

## 10

## SCENT, SOUND AND SYNAESTHESIA

Intersensoriality and Material  
Culture Theory*David Howes*

The importance of attending to the multiple sensory dimensions of objects, architectures and landscapes is quickly becoming a central tenet of material culture theory. This sensual turn – or better, ‘revolution’ (Howes 2004) – is evident in the various references to the sensuous made by the contributors to *The Material Culture Reader* (Buchli 2002). In ‘Contested landscapes’, Barbara Bender writes: ‘landscapes are not just “views” but intimate encounters. They are not just about seeing, but about experiencing with all the senses’ (2002: 136). In his chapter on ‘Trench art’, Nicholas Saunders discusses the heightened sensory experience of warfare,<sup>1</sup> and the ability of material objects (e.g. recycled munition shells) to ‘act as a bridge between mental and physical worlds’ (2002: 181). In ‘Visual culture’, Chris Pinney argues that the field of visual culture (as currently understood) ‘needs to be superseded by an engagement with embodied culture ... that recognizes the unified nature of the human sensorium’ (2002: 84–5).

Christopher Tilley devotes a chapter to an analysis of the sensory and social symbolism of Wala canoes. The Wala, a people of Vanuatu, traditionally attributed various sensory powers to their canoes and embodied this understanding by carving ears, mouths and ‘moustaches’ as well as male and female sexual organs on the prow and stern. According to Tilley: ‘The power of [this] imagery resides in its condensation of reference linked with the sensual and tactile qualities of its material form and reference to the human body’ (2002: 25).

The implication to be drawn from these highly stimulating references to the sensuous is that material culture, in addition to materializing social relations and symbolizing the cosmos, gives expression to a particular set of *sensual relations*. Thus, Wala canoes may be said to condense the sensory – as well as social and symbolic – orders of Wala culture. They are attributed sentience in the same way that they render sensible the cardinal ideas of Wala society. Otherwise put, Wala canoes, and their uses, embody Wala ‘ways of sensing’ (Howes 2003).

My aim in this chapter is to discuss the significance of scent, sound and synaesthesia for material culture studies. My account opens with a consideration of the model of ‘synaesthesia’ (literally, ‘joining of the senses’) advanced by Lawrence Sullivan, a scholar of comparative religion, in a seminal article entitled ‘Sound and senses’ (1986). It goes on to provide a synopsis of the burgeoning literature in the history and anthropology of the senses, pioneered by Constance Classen (1993a, 1998) and Alain Corbin (1986, 1994), among others, which highlights the multisensoriality embedded in the materiality of human existence.

The increasingly sensual orientation of material culture studies and the emergent focus on objects and environments within ‘sensual culture studies’ (a shorthand for the history and anthropology of the senses) represent a happy confluence.<sup>2</sup> Both developments may be linked to the interdisciplinary counter-tradition that

has crystallized in recent years partly in reaction to the excesses of 'textualism' and 'ocularcentrism' in conventional social scientific accounts of meaning. Sullivan's 'Sound and senses' was, in fact, published the same year as *Writing Culture* (Clifford and Marcus 1986) – that is to say, at the height of the textual revolution (also known as 'the literary turn') in anthropological understanding. The latter revolution began in the 1970s, when Clifford Geertz (1973) introduced the suggestion that cultures be treated 'as texts'. The idea of 'reading cultures' proved tremendously productive throughout the 1970s and early 1980s, but then the idea of 'textualization' (ethnography 'as writing') took command. This had the untoward consequence of deflecting attention on to styles of text construction, and away from the sensuous realities those texts sought to convey. Indeed, in his contribution to *Writing Culture*, Stephen Tyler (1986: 137) went so far as to proclaim that: 'perception has nothing to do with it' (the 'it' being ethnography).<sup>3</sup> While it may be etymologically correct to hold that ethnography is tied to writing, it is not epistemologically sound to reduce the anthropological endeavour to an exercise in 'text construction'.

Sullivan intended his model of 'sensing' – as opposed to 'reading' (or 'writing') – culture to serve as a multisensory alternative to 'the model of the text' (Ricoeur 1970, cited in Geertz 1973). That his article has languished in such obscurity is testimony to the extraordinary power of logocentric models in the humanities and social sciences, whether inspired by the Saussurean dream of a 'science of signs' (modelled on linguistics) or Wittgensteinian 'language games' or Foucauldian 'discourse analysis'. But 'the model of the text' no longer enjoys the same grip over the anthropological (or historical) imagination it once did. For example, while it was fashionable for a spell to consider consumer culture as 'structured like a language' following Baudrillard's lead in *The Consumer Society: Myths and Structures* (1970/1998) and *The System of Objects* (1968/1996), many voices now caution against such a 'simplistic equation between language and materiality, mainly due to the unordered and seemingly unstructured nature of consumption' (Blum 2002: 234, citing Miller 1998).

It will no doubt come as a surprise to some that: 'The limits of my language are *not* the limits of my world' – or in other words, that the evidence of our senses is equally worthy of attention. However, this observation would appear to be a point of increasingly widespread consensus among scholars of material culture: 'a design is not a word and a house is not a text:

words and things, discourses and material practices are fundamentally different', writes Tilley (2002: 23–4; see further Pinney 2002: 82; Tacchi 1998; Stahl 2002). It is also fundamental to sensual culture studies, which has long warned against the visual and verbal biases intrinsic to the dominant social scientific accounts of 'meaning' (Classen 1990; Howes 1991: 3). Setting aside linguistic models and attending to the multiple respects in which culture mediates sensation and sensation mediates culture can be a source of many insights into the 'interconnectedness' of human communication (Finnegan 2002). 'Society', in so far as it is grounded in 'consensus' – meaning 'with the senses' – is a sensory fact, just as the sensorium is a social fact.

### THE MODEL OF SYNAESTHESIA

In 'Sound and senses', Sullivan presents a review of recent developments in performance theory, hermeneutics and information theory. His account culminates in the suggestion that: 'The symbolic experience of the unity of the senses enables a culture to entertain itself with the idea of the unity of meaning' (1986: 6). He goes on to apply his model of 'the unity of the senses' – or 'synaesthesia' – to the interpretation of the myths and rituals of diverse South American Indian societies.

Medically speaking, synaesthesia is a very rare condition in which the stimulation of one sensory modality is accompanied by a perception in one or more other modalities. Thus, synaesthetes report hearing colours, seeing sounds, and feeling tastes (see Marks 1982).<sup>4</sup> Such inter-modal associations and transpositions are also commonly reported by persons under the influence of hallucinogens. Sullivan's account is, in fact, centred on a variety of South American Indian societies which make ritual use of the hallucinogenic *Banisteriopsis Caapi* plant. However, he also extends the term synaesthesia to refer to the ritual process of bringing many or all of the senses into play simultaneously. This makes his theory of 'cultural synaesthesia', as it could be called, potentially applicable to the interpretation of ritual and cosmological systems the world over.

The strength of Sullivan's model lies in the way it recognizes 'the unified nature of the human sensorium', as Pinney (2002) would say; but, from the perspective of the anthropology of the senses this is also one of its weaknesses. The weakness stems from Sullivan's

presupposition of 'the oneness of meaning'. The latter presumption derives from the information theory approach to the study of ritual communication, which holds that 'although the receiver of a ritual message is picking up information through a variety of different sensory channels simultaneously, all these different sensations add up to just one message' (Leach 1976: 41). Such an approach imposes a spurious unity on ritual communication because of the way it treats 'meaning' as primary and the senses as so many arbitrary and basically interchangeable channels for the delivery of some hypostasized 'message'. It would be more consonant with what we now know about the materiality of communication to regard sensing (seeing, hearing, touching, etc.) as primary and meaning as mediated. The information theory approach also tends to deflect attention from the subject of the socialization of the senses through ritual, whereas it is precisely this sensual socialization that ought to occupy the analyst. These points of critique may be illustrated by analysing Sullivan's interpretation of the Tukano-speaking Desana myth of the 'origin of communication' through the lens of Classen's (1990) independent account of the Desana sensory order.

As Sullivan relates:

For Tukano speakers of the Northwest Amazon the crying sounds of a mythic baby called Cajpi are also the tastes and visual images of the hallucinogenic drink made from his body (the magical plant, *Banisteriopsis Caapi*) 'for as soon as the little child cried aloud, all the people ... became intoxicated and saw all kinds of colours.' The divinity named Yepa Huaké commanded that the child be dismembered. A piece of his body was given to each social group. This distribution established not only the ranked hierarchy of groups in society today but also the different qualities of vision and modulations of sound that constitute each group's cultural existence as art, musical performance, and speech.

(1986: 26)

Sullivan goes on to bring the Desana 'interpretation' of ritual and mythic communication into alignment with information theory:

The significance of the ritual beverage and the visions induced by ritual acts arises originally from the crying sounds of the sacred child. That sound in the environment of the unspoiled mythic world is an image similar to the perfect noise-free channel that Corcoran, the communication theorist, described as lying beyond this imperfect world of noise and redundancy. It is a unique

message, a unique signal, which bears meaning for all the senses ... [The] Tukano-speakers would agree that that kind of clarity and wholeness of meaning no longer exists. The dismembered state of meaning in this world requires and causes the redundant messages sent through different senses and media.

(1986: 26-7)

What Sullivan accomplishes by means of the above passage, which stages a conversation between Corcoran and an imaginary Tukano-speaker, is a translation of one cosmology into the terms of another (scientific Western) one. But this conversation is forced, and overrides the question of whether the Desana shaman would be willing (or able) to state his 'message' without recourse to the medium that models it – that is, without insisting that Corcoran ingest *yagé* (the Tukano name for the magical *Banisteriopsis Caapi* plant) first? Let us turn the conversation around, following Classen's analysis of the Desana sensory order in 'Sweet colors, fragrant songs' (1990).

In the beginning there was sound (the baby's cry), not a 'word' or 'score' (another favourite metaphor of information theory). This sound embodied smells and temperatures, as well as colours and tastes. These sensations are meaningful to different senses now, but were indistinguishable from each other in the mythic world. Thus, the sound of the baby's cry is viewed as having contained the Tukano 'sense ratio' (to borrow McLuhan's 1962 terminology) in embryo.

The division and distribution of the parts of the child's body modulated the original sound, just as it modulated society, partitioning the latter into ranked groups, each with its own style of singing, speaking and use of colours as well as other sensory media (odours, tastes). The division of sound, the division of the senses and the division of society, therefore, all arose together. Thus, the Tukano social and moral universe is structured in accordance with a model derived from the interrelation of the senses under the influence of *yagé*.

Social norms are sensory norms. This fundamental tenet of the Tukano sensory-social order finds expression in the way the different flavours with which each of the social groups were imbued at the moment of partition are to this day used to regulate marriage: 'Compatible marriage partners are those with opposite flavours' (Classen 1991: 249). It is also embedded in the contemporary ritual use of *yagé*: 'Through the use of hallucinogens, and a controlled sensory environment, shamans attempt

to "make one see, and act accordingly," "to make one hear, and act accordingly," "to make one smell, and act accordingly," and "to make one dream, and act accordingly" (Classen 1990: 728). The need for the shaman to control the sensory environment follows from the fact that each social group embodies a different modulation of the senses. A shaman would not want his patients to see red where they ought to be seeing yellow, or smell a pungent odour when they ought to smell a sweet one, for it is believed that were the senses to be crossed in this way people would commit incest and other contraventions of the Tukano moral order.

Sullivan suggests that Tukano-speakers would agree with information theorists that the 'wholeness of meaning' is gone. He also claims that: 'Wholeness is seen in retrospect and in mourning' (Sullivan 1986: 27). This is far from clear. If there were only one sense and one meaning – that is, if the Desana sensory ratio had remained in the embryonic form it had in the mythic world, and never unfolded – then the sound of, say, a flute would convey a wealth of meaning, but not be able to evoke images in other modalities the way it does today. The Desana appear to delight in the cross-sensory associations which the unfolding of the sound of the baby's cry into the other senses has made possible. When a boy plays a flute, for example: 'The odor of the tune is said to be male, the color is red, and the temperature is hot; the tune evokes youthful happiness and the taste of a fleshy fruit of a certain tree. The vibrations carry an erotic message to a particular girl' (Reichel-Dolmatoff 1981: 91). The multiple associations adduced here serve to multiply the perceived meaning (or connotation) of the tune. Alas, the only thing the information theorist can see in this concatenation of sensations is redundancy; that is, all the *resonances* of the Desana way of sensing would be lost on one such as Corcoran.

Hence, while the theory of cultural synaesthesia has the potential to illuminate many aspects of cultural performance, space must be made within this theory to allow for a more relational, less unified conception of the human sensorium. Specifically, while the notion of 'the unity of the senses' is a helpful point of departure, and certainly more culturally sensitive than 'the model of the text' or 'score', more attention needs to be paid to such issues as: (1) the weight or value attached to each of the modalities, instead of assuming equality and interchangeability; (2) the sequencing of perceptions, instead of assuming simultaneity; and (3) the way the use of different senses

may give rise to different meanings, instead of assuming redundancy. Each of these assumptions (which Sullivan imports into his interpretation of the Desana myth owing to his uncritical reliance on information theory) limit what we sense, whereas the Tukano material challenges us to *expand* our senses, to recognize their interplay, and thus discover more meaning instead of less.

## THE MODEL OF INTERSENSORIALITY

A consideration of Dorinne Kondo's sensuous symbolic analysis of the Japanese tea ceremony will help concretize what is meant by the model of intersensoriality (in place of synaesthesia) advanced here. Kondo notes the emphasis on non-verbal symbolism in Japanese culture. The tea ceremony itself entails a cleansing and heightening of perception conducive to a state of silent contemplation. In the ceremony meanings are conveyed through sensory shifts, from garden to tea room, from sound to silence, from the odour of incense to the taste of tea. Kondo describes the aesthetic order of the tea ceremony as an 'unfolding, a sequence of movement with tensions, climaxes and directionality' (1983/2004: 197).

As is well illustrated by the sensory sequencing of the tea ceremony, intersensoriality need not mean a synaesthetic mingling of sensation. The strands of perception may be connected in many different ways. Sometimes the senses may seem to all be working together in harmony. Other times, sensations will be conflicted or confused. Either state may be employed as a social or aesthetic ideology.

Just as the model of intersensoriality does not necessarily imply a state of harmony, nor does it imply a state of equality, whether sensory or social. Indeed, the senses are typically ordered in hierarchies. In one society or social context sight will head the list of the senses, in another it may be hearing or touch. Such sensory rankings are always allied with social rankings and employed to order society. The dominant group in society will be linked to esteemed senses and sensations while subordinate groups will be associated with less valued or denigrated senses. In the West the dominant group – whether it be conceptualized in terms of gender, class or race – has conventionally been associated with the supposedly 'higher' senses of sight and hearing, while subordinate groups (women, workers, non-Westerners) have been associated with the so-called lower

senses of smell, taste and touch (Classen 1998: 154–6).

Within each sensory field, as well, sensations deemed relatively unpleasant or dangerous will be linked to ‘unpleasant’, ‘dangerous’ social groups. Within the field of smell, for example, the upper classes were customarily considered to be fragrant or inodorate, while the lower classes were held to be malodorous. George Orwell described this olfactory division of society forcefully when he wrote that ‘the real secret of class distinctions in the West’ can be summed up in ‘four frightful words ... *The lower classes smell*’ (quoted in Classen et al. 1994: 166). This perception of malodour had less to do with practices of cleanliness than it had to do with social status: according to the sensory classification of society a low social status translated into a bad smell. Thus Orwell stated that a nasty smell seemed to emanate from ‘even “lower class” people whom you knew to be quite clean – servants, for instance’ (Classen et al. 1994: 167). Here we can see how sensations of disgust are a matter not just of personal distaste but of social ordering (Miller 1997). The transformation of class distinctions into physiological sensations is a powerful enforcer of social hierarchies (see Corbin 1986; Classen 2001).

An instructive comparative example is provided by Anthony Seeger’s analysis of the sensory order of the Suyà Indians of the Mato Grosso region of Brazil in ‘The meaning of body ornaments’ (1975). Suyà men pride themselves on their ear discs and lip discs. These ornaments are understood to make one ‘fully human’ (*me*). The faculties of speech and hearing are, in fact, ‘highly elaborated and positively valued in Suyà society’ (Seeger 1975: 215). For example, the Suyà word for hearing, *ku-mba*, means not only ‘to hear (a sound)’ but also ‘to know’ and ‘to understand’. Thus, when ‘the Suyà have learned something – even something visual such as a weaving pattern – they say, “It is in my ear”’ (1975: 214). The ear is the primary organ through which the world is cognized. It is also the organ through which the human subject is socialized: both boys and girls are fitted with ear discs at puberty. A person who is fully social – that is, one who conforms fully to the norms of the group – ‘hears, understands and knows clearly’ (1975: 214). Only senior men and chiefs are permitted to wear lip discs, and (by virtue of this oral modification) engage in ‘plaza speech’ or ‘everybody listen talk’ as well as perform the songs which are so central to the Suyà symbolic order and sense of cultural identity.

Significantly, ‘the eyes are not ornamented, tattooed or specially painted’, nor is the nose (1975: 216). This diminution of the eyes and nose (in contrast to the extension of the lips and ears) is linked to the fact that only certain highly dangerous and elusive game animals are credited with a keen sense of smell, as well as ‘strong eyes’. Related to this is the fact that adult men are presumed to be ‘bland smelling’ while adult women, who are deemed to participate more in nature than society, are said to be ‘strong smelling’ (Seeger 1981: 111). Witches are also credited with ‘strong eyes’, and their transgressive position within the moral (which is to say, aural) bounds of society is further underscored by the fact that they are poor of hearing and engage in ‘bad’ or garbled speech.

It is of historical interest to note that Seeger’s analysis in the ‘Body ornaments’ piece was inspired in part by McLuhan’s notion of media as ‘extensions of the senses’. Whereas McLuhan’s point in *The Gutenberg Galaxy* (1962) was that our media become us, Seeger’s point is that body decorations do much the same. The ear-minded sensory order of the Suyà is precisely what one would expect of an ‘oral-aural’ (as opposed to chirographic, typographic or electronic) society, in McLuhan’s terms. However, Seeger also complicates McLuhan’s typology by attending to the different meanings and values of the different faculties in the Suyà sensory order, and in those of other Gê-speaking peoples of the Mato Grosso. For example, the neighbouring Kayapo mark the attainment of puberty by fitting boys with penis sheaths, and do not wear ear discs (only strings of beads). Adult Kayapo men do wear lip discs, but they are not very ornate. This makes them less than human by Suyà standards, and this ranking is, of course, mutual. The Suyà economy of the senses thus differs from that of the Kayapo, as regards the salience and direct/indirect regulation of aurality and tactility (or sexuality) respectively. This suggests that, contrary to McLuhan’s theory, not all ‘oral societies’ are of one mind with respect to the ranking and uses of hearing relative to the other senses – a point which has been confirmed by numerous subsequent studies (Classen 1993a, 1997; Geurts 2002; Howes 2003).

## SENSORY WORLDS

The field of material culture studies stands to be significantly enriched through attending to the multiple sensory dimensions of ‘material

worlds' (Miller 1998). As Daniel Miller observes in 'Why some things matter': 'through dwelling on the more mundane sensual and material qualities of the object, we are able to unpick the more subtle connections with cultural lives and values that are objectified through these forms, in part because of the qualities they possess' (1998: 9). My focus in this section shall be on artefacts as extensions of the senses and the emergent notion of emplacement, or the sensuous reaction of people to place.

### Artefacts

Every artefact embodies a particular sensory mix. It does so in terms of its production (i.e. the sensory skills and values that go into its making), in the sensory qualities it presents, and in its consumption (i.e. the meanings and uses people discover in or ascribe to it in accordance with the sensory order of their culture or subculture).

The shell valuables (armshells and necklaces) which circulate in countervailing directions around the vast inter-island system of ceremonial exchange known as the '*kula* ring' in the Massim region of Papua New Guinea provide a good example of artefacts as extensions of the senses. The sonic, kinetic and visual as well as olfactory characteristics of these objects (together with their attachments) are keyed to the Massim hierarchy of sensing and scale of self-constitution. The shell valuables provide a standard in terms of which the social status and persuasive powers of their (always temporary) possessors can be judged and communicated. In the Massim world, every man of the *kula* wants to progress from being a face with no name (i.e. admired for his visual and olfactory appearance when he goes on a *kula* expedition to visit his partner on a neighbouring island) to being a name with no face (i.e. have his name circulate quite apart from his body in concert with the named shells of note that have passed through his possession).

According to Annette Weiner's revisionist analysis of *kula* exchange, the *kula* is not about 'the love of give-and-take for its own sake', as Malinowski suggested, 'but creating one's own individual fame through the circulation of objects that accumulate the histories of their travels and the names of those who have possessed them' (quoted in Howes 2003: 67). The cardinal value of Massim civilization is, in fact, *butu*, which means both 'noise' and 'fame'. This value is condensed in the sensual qualities of the attachments which serve as an index of a

*kula* valuable's status or rank. The attachments consist of trade beads, seeds, other types of shells, and bits of plastic or tin, which are tied either to the valuable itself or to a frame. Basically, the attachments serve to augment the space of the valuable by extending its boundaries, by suggesting motility and by making a chiming or tinkling noise. It is fitting that the attachments enlarge the body of the shell, extending it outward in space, given the connection between beautification and exteriorization that is so fundamental to Massim aesthetics (Munn 1986; Howes 2003: 72–3). It is also fitting that they impart motion (specifically, a trembling motion) to the shell, since the essence of a valuable lies in its mobility – its being for transmission. The main function of the attachments, however, is to signify success in *kula* exchange through sound, hence the significance of the chiming or tinkling sound they make. (In many parts, *kula* transactions are in fact concluded at night, so that it is the sound of a *kula* valuable being carried off to the beach that signals success on the exchange.) As Nancy Munn observes, 'the mobile decor makes a sound that ramifies the space [of the shell] – as if putting it into motion – so that what may be out of sight may nevertheless be heard' (quoted in Howes 2003: 82).

The sensory meaning of an object or artefact may change over time. Consider the case of the rose. The transformation of the rose from a pre-modern symbol of olfactory and gustatory perfection to a modern symbol of formal visual perfection indexes the shifting balance of the senses in Western history – specifically, the visual eclipse of smell. While in pre-modern times 'A rose by any other name would smell as sweet' and rose petals were frequently used in cooking, in modern times, many varieties of roses look quite splendid but have, in fact, lost their scent owing to selective breeding. This shift did not go uncontested. William Morris, for example, railed against 'the triumph of surface over essence, of quantity over quality', represented by the way in which showy gardens had come to replace scented gardens in Victorian England (Classen 1993a: 31).

The sensory meanings of objects also vary across cultures. Analysing commodities as bundles of sensual relations, susceptible to multiple appropriations (or appraisals), can help elucidate the sensory as well as social biographies of things in the course of their domestication (see Dant 1999: 110–29). It can also help to explain the often innovative meanings and uses ascribed to foreign products in contexts of 'cross-cultural consumption' (Howes 1996).<sup>5</sup>

For example, the Algonquin Indians traded furs for glass beads of various hues with the French in seventeenth-century Québec, and there was also a significant traffic in prayer beads. But the Algonquians did not admire the beads simply for their 'brilliance', they also occasionally ground them up and smoked them because 'the respiratory route' was the standard sensory channel for the ingestion of power-laden substances (von Gernet 1996: 170–6). To take a contemporary example, Johnson & Johnson's baby powder is a popular trade item in Papua New Guinea. Rather than being applied to babies, however, it is used for purifying corpses and mourners, asperging the heads of ritual performers, and for body decor.<sup>6</sup> This decorative use of baby powder (as a substitute for crushed shell) has the effect of intensifying the visual and olfactory presence of the person in ways that accord with the emphasis on exteriorization in the Massim aesthetic order, as discussed elsewhere (see Howes 2003: 217–18).

It is not only in contexts of cross-cultural consumption that commodities acquire new uses and meanings on account of local appraisals of their sensual qualities. Take the case of Kool-Aid – that icon of American middle-class family life – which is used as a (cheap yet colourful) hair dye by numbers of rebellious North American 'tweens' (i.e. those aged 10 to 13). Here tween subculture is the determining factor in 'making sense' of what Kool-Aid is good for, converting a taste into a sight.

### Emplacement

The sensuous reaction of people to place has received increased attention of late thanks to the pioneering work of Yi-Fu Tuan (1974, 1995) and Steve Feld (1996), among others. Their example has led geographers and anthropologists alike to foreground the notion of sense-scapes in place of the conventional notion of landscape, with its primarily visual connotations (see Porteous 1990), and to pay heightened attention to processes of 'emplacement' (Rodman 1992; Fletcher 2004) as distinct from (but inclusive of) processes of 'embodiment' (Csordas 1990).

In his contribution to *Senses of Place*, Feld probes the seemingly transparent meaning of the word 'sense' in the expression 'sense of place' by asking: 'How is place actually sensed?' He goes on to argue that 'as place is sensed, senses are placed; as places make sense, senses make place' (1996: 91). Feld's point is nicely exemplified by numerous subsequent studies

of the sonic dimensions of social life (or sonorization of the material world), such as those collected in *Music, Sensation, and Sensuality* (Austern 2002), *The Auditory Culture Reader* (Bull and Back 2003) and *Hearing Cultures* (Erlmann 2004).

The odorization of the material world, both historically and across cultures, has also come under increased investigation (Corbin 1986; Classen et al. 1994; Rasmussen 1999; Drobnick forthcoming). Vishvajit Pandya's ethnography of Ongee 'osmology' (or science of scent) presents a particularly illuminating case study of the socialization of olfaction. Among the Ongee, a hunting and gathering people of Little Andaman Island in the Bay of Bengal, smell is the primary sensory medium through which the categories of time, space and the person are conceptualized. Odour, according to the Ongee, is the vital force which animates all living, organic beings, and life, for the Ongee, is a constant game of olfactory hide-and-seek. They seek out animals in order to kill them by releasing their odours, and at the same time try to hide their own odours both from the animals they hunt and from the spirits who hunt them.

Space is conceived of by the Ongee not as a static area within which things happen but as a dynamic environmental flow. The olfactory space of an Ongee village fluctuates: it can be more expansive or less, depending on the presence of strong-smelling substances (e.g. pig meat), the strength of the wind, and other factors. The Ongee smellscape, then, is not a fixed structure but a fluid pattern that can shift according to differing atmospheric conditions. The Ongee convey the fluid nature of odour by employing the same word, *kwayaye*, for both the emission of odours and the ebb and flow of tides (Pandya 1993; Classen et al. 1994: 97–9).

When Pandya observed that his official map of the island did not correspond with his experience of it among the Ongee, an Ongee informant replied:

Why do you hope to see the same space while moving? One only hopes to reach the place in the end. All the places in space are constantly changing. The creek is never the same; it grows larger and smaller because the mangrove forest keeps growing and changing the creek. The rise and fall of the tidewater changes the coast and the creeks. ... You cannot remember a place by what it looks like. Your map tells lies. Places change. Does your map say that? Does your map say when the stream is dry and gone or when it comes and overflows? We remember how to come and go

back, not the places which are on the way of going and coming.

(Pandya 1991: 792–3)

Among the Ongee, space is as fluid as the odours which animate the world. How would a Western cartographer begin to map the complexities of the Ongee's fundamentally non-visual sense of place?<sup>6</sup>

A culture's sensory order is also projected in its architecture. A good comparative example would be the nineteenth-century European fashion for balconies versus the windowless walled domestic compounds found in many parts of Africa. The architectural form of the balcony allowed the bourgeois subject to gaze but not be touched while the walled compound inhibits sight and fosters tactile engagement. The latter arrangement is important to a people such as the Wolof of Senegal, for whom touch is the social sense and vision the sense of aggression and transgression (Howes 1991: 182–5). Another interesting comparative example is the Inuit snowhouse or 'igloo' versus the modern bourgeois home. According to Edmund Carpenter, 'visually and acoustically the igloo is "open," a labyrinth alive with the movements of crowded people' (1973: 25). By contrast, the proliferation of rooms within the bourgeois dwelling has had the effect of privatizing what were once more social functions (the preparation and consumption of food, the elimination of bodily wastes, sleeping) by confining each to a separate compartment. The fragmented understanding of the sensorium with which most modern Western subjects operate is at least partly attributable to this great nineteenth-century repartition of space and bodily functions.

Most studies of emplacement have tended to focus on the ordering or integration of the senses. However, it is important to consider the underside of emplacement as well – namely, the sense of displacement typically experienced by marginal groups within society. For example, Chris Fletcher (2004) has coined the term 'dystoposthesia' to describe 'the incompatibility of bodies to the space they inhabit' experienced by those who suffer from 'environmental sensitivities' (ES). For sufferers of ES, the visual world is dangerously deceptive. Through the eye-catching facades of modern life – furniture, paint, rugs, cosmetics – seep invisible toxic fumes, turning the dream worlds of consumer capitalism into corporeal nightmares. ES sufferers have no evident reason for their deranged sensations, for the world they perceive as threatening is judged by others to be safe. Indeed, ES is medically unrecognized and often

dismissed as a 'garden variety mental disorder'. In order to retain a sense of sanity, ES sufferers must 'work out a bodily logic of what remains illogical' (Fletcher 2004: 384).

The term dystoposthesia might also be applied to the life world of the homeless persons in Boston studied by Robert Desjarlais in 'Movement, stillness' (2004). Whether on the street or in a shelter the homeless are incompatible with their sensory environment. Both sites offer a continual series of sensory assaults; brutal in the case of the street, distracting in the case of the shelter, with its constant hum of activity. Desjarlais describes how the homeless develop various sensory techniques to cope with their situation. When a 'quiet place' cannot be found, the body itself becomes 'silent', numb to the world outside and the feelings inside: the homeless 'play dead', even though this strategy exposes them to additional risks.

## SENSORIAL INVESTIGATIONS

Victor Buchli has drawn attention to the curious neglect of materiality in material culture studies. He observes that 'material culture' transforms 'a mostly inarticulate realm of sensual experience into the two dimensions of a scholarly text or the "nature-morte" of the museum display' (2002: 13). He wonders whether there is any alternative to this seemingly inexorable 'decrease in physicality' (or movement towards 'the dimensionless and ephemeral') when objects are reduced to writing or subject to classification and exhibition in glass cases.

I am in sympathy with Buchli's critique of the neglect of materiality in material culture studies, though I would be more inclined to speak of the sensuality of material culture. I am also in agreement with his attack on the ideology of 'conservation'. (Conservation, according to Buchli, conserves nowhere near as much as it 'produces' a particular order of things.) However, I also believe that a number of questionable assumptions remain embedded in Buchli's state-of-the-art critique, and that these have the effect of limiting what he is able to conceive of by way of alternative modes of presentation. Why suppose that artefacts are not for handling? Why prioritize the visual appearance of an object?<sup>7</sup> This last question is prompted by Buchli's observation that:

Most of our publications deny us any visual representation of the very physical objects we explore. This was never the case in the beautifully illustrated



discussions of material culture in the past and their exquisite display when the affects of these objects were at their most problematic ... [from a contemporary postcolonial perspective]. Their visuality and form was the primary vehicle of authority and information, the text was merely supplementary and discursive.

(2002: 14)

To truly access the materiality of an object, I maintain, it is precisely those qualities which cannot be reproduced in photographs – the feel, the weight, the smell, the sound – which are essential to consider. As the previous sections of this chapter have indicated, these non-visual qualities are also often of key importance within an artefact's culture of origin. Appreciating the visual design of a Tukano basket would tell one nothing of the range of sensory characteristics which are meaningful to the Tukano, right down to the odour of the vines from which a basket is made. To access such non-visual qualities, however, often involves breaking one of the most sacred museological taboos and actually *handling* a collectible. This fear of touch is not intrinsic to the museum. Early museums often gave visitors tactile access to their collections, of which visitors took full advantage. Thus seventeenth and eighteenth-century diarists record lifting, feeling and smelling artefacts in the collections they visited (Classen and Howes forthcoming). It is certainly the case that most early curators did not share the modern preoccupation with conservation. However, it is even more true that the sensory values of the time gave an importance to tactile knowledge which has since been discounted. Even though it might endanger the collection, visitors were still allowed to touch because of the belief that touch was essential for appreciation. The current sensory order of the museum resulted from the confluence of a widespread hypervaluation of vision in modernity and a new emphasis on the preservation of the material past (Classen 2005).<sup>8</sup>

Owing to its association with museum studies and to its development within a particular culture of vision, material culture studies has tended to overlook the multisensory properties of materiality. While this is now changing, as we have seen, old habits die hard. Examining the sensuous worlds of non-Western peoples such as the Tukano and the Ongee brings out the importance of exploring all the sensory dimensions of material life, even the olfactory – the most denigrated sensory domain of modernity. The model of intersensoriality, in turn, compels us to interrelate

sensory media, to contextualize them within a total sensory and social environment. While all media may not be conveying the same message, or given the same attention, they are nonetheless all playing on each other. The study of material culture, from this perspective, becomes the exploration of sensory relationships and embodied experience within particular regimes or systems of cultural values. It is only through such multisensory investigations that material culture studies can become a full-bodied discipline. After all, a material culture that consisted solely of images would be immaterial.

#### NOTES

- 1 Saunders's point is that the Great War of 1914–18 was a crisis of synaesthetic proportions, and not simply a 'crisis of vision', as others maintain (e.g. Jay 1993: 211–15).
- 2 The sensual revolution in material culture studies is not confined to the work of the University College London Material Culture Group, as the examples cited thus far might suggest. For example, Nadia Seremetakis makes an eloquent case for treating 'perception as material culture in modernity' in *The Senses Still* (1994), and David Sutton (2001), building on the work of James Fernandez (1986), has highlighted the sensory dimensions of memory and food. There is a whole sub-field of archaeology now dedicated to the 'archaeology of perception' (Houston and Taube 2000; Ouzman 2001). Other leading proponents of the sensory analysis of artefacts include Richard Carp (1997) and Jules Prown (1996).
- 3 In drawing out this logical implication of the 'writing culture' position, Tyler is, of course, exposing the limits of representation, unlike the other contributors to the Clifford and Marcus volume (1986), who would appear to condone and even celebrate them (see Howes 2003: 22–3).
- 4 There is a quality to synaesthetic expressions, such as 'crumbly yellow voice', which some perceive to be akin to metaphor. Similarly, one finds the term 'synaesthesia' being used interchangeably with 'metaphor' in the works of anthropologists such as Isbell (1985). This is untoward, for synaesthesia is a sensory process, not a linguistic one like metaphor, and its value as a theoretical concept may consist precisely in the way it enables us to analyse rituals from a perspective that is beyond metaphor – that

- is, from a perspective which treats rituals as 'ways of sensing' the world (Howes 2003). Such an approach builds on the manifold senses of the word 'sense' – 'sense' as 'sensation' and 'signification', to which one might add 'direction' (as given in the French word *sens*).
- 5 Also of note in this connection are those studies which highlight the struggle for dominance of conflicting constructions of the sensorium in situations of culture contact (see Classen 1993b; Hoffer 2003).
  - 6 Ongee osmology, in addition to defying cartography, poses a significant challenge to phenomenological approaches to the study of human-environment relations. To take a paradigm case, in *The Perception of the Environment* (2000) Tim Ingold dwells extensively on sight and sound and 'motion' (or action) but his text is virtually devoid of references to smell or taste or touch. The Ongee would thus find little or nothing to perceive in Ingold's phenomenologically reduced 'surroundings' – but then, this should not be so surprising, given that phenomenology comes from the Greek *phainen*, which means 'to appear'. Ingold's work, in addition to being open to critique for (uncritically) reflecting certain conventional Western perceptual biases in its account of 'the environment', must be challenged for the Eurocentrism with which it champions the theories of perception advanced by philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty and psychologist J.J. Gibson as if the universal validity of those theories were a given, instead of remaining to be seen (see Ingold 2000: Chapter 14; Howes 2003: 239–40 n. 8).
  - 7 To these questions one might add: why assume that writing must be a two-dimensional medium? There exist counter-examples, such as the Inca *quipu*, which consists of a series of knotted strings, and is best characterized as a multidimensional and multisensorial form of writing (Classen and Howes forthcoming; see further Küchler 2002 and Connor 2003: 40–1 on the multisensory symbolic significance of knots and knotting). Given the unlikelihood of Inca writing ever being revived, much less becoming the lingua franca of the academy, it might be objected that our writing about material culture means continuing to frame it within a two-dimensional medium. To this objection I would respond that it is nevertheless possible to hone our powers of (verbal) description to the point that our words mingle

with their referents, thereby sensualizing language instead of merely verbalizing things. This path is suggested by the work of historian Alain Corbin who, by recuperating past phrases, such as *aura seminalis*, *miasma*, etc., has succeeded at rendering history sensible (see Corbin 2000: 62). It is also exemplified by certain contemporary writers, such as Seamus Heaney (1991) and Susan Stewart (2002), who exploit the materiality (or better sensuality) of language in untold ways. So too can what Buchli (2002) calls the dimensionless "*nature morte*" of museum displays' be complicated sensorially by curating exhibitions for all the senses, as exemplified by the work of Displaycult (Drobnick and Fisher 2002).

- 8 For an account of the florescence of the 'exhibitionary complex', or visual eclipse of touch, in the mid-nineteenth century see *The Birth of the Museum* (Bennett 1995), and for an analysis of the prehistory and fall-out of this transformation in perception see Classen (forthcoming) and Candlin (2004).

## REFERENCES

- Austern, Linda P. (ed.) (2002) *Music, Sensation and Sensuality*. New York: Routledge.
- Baudrillard, Jean (1968/1996) *The System of Objects*, trans. J. Benedict. London: Verso.
- Baudrillard, Jean (1970/1998) *The Consumer Society: Myths and Structures*. London: Sage.
- Bender, Barbara (2002) 'Contested landscapes', in V. Buchli (ed.), *The Material Culture Reader*. Oxford: Berg, pp. 141–74.
- Bennett, Tony (1995) *The Birth of the Museum: History, Theory, Politics*. London: Routledge.
- Blum, M. (2002) 'Remaking the East German past: *Ostalgie*, identity, and material culture', *Journal of Popular Culture*, 34 (3): 229–53.
- Buchli, Victor, ed. (2002) *The Material Culture Reader*. Oxford: Berg.
- Bull, Michael and Black, Les (eds) (2003) *The Auditory Culture Reader*. Oxford: Berg.
- Candlin, Fiona (2004) 'Don't touch! Hands off! Art, blindness and the conservation of expertise', *Body and Society*, 10 (1): 71–90.
- Carp, Richard (1997) 'Perception and material culture: historical and cross-cultural perspectives', *Historical Reflections/Reflexions historiques*, 23 (3): 269–300.
- Carpenter, Edmund (1973) *Eskimo Realities*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.
- 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 D. Howes (ed.), *The Varieties of Sensory Experience*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, pp. 239–55.
- Classen, Constance (1993a) *Worlds of Sense: Exploring the Senses in History and Across Cultures*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Classen, Constance (1993b) *Inca Cosmology and the Human Body*. Salt Lake City, UT: University of Utah Press.
- Classen, Constance (1997) 'Foundations for an anthropology of the senses', *International Social Science Journal*, 153: 401–12.
- Classen, Constance (1998) *The Color of Angels: Cosmology, Gender and the Aesthetic Imagination*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Classen, Constance (2001) 'The senses', in Peter Stearns (ed.), *Encyclopedia of European Social History from 1350 to 2000 IV*. New York: Scribner.
- Classen, Constance (2005) 'Touch in the early museum', in C. Classen (ed.), *The Book of Touch*. Oxford: Berg.
- Classen, Constance and Howes, David (forthcoming) 'The museum as sensescape: Western sensibilities and indigenous artifacts', in E. Edwards, C. Gosden and R. Phillips (eds), *Sensible Objects*. Oxford: Berg.
- Classen, Constance, Howes, David and Synnott, Anthony (1994) *Aroma: the Cultural History of Smell*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Clifford, James and Marcus, George, eds (1986) *Writing Culture: the Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Connor, Steven (2003) *The Book of Skin*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Corbin, Alain (1986) *The Foul and the Fragrant: Odor and the French Social Imagination*, trans. Miriam Kochan, Roy Porter and Christopher Prendergast. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Corbin, Alain (1994) *Village Bells: Sound and Meaning in the Nineteenth-Century French Countryside*, trans. Martin Thom. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Corbin, Alain (2000) *Historien du sensible : entretiens avec Gilles Heuré*. Paris: la Découverte.
- Csordas, Thomas (1990) 'Embodiment as a paradigm for anthropology', *Ethos*, 18: 5–47.
- Dant, Tim (1999) *Material Culture and the Social World*. Buckingham: Open University Press.
- Desjarlais, Robert (2004) 'Movement, stillness', in D. Howes (ed.), *Empire of the Senses*. Oxford: Berg, pp. 369–79.
- Drobnick, Jim, ed. (forthcoming) *The Smell Culture Reader*. Oxford: Berg.
- Drobnick, Jim and Fisher, Jennifer (2002) *Museopathy*. Kingston, ON: Agnes Etherington Art Centre, Queen's University.
- Erlmann, Veit, (ed.) (2004) *Hearing Cultures: Essays on Sound, Listening and Modernity*. Oxford: Berg.
- Feld, Stephen (1996) 'Waterfalls of song', in S. Feld and K. Basso (eds), *Senses of Place*. Santa Fe, NM: SAR Press, pp. 91–135.
- Fernandez, James (1986) *Persuasions and Performances: The Play of Tropes in Culture*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Finnegan, Ruth (2002) *Communicating: the Multiple Modes of Human Interconnection*. London: Routledge.
- Fletcher, Christopher (2004) 'Dystoposthesia', in D. Howes (ed.), *Empire of the Senses*. Oxford: Berg, pp. 380–98.
- Geertz, Clifford (1973) *The Interpretation of Cultures*. New York: Basic Books.
- Geurts, Kathryn Linn (2002) *Culture and the Senses: Bodily Ways of Knowing in an African Community*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Heaney, Seamus (1991) *Seeing Things*. London: Faber.
- Hoffer, Peter Charles (2003) *Sensory Worlds in Early America*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Houston, Stephen and Taube, Karl (2000) 'An archaeology of the senses: perception and cultural expression in ancient Mesoamerica', *Cambridge Archaeological Journal*, 10 (2): 261–94.
- Howes, David, ed. (1991) *The Varieties of Sensory Experience: a Sourcebook in the Anthropology of the Senses*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Howes, David (ed.) (1996) *Cross-cultural Consumption: Global Markets, Local Realities*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Howes, David (2003) *Sensual Relations: Engaging the Senses in Culture and Social Theory*. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press.
- Howes, David, ed. (2004) *Empire of the Senses: the Sensual Culture Reader*. Oxford: Berg.
- Howes, David, and Classen, Constance (1991) 'Conclusion: sounding sensory profiles', in D. Howes (ed.), *The Varieties of Sensory Experience*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, pp. 257–88.
- Ingold, Tim (2000) *The Perception of the Environment*. London: Routledge.
- Isbell, Billie Jean (1985) 'The metaphoric process', in G. Urton (ed.), *Animal Myths and Metaphors in South America*. Salt Lake City, UT: University of Utah Press, pp. 218–313.
- Jay, Martin (1993) *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Kondo, Dorinne (1983/2004) 'The tea ceremony', in D. Howes (ed.), *Empire of the Senses*. Oxford: Berg, pp. 192–211.
- Küchler, Susanne (2002) 'The anthropology of art', in V. Buchli (ed.), *The Material Culture Reader*. Oxford: Berg, pp. 57–80.
- Leach, Edmund (1976) *Culture and Communication*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

- Marks, Lawrence (1982) *The Unity of the Senses*. New York: Academic Press.
- McLuhan, Marshall (1962) *The Gutenberg Galaxy*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Miller, Daniel (1998) 'Why some things matter', in D. Miller (ed.), *Material Cultures*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, pp. 3–21.
- Miller, William Ian (1997) *The Anatomy of Disgust*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Munn, Nancy (1986) *The Fame of Gawa*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Ouzman, Sven (2001) 'Seeing is deceiving: rock art and the non-visual', *World Archaeology*, 33 (2): 237–56.
- Pandya, Vishvajit (1991) 'Movement and space: Andamanese cartography', *American Ethnologist*, 17: 775–97.
- Pandya, Vishvajit (1993) *Above the Forest: a Study of Andamanese Ethnoamnenology, Cosmology and the Power of Ritual*. Bombay: Oxford University Press.
- Pinney, Christopher (2002) 'Visual culture', in V. Buchli (ed.), *The Material Culture Reader*. Oxford: Berg, pp. 81–104.
- Porteus, J. Douglas (1990) *Landscapes of the Mind: Worlds of Sense and Metaphor*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Prown, Jules (1996) 'Material/culture', in W.D. Kingery (ed.), *Learning from Things*. Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, pp. 19–27.
- Rasmussen, Susan (1999) 'Making better "scents" in anthropology: aroma in Tuareg sociocultural systems and the shaping of ethnography', *Anthropological Quarterly*, 72 (2): 55–73.
- Reichel-Dolmatoff, Gerardo (1981) 'Brain and mind in Desana shamanism', *Journal of Latin American Lore*, 7 (1): 73–98.
- Rodman, Margaret (1992) 'Empowering place: multi-locality and multivocality', *American Anthropologist*, 94 (1): 640–55.
- Saunders, Nicholas (2002) 'Memory and conflict', in V. Buchli (ed.), *The Material Culture Reader*. Oxford: Berg, pp. 175–206.
- Seeger, Anthony (1975) 'The meaning of body ornaments', *Ethnology*, 14 (3): 211–24.
- Seeger, Anthony (1981) *Nature and Society in Central Brazil: the Suyá Indians of Mato Grosso*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Seremetakis, C. Nadia, ed. (1994) *The Senses Still: Memory and Perception as Material Culture in Modernity*. Boulder, Co: Westview Press.
- Stahl, Ann B. (2002) 'Colonial entanglements and the practices of taste: an alternative to logocentric approaches', *American Anthropologist*, 104 (3): 827–45.
- Sullivan, Lawrence E. (1986) 'Sound and senses: toward a hermeneutics of performance', *History of Religions*, 26 (1): 1–33.
- Stewart, Susan (2002) *Poetry and the Fate of the Senses*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Sutton, David (2001) *Remembrance of Repasts: An Anthropology of Food and Memory*. Oxford: Berg.
- Tacchi, Jo (1998) 'Radio texture', in D. Miller (ed.), *Material Cultures*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 25–45.
- Tilley, Christopher (2002) 'Metaphor, materiality and interpretation', in V. Buchli (ed.), *The Material Culture Reader*. Oxford: Berg, pp. 23–56.
- Tuan, Yi-Fu (1974) *Topophilia*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Tuan, Yi-Fu (1995) *Passing Strange and Wonderful: Aesthetics, Nature and Culture*. Tokyo and New York: Kodansha.
- Tyler, Stephen (1986) 'Postmodern ethnography', in J. Clifford and G. Marcus (eds), *Writing Culture*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, pp. 122–40.
- Von Gernet, Alexander (1996) 'Reactions to the familiar and the novel in seventeenth-century French-Amerindian contact', in L. Turgeon et al. (eds), *Cultural Transfer: America and Europe*. Québec: Presses de l'Université Laval, pp. 169–88.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I wish to acknowledge the support of the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada and the Quebec Fonds pour la Formation de Chercheurs et l'Aide à la Recherche, as well as all the stimulation I have received from my conversations with Jean-Sébastien Marcoux and other members of the Concordia Sensoria Research Team (<http://alcor.concordia.ca/~senses>).