

On How (Not) to Turn the Senses into Food for Thought; or, When Context is King
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Sensing the Past: Seeing, Hearing, Smelling, Tasting, and Touching in History
Mark M. Smith, University of California Press, 192 pp.

There is yet another 'turn' in US History departments: sensory history. Touted by historians in *The American Historical Review*, with prospective scholarship to 'examine hitherto ignored phenomena,' thereby 'opening unexplored territories of the past,' the history of the senses has a promising future.¹ Mark Smith, Professor of History at the University of South Carolina and president of The Historical Society, has been a prominent contributor to the field for almost a decade. Smith makes his case for sensory history in *Sensing the Past: Seeing, Hearing, Smelling, Tasting, and Touching in History*, published a few years before the current interest. In *Sensing*, Smith traces the importance of the senses for chief cultural developments from antiquity to the pre-Enlightenment era, focusing on how the senses informed the modern emergence of 'social classes, race and gender conventions, industrialization, urbanization, colonialism, imperialism, nationalism, [and] ideas concerning selfhood and the "other"' (1). This review essay concentrates on and challenges Smith's views of how the historian should produce, assess, and validate histories of the senses. Rather than offer a new understanding of how to write sensory history, Smith's approach is disappointingly status quo.

In addition to canvassing the past thirty years of scholarship, Smith considers *Sensing* an opportunity to provoke a critical conversation about the practical and theoretical assumptions that have guided the presentation and methodology of histories of the senses. He seeks to intervene into the literature so as to 'reframe an emerging historical conversation...at a key juncture in the evolution of writing on the history of senses' (1-3). Smith's main argument is against the 'orality theory' (11), a model developed by Marshall McLuhan and Walter Ong and which Smith claims has regrettably dominated the literature. Proponents of the 'orality theory' assert that vision came to dominate Western thinking following the invention of movable type in the sixteenth century. The print revolution braided sight and logic, seeing and reason, vision and objectivity, while hearing, smelling, tasting, and touching were denigrated as irrational and premodern (8-11). The invention and dissemination of movable type therefore became the historical pivot to demarcate the 'great divide' in the history of the senses.

For Smith, however, this account obscures the ways non-visual senses were essential to the development of modernity in Europe and North America. The 'print revolution empowered vision,' he acknowledges, 'but did so unevenly and not always at the expense of the other senses' (2). Instead, according to Smith, the conventional narrative, which views modernity as predicated on and promoting sight (and writing) while at the same time stifling hearing, smelling, tasting, and touching, overlooks the ways modernity and

¹ Jay, Martin. 2011. In the Realm of the Senses: An Introduction. *The American Historical Review* 116 (2): 307, 314.

the five senses have co-existed and influenced one another. Smith also suggests that vision was not always the stable, rational sense, either during or after the diffusion of print. The orthodox account therefore 'reinscribe[s] the value of the eye in the very writing of history,' reaffirming 'prevailing frameworks [by] stressing the victory of the rational eye under modernity' (21).

Smith seeks to dismantle the sensory hierarchy with which histories of the senses have thus far been written. To dismantle this hierarchy permits the writing of an accurate narrative that explains how sensual experiences influenced a broad range of intellectual and cultural developments in the past. Smith's aim is therefore neither to invert 'standard sensory hierarchies [n]or to reaffirm them,' but to 'complicate them,' which, for Smith, allows the writing of 'the history of the senses in a fully historicized fashion over many places and arching over a long period of time' (18). Fairly rare for a historian, then, Smith calls for a deconstructive history. Though he does not describe his work in these terms, Smith's aim to overturn and displace, to deconstruct, the sensory hierarchy is similar to French philosopher Jacques Derrida's project. Except for a brief reference (20) when discussing intellectual historian Martin Jay's *Downcast Eyes*, however, Derrida is curiously absent from *Sensing*. Regardless of Derrida's spectral presence and despite Smith's legitimate claims of the innovativeness in attempting to write a history of the sensate unchained from the myopia of ocularcentrism, Smith remains trapped by the shortcomings of contextualism, of which deconstruction, the implicit inspiration for *Sensing*, has been the most recent and most ascetic form. Understanding these limitations and outlining a possible future for how to write histories of the sensate require further investigation into Smith's method.

Smith argues that contextualization dismantles the hierarchies dependent on the historically erroneous oppositions between premodern/modern and sight/non-visual senses. He explains that he agrees with French historian Alain Corbin's position that 'we must stress the primacy of context if we are to avoid becoming hostage to the rhetorical sensory hierarchy sponsored by a given class of a particular place and time' (15). To deconstruct sensory hierarchies and then correctly interpret the interrelatedness of the senses requires meticulous attention to the original context of each sense experience; the historian is otherwise duped by the prejudices of the literature – biases, not of the heterogeneous groups and individuals who emphasized different combinations of senses, but of a circumscribed elite that has favored writing and thus supported the print revolution (vision). Smith, for instance, observes that McLuhan's 'orality theory' is 'over-theorized and under-researched' (12), the result of evidence drawn from English literature (McLuhan's graduate training was in English). In contrast, Smith suggests, sensory historians ought to 'seriously [consider] the full social and cultural context of...the way people thought about the senses' (4). Such a 'context-sensitive historical inquiry,' Smith writes, can 'ask serious questions about...sight's relationship to the other senses' in both 'premodern and modern societies' (17). Contextualization – the interpretation of the social and historical situation that surrounds sensory events – forms the center of Smith's approach and, as he suggests, ought to be the watchword for sense historians.

Contextualization not only dismantles the binaries of the historiography. Contextualization also protects against the essentialization of the senses, which, Smith notes, ignores the 'historically and culturally generated ways of knowing and understanding' (3) sensual experience. Smith writes:

[T]he word 'is' rarely graces the pages of this book; I do not claim that the sense of smell, taste, sight, sound, or taste 'is' anything. To do so violates a fundamental point of this essay: the senses are not universal, and not transhistorical, and can only be understood in their specific social and historical contexts. The idea that a sense 'is' anything does enormous violence to the central idea that senses were lots of things. Their histories cannot be understood by accepting misleading conceits concerning what a given sense supposedly means – or 'is' – today, whatever that might mean (3).

By committing oneself to the contextualization of the senses, Smith believes that one can prevent the error of claiming to have seized the Platonic substance of the senses. For Smith, contextualization also prevents the nostalgia for a past that often turns out to be an ideological construct. 'Without careful and precise contextualization and historicization that pays attention to the senses as relative cultural constructs,' Smith warns, 'we are in danger of reinscribing an historical conceit that makes the past simply sensual just because it was the past' (17). Furthermore, according to Smith, contextualization avoids the ahistorical illusion that one has bridged the division between *then* and *now* to presently experience the past *as it really was*. Smith writes: '[T]he idea that we can, at the point where historical sources stop, deploy our imaginations to capture and recreate [a sensory experience], is fictional...because our capacity to imagine is heavily influenced by the values and context of the moment in time and place that we occupy' (124). During a critique of US historians Peter Hoffer and Wade Shaffer, both of whom advocate for what Smith characterizes as 'a transcendent sensory past,' Smith declares that 'it is impossible to experience...sensations the same way as those who experienced these sensations'. This is 'true,' he concludes, 'for all historical evidence' (121). Here and throughout *Sensing*, Smith seems to be parasitizing Derrida, for whom 'the concept of experience...is most unwieldy [and] belongs to the history of metaphysics'. For Derrida, 'we must, by means of the sort of contortion and contention that discourse is obliged to undergo, exhaust the resources of the concept of experience'.² Similar to Derrida, Smith argues that, instead of succumbing to the metaphysical illusion of having re-presented past sensory experiences, the historian should adhere to polymath Jean-François Revel's 'hard-nosed historicism' (124). For Smith, then, the identification of context is the elixir for ocularcentrism, the answer to problematic claims to have accessed ontology and the

² Derrida, Jacques. 1976 (1967). *Of Grammatology*. Baltimore & London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 60.

past, the proper means for writing histories of the senses. In different circumstances and on a different topic, Derrida concurs: 'nothing exists outside context'.³

At first, Smith is utterly convincing. His deconstruction of the 'great divide' in the history of senses is a much-needed corrective to the dominance the orthodox account enjoys. Most historians would also endorse Smith's insistence that one contextualize so as to understand senses. Smith's argument is agreeable to contemporary humanists as well. Humanists of all stripes would approve of Smith's contextualism for ethical and political reasons (125) – the assertion that one has directly and thus completely grasped 'reality' leads to totalitarian claims of possessing the absolute meaning of 'being,' of what 'is'. The postmodernist emphasis on language and cultural significance as opposed to what used to be called 'the Thing itself' is at this point habitual, having influenced the 'scholarly analysis of every human action in the social and historical world'.⁴ As Smith, individuals and groups, across the political spectrum, endlessly reiterate some variety of the mantra that, because nothing exists outside context, one is left with the interminable task of contextualization, of interpretation, of 'writing' about the world, or, as in Smith's case, composing histories of the senses. Context is King.

However, Smith insufficiently explores the limits the sovereign power he grants to context places on histories of senses past. Because Smith's stress on context not only veins the body of his text but is also the bedrock of his approach to the writing of sensory history, his blindness to the inadequacies of solely relying on context undermines his project. Smith demands that one can only write accurate histories of the senses if one contextualizes. For Smith, the historian establishes context through writing, the medium of print: '[W]e can readily grasp what particular sensory events of stimuli meant to particular individuals and groups in particular contexts [through print] ... [P]rinted evidence and the sensory perceptions recorded by contemporaries...constitute the principal medium through which we can access the senses of the past and their meanings' (125). According to Smith, print is the key path through which the historian contextualizes and composes accurate interpretations of senses past. Yet, because his strategy for historicizing the sensate emphasizes print, Smith only 'looks' at the non-visual senses. In fact, though Smith recognizes that others' questioning of dominance of sight has often inadvertently reinstated the importance of the eye at the expense of the other senses (20), he fails to confront how his exclusive reliance on printed evidence reinforces the primacy of vision – Smith places the non-visual senses, which do not exist in writing and cannot be 'seen,' under the isolating gaze of the eye. Smith ironically repeats the error he levels against orthodox accounts of senses past that, as he explains, have elevated writing and thus favored vision over hearing, smelling, tasting, and touching. By replicating the ocularcentrism he critiques in others, he strengthens the biases of the discourse he seeks to deconstruct. He 'reinscribe[s] the value of the eye in

³ Derrida. 1988. *Limited Inc.* Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 152.

⁴ Kramer, Lloyd. "Searching For Something That Is Here And There And Also Gone." *History and Theory* 48 (1): 85.

the very writing of history,' reaffirming 'prevailing frameworks [by] stressing the victory of the rational eye under modernity' (21).

Smith's method is neither radical nor original when placed inside the milieu of late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century academic culture.⁵ His approach is aligned with work in the humanities and social sciences on either side of the Atlantic that has dominated Western culture since the early Enlightenment. This type of scholarship assumes that intellectual work necessitates interminable analysis of the things of the world. Such scholarship focuses on language and the "meaning" of nature, social institutions, or human cultures' and, in so doing, devalues the materiality of things that cannot be easily identified and then imprisoned in a context, in print, in words. Smith is in fact spellbound by this "meaning-based," or "hermeneutical," interpretative paradigm,' a 'kind of thinking that uses a "Cartesian" dichotomy to detach subjects from the objects in nature or society that they describe'.⁶ He privileges effects produced by the mind (consciousness or *res cogitans*) over effects produced by the body (*res extensa*). Thus, for Smith, it turns out, 'subjectivity' and 'objectivity' are central, while corporeal existence – the place outside the division between subject and object – is at best peripheral.⁷

To be sure, Smith's call for historians to contextualize sensory events is persuasive. Individuals mediate sensory experiences through systems of meaning and thus remain partially inside the 'Cartesian' dichotomy. If not, there would be no traces or texts to analyze. However, Smith offers no alternative method besides his 'Cartesian' approach, which explores how we *interrogate* and *see* the world but at the same time downplays our ontological interest in how we *exist* – feel, hear, taste, and smell – as bodies of the world. Smith for instance insists that 'the taste of a lemon is far from historically or culturally constant and *how* it tastes, its meaning, its salivating sharpness or sweetness is dependent on many factors, the not least of which is history' (124, emphasis in original). 'What is tasteful and what is tasteless is a product of context' (125). From Smith's perspective, the historian's task consists only in identifying the context of a sensory event and, as context was, is, and will be constantly shifting, the historian is unable to capture historical actors' original sensory experience.

Smith however conflates the *how* of history with the *what* of history, the ontological happening of history with the epistemological meaning of history. While for Smith history 'is' exclusively context, history, particularly sensory history, is not entirely cultural, a series of metaphors or rhetorical systems. History is not only, as deconstructionist Paul de Man argued, an endlessly self-referential text that only offers an

⁵ Gumbrecht, Hans Ulrich. 2004. *Production of Presence*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

⁶ Kramer, 86. See Descartes, René. 1996. *Meditations on First Philosophy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

⁷ Gumbrecht, 18, 106-108.

allegory of its own (mis)reading.⁸ The issue is also not, as Smith worries, that 'curators/managers' of museums and re-enactments 'wrongly marry the production of the past to its present-day consumption,' deceptively 'render[ing] consumable...something which is, in fact, beyond consumption' (121). The issue is not how capitalism commodifies the past for the consumer. The issue is how and when 'things' *there* in their immediacy – not metaphors that displace one's proximity to the world – produce sensory experiences. Smith is indeed correct that past sensory events cannot be completely conveyed through language, in writing or print. However, a sensory event 'is' no-thing before it is examined, objectified, and means some-thing. The incapacity of language does not mean the historian should, as Smith advocates, wholly descend into the abyss of context, retreating from and ignoring the history *outside the text*. Derrida's statements that 'there is nothing outside the text' and, as noted, that 'there is nothing outside context' reach an eerie apotheosis in Smith's approach.⁹

Because Smith's contextualist strategy distances the non-visual senses, he stifles the sensory experiences of hearing, smelling, tasting, and touching, entombing them in a linguistic hall of mirrors. His method is unable to address the experiential encounters with things of the world immediately present in the historian's physical space. He is deaf to warnings offered by those such as French philosopher Michel Serres: 'When they [i.e. the philosophers, the historians – academics] come across an object, they change it, by sleight of hand, into a relationship, language or representation'.¹⁰ 'If my finger touches my lip and says I, my mouth becomes an object, but in reality it is my finger that is lost'.¹¹ Literary theorist Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht explains: 'If we attribute a meaning to a thing that is present, that is, if we form an idea of what this thing may be in relation to us, we seem to attenuate, inevitably, the impact that this thing can have on our bodies and our senses'.¹² The more context, the more meaning. The more meaning, the more print. The more print, the greater the dominance of the eye. The greater the dominance of the eye, the greater the loss of the immediacy of the other senses. As Smith prohibits sensory experiences 'outside the text/context' to factor into the historicization of the senses, he thus disregards the ontological concern in how one exists, an interest that organizes any epistemic foundation, as ontological interest happens before interpretation, prior to culture and print. His focus on contextualization erects binaries between mind and body, vision and non-visual senses.

Smith writes on his website that he hopes to 'help restore the full sensory texture of history and examine what the senses in addition to seeing might be able to tell us about

⁸ See de Man, Paul. 1979. *Allegories of Reading: Figural Language in Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke, and Proust*. New Haven: Yale University Press. Derrida argues that metaphor is the heart of philosophy. See Derrida. 1985. *Margins of Philosophy*. Chicago: University of Chicago, 208-272.

⁹ Derrida. *Of Grammatology*, 158.

¹⁰ Serres, Michel. 2009. *The Five Senses: A Philosophy of Mingled Bodies*. Continuum International Publishing Group: New York, 41.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 25.

¹² Gumbrecht, xiv.

historical experience and causation'.¹³ However, his excessive focus on print, which is also an extreme focus on sight, strengthens an epistemology that distances hearing, smelling, tasting, and touching. Smith cannot do justice to the 'production of presence,' those moments when cultural phenomena and cultural events become tangible and have an impact on our senses and our bodies. Far from showing us a new way to write histories of the sensate, then, Smith reinforces the dominant mode of historical writing that considers the past as silos of data to be cataloged and stored for future interpretation.

And, yet, prior to *Sensing*, Smith did not always hold these views. He implies that he underwent an epistemological conversion following his reliance on psychoacoustics in his earlier book, *Listening to Nineteenth-Century America*, as psychoacoustics is a 'methodology that can, without due care, blur the distinction between past and present'.¹⁴ In a footnote in *Sensing*, Smith writes: 'My [...] thinking has [since] moved toward a more constructionist – and historical – treatment of the senses' (155 n. 1). It is toward this contextualist, in the end deconstructionist, approach to the senses that Smith hopes historians will embrace, envisioning in the closing paragraphs of *Sensing* that histories of senses past may come to influence all historical endeavors: 'If, over the coming decades, sensory historians generally begin to include all of the sensate in their studies, they could hope that their habit of attending to the sensate will begin to percolate into the profession at large' (131).

For this reviewer, however, if, over the coming decades, historians do not develop a strategy for writing histories of the sensate that attend to the oscillation between the ontological, 'presence-based' concern in the *how* of history and the epistemological, 'meaning-based' interest in the *what* of history, they will succeed in transforming sensory history into a cold objective pabulum – food for thought and language – material solely for intellectual nourishment, not of the five senses. If historians solely practice Smith's method, they will remain imprisoned within the tradition of late twentieth- and early twentieth-century academic culture. Steadily growing for the last thirty years, this culture, epitomized by Derrida and his intellectual progeny, privileges the production of meaning and downplays the powers of presence. It is time however to 'end the tyranny of the absolute monarch' of context and overthrow what Gumbrecht has labeled the "'academic enthronement of hermeneutics'".¹⁵

In *Sensing*, Smith nonetheless performs a rewarding service. Not only does he map out ways to dismantle the 'great divide' in the history of senses. Smith also, albeit unintentionally, highlights the limits of the hermeneutical approach for studies of senses past. Yet, to break open the confines – or rather, to deconstruct – Smith's extreme emphasis on context the historian need not renounce the medium of print, reject context,

¹³ <http://www.cas.sc.edu/hist/facultyprofiles/smithmark.html>, date accessed May 13, 2011.

¹⁴ Smith. 2001. *Listening to Nineteenth-Century America*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 266-267.

¹⁵ Gumbrecht, 11. Quoted in Lindsay Waters, 'Literary Aesthetics: The Very Idea,' in *Producing Presences: Branching out From Gumbrecht's Work*, Mass.: University of Massachusetts Dartmouth, 2007), 165. See Davies, Martin L. 2010. *Imprisoned by History: Aspects of Historicized Life*. Routledge: New York, New York.

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<http://wp.me/p1Bfg0-5f>

and simply 'be'. Nor should the historian, as Smith aptly warns against, appeal to a romanticized sensory past. The historian ought to consider the context of sensory experiences, the history found in the narrative or text, or in metaphors. However, the historian should also note those historical moments not in print. To include these experiences and their effects does not reject vision, jettison the text, silence language, end interpretation, and deploy the imagination to write fictional accounts of an awe-inspiring past. To include these flashes of presence is to recognize the outside of the text. It is to acknowledge that we can no longer afford to believe ourselves to be purely 'Cartesian,' that is, of the 'rationally choosing,' ocularcentric Subject. It is, in addition to observing, to listen, smell, feel, and taste the past. Thus, rather than subscribing to an exclusively representational, 'meaning-based' notion of history, historiography ought to also embrace its 'presence effects.' Only then can the historian embark on satisfying Smith's desire to explain historical experience and causation; only then can the historian attempt to rebuild the full sensory texture of history. Otherwise, our histories, of the sensate or otherwise, may indeed turn out to be just food for thought.

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