Common Senses: Sentient Ethics in the City

Kathleen Ferguson

Durham University, U.K.
DOI: https://doi.org/10.13023/disclosure.11.02

Follow this and additional works at: https://uknowledge.uky.edu/disclosure

Part of the Social and Behavioral Sciences Commons

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial 4.0 License.

Recommended Citation
DOI: https://doi.org/10.13023/disclosure.11.02
Available at: https://uknowledge.uky.edu/disclosure/vol11/iss1/2

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Social Theory at UKnowledge. It has been accepted for inclusion in disClosure: A Journal of Social Theory by an authorized editor of UKnowledge. For more information, please contact UKnowledge@lsv.uky.edu.
Little Magazine, and Postmodern Culture, among others. He has also published two books of poetry, Crossing Borders and Stirr'd Up Everywhere (a collage poem/artist's book), and he is editor of Estuary, a journal of art and literature. He is currently Assistant Professor of English at CUNY-Kingsborough.

Frank Miller is a freelance photographer living in Eugene, Oregon. He has been exhibiting his work since 1998 and has had several solo shows. He is currently finishing a project examining the decline of tourism at Niagara Falls.

Patrick O'Connor is an Assistant Professor of Spanish at the University of Chicago. His research focuses on twentieth century Latin American novels, principally from a gender studies and queer theory approach. He is the author of numerous articles on contemporary Latin American literature and film, and he is currently completing a manuscript entitled “Paper Dolls and Spider Women: Latin American Fiction and the Narratives of the Perverse.”

Steve Pile is Senior Lecturer in the Faculty of Social Sciences at the Open University (UK). He is author of The Body and the City (Routledge, 1996) and co-editor of many books, including Place and the Politics of Identity with Michael Keith (Routledge, 1993) and City A-Z with Nigel Thrift (Routledge, 2000). He is currently working on a book that explores the relationship between the city, fantasy, and the production of space.

Kathleen Ferguson
Common Senses:
Sentient Ethics in the City

The industrial revolution has encroached on the realm of the spirit, and is transforming the global city into an intellectual cloister. Once words come to dominate and occupy flesh and matter... all we have left is to dream of the paradisiacal times in which the body was free, and could run and enjoy sensations at leisure. If a revolt is to come, it will have to come from the five senses. (Serres 71)

To walk through a city is to be vulnerable to the articulations of those around us and to become aware of the permeability of our own personal space. The walker is confronted with the presence of other bodies at every step. The gamut of sensory perception reaches out to our sentience and casts the city as an aggregate of smells, tastes, tactile impressions, sights, and sounds. There is a wealth of bodily material to draw upon in urban places; sensory phenomena emanate from us, from passers-by, and from the city itself. It may be possible to think of this storehouse of incarnate experiences as something more than simply the material conditions that make urban wandering pleasurable. Perhaps the work of the senses may provide a starting point for an ethics that is dynamic in its insistence upon embodiment, that challenges the boundaries of mind and body, and that has political pertinence in terms of social affect. With this possibility in mind, the figurative call to “revolution through the senses” is evocative, but it is an appeal that is measured against an intellectual climate in which the actual pre-discursive experiences of our bodies count for...
little. Furthermore, the setting of such an investigation, the metropolis, is often depicted as anything but a site of plurality and sentence. Rather, cities are more likely to loom as places of insecurity and fear, of sensory over-stimulation and exhaustion.

There are questions of exactly who stands to gain from depicting cities in this way. Urban studies abound with descriptions of cities bifurcated into safe spaces and “no go” areas. But perhaps the validity of such descriptions needs reviewing; who can look at their city and say that this process has completely taken over the streets? Contemporary cities are nothing if not a vast expanse for the production of disparate desires and expectations. While rural and even suburban places are marked by the homogeneity of human needs against environmental conditions, cities face the preponderance of conflicting social demands pitted together in a confined space. While incidents of enraged behavior are more likely to be reported than relatively smooth congress, it is clear that these multi-faceted urban spaces are, for the most part, roughly complementary. They are not barricaded; their boundaries are signified in each change of terrain, when moving from a pavement that is open to the elements, to an enclosed retail “cosmos,” usually with private policing, gigantic-scale architecture, and the subtle mechanisms of appropriate dress and manner. Throughout these protean conurbations, there remains one constant that links all participants in a given space and all spaces within the metropolis: as we move through the disparate parts of a city, the presence of sensory material acts as a constantly evolving loop of information that connects each walker to the other, and both to their shared environment.

In this article, sensory perception is taken as a vital point of contact with the metropolis. I want to consider it as a technique of the body that can be read onto the city at large, as it is circumscribed by issues of subjectivity, variation, and difference. The continual “call to action” that is sent out by the senses requires that the simplest actions can unfold to reveal complex personal responses to the lived environment. With Serres’s response to the de-corporealization of modern life, it may be that the senses offer, if not quite a revolt, then at least a critical take on the social life of cities. We (the heterogeneous collective of urban participants) are drawn to the city and become part of it at the very moment that our preferences and prejudices are entered into the city’s sensory realm. We become part of the scenery for others, and just as surely as we exude smells and seek pleasing tastes, the sense data of the city comes to shape our expectations of urban life.

From the experiences of our sensing bodies, we are able to draw together a personal response to environments like the city. Still, it is a reading that is somewhat stigmatized by its subjectivity, by the difficulty we would have in translating the exact nature of those thoughts to a practicable, discursive code to be shared with others. In short, the things that we sense and the very fact of our sensing them seem to have very little intellectual and social value for those around us, even though these phenomena may be common and enduring. The framework of learning within which our ability to process information and produce discourse is based has been profoundly steered away from any involvement of bodily experience. The capacity to formulate knowledge is specifically premised upon a critical distance placed between the mind and body. The two are not often seen as communicating partners, let alone symbiotic elements. In contrast to the problematic dualism of Western rationality, the tenets of phenomenology suggest that the interaction of mental and physical considerations is an enabling condition of intellectual investigation, rather than an impediment. Where the scientific and philosophical revolutions of the Enlightenment period suggest that matter and consciousness can and indeed must be separated, phenomenology allows for an intellectual reading that does not shirk those parameters of experience that are introduced through bodily responses, not least of which are those that evolve from the senses.

In its reaffirmation of a subject that is “always already” a co-existence of body and mind, phenomenology stresses the basic materiality of social institutions but also makes a space for a dialogue of common ground. In relation to urban studies, it provides an alternative to visions of the city as the site of a certain political economy, as a space of fearful segregation, or as the map of regimes of power, while not diminishing the importance of such fields of enquiry. Perhaps the main problem with a phenomenological study would be the tendency to reduce the considerable problems of inequity in modern society to simple signifiers of difference, to sensory play and untrammeled embodiment. So, it is critical that an enquiry into the experience of sensory perception in the metropolis is contained within an ethical framework, one in which the interconnection of sentient subjects and the subsequent power of affect is given particular political resonance.

The body, through its modes of sensory perception, speaks of a common realm of human experience through which taste, touch, smell, sound, and sight inform us all, at some level. For the body is a porous medium through which to consider social interaction; it is the most basic consideration that necessarily encompasses every one who traverses urban space. The portal of sensory perception should however not be interpreted as a corporeal barrier to those who are physically impaired in one, several, or even all the senses. Considering sight, for example, is not to suggest that one who is not able to use this sense is unable even to converse in terms of vision. On the contrary, much can be contributed by a conversation in which absence throws the presumptions of the more able-bodied into sharp relief. Lack of sight challenges the dialogue of unencumbered participation into becoming a more critical and
self-aware project.

Sensory perception is a diffuse means of analysis and this makes it difficult, if not impossible, to claim an objective standpoint from within a climate of quickly evaporating data. Just as the transmission and reception of sensory data is often the product of wafting vapors and passing impressions, so the assumptions of power and control are treated with irreverence by competing, overlapping, dynamic senses. As such, the mechanisms of the individual body may serve as a prolific nexus between the personal and the political, the public and private spheres, the corporeal and the mental. I have become aware of an atmosphere of experimentation and open-ended discussion within writing on the senses, and so this work hopes to enter into the same vein. Of particular interest is Michel de Certeau’s writing on urban perambulation in the renowned essay, “Spatial Practices: Walking in the City,” as well as related critiques of the powerful visionary subject which posit alternatives to this subject by drawing upon other senses and other identities. Writers such as Rosalyn Deutsche, M. Christine Boyer, and Iris Marion Young share Certeau’s disdain for the all-seeing presence that evokes the city even as it keeps its distance. Such a response is not new. Georg Simmel and Walter Benjamin clearly had a fascination with modern metropolises such as Berlin and Paris and this was made known in their work, even when that awe was mixed with the fear of imminent mechanization and political oppression left unchecked in the dense spaces of the city. And so there is a lineage of urban writers arguing for a means of interpreting urban space that charges every city power with the power of affect and, if follows, with some measure of responsibility for that space.

In contemporary cities, markers of economic and political power certainly make their presence known as they are visibly inscribed on the surface of the streets, but they belie a more complex and responsive world. Such a city would come to incorporate urban space where surveillance can be pitted against the desirability of being seen, and where the lexicon of consumption and production is broken down by quixotic and unpredictable responses to the city’s marketing. Indicators of specifically urban culture, such as smog and traffic noises, as well as the close physical presence of other people and the variety and quantity of market choice are, in themselves, the embodiment of the city’s sensual cosmos. These indicators, so often regarded as impediments to personal freedom in the city, actually constitute the beginnings of a praxis of interpersonal involvement amidst impersonal spaces. There is the possibility that we share the individual bodily experiences of sensory perception with an enormous congregation of passers-by whose bodies also perceive, to some degree, the same space. And so a crowd that would otherwise be divided by ethnicity, class, gender, age, or physical ability is cast together in a practice that occurs possibly thousands of times a day, in an endless array of circumstances. Although remaining almost entirely unremarked upon, it is this feature of physical affect that is perhaps most compelling. While de Certeau and Young note the possibilities for a sort of community that evolves from co-presence in the city, there is something more at work. The phenomenological repercussions of a sense-aware response to the city could be pushed a little further to encompass an ethics of the senses, an “affective politics” that includes without distinction and influences without the need for words. In the absence of discursive structures, sentence affects us instinctively and in ways that often elicit social censure—childhood instructions not to stare, linger over smells, or eat voraciously, for example. Such is the defining power of the senses in our lives.

The perceived “naturalness” of the senses allows them to be read parallel to commonplace social interaction in cities. The lack of theoretical structure around the sentient body allows for new ways of thinking about the unique social relations that may be formed in cities, while clashing and compelling sensations of a metropolis might also demand a new approach to the discipline of phenomenology. This critical approach to the physical attributes of space and self carries with it the possibility of thinking about cities less as centers of commerce and culture than as the nexus of innumerable points of desire whose confluence allows us to consider the reality of being sentient subjects in a shared space. From this point, the basic premise of studying phenomena in their own right is expanded to become the foundation of such a project. Sentience may become a by-word for the common experiences that bind users of the city where distance, movement, prejudice, or disinterest would suggest that no social contract exists.

Both the senses and the city are marked by a desire for difference and a preponderance of distraction. These tendencies agitate the thinker who longs for a metropolis of clear, straight lines and a mental regime of logic in which the irrational or playful components of life are divorced from their proper (inevitably inferior) domain. Of course, there are alternatives to this view. They can be found in those sites of endless provocation to the sober, sterile world of rational thought—perhaps there are opportunities for reflection of a different sort amidst the clamor of public transport and crowds. For within this chaos of neural stimulation and the constant reminder of our shared embodiment in moments of hunger and thirst there is another form of knowledge that thrives on distraction and uses the heterogeneity of its subject as a driving force. The materiality of the senses and the joy that can be gleaned from walking around the city (always a mixed pleasure, but nevertheless an invigorating one) bespeaks an involvement with the world that cannot be conveyed in abstract and disembodied terms. In the absence of any uniting theory of the city and with nothing seemingly in common among users of that space, what could be more self-
The subjective life of an embodied urban subject could be the source of a detailed understanding of the dynamic friction of cities, but to do so would be to turn away from other possibilities that extend sensory perception from the aesthetic appreciation of an individual to a praxis which engages the affect we have upon each other. This affective project could produce the first gestures of an ethical language, grounded in the ubiquitous presence of others in a city and questioning the basis of subjectivity itself. Why must the body, by imperative, be presented as something uncommon and unique to the extent that representation is almost impossible? Perhaps there remains a sense of embarrassment when confronted with the simple demands and quotidian requirements of the body. This entity, usually concealed and embarrassing when confronted with the simple demands and quotidian requirements of the body, is impor-

tant to note, however, that even as technological changes to the city mean that physical interactions are modified in ways that seem to re-

duce the importance of bodily mediation, issues of corporeality are still central in the metropolis. The moving body cannot be underplayed as a protagonist, so that even seemingly disembodied actions such as sending an e-mail are defined by the minutiae of action as much as they are an absence of movement that makes itself known through convenience. Movement, whether actual or as an absent presence, brings about a model of the city that requires constant updating where boundaries are plastic and other bodies must be drawn into the corpus of social and civic life.

The phenomenological body finds its most likely form of expression in the senses. The dynamism, the frequent change in environment, and the glancing over of surfaces is exactly the kind of exchange that is entailed in considerations of dynamic intersubjectivity. Sensory data becomes a means for producing affect, in that each gesture confirms the body as the locus of communication and the basic unit we have for interpreting the world. The use of each organ of sensory perception must involve countless, although perhaps imperceptible, moving parts, thus drawing the body out of a contemplative state to engage with its surroundings. This can be seen in the necessary uprooting from that personal and intimately understood domain of the self that takes place in a walk through the city, such that coming face to face with a subject whose every movement demarcates it as "the other" ultimately engenders openness and a wish for transparency. Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1968) makes a complex but poignant observation that best describes this process:

For the first time, the seeing that I am is for me really visible; for the first time I appear to myself completely turned inside out under my own eyes. For the first time also, my movements no longer proceed unto the things to be seen, to be touched, or unto my own body occupied in seeing and touching them, but they address themselves to the body in general and for itself (whether it be my own or that of another), because for the first time, through the other body, I see that, in its coupling with the flesh of the world, the body contributes more than it receives, adding to the world that I see the treasure necessary for what the other body sees. (144-5)

The existence of subjective desires beyond our own is best seen in the moment of reciprocal interaction. This process is performed as a series of movements, perhaps unself-consciously enacted tasks, that come before considerations of alterity, which must be "put into words," articulated after the fact. Instead of focusing upon the premeditated communication of consenting interlocutors, the immediacy of fleeting encounters in an impersonal space such as the city provides a real test to reciprocity and the fair treatment of strangers. It is true that moments of excess and discomfort may outweigh any sense of liberating and democratic exchange. The movement of others may be an irrita-
The mind makes space for the body, and vice versa, through constant relays of sensation and memory. Both the body and the mind are implicated in the kinds of subjectivity, illegibility, and poiesis that evolve from city streets. These flashes of information cannot easily be segmented into mental and corporeal categories. It is not enough to think of embodied knowledge (such as a remembered route through the city or a sudden whiff of scent) as ruptures in a dominant intellectual order of cognition and evaluation. This corporeal knowledge must be seen as vital analytical and social tools in their own right, given that the viability of the senses is exerted by their lack of form and clarity.

The senses are divided into (at least) five different categories that do not really constitute rigid boundaries at all. These collapsible categories underwrite the formality of distinctions such as mind and body, public and private, internal and external. These binary sets are both easy to trace and productive, if only for being predictable, but they place profound limitations on the sentient subject. Materially, there are only two poles on either end of a linear trajectory along which to consider social space and there is even less flexibility to consider the role of one sensing body in a city of similarly sensing bodies. The basic pre-determinations of a mind that thinks and a body that acts does not take into consideration the spectrum of ability contained in each faculty. Nor does it consider the way that material obstacles in a dense urban environment might impact on any such bodies. Disability and confusion are constant factors in a space where rationality and clarity can no longer be seen as a birthright.

Although phenomenological studies provide an aperture into the predominantly Cartesian models of investigation into social space, they face their most critical challenge when transplanted to everyday life. Cities are not always a source of delight for the senses, but it is on crowded streets and in draughty bus stops that the shared legacy of embodiment has its best opportunity to affect us through mental and physical vectors that shift and merge. A model of phenomenology that is able to take into account the limitations on movement or the assault on the senses that takes place in cities can only be made more inclusive and more applicable. There is much to recommend a sentient, open body as a potentially ethical urban subject, but it should not be "let loose" in the city as an unconstrained and omnipotent entity. Considerations of proper behavior and the socially acceptable deployment of corporeality limits this body to some extent, but there are other, far more critical, factors at work. The body in pain, aged, disabled, employed in heavy labor, incarcerated, pregnant, or lost demands to be accounted for in the city. The act of movement and, in particular, the moving body, suggests a pre-linguistic and pre-social point of contact with the world. The kinetic body is (almost) sufficiently commonplace to be transparent, and its position in theories of spatial practice suggests a centrality that belies the frequently disparaging attitude of philosophy toward material considerations. This act of theoretical encompassing is far removed from the embarrassing proximity and seemingly obligatory social and physical restraints placed on the body. On the other hand, the state of embodiment can be used as an episteme of social interaction that is radically inclusive. When phenomenology is conjoned (perhaps even tainted) with an ethics of the everyday, then the imperfect body becomes the norm rather than the exception. One critic's umbrage at the impracticality of a flawless sentient subject confirms this:

"Philosophy's body—from Plato to Aristotle to Merleau-Ponty—is active, athletic, healthy, erect, well-born, well-bred... a corpus sanum cut to fit a mens sana in the felicity of being-in-the-world."

(Caputo 194)

So far, I have posited the experiences of our bodies as being a particularly dynamic entry point to the city. By no means would I suggest that this embodiment is the only means of considering social interaction in urban space, far from it. Rather, I hope that a re-considered model of the phenomenological body, one that takes into account the limitations of ability, will provide us with a civic subject that is approachable in its imperfection. The most basic consideration of existence should be a no less valid means of interpreting the everyday regimes of urban planning or mass media consumption. Through this most catholic response to common interests, the city remains the focus for the shared use of space. In a tightly packed, abundant population, our fellow pedestrians can quickly be re-configured as a mob, a potential threat, or a drain on physical and/or social resources. And yet it may be just as practical to consider an empathic appreciation of the everyday interactions that enables city users to draw out a praxis from the commonalities of their bodies. It is this empathy that I want to connote in the term "affective politics" as a gesture towards a phenomenology that has been tempered by criticism of robust sentence. So when the city is examined through sensory interaction, a politics such as this might incapacitate our motion, leave us blind, and force us to orient ourselves with numbed fingertips, and even then be unsure of our place. Disability comes to inhabit each one of us, none more so than those who claim to have captured perception.

Examining the Sensed City

If we can dispense with the notion of complete and coherent body, then the sclerotic world of the senses provides another way of approaching urban space. Traditionally, the sense of sight has been used...
as the first point of reference in the city of reciprocating bodies. In recent years, scholars of urban space have detailed the ways in which the vectors of sight correspond with the deployment of power, often comparing vision with presumptions of unmediated knowledge. The idea of scopic control is persuasive; who hasn’t felt unaccountably furtive when faced with a closed circuit camera in a mall? But this reading of sight could never be a synecdoche for all the other types of glances that take place in the city. The human frailty of sight should not be underestimated.

While the importance of personal perception gives a fleshly experience to the oculocentricity of many Enlightenment thinkers, the case of social “sightedness” provides a far more complex and demanding response. What constitutes a sight-worthy subject or a viewable panorama is a matter of conjecture, but these issues are given unique resonance in urban places. In the city, the premium value of land and the vastly increased access to a receptive audience of passers-by means that the city has particular potential for claims to power. The power of the face that turns to us with the full force of vulnerability offers an entry point to the city. Even though urban spaces may often be cushioned in a language of exclusion, the impetus of intersubjective sight—the returned gaze—provides an alternative to the dictum, “walk quickly and don’t make eye contact.” What could be less conducive to pleasure in the city? How else could the insularity of city users be undone by a moment of recognition? This act of acknowledgment is not simply one of acquaintance, but of mutual encountering. Its role in engendering community should not be underestimated in relation to more prosaic, verbalized affirmations of belonging.

The uses of vision are manifest. For those with little access to public articulation, the city provides the chance to make and maintain social contacts. For homeless city dwellers, the imperative to “stay on the scene” often comes down to persistence and presence that can be registered only by staying resolutely in the line of sight, in a place where the returned gaze is a possibility. The desire to look down over the city be-speaks a longing for escape from the binds of pedestrian mores. After all, the act of walking around the city is frequently laborious and the (usually) unspoken demands of other users of the space may impose themselves in uncomfortable ways. But the confines of the panoramic viewing tower are by no means emblematic of the city as a whole, and the return to ground level is only a matter of time.

To some extent, the affective nature of sight is the easiest to gauge. Certainly when we find ourselves being watched, examined, or glanced at there is some sense of being called upon to respond, just as the perception of others entails some form of invocation. While the other senses rely on proximity to exert intersubjective interaction, vision can extend much further than the body’s realm of immediate con-

trol. Once removed from the spatial enclosure of proximity, it becomes increasingly difficult to consider the relationship of those who perceive and are perceived as any kind of community. So, while the clear physiological indicators of sight gives this sense an advantage as a means of determining commonality, its detachment from its surroundings suggests that those more bodily proximate senses, such as sound and smell, also have considerable validity in a corporeal response to the city.

In his evocative essay, “Seen from the Window,” Henri Lefebvre (1996) makes a strong case for aural reception as a process in which rhythms of self and environment synchronize, blurring, until the sounds of the city correspond to the turbulence of our footfalls:

If we don’t listen to sounds and noises and instead listen to our own body (whose importance cannot be overvalued) usually we do not understand (hear) the rhythms and associations which none the less comprise us. (219)

The sounds of our own bodies—those words, assertions, and affirmations that resound through the city, but also the pumping of blood in our ears, the squirming of intestinal juices—are all undeniably constitutive elements of our subjectivity. A disability in registering these manifestations of our viscous, corporeal forms would surely result in a massive sense of alienation from ourselves. In this context, the work of Oliver Sacks springs to mind, as he relates the case of psychologically and psychiatrically impaired patients who report a terrifying disconnection from their own bodies. So, the internal noises of the body must be recognized as an integral element of everyday life. And yet, the case of shared and mediated space in the city would suggest that there is far more to this type of sensory reception than a simple awareness of internal sounds and solitary reception. It is the delivery of these messages of the body to a wider audience that marks the passage from an endogenously focused means of communication to one that is opened to reciprocal speech and an open ear.

The same process can be seen at work in the sense of smell, in which any discomfiture about bodily limitations tends to reach its limit—there is something ridiculous about this sense and yet the data it captures is fundamental. When smells are received, they are interpreted as part of the exogenous climate that is immediately internalized and made subject to aesthetic judgements and memory. As these exteriors are reversed and exposed to internal spaces, so the sense of smell invokes Merleau-Ponty’s term the “chiasm,” the bond between self and other, subject and object. Through this connection, “the body sensed and the body sentient are as the obverse and reverse, or again, as two segments of a sole circular course” (1968, 138). For not only is the outside environment re-coded to be incorporated by individual experience, but this personal response is then made known to the world once
again, this time through its common reception in a shared space. The acknowledgment of the smell of food cooking or of exhaust fumes is not an isolated or solitary expression in the city, but rather is apprehended en masse. And so smell is indicative of a community in which all that is shared is the body and its receptivity to the world.

As a small corner of the city exudes a certain scent—for instance, when the pedestrian turns a corner to discover that exhaust fumes are suddenly masked by the smell of ground coffee—a disparate crowd becomes a community of sense-receptive bodies. For a moment, a bond of affect that produces memories and desires, likes and dislikes, links this group of strangers. Responses are triggered even when they are not consciously formed in the mind. Furthermore, this microcosm of smell reception is repeated constantly at many different locales in the city and beyond. The same processes of momentary alliance between strangers are generated by all the senses. In turn, they produce a chance to reflect on the state of the many individual bodies that constitute this strange and yet intimately familiar community.

The body of experience that exists in the city is not subterranean knowledge; it is not concealed from passers-by or subalternate to the rational, planned approach to urban spaces. Instead, the place of the senses is plastered across the city walls, spread out on footpaths, displayed at eye level, and written in the sky. Sensory reception is sufficiently transparent as to be invisible. It is received but rarely articulated and certainly not placed in the context of a political model of affect and subjectivity. Insofar as smell is concerned, there is weighty philosophical bias against its validity. Hegel diminishes the aesthetic function of olfaction on the basis of the nose’s “ambivalent place on the face—between the ‘theoretical’ and ‘spiritual’ zone of the eyes and ears, and the ‘practical’ zone of the mouth” (qtd. in Drobnick 10). In this pervasive understanding of the nose and its function, there is little place for rationality or political affect. But it is precisely because of this absence that a sense such as smell opens the way for a study of shared space. The pluralism of sensory data and receptive bodies makes a case for communal sentiment.

Conclusion: Employing the Senses

Throughout this article, the senses have been constructed as the basis of a body of knowledge that is deliberately and self-consciously in transit. Attempts to define urban forms through more concrete considerations, such as the division of public and private domain, would have the effect of writing over the presence of difference and change that produces the energy of a sense-aware city. The movement of sensing bodies in such a city, while not all-encompassing, is an integral generator of this energy. A politics of the city that is based solely on the movement of its subjects would deny the real desire for respite and calm felt by even the most frenetic citizen. It would undermine the political and social contribution of those for whom movement is impaired, or at least difficult. Indeed, there are many struggles to customize the city’s built form for those in wheelchairs, with strollers, without sight or hearing, with particular bodily needs in relation to transport, or the aged. And it is the culmination of all these needs that shapes urban spaces into more humane environments that are able to accommodate all citizens. These urban reconstructions are as social as they are material—they act to charge space with an everyday politics that creates discursive environments in which compassion and acceptance of alterity is the norm.

The senses are mutually implicated in acts of place-making in which social conditions can be embodied in material forms. A response to sensory perception that is motile and responsive manages to subvert the dualism of mind and body. Importantly, this moving, sentient subject also extends beyond the responses of phenomenology, amongst which Cartesian dualism remains a fecund, if somewhat limiting trope. A body that can remember and a mind that receives sensation unencumbered by an intellectually judicious response speak of an entity with permeable boundaries. While this image is at odds with the rigidly defined philosophical subject, it also provides a fundamental challenge to phenomenology, despite its sustained critique of Descartes. For even though the duality of the body and the mind is under fire, it is at the same time entrenched firmly at the center of analysis where one function is portrayed as somehow less valid. The potential for interrelated readings of sensory perception are rich and varied; from simple cross-references of sight and sound used in everyday negotiations of the city, through to the complex domain of blended senses—synaesthesia. In these cases of shared response to the environment, the senses are able to cluster together in an aggregation of meaning that is diverse and mutually reinforcing.

From the discourse of the public domain, through to aesthetic representations of urban space, my argument depends upon an incorporated response to the body. The most basic knowledge that we have of ourselves is that of our bodies. Although this understanding may be fraught with all sorts of difficulties relating to the value of this fragile envelope, it remains the most basic mechanism for receiving our awareness of others and our environment. The city seems, at least for this researcher, a particularly fleshly terrain—it is the locale of consumer desires and the locus of power. The very proximity of others draws us out of personal reflection, sometimes jarringly, to remember the contiguous relationship that we have with the rest of the world. It would be difficult, if not impossible, to imagine a city in which social relations were compartmentalized and subjects were able to maintain a steady detachment from one another. The overflow of sensory data and the constant presence of crowds make urban space so appealing and, at
times, so infuriating. It is essential to keep these challenging signifiers of difference at the center of any conception of the city. Such an ongoing project would merge sensory perception with a deeply engaged and responsive approach to the city. At best, this radical inclusivity that already exists at certain times and in certain places in all cities could even be conceived as a "revolution through the senses."

Notes

2. William Whyte offers a prime example of Manhattan’s crowded streets as both nuisance and drawcard. “You will also find them on Lexington Avenue, the side of the street with the most obstructions and slowest going is the side that attracts the most people. People love to hate Lexington, and have terrible things to say about it. Some actually avoid it, but it does appear that many of the people on Lexington Avenue are there because they want to be” (79).

3. Refer to Bookchin and to Ross for a response to the perceived anti-humanism of theories surrounding “the selfish gene” or “the population bomb.” In many ways, these objections could also apply to urban theories such as that of Simmel, which view cities as an overwhelming, even inauthentic spaces that usurp agency from their protagonists and leave them vulnerable to everything from personal despair to consumerism. While the aforementioned critiques do raise the issue of a positive reading of human projects such as the city, the task is left to writers such as Jane Jacobs and William Whyte to reconfigure a narrative of urban existence marked by optimism and dynamism.

4. Martin Jay’s work Downcast Eyes is perhaps the most comprehensive of these studies, but it is joined by Burgin and by Boyer.

5. This is particularly evident in the case of lost propriocentric function, in which the body’s ability to navigate space, balance itself, judge distances, and even recognize itself may be lost (Sacks).

Works Cited


Airin-Cho

"Airin-Cho" translates roughly as "The District of Neighborly Love." The name, given to a neighborhood in southern Osaka, is a grim joke to the people who live there. Airin is a desperately poor and almost completely ignored shadow in Japan's economic miracle, not even listed on maps of the city. Most of the people there are homeless, transient men who have slipped through the cracks in Japan's rigid society. Unable to enter Japan's mainstream, they live off of government handouts or day work at construction sites. Chronic alcoholism is common, and with it violence and despair. Police do not enter the area for fear of inciting riots, instead monitoring it through video cameras on tall poles. Yet as severe as the conditions there are, there is often a kind of anarchic buoyancy to the people in Airin. Forgotten and exiled within their own country, they look out for each other, knowing that the only help that will come will be from themselves.