



Making Sense of Things

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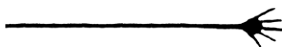
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Beyond Sight: Archaeologies of Sensory Perception

Fredrik Fahlander & Anna Kjellström



The ‘archaeology of the senses’ became a subject in the 1990s and developed various offshoots at the beginning of the twenty-first century (e.g. Campbell & Hansson 2000, Houston & Taube 2000, Hamilakis 2002, Houston, Stuart & Taube 2006, Joyce 2008). The aim of such studies is to expand the horizons of archaeology, discussing and evaluating how a broader spectrum of human sensory experiences as they appear through sight, hearing, smell, taste and touch can be understood through materialities of the past. Previously, certain strands of evolutionary and cognitive archaeologies have explored these issues, but from a general perspective, arguing that archaeologists need to acknowledge the mediating role the senses play “between the external real world and the inner world of the mind and the ability of sensory observations to alter conceptions relating to the real world” (Trigger 1998:23). The recent school of sensory archaeology tends to be more specific and puts greater emphasis on the significance of sensual impressions in relation to more functional and rational dimensions.

Of the five Aristotelian senses, *sight* is definitely the most prominent sense to be explored and employed in both archaeological practice and interpretation. There is no room here to cover the great body of work on the visual; suffice it to mention a few archaeological examples. For instance, the possible importance and symbolism of colour has been emphasised recently (Jones & MacGregor 2002; also see Thedéen, this volume). Also, the aesthetic qualities of artefacts have been discussed as one parameter separating ‘female’ from ‘male’ stone tools

(Hinnersson-Berglund 2005). Perhaps the most explicit discussion on the importance of sight is found in phenomenological landscape archaeology (Tilley 2004, 2008). The focus of such studies is generally ocular, stressing sightlines and visibility between monuments and their location in relation to environmental features such as rock-outcrops and other conspicuous elements of the landscape.

The phenomenology of space has also spawned interest in other ambient aspects of the landscape such as 'soundscapes' (Tilley 1999:180, Lefebvre 1991:197). Sound is often forgotten in our images of the past although it is often a vital component of any place. For instance, we may consider Joakim Goldhahn's (2002) discussion on the roaring sound of the streams at Nämforsen as one component making the site rich in rock carvings. Another example, as noted by historian Alain Corbin (1994), is how the range of the parish church-bell can have unintentional effects as an acoustic marker of territory. By its sound (which normally has unique audible properties) each bell assists in including and excluding people, and is almost as effective as any natural or cultural physical enclosure.

The so called lower three senses - smell, touch and taste - are employed to a lesser extent in archaeology, possibly because they are normally more difficult to detect or infer. Smell is most commonly mentioned with regard to foul odours, such as smelly places unsuitable for habitation or the stench of decomposing bodies (Nilsson-Stutz 2004). Positive aromas such as the sweet scent of flowers or the appetizing smell of food-preparation are rarely concerned (but see Fahlander in this volume). However, smellscape may be as important as physical locales or soundscapes (Porteous 1985:369). Furthermore, the control of smell, for example in the church of a medieval abbey, reflects a clear but subtle authority (Regner 2009). In the same way as familiar sounds may define 'home' the particular combinations of smells that impregnate a settlement may be a part of the distinction of ethnicity and place. Touch, or 'feel', has long been advocated as a diagnostic trait to distinguish certain kinds of pottery from other wares (Orton 1993). 'Feel' is also frequently employed in excavation to separate different layers or features, for instance, sun baked clay tiles, which under certain circumstances are impossible to distinguish from the identically coloured surrounding soil by visual examination only. The social importance of touch is, however, rarely addressed in archaeological interpretation (but see Myrberg, this volume). Chris Tilley (2004) is one of the few scholars who has

incorporated the 'feel' of the stones of megaliths as a parameter in addition to type of rock, form and colour, but unfortunately without delivering any substantial conclusions of its importance in choosing stones for megalithic monuments. Another example is the perceived power of sacred objects and the transmission of energy through touching these items (e.g. Dahlerup Koch 2000).

These brief examples generally focus on the importance of a single aspect of the landscape or material. In most cases, however, we are more likely to encounter combinations of sensory input that need to be examined together. One example is the preparation and consumption of food. Here all senses are activated in processing the crunching sound while biting a fresh apple, the fizzling sound, the smell and colour of meat being grilled, the taste (smell) and feel of tender meat in the mouth. Another less pleasant example concerns the decomposition of the dead human body. Dealing with dead bodies is a recurring 'problem' in most societies that involves the whole gamut of sensory experiences, from sight, smell and touch to sound - and perhaps even taste. When the body stiffens as a result of rigor mortis, it swells up because of gases, changes colour, and it starts to smell and leak fluids. It makes noises and can even explode when the gases have built up to a critical mass (Roach 2003, Nilsson-Stutz 2004; see also Nyberg, this volume). Certain rituals, such as a cremation, often involve a combination of sensory inputs: the pyre itself provides a variety of visual effects, smells and sounds. These inherent elements can be manipulated for different reasons, exaggerated or disclosed. By using a special kind of wood or other materials in the pyre more pleasant fragrances can be produced, partly disguising the smell of burning flesh (cf. Oestigaard 2005).

Exactly how many senses there are, and the precise definition of what constitutes a sense, is still debated among neurologists. Among the commonly accepted senses, aside from the Aristotelian, are: *thermoception* (the experience of heat and cold), *nociception* (the unconscious perception of physical pain), *equilibrioception* (the awareness of the body's position and acceleration), *proprioception* (the perception of the physical body), and *interoception* (the awareness of the body's inner physiology). Although in large controlled by the physical body, even these senses are culturally and individually affected. To these accepted senses we may also add 'non-sense'. That is, experiences believed to be sensual, but which cannot be measured or substantiated. One such non-sense is what is commonly referred to as 'the sixth sense'. Although it is not a sense per

se, it is often experienced as such in many cultures. This might include various situations where a supernatural presence of ghosts, the undead and other immaterial entities are sensed by some. It does not matter if such entities actually exist; they may still have a social impact. Even though the supernatural cannot be proved, the actions taken based upon such experiences or beliefs may leave traces. One example may be seen in cases of post-depositional manipulations of burials in which a faulty ritual is corrected to please the dead (Gansum 2008, Fahlander 2010). Two other more concrete and physical examples of non-sensing, though with very different expressions, are phantom pain and the complete lack of bodily perception due to neurological disabilities. Both may be considered in connection with finds of skeletons exhibiting severe traumatic or pathological changes (Kjellström 2010; Kjellström, this volume). The lack of a sense is difficult to identify in archaeology, but surely it would have had social consequences. For example, during the seventeenth-century witch trials the ability to experience physical pain was an important demonstration of being human (Johannison 1998).

Making sense of archaeology

Archaeology of the senses does not necessarily aim to explore and develop a 'softer' side of prehistory. On the contrary it may concern as much hard science as any traditional area of research. However, it is obvious that sensory experiences are often quite closely tied to a repertoire of feelings and it is difficult to omit that from the discussion. The obvious problem is that feelings in general are considered relative on both the individual and cultural levels. Indeed, it is often easy to find diametrically opposed examples concerning the same issue: the loss of a relative can cause bottomless grief or sheer happiness; certain foods may result in utter disgust or the ultimate satisfaction; a face or body shape may be repugnant and ugly to someone, while to others it is handsome and attractive, and so forth. There cannot be any doubt that feelings emerging from sensory impressions are as important as rationality or economic calculations, but in order to appreciate their role and impact they need to be discussed on a particular level in order to make sense. Because of the close relationship between the senses and individually or culturally regulated experiences, the discussions must almost inevitably include a rhetorical or hypothetical analysis.

At a methodological level, the archaeology of the senses is indeed a challenge (Houston & Taube 2000:290). It is difficult enough to interpret similar kinds of information in contemporary society with living informants, and the degree to which it is possible to conduct analyses and access or rescue this type of information from the depths of history may be questioned. But on the other hand, to discuss things, images and other remains of the past one-dimensionally would not be desirable either. The inclusion of more senses certainly enriches our understanding of the past. In their book *The Memory of Bones: Body, Being and Experience among the Classic Maya* (2006) Houston, Stuart & Taube discuss how the Maya experienced their world through smell, sound and sight. They argue that the Maya viewed these aspects as invisible but important phenomena, which created vitality and meaning in the world. The sensory organs like the eye were believed to possess a kind



Fig 1. The 'Fuller Brooch' (Anglo-Saxon, late ninth century) supposedly depicting the five Aristotelian senses. Sight is in the centre, Taste (upper left), Smell (upper right), Touch (lower right), and Hearing (lower left). Photo: The British Museum.

of independent agency; the gaze affected and thus altered that which was in its realm, creating fear and respect. This can be inferred from the arrangement and structure of buildings, but first and foremost in the images of faces on monumental art. Here the eyes are often exaggerated and accentuated, and many of these were intentionally mutilated in order to stop their gaze (see Normark, this volume).

It does, however, become painfully clear that much of Houston, Stuart & Taube's vivid discussion of the sensory aspects of Maya culture is possible because of the rich Maya pictorial art and script. It is far more problematic to grasp similar sensory aspects to the same extent and detail when working with pure prehistoric contexts with little or any iconographic evidence. The senses seldom leave a direct imprint in the archaeological record and more typically must be implicitly inferred. It may, in some cases, be possible to gather and stretch elements of written sources a bit back into prehistoric contexts, but such procedures which involve 'running the film backwards' are not without pitfalls. One always runs the risk of 'contaminating' the otherness of the past with modern rationality, similar to the way in which ethnographic or contemporary analogies/inferences can permeate the past with western colonial ideas of the primitive (Fahlander 2004).

One way forward is to seek and define relationships between different senses. Normally one sensory impression triggers another one, such as when we hear a sound and point our gaze in that direction. There is also the 'Madeleine effect' where one sensory experience (cookie and tea) evokes feelings and memories. On a general level, Tilley's (1999) discussion of metonyms and metaphor may offer one way of exploring such unconscious relations between sensory input and its materialisation. But a more promising perspective may be to explore the various ways in which people seek to manipulate the scope of sensory input: the gaze can be prohibited or encouraged, smell can be hidden or masked, taste manipulated or accelerated, the surface of an object can be made smooth or rough. Many such procedures have material connections and such 'material engagement' or 'entanglement' is indeed an important factor in the formation of social conditions (DeMarras, et al. 2004, Tilley 2007; Back Danielsson, this volume). The research on the socialness of things has developed rapidly in recent decades from a variety of perspectives from existential hermeneutics to almost functional approaches all emphasizing the relationship between the material and the social. The just 'add things and stir' approach to social theory has resulted in a wide

range of examples of how the material and the human domain recursively interact with each other. The relationship between materialities and the environment is obvious in the way they are experienced as well as the way they may act back on the social context by its affordances and restraints (Fahlander 2008). For instance, Bradley suggests that the building of monuments changed the experience of time and place in the Neolithic as an unintended consequence of the changes of the landscape (Bradley 1993:21). Peter Wilson presents similar ideas of a 'domesticated human'. He suggests that the concept of the house and the establishment of permanent settlements were the major formative aspects of the Neolithic, far more important than the practice of agriculture. Peter Wilson argues that the experiences of enclosing concepts such as the house (and tomb) initiated new social strategies (Wilson 1988). There are also cases when the material and the body are conjoined in an almost cyborg-like way, working as extensions of bodily senses, such as glasses for the myopic or the stick of the blind (Merleau-Ponty 1994, Knappett 2005, Latour 2005).

The outline of the book

The theme of this volume is to explore how human sensuous experiences through sight, sound, taste, smell and touch can be studied in past worlds. The authors discuss a range of different topics such as the materialisation and symbolism of colour, the multi-sensuous dimensions of commensality and cultural constructions concerning pain and odour. The articles comprise examples from various regions and time periods from Scandinavian Iron Age burial rites to classical Maya monumental art and issues of death and burial in eighteenth-century Sweden. In all, these examples demonstrate new and interesting ways of working with the material record, adopting an approach which is not normally recognized in archaeology.

In the first paper, *A Peaceful Sleep and Heavenly Celebration for the Pure and Innocent. The Sensory Experience of Death during the Long Eighteenth Century*, Jenny Nyberg discusses various sensory impressions that people may have perceived in association with death and funerals among burghers and nobility in eighteenth-century Sweden. She draws on material from the Royal Naval Church (Karlskrona, southern Sweden) to demonstrate how items in graves reflect a sensorial setting, including sight, smell, hearing and touch, where death becomes a beautiful peace-

ful sleep. Furthermore, pillows, winding sheets, caps, kerchiefs, gloves, burial coronets, adorning flowers and lace, diminish the experience of corporality and create metaphors of celebration and wedding. The body and the processes of decay are effectively and efficiently masked and suppressed. Nyberg's study thus shows that the materialities of death are culturally controlled and imbued with a strong emotional and sensorial meaning.

A wide scope of sensory input is also the point of departure for Fredrik Fahlander's contribution, *The Nose, the Eye, the Mouth and the Gut. Social Dimensions of Food-Cravings and Commensality*. In his text Fahlander aims to emphasise the multisensuous dimensions of eating and its many social implications. The consumption of food and beverages may entail pleasant sensory experiences of smell and colour, taste and feeling of being sufficiently full, but may also involve tension and conflict, feelings of disappointment, disgust, hunger, and fear of poisoning. A sensory perspective on food and food ways, he argues, can open up new perspectives in many traditional research areas. For instance, Fahlander suggests that cravings for certain tastes may actually have been an important factor behind mobility and contacts between different groups in the past. He also stresses how food and technologies associated with food preparation may have been significant for group sodality and ethnicity in the same way that material culture and language often are.

While Fahlander's paper primarily focuses on desirable sensory experiences, Anna Kjellström investigates a bleaker side of everyday existence. In her paper, *Tracing Pain: Identifying Suffering in Skeletal Remains*, she scrutinizes the possibility of identifying pain in archaeology and physical anthropology. Pain is both a symptom of physical disorders and a sense of distress and negative emotions, and it may be discussed in various frameworks. It is suggested that an understanding of how pain affects single individuals as well as the general public may contribute to the intelligibility of a particular society. Kjellström stresses that pain can be considered to be a general physiological process, which is individually experienced but culturally expressed. Acknowledging these different processes helps to recognize and to examine differences and similarities in time and space. Furthermore, both a quantitative and a qualitative approach are advocated which helps to recognize the experienced and culturally governed sensation of pain.

Johan Normark's article, *Face/Off: a Neomaterialistic Study of the Face*, also concerns sensory detriment and mutilation – although from a more

metaphorical perspective. Normark builds on a Deleuzian framework in his study of how the senses of the Maya kings are materialized in monumental architecture. The human subject, he argues, is always in a state of becoming. It emerges through morphogenetic processes that from a broad set of component parts create an assemblage that we call a human subject. Normark focuses on the intentional and partial destruction of monumental art in the Maya area in southern Mexico and northern Central America. On several occasions depictions of the king's face have been destroyed, especially the eyes, ears and mouth. It appears that the goal was to deprive the king of his main perceptive capabilities, suggesting that he was thought to have kept his sensory abilities even after his death. This defacement, argues Normark, indicates that the portrait was not only an index of the king and the divine power the ruler was considered to manifest. It was also an important part of the State.

The material dimension of the senses is also touched upon in Nanouschka Myrberg's contribution, *The Colour of Money: Crusaders and Coins in the Thirteenth-Century Baltic Sea*. Myrberg investigates how colour in the European Middle Ages may have been perceived quite differently from how it is today, and evoked different values and concepts. Myrberg focuses on medieval heraldry, which combines colours, brilliance, and patterns, in an intricate way to express symbolism. The medieval colour, Myrberg argues, is a *texture* just as much as a *hue*. One example is found on thirteenth-century Gotlandic coins, where associations between sight and touch may have been used in a cross-modal way to represent colour on the metallic objects. In this case the important symbolic colour of the red cross of the crusaders was evoked through the feel of its hatched surface on the coin. Perhaps touching the 'red cross' of the Gotlandic coins brought forth the spiritual content of the symbol, revealing its immanent realities to the user.

Colour, or rather the lack of colour, is also the subject of Susanne Thedéen's contribution, *Immortal maidens: The Visual Significance of the Colour White in Girls' Graves on Viking-Age Gotland*, where Thedéen emphasises the visual symbolism of the colour white and its apparent association with young girls in Gotlandic society during the Viking Age. Much of the bijouterie found in the graves is quite colourful including yellow, green, red, blue and turquoise beads as well as those of exotic materials such as carnelian, amethyst and rock crystal. White shell-beads occur much less frequently and are generally only found

in the graves of the female sex – especially young girls. This pattern, Thedéen suggests, is an important key to understanding the stages in the young girls' life-course. The colour white not only refers to social status, but may also be linked to the buried girls' identities as maidens, or to signal the future fertility and progeny of the kin.

Sensory aspects of the materiality of death are also the concern of Ing-Marie Back Danielsson's contribution, *Sense and Sensibility: Masking Practices in Late Iron Age Boat-Graves*, in which she deals with the significance of masking practices in Late Iron Age boat-graves in Scandinavia. With the helmets of the boat-graves at Valsgärde and Vendel as the focus, Back Danielsson's main theme is an investigation of how the helmets affect, distort or even deprive the senses of both wearer and spectator. The masks should therefore not be regarded solely as disguise or protection, but also as a way for the owner to transform into something else, a new persona or spiritual being. The helmets and other war-related paraphernalia in the boat-graves can be seen as markers of a high status martial and masculine identity, further highlighting the multi-sensuous character of the boat-graves. She demonstrates that the senses invoked through the burials played an important role in the public ritual as a means to entrenching memories of a past, establishing a lineage with ancestors as well as pointing to, and projecting, a desired future.

The final text in the volume consists of a commentary essay, *The Inescapable Body*, by Stephen Houston, one of the key figures in the formation of the archaeology of the senses who was also discussant in the workshop.

Despite the common theme, the articles in this volume do not form a coherent body of thought. There is no 'ready-made' theory and method available especially designated for an 'archaeology of the senses'. Undoubtedly, such an apparatus would be a strange creation of little use. The aim of the volume is rather to open up windows and to widen our perspective on how the materiality of the past can be interpreted by emphasising a broader range of sensory experiences and sensations 'beyond sight'.

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