars based in several countries in Europe and beyond. However stressful it can be to have to choose one of four or five promising sessions every couple of hours during three action-packed days, on the whole, the structure of the conference was articulate and comprehensible. Glancing at the program one could anticipate what would in the end turn out to be a dense and rewarding intellectual and social experience. The simultaneous exposure to different approaches and kinds of inquiry offered the possibility for manifold tangential associations (but also actual connections) between literature and arts, digital media and translation theory, affect and immersion.

Did some general principle for theorizing the sensorium emerge from the conference? Even if that had been the aim of the whole endeavor in the first place, which it had not, one would have to be suspicious of any definite answer. The discussions last October often incited our enthusiasm and curiosity, and at times touched upon fundamental questions in semiotics. Studying the senses was recognized as a way to test not only definitions of the sign and of semiosis, but, more relevantly, to explore the mechanisms through which semiotic categories and concepts emerge, rise, fall, get promoted, engineered and institutionalized – or, possibly, interact and mutually enhance one another in new constellations.

The Hellenic Semiotics Society is turning 40 this year and seems to be responding to the economic crisis with resilience. Its last triennial gatherings (in Nicosia, Cyprus, in Volos and Thessaloniki, Greece) have hosted a steadily growing number of papers, with an increasingly international participation. The extrovert profile methodically cultivated by Hellenic semiotics comes with a resolution for more intersectional exchanges of this kind.

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