A sense of the past: exploring sensory experience in the pre-modern world

On his arrival in the Caribbean in October 1492 Christopher Columbus experienced a sensory explosion: fragrant scents, tropical fish, sweetly singing multi-coloured birds and encounters with unknown peoples whose erotic nakedness, incomprehensible language and apparent lack of social organization clashed with his perception of mankind (Fig. 1). As far as we can determine from the European sources and surviving archaeology, the indigenous islanders on their part were astounded by the sound of cannon firing, their first meeting with a chicken, speaking paper (writing), brass tacks and bells and the taste of sugar and other new foods. Much has been written on this first encounter between European and Caribbean peoples, but focusing on its sensory impact as David Abulafia does in a new book helps to explain the subsequent sordid tale of slavery, disease, ambition and greed far better than can any political or commercial history (Abulafia, 2008).

Sensory history is a fairly new historical approach. The first of the three works reviewed here: Mark C. Smith’s aptly titled Sensory History (2007), provides a much-needed international overview of the approach, covering the period from antiquity to the 12th century. The other two works: Hubbub (2007) by Emily Cockayne, and The Senses in Late Medieval England (2006) by Chris Woolgar, focus on England between the twelfth and the eighteenth centuries. Although each book differs in style, each historian argues that sensory experience is historically and culturally contingent: people of different times and places hear, see, taste, touch and smell in distinctive ways. Each historian is influenced to some degree by anthropological arguments that sensory and emotional experience is never universal. Although historians can reflect on the nature of sensory experiences through analysis of texts or artefacts, they cannot recover a sense of how the past actually smelt or felt. Even if we were able to build a time machine, our own culturally shaped senses would prevent us from experiencing medieval London like a medieval person.

Although historians of the senses are aware of the fundamental contribution of neuroscientists to understanding brain function, they argue that they cannot be reduced solely to physiological processes. Some sensory historians ignore science completely, but others remember that mainstream explanations of sensory perception at any given time and place do influence how that world is experienced. As neuroscientist Antonio Damasio’s work shows, modern science enables us to imagine our senses as

SENSORY HISTORY
By Mark M. Smith 2007.
Oxford: Berg
Price: £55 (Cloth),
£16.99 (Paper)
ISBN: 9781845204143
(Cloth), 9781845204150 (Paper)

HUBBUB
Filth, Noise and Stench in England 1600–1770
By Emily Cockayne 2007.
New Haven and London: Yale University Press
Price: £25/$35 (Cloth),
£10.99/$18 (Paper)
ISBN: 9780300112146
(Cloth), 9780300137569 (Paper)

THE SENSES IN LATE MEDIEVAL ENGLAND
By Chris Woolgar 2006.
New Haven and London: Yale University Press
Price: £25/$40
ISBN: 9780300118711

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passive receptors of outside images which are processed and presented to a ‘self’ located in some kind of super-cinema of the brain. We often describe the brain as a computer or a set of circuits, hard-wired to behave in a certain way (Damasio, 2000). This imagery reflects how neuroscience grew as a discipline in tandem with developments in electricity, cinematography and computing; it explains how we perceive our world, but is also shaped by it.

In 1492, learned debates also influenced how the world was perceived. As medical historians Nancy Siraisi and James T. McIlwain, also a neuroscientist, point out, medieval scholars would have located sensory perception in the brain (Siraisi, 1990; McIlwain, 2006). However, they would have perceived the five senses as active entities conveying information about the outside world to the internal senses of common sense, imagination, memory and fantasy (the ability to visualize) (Fig. 2). Scholars differed considerably over how this worked in practice: for example, were rays emitted from the eyes towards the viewed object or was it the other way round? Either theory allowed for these rays to influence both viewer and object, thus explaining the widespread concept of the evil eye, or a belief still current in the 18th century that what a mother saw affected her foetus. The brain, however, was not the only sensitive organ of the body. The heart was believed to be the centre of the animal soul, and thus closely associated with more carnal senses such as touch. The brain, the centre of the rational soul, was more closely associated with sight; the eyes often viewed as the ‘windows of the soul’. Sight, therefore, was given pre-eminence in the pre-modern world as it is today, but often for spiritual reasons due to the inter-dependence of religion and rational knowledge (scientia). Thus even if the brain functioned in the past very much as it does today, the emotional and moral meaning of sensory experience differed dramatically. It is this meaningfulness that sensory historians try to explore.

In his overview of sensory history, Mark M. Smith explores the meaningfulness of the sensory encounter between Columbus and the Caribbean islanders. The nakedness of the islanders both attracted and offended the Europeans’ sense of touch. On the one hand, the islanders were perceived as beautiful, living in a state of childlike innocence akin to that of the Garden of Eden: even the fragrance on the breeze had the scent of paradise. On the other hand, their vulnerable nakedness invited possession: they were made captive and raped. The islanders’ nakedness was highly erotic but their very attractiveness suggested that the islanders were carnal rather than rational in nature. This belief was reinforced by their inability to communicate through recognizable speech, the fact that they were untouched by baptismal water: a key feature of personhood at this time, and the initial perception that they had no marriage laws or means of government. As Columbus continued his voyage, stories of cannibalism and body piercing further reduced his belief in the rational soul of the new peoples, and also provoked fear. This heightened when...
both crewmen and islanders began to die of disease: the sailors may have contracted pox (although epidemiologists and palaeo-archaeologists continue to debate the origins of syphilis), and the islanders were decimated by European ailments (Abulafia, 2008).

Smith’s book is an inspiring survey of a vast wealth of historical research. He considers the pleasurable connotations of foods and perfumes, and looks at evidence from the medieval, ancient and non-Western worlds, but he focuses on how the senses were used to dominate and manipulate in the modern colonial world, since he is primarily a historian of race in North America. Smith argues that from the time of Columbus sensory experience gradually altered the self-perception of dominated and dominator alike. He believes that racial stereotypes are multi-sensory, based not just on reactions to visual appearance but also, and often more profoundly, on prejudices arising from taste, smell, sound and, as we have already seen, touch. The sounds of song and prayer and the aroma of cooking foods all have a role to play in the construction of cultural differences, but they are often neglected. Smith believes that all historians would benefit from incorporating some aspect of sensory history into their research: developing a sensory ‘habit’ as he puts it. To some extent, historians of medicine and of the body have already taken this step (Bynum and Porter, 1993). There are many studies of how the human body has been subjected over time to punishment, fashion or hygiene, which usually analyse sensory experience, especially pain. However, one should always avoid seeing bodily experience as universal. Palaeo-archaeologists can infer from skeletal evidence, but they cannot know what it meant to wear dentures in the 15th century or be tattooed in the 17th. Medical historians have long explored the history of belief in bad smells as causes of disease and understand that all the senses are crucial to diagnosis: even today when technology allows us to see inside the body, the sounds of the chest and the feel of the pulse are still important. What historians must avoid, however, is the temptation to diagnose retrospectively past feelings of ‘dis-ease’, to judge past medical practices by modern standards, and to see medical history as a progress towards modernity (Arrizabalaga, 2002).

The concept of modernity is important to Smith who tried to draw together the main historiographical debates of sensory history. These debates focus on the theory that at some point during what is known as the ‘early-modern’ period (c.1500–1750), sight became the most important sense due to the advent of printing and changes in art, both of which denigrated orality and encouraged ‘good taste’ based on new levels of social and intellectual attainment. The other senses, especially touch and smell, became seen as more primitive. Smith gathers together plenty of research that challenges this traditional ‘great divide’ position, arguing that historians need to think in terms of ‘intersensoriality’ i.e. multiple and inter-related sensory experiences in all times and places. However, there is still a tendency to see the past as dirtier and smellier than the present. ‘Othering’ the past in this way or judging based on our presentist, ‘civilized’ attitudes are deeply problematic, and historians of the senses need to be acutely aware of how cultural attitudes are constructed. On the other hand, Smith’s argument that there is no sensorial continuity between past and present does seem to reconfirm ‘the past as other’, allowing for the maintenance of old prejudices. His critique at the end of the book of ‘living’ museums which attempt to reproduce the smells and sounds of the past for modern consumption, and encourage children especially to explore the past in a more tactile way, seems overly negative. It is true that these activities stimulate the modern senses and cannot truly recreate past experience, but it is also the case that the modern imagination needs a sense of the past for the creation of identities. Without this sense there would be no historians.

The other two books to be reviewed here both tap into the modern imagination very effectively. They indicate the timeliness of Smith’s overview and the future importance of sensory history. It is exciting to find two historians trying to do something different for time periods where historical approaches are still quite traditional and for which sources are rare, since most pre-modern people were illiterate. Both these books make for rewarding reading. The Senses in late medieval England is a lavishly illustrated introduction to the Middle Ages written by an expert on the medieval household. Chris Woolgar begins by briefly discussing medieval sensory concepts, and then presents a chapter on each sense, including speech as an extra sense of the mouth, dislodging our preconceived idea of five senses. The last three chapters deal with the elite sensory environments of the bishop, the queen and the nobleman (Fig. 3). All the chapters provide fascinating glimpses of medieval experience, but Woolgar seems to be using the senses as a simple framework for a history of medieval life, without engaging with debate. For example, he pays only cursory attention to the differences between ‘medieval’ and ‘modern’ sensory environments, and his rigid treatment of the senses does not allow for any concept of intersensoriality. He also uses a more limited number of sources than one might expect, none of which is critiqued for their sensory bias. For example, saints’ lives are problematic because the whole point of these narratives is to show the saint enduring hardship and pain. Woolgar surprisingly does not include any letters from the four wonderful collections that survive from 15-century England. Written by members of gentry and merchant families with connections to the royal court or to European trade, these letters make requests for oranges and spices, show anxiety about health and injury, and provide evidence for clothing and fashion that suggests the percolation of elite tastes down through society. One cannot help but wish that the author had expanded the interdisciplinary approach followed in his last three chapters to explore other sensory environments at different social levels through their archaeology and architecture as well as properly critiqued written sources. Woolgar does have the ‘sensory habit’ encouraged by Smith, but structurally and conceptually this book does not work as well as it could have done.

At first sight, Hubbub by Emily Cockayne seemed to re-affirm modern preconceptions of the negative aspects of pre-modern life, especially its subtitled reference to Filth, noise and stench. However, its approach is far more subtle than the title suggests, and this is much more convincing sensory history than Woolgar’s book. Cockayne, whose previous work has been on the history of sound in the early-modern period, analyses two centuries of urban history by looking at what annoyed the senses of plaintiffs, diarists, novelists and town councillors. She has many more written sources than Woolgar and uses them imaginatively; she also
effectively analyses visual images, such as the engravings of William Hogarth which depict the dangers, moral and physical, of London street life but also illustrate the elite’s hardening attitude towards the poor (Fig. 4). *Hubbub* is divided into chapters entitled ‘Ugly’, ‘Noisy’, ‘Dirty’, ‘Mouldy’, etc. with each chapter subdivided by proverbs of the period such as: ‘He that runs in the dark may well stumble’, and ‘Cast no dirt into the well that hath given you water’: sayings which indicate that people of this period recognized their own social problems. The thematic chapters lend themselves well to intersensoriality. Cockayne is keenly aware how the senses inter-relate. She understands—for example—that ugliness does not just offend visually but causes multi-sensory aversion, and that we are alerted to rotten food by touch, smell and sight, hopefully long before we have to taste it. Each chapter also engages with specific historical debates: ‘Gloomy’ analyses street lighting, ‘Grotty’ examines housing regulations, and ‘Itchy’ considers personal hygiene, clothing and healthcare.

Cockayne argues throughout this book that by analysing what was thought wrong with the environment in the view of some articulate and usually wealthier people, she can better understand ideal standards of living, and why some communities tried to change their environment. In taking this route, Cockayne has to reflect on the bias of her sources. Grumbling diarists like Samuel Pepys or those who take their noisy neighbours to court were not representative of the whole population. We can still only infer the hardship suffered by the poorest people from illustrations, architectural drawings and criminal proceedings. Cockayne understands that sensory experience is purely subjective, and so even if objectively an historian can see the built environment improving by modern standards: public lighting, paved streets, improved waste disposal, this does not mean that the grumbling stopped. Better living conditions mean higher expectations and therefore greater disappointments and causes for complaint. Cockayne suggests that life did get better for many people. The social aspirations of the

*Fig. 3* Representation of the birth of St Edmund in a manuscript written by John Lydgate and presented to Henry VI between 1434 and 1439 (British Library MS Harley 2278, fol 13v): C. Woolgar, *The senses in late medieval England* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2006), Fig. 81, p. 246.
Fig. 4 William Hogarth, Gin Lane (1751), engraving: E. Cockayne, Hubbub: filth, noise and stench in England (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2007), Fig. 15, p. 47.
Cockayne concludes by arguing that despite all the problems of urban life, some of the people who migrated there during this period really did have opportunities for increased wealth and comfort. She also notes that for many people increasing industrialization towards the end of the period led to worsening noise, overcrowding and pollution. This is the problem with the concept of ‘progress’: change is always haphazard, based on commercial gain as much as any sense of the greater good. One of Cockayne’s conclusions is that emerging industries that made money were encouraged despite the problems they caused: ‘We will bear with the stink, if it bring but in chink’. Nevertheless, the concept of environmental pollution and related health risks was discussed in the 18th century, and there is a vast wealth of detail in this book on industrial accident, domestic injury, disease and disfigurement.

Cockayne’s book pays little attention to modern theories of sensory perception. She tries to explore what she calls ‘inpert’, internal viewpoints from the society itself, rather than relying on ‘expert’, external (usually modern) views. This gives this book a freshness of perspective, but also forces the reader to take on board the morals and inequalities of the time period. Although she does not refer to them, Cockayne could equally have described life in British slave plantations in the Caribbean during the same period. Like Smith, she considers the manipulative controls established by sensory prejudice—for example—negative attitudes towards the diseased, the old and lunatics were leading to increasing institutionalization and the poor became morally viewed as responsible for their own poverty and illness. Being ill was an implicitly moral experience throughout the medieval and early-modern periods. Arguably it still is, but modern people find it difficult not to judge past prejudices as barbaric or ignorant in contrast to their own ‘enlightened’ views. For example, David Abulafia often feels the need to condemn attitudes that led to slavery and disease in the Caribbean (Abulafia, 2008). Sensory history, or any study of past experience should try to explore why past people behaved as they did on their own terms, even if their behaviour is incomprehensible to us. This does not mean that historians cannot look at calls for change articulated within the time periods discussed, or see threads of continuity between past and present environments that shape who we are and where we live today. This is what Emily Cockayne manages to do. Ultimately, her book is an optimistic view of human endeavour that reaffirms the historian’s role to inform and entertain within a new and exciting field of research. It is to be hoped that sensory history continues to develop since all three of the books reviewed here show how it can enhance our sense of the past.

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References