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Marie-Luce Gélard

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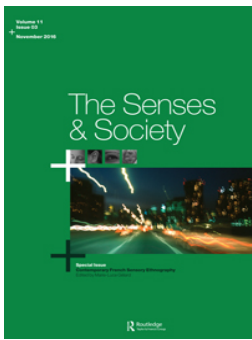
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# Contemporary French Sensory Ethnography

Translated by Carmen Ruschensky

**Marie-Luce Gélard\***

**Marie-Luce Gélard** is a Professor of Anthropology at the Université Paris Descartes, Sorbonne Paris Cité and a member of the Institut Universitaire de France (IUF). Her research focuses on forms of sensory perception and corporeal coding in the Moroccan Sahara.  
[mlgelard@yahoo.fr](mailto:mlgelard@yahoo.fr)



In France, sensorial anthropology (*anthropologie sensorielle*) or sensory ethnography (as it is also known) is a diffuse field of research. While the senses are evoked by many contemporary anthropologists, they are rarely an object of study in themselves, unlike the case in some related fields, such as the anthropology of emotions, for example (Gélard 2016).

Unquestionably, it is historians who laid the groundwork for the study of the cultural construction of the sensible (Corbin 1990, 1992; Febvre 1941) and “micro-history” (Ginzburg 1980, 1989; Revel 1996). The field of sensory history was forged over time by scholars who sought to trace the differential elaboration of the senses within particular historical contexts. Alain Corbin undertook a reconstruction of the use of the senses in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and proposed a historical anthropology of the senses in an article in the journal *Anthropologie et Sociétés* (Corbin 1990). But there was little subsequent dialogue between historians and anthropologists on the subject of the senses, and francophone sensory anthropology has remained fragmented.

While sensory anthropology is already well established in institutions on the other side of the Atlantic – at Concordia University in Canada and MIT and Harvard University in the United States – and has even already produced a history of the history of the senses (Howes 2014), sensory research in Europe continues to be divided, due, in part, to French anthropologists' reluctance to affiliate themselves with a particular school of thought.

It was in considering the fragmented character of French research on the senses that I became interested in the idea of uniting colleagues around common themes studied in different cultural contexts. This experiment, which was based, from the outset, on a multidisciplinary approach to the study of the sensory body and different sensory languages (Gélard 2013), revealed that the senses are not limited to the realm of sensation but also have much to teach us about different symbolic universes. The project thus acquired a life of its own, giving rise to the pooling of research currently being conducted by anthropologists and others around the topic of the senses, sensory languages, and sensory bodies.

### **The Senses as Tools and Objects of Anthropological Analysis**

This special issue presents some of the currents emerging across the field of sensory ethnography in France today. The contributors evoke and analyze the sensory expressions at the heart of their research. The senses are considered both as tools and as objects of anthropological analysis. They are shown to form the very basis of how we communicate, and to constitute the experiential ground of our cultures and societies.

The French approach to studying the sensory domain that is presented here is both old and new. Old, because the senses were very present in the early stages of anthropology's emergence as a discipline before being abandoned and their study usurped by the biological sciences. New, because there has been a notable resurgence of studies on the senses, this time with more emphasis on their enculturation.

Olivier Sirost's decidedly historical perspective demonstrates how francophone interest in the study of the senses originated in the nineteenth century with the figure of the "noble savage." Early anthropological descriptions and painterly expressions had a very significant sensual dimension. While logically prior, we reserve his essay till the end of this special issue, so it can be better savoured.

### **Of Words and Senses and the Senses of Words**

The components of language and the conjugation of the senses are intimately intertwined, writes David Le Breton. Consequently, there is a direct link between the senses and their linguistic and cognitive expression (how we conceive and articulate sensory experience).

The author highlights how everyday language and its metaphors are directly connected to social understandings of the senses. His analysis extends to several non-Western societies and thus confirms the importance of context in the study of corporeal metaphors related to the use and/or enjoyment of the senses.

It is within a completely different context, among the Imraguen fishermen of Mauritania, that Hélène Artaud invites us to contemplate mimetic processes and how the natural environment infiltrates meaning-making. Her analysis reveals how a society's cultivation of the senses is linked to its natural environment.

### **The Sensory Ethnography of Everyday Life**

Nathalie Ortar provides a detailed ethnography of the constricted sensory experience of French workers on the move. She takes the notion of the *habitus* or techniques of the senses in a whole new direction than Mauss, although Mauss did mention certain German tribes and their ability to sleep while perched atop their horses in his classic essay on the techniques of the body.

I illustrate, in my essay, how sensory displays of the self in a Saharan village in Morocco (using perfume, making noise to signal one's presence, etc.) become precious methodological tools that an anthropologist can use in studying a given society's sensory order. In paying close attention to these sensory languages, we gain a more intimate understanding of relationships between individuals, the sexes in particular, and of the overall tenor of relations in a culture.

### **Experimental Procedures that Provide Access to Sensory Universes**

Vincent Battesti and Nicolas Puig propose an experimental procedure ("Mics in the Ears") that provides access to the "natural language of sounds" in the city of Cairo. Their investigative method paves the way for future research on the ethnology of sound perception. Also working within an experimental vein, Marina Rougeon uses photography to capture the visual dimension of everyday ambiences in the city of Goiás, in the Central-West region of Brazil.

In different contexts and different ways, all of these texts highlight the importance of studying the senses as media and as communicational objects. The diversity of topics broached attests to the multiplicity of new directions in sensory research and a growing interest in the study of sensory expressions. Having long been relegated to the biological sciences and/or consigned to psychology, the senses and sensory phenomena are finally being recuperated as objects worthy of anthropological study.

## A Word of Thanks

I wish to extend my sincere thanks to David Howes for supporting the collective adventure that this special issue on French sensory ethnography afforded. I am extremely grateful for his interest in the project and his invaluable observations.

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