

Sensory History and Sociology – Offering a Helping Hand?

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‘The Victorian Tactile Imagination’ conference set itself the ambitious aim of exploring tactility in the nineteenth century, and embraced interdisciplinary approaches in doing so. For a variety of reasons, ranging from a pragmatic need to secure funding to a genuine desire to conduct the best possible research, ‘interdisciplinarity’ has become a buzzword in academia in recent years. It is therefore worth highlighting a few examples of disciplinary representation at the conference, while also considering the wider issue of interdisciplinarity. Owing to restrictions of space and because of my own area of research, I will consider this specifically in relation to the insights and benefits that social theory may bring to sensory studies of nineteenth-century culture.

Several papers provided examples of how interdisciplinarity can be achieved by borrowing insights that have previously been favoured among sociologists. One excellent instance of this was William Cohen’s keynote address analysing Thomas Hardy’s *Woodlanders* through an Actor Network Theory (ANT) approach, in order to understand the tactile interplay of human and non-human actants in the novel. While *The Woodlanders* has been the subject of many studies, in appropriating an ANT approach, Cohen was able to move away from traditional vision-orientated understandings of the novel, in which sight becomes a question of mastery. Instead, the use of ANT allowed tactility to be understood, and for a reciprocal relationship between subjects and objects to emerge, with each functioning as co-workers shaping the other.

While there were additional examples of interdisciplinary approaches to reading Victorian tactile culture, a large number of delegates were drawn from the disciplines of English literature and art history. Yet given that studies of the social formation of the senses can reveal much about wider society, understandings of tactile histories can only stand to benefit from greater interdisciplinary engagement and conversation between historians and sociologists, to name but one such pair. Sociologists and their theories have long received a cool reception among historians:

Fernand Braudel cited their relationship as being ‘a dialogue of the deaf’.¹ Peter Burke suggests why this has been the case:

Sociology may be defined as the study of human society, with an emphasis on generalisations about its structure and development. History is better defined as the study of human societies in the plural, placing the emphasis on the differences between them and also on the changes which have taken place in each one over time.²

In spite of Burke’s assessment, much of this ‘deafness’ should be seen as a misunderstanding of what historians and sociologists have to offer each other. This is not, however, the place for a detailed discussion of interdisciplinarity in general but an outline of how sociology might be used to complement and enhance sensory studies.

Sociology today embraces multiple areas and is, in itself, permeated by a range of disciplines such as art, literature, geography, and anthropology. But the classic explanation of Charles Wright Mills in *The Sociological Imagination* remains helpful. To work with a sociological imagination is to adopt a certain attitude to research, rather than a didactic framework. He defines the sociological imagination as the ability to understand the world and one’s own place in it by questioning taken-for-granted assumptions on life and to work out *why* things are the way they are, and the underlying structures behind this. This reconciliation of the life of the individual with wider society is, in effect, to lift the veil of inevitability from existence and to understand that things could be different.³ This approach can be deployed effectively with sensory history. David Howes has stressed how sensory studies must involve a commitment to the social formation of the senses, considering them, not in their biological capacity, but as moulded through the social context in which they function.⁴ A sociological approach to sensory history, therefore, will involve the determination to understand the wider context and invisible social structures in which sensory history occurs, and to understand how

¹ Fernand Braudel, *Civilization and Capitalism, 15th to 18th Century*, trans. by Siân Reynolds, 3 vols (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), III: *The Perspective of the World*, 342.

² Peter Burke, *History and Social Theory* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1992), p. 2.

³ Charles Wright Mills, *The Sociological Imagination* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 5.

⁴ David Howes, *Sensual Relations: Engaging the Senses in Culture and Social Theory* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2006).

this fosters certain modes of sensory formation over others. In other words, sociology can provide the researcher with the bigger picture, an understanding of what is going on behind the scenes.

Attention to the senses among sociologists has a long but intermittent trajectory. However, that interest has been renewed in recent years as part of a wider concern with the vitalism of lived experience — becoming — and the flow of life as opposed to stasis and ideas of being as fixed.⁵ This interest partly reflects a belief that there is more to social life than that which can be expressed through words, as shown in theories of affect and non-representational theory. Nigel Thrift notes that ‘probably 95 per cent of embodied thought is non-cognitive, yet probably 95 per cent of academic thought has concentrated on the cognitive dimension of the conscious “I”’.⁶ More recently, a bolder engagement with the senses has also been proposed in light of the debates surrounding big data, the rise of which is viewed as causing a ‘crisis in empirical sociology’, and the role of the sociologist in understanding society. A focus on the senses and the work of the sociologist in this vein has been stressed because of the inability of such data to elucidate more corporeal experiences.⁷

In practice, a sociological approach to the senses is not monolithic. In terms of its methods alone, experimentation with the arts, photography and walking, and other ‘mobile’ ethnographies represent the diversity of approaches.⁸ Likewise, when using social theory to explain sensory histories, multiple approaches are available.

To provide a clear example of how social theory can add to sensory studies and, more specifically here, in understanding histories of tactility, I will outline some of my own recent research, which focuses on the place of tactility and the skin among female middle-class consumers in the nineteenth century. Questioning the visual paradigm that has been largely accepted within studies on nineteenth-century consumerism, I analyse how women used the sense of touch when shopping, especially in relation

⁵ Scott Lash, ‘Life (vitalism)’, *Theory, Culture and Society*, 23 (2006), 323–49.

⁶ Nigel Thrift, *Non-Representational Theory: Space, Politics, Affect* (London: Routledge, 2008), p. 58. For an overview of sociological engagement and developments in the field, see Kelvin E. Y. Low, ‘The Social Life of the Senses: Charting Directions’, *Sociology Compass*, 3 (2012), 271–82.

⁷ Mike Savage and Roger Burrows, ‘The Coming Crisis of Empirical Sociology’, *Sociology*, 41 (2007), 885–99.

⁸ For examples of this, see *Live Methods*, ed. by Les Back and Nirmal Puwar (London: Wiley, 2013); and *Mobile Methods*, ed. by Monika Büscher, John Urry, and Katian Witchger (London: Routledge, 2011).

to fabric and clothes. I consider this in terms of how they judged texture and quality, how clothes were marketed to them during the rational clothing movement, the tactility of language in catalogue shopping, and, moving onto wider bodily tactility, tactile interactions with space and bodily comfort within the new department stores of the latter part of the century.

Social theory is often criticized among historians for its sweeping generalizations, without attending to the details. In no way should the use of theory in sensory studies imply this. Natalie Zemon Davis, who has successfully drawn on such insights in her historical work, succinctly articulates that ‘there is no substitute for extensive work in the historical sources’.⁹ In my research, a thorough use of the archives is vital to uncover how women were engaged through their senses when shopping, achieved through analysing shopping catalogues, inventories, the women’s press, newspapers, etc. When it comes to understanding why women used the sense of touch, part of the explanation can also be found in the archives. For example, I discuss the use of tactility in judging quality in relation to free trade and the possibilities for fraud and adulteration that flourished as a result of this. This information is visible in contemporary documents. However, what the archives do not reveal is exactly how this sense of tactility was socially formed in women, something that needs to be understood if its use in consumerism is to be fully explained.

It is questions such as this which show the importance of Wright Mills’s argument that the sociological imagination ‘enables us to grasp history and biography and the relations between the two within society’. It is a way of understanding that the life of an individual or a group develops in line with the society in which it is situated (Mills, p. 6). Social theory is important for understanding how tactility was socially developed among women, but this raises the question of which theory to choose.

In trying to explain why women used their tactile sense when shopping, I wished to understand exactly how women came to have an attuned tactile sense. For this, a thorough reading of various theories on the body and sensory interactions was appropriate and this led me to adopt much of Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s work.¹⁰ Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology developed out of a dissatisfaction with traditional accounts

⁹ Natalie Zemon Davis, ‘Anthropology and History in the 1980s’, *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 12 (1981), 267–75 (p. 273).

¹⁰ For an excellent introduction to sociologies of the body, see *The Body: Social Process and Social Theory*, ed. by Mike Featherstone, Mike Hepworth, and Bryan S. Turner (London: Sage, 2001).

of perception that stressed either realism or idealism. Instead, in his work, Merleau-Ponty claims that perception occurs through a meeting of the perceiving subject and the perceived world.¹¹

This meeting between subject and object takes place through the body, primarily through the senses. This is what makes Merleau-Ponty's work of such value in my understanding of how a tactile sense was developed among middle-class Victorian women. Crucially, how the body perceives a present experience is connected to past embodied encounters and the bodily memories that are part of this (Merleau-Ponty, pp. 96–97). Understanding this latter point led me to explore women's wider activities, it being clear that focusing on shopping alone was not enough to explain the wider formation of their sensory habitus. Therefore, not only did this provide an explanation of what was happening but it helped to point to further research that was required. By analysing women's home activities through the archives, namely needlework, which occupied a large amount of their time, I discovered that women developed, and were encouraged to develop, a keen tactile sense through their sewing activities. While being careful not to make facts fit neatly into the theory, Merleau-Ponty's theoretical approach has proved indispensable in forging this wider connection because of the emphasis that he places on bodily interactions with the world. I argue that women were so quick to draw on tactility for judgement when shopping because they already possessed the ability to do this in the form of bodily memories, formed through their domestic activities.

Returning, then, to Mills's argument that a sociological imagination is a disposition that enables the researcher to think about why things function and hold together in a certain way, the use of Merleau-Ponty in my work demonstrates that women's sensory activity when shopping was very much contingent on a particular social experience. Their use of tactility was pronounced because this was a sense that they had developed through their other activities. Using sociology in this way reinforces how tactility among women was socially dependent.

This brief report has summarized just a few of the issues concerning interdisciplinarity that came out of 'The Victorian Tactile Imagination' conference, with attention being focused on the possibilities of sociology for sensory studies. The conference was an encouraging sign that interdisciplinarity is being pursued within sensory history, with some evidence of

¹¹ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* (London: Routledge, 2002).

social theory being drawn upon, and this is starting to produce interesting findings. As so much of the conference contained discussions of the social formation of the senses, sociology should be one of the first ports of call for understanding the deeper context behind what occurs on the surface.