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## Reflections on an Aesthetics of Touch, Smell and Taste

Mădălina Diaconu

*University of Vienna*, [madalina.diaconu@wu-wien.ac.at](mailto:madalina.diaconu@wu-wien.ac.at)

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## Reflections on an Aesthetics of Touch, Smell and Taste

*Mădălina Diaconu*

### Abstract

Modern aesthetics regards sight and hearing as the only senses which were able to produce art. Touch, smell and taste might offer pleasant stimuli, but can never achieve the status of art objects. What are the arguments for this rejection, and are they still sustainable? This paper focuses on the general and specific difficulties of forming an aesthetics of touch, smell and taste; some can be overcome, while others are still waiting for a proper answer. At the same time, artistic movements, as well as changes in recent discussions of the aesthetics of everyday life prove the necessity of extending aesthetic theory to objects of all senses. Such a re-formulated theory is briefly outlined in the last section of the paper.

### Key Words

touch, smell, taste, aesthetic stimuli

### 1. Why Are Philosophers Reticent about Touch, Smell and Taste?

The haptic sense encompassing the feeling of touch, temperature, pain, movement and force, the olfactory sense and the sense of taste have traditionally been neglected in the history of aesthetics. When they have been taken into consideration, it was only to deny the existence of art forms that address these senses. Let us begin by having a look at the objections brought against their aesthetic potential.

It has often been argued that touch, smell and taste cannot produce art because they deal with ephemeral stimuli and consume their objects. However, there are also other forms of art, such as music, theatre, dance, etc., that are as transitory as the stimuli of these secondary senses. Moreover, with the critique of the metaphysics of presence, the negative connotations of ephemerality turned out to be specific for the Western culture and, as a result, cannot be generalized.

A second argument against an aesthetics of the aforementioned secondary or "lower" senses was that their sensory data tend to gather in synaesthetic configurations. One sees tactile qualities, and the gustatory and olfactory impressions are so intertwined that together they form the so-called oral sense. Yet why should the strong synaesthetic dimension of haptic, olfactory and gustatory experience affect their aesthetic quality? After all, the single senses of the visual arts and music is not the source of their artistic value. If it is true that the synaesthetic bias frequently makes it impossible to consider the secondary senses separately, this means only that they require a more complex approach than the usual aesthetic interpretation. For example, vegetarianism has an encompassing aesthetic component which is irreducible to the sense of taste but implies the idea of a cosmic harmony and an ethical and even religious background. Also, the use of natural materials in architecture for their pleasing tactile, thermal and olfactory qualities has to reckon with economic conditions, climatic factors and the like.

Still, even if one could prove the existence of art forms based on the haptic sense, olfaction and taste, it is currently claimed to be difficult, if not impossible, to elaborate a discourse on them in the form of a critique and an aesthetic theory because of the poor and vague terminology used to describe their experience and qualities. Research shows that our language does not make any difference between the transitive and intransitive meaning of verbs (e.g. "to smell," "to taste") and that designations of sensory qualities, especially smells, are frequently borrowed from the realm of other senses or from psychology. In other words, there are objective and general reasons that make it difficult to adequately express the subject's impressions. Because the secondary senses are doubly near by the physical contact and emotional intimacy involved, we are not able to keep a distance from the subjective character of the experience in order to adopt a critical and reflective attitude, which is a basic presupposition of the aesthetic experience. The subject seems either to melt with its pleasant object or attempt to flee from it, if its effect is unpleasant or dangerous. The strong affective impact of haptic, olfaction and taste is indeed obvious, yet by no means exclusive; above all, it does not impede sharp critical judgment. Perfume designers, gastronomic critics and wine tasters are a good example of this.

Aestheticians have also doubted that the so-called lower senses are able to achieve that structural complexity that would be required to sustain our attention over time. This objection, once raised by Harold Osborne for smells, was invalidated by the creators of fragrances, who emphasized the high number of components of each scent, as well as its multileveled structure and temporal development.<sup>[1]</sup> This lack of reflection and complexity is responsible, as well, for the common belief that tactile and olfactory stimuli actually have no meaning and thus cannot release a process of perceptual contemplation and interpretation. However, such a conclusion has to be considered premature, given the incipient research on this topic and the fact that our epoch confines the education of the senses to the visual arts and music.

On the other side, one should be cautious against a superficial optimism in the attempt to rehabilitate the secondary senses in aesthetics. The question of the existence of haptic, olfactive and gustatory representations has still not found an unanimous answer in the scientific community, and it might even be too early to try an answer without adequate support from epistemology and cognitive science. Also, the ethno-linguistic research on the language of the senses is only in its infancy and is sporadic, although promising. Studies have shown that the lexical imprecision for haptic, smell and taste are typical for Indo-European languages but should not be extrapolated to all language families. But other communities seem to have developed a more refined terminology for these senses, which in the West are considered secondary in importance. For example, Quechua, the language spoken by the Incas and still used in the Andes, has different names for the following acts: to smell something, to smell a good odor, to smell a bad odor, (for a group) to smell something together, to make someone smell something, to secretly sniff out what is being planned, to let oneself be smelled and to

come across a food odor.<sup>[2]</sup> Naturally, too, higher linguistic differentiation comes with the increased contribution of the various senses to knowledge in everyday experience; it is unanimously accepted that olfaction and hearing play a much more important role in the rainforests than in our culture. Moreover, tests showing that proprioceptive tasks were carried out better by African than by European workers reopened the question, first raised in the 1960s, about the cultural character of the sensorial orders and the influence of cultural mechanisms on psychological differentiation and on sensotypes (prevailing perceptive patterns).<sup>[3]</sup> On the whole, smell and taste are embedded in particular sociocultural and symbolic systems that codify and regulate an individual's reaction to sensory stimuli in specific ways; correspondingly, aesthetic theory, too, should leave behind the ideal of an universal subject.

As for discourse on touch, smell and taste, their underdeveloped terminology and the tendency to compensate for this by resorting to a metaphorical language are indeed real difficulties for any aesthetic theory of these three senses. However, the solution here is not to try to avoid any metaphors and catachreses (i.e., forced or dead metaphors) when describing sensory experience, but to become aware of them and use them consciously. The aesthetics of the senses requires a meta-aesthetics, a reflection on its own language.

Those who have been critical of the existence of arts of touch, smell and taste also used to object that these sensory modalities mainly served the needs of survival and sexual reproduction. This had two major consequences. First, the subject's finitude or mortality and the powerful erotic aspect of these senses considerably restrict the realm of what may be considered an aesthetic experience, in comparison with the visual arts. This objection is basically legitimate, although an erotic boundary and even a vital one (related to pain or disgust) have been challenged for decades by several performers (Valie Export, Orlan, Stelarc, Elke Krystufek, etc.). The precise clarification of this issue requires special investigation and is beyond the scope of this paper. Second, touch, smell and taste apparently do not contribute to a humanist perspective because they do not grasp the difference between man and animal. Quite the contrary: They appear to be more developed in the case of primitives and women, whereas civilized humans should at least endeavor to repress them in favor of the so-called higher, theoretical senses, such as sight and hearing. Yet no animal, no matter how fine its sensory organs, has ever produced artistic forms. This argument was formulated around 1800 in France in support of gastronomy and eroticism as human creations. As for the feminine privilege in the field of the secondary senses, seems to be confirmed in part empirically (women are less attracted of e-shopping than men, they are able of a finer olfactory differentiation, etc.), but partly turns out to be a false cliché(cf. the gender of chefs in gastronomy).

Last but not least, the evidence that our age has developed exclusively visual and acoustic media enhances the repression and impoverishment of the experience of smell, taste, and the haptic sense; these senses are aroused only indirectly by media. However, the next section will point out that recent

tendencies suggest the emergence of a way to rediscover touch, smell and taste in the aesthetics of everyday life, with the support of the creative industries.

## 2. Why Do Artists Still Work with these Senses?

The assumption of traditional aesthetics that there are no arts devoted to touch, smell or taste and that gastronomy, perfumery, carpentry, dressmaking, etc. are mere handicrafts or, at best, minor (i.e., practical, applied) arts has not prevented creative agents from working in the media of these senses. Nevertheless, this artistic ideology still influences the organization of the art in universities and other art institutions, such as museums and galleries. Reciprocally, designers, perfumers and chefs obviously mistrust the verbal effusion when it comes to philosophical art interpretations. The interest of contemporary choreographers in phenomenology belongs to the very few exceptions to this respect, just as does the appeal of *Groupe du Colisée* to aestheticians to support the perfumers' work. Olfactory education, the *Groupe du Colisée* argued, must not be left solely to the sales representatives in the fragrance industry; these advocate nothing else but their own market interests and remain ignorant of artistic ideologies and criteria of the artistic value.

Nowadays, the secondary senses enter art in two ways that, oddly, run parallel: either as synaesthetic art experiments or as phenomena of lifestyle. Examples of the first direction is provided by body art, land art (in which a person as a sensory whole interacts with the environment), contemporary dance (focusing on proprioception and enacting the bodily cogito), etc. Eat Art exerts social critique, playfully deconstructing the traditional association between gastronomic and erotic desire (Daniel Spoerri) or interpreting cooking as a mythical-metaphysical genesis (Peter Kubelka). Architectural critics and historians (Juhani Pallasmaa, Kenneth Frampton) criticize the visual fixation of modern architecture, with its flat, mirroring facades and scenic design. Even government programs (e.g., Finland in 2004) define architectural beauty "not just [as] a subjective appreciation of a façade or an object, but [as] a central element in the feeling of wellbeing that citizens can have in their living environment."<sup>[4]</sup> But all the senses contribute to this feeling of wellbeing : the smell of the building, the feeling of the consistency, stability and resistance of the materials under one's feet, the echo of footsteps and the temperature both in a literal and the metaphorical sense of inner spaces.

Not only artists but also the aesthetics of everyday life suggest a hunger for impressions of the secondary senses, which may be attributed to the need for intimacy, affection and having a holistic experience of the body. Cooking has widely been transformed from drudgery into a fashionable hobby for *cuisiniers de dimanche*, not to mention the quasi-aesthetic rituals of enology. Aromatherapy and body workshops are flourish on the threshold between science, esoteric beliefs and aesthetic hedonism. The creative industries experiment with new materials that strongly address touch (in the IT, automobile industry, furniture design, etc.). The marketing advantage of haptic and olfactory design of household goods has been used successfully for years. As a result, the meaning

of design has been extended to other senses, and expressions such as "sound design" have become current. Yet mention of "smell design" are rather scarce, even after Citroën C4 won a prize a few years ago for its *parfumeur d'ambiance*; and, again, "food design" still generally refers to the visual display of the edible. Finally, the relaxation industry (spas, "wellness-centres," etc.) is also based on practices that engage all senses.

All these phenomena testify to an increasing interest in the enjoyable and instructive experience of all the senses and so suggest the need to revise aesthetic theory to include them. A start has already been made with the contribution of ecological aesthetics. However, a closer look at which works of touch, smell and taste should be included in an aesthetics conceived as art philosophy raises particular difficulties.

### 3. Touch Is Everywhere

The prospect of working out an aesthetics of the haptic qualities first raises the question of where works of art based on these qualities can be found. In our daily life, the meaning of tactility remains imprecise and is often confounded with the haptic and kinaesthesia, which results in a certain ambiguity. On one hand, it appears that no ordinary subject can experience purely tactile works of art, as there is a basic tendency to visualize everything we see. On the other hand, elements of the haptic system (sense of touch, pain, force and temperature) are actively engaged in our current aesthetic experience of fine art, dance and architecture, when handling objects of applied art, and even when playing music. Should touch, then, and haptic sensation in general be equated with kinaesthesia and the performative aspect of art creation and art experience?

Let us take a few examples: What could possibly make Jean Dubuffet's and Yves Klein's tangible surfaces and textures more tactile than the naturalistic imitation of tactile qualities exclusively by visual means as seen in Flemish still life painting? Or can Body Art better meet the artist's need for proprioceptive self-realization (i.e., the perception of one's own body from inside) than any classic form of painting in which the artist feels the resistance of the canvas at the tip of the brush and, by that, his or her own body movements? Where are the borders of literal tactility, and when does touch become metaphorical? Each *touche* is a sort of *toucher*, in the painting as well as in the music (the keyboard instruments are called in German *Tastinstrumente*, from *Tasten*, touch). In the end, art creation in general is a *poiesis* by means of gestures, and no visual art has ever been made without using the hands.

Given all this, what might still justify the interdiction against touching the objects in museums, apart from practical reasons such as preserving the works as material objects? Why are visitors not permitted to follow the artist's gestures with their own hands? There is a knowledge that is waiting to be awaked at the tip of our fingers, and the museal prohibition of touch inhibits natural cognitive impulses. Therefore, an aesthetics of tactility places the status of the museum itself as a specific modern institution at stake, and stimulates creativity in designing exhibition sites that not only permit viewers to touch

the objects but even require it as part of the corporeal engagement with them. Moreover, the thematic enlargement of aesthetics implies including categories of human tactile subjects who have been previously forgotten in art theory and who concretely or metaphorically lay their hands on art works, with or without aesthetic intentions: restorers, curators, users of applied arts, collectors and sponsors, faithful people who adore religious art by touching it, and others who destroy art. All these categories are inherent to the art-world, and this alone justifies their integration into aesthetics.

And yet, if tactile works are to be found in the fine arts overall, are there also examples of works that primarily or exclusively address touch? The simplest way to answer this is to focus on the art produced by or created for the blind. The experience of the blind calls into question the Kantian thesis of artistic experience as a synthesis between sensory delight and intellectual interpretation. For sightless subjects, hedonism and intellectualism are juxtaposed, instead of being reconciled into a synthesis: the pleasant, the beautiful and the good converge. For example, research conducted by G. Révész showed that a sculpted human face is likely to be judged as beautiful by the blind if it respects certain proportions and regularities and correctly reproduces the concept of a particular human type: man, woman, child, etc. Here beautiful means the same as pleasant to the touch and correct according to intellectual judgment.<sup>[5]</sup> Upon closer inspection, it turns out that current theories on the art experience of the blind and the didactic methods based upon them take as their model the art produced for seers; as a result, the art of and for the blind can be nothing else than an inferior or imperfect art.

Fortunately, a new direction seems to be ongoing lately. Attempts to work with tactile qualities independently of sight have been undertaken by Kathrin Schaller, , among others, who wrote a poem in Braille comprised of chestnuts differently grouped in plaster moulds (2003), and by Frédérique Decombe, whose piece of wax, called *Langue de chat Braille* (1994), ended with a sign in Braille that would gradually disappear by being repeatedly touched. Such works have no meaning when we look at them, but have to be touched first. Other artists created acoustic installations that transmit vibrations to the body (Thomas Baumann) and produced surprise-boxes, a kind of metal blob with buttons and integrated loudspeakers (Werner Reiterer, 2003).

Artists have also created environments for different senses, including exhibitions where blind people and seers were subjected to diverse haptic sensations. The visitors were introduced to unlit spaces (Daniel Spoerri's *Dylaby* in 1962 in Amsterdam; Spoerri's guided tactile tour through Munich in 1984) or were invited to expose their hands, feet and head to the unknown content of obscure boxes (exhibition of the students in design at the Fachhochschule Köln in Bonn in 1995). Other tactile exhibitions with instructive goals were meant for viewers of all ages (*Touch me*, Basel, 1996; *Tastwege*, Dresden, 1997, *SexyEi*, Rheinland-Pfalz, 1997). Pedagogical techniques have been worked out in *ateliers du toucher*, and architects have designed playgrounds that explicitly mediate hands-on learning for children (e.g., "Shiru-

ku Road," by Kijo Rokkaku, Tokyo).

Still, how can original works of art for the touch be produced, without repeating a previous experience? The novelty or originality may be approached in two ways: by varying either the modalities of the gestures or the touched object. In the first case, the subject may try to investigate or simply experience by touch one object in different ways, more gently or harshly, moving the hands on different routes, letting the hand rest on the object or allowing only short contacts, etc. I have not encountered practical examples of such tactile art, however. From a theoretical point of view, however, this strategy might produce, at best, art in the Roman and medieval meaning: the art of doing something, like *ars navigandi* or *ars amandi*, yet by no means be a creative production. Actually, disabled persons will improve the automatic performance of certain activities until they are perfect, but by doing this, they neither aim to reach the state of disinterested contemplation nor enjoy the variation of their own gestures.

Secondly, the artist may invent new materials, which are enjoyable or interesting for exploratory touch, just like the perfumer creates fragrant scents with new characteristics. In this case, the meaning of being an artist has to be redefined, and the romantic separation or even conflict between the craftsman/engineer and the artist has to be revised. Such a development is endorsed by the contemporary rapprochement between art and technology; not only do media artists find in technology new forms of expression, but also the economy involves artists and designers in research programs whose goal is to produce new materials. If artistic creativity were validated as having potential for technological development, this still does not answer the question, What might ground the aesthetic value of a tactile object or material? Is it only the pleasure of touch?

#### **4. Art of Smell**

Unlike the quasi-ubiquity of the tactile arts, aesthetically valuable fragrances are clearly confined to a particular art: perfumery. While touch seems to adhere unobtrusively to other senses, particularly to sight, thus losing its specific character, perfumery cannot be replaced or even reconstructed with approximation by any other art. From the perspective of real experience, the visual representation of smells in the fine arts and their literary descriptions have nothing to do with an olfactory art but merely with the meaning of smells and the suggestion of atmospheres. An olfactory work of art has to be really smelled and felt, either in a closed space, in a garden, or in a flask.

In the realm of olfaction, one of the main difficulties in justifying an olfactory aesthetics consists mainly in the lack of specific education and sensibility. Personally, I am inclined to believe that the elaboration of methods to cultivate the olfactory sensibility, for example by organizing special courses or "smell tours" within parks or urban environments, might be a promising strategy to this respect. The expectation that the sense of smell can, to some extent, be subject to a deliberate shaping relies on the fact that most perfume designers, as well as the few philosophers who proved to be sensitive to smells



(e.g., Charles Fourier) came from families whose occupations were related to the production and commerce of fragrant materials and who therefore had early contact with a wide diversity of smells.

In general, however, there is a glaring discrepancy between the philosophers' and the perfumers' experience, in so far as the latter may be reconstituted from their scarce aesthetic reflections. As a rule, philosophers have categorically rejected any use of fragrances as frivolous, dangerous, and embarrassing and have considered the olfactory feeling as a merely subjective (sensuous and sensual) pleasure. On the contrary, perfume designers have understood their creation as a formal and abstract art of composition similar to music. Correspondingly, when we smell a created fragrance, the impressions mix hedonistic judgments, autobiographical associations, fantasies about fictitious worlds and, at its best, a sharp apprehension of the formal olfactory composition.

In that case, it is no longer originality that causes a problem for artists, as previously for touch, given the unlimited number of possible combinations of fragrant materials. Rather it is the control of the diffusion of smell in a closed space, including its de-odorization afterwards, as well as the composition of complex structures (odorous "symphonies") with several, simultaneous or successive, smells. Such difficulties are technical, not theoretical; they explain why smells are still parsimoniously employed in film and theatre performances and do not form the subject of discussion on the aesthetic of fragrances. Last, but not least, psychological research has proven that artificial fragrances can only seldom be identified without any support of visual or verbal stimuli. However, it is still not clear if this characterizes the sense of smell in general or is an effect of the lack of experience and olfactory keenness brought about by the modern civilization.

## **5. Gastronomic Judgments**

The failure to recognize and thus the impossibility of repeating and deepening the experience of the same object as a presupposition for the aesthetic experience is also a common tactile experience. Some blind people were not able to recognize their own sculptures only few days after they had shaped them, which represents a serious problem any tactile aesthetics has to deal with. Anyway, this certainly does not apply to eaters. Despite the great number of variants of a particular dish, the subject experiences the feeling of repetition spontaneously and usually does not encounter any difficulties in naming the dish. Even when this is completely new, it is still possible to subsume what is edible under a general category. The obsessive and restless quest for the name of the object and the situation in which we felt it for the first time - a typical phenomenon for olfaction - are, in spite of Proust's madeleine, rather rare in the realm of taste.

No discussion of the feasibility of a gastronomic aesthetics may ignore the so-called relativity of the tastes, an objection that philosophers often have raised against the artistic status of gastronomy. Yet even though this topic addresses a real issue, it has been obviously overemphasized. Moreover, the adage "*de gustibus non disputandum*" needs a double corrective: Contradictory judgments and passionate

controversies on the value of a work are known in other arts, too, epitomized by modern art and contemporary music. And were the judgments of the gastronomic taste completely lacking a general character, then it would be absolutely impossible - or fraudulent - to make recommendations for certain restaurants or to give them marks or rank them, which is the ultimate task of the gastronomic critique. The critics' taste would be as justified as anyone's, instead of being founded in the immanent gustatory or aromatic qualities of the edible.

Actually, the subject is multiply influenced when choosing and judging food quality: apart from practical considerations, visual advertisements of food and body images play here as important a role as social ideologies and ethical or religious beliefs. From the perspective of sensuous experience, a meal resembles a *Gesamtkunstwerk*, addressed to all the senses and is served by all sorts of auxiliary arts relating to the vessel and the cutlery, the flower arrangements and the visual presentation of the edible. As for the food itself, it arouses the appetite through its colors, smell, consistency and even sound (e.g., crispy aliments). The French cuisine used to take the fine arts as a model in the visual presentation of the dish: Antonin Carême built pavilions and castles with the same passion as the French nouvelle cuisine was inspired by abstract painting.

But exactly how does taste itself become an object of positive aesthetic judgment? The study of the terminology employed in contemporary gastronomic reviews suggests a vague belief in some kind of culinary harmony that leads to acceptable and respectively less acceptable combinations of elementary tastes. However, the assertion of this principle has remained, until the present, in a rather rudimentary stage. Personally, I expect the investigation of non-Western, especially Indian and Chinese, theories to propel the research sooner than historical studies on the sense of taste in the Western cultures.

Finally, the problematic character of the taste categories is noteworthy. Intercultural studies have suggested that the four basic taste nodes: sweet, sour, bitter and salty, might be a cultural construction. To use an example, Hindus regard tasting and eating as a far more encompassing and complex process than most Western people do. According to this enlarged meaning, the sense of taste is engaged from the phase of cooking, understood as a kind of predigestion, till the final release of so-called "post-digestive tastes" (*vipāka*), not to mention here the cosmic and metaphysical implications of eating and being eaten.

## **6. Western Oculocentrism as a Cultural and Historical Process**

Conceiving aesthetics as part of the philosophy of culture and not as the theory of an universal (*ad liminem* transcendental) subject highlights two other reasons why haptic, olfaction and the sense of taste have been generally neglected thus far in aesthetic theory: Western metaphysics understood "being" as a permanent presence and regarded civilization as the ideal of humanity.

Since the ancient Greeks, Western philosophy brought being

and time together: the longer something lasts, the more being it implies; and the higher its ontological status, the more valuable it is. Transitory goods are deceitful and minor. As a result, the fine arts, whose material agent is (quasi-)permanent, had to slide almost naturally into the center of aesthetics. Later on, the theory of music, theatre and other performing arts emphasized the value of the transitory, and permanent material objects have been replaced by repeatable performances of the same work of art.

Cooking recipes and scent formulas are, to some extent, similar to music, theatre and literature. Here, too, one encounters experts who are able to represent the work only by reading its verbal and numerical transcription, just like a musical ear "hears" the music by reading its score or a choreographer "sees" the movements in the Labanotation. The translation of gastronomy and perfumery into another system of signs serves to disseminate their know-how, but also to archive and thus preserve them from oblivion. Nevertheless, their results, as phenomena, cannot be reduced to the language they are saved in, just as in other performing arts.

Given such similarities with the classical performing arts, why are perfumery and gastronomy not considered art forms? Neither a shorter tradition of these occupations nor the inferior social status of their authors can account for this (think of the halo of glamour that surrounds the perfumers), but rather the ephemeral character of their works and the impossibility (up to now) of recording and reproducing them technically. Now the question of whether this impossibility is fundamental (*de jure*) or merely historical (*de facto*) goes beyond an aesthetic interrogation and should be left to technology.

Modern civilization has been described as the process of an increasing the limitation of touch and olfaction (deodorization).<sup>[6]</sup> At the end of this process, the secondary senses have been banned from public space, relegated to the private realm, and considered irrelevant for our knowledge. Although the epistemological priority of sight and hearing as so-called theoretical senses has irrefutable biological reasons, the contemporary hegemony of vision must not be considered a fundamental and eternal characteristic of humanity but, at least to some extent, the result of a historical process undergone by Western culture. It is often said that smell, taste, and the haptic sense are more animal than sight and hearing, meaning that they meet deeper bodily needs. Indeed, both common sense and tests of sensory deprivation give evidence to the fact that people can survive without being able to see or hear, but not without touching or being touched and, obviously, without breathing or feeding themselves. Yet sight and hearing are basic biological necessities, too, and the pleasure they cause has repercussions on the entire body, on its tonus and vital functions. Besides, as it has already been said, a prominent vital character does not exclude the possibility of producing aesthetic configurations: None of all the animals that have finer organs of perception for touch or smell than man has ever developed art forms.

Civilization has proclaimed man's autonomy and independence from nature as an ideal. The liberation from instincts implies the metaphorical equation, "sight is power": the higher the

position one conquers, the better one is able to see and control the world that lies, ordered and classified, at one's feet. If vision empowers knowledge, it also impoverishes sensory diversity and makes reality feel less real: the visual "*sujet de survol*"- Merleau-Ponty's expression<sup>[7]</sup> - loses contact with the environment, the world threatens to become an abstraction and, along with it, one's own body. The place from which the world opens itself to the domineering gaze lies outside the world. Correspondingly, distance and contemplation characterize the Kantian aesthetic subject. Conversely, a defenestration of the subject occurs by rehabilitating touch, smell and taste; humans descend again into the middle of the world and its whirl.

## 7. Outline of an Aesthetics of the Secondary Senses

In an aesthetics of the secondary senses, liberty is freed of its negative meaning as independence from others and as abstraction (in the meaning of pulling oneself out of the world), and becomes an *Einstimmung*, a kind of tuning and resonance with the environment (from *Stimmung*, German for mood). Liberty realizes the subject's belonging to an encompassing whole; the human's bodily and emotional dependence on what surrounds him refers to his positive feeling of a primary reliance or confidence in the world and in other beings as well. Living in the world and being subject to experiences are both conditions for the subject's self-fulfillment. To be more precise, being "subject to" implies "passibility" (French: *passibilité*), a concept that refers at the same time to the subject's vulnerability or sensitivity and to its intentional engagement with the object.

As to the object of aesthetics, art still remains at its core, but has to be redefined as to refer to the most complex configurations of all senses, be they isolated senses or synaesthetic experiences. In my opinion, such a strategy of revising aesthetic theory should be understood as a logical continuation of the process that has taken place in art theory in recent decades and that has led to the enlargement of the concept of art by including design, landscape architecture, fashion, etc. Eventually, specific art forms are concealed behind the aesthetics of everyday life, only waiting to be pointed out and explicitly cultivated. In any case, sensitivity becomes the primary condition of the aesthetic judgment.

Due to the intricate cultural, symbolic and social aspects of the secondary senses, their aesthetic experience does not necessarily have to be narcissist, as some might assume, but quite the contrary. Though a reflected positive attitude toward senses has still to be regarded as crucial to the aesthetic experience, ecological aesthetics has already emphasized the ethic dimension of a reflexive hedonism: sensory pleasure is one of the criteria of any good life, both of the individual and the collectivity.

How far art may go (e.g., when dealing with pain) is, to some extent, relative to the codes of a society at a certain moment. The aesthetic ideal ceases to strive after the production and interpretation of some aesthetic values that supposedly exist apart from any moral, theoretic, religious or economic purposes, but aims to reach an encompassing understanding of how all senses, particularly touch, smell and taste, may be

used aesthetically within the frame of their more or less relative vital, social and cultural context. As a consequence, the border between aesthetic and non-aesthetic activities, between everyday and artistic experience, becomes permeable and removable, from one culture to another or in different epochs, although it does not disappear completely. Vertical and abstract aesthetics has established that border (e.g., the distinction between the good, the beautiful and the pleasant) from above in a speculative manner, whereas horizontal aesthetics interprets art from within concretely experienced situations.

In addition, the aesthetics of all the senses is a topological theory, which means that it focuses on complex spatial structures and on temporality as factor in aesthetic value. Apprehended from inside, lived situations are comparable to fields of forces, in which what attracts the subject is invested with a positive value and what rejects it with a negative one, in the double sense of repulsion and lack of interest. In any case, the difference between "good" and "bad" configurations of stimuli is preserved, as are value hierarchies as well.

The situational character of the aesthetics of all the senses prevents one from generalizing the boundaries of the aesthetic in the attempt to produce a general definition of what is art and what it is not. Also it takes into account the particular function of the object in the applied arts, such as architecture and design, and its interaction with the bodily subject. The practical use of clothes, furniture and other personal objects over some time alters the physical characteristics of the object, often inducing a specific aesthetics of degradability, vulnerability and temporality. The vintage shops and flea markets, just to take two examples, are genuine sources of artistic creativity; filmmakers and theatre directors create specific poetic atmospheres by means of used objects; the aesthetic quality of wine grows by maturing in time, etc. Some of the art forms addressed to the secondary senses imply a double hermeneutics: the interpretation of the scent associated with certain people requires an understanding of not only the formal olfactory composition, but also the person's motivations in wearing it; the same applies to tattoos or fashion. Finally, several art forms based on haptic, olfactory and gustatory stimuli are synaesthetic. Their philosophical-aesthetic theory should therefore be able to deal with connotations, associations and metaphors, yet without becoming literature.[8]

### Endnotes

[1] Harold Osborne, "Odours and Appreciations," *The British Journal of Aesthetics*, 17, 1 (Winter 1977), pp. 37-48; Edmond Roudnitska, *L'esthétique en question* (Paris: P. U. F., 1977); Robert R. Calkin, J. Stephan Jelinek, *Perfumery. Practice and Principles* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1994).

[2] Constance Classen, David Howes, Anthony Synnott, *Aroma. The Cultural History of Smell* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), ref. on p. 112.

[3] Mallory Wober, *The Varieties of Sensory Experience. A Sourcebook in the Anthropology of the Senses* (ed. by David Howes, Toronto, Buffalo, London: University of Toronto Press,

1991), 33 sq.; Kathryn Linn Geurts, *Culture and the Senses: Bodily Way of Knowing in an African Community* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002).

[4] Paavo Lipponen, *Architecture and Public* (Europäisches Forum Alpbach, Architekturgespräche, 2004, manuscript), p. 5.

[5] G[éza] Révész, *Die Formenwelt des Tastsinnes. 2. Bd. Formästhetik und Plastik der Blinden* (Den Haag: Nijhoff, 1938).

[6] Norbert Elias, *Über den Prozeß der Zivilisation. Soziogenetische und psychogenetische Untersuchungen, 1* (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 1997), respectively Classen/Howes/Synnott, *op. cit.*

[7] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Le Visible et l'Invisible, suivi de notes de travail* (Paris: Gallimard, 1993), ref. on p. 179.

[8] Other accounts of the aesthetic potential of touch, smell and taste can be found in Mădălina Diaconu, *Tasten, Riechen, Schmecken. Eine Ästhetik der anästhesierten Sinne* (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2005), idem, "Patina - Atmosphere - Aroma: Towards an Aesthetics of Fine Differences" (in *Logos of Phenomenology and Phenomenology of the Logos. Book Five. The Creative Logos. Aesthetic Ciphering in Fine Arts, Literature and Aesthetics*, ed. by A.-T. Tyminiecka, Dordrecht: Springer, 2006), pp. 131-148 and idem, "Illusionary Touch, and Touching Illusions" (in *Human Creation Between Reality and Illusion*, ed. by A.-T. Tyminiecka, Dordrecht: Kluwer, 2005), pp. 115-126.

Mădălina Diaconu

Institute of Philosophie

University of Vienna

Universitätsstraße 7

Vienna, 1010

[madalina.diaconu@wu-wien.ac.at](mailto:madalina.diaconu@wu-wien.ac.at)

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