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SENSING BOOKS. COMMUNICATION BY MORE THAN SIGHT AND SOUND

The following has a simple aim: it is to suggest that the communicative reception history of books and material texts must attend more to smell, feel and even taste among other sensory experiences. It is perhaps suggestive that »media« may be construed from the Latin as »the way between«, and yet existing histories of communication processes are often surprisingly conservative in relation to sensory scope and boundaries. This is even the case for studies of early modern and eighteenth-century Europe where research in the history of emotions and senses has been so productive. For Richard Cullen Rath, to date the most investigative scholar of late seventeenth- and eighteenth-century sensory media, the visual and aural are primary and only a concluding afterthought comes his assertion that »in the discussion of media, the senses, and enlightenment, the proximal senses – smell, taste and touch – necessarily take a back seat to the distal senses«.

1. ENLARGING THE SENSORY

The cultural history of material texts forces consideration of the relationship between the primary modes of communication: the spoken and the written (or imprinted or otherwise made graphic) and modes of perception, the aural and the visual. All elements of communication, however, operate in uneven, changing and restricted combinations. Above all, concentration on sight and sound should not obscure the impor-

tance of other sensory experiences which might be allied and even crucial to textual receptivity. Sensory experiences filter information and feed our cognitive processes. Knowledge is attained and our environment interpreted through sensory channels. However prominent and specific, visual and verbal communications are also contextually related to other sensory experience such as olfactory and gustatory systems, vestibular movement (the sensory system crucial to a sense of balance and spatial orientation), and proprioception (the personal sense of the relative position bodily parts and the efforts employed in movement). In turn, sensory experience is modulated by age, by physical differences and impairment, and by habitual and culturally regulated behaviour.2

Histories of communication in early modern Europe focus insistently on the advance and mutation of visual cognition. The introduction of printing by moveable type has been evaluated in reception terms as the increasing displacement of the ear by the eye and of the generation of a »print culture«, problematic as that concept is.3 As summarised by Daniel Woolf, it was »the increased assault on the eyes provided by prints.« According to Constance Classen, »mastering the printed page required intensive visual training – [eye drill].« Debate continues about the consequences of a »printing revolution«, of the nature and impact of a technologically determined »cultural fixity«,4 and of the intellectually and socially transformative relationship between print, image and manuscript. Emphasis on the power and influence of print has been modified by evidence of the continuing effectiveness of script, particularly in relation to issues of authority and authenticity.5 More recent questioning of »printedness« and mediation has highlighted the reading relationship between text and image, the density and design of type, the awareness (or not) of space, and the reception of the mise-en-page. Such debate, however, remains focused on visual cognition – the responses evinced by ocular means.

A broader and now familiar objection to the privileging of viewing and the viewable – whether print, manuscript, image or all in combination – is that oral habits of thought and communication continued even as visual texts proliferated. Walter Ong, an early

2 As Rath observes: »The communicative aspects of mediation are thus entirely external to the senses and the self, but reachable by no other means and therefore virtually connected to the sensory realm«, Rath (2014) p. 206 (see footnote 1).
critic of boundaries between cognitive styles, still attended greatly to the differentiation between the oral/aural and the seen and visually read in postulating the existence of different types of reading communities (largely in the early modern period). Discussion of «logocentrism» often hinges on the extent to which writing is more than the image of speech. Nonetheless, perceptions of a shift to visualization can be overstated and Arnold Hunt and others have insisted on the power of voicing texts, of audiences hearing and of readers, notably preachers and teachers, modulating their oral communication of texts. Broad histories of hearing have given fresh attention to speech communities and acoustic environments. Disrupting the traditional focus still further, however, are important studies attempting to recover the historical significance of early modern smell, taste and touch. Alain Corbin pioneered investigation of smells and fragrance between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries, and his work has been followed by numerous histories of odours in the same centuries, including contributions by Norbert Jonard, Mark Jenner and Robert Muchembled (among several others) of taste (if often centred on food), and, most recently, of touch and the vestibular.

A cultural historian’s own experience can be suggestive. As a boy in rural East Anglia in the 1960s, I was taken by my father to a newspaper reading room where the »Silence« visually demanded by signs on the walls actually enhanced the sound of frequent crinkled page-turning (of at least the fresher newspapers). Pages were lifted and flattened out by men – mostly farmers and cattlemen – standing in front of high sloping desks. Further noise came from the licking of the thumbs and forefingers that turned pages, followed by the ahems, clucks and chuckles of engrossed readers (the reading room was large enough for about thirty readers at a time). But smell also evokes and contributes to communicative experience – in this case, the smell of desks reeking of a morning’s oiling, of much-fingered newsprint and the earthy pungency of its readers, many of whom also smoked hard on pipes and cigarettes. Whiffy dogs came in and they contributed to the reading olfactorum. News was absorbed, at least associationally, by the nose and fingers. And where smell and touch were associated with the communicative experience, so also was taste – when, for example, smell was strong or when page-turning involved licking.

In addition, as this anecdotal example reveals, smell invites the memory of communicative behaviour – and a selective memory at that. When I turned the pages of the newspapers myself – usually to look at cartoons – it was an unpleasant experience that leaves a redolent memory to this day. Slithery newsprint surfaces combined with the sickly odour of week-old (or older) newspapers, dampened, thumbed and fingered by scores of readers. Many men read, I remember, by moving their forefinger between words. And consolidated by memory is the maleness of it all. Women seemed never to enter the reading room, perhaps by unspoken agreement, perhaps because of the unappetising mix of reading materials and reading smells. That reading-room smell is also associated with time. Saturday was the main livestock market day and the farmers – with boots from the wet, straw-strewn market and stockyard floor - read mostly mid-morning on Saturdays before returning home with their empty malodourous trucks.

There are innumerable parallels, such as the leathery mustiness accompanying and affecting reading in so many libraries of old books. The olfactory experience can partly

David Howes / Anthony Symnott: Aroma: A Cultural History of Smell. London: Routledge 1994, but again, with the exception of part of the chapter on »The aroma of the commodity« focusing on the human body.


be explained by the material paraphernalia for books’ storage and reading and the detritus of human interaction (the fishbone used as a bookmark REF coming from Tony Grafton), but it also results from simple chemical ageing, in confined, damp, warm or largely undisturbed places, of the components of the books: parchment, paper (rag-based or wood chip), ink and binding materials (including the mutton fat rubbed into book covers by the father of one of our most distinguished cultural historians).  

The removal of a book from a packed shelf releases volatile compounds – as conjured in a current spoof internet advert for a »Smell of Books« aerosol which »brings back that real book smell you miss so much [...] Does your Kindle leave you feeling like there’s something missing from your reading experience?«  

The British Library shop has sold a candle that purports to smell of »library«.  

Alberto Manguel has written of a special fondness for old Penguin paperbacks derived from their attractive aroma of »fresh rusk biscuits«.  

Christopher de Hamel has mused about the different scents of manuscript books: »I have no vocabulary to define this, but there is a curious warm leathery smell to English parchment, unlike the sharper, cooler scent of Italian skins.«  

In 2017 two members of the Institute for Sustainable Heritage at University College London produced a »Historic Book Odour Wheel« based on the analysis of samples from an old book, picked up in a second-hand shop and which connects identifiable chemicals with people’s reactions to them. As they wrote: »When we talk to curators of historic libraries, they point out that smell is the first really important reaction between the visitor and the library itself.«  

Recently also the word »bibliochor« has been used to describes the smell emanating from old books, a neologism combining the Greek biblion (book) with ichor (the fluid that flows like blood in the veins of the gods). As one claimant to its invention writes, »like petrichor (the earthy scent released by rainfall on dry soil), bibliochor describes a very distinct fragrance that somehow inhabits one’s very soul when they encounter it.«  

It is also the case that even a discussion primarily concerning early modern Europe benefits from comparisons with important extra-optical/visual and extra-oral/aural sensory experiences in other cultures. In the handling of a book, what was read or heard, is affected by other sensory experience, some of which might be a form of »reading«.

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15 I am obliged to Professor Peter Burke for this reminiscence.  
16 http://smellofbooks.com, »Have you been avoiding e-books because they just don’t smell right?«  
19 Christopher de Hamel: Meetings with Remarkable Manuscripts: Twelve Journeys into the Medieval World. London: Allen Lane 2016, p. X.  
Certain material texts demand touch in order to communicate. Tactile receptors range from subtly raised painting on early Chinese bamboo books to Inca khipus (or quipus) whose textured and twisted knots were interpreted mnemonically by feel as well as by colour. Significantly shaped and incised texts also allowed reading in poor or dimmed light and aided sensory impairment. An obvious, more modern example is the message-brokering of Braille, introduced in 1821 but based on earlier tactile experiments in embossed letters and «night writings». Touch further links the most ancient tablets with the most modern. Cuneiform impression might be additionally sensed by touch; the screen-touching used to scroll down digital texts on phones and tablets requires sight and light but the touch-sensing technology draws the finger to the character forms, and often activates them. Licked finger-from-mouth to assist page turning does not translate to the digital screen, but it remains a habit in the reading of paper (and some other material) publications, and it features compellingly in histories and fictions from «La Reine Margot», the film adaptation of Alexandre Dumas’s novel in which Catherine de Medici infuses a book with arsenic to poison Henri de Navarre (but instead kills her own and more bibliophilic son Charles IX), to the deadly book of Aristotle that kills all finger-licking leaf-turners in the fourteenth-century monastery in Umberto Eco’s 1980 novel »The Name of the Rose«. Copper acetarsenite or »Paris green« developed from 1814 was widely used in the nineteenth century to produce bright emerald coloured bindings of (it is now known) significant toxicity. Victorians also bound numerous medieval manuscripts in the same poisonous material.

2. Discerning the Faculties

Matthew Milner’s examination of senses in the English Reformation adopts a multi-sensory approach demonstrating how early modern operation and modes of sensory communication differed greatly from post-Enlightenment understandings. The touch and taste of books is, perhaps, under-examined in Milner’s study, but his discussion of the different interpretations of the experiential Eucharist highlights the keen appreciation of sensory experience. Milner also offers the ironic musing that »amidst the full panoply of theophony lay the sensory paradox where proper sensation was no sensing at all«. Such observation, of contradiction and negation, invites consideration of the silent and the less noisome library as a refuge from disruptive sensory communicative experience. If we accept Corbin’s construal of foul-smelling habitations, workplaces and people in »pre-deodorized« early modern Europe, then libraries and privileged reading sites might not only be have been more silent places, assisting noiseless reading and a more interiorised world, but also sanctuaries from the pungent and the noxious. Even beyond the library (a largely rarefied and elite space), the absorption in reading might have negated proximate sensory revulsions – reading as a temporary obliteration

of local unpleasantness – and promoted the contemporary identification of differently receptive places.

Books, of course, can smell of their owners and uses. A character in Samuel Jackson Pratt’s »Family Secrets« muses about the state of books in Page’s Circulating Library:

>Pray dear Mr. Page,« cries a pretty lisper, who had been looking over the catalogue, >is it not that Lady Sarah Dingey? she who makes your books smell so horribly of spirits, and is so generous with her snuff?-- I declare my sister Bab and a whole party of us were the other evening almost poisoned, in the first volume of »Delicate Distress« and sweet Jane Hectic was quite overcome before she had half got through »Excessive Sensibility«.  

A consciousness of smell also appears in numerous literary representations: the textual creation of the olfactory in poetry, drama and the novel. This also translates into metaphorical allusions: the taste of literature, the appetite for reading, the digestion of texts (and much more), while books might also be sniffed out. In 1600-01 the essayist Sir William Cornwallis recorded of his reading that »I have beene content to taste Histories«. And as Pierre Bayle wrote towards the end of that century, »if a child, before he learned to read or write, were made acquainted with all things [...] how easily would he understand all good books afterwards, and smell out the popgeries of bad ones. The metaphor was commonly used throughout the next century. The pseudonymous Monsieur de Blainville, transporting some Catholic books through Italy, for example, declares that »several did smell Rank of the Faggot«.

In terms of communication history, a significant consequence of these representations was the association of the malodorous with disreputable books. The magistrate and Presbyterian »prophet« John Lacy (b. 1664) insisted that wicked books smelt. In his »Vision«, he imagined an assembly of men confronted with twelve sealed books:

One of them opened the Books, and on the Opening there issued forth a strong noisome Smell, as the Smell of Poison, so that the Assembly were struck with great Horrour, neither could they endure the same. But an Angel came down into the Place, who sprinkling Dew upon them, they read the Books without Fainting, for there was a Power in the Dew to conquer the noisome Smell that issued from the Books. So they read the Volumes, and in the Reading they looked pale with Fear, and red with Anger… For there was written therein divers Corruptions of filthy

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29 Monsieur de Blainville: Travels through Holland, Germany, Switzerland and Italy. 3 vols. London: Johnson & Davenport 1767, 2: p. 337.
Gain, great Wickedness, and a long Account of Idolaters, how that they intended
to destroy the good King.\textsuperscript{30}
Such visions paralleled early modern associations between foul smells and the spread
of disease.\textsuperscript{31}

Critical reception was often aligned with smell. As Elizabeth Hamilton wrote of
periodical reviewers (reviewing, she notes, the astonishing number of new books now
being produced in England): »These terrible Genii are said to judge of books by the
smell, and when that has happened to be offensive to their nostrils, have been known,
by one well-aimed dart, to transfix an unfortunate book to the shelves of the book-
sellers' shops for ever.« If, however, she continues, an author may aventure to send
forth a book into the world, may it find these terrible Reviewers in this favourable mood.
May its perfume be pleasing to their nostrils, and its form find favour in their sight.\textsuperscript{32}

An early eighteenth-century skit on authorship dismisses a publication with the words:
»This is Food only for such F--losophical Folks as our Author, who is arriv'd to the tip

top of Learning by the Smell of Books that have bells on their Backsides.«\textsuperscript{33}

3. FURTHER OBSERVATIONS
In the communications circuitry so often adopted in book history, processes and prac-
tises are not always as separable as sometimes assumed. Certain modes of reception
following from production and transmission, for example, retain sensory traces from
the earlier stages of »mediations«. These originating stages include both the myriad
smells and touch involved in production – from, in printing alone, the casting of type and the
engraving of plates, to the deft manual sensitivity required in composing the many small
pieces of type. Joseph Moxon reported at length on the posture required to print
correctly, of the »process of making Inck [...] as noisyom and ungrateful to the Sence« and
of the casting of metal type that »Half a Pint of Sack mingled with Sallad Oyl, [is] pro-
vided for each Workman to Drink; intended for an Antidote against the Poysonous
Fumes of the Antinomy«.\textsuperscript{34} Composition especially demanded exacting and refined
vestibular sensing - the eye-hand coordination that for the compositor, as Moxon
warned, meant that »his Thoughts ran no faster than his Fingers«.\textsuperscript{35} Many readers also
appreciated the tactility of the printed page that resulted from the manual dexterity of
compositors and pressmen. Imposed type on paper (the impression made in soft dam-
pended paper)\textsuperscript{36} can offer the appearance – if only the appearance – of a raised surface

\textsuperscript{30} The Vision of John Lacy, Esq; and Prophet, on Thursday the 9th of June, 1715. London: J.
Roberts 1715, p. 11.
\textsuperscript{31} Jenner (2000) p. 131 (see footnote 12).
\textsuperscript{32} Elizabeth Hamilton: Translation of the Letters of a Hindoo Rajah; Written Previous to, and
\textsuperscript{33} A Letter from a Male Physician in the Country, To the Author of the Female Physician in
\textsuperscript{34} Joseph Moxon: Mechanick Exercise: Or The Doctrine Of Handy-Works Applied to the Art
(Of Inck), 167 (»Of Making Mettale).\textsuperscript{35}
\textsuperscript{35} Moxon (1683) p. 82 (»Of Composing«) (see footnote 34).
\textsuperscript{36} Moxon (1683) p. 278–281 (»Of Wetting Paper«) (see footnote 34).
that might enable gentle touch to distinguish letters. Moxon described how the accumu-
lated protrusion of type imposition on recently printed piles of paper sheets could
cause the pile to lean in a particular direction. This was because the almost impercep-
tible raisings of the surface fell in exactly the same place on each sheet, or, as Moxon
put it, makes the Paper there more Huffie. 37

Diverse sensory experience permeates communicative reception – olfactory and the
tactile besides the visual and auditory. New technology enables us to record ever more
sensitive receptive and user experiences, especially in relation to messaging between
sensory channels that is beyond visual and verbal communication. New archival mate-
rial – and the revisiting of well-known sources – allows fresh interpretation of the gestu-
ral use of books, from the symbolic movement of the bible and other holy books and
scrolls during communal religious worship to the political brandishing of little books
and manifestoes. Such demonstrative usage is of interest in itself, 38 but of greatest sig-
nificance is the sensory perceptions and assumptions involved in these acts. Yet much
theoretical media, communications and more recently, mediation modelling attends
imperfectly to broader sensory experience. The theory of communication by the pio-
nieving information theorist Claude E. Shannon, for example (where a message is enco-
ded and decoded as part of a communication process), follows a narrow sensory defi-
nition of channels of communication, as indeed, do the communications questions of
the foundational media theorists Harold Innes and Harold Lasswell. 39 Very rarely did
these influential contributors (who inspired Marshall McLuhan among many others)
consider the simultaneity of multi-sensory communication. But it is this multi-layered,
multi-sensory receptivity that speaks to the idea of communication as an experience.
Cultural historians are increasingly aware of this – as must be historians of the book
and textual reception.

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37 Moxon (1683) p. 305 (see footnote 34).
38 See in particular the insights of Leah Price: How to Do Things with Books in Victorian
Britain. Princeton: Princeton University Pr. 2012, and for earlier, specific practises, David