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## Worlds of sense and sensing the world: a response to Sarah Pink and David Howes

In a recent debate with Sarah Pink in the pages of *Social Anthropology*, concerning the prospects for an anthropology that would highlight the work of the senses in human experience, David Howes objects to what I have myself written on this topic, specifically in my book *The Perception of the Environment* (Ingold 2000). In doing so, he distorts my arguments on six counts. In this brief response, I set the record straight on each count, and argue for a regrouping of the virtual worlds of sense, to which Howes directs our attention, in the practicalities of sensing the world.

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In a recent issue of *Social Anthropology* (18[3]: 331–40, 2010), Sarah Pink and David Howes debate the potential for an anthropology that attends to the work of the senses in human perception, action and experience. Pink calls this *sensory anthropology*, and is keen to show how it takes us beyond the *anthropology of the senses* that has been energetically promoted by Howes and his collaborators over the last two decades and more. In the course of their debate, both Pink and Howes refer to a chapter, entitled ‘Stop, look and listen!’, which I wrote for my book *The Perception of the Environment* (Ingold 2000: 243–87). But whereas Pink cites the chapter in support of her argument, for Howes it clearly strikes a raw nerve, for he proceeds to launch into a catalogue of disagreements, as though the mere citation of my work were enough to render Pink guilty by association of all the sins and errors he attributes to me. I, likewise, am condemned for referring to the work of Maurice Merleau-Ponty. With Howes, you have to be careful whom you cite, because if they happen to be on his hit list, you’re fired! Since, in the course of delivering his verdict, and not for the first time (e.g., 2003: 239–40, n.8), Howes has distorted my arguments almost beyond recognition, I would like to take this opportunity to set the record straight.

First, Howes asserts as a fact that the ‘environment’ I posit in *The Perception of the Environment* is ‘one in which you can look, listen, and are always on the move, but not taste or smell’ (Ingold 2010: 335). This is simply false. It is true that I chose to focus in ‘Stop, look and listen!’ on visual and aural perception and the relation between them (a relation in which touch and feeling are also implicated). This does not however rule out taste and smell. I do not subscribe to the Aristotelian hierarchisation of the senses, and there is nothing in my argument to suggest that I do. My aim was

to critique the reduction of vision to the triadic relation between objects, images and their interpretations – a reduction that is ubiquitous both in the anthropology of the senses and in visual studies more generally – and to show not only that as a mode of active, exploratory engagement with the environment, looking is akin to listening, but also that just as hearing is an experience of sound, so seeing is an experience of light. Understood as looking (or watching) and seeing, vision has much more in common with audition than is often supposed, and for that matter also with gustation and olfaction. Had I focused more on the latter, it would only have reinforced my argument.

Second, Howes contends that the ‘purely phenomenological perspective’ to which I am allegedly wedded universalises the ‘subjective sensations of the individual’ and thus gives priority to ‘the individual and the subjective over the communal and social’ (Howes and Pink 2010: 335). This is nonsense. In my book I go to great lengths to refute the notion of the human (or non-human) being as an individual subject bombarded by sensation-inducing sensory stimuli from the external environment, and with it the idea – to which Howes himself subscribes – that in order to ‘make sense’ of the world, these induced sensations have to be cognitively assembled (or ‘constructed’) in terms of received cultural categories. Howes appears incapable of thinking outside the box of a representational theory of knowledge production whose walls are set up by the dichotomies between subject and object, between individual and social, and between object and image. My purpose, to the contrary, has been to dismantle the box, starting from the premise that every living being is a particular nexus of growth and development within a field of relations. Skills of perception and action, I argue, emerge within these processes of ontogenetic development. It is because these skills differ from being to being, depending on where they stand in relation to others, that they perceive the environment in different ways.

Third, Howes alleges that from a phenomenological standpoint, ‘culturally informed practices that differ from one’s own are inaccessible’ (ibid.). In truth, they would be inaccessible only if one’s own self and the selves of others were individual subjects of the kind that Howes imagines subjects to be: each locked in a private world of sensations, such that they can communicate with one another, and share their experiences and understandings, only by framing these sensations within a system of collective representations common to a community and validated by verbal convention. If that were indeed the case, then an ethnographer wishing to access the experiences and understandings of people of another culture, and not initially privy to their representations, would face a dilemma akin to that of the would-be map-reader who needs a key to read the map, but has to be able to read the map in order to decipher the key. He or she could never get off the starting block (Ingold 2001: 117). In reality, of course, this dilemma is readily circumvented by means of participant observation, which allows the ethnographer to access other people’s ways of perceiving by joining with them in the same currents of practical activity, and by learning to attend to things – as would any novice practitioner – in terms of what they afford in the contexts of what has to be done. This communion of experience establishes a baseline of sociality on which all attempts at verbal communication subsequently build. It is what makes anthropological fieldwork possible (Ingold 1993: 222–3).

Fourth, Howes (Howes and Pink 2010: 335) maintains that I rely on Merleau-Ponty, and proceeds to vent his objections to the latter as though that were sufficient to invalidate my arguments. In fact I ground my argument in a triangulation of the works

of three theorists, of which Merleau-Ponty is but one (Ingold 2000: 258–66). The others are Hans Jonas (1966) and James Gibson (1979). All three, in different ways, reject the representational theory of knowledge on which Howes founds his anthropology of the senses. That Howes's anthropology is so founded is apparent from the way he reifies 'the senses' as bodily registers that convey messages to the mind of the perceiver. Sometimes, he says, the messages sent by different registers may be contradictory: thus the senses can conflict as well as collaborate. They may even fight with each other (Howes and Pink 2010: 336)! Of course we are sometimes caught out. Appearances can be deceptive. This is not, however, because the mind has to piece together information about external objects delivered by way of different registers. For the senses are not keyboards or filters that mediate the traffic between mind and world. They are rather – as Gibson (1966) always insisted – aspects of the functioning of the living being in its environment. And their synergy lies in the fact of their being powers of the same organism, engaged in the same action, and attending to the same world (see also Merleau-Ponty 1962: 317–18). If we are occasionally deceived, it is because what we find there does not always match our expectations.

Fifth, Howes holds as sacrosanct the principle that as anthropologists, we should attend to and respect indigenous understandings of perception. 'The way should always be left open', he says, 'for indigenous paradigms of perception to "break through" anthropological or philosophical or neurological models of perception' (Howes and Pink 2010: 340). I agree. Howes's anthropological model of perception, however, does precisely the opposite. By insisting that every indigenous paradigm is itself a 'product of culture', he effectively neutralises any challenge it might present to his own approach. As just another cultural product, it can be enlisted as grist to the mill of a universalist and universalising comparative project. Indeed, despite fervent avowals to the contrary, Howes appears to have no more regard for indigenous paradigms than he does for contemporary neuroscience. 'It is important to keep in mind that neuroscience is itself a product of culture', he loftily declares, 'and therefore cannot provide an a-cultural, a-historical paradigm for understanding cultural phenomena' (ibid.: 335). In that case, the same must be true of all indigenous understandings as well. Indeed, it is hard to imagine any paradigm that could be less cultural, and less historical, than one which assumes that everyone else's paradigm, whether indigenous person or scientist, is a product of cultural history.

Finally, and following from this, we find Howes's unequivocal assertion that 'perception is a cultural construct' (ibid.). This literally gives the game away. For an anthropology of the senses that starts from the premise that perception consists in the cultural modelling of received bodily sensations can have nothing to say about how people practically look, listen, touch, taste and sniff as they go about their business. On the other hand, it has everything to say about how experiences of seeing, hearing, feeling and so on feed the imagination and infuse its discursive and literary expressions. In the very objectification of the senses, as things one can have an anthropological study of, it seems that the eyes, ears and skin are no longer to be regarded as organs of a body that, as it makes its way in the world, attentively looks, listens and feels where it is going. On the contrary, they become instruments of playback, capturing moments of experience and relaying them to a reflexive consciousness for subsequent review and interpretation. In this shift of focus, from how people sense the real world they inhabit to how they inhabit virtual worlds of sense, the anthropology of the senses has followed a path already well trodden in the study of what has come to be known

as 'visual culture', within the context of a wider intellectual trend that propelled the inflationary expansion of cultural studies.

For students of visual culture, seeing apparently has nothing to do with observation, with looking around in the environment or watching what is going on. Nor does it have anything to do with the experience of illumination that makes these activities possible. It rather has to do, narrowly and exclusively, with the perusal of images (Elkins 2003: 7). Where there are no images to view, there is no vision. It is as though the eyes opened not upon the world itself, but upon a simulacrum of the world whose objects already bear witness to the experience of sight and return that experience to us in our gaze. Cut adrift in this world of images, in which all one can ever see is itself a reflex of vision, the viewer seems blind to the world itself. A principal claim of the anthropology of the senses, of course, is to have dethroned vision from the sovereign position it had allegedly held in the intellectual pantheon of the western world, and to highlight the contributions of other, non-visual sensory modalities, above all to the sensory formations of non-western peoples. It is, therefore, ironic that in 'rediscovering' these modalities – of hearing, touch, smell and so on – anthropologists of the senses such as Howes have implemented exactly the same manoeuvre as have their intellectual bedfellows in the study of visual culture. To the worlds of images conjured up by the latter, they have simply added worlds of sounds, of feelings and of smells.

A symptom of this manoeuvre is the multiplication of 'scapes' of every possible kind. If the eyes return the world to us in its visual image, conceived in art-historical terms as landscape, then likewise the ears reveal a soundscape, the skin a touchscape, the nose a smellscape, and so on. In reality, of course, the environment that people inhabit is not sliced up along the lines of the sensory pathways by which they access it. It is the *same* world, whatever paths they take. But these multiple 'scapes' do not refer to the practically and productively inhabited world. They refer to the virtual worlds conjured up by capturing the embodied, perceptual experiences of habitation and rendering them back, in artificially purified forms, for interpretation and consumption. The gap between perceptual practice and sensory imagination thus remains as wide as ever. In writing 'Stop, look and listen!', I attempted to close this gap, by showing how what has been thought and written *in terms* of the senses is necessarily embedded in real-life practices of looking, listening and feeling. Howes has greeted this attempt with outright hostility, if not dismissal, declaring that the very worst thing anthropologists could do is base their analyses on the models of 'perceptual systems' proposed by psychologists such as Gibson or philosophers such as Merleau-Ponty (Howes 2003: 49–50).

It is obvious whom Howes has in his sights here! For him, anyone interested in vision and how it works, myself included, is automatically guilty of 'epistemological imperialism' (2003: 240). The accusation is of course ludicrous. Eyesight is quite obviously important to most human beings everywhere, and to accuse anyone who chooses to write about it of having succumbed to western ocularcentrism is about as absurd as banning research on human toolmaking and tool-use on the grounds that it amounts to collusion in the modernist project of technological world-domination! Though I would not be so foolish as to claim to be entirely free from bias, whatever biases come with studies of the ways people use their eyes, ears and skin to perceive, or of the ways they use tools to act, pale into insignificance beside the imperialism inherent in a comparative project that locks the ways of thinking and knowing of 'indigenous cultures' into closed sensory epistemologies that are held up to the overarching purview of the all-seeing, all-knowing western anthropologist. This is the project that Howes

proposes in the name of the anthropology of the senses. The philosophies he so stridently denounces are precisely those that have the potential to take us beyond such an abject cultural relativism towards the recognition that if people differ in the ways they perceive the world, it is precisely because of what they all share, namely their existential grounding in the one world that they, and we, inhabit. To reground the anthropology of the senses, our first priority must be to restore the virtual worlds of sense to the practicalities of our sensing of the world.

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