

# INTRODUCTION

## Semiotics and the senses

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By devoting this issue of *Punctum* to the semiotics of our current shifting sensorium we signal to the cross-fertilization of two scientific traditions founded almost simultaneously, in the final years of *le belle époque*: Georg Simmel's sensory sociology and Ferdinand de Saussure's semiology. The former, first intimated in Simmel's apprehension of metropolitan modernity as an over-stimulation of the senses (1903) and succinctly outlined in his 'Sociology of the Senses' (1907), stipulates the study of the senses as a way to become aware of the 'delicate, invisible threads' of social interaction, as a means to achieve a more accurate understanding of the 'web of society' as we experience it rather than as an abstract set of 'major organizational systems' acting upon people. Explicitly set against the organicist and functionalist models that comprised the sociological doxa of his time, Simmel's proposal demonstrates his pioneering role in launching the interactionist tradition of sociology, and, more specifically, in laying the cornerstone of the contemporary study of the social life of the senses. Saussure's path-breaking approach to language, on the other hand, summarized in the courses he taught between 1906 and 1911, foregrounded the conventional and relational nature of the linguistic sign. Although Saussure seems to move in direction opposite to that of Simmel, by stressing the overriding role of the linguistic system (*langue*) over individual language use (*parole*), his programmatic definition of semiology as the study of 'the life of signs in society', assigned to the new science he envisaged the inquiry of the dynamics of the cultural arbitrary in all forms of cultural communication. It is here that the stage is set for the encounter of the study of the social life of the senses with the study of the social life of signs.

Another crucial point of departure for our problematics involves two distinct contributions that both appeared in the early 1960s. The expression 'the fugue of the five senses', adopted in this issue's title, was used by Claude Lévi-Strauss (1964) in his analysis of the interplay of sensory codes in the myths of the South American Indians. In the same year, Marshall McLuhan

challenged both popular and scientific perceptions of mass media, with his assertion that electronic media demolish the hegemony of vision brought about by typography-based literate culture by fostering a kind of tribal, multi-sensorial sensibility. He perceives television, for example, not as a visual medium but as 'a tactual-auditory medium that involves all of our senses in depth interplay' (McLuhan 1964:336). Electronic media, he predicts, will become the new skin of humanity, while their aural and tactile bias will foster a heightened sense of empathy and synesthesia, in-depth involvement and inter-connectedness.

Both McLuhan's prognostications about the re-tribalization of post-literate/post-visual society and Levi-Strauss' 'science of myths' seemed to many of their contemporaries controversial and counter-intuitive. Just as for McLuhan it is the 'medium that is the message', in Levi-Strauss' analysis of myth it is the structure that is the meaning. In some respects, McLuhan's abstruse distinction between hot and cold media, aimed to grasp the different sensory-perceptive processes enabled by different communication technologies, offers an example of the *bricolage* which, according to Levi-Strauss characterizes mythical thought. Despite their initially dismissive reception by the scientific community, McLuhan's ideas about the media-induced (re)shaping of the human sensorium soon took root and grew into a distinct intellectual tradition commonly known as 'media ecology'. By contrast, Levi-Strauss' attention to the sensory codes had a rather inconsequential impact either on the semiotic or the anthropological research of the time, dominated as they both were by the textualist paradigm.

It was in direct opposition to the 'verbocentrism' and 'textualism' then dominant in anthropological theory, David Howes points out, that sensory anthropology started out, in the 1980s, inspired as it was, 'by a desire to explore under-investigated non-visual modes of experience' (Howes 2013). The subsequent growth of sensory anthropology had a vital contribution to the interdisciplinary field of Sensory Studies, which emerged in the 1990s with the additional valuable input of sociology and urban studies, social and cultural history, arts and literature, film and media studies. Amongst the wide-ranging research spawned in this field, during the last twenty-five years, the six volume *A Cultural History of the Senses* project, prepared under the general editorship of cultural historian Constance Classen (2014), is an eloquent testimony to this uniquely fertile encounter of social sciences and humanities around the problematics of the body, culture and the senses.

Both media ecology and Sensory Studies were instrumental in shaking the hierarchy of the senses that runs through the evolution of Western culture, having been elaborated and coded repeatedly from antiquity till the high days of post-war modernism in the 1950s and 1960s. In civilizational terms, the higher/lower senses distinction was formulated on the basis of the culture/nature opposition, with smell and taste in particular, being identified with the animalistic realm. Under the influence of Christianity, this hierarchy was forged in moral terms, with the lower senses being identified as the privileged venues of temptation and sin.

Ocularcentrism has also permeated the semiotic tradition. While 'visual semiotics' is a

highly developed and influential area of semiotic theory and research, privileged to have its own International Association for Visual Semiotics (est. in Perpignan, in 1988), no other human sense comes even near in terms of scholarly recognition and attention. In his detailed survey of the main areas of theoretical and applied semiotics up to 1989, Winfred Nöth underlines that ‘the conditions under which nonverbal behavior becomes sign or communication are of central interest to the foundations of semiotics’ (Nöth 1990: 387). However, he cannot produce but scant evidence of semiotic engagement with the so-called ‘lower senses’, apart, that is, from the extra-human field of zoosemiotics. Even in the case of ‘body language’, the most significant work mentioned regards the neighboring fields of Ray Birdwistell’s *kinesics* and Edward T. Hall’s *proxemics*. As Eric Landowski points out, it was only in the 1990s, after having developed (during the period 1970-1980) as a grammar of discourse, that semiotics has, in effect, been constituted on the basis of a phenomenologically inspired reflection on the perceived world, envisaged as the ‘non-linguistic space’ of the emergence of signification (Landowski 2004: 3). Ironically enough, it was from within the visual semiotics that grew the realization that the nonverbal cannot be restricted to the visual. More specifically, the systematic engagement with the heterogeneity of extra-visual sensorium sprung, when the inadequacy of a strictly representational approach to non-verbal communication was acutely felt. This is the case with both the two contemporary semiotic approaches to the senses.

As regards the first one, the Paris School of Semiotics, the turning point has been Algirdas Julien Greimas’s *De l’imperfection* (1987). Its foregrounding of the affective subject and of the hitherto ignored by semiotics issue of aesthesis (esth sies) – i.e. the way we sense previously uncoded things – has contributed in stimulating ‘further examination between sensory perception (*le sensible*) and the production of meaning (*l’intelligible*)’ (Martin & Ringham 2006: 224). Exemplary, in this regard, are the studies by Jacques Fontanille and Claude Zilberberg (1998), Eric Landowski (2004) and others, that elucidate the role of the senses – all five of them – in the emergence of meaning. As a consequence of this reorientation of post-Greimasian semiotics, according to Landowski, is the fact that the two antagonistic tendencies of semiotics – i.e. focusing either on the discursive, the rational, the articulated and the formalised, or on the pre-discursive, the affective, the amorphous and the esthetic – could reunite: ‘In reality, if a semiotics of “the sensible” – or rather, a semiotics able of accounting for the *efficiency principles of the sensible* in the process of the constitution of *sense in general* – ought to be established, it cannot be in opposition neither to the semiotics of the various forms assumed by “the intelligible”, nor by presuming to replace it. Both these possibilities would, in effect, lead us to admit as an inevitable necessity a division, whereas the real challenge today is precisely to find a way to overcome such a duality’ (Landowski 2004: 5).

The second contemporary approach to the senses is associated with the problematic of multimodality developed by social semiotics. This notion of multimodality was initially developed by Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen in their effort to enhance their distinctive

approach to visual semiotics by emphasizing the intricate and systematic interweaving of the verbal and the visual in much of contemporary communication. Their intention to 'break down the disciplinary boundaries between the study of language and the study of images' by considering the verbal and visual aspects of a text not as 'entirely distinct elements' but as 'an integrated text' (1996: 183) is part of the wider 'visual turn' that, in the 1990s, advanced the systematic study of the visual as a corrective to the logocentric emphasis of the humanities, dictated by the preponderance of modern visual media. A similar emphasis is found at the time in W.T. Mitchell's notion of the 'imagetext', whereby he grasps the inherent hybridity of texts, the mutual contamination between the verbal and the visual. Hence his suggestion to go beyond their comparative study and focus on the construction of the human subject 'as a being constituted by both language and imaging' (Mitchell 1994: 24).

At the beginning of the 2000s, the concept of multimodality acquired a new significance in the work of Kress and van Leeuwen, who proceeded to expand its remit to cover the full range of semiotic modes in tandem with the shift of their initial focus on verbal-visual combination to that of multisensory communication (see Kress 2003, 2010; van Leeuwen 2001; Kress & van Leeuwen 2001). Addressing specifically the need for an enhanced definition of literacy, appropriate for the 'the new media age', Kress suggests that "reading the world" through different senses – sight, touch, hearing and even taste and smell – is always present in 'reading', even when we ostensibly focus on script alone' (Kress 2003: 141). Moreover, the anti-logocentric agenda of the earlier Visual Studies is replaced by the much more ambitious project of transcending the centuries-old mind/body dualism of Western thought: 'Introducing a concern with materiality and the senses into representation brings the long-standing separation in Western thinking of mind and body into severe question, and therefore challenges the reification and consequent separation of cognition, affect and emotion. It becomes untenable to assume that cognition is separable from affect; all representation is always affective, while it is also cognitive' (Kress 2003: 171).

The formative influences on the post-Greimasian semiotics and on the social semiotics of Kress and van Leeuwen are phenomenology and pragmatics, respectively. Notwithstanding their different terminology and methods, for both these recent semiotic traditions, what begun as a rehabilitation of the status of the visual, ended up as a sweeping rehabilitation of the full range of the senses. Another striking similarity, is their common desire to overcome the constitutive duality of body/mind. A notable difference, however, is the express engagement of social semiotics with the new media, which brings it in close dialogue with the recent work inspired by the media ecology tradition (see e.g. Bull 2007, MacDougall 2005, Shinkle 2008).

The current, near universal spread of touch screens and haptic devices have made many to talk about a veritable 'haptic revolution'. Sensors are placed in all kinds of appliances and tools, forming the basis for the rapidly expanding Internet of Things. They are increasingly placed on our own clothes and bodies, through wearable computing devices which provide

a complex interface with our environment but also with our own internal organs, physical and even mental conditions. More and more we interact with our diverse digital devices via voice, movement or gestures, and unlock them via our fingerprint or face recognition tools. A wide range of multisensorial environments, of multimodal and cross-sensory experience have emerged in art, entertainment, education, museums, urban life and social interaction. 'In the age of ubiquitous digital media, synesthesia is everywhere. Auditory-to-visual synesthesia, or "colored hearing" is realized on VJ screens in every club. On these screens sound is transformed, through special algorithms, into visual pattern and form instantly and automatically' (Whitelaw 2008: 260).

It seems that, as McLuhan had predicted, the electronic media have fostered a new, heightened sense of the fully sensual body. The cross-sensorial and synesthetic affordances of digital media not only have vindicated his aphorism that 'the medium is the message' – his provocative insinuation of the tactile bias of electronic media – but have given a new urgency to Merleau-Ponty's assertion that synesthetic perception is the rule rather than the exception (1962: 229). His emphasis on the synthetic or synergetic nature of perception, echoed also in Michel Serres's emphasis on the hybrid or 'mingled bodies', should encourage sensory semiotics to consider as its proper area of study not the singularity or distinctiveness of the different senses but their constant interplay, their inherent fusion and confusion, blending and intermingling. Its task is not to distinguish and separate, to bring order to the chaos, but rather to delve into the untidy muddle of our perceptual-cognitive processes and investigate the semiotic energies invested and released by our common, everyday practices of association, bridging, confluence and mingling that comprise the 'social life of the senses'.

Our special issue on the Fugue of the Senses opens with Emiliano Battistini and Marco Mondino's multisensorial semiotic reading of Ballarò and Vucciria, two historic market districts of the city Palermo, in Sicily. Drawing from recent research into the urban sensescapes (soundscape, smellscape, tastescape, walkscape) they succeed in combining the detailed analysis of the different sense dimensions with an insistence on a holistic approach that offers an integrated understanding of urban places as 'synesthetic crossroads'.

In 'Media and walking: a multimodal approach', Nikos Bubaris approaches the issue of multisensoriality when walking is combined with mobile media. Developing an analytical framework based on the problematics of multimodality, Bubaris investigates the shaping power of mobile media over the experience and meaning of walking by focusing on two media walk projects recently presented in Athens.

In Nassia Chourmouziadi's 'The deadlock of museum images and multisensoriality' the author provides a critical review of current museum practices that, having abandoned the ocularcentric bias of the modernist 'exhibitionary complex', have integrated multisensoriality as a means to advance new, emotionally and politically engaging pedagogies of feeling. Aiming to overcome undue emphasis on either cognition or feeling, Chourmouziadi discusses a range

of contemporary museums and exhibitions outlining an approach that seeks the balanced interplay of the sensible and the intelligible.

Valeria De Luca's article concerns the semiotics of dance, and in particular, the investigation of the bodily level of semiosis that takes place in the movements and bodily interaction that are characteristic of Argentinian tango. Drawing from the post-Greimasian semiotic tradition, her analysis of the intricate semiotic play of *marcación* leads her to question the current understandings of embodiment and empathy.

In 'Touching through calligraphy and tattoos: two exercises on human and animal bodies' Apostolos Lampropoulos investigates the complex depths of touch, the so-called 'deepest sense'. His examination of the disparate practices of calligraphy on human skin in Peter Greenaway's film *The Pillow Book* and the tattooing of pigs in Wim Deloye's art project *Art Farm* allows him to explore the dialectic of intimacy and violence, sharing and objectification that pervades the multiple dynamics of touching.

Our last article in this multi-faceted engagement with the semiotics of senses, focuses on smell, and more specifically on female perfumes. In his 'Deciphering the message in the perfume bottle', Panagiotis Xouplidis examines the cultural construction of the feminine perfume olfactory system and, utilizing a social semiotic perspective, proceeds to unravel the cross sensory management of female perfume packaging.

A decade ago, the social historian Mark Smith asserted that 'it is a good moment to be a sensory historian' (2007: 841). The impressive growth of historical research into the senses had given him good reason to do so. Given the recent awakening of semiotic interest in the contemporary 'fugue of the five senses' we are, I believe, justified to rephrase Smith, and declare that it is a good moment to be a sensory semiotician.

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