

# Doing Sensory Ethnography

## 1 Situating Sensory Ethnography: From Academia to Intervention

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[p. 7 ↓ ]

# 1 Situating Sensory Ethnography: From Academia to Intervention

*Doing Sensory Ethnography* investigates the possibilities afforded by attending to the senses in ethnographic research and representation. An acknowledgement that sensoriality is fundamental to how we learn about, understand and represent other people's lives is increasingly central to academic and applied practice in the social sciences and humanities. This appreciation, which David Howes has referred to as a 'sensorial turn' (2003: xii) has been couched in terms of an anthropology of the senses (Howes 1991a), sensuous scholarship (Stoller 1997), sensuous geography (Rodaway 1994), sociology of the senses (Simmel 1997 [1907]; Low 2005), the senses in communication and interaction (Finnegan 2002), the sensorium and arts practice (Zardini 2005; Jones 2006a), the sensoriality of film (MacDougall 1998, 2005; Marks 2000), a cultural history of the senses (Classen 1993, 1998), the sensuous nature of the 'tourist encounter' (Crouch and Desforges 2003) or of medical practice (Edvardsson and Street 2007; Hindmarsh and Pilnick 2007; Lammer 2007), sensory design and architecture (Malnar and Vodvarka 2004; Pallasmaa 2005), attention to the senses in material culture studies (e.g. Tilley 2006), 'brand sense' (Lindstrom 2005) in the 'multimodality' paradigm (Kress and Van Leeuwen 2001), and within the notion of 'complex ethnography' (Atkinson et al. 2007).

Across these fields of study scholars are creating new paths in academic debate through the theoretical exploration of sensory experience, perception, sociality, knowing, knowledge, practice and culture (e.g. Ingold 2000; Thrift 2004; Howes 2005a). The debates and arguments inspired by these literatures are shaping empirical studies and real-world interventions over a broad range of substantive areas. They inform how researchers represent their findings in conventional written and audiovisual texts and in innovative forms designed to communicate about sensory experience. They also have implications for ethnographic methodology.

In this chapter, I situate sensory ethnography in two ways. First, I outline its continuities and departures from existing ethnographic methodologies. Second, I locate [p. 8 ↓] it in relation to the intellectual trajectories of discipline-specific scholarship and applied research.

## What is a Sensory Ethnography?

Uses of the term 'ethnography' refer to a range of qualitative research practices, employed, with varying levels of theoretical engagement, in academic and applied research contexts. Ethnographic practice tends to include participant observation, ethnographic interviewing, and a range of other participatory research techniques that are often developed and adapted in context and as appropriate to the needs and possibilities afforded by specific research projects. There is now no standard way of doing ethnography that is universally practised. In this context, Paul Atkinson, Sara Delamont and William Housley have suggested that there has been a shift from the 'classic' emphasis on 'holism, context and similar ideas' to the increasing fragmentation of ethnographic research. Moreover, they claim that this has led to a situation where 'different authors adopt and promote specific approaches to the collection and analysis of data' and 'particular kinds of data become celebrated in the process' (2007: 33).

Sensory ethnography, as proposed in this book, is certainly not just another route in an increasingly fragmented map of approaches to ethnographic practice. Rather, it is a critical methodology, which, like my existing work on visual ethnography (Pink 2007a), departs from the classic observational approach promoted by Atkinson, Delamont and Housley (2007) to insist that ethnography is a reflexive and experiential process through which understanding, knowing and (academic) knowledge are produced. Indeed, as Regina Bendix has argued, to research 'sensory perception and reception' requires methods that 'are capable of grasping "the most profound type of knowledge [which] is not spoken of at all and thus inaccessible to ethnographic observation or interview" (Bloch 1998: 46)' (Bendix 2000: 41). Thus sensory ethnography discussed in the book does not privilege any one type of data or research method. Rather, it is open to multiple ways of knowing and to the exploration of and reflection on new routes to knowledge. Indeed, it would be erroneous to see sensory ethnography as a method for data collection at all: in this book I do not use the term 'data' to refer to the ways

of knowing and understanding that are produced through ethnographic practice. To reiterate the definition of ethnography I have suggested elsewhere:

ethnography is a process of creating and representing knowledge (about society, culture and individuals) that is based on ethnographers' own experiences. It does not claim to produce an objective or truthful account of reality, but should aim to offer versions of ethnographers' experiences of reality that are as loyal as possible to the context, negotiations and intersubjectivities through which the knowledge was produced. (Pink 2007a: 22)

Atkinson, Delamont and Housley have suggested that what they term 'postmodern' approaches to ethnography have 'devalued systematic analysis of action and representations, while privileging rather vague ideas of experience, evocation and personal engagement' (2007: 35). In my view, an acknowledgement of the importance of these experiential and evocative elements of ethnography is in fact essential, but a lack of [p. 9 ↓ ] attention to the practices and material cultures of research participants is not its automatic corollary. Moreover, while the concept of experience has unquestionably become central to ethnographic practice, recent methodological approaches to experience in ethnography are far from vague. Rather, they have begun to interrogate this concept (see Throop 2003; Pink 2006, 2008c; Pickering 2008) to consider its relevance in social anthropology and cultural studies. These points are taken further in Chapter 2.

What ethnography actually entails in a more practical sense is best discerned by asking what ethnographers do. This means defining ethnography through its very practice rather than in prescriptive terms. For example, Karen O'Reilly, reviewing definitions of ethnography across different disciplines, has suggested a minimum definition as:

iterative-inductive research (that evolves in design through the study), drawing on a family of methods, involving direct and sustained contact with human agents, within the context of their daily lives (and cultures), watching what happens, listening to what is said, asking questions, and producing a richly written account that respects the irreducibility of human experience, that acknowledges the role of theory as well as

the researcher's own role and that views humans as part object/part subject. (2005: 3)

While in this book I will go beyond this definition to rethink ethnography through the senses, the principle of O'Reilly's approach is important. Her definition provides a basic sense of what an ethnographer might do, without prescribing exactly how this has to be done. Delamont, in contrast, is more prescriptive in her definition of 'proper ethnography' as being 'participant observation during fieldwork' (2004:206) – something that she proposes is 'done by living with the people being studied, watching them work and play, thinking carefully about what is seen, interpreting it and talking to the actors to check the emerging interpretations' (2004: 206). Delamont's interpretation reflects what might be seen as the classic approach to ethnography as developed in social anthropology in the twentieth century.

While classic observational methods certainly produce valuable in-depth and often detailed descriptions of other people's lives, this type of fieldwork is often not viable in contemporary contexts. This might be because the research is focused in environments where it would be impractical and inappropriate for researchers to go and live for long periods with research participants, for instance, in a modern western home (see Pink 2004) or in a workplace to which the researcher has limited access (see Bust et al. 2008). Limitations might be also related to the types of practice the researcher seeks to understand, due to constraints of time and other practical issues impacting on the working lives of ethnographers as well as those of research participants. In applied research, other constraints can influence the amount of time available to spend on a project (see Pink 2005a). This has meant that innovative methods have been developed by ethnographers to provide routes into understanding other people's lives, experiences, values, social worlds and more that go beyond the classic observational approach. These are not shortcuts to the same materials that would be produced through the classic approach (see also Pink 2007e for a discussion of this). Indeed, they involve 'direct and sustained contact with human agents, within the context of their daily lives' (O'Reilly 2005: 3). Nevertheless they are alternative, and ultimately valid, ways of seeking to understand and engage with other people's worlds through sharing activities, practices and inviting new forms of expression. It is these emergent methods that are defining the new sensory [p. 10 ↓ ] ethnography as it is practised. The mission of this

book is not to argue for a single model of sensory ethnography. Rather, I understand sensory ethnography as a developing field of practice.

As the definitions discussed above indicate, a set of existing methods is already associated with ethnography, and usually covered in ethnographic methodology books. These methods include participant observation, interviewing, and other participatory approaches. Ethnography frequently involves the use of digital visual and audio technologies in the practice of such methods (Pink et al. 2004; Pink 2007a) and might also be conducted, at least in part, virtually or online (see Hine 2000), in addition to the ethnographer's physical engagements with the materiality and sensoriality of everyday and other contexts. Whereas participatory methods often entail ethnographers participating in, observing (or sensing) and learning how to do what the people participating in their research are already engaged in (and presumably would have been doing anyway) interviewing normally involves a collaborative process of exploring specific themes and topics with an interviewee. Other less conventional methods may entail more intentional interventions on the part of the researcher. For instance, these could include collaborations such as producing a film, writing a song or inventing a new recipe with one's research participants, or inviting them to reflexively engage in an everyday or designed activity. Doing sensory ethnography entails taking a series of conceptual and practical steps that allow the researcher to rethink both established and new participatory and collaborative ethnographic research techniques in terms of sensory perception, categories, meanings and values, ways of knowing and practices. It involves the researcher self-consciously and reflexively attending to the senses throughout the research process, that is during the planning, reviewing, fieldwork, analysis and representational processes of a project.

One might argue that sensory experience and perception has 'always' been central to the ethnographic encounter, and thus also to ethnographers' engagements with the sociality and materiality of research. This makes it all the more necessary to rethink ethnography to explicitly *account for* the senses. Indeed, when classic ethnographic case studies are reinterpreted through attention to sensory experience, new understandings might be developed (see Howes 2003). To some readers these dual arguments – that ethnography is already *necessarily* sensory and the call to rethink ethnography as sensory – may be reminiscent of earlier revisions. Around the end of the twentieth century it was proposed that all ethnographic practice should be

reflexive, is gendered (e.g. Bell et al. 1993), embodied (e.g. Coffey 1999), and visual (e.g. Banks 2001; Pink 2007a). These perspectives were accompanied by powerful arguments for understanding ethnographic practice through new paradigms. A sensory ethnography methodology accounts for and expands this existing scholarship that rethought ethnography as gendered, embodied and more. In doing so it draws from theories of human perception and place to propose a framework for understanding the ethnographic process and the ethnographer's practice (this is developed in Chapter 2). Thus the idea of a sensory ethnography involves not only attending to the senses in ethnographic research and representation, but reaches out towards an altogether more sophisticated set of ideas through which to understand what ethnography itself entails.

The proposal for a sensory ethnography presented in this book draws from and responds to a series of existing discipline-specific intellectual and practice-oriented trajectories that already attend to the senses through theoretical, empirical or applied [p. 11 ↓ ] engagements. In the remainder of this chapter I identify a set of themes and debates in the existing literature in relation to which a sensory ethnographic methodology is situated.

## Sensory Ethnography and Academic Practice

The approach to sensory ethnography advocated here does not need to be owned by any one academic discipline. However, sensory ethnographic practice has, to date, emerged through substantive (academic and applied) research projects that are located within particular academic disciplines – or that are at most interdisciplinary in that they might span two or three disciplines. The most influential disciplines in this field have been social and cultural anthropology, human geography and sociology, with noteworthy developments also in archaeology (e.g. Levy et al. 2004; Witmore 2004), history (Classen 1998; Cowan and Steward 2007) and in ethnographically oriented interdisciplines of tourism studies (Crouch and Desforges 2003), nursing studies (Edvardsson and Street 2007) and performance studies (Hahn 2007). Below, focusing on social/cultural anthropology, human geography and sociology, I chart the



development of these discipline-specific trajectories and suggest how they might inform a sensory ethnography.

## The Anthropology of the Senses and Its Critics

While there was intermittent anthropological interest in the senses earlier in the twentieth century (see Howes 2003: Chapter 1; Pink 2006: Chapter 1; Robben 2007 for analytical outlines of this history), the subdiscipline known as ‘the anthropology of the senses’ became established in the 1980s and 1990s, preceded by and related to existing work on embodiment (see Howes 2003: 29–32). Led by the work of scholars including David Howes (1991a), Paul Stoller (1989, 1997), Nadia Seremetakis (1994), Steven Feld (1982), and Feld and Keith Basso (1996a), this has involved the exploration of both the sensory experiences and classification systems of ‘others’ and of the ethnographer her or himself (see also Herzfeld 2001). These scholars played a key role in agenda-setting for anthropological studies of sensory experience, and their ideas continue to shape the work of contemporary ethnographers of the senses (e.g. Geurts 2002: 17; Hahn 2007: 3–4). However, Tim Ingold (2000) has proposed a critical and influential departure from the anthropology of the senses as it was developed by Howes and Classen, Stoller, Feld and others. These debates have played an important role in framing subsequent treatments of the senses in anthropology and other disciplines. Moreover, they raise critical issues for the principles of a sensory ethnography, as developed in Chapter 2.

The anthropology of the senses was to some extent a revisionary movement, calling for the rethinking of the discipline through attention to the senses. Howes’ edited volume, *The Varieties of Sensory Experience* (1991a), laid out a programme for the subdiscipline. This was a project in cross-cultural comparison that Howes described as ‘primarily concerned with how the patterning of sense experience varies from one culture to the next in accordance with the meaning and emphasis attached to each [p. 12 ↓ ] of the modalities of perception’ (1991b: 3). These concerns proposed an analytical route that sought to identify the role of the senses in producing different configurations across culture, as Howes put it, to trace ‘the influence such variations

have on forms of social organization, conceptions of self and cosmos, the regulation of the emotions, and other domains of cultural expression' (1991b: 3). This approach was focused on comparing how different cultures map out the senses. Based on the assumption that in all cultures the senses are organised hierarchically, one of the tasks of the sensory researcher would be to determine the 'sensory profile' (Howes and Classen 1991: 257) or sensory 'order' of the culture being studied. A good example of how this approach is put into practice can be found in Howes' (2003) work concerning Melanesian peoples.

While Howes' approach has opened up new avenues of investigation and scholarship, it has not escaped criticism. The ethnographic evidence certainly demonstrates that different cultures can be associated with the use of different sets of sensory categories and meanings (e.g. Geurts 2002; Pink 2004). Indeed, as I have argued elsewhere, the comparison of how sensory categories and moralities and practices associated with them are articulated and engaged in the constitution of identities across cultures is a viable proposition (Pink 2004, 2006). Nevertheless, taking cultural difference as the unit of comparison can be problematic when it shifts attention away from the immediacy of sensory experience as lived, and as such from the moment of perception. Ingold's critique of this dimension of Howes' approach argues that its focus on the 'incorporeal "ideas" and "beliefs" of a culture' treats 'sensory experience as but a vehicle for the expression of extra-sensory, cultural values' (Ingold 2000: 156). This, Ingold writes, 'reduces the body to a locus of objectified and enumerable sense whose one and only role is to carry the semantic load projected onto them by a collective, supersensory subject – namely society – and whose balance or ratio may be calculated according to the load borne by each' (2000: 284). Instead, Ingold has proposed a refocusing of research in the anthropology of the senses, away from 'the collective sensory consciousness of society' and towards the 'creative interweaving of experience in discourse and to the ways in which the resulting discursive constructions in turn affect people's perceptions of the world around them' (2000:285). Howes has responded to the critique with a further insistence on the importance of undertaking 'an in-depth examination' of the 'social significance' of the 'sensory features of a society' (2003: 49). The disagreement between Howes and Ingold is based both in their different theoretical commitments and in their agendas for approaching the senses in culture and society. While Howes has recognised the importance of perception (2003: 40), he nevertheless

seems to be calling for anthropologists of the senses to take cultural models as their starting point. This, like the classic approach to ethnography discussed above, focuses attention away from the specificity of individuals' practices and the experiential (see also Pink 2004). In contrast, Ingold places human perception at the centre of his analysis. In Chapter 2 I return to this debate to suggest how a sensory ethnography might account for both sensory perception and cultural difference.

A second strand in the work of Howes (1991a) and Stoller (1989) emphasised the commonly assumed dominance of vision, or occularcentrism, in modern western culture. Through cross-cultural comparison, a body of work emerged that suggested how in other cultures non-visual senses may play a more dominant role. A particularly striking example is presented in Constance Classen, Howes and Anthony [p. 13 ↓ ] Synnott's work on smell, through their discussion of Pandaya's work on the Ongee people in the Andaman Islands. They describe how, for the Ongee, 'the identifying characteristic and life force of all living beings is thought to reside in their smell'. Indeed, they write: 'it is through catching a whiff of oneself, and being able to distinguish that scent from all the other odours that surround one, that one arrives at a sense of one's own identity in Ongee society' (Classen et al. 1994: 113). This and other ethnographic studies discussed by Classen et al. (1994) leave little doubt that in different cultures notions of self and more might be attributed verbally and/or gesturally to different sensory categories. Yet it does not follow from this that the embodied experience of the self, for instance, is necessarily perceived simply through one sensory modality. To deconstruct the argument that in different cultures different sensory modalities are dominant we need to separate out the idea of there being a hierarchically dominant sense on the one hand and, on the other, the ethnographic evidence that in specific cultural contexts people tend to use particular sensory categories to conceptualise aspects of their lives and identities. While the latter is well supported, the former is challenged in recent literature. This argument can be expanded with reference to the status of vision in modern western societies. Ingold argues that the assumption that vision is necessarily a dominant and objectifying sense is incorrect (2000: 287). He suggests this assumption was brought about because instead of asking, 'How do we see the environment around us?' (Gibson 1979: 1, cited by Ingold 2000: 286), instead 'philosophical critics of visualism' presuppose that 'to see is to reduce the environment to objects that are to be grasped and appropriated as representations

in the mind' (Ingold 2000: 286). Based on theories that understand perception as multisensory, in that the senses are not separated out at the point of perception, but culturally defined, Ingold thus suggests understanding vision in terms of its interrelationship with other senses (in his own discussion through an analysis of the relationship between vision and hearing).

Following Ingold's critique, others have taken up questions related to vision (e.g. Grasseni 2007a; Willerslev 2007). Cristina Grasseni has proposed a 'rehabilitation of vision' not 'as an isolated given but within its interplay with the other senses' (2007a: 1). Grasseni argues that vision is 'not necessarily identifiable with "detached observation" and should not be opposed by definition to "the immediacy of fleeting sounds. Ineffable odours, confused emotions, and the flow of Time passing" ([Fabian 1983]: 108)'. Rather, she proposes the idea of '*skilled visions* [which] are embedded in multi-sensory practices, where look is coordinated with skilled movement, with rapidly changing points of view, or with other senses such as touch' (2007a: 4). Tom Rice, whose research has focused on sound, also questions the usefulness of what he calls 'anti-visualism'. Rice suggests that in the case of sound the effect of the anti-visualist argument is in 're-establishing the visual/auditory dichotomy that has pervaded anthropological thought on sensory experience' (2005: 201). My own research about the modern western 'sensory home' (Pink 2004) through a focus on categories of sound, vision, smell and touch likewise suggests that no sensory modality necessarily *dominates* how domestic environments or practices are experienced in any one culture. Rather, the home is an environment that is constituted, experienced, understood, evaluated and maintained through all the senses. For example, British and Spanish research participants decided whether or not they would clean their homes based on multisensory evaluations and knowledge that they verbalised in terms of how clothes, or sinks or floors look, smell [p. 14 ↓ ] or feel under foot. The sensory modalities research participants cited as being those that mattered when they evaluated their homes varied both culturally and individually. However, this was not because their perceptions of cleanliness were dominated by one sensory modality but because they used sensory modalities as expressive categories through which to communicate about both cleanliness and self-identity (see Pink 2004). Drawing from this existing theoretical and ethnographic work, here I suggest an approach to sensory ethnography that recognises that vision does not dominate the way we experience our environments. Rather, I explore the relationship

of vision, visual media and visual practices to those associated with other sensory modalities.

The 'reflexive turn' in social and cultural anthropology is usually attributed to the 'writing culture' debate and the emergence of a dialogical anthropology (e.g. Clifford and Marcus 1986; James et al. 1997). This highlighted, among other things, the constructedness of ethnographic texts, the importance of attending to the processes by which ethnographic knowledge is produced and the need to bring local voices into academic representations. The reflexivity that emerged from discussions in sensory anthropology was a critical response to this literature. Howes argued that the 'verbocentric' approach of dialogical anthropology was limited as it failed to account for the senses (1991b: 7–8), and Regina Bendix criticised 'its focus on the authorial self [which] shies away from seeking to understand the role of the senses and affect within as well as outside of the researcher-and-researched dynamic' (2000: 34). In the late 1980s, reflexive accounts of the roles played by the senses in anthropological fieldwork began to emerge in connection with both the issues raised by the 'writing culture' shift and the contemporary emphasis on embodiment. These works stressed the need for reflexive engagements with how ethnographic knowledge was produced and an acknowledgement of the importance of the body in human experience and in academic practice. Paul Stoller's *The Taste of Ethnographic Things* (1989), followed almost a decade later by his *Sensuous Scholarship* (1997), pushed this 'reflexive' and 'embodied' turn in social theory further. Stoller's work shows how anthropological practice is a corporeal process that involves the ethnographer engaging not only with the ideas of others, but in learning about their understandings through her or his own physical and sensorial experiences, such as tastes (e.g. 1989) or pain and illness (e.g. 1997, 2007). Likewise, Nadia Seremetakis (1994) and Judith Okely (1994) both used their own experiences as the basis for discussions that placed the ethnographer's sensing body at the centre of the analysis. As for any ethnographic process, reflexivity is central to sensory ethnography practice. In Chapter 3 I build on these existing works to outline how a sensory reflexivity and intersubjectivity might be understood and practised.

Since the beginning of the twenty-first century several book-length anthropological 'sensory ethnographies' as well as an increasing number of articles (e.g. in the journal *Senses and Society*) and book chapters have been published. The legacy of the earlier anthropology of the senses is evident in these ethnographies with their foci on, for

instance, cross-cultural comparison (Geurts 2002; Pink 2004), apprenticeship (e.g. Downey 2005, 2007; Grasseni 2007c; Marchand 2007), memory and the senses (Sutton 2001; Desjarlais 2003), and commitment to reflexive interrogation. These new works also take the anthropology of the senses in important new directions. While the earlier sensory ethnographies focused almost exclusively on cultures that were strikingly different from that where the ethnographer had originated, more [p. 15 ↓ ] recently anthropological studies that attend to the senses have been done 'at home', or at least in modern western cultures. This has included a focus on everyday practices such as housework (Pink 2004) and laundry (Pink 2005b), gardening (Tilley 2006), leisure practices such as walking and climbing (e.g. Lund 2005), clinical work practices (e.g. Rice 2006; Lammer 2007) and homelessness (Desjarlais 2005). Such sensory ethnographies both attend to and interpret the experiential, individual, idiosyncratic and contextual nature of research participants' sensory practices *and* also seek to comprehend the culturally specific categories, conventions, moralities and knowledge that informs how people understand their experiences.

To sum up, the anthropology of the senses is characterised by three main issues/ debates. It explores the question of the relationship between sensory perception and culture, engages with questions concerning the status of vision and its relationship to the other senses, and demands a form of reflexivity that goes beyond the interrogation of how culture is 'written' to examine the sites of embodied knowing. Drawing from these debates I suggest that while ethnographers need to attempt to establish sets of reference points regarding collective or shared culturally-specific knowledge about sensory categories and meanings, such categories should be understood in terms of a model of culture as constantly being produced and thus as contingent. This, however, cannot be built independently of the study and analysis of actual sensory practices and experienced realities. To undertake this, a sensory ethnography must be informed by a theory of sensory perception. I expand on this in Chapter 2.

# Sensuous Geographies, Ethnography and Spatial Theory

Theories of space, place and the experience of the environment are central concerns to human geographers. These theoretical strands, as well as recent ethnographic studies in human geography, are particularly relevant to a sensory ethnography that attends to both social and physical/material practices and relations.

As for social anthropology, a notable interest in sensory experience became evident in the latter part of the twentieth century. The geographer Yi-Fu Tuan stressed the role of the senses in his earlier work, proposing that 'An object or place achieves concrete reality when our experience of it is total, that is through all the senses as well as with the active and reflective mind' (1977: 18). Nevertheless, it was around the same time as the emergence of the anthropology of the senses that geographical approaches to the senses were articulated more fully. However, in contrast to the anthropological literature, this work did not explore sensory experience ethnographically, or cross-culturally, but tended to draw from existing social science studies, philosophy or literature. Also in common with the anthropology of the senses, in part this literature proposed a revision of dominant concepts in the discipline, through the senses. Thus in *Landscapes of the Mind* (1990), Douglas Porteous called for a rethinking of the centrality of landscape in geography through a focus on 'non-visual sensory modes' (1990: 5), resonating with contemporary work in anthropology (e.g. Howes 1991a). Indeed, in accordance with the approaches of his time, Porteous took an accusatory stance against vision. He proposed that '... vision drives out the other senses' and defined it as 'the ideal sense for an intellectualised, information-crazed species that has withdrawn from many areas of direct sensation' (1990: 5). In response, he set out notions of 'smellscape' [p. 16 ↓] and 'soundscape' (1990: 23) to examine how these different modalities of sensory experience figure in the way people experience their environments. While Porteous's scapes tend to separate out different sensory modalities, Tuan stressed multisensoriality in his volume *Passing Strange and Wonderful* (1993). Within his wider task of exploring 'the importance of the aesthetic in

our lives' (1993: 1) Tuan suggested understanding our experience of 'natural' or built environments as multisensory.

In *Sensuous Geographies* (1994), Paul Rodaway sought to take sensory geography in another direction. Rodaway aligned his work with a revival of humanistic geography and links between humanistic and postmodern geography that developed in the 1990s (e.g. in the work of Tuan) and phenomenological approaches (1994: 6–9). Rather than separating the 'physical, social, cultural and aesthetic dimensions of human experience' as Porteous and Tuan had, Rodaway, influenced by Gibson's ecological theory of perception (Rodaway 1994: ix), sought 'to offer a more integrated view of the role of the senses in geographical understanding: *the sense both as a relationship to a world and the senses as themselves a kind of structuring of space and defining of place*' (Rodaway 1994: 4, original italics). Of particular interest are the common threads his work shares with social anthropologists. Like his contemporary anthropologists, Rodaway noted that 'Everyday experience is multisensual, though one of more sense may be dominant in a given situation' (1994: 5). These earlier calls for attention to the senses sought to theorise key geographical concepts in relation to the multisensoriality of human experience, focusing on space, place and landscape. However, although they have undoubtedly been inspiring texts, neither individually nor collectively do they offer a satisfactory or complete framework for sensory analysis. While Porteous took the important step of turning academic attention to the non-visual elements of landscape, by situating his work as a response to visualism he limited its scope. The critiques of the anti-visualism thesis as it developed in anthropology (e.g. by Ingold 2000; Grasseni 2007a), discussed in the previous section, can equally be applied to this body of work in human geography.

More recently, geographers have continued to develop these core theoretical themes – of space, place and landscape – with attention to the senses. For example, Nigel Thrift has conceptualised space through a paradigm that recognises its sensual and affective dimensions (e.g. Thrift 2006). Other developments include theoretical discussions in the context of urban geography and future geographies. For instance, discussing collective culture and urban public space, Ash Amin discusses what he calls 'situated surplus', which is produced out of 'the entanglements of bodies in motion and the environmental conditions and physical architecture of a given space'. This, he suggests, drawing also from the work of other geographers (citing Pile 2005; Thrift 2005) and



resonating in several ways with the work of contemporary anthropologists (e.g. Harris 2007a), is 'collectively experienced as a form of *tacit, neurological and sensory knowing*' (Amin 2008: 11, my italics). Moreover, Thrift has speculated about how 'new kinds of sensorium' (2004: 582) might develop in an emergent context of 'qualculative' space, where new ways of perceiving space and time would develop and our senses of (for example) touch and direction would be transformed.

Geographers who have recently taken ethnographic approaches to the senses include Divya P. Tolia-Kelly's collaborative work concerning migrants' perceptions of the Lake District in the UK (2007), Tim Edensor's writings on industrial ruins (e.g. 2007), Justin Spinney's mobile (2007) ethnography of urban cyclists and Lisa Law's (2005) analysis of how Filipina domestic workers negotiated their identities in [p. 17 ↓] Hong Kong. Some of this ethnographic work examines the senses through the geographical paradigm of landscape. For instance, Law shows how, among other things, Filipina domestic workers produce their own sensory landscapes in public spaces of the city on their days off. Through this, she suggests that they evoke 'a sense of home', which 'incorporates elements of history and memory, of past and present times and spaces, helping to create a familiar place ...' (2005: 236). In the context of an existing lack of 'a methodology for researching sensory landscapes', Law suggests ethnographic research can make an important contribution (2005:227). This and other work, such as the innovative collaborative arts practice-based methodologies developed by Tolia-Kelly in her work on migrants' experiences of landscape (2007), demonstrate the potential for ethnographic methodologies in human geography. By focusing on the sensory-experiencing body and exploring its interdependency with landscape (see Casey 2001), a sensory ethnography can reveal important insights into the constitution of self and the articulation of power relations.

The long-term interests in both spatial theory and the senses that have converged in the work of human geographers create a fertile intellectual trajectory from which a sensory approach to ethnography can draw. In Chapter 2 I take these connections further to suggest how geographical theories of place and space (Massey 2005) might, in combination with philosophical (Casey 1996) and anthropological (Ingold 2007, 2008) work on place and the phenomenology of perception, inform our understanding of sensory ethnography practice.

# Sociology of the Senses: Interaction and Corporeality

An initial impulse towards a sociology of the senses was proposed by Georg Simmel in his 1907 essay 'Sociology of the senses' (Simmel 1997 [1907]). Simmel's agenda was not to establish a subdiscipline of a sociology of the senses. Rather, as part of an argument about the importance of a micro-sociology (1997 [1907]: 109), he focused on, as he puts it, 'the meanings that mutual sensory perception and influencing have for the social life of human beings, their coexistence, cooperation and opposition' (1997 [1907]: 110). He suggested that our sensory perception of others plays two key roles in human interaction. First, our 'sensory impression' of another person invokes emotional or physical responses in us. Second, 'sense impression' becomes 'a route of knowledge of the other' (1997 [1907]: 111). Although Simmel concluded by proposing that 'One will no longer be able to consider as unworthy of attention the delicate, invisible threads that are spun from one person to another' (1997 [1907]: 120), it is only a century later that sociologists are engaging in depth with this question. In part, Simmel's legacy has been to encourage sociologists to focus on a sensory sociology of human interaction. However, coinciding with my own rather frustrated search for sociological research about the senses, Kelvin Low has recently confirmed the earlier assessment of Gail Largey and Rod Watson (2006 [1972]: 39) in his observation that 'sociologists have seldom researched the senses' (Low 2005: 399). Nevertheless some significant sociological work on the senses has emerged.

Although Simmel saw the 'lower senses' to be of secondary sociological significance to vision and hearing (1997 [1907]: 117), he suggested that 'smelling a person's body odour is the most intimate perception of them' since 'they penetrate, so to [p. 18 ↓ ] speak, in a gaseous form into our most sensory inner being' (1997 [1907]: 119). This interest in smell and social interaction has continued in the sociology of the senses. Largey and Watson's essay, entitled 'The sociology of odors' (2006 [1972]), also extends the sociological interest in social interaction to propose that 'Much moral symbolism relevant to interaction is expressed in terms of olfactory imagery' (2006 [1972]: 29). They stress the 'real' consequences that might follow from

this (2006: [1972]: 30). For instance, they note how ‘odors are often referred to as the insurmountable barrier to close interracial and/or interclass interaction’ (2006 [1972]: 32) as well as being associated with intimacy among an ‘in-group’ (2006 [1972]: 34). Also with reference to social interaction, Largey and Watson see odour as a form of ‘impression management’ by which individuals try ‘to avoid moral stigmatization’ and present an appropriate/approved ‘olfactory identity’ (2006 [1972]: 35). Low, who proposes that this approach might be extended to other senses (2005: 411), also examines the role of smell in social interaction. He argues that ‘smell functions as a social medium employed by social actors towards formulating constructions/ judgements of race-d, class-ed and gender-ed others, operating on polemic/categorical constructions (and also, other nuances between polarities) which may involve a process of *othering*’ (2005: 405, original italics). As such, he suggests that ‘the differentiation of smell stands as that which involves not only an identification of “us” vs “them” or “you” vs “me,” but, also, processes of judgement and ranking of social others’ (2005: 405). Building on Simmel’s ideas, Low’s study of smell, which involved ethnographic research, ‘attempts to move beyond “absolutely supra-individual total structures” (Simmel, 1997 [1907]: 110) towards individual, lived experiences where smell may be utilized as a social medium in the (re)construction of social realities’ (Low 2005: 298).

Other sociological studies that attend to the senses have departed from Simmel’s original impetus in two ways. On the one hand, Michael Bull’s (2000) study of personal stereo users’ experiences of urban environments takes the sociology of the senses in a new direction. Noting how ‘Sound has remained an invisible presence in urban and media studies’, Bull sets out ‘an auditory epistemology of everyday life’ (2001:180). Using a phenomenological methodology, he demonstrates how this focus on sound allows us to understand not simply how urban soundscapes are experienced by personal stereo users, but also how practices and experiences of looking are produced in relation to this (2001: 191). Other developments in sociology have continued to focus on social interactions, but rather than focusing on one sensory modality or category, have stressed the multisensoriality and corporeality of these encounters. While not identified as a ‘sociology of the senses’, uses of the multimodality paradigm (Kress and Van Leeuwen 2001) by sociologists have also allowed researchers undertaking observational studies of interaction to acknowledge the sensoriality of these contexts

and processes (e.g. Dicks et al. 2006). The limits of the multimodality approach, with particular reference to the use of video, are assessed in Chapter 6.

However, of most interest for the development of a sensory ethnography is the work of Christina Lammer (e.g. 2007) and of Jon Hindmarsh and Alison Pilnick (2007), which involves the use of video methodologies and sociological approaches to understand the sociality and multisensoriality of interactions in clinical contexts. Hindmarsh and Pilnick's study of the interactions between members of the pre-operative anaesthetic team in a teaching hospital shows how what they call '*intercorporeal knowing* [...] underpins the team's ability to seamlessly coordinate emerging activities'. In this context they describe [p. 19 ↓] how 'The sights, sounds and feel of colleagues are used to sense, anticipate, appreciate and respond to emerging tasks and activities' (2007:1413), thus indicating the importance of multisensorial embodied ways of knowing in human interaction. Lammer's research about 'how radiological personnel perceive and define "contact" as it relates to their interaction with patients' has similar implications. Lammer set out to explore the 'sensual realities ... at work in a radiology unit' (Lammer 2007: 91), using video as part of her method of participant observation. She argued that in a context where patients tended to pass through the radiology department rapidly, 'a multisensual approach would encourage empathy and create a deeper sensibility amongst health professionals at a teaching hospital' (2007: 113). Collectively, these works draw our attention to the corporeality and multisensoriality of any social encounter or interaction – including not only the relationships between research participants but those between ethnographer and research participants. Building on this in Chapter 3, I suggest that understanding our interactions with others as multisensorial encounters necessitates a reflexive awareness of the sensory intersubjectivity that characterises such meetings.

## Sensory Ethnography and Applied Practice

The sensorial and aesthetic dimensions of our lives are certainly up for scrutiny and comment in domains beyond academia. The journalist Virginia Postrel's (2003) book *The Substance of Style* is significantly subtitled *How the Rise of Aesthetic Value is Remaking Commerce, Culture and Consciousness*. Postrel proposes that 'sensory appeals are becoming ever more prominent in our culture' (2003: xi) and we are living in what she calls 'the age of look and feel' (2003: 189). Postrel's ideas are very broadly

congruent with changing approaches across the social sciences and humanities: it is generally agreed that it is time to attend to the senses. The use of ethnographic methods in applied research – whether or not this is led by academic practitioners – is widespread across a range of fields of applied research, including consumer research, marketing, product development, health, education, overseas development and more. In some of these fields, sensory analysis is also particularly important. In this section, by means of example, I reflect on consumer research and health studies.

In consumer research, a range of methods have long since been used to analyse people's sensory perceptions of products and brands to the point where now, in a context of consumer capitalism, 'tapping the subjective sensory preferences of the consumer and creating enticing "interfaces" has come to take precedence over conventional design principles' (Howes 2005c: 286–7). In 1999 and 2000 I developed two ethnographic studies with Unilever Research in which the multisensoriality of how people experience their homes, material cultures and domestic products and practices was essential to both the research questions and processes engaged in. Both projects were situated in the domestic sphere and involved using video and interviews to research and represent how cleaning and home decorating (Pink 2004, 2006) and laundry (Pink 2005b, 2007c) are part of everyday practice, identity and morality. An ethnographic approach to exploring people's multisensory relationships to the materialities and environments of their everyday lives, and to their feelings about them, offers a remarkably rich and informative source of knowledge for academic and applied researchers alike. However, in these contexts ethnography is not necessarily the dominant methodology. Indeed, in consumer and marketing research a range of sensory [p. 20 ↓ ] research methods have been developed. Some of these are qualitative, for example Howes notes some, including 'body-storming' focus groups (see Bonapace 2002: 191), which aim to 'divine the most potent sensory channel, and within each channel the most potent sensory signal, through which to distinguish their products from those of their competitors and capture the attention of potential customers' (Howes 2005c: 288). While the utility of research that attends to the senses is often recognised in consumer studies, the use of sensory ethnography, as formulated in this book, appears not to be widespread.

In health research, the applied potential of sensory approaches to research is also becoming evident. Recent studies have focused on contexts of nursing (Edvardsson

and Street 2007), interventional radiology (Lammer 2007) and anaesthesia (Hindmarsh and Plinick 2007). Located academically in sociology, some of this research focuses on the embodied and sensory nature of social interactions and environments in clinical contexts, often using visual methods. The importance of acknowledging the sensorial dimensions of biomedical practices is evident from Hindmarsh and Pilnick's (2007) study. David Edvardsson and Annette Street's work develops this in a slightly different way by providing a reflexive and 'insider' account of health contexts. They discuss the idea of 'the nurse as embodied ethnographer' (the subtitle of their article), suggesting that researchers should account 'for the embodied illness experience' and 'the sensate experience of the nurse as ethnographer', and thus 'open up nursing practice to phenomenological descriptions' (2007: 30). Although their work is clearly rooted in academic debates (drawing from the work of Stoller and Emily Martin), it has practical implications and Street has 'taken this idea further into teaching neophyte nurses to attend to their senses and their embodied responses, in order to better understand the lived experiences of patients and their families' (Edvardsson and Street 2007:30). Lammer (2007) was also concerned to find ways to present her findings concerning the interactions between clinicians and patients (see above) to clinical staff, and as part of this produced a documentary video *Making Contact*. This and her later project *CORPO realities*, which also involves collaborations with artists, creates innovative links between arts and biomedical practice (Lammer n.d.).

Together these studies and forms of social intervention show that a sensory ethnography approach can have a key role to play in applied research. It draws out the everyday realities of people's experience and practice and provides insights about how to make these experiences and practices more pleasurable and effective – whether this means developing products that people will desire using, foods they will enjoy eating or making medical procedures and care contexts more comfortable.

## Sensory Ethnography and Arts Practice

Parallel to, sometimes overlapping, and in some cases in collaboration with interest in the senses in ethnographic disciplines has been attention to the senses in arts practice (see, for example, Jones 2006a, 2006b and 2006c; Zardini 2005). It is not within the scope of this book – which is primarily focused on ethnographic practices – to undertake

an art historical review of the senses. Rather, I am concerned with drawing out some of the most salient contemporary parallels and connections between academic and arts disciplines with specific reference to the senses.

There is already a growing literature concerning the relationship between anthropology and arts practice (Silva and Pink 2004; Schneider and Wright 2006; Ravetz 2007; [p. 21 ↓ ] Schneider 2008), some of which places emphasis on sensoriality (Grimshaw and Ravetz 2005). However, most ethnographers of the senses have, to date, tended to represent their work in written texts. Exceptions include the work of the ethnographic filmmaker David MacDougall (see MacDougall 1998, 2005), discussed in later chapters, and the audiovisual practice of the sociologist Christina Lammer (e.g. 2007) discussed above. While the relationship between ethnography, the senses and film is more extensively documented (see also Pink 2006), connections have also been made between sound art and ethnographic representation. John Levack Drever has identified commonalities between theory and practice in ethnography and soundscape composition, suggesting they share a focus on: 'fieldwork through sensuous experience and the creation of an outward response to that experience from the inside'; 'a holistic approach to the environment and to its people'; and a concern with 'translating their findings into condensed itinerant forms' (2002: 24). Drever notes how some recent soundscape practice has drawn from ethnographic approaches, while in the anthropologist Steven Feld's CD *Voices of the Rainforest* (1991), he suggests 'we can observe the fertile blurring of ethnography, soundscape composition and soundscape studies' (Drever 2002: 25–6).

Specific connections tend to be less frequently made between ethnography, the senses and arts practices as developed in installation and performance art. Nevertheless, as I outline in the following chapters, there are interesting parallels between recent developments in sensory ethnographic methods and arts practice. Perhaps the clearest example is in forms of practice in each discipline that use walking as a method of researching (e.g. the arts practice of Sissel Tolaas (see Hand 2007) and the ethnographic practice of, for example, Katrín Lund (2005, 2008), Jo Lee Vergunst (2008) and others), representing or engaging audiences in other people's sensory experiences or in specific smell or soundscapes (e.g. the work of Jenny Marketou, discussed by Drobnik and Fisher (2008)). Some of these case studies are discussed in Chapters 4 and 8.

These discussions of arts practice and the sensory ways of knowing that are implied through them invite a consideration of how sensory ethnography practice might develop in relation to explorations in art. Drawing from this in Chapters 4, 6 and 8, I consider this relationship with reference to participatory research methods, visual methods and sensory ethnography representation respectively.

## An Interdisciplinary Context for Sensory Ethnography

Since the early twenty-first century an increasingly interdisciplinary focus on the senses has emerged. This has been promoted through a series of edited volumes led by David Howes' *Empire of the Senses* (2005a). These collections unite the work of academics from a range of disciplines to explore sensory aspects of culture and society (Howes 2005a) using modern western categories of audition (Bull and Back 2003), smell (Drobnik 2006), taste (Korsmeyer 2005), touch (Classen 2005) and visual culture (Edwards and Bhaumik 2008). According to Howes, this increased focus on the senses represents a 'sensual revolution' – an ideological move that has turned 'the tables and recover(ed) a full-bodied understanding of culture and experience' as opposed to one that is modelled on linguistics (2005a: 1; see also Howes 2003). Although some would disagree that the revolution contra linguistics (e.g. Bendix 2005: 6) should be the central concern of a sensory approach to ethnography, Howes is certainly correct [p. 22 ↓ ] that the senses have come to the fore in the work of many contemporary academics, as represented in the multiplicity of publications, conferences and seminars that are focusing on this very question in these early years of the twenty-first century. The extent to which this work will emerge in *interdisciplinary* projects that combine approaches from, say, anthropology, history and arts practice, rather than in the form of *multidisciplinary* edited readers and in the journal *Senses and Society*, still remains to be seen.

Nevertheless, as I have demonstrated in the previous sections, a sensory approach crosses and sometimes unites academic, applied and artistic concerns with theory and practices of research and representation. Through a focus on the senses and the experiential, academic and applied researchers and artists might potentially collaborate



at the boundaries or intersections of their already interlinked fields of practice. A project in sensory ethnography might well produce a contribution to interdisciplinary theory-building, an applied intervention and an artwork. As such, it would have the potential to communicate to a range of different audiences, using different media, and creating different sensory strategies through which to invoke the experience of one person or persons to others.

## Summing Up

In this chapter I have shown how an interest in the senses has extended across academic and applied disciplines that use ethnography and are concerned with understanding and representing human experience. Each of these existing bodies of literature offers important insights that I draw on in the following chapters to propose a sensory ethnographic methodology. I have suggested that a sensory ethnography can be of use not only in discipline-specific projects and in applied research, but also in projects that bridge the divide between applied and academic work, and in projects that develop and combine perspectives and aims of different disciplines in interdisciplinary analysis.

## Recommended Further Reading

Howes, D. (2003) *Sensing Culture: Engaging the Senses in Culture and Social Theory*. Ann Arbor, MI: The University of Michigan Press.

Howes, D. (Ed.) (2005) *Empire of the Senses: The Sensual Culture Reader*. Oxford: Berg.

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Rodaway, P. (1994) *Sensuous Geographies: Body, Sense and Place*. London: Routledge.

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