



SENSORY  
STUDIES

David Le Breton  
Translated by  
Carmen Ruschensky

# Sensing the World

An Anthropology of the Senses

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# Sensing the World

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# Sensing the World

An Anthropology of the Senses

*David Le Breton*

*Translated by  
Carmen Ruschinsky*

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# PREFACE:

## David Le Breton and the Sociality of Sensation

David Howes

This is a book to be savored. The author recounts how it was written over a period of sixteen years (1990–2006), whenever he could take time out from his busy schedule—giving a course of lectures here, holding a workshop there, researching other books—to sit down, usually at a café, and reflect on the material he had read on the train, heard about in the media, or observed in his daily life.<sup>1</sup> Having, in 1990, just published *Anthropologie du corps et modernité*—an academic blockbuster (now in its seventh edition)—David Le Breton was very much in demand as a speaker and animator. This book has some of the flavor of all those cafés in which it was written, and the hectic pace of Le Breton’s itinerant existence at the time, though he had by that point acquired a permanent post. The writing is upbeat, wide-ranging, probing, and engaged or “passionné” (passionate). Le Breton is a *very* passionate intellectual and a very public intellectual—as well as a prolific one. Indeed, this is the nineteenth of the thirty-one books he has written to date. Many of these books were published by Éditions Métailié, whose founder and director, Anne-Marie Métailié, is renowned for her cosmopolitan flair and discerning eye. It was specially commissioned by Métailié, and one can see how it is in many ways a paean to her complex vision for the human sciences—a vision with our humanity at its core.

*La saveur du monde* is the first of Le Breton’s books to be translated into English, though there have been numerous translations of his works into other European languages. It is a privilege for us to introduce this work to the English-speaking world as the sixth volume in the Sensory Studies series—and, together with the author, we wish to thank the University of Strasbourg Institute for Advanced Study (USIAS), and in particular its



director, Thomas Ebbesen, for the generous financial contribution that made this translation possible.

## Sensology

For Le Breton, as for others of us, the anthropology of the senses emerged out of a prior engagement with the anthropology of the body. He began reflecting on the question of “the body” toward the end of the 1970s while writing his doctoral thesis in sociology under the direction of the illustrious Jean Duvignaud. The topic of the body was very much in vogue thanks to the work of Michel Foucault on the micropolitics of corporeal practices, as in *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. But Le Breton resisted the tendency to treat the body as object that was so rampant—both in the literature (e.g., Foucault) and in popular culture (e.g., liberation of the body, body therapies)—at the time, since this appeared to him to smuggle a certain dualism back into the discussion. “For me, there is no world apart from the body and hence of the senses” (in Andrieu 2007: 5) This formulation, with its cosmic solipsism (almost), owes more to the subjectivism of Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology of the body and perception—and in particular Merleau-Ponty’s notion of “the flesh of the world”—than, for example, the instrumentalism of Marcel Mauss’s theory in “Techniques of the Body” (i.e., the body as “man’s first tool”), much less the “docile body” of Foucault’s carceral modern subjects. For Le Breton, the body is the existential ground of perception and being—or, better, *life*—itself. But it is important not to think we are simply talking about the “lived body” of phenomenology here. That construct, too, in Le Breton’s estimation, perpetuates the old dualism. Le Breton’s overriding interest is rather in “the life of the subject”—the subject as embodied individual, the subject as social actor, and the subject as seeker after meaning (*sens* in French).

For his understanding of meaning (*sens*), Le Breton found that he had to step out of phenomenology and into anthropology. Phenomenology lacked an adequate purchase on the encompassing inevitability of society and culture—and above all, the symbolic.

What interests me in my work as an anthropologist are the resources of meaning [*ressources de sens*] that individuals project onto the world.... Perception, for example, is a dialogue between the postulate of a world that is ultimately unknowable in any absolute sense and the interpretation that an individual, belonging to a community of meaning [*communauté de sens*] and of values, and with his or her own style, brings to it. (in Andrieu 2007: 6)

The emphasis on each individual having his or her own style, while at the same time belonging to a community that provides them with the resources

(the language, the habitus, the lenses) to interpret the world symbolically, and the allowance that there is also a world out there (if only as a postulate) that is impervious to the sense people try to make of it—these are the key elements that make up Le Breton’s anthropology of the body, the senses, and the world.

While Le Breton often cites Merleau-Ponty’s *Phenomenology of Perception*, and there is a school of phenomenological anthropology (see Throop and Desjarlais 2011), his anthropology is ultimately much closer to Ernst Cassirer’s *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*. According to Cassirer: “Symbolic forms are not imitations, but *organs of reality*, since it is solely by their agency that anything real becomes an object for intellectual apprehension, and as such is made visible to us” (quoted in Becker 1979: 2). In *The Imagination of Reality*, the anthropologist Alton Becker says of this passage that it packs a “powerful metaphor[:] conceiving of symbolic systems as ‘organs’ of perception; not what we know and believe, but the means of knowing and believing” (Becker 1979: 2). Cassirer’s pronouncement chimes with Le Breton’s convictions regarding how human beings project meaning onto the world or make sense of things in the act of sensing. Le Breton’s sensorial anthropology could otherwise be compared to Symbolic Interactionism, with its emphasis on interpretation, “the definition of the situation,” social interaction, “minding,” and human agency. It is no coincidence that Le Breton wrote a treatise on this school of American sociology (Le Breton 2004b).<sup>2</sup>

If one were to try and sum up Le Breton’s approach in a single word, the most apt word would be “sensology,” as proposed by the distinguished historian of ideas and prominent sensory studies scholar, Richard Newhauser (2014). This neologism nicely captures the back and forth between sensing and sense-making (or symbolization), between sensation and signification, feeling and meaning, that is given in the French word *sens* and is also implicit in the English word “sense” (Rodaway 1994)

### *Sensus in extremis*

Throughout Le Breton’s work, there is a strong emphasis on relationality. As he points out in an interview with Bernard Andrieu:

Meaning is not in things. It emerges in the relation between social actors and things, as well as in the intertwined debates with others about their definition [i.e. “the definition of the situation”]. The projection of meaning is a social and individual activity that sometimes meets resistance from the world or from other members of the society. (2007: 6)

Thus, Le Breton’s individual is a social subject but not necessarily a (fully) socialized one. This *écart* is partly a reflection of his own double formation—in sociology and prior to that clinical psychology, and partly his own condition as a subject, his existential self. Le Breton freely admits that his

own life has been a troubled one, that he is a “survivor,” who often feels guilty about going on living when so many close acquaintances of his have died (see Lévy 2010: 13, 143). This is perhaps what draws him to the study of other individuals on the margins of society—those who engage in risky or “extreme behavior,” such as the anorexic, the cutter, the suicidal. But he strongly resists the all-too-easy pathologization of such behavior.

It is precisely because we live in a safe society [*société sécuritaire*] that the fact of putting one’s life in danger takes on the meaning of a quest and a transgression. It adds to the symbolic effectiveness. And in any transgression, there is power. Anyone who takes it upon themselves to confront a prohibition is going to reap the power that comes with having dared look death in the face and risk dying. There is also a power of metamorphosis in the fact of confronting limits when society prohibits us from doing so and seeks to prevent this. This is the paradox of risk-taking: there are an enormous number of social workers, doctors, psychologists, associations and hotlines in place to prevent young people from putting themselves in dangerous situations. And the more this network of prevention grows, the more the transgressions and danger-seeking grow, and are constantly renewed: new scarifications, choking games, etc. (in Chavaroché and Chobeaux 2008)

In place of advocating prevention, Le Breton advocates “l’accompagnement” or “being with the other,”—that is, empathizing with them in their quest for meaning through starvation, self-harm and other forms of extreme sensation.<sup>3</sup> This has put him at odds with the community of health professionals in many a notorious debate on television or at conferences. His method of sensing along with the other is manifest in a wide array of empirical studies (e.g., Le Breton 2002, 2003, 2007).<sup>4</sup> These books all bear testimony to Le Breton’s profound humanity (the quality that Métailié so admires in his work), to his openness to grappling, both sociologically and sensationally, with what some call “bare life.” Sartrean existentialism pales in comparison with Le Breton’s *sensationism*.

## Savoring the World

“So, you’ve written a cookbook!” one colleague quipped when hearing the title of the present work, *La saveur du monde* in the original (Le Breton, personal communication). Not quite, but this book does attest to the enlargement of Le Breton’s concentration, from a focus on exploring the *voir-savoir* (or seeing-knowing) nexus in a seminal chapter of *Anthropologie du corps et modernité* (the chapter dealt with the rupture in humanity’s relation to the body instigated by Vesalius’s visualization/objectification of the dissected corpse) to grappling with the *saveur-savoir* (or tasting-knowing) nexus, the *entendre-entendement* (hearing-understanding) nexus, the *sentir-*

*sentir* (smelling-sensing) nexus, and so forth in this book. In other words, Le Breton grew out of the “anti-ocularcentrism” of conventional French Theory (Jay 1993) and into his other senses, but without turning his back on sight, as his investigations progressed and his thinking matured. Michel Serres traces a similar trajectory in *The Five Senses: A Philosophy of Mingled Bodies*.

In closing, let me highlight some of the points about this work the reader will want to savor as they digest it. Le Breton is sensitive to the sensory underpinnings of language and constantly teases out the sensology of everyday speech;<sup>5</sup> he plumbs the depths of light and sound (as well as noise) but also turns his attention on their antithesis, darkness and silence; he inquires into what blindness and deafness mean to the individual living with either or both of these conditions and what they can teach us about “normal” vision and audition; he is not afraid to venture beyond the ordinary bounds of sense and undertake an anthropology of such extrasensory perceptions as clairvoyance or the odor of sanctity; he is attuned both to the individuation and interrelations of the senses (e.g., “The hands want to see, the eyes want to caress,” to quote Juhanni Palasmaa); he ruminates on the pleasures of the senses (especially those of the table and of sex) but devotes the final chapter of this book to pondering the cultural conditions of disgust; he is particularly entertaining (and scathing) in his analysis of the racist sensorium; and, he occasionally leavens his social analysis of the sensory self (including the sense of self) with psychoanalysis.<sup>6</sup> In short, Le Breton leaves no sense unturned or any sensation out. This evenness of attention to what each of the senses has to contribute to our social and personal existence is what makes this book such an excellent introduction to the anthropology and sociology of the body and senses.

Le Breton is fortunate to have Carmen Ruschensky as his translator. Ruschensky is a graduate of the renowned translation studies program at Montreal’s Concordia University. She is currently enrolled in the Humanities Ph.D. program and a member of the Concordia Centre for Sensory Studies. Her translation is faithful both to the sometimes rambling and driving power of Le Breton’s writing. It should be noted that Le Breton, in conversation with the present editor, has also revised his original text, trimming some sections and expanding on others to ensure that the reader can enjoy a taste of and for the world in all its multisensory richness.



# Introduction

*I love that knowledge gives us life, cultivates us; I love making my home in it, that it helps me to eat and drink, to stroll, to love, to die, sometimes to be reborn; I love sleeping between its sheets and I love the fact that it is not something outside me*

– MICHEL SERRES, *THE FIVE SENSES: A PHILOSOPHY OF MINGLED BODIES*

There is no alternative to experiencing the world, to being endlessly traversed and changed by it. The world is the emanation of a body moving through it. A to-and-fro arises between the sensation of things and the sensation of self. Before thought, there is feeling. To say, with Descartes, “I think therefore I am” is to ignore humanity’s sensory immersion in the world. “I sense therefore I am” is another way of saying that the human condition is not only spiritual or mental, but, first and foremost, embodied. An anthropology of the senses implies being immersed in the world, being within, not in front of it, and allowing sensuality to inform one’s writing and analysis. The body is a profusion of sensory experience. It is absorbed in the movement of the world and mingles with it through all its senses. Human flesh and the flesh of the world combine in a seamless fabric, an ever-present sensory continuity. We become self-aware only through sensing, and we experience our existence through the sensory and perceptual resonances that continually permeate our being.

The first glimmer of a sensation breaks our routine sense of self. The senses provide a means for making sense. Against the endless backdrop of a world in continual motion, they crystallize experience and make it intelligible. We notice a sensation that makes more sense than others and unlocks the mysteries of the past or present, yet a multitude of stimuli confronts us every instant only to fade into obscurity. A particular scene or face, a sound, taste, scent, or touch, elicits a feeling of presence and heightened self-awareness that remains otherwise dormant throughout the day, unless we are constantly alert to incoming sensations. The world that we inhabit exists through the agency of our flesh, which rises to greet it.

Perception is not coterminous with the objective world but a form of interpretation. Every individual navigates a sensory universe tied to a personal history born of his or her education. Walking in the same forest, different individuals are sensitive to different stimuli. There is the forest of

the mushroom picker, the Rambler, the fugitive, or Aboriginal; the forest of the hunter, gamekeeper or poacher; the forest of lovers, vagabonds, or ornithologists; and also the forest of animals and trees, of night and day, a thousand forests in one, a thousand realities in a single mystery that remains hidden and yields its secrets only in fragments. There is no true forest, only a multitude of perceptions based on one's perspectives, expectations, and social and cultural affiliations.

Anthropologists are the explorers of these tangled layers of reality. In the end, they also offer an interpretation of the forest, but strive to expand their view and their senses in order to understand this layering of realities. Unlike others, anthropologists are aware of the *mi-dire*, the half-speaking of a truth that can never be completely verbalized. Anthropologists' work consists in surveying these sedimentations. They know, following André Breton, that the world is a "forest of symbols" that conceals a reality sustained by the quest to find it. Researchers are as in a labyrinth seeking an improbable center. Sensory experience is primarily shaped by the meanings of the world as it is lived, because this is the only form of experience it provides. If we define situations as real, they are real in their consequences, said William Isaac Thomas.

Our sensory perceptions, intertwined with meanings, delineate the fluctuating limits of the environment in which we live, revealing its range and flavor. The human world is a world of flesh, a construction born of sensoriality filtered through our social and cultural condition, personal history, and attention to our surroundings. The body stands between the heavens and earth as the ground of identity. It is the filter through which we appropriate and lay claim to the substance of the world through symbolic systems shared with members of a community (Le Breton 1990, 2004). The body is the human condition of the world, the site where the incessant flux of things settles on precise meanings or impressions, metamorphosing into images, sounds, odors, textures, colors, and scenes. Individuals participate in the social bond not only through their understandings, words, and undertakings, but also through the gestures and expressions that accompany communication, through their immersion in the countless rituals that accentuate the rhythms of everyday life. All of the actions that form the thread of existence, even the least perceptible, are processed by the body. The body is not an artifact that houses an individual. It is not an obstacle to existence. On the contrary, the body, always embracing and embraced by the world, leads the way and provides for our hospitable welcome in the world. "Thus what we discover by going beyond the prejudice of the objective world is not an occult inner world" (Merleau-Ponty 1962: 58). It is a world of meanings and values, a world of complicity and communication between people and their surroundings.

Every society, faced with an infinity of possible sensations every instant, creates its own "sensorial organization" (Ong 1991). It defines particular ways to select from and mediate its relation to the world, and establishes the filter of meanings and values through which its members orient themselves

in the world and communicate with each other. This does not mean there are no differences between individuals, even within a group of the same social status. The meanings we attach to perceptions are subjective. Whether a cup of coffee tastes sweet or water feels cold, for example, is often open to debate, revealing that individual sensibilities are diverse and nuanced, even within the same culture.

Sensory anthropology is based on the idea that sensory perception is not only physiological but also, primarily, grounded in a cultural orientation that allows for some degree of individual variation. Sensory perceptions form a prism of meanings on and from the world. They are shaped through education and brought into play according to the personal history of each individual. They might vary from one person to the next within the same community, but they more or less correspond on the essential points. Beyond the personal meanings at play within a social group are larger significations, forms of human logic (anthropo-logic) that unite people across different societies in their sensibility to the world. Sensory anthropology is one of many approaches to anthropology. It explores and maps what human beings belonging to different societies make of their ability to see, smell, touch, hear and taste.<sup>1</sup> Though the map is not the actual territory on which people live, it can provide insight into their existence, delineating its essential contours and providing a mirror image, which, though slightly distorted, allows us to better understand our distance or proximity to the Other and also, in the process, better understand ourselves.

The world is not the background decor for our actions but their center of reality. We are immersed in an environment that is defined by our perception of it. Sensory perceptions are primarily a projection of meanings onto the world. They always entail a weighing of options, an establishing of boundaries, and an active reflecting on the uninterrupted sensorial flux that we are perpetually submerged in. The senses are not “windows” on the world or “mirrors” that capture reality, oblivious to different cultures and sensibilities. They are filters that retain in their sieve only that which we have learned to sift out or seek to identify by mobilizing our resources. Things in the world do not exist in themselves. They are always invested with a perspective, a value that makes them worthy of being perceived. The limits and range of sensory experience are circumscribed within a social symbolic order.

To experience the world is not to live in a right or wrong relationship to it. It is to perceive the world in a personal way within the context of a cultural experience.

The thing is inseparable from a person perceiving it and can never be actually *in itself*, because its articulations are those of our very existence, and because it stands at the other end of our gaze or at the terminus of a sensory exploration which invests it with humanity. To this extent, every perception is a communication or a communion, the taking up or completion by us of some extraneous intention or, on the other hand, the



complete expression outside ourselves of our perceptual powers and a coition, so to speak, of our body with things. (Merleau-Ponty 1962: 320)

Every minute, we are perceptually decoding our surrounding world and transforming it into a coherent familiar fabric, even while unexpected touches sometimes take us by surprise. We see, hear, smell, taste, and touch the world, experience ambient temperature, and perceive the interior hum of our bodies and, in doing so, make the world a measure of our experience. We make it communicable to others who are immersed in our shared system of social and cultural references.

The common use of the term “world view” to designate a “representational” (another visual metaphor) or symbolic system unique to a given society reveals the hegemony of vision in Western societies, the valorization of sight that makes only a seen world possible. “When modern technological man thinks of the physical universe,” writes Walter J. Ong, “he thinks of something he can visualize either in itself or in terms of visual measurements and charts. The universe for us is essentially something you can draw a picture of” (Ong 1969: 636). Vision dominates over the other senses in our societies and is our primary reference. Yet other societies, instead of world “view,” speak of tasting, touching, hearing, or smelling the world to describe their way of thinking or sensing their relation to others and the environment. Every culture determines a field of possibilities for the visible and invisible, the tactile and untouchable, the olfactory and the odorless, the flavorful and the bland, the clean and the dirty. A culture delimits a particular sensory universe, and different sensory worlds do not match up perfectly, because they are also worlds of meanings and values. Every society develops a “sensory model” (Classen 1997) nuanced, of course, by individual differences based on class, social group, age, gender, and, especially, one’s personal history and particular sensibilities. To come into the world is to acquire a way of seeing, touching, hearing, tasting, and smelling that is unique to one’s community of belonging. Human beings inhabit different sensory universes.

Several scholars have attempted to study this sensory profusion in a precise and systematic manner, in order to understand how different societies ascribe particular meaning to sensory experience, including Stoller (1989, 1997), Devisch (1990, 2008), Howes (1991, 2003, 2005), Classen (1993a, 1993b, 1998, 2005), Sutton (2001), Geurts (2002), and historians like Corbin (1982, 1988, 1991, 1994), Havelange (1998), Dias (2004), Illich (2000, 2004), and others. The complete list of works, or those focusing on a particular aspect of our sensory relation to the world, would be very long indeed. For David Howes,

The anthropology of the senses is primarily concerned with how the patterning of sense experience varies from one culture to the next in accordance with the meaning and emphasis attached to each of the modalities of perception. It is also concerned with tracing the influence

such variations have on forms of social organization, conceptions of self and cosmos, the regulation of the emotions, and other domains of cultural expression. (Howes 1991: 4)

Anthropologists deconstruct their own culture-specific sensory perceptions and open themselves to other other ways of sensing the world. Ethnologists or travelers often experience a kind of sensory culture shock, being confronted with an array of unexpected flavors, odors, musical styles, rhythms, sounds, tactile experiences, and sights, all of which upset their familiar routines and initiate them to different ways of sensing their relation to others and the world. The values attributed to the senses are unlike those of their own societies. “At first Africa assailed my senses,” writes Paul Stoller (1989: 4), evoking the sensory decentering needed to access the living reality of Songhay ways of life. “[M]y senses of taste, smell, hearing, and sight entered into Nigerien settings. Now I let the sights, sounds, smells, and tastes of Niger flow into me. This fundamental rule in epistemological humility taught me that taste, smell, and hearing are often more important for the Songhay than sight, the privileged sense of the West” (1989: 5).

Anthropological study implies freeing oneself from familiar perceptions in order to grasp other forms of experience, other ways of sensing the multitude of worlds that are the basis of sensory experience across the globe. Anthropology takes our senses on a detour, teaching us how to see afresh and giving form to the *invu* [unseen] (Marion 1991: 51), to its untapped potential. It reinvents tasting, hearing, touching, and smelling, breaks the routine of thought, and questions the reductive methods of traditional analysis in favor of a broader perspective. It is an invitation to the vast terrain of the senses and sense-making, because sensing never occurs without meaning, without “sense.” Anthropology reawakens us to the fullness of the world and reminds us that every form of socialization limits our range of possible sensations. It shatters the ordinariness of experience.

He who chooses only *to know* will have gained, of course, the unity of the synthesis and the evidence of simple reason; but he will lose the real of the object, in the symbolic closure of the discourse that reinvents the object in its own image, or rather in its own representation. By contrast, he who desires *to see*, or rather to look, will lose the unity of an enclosed world to find himself in the uncomfortable opening of a universe henceforth suspended, subject to all the winds of meaning. (Didi-Huberman 2005: 140)

I first sketched out these ideas fifteen years ago in *Anthropologie du corps et modernité* [*Anthropology of the Body and Modernity*] (1990), where I proposed the importance of an anthropology of the senses and analyzed, in particular, the Western dominance of vision. This book has been with me ever since. I have worked on it tirelessly but intermittently, always feeling I had an ocean to cross before me. I accumulated material, studies,

observations, readings, and travels, writing down, on each occasion, several lines or pages. Over the course of a year, in the intervals between other research projects, I sometimes tried to systematically explore one sense, then another. Time passed, pages accumulated. I occasionally published a specific article on the cultural forms of one sense or another.

Writing an anthropology of the senses raises questions about writing itself—how should the story unfold from one end to the other? How does one select from the infinite information, bring it to life, without losing the reader in profusion and accumulation? I sometimes worked for weeks or months on certain social aspects of sensory perception only to exclude these passages from the final work, for lack of coherence with the whole. I often had the impression that I was doing the work of a pruner, painfully editing out many possible avenues in order to stay on track, maintain the coherence of the writing and thought. This is why, when I think about having devoted fifteen years to writing the book, it seems I had to overcome, one by one, each of my regrets before allowing myself to finally submit it to Anne-Marie Métaillé, founder of Editions Métaillé, who had been waiting to publish it since the early 1990s. I once again owe her my profound gratitude for conceiving her profession as a form or support for the author's work, especially through the confidence she places in authors themselves. Without her support, I might not have undertaken such an ambitious project. I am, once again, also deeply indebted to Hnina, who read and reread several chapters of the book.

# 1

## Sensing the World: An Anthropology of the Senses

*Now knowledge is conveyed through the senses; they are our Masters [...] Knowledge begins by them, and can be reduced to them. After all, we would have no more knowledge than a stone if we did not know that there exist sound, smell, light, taste, measure, weight, softness, hardness, roughness, colour, sheen, breadth, depth [...] Anyone who can force me to contradict the evidence of the senses has got me by the throat; he cannot make me retreat any further. The senses are the beginning and the end of human knowledge.*

– MICHEL DE MONTAIGNE, AN APOLOGY FOR RAYMOND SEBOND

### There Is No World without Sense

The perceptual world of the Aivilik in the singular environment of the Canadian Arctic is very different from that of Westerners. The view, in particular, has a distinct tone. To the untrained eye, the ice-field landscape appears infinitely monotonous, lacking any perspective or contour to focus on or situate the gaze, especially over the winter months. When the wind picks up or it starts to snow, spatial confusion is heightened by poor visibility. Edmund Carpenter observed that the Aivilik Inuit are perfectly capable of finding their way and orienting themselves, but he has never heard them refer to space in visual terms. They navigate without getting lost, even when visibility is reduced to zero. Carpenter recounts a series of experiences. On one extremely foggy day, for example, his companions

listened to the surf and to cries of birds nesting on promontories; they smelled the shore and surf; felt the wind and spray on their faces and “read,” through their buttocks, the wave patterns created by the interplay of wind and swell. Loss of sight was not a serious handicap. When they used their eyes, it was often with an acuity that amazed me. But they weren’t “lost” without them. (Carpenter 1973: 36)

The Aivilik make use of multiple senses to get around. They are never lost in spite of the sometimes rapid changes in atmospheric conditions. Sounds, smells, and the direction and force of the wind all provide precious information. They draw on numerous elements to orient themselves. Their references

are not actual objects or points, but relationships: relationships between, say, contour, type of snow, wind, salt air, ice crack. I can best explain this with an illustration: two hunters casually followed a trail which I simply could not see, even when I bent close to scrutinize it; they did not kneel to examine it, but stood back, examining it at a distance. (21)

A trail is made of diffused scents. It has a taste, a touch, and a smell. It calls attention to subtle signs that escape vision alone.

The Aivilik have a dozen terms for different types of wind and textures of snow and an extensive vocabulary for describing auditory and olfactory experience. Sight, for them, is a secondary sense for orientation. "A man in Anaktuvuk Pass, in response to a question about what he did when he visited a new place, said to me, 'I listen.' That's all. I listen, he meant, to what the land is saying. I walk around in it and strain my senses in appreciation of it for a long time before I, myself, ever speak a word" (Lopez 1987: 230). In Aivilik cosmology, the world was created by sound. While the Westerner might say, "Let's see what we can hear," they would say, "Let's hear what we can see" (Carpenter 1973: 33). They have a fluid concept of space that, unlike the enclosed, visual geography of the Westerner, is adaptable to the radical changes that the seasons bring, the prolonged nights and days, the endless expanse of snow and ice that erase every visual reference point. Spatial knowledge is synesthetic, always implicating the full range of sensory experience. In the Inuit tradition, animals and humans spoke the same language. Before the arrival of firearms, hunters had to demonstrate infinite patience when approaching their prey, identifying the sounds of their own movements to avoid making noise. A subtle "conversation" developed between the hunter and the animal, played out in a symbolic drama that bound them together.

Other communities of the Far North also place sound at the center of their cosmogony, evoking a "hearing" rather than a vision of the world. The Saami, for example, have the tradition of the *joik* (Beach 1988), sung descriptions of the earth and its inhabitants, evoking animals, birds, wind or land. These are not just songs, however, but celebrations of the close bond between humans and the world in all its forms. The *joik*, far from being a rehearsed performance, is an open environment that gives rise to new forms according to the circumstances and is performed using a handful of words or sometimes just sounds. For the Saami, the world does not come into being through sight alone but also through sound.

## The Senses Are Good to Think

The human condition is corporeal. The world reveals itself only through our sensory perception. There is nothing in the mind that has not first passed through the senses. “My body is made of the same flesh as the world,” said Merleau-Ponty (1968: 248). Sensory perception physically plunges us into the world where, immersed in a world of significations, we are not limited but aroused by the senses. In a passage from *The Dawn of Day*, Nietzsche imagines that

certain organs could be so formed as to permit us to view entire solar systems as if they were contracted and brought close together like a single cell: and to beings of an inverse order a single cell of the human body could be made to appear in its construction, movement, and harmony as if it were a solar system in itself. (Nietzsche 1911: 107)

Further on, he observes that an individual’s relationship to his or her body is like that of a spider to its web:

My eye, he writes, whether it be keen or weak, can only see a certain distance, and it is within this space that I live and move: this horizon is my immediate fate, greater or lesser, from which I cannot escape. Thus, a concentric circle is drawn round every being, which has a center and is peculiar to himself. In the same way our ear encloses us in a small space, and so likewise does our touch. We measure the world by these horizons within which our senses confine each of us within prison walls. We say that this is near and that is far distant, that this is large and that is small, that one thing is hard and another soft. (106)

Nietzsche describes the individual as enclosed within the limits of the body and dependent upon it for all knowledge.

Yet the body is also our point of entry into the world. In experiencing oneself, one experiences the world unfolding. Sensing involves both moving through the world as a subject and receiving the profusion of sensations from outside. Physical experience, however, is only one aspect of sensory perception. The first frontier is not so much the flesh but rather that which culture makes of our embodied experience. It is not the body but rather a symbolic universe that intervenes between the individual and the world. Biology adapts to that which culture has equipped it for. If the body and the senses are the mediators of our relation to the world, it is only by means of the symbolic meanings that infuse them.

The body’s limits, like those of the human universe, are defined by the symbolic systems that ground our existence. Like language, the body is a measure of the world, a net thrown over the multitude of stimulations that assail us throughout the day and of which only the most significant are

retained, prevented from slipping through the cracks. Individuals, through their bodies, continually interpret and respond to their environments according to inclinations interiorized through education and habit. Sensation is immediately submerged in perception, and knowledge arises between the two, reminding us that human beings are not just biological organisms but meaning-making creatures too. Seeing, hearing, tasting, touching or smelling are ways of thinking the world, filtered through the prism of a sensory organ and rendered communicable. This is not a matter of alertness or attention. Even the least lucid among us never ceases to filter the profusion of incoming stimulations.

Confronted with reality, the individual is never just an eye, an ear, a hand, a mouth or a nose but, rather, immersed in an *activity* of looking, listening, touching, tasting or smelling. Continually engaged in the sensory world, one is imbricated in a world of senses for which the environment is the pretext. Perception is not the imprint of an object on a passive sensory organ but the fruit of reflection, an activity of knowing diluted in the evidence of experience. We do not perceive reality but rather a world of meanings.

To simplify things, individual existence calls for a certain negligence with respect to the profusion of sensory stimuli. The senses avoid chaos. Indeed, perception is selective, the result of sorting through the endless flow of sensations that envelops us. It passes over that which is familiar and unremarkable. Perception is not attentive but, rather, absorbed in the evidence of experience. And while we may not always have precise names for our perceptions, we are aware, nonetheless, that others might. Where one person is content to see a “bird” or a “tree,” the connoisseur identifies a chickadee and its mating season, or a poplar tree. Categories are relatively open-ended. They generally encompass the objects or events we notice without having to make an extra effort of understanding.

This symbolic latitude and access to a sort of naked reality are the products of a mental attitude brought about by focused contemplation or lingering attention.

I never wholly live in varieties of human space, but am always ultimately rooted in a natural and non-human space. As I walk across the Place de la Concorde, and think of myself as totally caught up in the city of Paris, I can rest my eyes on one stone of the Tuileries wall, the Square disappears and then there is nothing but this stone entirely without history: I can, furthermore, allow my gaze to be absorbed by this yellowish, gritty surface, and then there is no longer even a stone there, but merely the play of light upon an indefinite substance. (Merleau-Ponty 1962: 293)

When perceptions become unreal, however, the world disappears.

Only that which has meaning, however minimal or basic, enters into the field of consciousness and rouses our attention. Yet reality sometimes slips

through the seams of this symbolic fabric—certain unnamable visual, audible and other experiences are impossible to define in spite of our efforts. People are not always attentive, but experience shows that human beings are clearly capable of seeking out and recalling sounds, odors, tactile impressions, or images encountered in passing that might have initially gone unnoticed. In this way, the world reveals itself in sudden, countless concretions. We inhabit the time and space of our lives through our bodies and are most often unaware of it, for better or worse (Le Breton 1990). But there is no reality beyond the perceptible, because our being in the world is embodied, and thought is never just a product of the mind. Perception is the origin of meaning, while sensation is the fleeting yet ever-present ambiance that goes unnoticed until transformed into perception, that is to say, meaning. Perception is therefore the point of entry into knowledge and speech, if only, at times, to express perplexity before a mysterious sound or indefinable taste.

The body has a conceptual dimension, just as thought is rooted in the body. This fact of everyday experience undermines all forms of dualism. The body is “a project directed toward the world,” wrote Merleau-Ponty, observing that movement is already knowledge, practical sense. Perception, intention and movement intermingle in ordinary actions though a kind of evidence that cannot be separated from the education and familiarity that ground and guide experience. “My body,” he says, “is the fabric into which all objects are woven, and it is, at least in relation to the perceived world, the general instrument of my ‘comprehension’” (Merleau-Ponty 1962: 235). The body is not a passive substance, subjected to the control of the will by its own mechanisms. It is first and foremost a way of knowing, a living theory applied to its environment. This sensory knowledge enlists the body in our intentional engagement with the world, orienting movements or actions without requiring lengthy prior reflection. Hundreds of scattered perceptions occur throughout the day without recourse to the in-depth mediation of the cogito. They unfold naturally as the evidence of our relation to the world. Under normal circumstances, the flow of experience is rarely interrupted or uncertain. We navigate the sensory twists and turns of our familiar environments with ease.

Sensory perceptions make sense, encompass a world of familiar references, insofar as they coincide with a unique individual’s way of organizing categories of thought based on what he or she has learned from peers, travel, acquaintances or interests, or from his or her particular skills as a cook, a painter, a perfume maker, a weaver, etc. Anything that eludes habitual decoding of sensory experience is met with indifference or a shrug. When taken by surprise, we confront the unfamiliar by seeking resemblances, by trying to identify unusual smells or sounds, for example, that have caught our attention.

To perceive is to take symbolic possession of the world, to decipher it in a way that situates us in a position of understanding. Meaning is not contained in things like a hidden treasure. It arises in the relation between



the individual and the world and in the intricate debate with others, consenting or not, about the correct ways of categorizing and defining things. Sensing the world is another way of thinking the world, of transforming the tangible into the intelligible. The perceptible world is the social, cultural, and personal translation of a reality that would be otherwise inaccessible, if not for this detour through the sensory perception of a socially situated individual. It reveals itself to us as an endless possibility of meanings and flavors.

## Language and Sensory Perception

Like language, the body is a constant purveyor of meanings. Confronted with the same reality, individuals whose bodily experience is steeped in different cultures and histories do not experience the same sensations or interpret the same sensory input: they are sensitive to information that they recognize and relate to their own systems of reference. Their sensory perceptions and world views are dependent on acquired symbol systems. Like language, the body projects a filter onto the environment, embodies a semiotic system. Perception is not reality but a way of sensing reality.

To decipher our surroundings, we possess a range of senses that vary in quality and intensity and register our perceptions. In order to share our experience with others, we rely on the mediation of language or on gestures or actions that have established connotations. There is a subtle dialectical interplay between language and perception. From one second to the next, the role of language is probably decisive. Words crystallize perception, invoke it. They are not labels attached to a myriad of exterior, objective stimuli. This would give credence to a dualistic world view that opposes mind and matter. On the contrary, things only become real upon entering the register of language. This is why, in different parts of the world, people do not see, smell, taste, hear or touch the same things in the same ways. Nor do they experience the same emotions.

Language is not dualistically opposed to the reality it describes. Words running through the world like a current are so entangled in it that establishing a clear boundary between the two is impossible. Between language and the world, each society establishes its own seamless fabric of lived sensory and semiotic realities, such that individuals inhabit worlds whose features and boundaries are clearly distinct, though communication is still possible. Perceiving a multitude of nuances in the whiteness of snow implies using an almost equal repertoire of words to designate and compare those nuances without resorting to interminable periphrases and metaphors. Someone whose repertoire includes only the term “snow,” would certainly not have the impression that the experience of snow is something infinitely greater than they are capable of imagining. To grasp these nuances, we need words to construct the evidence that would otherwise remain invisible, beyond language and perceived reality. For the Inuit this is not the case,

since their vocabulary for designating snow, according to its various characteristics, is very large. Likewise, for the city dweller, nothing resembles a sheep more than another sheep, but the shepherd is capable of recognizing every one of his or her animals and, as such, naming them as well. Words capture perception in their prisms of signification and provide the means for formulating meaning.

But if sensory perceptions are intimately bound up with language, they often also escape it, as feelings and sensations can be at times difficult to put into words: the taste of a liqueur, the pleasure of a caress, an odor or a painful sensation, for example, can often only be described using metaphors and comparisons, demanding an effort of the imagination and the creative use of a language that fails to translate the subtleties of experience. Around the core of every felt sensation is a surrounding residue that cannot be reduced to language. If perception is closely related to language, it is not completely subordinated to it.

## Cultivating the Senses

At birth, infants perceive a world of sensory chaos, a universe where qualities, intensities and information intermingle. The newborn oscillates between want and satiety without precise awareness of inner experience or the surrounding world. He or she is immersed in an elusive universe of internal sensations (cold, warmth, hunger, thirst); odors, especially the mother's; sounds (words, surrounding noise); vague visual forms, etc. Over several weeks and months, this magma slowly solidifies into a comprehensible universe. Certain ways of being held, named, or touched; smelling the same odors; seeing the same faces; hearing the same voices or surrounding sounds guide the child to a world of significations. The senses give way to a universe of sense-making in which the child constructs reference points, extends beyond the limits of the self, and opens to a feeling of presence in the world. Touch is probably the first sense to emerge. Tactile and auditory sensations come first, sight comes later.

Sensory and perceptual experience of the world arises in the reciprocal relation between the subject and his or her human and ecological environment. Education, identification with family members, the play of language that gives names to flavors, colors, sounds, etc., all shape infants' sensibilities and give rise to their ability to engage in a meaningful exchange with those around them, to be more or less understood by members of their community. The perceptual experience of a group is modulated through exchanges with others and a singular relation to a context. Perceptions are modified or refined through conversation and learning. They are never set in stone but always open to individual experience and grounded in the present. At the origin of all human existence, the other is the condition of meaning, that is to say, the foundation of social relations. A world without the other is a world without relation doomed to nonsense.

Sensory knowledge continually evolves through accumulated experience or learning. Studies have demonstrated the cultural modeling of the senses. Howard S. Becker, for example, has described the sensory experience of a young American learning to smoke marijuana. The young man, a willing novice, is impelled to gradually adapt his perceptions to group expectations in order to have the “appropriate” and rewarding experience of being part of the group. The first time he tries smoking marijuana, he feels “nothing,” apart from a slight discomfort. The task of the more experienced smokers, during these first clumsy attempts, is to teach him to recognize certain sensations as indications of being “high,” in other words, of enjoying the effects of the drug in a way that conforms to their own experience. In the group, the novice learns to identify fleeting sensations and associate them with pleasure. His peers offer examples and advice, teach him how to hold in the smoke and appreciate its effects, and rectify his attitudes. He, in turn, observes them, strives to identify with them and achieve the appropriate physical experience. His perception is based on a sort of bricolage between what others tell him and what he himself imagines. While the physical effects of marijuana are initially unpleasant, over time, they are transformed into desirable sensations, a source of sought-after pleasure:

Marijuana-produced sensations are not automatically or necessarily pleasurable. The taste for such experience is a socially acquired one, not different in kind from acquired tastes for oysters or dry martinis. The user feels dizzy, thirsty; his scalp tingles; he misjudges time and distances; and so on. Are these things pleasurable? He isn’t sure. If he is to continue marijuana use, he must decide that they are. (Becker 1953: 239)

In this type of cultural modeling, individuals’ intentions, along with their ambivalent feelings, commingle with and are influenced by those of their companions. Many novel sensory experiences can be had by those willing to learn. People can learn to distinguish wines, to taste and describe the sensations they procure in myriad ways, and be consequently amazed at their former insensitivity. Little by little, education reveals the multiplicity in that which had previously appeared unidimensional and simple. Just as one might discover the infinitely varied universe of perfumes, a young chef comes to understand, little by little, how the taste of food depends on a series of details in a dish’s preparation or cooking.

## Sensory Disparities

In a coastal village of Peru, individuals whose souls are thought to be troubled by hostile spirits undergo a therapeutic ritual performed by a shaman. The *curandero*’s clairvoyance and therapeutic abilities are enhanced by a powerful hallucinogen, the San Pedro cactus, which contains mescaline.

The plant opens the doors of perception and allows him to “see” beyond ordinary appearances. He describes the effects, noting, at first, a light numbness in the body and then

a great vision, a clearing of all the faculties of the individual. And then comes a detachment, a type of visual force in the individual inclusive of all the senses: seeing, hearing, smelling, touching, etc., all the senses, including the sixth sense, the telepathic sense of transmitting oneself across time and matter.... It develops the power of perception... in the sense that when one wants to see something far away... he can distinguish powers or problems or disturbances at a great distance, so as to deal with them. (Sharon 1972: 130)

The shaman’s “visions” are a testament to a long apprenticeship with elders in different regions of Peru. Under their guidance, he has learned to control the effects of the plant and especially to interiorize the code for deciphering the flood of images, acquiring a perception freed from the scoria of everyday life and immersed in the spirit world. Navigating unhindered in this invisible universe requires possessing special powers to confront ferocious animals, evil spirits, and sorcerers on equal terms.

Thanks to this divine aid, the San Pedro that purifies and enlarges perceptual capacities to the point of clairvoyance, the shaman is armed for combat and ready to undergo the grueling series of ordeals that await him over the course of the therapeutic treatment. The ceremony bears witness to a merciless struggle between the *curandero* and his formidable adversaries. But the confrontation itself adheres to codified scenarios. At a certain point in the therapy, the shaman lunges toward the *mesa* (the table displaying the series of power-enhancing objects) and seizes a sabre, which he uses in a vigorous battle against adversaries invisible to the uninitiated.

American anthropologist Douglas Sharon’s research on hallucinogenic plants brought him to the village, and, hoping to gain a more intimate understanding of the healing process, he participated in a ceremony. To immerse himself more completely in the learning experience, he consumed an infusion of San Pedro, following the example of the *curandero*’s patients. Over the course of the therapy session, still lucid and disappointed at not experiencing the anticipated visions, the ethnographer observed the ritual struggle between the *curandero* and the spirits at the origin of the patient’s illness. As his gaze followed what, for him, were the agitated movements of a lone man simulating a fierce combat in empty space, he realized that the other patients, on the contrary, were intensely immersed in the action, showing strong emotional responses to the different phases of the unfolding battle. “Everyone else, it seemed, was seeing a monster of some sort pulling his hair and trying to abduct him. From the participants’ comments during the session and their obvious state of panic, it appeared that all except myself were sharing this perception together and at the same moment” (Sharon 1972: 134).

The foreign observer is left cold—no particular vision calls out to him, in spite of his anticipation. He doesn't "see" the monster that confronts the *curandero* under the terrified gaze of the audience. He remains outside this emotion that cements the group, indifferent to the collective excitement. Basing his representations on other sources, the American researcher cannot open his senses to images that have, for him, no cultural anchoring. Over the course of his initiation, he will likely succeed but, at this stage, he is still a novice. On the other hand, the visions that the locals experience and perceive as real are rooted in a source of cultural images. By participating in these therapies, they have learned to ascribe a precise form and meaning to certain sensations provoked by the use of San Pedro. The shaman's gestures merge with and guide these sensations and visions, and the group reinforces this convergence. To appreciate the effects of the drug, to link precise and coherent images with episodes of the ceremony, participants have had to learn to decipher their sensations by relating them to a particular symbolic system. It is precisely this code that Sharon set out to acquire over the course of his initiation.

The shaman thrives on the fervor generated by his actions and is sustained by the collective emotion that is the product of his craft. But the emotional climate that binds the community is not natural; it is not the result of a physiological process inherent in the chemical properties of the drug. This emotional response is not a primary but a secondary effect. It is a symbolic process, that is to say, a learning process that is integral to the community members' abilities to identify the shaman's acts and to recognize meaningful stages in his battle against the spirits.

Writer Nikos Kazantzakis recalls an incident from his childhood in Megalo Kastro, Crete. Prince George had just taken possession of the Island in the name of Greece, and inhabitants were overcome with jubilation. His father brought him to a cemetery and halted at one of the graves.

My father removed his kerchief from his head and fell face-downward on the ground. He scraped away the soil with his nails and made a little hole in the shape of a megaphone. Into this he inserted his mouth as deeply as he could. Three times he cried out, "Father, he came! Father, he came! Father, he came!" His voice grew louder and louder. Finally he was bellowing. Removing a small bottle of wine from his pocket, he poured it drop by drop into the hole and waited each time for it to go down, for the earth to drink it. Then he bounded to his feet, crossed himself, and looked at me. His eyes were flashing. "Did you hear?" he asked me, his voice hoarse from emotion. "Did you hear?" I remained silent. I had heard nothing. "Didn't you hear?" said my father angrily. "His bones rattled." (Kazantzakis 1965: 107)

While visiting the village of Mehanna, Niger, in 1976, Paul Stoller accompanied a Songhay healer to the bedside of a sick man who was the victim of a curse, suffering from nausea and diarrhea, and very weak. A sorcerer had taken possession of the man's double and was slowly eating

him from within, depleting his vital forces. The task was to find the double and prevent the man from dying. The healer had prepared a remedy, focusing on the points of contact between the body and the world: the ears, mouth and nose. Taking Stoller by the hand, he led him on a trek toward the outskirts of the village, in search of the man's double. He mounted the crest of a dune where there was a pile of millet seed, carefully examined it, then suddenly exclaimed "Wo, wo, wo, wo," flapping the palm of his hand over his open mouth. He turned to the ethnologist: "Did you hear it?—Hear what? I asked dumbfounded.—Did you feel it?—Feel what? I wondered.—Did you see it?—What are you talking about? I demanded." The healer, disappointed that his companion had not seen, felt, or heard anything, turned to him and said: "You look but you do not see. You touch, but you do not feel. You listen, but you do not hear. Without sight or touch one can learn a great deal. But you must learn how to *hear* or you will learn little about our ways." (Stoller 1989: 115)

These examples, taken from very different cultures and situations, reveal how the interrelatedness between human beings and the world depends on the symbolic systems that mediate between them. The senses are not only an interiorization of the world, they channel meaning, creating a particular order and organizing a multitude of information. A bird song or a particular flavor can be easily identified, leave us in doubt, or even be completely unknown, compelling us to retain the sensation in case we should encounter it again in the future.

Meanings permeate the auditory world. Thus the piano tuner is able to adjust the instrument's sound by listening for subtle nuances between notes, nuances that are inaccessible to the uninitiated. Identifying them requires training and specialized knowledge, and this is what separates the piano tuner from the average person who simply perceives a *continuum* with no apparent distinctions. The cultivation of a sensory modality, the key to deciphering meaning, consists in revealing these distinctions, the variation in that which at first appears uniform. The uninitiated are stunned by this apparent virtuosity, but it is the product of a learning process sharpened by a particular sensibility. The cultural uses of the senses form an infinite repertoire that varies from one time and place to another. While the animal's sensory capacities are almost fully developed at birth, determined by the genetic code of the species, our cultural affiliations and personalities equip us humans with an exceptionally varied sensory range.

## Synesthesia

In everyday life, we do not accumulate perceptions in a sort of continual synthesis; we are immersed in our perceptual world. Every moment of our existence appeals to the full range of our senses. Sensory perceptions permeate our being. We are not surprised to feel the wind on our face while, at the same time, observing the sway of trees along our path. One moment

we are looking at the river, the next, we are swimming in it, feeling its coolness at the end of a hot day. We inhale the fragrance of flowers before stretching out on the grass to sleep, while, off in the distance, church bells ring-in the early afternoon. The senses work together to make the world coherent and habitable.

It is not the senses but, rather, people who decipher the world, according to their individual sensibilities and backgrounds. Sensory perception delivers us into the world, but we are the composers of our experience. It is not the eyes that see, the ears that hear, or the hands that touch. Our presence in the world is whole, and the senses intermingle, in every instant, with the impression we have of our own existence.

We can only isolate the senses and examine them separately by deconstructing our overall sense of the world. The senses are always present in their totality. In his *Letter on the Deaf and the Dumb*, Diderot invents a fable on this subject:

It would be amusing to get together a society, of which each should have only one sense; there can be no doubt that all these persons would look on one another as out of his wits, and I leave you to judge with what reason [...] We may remark that this group of five persons, each possessing only one sense, might by their faculty of abstraction have one interest in common—that of geometry—and might understand one another on that subject, and that alone. (Diderot 1916: 165)

The world only emerges through a union of the senses. Isolating the senses amounts to substituting the logic of geometry for the experience of everyday life. Perceptions are not an accumulation of bits of information traceable to individual sense organs enclosed within rigid boundaries. There are no separate olfactory, visual, auditory, tactile or gustatory systems, but a sensory convergence that appeals to them all at once.

The flesh is a site of continual sensory resonance. Stimulations combine, alternate and ricochet off each other in an ongoing flow of movement. The tactile and the visual, for example, collaborate in the perception of objects. Taste is inconceivable without the olfactory, the tactile, and maybe even hearing senses. The unity of the perceptual world crystallizes in the entire body.

The form of objects is not their geometrical shape: it stands in a certain relation to their specific nature, and appeals to all our other senses as well as sight. The form of a fold in linen or cotton shows us the resilience or dryness of the fiber, the coldness or warmth of the material [...] One sees the weight of a block of cast iron which sinks in the sand, the fluidity of water and the viscosity of syrup [...] One sees the hardness and brittleness of glass, and when, with a tinkling sound it breaks, this sound is conveyed by the visible glass. One sees the springiness of steel, the ductility of red-hot steel. (Merleau-Ponty 1962: 229, 230)

Here, Merleau-Ponty makes an important point about geometry, but subordinates the whole of sensory experience to vision. For others, the tactile reigns. Indeed, the skin is the sensitive perimeter that unites all of the sensory organs, grounded in a tactility that is often presented as the culmination of the other senses. Thus, sight becomes a caressing gaze, and taste, a flavor that touches our taste buds. We come into contact with odors, and sounds reach our ears. The skin is a medium, a unifying ground of the individual, as will be discussed further in Chapter 4.

Sensory experiences are like streams flowing into a single river, into a single individual's awareness, which is never at rest and always alert to the surrounding incandescence of the world. We smell the fragrant honeysuckle visible in the distance, feel the vibrations of music that moves us, because the body is not a succession of clearly defined sensory signals but a synergetic whole, where all sensations intermingle. "Cézanne declared," says Merleau-Ponty,

that a picture contains within itself even the smell of the landscape. He meant that the arrangement of color on the thing [...] signifies by itself all the responses which would be elicited through an examination by the remaining senses; that a thing would not have this color had it not also this shape, these tactile properties, this resonance, this odor. (1962: 318)

The body is not an object among others, indifferent to the world. It is the pivot that makes the world possible, through the education of an individual who is inconceivable without the flesh that forms his or her existence. "Synesthetic perception is the rule," writes Merleau-Ponty (1962: 229). Perception is not a sum of collected data but a comprehensive experience of the world that is continually engaging all of the senses.

## The Limits of the Senses

Perceptions are diffuse, ephemeral, uncertain, and sometimes inaccurate. They offer a relative perspective on things, while a more methodical pursuit of knowledge replaces the usual sensory fluctuations with rigorous observation. Science is not concerned with knowledge of objects that can be touched, seen, smelled, tasted, or heard. It is puritanical. It rejects the body and studies things with a cold, geometric logic. Perceptual knowledge lacks universality and rigor, but it serves, with humility, to reveal the continuity of daily life and the flavor of the world [*la saveur du monde*]. It is not the knowledge of the laboratory, but of the open air. However, in ordinary experience, sensory perceptions are not the only matrices of our relation to the world. Reason too, not that of science but of experience, continually corrects our illusions. Yet reason is not an infallible instrument of truth either. Adjusting to the world therefore engages both perception and reasoning.



Existence entails a continual and sometimes contradictory refinement of the senses to get closer to the ambiguous reality of the world. The work of the senses in ordinary life always implies the work of sense-making. “Man’s eyes and ears are but false witnesses if his soul does not understand their language,” said Heraclitus. Democritus opposed the “dark knowledge of the senses” to the “light” of reason. Plato inaugurated a long tradition of contempt for the senses and the body. In *Phaedo*, he says: “And indeed the soul reasons best when none of these senses troubles it, neither hearing nor sight, nor pain nor pleasure, but when it is most by itself, taking leave of the body and as far as possible having no contact or association with it in its search for reality” (Plato 1977: 13). Perceptual knowledge fluctuates, never remains the same, while the soul, by contrast, “departs into the realm of the pure, the everlasting, the immortal and the changeless [...] being akin to these” (Plato 1966: 79d). Through the eyes of the soul and the mind, the mysteries of the perceptual world are penetrated, the veils that obscure the reality of the world are removed, and a purified knowledge becomes possible.

Aristotle disagreed with Plato, denouncing this abstraction of sensory experience:

And as concerning reality, that not every appearance is real, we shall say, first, that indeed the perception, at least of the proper object of a sense, is not false, but the impression we get of it is not the same as the perception. And then we may fairly express surprise if our opponents raise the question whether magnitudes and colors are really such as they appear at a distance or close at hand, as they appear to the healthy or to the diseased; and whether heavy things are as they appear to the weak or to the strong; and whether truth is as it appears to the waking or to the sleeping. For clearly they do not really believe the latter alternative—at any rate no one, if in the night he thinks that he is at Athens whereas he is really in Africa, starts off to the Odeum. (Aristotle 1989: 1010b)

Aristotle is here poking fun at Plato’s rejection of the body and the senses. He recalls, with reason, that sensory information depends on circumstances and does not contain hidden eternal truths. Thus the case against the senses is, for Aristotle, an absurdity, an abstraction. Yet, as he mischievously notes, this doesn’t prevent Plato and his followers from getting by in daily life without too much trouble, all the same.

We trust the senses only after having weighed the information they provide. When I see the broken reflection of a stick in the water, I do not see it as a broken stick. If the setting sun appears close, I don’t reach out my hand to grasp it. Descartes was skeptical of sensory knowledge, to which he accorded a limited role in scientific study. As the *Third Meditation* begins: “I will now close my eyes, I will stop my ears, I will turn away my senses from their objects, I will even efface from my consciousness all the images of corporeal things; or at least, because this can hardly be accomplished, I

will consider them as empty and false” (Descartes 2008: 86). His wax parable recalls the impermanence of things. In everyday use, wax takes many forms without posing a problem. Its properties vary according to the circumstances. It is not always the same sensory object. Descartes concludes that only understanding can render the true essence of wax. Even the “interior senses” can deceive, he says in the *Sixth Meditation*, alluding to the pain that amputees sometimes feel in their missing limbs. He concludes that, due to an error of the imagination, he had “reason to doubt whether any one of [his] limbs was really affected even though [he] felt pain in it” (1960: 157). Unaware of the reality of phantom limb pain, Descartes comes to doubt the pain he experiences, as if the body were perpetually mistaken, all the while imposing its cumbersome presence on the soul.

Errors of perception also emerge in the ambiguous overlap between the sensations of real life and those of dreams, which are, nonetheless, very real to the dreamer. “For, since nature fills me with impulses of which reason disproves, I did not think I should place too much trust in the teachings of nature,” Descartes concludes (1960: 158). For Descartes, sensory knowledge was inferior to understanding, but he considered it necessary to existence for practical reasons and, in spite of everything, still essential to science, even though it had to be eventually put to the test.

But how could I deny that I possess these hands and this body, and withal escape being classed with persons in a state of insanity, whose brains are so disordered and clouded by dark bilious vapors as to cause them pertinaciously to assert that they are monarchs when they are in the greatest poverty; or clothed in gold and purple when destitute of any covering; or that their head is made of clay, their body of glass, or that they are gourds? I should certainly be not less insane than they, were I to regulate my procedure according to examples so extravagant. (2008: 74)

Descartes thus distinguishes two separate sensorial systems: “But we must note the distinction emphasized by me in various passages, between the practical activities of our life and an enquiry into truth; for, when it is a case of regulating our life, it would assuredly be stupid not to trust the senses” (1934: 206). In the union of body and soul, access to reality is mediated through the senses, but the soul corrects perception. It alone provides certainty.

In expressing his contempt for the senses in favor of a scientific knowledge worthy of its name, Descartes overlooks another dimension of perceptual knowledge, that which fuels the work of artisans and artists. Nietzsche sums up the reasoning that led to the disqualification of the senses: “The senses deceive, reason corrects the errors; consequently, one concluded, reason is the road to the constant; the least sensual ideas must be closest to the ‘true world.’—It is from the senses that most misfortunes come—they are deceivers, deluders, destroyers—” (1968: 317).

Sensory perceptions are, in fact, neither true nor false. They reveal the world on their own terms, leaving us to judge, according to our knowledge. They provide a sense of direction, a map that does not correspond exactly to the terrain, except for those who “mistake bladders for lanterns” (i.e., are easily deceived by appearances). In principle, people know how to navigate ambiguous situations and act accordingly by shifting to have a better view, drawing closer to hear an inaudible cry, or removing, from the stream, the branch that seemed broken but actually wasn’t.

## Jerusalem and Athens

People’s sensory experiences vary according to their environments, backgrounds, and personal histories. Social and cultural affiliations further structure our sensory relation to the world. Every culture comes with a certain sensory order, a way of sensing the world nuanced by each individual’s personal style. Western cultures have long valued hearing and vision but in different ways.

The Semitic or Jewish tradition endowed hearing with a prestige that has echoed through the Western tradition for centuries (Chalier 1995). In Judaism, the prayer *Chema Israë!l*, recited daily over a person’s lifetime, bears witness to this attitude—the desire of the pious Jew is to die uttering these words one last time:

Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. These commandments that I give you today are to be on your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. (Deuteronomy 6:4–9)

Education also involves listening. “When a Talmud sage wants to draw attention to an idea or underline a problem, he says: ‘Listen, starting from there’ (*chema mina*), and when the disciple doesn’t understand, he responds: ‘I didn’t hear’” (Chalier 1995: 11).

The creation of the world is an act of speech, and Jewish existence a form of listening to the revealed word. God speaks, and his speech never ceases to be full of life to the believer. As he calls elements and beings into existence, he reveals himself essentially through his words. He delegates to humanity the privilege of naming the animals. Attentive listening is necessary for faith and for dialog with God. “Listen!” God commands through the intermediaries of the prophets. Edifying narratives, remarks, injunctions, words of praise, and prayers—God’s many forms of speech to humanity—are woven throughout the Bible. Solomon opens his ears to receive wisdom. The New Testament further accentuates the word of God as teaching by transferring his voice to Jesus, whose every act and gesture,

whose every word, is reiterated by the disciples. *Fides ex auditu*, “faith comes from listening,” says Paul (Romans 10–17). On the road from Damascus, Paul, hearing the word of God, is overcome and loses his sight. This metamorphosis affects his very being and transforms his understanding of the world.

Vision has also been regarded as a paramount sense from the beginning of the Western tradition. Plato characterized sight as the noblest of the senses. In *Timaeus*, he writes:

The sight in my opinion is the source of the greatest benefit to us, for had we never seen the stars, and the sun, and the heaven, none of the words which we have spoken about the universe would ever have been uttered. But now the sight of day and night, and the months and the revolutions of the years, have created number, and have given us a conception of time, and the power of enquiring about the nature of the universe; and from this source we have derived philosophy, than which no greater good ever was or will be given by the gods to mortal man. (Plato 1019–1026)

In the *Republic*, the philosopher’s rejection of ordinary sensory experience and ascension to the world of Ideas takes place under the aegis of the visual, not the auditory. The philosopher “sees and contemplates” the sun. Vision is more suitable than hearing for translating eternal truth. Hearing is too enveloped in temporality to attain validity, whereas vision transforms contemplation through metaphor and suspends time. Aristotle, less estranged from everyday perceptions, still accorded vision a privileged status:

All men by nature desire to know. An indication of this is the delight we take in our senses; for even apart from their usefulness they are loved for themselves; and above all others the sense of sight. For not only with a view to action, but even when we are not going to do anything, we prefer seeing (one might say) to everything else. The reason is that this, most of all the senses, makes us know and brings to light many differences between things. (Aristotle *Metaphysics* Book I)

In a little treatise entitled *Hebrew Thought Compared with Greek*, the “Scandinavian professor,” Thorlief Boman spells out the implications of the contrasting sensory orientations of the Hebrew and Greek languages for the act of thinking and for the Semitic and Greek “world views.” He observes that it is “astounding how far clear thinking depended for the Greeks upon the visual faculty”—Euclid’s geometry, Plato’s Doctrine of Ideas, *theoria* as “viewing” (Boman 1960: 200). He cites approvingly Bruno Snell’s suggestion that the Greeks were “men of eyes” (*Augenmenschen*). “Quite as decided,” he goes on, “is the emphasis upon the significance of *hearing* and the *word in its being spoken*” in the Hebrew tradition. This dichotomy is further manifest in contrasting conceptions of truth. For the Greeks, truth is “that

which is unveiled, ... that which is to be seen clearly” (objective, impersonal), whereas for the Israelites truth is “the completely certain, sure, steady, faithful” (subjective). On this account, privileging seeing leads to “logical thinking” and a *static* (timeless) world view while emphasizing hearing leads to “psychological understanding” and a *dynamic* world view—that is, an epistemology “directed towards events, living, history” (Boman 1960: 202).

The two traditions, Semitic and Hellenic, became entangled with the emergence of Christianity. The Christian tradition “arose on Jewish soil,” but, Boman goes on, its “centre of gravity shifted into the Greek-speaking Hellenistic world” after the year 70, and it “has been the religion of Europeans ever since” (1960: 17). Hearing and seeing, ear and eye, thus complement, but also vie with each other due to the Hebrew and Greek roots—that is, to Jerusalem and Athens being the twin sources or foundations—of Western thought.<sup>1</sup>

To pick up the story of Western thought again some 1,500 years later, the Annales historian Lucien Febvre (1968) devoted a little section of *The Problem of Unbelief in the Sixteenth Century* to analyzing the “sensory underpinnings of thought” in the epoch of Rabelais. The Renaissance man of the sixteenth century, according to Febvre, embraced the world, immersed himself in a total sensory experience, without according a special status to vision:

We are hothouse plants: those men grew out of doors. They were men close to the earth and to rural life, who encountered the countryside even in their cities, its plants and animals, its smells and noises. They were open-air men, seeing nature but also feeling, sniffing, hearing, touching, breathing her through all their senses. (1982: 424)

Vision, according to Febvre, was not separated from the other senses as a privileged mode of relation to the world. Vision was secondary to hearing, especially with respect to the status of the word of God, the supreme authority of human existence. Music also played an important social role.

Febvre’s student, Robert Mandrou (1975), observed that sixteenth-century writers did not describe characters in terms of visual qualities but, rather, with reference to things they said, or to anecdotes and rumors. Poetry and literature provide abundant evidence of remarkable sounds, odors, tastes, tactile sensations and sights. “The taste, the touch, the eye, the ear, the nose/Without which we’d have bodies made of stone” writes Ronsard (cited in Febvre 1982: 424), mingling vision with the other senses. Beauty is not limited to visual contemplation but is a sensory celebration that encompasses smell and hearing:

Within my mouth I often hear/The sighings of that zephyr dear./ My soul would breathe and rise up free/ To hang upon my lips for thee, /Oh mouth that’s filled with spices rare. /Thy breath doth make a meadow

fair/ And flowers spring on every side/ Where'er thy perfume's scattered wide. (Ronsard in Febvre 1982: 427)

Febvre and Mandrou provide many examples of a sensoriality that has become foreign to contemporary experience. For example, Febvre writes that “Paracelsus, in insisting that medicine be preeminently a matter of physical observation, had recourse to a whole set of acoustical and olfactory metaphors that are somewhat surprising to us. He wanted it to be ‘no less resounding to our ears than the cascade of the Rhine or the roar of waves on the Ocean.’ He wanted the nostrils to be used, too to ‘distinguish the smell of the object under study’” (1982: 431).

## The Western Hegemony of Vision

Febvre and Mandrou’s account of the “underdevelopment of sight” in the sixteenth century was challenged indirectly by Marshall McLuhan (1962) who, in *The Gutenberg Galaxy*, theorized that the invention of the printing press in the fifteenth century already tipped the balance or “ratio” of the senses in favor of vision. More on this presently. Febvre and Mandrou’s account is directly challenged by Carl Havelange, who argues that European culture did not wait until the eighteenth century (i.e., the Enlightenment)

to accord a central place to vision [...] The spread of printing starting in the 16th century, optical discoveries at the beginning of the 17th century, and the advent of modern procedures of scientific observation, for example, all point to a transformation in ways of seeing and conceptualizing the gaze (Havelange 1998: 11)

One of the most influential visual models of modern times which, like the printing press, also dates from the fifteenth century, is linear perspective. Linear perspective is a method for capturing, simulating, and duplicating reality by geometrically transposing three-dimensional space onto a two-dimensional surface. The canvas becomes a window onto the world or “mirror of reality.” However, perspective does not reproduce the retinal image of an object. It is of a spatial rather than a visual order (Edgerton 1991). It is, in fact, a geometrically defined construction. Cartesian rationality would later come to legitimize this way of seeing, which was “discovered” by Brunelleschi and codified by Alberti. The new technique gave rise to a disembodied logic of the gaze that replaced the act of looking (Bryson 1983): the sovereign subject stands before the frame or window and looks out onto the world from a fixed point of view. “This subjectification of the gaze also came at a price: the reduction of the real to the perceived,” writes Debray

(1992: 324). And, as Martin Jay observes, it also entailed a suspension of desire and contact. This can be seen in the history of the nude in Western art. Jay suggests that it was not until the provocative nudes of Manet's *Déjeuner sur l'herbe* and *Olympia* that the privilege of the dispassionate eye was challenged "by the shocking return of the viewer's gaze" (Jay 1993: 155).

Perspective opens onto time and space; it is the appropriation of the world through the sovereignty of vision. "In classical Latin, the term *perspicuus* refers to that which can be perceived presenting no obstacle to the gaze. *Perspicere* means to look with attention, to look through" (Illich 2004: 221). Linear perspective offers a transparent view of space, a precise line of visibility. It separates the subject and the object, transforming the first into an omnipotent spectator and the second into an inert, reified form. Perspective was not a fact of nature waiting to be discovered. It is a symbolic form, a way of seeing, that made sense within a particular historical moment and social context (Panofsky 1975).

Alongside the history of painting, the history of reading has impacted the distribution and/or conjugation of the senses and the sensible. During the first millennium, *lectio* referred to *lectio divina*, in which a *lector* momentarily lent his voice to God to address his companions. *Lectio* implied listening. The *lector* would read aloud from a book to address an audience, not for his or her own mental comprehension. Yet already in the fourth century a mutation took place in the practice of reading. Saint Augustine recorded it in his recollection of meeting Saint Ambrose, the bishop of Milan. Upon entering Ambrose's room, he was surprised to see the latter immersed in silent reading. "When he was reading, his eye glided over the pages, and his heart searched out the sense, but his voice and tongue were at rest" (Augustine 2012: 64). The practice of silent reading spread gradually, and then was compounded by the new copying techniques of the twelfth century, which robbed the ear of its ancient hegemony in the study of sacred texts and transferred authority to the eye. The book "written to be listened to" was replaced by "the text addressed to the eye" (Illich 2004: 161). In 1126, Hugh Saint Victor, master of the Augustinian stadium in Paris, wrote: "There are three forms of reading: with my ears, with yours, and in silent contemplation." As the third way, the silent reading of the gaze, became more common, reading lost its face and voice and entered the interior realm governed by vision (Illich 2004: 164, 165). Vision came to conquer reading and redistribute the sensory equilibrium. One no longer learned to read aloud but in silence.

As intimated above, according to Marshall McLuhan (and his student, Walter J. Ong), it was the invention of the printing press that had the most decisive impact on the Western sensorium, dethroning hearing from its ancient place of privilege, and laying the foundation for the hegemony of vision. However, given that only a tiny part of the population could read, the impact of printing was still limited, and hearsay remained an important point of reference for most. But the circulation of the first printed works during the second half of the fifteenth century in many European cities

helped transfer the authority previously enjoyed by hearing onto writing, that is to say, vision. For example, geography, in the wake of maritime exploration, was expanding the field of knowledge thanks to the preparation of maps of increasing precision; in medicine, vision was also attaining more cultural value. The meticulous dissection and observation of cadavers, as practiced by Vesalius, contributed to the development of a new anatomical knowledge, no longer based on received wisdom (Le Breton 1993).

During the Renaissance, the eye was celebrated as the window of the soul. In the words of Leonardo da Vinci

The eye, which reflects the beauty of the universe to those who see, is so excellent a thing that he who consents to its loss deprives himself of the spectacle of the works of nature; and it is owing to this spectacle, effected by means of the eye, which enables the soul to behold the various objects of nature, that the soul is content to remain in the prison of the body; but he who loses his eyesight leaves the soul in a dark prison, where all hope of once more beholding the sun, the light of the whole world, is lost. (Da Vinci 1906: 125)

The increasing importance and social influence of vision, and the waning of the other senses of smell, touch, and, to some extent, hearing, not only transformed relations to the visible in terms of observation, it also contributed to the changing status of the subject in society and the rise of individualism. In *Ways of Seeing*, John Berger underscores the historical significance of the way linear perspective centers everything on the eye of the observer: “The visible world is arranged for the spectator as the universe was once thought to be arranged for God” (1972: 16). Similarly, the *quattrocento* saw the gradual emergence of an interest in portraiture, resemblances, and the celebration of public figures, representing a break from previous centuries in which anonymity was the rule and individual existence was subsumed in the sacred, in the history of the Church. In the second edition of the *Vite dei più eccellenti pittori, scultori e architettori* (1568), Vasari begins each biography with a visual portrait of the artist discussed, often a self-portrait, and his preface underlines the importance of the engravings’ accurate representation of the real men’s features. The individual, in the modern sense of the term, was slowly taking shape.

This concern for the resemblance of the portrait to the model coincided with a metamorphosis of the gaze and the gradual ascent of individualism, still in its infancy at the time. Portraitists were preoccupied with capturing the singularity of the men and women they painted, and this implied studying their faces, recognizing them as individuals with a name and a unique history (Le Breton 2003a: 32 sq.). The collective “we” that had reigned in feudal society with its hierarchical corporate structure was slowly being replaced by the “me” or “I.” Sight, a sense of distance, came to dominate over the senses of proximity like smell, touch, and hearing. The gradual distancing of



the other with respect to the new status of the subject as a sovereign individual was also influencing the status of the senses.

In view of all these indicators of the burgeoning role of vision, it is difficult to subscribe to Febvre and Mandrou's thesis regarding the "underdevelopment of sight" in the time of Rabelais. Underdevelopment according to what standard of measure? In the printing house, in linear perspective painting, in anatomical, medical, or optical research: "the eyes guide everything," writes Rabelais in *The Third Book* (in a flat out rebuke to Febvre's reconstruction of the sixteenth-century sensorium). Descartes too, in the *Dioptrics*, accords sight authority over the other senses: "All the management of our lives depends on our senses, and since that of sight is the most comprehensive and the noblest of these, there is no doubt that the inventions which serve to augment its power are among the most useful there can be" (2001: 65). The microscope and telescope, bearing out his prediction, extended vision to infinite space, investing it with even greater power. According to Kant, "The sense of sight, even if it is not more indispensable than that of hearing, is still the noblest, because among the senses, it is furthest removed from the sense of touch, the most limited condition of perception" (Kant 2006: 48). In *Aesthetics*, Hegel rejects touch, odor, and taste as unfit for art, which, in its affinities with spirituality and contemplation, is removed from the more animal senses and appeals, rather, to sight and hearing.

The status accorded to vision, esteemed by philosophers and increasingly crucial to a range of social and intellectual activities, expanded into other spheres. In the nineteenth century, its primacy over the other senses in terms of civilization and knowledge became a commonplace as evidenced by the obsession with measurement in the physical anthropology of the epoch, as in the other sciences. In medicine, visually oriented clinical work—the dissection of cadavers and comparative study of diseases, for example—was already well established but continued to push the limits of the visual empire. In the entry "Observation" of the *Dictionnaire usuel des sciences médicales*, Dechambre proclaims:

No more diagnosis of the larynx without the laryngoscope, diseases of the eye without the ophthalmoscope, diseases of the chest without the stethoscope, the uterus without the speculum, variations in the pulse without the sphygmograph and curve graphs, or variations of body temperature without the thermometer. (in Dias 2004: 170)

This expansion of medicine's sensory capacities was especially visual, though some instruments, like the stethoscope, relied more on hearing. The microscope transformed research by making the infinitely small accessible to the eye. Toward the end of the century, X-rays were able to penetrate the screen of the skin, and over the course of the twentieth century, medical imaging would eventually make every recess of the body visually accessible.

This increasingly refined study of the visible body paved the way for contemporary medical imaging techniques. Medicine abandoned the study of patients' odors, or the taste of their urine, as was still common in the Renaissance. The diagnostic process was increasingly based on visual analysis, the other senses mostly forgotten. But vision refined by technology took on a particular aspect, giving rise to a standardized, rationalized, calibrated way of seeing, a quest for symptoms filtered through a very precise "vision of the world." "Sight alone is not enough, but every technical process depends on it [...] human vision is at the root of technique [...] Every technique is founded on and makes use of visualization" (Ellul 1981: 15). Technical mastery of the world came to depend on visual mastery.

The ascendancy of vision over the other senses pervaded not only technology but also social relations. Already, at the beginning of the twentieth century, Georg Simmel observed that "modern social life increases in ever growing degree the role of mere visual impression which always characterizes the preponderant part of all sense relationship between man and man, and must place social attitudes and feelings upon an entirely changed basis" (Simmel 1921: 360). The city had become a space of visual organization and the proliferation of the visible, and the hegemonic gaze came to govern all movement.

The penetration of the eye into every sphere has continued unabated, as the current status of the image reveals. According to Jacques Ellul, up until the 1960s, images were often simple illustrations accompanying a text. Words prevailed, and the image was a support (Ellul 1981: 130). But as the old adage says, "a picture is worth a thousand words" and this valorization has been institutionalized. "The information age is embodied in the eye," writes Ivan Illich (2004: 196). Our sight is now set less on the world than on the countless images that populate screens of every sort: television, cinema, computer or photocopier. The world is increasingly reduced to images, making media the principal vector of everyday life.

When the real world is transformed into mere images, mere images become real beings—dynamic figments that provide the direct motivations for a hypnotic behavior. Since the spectacle's job is to use various specialized mediations in order to show us a world that can no longer be directly grasped, it naturally elevates the sense of sight to the special preeminence once occupied by touch: the most abstract and easily deceived sense is the most readily adaptable to the generalized abstraction of present-day society. (Debord 2014: par. 18)

Images supplant the real and call into question the status of the original. Indeed, if the image replaces the real, then the image itself becomes the new original, even though it is continually manipulated or "doctored" to serve a particular agenda. Our society is witnessing a hypertrophy of the visual, in which the copy takes precedence over the original, which has no value beyond that granted by the copy. It is now "the map that precedes the

territory,” says Jean Baudrillard (1994: 1), a “precession of simulacra.” The real is a production of images: “In fact, it is no longer really the real, because no imaginary envelops it anymore. It is a hyperreal, produced from a radiating synthesis of combinatory models in a hyperspace without atmosphere” (2).

Meanwhile, the means of surveillance have proliferated inordinately. Surveillance cameras are everywhere, not only in satellites, but also in airports and other strategic locations of cities, stores, train stations, highways, intersections, service stations, banks, etc. These cameras scan everyday scenes for details, providing a hyperacute view that surpasses ordinary vision, thanks to a range of technologies that allow for close-up or remote angles and perspectives. Cell phone cameras, webcams, and reality TV shows shine the spotlight on everyday life. “Our society is not one of spectacle, but of surveillance,” says Michel Foucault, “[...] we are neither in the amphitheater nor the stage, but in the panoptic machine” (Foucault 1979: 216, 217). Spectacle and surveillance are not contradictory, as Foucault seems to suggest in this observation from the 1970s. In the contemporary world, their effects are combined, producing a continuous juxtaposition, a monumental shift of the private toward the public.

## 2

# From Seeing to Knowing: Sight, the Projective Sense

*As I sit at my window this summer afternoon, hawks are circling about my clearing; the tantivy of wild pigeons, flying by two and threes athwart my view, or perching restless on the white pine boughs behind my house, gives a voice to the air; a fish hawk dimples the glassy surface of the pond and brings up a fish; a mink steals out of the marsh before my door and seizes a frog by the shore; the sedge is bending under the weight of the reed-birds flitting hither and thither.*

– HENRY DAVID THOREAU, WALDEN

## The Light of the World

We are immersed in a never-ending profusion of seeing. Sight is the sense most constantly solicited in our relation to the world. It suffices simply to open one's eyes, or so it seems. Our relationships with others, our movements, virtually all activities appear to implicate vision, making the blind person an anomaly and object of anxiety. In many societies, blindness is equated with tragedy and regarded as among the most severe of disabilities. According to traditional stereotypes of the blind person,

all his activity and his very thought, organized around visual impressions, leave him whilst all his faculties seem to be wrapped round in darkness nailing him to the spot. It seems [...] that the blind man remains crushed under the burden that is overwhelming him, that the very sources of his individuality are poisoned. (Villey 1930: 15)

To lose one's sight is to lose the enjoyment of life, to be relegated to its margins. The "dark," "monotone," "sad" world of the blind is readily evoked, as is the blind person's "imprisonment," "solitude," "vulnerability," and "incapacity" to live without assistance.

The blind, for their lack of sight, are often denied full humanity. Pierre Henri long ago pointed out the pejorative connotations of the word blind, as well as its metaphorical derivatives in several languages. Blindness, it is presumed, denies access to any kind of lucidity and thus deprives blind individuals of the ability to discriminate. To see is to understand, weigh, and compare. To cover one's eyes, to "wear blinders," is to be blind to circumstances. "In all languages [...] blindness refers to one whose judgment is compromised, one who lacks understanding and reason [...] is incapable of reflection and analysis, is undiscerning, careless, thoughtless, ignorant, unaccountable, and false" (Henri 1958: 11).

It would seem that part of the reason the blind are stigmatized and their presence may be found unsettling is because their eyes lack expression and light. Their faces appear inert, their gestures seem inappropriate, and their slow movement contradicts the flux of urban life or ordinary daily rhythms. Prejudices abound with respect to their supposed world of "darkness" and "night." They are out of sync with others. In everyday life, existence is "principally and essentially visual; one would not make a world out of scents and sounds" writes Merleau-Ponty (1968: 83). Of course, for the blind, the world *is* a universe that interweaves odors, sounds, and contact with things. For the sighted, however, the world is experienced primarily through the eyes, and other sensory worlds are harder to imagine.

Seeing offers endless possibilities, because there are infinite ways to look at things (even though, in everyday life, a more functional perception usually suffices to guide our movements or actions). Different perspectives and variations of light add depth to the already multiple layers of meaning. Sight is undoubtedly the most economical of the senses. It extends its reach across the breadth of the world, whereas the other senses require proximity to their objects. It fills in distances and seeks far-off perceptions. Compared to the ear, captive to sound, the eye is active, mobile, selective, an explorer of the visual landscape. The eye navigates freely, stretching into the distance to seek out a detail or returning to a sight in closer range.

Vision projects us into the world, but we can only see what is in front of us. To have a better view, we have to move around things, move closer to or further away from them. That which escapes vision is often the result of delayed visibility. The fog lifts or the sun comes up. A shift in position changes our viewpoint and offers a new perspective. Visual acuity also has limits. We cannot see everything. The infinitely small or distant escape our range of vision without the aid of special instruments. Things are sometimes too far or too close, or they are vague, imprecise, ephemeral. Sight is a naïve sense, because it is imprisoned by appearances, unlike smell and hearing, which uncover scents and sounds wherever they are hiding.

Plato regarded images as illusions that obscure the essence of reality—we perceive only shadows but mistake them for reality and thus remain prisoners of a simulacrum. Reality lies beyond the world of everyday life in the universe of Ideas (or Forms). The eye takes the world at face value, without reflecting on it. Metaphors often evoke its misperceptions.

We “mistake bladders for lanterns” or see the speck of dust in the other’s eye and not the beam in our own. Vision transforms the world into images and thus easily into a mirage. However, it shares with touch the privilege of being able to judge the reality of things. Seeing is the necessary path to recognition.

## Visual Vocabularies

A visual vocabulary structures thought in many European languages. Seeing is believing, as many common expressions remind us: “You have to see it to believe it,” or “I’ll believe it when I see it.” “Word of you had come to my ears,” says Job, “but now my eye has seen you” (42:5). Vision is associated with knowledge. “I see” is synonymous with “I understand.” Seeing something “with your own eyes” is beyond argument. That which is “staring you in the face” or is “evident” is not open to debate. In everyday life, for something to be considered true, it has to be accessible to vision. “To know is to devour with the eyes,” writes Sartre (1992: 739).

The verb “to see” comes from the Latin *videre*, originating in the Indo-European word *veda*, which means “I know” and is the source of terms like “evidence” (that which is visible) and “providence” (foresight, according to God’s will). *Teoria* is contemplation, reason detached from sensory experience, even though the senses give rise to it. “Speculate” comes from *speculari*: to see. A series of visual metaphors characterize thought with reference to ideas such as clarity, light, perspective, point of view, world view, imagination, intuition, reflection, contemplation, and representation. Ignorance, on the other hand, draws on metaphors that represent loss of vision: darkness, obscurity, blindness, night, and fog.

“The common origin of the Greek *tuphlos* (blind), the German *dauf* and English ‘deaf,’ the English ‘dumb’ (mute) and German *dumpf* (mute, stupid) is remarkable,” writes Henri.

It’s as though sensory disabilities, having been conceived as obscuring knowledge, disturbing the mind, and masking external reality led to these concepts being confused with and defined by words related to material conditions: closed, dark, cloudy [...] Is it possible to conceive that, without sight, one can still take full advantage of the auditory, olfactory, gustatory, and tactile senses, develop perceptions based on them, recognize a chair simply by leaning up against its back, or recognize food by its taste, without seeing? (Henri 1958: 38)

Vision is sometimes imagined as a projection cast onto the world and sweeping across it like a beam of light. However, unless focused on a particular sight, it does not stretch out along a single line but, rather, encompasses a multitude of elements in a diffuse manner, from one moment to the next. It suddenly extracts from the ongoing visual stream an unusual

scene, a familiar face, a reminder of a task to be fulfilled, or an arresting color. In everyday life, the visual world unfolds like an uninterrupted reel and with a kind of calm indifference, unless a singular feature attracts our attention. The visual yields itself without our having to think about it. It is a sort of forgotten activity, a sensory economy that frees the conscious mind from a vigilance that would otherwise become unbearable over time. It is a routine revolving around that which is familiar and quickly deciphered or, otherwise, unremarkable and demanding no effort.

## Of Gazing and Glancing

The eye passes over that which is familiar without settling on anything. The glance is the way of seeing that best exemplifies this visual mode. Ephemeral, carefree, superficial, it flits about in search of something to fix on. By contrast, the gaze is fixed on an event. It implies duration and an effort of understanding. It explores details and contrasts with ordinary vision in its more sustained and grounded attention. This penetrating gaze focuses on specific information and separates situations from the visual flow of daily life. It is a kind of *poiesis*, a sensory confrontation, an effort to see more clearly, to understand when faced with something astonishing, dreadful, beautiful, or singular that catches our attention. The gaze is a variation of sensory experience, a way of taking control, laying claim to a sight wrested from the endless visual continuum.

As Riegl (1985) observed, the act of looking at something up close is sometimes an almost tactile or haptic way of seeing that plunges into the depth of things, like a sort of palpation with the eyes. Touching not with the hand but instead with the eye, it seeks to make contact, to perform a kind of caressing motion. While the optical eye maintains a distance, making a spectacle of things and jumping from one scene to the next, the haptic eye inhabits its object. These are two possible ways of looking. The haptic view touches with the eyes just as the blind see with their hands. For Jacques Brosse, for example, the contemplation of a statue in a museum first engages a tactile vision that moves around the object, feeling it, and symbolically conjuring the moral distance that prohibits touching it with our hands. “In other words, because of the presence of the museum guard, the signs, and the usual restrictions, we only take pleasure in it insofar as sight replaces touch and takes over its function” (1965: 121). This is undoubtedly like returning to the source of the work, which is born in the hands of an artist who modeled it, carved it, and shaped it, molding its physical matter. But this eye that touches things often seeks to experience an object of curiosity or desire up close. Lovers know this captivating gaze that is already a caress. Goethe recalls his nights spent with a certain young woman:

But at the love-god's behest, by night my business is different; / Half of my scholarship's lost, yet I have double the fun. / And is not this education, to study

the shape of her lovely / Breasts, and down over her hip slide my adventuring hand? / Marble comes doubly alive for me then, as I ponder, comparing, / Seeing with vision that feels, feeling with fingers that see. (1999: 15)

Vision requires the other senses, especially touch, to exercise its powers to the fullest. The eye that is deprived of these is paralyzed. It follows the tactile explorations of the fingers and hands. But while the eye is limited to the surface of things, the hand turns objects around, seeks them out, and repositions them.

We must habituate ourselves to think that every visible is cut out in the tangible, every tactile being in some manner promised to visibility, and that there is encroachment, infringement, not only between the touched and the touching, but also between the tangible and the visible, which is encrusted in it. (Merleau-Ponty 1968: 134)

Touching and seeing mutually inform one another in the perception of space (Hatwell 1986). “The hands want to see, the eyes want to caress” (Pallasmaa 2005: 14). The eye is more supple than the hand. It has a wider latitude in its exploration of space, which it accesses in its entirety at once, whereas the hand can only apprehend spaces slowly and successively. Without the hands, the eyes are impaired, and without the eyes, the hands are left to fumble about. “Sight always offers more than we can absorb, while touch is a discovery of the mediation, the interval that separates us from our surroundings” (Brun 1986: 157).

Culturally, the power of the gaze tends to reduce the world, placing it at its mercy. Its impact can be beneficial or harmful. Belief in the evil eye, for example, is widely shared among many different cultures. In several societies, and Western traditions are not exempt, the eye holds the world hostage, fixing it to assure control. The person who is its object symbolically surrenders to its ambiguous power, often without even being aware of it. Seeing is a seizing of power because it fills in the distance and captures its object. It is immaterial but nonetheless active, exposing things to the light of day. Keeping an eye on someone is a way of pinning them down so they cannot escape. But we can also “catch someone’s eye,” “feast our eyes” on or “get an eyeful” of someone or something. Voyeurs are content to indulge their desire through the gaze alone, through a visual embrace, even when the other is unaware. Distance is abolished through seeing. To “devour” someone or something “with one’s eyes” is not just a metaphor. Certain belief systems take it literally.

## The Look of Desire

While Freud acknowledged that touch was essential to sexuality, he still insisted on a personal (and cultural) hierarchy of the senses by privileging



sight in erotic relations: “The libidinous excitement is frequently awakened by the optical impression” (1962: 20). It is instructive to consider the visual dynamics of desire in light of Freud’s statement. As we shall see, the tactile is not as absent as he presumes when he writes: “The eye which is very remote from the sexual object is most often in position, during the relations of object wooing to become attracted by that particular quality of excitation, the motive of which we designate as beauty in the sexual object” (1962: 68).

Women, especially in Western societies, are associated with beauty and held to strict criteria of desirability, whereas men are positioned to compare, evaluate, and judge a woman’s sexual appeal as measured by her appearance or youth, without hesitating, or even considering the possibility that they too could come under the weight of a woman’s gaze assessing their virility. “Woman,” wrote Baudelaire,

is quite within her rights, indeed, she is even accomplishing a kind of duty, when she devotes herself to appearing magical and supernatural; she has to astonish and charm us; as an idol, she is obliged to adorn herself to be adored. Thus she has to lay all the arts under contribution for the means of lifting herself above Nature ... (1964: 33)

Baudelaire does not speak of men here because to his mind only women are beholden to visual evaluation.

Fixing one’s gaze on the other is never an insignificant event. The eye takes possession of, lays claim to something, for better or for worse. Though immaterial, it acts symbolically. In certain conditions, it conceals a formidable power of metamorphosis. The physical effect on those who suddenly find themselves captive to an insistent gaze is undeniable: breathing accelerates, the heart beats faster, blood pressure rises, and psychological tension mounts. Lovers plunge into each other’s eyes as though plunging into the sea, into another dimension of reality.

Looking is a form of contact; it touches the Other, and the tactility it assumes has its place in the social imagination. Everyday language provides endless examples: the eyes caress, roam, and linger; we shoot someone a glance or stare them down; a look can be penetrating, sharp, cutting, piercing, or riveting; eyes glaze over, menace, or betray. Many expressions translate the face-to-face tension that exposes the mutual nakedness of faces: people can be poker-faced, not see eye-to-eye, give each other dirty looks or sideways glances, and so on. Likewise, lovers “make eyes” at each other, gaze longingly, and devour each other with their eyes. A look can be hard, abrasive, heavy, sweet, soft, endearing, or cruel.

The eyes touch what they perceive and mingle with the world. A passage from Charles Juliet’s *Journal* conveys this symbolic power of the gaze. Juliet was seated at an outdoor café across from a young woman.

Her head was lowered and my eyes beckoned her. She raised her eyes and literally impaled herself on my gaze. We stayed like this for ten to

fifteen long seconds, yielding, searching, blending into one another. Then she caught her breath, the tension subsided, and she looked away. Not a single word was spoken, but I don't think I have ever communicated with someone so intimately, nor penetrated a woman so completely as in that particular moment. After, we didn't dare look at each other again, and I felt that she was overwhelmed, that it was for both of us as if we had just made love. (1978: 259)

An exchanged look is not inconsequential and can even, sometimes, change a person's life. As a case in point, consider the young Rousseau who, having walked from Gouffignon to Annecy with a recommendation letter from Monsieur de Pontverre, was amazed at the sight of Mme de Warens, of which he says in the Tenth Walk: "this first moment determined my whole life and by an inevitable chain of events shaped the destiny of the rest of my days" (1992: 140). Rousseau did not yet know the woman whose protection he sought. He had imagined her to be an older woman, steeped in piety. She was about to enter the church of the Cordeliers when he caught sight of her, and, hearing the young man's timid voice, she instantly turned around: "How the sight of her affected me!" writes Rousseau: "What I saw was a face radiant with grace, blue eyes full of sweetness, a dazzling complexion, the curve of an enchanting bosom" (2008: 48). "Let those who deny that there is sympathy between souls explain, if they can, how it was that, from the moment of our first meeting, from her first word, her first look, Mme de Warens inspired in me not only the most tender attachment but the most perfect trust, and one that has never failed" (2008: 50).

Looking at the Other is never indifferent. It can be a guilty pleasure, and contains the threat of transgression. It is therefore hardly surprising that the Church condemned so-called "concupiscent" looks. Seeing is already an extension of the self, and being seen places us in a position that the Other can take advantage of. Thus nuns, for example, are expected to maintain a "modest gaze" and are obliged to humbly lower their eyes in all circumstances in order to avoid bad thoughts (Arnold 1984: 88). This is the ritualization of a submission that gives men the right to look at women as they please without consequences. The gaze is concupiscence, a temptation to give in to desire. It has to be reined in at its source. "It is difficult for the gaze to limit itself to ascertaining appearances," writes Starobinski "By its very nature it must ask for more.... A magical wish, never entirely fulfilled yet never discouraged, accompanies each of our glances: to seize, to undress, to petrify, to penetrate: to fascinate" (1989: 3, 4).

The gaze carries the risk of sin. A simple flushing of desire, even if it remains within the confines of privacy, is no less a defilement of the soul. Augustine is explicit:

Even if your gaze chances to fall on a woman you should not stare at her. There is no rule forbidding you to see women when you go out, but

to attract or encourage their attention is wrong. Nor is it only by touch and strong feelings that desire (*concupiscentia*) for women is aroused but also by the way of looking. You cannot claim to have pure minds if you have impure eyes, for an impure eye is the messenger of an impure heart. When impure hearts exchange messages by their glances, even though the tongue remains silent, and when through wrong desire they take pleasure in each other's ardor, then chastity takes flight from their behavior even though there has been no despoiling of the body. (2004: 114)

In the eyes of the Church, the gaze is never only contemplation and distance, but a compromise with the world. A desire imagined is a desire fulfilled for the soul, which is tarnished by it. There is no innocence in looking. The Gospel is unequivocal: "But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart" (Matthew 5:28).

Conversely, in our modern era, pornography invites us to "see everything" and up close. It turns the spectator into a voyeur, eyes riveted, fixed on the other's genitals. But, apart from the male ejaculation, which is the only bodily liquid deemed to have dignity,

any liquid coming out of the woman's sex is considered dirty. The close-ups of penetration have to be "clean." The slightest trace is immediately removed with a baby wipe. A female porn star's on-set bag resembles a first-aid kit to treat infections: cleaning gel, wipes, douches, vaginal sponges. (Ovidie, cited in Marzano 2003: 191)

Women's and men's bodily fluids clearly do not enjoy equal social status; thus, the importance of the "cum shot" in pornographic films, the visible ejaculation outside the woman's body in a context where her pleasure is of no interest relative to the man's performance, and the evidence of sperm—the demonstration of masculine virility and self-absorbed male pleasure. The woman becomes an object of indifference, a pretext for the exhibition of male power.

Pornography is centered on the male orgasm because it is visible, explosive, triumphant, and incontestable, the logical outcome of the "performance." It is based on an all-inclusive view, nothing else. It is not only about taking pleasure in the view, but also about plunging as deep as possible into the woman's orifices in a quest for the truth of desire. The woman's body, contorted to display every intimate angle, becomes the receptacle of the man's mechanical performance.

The possibility of "showing everything" and of "seeing everything" that is the basis of pornography runs counter to the modesty that helps delineate the boundaries of an interior space and transform the body into a sort of protective psychic envelope that can filter what is coming from the outside. (Marzano 2003: 203)

Feminist discourse contests the privileging of the male gaze. “The moment the look dominates,” writes Luce Irigaray, “the body loses its materiality. It is perceived above all externally and the sexual becomes much more a matter of organs that are highly circumscribed and separable from the site of their assembly in the living whole. The male sex becomes *the* sex because it is very visible, the erection is spectacular” (Irigaray cited in Heath 1981: 161). “Women, on the other hand, maintain more archaic sensory stratifications that are repressed, censured and devalued by the empire of the gaze. Touching is often more emotional for them than looking” (Irigaray 1978: 50).

## Learning to See

The figures that surround us are visually ordered into recognizable schemas based on the focus of our gaze and the attention we accord them. As Aristotle observed, “sense perception is a faculty of receiving the forms of outward objects independently of the matter of which they are composed” (1883: 87). Recognizing the “tree” schema, for example, normally suffices, but, if necessary, we can identify a specific tree: a cherry tree, an oak tree, or, even more precisely, a particular tree in our own yard. In this way, visual apprehension facilitates everyday life. Thanks to a rule of economy, we avoid being submerged, inundated, in a flood of visual information. General recognition of incoming stimuli is all that is needed to safely navigate our surroundings. The same space, however, can be a source of endless knowledge for others.<sup>1</sup>

The senses have to make sense so we can orient ourselves in the world. We have to learn to see. At birth, infants find no meaning in the indefinite, colorful and changing forms that surround them. They slowly learn to discriminate incoming stimuli, beginning with the mother’s face, by integrating schemas that are at first singular and gradually generalized. Recognition depends first on cognition. For several months, children’s sight is less refined than their hearing and has no sense or purpose. It develops, little by little, to become an essential element of their education and relationship with others and the world. Children thus acquire the keys to visual interpretation shared within their social milieu. Seeing is not a recording but a learning process. This refinement allows children to discern the contours of objects; their size, distance, location, and how they are affected by them. They learn to name the colors of objects, to identify others in their surroundings, to avoid obstacles, to grasp at things, to walk, climb, play, run, sit down, and so on.

Muzafer Sherif’s classic study (1935) illustrates the influence of others in this regard. The experiment consisted in having participants in a dark room observe a point of light that appears to all of them to move. Though no frame of reference was available to locate the light’s position in space, the distance of its perceived movement varied enormously from one participant

to the next. Each subject first participated in the experiment alone, calculating the average movement of the point of light. They were then left to discuss their various perceptions. When reexposed to the same point of light, once again in isolation, the participants tended to arrive at more similar results, creating, without realizing it, a social norm. Though removed from the conditions of everyday life, this experiment reveals in another way how perceptions are socially shaped.

Seeing is not a passive act, the world projected onto the retina but, rather, a visual perspective-taking. The most elementary visual tasks have to be learned. This is the lesson of the famous question raised in July 1688 by the Irish philosopher William Molyneux in his letter to John Locke, a question that would test the wisdom of the philosophers of his time and spawn numerous writings and debates. Molyneux asked whether a person who had been born blind and had learned to discern a sphere and a cube of the same size through touch would be able to distinguish between them visually if his or her sight were restored at twenty years of age. An affirmative response to the question would imply that knowledge can be transferred from one sensory modality to the other: that which is known through touch would also be knowable through vision. Molyneux questioned this and proposed that the transfer of tactile to visual knowledge requires experience. The object that one touches and the object that one sees are not the same. Locke agreed with Molyneux and thought that individuals who are born blind would be lacking, during their childhood, the simultaneous education of sight and touch, and this would affect their judgment. Berkeley also agreed that anyone born blind and then gained their sight would only develop proper use of their eyes over the course of a learning process.

In 1728, an operation performed by the surgeon Cheselden restored the sight of a 13-year-old child suffering from a congenital cataract. The operation, however, did not restore the child's use of vision—for the child failed to perceive contrasts and certain colors and had difficulty orienting himself in space. As Diderot notes, the youth was “for a long time unable to distinguish dimensions, distances, positions, or even figures. An object an inch in size held before his eye so as to hide a house from him appeared as large as the house itself. All he saw seemed as close to his eye as the object he touched to the skin” (1916: 125). It took him two months to integrate a sense of the representation of objects, images previously having appeared to him as simple surfaces covered in various colors.

Having been sequestered in the darkness of a cave for many years and having developed an ability to see well in the dark, Kaspar Hauser, when finally released from his confinement, was disturbed by the light of day and the world that surrounded him. He struggled to acquire a sense of perspective and distance. One day, the lawyer and legal scholar Von Feuerbach, who had taken an interest in the young man, asked him to look out the window of his house. Kaspar, while leaning outside, was overcome with anxiety and managed to stammer one of the few words he knew at the time “ugly, ugly.”

Some years later, in 1831, Kaspar had acquired the majority of cultural codes that he was lacking, and when the lawyer asked him to relive this experience, Kaspar replied:

Yes, indeed, what I then saw was very ugly. For when I looked at the window it always appeared to me as if a window-shutter had been placed close before my eyes, upon which a wall-painter had splattered the contents of his different brushes, filled with white, blue, green, yellow, and red paint, all mingled together. Single things, as I now see things, I could not at that time recognize and distinguish from each other. This was shocking to look at; and besides, it made me feel anxious and uneasy; because it appeared to me as if my window had been closed up with this partly-coloured shutter, in order to prevent me from looking out into the open air. (quoted in Singh and Zingg 1966: 323)

Von Feuerbach made the connection between Kaspar and Cheselden's patient, who had also struggled against a reality imposed on his eyes.

Diderot once observed the effect of a cataract operation performed by one Daviel on a blacksmith whose eyesight had been damaged practicing his trade. Based on his observations, he reasoned that even if a person once had a flawless use of sight, it was not easy to recuperate it after decades of disuse:

During the twenty-five years of blindness he had grown so accustomed to the guidance of touch that he had to be forced to use the sense which had been restored to him. Daviel would beat him and say "Use your eyes, you wretch!" He walked and moved, and did all that we do with our eyes open, with his eyes shut. (1916: 144)

Diderot rightly concludes that,

Whence it follows that we owe the notion of the continuous existence of objects to experience, of their distance to the sense of touch; that the eye may perhaps have to learn to see as the tongue to speak; that it would not be surprising should the aid of one of the senses be necessary to another [...] It is by experience alone that we learn to compare our sensations with what occasions them. (1916: 124–127)

Vision implicates exploring the successive layers that frame the act of seeing. The eye has to capture the real in perspective, recognize depth in order to go beyond the surface and extract things, colors, names, and aspects that vary according to the viewing distance, the play of light and shadow, and the illusions created by different circumstances. Those born blind who are "reborn" into the faculty of sight cannot immediately make use of it. They are lost in an entanglement of forms and colors on a single surface that presses upon their eyes. Trapped in a world of incoherent

forms and intermingling colors, immersed in visual chaos, the newly sighted are able to make out shapes, boundaries, and colored tones only gradually, as they are still lacking the sense of meaning required to navigate through this labyrinth with understanding. Their eyes are prepared to see but they do not yet possess the keys to the visible world. To distinguish between a triangle and a square they have to count the corners. Likewise, they struggle to understand the significance of a painting or a photograph. The representation of an object in two dimensions is hard to read.

## Acquiring Sight

The formerly blind who regain their vision make painstaking efforts not only to learn to use their eyes but also to look at the world around them. They typically go through a period of doubt, despair, and depression that sometimes ends tragically. Some of the blind individuals described by Van Senden (1960) were relieved to revert to blindness and stop having to fend off the visible world. As long as the newly sighted have not integrated the codes, they remain blind to the meanings of visual experience, having gained sight but not its use. Some cannot bear the psychological cost of a learning process that shatters their previous relation to the world.

Blind individuals who are operated on too late for congenital cataracts rarely learn to fully make use of the sight that has been granted to them. They sometimes remain more blind in their behaviors and sentiments than those who, through a reverse process, succumb to complete blindness later in life. (Henri 1958: 436)

To be effective, the former blind person's sight must cease to function as a substitute hand and be used for its own specificity. But, while most children enter into vision without any particular effort, without knowing they are learning and enlarging their sovereignty over the world, those born blind who are learning to see proceed step by step into a new dimension of reality that demands their astute observation. In slowly acquiring with time and effort what for others was obvious growing up, the blind discover that sight is above all a feat of education. The newly sighted learn, like newborn babies, to discern objects, their dimensions, distance, and depth; to identify colors; and so on. They have difficulty recognizing a face or an object if they have not first encountered it with their hands. For a long time, touch remains the primordial sense through which they appropriate the world.

Sometimes the symbolic assimilation of sight remains inaccessible and the blind continue to live in a world without color, depth, or interest, one that is encumbered by useless and troubling details. This is reflected, for example, in the experience of "S. B.," whose story has attracted the attention of several authors (Green 1993; Ehrenzweig 1995; Sacks 1996; Lavallée 1999). This accomplished and reputed artisan had become blind

at the age of ten months, but he never lost the hope of regaining his sight. He finally received a corneal transplant when he was fifty-two. The operation being a success, he was in a state of euphoria for a few weeks before becoming disillusioned. Previously in tune with a universe of touch and sound, he now remained on the margins of the visual world, powerless to understand its codes. Because of his precocious blindness, he had never constructed the visual schemas needed to later orient himself. Tactility remained his primary source of mediation with the world. Before naming an object, he had to touch it, and then stop touching to see it. His eyes did not function autonomously, serving, instead, to verify the tactile experience that alone made the world coherent to him. To make things worse, many things became enigmatic to him. He recognized people not by their faces but by their voices. He found his own or his wife's facial features unpleasant. In the residence where he stayed, he preferred to go about his business at night. He often sat facing a mirror with his back turned to his friends, trying to capture the infinity of the visible in an image he could finally understand. Little by little, S. B. managed to cope with the visual chaos, the grayness, the proliferation of details that he was struggling to understand. But a sense has no function beyond the meaning that gives life to it. S. B. regained his vision too late. He was unable to mobilize his resources and find something of interest to him in his visual experience. In regaining his sight, he was simply overwhelmed by an excess of meaning. The addition of sight was a paradoxical amputation because of the efforts it demanded of him and his disappointment in discovering a world that failed to live up to his expectations. He died a few years later in a "deep depression" (Ehrenzweig 1995: 15).<sup>2</sup>

In everyday life, when objects are unclear, either because of their distance, shape, or poor visibility, we change position or project a meaning that is more or less accurate. These projections are often revealing of fleeting or unconscious thoughts. Meaningless patterns take on familiar forms. The Rorschach test, for example, is used in psychiatry to trigger associations. Inkblots, which signify nothing precise, are offered up to the patients' imagination. People's responses are revealing of their preoccupations, desires, and anxieties, and give the therapist material to work with. Even though the images signify nothing in themselves, individuals project their own singular meanings onto them. Leonardo da Vinci had foreseen this principle in his *Notebooks*, observing that

when you look at a wall spotted with stains, or with a mixture of stones, if you are about to devise some scene, you will be able to see in it a resemblance to various landscapes adorned with mountains, rivers, rocks, trees, plains, wide valleys and various groups of hills; or again you may see battles and figures in action; or strange faces and costumes, and an infinite number of things which you can then reduce into separate and well-drawn forms. (2008: 173)



Gombrich (2000) makes this disposition to complete forms or render them intelligible one of the bases of illusion in art but also of everyday life. A syncretic view reveals the atmosphere of the scene observed. A situation or object is perceived according to an overall pattern. Its meaning is not yet defined and only becomes evident after the fact, following closer examination. An expectation of meaning is created. Ehrenzweig, in this regard, speaks of an unconscious “scanning” which allows us to discern open structures of meaning, whereas conscious thinking requires more closed and precise notions. The scanning eye suspends situations and instantly confers a meaning upon them that is refined through closer observation (Ehrenzweig 1995: 42). The meaning always comes after, as in language, even though it is then altered, perhaps even several times, given that a situation rarely possesses a single meaning.

Expectation creates meaning, filling in, as needed, the missing links afforded by conventional schematic representations of reality. Gombrich makes reference to the war years, during which his task in London consisted in listening to and reporting on German radio transmissions. Technical conditions, however, made some of the recordings barely audible, in spite of their strategic value, and

it became quite an art, or even a sport, to interpret the few whiffs of speech sound that were all we really had on the wax cylinders on which these broadcasts had been recorded. It was then we learned to what an extent our knowledge and expectations influence our hearing. You had to know what might be said in order to hear what was said. (1996: 204)

To see (or hear) the world, we are continually piecing together missing visual cues based on the probability of their occurrence and what we expect to see. This type of attention allows us to recognize a landscape or a friend in the distance without yet being able to make out the details that would establish a more precise identification.

Syncretic vision is not lacking in details but, rather, integrates, numerous points of view, because it does not choose but instead remains open to all of the visual cues. “The experienced [card] player,” writes Ehrenzweig, “gifted with a mysterious card sense can consider all the relevant distributions in a split second, holding them in a single view as it were” (1995: 39). This view captures the structure of the whole or, rather, a meaningful atmosphere. Similarly, the caricature is a form of syncretic looking that reveals the gestalt of the represented subject, a sort of distillation that resembles the person more than an ordinary portrait. The canvases of Picasso, Klee, and Matisse often convey this vision based on an overall impression of a face or object. This scanning is interrupted when we temporarily focus on a particular item. Analytic vision then deconstructs the whole, fragmenting its object of attention to gradually assimilate it little by little. We focus first on those elements that make sense to our eyes, neglecting any other visual data. The analytic gaze moves over the entire scene from one sign to another.

Making sense of a naturalistic painting is a simple task. We can easily perceive a rural landscape or a woman's face, which we translate, through convention, into three dimensions, when in fact we are looking at nothing more than a flat and colored surface.

"The facts show above all else that sight is nothing unless the subject is more or less used to using his eyes," writes Merleau-Ponty (1962: 223). The eye is not innocent; it arrives on the scene with a history, a culture, and an unconscious. It belongs to a subject. Rooted in the body and in the other senses, it does not reflect the world but rather constructs it through various representations. It seizes upon forms that carry meaning: clouds preceding a thunderstorm, people passing by, the leftovers of a meal, the icy traces of a morning frost on a window, a thousand occurrences unfolding all around. Meanings are continually unfolding and being exchanged between the seer and the seen. "Nothing is seen nakedly or naked," writes Goodman: "The myths of the innocent eye and of the absolute given are unholy accomplices" (1976: 8).

## World Views

All visual perception depends on a mindset or, in other words, a world view. The landscape resides within us before we enter into it, because it only makes sense by virtue of what we see in it. The eyes are not only receptors of light and things in the world. They are also creators of the world, insofar as seeing is not a recording of external reality but, rather, a projection of one's world view beyond the self. Sight filters the reality of experience through a social and cultural prism, a system of interpretation, which bears the imprint of an individual's personal history within a social and cultural fabric. Every look projected onto the world, even the most trivial, engages a visual thought process to produce meaning. Sight extracts from the visual variety reference points that make the world conceivable. Far from being a passive registering mechanism, it is an *activity*. There is no fixed view but, rather, an infinity of eye movements that are both unconscious and intentional. We move through the world, from one glance to the next, visually surveying the space before us, lingering on certain situations or focusing our attention more specifically on this or that detail. The eyes are continuously engaged in a process of meaning-making.

All vision is interpretation. Vision is always a method, a reflection on the world. Michel Foucault, in tracing the birth of the clinic at the end of the eighteenth century, describes a shift in attitude toward the human corpse. Doctors changed their perspective, saw something different:

doctors described what for centuries had remained below the threshold of the visible and the expressible, but this did not mean that, after over-indulging in speculation, they had begun to perceive once again, or that they listened to reason rather than to imagination; it meant that the

relation between the visible and the invisible—which is necessary to all concrete knowledge—changed its structure, revealing through the gaze and language what had previously been below or beyond their domain. (1994: xii)

The clinic created a different relation to the body and to illness, a different way of seeing. It spoke, writes Foucault, the language of a “positive science” (1994: xviii). The visible modalities had changed. Though the anatomist Bichat had provided one of the first accounts of this in the history of medicine, the latter was still evolving and the modalities of vision that it was based on would also continue to evolve. The same screen of reality presents a new version every time.

Visual acuity is secondary compared to the particular quality of seeing. The writings of William Henry Hudson, a traveler and naturalist whose work focused as much on human as on vegetal and animal nature, provide a series of examples. He describes a friend from Patagonia who was able to memorize all of the cards in a single card game thanks to minute differences in the color of their backsides. “Yet this very man,” writes Hudson,

whose vision was keen enough to detect differences in cards so slight that another could not see them, even when pointed out—this preternaturally sharp-eyed individual was greatly surprised when I explained to him that half-a-dozen birds of the sparrow kind, that fed in his courtyard, and sang and built their nests in his garden and vineyard and fields, were not one but six distinct species. He had never seen any difference in them. (1893: 170)

A shepherd knows every sheep in his herd even if he has hundreds of them, just as the farmer knows his cows. Sailors can identify atmospheric changes that remain elusive to others. The doctor knows how to read the imperceptible signs of an illness even when the patient’s friends or family detect no changes. “Knowing how to look: this is the whole secret of scientific invention, of the great clinicians’ swift diagnoses, of the true strategists’ ‘once-over’” (Schuhl 1952: 209).

Before being able to see we must first learn to read the signs, as in learning to use a language. In *Arctic Dreams*, Barry Lopez describes how he learned to see:

We moved slowly, steadily, through the ice floes, without conversation, occasionally raising a pair of field glasses to study a small, dark dot on the water—a piece of ice? A bird? A seal breaking the surface of the water to breathe? It is not so difficult to learn to distinguish among these things, to match a “search image” in the mind after a few days of tutoring with the shading, shape, and movement that mean *seal*. (1987: 67)

Trackers and hunters read the minutest details of an environment to trace a person or an animal. A cultivated sense of sight never ceases to surprise

those who are unaware of its perceptual codes. As the explorer Vladimir Arseniev recounts, his guide Dersu Uzala possessed a formidable knowledge of the Siberian Taiga and was able to read the terrain like an open book to the amazement of his companions (Arseniev 1941). The Aivilik also possess an incredible visual acuity. Carpenter had perfect vision, but he notes that

a seal on the ice was known to them long before I could see it.... Standing at the floe edge they could tell at a glance whether it was bird or seal... The shout *tingmisut!* (plane) usually went up long before I could see anything and the children would continue to watch long after it had disappeared from my view... I'm not suggesting that their eyes were optically superior to mine, merely that such observations are meaningful to them and that years of unconscious training have made them masters at it. (1973: 26)<sup>3</sup>

Drawing on his own experience, Hudson challenged the prevalent belief of his epoch (the late nineteenth century) in the superiority of Native American over Western vision. Hudson simply noted that the two peoples do not look at the same things:

each person inhabits a little world of his own, as it were, which to others is only part of the distant general blueness obscuring all things, but in which, to him, every object stands out with wonderful clearness, and plainly tells its story.... The secret of the difference is that his eye is trained and accustomed to see certain things, which he looks for and expects to find. (1893: 171, 172, 174)

A familiar story unfolds before us, a world that we already know and in which we look for signs, ignoring those that we don't recognize. "A Japanese," writes Rudolf Arnheim, "reads without difficulty ideographs printed so small that a Westerner needs a magnifying glass to discern them, not because the Japanese have a more acute eyesight but because they hold the *kanji* characters in visual storage" (1997: 93).

## The Bounds of Sight

Vision is not an imprint of reality upon the mind. There would be too much to see. It involves selection and interpretation. It only ever apprehends one version of an event. Space is a mental formulation, as well as a social and cultural one. Our visual appropriation of the world is filtered by what we might call, following Bion—but applied to vision—a "contact barrier," a sensory frontier that is continuously brought into play, a "containing" or holding capacity, a mental screen that filters visual data and instantly interprets it.

The repercussions of events also nuance our ways of seeing. Someone who is in mourning or unemployed, or confronted with serious personal

problems, is said to have a “dark outlook” on things, while, conversely, one who is rejoicing in good news has a “rosy outlook.” The person who suddenly suspects an intruder has been in their house no longer sees the bedroom in the same way, even if its layout or lighting remains unchanged. Sight is imbued with moral considerations. Our personal history and circumstances alter the tone of our look. Someone who once disliked a particular city or region cannot stop talking about how beautiful it is after having fallen in love or overcome past difficulties there. An encounter with someone that is initially unpleasant is transformed into the very opposite if circumstances reveal that person “in a different light.” A face that was once disagreeable is suddenly pleasing to the eyes, or vice versa. The moral qualities associated with visual stimuli and their perception, and their selection within the profusion of the real, are always dependent on the state of mind of the actor. In seeing the world, we are continually seeing ourselves. All vision is a self-portrait, but one that is, from the outset, immersed in a particular culture, too.

The boundaries of the sensible vary from one culture or historical period to another. The visible and invisible are shaped in unique ways. A medieval person’s vision has little in common with our ways of looking at the world today. People then did not see the world with the same eyes that we do. Rabelais’ contemporaries were not yet “disenchanted,” assimilated to forces of production or leisure:

Their world was a fluid one where nothing was strictly defined, where entities lost their boundaries and, in the twinkling of an eye, without causing much protest, changed shape, appearance, size, even “kingdom,” as we would say. And there were all those stories about stones that breathed, came to life, stirred and moved; trees that came alive without causing astonishment to those readers of Ovid [...] Finally, there were animals that behaved like men, and men who changed into animals at will. The typical case was the werewolf, a human being who could be in two different places at once, to no one’s surprise: in one place he was man, in the other he was animal. (Febvre 1982: 438, 439)

The world would have to wait until the seventeenth century for the emergence of a rationalized vision, detached from any notion of transcendence, among certain scholars who sought to become the “masters and possessors of nature” (Descartes 1998: 35), a vision that was imbued with what Febvre called the “sense of the possible” (Febvre 1982: 438). Vision in the sixteenth century was not animated by the certitude that the *non posse* engenders the *non esse*, that the impossible could not become a reality.

The *Malleus Maleficarum* (The Hammer of Witches), the witch-hunting manual published in 1486, written by two Dominican monks and inquisitors, offers an amazing repertoire of the common beliefs of the epoch and what individuals were convinced of seeing with their own eyes.

For the two authors, witchcraft was a proven fact of the Catholic faith, and any attempt at refutation of this idea was considered heresy. The text describes the accounts of witnesses whose view of the world closely corresponded to what they expected to see through the cultural codes of their epoch. One of the authors recounted his own experience. A certain city was being devastated by the plague. Rumor had it that a dead and buried woman was swallowing bit by bit the shroud in which she had been buried. The epidemic would only come to an end once the shroud had disappeared. After holding council, the officials decided to exhume the body. They “found half the shroud absorbed through the mouth and throat into the stomach, and consumed. In horror at this sight, the Podesta drew his sword and cut off her head and threw it out of the grave, and at once the plague ceased” (Kramer and Sprenger 1971: 78). A crowd is said to have witnessed a beheaded person take his head under his arm and slowly walk away from the site of his execution. People believed that a victim’s remains shed blood in the presence of his assassin.

Satan was thought to seduce women and force them to commit sins of the flesh with him or harm others through the use of powerful spells. Some horrified witnesses described the witches’ and devils’ Sabbaths. Witches were seen

lying on their backs in the fields or the woods, naked up to the very navel, and it has been apparent from the disposition of those limbs and members which pertain to the venereal act and orgasm, as also from the agitation of their legs and thighs, that, all invisibly to the bystanders, they have been copulating with incubus devils; yet sometimes, howbeit this is rare, at the end of the act a very black vapour, of about the stature of a man, rises up into the air from the witch. (1971: 114)

Witches were believed to raise hailstorms, tempests, and lightning, which witnesses saw them produce by urinating or throwing water on the sites marked by their curses (1971: 107). They could change men into animals and kill fetuses or newborns through the power of their spells. Men who had been attacked by witches were said to have had their virile members, “torn right away from the body ... [and] hidden by the devil through some prestidigitatory art so that they can be neither seen nor felt” (1971: 119). One of the authors cites the experience of a “venerable Father” whose reputation was above reproach:

“One day,” he says, “while I was hearing confessions, a young man came to me and, in the course of his confession, woefully said that he had lost his member. Being astonished at this, and not being willing to give it easy credence [...] I obtained proof of it when I saw nothing on the young man’s removing his clothes and showing the place.” (1971: 119)

The priest, convinced, suggested that the young man seek out the woman suspected of bewitching him and try to “soften her with gentle words and promises” (1971: 119). The young man “came back after a few days and thanked me, saying that he was whole and had recovered everything. And I believed his words, but again proved them by the evidence of my eyes” (1971: 119).

As Robert Lenoble observes, commenting on the pictorial representations of the time, people saw depicted angels, saints, and unicorns “with their own eyes” and never doubted their reality. Renaissance bestiaries included the formidable cockatrice, a hybrid animal believed to be hatched from an egg laid by a cock and incubated by a toad. With a single look, it could kill individuals who crossed its path if it saw them before being seen itself. Other animals were reputed to possess similar evil powers, for example, wolves, cats, lions, hyenas, and owls (Havelange 1998). What we refer to today as “supernatural” was simply regarded as “natural” in this period. The frontiers of the visible are only comprehensible on the basis of what people expect to see, not on that of an objective reality, which, precisely, no one ever sees because it does not exist.

The Wuli inhabit a small village community on the border between Cameroon and Nigeria. Certain privileged individuals possess the ability to see things that are invisible to ordinary people, and only a few of the initiated dare to look at and use certain powerfully charged ritual objects. The society’s origin myth describes a confrontation between two demiurges, the water spirit and the evil spirit. The water spirit, master of the rivers, creates a great flood to extinguish a fire ignited by the evil spirit, and is thus also able to create human beings. He then leaves humans to people the earth, but he sometimes reveals himself to certain individuals to teach them new techniques or indicate which plants to use to cure certain illnesses. The evil spirit roams the earth’s surface, not having entirely abandoned his evil ways. He transfers evil powers to certain individuals while they are still in their mothers’ wombs by implanting a specific sign: their heart’s atrium is shaped in the form of a cock’s comb. Sorcerers have the ability to double themselves at night while they sleep. Their evil double leaves their body in the form of an animal to seek out victims and transmit illnesses to them. But this double is invisible to the eyes of ordinary men and women. Sorcerers remain in the shadows. They can only be identified by certain physiological anomalies, but these are only revealed through ritual autopsies performed after their death.

The water spirit helps human beings by enabling certain individuals to also double themselves during sleep, but consciously and for positive purposes. These individuals leave their sleeping bodies in the form of a moth or bat. Possessing “two pairs of eyes,” they can see, in the dark, the animals secreted by the sorcerers, and they know how to identify sorcerers, who are invisible to others. The water spirit also helps his creation by

transferring some of his powers to ritual objects that the uninitiated must avoid looking at, due to the objects' hidden potency. As Viviane Baeke observes, diviner-magicians,

with their gift of double vision, can converse with sorcerers' doubles in the invisible night-world and counteract their evil designs. The evil spirits may use their arsenal of spells to frighten or even to kill a sorcerer, not by acting on his double during the night, but by attacking his physical person in full daylight. (1991: 5)

Different forms of Hinduism privilege a particular mode of vision far removed from the distance or separation that seeing is currently associated with in Western societies. *Darshan* means "seeing," and can also be translated as "auspicious sight." One goes to see the image of a deity to "take *darshan*" from that deity, and in like manner the divine image is said to "*give darshan*" to the worshipper. Everything centres around effecting this exchange of vision.: "Beholding the image is an act of worship, and through one's eyes one gains the blessings of the divine." But while the gaze is reciprocal, it is also hierarchized: the divine gaze is so powerful that it can kill. Thus, special precautions must be taken when the eyes of an image are "opened" (by pricking with a golden needle) for the first time: "The gaze which falls from the newly opened eyes of the deity is said to be so powerful that it must fall upon some pleasing offering, such as sweets, or upon a mirror where it may see its own reflection ..." (Pinard 1991: 222-23, quoting Diana Eck)

The theme of the gaze is omnipresent in Hindu mythology and theology, whether it be through the multiple eyes that cover Brahma's body or Shiva's third eye. It is prevalent in many different artistic practices and celebrations. The guru's appearance is always an illumination for the worshipers who thus partake of his sanctity, provoking an intense emotion, tears, and a loss of the self in the master's substance. It is like an infusion of Divine breath for the transfigured men and women. Sudhir Kakar describes the guru's arrival in a certain Hindu sect:

Maharajji approached them with folded hands raised in greeting and sat down on a sofa placed in the middle of the guesthouse lawn [...] he looked steadily for a couple of minutes at one section of his small audience, regally turned his face and stared unblinkingly at another section—a virtuoso use of look and silence. The transformation of the disciples' faces as their eyes looked into his was remarkable. The eyes glazed over as they drank in his visage. Visibly, their brows smoothed out, their jaw muscles slackened and a beatific expression slowly spread on the faces. (Kakar 1991: 139)

To be permeated by the guru's vision is akin to an inner illumination, a direct participation in the aura radiating from his being.



## Experiencing Color

Color can be difficult to designate by name. It represents a challenge to language, especially when we seek to reveal its nuances.<sup>4</sup> Words play at the edges of color without ever quite elucidating it. Color's radiance disturbs the smooth functionality of language by recalling its inadequacies. We have only broad chromatic categories, with occasional recourse to other adjectives (light, dark, pale, etc.), to describe our colored worlds. "When we are asked," writes Wittgenstein, "What do 'red,' 'blue,' 'black,' 'white,' mean?" we can, of course, immediately point to things which have these colours—but that's all we can do: our ability to explain their meaning goes no further" (1979: 29). Anyone can recognize virtually thousands of different colors. But we rely on mental categories to identify them, otherwise we approach them from every angle without really arriving at a concrete description. Learning to distinguish new colors expands our recognizable palette. Yet, while the chromatic vocabularies of our societies are undoubtedly richer than ever, rare are those individuals who have a refined use of their full range.

In early childhood, the diffuse experience of color precedes the acquisition of words used to describe it. Children have to learn to distinguish the range of colors designated by their particular society. As their awareness of things is socially shaped, they enter into another dimension of the real. They begin to discern and name objects and, based on these, gradually differentiate their colors ("it's like milk"). It is only the acquisition of a vocabulary to conceive the world, and particularly different colors (or the categories that accompany them), that crystallizes their learning process. At birth, infants have the potential to recognize an infinite number of colors, just as they have the potential to speak an infinite number of languages. But, over time, they only identify those that are retained by the language of their community. The perception of colors then becomes tied to a social and cultural context and an individual sensibility. The name fixes our perception, even if it does not exhaust its possibilities.

How does he know that he sees red (or has the visual image), i.e., how does he connect the word "red" with "a particular color"? In fact, what does the expression "particular color" here mean? What is the criterion for his connecting the word always to the same experience? Is it not often just that he calls it red? (Wittgenstein 1968: 287)

The ease with which we recognize and name every shade within a chromatic range calls upon a sensitivity and an education grounded in our belonging to a particular social and cultural community. All human groups project a symbolic order on the world that surrounds them, particularly in the perception of objects and their colors.

The perception of color is a fact of education grounded in an individual's personal history. Michel Pastoureau rightly observes that historians should not

limit themselves to strict definitions of color, nor, especially, anachronistically project onto the past our current definitions. They were not the same in previous epochs, and they will not be the same in those that follow [...] For the historian, as for the ethnologist, the spectrum for classifying colors should be envisioned as a symbolic system, amongst other symbolic systems. (1990: 368, 371)

Color does not exist beyond our vision, which detaches objects from the ambient light. It is not only an optical, physical and chemical fact, but first and foremost a fact of perception. It is not mechanically deduced from the different modalities of Newton's spectrum but is, rather, a form of personal data steeped in a particular education. We do not record colors but rather interpret them. Colors are, above all, categories of meaning, and they are perceived differently in different societies.

## Color Vocabularies

The very notion of color, as it is understood in most Western societies in the sense of a colored surface, is ambiguous. Since its definition is not universal, it is impossible to arrive at a direct comparison with other cultures, whose terms may be very different. Translating between languages or cultural systems presents countless difficulties. Pastoureau cites a few examples in the case of Bible translation

Latin translation is notable in this respect, for it introduced a great many color terms in places where the Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek used only words for matter, light, luminosity, density, and quality. For example, where the Hebrew word means "shining," the Latin often has *candidus* (white), or even *ruber* (red). Where the Hebrew has "dirty" or "dark," the Latin is *niger* or *viridis*, which in the vernaculars become *black* and *green*. Where the Hebrew and Greek have "pale," the Latin is sometimes *albus* and sometimes *viridis*, which in the vernaculars become *white* and *green*. Where the Hebrew is "rich," the Latin often translates as *purpureus* and the vernaculars, *purple*. In French, German, and English the word *red* is used abundantly to translate Hebrew and Greek words that in the original text denote not coloration but richness, force, prestige, beauty, love, death, blood, and fire. (Pastoureau 2001: 18, 19)

In 1858, William Ewart Gladstone observed that the writings of Homer and other ancient Greeks did not share the vocabulary of his own epoch. Homer, for example, used the same term to designate blue, gray, and dark colors simultaneously. Drawing on an evolutionist perspective, Gladstone concluded that the Greeks had a weak sense of color that was mostly centered on the opposition between light and dark. Other authors of his epoch also observed that blue was absent from the vocabularies of the Bible,

the Quran, ancient Greece, and many traditional societies. They saw this as a perceptual anomaly, which they attributed to a deficiency of visual categories. These authors naturalized the perception of color, steeped, as they were, in biological references and classifying peoples according to an evolutionary scale that treated European cultural categories as representing the necessary absolute outcome. The progressive “aging” of peoples would eventually endow them with a more advanced physiology. Colors, in this context, were never considered as symbolic categories.

However, as early as 1879, Virchow had observed that Nubians, regarded as typical examples of this “weak” chromatic sensibility, could easily recognize objects or colored paper samples with minimum instruction. Thus began a lengthy debate surrounding the universality or the relativity of color perception. In 1881, a dozen Fuegians were brought from Tierra del Fuego to be exhibited at the Jardin d’acclimatation in Paris, where they were observed and measured from every angle by the scientists of the day. The Fuegians were considered to be a “backward” people and were classified by Darwin as “among the most inferior barbarians” (Dias 2004: 213). Leonce Manouvrier, notably, conducted numerous experiments on them and observed that “the Fuegians themselves demonstrated a perfect ability to distinguish the most subtle nuances, without, of course, being required to name these nuances, since their vocabulary must not be very developed” (cited in Dias 2004: 128). Paul Hyades, for his part, arrived at similar conclusions:

One cannot assume that the Fuegians could not distinguish other colors, and, if they varied so much in naming our wools, this seems to stem from the fact that the nuances we were showing them did not correspond exactly to the ones they are used to seeing, or perhaps because they wanted to identify the texture, the appearance of the wool, rather than its color. They do not possess words for referring to color in general, and this made our tests very difficult. (cited in Dias 2004: 217)

Nietzsche was not the least troubled by these differences in perception, seeing in them, rather, a particular humanization of nature:

How differently from us the Greeks must have viewed nature, since, as we cannot help admitting, they were quite colour-blind in regard to blue and green, believing the former to be a deeper brown, and the latter to be yellow. Thus, for instance, they used the same word to describe the colour of dark hair, of the corn-flower, and the southern sea; and again they employed exactly the same expression for the colour of the greenest herbs, the human skin, honey, and yellow raisins: whence it follows that their greatest painters reproduced the world they lived in only in black, white, red, and yellow. How different and how much nearer to mankind, therefore, must nature have seemed to them [...] This is something more than a mere deficiency. Thanks to this nearer approach and simplification, [the Greek] imagined he sees in things those harmonies of colours which

possess a great charm, and may greatly enrich nature. Perhaps, indeed, it was in this way that men first learnt to take delight in viewing existence. (1911: 269, 270)

Ethnographers have often noted disparities of color perception in different societies. Wilson D. Wallis observed that the “Ashanti have distinct names for the colors of black, red, and white. The term *black* is also used for *any dark color*, such as blue, purple, brown, etc., while the term red does duty for pink, orange and yellow” (1926: 421). According to Dominique Zahan, throughout Africa, color is divided into red, white and black: “The Bambara of Mali include all green or blue objects in the ‘black’ category,” he writes, “dark yellows and orange are part of the ‘red’ category, and light yellows are designated as ‘white.’ The Ndembu of Zambia also equate blue with ‘black’ and yellow and orange with ‘red’” (Zahan 1990: 119). Henri-Alexandre Junod was amazed, in 1913, at how different the color categories of the south-east African Baronga were from those of Europeans:

*Ntima* means both black and dark blue. *Libungu* is carmine, red, purple, and also yellow. Yellow is not perceived as a distinct colour. *Psuka* is the tinge of dawn, and of the rising sun. *Nkushe*, which means seaweed, is applied to the *blue* sky; *nkwalala* is grey, *lihlaza* (Ro) is green, the green of grass in the spring, and the corresponding term Djonga is *rilambyana*, that which makes dogs howl. Very green grass has this effect on Native dogs. (2003: 305)

The Maori of New Zealand distinguish between a hundred different reds but only with respect to oppositions related to specific objects: dry/wet, hot/cold, soft/hard, etc. Their perception of red depends on the structure of the object and not the other way around, as in the Western view of colors. The Hebrew *yârâq* signifies sometimes yellow, sometimes green. It is applied to the greenness of trees and plants, but the same root word designates an illness that makes plants “yellow.” The Book of Jeremiah uses the same term to designate the paleness that spreads across the faces of those overcome with terror (Guillaumont 1957: 342).

The ancient Chinese *ts'ing* refers to the blue derived from indigo but also to the green of trees or to the fur of an animal. English speakers do not conflate orange and yellow, which are clearly distinguished within their linguistic repertoire. The same is not true of the Zuni, who only have one term in their language to designate the two colors and therefore do not differentiate between them (Lennenberg and Roberts 1953).

In the closing remarks of an important conference, Meyerson compared the naming of colors across different cultures, noting that

these systems are not coextensive from one language to the next. There are, without a doubt, common features of naming, just as there are common features of perception. All languages, it seems, have terms for

black, white and red. But the range of meanings and comprehension even of these three main concepts do not appear to be the same everywhere. Black may include blue and green, or not. It may refer to darkness in general, or not. Likewise, white can designate, though not everywhere nor always, luminosity, brightness, silver, or even gold. Red can overlap more or less with orange, auburn and yellow. Beyond these three notions, which, again, are largely present in all societies, we observe many variations everywhere [...] A specific term may have a very precise meaning in one instance and, in another, be a marker of an emotional or social category, or sometimes both at the same time. (Meyerson 1957: 358)

In this regard, the rainbow is an excellent gauge of different peoples' perceptions. While modern Europeans divide it into seven colors, following Newton,<sup>5</sup> the Greeks and Romans saw three, four, or five colors. Only one, Ammianus Marcellinus, distinguished between six colors (purple, violet, green, orange, yellow, and red). Xenophanes and Anaximenes, like Lucretia later, saw red, yellow, and violet, to which Aristotle added green. Seneca saw five colors (purple, violet, green, orange, red) (Pastoureau 2001: 31). Arab and European scholars of the Middle Ages brought the same ambiguity to these observations, but none of them discerned blue among the colors:

Of the seven colors of the rainbow, three do not even have a specific name in Arabic: violet, indigo and orange. These are undefined, vague colors, "unnamable." Red and green stand out, however, as very positive colors, in contrast to the suspicion, bordering on repulsion, that Arab culture has towards yellow and especially blue. These are, indeed, the only colors that have been given a distinct and specific morphological form in *af'al* and which Arab grammarians refer to as "name of color": *ah'mar* (red), *akhdhar* (green), *azraq* (blue), *açfar* (yellow), *abiah* (white) and *aswad* or *akb'al* (black). (Boudhiba 1976: 347, 348)

Summing up, colors are intrinsically woven into a system of values and local symbolism that subordinates all naming to a particular context. Every color terminology is based in a particular way of conceiving the world. Separating colors from their objects, taking them to be pure instances of color, is a world view that is highly questionable, being as it is, from the outset, an abstraction, removed from real life. We do not assign names to colors; we assign names to meaning. "Can't we imagine certain people having a different geometry of colour than we do? That, of course, means: Can't we imagine people having colour concepts other than ours? And that in turn means: Can't we imagine people who do *not* have our colour concepts ...?" (Wittgenstein 1979: 11).

Under laboratory conditions, it may appear that people of all societies can adequately classify colored strips isolated from any reference to reality (see

e.g. Berlin and Kay 1969). Like a child's game, however, the exercise is limited. For people immersed in their real-life conditions within a culture, it no longer holds any meaning. In Conklin's studies on Hanunôo color categories, he asked his informants to name the colors of certain objects or colored cards removed from any local context. Their response, he noted, was often confused, uncertain, or hesitant. By contrast, he obtained immediate responses when he showed them everyday objects or formulated his questions differently, asking his informants, for example, what the objects resembled. Conklin discovered four different levels of classification that incorporate a number of different factors. If we force the Hanunôo vocabulary into a Western register, the four distinct colors correspond to black, white, red, and green. But, this is far from what the Hanunôo actually see: "First, there is the opposition between light and dark [...] Second, there is an opposition between dryness or desiccation and wetness or freshness (succulence)" (Conklin 1955: 342). The term "color" does not exist in this language, as is the case in many other cultures—ancient China, for example (Gernet 1957: 297). Summarizing his research in sub-Saharan Africa, Pastoreau observes that peoples' ways of seeing are less sensitive to divisions between colors than to knowing "whether a color is dry or damp, soft or hard, smooth or rough, mute or sonorous, joyful or sad. The color is not a thing in itself, much less a phenomenon related only to sight" (Pastoreau 2001: 175).

Looking at the colors of the world, we pay little attention to their physical, chemical, or optical aspects. We are content simply to see, unaware of the cultural unconscious that infuses our way of seeing. What seemed simple at first—comparing perceptions of color—reveals itself to be of an infinite complexity, because people see things differently, depending on their social and cultural affiliations. The center of gravity for naming colors does not lie in the colors themselves, but in the information provided by the culture. Colors have meaning only in precise circumstances inherent in the perception of the object. The distinctions they reveal are not between the colors themselves but are of another cultural order. Thinking that we are comparing color terms, we find ourselves comparing, rather, different visions of the world. "Although for the anthropologist contrastive behaviors rather than contrastive wavelengths are more likely to reveal cultural information, each type of study should aid the other by suggesting new relationships and by calling for new hypotheses and explanations" (Conklin 1973: 940, 941).

Objective physical reality (but "objective" for whom?) fades from view when confronted with the categories of meaning we project onto it. Color is seen through specific filters. Every community focuses on certain properties of the object observed. If a single term is used to describe distinct colors, people will perceive them as being close, just as we refer to shades of green, for example. We can always perceive differences through an effort of attention, but in everyday life such an attitude is hardly the norm. Perception, whether visual, auditory, olfactory, tactile, or gustatory, always bears the stamp of an individual's unique affiliation to a particular culture.

It is never, however, fixed and unchanging. People who step out of their language or culture and engage with others learn to see the world differently. They expand their chromatic knowledge or visual perception.

Languages approach reality from many angles in an attempt to define it, but none ever captures the meaning of things through signs alone. The word “dog” does not bite, the word “red” does not glow. Languages reflect the world’s human dimension, but not the world itself. Knowing how to speak several languages is advantageous. A refined knowledge of several languages provides a reservoir of meanings and enhances a person’s ability to apprehend and express the plurality of the world. Each language conceives the world in its own way, is already a filter, an “interpretant” (Benveniste 1974). None does it quite like another, nor do they complement one another. They are so many possible dimensions of the real.

## Experiencing Darkness

Vision calls for light. “And God said, ‘Let there be light,’ and there was light. God saw that the light was good, and he separated the light from the darkness” (Genesis 1:3). The world began in light and, for sight, it ends in darkness. “Then they will look toward the earth and see only distress and darkness [...] utter darkness” (Isaiah 8:22). Darkness deprives human beings of their faculty of vision, plunging them into a chaos of meaning. They are no longer the center of the world. It envelops and neutralizes perceptual conditions by disconnecting these from their identifiable sources. A sound that might be negligible during the day because it is easily associated with an event becomes more enigmatic at night. If it is unfamiliar, it can readily provoke anxiety. Vision fails to neutralize the threat. Robert Mandrou recalls how the night was long regarded as a world of terror in European societies:

Nocturnal darkness was the realm of fear everywhere, in both town and country—even in Paris, where the watch had more rounds than in any other town. From curfew to the opening of the gates, the town, with all its lights and fires extinguished, shrank fearfully into darkness [...] Night was the realm of darkness—and consequently also of ghosts and hellhounds: the Spirit of Evil was at home there, just as the reassuring light was the province of a God of goodness. (1975: 55, 56)

The night is a world of profound ambiguity. And if some people experience, in these circumstances, a feeling of being immersed in total peace, others are disturbed by the absence of reference points and the reassuring murmur of daytime activities. Night time’s acoustic singularity is suggestive of the worst or best possible scenarios. Darkness confers an extra power on silence by erasing the contours of the world, by temporarily—but who knows for how

long, once anxiety has set in—relegating all recognizable form to formlessness, to chaos. The world is suspended. Silence and darkness complement one another, depriving us of any sense of direction, leaving us to our own devices. They make us aware of our limitations.

The sound of a squeaking floor in the house we thought was empty, a noise in the garden, or a scream in the field are worrisome intrusions, vague threats that put us on edge and compel us to seek out the sounds' origins and take control of the situation. Michel Leiris (1997) recounts an anecdote from his childhood. One evening when he was walking hand in hand with his father in a peaceful countryside, he heard a noise that piqued his curiosity but also frightened him, just as darkness was setting in. Though his father told him it was a carriage passing in the distance, Leiris wondered if it wasn't an insect instead. In that uncertain hour between night and day, on unfamiliar ground, "this slight buzzing heard in the night" provoked for Leiris an anguish which "resulted perhaps exclusively from the fact that it manifested the state of wakefulness of something infinitesimal or distant, the only sound present in the silence of a more or less country place where I imagined that at such an hour everything had to be asleep or beginning to fall asleep" (1997: 19). The young Leiris saw this experience as a sort of initiation to death. Years later, "in the very depths of a Paris night" (1997: 24) a passing carriage's clacking of hooves on the pavement would provoke a sleepless reflection on the ever-present intrigues of the outside world in the dead of night, intrusions that break the usual silence of these times and places and awaken for him an image of death. With these unexpected sounds that dissolve the surrounding silence, one slips into a state "on the frontier of the *other world*, of receiving a message from it, even of having entered it without disintegrating there, or of embracing the course of life and death with eyes that look out from beyond the grave" (1997: 18).

With eyes stripped of the power to see and ears exposed to auditory cues impossible to identify, one easily succumbs to fear and to imagining the worst. We fall prey to auditory perceptions without being able to relate them to anything concrete. In the still depths of silence, noise understandably becomes a threat, a sort of reminder of the fragility and finitude that has us in its grips and forces us to be on our guard. Ordinarily, vision appeases worry or contains threats.

At night we lose our hold on meaning. Ordinary relationships to people and things come undone. Darkness liberates meanings, diverts them from their usual reference points and sends them into turmoil. Deprived of surface meaning, the world becomes one of unfathomable depths. The reality principle is fragile. Midnight is the hour of crime, of nightmares, just as twilight is a world between realities, between *chien et loup*, which expresses the uneasy feeling of losing one's bearings.

When the forms of things are dissolved in the night, the darkness of the night, which is neither an object nor the quality of an object, invades like



a presence. In the night, where we are riven to it, we are not dealing with anything. But this nothing is not that of pure nothingness. There is no longer *this* or *that*; there is not “something.” But this universal absence is in its turn a presence, an absolutely unavoidable presence. (Levinas 1995: 58)

In the dark, we are no longer the masters of our watchtowers, reassured by the visible objects that come into view around us. We are surrounded by the invisible. Overwhelmed by the possible, we no longer know where we are nor where we are going. We lose our identity. Darkness is not the absence of perception but another mode of vision. It is not blindness, but a darkened vision, deprived of its former reference points. The erasure of visible boundaries provokes an anxiety that is not due to night time itself but, rather, to the impossibility of attaching meaning to one’s surroundings. Darkness abolishes the visual and gives free rein to fantasy. Deprived of reassuring references, the individual succumbs to anxiety. Thus the crying, evoked by Freud, of a three-year-old child sleeping in a room without light: night becomes a projection screen for all of his fears: “‘Aunt, talk to me, I am afraid because it is dark.’ ‘How will that help you,’ answered the aunt; ‘you cannot see anyhow.’ ‘That’s nothing,’ answered the child; ‘if some one talks then it becomes light’” (Freud 1962: 81). The spoken word is an objection to the frightening silence of the surrounding world, to the disturbing suspension of reference points that leaves a person feeling that the ground is slipping away beneath his feet. Indeed, silence is also associated with meaninglessness and therefore with the absence of familiar signs, with the threat of being swallowed up in the void. Speech offers a thread of meaning, the hint of a presence that populates the world with its reassuring humanity. In the indifferent murmur of the real and the anonymity of the night a voice introduces a center and organizes meaning around itself. Later, light’s return restores calm by restoring a place’s familiar contours.

Nocturnal vision can be found in certain societies or circumstances. It results from a learning process and especially an habituation to conditions that make it necessary to be able to move about or work in the dark. The visual acuity required for trades or types of work practiced at night has often been noted. The Nivernais peasant described by Guy Thuillier (1985: 3) possesses a good night vision that allows him, among other things, to engage in the practice of poaching. Ethnologist and traveler Francis Mazières recounts the ease with which the inhabitants of Easter Island move about at night, even in places that they do not know. He recalls having had a similar experience among an indigenous people of the Amazon, under the reduced light of the forest canopy. He says that he learned himself how to move about in relative darkness, adding, however, that “they knew how to look better than me” (2009: 23). This is also the experience of prisoners held captive in dark spaces. Over time, they become habituated and are able to orient themselves.

## Clairvoyance

But there are also eyes that pierce the darkness, see beyond appearances, even beyond the visible. Many cultural mythologies confer a faculty of clairvoyance on the blind. When the eyes are closed, said Plotinus, “the inner light of the eye” shines with clarity (Deonna 1965: 50). Individuals who lose the faculty of sight can benefit from a vision turned inwards, without loss. Though they see nothing of the surrounding world, they have access to a world that is invisible to others. Numerous myths describe the overcompensation of those who have lost their sight in terms of clairvoyance. Tiresias is struck blind by Athena after seeing her bathing. But the goddess cedes to the injunctions of the young man’s mother and grants him the gift of prophecy. Oedipus punishes himself for his crimes by gouging out his eyes, but in the text by Sophocles, *Oedipus at Colonus*, at the end of his life, he has become a man of wisdom. Blindness is not mutilation, but an opening of vision onto a time still unknown. It marks an ability to see beyond the visible world to which the eyes of those who cannot see as far are bound. Clairvoyance pierces the outer shell of things to access their hidden interior. It is the revelation of appearances. It also crosses temporal limits in seeing beyond the present moment. But the seer often pays for his or her power with blindness (Delcourt 1957: 59, 124).



# 3

## Listening to the World: Hearing, the Sense of Understanding

*I hear the sound of Heywood's brook falling into Fair Haven Pond—inexpressibly refreshing to my senses—it seems to flow through my very bones.—I hear it with insatiable thirst—It allays some sandy heat in me—It affects my circulations—methinks my arteries have sympathy with it. What is it I hear but the pure water falls within me in the circulation of my blood—the streams that fall into my heart?*

– HENRY DAVID THOREAU, WALDEN

### Listening to the World

We make our way through a world of never-ending sound by producing sounds ourselves or by provoking them through our words, actions, and gestures. While we can choose to suspend the activity of the other senses by closing our eyes or withdrawing our hands, the sounds of our surrounding environment leave us defenseless. Sounds overcome obstacles and make themselves heard in total indifference to our intentions. The ears are always open to the world “setting on them no gate or closure whatever as she did with the eyes, tongue, and other openings in our bodies,” says Pantagruel. “I believe the cause is so that always, every night, we may be continually able to hear, and by hearing perpetually to learn” (Rabelais 1999: 304). Hearing has neither the malleability of touch or sight, nor their resources to explore space. It can only “keep an ear out” or “turn a deaf ear.” Penetrated by sound against our will, we are in a position to welcome or reject sounds, but less so to act on them. Whether the sound resonates with us or not, we are always at the center of the event. Sounds are more enigmatic than images because they are temporal and transient, whereas sights remain fixed and open to exploration. To identify a sound, we have to keep listening

for it, and it doesn't always repeat itself. It disappears in the very instant that it is heard.

Through speech, thought finds in sound its most important form of expression. The other senses—apart from sight, which shares with hearing, but in another register, the same privilege—remain undeveloped in this regard, too close to the body, too imprecise, too intimate. Meaning is first incarnated in an utterance addressed to an Other. With the exception of sign language, languages are based initially in sound. Thus, even deaf children “participate indirectly in a world held together by voice” (Ong 1967: 141). Hearing is the unifying sense of the social bond in that it implies listening to the human voice and being receptive to the other's words.

It is the custodian of language. *Entendement* from *entendre* (to hear) is another term for *pensée* or “thought.” To be *entendu* is to be understood. Saying “*entendu!*” or “I hear you” is also a way of expressing agreement. Many societies attribute a value to listening that others confer upon vision. Hearing is often associated with thought. Among the Wahgi of the Highlands of Papua New Guinea, perception is contingent on what is said, not on what is seen. Their world is ordered through listening (O'Hanlon 1989) Chamberlain observed that in the north of Queensland, Australia,

the ear is believed to be the seat of intelligence, etc., through or by means of which the impressions from the outer world are conveyed to the inner. So the natives of Tully River, when they first saw the whites communicate with each other by means of a letter, used, after looking at it, “to put it up to their ears to see if they could understand anything by that method.” (1905: 126)

For the Sedang Moi of Indochina, the ear is also the seat of intelligence. To say of someone that he or she “does not have an ear” means that the person is not very smart; and the word *tlek* or “mute” also means “stupid” (Devereux 1991: 44). Among the Suyá of central Brazil, the word for hearing, *ku-mba*, means not only “to hear” a sound, but also “to know” and “to understand.” Seeger writes: “[when] the Suyá have learned something—even something visual such as a weaving pattern—they say, ‘It is in my ear’” (Seeger quoted in Howes 1991: 176). Knowing for them is valorized through the ears.

A blind person's representation of space is constructed through a constellation of senses in which touch and especially hearing play an essential role. The blind are thus able to mitigate their difficulties in moving about. To determine the dimensions of a room, they listen to the sound of their footsteps reverberating against surfaces or to the sound of their voices bouncing off the walls. They create noise with their feet and hands in order to better apprehend the surrounding space. Sound reveals what is inside. A silent environment has to be activated with sound, made to “speak,” so that affordances can be identified. The blind,

in order to obtain an audible response, are sometimes obliged to provoke it by producing sounds themselves, which, reflected back, establish for them the auditory ambiance of a place [...] In order to situate a corridor opening onto the sidewalk or have an idea of the volume of a room or gallery, it is common for blind people to intentionally drag their feet, or, on the contrary, stamp the floor in a more marked manner or, otherwise, to cough or clear their throat. (Henri 1958: 274)

The blind person's auditory acuity reminds us how much sound contributes to the way we orient ourselves in the world, even if the information it provides is most often obscured by vision, which renders sound subaltern. If the sighted rely for the most part on vision, to see, for example, a car passing on the road, the blind person depends on hearing the car's engine or vibrations.

There is continuous flow of sound that sets the familiar tone of everyday life and accompanies people on the path of their existence.<sup>1</sup> These emanations never completely subside and add a layer of depth to the world. Without them, vision would be nothing but the contemplation of a surface. Every sound is associated with the object that gives rise to it, it is an object's sensible trace, a thread that connects us to the endless movement of the world that surrounds us. "There is no sun of sounds," wrote Louis Lavelle (1954: 194), emphasizing this persistent feature of sound and its subordination to the various objects that potentially serve as its vehicles. But sound is also distinct in that it extends beyond its point of origin. Hearing is a kind of immersion like that of smell. Unlike vision, which is always bound to a perspective, sound is radiant, having no frontiers beyond its intensity. Marcel Proust writes:

I heard the tick of Saint-Loup's watch, which could not be far away. This tick changed place every moment, for I could not see the watch; it seemed to come from behind, from in front of me, from my right, from my left, sometimes to die away as though it were a long way off. Suddenly I caught sight of the watch on the table. Then I heard the tick in a fixed place from which it did not move again. That is to say, I thought I heard it at this place; I did not hear it there, I saw it there, for sounds have no position in space. (Proust 1982b: 72)

Just as sound unifies space, it also unites people under its banner. As a shared expression, it provides a strong feeling of belonging, that of speaking with a single voice. The crowd sings the same songs and chants the same slogans. It is strengthened by the power of the auditory stimulations. Sound fosters solidarity among people in contrast to sight, which keeps others at a distance, as though on a stage.

Hearing penetrates beyond vision, imprints a texture upon the contours of events and populates the world with an inexhaustible store of presences, of hidden lives. It signals the hum of life where nothing would otherwise be

detectable. It conveys the sensory depth of the world, where vision has passed it over, remaining on the surface, unaware of the vibrant events unfolding behind the scenes. Sound, like odor, reveals what is behind appearances. It forces that which is inaccessible to vision to make its presence known. It redirects the invisible by momentarily channeling it through the ear. The hunter hears the animal brushing past tree branches or grasses in the bush. The watchman scrutinizes sounds in the dead of night so as not to be surprised by the enemy. Where the fog renders vision powerless, the sailor notes the sound of water against the hull of the boat or the rustling of the sails. All of the sounds emitted become precious information for safe navigation. The world still yields up its secrets even with our eyes closed.<sup>2</sup>

Hearing introduces a succession, a rhythm that gives way to expectation and fluidity. It is woven into the passage of time. Sounds disappear in the same moment they can first be heard. They are ephemeral. We speak of “lending” an ear as though to emphasize this temporality. We lend rather than give ourselves to sound because it is beyond our power to control it. Once heard, it disappears, whereas, in principle, vision is always available or can be relocated in space. The sonority of the world reminds us of our contingency, our lack of mastery, even while the other senses give in to our repeated demands: we can go back to the autumn landscape or sunset on the hill, taste the flavor of a particular dish or wine today and then again tomorrow, use the same fragrance, caress once more our lover’s skin. Sounds disappear, escape our control, just as they escape our desire to hear them again—except with the aid of devices that allow us to control and diffuse them at will, thus restoring our sovereignty. Sound imposes a before and an after. Listening to the sounds of the world forces us to experience the passage of time.

Indeed, over time, various mechanisms have been developed to restore human sovereignty over this effervescence of sounds, to discipline auditory chaos through repetition: bells, musical instruments, songs, wind harps, all function to organize sounds according to human will. Modern recording devices such as tape recorders have extended this power. But sound is only reproducible insofar as it is separated from time and transformed into a space that can be revisited. Before these developments, people imitated animals or other nature sounds in order to produce the familiar sounds that eluded them due to their ephemeral and unpredictable character. “Birdcalls were carved usually from an owl’s wing, sometimes from rabbit bone, the latter being less pure in tone,” writes Czesław Miłosz.

The bone one was good at imitating the trill of a hazel grouse, otherwise indistinguishable from the bark of the pine, its favorite sanctuary in times of danger [...] Slowly, noiselessly, they slipped into the shadowy undergrowth. Again Romuald put the birdcall to his lips; he blew softly, knowingly, his fingers playing on the pipe’s holes [...] Then a reply—a hazel grouse, and another, closer. (Miłosz 1981: 135, 136)

## The Sounds of the World

Our existence is woven into the continuity of sound. The voices and movements of friends and family, the disembodied words of the radio or television, the echoes of the street, the neighborhood, the songs and music of celebrations and rituals, children playing in the village square or leaving school, the return of the herd with their bells around their necks, church bells or the muezzin's calls to prayer from the minaret, the chaotic noise of the city, the endless ringing of cellphones, cars and trucks passing in the nearby streets or roads, the murmur of the forest, the rustling of leaves in the trees, the sound of rain on the pavement or roof, bird calls, farm hens, the muffled sounds of the body.

"Those who have never stepped out of the house at the break of day and heard the babble of blackcock must lead sorry lives, indeed, because such have never known spring," recalls Milosz, with nostalgia (1981: 177). Perhaps, but one has to live in a countryside that knows the blackcock's ways. Elsewhere, one would be moved by the bellow of the stag or the silence of the desert or forest. The range of sounds that can be heard is bound to an ecological and cultural context, and, beyond that, to the particular auditory sensibility of the person who is listening.

Every human community occupies a unique auditory universe, with its own rhythms of collective ceremonies, technologies, and animals; its own seas, deserts, mountains, winds, rains, storms, seasons, and so on. Thoreau, at Walden, describes hearing the Fitchburg Railroad not far from the pond where he lives: "The whistle of the locomotive penetrates my woods summer and winter, sounding like the scream of a hawk sailing over some farmer's yard, informing me that many restless city merchants are arriving within the circle of the town" (1983: 200, 201). Sometimes, the Sunday church bells of neighboring villages also reach his ear. Animals reign supreme in this rural New England world of 1854, still untouched by industrialization.

At evening, the distant lowing of some cow in the horizon beyond the woods sounded sweet and melodious, and at first I would mistake it for the voices of certain minstrels by whom I was sometimes serenaded [...] Regularly at half past seven, in one part of the summer, after the evening train had gone by, the whippoorwills chanted their vespers for half an hour, sitting on a stump by my door, or upon the ridge pole of the house [...] When other birds are still the screech owls take up the strain, like mourning women their ancient u-lu-lu [...] I was also serenaded by a hooting owl. Near at hand you could fancy it the most melancholy sound in Nature. (1983: 207)

At nightfall multiple sounds can be heard, which Thoreau describes in detail: "Late in the evening I heard the distant rumbling of wagons over bridges—a sound heard farther than almost any other at night—the baying of dogs, and



sometimes again the lowing of some disconsolate cow in a distant barnyard. In the meanwhile all the shore rang with the trump of bullfrogs” (1983: 209). Thoreau offers an inventory of the sounds that were missing:

I kept neither dog, cat, cow, pig, nor hens, so that you would have said there was a deficiency of domestic sounds; neither the churn, nor the spinning wheel, nor even the singing of the kettle, nor the hissing of the urn, nor children crying to comfort one. An old-fashioned man would have lost his sense or died of ennui before this. Not even the rats in the wall [...] only squirrels on the roof and under the floor, a whippoorwill on the ridge pole, a blue-jay screaming beneath the window. (1983: 210)

Thoreau observes the metamorphoses of vegetal and animal life at Walden over the seasons, the diverse sounds of the world. The shimmering silence of winter, the singing of crickets in summer, the buzzing of bees, the felt-like snowcover of a sleepy landscape, the violence of a storm in a raging wilderness.<sup>3</sup> One who lends an ear to the rhythm of the seasons knows how to identify their changing physiognomy and differences in sound from one place to another.

## Childhood Immersion in Sound

For the hearing, the auditory world is subject to noisy intrusions, but, in principle, listening is one of life’s undeniable pleasures. Sound is the very material of language. The human voice accompanies us throughout our lives. Its incessant hum assures our full integration in the social fabric. “Hearing is an eminently social sense,” writes Wulf (2002: 457). The mother’s speech is the first sound, charged with emotion and meaning, that introduces the infant still in utero into the human universe. The fetus is immersed in the amniotic fluid and its odors, feels the mother’s movements and hears the continual beating of her heart, as well as her voice and the voices of those around her. Studies have shown that prematurely born infants who listen to a recording of the mother’s heartbeat have a reduced mortality rate. The mother’s heartbeat has a soothing effect. But her voice, in particular, is always engaged in communication, gradually guiding the infant toward meaning, toward the social bond. It is the thread that ties the child to his or her humanity, aiding the transition from crying to words and to finding his or her own voice (*voix*) and way (*voie*). Children know that their words or cries have an effect on those around them. They become aware of their power, and they gradually learn to respond to the surrounding voices. They construct their narcissism within the auditory envelope that the mother provides. They experience jubilation in emitting and hearing sounds, especially when these sounds provoke a response from others.

Infantile speech reproduces the general melody of the language of the surrounding milieu. Infants create a comfort zone for themselves, what Winnicott (1971) refers to as a “transitional space.” They hear themselves simultaneously from within and without, and take pleasure in producing their own sounds. They are enveloped by the words exchanged around them, especially the different intonations, which provide sound material to explore and delight in. The sharing of lallations between children and their family circle is an immersive pleasure, an intense, multisensory communication that represents both an invitation to join the surrounding chatter and the constitution of a melodic dialog (Diatkine 1980), which eventually provides access to language and the pleasure of speaking. These vocalizations create a nurturing sound environment. Through them, children symbolically and concretely construct the mother’s presence, master separation, and fill the world with a feeling of peace. They enjoy stimulating themselves and experiencing their voice, body and, also, their sovereignty.

This transitional space depends of course on the mother’s ability to provide enough love without smothering the child with affection or being, on the other hand, too absent. The mother’s voice, her face, the two together forms the poles that provide the newborn’s entry into the human community. If the mother is able to accompany the child without being too overbearing, she constructs a favorable and calm narcissism that becomes the basis for the child’s sense of security. Even from another room, children hear the voice signaling that their mother is nearby. With the mother’s help, children are able to integrate the language that they are immersed in. The mother’s voice is poised between the body and language, between affect and representation. She is the child’s point of entry into meaning.

Our mother tongue is in fact the first foreign language that we learn, though we quickly adopt it as our own. Children gradually enter into it through their babbling, at first strictly focusing on themselves though still seeking the other’s attention. “The egocentric activity of speaking, as a mere *self*-utterance, increasingly gives way to the will to communicate understanding, and with this to the will to universality” (Cassirer 2013: 352). The mother’s voice and words are an invitation to a common language, which is also that of the child’s community of belonging. Her voice, like her face, is a container, an auditory envelope that enhances the presence of her face and alleviates the child’s anxiety (like the comfort of a voice in the dark). An “auditory mirror” (Castarède 1987: 149), at first vocal, precedes and prepares the “visual mirror” that ensures the child’s access to the social bond. Deaf children, however, miss out on this transition. Deprived of auditory markers and possessing only vision and physical contact to get around, they find themselves out of sync with family members, as they struggle to relay everyday sounds through visual and tactile equivalents. Deaf children are not deprived of a voice, but their vocalizations are based less on a melodic dialog with others than on a kinesthetic or visual one.<sup>4</sup>

Over time, newborns gradually learn to recognize the magma of sounds that surround them—the exterior sounds that more or less correspond to the voice of the mother or other family members, the sounds of their own bodies, and the sounds of surrounding technologies. Sounds that may have at one time caused anxiety are brought under control. The process of learning to recognize sounds, becoming familiar with them by integrating them into a universe of meaning, is informed by the ambient culture, by the auditory ambiance in which the child is immersed. “The old house, for those who know how to listen, is a sort of geometry of echoes. The voices of the past do not sound the same in the big room as in the little bed chamber, and calls on the stairs have yet another sound” (Bachelard 1969: 60).

There is no more a natural way to hear than there is a natural way to see. The ear is educated over time through learning and experience. The ornithologist comes to know the numerous sounds emitted by birds over time. People learning a foreign language come to recognize its sounds and rhythms, to grasp its coherence. Musicians bring a personal expression to music that they first acquire from external sources.

The music of composers who transform the musical sensibilities of their day can sometimes be hard on the ears. “We know that even Mozart’s music was criticized for its confusion by the Emperor Josef II of Austria. He complained that the music was overloaded with too many notes,” writes Anton Ehrenzweig.

His displeasure was probably caused by the richness of the polyphonic structure that obscured the clean line of the melody. Mozart, in his later works, purposely strengthened the more inconspicuous middle voices by giving them a melodious expressiveness of their own (thus giving food to horizontal listening). He hoped that their intricacy would escape the naïve listener and please the connoisseur. The Emperor’s discomfort shows that Mozart failed in deceiving the naïve listener. (1995: 71)

Ehrenzweig also recounts how Beethoven’s last quartets would have to wait a century before being performed again. His harmonies were perceived as unpleasant on first hearing.

Once we have accommodated our sensitivities to these low-level linkages, his earlier music can be heard with a better understanding of its original ruptures and sudden transitions which are now largely lost. Familiarity has trained us to slip too lightly over obstacles that formerly must have been felt as deep abysses. (1995: 73)

To accommodate ourselves to unexpected sounds in music, we have to overcome the sense of imperfection or incompleteness that we first experience. We have to acquire the codes needed to grasp the inner sense of sounds by associating them with a meaning, or a negative or positive value. On the first hearing, unfamiliar music is unpleasant. Musical intervals, at

first discordant, sometimes become more pleasing after several listenings when we are able to better appreciate the concept. The intensity of Chinese music is often irritating to someone who is unfamiliar with its auditory system. Gradual habituation quells the harshness of the world's sounds and allows us to appreciate other ways of hearing.

The experience of deaf people who have recovered their hearing through surgery is far from being an instant immersion in a pleasant universe. There is no transparency of meaning—learning is the key to the world of sound. Far from exulting in the surrounding sound, these individuals are faced with the unrelenting assault of an incomprehensible din. Everything is noise to them. Nothing yet makes sense to their ears. The information has to be gradually assimilated. They feel overtaken by parasitic sounds whose force is overwhelming. The recovery of hearing is a painful experience. Jean Grémion recounts the tragic story of a young woman, Melane, who, after recovering the hearing she was deprived of since birth, found the chaos of sounds around her intolerable and eventually took her own life.

People talking is a bit like an uninterrupted series of screams. You get the feeling they're yelling. It's horribly assaulting. The same is true with sounds. A running faucet sounds like a waterfall. The noise from ruffling newspaper is like an explosion [...] I became a sound! The chirping of a bird. It invaded me, drew me in, weighed down on me, permeated me to such an extent that I became that bird. And it was like that with everything. (Higgins 1980: 93 sq.; Grémion 2002: 134)

To sound “right,” sounds have to be infused with a meaning, otherwise they are experienced as a symbolic violence.

## Noise and the *bonne entente*

Hearing is the sense of interiority. It seems to draw the world deep within the self, while vision projects us beyond ourselves. But hearing is captive. While sight, touch, and taste impart a sense of sovereignty, hearing is defenseless against the intrusion of unwelcome sounds from the outside world. Noise is an affliction of sound that becomes a source of suffering if the ear is constrained and has no escape. Sound becomes noise when it has lost its meaningful dimension and imposes itself with an aggression that leaves people defenseless (Le Breton 1997). Negative and insistent, noise commands our attention against our will and becomes a nuisance. An etymology that is often cited, perhaps unfounded but revealing all the same, links the English term “noise” to the Latin *nausea*. The experience of noise forces us out of our comfort zone and becomes all-consuming in the moment. Kafka metaphorically represents this violence with the image of an animal nestled in the wonderful silence of its burrow. One day, the creature is frightened by a faint whistling, which becomes louder and is eventually

joined by hissing sounds. The animal feels trapped, relentlessly hunted and having no way to protect itself. From all sides, it is hounded and terrorized by noises that make it a stranger in its own burrow, its existence unbearable (Kafka 1946).

Sensitivity to noise is a question of circumstances and, especially, of the meaning that we attribute to the sounds we hear. When we take part in the local fair, the auditory ambiance that surrounds us contributes to our enjoyment. If we are neighborhood residents trying to sleep, this same ambiance is an intrusion. The sudden explosion that shakes a quiet neighborhood initially prompts an angry response, but drawing near the window and catching sight of a fireworks display that we forgot about on that date radically alters the meaning of the event. Noise, like music, is a question of listening and therefore of meaning. It is a dissonance that counters our expectations, just as music that is performed poorly or out of context, which is too quiet or too loud—even a type of music we normally enjoy—becomes difficult to listen to.

In the presence of the other we are in “listening mode,” expressing our silent openness to or acceptance of the other’s speech. The sound of the voice is calming, a reassuring reminder of the continual hum of life that surrounds us, whereas, noise is an irritation that puts us on our guard, on alert. An insistent form of stress, it makes us ill at ease, uncomfortable, and prevents us from fully enjoying our surroundings. It is particularly upsetting when it drowns out the human voice and makes conversation impossible. “There are no noises in nature, only sounds,” writes Jacques Brosse. “No discord, no anarchy. Even the rumbling of thunder, the roar of an avalanche, or a tree in the forest crashing to the ground answer to auditory laws and do not transgress them. It is only humans, and the world created by humans, that brutally ruptures and tears apart the fabric of harmonic unity” (Brosse 1965: 295, 296). Both literally and figuratively, the peace, the *bonne entente* (from the French *s’entendre*, meaning “hear each other” or “agree”) is always broken by noise.

Concern over noise probably appeared with the first large concentrations of human beings necessitating the circulation of people and information, the presence of animals, different forms of transport, and similar developments. The first legislation related to noise was introduced by Julius Caesar in 44 BCE, observes R. Murray Schafer (1994: 189). Alfred Franklin evokes the twelfth-century town criers of Paris, sworn officials whose task was to make public announcements in the streets—official acts, convocations to meetings, marriages, burials, and other information, such as the status of missing persons. Other town criers worked with merchants peddling their wares. Street vendors called out to passersby to attract their attention. “That my cries be heard / All over Paris until night” (Jean de Galande, cited in Franklin 1980: 14). Just after dawn, bath-keepers announced the opening of the public baths. Then there were the merchants selling fish, poultry, meat, fruit, wine, flour, milk, and flowers, but also others selling clothes, furniture, dishes, and coal. Mendicant friars called out to passersby to solicit alms for their

community, their cries blending with those of other beggars. “Coopers, boilermakers, grinders, cobblers and grocers [...] competed in an onslaught of sounds with merchants of old clothes, rags, scrap iron and broken glass” (Franklin 1980: 78).<sup>5</sup>

An author of Rabelais’ epoch once evoked the 107 cries of the public square, but Bakhtin suspected many more: “We must recall that not only was all advertising oral and loud in those days, actually a cry, but that all announcements, orders, and laws were made in this loud oral form [...] As for the nineteenth century, compared with the era of Rabelais it was silent” (1984: 182). For a long time, the criers’ presence represented an important contribution to the sounds of the city until advertising on loudspeakers eventually took over.

Beyond the voices or cries of humans and the presence of animals, cracking whips, and carts and carriages circulating in the narrow paved streets added to the ambient cacophony. Later, factory steam engines, railways, automobiles, and construction further transformed the auditory economy. “Around me roared the nearly deafening street,” wrote Baudelaire (1998: 189). Rilke, writing in turn-of-the-century Paris, describes the flurry of sounds that continue uninterrupted into night:

That I can’t give up sleeping with the window open. Electric trolleys race ringing through my room. Automobiles rush over me. A door slams shut. Somewhere a pane of glass shatters, I hear the big fragments laugh, the small splinters titter. Then, suddenly, a muffled, confined noise [...] Someone is climbing the stairs. Coming, incessantly coming. Is here, is here a long time, passes by. And the street again. A girl screams: *Ah, tais-toi, je ne veux plus*. [Oh, shut up, I’ve had enough] The trolley comes running up all excited, runs on over it, over everything. Someone calls out. People are running, overtake each other. A dog barks. What a relief: a dog. Toward morning even a cock crows, and that is an indescribable blessing. Then I suddenly fall asleep. (Rilke 2008: 2)

The development of new technologies went hand in hand with an increasing intrusion of sounds in everyday life and a growing inability to control their proliferation. While we can quite easily evade the unpleasant aspects of other sensory perceptions, hearing fails us in this respect, and sound is thus experienced as noise. The urban space is noisy and homes are easily infiltrated by the sounds of neighboring streets or even nearby apartments. Places where one can find auditory comfort are rare, with the exception of certain parks or cemeteries. Noises intermingle and accompany the city dweller at all times: cars, trucks, mopeds, buses, tramways, construction sites, ambulance and police car sirens, alarms that go off for no apparent reason, street or neighborhood sales, fairs, sports events, political gatherings, and so on. Modernity comes with a constant presence of sounds that can be amplified over loudspeakers. The radio and television never stop, nor does the now commonplace music that fills public spaces, cafés, stores, and

sometimes even our means of transportation. The pervasiveness of sound in modern societies, along with the omnipresence of cellphones, brings a particular nuance to the idea of the sole hegemony of vision, even though the latter plays a major role in structuring the social space.

Noise is not confined to its source; it spreads like an oil stain. The din of the factory does not spare the neighborhood. The noise of the chainsaw fills the forest, flooding the valley with its uninterrupted roar. The roar of the speedboat breaks the serenity of the lake or shore, leaving us no choice but to withdraw or tolerate the nuisance. Modernity, by giving anyone and everyone the possibility of accumulating noisy instruments, simultaneously grants them an ascendancy over others. The multiplication of sound sources can sometimes be a weapon against a neighborhood rendered powerless. "Wealth," writes Brosse "is now measured by sound sources, the range of sounds that a person has access to" (1965: 296). Common and affordable technologies that amplify sound impart a symbolic power, become a form of revenge on one's surroundings or fate, or a way of projecting one's identity in space with indifference and contempt for others.

Though sound can be an insidious form of pollution, it is first and foremost a question of personal appreciation. It cannot be simply deduced from of an auditory volume. It resists all objective measurement because it is the result of our attention and our projection of a world of meaning onto auditory information. One person's source of enjoyment is another person's noise. A stereo playing full blast might be liberating for a group of young people, inspiring them to dance and feel more confident, but the same sound is a source of irritation for the neighbors, who regard it as an intrusion. The same holds true for car stereos playing full blast, windows down, all conversation rendered impossible, but whose real purpose is a demonstration of personal power. The teenager who modifies the motor of his moped enjoys the enhanced sound but it is a source of irritation for everyone in its path.

Noise wars are wars of meaning that implicate opposing significations—a violation of sensibilities for some, a source of fulfillment for others. The same sound can be either pleasing or exasperating. It is all a question of perspective. The factory's sounds are a source of suffering for many, but others derive pleasure from them. Because they choose to listen and are free to leave at any time, they marvel at the factory's incessant hum, which they consider to be a signature sound of the contemporary world. The factory's sounds may be harmful to the workers' health, but this is not their problem. The futurist Luigi Russolo, a wealthy aesthete who lived a refined life far from the factories, regarded these sounds as worthy of admiration. He was fascinated by the sounds of war. In his 1913 manifesto *The Art of Noise*, he writes,

Let's walk together through a great modern capital, with the ear more attentive than the eye, and we will vary the pleasures of our sensibilities by distinguishing among the gurglings of water, air and gas inside metallic

pipes, the rumblings and rattlings of engines breathing with obvious animal spirits, the rising and falling of pistons, the stridency of mechanical saws, the loud jumping of trolleys on their rails, the snapping of whips, the whipping of flags. We will have fun imagining our orchestration of department stores' sliding doors, the hubbub of the crowds, the different roars of railroad stations, iron foundries, textile mills, printing houses, power plants and subways [...] And we must not forget the very new noises of Modern Warfare. (2004: 7)

One person's music is another person's noise. Differences of taste exacerbate class rivalries and are very apparent in conflicts surrounding issues of noise. In the nineteenth century, the music of street singers and musicians offended the sensibility of the bourgeoisie, who were accustomed to the refined music of salons and not prepared to tolerate, under their balconies, a different way of singing and performing. They regarded the music and songs enjoyed by the working classes as vulgar and cacophonous. Favoring low frequencies, popular music seeks the amorphous and the diffuse in contrast to the clarity and concentration of salon music that separates performers and listeners into two symmetrical groups, usually facing one another, and privileges higher frequency sounds with clear direction—the music of the classical concert, for example (Schafer 1994: 117).

Various pieces of legislation attempted, in vain, to limit or prohibit street musicians, who sometimes, in England, for example, took malicious pleasure in provoking the bourgeoisie. A collective letter signed, notably, by Dickens, Carlyle, Tennyson, and Milais, complains of their persecution by

these brazen performers on brazen instruments, beaters of drums, grinders of organs, bangers of banjos, clashers of cymbals, worriers of fiddles, and bellowers of ballads; for, no sooner does it become known to those producers of horrible sounds that any of your correspondents have particular need of quiet in their own houses, than the said houses are beleaguered by discordant hosts seeking to be bought off. (Schafer 1994: 66)

More than the difficult-to-apply laws or widespread hostility toward street musicians, it was, rather, the noise of automobiles and the installation of sidewalks that eventually contributed to their demise. The clamor of popular celebrations was for a long time an intolerable noise to bourgeois ears, an appalling racket accentuating the vulgarity of the lower classes and the failure of the civilizing process. Meanwhile, the music and festivities of the rich were perceived by the working classes, in turn, as the dreary affairs of high society.

There is a proxemic dimension to the perception of sounds coming from outside the home. The constant noise of the street, which most people perceive as being beyond their control, is eventually forgotten, whereas the encroachments of neighbors' sounds are considered intolerable, because



they are a persistent reminder of the Other's unwelcome presence in their private space. Barely muffled by thin walls, a car parked in the street with the motor running or a television playing a little too loud are experienced as acts of aggression by the tired neighbor who is trying to sleep. In French, when people *ne s'entendent plus* ("don't get along anymore" or, literally, "no longer hear each other"), the *bonne entente* is broken. Police stations receive numerous complaints pertaining to neighborhood conflicts over noise: disputes, crying babies, barking dogs, or, perhaps, a television, radio, or stereo turned up too loud. The victims of the noise are expelled from their own universe and can no longer feel "at home" there. The house becomes porous, abuzz with others' presence or the threat of their next intrusion. Every outside sound is an infringement on the self. Just as our own odors scarcely bother us, our own sounds do not seem unpleasant to us either. It is always others who make noise. Violence sometimes ensues when an enraged neighbor, "pushed to the limit," as the headlines would say, fires on a gathering of teenagers blasting their music in the street below.

Countless conflicts around the policing of noise reveal the discord between different modes of auditory perception, the social, cultural, and individual incompatibilities that the law seeks to arbitrate by setting intensity thresholds on machinery, limiting the opening times of noisy establishments, prohibiting noise after a certain hour, or regulating the noise of factories or public facilities. These are indeed the source of many *malentendus* ("misunderstandings" or, literally, "poorly heard"). The Japanese are content with paper walls to establish peace in their homes. The experience of noise is visually eliminated through the use of auditory screens that, for Westerners, however, are ineffective in preventing the party next door from reaching their ears (Hall 1990: 45).

What constitutes a sound nuisance varies from one neighborhood, city, or continent to the next. Social and cultural differences come into play in the evaluation of sound and define the thresholds of acceptability or rejection. "While the Jamaicans had no attitude concerning machine sounds," writes R. Murray Schafer, "these were strongly disliked in Canada, Switzerland, and New Zealand. Jamaicans also approved of aircraft while the other nationalities did not. For all nations except Jamaica traffic noise was especially objectionable" (1994: 147). The cacophony of honking horns has disappeared from European countries thanks to legislative measures, but it still exists in Middle Eastern and Asian cities, in Istanbul or Cairo, for example, where horns add to the noise of traffic and music emanating from shops.

On the other hand, sound can sometimes be a screen that allows people to withdraw from the world and distance themselves from undesirable experiences. Young people construct auditory walls for themselves with their car radios, CDs, or MP3 players, whether in their daily routines or at the nightclub. Surrounding conversations or sounds are drowned out by music that they have chosen themselves. They refuse the imposition of an auditory universe that they are not in control of. The sound levels block

anything else coming from outside. With their earphones, young people withdraw into themselves and bask in their own sovereignty. They want the world to begin and end with sounds arising from their decisions alone.

Sound intensity that is deliberately maintained within the peer group, using the car radio or other instruments to amplify sound, reduces communication to a purely phatic function that makes it impossible to gauge individuals' isolation or confusion. The sense of mastery sought in making noise or withdrawing into a personal sound universe is a source of pleasure and satisfaction, an effective identitary positioning that contributes to the constitution of the self as subject. But hearing that is regularly exposed to high levels of sound, even if it is not perceived as such, gradually deteriorates over time. This immersion in cranked-to-the-maximum high intensity sound inflicts significant damage on the ear and leaves some adolescents with a hearing ability similar to that of individuals in their sixties. Their passion for noise sometimes comes at the price of being one day reduced to silence.

In principle, hearing is restored within a few hours if exposure to damaging sounds is brief, but when it is continual and repeated, it has irreversible effects. These types of injuries are grouped under the term "boilermakers' disease," because they were first described by Thomas Barr in his 1890 study on individuals working in this particularly noisy industry (Schafer 1994: 75). Occupational deafness is caused by working conditions that are taxing on the ears, and workers are sometimes reluctant to use protective gear in order to have more control over their work. The only prevention, in this regard, is the early training of young people who are just starting out in types of work where they are subjected to high sound pressure levels. Once habits are engrained, workers no longer perceive the noise as a nuisance. On the contrary, they use it as a measure of the quality of their work. Regular exposure to noise hampers and diminishes sharpness of hearing. Workers forget about the cacophony of the machines. When they go on strike, the first shock is the silence of the workshop.

We become accustomed to high sound levels. We are able to work, sleep, write, read, eat, and live amidst noise, but not without consequences for our sleep or our health. Children exposed to this have more difficulty learning to read, and they struggle to concentrate on activities in class. Schoolchildren at a grade school in Manhattan who were constantly exposed to the noise of an elevated train were found to be eleven months behind in learning compared to children on the quieter side of the building. After noise reduction equipment was installed on the tracks, a follow-up study showed no difference in the two groups (Ackerman 1991: 187). Noise neutralizes attention and concentration, and destroys any form of inner reflection. But it also makes people more self-absorbed, as another study comparing the effect of three different auditory ambiances on people's behavior revealed. In one experiment, on a tree-lined street of a residential neighborhood, a man with one arm in a cast was prompted to "accidentally" drop his books on the ground. Under ordinary ambient sound conditions of 50 decibels, the

percentage of passersby who offered their help was 80 percent, whereas this number fell to 15 percent when there was a lawnmower emitting 85 decibels nearby.

Noise isolates, accentuates aggressivity, and relieves us of any moral obligations to the other. This defensive response to noise proves to be a handicap to social integration in the long term. People are often unknowingly subjected to continual stress, to a state of overstimulation that they are not always aware of. Numerous studies have demonstrated the effects of noise on the quality of people's work and the time it takes to perform certain tasks (Miller 1978: 609–612). Our apparent adaptation to noise actually becomes dangerous over time, as it gradually impairs our hearing ability and sometimes leads to hearing loss.

The gradual deterioration of hearing that comes with age is exacerbated by constant exposure to background noise. If so many Westerners are affected by this, it is because of circumstances that oblige people to live in a state of permanent noise. A study conducted in the sixties on the traditional Mabaan population of Ethiopia illustrates this. The Mabaan live a silent life. Their voices are low, they do not play drums or use firearms. The noise level of their village is minimal. Tests on the hearing capacities of 500 individuals revealed that their hearing does not diminish at all with age.

The quality of relations between people, the pleasure of being together, is often privileged in auditory metaphors: being in resonance, in harmony, in tune, in chord, all ears, tuned in, lending an ear, and so on. The *bonne entente* implies a slackening of individual boundaries in a universe of meanings and sounds that unite people. Friends and lovers resonate in unison. The auditory world creates a physical connection between the self and others. If we choose it, welcome it, it mediates relations, removes obstacles, and brings people together. Noise is always a destroyer of the social bond.

When the Other is not appreciated, his or her language is perceived as noise, a broken string of intermingled sounds having no rhyme or reason. An affront to the auditory world, the Other lives in noise, in cacophony. Everything they say and do is an offence to the "refined" ear of the racist. Their music is discordant and its corresponding rhythms are loud. The language they speak is a sort of gibberish, like the *charabia* that Auvergnians were said to speak or the *baragouin* associated with the Bretons. It seems incomprehensible with its grotesque intonations and speech defects. The term "barbaric," designating the other in Antiquity, ironically also reflects the way Greeks perceived the language of alterity (Weinreich 1986). It was regarded as noise, a jumble of auditory emissions, which were ridiculed in the most grotesque manner.

Some travelers found in the particularities of African languages a confirmation of their prejudices. According to Malte-Brun, African languages consist in "barely articulated yells, many strange sounds, roars, whistling sounds imitated from the animals" (Cohen 2003: 241). Virey writes that the Hottentot "feels a difficulty in speaking; his voice is like the clacking of a turkey" (1837: 101). For Loti, in *Le roman d'un spahi*, Negroes have an

“ape-like” voice. When they talk all at once, he hears nothing but “sharp, querulous voices,” and they seem to “chatter away like monkeys” (1912: 133). African music is “unpleasant,” “raucous,” “discordant,” “shrill,” nothing but “cacophony,” as it is too different from music based on Western criteria, the only valid measure of universal quality, supposedly. African drums emit “spluttering” and “rumbling” sounds, African voices are like “belching,” and their songs are like the “demonic howling of a crowd of the possessed. Quite simply, this music is nothing but an intolerable racket” (Martinkus-Zemp 1975: 79 sq.).

## Breaking the Spell of Silence

An individual’s relationship to silence is revealing of social and cultural but also personal attitudes. Individuals have to possess the symbolic resources to appreciate silence without being overcome by fear, otherwise they fall prey to fantasy. While some people find calm in the breathing room of silence, an interiority difficult to achieve in a world of continual noise, others dread a world laid bare by the sudden intrusion of a silence that erases the familiar sounds on which their peace of mind depends. For the latter, sounds are the fabric of meaning that protect them from the brutality of the world, a shield against the abyss thus exposed. Silence in effect weakens our hold on meaning, eliminates any distractions, and leaves us face to face with ourselves, forcing us to confront our repressed pains, failures, and regrets (Le Breton 1997). It usurps any control we might have over the situation and instils fear, causing some inveterate urbanites, for example, to have trouble sleeping in the countryside or in a silent house. Darkness also adds to their discomfort by depriving them of daytime’s visual reassurance. As they are in a state of extra vigilance, the least stirring of activity outside or the creaking of a cabinet door becomes so many threats on the screen of their projected nightmare. They have to become accustomed to the calm of their surroundings, adapt to the sounds around them, and stop interpreting the absence of sounds as the insidious approach of an unexpected enemy.

Indeed, an event comes into existence through the intrusion of its sound. It cuts into a silence that is, by contrast, experienced as a flat expanse. A sound can always quite easily be associated with a source, while silence floods the space and leaves meaning in suspense. People who fear silence remain on the lookout for sounds that will humanize their surroundings. They are afraid to speak, as though the sound of their voices would unleash dark forces waiting to pounce on them. Others, to avoid anxiety, exchange banalities, shout or whistle, sing out loud, listen to their music, make phone calls, or turn on the computer or television. In restoring their empire of sound, they seek to reestablish their suspended human rights and recover the ground of their identity, which has been temporarily shaken by the absence of identifiable auditory markers. Sound has a reassuring function in that it provides tangible signs of existence and attests to the endless

turbulence of an ever-present world. It empowers us especially when we are in control of it, whereas silence remains elusive and infinitely beyond our reach. As a sign of the continuity of others presence nearby, it reassures in reminding us that beyond ourself the world continues to exist. The radio or television fills the house and remains on sometimes as simple background noise, the purpose being to intentionally erase a silence that is hard to bear because it evokes absence, loss, the emptiness of existence, or a loneliness that is difficult to face.

Among the Tuaregs of Kel Ferwan and neighboring communities near the Nigerien city of Agadez, conversation is, at certain hours, a weapon against the perils of silence. The desert is populated by the *kel essuf* “people of solitude,” malevolent beings that haunt solitary places. Night is especially propitious to their arrival, dusk as well, when one world changes into another. They strike mute or mad anyone who crosses their paths and doesn’t know how to defend himself. They pose a threat in situations dominated by silence. A person can fall into the *essuf* or “place of solitude” if he or she is alone in the evening or night, separated from loved ones, and falls prey to the sadness or melancholy of a desolate place. Safety is only assured in the sharing of words between people. Fluid conversation averts the insidious machinations of the *kel esuf*. Light-hearted language or even trivial subjects are not unwelcome. People do not have to apologize for using routine forms of expression, says Dominique Casajus. This is the origin of the expression “removing the *essuf*” or what an English speaker would call “small talk.” Together, people are in continual conversation, finding countless ways of exchanging information or, on a more basic level, just filling in the silence. Strangers draw from a repertoire of appropriate formulas to dissipate any uncomfortable feelings and maintain a satisfactory level of exchange. Speech has to be protected like the flame of a candle, awaiting sleep or daybreak. “The person surrounded by friends who seems removed from a discussion and sunk in thought is immediately cajoled out of his or her silence amidst laughter” (Casajus 1989: 287).

Victims of circumstance, Tuareg individuals who have been deprived the consolation of speech and whose mental health has been affected, benefit from a ritual therapy consisting in listening to traditional religious chants sung by women. If this fails, the community solicits the word of God with a Quranic reading. The language of people or of God is a weapon against the formidable silence that makes people vulnerable to the *kel essuf*.

Noise, in opposition to silence, has often had a beneficial function in various traditions, and it continues to be used during certain periods today. Noisemaking rituals have long been a part of weddings in many European regions. The practice has endured with the traditional procession of cars through the city or countryside and the attendant symphony of honking of horns. Françoise Zonabend describes the ritual noisemaking that once accompanied weddings in the Châtillonnais village of Minot. Shouts, children’s screams, clanging bells, gunshots, the honking of horns, and other sounds followed the procession. The meal lasted for several hours and was

interrupted by songs, cries, and laughter. The residents of Minot are surprised by how quiet weddings are today: “People no longer know how to enjoy themselves. There are weddings nowadays where one hears nothing” (1984: 111 sq.) Suspicion weighs on these marriages. People wonder if this auditory secrecy does not have some shameful story behind it—improprieties on the part of the couple or a conflict between parents, for example.

The ritual din of the wedding is not only a display of jubilation and a public affirmation of the marriage, it also announces the young woman’s change in status, “a highly dangerous disjunction” that the noise accompanies and symbolizes, according to Lévi-Strauss (1969: 287), in dissipating negative influences and seeking to enhance the couple’s fertility and abundance. Silence would be a sign of sterility, of danger, or the implicit admission of some form of inappropriate conduct.

Sound that opposes itself to silence, if deliberately chosen by the individual or community, possesses the quality of a conjuration that breaks the spell of silence, perceived as a world in which humanity has lost its prerogatives.<sup>6</sup> Noise then becomes a call to order to reestablish a sense of meaning that threatens to come undone.

## Noisemaking as a Call to Order

Sound that penetrates and forces its way in is sometimes charged with a power that can alter people’s relation to the world. The wielding of this power guarantees that others will be reduced to silence. Sound becomes an instrument of power in two ways: by confiscating the means for monopolizing speech, but also, by harassing those who cannot get away from it. It either imprisons people in an auditory order or forces them into silence. These are two very effective forms of pressure on individuals and groups, two political uses of sound.

The political use of sound is particularly evident in the noisemaking custom of *charivari*, a traditional manner of breaking the silence, in the literal sense of the word, with an organized din. A derisive and obscene ritual involving a mock serenade of chaotic and discordant sounds, its purpose was to publicly display disapproval of situations or behavior regarded as morally reprehensible within the eyes of the community but not officially condemned by law: choosing an unsuitable spouse (differences of age or status, leading to suspicions of a marriage of interest), choosing a partner outside the circle of the community, remarrying too soon after losing a spouse, or any other behavior deemed inappropriate. The young people of the village would meet and proceed by foot to the home of their victims in a tumultuous parade, making as much noise as possible, screaming, shouting insults, swearing, singing, and attracting the attention of the entire neighborhood. They brandished a variety of utensils and instruments—pots and pans, scythes and spades, bells, rattles or drums—all used in a chaotic manner. Anything that might add to the auditory onslaught was used to

make the couple's life unbearable and publicly announce the community's disapproval. Upon arriving, the members of the cortège would produce a deafening racket until they were offered something to drink or given some money. This rupture of the auditory order, especially in the silence of night, was a noisy way of signaling unacceptable social relations, teach the wrongdoers more humility, or reintegrate them, in spite of everything, through a symbolic gesture.

Through the embarrassment that it caused, the charivari served as a powerful form of publicity that forced its victims to lose face in the eyes of the group. In giving money, that is to say, in making amends, the wrongdoers bought the young people's silence, compensating them by paying the price for their disregard of the norms. Noise represented for the young people the nonsense, the rupture of the social bond, the "noise" enveloping communication in the village. The din of the charivari did not prevent the breach of norms, according to Lévi-Strauss, but it "objectively announced" and "metaphorically counterbalanced" it (1969: 338). In cases of remarriage, it also undoubtedly served to appease the deceased spouse and accompany people through "dangerous conjunctions" (1969: 287). The charivari was a form of resistance through sound that endured up until the beginning of the twentieth century, in spite of opposition from the Church and civil authorities. Today's version is the political demonstration, with its slogans, whistling and booing, uniting the crowd and transmitted over loudspeakers. The charivari has taken other forms. During the military dictatorship in Brazil, for example, citizens sometimes demonstrated at night banging pots and pans or making a deafening racket. A detested leader's passage was met with a symphony of honking horns.

The charivari is a symbolic attempt to counteract disorder, whether it be of a social or cosmic nature. It seeks to neutralize threats that represent a break with the familiar order of things. Lévi-Strauss observed the noisemaking rituals of certain traditional societies during eclipses and how these signal "an anomaly in the unfolding of a syntagmatic sequence" (1969: 289). Maurice Godelier describes the din of the Baruya of New Guinea during an eclipse: "I understood through these cries that the moon was 'in the process of dying.' As soon as these words were shouted, from every direction of the village there arose a charivari of sounds of clanging objects and profound clamor. After a long minute, the silence returned" (cited in Le Goff and Schmitt 1981: 347). Auditory activities whose purpose is to ward off threats have been part of many traditional European holidays, and, in modern times, continue to accompany the ringing-in of the new year with its symphonies of honking horns, firecrackers going off, and fireworks.

Louis-Vincent Thomas perceives the funerals of West Africa as a combining of deliberate noises intended to counteract death. Human disorder responds to the disorder of death in a sort of return to initial chaos giving rise to rebirth at the end of the ceremony:

clapping hands, horns, gunshots, drums, bells and castanets succeed one another and add to the songs, cries and discussions in a cacophony that is difficult to describe. And all of this is louder and longer lasting if the deceased is older and has a higher status. In certain moments, to the frenetic rhythm of the drums and aided by libations of palm wine, everyone present is drawn into a carnivalesque atmosphere, different individuals contributing to the noise in their own way to make their presence known. (Thomas 1982: 165)

While organized noisemaking is a response to the disorder of the world, a symbolic recovery of control over the conditions of existence, in other circumstances, intentionally produced silence partakes of the same logic. Mary Douglas (2003 [1975]) has observed among the Lele that the sounds of women's daytime activities, grinding grain, for example, cannot be produced after dusk. These sounds attract the attention of spirits who would be furious. Inadvertently emitted sounds would create an opening to their harmful intrusion. What is disturbing is an inhabitual auditory organization, a rupture in the customary order of the world.

## Sound as Transition and Threshold

All social phenomena involving transition make use of percussion, according to British anthropologist Rodney Needham (1967). Sound possesses the virtue of being able to interrupt the existing temporality and instantly create a new ambiance, delineating and unifying an event's different manifestations. A change in sound demarcates and transforms the atmosphere of a place. It functions as a sign of passage. Its instruments are numerous, from hand-clapping and foot-stamping to firecrackers, cymbals, gongs, bells, or, especially, drums, or even voices or music broadcast over speakers. The beginning or end of a ritual, even different moments within the same ceremony, are subject to an auditory parsing that marks out time, often conveyed through percussion. "The main characteristic of percussion instruments is that they are monotonic, which renders them unsuitable, alone, for melodic use but which makes them admirable for producing rhythm" (Jackson 1968: 296).

Music, understood in the broad sense, has a strong and ambivalent relationship to trance or possession. Sometimes it is indispensable to the episode while in other times and places it serves no purpose. It can play a role in every sequence of the ceremony or only in certain parts. The types of sounds that accompany these events are numerous, from bells and rattles to the clamor of cymbals, drums, or violins, among other instruments. Sometimes voice and song are woven into the movements of those in contact with the beyond. Between the musicians, and the men and women who are possessed, the sounds emitted establish a communication, a resonance based on a shared code.



Rodney Needham (1967) describes the entry into the other world that characterizes shamanism, possession, and other ceremonies based on rites of passage as taking place through the intermediary of percussive instruments. According to Needham, it is not the melody or the rhythm that effects the transition but, rather, the inherent physiological quality of percussion, which is independent of cultural conditioning. "There is no doubt that sound-waves have neural and organic effects on human beings, irrespective of the cultural formation of the latter. The reverberations produced by musical instruments thus have not only aesthetic but also bodily effects" (Needham 1967: 610). Other authors maintain that the trance state is provoked by sounds susceptible to influencing the brain's alpha rhythms or by a disturbance of the inner ear.

There is controversy surrounding these claims, though, for there are also those scholars who argue that the effectiveness of sounds in inducing trance is not based on the nature of the sounds but on their consistent and meaningful organization by the human community hearing them. If percussive sounds are often used to effect a transition between categories or phases, it is because of their meaning, not their physics. Many ceremonies involving contact between humans and gods take place without percussive instruments. Drawing on an extensive corpus of anthropological data, Gilbert Rouget (1985) has shown that music's power to induce trance or possession is based neither on vocal emissions nor on a particular instrument. The drum is never the only instrument used, even though many writings on shamanism mention it. Rattles, bells, gongs, violins, and other instruments unique to specific cultures also play a role. But neither the frenzy nor the intensity of sounds necessarily induces a state of possession. During the same ceremony, everyone hears the same music, but only certain adepts, according to their role, enter into a trance. "This does not mean that drumming is never responsible for entry into trance, it means only that when it is responsible it is so for reasons of another kind" (Rouget 1985: 175, 176).

The state of trance is no more dependent on one musical element than another, whether it be "rhythmic, dynamic or melodic" (Rouget 1985: 78). Rhythmic variations are common but not universal. Acceleration of the *tempo* often goes hand in hand with increasing intensity of the sound, as is the case in Afro-Brazilian *candomblé* music, or the *ndöp* ceremony in Senegal, for example. But the dramatization of music through *crescendo* or *accelerando* is far from the rule. As Rouget wryly observes, there have been no reported cases of trance-like possessions in concert halls filled with people listening to Ravel's *Boléro* (Rouget 1985: 86). John Blacking, evoking the *Venda* of South Africa, notes that

the exciting rhythms of the *Venda* possession dance (*ngoma dza midzumi*) do not send every *Venda* into a trance. They send only members of the cult, and then only when they are dancing at their own homes, with which the spirits of the ancestors who possess them are

familiar. The effectiveness of the music depends on the context in which it is both performed and heard. (1974: 44)

Blacking amusingly recounts once playing a drum as the dancers entered the arena, one after the other. An older woman had begun dancing but, after a few minutes stopped, complaining of his drumming. “She claimed that I was ruining the effect of the music by ‘hurrying’ the tempo—just enough, I suppose, to inhibit the onset of trance” (1974: 45).

There is then no universal melody that accompanies states of trance. On the contrary, in many ceremonies, trance is induced by a specific rhythm or melody in which the possessed recognizes his or her personal divinity. In southern Italy, each tarantata reacts to the song that characterizes her spider. Musicians try a series of songs or chants drawn from a traditional repertoire. The tarantata enters into trance upon hearing “her” melody (De Martino 1966). It is a distinct musical or verbal “motif” that induces possession. Sometimes, as, for example, among the Thonga, “every possessed person invents a song which will be henceforth *his*, and by means of which crises, or trances will be provoked or cured” (Junod cited in Rouget 1985: 102). But no rhythm, no instrument possesses the power to instantly induce possession among adepts, even when it evokes their personal motif. Individuals only enter into trance under the right conditions. These are not met if an individual is in an impure state or if there are several members present who can possess a divinity expected to arrive alone at the site of worship. Sometimes adepts are unable to enter into trance, in spite of the musicians’ efforts. The divinity does not want to come for some reason, or the man or woman expected to embody the entity is not able to enter into its skin. The music also has no impact if it is heard outside of circumstances related to the ceremony. It is only effective when the favorable conditions established by the culture are met.

We recall that shamans typically first learn of their vocation during crises that are experienced in solitude, in a context where no music, no drumming is involved. Little by little they learn that these episodes are signs of their developing powers to act as healers and commune with the gods. Initiation by another shaman crystallizes this virtuality, channeling it by giving meaning to something that was previously experienced as disorder. Mastery of music is introduced at this time to ritualize the trance. While the shaman’s sacred drum (or other instrument) is fundamental, it does not suffice in itself to automatically induce the trance.

The role of the music is much less to produce the trance than to create conditions favorable to its onset, to regularize its form, and to ensure that instead of being a merely individual, unpredictable, and uncontrollable behavioral phenomenon, it becomes, on the contrary, predictable, controlled, and at the service of the group. (Rouget 1985: 320)

The sounds’ physical effect is the result of its symbolic effectiveness, not an acoustic effect. It is not a sensation that acts on adepts but rather a sign, that

is to say, a perception to which they attach a distinct meaning, a sound they identify because they have learned to recognize it and act accordingly. Rouget notes that the relationship between music and trance is “not ruled by natural constraints but by cultural arbitrariness” (Rouget 1985: 216). The trance is triggered by the song or words, a particular aspect of the music’s sound that is charged with meaning and emotion for adepts and inscribed in their body’s memory. Intensity, rhythm, beat, and other elements are only effective if they are associated with learned behaviors.

## The Creation of the World

In many societies the creation of the world takes the form of an act of sound. When God expresses the desire to create heaven and earth, humans and animals, an auditory element brings these into the world. The divinity sings, shouts, breathes, speaks, or plays a musical instrument.

The primordial abyss, the gaping mouth, the singing cave, the singing or supernatural ground of the Eskimos, the crack in the rock of Upanishads or the Tao of Ancient China, from which the world emanated “like a tree,” all include images of empty space or non-being, from which the creator’s barely perceptible breath emerges. This sound, arising from the Void, is the product of a thought that stirs the emptiness and, in its resonance, creates space. (Schneider 1960: 133)

The Egyptian gods were born of sound after being summoned by Atum-Re. An Estonian myth describes the origin of nature’s innumerable voices when the god of song descended one day on the Domberg and invited all the creatures there to begin singing. Each learned

some fragment of the celestial sound; the listening wood learnt its rustling, the stream its roar, the wind caught and learned to re-echo the shrillest tones, and the birds the prelude of the song. The fishes stuck up their heads as far as the eyes out of the water, but left their ears under water; they saw the movements of the god’s mouth, and imitated them but remained dumb. Man only grasped it all, and therefore his song pierces into the depths of the heart, and upwards to the dwelling of the gods. (Chamberlain 1905: 120)

The *Om* or *Aum* is a sacred term in the Vedas, the sound containing the entire universe. It is Brahman, the origin of all activity, all information. The sound *Aum* is not a human invention but a primordial and uncreated sound that escapes all temporality and that certain mystics sometimes hear when their spirits are completely withdrawn from profane sensory experience. For ordinary people, the universe revealed by the senses is a screen that hides the sound of origins, inaudible to their ears.

A is the root sound, the key, pronounced without the tongue's touching any part of the palate; it is the least differentiated of all sounds. Again, all articulate sounds are produced in the space between the root of the tongue and the tip; the throat sound is A, and M is the last sound produced by the closing of the lips. U represents the rolling forward of the impulse that begins at the root of the tongue and ends at the lips. If properly pronounced, Aum represents the whole gamut of sound production as no other word can. Therefore it is the matrix of all sounds, and the fittest symbol of the Logos, the Word "which was at the beginning." (Nikhilananda 1971: 83)

The voice that chants the *Aum* is no longer human, it is spiritualized. "It thus becomes co-creator with the divine voice" (Pinard 1990: 80). All of the different strands of Hinduism, Jainism, and Buddhism look to the sanctity of the *Aum* as crystallizing the ultimate reality.

The goal which all the Vedas declare, which all austerities aim at and which men desire when they lead the life of continence [...] it is Om. This syllable Om is indeed Brahman. This syllable is the highest. Whosoever knows this syllable obtains all that he desires. This is the best support; this is the highest support. Whosoever knows this support is adored in the world of Brahma. (*Katha Upanishad* 1: 15–17)

In many societies where orality is key, the meaning of a tone lies not in "what it points to but *in the pointing itself*" (Zuckerandl 1973: 68). A word, a sound, or a form of music possesses a cultural power to transform reality if it is used correctly in the right moment.

Being powered projections, spoken words themselves have an aura of power. In personal relations—and spoken words of their very nature entail real, not imagined, personal relations, since the audience is on hand and reacting—words do have real power: the king's statement that so-and-so is his representative makes him his representative as nothing else does. Words in an oral-aural culture are inseparable from action for they are always sounds. (Ong 1967: 113)

The spoken word influences the world according to the intentions and knowledge of the one who uses it and with respect to the power it traditionally holds.

Among the Songhay of Niger, sounds are thought to have the potential to transform the world. Certain descendants of a mythic ancestor know words that protect soldiers from injury or others from accidents in everyday life. The *sorko* or sorcerer, for his part, knows words that repel witches.

To learn how to hear, the Songhay healer must learn to apprehend the sound of words much like the musician learns to apprehend the sound of

music. Just as sound is the central feature of the world of music, so sound is the central feature of the world of magic. This world of sounds comes to life in a network of forces. (Stoller 1984: 563)

Before transmitting meaning, words carry power. Stoller recounts his experience accompanying a *sorko* to hunt down a witch whose curse was making a man severely ill. The *sorko* climbed up onto a dune and emitted a sound. He then turned to the bewildered ethnologist and asked him what he had witnessed. But Stoller hadn't perceived anything and was thus scolded by the *sorko* who criticized his lack of attention and receptivity to his teachings. A heavy silence of disapproval weighed on Stoller as they returned to the sick man's home. There, to Stoller's surprise, the man was busy at work in his yard. He was cured. "The words were good for this one," said the *sorko*. Words correctly pronounced by the right person make the witch's spells powerless. "The power of the incantation," says Stoller, "is not in the words as carriers of referential meaning, but in the sounds of the words" (Stoller 1984: 568).

Among the Songhay, the sound of the *godji* is used to remember their forebears. The *godji* is a monochord instrument which is said to have been given to the community by the first *sorko* after having defeated an evil spirit.

The sound of the *godji* penetrates us and makes us feel the presence of the ancestors, the ancients (*don borey*). We hear the sound and know that we are on the path of the ancestors. The sound is irresistible. We cannot be unaffected by it and neither can the spirits, for when they hear it "cry," it penetrates them. Then they become excited and swoop down to take the body of the medium. (Stoller 1984: 564)

Sounds are not only sounds but also elements of a living cosmology to which myths provide the keys. The sounds heard by the Songhay are not the same as those heard by Stoller or a foreign visitor. They are forces that connect the present to a long Songhay history, which connects those living today to their ancestors.

## Deafness or the Visual Relay of Sound

Hearing is not only essential to anchoring us in a world filled with sounds but also plays a decisive role in children's moral and intellectual development. Deaf children cannot hear their mother's or family's voices. They can only grasp their facial expressions, gestures, and looks. They are not able to ask their parents about the meanings of things around them or express their own desires. Language often remains foreign to them. Deaf children who do not receive a particular education are condemned to muteness. A community of meaning is by and large an auditory community, a point of entry into the hum of everyday life, an ability to respond to the voices of those around us

and to question and elicit their comments in turn. Deafness suppresses a dimension of reality.

For a long time, children born deaf became mute because they did not have the access to the mechanism of language. Their extension into the world was limited by their difficulty entering a symbolic universe, remaining on its surface, for lack of education in this sense. Their exclusion from verbal exchanges, the image of mental retardation associated with their demeanor, condemned them to the status of village idiots or beggars.

Every deaf community “spontaneously” develops its own language based on highly developed gestures and close attention to the visible world. Sound as the basis of language is thus replaced by vision, the eye taking over with the same efficacy as the ear. Bernard Mottez objects to using the term “silence” in relation to deaf people.

We prefer visual terms [...] terms related to the visual world rather than to a world of silence to describe the world of deaf people and their way of being in the world. This is because the meaning of the word silence lends itself to misunderstandings insofar as individuals’ experiences are very different depending on whether they are deaf, hard of hearing, or have lost or gained their hearing. (1981: 50)

Sign language substitutes for oral language in its anthropological function. It allows children to formulate their thoughts and gives them a language, memory, and way of understanding the world. It helps them integrate the rules inherent to the language of their society and thus participate as full citizens. In some regions, because of the large number of individuals born deaf, the entire community is obliged to use both oral and sign language; thus, every actor is integrated into the social bond without discrimination (Groce 1985).

For the hearing, sign language can be difficult to accept due to the sensory rupture it creates with ordinary rituals of interaction that demand bodily discretion. Of course, communication implies an intermingling of words and gestures, of language and the body, but it is first perceived as a fact of language and therefore of hearing, and bodily movements are regarded as only commentaries on the sovereign words. Sign language goes beyond this framework and does justice to the body and the face, but it disturbs the hearing, who consider the voice alone worthy of language. They see signs as “gesticulations,” as a gesturally “noisy” manner of expressing oneself. A conversation between deaf people in a public place arouses curiosity, and attracts comments and sometimes even ridicule (Higgins 1980: 126sq.).

The body’s depreciated status in communication is reflected in the repression that sign languages faced in favor of speech education following the Milan Conference of 1880. Though early educators of deaf children, such as the Abbé de l’Epée or Degérando, had recognized sign language as a distinct, complete language that allowed children to develop their thought and ability to communicate with others, the idea of the deaf having a distinct

culture raised concerns among the hearing that the deaf would withdraw from society and become dissident. This attitude was fueled by the biological imaginary of the epoch that feared an increase in the deaf community's population. Alexander Graham Bell, the inventor of the telephone, whose wife was deaf, expressed this fear:

Indeed, if we desired to create a deaf variety of the race, and were to attempt to devise methods which should compel deaf-mutes to marry deaf-mutes, we could not invent more complete or more efficient methods than those that actually exist [...] the evidence shows a tendency to the formation of a deaf variety of the human race. (1884: 217; 221)

This concern with the full social integration of the deaf reinforced the pedagogical focus on spoken language. The Milan Conference prohibited signing which was seen as an obstacle to acquiring speech. This decision had serious consequences, putting the fate of deaf education into the hands of the hearing and plunging sign language into a state of moral and pedagogical inferiority. The deaf, who are mute only because of their lack of hearing and language, had to submit to speech and try to acquire a rudimentary version of it without the aid of sign language and, this, only in communication with the hearing. The deaf community thus experienced a painful cultural regression. The desire to socially integrate deaf people necessitated the ritualized effacement of the body in social life (see Le Breton 2004: 106 sq.) that signing continually transgressed.

It was only in the 1980s, after a difficult struggle, that deaf communities regained full use of their languages. The pedagogical approaches used in specialized schools became more flexible and began to encourage both signing and orality. In France, it wasn't until a decree of January 1991 that the ban on sign languages in teaching was lifted and parents

could choose bilingualism for their children. That's an important option because it allows deaf children to have their own language, develop psychologically, and at the same time communicate with others in oral and written French. A whole century of what I call cultural terrorism by the hearing majority had gone by. (Laborit 1999: 127)<sup>7</sup>

This century-long opprobrium on sign languages reflects the extent to which, in the Western mentality, thought, and communication are first and foremost based in orality. The body is like the indecent dimension of speech, the "bad part" that imposes itself on the eye: its presence has to be subdued by subjecting it to codes of discretion and norms (Le Breton 1990). Sign language, by contrast, seems to honor the body and face. It interrupts the rite and disturbs the hearing who consider the voice alone a worthy vehicle of language.

While the repression of gestuality in ordinary communication makes the deaf, in their exchanges with one another, the center of unwelcome attention,

it also undermines deaf children's education and contributes to making their lives difficult. Though, beyond the family circle, they will meet few people able to converse with them, children born to parents who are themselves deaf learn to sign in a natural way, just like other children learn to speak. However, deaf children born to hearing parents do not benefit from this language "immersion." They are often isolated, disconnected from their surroundings, unless a member of the family responds to their efforts at gestural communication.<sup>8</sup> While this miming does not have the structure of a language, it nonetheless offers a way out of their isolation and brings them closer to ordinary communication. Laborit recalls her enthusiasm in discovering, beyond the complicity that connected her to her mother, the existence of a sign language that felt like an opening onto the world, like a full entry into communication (Laborit 1999: 32 sq.).

But children who do not have family members stimulating them in this way, encouraging their attempts at communication, often show marked delays in their psychological, emotional, intellectual, and social development. Even if love and affection have a place in their symbolic universe they still experience a degree of suffering and isolation. Laborit's experience, in spite of her parents' attentiveness, attests to this:

I think that hearing parents who deprive their children of sign language will never understand what goes on in the mind of a deaf child. There's loneliness, resistance, a craving to communicate, and sometimes anger. At home you feel excluded by your family when everyone is talking and not paying any attention to you. Because you always have to ask, always tug at someone's sleeve or skirt to know just a little, a tiny little bit, of what's going on around you. Otherwise, life is like a silent film without captions. (Laborit 1999: 40)

This distance from the outside world is diminished, becomes negligible even, if children have access to signs as a first language and if their parents commit to stimulating them and encouraging their sensory entry into the world. Children who have a way to organize their thoughts and communicate with family, and especially with others, and have been sensitized to the complexity of the world, are not hindered in their personal development by their deafness, even though it imposes a particular relationship to the world.

It would appear that conventional Western childrearing practices, which tend to promote isolation (e.g., consigning a child to a crib) coupled with the primary importance ascribed to verbal communication (and concomitant devaluation of "non-verbal" communication) put deaf children at a disadvantage. According to Marie-Joseph Serazin, this is not the case for deaf children in sub-Saharan Africa, who experience a permanent body-to-body rapport with their mother, living to her rhythms, carried on her back or on her hip, breathing with her, feeling the warmth of her skin, vibrating with her as she performs household chores, as she walks, dances, talks with her friends. These children are at the heart of exchanges. Their deafness is



not a handicap, because, though sounds and words escape them, they benefit from countless visual, tactile, and rhythmic stimulations, immersed in sociability, continually solicited by different people, and participating with their entire bodies in the effervescence of the world.

In these societies sign language is not prohibited, because the dignity of the body in communication is not questioned. "It is paradoxical," writes Serazin,

that in Africa, where the spoken word is dominant, is a matrix of orality, hearing is relative and deafness is not a major handicap. Yet, in societies where writing and other techniques of mediation dominate, hearing becomes paramount and its deficit is a major handicap to the point of compromising the child's proper growth and development. (1983: 17)

While Western children depend on hearing for their education, for African children, it is one form of mediation among others. We may conclude that the depreciated social status of the hearing-impaired in Western societies is a consequence of the repressed status of the body and, especially of gestuality, in communication. The ritualized effacement of the body leads to the social repression of the deaf and makes it difficult for them to achieve full social integration: it makes deafness a handicap (Le Breton 2004). Yet, as Laborit observes again:

As far as I'm concerned sign language is my voice and my eyes are my ears. Frankly, I don't feel deprived of anything. It's society that makes me handicapped, that makes me dependent on hearing people, that makes it impossible to contact a doctor directly, that makes me need to have conversations translated, that makes me have to ask for help to make a phone call or for captioning on TV. (1999: 88)

Deafness reveals different degrees of filtering and indifference to the auditory environment. It is not a world of pure silence, because deaf individuals often hear the sounds of their bodies or ringing in their ears. With prostheses, many hearing-impaired individuals can still listen to the world. But profound deafness excludes all sound contact and obliges the deaf to turn to visual forms of communication (sign language, lip reading). While the inner "silence" may be deprived of sound, it is not deprived of meaning, and the ceaseless movement of the world permeates the individual no less. "To others," writes actor Howie Seago,

[my sign language] may be a visual representation of what they perceive as my "silence." For me, there is no "silence" within me, only in my ears. With my experiences of alienation, love, passion, pain, desires and constant struggles to communicate, the words spill out of my soul in a multitude of styles; frenzied explosions of fury, and gentle dances

of eloquence on wings of poetry. My eyes, my mind and my heart are certainly not silent. (1993: 150)

Indeed, through their sensitivity to vibrations, deaf people gather information about their surroundings: they recognize friends' voices, locate the sound of footsteps, or identify bits of music, a passing car, or an object falling on the ground. This sensitization to the meaning of vibrations on the skin's surface is essential to learning to speak.

The age at which deafness sets in is a decisive element in the individual's development, either opening or closing the door onto language and, especially, onto knowledge of the world's possible sounds. David Wright, for example, who became deaf at the age of seven, observes that his knowledge of language at this time facilitated his social integration. The personal experience of perception that he describes is common among those whose loss of hearing occurred before acquiring speech—they continue to hear voices and everyday sounds using vision in place of hearing. "That they were imaginary, the projections of habit and memory, did not come home to me until I had left hospital," writes David Wright. "One day I was talking with my cousin and he, in a moment of inspiration, covered his mouth with his hand when he spoke. Silence! Once and for all I understood that when I could not see I could not hear" (Wright 1980: 22).

Deaf individuals' experience of the world, before any acquisition of language, and notably through lip reading, is limited to a *vision* of the world, to a strictly visual decoding. The sounds they emit are not controlled by hearing. Deaf people cannot follow the example of those around them, because they are forced to live at a distance from the banal conversations of everyday life that teach children how to find their voice, adapt it to the specific rhythms of a social group, and respect its tones and accents. Their control over speech must therefore pass through other senses. By looking, touching, feeling the position and movement of certain parts of their bodies, and experiencing the vibrations of their own or their teachers' vocal chords, deaf people learning to speak take inhabitual sensorial paths to situate themselves in a field of sounds that they cannot hear.<sup>9</sup> Not being able to hear themselves, they "speak" by focusing on the kinesthetic and vibratory sensations of phonatory movements that have been acquired over a long and difficult learning process (Bouvet 1982: 56). While this sensory detour may not restore their full access to the auditory world, it integrates them into ordinary communication by providing a way to be understood by the hearing, though not, of course, without occasional misunderstandings.

Establishing a connection between different sensory universes and a universe of meaning is not easy for the deaf, as it requires unflinching attention to maintain contact. In communicating with hearing people, the absence of sound necessitates converting the signifying elements of spoken language to the visual register: decoding the movements of the lips, hands, or body; divining the tone of a look or facial expression; and so on. Nonchalant conversation is difficult to achieve because any interruption of attention

dissipates the signs. Seago aptly expresses the effort required during exchanges with the hearing:

My constant expenditure of energy in this continual observation interjects an unavoidable “edge” to my interactions with people who do not sign and even those who do. As a Deaf person, I carry this authentic tension around with me. It never dissipates, it’s always present. There are many moments of awkwardness with hearing people due to the strain of unnatural and inefficient communication. (1993: 144)

Deaf people’s experience also reveals that the need to have a lip-read phrase repeated often makes their interlocutors—who feel not so much listened to as studied—impatient. This deconstruction of the ritual in which sound is eclipsed by sight, is disturbing to some, as it reverses the customary interaction and transforms spoken words into subtle movements of the lips.

# 4

## Skin Deep: Touch, the Sense of Contact

*Touch is to the other senses as white is to the colors—the range of feelings are founded upon it. Everything that comes to us from outside is a form of contact, whether we experience it as light, sound or odor.*

ERNST JÜNGER, *LE CONTEMPLATEUR SOLITAIRE*

*Touch was also a kind of ecstasy—the feel of naked feet racing over smooth boards onto the cool of a corridor’s tiled floor, over a garden path’s circular flagstones still wet with dew.*

CZESŁAW MIŁOSZ, *THE ISSA VALLEY*

The tactile sense encompasses the entire body, inside and out. It emanates from the whole expanse of the skin, unlike the other senses, which are more circumscribed. We feel the surrounding world at every bodily surface and in every instant, even while we sleep. Sensory experience is first and foremost tactile experience, contact with others and objects, the feeling of our feet touching the ground. The world imparts its forms, volumes, textures, shapes, masses, and temperatures to us through its endless layers of skin.

Because of the eminence of touch in existence, its primary role in ontogenesis, the notion of contact is often extended to the other senses. Epicurus, for example, thought that all the senses could be reduced to touch, since all perception can be understood as a form of contact. Aristotle described each sense in its specific dimension, and he counted five. He conferred upon touch, however, a sort of eminence because it can be “separated from all other forms of sense,” while the other senses cannot be separated from it. “The primary form of sense is touch, which belongs to all animals” (1995: 658). A Russian dictionary published in 1903 states that “in reality all five senses can be reduced to one—the sense of touch. The tongue and palate sense the food; the ear, sound waves; the nose emanations; the eyes, rays of light” (in Mead and Metraux 2000: 175). As a matrix of the other senses, the skin is a vast geography that nourishes different sensory domains, encompassing them within its web, and providing

singular perspectives on reality that cannot be isolated from one another. “In truth, without touch I would always have thought of smells, tastes, colors and sounds as my own; never would I have judged that there are odorous, sonorous, colored and savory bodies” (Condillac 2014: 336).

But another line of thought, more Platonic, makes touch a vulgar sense that barely distinguishes the human from the animal. While Ficino, faithful to the Renaissance mind-set that associated touch with sexuality, acknowledged that it was a “universal sense” in both animals and humans, he objected to extending it to the intellect. “Nature,” he wrote, “has placed no sense farther from the intelligence than touch” (cited in O’Rourke Boyle 1998: 4). The sense of touch belongs to the material world, not to the soul or to the mind. It is grounded in the body. While contemplative love ascends from sight to mind, voluptuous love descends from sight to touch, and the latter does not have the same value. For Pico della Mirandola, another Platonist, the hands and touching physically restrain the soul that aspires to divine ascension. “Hands were instruments not of deification but degradation.... Hands touching is not a credible image for a Platonist program” (O’Rourke Boyle 1998: 5).

One can be blind, deaf, and anosmic and continue to live. A person can even have localized agnosias, but the loss of all tactile sensation signals the loss of personal autonomy, the paralysis of personal volition, and its delegation to others. People are powerless to move if they do not feel the solidity of their movements and the tangibility of their surroundings. To lose the sense of touch is to be robbed of any possibility of autonomous action. “Thus it is evident that this is the only sense the loss of which necessarily involves the death of the animal,” writes Aristotle (2008: 102). Without bearings, without limits around the self to recover a sense of presence, we dissolve into space like water flowing into water, we slip into an incomprehensible weightlessness. As the only sense indispensable to life, touch is the foundation of our relation to the world. Using the metaphor of a statue that awakens one sense at a time, Condillac writes that “our statue, who was without reflection with the other senses, begins to reflect with touch,” (2014: 246) and again “all our knowledge comes from the senses and particularly from touch because it is this sense which instructs the others” (2014: 337).

## The Skin

The most expansive organ of the human body, the skin contains the subject. It is a site of both opening and closure. As the real and symbolic envelope of the body, and therefore of the individual, it holds the unconscious memory of childhood, a reminder of the mother’s gestures of love or rejection. “Just as the skin is wrapped around the whole body, so the Skin-ego aspires to enwrap the whole psychological apparatus,” writes Didier Anzieu (2016: 109). Every personal history is first a history of the skin. Indeed, in many European

languages, the skin is a metonym for the person. In both English and French, individuals can “save their skin” (*sauver sa peau*), or in French, *se mettre dans la peau de l’autre* (“put themselves in someone else’s skin”) (shoes, in English), or *être bien ou mal dans sa peau*, literally, “be good or bad in their skin”—feel good or bad about themselves. Similar expressions exist in German (Benthien 2002: 18 sq.). The skin makes the subject.

The skin reveals individual differences, but it also demarcates gender, social condition, age, and a quality of presence. It can also signal a person’s “race” according to color and depending on social context. It is, above all, a limit of sensory experience and desire, connecting and separating, structuring our relationship to the world. It has a regulating function and acts as a filter that is both psychic and somatic. The skin is saturated with the unconscious and culture. It reveals not only the subject’s psyche but also people’s place within the social bond, the history in which they are immersed. The private and public come together on the skin’s surface. The skin is the point of contact with the world and with others. It is always a site of material meaning.

As a barrier against outside intrusions, though not impervious to assaults beyond a certain threshold, the skin is a living sense that breathes, converses with its surroundings, emits odors, and reveals states of mind through its texture, warmth, and color. Between inside and out, it establishes a passage of stimulations and meanings. It denotes separation, enclosing the individual, but it is simultaneously a site of exchange with the world, transmitting warmth, light, pleasure, and pain. It is a site of both boundaries and openings that reveals our sovereignty over the world to us, the volume we occupy in space.

Touch is the sense par excellence of closeness. Bound to a precise location, it obliges us to abandon other objects and focus exclusively on whatever we are holding in our hands. The tactile sense implies a rupture with emptiness and a confrontation with tangible limits. While vision yields an already constructed space, touch reveals the world through a series of contacts. It is always local, successive, and emerging in sequence. We explore one part, then another. We perceive a chair, for example, first with the eye, taking in its qualities, defects, and textures immediately. By contrast, the hand carefully explores it, gliding over its contours to slowly reconstruct the whole. While the eye embraces vast stretches, touch clings to the most immediate reality and implies a body-to-body interaction with the object. Without it, the world escapes us. But in everyday perception, sight and touch are like two sides of a coin, even though, in some circumstances, one will cede to the other’s authority, at night, for example, in the first case, or in surveying a landscape, in the second.

In continual contact with the surrounding world, the skin resonates with its movement. The skin feels nothing without feeling itself. “To touch is to touch oneself,” writes Merleau-Ponty. “[T]hings are the prolongation of my body and my body is the prolongation of the world, through it the world surrounds me [...] The touching oneself and the touching have to be

understood as each the reverse of the other” (1968: 255). The object touches us when we touch it and fades when we stop touching it.

All tactile stimulation marks the boundary between self and other, between inside and out. Touch carves out our presence in the world through the ever-present reminder of the skin’s limit. Proust writes:

For it always happened that when I awoke like this, and my mind struggled in an unsuccessful attempt to discover where I was, everything revolved around me through the darkness: things, places, years. My body, still too heavy with sleep to move, would endeavor to construe from the pattern of its tiredness the position of its various limbs, in order to deduce therefrom the direction of the wall, the location of the furniture, to piece together and give a name to the house in which it lay. Its memory, the composite memory of its ribs, its knees, its shoulder-blades, offered it a whole series of rooms in which it had at one time or another slept, while the unseen walls, shifting and adapting themselves to the shape of each successive room that it remembered, whirled round it in the dark. (1982a: 6)

Touch lends itself easily to memory. Its traces remain on the surface of the body, ready to be rekindled. They provide us with enduring reference points in our relation with the world.

In situations of stress, people touch their hair or their face; adjust or brush their clothing; tighten, clasp, or wring their hands; or run their hand across their forehead. Shifting position; tapping on the table; repetitively picking up and putting down objects; wiping a corner of the desk; sucking on candies, chewing gum, or holding a cigarette—these are all calming gestures that we perform unconsciously. These countless movements help reduce tension and reassure us, for lack of contact with another person.

## The Concreteness of Things

Dreamers pinch themselves to confirm their state of waking. By touching things, we recognize that they exist. The world, and therefore the presence of the other, is first a tactile modality. With respect to the material world, touch is sovereign. It attests to the concreteness of things and their veracity. The word of Thomas in the Gospels is clear in its apparent obscenity: “So the other disciples told him, ‘We have seen the Lord!’ But he said to them, ‘Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe’” (John 20:25). Upon his return, Jesus himself appeals to Thomas: “‘Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe’” (John 20:27). Thomas, without shame, thrusts his hand into the wound. “My Lord and my God!” he exclaims. And Jesus said to him: “Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have

not seen and yet have believed” (John 20:20–29). He forbids, however, Mary Magdalene to touch him (*noli me tangere*).

Touch is often invoked to establish the reality of things. But contact cannot always be the touchstone of truth. Even touch can be deceived, as in the biblical story of Jacob who deceives his elderly father, blind with age (Genesis 27). Before dying, Issac wants to bless his eldest son Esau, making him the mediator between God and humankind. He first asks Esau to bring him a plate of goatmeat, prepared as he likes it. But his wife, Rebekah, having overheard the conversation, prefers her younger son, Jacob. She informs him of the situation and tells him to fetch two goats from the herd so she can prepare a tasty meal. Jacob knows he can at first deceive his father, who has lost his vision, but that physical contact would give him away—while Jacob’s body is smooth, Esau’s is hairy. Rebekah has a solution:

So he went and got them [the goats] and brought them to his mother, and she prepared some tasty food, just the way his father liked it. Then Rebekah took the best clothes of Esau her older son, which she had in the house, and put them on her younger son Jacob. She also covered his hands and the smooth part of his neck with the goatskins. (14–16)

Dressed like this, Jacob goes to see his father, presenting himself as Esau. Hearing, however, does not deceive the old man, who recognizes Jacob’s voice. But, asking him to come closer, Issac relies on his sense of touch and is convinced that it is in fact Esau:

Then Issac said to Jacob, “Come near so I can touch you, my son, to know whether you really are my son Esau or not.” Jacob went close to his father Issac, who touched him and said, “The voice is the voice of Jacob, but the hands are the hands of Esau.” He did not recognize him, for his hands were hairy like those of his brother Esau; so he proceeded to bless him. “Are you really my son Esau?” he asked. “I am,” he replied. (21–24)

Isaac’s insistent touch fails to identify the fraud. His deception is assured by the animal odor that he smells while embracing his son. “So [Jacob] went to him and kissed him. When Issac caught the smell of his clothes, he blessed him and said, ‘Ah, the smell of my son / is like the smell of a field / that the Lord has blessed’” (25–28). The combination of physical contact, the flavors of the dish and the animal odor are proof to the elderly Issac that Esau is standing before him.

Reality is experienced through touch “first hand.” We perceive the boundaries of the skin by coming into contact with outside objects or by being touched. The eye alone does not perceive a body as different from the things surrounding it. Contact with an object is a reminder of the exteriority of things and others, of the continually shifting boundary that provides individuals with the sense of their own existence, of a difference that both



confronts them with the world and immerses them within it. "Reality is primarily evidenced in resistance which is an ingredient in touch-experience. For physical contact [...] involves impact [...] thus touch is the sense in which the original encounter with reality as reality takes place [...] touch is the true test of reality" (Jonas 2001: 147). Touch marks the ultimate limit between the self and the world. Contact with an object provides a sense of self and of what is outside, a distinction between interior and exterior. "Alone," writes Virginia Woolf, "I often fall down into nothingness. I must push my foot stealthily lest I should fall off the edge of the world into nothingness. I have to bang my hand against some hard door to call myself back to the body" (2000: 23).

When we have difficulty situating ourselves in the world, when we feel disoriented, we seek out the closest sensory limits through our body-to-body relation with the world. Physical limits restore the limits of meaning and provide a hold on a world that seems to be slipping away. What we fail to achieve in our lives, we seek to accomplish through our bodies. The reminder of the skin's boundaries has a calming effect and restores order to inner chaos. It reconstitutes the individual with a sense of unity. The skin that once enclosed the social world within relatively precise and coherent boundaries, providing the social bond with a foundation and predictable reference points, is today punctured through on all sides. As the world's skin deteriorates, individuals, by contrast, are withdrawing into their skin, trying to make a refuge of it, a place they can control for lack of any control over their surroundings.

Today, many people seek tangible limits in physical activities or extreme sports whose endlessly repeated slogans encourage them to "discover" or "push" their limits. This passionate quest for limits translates into a physical confrontation with the world driven by a desire to touch and experience it with their entire bodies. Physical contact and performance become identity frontiers.<sup>1</sup> A temporary feeling of wholeness is attained.

While physical activities or sports offer a playful form of contact with the world, individuals who engage in risk-taking and self-harm are seeking a container, a screen to filter out suffering. This recourse to the body is based on an anthropo-logic. It serves to remind individuals overwhelmed by suffering that they exist. "It's good that it hurts, because it proves you're real, you're alive," is often the sentiment expressed by those who cut themselves. Simply living is insufficient. As subjects, they have not invested enough in their bodies, their anchor in the world. They have to experience sensations that can provide them with a feeling of inner rootedness. I exist when I'm cutting myself because I am immersed in a very powerful emotional and sensory experience. The pain, the wound, and the blood force me to feel my existence. When the ego lacks support and the body struggles to establish an acceptable image or universe for itself, recourse to strong sensations provides these individuals with a sense of self. Existing no longer suffices. They have to feel they exist. The excess of sensation allows them to overcome an eroded sense of self and inconsistent body image (see Le Breton 2003b).

Cutting becomes a way to feel the limits of the self, to experience, ever so briefly, this union of ego and body image. When all that remains is the body to experience existence and be acknowledged by others, breaking the skin becomes a means of affirming personal identity. Their lack of control of their surroundings, the feeling of personal insignificance, leaves them no other choice. I exist because I feel myself and the pain is proof of this, whether from the cutting itself or the scar left behind. The flow of blood is an attestation of existence, evidence of being alive. “I go through periods of feeling empty, I have the impression I don’t exist.” When Stéphanie, eighteen, cuts herself, she feels “profoundly alive.” Deliberate self-injury is a kind of tentative quest for the exact degree of pain and cutting that will make them feel alive. Once this is achieved, the psychological pressure is lessened. The body of the suffering subject is continually leaking out unless boundaries are restored and limits are established to contain it (Le Breton 2003b).

## The Hand

Though touch extends over the entire surface of the body, the skin is most often passive, more touched than touching, unlike the hand whose vocation, other than holding, is precisely to reach out to bodies or things, fill in the gap and perform a manual evaluation. Aristotle saw the hand as a tool rooted in human flesh and susceptible to making the world more hospitable: “For the most intelligent animal would use the greatest number of instruments well, and the hand would seem to be not one instrument but many [...] Accordingly, to the one able to acquire the most arts, nature has provided the most useful of instruments, the hand” (2001: 687). While animals have only a single means of defense, Aristotle continues, humans, on the contrary, possess several, and it is always possible to “exchange them, and furthermore, he may choose what sort of weapon to have, and where. For the hand becomes a talon, claw, horn, spear, sword, and any other weapon or instrument—it will be all these thanks to its ability to grasp and hold them all” (2001). The hand feels not only the imprint of the object but also its warmth, volume, and weight and experiences in this contact either pleasure or pain.

Reaching out to the object, the hand liberates touch from the rest of the skin. Organ *par excellence* of grasping and touching, it explores, probes, caresses. The mobility of the arm, forearm, wrist, and fingers endow the hand with an exceptional motor and tactile range. The fingers’ many joints and the thumb’s contact with the other digits on the same hand make multiple gestures possible, some requiring strength, enclosing an object like a clamp, others demanding precision and finesse. The hand’s musculoskeletal structure allows for the movement, mobility, flexibility, power, and dexterity needed to undertake countless tasks requiring precision or strength. Among the body’s techniques, the hand, aided by refinements of the eye and

practical knowledge, plays a central role in the possibilities of learning, metamorphosis, and adaptation it affords.

There is a passive touch that is continually solicited by the fact of feeling the pressure of things at different points on the body. But touch is an active sense when the hand acts in a deliberate and exploratory manner, molding to a form, enclosing a volume, evaluating the consistency, texture, temperature, or solidity of an object. This activity removes passivity from touch. It is the deliberate undertaking of the hand that probes, evaluates, weighs, shakes, scrapes, rubs, moves, presses, and so on. Of course, we also touch with our feet, lips, and tongue, but with a lesser degree of appreciation. Unless a disability deprives us of the full use of our hands, touching implies putting the palm of the hand and all the fingers to work.<sup>2</sup> “The hollow of the hand is a mighty thicket of muscle. The least premonition of activity causes it to quiver” (Bachelard 2002: 63).

The infinite plasticity of the hand has made it possible for human beings to develop a multitude of arts and industries that are fundamentally manual. For the sailor, fisherman, potter, blacksmith, scribe, musician, writer, and so on, manual techniques have always been necessary as they still are today, whether we are operating computers or driving a car or a bicycle. Drawing on the uniquely human ability to create meaning and value, the hand has extended our sovereignty over nature by making us tireless toolmakers, *Homo faber*. Our linguistic unconscious recalls in its way that intelligence and the hand are interrelated by attributing what is undoubtedly the same Indo-European root to them: “*m.n.*” (*mens*: intelligence and “man” in Nordic languages). Many philologists agree that *manus* (Latin for hand) can also be traced to the same root.

Humanity was born of the hand and its countless uses. “Instrument of instruments” (Aristotle), “organ of the possible” (Valery), it has shaped our tools and our increasingly complex machines. It is the origin of all techniques.

## The Feel of Things

Feeling is to touching as listening is to hearing. Feeling is active and exploratory. It takes things in hand, turning them over in all directions in search of information. Such is the tactility of the blind, who seek to identify the objects in their paths or throughout the day with a precise probing of their surroundings, most often through simple contact with things already known. Feeling is a kind of tactile penetration that goes deeper to discover what surface information alone cannot provide. “As a matter of fact,” writes Villey,

no blind man would be satisfied with merely coming into contact with one spot of the proposed object. The pulp of the finger spreads out; it corresponds to several points of contact, to the six dots of the Braille

letter, for instance, which it perceives simultaneously. The movement made then, for the purpose of feeling, is always accompanied by a more or less extensive contact. Then, too, inversely, the blind man is never satisfied with an extensive contact: he always feels the need of having a more exact notion, by means of more or less numerous movements. (1930: 233, 234)

The sighted rarely make use of this refined form of tactile perception because the eyes can immediately assemble all the information needed, or so it is supposed. Certain trades, however, call for maintaining a high level of tactile competence at all times.

## Childhood Touch

The skin is from the outset, and over the course of our entire lives, our primary organ of communication. In our individual history, touch is the oldest sense, the most anchored. It is already present in utero after the second month of gestation and, thereafter, privileged in the first years of life. “[B]efore appearing in the daylight,” writes Serres, “we spent time in a women’s [*sic*] womb intertwining our tissues over one another in the dark: the development of the embryo, as it is said by antiphrasis, ought to be called envelopment [...] The baker models the bread dough with her hands the way the gravid woman unintentionally kneads the prenatal living mass” (2015: 190). Well before the fetus possesses vision, hearing, or smell, the skin already feels the vibrations of the world even if it different from the one that will be discovered later. In utero, the skin registers a multitude of messages organized around the mother’s rhythm of life, leisure and other activities, travels, meals, and so on.

Little by little, the uterine walls tighten around the fetus. Their contractions during childbirth constitute an essential step in the newborn’s entry into the world, activating the respiratory, circulatory, digestive, eliminatory, endocrine, and nervous systems. “The mother, feeling this massaging and expelling, and the infant, feeling massaged and expelled, share a common and complementary experience in this close bodily communication that prepares them both for a new reality” (Bouchard-Godard 1981: 265). Children born premature or by cesarean section present significantly higher rates of nasal, respiratory, gastrointestinal and genitourinary illnesses in their first year of life. The mortality rate of children born by cesarean is higher than that of other children (Montagu 1986: 56–59)

Premature babies are less alert, weaker, more fragile, and cry more often than other infants. These problems, according to Ashley Montagu, arise from a lack of tactile stimulation but also from the absence of the uterine contractions’ massaging effect during childbirth. The fact that premature babies are separated from their mothers in incubators simultaneously

introduces a sterility into physical relations. Newborns who benefit from the exchange of sensations with their mothers or caregivers develop better than those who remain isolated in the incubator, where the level of contact does not meet their caregiving needs. The former's immune defenses are stronger; they are more calm and relaxed, and they gain weight more quickly. Strong emotional contact partially counteracts the effects of absence arising from the harsh and aseptitized environment imposed by the healthcare setting. Of course, mothering can help reverse these effects later and bring about a harmonious development.<sup>3</sup>

Newborns' incomplete physiological and mental development, their inability to assure their internal homeostasis and entry into life, makes them dependent on their social environment, essentially that of the mother or other caregivers. Newborns, not being able to feed or protect themselves, will die if left unattended without care and affection. Tactile stimulation is essential to a child's development and sense of openness to the world, according to Montagu. During the first months of life in the presence of a loving and attentive mother, infants are in a body-to-body relation that envelops their entire skin. The sensations the child experiences in contact with the breast or the bottle, accompanied by the pleasure and satisfaction of fulfilling biological needs, mingle with other audible, tactile, olfactory, and gustatory sensations. The lips, mouth, tongue, and skin are abuzz with sensations that already contribute to the construction of the self. Any stimulation of the newborn's lips prompts a turning of the head and a jolt of attention. Among breastfed children, this response is their seeking out the nipple.

The world of the newborn is first manifested through the mouth, mobilizing tactility, taste, smell, and temperature. "To the neonate, the simultaneous sensations in the four sensory organs (oral cavity, hand, labyrinth, stomach) are a proprioceptive total experience. To him all four are mediated through contact perception" (Spitz 1965: 74). During breastfeeding or other maternal attentions, the child's hand is extremely active, pressing against the breast, gripping, caressing, and patting it. Newborns smell the mother's odor, hear the words or songs addressed to them, cradling them, in an intense skin-to-skin relation with the mother. While breastfeeding, newborns look not at the mother's breast but at her face. Even when they lose the nipple and are searching for it, they never stray from the mother's eyes. While touch is the center of their universe, the mother is already projecting them beyond themselves to meet the outside world.

The breast is simultaneously nourishing, warm and soft, a purveyor of affection, an object to play with, caress and pinch. Digestive disorders among infants who are breastfed are rare compared to the higher rate of disorders among those that are bottle-fed. The first seeds of language are planted in these initial experiences of bodily contact, which are extremely significant for either the affection and approval or rupture and reproach they entrain. At the same time, children's early tactile explorations are

decisive for their orientation in the world. They play with the mother's body, take hold of objects and put them in their mouths, to their lips, shake them in front of their eyes. Gradually they begin to coordinate their gestures, subordinating vision to movement before it in turn takes over.

While children touch the objects and people that surround them, they also soon assimilate the restrictions and rituals of contact specific to their society. Moreover, they begin to identify the basic meaning of an object by seeing it and not anymore just by touching it. Contact then becomes a source of complementary information but is no longer necessary in the first instance. It is in touching the world that children learn to distinguish themselves from it and establish themselves as subjects. They first discover the abundant sensoriality of their surroundings through the path opened up to them by the mother. She is for better (or, at times, for worse if she neglects this intermediary role) the child's sensual and sensory access to the world.

The mother is a matrix of both meanings and sensations. She attends, over time, to the child's social and individual birth, setting the tone of his or her relation to the world. Through skin-to-skin contact with the mother within a reassuring relationship of attachment, the child constructs a sense of limits and assimilates the confidence needed to experience a happy and fulfilling existence. He or she sees the surrounding environment as invested with meaning and value, neither invasive, nor empty, but worthy of interest. Parents raise children not only by feeding them and attending to their hygiene, but also by providing affection, carrying them, instilling in them a basic confidence that begins in the mother's arms. The mother's skin envelops the child psychologically. She imprints her significations, her closure and opening to desire, based on the quality of her own and the father's presence.

According to Didier Anzieu, children need to experience an envelope-container, that is to say, a loving "mothering" that gives them the sense of their personal limits and immerses them, through speech and contact, in a reassuring world based on exchange. Children deprived of affection are continually seeking the limits and confidence that they lack. Not having been held in loving arms leads them to feel empty and insecure in a world where they don't know what to expect or what is expected of them. If sensory stimuli are lacking, particularly "holding" (being both physically and morally supported) and "handling" (being physically and morally carried), "[the infant's body] must find a way of experiencing [the world] with whatever else is at its disposal—this explains the pathological substitute wrappings made of incoherent noises or motor agitation, which are meant not to bring about a controlled discharge of instinctual energy but to ensure the adaptive survival of the organism" (Anzieu 2016: 122).

Rupture with the fusion of bodies that precedes birth, the stripping away of the uterine envelope, makes the child an entirely separate subject, left on his or her own. In the body-to-body mother-child relationship, with its reciprocity, society and culture are defined, that is to say, a woman raises her

child in a particular way. When a mother responds to her child's movements, talks to and caresses the child, shows her affection, and transmits her warmth, the child acquires a positive tactile sense, according to Anzieu. She awakens the child's sensuality. This prepares the child for an eroticization of the skin and, later, a receptivity to the other. Ideally this exchange of touch between mother and child is unimposing, leaving the child to find his or her own way, guided by affection and not control.

If the mother is rigid and contradictory, according to Anzieu, she imprints a sensibility on the child that will later resurface in his or her relationships with others. An adult's affection toward others is a product of education, not of good or bad intentions. The quality of contact is rooted in the first years of life, in the manner in which the child was touched, carried, caressed, loved, and stimulated, or not. Children's sensibilities are formed in their relationships with their mothers and others in their entourage. By being caressed, cuddled, and loved, they learn to caress, cuddle and love, in turn. When affection and contact have been lacking, children often become insatiable in their adult lives or they become themselves distant or aggressive in their relationships with others, even those closest to them.

A minority of children do not seek bodily contact with their mother, even when encountering difficulties; rather, her presence by their side suffices. The attachment is not questioned. There is no sense whatsoever of rejection or indifference to their needs. Avoidance of contact also occurs with the father, though not always. Children simply adapt to the usual ways that their parents manifest their love through touching or neglecting bodily contact. These children are close to their mother when she is available to them. Depending on whether the father encourages contact or not, children will either seek contact or maintain a certain distance (Main 1990: 467). The forms of tactile education the child receives are of course also related to the social and cultural community, with its particular proxemic relations.

Winnicott's work has shed light on the transitional phenomena that help children deal with anxiety when left alone. At the moment of separation, they seek an emotionally invested object, re-creating an imaginary contact with the temporarily absent mother or, if she is at their bedside, strengthening the connection. A teddy bear, a piece of cloth, or a doll that they suck on or play with, throwing it down and picking it up again, helps mitigate the absence. The blanket or toy is a substitute for the maternal presence. As a "transitional object," a portable and prosthetic mother, it accompanies them as they fall sleep and consoles them when they are injured, sick, or temporarily separated from their mother. Children project themselves onto the object, making it a confidante of their disappointments and desires. The toy fosters an eroticization of the mouth while providing the ontological reassurance children need. They also suck their thumbs, rock back and forth, emit long lallations. Through an intense interplay of kinesthetic, visual, tactile, and auditory sensations, they dissipate their anxiety by constructing a world for themselves that is temporarily confined to the self. Later, access to language and the ability to

conceptualize absence reduces the need for this conciliatory recourse to the body.

In a number of societies, children are continually engaged in a body-to-body relation with the mother, in her arms, or wrapped in a cloth on her back or on her hip. They accompany her movements, share her activities and are in harmony with her rhythms. In many ways, they are like an extension of her body, even when she is working. They sleep while she grinds the millet or rice and lay by her side when she takes a rest. The mother is never hampered by their presence. She develops a body technique that in no way diminishes her ordinary activities or obliges her to leave the child alone. When she is temporarily absent, the child is taken care of in the same way by young girls in the family or village. The mother's skin is the semantic and sensory filter of the child's relation to the world.

The Netsilik in the Canadian Arctic, for example, closely associate the infant with the mother's body. Calm and serene, Netsilik mothers never chide their infants or interfere with their movements. Attached by a sling on her back, the infants have skin contact on their bellies while also being protected from the intense cold by the mother's fur coat. When they are hungry, they scratch the mother's skin and she immediately offers them her breast. They accompany her throughout her daily activities, always intimately connected to her. They eliminate their bowels in diapers made of caribou skins while on the mother's back. She then takes the child in her hands and changes them. This skin-to-skin contact takes place in a continual state of gentleness and tranquility, against a familial backdrop that is itself soothing. This type of environment develops children's confidence in the world and in their own resources. It infuses them with a sense of serenity, even in moments of adversity (Montagu 1986: 297). Mead has described how in Bali children grow up in an ongoing body-to-body relation with their mothers or entourage, not only with the family but with all of the women, men, and children in the neighborhood. They are continually immersed in a flow of tactile stimulation (Bateson and Mead 1942).

In many African societies, children are also very physically close to their mothers (Rabain 1979). René Devisch, evoking the Yaka of Zaire, captures this tactile sense of community among African families: "In a practically uninterrupted way, children maintain skin contact with their mother, father, brothers and sisters, or with their father's parents or other wives. Children rarely experience a lack of contact that they have to learn to fill by using a personal transitional object" (Devisch 1990: 56; 1993). Other societies, on the contrary, discourage children from clinging to the mother's body. In European societies, traditional swaddling long inhibited babies' movements. Deprived of freedom of movement, babies were left in their cribs or near the fields where adults could keep an eye on them while working. In contemporary Western societies, infants are touched, but clearly much less so than in most traditional societies. They experience most contact with others when learning to walk—they are touched and cuddled more at this time than in their early infancy, when they are often left in the crib and only taken in the mother's arms for feeding or care.



Western mothers are typically not as available to their infants as their African or Asian counterparts. And what little contact there is decreases further with age, often becoming rare at the onset of puberty only to disappear altogether in adolescence. Young children are continually touching each other in playgrounds and schoolyards, holding hands, caressing each other, jostling and playfully exploring their bodies. But this mutual contact diminishes in elementary school and is later abandoned. Every social group develops a specific way of educating and sensitizing its members to different forms of contact and tactile stimulation that correspond to the social skills they are expected to acquire and the environment in which they are immersed, though particular tasks or competencies also sometimes require an education based on a more refined sense of touch and tactile sensibility.

## Deprivation of Touch

A shared skin connects children to their mothers, and beyond that, assures their integration in the world, if the envelope is not punctured, fragmented, or withdrawn. Even if their other physiological needs are met, children deprived of sensory stimulation and affection do not have the same advantages in life as the child who is loved and fulfilled. A study by Spitz (1968) sheds a stark light on the consequences of the absence of body-to-body relations between the child and the mother (or caregiver). The study describes the symptoms of “hospitalism” in an institution for abandoned children. The children there were properly fed and taken in charge. The hygiene was also flawless, but the shortage of staff resulted in fragmented and mechanical care, lacking affection and leaving the infant no chance to become attached to a particular caregiver. One nurse was responsible for a dozen children. Her tasks did not allow time to play with them; sing them lullabies; caress them; hold them; or introduce auditory, tactile, or olfactory communication. The children were almost completely deprived of affection and skin contact. Their mothers came to feed them during the first weeks of separation but they were subsequently completely turned over to the institution’s personnel. Physical and psychological deterioration became evident within a few months: stagnation, passivity, inability to play, turn on their stomach or sit up, a lifeless facial expression, deficient ocular coordination, a blank stare, developmental delay, the appearance of tics, compulsive movements, self-mutilation and so on. The death rate was alarmingly high. Four years later, those who were still living still had trouble sitting, standing, walking, and talking. Emotional deprivation, the absence of stimulation, destroyed their ability to develop symbolically and physically. Denied a loving relationship, they withdrew into themselves and became vulnerable to illness and developmental problems. In 1938, Joseph Brenneman, the director of pediatric services at the Children’s Memorial Hospital of Chicago, decided that every hospitalized child was to be held, mothered, and cuddled several times a

day. This new regime reduced the mortality rate of children under his care from 10–30 percent.

Failing to develop an ontological security that fosters an active confidence in their environment, children lash out with cries, screams, and agitation. They are “insufferable,” never happy, have no limits in their relations with others. Feeling “not contained,” they become invasive. They lack confidence, and, when suddenly deprived of their few reference points or habitual ways, they become needy and are forever seeking to latch onto those around them. Their lack of early skin-to-skin exchange in a climate of confidence and affection creates for the adult later in life a pathological sense of limits. The lack of sensory limits gives rise to a quest for boundaries with the world. These men and women live in a state of chaos. They feel empty and insignificant, not really experiencing their own existence. They are lacking the necessary social and psychological limits between themselves and the world. In such circumstances, the skin-ego is perforated on all sides because it was not supported by a happy and consistent emotional bond in early childhood, according to Anzieu (2016).

The deprivation of love, the absence of skin stimulation in childhood, leads individuals to develop skin irritations that are relieved with scratching. Many psychosomatic skin conditions arise from disorders related to lack of contact and are the expression of the deprivation of tactile stimulation. These disorders are also difficult to live with, debilitating even, because of the embarrassment they cause or the judgment or disgust they provoke in others (Consoli 2003: 68 sq.). They prevent people from pursuing romantic relationships for fear of the other’s withdrawal or rejection. The skin disorder becomes a substitute for the lack of skin-to-skin contact. Children thus assume a skin envelope for themselves but in an ambiguous way, translating their absence of being while also satisfying the stimulation that they lack. Immersed in ambivalence, they are expressing their desire to change their skin. Their symptoms are a symbolic appeal to the mother to attract her attention and affection and simultaneously a reproach for her neglect by making themselves “repulsive.”

It seems that mothers of children with eczema do not abstain from bodily contact with the child; but the contact offered, whether initiated by them or in responding to the child’s incitement, never manages to be calming and confident. Because of the anxiety they provoke in the mother, for various reasons, this bodily contact seems destined to an excessive stimulation, whether stemming from loving or aggressive origins. (Bouchart-Godard 1981: 269)<sup>4</sup>

Thus, the quality of contact with the mother and other family members in childhood conditions the quality of eroticization of the skin that affects men and women later on.

The skin is a living memory of childhood deprivations. These continue to resonate long afterward, even if their effects are sometimes attenuated

by different remedies or relationships with others that reopen or help heal the wounds. Chronic or circumstantial anxieties can cause skin reactions: blemishes, in both the real and figurative senses, an outbreak of eczema, psoriasis, hives, or rashes. Allergies are not limited to plants or animals. They also affect people experiencing emotional stress. The internal irritation resonates on the cutaneous screen. The body semanticizes the lack of contact. The skin's delicate outer layer provides a personal seismograph that is very sensitive to an individual's mental and emotional state. While the skin is only a surface, it has the figurative depth of the self and embodies a person's interiority. In touching the skin, we touch the subject, both literally and figuratively. The skin has a double role as an organ of contact—it conditions the tactile experience but is also a gauge of the quality of our relations with others. In French, people often refer to *bons* or *mauvais contacts* (good or bad relations), or to being *bien* or *mal dans sa peau* (literally, feeling “good or bad in one's skin”). Every individual's relation to the world begins and ends in the skin ( Le Breton 2003b; Anzieu 2016).

At the turn of the twentieth century, the psychiatrist Gatian de Clérambault interviewed a series of women who had made silk the unique object of their sensuality and desire. Disappointed in their sexual contact with men, these women found that touching fabrics provided the erotic pleasure they were missing. The fabric

did not stand in for a potential desirable partner, it replaced him. And this relationship took the form of a passion and an orgasm, that is to say, a complete amorous relation [...] The fabric was not only a passive partner for them. It offered a reciprocity they said they had longed for and failed to obtain from their love lives—it responded to their caresses, opposed its silkiness or stiffness to their manipulations, “rustled” and even “cried out.” And they claimed, in the end, to have been “taken by the fabric,” though it was they who had defiled it. (Tisseron and Tisseron 1987: 13)

According to Clérambault, this attraction was sparked in their first years of life, in response to an absent or physically distant mother. The chance discovery one day touching a piece of fabric in their cribs, or in playing with clothing or a doll crystallized a pleasure that could later be rekindled anytime without relying on others. In the absence of love, these women symbolically appropriated the object, taking possession of the silk, and, in fondling it, took as much pleasure in rustling of the material as in its contact against their skin: “It excites you,” one said. “You become wet; there is no sexual pleasure that can match this for me” (Clérambault 1908: n.p.).

Sex sometimes becomes a pretext for being touched, rather than the other way round. An American study of thirty-nine women, ages eighteen to twenty-five, who had been admitted to a psychiatric hospital in Pennsylvania for depression revealed that over half of them used sex less for pleasure (which was usually lacking) than for the opportunity to be embraced and held. Many of them felt that sexual relations, even in this state of emotional

poverty, were the price they had to pay for their unsatisfied hunger for physical contact. As one young woman said, “I want someone just to hold me ... And it just seems to me ... one thing goes with another—If I do go to bed with someone ... they would hold me for a little while anyhow” (McAnarney 1990: 509). Sometimes women are frigid and feel only disgust with their own sexuality, but they long to be in someone’s arms, if only for a brief moment (Thayer 1982: 291). Starved for an affection they never received, either in their childhood or later in life, they fend off loneliness through bodily contact. This gives them the feeling of being loved, protected, comforted and, especially, contained within symbolic limits whose absence otherwise plagues their existence. Their status as women and their thirst for contact makes it difficult for them to separate sexual and physical intimacy because, for the men they desire, sex is all that matters.

## The Touch of the Blind

Touch has the potential to be a very keen sense even though it is often relegated to a secondary status by philosophers. But it takes on a new status when it becomes an essential modality of our relation to the world, as it is for the blind. Lacking sight, the blind orient themselves by hearing and especially by physical contact with things. Their entire bodies engage in touch, not only their fingers. When Diderot asks the blind man of Puiseaux his definition of an eye, he is impressed by the man’s response: “‘An organ,’ replied the blind man, ‘on which the air has the effect this stick has on my hand’” (Diderot 1916: 73). The man’s definition of a mirror is entirely subordinated to touch. It is “an instrument [...] which sets things in relief at a distance from themselves, when properly placed with regard to it. It is like my hand, which, to feel an object, I must not put on one side of it” (Diderot 1916: 71). Would he like to have eyes that see? The man responds that he

would just as soon have long arms: it seems to me my hands would tell me more of what goes on in the moon than your eyes or your telescopes; and besides, eyes cease to see sooner than hands to touch. I would be as well off if I perfected the organ I possess, as if I obtained the organ which I am deprived of. (Diderot 1916: 77)

In the *Additions*, Diderot recounts the case of a blacksmith whose vision was successfully restored by Daviel’s operation but who continued, nonetheless, to use his hands. Of the blind English mathematician Nicholas Saunderson, Diderot writes that he “saw by means of his skin” (Diderot 1916: 176). Diderot concludes that “If ever a philosopher, blind and deaf from his birth, were to construct a man after the fashion of Descartes, I can assure you ... that he would put the seat of the soul at the fingers” (Diderot 1916: 87). Many years later, Helen Keller would write in turn: “If I had made a man, I should certainly have put the brain and soul in his finger-tips” (1910: 116).<sup>5</sup>

Helen Keller's story is emblematic. Born in 1880 in Alabama, she was developing normally when, at eighteen months, an illness deprived her of sight and hearing. She withdrew into herself and became a difficult child. The patience and ingenuity of an exceptional teacher, Ann Sullivan, helped her reconnect with the world. For Helen Keller the world was revealed through touch (and smell), and it was through her hands that she was able to maintain contact with her loved ones and her surroundings. Before the intellectual regression brought on by her illness, she was on the cusp of language, pronouncing her first words. Later, running her fingers over her mother's face, she felt the movements of her features, her lips, and the vibrations of her vocal chords, and she tried in vain, by imitation, to produce sounds so she could participate in the exchanges from which she was excluded.

Ann Sullivan taught her the manual alphabet by tracing letters with her own fingers on the young girl's hand. But Helen did not immediately make the link with language. Of her first words, she often remembers "water," a word that she rediscovered later in an epiphany of sorts, and that became the basis for her reentry into communication and the world. One day, she was holding her hand under a fountain:

As the cool stream gushed over one hand [Miss Sullivan] spelled into the other the word *water*, first slowly, then rapidly. I stood still, my whole attention fixed upon the motions of her fingers. Suddenly I felt a misty consciousness as of something forgotten—a thrill of returning thought; and somehow the mystery of language was revealed to me. I knew then that w-a-t-e-r meant the wonderful cool something that was flowing over my hand. (Keller 1996: 12)

At ten years of age when she met one of the teachers of Laura Bridgman, another young woman who was deaf blind but had acquired speech, Keller began learning to speak as well. Her teacher, she says,

passed my hand lightly over her face, and let me feel the position of her tongue and lips when she made a sound. I was eager to imitate every motion [...] In reading my teacher's lips I was wholly dependent on my fingers: I had to use the sense of touch in catching the vibrations of the throat, the movements of the mouth and the expression of the face. (Keller 1996: 31, 32)

In the book that she wrote at twenty years of age, Helen Keller describes the two modes of communication that linked her to others and the world. Using the manual alphabet, her interlocutors, who she could neither see nor hear, would rapidly trace the letters of the alphabet, spelling out the words they wished to transmit onto the palm of her hand. Helen came to perceive the movement in a continuous way as though reading. The speed of communication depended on her partner's familiarity with this form of

contact. This rapid spelling of each letter allowed for ordinary conversation. She could even, with this method, follow a conference presentation, if the speaker's delivery was not too fast. Another way of communicating that demanded a familiarity with her interlocutors consisted in her placing her hand on their vocal chords. She would place her thumb on the larynx and index finger on the lips and carry on a conversation this way with a friend or relative. "In this way she is able to get the meaning of those half sentences which we complete unconsciously from the tone of the voice or the twinkle of the eye" (Keller 1905: 286).

Helen Keller's keen sense of touch was present at all times. Though she did not develop the subtlety of a Laura Bridgman (who was able to discern minute differences in the thickness of a strand of thread), she was able to identify her friends' character traits. Of Mark Twain she said, "I feel the twinkle of his eye in his handshake" (Keller 1905: 75).<sup>6</sup> Whereas others remember the faces of people they meet, she retained in her memory the pressure of clasping hands and all the other muscular contractions distinguishing one individual from another. She felt the vibrations of big cities' streets on the surface of her skin, and she preferred walking in the country because "the rumble and roar of the city smite the nerves of my face, and I feel the ceaseless tramp of an unseen multitude, and the dissonant tumult frets my spirit. The grinding of heavy wagons on hard pavements and the monotonous clangor of machinery are all the more torturing" (Keller 1905: 66). She says she "remembered in her fingers" many conversations with Ann Sullivan or other friends.

"When a passage of her books interests her," we are told, "or when she specially wishes to remember it, she repeats it quickly on the fingers of her right hand. Sometimes even, this play of the fingers is unconscious with her. She is simply talking to herself by means of the manual alphabet. Frequently, when she is walking about in the hall or the verandah, one sees her hands given up to a startling pantomime, and the rapid movement of her fingers is like a fluttering of birds' wings." (Villey 1930: 97)

With respect to this particular touch that guides the blind in their daily activities, Revesz (1950) suggests using the term haptic to designate modes of contact that go beyond touch and kinesthetics all the while being subtly linked to them. The blind use their cutaneous sensitivities to identify qualities of space. Once they know a chair, they can immediately identify it without having to reconstruct it:

There is no procession, even rapid, of representations, in which the various parts come and join themselves to each other, in the same order as for my first sensation, but with a speed a hundred or a thousand times greater. The chair suddenly appears to the consciousness, entire in all its parts. Its various elements co-exist in it, with perfect clearness. The chair appears there with a very real complexity. I could not tell in what order

the various parts were first perceived by me, and it is just as easy now to give details about them in a different order. (Villey 1930: 185)

If memory is essentially visual for the sighted, it is olfactory and tactile for the blind. A single contact with a known object quickly restores its structure. In a familiar environment, blind people are aware of the objects, furniture, and atmosphere that surround them. They can identify the ambiance of the different rooms of their dwelling or other places through a tactile recognition that is difficult to define. Without suggesting that this tactility is infallible, because it is also uncertain, the blind are often able to sense obstacles in their path from a distance.

They generally localise these sensations on their forehead, or on their temples, and only those objects which are as high as the face are, as a rule, perceived by them in this way. A blind person endowed with this faculty, when meeting with a tree on his path, instead of flinging himself on it, will stop short two or three yards from it, sometimes even further, walk around it and continue his way calmly. (Villey 1930: 101)

These diffuse impressions are associated in a very subtle way to tactility, temperature, and hearing. The sense of obstacles for the sighted is transmitted through visual information, but they sometimes rediscover this tactility when walking at night or feeling their way about in darkness.

However, in general, the system of knowledge produced through touch is different from that of vision. For the blind, touch yields the elements to be known in a successive manner, whereas vision offers them up all at once. Touching is a discontinuous experience, a tentative groping that provides knowledge to be elaborated on. It is much more efficient when the elements being touched are already partially known. But while the eye is generous in the information it provides, the hand always proceeds with a scarcity of information. It discovers things little by little according to how they are disposed along the route. Air currents, objects radiating warmth or cold add to the auditory and tactile information and provide precious indications along the way, whether in a room or in the streets. "As long as the sun shines," writes Rousseau, "we have the advantage over them. In the dark they are in their turn our guides. We are blind half our lives, with the difference that the truly blind always know how to conduct themselves, while we dare not take a step in the heart of the night" (1979: 133).

The keen sense of touch developed by many blind people contradicts the status of the body in everyday rituals of social interaction. The prohibition against touching is strong in Western societies and adds to blind people's difficulties getting around. Though they can touch objects to situate themselves in an environment, not without causing some discomfort for the sighted, they cannot touch their interlocutors. And their occasional blunders in a crowd, if they bump into someone, are not always easy to live with.

The blind, more than others, are always touching in their everyday lives, and they touch one another without question (Le Breton 2004).

This quality of touch or hearing among the blind is purely accidental, born of necessity. The sighted can acquire these skills through learning or if they become blind themselves. Among the sighted, the eye continually replaces touch. The blind have no choice. However, this learning process among children blind from birth must be stimulated from their first years of life. Skillful touching is learned as a technique of the body that is refined over time.

Accentuated by sound, people's ordinary dealings are a visual affair. Inversely, the blind, made to live in a world of the sighted, seek out tactile and muscular points of reference: inclines in the path, sensations of surface properties underfoot (sand, pavement, stones, mud, etc.); the texture of the road or sidewalk, manholes, curbs; the consistency of trees, walls, or other urban furnishings; obstacles intuited in advance; sensations of warmth, cold, and humidity; the vibrations of doors opening and closing, passersby, cars; and so on. Hearing does not "compensate" for seeing, even if it multiplies the warnings. Touch, for its part, depends on the immediacy of contact. But the ease with which the eye roams over the space is not shared by the arm, and the blind only receive the tactile information in the instant that contact is established.

Hearing provides another guide through the intensity and directionality of sounds: the noise of cars and traffic, the sounds of particular places such as cafés, stores, construction sites, streams, rivers, springs, and so on. But the blind are less able to situate themselves if a profusion of sounds floods over them all at once and the sounds are obscured due to rain or the proximity of a busy street, or an environment that is suddenly silent or emits muffled sounds, when it snows, for example. "A strong wind, for them, produces the same effect as fog does for others. They become disoriented and lost. The violent sounds, gusting in unison, come at them from all sides; they no longer know where they are" (Canetti 1978: 138). A multitude of silent details intervene between the blind and the world, but offering them no point of reference. Many olfactory markers also accompany their daily excursions, even if their origins are less precise. Sometimes these are ever-present: a bakery, fish market, florist, or grocer, or they may be linked to seasons or flowering periods.

The blind's trajectories contrast with the hypertrophied eye of most passersby, also recalling how, when not useful, many sensory indications become routine and are no longer perceived. The blind's enjoyment of the world is rooted in a different dimension of reality than the sighted's. While the notion of a "nice day" is visual for some, it possesses another sensory tone for the blind, one that is olfactory or tactile, for example. John Hull writes:

For me, the wind has taken the place of the sun, and a nice day is a day when there is a mild breeze. This brings into life all the sounds of my



environment. The leaves are rustling, bits of paper are blowing along the pavement, the walls and corners of the large buildings stand out under the impact of the wind, which I feel in my hair and on my face, in my clothes. A day in which it is merely warm would, I suppose, be quite a nice day but thunder makes it more exciting, because it suddenly gives a sense of space and distance. (1991: 32)

Borges once said that in the past he never liked traveling: “Now that I’m blind, I can’t get enough of it [...] I can’t see the places, but I perceive them, through what signs, I don’t really know” (cited in Chao 2001: 24).

## The Temperature of Events

Among the Jarai of Vietnam, should a person get lost in the tropical forest after the sun has gone down, they feel the bark of the trees to find the warmest side, the side that has been warmed longest by the sun, and from this they deduce the route to take (Koechlin 1991: 171). Ecological necessities give rise to cultural imperatives, forms of social bricolage that are surprising to Western societies where these refinements of touch would be of little use. The thermal sense is a “form of touch that is exterior, affective and temporal,” (Lavelle 1921: 213) but less material, more subject to fluctuations, and interconnected with personal emotional variations and ambient conditions. Its object is atmospheric, as Tellenbach would say, and it implicates a diffuse combination of internal and external stimuli that people cannot control and that they protect themselves from by removing or adding cloths or using an appropriate heating system. Touch is never independent of the thermal sense. Thermal receptors protect the self from potential damage caused by the cold or the heat. They signal danger before pain sets in and give us time to protect ourselves.

Whether we are passive or active, we continuously experience the temperature of the objects and bodies that we are in contact with. Conditions of heat or cold in the surrounding environment rebound off the skin. Our ability to regulate temperature, depending on our personal disposition, determines our thermal sensitivity. Air envelops the skin like an invisible piece of clothing, which may be warm or cold depending on the circumstances. Medium temperatures are not felt, slipping past the skin without notice. The thermal sense is only activated in response to excessive temperatures outside or internal changes within the body. The variations we experience reflect the changing modalities of our immersion in the fabric of events. The temperature felt outside is determined by the body’s degree of warmth, which is in itself significantly linked to emotions. With a fever, we sometimes get the shivers and cannot get warm in spite of extra clothing, but we also get the shivers from unsettling news that gives us the chills.

Emotional changes are marked by an increase in body temperature and influx of blood to the area concerned. Depending on the circumstances and

a person's sensitivity, the thermal variations that we experience are sometimes perceptible to vision (if we blush) or to touch. The thermal sense is indicative of the "temperature" that reigns in a relationship. Thus we refer to a "cool" or "warm" welcome, a person's "coldness" or "warmth," a "fiery" speech, news that leaves us "cold" or "warms" the heart, a "cold" or "simmering" look, and so on. The heat that rises to one's cheeks or hands, the cold sweat, attest to the way particular situations modify the body's temperature. To "warm up to someone" or have "chills running down one's spine"—these common expressions attest to the embodied nature of language. The flesh of words is connected to the corporeal resonance of events.

Anzieu interprets the sensation of hot or cold in contact with another person as a mobilization of the skin-ego formed of a corporeal self turned to the outside world, and a psychic self turned inward to the subject and attempting to create or re-create "a protective wrapping that is more hermetically sealed, more closed in on itself, more narcissistically protective, a shield that keeps other people at arm's length" (2016: 194).

Depending on the circumstances of their education, individuals will have a higher or lower tolerance for the cold of outdoors. Children raised in an overprotective environment and unaccustomed to tolerating variations of temperature live their entire lives according to criteria established during childhood. Those who have been raised in a more relaxed context in this respect acquire a resistance to cold or heat. Childhood conditions determine the depth of personal tolerance to the ambient temperature. Darwin, seated with his frozen colleagues around a fire with the inhabitants of Tierra del Fuego, was surprised to see these naked men keeping their distance from the flame.

Likewise the hand is culturally oriented to manifest or not a tolerance to the temperature of objects. Writing of the indigenous population of Buka, the anthropologist Beatrice Blackwood was astonished to see them "put their hands into water that is only just off the boil, and take out a taro so hot that when they passed me my share I invariably dropped it [...] Similarly they will plunge a hand into a potful of shellfish immediately after it has been taken off the fire" (cited in Klineberg 1954: 214). This is not due to these men's particular nature but, rather, to the culture that mobilizes a particular sensibility among its members.

Humans' abilities to resist cold or heat are considerable. The experience of so-called "savage" children provides rich examples of this (Le Breton 2004). When Victor was discovered at the end of the eighteenth century in the mountains of Aveyron, the child was living entirely naked, in spite of the recent harsh winters. His body showed no evidence of damage from the cold. As Jean Itard, the educator who took Victor into his care, would later observe in the Institute's gardens, the boy had an unusual ability to withstand the cold, which he relished with surprising avidity:

Frequently, during the course of the winter, I have seen him, whilst he was amusing himself in the garden belonging to the asylum of the Deaf

and Dumb, suddenly squat down, half naked, on the wet turf, and remain exposed in this way, for hours together, to wind and rain. It was not only to the cold, but also to the most violent heat, that his skin, and sense of touch, shewed [*sic*] no kind of sensibility. (Malson 1972: 105)

In the depth of winter, Itard came upon the half naked boy rolling around in the snow with delight. Icy temperatures harmlessly slid off his skin.

Curiously, Itard was troubled by the child's thermal resistance, his jubilation when faced with the harsh elements that reminded him of his former liberty. Rather than judging it as a positive attribute, he considered it a deficiency and set out to make the boy perceive ambient temperature according to criteria that he undoubtedly deemed more "natural" but which were in fact those of a particular community and period. Itard subjected the child to a series of physical activities to make him lose the thermal perception forged in the solitude of the high plains of Aveyron. He recounts in his journal how he systematically imposed many hours of daily hot water baths on the child. After months of rigorous treatment that slowly eroded and weakened the child's body, the instructor managed to alter Victor's original perceptions. The child thus became sensitive to differences in temperature. He began to dread the cold and use clothing, following the example of Itard and his entourage.

But this assimilation was not without repercussions. Victor lost his prior defenses against illness. He became vulnerable to the variations of temperature of his environment, whereas in the past he had enjoyed an iron constitution. Itard overlooked these consequences and congratulated himself in this journal on the results obtained.

In a number of societies, hot baths, taken alone or in groups, are a tradition that provides a feeling of relaxation, purification, or escape and also often the alleviation of pain or fatigue. The bath experience is essentially tactile, reawakening a connection to the skin and the effects of the water temperature or ambient air. The warmth washes over the body without burning and relaxes it, alleviates fatigue, encourages reverie. The water envelops the skin and reminds individuals of their bodily depth, of the satisfying sense of their boundaries. It undoubtedly also evokes the buried memory of the womb. Children love playing in water; splashing, laughing, they never want to come out. Body rituals in our bathrooms give free rein to stimulation of the skin. Hot baths are often associated with sexuality, or at least with the various pleasurable stimulations that we indulge in.

The cold bath (or shower) is more invigorating. It provokes respiratory changes, gives us a second wind, energizes the body and stimulates the mind. Thoreau at Walden describes the pleasure of his daily baths, when he "washed the dust of labor from [his] person, or smoothed out the last wrinkle that study had made" (1983: 240). Every morning, he writes, "I got up early and bathed in the pond; that was a religious exercise, and one of the best things which I did. They say that characters were engraven on the bathing tub of king Tching-thang to this effect: 'Renew thyself completely

each day; do it again, and again, and forever again.' I can understand that" (1983: 180).

## From the Sense of Contact to Contact with Others

The skin is coated in meaning. Touch is not only physical but also semantic. The language of touch privileges the quality of *contact* with the other. For example, we "extend a helping hand" to someone in need or "let them down." We "hit it off" with someone, or not. "Feeling" relates both to tactile perception and to the sphere of emotions. Having "tact" or *doigté* (meaning both "dexterity" and "diplomacy") consists in dealing with others in a fair and discrete manner (*effleurer*, literally "touch" or "skim") that maintains a certain aloofness, without, however, withholding essential information (*tenir à l'écart*, literally "keeping or holding at a distance").

"To give one's hand" (in marriage) is to give of oneself completely. But being "in the palm of someone's hand" signifies a loss of personal autonomy, especially if the person in control is "strong-fisted" and wants to "force the other's hand." We "get our hands on" something we have been looking for. We are "touched" by a story that moves us but can sometimes be "manipulated." We flatter others by "rubbing them the right way" or else try to handle them with "kid gloves" so as not to offend them (in French *heurter*, meaning both "strike" or "bump into" and "offend"). Some people "tread carefully" or "handle themselves with caution," and they may be "touchy," overly sensitive or "thin-skinned." Others are "thick-skinned" (insensitive, tough), or "thick" (stupid). We "feel someone out" before proposing something that might not be well received. We are "cut to the quick" by unkind words or an encounter that "gets our hackles up." Some people may "get on our nerves," but we are too sensitive if we have "knee-jerk reactions." A comment "sends shivers down our spine" or "warms our heart," gives us "goose bumps" or "hives," "soothes" or "irritates." A scene is "striking" or "heart-rending." The seducer tries to "make a move." We "risk our neck" or "save our skin" in a dangerous situation. A person can be "warm," "icy," "tender," and so on. All these terms draw on the vocabulary of touch to express different modes of interaction. The quality of our relation to the world is first and foremost a relation to the skin.

## The Embrace

Women's and men's genitals are often perceived as bestial, dirty, foul-smelling, and even ridiculous. They are prime material for vulgar jokes. "The sexual act and the members employed therein are so repulsive, that if it were not for the beauty of the faces and the adornments of the actors and the pent-up impulse, nature would lose the human species," writes Leonardo

DaVinci (cited in Gilman 1987: 170). If sexuality is not sublimated by desire, it is a common source of disgust. For Freud, there is “no doubt that even the genitals of the other sex themselves may be an object of loathing” (1962: 16, 17). “I think that the stupid bungle of Nature in making the generative organs serve as means of relieving the bladder has much to do with this revulsion,” writes Havelock Ellis (1905: 162).

It may be said that desire is the transformation into pleasure of what would be disgust with a partner who is not of one’s choosing. The closeness of two bodies is only thinkable in their mutual desire. The boundaries of disgust then recede into the distance. Desire is a kind of alchemy that makes the other’s sexual attributes desirable. Erotic proximity shares everything. “Amor leads lovers post-haste into physiological intimacy and there is no longer anything that remains mutually repellent to them. All the secrets of bodies and the secretory glands are shared in common. Touch-all is a lover’s name. This organic truth, this ex-secratio of the secret places and natural needs, accommodates itself to the ordinary and extraordinary ‘poetry’ of love” (Valéry 2000: 520).

Sexuality removes the separation of bodies in space, uniting them in the embrace, the caress, the kiss. The blending of bodies that makes touch the essential sense of sexuality is an attempt to temporarily overcome separation by engaging the other in shared pleasure. “Eros desires contact because it strives to make the ego and the loved object one, to abolish all spatial barriers between them,” writes Freud (1926: 122).

The caress is not a seizing of the other but a gentle touch that lingers endlessly on the surface. Touch is the primary sense of encounter and sensuality. It is an attempt to overcome distance by drawing closer to the other in an immediately engaged reciprocity. There is no touching without being touched. Lovers are mutually incarnated in the erotic caress. Lovers discover themselves through the shaping of the other’s body. The reciprocity of hand and object is fully realized here. The hand touches and is itself touched, embodying all of its power to act in the world. The caress, writes Sartre,

is not a simple stroking, it is a *shaping*. In caressing the Other I cause her flesh to be born beneath my caress, under my fingers. The caress is the ensemble of those rituals which *incarnate* the Other [...] *Desire is expressed by the caress as thought is by language*. The caress reveals the Other’s flesh as flesh to myself *and to the Other*. (1992: 506, 507)

But the caress only has power if it is consented to by the one who receives it. If it is not desired, it is a form of violence. The same movement, depending on how it is received, is either a violation or an offering. It is intolerable if imposed by force or intimidation. Proust writes:

I could, if I chose, take Albertine on my knee, hold her head in my hands, I could caress her, run my hands slowly over her, but, just as if I had been

handling a stone which encloses the salt of immemorial oceans or the light of a star, I felt that I was touching no more than the sealed envelope of a person who inwardly reached to infinity. (1982c: 393)

Desire is never entirely satisfied. Destined to always being wanting, it drives lovers to return again and again. This desire for fusion that is forever disappointed is nostalgic but also fortunate for the lovers, because to completely lose oneself in the other is the end of all desire. “The caress,” writes Jean Brun, “is not a kind of grasping. It is more than just physical contact. It is the means by which we seek to give expression to our here and now in the other and to make the other’s here and now resonate within ourselves” (1967: 106).

The caress is the revelation of the self by the other. It is a gift that only acquires meaning by being offered in return in the same movement. “The other gives me what she does not have—my very flesh,” writes Marion. “And I give her what I do not have—her very flesh” (2007: 120). “Your lips drop sweetness as the honeycomb, my bride; milk and honey are under your tongue” (4: 11), says the lover in the *Song of Songs*, responding to the call of his beloved: “Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth—for your love is more delightful than wine” (1: 2). Kissing on the mouth, with the pressing of lips and mingling of bodies, is the domain of lovers. It is not found in any other rituals of everyday life. “Every kiss provokes another. Ah, in those earliest days of love how naturally the kisses spring to life! So closely, in their profusion, do they crowd together that lovers would find it as hard to count the kisses exchanged in an hour as to count the flowers in a meadow in May” (Proust 1982a: 260).<sup>7</sup>

The kiss ritually exchanged after newlyweds slip the rings on each other’s fingers before leaving the religious or secular ceremony is a symbolic form of engagement and an official confirmation of their shared affection. The mouth devours the other without biting; it is an endless desire, a fusing with the body of the loved one, without end.<sup>8</sup> The mouth

begins the process, because, already open, without distinction between exterior and interior, it offers itself from the outset as flesh; it incarnates first the lack of distinction between touching and touching oneself, feeling and feeling (oneself) feeling. But, if nothing resists it (and, precisely, the flesh that it begins to give to the other is defined by its nonresistance), that is, since nothing resists it, the kiss [*baiser*] of my mouth upon her mouth (where each mouth gives flesh to the other without distinction) inaugurates the infinite taking of the flesh. All that remains for the whole of the other and of me to take flesh is to extend the kiss beyond the kissing and kissed mouth. (Marion 2007: 124)

Sexuality is not limited to genital contact: the entire body is erogenous, as the example of the kiss demonstrates. But men’s and women’s education on the subject leaves many women frustrated. While women expect an

enormous amount of caressing, a lot of men regard petting as pointless and serving no other function than to accelerate the orgasm. Many men are engaged in a kind of homosocial performance for their masculine peers, either real or imagined, that has no meaning beyond a display of virility that excludes the woman. Women are often lacking affection as many feminists and sexologists have observed.

For the man, the erect penis is the only dispenser of pleasure. “All the rest is just theatre,” as one man remarked in an interview. Women who are unhappy, deprived of affection in their everyday lives, become involved in sexual relationships, often without experiencing pleasure, just to be held in someone’s arms (see above). “Woman takes pleasure more from touching than from looking,” writes Luce Irigaray,

and her entry into a dominant scopic economy signifies, again, her consignment to passivity: she is to be the beautiful object of contemplation [...] But *woman has sex organs more or less everywhere*. She finds pleasure almost anywhere. Even if we refrain from invoking the hystericization of her entire body, the geography of her pleasure is far more diversified, more multiple in its differences, more complex, more subtle, than is commonly imagined—in an imaginary rather too narrowly focused on sameness. (1985: 26/28)

According to Irigaray, women do not recognize themselves in what she calls “masculine specula(riza)tion” (1985: 30).

## Restrictions on Touching

In fourteenth-century Montaillou, the activity of delousing brought together both generations and genders. Children deloused one another, servants deloused their masters, women, their husbands or lovers, daughters, their mothers, and so on. Women with particularly agile fingers earned money doing this. Delousing was a social activity, especially among women, tinged with tenderness and sensuality, “The operation might take place on the flat roofs of the houses, which stood close together either side by side or facing one another” (Le Roy Ladurie 1979: 141). For centuries, delousing was a banal activity that marked a moment of relaxation, and tranquility in day-to-day life. Rimbaud’s famous poem describes the “seekers of lice” who “run enchanting, slender, awful fingers” through their brothers’ hair “full of red torment” (2001: 131). Rimbaud barely conceals his sensual delight in having these feminine fingers gently running through his own hair. While delousing was a hygienic practice, it was also an occasion to be in close contact with the other in a moment of mutual abandon. In many societies, the delousing of hair is a customary form of bodily contact, a moment of relaxation and affection between individuals united through a family connection or emotional closeness.

In colonial Brazil, the *cafuné* or custom of having one's lice removed and hair caressed for a long time, often by slaves, is described, not without difficulty, by Charles Expilly, a French explorer of the period:

During the hottest moments of the day, when moving or even talking becomes tiring, the *senhoras* retire indoors and put their heads in the laps of their favorite *mucamas* (Brazilian white women's slave-girls) and offer them their heads [...] This exercise is a source of pleasure for the sensual Creole women. A voluptuous shiver runs through their bodies with the touch of these caressing fingers. Invaded, overwhelmed by the powerful force spreading throughout their entire bodies, some of them succumb to the delicious sensations and swoon with delight on the knees of their *mucamas*. (cited in Bastide 1996: 60, 61)

Expilly also describes the festivities during which women gather and talk, their hair abandoned to the hands of young slaves. Men are not exempt from this activity and also offer their heads to their mistresses or chambermaids. For Roger Bastide this custom is an island of sensuality for the mistresses of the house and tolerated by a rigid society in which husbands' amorous liaisons are numerous. The women's frustration leads them to eroticize the physical contact of the *cafuné*, which Bastide even describes as lesbian love (Bastide 1996: 77 sq.).

In Western societies, the body delineates the contours of the ego, it incarnates the individual. The boundaries of its skin are coupled with a no less significant symbolic boundary that distinguishes the self from others and creates a personal sovereignty that cannot be breached without the individual's consent (Le Breton 1990, 2004). Children touch each other much more when they are young and still unaware of corporeal rituals or prohibitions on touching others. But as their education takes effect, this contact gradually decreases. Touching or close physical contact is replaced by words, exchanged looks, distant gestures, and facial expressions. The social rituals that are imposed on children and gradually contribute to their development complete the process begun at birth. They detach themselves from the mother, encouraged by her but also knowing she is still available to respond to their needs.

Physical contact that was once happily sought out becomes ambivalent, subject to deliberation. From loved ones, it is still valued, but from strangers, it becomes a source of discomfort, a violation of privacy. Henceforth, their relations with the world are limited by various restrictions, even as their room to *maneuver* never ceases to expand. "The prohibition on touching separates the area of the familiar, which is protected and protective, from the area of the unfamiliar, which is disturbing and dangerous" (Anzieu 2016: 160). Children begin to experience their sovereignty over the world. They know they cannot touch everything without precaution and that others' bodies are not available to their explorations except in privileged moments granted by their culture involving specific partners and body parts



that are no less coded. They also learn that no one has access to their body without their own approval. Prohibitions on touching delimit their position as subjects in the world, restricting their omnipotence, establishing their margins of desire, and authorizing their seamless integration within the social bond.

In Western societies, bodily contact mostly takes place with family members or sexual partners. Friends rarely touch one another beyond the handshake or greeting peck on the cheek. Nonetheless, most social relationships are reinforced by some form of contact in greeting or parting—a handshake, an exchange of kisses, a pat on the back or a hug. This initial contact is a prelude to establishing the transparency of the encounter. The desire for closeness mixed with the fear of being drawn in closer than expected makes the touch ambivalent. The ceremony of greeting “expresses both approach and retreat across a range of varied accentuations” (Straus 1989: 615). To touch the other is to hold oneself at the edge of the abyss created by their presence.

Modalities of touch vary considerably depending on gender, age, social status, or the degree of familiarity or kinship between people.<sup>9</sup> Tolerance to physical contact is primarily cultural, linked to the education received, but it also varies according to individual sensibilities and circumstances. The possible tactility of an interaction covers a broad range, from complete absence of contact to an intense development of physical relations. The Canadian psychologist Sidney M. Jourard (1966) counted the number of times interlocutors touched one another in one hour in cafés in different cities. In spite of the experiment’s impressionistic method, the results are telling: San Juan (Porto Rico), 180; Paris, 110; Gainesville (Florida), 2; London, 0. Anglo-Saxon societies favor a distancing of the body from the other, whereas, Arab-Muslim societies, for example, reveal no hesitation in touching (at least between men and men, or women and women). The prohibition or intensification of touch is a fact of culture.

Social encounters are more or less tactile depending on the societies and circumstances involved. Societies that privilege distance between individuals are marked by minimal physical contact. If the symbolic distance is breached, the exchange loses its neutrality: a hand touching a part of the body, even only another hand or arm, when not the custom, arouses feelings of emotional complicity or discomfort. Even a furtive touch devoid of any particular intention can create a feeling of closeness. A study conducted in an American library (Fisher et al. 1976) demonstrated that students whose hands were briefly brushed when having their cards returned gave a more positive evaluation of the personnel than those who had not been touched, even though boys’ and girls’ attitudes differed, the former, for example, being ambivalent and sometimes openly hostile if the employee was a man. Even accidental contact has an important emotional impact. In another experiment, a woman approached people coming out of a phone booth where she had deliberately left a coin. When she touched

her interlocutor, she had an infinitely greater chance of recuperating her money (Thayer 1982).

The effort to make contact can also signal a more or less skillful attempt at seduction or a declaration of hidden love. Behavior associated with flirting implies breaking the reserve and cautiously penetrating into the personal sphere of the other. Most often it is the man who takes the initiative of touching by putting his hand on the girl's shoulder or thigh, moving in closer and breaking with proxemic customs. He can become "clingy" and transform his body into an instrument of power if his sought-after partner refuses to make contact and wants to get away. Or he may wait for a sign of consent, willing to pull back and try again later.

Rupture of the intimate space takes an opposite form when individuals are confronted by intimidation that aims to make them uncomfortable and submit without physical protest. Disrespect of these symbolic boundaries, which remain unconscious until they have been transgressed, is also experienced as aggression. "Contact through the other senses," writes Elias Canetti,

sight, hearing and smell, is not nearly so dangerous. With them there can be space between the attacker and the victim and, as long as this space exists, nothing is finally decided and there is still some chance of escape. The sensation of touch, on the other hand, is the forerunner of tasting. The fairy-tale witch asks her victim to stretch out a finger so that she can feel whether he is fat enough to eat. (Canetti 1984: 204)

Violence consists in "coming to blows," at which point the Other's sacred integrity is abolished. The enemy's body is ruptured, injured, penetrated by force. Aggressive situations destroy boundaries. The physical contact aims to intimidate by depriving the other of any reserve, by invading others' private space and symbolically threatening them. Similarly, it is through a rupture of social rules of contact that the aggressor is eventually apprehended. "The feel of the hand of authority on his shoulder is usually enough to make a man give himself up without having to be actually seized. He cowers and goes quietly" (Canetti 1984: 205).

Societies usually attentive to maintaining interpersonal distance nonetheless sometimes favor physical closeness in circumstances associated with strong collective emotions. Sports events, for example, elicit unparalleled enthusiasm among players and fans. The emotion temporarily unites individuals in a feeling of being as one with the team, of dissolving into a glorified "us." The body as limit of one's identity is forgotten. The same holds true for demonstrators marching in the streets, bound by the sentiment of solidarity in the same cause. At a carnival, party, or rave, people have the feeling that the boundaries of their bodies are dissolving and they are fusing with the crowd. In a more intimate context, and beyond any reference to eroticism in the strict sense of the term, the contact between a physical therapist and his or her patient involves the same opening up of the self beyond the enclosure of the body.<sup>10</sup>

Summing up, in Western societies contact with the other's body is strictly regulated by rituals of effacement (Le Breton 1990). Individuals have a personal reserve around them, an intimate space that extends their bodies and creates between them and others a boundary that cannot be broken without their consent or an act of violence. A symbolic envelope reassures them in their contact with others, who know intuitively what distance to maintain to avoid causing mutual discomfort. The only access they have to others' bodies is tied to romantic relationships, sexuality, or family contexts. Besides flirtation or the affection of a first encounter, when the consensual touch surprises and arouses, physical contact is the exception in most meetings, a slackening of the ordinary social symbolic order and point of entry into another ritual state. It introduces a sense beyond common sense. The least attempt to move in closer possesses strong emotional connotations, because it breaks with the proxemic conventions in use. We cannot be touched in the same way we are heard or seen.

## The Healing Touch

Due to its roots in ontogenesis, touch is a primordial form of contact that grounds us in the world and, in times of suffering, undoubtedly revives the memory of the maternal presence and restores our confidence in ourselves and in the world. The hand is a healing instrument. The hand of Christ famously cured the sick. At the synagogue a man stretched out his withered hand, and he took it and "it was restored, healthy like the other" (Matthew 12:9-13). He touches wounds and they close, he touches the disabled and they heal, he touches the foreheads of the fever-stricken and they are cured. People bring children to him so he can "place his hands on them" (Mark 10:13). He lays hands on the skin of lepers or on the eyes or head of the blind in a propitious body-to-body contact that relieves them of their suffering. The hand of Jesus is the agent of God's power. The apostles inherited this privilege and disseminated the "holy spirit" by laying their hands on the foreheads of the faithful gathered around them.

The tactile sense fulfills the anthropological function of containing and restoring the self in situations of suffering or absence of being. Touch provides a sense of self, as well as a sense of what is outside. The gesture restores boundaries, the sensation of one's self in a larger environment. It calls to mind the border between self and non-self through the resistance experienced, the barrier encountered. In situations of uncertainty or confusion, the quest for sensations allows individuals to renew their sensory place in a world that escapes them. In situations of suffering, recourse to the skin, even self-injury (Le Breton 2003) is sometimes necessary to restore a tangible limit in place of the meaning that eludes them. While the sense of touch is all-encompassing, finding its organ of real and symbolic envelopment in the skin, it also delimits what is different from the self. In situations of suffering, contact (in both senses of the term) is a powerful means of restoring the self.

Touching someone who is suffering can be susceptible to misunderstanding and sometimes even arouse the suspicion that the toucher “has designs” on the touched, especially in interactions between men and women. As a commitment to the other, the healing gesture must be a fact of contact without any sexual connotation or domination. Whatever forms it takes (tenderness, rubbing, massage, etc.), it awakens feelings linked to a person’s individual history.<sup>11</sup>

Skin contact thus carries a threat of harboring ulterior motives (seduction, fondling, etc.) or manipulative intentions while, at the same time, being an anthropological necessity for many people who require treatment. Only the singularity of the circumstances can judge the possible ambiguity of a comforting gesture. But in touching the other, there is always something of the untouchable that marks individuals’ intimate limits, the contact they find tolerable or disturbing, the limits they set on the other’s willful imposition. At his dying father’s bedside, Yasushi Inoue discovers, one last time, how confined the self is in a body:

He took his emaciated right hand out from beneath the bed clothes and reached toward me. Since Father had never done anything like that before, I could not understand what he wanted, but I took his hand in mine. Then Father clasped it. Just that—two hands gently holding onto each other. Then in the next instant I felt my hand being softly pushed away. It was a sensation similar to the slight jerk of the tip of a fishing rod. I was startled and withdrew my hand quickly. I still don’t know how to interpret this, but I had the distinct feeling that Father was expressing some deep, inner reaction by this gesture, and at that moment I felt chilled, chastised—as if Father were saying, “You’re being arrogant, holding your father’s hand. It’s no joke,” and suddenly I felt rejected. (1984: 18)

Touch cannot impose itself against the will of the one who receives. Otherwise, it becomes a form of intrusion.

Touching the other in these circumstances always borders on control, on having an emotional hold over the person. The hands are susceptible to lying about their intentions. However, any attempt to relieve others’ pain implies a form of manipulation, a desire to change them that raises ethical questions (Roustang 2000: 31 sq.). Though one has to take into consideration men’s and women’s distinct status in the United States and the specific norms of virility that reign in this context, particularly within a white Anglo-Saxon Protestant (WASP) milieu, American studies have shown that women are significantly more receptive to physical contact than men (McCorkle and Hollenbach 1990). In a therapeutic context, American men are often uncomfortable with physical contact, which they interpret in terms of seduction, intrusion, or domination, whereas women find in it a comfort devoid of ambiguity. It is as though men associate touch from the outset with sexual invitation, whereas women see in it only a gesture of comfort and friendship. Tiffany Field sees this as symptomatic of women being

touched more often by their mothers, fathers, and friends of the same or opposite sex, and also being more exposed to contact during gynecological examinations, for example. "For this reason, touch could be reassuring for women in hospitals, but disruptive for men who have less experience with touch in general and especially in medical situations" (Field 2003: 26). The touch, the healing gesture, is not mechanical but an act of communication, and the way it is perceived is not always congruent with the intention behind it.

## Taking Care

The hospital setting places caregivers and patients in an unusual situation. Caregiving inevitably raises questions around privacy due to the rupture it creates with ordinary codes of civility. In the caregiving relationship, touch takes different forms. It is used in diagnoses involving palpation or the taking of the patient's pulse. It is needed in personal hygiene when patients have lost their autonomy. It is also used in various treatments related to patients' specific health issues. The hospital experience makes patients dependent and gives others an unusual right to penetrate their intimate sphere and access their bodies. However, in this respect, tactile relationships with patients are not all the same. Hospitalized children are readily touched, cuddled, and caressed. They attract an affection that acts as a kind of antidote to their pain. But adolescents receive less attention for fear of the ambiguities it might raise. The same holds true for adult or elderly patients who are no less in need of a comforting touch.

This privileged contact is present again at the end of life when the illness has consumed the subject and all that remains is an awkward embrace. Sometimes when a child is dying, the mother will lay down at his or her side, holding the little one against her belly as though to take the infant back inside of her. The tactile sense, in the treatment or care of the disabled, sick, dying, or elderly, reconstructs the social bond that is no longer accessible through spoken language. For a person who is dying, contact with a significant other who is emotionally invested reestablishes a boundary of existence, a container that restores the personal value that has been undermined by illness or age. The sensory pleasure of this touch is even greater for someone who is lacking affection. Trumbo's character Joe in *Johnny Got His Gun*, mutilated from a bomb explosion and reduced to the physical contact of skin on skin, expresses the intensity of an exchange with one of his nurses:

She got to massaging him and he liked that she had such a brisk gentle touch to her fingers [...] And then one day he felt a change in the touch of her fingers. They were not gentle and brisk any longer. He felt the change through the tips of her fingers through the tenderness of her touch he felt pity and hesitancy and a great gathering love that was neither him for her

nor her for him but rather a kind of love that took in all living things and tried to make them a little more comfortable a little less unhappy a little more nearly like others of their kind. (Trumbo 1994: 214, 215)

The skin is an anchor that moors the subject to the world. It gives meaning to compassion. The offer or, rather, generosity of a gesture of support is invaluable.

When language fails, even for expressing feelings in everyday life, touch can still provide an emotional depth to contact, a way of reconnecting with the body. It is a wellspring of meaning, precisely because it surpasses ordinary rituals of interaction. Joe, enclosed within his body and linked to the world only through his skin, can describe the hands of the nurses attending to him with great precision. His experience would apply to many patients.

The day nurse had smooth slick hands a little hard like the hands of a woman who has worked a long while so he guessed that she was middle aged and he imagined her with gray hair [...] The day nurse had a brisk way of doing things—flip and he was on his side whoosh and a sheet slid next to him flop and he was on his back swipe-swipe and he was bathed [...] Mostly their hands were very soft and just moist enough to go bumpily instead of smoothly over his body. He knew they were young. (Trumbo 1994: 183, 184)

Physical contact with a person who is ill or in emotional distress has a containing, soothing function. The presence of the other, rooted in contact, is an antidote to self-disintegration. “The physician celebrates computerized tomography,” writes Norman Cousins. “The patient celebrates the outstretched hand” (cited in Field 2003: 16). A study conducted by Anzieu’s student, the psychologist Emmanuelle Moutin, evokes an experience of this order. A prison inmate had been hospitalized following a suicide attempt by fire, in which he had been badly burned but survived. One day he was complaining of his pain, and the nurse agreed to give him extra painkillers but was temporarily called away. During her absence, Moutin stayed with him:

We had a spontaneous, warm conversation about his past life and some personal problems that meant a lot to him. When at last the nurse came back with the analgesics, he refused them, saying, with a big smile: “It’s all right, I’m not in pain any more.” He was as surprised as anyone. We continued our conversation, and afterwards he fell asleep peacefully without the help of drugs. (cited in Anzieu 2016: 229)

Kind words, a listening ear, being acknowledged without judgment, re-created for this man a skin container that alleviated his suffering.



# 5

## Scents of Self and Other: Smell, the Sense of Transition

*But the larder was the place he liked most to visit, which happened rarely. His grandmother's hand would turn the key in a door painted bright red and release a rush of odors: the smell of smoked sausage and hams hanging from the rafters, mingled with others emanating from the little drawers stacked along the walls. Sometimes his grandmother pulled out the drawers and let him sniff their contents. "This is cinnamon," she would say, "this is coffee and these are cloves."*

– CZESŁAW MIŁOSZ, *THE ISSA VALLEY*

### The Western Denigration of Smell

Aristotle regarded smell as a crude sense, inferior to that of animals and of little benefit to humankind. Though Condillac made smell the first sense of his famous statue, it was hardly to signal its importance in the definition of the human but, rather, “because of all the senses it is the one that seems to contribute the least to the knowledge of the human mind” (2014: 170, 171). Many philosophers, like Kant, have regarded smell as the “animal” sense, the sense with the least value and interest: “It does not pay to cultivate it or refine it at all in order to enjoy; for there are more disgusting objects than pleasant ones [...] and even when we come across something fragrant, the pleasure coming from the sense of smell is always fleeting and transient” (2006: 50, 51). In 1878, according to the hierarchy proposed by Paul Broca, founder of the Société d'Anthropologie de Paris in 1859, vision was the “most intellectual of the senses” (Dias 2004: 40), going hand in hand with the development of human intelligence, whereas smell, limited to receiving impressions without reflection, had very little value. Thus this sense dominated for him “among brutes and can be described as a brute sense [...] adding nothing to man's knowledge, playing a minor role in his pleasures, perhaps even procuring more displeasure than enjoyment,



and offering so little to civilized life that its loss is not even considered a disability” (Dias 2004: 50).

Humans are animals that do not smell (or who do not want to recognize that they smell), and, in this, they set themselves apart from other species and their own history. In *Civilization and Its Discontents*, Freud, in the same spirit, associates the decline of smell with the development of civilization:

the decline of the olfactory stimuli [...] seems to have resulted from man’s decision to adopt an upright gait, which meant that the genitals, previously hidden, became visible and in need of protection, thus giving rise to a sense of shame. The beginning of the fateful process of civilization, then, would have been marked by man’s adopting of an erect posture. From then on the chain of events proceeded by way of the devaluation of the olfactory stimuli and the isolation of the menstrual period, to the preponderance of the visual stimuli and the visibility of the genitals, then to the continuity of sexual excitation and the founding of the family, and so to the threshold of human civilization. (2002: 41, 42)

Freud constructs a grandiose fiction on the sensory origins of humankind. His analysis is symptomatic of an epoch and culture that situated smell and vision at opposite extremes of the sensory hierarchy (Classen et al. 1994). This sensitivity to odors is promoted as a foil to the intolerable animality of human origins, better off left to the “primitives.”

Ruth Winter evokes an important experiment conducted by researchers at the University of California on relationships between odor and proxemics. Perfumed and non-perfumed participants were to walk through a public park and observe people’s reactions as they passed. They would sit on a bench, solicit information, or intervene in people’s conversations. While participants who had a neutral smell went unnoticed, passersby distanced themselves from those wearing perfume, in spite of its pleasant odor (Winter 1978: 14). The “heavily” perfumed woman was perceived as a “tart” or alluded to with a knowing smile. The perfumed man was even more exposed, because he was seen to contradict an implicit norm associating masculinity with the absence of outward affectations. His perfume was regarded as an insult to his virility and aroused suspicion.<sup>1</sup> Perfume is only attractive, a decisive touch in the game of seduction, when it is used sparingly by a woman.

Applied to key areas of the body, the neck, ear lobes, cleavage, or wrists, a perfume’s charm stems from the subtlety of its use. As a sensory supplement that embellishes one’s presence, it is an olfactory artifice that aims to seduce but also to please the one wearing it, as it creates a favorable self-image that enhances a person’s aesthetic relationship with the world and indicates availability, a prelude to other anticipated pleasures. Beyond clothing, makeup, hair, and style, perfume adds its subtle note to the positive presentation of self. It is a sort of olfactory signature deliberately chosen from a vast array of possibilities, a revelation of the self, but also a playful

and volatile affirmation. The choice of perfumes today is considerable. Like everything in fashion, it is a question of women (and sometimes men) finding a personal way to adopt current styles and discretely stand out in the eyes of those who matter. Perfumes and *eaux de toilette* provide a presence, a flesh, for people who fear going unnoticed and are not unaware of people's wariness of the body's natural odors.<sup>2</sup>

Ivan Illich recalls that the historian Arthur Kutzelnigg counted 158 words in Middle German to designate odors in Dürer's epoch. Only 32 are still used today, often only in local dialects (Illich 2004: 97). On the other hand, without being exhaustive, Françoise Aubaile-Sallénave counts approximately 250 terms related to notions of odor or perfume in Arab-Muslim societies, which are clearly more hospitable to smell. Odors "provide metaphors in every domain of social, moral, intellectual and religious life, offering a very ample semantic range, from the most trivial meanings to the most exalted images of the religious and mystical cosmology" (1999: 115).

Contrary to other societies that have fully developed the art of odors and whose streets and houses are filled with exhalations of all kinds, Western societies do not value smell. Social discourse instead stigmatizes odors. In spite of its eminent position in our personal lives, smell is socially suspect and subject to repression. It is that which is not spoken of, except to establish complicity around an unpleasant smell. Odors are less related to aesthetics than to aesthesia. They often operate outside the realm of consciousness, affecting our behavior without our being aware.

Many authors have written about the devaluation of smell in American culture, notably within white Anglo-Saxon Protestant culture, which propagates a puritanical insistence on hygiene and sanitization. Symbolically, odor evokes the body or that which refers to the body and is therefore regarded as obscene in public or even private space.

In the use of the olfactory apparatus Americans are culturally underdeveloped. The extensive use of deodorants and the suppression of odor in public places results in a land of olfactory blandness and sameness that would be difficult to duplicate anywhere else in the world. This blandness makes for undifferentiated spaces and deprives us of richness and variety in our life. (Hall 1990: 45)

Sources of sensuality are regulated, carefully controlled. Anything that comes from the body lends itself to suspicion and erasure. This provided Henry Miller with a key platform for his critique of American culture:

Of nothing are you allowed to get the real odor or the real savour. Everything is sterilized and wrapped in cellophane. The only odor which is recognized and admitted as an odor is halitosis, and of this all Americans live in mortal dread. Dandruff may be a myth, but halitosis is real. It is the genuine odor of spiritual decomposition. The American body, when

dead, can be washed and fumigated; some corpses even achieve a distinct beauty. But the live American body in which the soul is rotting away smells bad and every American knows it and that is why he would rather be a hundred percent American, alone and gregarious at the same time, than live breast to breast with the tribe. (1981: 343)

The control of personal odors is a growing concern in Western societies, enforced by ostracism or a bad reputation. Nothing should be revealed of the natural body.

Enclosed within their own olfactory bubble (that they do not smell themselves), people have little tolerance for the intrusion of someone else's bodily odor into their private space, unless it is known and familiar or involves a situation of seduction. Disagreeable odors are the other's, not theirs, even though the fear of others being bothered by their smell remains. Advertising continually warns us of this. The body is a source of mistrust: while you may not smell yourself, others can perceive bad odors emanating from you without your knowing it. Advertising stigmatizes bodily exhalations—odors of sweat, bad breath, urine, etc.—then offers to rid us of them with the help of various deodorants. Smelling others is no more tolerable than the thought of being smelled by them in turn. People perfume themselves or neutralize body odors to make themselves more acceptable to others.

Women are the first targets of this shaming that depicts the body as a site of naturally occurring bad odors. In Western thought, women are more associated with the body than men and therefore risk smelling worse. Their natural odors have to be replaced by perfume. This is an honorable way to deal with adversity. The profusion of scents now available on the market to be used on the body or in the home aim not so much to add new odors than to mask or rectify "natural" odors perceived as unpleasant, even though people do derive some extra pleasure from the different perfumes. Synthetic smells take precedence over natural olfactory ambiances. They are sometimes used to camouflage harmful qualities associated with a product by adding, for example, a scent of freshness or the outdoors to a paint or detergent. This provides a symbolic pureness to otherwise often toxic products.

In Western societies, the rightful place of odors in everyday life is methodically denied. People try to conceal or disguise natural odors, add scents to common objects, rearrange the olfactory ambiance of everyday places. Recent years have seen a proliferation of businesses selling perfumes, cosmetics, incense, toiletries, and aromatherapy products. A veritable fragrance industry has emerged that seeks to cover the real odors of the world with artificial scents. A pioneering experiment conducted by Laird in 1940 involved offering three pairs of stockings to women, the first scented with a fruity note, the second with a floral note, and the third with its original odor. Most women chose the pair with floral scents, adding that they found the nylon to be much softer (Winter 1978). In retrospect, the findings seem unremarkable today.

Experts carefully fabricate odors to make products as seductive as possible to consumers. Products related to cosmetics or daily body care are scented to proclaim the harmlessness of their use. Toilet paper smells of lavender, soap gives off scents of orange, lavender, or pine. No commodities are spared this olfactory marketing. Used cars smell “new” or luxurious. Businesses and public places add value to their premises or products with synthetic fragrances thought to induce calm and patience. Parking lots are pleasantly scented to counter people’s concerns about safety and dissipate odors of exhaust fumes or gas. Fitness clubs diffuse lemony fragrances to disinfect their spaces. Thalassotherapy centers diffuse odors of the sea or countryside to nourish feelings of well-being among their clients. Fragrant exhalations are judiciously conceived to incite consumers to buy, for example, the aroma of coffee in a supermarket’s aisles.

The fragrance industry is even implicated in increasing employee productivity. Japanese firms offer a set of scents ranging from citrus fragrances to stimulate work first thing in the morning and early afternoon, before lunchtime or toward the end of the day, and floral fragrances to increase concentration; at other times, woody odors are used to relieve fatigue (Synnott 1993: 203). This is a paradigmatic example of the way companies seek to lead employees and others “by the nose” through a mercenary use of “aromachology.”

Though odor has a low cultural status in Western societies, behind the scenes, it is at the center of meticulous marketing techniques set on influencing behavior. The production of synthetic odors has to strike a delicate balance to match olfactory ambiances with objects’ associated meanings. If the symbolic dimension is neglected, clients will not be convinced (Holley 1999: 216). Synthetic aromas re-create a product’s nonexistent “natural” odors or modify odors considered not appealing enough. Many consumer products today, from medications to cars, cosmetics to kitchen utensils, and food to furniture, are enhanced with odors to make them appealing. A product whose odor has positive connotations, is associated with fruit, nature, open spaces, and so on, is absolved of all suspicion and is olfactively purified.

## Odor as Moral Atmosphere

Odor is diffuse in space, a faint air that envelops objects, without any real horizon or precise place, an atmosphere that spreads out from a zone that is both local and indefinite. Odor is not enclosed in things like taste, or on their surface like color. It is a subtle envelope. Detached from its source like a sound, floating in space, it penetrates individuals who cannot prevent its intrusion. Identifying an odor’s source entails circling around it, searching, sometimes with uncertainty. While we can close our eyes to ignore a disturbing scene, stop eating or drinking to avoid an unpleasant flavor, or refrain from touching a decomposing substance, we cannot escape odors

even when they make life unpleasant. “Contrary to liberty,” as Kant would say, odor invades those who smell it. It determines the emotional ambiance of a place or encounter because it is a state that is ethereal but whose effects are powerful. Mingled with our imaginations, it is never so much the odor that is smelled as it is the meaning invested in it.

Odor is a marker of atmosphere, it imprints the emotional tone of a moment that we want to differentiate from others, extract from the ordinary. In religious or profane rites, it functions as a container of ambiance to distinguish the situation, an olfactory parsing that highlights the assigned value. Smell is a transitional sense (Howes 1991). In Provence, for example, family and friends traditionally brought bouquets of protective fragrances to the newborn’s bedside. It was believed that if the child’s entry into life takes place under favorable odoriferous circumstances, nothing should stop it from continuing in this same olfactory direction. Fragrant offerings accompanied both boys’ and girls’ passage into adulthood. Adolescents reaching sexual maturity would receive from their godmother a protective jewel, the *cassoléo*. “Ovoid pendants, often silver, they were filled with camphor and aromatic herbs, worn as protective jewels that were both decorative and prophylactic” (Roubin 1989: 252).

Many developmental phases of life involved the use of fragrant objects. In May, young men traditionally hung branches of basil or hawthorn at the doors of girls they were courting. Inversely, writes Roubin, the presentation of a cypress branch or thistle was as sign of rupture. A branch of thyme expressed the intensity of the love. The girl, if she acknowledged the declaration, would respond with a branch of rosemary (Roubin 1989: 257).

The olfactory parsing of symbolic moments in individual or collective life is a common feature in many cultures. For example, in the Maghreb, during childbirth, a specific atmosphere is created to protect the mother and unborn child. A small brazier is placed near the door to emit pungent fumes that ward off evil spirits and protect against the evil eye (Aubaile-Sallénave 1997: 186 sq.). Waanzi children in south-eastern Gabon undergo various rites of purification and personal development that involve the use of odors. Plants or receptacles containing macerated leaves and bark shavings are placed under the beds or in the corners of dwellings. The fragrant products envelop the children and protect them. “Very often, the clothing or jewelry of wise and respected individuals are brought to children so they can absorb their odor, and, in doing so, distinguish themselves with the same qualities for the rest of their lives” (Mouélé 1997: 214).

Odor imprints a particular tone on our relation to the world. It entices us to stay or flee from a situation. It incites us to be mistrustful or carefree, induces worry or relaxation. The exhalations of a place express its nonmaterial dimension, the emotional climate that envelops it. “In nearly all sensory experience,” says Tellenbach, “one finds an extra that remains unexpressed. This extra that exceeds the real event but that we sense at the same time as it, we can refer to as atmospheric” (1983: 40). Smell, more

than the other senses, takes part in both the material and mental atmosphere of a place or situation. This olfactory alliance influences people's thinking and shapes expectations. In one experiment, patients expecting a possible cancer diagnosis were, without their knowledge, exposed to the vanilla-like odor of heliotropin. An anxiety test afterward revealed these patients to have lower anxiety levels than others. They later described this odor to be pleasant and relaxing (Holley 1999: 184). Aromatherapy is founded on the principle that odor has a psychological and emotional influence on the individuals smelling it. Used correctly, it contributes to their feelings of well-being and helps them overcome stress and anxiety.

Smell is simultaneously a sense of contact and distance. Individuals, without their choosing, find themselves immersed in an olfactory situation that seduces and draws them in, or repulses and sends them running to get away as fast as possible from a place that offends the nose. Odor leaves no one indifferent. It is either to a person's liking or not. While it imprints an ambiance, it can also play a negative role in contributing to the pollution or degradation of a site. Any odor that is out of place is a source of discomfort and strangeness, because the interiority that it expresses does not correspond to the expectations associated with the circumstances. Any olfactory rupture destroys the anticipated atmosphere. An odor of sewage penetrating a sacred place quickly dispels any feeling of spirituality.

## The Relative Value of Odors

The perceived value of odors is a product of circumstances. Odors do not have a language that derives meaning from significant relationships with others. Only the context in which they appear lends them value and meaning. The context of an odor is not another odor but the world in which it appears and is typical (Gell 1977). It is not a perfume's composition that is important but the fact that it creates a specific atmosphere. Sébastien Chamfort, a provincial nobleman returning home after a stay at Versailles, in the seventeenth century, made his servants urinate on his castle's walls to imbue them with the "aristocratic aura" that had so impressed him at court. Even the odor of urine, in certain contexts, can become the sweetest of odors through the meaning that it assumes.

The symbolic relativity of odor's appreciation is sometimes related to social definitions of gender. Among the Waanzi, for example, the hierarchy of odors is subordinated to basic prohibitions that separate men and women:

Given that a large number of prohibitions are related to age, sex or totemic affiliation, the value of a person's or object's odor depends a lot on these parameters. During the cooking of a yellow-backed duiker, for example, all of the men smell the most exquisite aroma, whereas the women, for whom this meat is taboo, speak of a nauseating odor. (Mouélé 1997: 216)

There is no good or bad odor among the Waanzi beyond the social status associated with it.

Médard Mouélé also recounts how the fisherman's odor is considered good in this society, because it symbolizes the luck that accompanies them in their work. Once the fishing day's work is done, however, it becomes intolerable, out of place, and the fisherman has to take a bath to avoid gibes and taunting upon his return home. The change in context transforms the status of the odor, because it is not the odor itself that inconveniences but rather its meaning in the moment. It has also been shown that doctors and nurses lose some of their disgust toward bodily odors of excrement or patients' absence of hygiene or bad breath. The practise of their profession is a protective screen, but one that is raised, however, when the professional leaves work.

Odors emanating from the human body (sweat, breath, urine, gas, excrement, sperm) are perceived as unpleasant in most cultures, especially with respect to odors, real or imagined, coming from members of another group. But this is not universal. Numerous salutation rituals involve smelling the other's face or armpits. Among the Kanum-Irebe of New Guinea, it is a custom to retain a bit of the odor of someone who is parting. The person remaining passes a hand under the armpit of the traveler, smells it, and rubs it on his or her own body. Likewise, for many societies, kissing is not a brief contact of the lips on another's cheek or lips. It is an olfactory contact, a way of taking in and imbuing oneself with the other's intimate self, of sealing the encounter at points of contact where odors are emitted and exchanged. In Burmese culture, for example, to kiss means "to breathe out-breathe in" (Bernot and Myint 1995: 172). In Western societies, the kiss, though implicating a physical closeness, consists first in the inhalation of the other's odor and warmth. Ronsard associates the kiss with the "sweet-smelling breath" of his beloved. He feels not only her lips pressed against his but "all the secret perfumes / Which Arabia happily brings us" (n.d., n.p).

## The Odors of Existence

Odors are a basic form of the unspeakable. Describing an odor to someone who does not smell it or is unfamiliar with it is a challenge. The olfactory vocabulary of Western languages is impoverished, based either on value judgments (something smells good or bad), emotional effect (a seductive, annoying, or sickening odor), echoing another sense (a soft, smooth, fruity, caressing, penetrating, bold, or sharp odor), evoking something else (the odor of wheat, roses, etc.), or comparison ("it smells like ..."). References to odor often make use of paraphrase or metaphor. We speak of an odor's aura or effects, but never of the odor itself in its singularity.

To speak of a "good" or "bad" odor is to express an opinion that is for the most part personal. Odor is an eminently subjective perception, as much in how it is experienced as in how it is identified or evoked. It mobilizes an

interior geography and history, a personal story that is more difficult to relate to others' experience than is the case with a color or a sound. Odor shares with taste an individualization of experience. It reduces language to impotence, relying instead on approximations. In Western languages at least, there is no vocabulary to designate odors in their specificity, in contrast, for example, to certain African languages, which have a precise olfactory lexicon. Among the Wenzhi, fourteen terms are used to designate odors, without reference to their source or object (Mouélé 1997).

Of course there is a specialized vocabulary for perfumes and the fabrication of scents, but it contributes little to the layperson's vocabulary. Smell is the least diversified sense in language. Even though we are able to discriminate thousands of odors, we stumble over our words to describe or communicate them to others. The olfactory sense remains private even though it continually affects our behavior by creating a particular emotive ambiance. In Western societies, it gives rise to a modest, even repressive attitude, a reluctance to evoke it as a topic of conversation.

Our ability to perceive an odor depends on contrast, on the difference between one olfactory ambiance and another. Odors are volatile and begin to dissipate as soon as one stays in the same spot or area for too long. A few minutes suffice for an odor to fade from consciousness. Odor is also protective. It alerts us, in particular, to spoiled food or the presence of harmful or toxic substances. The danger of certain lethal substances is doubled by their absence of odor. Caution requires "flair." A "good" odor should indicate a beneficial food or ambiance, whereas a "bad" odor, by contrast, suggests a danger or nuisance.

A variety of odors, specific to the given social ecologies and ambiances, continuously accompany us in our movements throughout the day.<sup>3</sup> From one moment or place to the next, we traverse multiple layers of odors: odors of clothing, sheets, and laundry; odors of the home and its different rooms, the cellar, the attic, the kitchen; odors emanating from the garden, the street, stores, public places, and so on. Add to these all of the other odors encountered over the course of a day: bathroom products, coffee, chocolate, toast, tobacco, pots simmering on the stove, flowers placed on tables, etc. Every region also possesses its own odors linked to its vegetation, seasons, animals, or local industries that infuse the surrounding space with agreeable or noxious smells. There is the odor of the coast, of sea air, of fish, the port, mud, seaweed, and sand, or of the mountains, the forest, the prairie and so on. There are seasonal variations of odors emanating from trees, fruits, flowers, and places, but also the odors of rain and wet earth, the dry grasses of summer, and the fields, whose odors vary according to different work cycles throughout the year. There are olfactory landscapes, "smellscapes" (Porteus 1990) that change with the seasons and the meteorological conditions. Roubin speaks of a "preferential olfactory field" designating "waves of odorific incitations dependent on the activities rooted in a place and giving rise to ways of doing things and forms of sensitivity that people maintain at the heart of their lifestyle" (Roubin 1989: 185 sq.).



In addition to the odors of cooking that sometimes permeate the home, adding scents to the spaces of daily life, to the different rooms of the house, in particular, is common in many societies: incense sticks, Papier d'Arménie, aromatics, dried herbs, powdered sugar thrown into the chimney that releases an odor of caramel. Japanese homes emit scents of aromatic woods or incense. Assimilated in the fifteenth century to the words of Buddha, scented, as with everything related to him, the Japanese “listen” to diffuse odors that evoke the rhythm of the seasons or particular ambiances. These provide a feeling of relaxation, well-being, and olfactory pleasure, and they unite the individuals present in a shared and pleasing atmosphere. Varieties of incense have increased from 400 during the Meiji period (1868–1912) to 600 today, and their popularity continues to grow. *Kōdō*, a traditional aesthetic practice, unites a dozen people under the auspices of a master of ceremonies and his assistant. The actions and gestures of the participants are carefully coded. Each person “listens” to different incenses and tries to identify them. Sylvie Guichard-Anguis describes a gathering in Kyōto, which had as its theme the season’s cold. “Three different incenses evoked frost, snow and ice. Each participant smelled them and then mixed them with a fourth: the moon” (1998: 141). Incense burners were then presented in random order to the participants who were to identify each incense and write their names in calligraphy on a paper intended for this purpose.

## Learning to Discriminate Odors

Young children experience no repulsion to their excrement and urine. Slowly, under the pressure of education and imitation, they interiorize the feeling of disgust and begin to also despise bodily odors, especially those of others. Around the age of four or five, they begin to reproduce their elders’ admonitions, but, in the process of learning, they still delight in using forbidden terms related to bodily functions that adults consider repugnant. Exuberant references to farting abound. The obscene folklore of children studied by Claude Gaignebet (1980) makes numerous references to scatological odors that fill adults with disgust in public, but significantly much less when they are alone or when it involves their own odors. *Stercus cuique suum bene olet*—“Every man likes the smell of his own dung,” recalls Montaigne (1958: 709).<sup>4</sup>

Certain odors have no rightful place in society, even if they are accepted for the self without trouble. Children frankly remind us of this with their excremental play. They remain on the threshold of the norms of disgust, distancing themselves while also being very concerned about them. But they resist for a long time before giving in to repression. “Children, indeed, are proud of their own excretions and make use of them to help in asserting themselves against adults,” writes Freud in his preface to Bourke’s work on scatological rites (1974: 336).

Under the influence of its upbringing, the child's coprophilic instincts and inclinations gradually succumb to repression; it learns to keep them secret, be ashamed of them and feel disgust at their objects. Strictly speaking, however, the disgust never goes so far as to apply to a child's own excretions, but is content with repudiating them when they are the products of other people. (1974: 336)

This learning to understand the meaning of bodily excretions and our expected conduct when confronted with them, reveals that while disgust might be universal in its form, it is not so in its content.

We imagine that it is the stink of excrement that makes us feel sick. But would it stink if we had not thought it was disgusting in the first place? We do not take long to forget what trouble we go to to pass on to our children the aversions that make us what we are, which make us human beings to begin with. (Bataille 1986: 58)

Children, growing up in a particular social and cultural context, receive an olfactory education specific to the values of their group. This education not only focuses on distinctions between "good" and "bad" odors but also offers a meticulous initiation into a world of meanings. Among the Umeda, hunters develop a keen ability to recognize the presence of wild pigs and even identify their age from their spoor. This olfactory sensitivity is acquired by the young as they follow their elders in the jungle. They also learn to identify from afar the slightest odor of smoke coming from an encampment (Gell 1977: 126).

## Becoming a "Nose"

The discrimination of odors is sometimes part of an overall ecology, as among the Umeda, or needed to practice a particular profession. The virtuosity of perfumers is a result of their having learned to use smell and their other senses for professional purposes over the course of a long personal and professional training. With advances in chemistry, perfume-making became an art in the nineteenth century. Huysmans' 1884 depiction of the character Des Esseintes is illustrative of this new breed of creators:

For years now he had been an expert in the science of perfumes; he maintained that the sense of smell could procure pleasures equal to those obtained through sight or hearing, each of the senses being capable, by virtue of a natural aptitude supplemented by an erudite education, of perceiving new impressions, magnifying these tenfold and co-ordinating them to compose the whole that constitutes a work of art. After all, he argued, it was no more abnormal to have an art that consisted of picking out odorous fluids than it was to have other arts based on a selection of

sound waves or the impact of variously coloured rays on the retina of the eye [...] In short, the artist in perfumery completes the original natural odour, which, so to speak, he cuts and mounts as a jeweller improves and brings out the water of a precious stone. (2003: 105, 106)

A perfume combines dozens of ingredients and fixatives that nuance its duration and intensity, but each ingredient only acquires meaning by blending into a whole that modifies its individual qualities. Its creation belongs to the art of composition, to a volatile form of musicality. While chefs devote themselves to bringing out the best taste of foods, inventors of perfume seek olfactory assonances that best reflect their intention in the moment. They combine ingredients until the desired note is obtained. “In intuitively choosing the thirty or fifty elements and their proportion so that the notes, affinities, intensities, moments of effectiveness or duration intermingle harmoniously in the sought-after effect,” the creator draws on his or her memory, experience, and imagination (Roudnitska 1977: 123). From a range of approximations, perfume makers are able to organize their impressions and make effective choices in creating their compositions.

Roudnitska provides a few examples that would elude ordinary individuals’ olfactory intuition: “In a certain essence of rose, we might find a freshness, a floral or heady quality, fruity (or acidic) notes, rising to a delicate smoothness or a young, peppery pungency. It will be ethereal or heavy, and so on” (1980: 27). While the ordinary experience of odors is somewhat limited, difficult to characterize other than using a moralistic vocabulary or comparisons to objects, perfumers have a meticulous knowledge of thousands of odors (3,000 synthetic odors and around 150 natural essences) that constitute the keyboard on which they compose their perfumes, drawing on a broad range of raw materials whose particular arrangement, using a few elements, results in a unique formula. In the presence of an odor or another perfume, they can identify its ingredients and their percentage. Edmond Roudnitska confesses his humility, in spite of his fame, when faced with the plurality of choices in fabricating a perfume: “When faced with the thousands of possible combinations of our hundreds or even thousands of usable ingredients, one wonders if the practical experience of the composer of this complex interplay of combinations is not inadequate, even after a long and accomplished career” (1980: 174). Mastering fragrances just as cooks master flavors or musicians master sounds, perfumers are the aesthetes of smell. The top notes are the first to be perceived, bold but disappearing quickly. The middle notes appear next, giving the perfume its body. The base notes provide the perfume’s trail and reinforce the middle notes (Vignaud 1982: 158). An olfactory composition employs a series of notes, simultaneously or successively, which fade out, overlap and blend in a variety of arrangements.

Learning to become a “nose,” that is to say, a perfumer, is a long-term undertaking. Lucienne Roubin described in the 1980s the training of the student-perfumers of Grasse. The initiation begins at a very young age for

most of them, coming from families already engaged in the profession. The parents teach their children to recognize and memorize odors. But these children also live in an environment that is full of odors, and they often visit the laboratories where the perfumes are fabricated. They acquire there a refined olfactory discrimination. "There is a calling for people born in Grasse because of the multitude of odors here," says a local perfumer (Roubin 1989: 171). Perfumers integrate their own unique vocabulary, grammar, and style. The training process begins by developing a solid olfactory memory to be able to quickly identify a vast range of odors. It involves a tireless memorization, repeated countless times in order to achieve a flawless mastery of odorous substances. Exercises also focus on combining odors to give them the desired perfumed tonality, or, inversely, to break down ingredients that are part of the formula.

Over the course of these experiments and through a series of deductive operations, the perfumer acquires a mental representation of various odorous substances. Drawing on these non-linear images, perfumers establish their own personal scale of scents, and are able, from this, to evoke a given odor even in the absence of the corresponding sensation. (Roudnitska 1980: 16)

Far from the common view that discredits it, olfaction is a professional memory of choice in many lines of work seemingly removed from this sensory register: flavorists, bacteriologists, bakers, cheesemakers, and so on. Many professionals find in odor the key to putting their expertise into practice. However its refinement is not just a matter of formal training. Learning to manipulate odors develops over time through accumulated experience (Candau 2000, 2002).

Just as a wine merchant can recognize a vintage from the taste of a single drop; just as a hop-dealer, the moment he sniffs at a sack, can fix the precise value of its contents; just as a Chinese trader can tell at once the place of origin of the teas he has to examine, can say in what estate in the Bohea hills or in what Buddhist monastery each sample was grown [...], so Des Esseintes, after one brief sniff at a scent, could promptly detail the amounts of its constituents, explain the psychology of its composition, perhaps even give the name of the artist who created it and marked it with the personal stamp of his style. (Huysmans 2003: 108)

Certain professions, other than of course perfumers and enologists, find in odor a kind of professional gauge. Thus for cooks, smell is a vector for judging the quality of ingredients, or the desired doneness of a dish. Some cooks compare odors to "musical notes." Others maintain control over their assistants' work by perceiving the odors of an exceeded cooking time. They immediately smell the undesirable odors coming from an improperly cooked

dish or an ingredient of poor quality. The adequate creation of a dish does not only depend on its visual presentation but also on the aromas it gives off. The choice of ingredients also benefits from an olfactory competence refined by experience. A good cook can smell the degree of freshness in a piece of seafood, fish, meat, fruit, or vegetable (Candau 2002: 99, 100). Cooks freely admit to their purely intuitive use of smell. They “smell out” the essential elements for the successful preparation of their dishes, but they fail to name with precision the perceived odors. “One knows by smelling, but it is difficult to describe” (101).

Odor’s function as a clue in certain circumstances is equally precious for forensic specialists, even though this knowledge from experience is hardly part of their university education. Judging from olfactory information emanating from the corpse, certain experts can immediately recognize whether the person had been drinking and what, whether he or she had taken drugs, the time and possible causes of death, and so on. Of course, this olfactory competence must be confirmed by the concrete evidence supplied by the autopsy. It is also not uniformly mastered across the profession. Certain forensic experts barely develop it or do not trust it as a reliable source.

## Olfactory Memory

Vision, taste, touch, and hearing are all purveyors of memory, but odor possesses a rare evocative power. In spite of our efforts, however, we cannot willfully call an odor to mind. We can only establish a visual image. On the other hand, we can be struck by an odor unexpectedly, even contained in a bottle or at a turn in our path, which transports us far in time. Even the aroma of a modest sliver of bread possesses the power to transport us to a moment of our childhood. A patient in a coma reacts suddenly to an odor of oranges, his nose following a card scented with its odor, tears welling up in his eyes. A few hours later, he dies in peace, having been reacquainted with a familiar odor from his Guyanese village. Marie-Thérèse Esneault recounts the case of another patient being treated with relaxation techniques in the intensive care unit of a prison. This man asked her to bring him cards scented of lilac, which he placed next to his pillow. Over his last weeks of life, he clung to this odor. “I ended up leaving a small bottle of the solution in his room so that the nurses could from time to time soak the card again, exactly as though replacing an intravenous infusion bottle. He fed in some way off this odor, and, right up until the last moment, his cell was infused with the scent of lilacs” (Gaulier and Esneault 2002: 94).

Another patient asked Esneault one day for a flask of mint.

Imagine my surprise when he started crying and said: “I see mint fields as far as the eye can see. It goes way back. In Algeria, it’s my mother, the tea.” It was possible to return to this inner place so deeply buried and

repressed. The following week he was beaming, telling me that he was getting out of the hospital though the doctors had told me he had at least another three months there. (Gaulier and Esneault 2002: 135)

The man had become convinced that each inhalation of the mint odor was strengthening his weak lungs. Each injection of memory rekindled his will to live.

The above examples are taken from Esneault's book *Odeurs prisonnières*, cowritten with an inmate of the penitentiary hospital of Fresnes. It describes her work undertaken at the hospital involving the use of scented cards. The cards were passed from one nose to another, provoking emotions, joy, cries of surprise, reawakened memories, self-expression, and exchange. The activity provided a sensory escape for men deprived of pleasant stimuli, their bodies under wraps, confined to odors of disinfectants, humidity, urine, and tobacco. Opening different bottles immediately evoked for Michel Gaulier certain places and moments from his past. "Our cell has been transformed into a lighthouse ever since I got this little card infused with sea odors. Not a moment goes by where, with a sudden change, opening a window, say, the sea mist isn't wafting over us, much to our surprise" (Gaulier and Esneault 2002: 59). In hindsight, he writes: "If I were to sum up what came back to my memory most often, it was mostly childhood memories, people I was very close to (my parents), places and situations that marked this or that moment and with a lot of details" (Gaulier and Esneault 2002: 123).

Olfactory memory is a long-term affair, a trace of history and emotion brought back to life by circumstances. Always imbued with emotion, odor allows us to travel through time, extract fragments of our lives that would otherwise be forgotten. It solicits memory when associated, whether up close or from afar, with an event of individual history, even if we sometimes have to reflect on it to remember precise circumstances. It is an incision in time. It arouses immediate feelings of happiness or sadness, depending on the tone of the memories. Contained in a flask or associated with a given object or place, it becomes an instrument of remembering. In a novel by Carson McCullers, the character Biff seldom thinks of his wife who died several months past. The memory of her is resuscitated when he opens a bottle of perfume that she wore.

The scent made him stiffen [...] He was stunned by the memories brought to him with the perfume, not because of their clarity, but because they gathered together the whole long span of years [...] He felt in him each minute that he had lived with her [...] But often he would uncork the bottle of Agua Florida and touch the stopper to the lobes of his ears or to his wrists. The smell mingled with his slow ruminations. The sense of the past grew in him. Memories built themselves with almost architectural order. (2000: 224, 225)

Odor accesses moments in time through individual decision. It can deny absence or death, or summon ghosts from the past.

With our eyes closed, our ears stopped, feet and hands bound, lips sealed, we can still identify, years later and from a thousand other smells, the undergrowth of such and such a place in a particular season at sunset, just before a rain storm, or the room where feed corn was kept, or cooked prunes in September, or a woman. (Serres 2009: 169–170)

Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past* is built upon infinitesimal sensations whose revelations are an endless source of memories:

But when from a long-distant past nothing subsists, after the people are dead, after the things are broken and scattered, taste and smell alone, more fragile but more enduring, more unsubstantial, more persistent, more faithful, remain poised a long time, like souls, remembering, waiting, hoping, amid the ruins of all the rest; and bear unflinchingly, in the tiny and almost impalpable drop of their essence, the vast structure of recollection. (1982a: 50)

## World Scents (Osmologies)

Odor sometimes serves culturally to conceive the world, to act on it. Instead of a “vision” of the world, an “olfaction” of the world thus applies, an osmology rather than a cosmology. In olfactively oriented cultures, in contrast to the many others that privilege vision, the flesh of the universe emits a plurality of odors over which individuals try to exert control. For the Umeda of New Guinea, odor is a principle that acts on the world. Odors emanating from magic preparations possess unique powers. *Oktesap* is a perfume worn in a sachet around the neck whose aroma attracts wild pigs to the hunter. It is believed that this soft odor worn by hunters throughout the day is also active at night. By nourishing the hunter's dreams, the perfume brings him luck. On the threshold between worlds, it works just as well on dreams as on daytime activities. Its use provides the individual and his entourage “less a sign of good fortune or happiness or the sweet life, than a condition for that life” (Gell 1977: 33).

For the Ongee of the Andaman Islands in the Bay of Bengal (Classen 1993b: 125 sq.; Classen et al. 1994: 152 sq.), odor is a source of identification and an organizing principle of social life. It causes and relieves pain, exercises control over life and death. Individuals are composed of odors, the bones being their material form. The maturation process represents an olfactory growth. The gradual movement of odor through children's bones and teeth gives life to their bodies by crystallizing matter. The appearance of teeth marks their accession to humanity as conceived by the Ongee. Among the elderly, odor gradually declines, causing illnesses, increased fragility of bones, and especially the loss of teeth. The elderly die when their supply is no longer sufficient. They then become spirits, odorless beings who may

rebegin the cycle of odor, of life through another birth. Death signals the irreversible depletion of an individual's personal odor or its absorption by a spirit (*tomya*). This inhalation, if it causes someone's death, simultaneously gives birth to a spirit. And if a spirit is absorbed by a woman, it fertilizes a human soon to be born. The odor condensed within the self is in this sense the measure of a person's state of health—the common salutation “how are you?” translates locally as “how is your nose?” When people respond that they feel “heavy,” they approach the person who inquired and rub their nose on their cheek so as to relieve themselves somewhat of this surplus of odor that causes a feeling of heaviness.

Collective life brings personal odors together and prevents individuals from being too easily inhaled by a spirit and therefore vulnerable to sickness or death. Certain techniques contribute to assuring mutual protection. When in movement, everyone stays in the trail of fumes of the preceding person, who carries a piece of burning wood. This parade requires the Ongee to keep their campfire going at all times. Clay paintings on the body effectively retain personal odors in their mesh. After a meal of meat, the Ongee also avoid propagating the animal's odor, which might alert fellow creatures in the jungle that one of their own has been killed and eaten.

When people are sleeping, their spirits, which reside in the bones, gather all of the odors emitted throughout the day and bring them back into the body to ensure their continued existence. Illness reflects a loss or increase in the quality of odor embodied by an individual. Heat diminishes its quality. It dissolves the solidified odor that constitutes the skeleton, and the individual loses weight, unless this hemorrhaging is countered by clay drawings on the skin that retain the odor. Cold freezes it, with equally detrimental results. Treatment then consists in warming the patient. An injury causes a loss of the odor contained in the bones. The wound is thus coated in white chalk to generate a sensation of cold and contain the olfactory leakage. These therapies seek to restore the circulation of odors between individuals and the world.

The Ongee bury their dead, but on the first full moon they exhume the corpse, remove the jawbone and conceal it under the other bones. The jaw, with the teeth still inside, is dangerous because it conserves the personal odor, especially the odor of meats that have been chewed in the past. The removal of this jawbone renders harmless the spirit of the dead person, no longer able to chew and more likely, from then on, to cooperate with the living. The returning of the bones to the encampment signals the end of mourning. Friends and family of the deceased tie dried plants around the bones and paint them with clay to cool them and preserve their odors. Kept in a basket, the odoriferous bones provide a way for people to communicate with their ancestors if their aid is required, to help, for example, treat someone who is sick.

The ancestors' cooperation is also solicited during initiation rites, because the young initiates have to undertake a voyage into the spirit world. On this occasion, in sharp contrast to customary practice, the young



Ongee attract the attention of spirits by dispersing their odor. The entire group takes part in this deliberate effusion. Clay paintings are temporarily erased, and baskets of roasted meat are suspended from tree branches. Only married men make this voyage into the other world. Women help them by inhaling their odor to draw it out and by massaging them to push the odor to the lower part of the body to lighten their spirit. Over the course of two days, lying inanimate on the ground, the initiate learns to understand the spirit world and, in particular, how to appease the spirits. Upon the men's return, women massage them and cool down their bodies to reestablish the equilibrium of odors. The spirit world is not entirely separate from the human world. A web of relations, notably olfactory relations, unites them, but is carefully delimited by rites. Both universes are dependent on one another. For the Ongee, the world is breathing, inhaling, and exhaling, made up of crystallized and floating odors animated by an endless movement that the culture seeks to control. The correct execution of rites ensures the correct circulation of odors and the maintenance of the cosmos.

The Dassanech of southwest Ethiopia form a cultural community that is divided into two groups—herdsmen and fishermen. Their relationship is hierarchical but complementary. Social organization is founded on pastoral values, making the fishing community dependent and subaltern. The world order in which they live is an osmology. It is the odors attributed to different members of the group, in relation to their daily occupations, that determine overall social relationships (Almagor 1987). However individuals as such do not smell, or at least they do not emit any inherent negative or positive odor. It is the tasks they perform that define them and cause them to smell. Herdsmen perceive fishermen as giving off bad odors, and when they approach their huts, they hold their noses, fearing the foul odors will contaminate their livestock or jeopardize the fertility of their herd. Many other peoples live in these regions, but their odor is perceived as good. Only the fishermen's odor is regarded as harmful and causes disgust. Good odor is culturally associated with vitality, creation; bad odor with the gradual corruption of elements. For herdsmen, their cows indeed embody fertility, the ceaseless movement of nature—they emit a “good” odor. They are not only considered a gift from God but also the very foundation of their existence. Cows' odor is deemed so beneficial that people wash their hands in their urine, smear cow dung or ghee (clarified butter) on their shoulders, head, and hair, and on the chests of their nubile daughters to encourage fertility. The odor of ghee also serves to attract men. It is a powerful perfume of love (Almagor 1987: 109).

In this context, where the center of the world's gravity is pastoral, the fish is an antithetical creature. For the Dassanech, cows use odor to orient themselves in the herd, care for their calves, for the bull to sniff the cow before servicing her. The fish is regarded as lacking sexual organs, lacking olfactory qualities, and therefore, in this vision of the world, lacking sexuality. It belongs to the realm of immobility and stagnation and is not

part of the vitality of the world. Fish give off bad odors, and those who spend their lives fishing are affected by this. This odor of death can symbolically alter the cattle's fertility and thus necessitates carefully ritualizing relations between the two groups. According to the same cultural logic, the vaginas of menopausal women are thought to smell of fish. Infertility smells bad.

The fact that fishermen spend many hours in the waters of rivers and lakes makes no difference. Odor is a question of cultural judgment. It is the social values that emit bad odors not the men contaminated by their tasks. Fishermen smell because of their unfortunate association with an organism of ambiguous status, frozen in a present without end. Steeped in pastoral values, the fishermen themselves regret their odor and prefer that of the herds. These olfactory and social distinctions do not make the Dassanech culture a dualistic society. Numerous exchanges take place between the two groups but always under the aegis of rituals that limit possible threats.

The Suyá of the Mato Grosso region of Brazil distinguish a hierarchy of odors based on the values of adult male society. A man is, in effect, considered a mix of odors or without odor. He embodies the "good" odor of social relations, of culture, in contrast to other odor categories. The elderly are believed to emit an acrid odor, young boys and girls, a strong odor, and women, an even stronger odor. The olfactory classes are ordered in favor of men, who incarnate social and olfactory perfection, while young boys are not fully developed, still close to nature, and women, immersed in the biological world of periods and pregnancy, embody a certain disorder. Old women have lost their very strong odor because they are no longer fertile or attracting men. They have ceased to be a disruptive force in the community. Young boys who have completed their rite of passage into manhood lose their entire odor, in contrast to girls, for whom the onset of puberty brings with it symbolically a "very strong odor." The chief of the community also harbors a "very strong odor." But his status distinguishes him from ordinary men. His spirit, residing in the heart of specific plants and animals, makes him closer to nature, thus "capable of disturbing the ideal of social uniformity" (Classen 1993b: 86).

Death also has an odor other than putrefaction, as the Javanese community of Surakarta reminds us. In this society, people in mourning adopt an attitude of detachment (*iklas*). The deceased are revived by God. They have not disappeared but are elsewhere in another world, where they continue to watch over their friends and family. A display of too much emotion by their loved ones overwhelms them. They have to pursue their journey in the afterlife without being held back, even in the memory of their loved ones. The state of being *iklas* manifests a rupture of memory with the deceased. The master of ceremonies recounts episodes of the deceased's past, detaching them from friends and family, as though speaking of another person. Photographs are taken of the corpse, fixing not the memory of the deceased but his or her definitive state, abolishing any history or life events. This image must be dissociated from any reference to the deceased, kept as

an image frozen in time. The decomposing body, for its part, is fated to the passage of time, to destruction. The corpse's odor breaks this accord and alters the body's image by returning it to temporality. It is considered contagious and must be suppressed in order to ensure the deceased's positive petrification but also to protect loved ones from any threat of death. The stench of the degrading body is dispelled with a foul-smelling incense that is supposed to erase its memory (Siegel 1983).

Among the Canaque of New Caledonia, the "odor of life" and the "odor of death" distinguish "human beings, who live a positive life, from those who continue their existence in a negative state" (Leenhardt 1979: 50). The "odor of death" is

not made exclusively of the unpleasant smells of putrefaction but of those which are exuded by dry bones or anything which is irremediably deprived of life. It is the odor of the skeleton abandoned on the mountain, called "god's bones." It is the odor of the defunct and the gods. It remains attached to them, for in the speeches given by the organizer of the *pilou* festival at the end of mourning, three or four years after their death, the *baos* are still called "the people with a rancid odor." (Leenhardt 1979: 48)

And the sojourn of the dead is in fact infused with this odor. The deceased are marked by an odor that is more or less strong relative to the length of time that has passed since their death. In making their way to the world of the dead, the same world that the gods inhabit, they conserve traces of their "life odor." These odors disturb the gods who therefore provide them with a certain food that will transform their olfactory status.

On the other hand, a little further north in the Solomon Islands, there is no talk of the "odor of death," and it is not banished.

If they use scented herbs—citronella or some other plant—the thought is not to dispel pestilence but to secure herbs prized by the defunct that will propitiate them. In the Solomons, archers hang such herbs down their backs, to avoid being surprised from behind. The traveller who wants to descend into Hades and escape detection by the gods, who might suspect him of being a living person, does not smear himself with putrid water as in the New Hebrides, but with the juice of one of the herbs the gods love. (Leenhardt 1979: 49)

For the Serer-Ndut of Senegal, individuals possess two life essences, each defined by a specific odor. The first is physical and bears the odor of the body proper, while the second is spiritual and belongs to the immortal soul. The latter leaves the individual right before death but also allows seers to recognize an ancestor incarnated in newborn child or determine an appropriate course of treatment for certain illnesses (Dupire 1987: 6). A particular funerary rite attests to the formidable power of this "odor of the soul."

The stretcher-bearers who transport the corpses of the elderly place them on the doorstep and have the young children and young women of the dwelling step over the body three times. This is done out of fear that the deceased will try to bring the young into the afterlife to keep them company, and the ritual creates this illusion by making their souls, which are hovering around the corpse, “smell” the “odors of the souls” of their terrestrial companions. They apologize for this deception by whispering: “Forgive us, they are accompanying you.” (Dupire 1987: 12)

In these cases, we see how odor has the power to socially and culturally organize key dimensions of collective existence.

## The Odor of the Self

All human beings emit an odor, regardless of the way they wash or perfume themselves, a unique odor that comes from the skin and undoubtedly interferes in their exchanges with others. Though it is subject to modulations over the course of a day or a lifetime, a basic formula remains, just as a face changes but remains distinct. Its differences are variations on a single theme. Each person’s odor is a signature in space. Like the lines on the palms of their hands, this olfactory trace belongs to them alone. Continuously immersed in their own odor, people are unaware of its tone. Their personal odors do not bother them as much as others’ odors do. As Nikos Kazantzakis recalls from his past,

Every person had his distinctive odor for me when I was two or three years old. Before raising my eyes to see him, I recognized him by the smell he emitted. My mother smelled one way, my father another; each uncle had his special odor, as did each woman of the neighborhood. When someone took me in his or her arms, it was always because of his smell that I either loved him or began to kick and reject him. In time this power evaporated. The various smells blended; everyone plunged into the same stink of sweat, tobacco, and benzene. (1965: 46)

Individuals who are born blind sometimes have a hyperacute sense of smell that allows them to identify their interlocutors. Helen Keller, having only two senses at her disposal, touch and smell, was able to recognize individuals by their personal odor. She even developed a sort of characterology based on the olfactory information that she perceived: “Sometimes,” she says,

it happens that I meet with people who have no distinctive, individual odour: I rarely find them animated and agreeable. On the other hand, those persons whose odour is very marked often have a great deal of life, energy and intelligence. The exhalations of men are generally stronger and more individual than those of women. In the perfume of

young people, there is something elementary, something that is akin to fire, hurricane and the tide of the sea. One smells in it the pulsations of force and of the desire of life. I should like to know whether others have observed, as I have, that all little children have the same perfume, a pure, simple perfume, indescribable like their personality which has not yet awakened. It is not until the age of six or seven that they begin to have a perceptibly individual perfume. This develops and ripens with their physical and intellectual forces. (cited in Villey 1930: 271, 272)

Pierre Henri, in his earlier writings on another sensory universe,<sup>5</sup> describes how the blind are able to deduce information from olfactory emanations because they are accustomed to them:

His nose is terribly indiscreet: it informs itself about the other's health (odors of lozenges, potions, bandages), culinary tastes (spices, coffee, too much wine, liqueur), clothing (furs or wools imbued with the scent of mothballs, leather gloves, rubberized garments), or other features (perfumes, tobacco), the person's attention to or negligence of hygiene, profession (odors of sawdust, plaster, pharmaceutical products, lube oil), etc. (Henri 1958: 46)

Of course, not all blind people possess an olfactory sense developed to this pitch. As with touch and hearing, a person has to refine their capacities and, over time, establish a solid knowledge of the world through these sensory intermediaries. But not all make this effort, which, for some, begins at a very young age due to the encouragement of parents, teachers, relatives, and especially the child's desire to escape his or her isolation and dependence. The exceptional ability to discriminate odors is not the privilege of all blind people but only of some (Ferdenzi et al. 2004: 126 sq.).

Helen Keller's singular ability is echoed in the experience of a young patient of Oliver Sacks. Due to the secondary effects of the drugs he was taking, the young man developed an astonishing ability to decode the world through odors. He could recognize his friends or other patients of the clinic by their odor. He could also smell their emotions: fear, contentment, sexuality. Like the main character in Patrick Süskind's novel *Perfume*, he came to know the "olfactory physiognomy" of each individual he encountered, of every place, every shop. He sometimes thought that something "wasn't" really real until [he] felt it and smelt it" (Sacks 1998: 157). But after three weeks his smell returned to normal, leaving him with a sense of regret: "I see now what we give up in being civilised and human" (Sacks 1998: 157). Villey also recounts the story of a blind woman who never failed to identify her visitors: "Her sense of smell is so subtle that by it she recognises persons before she has had time to touch them. It seems as though each individual had a special odour, a distinctive sign, just as each flower has its own perfume" (1930: 90).

A man, a woman, or an object sometimes leaves an olfactory trace in space or on a fabric, as Montaigne observes with uncustomary zeal:

Whatever the odor is, it is a marvel how it clings to me and how apt my skin is to imbibe it. He who complains of nature that she has left man without an instrument to convey smells to his nose is wrong, for they convey themselves. But in my particular case my mustache, which is thick, performs that service. If I bring my gloves or my handkerchief near it, the smell will stay there a whole day. It betrays the place I come from. The close kisses of youth, savory, greedy, and sticky, once used to adhere to it and stay there for several hours after. (1958: 228)

A room sometimes conserves the invisible presence of individuals who have just left, their odor lingering in the space: a perfume, an odor of tobacco, soap, sweat, or anxiety. This allusive memory, though impalpable, is an invaluable clue for police investigators. It is an act of accusation at the scene of the crime, an unequivocal sign of a particular individual's recent presence. The perfume of the lady in black is unmistakable.

Research conducted on children has demonstrated the ease with which they identify their mother's odor. Sensing the odor of the maternal breast, newborns turn their heads toward it and sometimes assume the typical posture of breastfeeding, with their bent arms resting on the breast and their fists closed (Schaal 1995). Children between twenty-seven and thirty-six months old prompted to choose between two sweaters of the same shape and color, one of which was worn by their mother, recognized the latter seven times out of ten. When infants were presented with the smell of this sweater in a nursery, it was found to have a calming and soothing effect on their behavior: children who were unhappy or aggressive became calm, sometimes stretching out on the fabric, hugging it, putting it in their mouths. If they had been refusing to eat, they regained their appetites. By virtue of its odor, the sweater becomes a transitional object, a symbolic substitute for the mother's presence, a calming motif. The child spontaneously says to the daycare worker offering the sweater: "It smells good, it smells like mommy." Likewise, when mothers were asked to choose between three undershirts, one of which had been worn by their ten-day-old baby, they were rarely mistaken, after several tries. However, patterns of previous contact had a decisive influence: mothers who had established a relationship of emotional proximity with their children were almost never wrong, unlike mothers who kept their children at more of a distance.

Infants who have spent a long time in another person's arms (the nanny, a relative, etc.) have a change in odor that bothers some mothers, who hasten to wash them, perfume them, change their cloths, or shower them with extra affection to re-create the lost odor (Schaal 2003: 63). Odor is an indication of the quality of exchange, a shared pleasure, a point of reference, but if contact is not established, a gap remains. This olfactory distance is reflected in the French expression *Je ne le sens pas*, literally, "I don't smell

him,” meaning “I don’t like or I can’t relate to him.” Mothers who are less attached to their children have difficulty identifying their odor. The unpleasant emanations of newborns who are sick sometimes even lead their mothers to reject them.

The subject’s identification with an olfactory imprint reaches its peak among certain patients who, alienated from their environment and experiencing a real or imagined rejection by others, a loss of personal value, develop a delusional sense of their own odor and become convinced they emit noxious smells. They rightly or wrongly perceive signs of others’ discomfort in their presence, and they are convinced that, in spite of their neighbors’ discretion, others can smell their stench but refrain from saying so to avoid hurting their feelings. The delusion that foul odors are emanating from them disrupts their relation to the world. It provides imaginary content for a more or less conscious feeling of shame, an inability to project themselves into the future due to a negative self-image (Tellenbach 1983: 106 sq.)

## Erotic Odors

In amorous relationships, the exchange of odors is part of the exchange between bodies. Intimacy allows bodies to intermingle without the protection of interaction rituals that maintain distance. It implies an enjoyable resonance of the couple’s mutual odors. Discomfort with the other’s odor is a serious obstacle to affection. Havelock Ellis cites several pages of Casanova affirming his delight in the odor of women he had known: “I have always found sweet the odor of the woman I have loved [...] There is something in the air of the bedroom of the woman one loves, something so intimate, so balsamic, such voluptuous emanations, that if a lover had to choose between Heaven and this place of delight his hesitation would not last for a moment” (Ellis 1905: 78).<sup>6</sup> Personal odor is an ingredient of desire in that it repels or attracts. In *War and Peace*, Count Pyotr decides to marry Princess Yelena after having smelled her odor at a ball. Once again, odor is perceived as an emanation of interiority, proof of a meeting of minds that accentuates the ardor of the physical relation.

Love or sexual attraction thrives on the loved odor of the other, just as hate is fueled by the other’s real or imagined bad odor. A mother rejects the child whose odor she does not recognize. Lovers whose odor does not agree risk separating. Unpleasant odors are a continual reminder of a basic underlying disharmony.

The *Song of Songs* attributed to King Solomon, the Shulamite’s lover, depicts perfume as an erotic celebration, an olfactory intoxication that adds its sensual note to the sensory music of intermingled bodies. Whether it is his odor: “Pleasing is the fragrance of your perfumes; your name is like perfume poured out (1:3) [...] My beloved is to me a sachet of myrrh resting between my breasts (1:13) [...] His cheeks are like beds of spice yielding perfume. His

lips are like lilies dripping with myrrh” (5:13), or that of his companion: “and the fragrance of your perfume more than any spice! [...] Your plants are an orchard of pomegranates with choice fruits, with henna and nard, nard and saffron, calamus and cinnamon, with every kind of incense tree, with myrrh and aloes and all the finest spices” (4:10–15).

When the poet introduces King Solomon in the story, he is described as “coming up from the wilderness like a column of smoke, perfumed with myrrh and incense made from all the spices of the merchant” (3:6). The *Song of Songs* is a lovesong to a flamboyant eroticism, a celebration of the privileged relationship of a people to its God or an anticipation for others of their spiritual union with Christ. The diffusion of perfumes or aromatics and their power of attraction extend to both carnal and spiritual relations. “I have perfumed my bed with myrrh, aloes and cinnamon,” says the adulteress in *Proverbs* (7:17). People did not make use of the same products in everyday life, but fragrant oils and perfumes, as the *Song of Songs* reminds us, were commonly used to seduce a lover, welcome visitors, or anoint the dead. Jerusalem was a center of perfumery in antiquity. The *Song of Songs* calls it a “column of incense.”

Certain odors or perfumes are associated with enhancing erotic powers. Frank Beach describes a south-western Pacific society’s use of an aphrodisiac based on an analogy between the odor of fish and the vagina:

Men use a red ground cherry attached to the leader of a trolling line to attract fish. After having caught a fish in this way, the ground cherry is believed to have power to attract women in the same way that it attracted fish. Their vaginas, like the elusive fish, will be attracted to the possessor of the ground cherry [...] Other odors are also thought to be seductive. Most potent of these is a very musky aromatic leaf worn only by men when they dance, and another is a somewhat astringent odor of coconut oil mixed with turmeric. Women rub this mixture into their hair on festive occasions. (1965: 184)

Among the Yaka, notes René Devish, sexual attraction is based less on games of touch than on exchanges of odors:

Olfaction and sexual appetite, which is compared to hunger, are considered to be manifestations of the vital flow (*mooyi*) [...] In the amorous encounter, the sense of smell alternatively plays the roles of source and witness to the sexual desire of the partner. The term for erotic transport, *-nyuukisana*, translates literally, “to cause to mutually scent the odor that one excites because of the other.” (Devisch 1993: 135)

An insurmountable disagreement between partners is explained as “an incompatibility of odors” (Devisch 1993: 135). The incestuous person “chokes down the foam of his own fermentation,” which exposes him to leprosy, and “the association with leprosy shows how much incest is



regarded as negating the very role of skin, that is, the minimal limit between consanguines” (Devisch 1993: 136). The revulsion to incest and leprosy has an olfactory basis.

## Smell as Moral Intuition

Odor is an immediate conception of the world, an instruction for responding to circumstances in which it is smelled. It is either good or bad. It is, in other words, an irrevocable judge. A natural moral quality emanates from people or things. It has a formidable power because it most often confirms a preexisting prejudice. An event can even sometimes “smell rotten” or “smell like trouble” and thus give rise to concern. Odor reveals an incontestable interiority and exposes the soul of people, events, and places. If stench is a sign of moral malignancy in the social imagination, it also marks, if it involves a social dimension, the condemnation of men or women who infringe upon the tacit rules of the community. Noise-making charivaris in certain regions of Basse- or Moyen-Provence, or in the north of Spain, were coupled with charivari practises based on smell. The deliberate use of repugnant smells signaled social disorder, a rupture with the community’s unwritten rules. If a foreigner tried to marry a local woman, if the age difference was too great between husband and wife, or if a widow or widower wanted to remarry, they were subjected to a symbolic denunciation by the village youth, who would expose them to the noxious fumes of a burning donkey carcass in front of their house. The foul odor signified a rupture in the village’s usual atmosphere. However, if the newlyweds arranged beforehand to make a substantial donation, the young people often accepted and, their prejudice being recognized, would even make an offering of fragrant flowers strewn along the streets. In certain regions of Spain, the malodorous verdict imposed on a couple who transgressed the implicit norms of the group was also marked by a “mock incensation” and, in Navarre, even included throwing garbage or smelly objects inside the couple’s home (Roubin 1989: 262, 263).

Odor is a metaphor for intimacy, a revelation of the self. Patrick Süskind provides an illustration of this in *Perfume*. The young Grenouille, at the same time that he smells the priest who takes him in, seems to appropriate his substance, as though drinking it in with every breath. Father Terrier is so horrified by this that he seems to equate his own odor with his soul, which he fears losing or having laid bare if the infant continues to examine him for too long:

It seemed to Terrier that the child saw him with its nostrils, as if it were staring intently at him, scrutinizing him, more piercingly than eyes ever do, as if it were using its nose to devour something whole, something that came from him, from Terrier, and that he could not hold back or hide it [...] He felt naked and ugly, as if someone were gaping at him while revealing nothing of himself. (Süskind 1987: 20)<sup>7</sup>

This olfactory unveiling evokes an unbearable examination of conscience—personal odor as a sensory part of the soul? In many cultures, a person's odor is equated with a sort of odor of the soul. It is inhaled and exhaled, is breathed in, and penetrates to the most intimate self, creating the feeling of giving oneself over to the other or being invaded by the other through personal odor.

In many social imaginaries, odor is associated with wisdom and intuition. We “sense” or “smell” someone's presence, thanks to a sort of “flair.” To “have a nose” for something is to have an intuition that goes beyond appearances to discern intangible signs, revealing hidden dimensions that are invisible to others. “Sniffers” observe and predict future market trends or events. Odor cannot be controlled, and is therefore assumed to be free of hypocrisy or dissimulation. It is a disclosure, a revelation. Smell is undoubtedly the sense most bound up with fantasy in perception, and even more so when irrational judgments are imposed.

## The Odor of Sanctity

The passion for perfumes and aromatics known to antiquity was prolonged to some extent in Christian practices and ceremonies,<sup>8</sup> based, as they were, on the cultural foundations of the Semitic world, in which perfumes, spices, aromatics, and ointments held an essential place. The *Gospel of Matthew* recounts the episode of the Adoration of the Magi. Already, Christ's birth takes place under the auspices of good odors. The kings bring him presents of gold, incense, and myrrh: “Gold is for the king, incense is for God, and myrrh is for the one who will have to face death, that is to say, not only the man but also, perhaps, the Redeemer” (Albert 1990: 209). Even the baby Jesus' excrement has a delectable odor. Jean-Pierre Albert cites a Catalan story from the turn of the century: “The Virgin spread baby Jesus' swaddling clothes over rosemary. It was said that through the delicate odor of the rosemary, one could still smell the excrement of the good baby Jesus” (Albert 1990: 145).

The figure of Mary Magdalene haunts the Gospels with her devoted and loving presence at Christ's side. In the *Gospels of Luke and John*, she anoints Jesus' feet with a precious perfume, a scene that earns her Judas' contempt. The latter asks why they did not sell the perfume and give the money to the poor. Jesus responds: “Leave her alone [...] It was intended that she should save this perfume for the day of my burial. You will always have the poor among you, but you will not always have me” (John 12:7–8). In a certain way, Mary Magdalene's lustration prefigures the burial. The very image of devotion, of selfless love for Christ, the young woman receives grace and forgiveness for her sins. Perfumes surpass their materiality. Their meaning is first metaphysical, elevating the soul toward God, toward contemplation of heavenly things.

In their profane uses, they are deeply rooted in seduction, eroticism, and the vanity of the flesh. Mary Magdalene, a former sinner who had used them abundantly for the worst, restores them to their first destiny, that of God.<sup>9</sup> In return, humans know the supreme happiness of divine perfumes. “Anoint Jesus, he will anoint you,” Albert pleasantly concludes (1990: 239). The virgin emits a marvelous heavenly odor that even the aromas at her death can not subdue. The angels dispense their sweet odor to the martyrs and saints to whom they appear.

Jacobus de Voragine presents Christ as an aromatic source that must be ruptured to release the good odor and dissipate the stench surrounding men since the original sin. Christ is the divine perfume exhaled on the altar of sacrifice.

Humankind was captive, wounded, foul-smelling. This is why Christ wanted to be wounded, so that the membrane could be torn open and the treasure released, the captive redeemed [...] Christ was as full of ointment as an alabaster vase, and, for this, he wanted to be cut by many wounds to release the precious unguent with which the wounded are healed [...] The body of Christ was filled with balm, as much as a storeroom, and he wanted this reserve to be opened to let the balm flow and heal the one who smells. This repository was in fact opened when a soldier pierced Christ’s side with his lance. Of the odor of this balm, it is said: I have made my perfume like cinnamon and fragrant balm. (cited in Albert 1990: 174)

The cross itself was perfumed, made from the wood of a tree of paradise. “While the king was on his couch, my nard, i.e., the holy cross, gave forth its fragrance” (De Voragine 1995b: 168). Again, according to De Voragine, when Helena arrived at the site where the Cross was buried, Judas prayed and “the earth suddenly quaked and a mist of sweet-smelling perfumes greeted their senses” (1995a: 282). The Cross’ relics continued to emit a sweet odor, that of Christ, whose former presence continued to cover it in sweet scents. Starting in the eighth century, Eastern Church liturgies introduced the custom of anointing the crosses offered to worshipers to incarnate their union with the divine.

Odor is a moral marker. It reveals an interiority, in spite of people’s ploys to hide their “true” nature. Jesus’ presence emits a sweet odor. It is the divine perfume that illuminates humankind. The “good odor of Christ” is transformed into the odor of sanctity among those whose faith is fervent and infallible. In his lifetime, Saint Philip Neri “emanated a particular odour which sterilized the sense, and destroyed the carnal appetite [...] His senses of touch and smell acted as delicate devices for sounding out a person’s interior life and probing the normally inaccessible labyrinths” (Camporesi 1994: 174). The saint even possessed the ability to smell the “stench” of sinners who came to him soiled by impure thoughts. During confessions, disturbed by the odors of the sinner, he kept a handkerchief at hand to disguise his revulsion (Camporesi 1994: 174). In Prague, a monk had the

reputation of being able to detect the degree of a woman's chastity by her odor (Ellis 1905: 64). Many saints were witnesses to similar miraculous odors: Catherine of Siena, Simeon, Dominic, Nazarius, Ambrose, and others.

In the Christian tradition, the non-corruption of the body and its indescribable odors offer a foretaste (a fore-odor) of paradise. "You will not let your holy one see decay," writes David (Acts 2:27). De Voragine's *The Golden Legend* enumerates countless stories of martyrs whose bodies emit fragrant odors after their death,<sup>10</sup> a kind of metaphysical revenge on their profane past. Their sweet smells attest to the symbolic presence of God around them. The opening of tombs and reliquaries floods those present with an olfactory sensation unlike any they have experienced before. When the venerable Bede died "so sweet a perfume pervaded the place that all thought they were in paradise" (1995b: 375). When Saint Mark's body was lifted from the tomb, "an odor spread over the whole city of Alexandria—an odor so sweet that all the people wondered where it came from" (1995a: 245). The same odor accompanied the translations of the relics of Stephen (1995b: 41), Dominic (1995b: 55), and others.

Two years after his death, the tomb of Stanislas Kostka was opened, and the young saint appeared "not only intact and whole, as though he had been buried for no more than a few hours, but also giving off an odor, a fragrance of paradise" (Camporesi 1995: 85).<sup>11</sup> The sacristan took a bone from his spine and placed it in the sacristy, and a magnificent fragrance pervaded the room and spread throughout the church (Camporesi 1995: 85). As for the Blessed Beatrice II of Este, her grave exuded "a supernatural fragrance so sweetly aromatic and unlike any earthly odours, that it filled any who drew near to that holy repository with joy, solace and enchantment" (Camporesi 1988: 7). Disbelievers who expressed doubt in front of the crowd as to the sweet odor emanating from the remains were swiftly punished. One man who dared declare that the corpse of Ladislav smelled bad had his neck wrung until, panicked, he admitted his error. His head recovered its normal position, but he was left with a scar as a souvenir of his sacrilege (Deonna 1939: 206). The symbolic dimension of odor is confirmed by numerous incidents of disbelievers who fail to smell the divine odor and thus find themselves at odds with a crowd united in a state of rapture.

Various adjectives are used to describe metaphysical odors that have no relation to a terrestrial world. The origins of "celestial," "angelic," "divine," and "heavenly" odors transcend the meager realm of humans and remind them that their time spent on earth is just a test, that their true roots are in heaven. The saints' odors provide a glimpse into the odors of paradise. Some hagiographers wrote at length about these fragrances nourishing and strengthening the soul. To smell those of Saint Lydwine "was as though one had eaten ginger, cloves and cinnamon; the intense and strong flavor had a gentle bite on the tongue and palate, and those who encountered it had no need of food" (Deonna 1939: 205).

It is not only the saint's remains that emit this heavenly perfume, but also any objects that they had touched or had belonged to them: their

relics, clothes, bathing water, and so on. On a winter's evening, a Russian pilgrim was heading to an inn that he knew was not far away. A wolf suddenly appeared and lunged at him. The man had his woolen rosary in his hand and struck at the animal with it, but the rosary was torn from his hand and got twisted around the wolf's neck. The wolf tried to free himself with his paws, but the rosary tightened around his throat. The pilgrim approached the wolf and carefully removed it, and the animal fled without ado. That evening, at the inn, he recounted his adventure. One skeptic laughed at him and dismissed it as superstition. But the pilgrim found a more attentive ear in an elderly teacher who offered an explanation. He recalled that Adam had named all the animals and that they approached him with fear. The rosary had belonged to a saint thus the pilgrim was able to reawaken Adam within himself, with the same purity of soul.

And the rosary which was constantly in the hands of the holy elder became empowered by his touch and spirit; it acquired, so to speak, the power of the first man's innocence. This is what we mean by a spiritual mystery of nature! And all animals in natural succession, even to this day, feel that power through the sense of smell, since the nose is the chief sensory organ in animals. (*The Way* 2003: 34, 35)

One wonders why the wolf had not smelled this sooner.

Purity, sanctity, and harmony are symbolized by pleasant, sweet odors. That which is evil, corrupt, impure, or unruly emits putrid and repulsive odors. In monotheistic religions, heaven is represented as a garden of delights full of marvelous smells, a place of blessed and intensified sensory experience. The interior senses, writes Saint Bonaventure, will be restored "to see what is most beautiful, to hear what is most harmonious, to smell what is most fragrant, to taste what is most sweet, and to embrace what is most delightful" (cited in McInroy 2014: 71).

For Anthony of Padua, paradise is the exaltation of the senses and, hell, their execration. In hell,

The eyes will shout out their demand for light and yet they will be always constrained to gaze on terrors, shadows and smoke ... The ears will shout out their demand for the pleasure of harmony and yet they will hear nothing but groans, shrieks, uproar, oaths, and curses for all centuries ... The sense of taste will long to assuage its burning thirst and hunger and yet there is no way of satisfying it, not even with the refuse of sewers ... The sense of smell will demand perfumes and yet it will not be able to smell anything except such a putrid air, such a stinking fetor that a single whiff would infect the entire earth. (Camporesi 1991: 56)

Hell is a place known for its foul smells, for devils and goats spreading their noxious odors of sulfur and decomposition, in the image of their moral repugnance.

Numerous myths recount stories of monsters and dragons poisoning the atmosphere with their pestilent odors. Sorcerers serving in the terrestrial world also emit noxious odors. Their evil rituals make use of foul-smelling products, such as animal carcasses or the odorific fumigations of infernal spirits. When Job is subjected by God to tests of suffering and illness, his disgrace is represented by his body's putrid emanations. In Dostoyevsky's famous novel, the unpleasant odor emitted by the corpse of elder Zosima raises objections to the man's holiness, but also to the existence of God. The man had lived a life of devotion, self-sacrifice, and purity. At his coffin, the crowd awaits the expected evidence of a blessed life—a sweet-smelling corpse that confirms the man's olfactory sanctity. But the stench emanating from Zosima's decomposing flesh incriminates him, his entire life suddenly cast in doubt by the absence of olfactory confirmation. In the orthodox tradition, the corpse of a righteous person is believed to emit a delightful odor. The crowd, recalling the sweet odors of a previous holy man's corpse, are in a state of shock: "Then it's a deliberate sign from God" (Dostoyevsky 2002: 326). One monk, a long-time enemy of Zosima, is quick to throw fuel on the fire: "He gave purgatives against devils. So they've bred here like spiders in the corners. And on this day he got himself stunk. In this we see a great sign from God" (Dostoyevsky 2002: 335).

The Prophet was born in Mecca, an important center of trade in aromatics. The Muslim tradition has also been known to celebrate the delightful odors emanating from the tombs of saints. The Prophet distinguished good from bad companions in olfactory terms:

It is like that of one who carries perfume and of one who blows into a furnace. The carrier of perfume might give you some as a gift, or you might buy some from him, or at least you might smell its fragrance. As for the other, he might set your clothes on fire, and at the very least you will breathe the foul air issuing from the furnace. (Nawawī 2007: 82)

Djinns were thought to emit foul odors that exposed people to the evil eye. Conversely, the good odors of basil, rose-bay, myrrh, or henna had protective powers. While friends are associated with perfume and freshness, the enemy is always malodorous. According to one hadith, the Prophet says there are three things that he loves the most in the world: women, children, and perfume. "I used to perfume Allah's Apostle with the best scent available till I saw the shine of the scent on his head and beard," says Aïcha, the youngest of the Prophet's wives (Bukhari 7: 806).

## The Odor of the Other

Beyond the real odors that we perceive, smell is a highly discriminatory sense. It defines, at once, the difference between union or rupture, sympathy or hate. It abolishes distance or increases it beyond limit. Rousseau called

olfaction “the sense of the imagination.” It is less affected by what is actually smelled than by what is expected (1979: 156). There is an odor of alterity, an olfactory demarcation between self and other. In Western societies, blacks, Jews, Arabs, prostitutes, poor people, strangers, and others are often stigmatized by odor and sometimes find each other mutually malodorous. Everyone has an olfactory halo that surrounds them, each distinct from the other. The idea of an “ethnic” or “racial” odor is dubious, racist even, unless one imagines individuals sharing a rare social homogeneity. But, from an anthropological perspective, odor is a moral marker. It is based not on a vision of the world but, rather, an olfaction of the world, an osmology, in the sense that odor organizes reality in its own way in the collective imagination. Good smells inspire trust, while bad smells are considered deceitful and dangerous, or, at least, unfamiliar or suspicious. Definitions of “good” and “bad,” however, vary considerably. In the Maghreb, the stranger is regarded as the “one who smells,” until receiving the status of guest. Examining the stranger’s odor reveals the person’s essence. It seems that a “natural” moral code indicates the path to follow. Odor, even if it is most often imaginary, is one of the symbolic boundaries between self and other.

At the turn of the twentieth century, a child named Manuel Cordova was captured by a Native American tribe in Amazonia. Though he disliked the natives’ musky odor, his discomfort was shared, because they too were bothered by his smell. He did not have the “good” odor. They washed him with herbs and fragrant liquids, and from then on he shared the same olfactory qualities as the other members of the society in which he was forced to live. His personal odor no longer set him apart. Years later when his stay with the natives was coming to an end and he was able to return home, he began to find their odor unpleasant again. He stopped feeling or “smelling” right with them. Their relationship had come full circle (Classen 1993b: 97).

The odor of the other is sometimes only an olfactory difference arising from lifestyle, a particular diet, a type of clothing, the use of oils or ointments, or particular work conditions. Its pejorative connotations are not necessarily racist but often attest to ethnocentricity. A Frenchman traveling in China was continually bothered by odors. He was invited to join a group of Chinese travelers on a train, but he was so bothered by their smell that even tobacco could not dissipate it. As time passed, he became increasingly nauseous. Arriving at their destination, the Chinese gathered around one of their group who could speak English. The Frenchman wanted to know what they were saying. The interpreter was hesitant but finally confessed: “The reason we were all playing mahjong was to think about something else. The odor... the odor kept us awake at night. Because... you smell so bad” (Planque 1987: 157). Bad odors are always the odors of the other, but everyone is always someone else’s other.

Edmund Carpenter writes that when he was a guest of the Aivilik, a woman

looked up suddenly from the boot she was mending and said “Do we smell?” “Yes.” She sewed in silence for a while, then said, “You smell and it’s offensive to us. We wondered if we smell and if it offended you.” I have often heard white men comment on the odor of the Eskimo, but I have never heard one turn this observation to self-awareness. (Carpenter 1973: 64)

The Ndut of the Sahel region in Africa are very attentive to cleanliness (in the physical sense) and purity (in the symbolic sense). They find white people, whose customs are very different from their own, to be unclean. A mother bathing her restive child warns that “he will soon smell of urine like the Whites” (Dupire 1987: 8).

Odor is a sensory transgression that transcends the skin’s boundaries. Its reach carries sexual connotations that can create the feeling of being invaded, violated even. It brings individuals into the same affective and intimate sphere; hence, the frequent complaints about others’ odors in prisons, dormitories, and shared hospital rooms. Having one’s private space invaded by this volatile and insistent presence is intolerable, especially when leaving is not an option. Odor then becomes a fixation, a personal obsession that makes the lack of privacy unbearable. First and foremost, a projection of meaning, odor is born in the imagination. It is subtle and ethereal, experienced as an invasion of privacy, a descent into an organicity that is usually concealed by the skin. To smell others is to experience in some way their animality, because it is to smell their flesh, to discover the physiological mysteries of an other who is first given as a subject. Odor is threatening, especially the odor of the other, because it permeates the body, the protective shell of the individual who inhales it. It is a kind of possession. It expels the self and allows another to take its place. When it is unpleasant, it is an unmasking. It exposes the flesh by divesting it of all spirituality.

This emanation of the other is more or less tolerable depending on the status accorded to odor in different societies. Hall describes the appreciation of odors among Arabs:

To the Arab good smells are pleasing and a way of being involved with each other. To smell one’s friend is not only nice but desirable [...] Bathing the other person in one’s breath is a common practice in Arab countries. The American is taught not to breathe on people. He experiences difficulty when he is within olfactory range of another person with whom he is not on close terms, particularly in public settings. He finds the intensity and sensuality overwhelming and has trouble paying attention to what is being said and at the same time coping with his feelings. (Hall 1990: 159, 160, 49)

Odor evokes an imaginary intermingling of bodies that, depending on the circumstances and individuals involved, can be a source of pleasure or desire for intimacy, or, conversely, one of disgust in being physically invaded by the



emanations of an other considered objectionable or belonging to a stigmatized social category (as in the case of racism). “The smell of a body,” writes Sartre,

is the body itself, which we breathe in with our nose and mouth, which we suddenly possess as though it were its most secret substance and, to put the matter in a nutshell, its nature. The smell which is in me is the fusion of the body of the other person with my body; but it is the other person’s body with the flesh removed, a vaporized body which has remained completely itself but which has become a volatile spirit. (1967: 174)

Odor is the Other reduced to an olfactory, penetrating, and insidious essence. It lifts the veil of deception to reveal people’s real nature without ambiguity. Smelling others removes all doubt as to who they really are.

Odor is the olfactory reversal of deceptive appearances, a confession of “interiority.” In revealing the quintessence of the individual, it cannot mislead. The French say *je ne le sens pas* (“I don’t smell him”) to indicate mistrust. Peoples’ olfactory designation confers a moral status upon them. The subjectivity of olfactory perception, the immediate interpretation that it projects onto the world, the stereotypes that it unconsciously fuels, and the precision that it seems to exhibit, make it the sense par excellence of racist or class prejudice. From the racist’s point of view, a person who is good necessarily smells good, while one who is bad smells bad—nature has provided every individual with an olfactory flag that removes any doubt. The signs of Good and Evil are indisputable. The racist’s judgments and actions are guided by this ingenuous olfactory compass.

Odor is an indispensable ingredient of hatred. “The social question is not only an ethical one, but also a question of smell,” writes Simmel (1997: 118). Morally, odor is transformed into a marker of individual or collective identity based on a subtle hierarchy. The person dispensing judgment never calls his or her own odor into question for an instant. The other is judged for better or worse and reduced to an inescapable olfactory fate.

All groups that are despised and belittled are associated with bad odors. After severing and exposing the heads of 4,600 Almohads conquered in Marrakech, the Caliph Al-Mamun of Seville responded to complaints of bad odors in the city with calm brutality: “the odor of our loved ones’ corpses is as sweet as perfume, and only the corpses of enemies smell bad” (Aubaile-Sallenave 1999: 96). “The case of a righteous companion and that of an evil companion is like that of one who carries perfume and of one who blows into a furnace,” the Prophet is quoted as saying (Nawawi 2007: 82). “Only the enemy stinks,” says an Arab proverb. *Ich kann ihn nicht riechen* (“I cannot stand your smell”) say the Germans. The French can refer to someone as *un type puant* (“a smelly guy”), *un fumier* (“manure/bastard”), *un malpropre* (“unclean/a swine”), *une ordure* (“filth/bastard”), *un pourri* (“rotten/bastard”), or *un sac à merde* (“sack of shit”). They cannot stand

someone (*piffer*, from *pif* meaning “nose”) if he is *dans le nez* (literally, “in the nose”). The English speak of stinkers, stinkoes, or stinkpots. The other is always malodorous, lacking the “odor of sanctity.” Simmel characterizes smell as “the dissociating sense,” the antisocial sense par excellence (1997: 119).

Former North-Vietnamese soldiers describe having “smelled” the Americans well before seeing them physically. One American veteran is convinced he is still alive thanks to his “nose”: “You couldn’t see a camo bunker if it was right in front of you. But you can’t camouflage smell. I could smell the North Vietnamese before hearing or seeing them. Their smell was not like yours or mine, not Filipino, not South Vietnamese either. If I smelled that smell again, I would know it” (Gibbons 1986: 324). The Other’s physical nature is on the margins of “normal” humanity. His or her emanations leave a symbolic trace much as an animal’s scent does.

Toynbee evokes the disgust sometimes experienced by Japanese vegetarians when encountering “the rank and fetid odour of the carnivorous peoples of the West” (1934: 231). Shusaku Endo speaks of the “suffocating body odor, this odor of cheese, particular to foreigners” (cited in Birolli 1987: 150). The terms *bata kusai* (literally “stinks of butter”) refer to Europeans’ unpleasant emissions (Birolli 1987). Sometimes it is simply a particular physical or mental characteristic that attracts olfactory attention. In the popular imagination, redheads are often associated with an unbridled sexual vitality. According to Virey, there manifests

a virile ammonical odor, which especially effects women whose nervous nature is very sensitive, to the point of producing symptoms of hysteria. This odor of buck is dispersed when the man gives himself often to women, because it depends especially on the resorption of the sperm into the animal economy. During the mating season, animal meat has an extremely unpleasant taste, it even turns one’s stomach. (1826: 111)

The social hierarchy is coupled with an olfactory hierarchy. Class prejudice is fueled by the presumption of the other’s bad odor—the worker or peasant, soaked in sweat and uninclined to bathing (Simmel 1997: 118). The idea that the poor smell bad has been a common theme of bourgeois literature since the first decades of the nineteenth century (Corbin 1986). Homosexuals do not escape olfactory discrimination: “Symbols of anality, congregating in the vicinity of latrines, they also partook of animal fetidity [...] the odors of the pederast, who was addicted to heavy perfumes, showed the close relationship between the smells of musk and of excrement,” writes Corbin (1986: 147). Loose women, whores (in French *putain* and in Latin *putida*: foul-smelling), and promiscuity are all associated with bad odors.

Women’s bad odor, especially during menstruation, is a leitmotif of ethnographic writing, in particular when their status is subordinated to men’s and associated with nature and their culture called into question. As “others” deprived of the power to name, women are at an olfactory

disadvantage. Among the Desana of the Amazon, women's fetid emissions are considered similar to those of the peccary, an animal despised for its sickening odor, promiscuity, and continual burrowing with its snout (Classen 1993b: 90). The odor of menstruation is the worst of all, attracting serpents and other venomous animals, and bothering the domestic animals. The woman is then temporarily separated from the community (Classen 1993: 87). A girl's first menstruation is accompanied both by her separation and a purification ceremony in which the shaman regularly visits her hut to breathe cigar smoke on her. She only recovers her place in the community after having thus been symbolically washed of her period's bad odors.

## Racist Conceptions of the Other's Odor

In emitting a bad odor, the other commands contempt and, in the racist imagination, merits the symbolic or real violence that he or she is the object of. Racism has often justified its hate or belief in the victims' biological inferiority with conventional references to their fetid odor. In colonialist and/or racist literature, black people have often been described as having a characteristic odor, suggesting, to the nose of their detractors, their particular proximity to animals. Buffon wrote that women from the north of Senegal, "when they are heated, [have] a disagreeable smell, though it is not as strong as that of the other Negroes" (1812: 142). As for those of Angola or Cap Verde "when heated, they smell so rank, that the places they pass through are infected with the stench for more than a quarter of an hour" (1812: 150).<sup>12</sup>

Not to be outdone, Virey declares that "when negroes sweat, their skin is covered with an oily and blackish perspiration, which stains cloths, and generally exhales a very unpleasant porraceous smell" (1837: 47). He, in turn, revisits Buffon's image of lingering odors, but applies it to "the inhabitants of Senegal and the negroes of Sofola" (1837: 48). When Africans move about, writes André Demaison in *Les oiseaux d'ébène* in 1925, "they leave in their wake [...] a trail of strange odors that" follow them (1926: 56). "The most unpleasant thing about a Negro's skin," writes Louis Figuier, "is the nauseous odour it emits when the individual is heated by perspiration or exercise: these emanations are as hard to endure as those which some animals exhale" (1872: 505). Virey cites Thurnberg, according to whom "the lion devours rather an Hottentot than a European, owing to the stronger smell of the former, who being always greased with tallow, is to him a more palatable prey" (cited in Virey 1837: 122).

Writing in 1931, Paul Reboux adeptly explains that

the same can be said of the brevity of the tropical twilight as of the odor of the negro. One would pass for a man who had never traveled if he ventured to speak other than as a traveler. I thus maintain that on the Caribbean sea the transition from day to night is as instantaneous as the odor of the negro is strong and unbearable. (in Jardel 1999: 88)

African women are not spared this unpleasant smell: “A sickening odor arises from their perspiring bodies,” an odor that is both “insipid and strong” (in Martinkus-Kemp 1975: 186, 187). “I must confess that the odor of these women rids me of any desire for them” (Martinkus-Kemp 1975: 186, 187). Faulkner, in *Intruder in the Dust*, provides a wrenching illustration of this racist theme from the perspective of a young white man having just entered the home of an elderly black man:

he was enclosed completely now in that unmistakable odor of Negroes [...] not the odor of a race nor even actually of poverty but perhaps a condition: an idea: a belief: an acceptance, a passive acceptance by them themselves of the idea that being Negroes they were not supposed to have facilities to wash properly or often or even to wash bathe often even without the facilities to do it with; that in fact it was a little to be preferred that they did not [...] he could not even imagine an existence from which the odor would be missing to return no more. He had smelled it forever, he would smell it always; it was a part of his inescapable past, it was a rich part of his heritage as a Southerner. (1991: 11, 12)

Max Weber denounced this olfactory imagination with incisive humor in 1910. Having read the claims of German racial “experts” touting the racial instincts of white Americans, who could not stand (to smell) Negroes due to their unpleasant odor, he responded that

I am able to rely on my own nose; I have no experience of anything like that whatsoever. I was struck that Negroes exhale the same smell as the Whites and vice versa. I can further refer to a scene happening every day in the Confederate States, displaying a lady on a carriage holding the reins and having a Negro sitting closely next to her, shoulder to shoulder, without her nose suffering from it. The notion of Negroes exhaling a certain smell is, as far as I’m concerned, an invention by the Union in order to give an explanation to the renewed denunciation of the Negroes. (cited in Kaesler 2009: 206)

John Dollard, in turn, echoed Weber’s sentiments. For all his efforts, he admits to never having succeeded in perceiving a particular odor among blacks distinct from that of whites and that “the widespread existence of the belief itself may induce a hyperfastidious sensitivity toward Negro odor which is not displayed toward the body odors of white people” (1988: 381).

That some people regard the other’s odor as an object of resentment is a well-known fact. Racists nonchalantly refer to the “Arab” odor they smell the minute they cross a symbolic line of the city, street, or neighborhood. The *foetor judaicus* has been a leitmotif of anti-Semitic discourse from the Middle Ages to the present day, accompanied by abundant literature on the subject. Among the paradigmatic examples, we find a fourteenth-century medical treatise taking up a common Christian theme of the time: “It is also

this stench and filth they are immersed in everyday in their homes, like swine in their troughs, that makes them susceptible to quincy, scrofula, bleeding and other foul-smelling diseases, and makes them always keep their heads down” (in Fabre-Vassas 1994: 120). During the rise of the Popular Front, the anti-Semitic press launched unrelenting attacks against Léon Blum, calling him “a pile of trash” and “a scumbag.” Maurras referred to him as “human rubbish.” He was compared to a “smelly camel:” “He perspires that sort of Middle-eastern vapor that all of his kind give off, that greasy wool odor, so typical of them” (Philippe 1997: 280).

Latin roots link the words “odor” and “odium.” Clearly, anyone who is the object of hatred and disgust (*odium*) is also subject to olfactory depreciation. Thus, strangely, in certain circumstances, a “bad” odor can also be reversed if the Other agrees to submit. During the Middle Ages, Jews did not have the “odor of sanctity” from the Church’s point of view and were rumored to have a foul smell. But this odor had the unique feature of disappearing following conversion and baptism into the Christian faith.

The physician Bérillon provides a piquant example of the fantasies that olfactory categorization of the Other gave rise to. Inventor of the dubious science of “ethnochemistry,” he proposed a comparative study of what he called the “human races” based on their organic composition:

The continuity of the chemical personality is perpetuated through hereditary transmission [...] among individuals of the same race, with the same fixity and regularity as in the anatomical personality. However, these chemical characters offer, in their specificity and stability, the double advantage of being measurable, thus allowing us to establish with precise formulations, the undeniable and indisputable differences between racial characters. The different chemical constitution of the races is also revealed by the specificity of their odors [...] We know that the odor of certain races is so strong that it continues to permeate a space long after people of that race have been there for only a few hours. This is the case with most negro races, as well as with the Chinese and the north Germans. (1920: 7)

This same author produced in 1915 an opuscle on a particular and elective ailment: *La bromidrose fétide de la race allemande* (the fetid bromidrosis of the German race). These few pages are a model of the genre. Bérillon strikes the pose of the neutral and benevolent scientist observing, with regret, a physical anomaly unique to certain peoples. Thus, he notes the considerable space devoted to remedies and recipes against bad odors in erudite and popular German pharmacopoeias, while their French counterparts make no mention of them. Luckily, according to him, bad odors are unknown to French physiology, so the French have no need to protect themselves against them. From the first line of his text, Bérillon affirms, with the calm objectivity of the scholar steeped in rigor, that bromidrosis (from the Greek *brōmos*, meaning “stench” and *hidrōs*, meaning “sweat”) is “one of the most

widespread afflictions in Germany” (1915: 1). “An ailment of Prussian origin,” it severely affects Brandenburg, Mecklenburg, Pomerania, and East Prussia. The statement is evidently self-sufficient: no statistics are included to support it. The problem has supposedly long taken a heavy toll on the reigning family, notably, “the current head of this dynasty,” who fails “to evade the particularly indiscrete olfactory perception of his family” (1915: 2). French physicians who “had to treat injured Germans spontaneously recognized a special odor, very typical, emanating from them” (1915: 3). All agreed that this odor, due to its stench, had an adverse effect on smell. A single German wounded in the Great War was enough to ensure the tenacious propagation of this odor anywhere he went. Bérillon evokes several times his own investigations on this subject, leading him to conclude that the odor is simultaneously “fetid, nauseating, pervasive and persistent” (1915: 3).

Bérillon, of course, does not stop there. His olfactory imagination knows no limit. The unfortunate odor is not limited to wounded Germans but extends also to Germans in good health. It is the “race” itself that gives off such a foul odor. Bérillon is quick to cite French officers who claim to have had to continually turn their heads away when faced with the difficult task of accompanying German prisoners. Bank notes found in the pockets of these prisoners give lie to the adage that money has no smell, because, as Bérillon explains, they had to be disinfected before being used, as did any other papers in their possession. Apparently the barracks that housed German troops continued to smell years after their departure, in spite of countless attempts to clean them.

People swore to him that German domestics working in France had the defect of “fetid perspiration of the feet” (1915: 5). French hotel owners, before the war, were already complaining of having to disinfect, with poor results, the rooms occupied by German clients after their departure. This dreary scent that lingers like a weed fortunately allowed officials to identify “a few weeks before the war, a German employee who, in the guise of an Alsace-Lorraine, was admitted to a medical education establishment in Créteil” (1915: 7). This pestilent odor even extends to air space: “Several aviators have told me that when they fly over German cities, they become aware of an odor that affects their nostrils, even when flying at a very high altitude” (1915: 3). The French do not suffer such a disadvantage. On the contrary, “a prefect serving on draft boards in various departments of France told me that in spite of the rigorous screening process, there was never more than one exemption for every four or five thousand conscripts. He also recalled that the physiognomy of those exempted was similar to those currently designated as belonging to the ‘Kraut’ type” (1915: 4).

Bérillon then refines his diagnosis: “The German, who has not developed control of his instinctive impulses, has not mastered his vasomotor reactions either. In this way, he has more in common with those species of animals in which fear and anger have the effect of triggering exaggerated activity of the odor-secreting glands” (1915: 5, 6). A “hereditary transformation of their

organic chemistry” distinguishes Germans from the other “races.” Also, as Bérillon explains, their elimination of fecal matter is incomparably greater in volume than that of other peoples. Furthermore, German urine possesses a physiological particularity that explains its nauseating odor. “Special treatises on the question indicate that the level of non-uric nitrogen is as high as 20% in Germany, while it is only 15% in France [...] the urotoxic coefficient among Germans is therefore at least one-fourth higher than among the French” (1915: 7). In addition to their renal function being “overworked and powerless to eliminate uric elements,” there is the particularity of their “plantaire sudation” (1915: 11). This concept, adds Bérillon, can be expressed by saying “the German urinates through his feet” (1915: 11). The German is certainly a foul-smelling creature. Bérillon’s delirious commentary concludes with the animalization and denigration of the Other through excremental association.

Many prominent writers of the era adopted the same imaginary logic. Maurice Genevoix describes, for example, how in the middle of the night his group had taken possession of a barn recently vacated by the Germans in the village of Meuse.

The door opened with a long moan. Eww!... What a stench! It smelled like whey, rats, armpits. It was sour and insipid, it nauseated me. What smelled so bad? And all of a sudden, a long-forgotten memory came back to me, triggered by this odor: I recalled the Kraut assistant’s room at Lakanal High. I would pass by from time to time and spend about half an hour there to work on my German. It was a blistering hot summer. He took off his jacket and leaned back. Opening the barn door, that same stench filled my nostrils, choked me. Him, sitting there smiling, half of his puffy face hidden behind his tortoiseshell glasses... That was it, I was going to have to sleep in that Kraut odor. (1950: 66)

Genevoix does not consider for a minute that the appalling hygienic conditions on both the German and French sides were the same. His imagination takes him by the shortest route down the racist path.

While Bérillon’s denigration of the Other via his olfactory imagination is an extreme example, he adheres to a basic racist logic. The same olfactory stigmatization of the French is of course echoed by some soldiers and ideologues on the other side of the Rhine (Brill 1932: 34).

The degree of hate toward a group or an individual is directly proportionate to the amount of stench they are thought to emit. The odor of the Other is a metaphor for the soul; it designates a social value. The physical smell is simply the result of belief in a moral smell, a license to hate. The Other’s presumed bad odor, its proximity to the animal, is used to justify rejection. This has the advantage of validating social inequalities by demonstrating the need to keep the Other at a distance, excluded from ordinary social interaction. Clearly if they smell that bad, they should stay among their own and not come around contaminating “our people” with

their unbearable fumes. Hence the racist theme, particularly with respect to blacks in the United States (Dollard 1975: 380), of refusing to cohabit and insisting on the need to maintain separate spaces.<sup>13</sup> Of course, Weber has shown how the case of domestics echoes that of Jews in the Middle Ages who lost their bad odor after conversion to Christianity—their subaltern employment magically restores their olfactory virginity.

## The Odors of Sickness

Body odors related to metabolism vary depending on the time of day and the individual's state of health. People coming down with an illness no longer feel (or smell) like themselves.<sup>14</sup> Every ailment undoubtedly possesses a unique odor that intimately blends with the sick person's smell to subtly modify its composition. In French, *ne pas se sentir bien* (to not “smell” well) is to feel sick. Françoise Dolton has described being able to recognize the odor of patients suffering from anxiety attacks. Some psychiatrists note how the particular odor of schizophrenics increases or decreases depending on their mental state (Winter 1978: 69, 70). For Anzieu, the olfactory envelope, the sensory emanation of the skin-ego, changes in certain circumstances, revealing the psychological status of patients through a language of odors. They experience, unknowingly, complex fluctuations during different phases of their treatment and their lives. He notes that

the essentially olfactory Skin-ego is a wrapping that is neither continuous nor solid. It is riddled with holes, corresponding to the pores of the skin and without sphincter control; these holes allow the excess of inner aggression to seep out through an automatic process of discharge that has no place for the interventions of thought; in other words, it is a sieve Skin-ego. (2016: 204)

The regular contact that nurses and doctors have with patients suffering from various illnesses leads them to develop an olfactory competence, a strong intuitive sense of the state of health of those around them. The sweet-smelling breath of someone in a coma may be an indication of diabetes. “Qualified practitioners can very well tell the odor that emanates from ulcers complicated by gangrene, every odor peculiar to consumptives, people laid low by dysentery, malign putrid fevers; and that odor of mice which is part of hospital and jail fevers” (Kirwan cited in Corbin 1986: 41). Lars Gustafsson's character in *The Death of a Beekeeper*, diagnosed with terminal cancer, wonders why his dog, who he has shared an affectionate relationship with for many years, has suddenly taken to running away from him.

Yet I'm not treating him any differently now than I have been for the last eleven years [...] I don't know what got into him. It really seems as if the dog doesn't recognize me anymore. Or more precisely: he recognizes me,



but only from very close up, when I can bring him to really *see* me and *listen* to me instead of going only by the smell [...] That all of a sudden I have taken on a different smell in some damnably subtle fashion which only the dog can perceive. (1981: 9, 10)

Freud, too, affected by a cancer in his jaw, was saddened to see his dog turn away from him due to the odor emanating from his damaged flesh.

Medical diagnosis was long based in part on analyzing patients' odors, in particular those of their urine or excrement, which were thought to offer valuable information on their physical state. Avicenna, for example, advised doctors to put their sense of smell to good use. He thought the odor of patients' urine could reveal the source of their illness. He described different types of odors and their links to specific illnesses. Smell, however, was still just one element among others in the diagnosis, which also included observing and listening to the patient. Corbin cites numerous examples of authors, who, over the course of the eighteenth century, produced catalogs documenting the semiology of odors (1986: 41).

## Odor's Double Edge

According to an ancient Pythagorean tradition, odor's volatility makes it no less material in its effects. With its power of penetration, it has the capacity to cause or heal illness, or serve as a prophylactic depending on its composition and the uses to which it is put. Perfumes, fumigations, herbal odors, and specific aromatics with unique cultural properties are included in the pharmacopoeia of many societies.

Odor creates the feeling of having one's body invaded, of being defenseless, and lacking any means to avoid its infiltration. Its power to penetrate is often perceived as equaling that of medications ingested orally. The association of bad odors with illness, with a specific biological origin even, and good odors with pleasure or relaxation, provides the social imagination with a clear illustration of odor's powerful effect. "The doctors might, I believe, derive more use from odors than they do; for I have often noticed that they make a change in me and work upon my spirits according to their properties" wrote Montaigne (1958: 229), aware of odors' potential symbolic effectiveness in creating an ambiance or state of mind. Pre-nineteenth century medicine regarded odors, depending on their composition, as capable of purifying the air or acting on a patient's body to restore health. Strong doses of the right odors were thought to keep disease-carrying miasmas at bay. Likewise, Arab medicine, inspired by the Hippocratic theory of humors, made use of the soothing, strengthening, warming, and cooling properties of odors. These were thought to regulate the body's inner states and contribute to restoring health.

Between the fourteenth and eighteenth centuries, scent-filled pomanders were crafted from precious materials. The work of goldsmiths, they were

used to decontaminate polluted air or impart a pleasing ambiance. They emitted an odor of musk or amber. During the Middle Ages, the amber pomander was indispensable for warding off pestilence, as well as for tonifying the body. Since disease was thought to spread through odors, one way of combating it was to neutralize it with other odors. Certain odors considered to be effective antidotes were also used to protect doctors. The consultation would begin once the room had been cleansed by fumigations or braziers. A physician's manual reads:

Thus holding a bit of your massapa in your mouth, and holding the hand with the aforementioned fragrances under the nose and in the other the aforementioned branche of burning juniper, you must look upon your patient from a certain distance away and enquire into his sickness and his symptoms and whether he be in paine, or if he hath any tumor anywhere, and so convene with him. And then, approaching him, with your backe turned upon him, you will hand your branche of wood to someone who will continue to hold it before your face and reaching behind you with your hand you will take the patient's pulse and feele his forehead and the region of his harte, always maintaining some fragrance beneath your nose. (cited in Le Guerer 1992: 76 ; archaic spellings as in the original)

The task then remained to examine the patient's urine and fecal matter.

The pleasant odors of effusions and fumigations purified the air, increased the organism's resistance, and protected doctors from contagion. To guard against harmful miasmas, doctors, or those not wanting to take chances, would otherwise breathe in the fumes of a sponge soaked in vinegar or a combination of rose water, vinegar, Malvasia wine, zedoaria root, and lemon peel. Their handkerchiefs were infused with the agreeable odors of incense, myrrh, violet, mint, storax, sandalwood, and lemon balm. Scented sachets placed on the heart were thought to strengthen it. Bunches of flowers or aromatic herbs were also worn or carried: rue, lemon balm, marjoram, mint, rosemary, and so on. Pendants containing a blend of aromatics were worn around the neck. Doctors changed and perfumed themselves often to cleanse themselves of miasmas. Homes had to be kept clean, ventilated, and purified with vinegar and good odors diffused by incense burners or aromatic cassolettes (juniper, pine, bay leaves, myrtle, and rosemary), storax, laudanum, and benzoin fumigations, aromatic wood braziers, essences, and potpourris.

Harmful or beneficial agents were conveyed by odors thought to have special powers of penetration. Annick Le Gu  rer (1992) has shown how the plague, dysentery, and malignant fevers were associated with foul, insidious odors that posed a grave danger to anyone who smelled them. Putrid waters, sewers, rotting flesh, and excrement were considered breeding grounds for the plague. Belief that disease was transmitted by the exhalations of the plague-stricken is a common theme in the history of the plague from antiquity to the nineteenth century. During epidemics, the air was said to be

poisoned—*empesté*, meaning “plagued.” “Lethargy grips them all. Decaying carcasses lie in the roadways, fields and woods, and the air is fouled with the stench. Strangely, dogs, carrion birds, and grey wolves, will not touch them. They rot on the ground, pollute the air with their dying breath, and spread contagion far and wide” (Ovid 2000: 354). The odor of the plague is an envelope of death that already separates the sick from friends and family the moment it enters their private sphere, but it also lingers and spreads its destructive germs further afield. In times of epidemic, olfaction is the plague’s port of entry, leaving the inner self defenseless. Breathing and inhaling air contaminated by miasmas cannot be avoided. Maintaining a distance from the Other is essential to avoid smelling these pestilential odors and absorbing them, along with the disease itself. Those afflicted are left to their own devices or examined at a distance by doctors.

Before anyone entered the home of the plague-stricken, doors and windows were opened and rooms were decontaminated by fumigation. In the sixteenth century, prophylactic efforts to cleanse the city of pestilence gave rise in Gap to the implementation of draconian measures. Leaving animal corpses, manure, excrement, urine, or waste waters in the streets was prohibited. Prostitutes or *putains* (from the Latin *putida* meaning “stinking”) had to leave the city. Having adopted these morally symbolic measures,

the authorities turned to a more concrete example of fetidness: Because of their nauseating activities, the town’s workers in leather, skins, and wool were to be relegated to the outskirts and were told to stay there if they wanted to avoid being fined and having their goods confiscated. Olfactory intolerance and social and moral disgust went hand in hand. (Le Guérer 1992: 31).

In Nîmes, in 1649, the lower classes were rounded up and confined to arenas pending the epidemic’s end.

The odorific battle against pestilence employed a consistent strategy. The idea was to attract and then neutralize dangerous odors in a sort of olfactory trap that defused them. Cities haunted by the plague were filled with the smoke of bonfires and fumigations. The smoke released foul odors of tar, sulfur, antimony, saltpetre, bones, animal carcasses, excrement, old shoes, and so on. The alternatives to pestilence were unpleasant, but they possessed protective properties. Staying alive meant sacrificing some olfactory comfort. Canons were even fired for the acrid odor of the powder, deemed useful for purifying unhealthy air and dispersing stagnating miasmas. The so-called “strong, harsh perfume” contained large quantities of pungent, acrid, and foul-smelling products. It was especially used for destroying the miasmas contaminating the air of rooms in which plague victims had died. The “common perfume” was made with less corrosive ingredients and more aromatic products. It was used essentially to treat adults in good health, and to purify clothing, fabrics, and letters. As for the

“sweet perfume,” composed exclusively of fragrant substances, it was applied to the final sanitization of buildings and to the “perfuming” of children and fragile individuals (Le Gu er 1992: 85, 86).

The eighteenth century saw the emergence of an obsessive fear of confined spaces susceptible to containing stagnant, fetid, dangerous miasmas. Georges Vigarello recalls a well-known episode of the period:

In the month of June 1774, some children were peacefully gathered in the church of Saulieu in Burgundy for their first communion. An “evil exhalation” suddenly arose from a tomb dug that very day beneath the tiles of the church. The effluvium spread and its consequences, or so it appeared, were catastrophic. “The cur , the vicar, forty children and two hundred parishioners who went inside, died.” (Banau and Turben cited in Vigarello 1988: 144)

The contamination that reigned in these enclosed spaces lacking air circulation was from then on a source of great concern. Accumulated garbage in the streets, stagnant waters, slaughterhouses, cemeteries, and hospitals became associated with the spread of germs of disease and death. Poor neighborhoods were particularly suspect, giving rise to a reconception of urban space.

Other diseases thought to emanate odors, particularly those of cholera victims, lead English doctors in the second half of the nineteenth century to call for better ventilation in hospitals, factories, schools, and homes to dissipate miasmas. Over the course of the nineteenth century, aromatic substances stopped being considered effective in treating and preventing the plague. Pasteurian discoveries relegated them to obsolescence, but they continued to be used in folk medicine, notably in the craze for camphor and aloes, which were believed to be effective in treating a wide range of ailments, from angina and anemia, to catarrh, hemorrhages, and indigestion (Le Gu er 1992: 98). Bags of camphor and aloes were inserted between floorboards, stuffed into mattresses, and hung in wardrobes. Camphorated alcohol sponged on the skin was thought to revitalize the body. Camphor powder, reputed to curb sexual appetite, was widely used in boarding schools, where it was dusted on bedding and in swimming trunks “in the region of the privates” (Raspail cited in Le Gu er 1992: 100).

## Deodorize to Civilize

For a long time, the odors permeating houses, farms, and streets were of little bother to those who lived with them. Unpleasant emanations were sometimes referred to, those of excrement, for example, but moralizing around everyday odors was not on the agenda. In farmhouses, families benefited during the winter months from the warmth given off by animals that were kept adjacent to the rooms reserved for living quarters. But

between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the olfactory sensibility changed. The mingling of odors and the stench of the city became unbearable, and scholars set out to study and control it. Alain Corbin has traced the development of this “hyperesthesia” that profoundly changed olfactory sensibilities in Western societies and gave rise to an ever-escalating preoccupation with odors and their suppression.

The city suddenly came to horrify hygienists who endeavored to reforge it. Writing of eighteenth-century Paris, Louis-Sébastien Mercier raised questions that could have applied to many cities of his time:

If I am asked how anyone can stay in this filthy haunt [...] amid an air poisoned by a thousand putrid vapors, among butchers' shops, cemeteries, hospitals, drains, streams of urine, heaps of excrement, dyers,' tanners,' curriers' stalls; in the midst of continual smoke from that unbelievable quantity of wood, and the vapor from all that coal; in the midst of the arsenic, bituminous and sulphurous parts that are ceaselessly exhaled by workshops where copper and metal are wrought: if I am asked how anyone lives in this abyss, where the heavy, fetid air is so thick that it can be seen, and its atmosphere smelled, for three leagues around; air that cannot circulate, but only whirls around within this labyrinth of houses; finally, how man can willingly crawl into these prisons whereas he would see that, if he released the animals that he has bent to his yoke, their purely instinctive reaction would be to escape precipitously to the fields in search of air, greenness, a free soil perfumed by the scent of flowers: I would reply that familiarity accustoms the Parisians to humid fogs, maleficent vapors, and foul-smelling ooze. (cited in Corbin 1986: 54)

Camporesi (1995) points to a similar situation on the peninsula. Between 1760 and 1840, hygienists were driven by an attention to the putrid, the mephitic, the miasmatic, and were elevated to the rank of heroes in the struggle against all that was repugnant. Olfaction played an essential role in defining what was considered healthy or unhealthy until Louis Pasteur's discoveries discredited the miasma theory, henceforth associating bad odors with discomfort alone and no longer with fear of disease.

Geneviève Heller's exemplary research in Lausanne sheds light on the propaganda surrounding cleanliness and hygiene that was directed at the working classes by the well-meaning bourgeoisie at the turn of the century. It was not only a question of being “clean” but also of being “pure,” of attaining a moral dimension of cleanliness. “As a guarantee of physical health, it was also a guarantee of moral health. The cleanness of the body begets the cleanness of the soul [...] Cleanliness is a guardian of health, the safeguard of morality, the foundation of all beauty” (cited in Heller 1979: 221). Health and prevention of illness were alibis in another quest, that of containing the threat of the working classes by bringing them into a visual and olfactory order. Of course, illness took a heavy toll on

these populations due to living conditions in run-down neighborhoods, where infection was rampant. Hygienic policy was a war waged on two fronts. On the one hand, it set out to neutralize filth, bad odors, and unsanitary conditions, and build infrastructures better adapted to cohabitation. On the other, it simultaneously sought to control or suppress a social milieu that it associated with chaos in the name of progress. Cleanliness was thus elevated to a form of social salvation. It provided a guarantee of purity, of quiet order in the fabric of meaning. "Cleanliness is next to godliness," as the Puritan expression goes.

Efforts were concentrated on garbage disposal, sanitizing the working classes, improving air circulation with public gardens, and establishing a complete sewer system or at least improved urban hygiene. Deodorizing and sanitizing the working classes was a symbolic way of bringing them into line, a moralization through hygienization. The attribution of bad odor was a recurring motif of contempt and exclusion. The disinfection of the city and poor neighborhoods was a form of moral disinfection, a gradual civilization of the poor in order to make them olfactively transparent. Not smelling them was the first step toward their physical and moral integration. This entailed clearing buildings, ventilating, deodorizing, and teaching children cleanliness and hygiene. At the turn of the twentieth century, the fear of excrement that had long dominated people's thoughts about harmful odors gave way to abhorrence of pollution. Industry replaced excrement in the "hierarchy of repulsion" and gave rise to a new ecological awareness (Corbin 1986: 228).



# 6

## Savoring the World: From Taste in Food to the Taste for Life

*Whoever eats a peach, for example, is first of all agreeably struck by the smell emanating from it; he puts it into his mouth and experiences a sensation of freshness and acidity which incites him to continue; but it is not until the moment when he swallows, and the mouthful passes beneath the nasal channel, that the perfume is revealed to him, completing the sensations which every peach should cause. And finally, it is only after he has swallowed that he passes judgement on the experience, and says to himself "That was delicious!"*

J.-A. BRILLAT-SAVARIN, *THE PHYSIOLOGY OF TASTE*

### Food as a Total Sensorial Object

Cooking is the art of arranging pleasing flavors. It creates for the taster an experience of tasting, a *dégustation*. It is rarely limited to flavor alone but also encompasses the manner in which the dish is visually prepared and the aromas that add to its appeal. Both are preludes to satisfaction. Negligence of these suppresses the appetite or arouses disgust. When evaluating food, the mouth simultaneously or successively incorporates different sensory modalities: gustatory, tactile, olfactory, proprioceptive, and thermal. The moment of truth is the confrontation between the food's exteriority and its interiority as it disappears into the mouth and produces flavor.

The mouth tastes flavors at the same time that the nose inhales them in an inseparable process. Food's aromas are perceived retronasally. Olfaction always accompanies taste. It is the "preliminary taste," according to Kant. What the English call "flavor" (from the Old French *flaveur*) points to this necessary sensory alliance. A congested nose makes food tasteless. A sommelier thus affected has a hard time identifying wines. The best of



wines can no longer be distinguished but by the four traditional tastes, all nuances dissolved. An anosmic person, someone deprived of the sense of smell, also lacks the ability to appreciate tastes and has the impression of eating cotton. Anosmia is a terrible handicap that transforms foods into morsels of little interest. Odor in effect gives taste its vitality, it adds value to it. Discord between a dish and its odors arouses suspicion or rejection. Likewise, the pleasant scent of a soap does not incite someone to eat it. The good odor of a substance is by necessity related to its belonging to a social register of edibility.

The mouth identifies the temperature of foods through touch, which contributes in its way to the modulation of taste. Thermal sensibility is activated in the mouth and provides one of the criteria for the appreciation of taste. A beverage or dish is enjoyed at a certain temperature, and above or below this temperature the flavor is diminished. Sorbet is eaten neither hot nor warm, just as a frozen steak or a hot beer hardly stimulates one's appetite. The mouth also enlists an algic sensibility. A food can burn or freeze, or even cause injury due to a particularity of its composition.

Texture contributes to the quality of taste, foods being either soft or firm, sticky or crunchy, tender, creamy, runny, grainy, smooth, prickly, astringent, spongy, and so on. "Gastronomical taste," writes Leroi-Gourhan, "is essentially based on flavors and textures, sometimes more on the second than the first. Some cultures alternate between one or the other, and this can result in very singular forms of gourmandize" (Leroi-Gourhan 1973: 171). Among the Gbaya Bodoë in the western Central African Republic, *tam*, meaning "to taste" also refers to a buccal touch that is qualified by thirteen distinct terms. For soft textures alone, Paulette Roulon-Doko counts twelve terms related to tactile perception and thirteen based on taste (1996). Among the Dogon, two verbs signify "to eat," one that concerns the consumption of soft foods, in particular, the cooked cereals that are a staple of their diet, and the other, closer to the verb "to chew" in English, that applies to the ingestion of foods requiring mastication (Calame-Griaule 1996: 83). In everyday life, the texture of foods is an essential characteristic of their appreciation. We sometimes select a fruit by the feel of it.

Even sound comes into play, when a food, for example, is appreciated for its crunchiness. This could apply to salads, crackers, cookies, appetizers, and so on, or when choosing a bread to determine its doneness by applying pressure or tapping lightly on its crust.

The visual presentation of food is also important. Food is either appetizing or unappealing to the eye. It removes any reluctance or raises suspicion. A piece of red chicken or white salmon makes consumers uneasy. Cloudy water is hardly inviting to drink. In a study on the effects of color (Moir 1936), individuals were served inappropriately colored foods. During the meal several guests complained of an unusual flavor that they could not identify, even though the food had otherwise not been altered in any way. The next day, some reported having indigestion and feeling sick. In similar

studies (Pangborn 1960; Maga 1974), the taste of arbitrarily colored beverages or sorbets became difficult to identify. Taste thresholds for basic flavors were altered when the conventional colors of foodstuffs were modified: “Green coloring increased the sensitivity to sweet. Both yellow and green decreased the sensitivity to sour, red decreased the sensitivity to bitter, and the lack of color affected the sensitivity to salt” (Moskowitz 1978: 163). The vital link between appearance and appetite sustains a vast food-coloring industry. Fruit juices, for example, are colored based on the appearance of the fruits they are made from. However, the apples, pears, peaches, and other fruits now displayed on grocery shelves are often as tasteless as they are eye-catching. Tasting is a visual pleasure that creates a moment of suspense when guests, a smile on their lips, comment on the presentation of the dish, already appreciating it with their eyes. A delicious dish served on a plastic plate or a good wine served in a cup loses part of its attraction.

In the Middle Ages, banquets included courses that were feasts for the guests’ eyes. Flocks of birds were released from pies. Swans and peacocks were presented adorned with their feathers. Their skins were removed with caution then reapplied after roasting. “Painted dishes” depicted scenes such as Saint George slaying a dragon (Flandrin 2003: 282). Like “an illuminated manuscript page of the same period” (Wheaton 1996: 9), the medieval banquet was both a performance and a meal. For nobility, the ostentatious dimension of food was as essential as the flavor it delivered.

In beholding the accumulation and profusion of products on the table, the first delectation at these banquets was visual. Guests were treated to a sight of roasted deer, stag, and wild boar served whole and surrounded by garnishings of geese, pheasants, quails, doves, partridges, and so on. Certain spices such as saffron were used in different quantities to create nuanced colors. Sunflowers, violets and red cedar were also used, as were certain herbs like parsley and sorrel. Color was also added with lapis lazuli, gold leaf, and silver, the edibility of which, according to Flandrin, was questionable (2003: 286). The collection of recipes in the *Ménagier de Paris*, published in 1393 by an elderly husband for the benefit of his young wife, describes sequences of colors that correspond to each dish. He explains how to produce these by combining suitable ingredients. The appearance of the dishes even seems to take precedence over the taste. The author provides a number of tips for achieving the desired colors, how to prevent, for example, the blackening of tripe or crawfish by salting them before rather than after cooking.

This attention to the aesthetics of presentation culminated in the creation of astonishing centerpieces throughout the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, and it continued up until the nineteenth century. The meticulous and elegant preparation of dishes and their presentation remained a constant of privileged tables, the appearance having as much if not more importance than the content. Starting in the fourteenth century, power structures in European societies began to change. Warlords began

to wield less power than the political classes, and the warring nobility was ceding its place to court nobility. The status of foods also changed. Heavy red meats gave way to lighter white meats. Large game disappeared or, at least, lost its supremacy. The tables of the powerful became more ostentatious, marking their distinction from the people and from less-wealthy nobles. Montanari describes a banquet organized in Bologna in 1487 that lasted for seven hours. Before being served, the dishes were paraded around the piazza to allow the guests to admire their magnificence. The list of dishes served defies description: appetizers and wafers with several types of sweet wine, roasted pigeons, pork liver, thrushes, partridges, bread, and “a castle of sugar ‘with artfully constructed merlons and towers’ and filled with live birds which as soon as the platter was brought into the hall flew out ‘to the great pleasure and delight of the diners.’” (Montanari 1996: 92). This was followed by deer, ostrich with various *pastilli*, veal’s head, and so on. Of course, the guests did not eat everything, dishes often being presented to different groups. People chose according to their taste and degree of satiety.

In his *Almanach des gourmands* (1803), Grimod also describes spectacular desserts, which literally lit up the night:

Monsieur Dutfoy did not limit himself to the resources offered to him by architecture; he also sought, in the art of pyrotechnics, new means of varying our pleasures. And the fireworks he adapted for his decorations, arising from amidst his palaces and temples, produced an effect easier to imagine than to describe. At the desired moment, a carefully hidden wick was lit, which burned for several minutes. Suddenly the temple was covered with odorous sparks of all colors, a thousand showers shooting to the ceiling. The guests, whose eyes and noses were simultaneously delighted (*jouissent*), stood under a vault of flamboyant sparks [...] We must admit that this sort of dessert is a veritable drama, and that it would be hard to imagine how one might end a sumptuous meal in a livelier and more dazzling manner. (cited in Weiss 2002: 35, 36)

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, Marie-Antoine Carême’s art mixed architecture and cuisine (or *pâtisserie*). Taking inspiration from the works of Tertio, Palladio, and Vignole, among others, he fashioned temples, ruins, castles, hermitages, and antique statues out of lard, fat, spun sugar, marzipan, chocolates, and other preparations to create columns and pedestals that catered as much to seeing as to eating. In response, Bouvilliers, another important chef of the period, maintained that culinary art consisted in pleasing the palate, all and everything else was incidental. But for Carême, cuisine could not be content with half-measures. It had to fulfill the senses as a complete art. This taste for culinary assemblage continued in some circles up until the turn of the century. It lives on in the centerpieces and other delicacies that still adorn tables on special occasions, such as marriages, births, communions, retirements, and so on.

## Oriental Cuisine

Typically, though probably more discretely, this aestheticization of food informs the presentation of dishes not only in restaurants but also in domestic kitchens. Even when based on routine, a meal still appeals first to the eyes, then to the palate. Chinese cuisine undoubtedly fulfills Carême's concept to perfection, though it does so by enhancing the plate or the dish rather than by making a theatrical display of it. In Wenfu Lu's *The Gourmet*, a cook from Suzhou asks a customer why he is taking his fresh cooked hams home and not eating them at the restaurant. The latter responds, "Because they're underdone and tasteless. We'll cook them again, then put them on top of some green vegetables on a white plate to make them look nice, smell good and taste delicious. Your cooking still leaves much to be desired" (Wenfu 1987: 145).

He recounts how, before savoring the delicate flavors of the dishes served, guests indulge in a feast for the eyes:

The table dazzled us. The white drawnwork tablecloth had been set with an exquisite dinner service: very thin porcelain with a semi-transparent design and a latticework blue rim which looked as if it would leak. There were no flowers on the table but the twelve cold dishes were just as colourful [...] The entire table was like a large blossoming lotus or water lily. (Wenfu 1987: 171, 172)

Chinese cuisine foregrounds the multisensoriality of dishes. It satisfies sight, smell, and taste through an aesthetic combination of colors, aromas, and flavors. It alternates between the crunchy and the tender, the sticky and the dry. Its art is to achieve a "perfect harmony of flavors, aromas, colors and forms," writes Françoise Sabban (1995: 239). Flavor, of course, remains central to the culinary experience. Chinese cooks are first and foremost masters of taste, but they also aim to please the eye and create appetizing odors. Ingredients are meticulously washed and peeled. The art of cooking is based on a subtle sensorial hierarchy: taste comes first, but sight and smell are necessary complements that enhance its effect. The presentation and aromatic preparation of a dish is not a second-order task.

Certain products are deodorized to bring their aromas into harmony with the dominant aroma of the dish. Beef, mutton, or fish may be marinated in "wine, vinegar and other flavorful liquids, or they are macerated using condiments, spices, and sweeteners, such as ginger, peppers, alliums, and sugar" (Sabban 1995: 241). The cook's task then consists in enhancing the ingredients with colors, shapes, and textures through the judicious use of cutting, mixing, and the appropriate cooking time for each ingredient. Cutting is not an arbitrary portioning of foods into small pieces. It contributes to the visual composition of the dish, the infusion of seasonings, and the partition of tastes by skillfully making them work together.

Chinese cuisine distinguishes between nearly 200 types of cuts. At banquets or prestigious meals, certain dishes immediately appeal to the eye with ingredients formed into animal or landscape patterns. The preparation of dishes responds to an architecture of vision, a symbolism of colors that varies according to the season and the availability of products. Red or green peppers bring out the whiteness of chicken, just as bamboo sprouts enhance the greenness of a salad.

The most classic way to present a main course is to center it on a serving platter as it comes out of the wok, in the most “harmonious” manner possible, that is to say, either in an artfully arranged jumble, or, on the contrary, in perfectly straight lines, whereas the secondary ingredient, if there is one, will form a ground or add a decorative touch that accentuates the main ingredient. The dish is placed in the center or middle of the plate, without, however, completely filling it. The porcelain rim should remain visible, and the background ingredient also, as the sauces are often transparent. (Sabban 1995: 243, 244)

For other dishes, other decorative principles are applied. The moment of truth, however, comes in the last phase—the presentation of the final dish to the guests, which represents the crystallization of a long sensual process.

For Tanizaki, Japanese cuisine should be looked at and contemplated at the same time that it is tasted. This begins with the choice of crockery.

Ceramics are by no means inadequate as tableware, but they lack the shadows, the depth of lacquerware. Ceramics are heavy and cold to the touch; they clatter and clink, and being efficient conductors of heat are not the best containers for hot foods. But lacquerware is light and soft to the touch, and gives off hardly a sound [...] There are good reasons why lacquer soup bowls are still used, qualities which ceramic bowls simply do not possess. (1980: 14, 15)

He describes his jubilation in discovering foods in this manner, in the play of light and sight. “What a world of difference there is between this moment and the moment when soup is served Western style, in a pale, shallow bowl” (1980: 15). Tanizaki devotes several pages to the affective dimension of the presentation of dishes.

And when *yōkan* is served in a lacquer dish within whose dark recesses its color is scarcely distinguishable, then it is most certainly an object for meditation. You take its cool, smooth substance into your mouth, and it is as if the very darkness of the room were melting on your tongue; even undistinguished *yōkan* can then take on a mysteriously intriguing flavor. (1980: 16)

Taste, the perception of food in the mouth, is a sensory constellation that blends the aroma of foods with their tactility, temperature, texture,

appearance, and odor. Eating is a total sensory act. The mouth acts as a frontier between inside and out. It allows for speaking and breathing but also for tasting. Taste is inseparable from this buccal matrix that blends sensorialities.

## The Tea Ceremony

Certain practises ritualize this sensory convergence in a rigorous manner. In China and Japan, the preparation and appreciation of tea is an art that engages all of the senses. Lu Yu, one of the ancient masters of the Chinese tradition (733–804), describes three sensory phases in the appreciative tasting of tea: the visual, the olfactory, and the gustatory, all of which still hold true for connoisseurs today. Taste oscillates between two poles, the sweet (*gan*) and the bitter (*ku*), two of the five Chinese flavors (Blofeld 1997). According to Marco Ceresa, while sweetness is the preferred quality of tea, bitterness is equally valued. But there is also a shift from *ku* to *gan* that regular tea-drinkers are sensitive to. The flavor of the tea is all the more satisfying when it is tasted in a harmonious setting. The water must be pure and the tea set pleasing to the eye but simple in appearance. Two or three people suffice because beyond that people become distracted, and because attention to the numerous details integral to the ceremony is required: the boiling and whistling of the tea kettle, the diffuse fragrant steam that it releases, the subtle vibrations of objects, and the culmination in the flavor of the tea penetrating the mouth. But the full sensoriality of the ritual also involves an openness of mind and body, the calm presence of others in the shared pleasure of the moment, and all of the sensations.

While in China the tea ceremony is informed by a certain carefreeness particular to Taoism, in Japan it represents a quiet hymn to existence, a search for perfection in a series of gestures, but within a more rigorous ritual framework. It is an enclave of beauty in the chaos of everyday life. It is not an aesthetic but essentially an ethic inscribed in a vision of the world. For Kakuzo (1964), cultural life in Japan is today still steeped in “tea-ism,” which sought to cultivate respect for nature and the art of flower arrangement, and instill a certain art of inner architecture and existence to different social classes. The right balance of taste is thought to correspond, in effect, to the best attitude in life. Those who are insensitive to exterior events are said to “not have enough tea,” while those who have too much are incapable of mastering their emotions and are continually overwhelmed.

Traditionally, the tea-room was a place protected from the disorder of the world, where guests could commune around beverages, flowers, and painted silks—a harmony of gestures, sounds, silence, colors, and flavors in a room devoid of ornamentation, constructed around emptiness, that is to say, according to the Taoist philosophy, a space that makes all movement possible, open to the world without limiting its use in any way. Only

emptiness can contain everything. The jug is valued for the empty space it offers within.

A classic work on the art of tea in the Zen tradition describes the garden path leading to the tea-room. The *roji* (lane) is a transitional passageway that invites individuals to forget about their worries and busy lives and prepare for the sacred experience that awaits them. "One who has trodden this garden path cannot fail to remember how his spirit, as he walked in the twilight of evergreens over the regular irregularities of the stepping stones, beneath which lay dried pine needles, and passed beside the moss-covered granite lanterns, became uplifted above ordinary thoughts" (Kakuzo 1964: 34). According to an order determined in advance, visitors slip one by one, in silence, into the tea room through a small door that reminds each visitor of their humility, regardless of their status. Each makes obeisance to the painting or flower arrangement on the *tokonoma* and discretely takes his or her place.

Once the guests are seated and quiet reigns, the host enters the room and begins the preparation. The silence is broken by the water boiling in the kettle, which "sings" due to pieces of iron arranged on its bottom that produce a kind of melody.

Whenever I sit with a bowl of soup before me, listening to the murmur that penetrates like the far-off shrill of an insect, lost in contemplation of flavors to come, I feel as if I were being drawn into a trance. The experience must be something like the tea master who, at the sound of the kettle, is taken from himself as if upon the sigh of the wind in the legendary pines of Onoe. (Tanizaki 1980: 15)

The light in the room is subdued, a solemn tone prevails, conducive to meditation. The guests' clothes themselves are discrete in color so as not to introduce discord.

The objects used in the ceremony are marked by time but are perfectly clean, and their fragile beauty invites meditation on the brevity of existence. The plot of Kawabata's *Thousand Cranes* ravel and unravels around tea and its utensils. The author lingers on the subtle glow of the Shino water bowl:

The white glaze carried a faint suggestion of red. As one looked at it, the red seemed to float up from deep within the white [...] The luster glowed quietly from the white depths [...] The very face of the Shino, glowing warmly cool, made him think of Mrs. Ota. Possibly because the piece was so fine, the memory was without the darkness and ugliness of guilt. (1976: 103, 108, 137)

The characters place the Shino next to a small cylindrical Karatsu bowl and compare their qualities at length: "The Karatsu was undecorated, greenish with a touch of saffron and a touch of carmine. It swelled powerfully toward the base" (1976: 140).

The main character reflects on how perfectly the Shino bowl suited the woman it had belonged to, a woman he had loved. By contrast, the Karatsu bowl seems to him the perfect emanation of his long-lost father's soul. The perfection of the bowls brushes away the disorder of the world. It satisfies an aesthetic sentiment but also a moral one. It alleviates suffering and purifies the mind.

The tea bowls, three or four hundred years old, were sound and healthy, and they called up no morbid thoughts. Life seemed to stretch taut over them, however, in a way that was almost sensual [...] The tea bowls were here, present, and the present reality of Kikuji and Fumiko, facing across the bowls, seemed immaculate too. (1976: 140)

Beyond knowing everything about tea, the tea master also knows how to receive, sweep, clean, and wash. The ceremony is a quiet liturgy in which everything is essential, calling upon all of the senses: the taste of the tea permeating the mouth is but one moment in the perfection of an instant. But the outcome is less important than the path, the quest itself for these brief periods during which the disorder of the world gives way to a flawless serenity. The poet Tang describes the delight that overtakes him while delicately sipping tea:

The first cup moistens my lips and throat, the second cup breaks my loneliness, the third cup searches my barren entrails but to find therein some five thousand volumes of odd ideographs. The fourth cup raises a slight perspiration—all the wrong of life passes away through my pores. At the fifth cup I am purified; the sixth cup calls me to the realms of immortals. The seventh cup—ah, but I could take no more! [...] Let me ride on this sweet breeze and waft away thither. (Kakuzo 1964: 14)

## The Cultural Range of Flavors

“The pleasures of the table belong to all times and all ages, to every country and every day; they go hand in hand with all our other pleasures, outlast them, and remain to console us for their loss” (Brillat-Savarin 1994: 13). Cooking is a music of taste in which the notes consist of flavors. It is the art of preparing flavors for the pleasure of eaters, of adapting elements to bring out pleasing flavors in countless and subtle ways. The appreciation of a food depends not only on its categorization as edible; it must also have savor.

Taste is the sense of the perception of savors but it also responds to a particular sensibility marked by social and cultural belonging and the way an individual adapts according to his or her personal history. It is common in Western societies to distinguish four primary flavors on which the taste of foods is based: salty, sweet, sour, and bitter. However, these distinctions are



not universal. This fourfold classification of flavors is a modern Western convention. The Japanese, for example, add to this list umami, which is related to the glutamate commonly used in Asian cuisine.

For most people, flavors are not experienced as belonging to single categories. Food would be rather dull in this case. Flavors go far beyond this, encompassing an infinite number of forms and qualities through their mixture. A piece of fruit or cake is not appreciated only for its sweet flavor, otherwise a cube of sugar would do just as well. "The number of savours is infinite," writes Brillat-Savarin, "for every soluble body has a special savour which is not quite like any other" (1994: 40). Aristotle distinguished between the sweet and the bitter, and described other flavors in terms of different intensities between these two poles: "There are, firstly, simple flavors, which are opposites, the sweet and the bitter; next to these on one side the succulent, on the other the salt; and, thirdly, intermediate between these, the pungent, the rough, the astringent, and the acid. These seem to be practically all the varieties of flavor" (Aristotle 2008: 65). Pliny the Elder describes "thirteen types of flavors": sweet, luscious, unctuous, bitter, rough, acrid, pungent, sharp, sour and salty flavors, as well as "mixed flavors" like those of wine that combine rough, pungent and luscious flavors, and one particular flavor that is unique—that of milk, and finally water, whose absence of body and flavor is a category apart (Vol. 3: 324). In 1752, Carl Linnaeus identified eleven basic tastes: sweet, acid, bitter, saline, astringent, sharp, viscous, fatty, insipid, aqueous, and nauseous (Finger 1994: 166). The Chinese count five: sweet, salty, bitter, sour, and pungent. Indians, drawing on the Ayurvedic tradition, distinguish six: sweet, salty, sour, bitter, pungent, and astringent. The Desana, an indigenous people of the Colombian Amazon, recognize five: sweet, bitter, acid, astringent, and spicy (Classen 1991: 249). The Thais count eight (sweet, salty, bitter, acid, spicy, bland, astringent, and fatty—associated with coconut), but also describe odors that enhance these flavors (a dish that gives off a "nice sweet aroma" or another "a nice salty aroma"). The same term is used to designate both the odor and the flavor. Pepper is also an odor (Levy-Ward 1995). The Burmese identify six: mild, sharp, spicy, salty, astringent, and bitter, in addition to sweet and acid. The Serer Ndut of Senegal combine the salty, bitter, and spicy into a single category, even though they perceive nuances between them (Dupire 1987). According to their cultures and choices, individuals develop gustatory sensibilities that are linked in a unique way to different culinary preferences, sauces, and combinations of flavors.

No single individual will ever experience the full repertoire of available flavors. Every ecology and every cuisine has its own ingredients and gustatory traditions, and coming to know all of these would be impossible. The products available at a given moment in the history of a society, or ways of preparing them, disappear over time, taking with them the particular flavors that brought life to them. The wines of antiquity, for example, were diluted with water, even sometimes with sea water, honey, pepper, various spices, and so on. Pliny mentions forty different kinds of pears, but there existed at the

time at least sixty, as well as a dozen species of plums and pomegranates, around a hundred different apples, and so on (Vol. 3: 300). Jacques Barreau, with reference to nineteenth-century Western societies, speaks of eighty-eight varieties of melons. Today, only five remain (Barreau 1979).

Countless families of apples or grains no longer exist, and their taste remains an enigma. The Roman “garum” has not been in use for a long time:

Another liquid, too, of a very exquisite nature, is that known as “garum:” it is prepared from the intestines of fish and various parts which would otherwise be thrown away, macerated in salt, so that it is, in fact, the result of their putrefaction [...] The most esteemed kind of garum is that prepared from the scomber, in the fisheries of Carthago [...] The people of Forum Julii make their garum from a fish to which they give the name of “lupus” [...] The same, too, with garum, which is now prepared in imitation of the colour of old honied wine, and so pleasantly flavoured as to admit of being taken as drink. Another kind, again, is dedicated to those superstitious observances which enjoin strict chastity, and that prepared from fish without scales, to the sacred rites of the Jews. (Pliny Vol. 5: 508, 509)

Roman cooks had a preference for *laser*, a resin harvested from silphium that had a strong odor and tasted similar to garlic, but the plant died out in the first century AD (Capati and Montanari 2003: 88). Other products that have become dietary staples in Western societies are of recent origin, such as tomatoes, eggplants, beans, peas, cauliflower, broccoli, and so on. Ice cream, sorbet, coffee, tea, and chocolate only became known in Europe over the course of the seventeenth century.

A minute modification in the preparation of a dish can be detected by the eater. Flavors are like the letters of an infinite alphabet that make the multitude of gustatory perceptions of different social groups and individuals both possible and particular. For Brillat-Savarin, speaking as a connoisseur, “there exists an indefinite number of series of basic savours, all capable of being modified by an infinite number of combinations [...] a new language would be needed to express all the resultant effects, mountains of folio volumes to define them, and undreamed-of numerical characters to label them” (1994: 40). Brillat-Savarin also divides up the progression of flavor, by distinguishing between the moment when the food enters the mouth, the moment when it is swallowed, and, finally, the moment of judgment, that is to say, of critical distance. Gustatory perception of the same food even varies in quality and intensity throughout the tasting process. For Brillat-Savarin,

the action of taste is simple, that is to say it cannot be impressed by two flavours at the same time. But it may be double and even multiple in succession; that is to say that in the same act of gutturation it is possible to experience a second and even a third sensation, one after the other, each fainter than the last, which we refer to by the words after-taste, bouquet, or fragrance. (1994: 44)

In the culinary experience, individuals recognize flavors or not, know how to name them or not, and like them or not. No flavor exists, however, in an absolute state, because its perception is based on the past experience and interpretation of an individual marked by a particular social context and history. A certain chemical preparation is sweet for 20 percent of subjects, bitter for another 20 percent, and simultaneously bitter and sweet for the rest (Faurion 1993: 81). An Eastern allegory describes three vinegar tasters. Buddha, Confucius, and Lao-Tzu are together in front of a jar of vinegar. Each dips his finger in it to have a taste: Confucius finds it sour, Cakyamouni finds it bitter, and Lao-Tzu finds it sweet. Flavor is always affected by values and by a “vision of the world,” or, rather, a taste of the world [*gustation du monde*].

It is difficult to compare people’s experience because the flavors they perceive are imbued with affectivity. The gustatory is an individual category, hidden in the privacy of judgment, a privilege of the inner self. Tasting isolates individuals in a universe of flavors and pleasures that seem to concern them alone *De gustibus non est disputandum*.<sup>1</sup> The taster struggles to find the words to describe his or her experience. Brillat-Savarin was obliged to invent words to help his readers grasp these nuances. When Alice describes the contents of a little bottle having “a sort of mixed flavour of cherry-tart, custard, pineapple, roast turkey, toffy, and hot buttered toast” (Carroll 2006: 6), she is expressing the largely subjective dimension of flavors that for her are associated with pleasure and peculiarity.

Though people’s basic experience of food is similar within a particular social group and time period, other epochs have known very different cuisines. Taste preferences are a matter of convention and susceptible to radical change. In French cuisine, the sweet and salty are completely separated, but, in the Middle Ages, and up until the turn of the seventeenth century, meat dishes were often served with sugar or honey. According to William Edward Mead, “Modern [English] taste is so different from that of four or five hundred years ago that scarcely one of the favorite dishes served at feasts would now be found eatable” (1931: 53). Mead’s observation would apply to many European societies, especially France, Italy, and Spain, all of which radically broke with medieval culinary traditions. Taste is not a mathematical value but is, rather, discriminating and symbolic, and strictly governed by variations in taste (understood in the moral sense). The literal translation of terms designating different flavors in different societies introduces a large margin of ambiguity. It is uncertain whether the same flavors are being referred to, and, if they are, whether some nuances are missing.

## The Development of Taste

Within the first hours of life, infants make a specific face in reaction to different sapid solutions placed on their tongues (Chiva 1985). Salty, sweet, bitter, and sour stimulations each produce a singular facial movement that takes the same form among all children. Lacking any experience in gustatory

perception, newborns already possess an ability to discriminate flavors, in spite of their lacking words or social education, which have not yet had an impact. The sour solution causes a brief reddening of the face, a blinking of the eyes, a pinching and pursing of the lips, and an increase in saliva. The sweet solution causes the face muscles to relax, the corners of the mouth to retract, a vigorous sucking, and the hint of a smile—the child's face suggests a feeling of satisfaction. The salty solution causes a more variable reaction, a wrinkling of the nose, a movement of the mouth, and a puckering of the lips. The expression appears to be one of displeasure. The bitter substance produces a grimace, a drooping of the corners of the mouth, a contracting of muscles. The infant salivates, sticks out his or her tongue and tries to spit up the product. The facial expression evokes aversion.

The grimace of bitterness or the cheerful repose of sweetness return when the child is given these sapid solutions again, at around 18 months of age, but also in response to other everyday life situations. A metaphorization of bitterness or sweetness already influences the child's relation to the world. Perception has become a value that extends to sentiments. "The child's universe of aversive, aggressive, and identifiable things has expanded," writes René Zazzo (cited in Chiva 1985: 9).<sup>2</sup> This extension of the facial expression occurs during the mirror phase, that is to say, in the apprehension of the self in the mirror of others.

Over the course of his study and in the close examination of his films, Matty Chiva discovered that mothers' facial expressions echoed those of their children, when the latter were presented with different sapid solutions. Infants' behaviors and movements are thus interpreted by their entourage and either reinforced or redirected, according to the cultural modalities of the group. In seeing these reactions, others conclude that the child either likes or dislikes a food. These facial expressions thus form the basis of communication. They are transformed into signification for others and for the infants themselves, who learn, in this way, to transmit emotions. These expressions become specific to an affective culture tied to the child's community of belonging and only emerge in precise circumstances (Le Breton 2004).

Chiva notes that children's specific facial reactions to sapid solutions are nuanced over time by their history, education, and the emotional climate in which they are raised, among other factors. Their gustatory sensibilities then begin to show disparities within the same social group. The innate dimension of the gusto-facial reflex is short-lived and gives way, a few months later, to personal, social, and cultural variations (Chiva 1985: 163).

While young infants reject mustard, salt, olives, or other foods that have a bitter, sour, or salty flavor, they later learn to like or dislike them based on indications received from their surrounding community. Bitterness, which initially provokes defensive reactions, is quickly overcome in Mediterranean cultures, where children eat olives and learn to appreciate them. Other strong-tasting foods that are at first rejected are gradually integrated into the pleasure of eating: vinaigrette, pepper, pickles, garlic, grapefruit, onion,

and so on (Fischler 1993: 110). In societies where food is spicy, children, without ever being forced, slowly assimilate the adults' behavior. Alimentary socialization shapes their gustatory sensibilities and their food preferences and aversions. In eating, the child comes to appreciate the family cuisine. The formation of taste implicates both biological and educational input. But the social symbolism of food takes precedence over biology, which adapts to cultural orientations. Food preferences are marked by an affectivity constructed in relation to the other. Chiva's study already showed that while some infants have a strong gustatory sensibility, others are content to eat what is given to them until they are full, while still others are situated midway between these two tendencies (Chiva 1979: 116).

Family culinary habits initiate children to different tastes, their amounts and their succession. Children become accustomed to flavors, products, and condiments that eventually become indispensable to them. Learning to taste a dish first consists in entering a cultural register of shared values. Alimentary taste is a social and cultural phenomenon, an interiorized form of predilection and avoidance, an enacted memory of childhood that is nuanced and refined by a personal history. It is marked by gustatory perceptions and singular appetencies with respect to foods and beverages that are not only sources of nutrition but also associated with values and sentiments—that is to say, pleasure or displeasure, predilections and aversions. As with the other sensory modalities, a symbolic filter intervenes between sensation and perception to create meaning, a vision or, rather, a taste of the world. Eating and enjoying food, knowing how and with whom to share it, is a learning process.

A child enters into a gustatory system through a culinary system that is unique to a family immersed within particular social traditions. The mother's cooking remains the cuisine of reference and reverence throughout a person's life. "We eat our most reassuring memories, seasoned with the tenderness and rituals that marked our early childhoods" (Moulin 1975: 10). We are reminded here of Proust's sudden recollection in savoring the *petite madeleine*:

And as soon as I had recognized the taste of the piece of *madeleine* soaked in her decoction of lime-blossom which my aunt used to give me [...] immediately the old grey house upon the street, where her room was, rose up like a stage set to attach itself to the little pavilion opening on to the garden which had been built out behind it for my parents [...] and with the house the town, from morning to night and in all weathers, the Square where I used to be sent before lunch, the streets along which I used to run errands, the country roads we took when it was fine [all of this] taking shape and solidity, sprang into being, town and gardens alike, from my cup of tea. (Proust 1982a: 51)

As children learn to identify flavors, to appreciate or reject dishes or foods, they may also participate in the confection of foods and thus learn not only

to discern flavors but also to create and enhance them. “Bar children from the kitchen and you condemn them to exile from dreams they will never know. The oneiric value of food is activated during its preparation [...] Happy is the man who as a child clung to the skirt of a woman working about the house” (Bachelard 2002: 65). These food experiences, however, are not limited to the home. More distant family relations, friends of parents or parents of friends, and meals taken at school are all variations on a culinary context specific to a given society. Children become familiar with a repertoire of foods, a certain order of dishes served, and to their unique preparations. They learn to recognize and hierarchize flavors according to their taste. Yet even though a common ground remains, many scholars agree on the absence of a clear continuity between children’s and parents’ tastes, especially with respect to the current world of fast-food that the younger generations are so drawn to. Differences between individual sensibilities to different flavors are also considerable, as is the sensory threshold at which these are perceived.

Peer-group influence is also a factor. During communal meals, at school, for example, children are sometimes confronted with a cuisine that is different than the one they are accustomed to. They hear others’ comments, observe their behavior, and these can have an impact on their attitudes. They may then willingly accept eating foods that they have never tasted. The peer group extends and nuances the alimentary preferences and propositions of the familial group, and this gives rise to discussion around dishes and foods, comparisons that refine or undermine taste and exercise a durable influence on the shaping of a person’s alimentary and gustatory sensibility.

Identifying with older peers, in particular, often leads to an interiorization of their tastes, even if these were only moderately appreciated in the past. Both Duncker (1938) and Birch (1987) have demonstrated the ease with which children allow their food choices and flavor preferences to be dictated by their older peers, through imitation and identification. Some children, whose tastes were known and experimentally compared with those of older peers, modified their behavior and allowed themselves to be tempted by new foods and flavors that did not appeal to them at first. It is the taste of the others held in esteem that leads them to appreciate foods previously avoided. Later, during adolescence, peer experience is also essential in transforming initially unpleasant perceptions into positive tastes. A person’s first glass of wine or beer is rarely perceived as enjoyable. The taste is not very appealing. To appreciate it, one has to become accustomed to it over time by identifying with others. The learning process is evidence of a new evaluation. It is not the wine or beer that changes taste but the individual drinkers who change their tastes. If the beverage maintained the same initial flavor, they would no longer continue to partake of it.

The culinary experience distinguishes between what is good and what is not. It forms a basis for appreciation over a lifetime, even if this is susceptible to slight modifications. This includes dietary staples such as rice, corn, potatoes, and manioc; key seasonings, such as olive oil in Provence, butter

and cream in Normandy, curries in India, lemon and oregano in Greece, lime, chillies, and coriander in Mexico, soya sauce and ginger in China; and so on. The combinations are infinite. Paul Rozin refers in this sense to “flavor principles,” identifiable culinary markers that uniquely define, up to a certain point, a particular cultural cuisine (Rozin 1981; Fischler 1993). Many societies produce dominant tastes, privileged associations between products and flavors that culturally distinguish their cuisine. These can sometimes be summed up in a single flavor: “Sour in the east, hot in the west, sweet in the south and salty in the north” is how Chinese cuisine is described by the chef in Wenfu’s *The Gourmet* (1987: 160). Individual taste is modeled on and intertwined with these sapid associations.

Cuisine is doubly inscribed in individual experience, as it imparts a sense of identity. Migrants bring their cuisine with them, and food is one of the sensory traces of their presence: Maghreban, Turkish, Portuguese, Spanish, Italian, and other restaurants abound in host societies. Particular flavors are sought after so as not to forget one’s origins. Writing of Algerian Jewish cuisine, Joëlle Bahloul, notes that

such a family is Blidan or Algérois because one finds on its Passover table the famous ragout of tripes simmered in garlic and paprika. Likewise, it is a sabbatical dish of spinach and chickpeas, *selq*, the green dish, that alone designates the Constantinois origin of its consumers. One can thus find, throughout Algeria, many regional entities that are distinguished precisely through food. (Bahloul 1983: 26)

Algerian Jews living in France continue to distinguish themselves through their culinary preparations. Bahloul evokes a woman looking for “peppers, chickpeas, cracked wheat, olives and condiments, cumin and paprika [...], attempting, in short, to reconstitute an Algerian market in a Parisian neighborhood. Sometimes, she had to look for a long time and travel long distances to find the products needed to prepare what she called ‘our cooking’ [*la cuisine de ‘nous-autres.’*]” (Bahloul 1983: 30).

Migrants find the markets of their countries of origin mixed in with the city’s other stalls and shops. Small businesses, with their national and cultural references and special products, cater to migrants who come to shop there and nourish their nostalgia. In these identity enclaves, people meet other men and women of the same cultural origin. The alimentary palette of the host society is also enlarged as new flavors become available to curious locals. Home cooking made with these ingredients and invitations exchanged are modes of replenishment; shared memories consumed are a return to gustatory origins. For first-generation immigrants, learning to eat according to the customs of the host country is a personal trial, an enduring hardship. If it is possible to reconcile the culinary customs of one’s village of origin with the alimentary means of the host country, a person’s sense of personal identity is partially preserved. “This glass of pale, cool, dry wine marshals my entire life in the Champagne. People may

think I am drinking: I am remembering” (Bachelard, cited in De Certeau et al. 1998: 188).

Cuisine constitutes the final trace of fidelity to one’s roots when all the rest has disappeared. Even when people have slowly adapted to the host country’s foodways in everyday life and reference to origins has begun to fade, important occasions (birthdays, family gatherings, religious holidays) see the return of traditional dishes on the communal table. Festivities are then accompanied by a culinary celebration of origins. In *La sonrisa etrusca* (The Etruscan Smile), a father, an elderly man come to die in Milan, and his son, completely detached from his childhood, secretly meet one night when the spouse is absent. The old man takes out from a hiding spot some foods from his region that he had managed to find in a small shop.

Suddenly rediscovering the aroma and taste of migas is, for the son, “like a portal opening onto fields in his memory, a portal through which enter shepherds and chestnut groves, burning vines and songs, childlike cravings and motherly hands” (Sampedro 1997: 124 sq.). The old man and his son exchange numerous memories of the foods of their village. When the meal is over, they embrace one another, renewing a long-lost bond.

Privileged flavors constitute a secret and timeless link that connects individuals to the tables of their childhoods, and, beyond that, to the maternal source, in her presence or absence, attention or indifference. In the act of eating there is always this root that causes us to find in food something more than nutrition, a residue of memory that is reactivated every time we eat. We are satiated by something other than food, nourished first by meaning. The pleasure of eating, of savoring flavors, is a condition common to all cultures that do not simply use products as they are found in nature, but that choose and prepare them in particular ways. Eating is a customary sensuality. The flavor of the world is first tasted in the mouth. We sink our teeth into it, with the pleasure of eating dishes associated with a history, and with preparations and foods that we recognize and share with others. Eating is a matter of taste in every sense of the term.

Just as people are convinced that their cultures are the most refined and coherent, they also assume that their cuisine is the best and their alimentary choices are unquestionable. In 1691, Massialot writes with candor in his preface to *Cuisinier royal et bourgeois* (1691), for example:

Man is not everywhere capable of such discernment, which is an emanation of his reason and intellect [...] Only in Europe do cleanliness, good taste, and skillful seasoning of meat prevail [...] While Europeans also rightly appreciate the marvelous gifts that we owe to the fortunate situation of other climates. Above all in France we can pride ourselves on our superiority in this regard to all other nations, as well as in manners and in a thousand other well-known advantages. (cited in Flandrin 2003: 297)



Cuisine is so much at the heart of cultural and social identity that each society recognizes itself in a privileged way in a dish of predilection, whether it be couscous, cassoulet, bouillabaisse, cod with cabbage, or what have you. “How many measures of rice have you eaten?” asks the Chinese or Vietnamese host of his guests to know if they have been sufficiently fed. For Cambodians, being satiated is having eaten rice. Among the Yao of Thailand, eating is also “eating rice.” In France, in working-class neighborhoods, the “soup” from *souper* (supper) had long designated the meal, and “breaking bread” or *casser la croûte* (having a snack) referred to the bread that was shared.

Sometimes flavors and their appreciation are subdivided by differences of class, region, age, or even gender in relation to the given forms of socialization. Depending on the degree of social conformity demanded, these tastes may apply to the whole group or vary according to individual choice. A dish being considered “too” salty, spicy or sweet is less an individual perception than a social judgment interiorized by the individual. It is a question not only of recognizing but also of liking or not the dishes offered for consumption. This prism has an enduring quality but is never definitive, insofar as people discover over time flavors that they had been unaware of and which may or may not be pleasing to them. These encounters, these personal experiences sometimes lead people to modify their tastes, to enjoy flavors they had previously rejected.

The individual range of tastes is thus not determined by education. It is based on a combination of influences that circumstances sometimes modify, not so much by suppressing older tastes linked to childhood than by adding new ones yet to be discovered. An example provided by the navigator John Cook with respect to his crew recalls the peer-group influence described by Duncker or Birch:

The Sour Kroutt, the Men at first would not eat it, until I put it in practice—a method I never once Knew to fail with seamen—and this was to have some of it dressed every day for the Cabin Table, and permitted all the Officers, without exception, to make use of it, and left it to the Option of the men either to take as much as they pleased or none at all; but this practice was not continued above a week before I found it necessary to put every one on board to an allowance [...] the moment they see their superiors set a value upon it, it becomes the finest stuff in the world and the inventor an honest fellow. (Cook 2016: 120)

Taste is a provisional position in relation to foods, not a fixed system.

## The Taste of Water

Refinement of taste is very developed among certain admirers of good food. Brillat-Savarin (1994: 47) explains how the gourmands of ancient Rome were able to taste the difference between a fish caught between the bridges

from one caught lower down the river. Juvenal (*Satire IV*) cites an acquaintance whose palate was so subtle that “from the first mouthful, he distinguished an oyster from Circeies from those of the Rocks of Lucrin or the depths of Rutupiae, and with one glance could tell on what shore a sea urchin had been gathered” (cited in Revel 1982: 37, 38). In the Chinese tea tradition the taste of water plays an important role. Master Lu Yu, one of the founders of the ritual, was one day the guest of a high-ranking dignitary who served him a tea made from the waters of a river renowned for its unsurpassed flavor. The master raised the cup and swallowed a mouthful. To his host’s surprise, he was disappointed with the water, which appeared to him to be of poor quality. The host, disconcerted, called the official responsible for the provisions. The man denied any negligence in performing his task. The water had indeed been obtained from this highly reputed river. Lu Yu, astonished, tasted the tea again. He recognized the taste but also sensed the presence of water that was not from the river’s midstream, but from the riverbank, where it loses its qualities. Impressed, the official confessed that a bit of water had spilled due to the boat’s movement and, to replace it, he had gathered some near the bank.

The quality of water is an essential element in the preparation of tea in China and Japan. It should not taint the beverage and should be sweet, which is not true of all waters. In the past, when a devotee of tea found a source of water worthy of his art, he was overcome with joy. Certain hermits were known to set up residence near reputed water sources. John Blofeld summarizes the ranking of waters traditionally recommended for the best preparation: first, water from a mountain spring that runs over rocks and stones, without vegetation, then any other mountain spring water, then water from the plains that has not been contaminated by the environment, then water drawn from a fast-flowing river, and, finally, well water—any other water being considered a last resort. Morning dew collected from leaves was considered of the utmost excellence, but it was rarely used due to the difficulty in gathering it (Blofeld 1985: 122).

Another story involves Lu Yu’s adoptive father, also a tea master and Abbot of the Dragon Cloud Monastery. During this period, Lu Yu was separated from his father for a long time. After his departure, the abbot had renounced tea. The Emperor, doubting that Lu Yu’s talent was unsurpassable to this point, invited the abbot to his palace and offered him a tea prepared by a court lady of unrivaled talent. The Emperor announced to his guest that he was going to drink a tea much superior to his son’s tea. The abbot smiled and took the cup, drank a mouthful and replaced the cup on the table. He was not convinced. Unbeknownst to the abbot, Lu Yu had also been summoned to the palace and also charged with preparing a tea. Another cup was brought by him to the abbot, who raised it to his mouth and smiled. Struck by his guest’s discernment, the Emperor summoned Lu Yu and reunited the two men (Blofeld 1985: 7). Blofeld describes a series of similar events highlighting the gustatory finesse of the tea masters.

A food is never good in an absolute sense but only for a particular palate. The cuisine of gastronomes is not the best, it is the one they appreciate. Others might criticize it or even consider it inedible. It would not shake their conviction that their own cooking or that of their favorite little local restaurant is better. In *Confessions*, Rousseau complains of having to eat the finely prepared dishes of his hosts and dreams, instead, of modest omelets made with chervil: “I had never—and still never have—known better fare than that provided by a rustic meal. If there is milk and butter, eggs, salad, cheese, brown bread, and some passable wine I am assured of eating well” (2008: 72).

The taste of water is presumed to be neutral, the very image of bland. However, excellent water can play an important role in a culture’s identity. In Macedonia in the 1950s, Nicolas Bouvier observed with surprise: “The natives didn’t make great claims for theirs anyway, they thought it had a poor, common taste. I never noticed that, but who cares in our countries about the taste of the water? In Macedonia they were crazy about it; they would urge you to walk five miles to reach a stream where the water was excellent” (2009: 61). But probably no water has the same taste as another, and these infinitesimal differences can also produce preferences and aversions.

## Good Food

A refined knowledge of flavors—and pleasure in seeking them out—is a feature of the human condition.

The Inuit behave like gourmets and connoisseurs, just like food lovers here, choosing their oysters and eagerly awaiting their arrival, examining textures and tastes, deciding to eat one variety of fish, very fresh and raw, but not another, choosing to bite into the aorta of the heart of the ringed seal or savor the tough skin of the whale, preferring to put aside migratory birds to eat cooked, but to consume their “local ducks” raw. (Roué 1996: 179)

The best taste is a cultural prism projected onto food, a filiation of childhood or special moments. Thus a familiar dish presented in an unfamiliar way can leave a person disappointed. “A very pleasant Julienne soup can be made without sorrel; but those who look for the sorrel always feel that without it the Julienne is a failure” (Dallas, cited in Mennell 1996: 6). In the 1930s, George Orwell regretted seeing what he called “good food” being abandoned by the English working class: “The number of people who *prefer* tinned peas and tinned fish to real peas and real fish must be increasing every year, and plenty of people who could afford real milk in their tea would much sooner have tinned milk” (1937: 89). In his indignation, Orwell does not perceive his ethnocentrism in considering “good” only the food that he himself

enjoys. In fact, populations deprived of a large choice of foods and limited to eating the same foods often like what they eat, in principle. They make a virtue of necessity and relish what is available to them. The “good” taste of a food is not in its “quality,” “cost,” “rarity,” “healthiness,” or “balance,” but precisely in the taste of the eater, in his or her personal value system, which can never be imposed as an absolute. Thus the Jesuit Jean-Baptiste Saint-Just perceives in the communion wafer a “bread of angels [...] that excels all savoury tastes and surpasses all sweetnesses which may flatter our senses” (Camporesi 1991: 148).

Haute cuisine is first and foremost a cultural appreciation that is of interest to individuals accustomed to bringing a critical perspective to food. Isak Dinesen’s novel *Babette’s Feast* clearly illustrates the differences in taste between different individuals and cultures. While the simple puritans are content to partake of Babette’s feast without taking any particular pleasure in it, General Löwenhielm, accustomed to good food, revels in one delight after the other, but his attempts to share his jubilation with the others is met with indifference. “He looked round at his fellow-diners. They were all quietly eating their Blinis Demidoff, without any sign of either surprise or approval, as if they had been doing so every day for thirty years” (1988: 36). While the general revels in recognizing the taste of a bottle of Veuve Cliquot 1860, the others perceive it as “some kind of lemonade.” But the alimentary puritanism of the guests is nonetheless subverted without their knowing. They become friendlier and warmer with one another, freer in expressing themselves. This “miracle” of commensality will have a lasting effect on them. But their enjoyment of the food remains unconscious. At no time do they ever take an aesthetic distance from what they are eating to take extra pleasure in it, unlike the general for whom every morsel is a wonder, and each sip of wine a flood of emotion that triggers numerous culinary memories. Between the general and the other guests, there is a difference in taste of the world, an aesthetic divergence marked by their respective histories and cultures. Neither is right or wrong. The cultural use of their senses decides for them without them knowing it.

Speaking of “haute cuisine” or “good food” thus implies attaching a value judgment to food, making a model of what is, in the first instance, a socially acquired ability to judge and compare. To enjoy “haute” cuisine, it is important to have diversified the foods one eats and taken a moral distance from these in order to always be able to choose among different dishes. The gastronome is less interested in the eating itself (a secondary consequence) than in the savoring of sought-after flavors. Gastronomy involves a playful distancing from food, a deliberate appeal to eaters’ taste with preparations they can judge. It transforms meals into an art of delectation, and requires its connoisseurs to display discernment and a propensity to discourse on food. In this sense, gastronomy, understood as a quest for culinary jubilation, and of which “haute” cuisine is one variation, is an ancient phenomenon, going hand in hand with social stratification and associated with the most affluent social groups.

## Pleasures (and Sins) of the Table

The apostle Matthew, he whose eyes were turned to the heavens, had no qualms about surrendering to earthly foods.

Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothes? Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they? (Matthew 6:25–27)

For Augustine, foods have no flavor, they are neutral: “This hast Thou taught me, that I should set myself to take food as physic. But while I am passing from the discomfort of emptiness to the content of replenishing, in the very passage the snare of concupiscence besets me” (2012: 143). He wryly evokes Adam losing paradise because of an apple. It is best to be wary of the lure of flavor. Food gives rise to ambivalent sentiments that vary according to different societies and competing visions of the world. Religious systems can call for fasts or feasts, attach value to foods or hold them in contempt.

The Islamic world is hospitable to flavor and food. The tales of *One Thousand and One Nights* abound in descriptions of dishes that are delicious to the eyes and mouths of the protagonists. The Eastern art of sweets is also well-known. Pastries, syrups, honeys, fruits, and spices fill the tables and are freely exchanged during celebrations or neighborhood gatherings. Gluttony, however, is condemned, as in Christianity. Love of food can be a quality, but not in excess, even when it is good. Individuals must know how to control themselves.

Gandhi, in spite of the richness and flavors of Indian cuisine, expressed his indifference to the pleasures of eating:

Food has to be taken as we take medicine, that is, without thinking whether it is palatable or otherwise, and only in quantities limited to the needs of the body [...] It is therefore a breach of this observance to take anything just for its pleasant taste [...] From this it follows, that to put salt in one’s food, in order to increase or modify its flavour or in order to cure its insipidity, is a breach of the observance. (1932: 11)

For Gandhi, food is the medicine needed to sustain life. Any other inclination should be resisted. It is strictly utilitarian—there is no pleasure attached to it and no interest in flavor.

Protestantism in its Puritan version condemned feasts and banquets and also reduced food to a physiological need to be fulfilled. Erasmus, though not reformed, bluntly expressed the sentiment that food was not worthy of celebration: “Even as a young man I never partook of food and drink

except as a kind of medicine, and often regretted that it was not possible to live permanently without them” (1989: 424).

Flandrin dates the definitive entry of the term *gastonomie* into the French language to around 1800, though it made a temporary appearance in 1623. Cuisine then became an “object of discourse” (Aron 1973: 15). The art of making good food was of course not a sudden European discovery. Gourmands did not wait for the invention of the word. “In the Middle Ages, the terms ‘*friand*’ (fond of) and ‘*friandise* (delicacy) already expressed a refined love of food and delicacy of taste” (Flandrin 1992: 93 sq.) For the Romans of antiquity, love of food was a primary passion: “Cooking was as distinguished as tasting. The great men of Rome were not averse to attaching their name to a new recipe” (Dupont 1999: 61).

Toussaint-Samat notes that in Roman antiquity there were, not unlike vintage wines, highly-esteemed fish. “To be worth eating, tuna had to come from Byzantium and be caught between the rising of the Pleiades and the setting of Arcturus. A gourmet could always tell” (2009: 277). Eels were fished in Lake Garda or in the Strait of Messina, where they were considered best. Hake was reputed if it came from Pessinus, golden bream from Lake Lucrinus. A red mullet of more than four pounds auctioned by Tiberius was known to have sold for a fortune to one gastronome, much to the regret of Apicius, who also sought to acquire it. Pliny notes the delicacy of the oysters of Lake Lucrinus, the preeminence of the wolf-fish in the Tiber River caught “between the two bridges,” the esteemed turbot of Ravenna, and the elops of Rhodes (Vol. 2: 468).

“Let us eat and drink, / for tomorrow we die,” says an epistle of Paul (*1 Cor.* 15:32). Jesus took part in banquets and never spoke adversely about food. At one time, the image of the monk who lives well and enjoys the pleasures of the table was a commonplace. Though Augustine condemned the joys of the table, his reprobation had little impact on the behavior of followers. Of course, ascetics and mystics would take contempt for food and flesh to another level. The alimentary puritanism of certain monastic orders was evident in their attempts to reduce pleasure by transforming food into a pure utility. Flandrin recalls that Hugh of Saint Victor, in the thirteenth century, reproached gourmets in search of food that was “too precious and delicious” or “too rare and uncustomary” and never satisfied with ordinary dishes. He denounced those who could swallow only “rich and delicious things” or who “put too much vain effort into preparing meats” and invented “infinite types of decoctions, fried foods and seasonings” (Flandrin 1992: 100). Hugh’s words had little effect. The main character of a novella by Gentile Sermini, a priest, disguised his cookbook as a breviary “full of cooking recipes, including all possible foods and rarities, how they should be cooked, with what seasoning, and at what time of year; this it included and nothing else” (cited in Montanari 1996: 64).

When the Church invented the seven deadly sins after 1270, gluttony was ranked fifth. It was only considered deadly in its excesses, less for its delectation than its voracity. Drunkenness was clearly more reprehensible,

leading to disorders, conflicts with others, lust, and so on. The gourmet was a figure of intemperance, and this defied a God-governed order that attributed a rigorous place to every individual in the social hierarchy. The gourmand was seen more as a glutton, using food in ways that were inappropriate for his position. The upper-middle classes overstepped their bounds in treating themselves to sumptuous meals that should have remained the privilege of the nobility and important Church figures. Gluttony was the sin of selfishness. The bourgeois squandered food that should have been more evenly distributed. Their excess deprived the poor classes. But soon the bourgeois appeared to be an essential foundation of the natural hierarchy of the world according to God, and their alimentary practices became legitimate in the eyes of the Church. Mirelle Vincent-Cassy (1993) observes that the search for exquisite flavors became acceptable in homes, where it was seen as women's duty to "strengthen" their spouses with delicious dishes.

In the fifteenth century, the nobility were in turn accused of gluttony, still in the name of excess, while the people were suffering from hunger. The sumptuousness of court meals seemed extreme in contrast with the millions of hungry forced into flight by war. "Reference to gluttony thus became a way of accusing the nobles and the king's entourage of starving the people, of not fulfilling a wartime function that justified an increase in provisions over what was usually supplied to workers. This came in the midst of the Hundred Years War when the French chivalry was facing tremendous defeats" (Vincent-Cassy 1993: 30). The Church reproached those eating too much for forgetting about the hungry. The question of flavors was thus less a concern than the waste of food to the benefit of a few whose position in society hardly justified their appetite.

The French Revolution is often considered the key moment in the history of French cuisine, because it introduced professional cooks into civil society, cooks who only provided their talent to nobles and bourgeoisie willing to pay for their services. Mennell reminds us, however, that the first restaurants made their appearance in the two decades prior to the revolution, reflecting an already changing culinary sensibility. The revolution, which left many cooks of aristocratic kitchens unemployed, accelerated this development (Mennell 1996: 136). Restaurants, unlike inns, taverns, greasy spoons (*gargotes*), cafés, bakeries, or other food businesses, claimed to offer a culinary refinement that did not exist in other public gathering places, because of the quality of the cooks.<sup>3</sup> Their restaurants soon became centers of gustation. The profession of chef-restaurateur thus made its debut while also creating a class of gastronomes, that is to say, connoisseurs of the culinary arts. French cuisine went on to acquire considerable prestige in the nineteenth century. Chefs like Carême or gastronomes like Grimod or Brillat-Savarin are its symbols. Grimod's *Le Manuel des Amphitryons* (1808) was the first publication on gastronomy.

In the wake of the revolution, Grimod had the idea of founding a jury of connoisseurs who would meet once a week to taste dishes prepared for

them. “A jury composed of respectable mouths steeped in gourmandize, whose palates are trained in all branches of the gustatory arts and know how to appreciate every aspect of the objects submitted to their judgment, is surely a tribunal as perfect as any human institution could be” (Grimod 1997: 18). *L’Almanach des Gourmands*, published every year from 1803 to 1812, pursued the same initiative. The first edition included a “nutritive calendar,” which listed, month by month, the culinary resources available according to the season. It also contained a “nutritive itinerary,” a gourmand’s walking tour of various Paris neighborhoods, with Grimod’s commentaries on the quality of different restaurants’ or boutiques’ cuisines. Grimod made cuisine into an art.

A distinction emerged between domestic cuisine (which could also be delicious) and professional cuisine, which depended on customer satisfaction—a word-of-mouth reputation—and was subject to competition. Cooks were held to standards of quality and innovation, their “success henceforth was to depend on the opinion of anyone and everyone, on the money of [their] customers, and hence on a new guild that places gastronomical art, like all the other arts, beneath its surveillance: the guild of critics” (Revel 1982: 210). The restaurant became a convenient place to eat away from home for practical reasons but also for enjoyment, a place to reawaken culinary pleasures beyond the domestic kitchen, to have a larger choice of dishes without having to prepare them oneself. The restaurant became the privileged place of gustation and conviviality.

## A Vision or Taste of the World

To define a culture we commonly speak of its vision of the world, or “world view,” giving sight a sensory primacy, but we could just as easily evoke a taste of the world, insofar as food categories also order the world in their own way, shape, that is, our taste for life. We do not feed indifferently on foods but, first and foremost, on meaning. Eating is to participate in one’s culture, to share tastes and distastes, preferences and indifference, sauces, cooking, and so on with others. To be considered edible, foods must appeal to the mind, recalls Lévi-Strauss. A community’s cuisine is arbitrary and conventional. Among the infinite edible things to be found in a particular environment, only a tiny fraction of these are put to culinary use. Divided between nature and culture, we partake of the foods in our surroundings, but only according to the meanings and values attached to them. Many societies develop a taste of the world that is based on a cosmology.

The Hausa distinguish people according to taste. Children are saltless, while grown men have a hot and spicy taste. Women have different tastes depending on their life cycle. A young woman who has recently lost her virginity is still imbued with sweetness. She receives food that is full of sweetness, warmth, and spice. By contrast, a pregnant woman should not eat anything too sweet and is offered a particular food, without spice.



The disparity in sweetness reflects the behavioural norms incumbent upon these persons: the new bride should be full of sexual desire (metaphorically equated with sugar), the nursing mother should avoid sexual intercourse or her milk will become “too sweet,” causing her child to sicken. Thus, amount of sweetness signifies the “extent of desire” required of the initiate into the statuses of newly wed and new mother respectively. (Ritchie 1991: 200)

The Hausa thus possess gustatory qualities that correspond to their status and stage in life. The gustatory metaphor also applies to the moral dimension of speech. A person who does not eat salt is thought to be a liar, while the one who eats salt is not. Individuals will swear to having eaten salt to affirm they are telling the truth (Ritchie 1991: 201).

In the Indian Ayurvedic tradition, the human body, like all that exists in the universe, is thought to be composed of various proportions of the five elements: earth, water, fire, air, and ether. The six Ayurvedic flavors also draw on this symbolism, as they emerge from various combinations of these elements. The sweet flavor, for example, mixes primarily “earth” and “water.” “A sour flavor is associated with a combination that is rich in ‘water’ and ‘fire’ elements. Saltiness corresponds to a combination of ‘earth’ and ‘fire,’ the pungent with a combination of ‘air’ and ‘fire,’ bitterness with ‘air’ and ‘ether,’ and the astringent with a predominance of ‘air’ and ‘earth’ elements” (Mazars 1995: 122). Complex flavors are derived from the combination of two or more basic flavors. Mazars counts fifteen combinations of two flavors, twenty of three, fifteen of four, six of five, and one of six, totaling sixty-three different flavors, in addition to the six principal flavors (1995: 122). These flavors are incorporated into a diet in view of their symbolic virtues. “Ayurvedic medicine teaches that substances with a sweet, sour or salty flavor relieve ‘air’ but aggravate ‘phlegm,’ because they are thought to consist primarily of earth and water. By contrast, pungent, bitter or astringent flavors combat the harmful effects of ‘phlegm’ but stimulate ‘air,’ because they are thought to contain a lot of it” (Mazars 1995: 122). Beyond food, the flavor of the world comes into play.

Though vision is an essential principle of Hindu spirituality, notably through *darshan* (auspicious sight) or touch as means of contact with the divine. Sylvain Pinard has shown how in Hinduism taste is a principle of organization that reflects a particular “taste of the world.” The gods bring rain, conditions favorable to good harvests, and are nourished by the people in turn. They are reputed gourmands and fond of specific foods. Individuals are also classified by taste through their belonging to a caste. When seeking to obtain the *darshan* of a saint or renouncer, Hindus seek not only an exchange of looks with the divine but also an exchange of food that is both reciprocal and hierarchized. The gods consume the offerings in their own way, and the leftovers are shared among people. This gustatory exchange thus entails the recirculation of a food made holy.

The Tamils considered the soil to be differentiated according to six flavors. Different castes lived on soil suited to their position and exchanged their unique flavors with the land. Thus the priestly Brahmin caste inhabited the “sweet soil” of the mountain tops, while the warrior Kṣatriyas dwelled on “astringent soil” (Pinard 1991: 227). As castes became increasingly mixed through sexual relations, intercaste marriage and migration, the connection of inhabitants to their respective soils was gradually lost. This mixing was thought to have diluted the original purity of the different castes, soils, and flavors.

However a caste that receives guests “imprints its mark, its flavor on dishes,” it is said. The cooks of the host house impart the status of their *jati* by their handling and cooking of the food, the way they make use of it. In so doing, they make a ritual distinction. This involves a specific reorganization of foods to produce a certain taste but also to purify foods that have been in contact with peasant and merchant castes (Pinard 1990: 91). This social symbolization of food is a prelude to its individual ingestion. One of the brahman’s duties is the “cooking of the world” (Malamoud 1975).

The foods that are shared are in fact the leftovers of the gods’ meal. The caste hierarchy is a gustatory hierarchy that is translated by what is eaten, the people it is shared with, and the specific methods of preparation. Numerous social divisions are echoed in as many alimentary conventions. In being accepted at a host’s table for a prospective marriage, the exchange of food between the spouses’ families symbolically translates the alliance, while also reinforcing the society’s religious traditions. That Hinduism accords a privilege to a taste of the world is evident in the fact that “the individual attains liberation by making him- or herself both eater and eaten. For to achieve *mokṣa*, the individual ‘soul’ or *ātman*, which is called ‘food’ in the Upanishads, must be sacrificed to Brahma, himself conceived of as food” (Pinard 1991: 226).

In classical Chinese thought, whose origin undoubtedly predates the fifth century BC, the world and its elements are inscribed in a rigorous system of correspondences. The body is thought to exist in precise resonance with the rhythms of the universe. Human flesh and the flesh of the world mirror one another. The five elements are oriented according to time and space. At the center of the cardinal points is the earth, from which emerges the five elements (wood, fire, earth, metal, and water) corresponding to the five seasons (spring, summer, end of summer, fall, and winter), the five colors (blue/green, red, yellow, white, and black), the five directions (east, south, center, west, and north), the five viscera (spleen, lungs, heart, liver, and kidneys), and, finally, the five flavors: sour, bitter, sweet, pungent, and salty. The entirety of the sensory or invisible world is organized according to this framework wherein each fragment finds ephemeral meaning in the eternal movement of the universe. Water is a vector of energy. A winter element, it is associated with germination and the development of life for which it is a necessary condition. It is related to the color black and to salty flavors. Wood represents the energy of renewal, of springtime. It can be twisted and

restrained. Its color is green and its flavor, sour. Fire represents the vitality of summer. Its nature is to burn and ascend. It corresponds to the color red and to bitter flavors. Metal is the energy specific to autumn. It is both hard and malleable. It is linked to the color white and to pungent flavors. Earth is the energy of the center, where humans dwell. A vital principle, it brings seeds to fruition and produces the harvest. It is accompanied by the color yellow and sweet flavors.

While Chinese cuisine represents an ethics and a taste of the world, it is also a dietary science, a simultaneous reflection on food and health. Eating is a reasoned internalization of the flavor of the world, both a gustatory pleasure and a preventative therapy or remedy. The way foods are chosen and prepared conforms to a network of correspondences.

To speak of flavors is to establish correlations between what we eat, the epoch in which we are eating it, our age of life, the climate, life circumstances (marriage, bereavement, reunion, separation), bodily energies, viscera and still many other factors, which, each in turn, is determined by the system of correspondences based on the five phases, as well as on the balance between yin and yang. (Kamenarovic 1995: 112)

Insofar as eating fills a need to maintain the body's state of harmony with the world, any excess of one flavor over another can lead to health problems. Eating too much salt can paralyze the "network of animation." Bitterness causes withering of the skin. Too much pungency leads to contracted muscles and dry nails. Excess sourness causes calluses, while too much sweetness is associated with achy joints and loss of hair. In keeping with each season, the principle of harmony ensures a balance of flavors that makes the body at one with the universe.

## Blandness

Western societies see in blandness the degree zero of flavor, insignificance even. Bland foods, like the manna that nourished the Hebrews in the desert, are unacceptable to the discerning palate. We avoid tasteless dishes or preparations, seeking instead satisfaction in a sensation that delivers its goods without reserve and in a timely manner. However, in Chinese thought, blandness is the "neutral value" that is at the heart of things but carries no precise meaning in itself. It is a source of endless transformation. Lao-Tzu says that the sage "savors that which has no flavor" (*Tao-Te Ching* 63: 147). Poetry, music, and food strive to deliver an essential blandness, not through negligence or indifference, but on purpose. Bordering on the erasure of sensory experience, blandness is transformed into a sensation of plenitude. Because of its neutral quality, it is not confined to one taste. Inexhaustible, it is savored slowly, contributing fully to the overall sensation. Other flavors satisfy in the moment and disappear having hardly been appreciated.

An homage to slowness, to the patient penetration of the world inside our being, blandness denies the immediate thrill that in the end leaves us unsatisfied. It is a beyond-taste. Thus a poem is lingered over, a landscape contemplated without boredom. A piece of music, a piece of calligraphy, or a dish is savored beyond the instant expression of a message that leaves nothing in its wake. The power of neutrality lies in its availability to the senses. It deepens without ever being depleted. Its effectiveness is in its discretion. “Flavor provokes attachment, and insipidity provokes detachment,” writes François Jullien (2004: 43). It introduces a distance that brings the world’s components into harmony without focusing our attention on a single one. Instead of seducing it encourages initiative. “Let your heart move freely in blandness-detachment (*dan*) and unite your breath with non-differentiation (*mo*). If you cleave to the spontaneous movement of things without permitting yourself to entertain individual preferences, the whole world will be at peace” (Jullien 2004: 44).

The neutrality of blandness brings the infinite plurality of the world into relation. “While flavor establishes opposition and separation, the bland links the various aspects of the real, opening each to the other, putting all of them in communication” (Jullien 2004: 52). Saltiness is not sour, sweetness is not bitter. These flavors are self-contained, there is no beyond. Only blandness allows the five flavors to coexist. Its quality of balance allows for all possible combinations, facilitating their interplay. While the emergence of flavor marks a rupture, the blandness remaining at the center allows us to adapt without great effort to the changes in our universe. Exemplary individuals are bland. Possessing no particular outstanding quality, they easily adjust their attitude and adapt to various situations. Their openness to the world is a measure of their insipidity, of their ability to remain centered, to remain at the secret heart of things. As François Jullien suggests, the wise partake of all the virtues without identifying with any one in particular and thus remain in tune with a world in perpetual motion. The preponderance of one virtue over another would weaken them. Blandness is a principle of harmony. It is the key to inner detachment.

## Taste and Identity

The flavor of relationships with members of other groups is sometimes expressed in culinary terms. The Other is a stereotype of what he or she eats that captures the neighbors’ imagination. Representations of others often take on pejorative connotations. At worst, they are considered “sickening” or “repugnant,” and the flavor of relations with them is one of disgust. Their cuisine is repulsive as they are themselves, insofar as they are symbolically contaminated by the food they eat. The form and content of food are powerful markers of identity. This can lead to a stigmatization of others based on the sentiment that only one’s own dinner companions are considered worthy of trust and those who eat at other tables are to be

mistrusted and feared. The term “eskimo” is related to the term *eskimantsik*, which neighboring Native Americans are said to have used sarcastically to refer to the Inuit as “eaters of raw meat.”<sup>4</sup> The English and Americans refer to the French as “frogs” (i.e., eaters of frog legs). The French counter by calling the English “*rosbifs*,” literally, “roast beefs.” The Italians are “macaronis” for the French, the Belgians *mangeurs de frites* (eaters of fries), and so on. Every Belgian anecdote begins with a ritual evocation of fries. Americans refer to the Germans as *krauts* (from sauerkraut). Alsatians are known in France as *mangeurs de choucroute* (eaters of sauerkraut).

With a mixture of amusement and contempt, the Iranian Gilâni consider their Arâqi (Iraq) neighbors to be poor “eaters of barley bread” (Bromberger 1984: 12–13). In the past, a Gilâni man who was angry with his wife would harshly tell her to “go eat some bread and die!” (Bromberger 1984: 12–13). Around 1830, a traveler observed that Gilâni parents scolded their children by threatening to send them to Iraq (Arâq), where they would have the misfortune of eating bread. The Arâqi, not to be outdone, have a profound aversion to olives, beef, and especially fish. In their eyes, the Gilâni are “eaters of fish heads,” the height of disgust.

In northern Afghanistan there is a story involving the principal cultural communities of the region: an Uzbek, a Tajik, an Afghan, and an Arab are seated on the ground in front of a tablecloth spread with food. Each chooses what he wants to eat. The Arab takes curdled milk, the Afghan, salad and an oignon, the Tajik, some pilaf, and the Uzbek, a bit of everything (Centlivres 1984: 37). “Uzbek stomach, military bazaar,” malicious tongues say. In the same geographic area, the Jat, marginalized, itinerant peddlers, are called “eaters of porcupine.” The Hazara, Shias in a country whose majority are Sunnis, are alleged to eat dead animals, which, symbolically, makes them outcasts of the orthodox community.

Countless nicknames used to ridicule others are drawn from an alimentary register. Food has an identity value. It serves to set one’s group apart from others’ and to regard the latter as suspect because of what they eat. “The people of your village are wretched *xocochileros* (eaters of hot sauce),” says a man to his wife in the Mixteca region of Mexico. A woman from a Nahua village planning to marry a man from a neighboring village is asked, “But how are you going to live there? All they eat is *pepeto* (a kind of soup made with grains and the pulp of squash)” (Goloubinoff 1996: 211).

The food that people consume determines their nature—“you are what you eat.” In many societies, character traits are associated with culinary preferences. In Ayurvedic medicine, for example,

A person whose *manas* is dominated by inertia, for instance, prefers stale, smelly, half-cooked food and food devoid of its natural juices. Laziness, dullness and mental unsteadiness mark his personality. An “active” *rajasic manas*, on the other hand, prefers spicy, sour and bitter foods: pride, impatience, sensuality and anger are his chief psychological characteristics. The person dominated by the purity of the *sattva* prefers

sweet and agreeable-tasting food that “brightens the intellect and spirit.” (Kakar 1991: 249)

People are associated with qualities attributed to foods. Sympathetic magic, that is, the transmission of the quality of one object to another through resemblance (the appearance of things determines their substance, they are what they seem) or contagion (what has come into contact remains in contact) creates an unexpected interdependence between the eater and the food. In the alimentary register, Frazer takes the example of the Cherokees who “are careful not to eat frogs, lest the brittleness of the frog’s bones should infect their own bones. Moreover, they will not eat the flesh of the sluggish hog-sucker, lest they should lose their speed, nor the flesh of rabbits, lest, like the rabbit, they should become confused in running” (Frazer 2012: 155). Those who suffer from rheumatism never eat squirrels, because they eat in a cramped position, which would aggravate their condition. A woman who is pregnant never eats ruffled grouse, because this bird hatches a large number of eggs, but few reach maturity.

Nemeroff and Rozin’s (1989) study is exemplary. They asked a group of students to evaluate an exotic culture whose fictitious status was unknown to them. The researchers described a certain number of cultural traits. In one version, students read that the “Chandorans” eat marine turtle and hunt wild boar only for its tusk. In a second version students read that Chandorans hunt marine turtle only for its shell and eat the wild boars that they kill. Each student knew only one version of the story. The group of students was then asked to evaluate the Chandorans using a series of adjectives. Students perceived eaters of wild boar as possessing qualities more descriptive of wild boars than turtles, and vice versa. A second study on a fictitious culture, the Hagi, once again confirmed the symbolic association of the eater with the eaten. In this case, students read of a vegetarian population that hunted elephants only to sell and, in the second version, of a meat-eating population that grew vegetables to vend to other villages. The results were equally conclusive: the elephant eaters were attributed elephant-like qualities, and the vegetable eaters, vegetative qualities.

Carol Nemeroff has shown that these beliefs are common, that they permeate the unconscious of cultures, fueling peremptory judgments of others. Another American study was based on a series of invented characters, whose alimentary behaviors were the sole discriminating criteria. Some of these fictitious individuals were said to eat foods associated with positive connotations (fruits, salads, chicken, potatoes, etc.), and others were said to eat foods associated with a less positive image (hamburgers, fries, donuts, etc.). Subjects had to choose from a series of adjectives to describe the different portraits. Consistently, consumers of “good” foods were described as more “moral” than those thought to be eating “bad” products. “In sum,” writes Nemeroff, “Americans perceive certain foods as morally good and others as bad, and pass moral judgments about individuals based on what they eat” (1994: 44).

A person can be “nice as pie,” “sweet as honey,” and so on. People’s identities are contaminated by the food they consume, as Rousseau unabashedly declares in *Julie, or the New Heloise*:

In general, I think one could often find some index of people’s character in the choice of foods they prefer. The Italians who live largely on greenery are effeminate and flaccid. You Englishmen, great meat eaters, have something harsh that smacks of barbarity in your inflexible virtues [...] The Frenchman, flexible and changeable, consumes all foods and adapts to all characters. Julie herself could serve as my example: for although she is sensual and likes to eat, she likes neither meat, nor stews, nor salt, and has never tasted wine straight. (1997: 372, 373)

Brillat-Savarin was convinced that people who eat fish are “less courageous than the flesh-eating races; they are pale in complexion, which is not at all surprising, because the component elements of fish are such as to augment the lymph rather than to strengthen the blood” (Brillat-Savarin 1994: 87).

In the French language in particular, taste is not only an ability to discriminate flavors. It also evokes the palatability of foods, an appreciation for certain objects or aesthetic qualities, and a particular sophistication, or pleasure taken in certain activities. Flandrin’s work has shown how, starting from the seventeenth century, the metaphorization of taste extended beyond the culinary to encompass society, literature, painting, and so on. Taste, no longer a haven of privacy, became a subject of debate, analogous to the etiquette (*bonne manières*) of the twelfth century or the eloquence (*bien-dire*) of the sixteenth century. “Good taste,” writes Flandrin, “became the primary social virtue, a matter of inner being as well as outward appearance. Politeness and polished speech concerned only behavior toward others. But taste affected what a man was, what he felt about the world” (2003: 307). Social distinctions based on taste had begun to take root. Keeping a good table attested to a refinement that was further reflected in one’s literary or artistic preferences. Taste as the art of discerning flavors in relation to foods came to designate, by extension, the quality of one’s perspective on the world, an appreciation of beauty demanding finesse, discrimination, and pleasure. Taste as a style of relating to objects pursued the mouth’s discernment of flavors on another stage. In his *Dictionnaire philosophique*, Voltaire wrote in 1764:

The taste, the sense by which we distinguish the flavor of our food, has produced, in all known languages, the metaphor expressed by the word “taste”—a feeling of beauty and defects in all the arts. It is a quick perception, like that of the tongue and the palate, and in the same manner anticipates consideration. Like the mere sense, it is sensitive and luxuriant in respect to the good, and rejects the bad spontaneously. (1924: 229)

Taste is always a process of meaning-making, a game of comparison that results in the appreciation or not of a food or an object.

## Sweetness

If taste is a quality of discernment, then the word of God is to be savored as a supreme delicacy:

And he said to me, “Son of man, eat what is before you, eat this scroll; then go and speak to the people of Israel.” So I opened my mouth, and he gave me the scroll to eat. Then he said to me, “Son of man, eat this scroll I am giving you and fill your stomach with it.” So I ate it, and it tasted as sweet as honey in my mouth. He then said to me: “Son of man, go now to the people of Israel and speak my words to them.” (Ezekiel 3:1–4)

The divine word is chewed, tasted, and absorbed in its sweetness to be transmitted elsewhere. The Bible describes God’s word as “sweeter than honey,” (Psalm 19:10) fruit “so good and sweet” for those who know it (Song of Songs 2:3). In the thirteenth century, Bonaventure pushed the metaphor to its extreme:

The sweetness of creatures has deceived my sense of taste, and I did not realize that you are sweeter than honey. You have adapted your sweetness to honey and every creature. Sweetness and every delight in creatures is nothing else but your sweetness [...] O Jesus, font of all sweetness and piety, forgive me for not having realized your inestimable sweetness and honey-like piety in creatures, and for not having tasted it with the interior love of my mind. (Bonaventure 2006: 237)

The communion wafer also inspired a rare gourmandize, as in the case of Philip Neri:

On taking the Body of Christ, he felt such an extraordinary sweetness that he acted just as others do on tasting some food which is particularly pleasant. For this same reason, he arranged to get the largest wafers that could be found, so that those sacred spices would last longer, and he could savour more greatly that noble food [...] In taking the blood, he licked and sucked the chalice with such affection that it appeared he could not tear himself away from it. (cited in Camporesi 1994: 170, 171)

Spiritual foods are no less flavorful to the believer than earthly ones. To define different degrees of faith, the Prophet made use of a gustatory metaphor:

The believer who recites the Quran is like an orange, fragrant to the smell and sweet to the taste. The believer who does not recite the Quran is like a date, which has no odor but is sweet to the taste. The hypocrite who recites the Quran is like a pleasant-smelling flower that tastes bitter.



The hypocrite who does not read the Quran is like a wild gourd, which has no smell and is bitter to the taste. (Chebel 1995: 284)

## Gustatory Vocabularies

The English word “taste” comes from the Middle English *tasten*, which means “to examine by touch.” The Latin root of the term has its origins in the word *taxare*: to touch with precision (Ackerman 1991: 128). *Le Robert* dictionary notes that the word *savor* comes from *sapor*, which means “taste or the characteristic flavor of something.” *Sapor* is also employed in a figurative sense, for example, when referring to someone with no personality (*homo sine sapor*). It is a derivative of *sapere*: “to have taste.” Likewise, the word *savoir* (flavor), linked to *sapere* (*savoir*, in French, “to know,” in English), is used in Middle French (1440–1475) as meaning “knowledge of something.” As Michel Serres has observed, “There is nothing in sapience that has not first passed through mouth and taste, through sapidity” (2009: 162). “Having taste” goes beyond a simple sensory aptitude. It attests to a particular ability to organize sensations, to demonstrate judgment on things and appreciate them. Sapidity is a way of incorporating the world within, of appropriating its substance.

No sooner had the warm liquid mixed with the crumbs touched my palate than a shudder ran through me and I stopped, intent upon the extraordinary thing that was happening to me. An exquisite pleasure had invaded my senses, something isolated, detached with no suggestion of its origin. And at once the vicissitudes of life had become indifferent to me, its disasters innocuous, its brevity illusory—this new sensation having had on me the effect which love has of filling me with a precious essence, or rather this essence was not in me, it *was* me. (Proust 1982a: 48)

The sense of taste is equally descriptive of a taste for life. We indulge our taste and “savor the moment,” or inversely, find life to be bland, without flavor, insipid. We watch over a sauce as though it were a promising situation. We risk being “peppered” with insults. We savor the beauty of a landscape as though it were a delicious meal. We “add spice” (or salt) to an action as we would to a dish to enhance its flavor. A story is said to be piquant, salty, hot, spicy, raw, and so on. We speak of an “acid pleasure,” a “bitter pain,”<sup>5</sup> or a “tasteless joke.” We make acid comments and become bitter over time. Relations turn sour. A beauty is said to be acid and, a character, acerbic. In French, when the “cuisine of politics” does not bode well, the “sauce” with which we will be eaten (*la sauce avec laquelle on va être mangé*) is not going to be “good.” Ambiguity and indecision are also expressed through culinary metaphors: we remain *mi-figue mi-raisin* (half-fig half-grape) when faced with a situation that is neither fish nor fowl. The spice of life makes it something sweet to be savored.

Gustatory vocabularies are particularly useful for expressing the tone of social relations and the value attached to them. Within some societies' distinct symbol systems, metaphorical description gives way to the materiality of dishes, whose flavors can explicitly express a state of mind. Among the Gbaya of the Central African Republic, dull speech is tasteless, has not been "ground" with the right ingredients to season it. It is boring for the listener. Among the Dogon, speech is considered to be a food. While "good speech" is a treat, unkind words fatten the person they are addressed to. Speech contains water, oil, and grains. If it is fecund, it germinates and grows in the listener but has no effect if it is negligible and vain, "without food," "without meat," or "without seed." Like cooking, speech calls for a skillful and flavorful combination of elements. It also possesses odor and taste; it is a form of nourishment. It has a different taste depending on what it is made of. Truth is "as bitter as African mahogany" (not always easy to "swallow"), and good speech is as "sweet as honey" (like flattery, which carries some risks) or agreeably salty like the words of the griot, which are full of flavor and represent the best taste (that of good food that is perfectly seasoned). Meanwhile, "bad speech" is spice for the liver, which is the organ of feelings and affectivity (Calame-Griaule 1986: 39).

As Stoller and Olkes have shown, the "flavor" of a guest's presence is marked by the quality of dishes prepared. Among the Songhay of Niger, taste carries a message. It is a way of signaling to others the regard in which they are held. Sauces are a gauge of the quality and proximity of social relations. "Socially distant guests should be served thick zesty sauces; close relations should expect thin tasteless sauces. Sauce makers, however, often scramble these expectations (serving thin sauces to guests and thick sauces to relatives) to express socially significant themes" (Stoller and Olkes 1990: 57). Stoller notes the importance of spicy and pungent "thick sauces," appreciated in spite of their somewhat anesthetic effects on the tongue and lips. Thick sauces contain a lot of ingredients, in contrast to the clear sauces consumed on a daily basis. "For the Songhay, a thin sauce adds bitterness to a ceremonial context (which requires thick sauces)" (Stoller and Olkes 1990: 59). On one occasion, Stoller and Olkes were invited to a meal, where they were presented with a dish prepared with one of the most inedible sauces they had ever tasted in Africa (1990: 338). Djébo, the young cook, was unhappy with her marital situation, because the regular presence of her husband's European guests obliged her to prepare elaborate meals in their honor. Having attempted in vain to get paid for her work without her husband's knowledge, she chose to express her anger by sending a powerful message in the form of a sauce that was inappropriate for the circumstances. Though Djébo's revolt had already found expression in her poorly prepared thick sauces, her use of good ingredients had, until then, kept criticism at bay. However, since a thin sauce served in place of a thick sauce is a precise language, family members could no longer ignore this expression of dissatisfaction. As the eldest son of the family observed, "She treats you the same way she treats us. You're part of the family now" (Stoller and Olkes

1990: 71). The quality of social relations is echoed in the quality of dishes and sauces. Woe to anyone whose presence is unappreciated. The taste of social relations among the Songhay is directly expressed through the flavor of their cuisine.

Many societies express the quality of the social bond in gustatory ways. Joel C. Kuipers (1991) demonstrates this among the Weyéwa of eastern Indonesia. In this society, encounters among friends of the same sex and generation, if lasting more than a few seconds, give rise to an exchange of betel nut to chew. Often this takes place on the veranda of someone's house, where the host keeps his official reserve intended for guests that includes areca nuts, a container of slaked lime, and betel leaves arranged on a *pandanus* mat. But kept within the house and intended for more honored guests is another mat with tastier and more desirable ingredients. The choice of serving one or the other depends on the host's relationship to the guest. The best ingredients are given to closest friends while the others are given to acquaintances who are not as close. Kuipers recounts the story of a somewhat presumptuous young man who was strongly rebuffed by the father of the girl he was courting. In a premature attempt to reestablish his intimate connection with the family, he reached into the coveted innermost fold of the host's basket and popped the nut into his mouth, only to find, significantly, that it tasted unpleasant. Different ways of serving areca nuts and other ingredients send a message about the flavor of the host's relationship to his guests.

Gustatory metaphors are also used in this society to characterize the flavor of women, of rice fields, and of animals destined for feasts. A clear distinction is made between "bitter" and "bland," which correspond respectively to social prohibition and permission. A girl designated as *poddu* is prohibited to marry, and no one would challenge this interdiction. She is considered inedible. This would be the case where a father, for example, promised a feast at his daughter's birth to thank the ancestors and then later reneged on his promise. The girl remains *poddu* until the father makes good on his promise. The same holds true if a man wants to sacrifice an animal. He must first perform a small ceremony declaring the animal *poddu*. Before the animal can be slaughtered and eaten, another small ceremony is performed in which it is redeclared *koba*, or "bland." Rice fields are prohibited or permitted according to the seasons. "Just as foods with bitter tastes are inappropriate for consumption," writes Kuipers, "and if inadvertently consumed, can transmit, in the context of a social visit, anti-social messages, in a similar way, women, water buffalo, and rice are rendered inappropriate for consumption by labeling them bitter" (1991: 123).

## Hunger

A taste for living governs one's taste for food. Hunger and satiety, or the appetite that regulates them, are never purely physiological or objectively measurable in calories. The feeling of hunger is a screen onto which we

project our appetite for living. We can eat to the point of bursting or just as easily abstain, devour food or nibble reluctantly. We can lose our appetite completely after a personal crisis. On bad days, all food seems bland and unappealing. On good days, everything becomes an invitation to indulge. Ordinary days oscillate between routine and inspiration, preparing something extra for “a little treat.” The choice of food and willingness to spend time preparing it reflect a person’s mood and circumstances. Good food is at the heart of special occasions, which give free rein to gustatory pleasures to enhance the festive tone of the day. The quality of food, always subjective, is a barometer of mood. The ups and downs of appetite are the same as those in a person’s life.

Like language, the sensation of hunger and the appropriate response to this physiological stimulation are innate, but, also like language, they are reinforced within a system of meanings and values, within a particular culture and society as these are embodied in a unique individual. Being hungry and eating do not always coincide, as anorexic and bulimic behaviors illustrate (De Tonnac 2005). Appetite is an actualized affectivity. While the ability to perceive the proprioceptive sensations of hunger is a given from birth, a predisposition that needs only to be realized, like walking or talking, the education and affective climate in which the child is immersed determines its orientation. The mother’s quality of presence is the factor that most affects the subject’s understanding of the feeling of hunger and how to respond to it. People who suffer from severe eating disorders often faced, in early childhood, inappropriate responses from their mothers to their alimentary needs. Mothers, for example, sometimes give their children too much to eat, using food to replace affection or keep them quiet by stuffing them with food. Inversely, they might impose a rigid alimentary regime that does not take the child’s needs into account, or they may be disorganized or capricious in their responses. In all of these different cases, the result is structurally the same: the child does not learn to recognize hunger and satiety (Bruch 1973).

Children’s development, and that of the adults they are to become, depends on receiving an appropriate and consistent response to their attempts to communicate with loved ones. When children’s needs, initially undifferentiated, are not decoded and reinforced with recognition and affection but, on the contrary, subjected to the vagaries of unpredictable, rigid, or even indifferent behavior, their relation to food translates their emotional difficulties. Deprived of clear and reassuring reference points that correspond to their needs and sense of identity, they can no longer distinguish between hunger and satiety. Neither the sense of fullness nor the meal itself is properly appreciated. Eating becomes an effort or a reflex, an undefined task. The perception of flavors, sensory pleasure, becomes secondary, nonexistent even.

Hence the paradox of the anorexic person who neutralizes her feeling of hunger in spite of her extreme thinness and risk of dying of starvation, the obese person who is haunted by the fear of dying of hunger, or the bulimic

capable of emptying a refrigerator in a few minutes, indiscriminately eating everything in sight, and then vomiting it up. Their relationship to food becomes a projection screen of their psychological tensions. Whether it is a desire to eat that nothing can defuse, especially satiety, a refusal to eat, or a complete rejection of food that leaves a person emaciated and at risk of dying, the subject turns his or her alimentary needs into a way of resolving existential and identity problems. Eating disorders are clearly a reflection of larger life problems.

Experimental studies have confirmed anorexic and obese individuals' inability to decode biological stimuli. A study on gastric motility conducted by Silverstone and Russel (1967) comparing a control population to anorexic patients showed that the visceral activity was the same in both groups but that the anorexic subjects, when asked to describe their sensations, declared not feeling any desire to eat and not associating these unpleasant feelings with hunger. A study by Stunkard and Fox (1971) observed the same phenomenon among obese women who were fasting for the experiment but did not associate the feeling of stomach contractions with hunger, in both cases, contrary to the control population. Obese subjects reacted more to exterior stimuli, particularly to food or its availability, while the subjects without alimentary disorders were more sensitive to internal stimuli. In another experiment, two different groups were given a glucose solution. Subjects not suffering from eating disorders first described it as "pleasant" but, after consuming it for an hour, became disgusted by it. The obese subjects' behavior did not change at all. No disgust was felt, satiety did not prevent the overwhelming need to keep eating (Bruch 1973: 53sq.). Flavor is perceived within a context of variables, accentuated or diminished, its value modified or even couched in disgust or accompanied by loss of appetite, as in the case of anorexics. It is not a mathematical or chemical value but, rather, an affective value in an individual's mouth, a potential that is only fulfilled by circumstances.

## Satiety

Satiety is not limited to the vocabulary of food, it extends to quality of life. According to the Bible "And so Job died, an old man and full of years," (Job 42:17), like Abraham, Isaac, or David. Taste for life is not only based on a vision of the world but is also profoundly influenced by a taste of the world. The flavor of foods is affected by their intrinsic qualities and a person's sensibility but also by the latter's degree of satiety. The gustatory sensation diminishes over the course of the food's absorption and tends to become saturated. A candy that stays too long in one part of the mouth must be moved to produce new impressions. Adaptation to a taste is proportional to its intensity and differs according to the flavors involved, responding more quickly, for example, to the sweet or the salty. However, the saturation of one flavor does not prevent the others from being experienced.

Degree of satiety affects the appetite but also the taste of foods. When people continue to eat in spite of feeling full, taste and pleasure wane, even when eating a dish that is usually appreciated. Eating when not hungry is not likely to inspire an appreciation of a dish's flavors. On the other hand, hunger elicits an increased sensitivity to flavors. It produces an intense sensory pleasure. All food seems delicious to the person who is famished, the least morsel is a source of wonderment. "People are strange creatures," writes Wenfu. "When there's food about their taste buds are highly sensitive—salty, delicate, savoury, sweet, hot, all can be differentiated. When there's nothing to eat, hunger takes over and three large bowls of plain rice give an indescribable contentment and satisfaction" (1987: 137).

Lasting hunger can arouse an intense longing for foods and make memories so vivid that past experiences are reconstructed in people's imagination. The hungry wonder how they could have at one time left a bit of soup or refused a second serving of cake. Those deported to the death camps were haunted by memories of food, tirelessly reliving past meals and imagining the ones they would make if they were ever freed one day, as Primo Levi recounts,

He had begun to speak of his home in Vienna and of his mother, but then he slipped on to the subject of food and now he talks endlessly about some marriage luncheon and remembers with regret that he failed to finish his third plate of bean soup. And everyone tells him to keep quiet, but within ten minutes Béla is describing his Hungarian countryside and the fields of maize and a recipe to make meat-pies with corncobs and lard and spices and... and he is cursed, sworn at and a third one begins to describe... (Levi 1996: 74)

Food resurfaces in dreams and discussions with piercing relentlessness. Beyond its specific qualities, the flavor of food becomes a sign of a formerly perfect world that the person was wrested from.

The memory I took away from my deportation in Nazi Germany's concentration camps is that of starving comrades dreaming up fabulous recipes for impossible banquets... And the first edition of the excellent and innovative *Maître de maison de sa cave à sa table*, by Roger Ribaud (1945), was it not conceived while the author was a prisoner of war in Germany, far from the dishes and wines that he was writing about and of which, especially, he dreamt of, as he says, to "erase the time of privations"? (Barreau 1983: 320)

Legends of the land of Cockaigne were particularly popular in times and places where food was lacking, compensating the imagination with flavors divorced from real life.

Taste, in the sense of a quest for the best gustatory experience, only comes into play if satiety is satisfied, food shortage not a threat. When food is rare,

the hedonism of preferences gives way to a different form of pleasure in that any food ingested is eaten with jubilation as though it were the best food in the world. Hunger and flavor play off one another. In times of scarcity, food that would usually seem banal becomes delicious.

We do not feed on flavors alone, but their absence can leave people bored and indifferent. In Western societies, unlike in China, the insipid is the absolute enemy of cuisine. When the Jews were crossing the Sinai their food came from heaven in the form of a manna. But just eating, even to satiety, was not enough, and they expressed to Moses their dissatisfaction with a food that had no taste and their nostalgia for past foods. “We remember the fish we ate in Egypt at no cost—also the cucumbers, melons, leeks, onions and garlic. But now we have lost our appetite; we never see anything but this manna” (Numbers 11:5–6). Circumstances, food shortages, for example, can also lead to eating without appreciating flavors, eating for nourishment, not for taste.

To be sure, peasants who had eaten dark rye bread, spelt soups, flatbread made of barley, and polenta made of millet down through the centuries became physically accustomed to such foods [...] Yet this does not contradict the fact that people have always preferred white bread made of wheat flour, which was for a long time unavailable to all but the upper classes and urban residents. (Capati and Montanari 2003: 95)

## Modern Food

Though many societies’ relation to food is still largely cyclical, contingent on seasons and harvests, a large part of the world has become accustomed to a general hybridization of foods, often at the price of flavor. Consumers today have a multitude of ingredients from all over the world to choose from to create their menus. “The dream has been realized and the land of Cuccagna conquered,” as Montanari notes wryly (1996: 164), at least for the economically privileged of the world. The imperatives of competition and globalization distance us from foods that are close at hand, making them seem old-fashioned or anachronistic, while bringing the distant nearer, making the unfamiliar edible, transforming it into a sign, a novelty. Today stores and markets abound in exotic food products. Exploring their display is a culinary journey of the imagination, or, for the migrant or exiled seeking the flavors of their culture, an identity ballad, an opportunity to surrender to nostalgia.

Fast-food chains have become tremendously popular, not only in Europe where they are contributing to changing the gustatory culture, but also in the rest of the world. The increasingly common reduction of the meal to a sort of alimentary reflex leads people to frequent these restaurants or snack throughout the day. Family members often no longer eat together, each eats

according to his or her own schedule, when returning from work or from school, cooking individual meals that are already partly prepared and need only to be reheated. Commensality is no longer on the menu. Nowadays people often eat alone and in a rush. Savoring good food is of no interest to them. They incarnate the worst of globalization. It is not the combination of flavors but their reduction to a minimum that fosters their widespread distribution. Everywhere throughout the world, the same product has the same taste and the same texture—sweet and mushy.

In this fast-food culture, especially when the choice of dishes is limited, the element of surprise is eliminated. “If bitterness has increased in the processed foods now available (colas, chocolate, citrus candies, pastries, dairy products, etc.), it is partly masked by the increased use of sugar in these same products,” writes Jean-Pierre Corbeau (2000: 70). It is also food eaten in hand, appealing to a more immediate, more regressive sensuality than that offered by a meal around a table. Food is brought to the mouth without thought, olfactory stimulation increased and combined with tactility. The success of fast-food is fueled by the imperatives for profit that affect every aspect of society, the fierce battle against any form of leisure or idleness. In the name of speed and efficiency, people eat at the office or at the local fast-food chain restaurant, not with an interest in flavors but simply to feed themselves, fill up for a few hours. People do not stop to eat. They sometimes even eat standing up or while driving or walking with the product in hand. Commensality is of the least concern, and flavors are secondary to the more utilitarian need to feed oneself as quickly as possible.

Japanese sushi, quite unexpectedly, has become widely available in Western cities, proposing assortments of raw fish direct from the sea without any preparation apart from the slicing and presentation of food on the plate. Indian, Maghrebian, Turkish, and African shops offer their products in European cities. Chinese, Japanese, Thai, Lebanese, Italian, Greek, Spanish, Portuguese, Haitian, Mexican, and Brazilian restaurants attract a clientele in search of exotic meals. Pizza is eaten in New Delhi and Rio, hamburgers in Beijing, and tacos in Strasbourg. Markets abound with kiwis, yams, mangos, lychees, and other fruits and vegetables that were until recently unknown or rare. People’s eating habits depend less and less on cultural norms and tend to diverge from the regional customs they grew up with. Individuals are now faced with an immense choice of ingredients or ready-to-eat products that only need to be heated. This profusion of foods is not always a delight. It is sometimes even a source of tragedy (mad cows, dioxin chickens, etc.) due to factory farm conditions, food processing, the use of preservatives, food coloring, and so on. Consumers draw from the reservoir of ready-to-eat products without knowing their origin, history, or actual composition. These foods have no source and no history.

The symbolism of the table is changing. In Europe, the young generations, in particular, are following the eating habits of their American counterparts. In their enjoyment of these foods, they are creating a new culture of taste,



choosing to consume products whose flavors cater to more standardized gustatory thresholds. They are unlearning the subtlety of taste.

The mustard is insipid, tasteless; the beer almost non-alcoholic, is flavourless; spices are bland, coffee weak and barely roasted, fruits and vegetables monotonous to the point of sameness. We can only differentiate between foods by the name and price on the label. Wine has been transformed into milk—white. Nothing to upset our stomachs or offend us. America eats mush. (Serres 2009: 185)

Saturated in fat and sugar, these foods fulfill the biological expectations of young people who have not been taught how to differentiate tastes and balance their meals. Many observers fear the loss of gustatory nuances among these generations accustomed to fast-food and ready-to-eat products. Taste is provided mostly by condiments that are supposed to stand out or “add zing” (ketchup, for example) and beverages that are extremely sweet (Coca-Cola, sodas, etc.).

As for the distribution of industrial products, this requires a sensory redefinition based on a series of analyses of flavors, odors, aromas, textures, presentation, and so on. Every product launch is preceded by several studies on consumer response. The reconstruction of the product might entail creating a synthetic taste that is more “real” than that of the fruit it is simulating, for example. Products that are flavored with strawberry or apple surpass the real fruits, which have become increasingly bland but at the same time more attractive, colorful, shiny, and artificial. Today, tastes are made artificial through the use of synthetic aromas, and the freezing or freeze-drying of products, for example. There are synthetic tastes based on truffles, strawberries, vanilla and so on, as well as tastes that are preserved thanks to various additives. “Gustatory pleasure,” writes Corbeau, “is based on an emotion that is instantaneous, simple, exaggerated, violent or ephemeral. Anything that is neither very sweet, very salty or very spicy, that does not stand out or surprise in some way, will have a hard time imparting its subtlety” (1996: 323). Many ready-to-eat products raise gustatory thresholds by exaggerating flavors, those of strawberries or apples, for example, making the strawberry or apple from the garden tasteless to young taste buds. The meal thus becomes a chemical-mechanical experience rather than cuisine in the traditional sense of the word. The transformations that foods are subjected to today makes them elusive, difficult to recognize after their production, processing, and marketing. They are becoming what Claude Fischler has referred to as UFOs—unidentified food objects.

Only a small selection of apple or pear varieties, of peaches, and many other fruits can now be found in supermarkets, where they have become works of art. Attractive and shiny, they are the products of clever design. Merchants focus on the visual appeal of products in the conviction that the nice appearance will win over customers, assured that the food’s taste will match its appearance. But these fruits often have no taste. Their blandness

sometimes even leads people to throw them out. The pleasure in looking at them and feeling them is not translated in their flavor. On the contrary, the fact that their grading and design is based solely on appearance has resulted in the elimination of taste. “The only taste an apricot has is the taste of the word ‘apricot’ passing over the lips” (Serres 2009: 233).

## Savoring the Company of Others

Though taste seems to be a sense that is enclosed within the mysteries of the subject, solitary in its use, words nonetheless allow for experiences to be exchanged. The meal implies a commensality, a sharing that renders sensations accessible to collective appreciation. “We should not so much consider what we eat as with whom we eat [...] There is no preparation so sweet to me, no sauce so appetizing, as that which is derived from society” (Montaigne 1958: 846). We savor the presence of some people and find others unappetizing. The taste of a meal, the success of a sauce, thus depends as much on the quality of relationships as on the quality of the dishes themselves.

The couple described by Italo Calvino in *Under the Jaguar Sun* substitute their loss of intense desire as lovers with an effort to connect through gustatory impressions. The narrator relates: “Did you taste that? Are you tasting it?” she was asking me with a kind of anxiety, as if at that same moment our incisors had pierced an identically composed morsel and the same drop of savor had been caught by the membranes of my tongue and of hers” (1988: 9). To avoid separation, they seek to share something elusive by establishing a mutual intimacy around flavors.

The reciprocity of the act of tasting implicates speech. Grimod was so convinced of this he thought the rule that weighed most heavily on the Carthusians, though their food was flavorful, was that of not speaking at the table.

Animated conversation during a meal is no less salutary than it is enjoyable. It facilitates and accelerates digestion, warms the heart and calms the soul. It is therefore morally and physically a double blessing. The best meal eaten in silence satisfies neither the body nor the mind. (Grimod 1997: 263)

Hence the inclination of gourmets to congratulate the cook, to express their enjoyment or disappointment, to recount former circumstances in which they ate the same dish, to criticize or praise the cooking, the combination of ingredients, the quality of the sauce, and so on. In a celebration of orality, the gustatory shares common ground with speech. “It is proven” writes Grimod, “that proper reconciliation is only possible at the table, that the clouds of indifference and disaccord are never entirely dissipated but by the sunlight of good food” (Grimod 1997: 83).

At the shared table, the pleasure of a flavor is accentuated when someone's comment about it awakens a similar sentiment in others. The narration of a meal prolongs it by other means, brings it to life in the imagination. Lu recounts the culinary adventures of a group of friends whose social position authorized them to continue their gastronomical pursuits in 1950s China. "Zhu and his friends would first meet at a teahouse to reflect on the delicious food they'd consumed the previous day. The conversation would then turn to the venue of the next meal [...] I cannot describe in detail all the delicacies of Suzhou and its environs. I'm afraid it would make even more people hold their conferences here" (Wenfu 1987: 101). Taste gives rise to another form of orality, that of speech.

Let the twain be gourmands, and at least once a day they have occasion to enjoy each other's company; for even those who sleep apart [...] eat at the same table; they have a theme of conversation which never grows stale, for they talk not only of what they are eating, but of what they are about to eat, what they have met with on the tables of their acquaintances, fashionable dishes, new inventions, etc. (Brillat-Savarin 1994: 138)

The meal is a communal celebration, a festive culmination of the social bond. Cooking is a quiet pleasure, a gift of flavor and sociability that we offer to others through the time and ingenuity that goes into the preparation of a meal. It calls in turn for the guests' gustatory appreciation and satisfaction. The sharing of flavors responds to a need to be together. It solicits family, friends, members of the community, passing guests, colleagues, neighbors, or members of a clan, lineage, and so on. In French, *copain* (friend) and *compagnon* (companion) are etymologically related to "sharing the bread" (*partage le pain*). Food unites individuals around shared symbols but also around dishes that are familiar or novel, successful or disappointing. In many societies, important events in a person's life or in a community are expressed in a celebration of flavors with food and drink specially prepared for the occasion. Conversely, in Benedictine abbeys, where meals are taken in silence, the brother who errs is condemned by the abbot to eating alone, away from the communal table. The private and solitary act that is gustation creates a commensality that adds a whole other dimension to cuisine.

Particular meals with specific dishes, both seasonal and traditional, mark occasions throughout the year, Christmas, for example, with its yule logs and foie gras in France; roast turkey in the United States; *tortillas de patatas* (omelets made with potatoes and onions), *besugo al horno* (oven-baked bream), *ternasco asado* (roast lamb), and variety of cakes (*turrones*, *mazapanes*, *guirlaches*, etc.) in Spain; and so on. Easter has its chocolate eggs. The 4th of July in the United States traditionally features hotdogs and barbeques. During local celebrations, communities highlight their culinary specialties and wines. Personal events that unite family, friends, and colleagues around culinary festivities include anniversaries, graduations,

birthdays, promotions, retirements, engagements, marriages, and even burials. These invitations bring people together to cement new relationships or reinforce already existing ones. In savoring each other's presence, we savor the same foods in a way that is out of the ordinary. The sharing of flavors, the shared pleasure of a good meal, fosters communication and strengthens friendships.

Shared or exchanged food is a sign of cohesion, a tangible symbol of ties between individuals of the same group. Before the war in Lebanon, Shiite and Maronite holiday pastries were the same. Fried or oven-baked, stuffed or not, they were prepared in different religious circumstances but attested to a shared cultural background. Cakes were of course shared within the same religious community, but others were never forgotten and were also invited to enjoy these desserts thanks to ties between neighbors and friends (Kanafani-Zahar 1996). The meal strengthens alliances between people. Like the *compagnon* with whom we *partage le pain*, the Anglo-Saxon "clanship of porridge" reinforces blood ties.

Certain populations confer a particular status on dinner guests. Among the Bedouins, the laws of hospitality protect the traveler who is invited to share a meal under the tent. Invested with certain privileges and rights but also obligations, the guest becomes "both a legal subject and a quasi-sacred being" (Chelhad 1990: 19). These guests cannot be delivered to their enemy or abandoned, nor avenged for a past crime. The host's responsibility remains in effect even when the guest has left the encampment. "As long as the bread and salt remain in the guest's stomach, the host is required to accord his protection, at least until the former has received hospitality elsewhere" (Chelhad 1990: 19). The "right of salt" accords the traveler complete protection over the entire area "that falls under the jurisdiction of the clan who has received him or who owes him allegiance or who has friendly relations with him" (Chelhad 1990: 19). Of course the guest must in turn behave as required and gratefully accept the food that is offered to him. Etiquette, for example, demands that the guest, "as soon as he is seated at the table, and before beginning to eat, choose a good piece of meat and give it to the master of the dwelling, entreating him to offer it to his spouse" (Chelhad 1990: 20). He must also show deference and respect for the dwelling in which he is welcomed. Dishonor awaits those who do not fulfill their obligations as guests. He is expected when leaving the tent to praise the hospitality received. However the terms of commensality sometimes imply maintaining a distance from the guest but sending him a gift of food or drink to be consumed in solitude. It is precisely the invitation to the common meal that would be considered inhospitable in this case, as among the Bemba, for example.

Among Arabs of the desert, writes Chelhad, the guest is "simultaneously master, prisoner and poet" (1990: 19). Hospitality is based on the logic of the gift /counter-gift, possessing a similar flavor and similar demands, that is if the host's personality does not "sour" relations. An Arab poet once wrote: "I would swallow a handful of dirt before enduring the hospitality of an

arrogant man who would consider himself my debtor because he had given me something to eat” (Chelhad 1990: 19). It is thought best to avoid the bitter aftertaste of an unworthy hospitality that would bind a guest to such a contemptible person. The connection between “salt and bread” can be found in a very different social context, that of Greece, where the table of hospitality was very generous and remains so to some extent today. “I do not forget that they gave me a place at their table and that I ate bread with them. I mean them no harm!” (Loukatos 1990: 73). The meal of hospitality binds individuals in amicable reciprocity. Durkheim once observed that

meals eaten in common are thought in many societies to create a bond of artificial kinship among the participants. Kin are, in fact, beings naturally created of the same flesh and blood. But food constantly refashions the substance of the organism. A common food can therefore produce the same effects as a common origin. (Durkheim 2008: 249)<sup>6</sup>

## The Banquet of Love

Defining what he calls the “sense of physical desire,” Brillat-Savarin explains that this physical sense cannot be reduced to touch. It is

as complete as are the mouth or eyes; and it has this peculiarity, that although both sexes are fully equipped to feel sensation through it, they must be joined together before the purpose Nature has set itself can be attained. And if taste, whose purpose is the preservation of the individual, is indisputably one of the senses, the same title must surely be given to those organs whose function is the preservation of the species. (Brillat-Savarin 1994: 29)

Indeed, language about sexuality is steeped in culinary and gustatory metaphors. “There is no more charming sight,” writes Brillat-Savarin unabashedly,

than a pretty gourmand in action: her napkin is daintily tucked in; one hand rests on the table; the other conveys to her mouth elegantly cut morsels, or a wing of partridge for her teeth to bite; her eyes are bright, her lips glistening, and all her movements full of grace; and she does not lack that touch of coquetry which women show in everything they do. (1994: 137)

To love the other is to feed off of them, to taste, devour, consume, nibble, or be “hungry” for them. Sex conjures images of eating and vice versa. One can, as a prelude to desire, salivate, have a watering mouth, a “craving,” or a “loss of appetite.” Many slang expressions or everyday metaphors

illustrate this direct link between eating and taking pleasure in the other's body. In French, a woman is a *beau morceau* (a nice piece), "appetizing," *croustillante* (crispy), "delicious," *pulpeuse* (luscious), "delectable," "spicy," "consumable," *bon à croquer* (good to eat), *comestible* (edible), or "well preserved." One "devours another with one's eyes." Many of these expressions do not have masculine counterparts. The lover says to his companion: "I'm hungry for you" or *je voudrais te manger* (I want to eat you). If it is a "devouring" love, she will respond with "my darling" or *mon chou* (literally, "my cabbage"). In the United States, she might once have been referred to as "cookie." New lovers are on a "honeymoon." Saying "it's good" is an expression of sexual pleasure.

Seducing a woman consists in "preparing the dish" (*faire du plat*). When she is "cooked to perfection" (*à point*) or "ripe" (*mûre*), having been "warmed up" (*chauffée*), the seducer can *se la farcir*, from *farcir*, meaning "to stuff," especially if she is a *poule* or *poulette* (a chicken or a "chick"). Breasts are compared to apples, pears, melons, and oranges. Testicles become nuts. The penis becomes a banana, a sausage, etc. The female face is an orchard: she has almond eyes, a cherry mouth, pulpy lips, and the skin of a peach. For Grimod de la Reynière, "it is proven that everything in this lowly world demands to be served, harvested or eaten in its best moment, from the young girl who has but an instant to show us her beauty in all its freshness and her virginity in all its radiance, to the omelet that insists on being devoured right out of the pan" (1997: 41). Elsewhere he wonders "what gourmand is so depraved as to prefer a thin and scrawny beauty to those enormous and succulent sirloins from Limagne or Cotentin that so delight the one who carves into them and make those who eat them swoon" (1997: 35). Grimod is certainly one of the authors who most readily compares women to food to cast the latter in a favorable light.<sup>7</sup> "The equation of male with devourer and female with devoured is more familiar to us and certainly also the more prevalent in the world but one must not forget that the inverse equivalence is often found at a mythological level in the theme of the *vagina dentata*. Significantly enough, this is 'coded' in terms of eating" (Lévi-Strauss 1966: 106).

The banquet of love is a feast of sensual foods. "I have come into my garden, my sister, my bride. I have gathered my myrrh with my spice. I have eaten my honeycomb and my honey; I have drunk my wine and my milk," says the beloved in the *Song of Songs* (5:1). The pleasures of the table and the pleasures of love come together under the aegis of orality and the mouth. "But a pair of lips, designed to convey to the palate the taste of whatever whets their appetite, must be content [...] with roaming over the surface and with coming to a halt at the barrier of the impenetrable but irresistible cheek" (Proust 1982b: 377, 378). Curnonsky elaborates on this, combining the two pleasures:

The mouth is available to us not only for eating but also for caressing ... All of the true lovers we have known were true gourmands. Love is a delicacy.

The lover's divan should always have next to it ice cream, fruits and fine pastries. Certain liqueurs go well with the tenderness of romance: rossoli, cream of vanilla, maraschino, but to rejuvenate weary lovers, nothing is better than chilled champagne.<sup>8</sup> (cited in Chatelet 1977: 145)

Certain groups use culinary metaphors to convey the sexual situation of men or women who are late to marry. Lévi-Strauss evokes a rite described by Van Gennep, in the region of Saint Omer, for example, in which a young woman whose younger sister has married first is seized upon during celebrations and lifted onto the top of the oven to warm her and make her more "sensitive" to love (Lévi-Strauss 1983: 334). In other regions, she has to dance on the oven floor—the *cul du four* or "oven's ass" (Lévi-Strauss 1983: 334). Elsewhere, she has to dance barefoot or eat a salad of onions, nettles, roots, or clover and oats. Lévi-Strauss sees in these rituals a form of symbolic opposition between the cooked (the oven) and the raw (the salad). These rites apply to celibate men and women who have not yet entered into the world of "culture" and are still close to "nature." The young woman or man who remains asexual or "raw" for too long risks turning rotten, becoming, in other words, no longer appetizing. The oven metaphor offers a symbolic way to speed up the cooking, to hasten, that is, entry into adult social life (Lévi-Strauss 1983: 344). "In Yoruba," Lévi-Strauss notes, "'to eat' and 'to marry' are expressed by a single verb, the general sense of which is 'to win, to acquire,' a usage which has its parallel in French, where the verb 'consommer' applies both to marriage and to meals" (Lévi-Strauss 1966: 105).

Evoking several African societies, Lévi-Strauss insists on the assimilation between sexuality and food, noting that cooking is often associated with coitus between husband and wife: "to put fuel into the fire and to blow it is to cohabit; the hearthstones are the posteriors; the cooking pot is the vagina; the pot ladle is the penis" (Cory cited in Lévi-Strauss 1983: 296). In Brazilian slang, *comer* refers both to the sexual act and to the act of eating. In Central Australia, an aboriginal person who poses the question *Utna ilkukabaka?* is asking whether someone has enjoyed his or her meal or enjoyed making love (Farb and Amelegos 1985: 85). "A liquorish mouth has a lecherous tail," says the wife of Bath in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* (2005: 119). Sexual appetite and gustatory appetite go hand in hand, just as *abstinentia* implies *continentia*.

For the islanders of Tikopia, the same terms apply to sexuality and food. When copulation is evoked they say that the sex of the woman "eats" that of the man. This is also said of the adulterous woman in the Bible: "She eats and wipes her mouth and says, 'I've done nothing wrong'" (Proverbs 30: 20). During the Counter-Reformation, François de Sales, insisted with horror on the similarities between sexual pleasure and gourmandize. One inevitably leads to the other. Among the Fipas of Tanzania, sexual secretions are implicated in the growth of crops. The night prior to seeding, husband and wife have sexual relations. The man spends the night touching the

genitals and breasts of his companion. In the morning he gets up without washing, his hands infused with genital secretions, and passes the seeds to be planted in the garden through a sieve. Then he sits with the tray of seeds between his legs, resting his penis on the sorted seeds. He rubs his penis until it is erect with a millet porridge mixed with a substance to help the plants grow. In doing so, he hopes to ensure that the future crop will be as fecund as his distended organ (Farb and Amelagos 1980: 86).

A recurrent theme in early European literature, that of the lover eating the heart or liver, is rooted to some extent in this ambiguity between sexual pleasure and eating. The story revolves around the vengeance of a woman who has been seduced and abandoned or a husband who has been betrayed. The lover is killed and the betrayer made to eat the heart or liver. The violation of the social rules of marriage and sexuality is met with an alimentary infraction that definitively invalidates the traitor's status as a subject. By engaging in sexually illicit relations, the unfaithful cannot escape the symbolic transgression that cannibalism represents in the social imagination. Committing the act of flesh entails, symbolically, having to consume the flesh of the illicit partner.





# 7

## The Cuisine of Disgust

*A teaspoon of sewage will spoil a barrel of wine, but a teaspoon of wine will do nothing for a barrel of sewage*

PAUL ROZIN QUOTED IN WILLIAM MILLER, *THE ANATOMY OF DISGUST*

### Fear of the Other

Disgust is essentially a real or symbolic threat to our sense of identity. Arising from a perceived danger to the self, to the group, it sets symbolic boundaries that allow us to stake out a position within the essential ambiguity of the world. Inassimilable, it represents a principle of destruction to an ever-precarious personal or collective identity. It is an irreversible, irrevocable, absolute alterity. This is why disgust is also a moral sentiment that makes an individual, group, or situation seem repulsive. When meeting Oedipus, who was still unaware of having killed his father and married his mother, the prophet Tiresias declares: “I repeat that you yourself are the murderer you seek [...] You yourself are the sacrilegious curse of this land” (Sophocles 2009: 15, 16). Disgust is a defense reaction, an unequivocal distancing from something perceived as a danger (Kolnai 2004: 33). Its paradox, if it is shared by members of the same group, is that the social bond it creates is based on a radical separation, one that unites the group’s members against the despised object while simultaneously setting them apart from others who appreciate or are indifferent to it. It is not an anomaly of the cultural system but is inscribed, rather, within an overall order where everything has its place. It is not an individual or collective fantasy but a cultural principle applied to an object or a situation. The disgusting encompasses everything beyond the realm of the thinkable.

Disgust is not about taste but about what is offensive to taste. Orality, in this case, is associated with feelings that induce nausea and vomiting, that is to say, metaphors of rejection rather than ingestion. Eating is less about food than about the meaning we attribute to it. We do not consume a meal so much as the values associated with it. Alimentary tastes have varied over the course of history. No one today seeking a boost of energy would go to a slaughterhouse and drink a glass of cold blood. While

cheese is now a constituent part of most French meals, this is not the case in all cuisines, and at one time it was subject to severe reprobation. Between the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, fermentation was regarded as a volatile mixture of magic and menace. Piero Camporesi describes the anxieties people experienced in seeing cheese transformed from liquid to solid. Fermentation was seen as a form of putrefaction. “For many centuries, many people believed in the intrinsic malevolence of cheese, and its ‘iniquity’ could be detected from its smell, which for many was sickening and nauseating, a sure indicator of dying matter (Campanella). It was a decomposing residue of degenerate and harmful substances, and a terrible corrupter of the humours” (1994: 42). Its strong smell was a warning, a self-recrimination. Its emissions were emissaries of its taste and nature.

Disgust with cheese was so intense that Marguerite-Marie Alacoque, though generally disposed to mortification of the flesh and the senses, had to struggle to overcome her horror of it. When she entered the convent, her brother had curiously requested of her superiors that she be spared having to eat cheese, but she had to face the ordeal.

As I was pressed from every side in order to induce me to do it, I no longer knew what I had to do, and it seemed easier to give up my life than submit myself to such a trial. And if I had not esteemed my vocation more highly than my life, I would certainly have abandoned religion rather than test myself in what was demanded of me. But in vain I tarried, as the Lord Almighty desired it of me as a sacrifice of myself, on whom so many others depended. (Camporesi 1994: 58, 59)

She forced it down and remained badly shaken afterward. The test of cheese, it seems, can be a formidable obstacle on the path to sainthood.

A German doctor writing in 1643 regarded cheese as a waste product, the excrement of milk and the opposite of butter, which incarnated the good and noble part. Cheese was, in his view, unworthy of respectable people, a “course and vile thing” suitable for peasants and paupers. Its abjectness dishonored the eater, in addition to putting his or her life in danger. Cheese lovers were “degenerate,” tasters of putrefied substances that had dangerous effects on humors responsible for maintaining the harmony of the body. The only difference between cheese and excrement, writes Lotichius in his 1643 treatise, is its color. Summarizing these hostile remarks, Camporesi writes:

This was the terrible truth: cheese increased the existing putrefaction in the dark meanders of the intestines and the recesses of the human bowels, generating disgusting little monsters. To eat cheese was the best way to turn the stomach into the perfect pasture of earthworms, round worms and repellent maggots which in turn would feast upon the flesh of the foolish peasant. (Camporesi 1994: 43)

Only barbarians could eat these putrefying substances. This did not prevent dairy products from circulating among all the classes of society, but not without provoking heated debates between their detractors and their admirers.

## Excremental Remedies

Angyal (1941) considered excrement to be the height of disgust, a mockery of the human condition that mercilessly reminds us of our complicity with the animal world. The sight of excrement—decomposing organic matter, the abject trace of the other—is a common theme of repugnance, notably, for example, when someone has neglected to flush the toilet. Disgust for the other is often framed in language related to excrement: someone is “full of shit,” a “piece of shit,” a “shit-head” and so on. There is no greater insult.

However, the use of animal and human excrement to treat numerous ailments has a long history in Western societies. Pliny the Elder’s texts abound in these types of medical recipes: goat droppings or the excrement of crocodiles or hippopotami were effective for treating eye pain, chicken droppings were used to treat mushroom poisoning or flatulence, horse dung cured ear infections. Hippopotamus excrement was also used as a fumigant to treat catarrhal fever. These are but a few random examples. Pliny’s long lists constitute an extensive bestiary praising the virtues of dung, droppings, and excrement in various forms. All animal fecal matter, it seems, concealed a wealth of therapeutic treasures for treating everything from fevers and burns to gout, jaundice, eye and ear problems, snake bites, and prolapsed wombs. Few ailments were neglected.

Other authors continued in the same stercoreary vein. Galen, expressing just a few reserves about the odor, did not disdain the use of livestock or domestic animal excrement. But human excrement, of course, held a place of honor. The application of a pessary made from the newborn’s feces at birth prevented sterility. Fresh human excrement soothed inflamed wounds. Plasters made of fecal matter were used to treat sore throats. Galen cites the example of a child’s dried feces mixed with honey as a treatment for consumption. Luther (1566) praises God in *Colloquia Mensalia* (*Table Talk*) for having “put such excellent physic in mere muck; we know by experience that swine’s dung stints the blood; horse’s serves for the pleurisy; man’s heals wounds and black blotches; asses’ is used for the bloody flux, and cow’s with preserved roses, serves for epilepsy, or for convulsions of children” (1857: 41).

Saint Jerome, advisor to the ladies of Rome from 382 to 385, warned against smearing one’s face with excrement to preserve a youthful complexion, not for the practise itself but for the excessive attention paid to appearance and the frivolities of life at the expense of the soul. The practise was refined a few centuries later. For women concerned with their beauty, distilled excrement provided a marvelous elixir to be spread over

the face and body. Distilled urine was already known to “increase hair growth, beautify skin, improve complexion, make scars vanish and heal chapped hands” (Laporte 2002: 105). In the stercoreary imagination, “the beautifying power of shit [was] on par with the Fountain of Youth” (Laporte 2002: 105). Fecal matter, distilled or raw, was long considered a cosmetic of choice and used abundantly by aging women wanting to remain forever young. A physician claimed to have known a woman of high standing who, thanks to her daily use of stercoreary fluid, maintained a beautiful complexion until a very advanced age. To ensure that she would always have a product of the finest quality, she relied on a healthy, young servant

whose sole duty was to answer nature’s call in a special basin of tin-plated copper equipped with a very tight lid. The deed done, the basin would immediately be covered so that none of its contents would evaporate. Once the contents had sufficiently cooled, the young man would carefully collect the moisture that had formed under the lid. This precious elixir was then poured into a flask that was kept on Madame’s dressing table. Everyday, without fail, this lady would wash her hands and face in the fragrant liquid; she had uncovered the secret to being beautiful for an entire lifetime. (Laporte 2002: 106)

Oil made from human excrement (*oleum ex stercore distillatum*) was still commonly used in the eighteenth century to soothe cankers and fistulas, slow hair loss, remove scars, or calm epileptics. The treatises of the epoch emphasized that only the excrement of a young man be used to fabricate this oil, not that of a child or elderly person. In 1696, in Frankfurt, Paullini published an excremental pharmacopeia that listed countless stercoreary remedies and their therapeutic indications. Once again, several centuries after Pliny, the range of thus-treated ailments is staggering: loss of virility, gravel, lice, corns, obstruction of the liver, pleurisy, worms, dislocated uterus, menstrual problems, poisoning, and so on. We learn that donkey excrement applied externally is effective against dementia, owl excrement is used for treating melancholy, and that human excrement used internally is best for mania. The internal use of peacock or horse excrement is recommended for treating paralysis.

A few years later in his *Chylogologia* (1725), Schurig wrote of the therapeutic uses of urine, sperm, and humus obtained from corpses, and proposed, in turn, his own edifying inventory of ailments and stercoreary remedies. We thus learn of the existence of the king of remedies used internally to treat chest pain: the feces of a child who has eaten lupin beans. Warm poultices made of human excrement were renowned for treating a whole range of dermatological problems. *Millefleur*, “water of a thousand flowers,” a product of distilled cow dung, was a common remedy. Bachelard reveals that this term in fact referred to cow urine carried warm to a sick person who was fasting (2002: 181). The author of the *Encyclopedia* has the

following to say of dog feces (*album graecum*): “Several authors, Ettmuller among them, have ascribed many properties to album graecum; they have celebrated it as being sudorific, attenuant, febrifuge, vulnerary, emollient, hydragogue, and specific in scrofula, quinsy, and all diseases of the throat” (2002: 182). These uses of *stercora* were very popular and continued up until the mid-nineteenth century.

In a work of the same period, Bourke refers to the particular attention paid at one time to the defecations of the Grand Lama of Tibet. These were carefully collected and dried, and used to make amulets, and his urine was ingested as a medicine. The Grand Lama’s excrement, Bourke explains, with reference to numerous travelers’ testimonies, was notably dried and powdered, and worn around the neck in small pouches (Bourke 1891: 28 sq.).

## Human Flesh, Universal Cure

While Europeans tend to be indignant in their denunciation of the horrors of cannibalism, they forget that the use of medicinal products based on human matter was still a common practice during the Renaissance. Western medicine had long been very hospitable to the principle of *homo homini salus*, according to which man is the best remedy for man. Organic human parts were a precious resource for those who knew how to transform them into remedies. In Western societies, human flesh held no gastronomical interest, but was long consumed in the form of medicinal preparations. The horror of its ingestion enhanced the product’s therapeutic powers in people’s imagination. One did not savor it as a succulent meat flavored by exotic sauces, but forced it down to treat a wound, alleviate pain, recover strength, and so on.

Human flesh was a remedy, not a food. It contained essential medicines that were a hidden source of salvation for those who could not be otherwise cured. The human body was not yet a sign of individuation. The body, far from dividing individuals, united them: it was first a connector not an interrupter, as it would gradually become (Le Breton 1990). Individualism had not yet made the body into a self-contained property, an articulation of an individual’s singularity. In the communitarian regime, the body belonged to the species, to the group. The cosmos was within human beings, and human beings were part of the cosmos. Human flesh and the flesh of the world were intertwined. Thus human remains were regarded as a precious resource by those who knew how to transform them into remedies (or curses, in the case of sorcery). Many treatments were applied externally: ointments, salves, strips of skin to treat hysteria or spasms, dried body parts applied to the patient’s corresponding affected areas, bone fragments to prevent bad luck, and so on. But many products were also consumed internally in the form of elixirs, syrups, pills, tablets, pastes, and dried powders.

It was the contact with death that made these paradoxical medicines effective, this implicit memory, like a homeopathic cure, providing individuals fighting illness with the greatest resistance. The body's sacred character, the deviation from its ritual destination in the ground, conferred enhanced power on its therapeutic use. Bones reduced to ashes and mixed into soups or wine were vested with a thousand virtues. The sweat of the dead was beneficial for treating hemorrhoids. Liquid or oil derived from the human brain or powder from the dried skull were used against epilepsy. Acme, a sort of moss collected on old skulls, was a reputed remedy. Should this moss come from the skull of a thief who was hanged? The common view was that the virtues of this blessing were greater if it came a man who had never been buried and, particularly, if he had died a brutal death (Murray 1904: 55 sq.).

The use of human fat was extremely popular. Christian Friedrich Garmann (1640–1708), a German doctor from Dresden, had a recipe for “divine water,” so called for its powers to alleviate several illnesses: “You take the whole body of a man who had been in good health but had died a violent death, cut it into very small pieces—flesh, bones and viscera—mix everything thoroughly, and reduce it to a liquid in an alembic” (Aries 1981: 358). In one of his works, Berangario praises the effectiveness of his flesh-derived cream: “I have always heard from the oldest of my family,” writes Berangario, “that the mummy which enters into this plaster must be part of a man’s head, and the mummy is dried human flesh” (cited in Camporesi 1996: 47). Berangario then provides a description of this remedy that mixes women’s milk and human mummy with a dozen other substances (Camporesi 1996: 47). Marsile Ficcin prescribes drinking blood drawn from youthful veins to counter the effects of aging:

Thus the good doctors, using blood distilled and refined by fire, are able to recreate and restore those who are eaten away and consumed, little by little, by the consumptive fever of old age [...] why should our elderly, who find themselves bereft of any other assistance, not likewise suck the blood of a young boy, of robust strength I mean, who is healthy, cheerful, even-tempered and who has perfect blood and, by chance, in abundance. Then suck it as would a leech or bloodsucker, from the open vein of the left arm. (Camporesi 1996: 44, 45)

The human body was a substance to be consumed, valued for its numerous therapeutic properties. The mummy, whose use Berangario praised, was for centuries regarded as a miracle cure for a whole variety of ailments. François I always carried pouches of it reduced to a fine powder and mixed with crushed rhubarb as a precaution in case of accident or injury. For Cardan, the mummy was an effective remedy for treating fractures and contusions and for fortifying the blood. A tablet used to treat anthrax was prepared with mummy ingredients and the blood of a man who was still young at the time of death. Camporesi describes one expert’s recipe for a mummy elixir: the

“very experienced” Osvald Crollius prepares it in the following manner: “take the corpse of a red-haired man of twenty-four years of age, and after it has been hung, sprinkle it with a powder made of myrrh and aloes, after which it must be rubbed with vinegar, thus drying part of the body suspended in the air, and from this will be obtained a brilliant red tincture.” (Camporesi 1988: 15)

A famous text by Ambroise Paré, *Le discours de la mumie et de la licorne* (discourse on the mummy and the unicorn) (1582), is a testament to people’s expectations surrounding preparations made from corpses. Christophe Jouvenal des Ursins, who had fallen from his horse and was treated by Paré, asked the surgeon why he had not given him any *mummy*. Paré explained that this “flesh of decomposed cadaverous dead bodies” does more harm than good and he had never seen it do anything but give the patient pain inside and make him sick (cited in Paget 1897: 208, 209). “Far from stopping the flow of blood from a contusion, the disturbing effect this fine drug has on the body would make it flow even more” (cited in Malgaigne 1840: 482). The surgeon was in fact indignant about its use, which his own experience reproved. If he denounced this practice, it was not because Hippocrates or Galen had never mentioned it, as he is quick to point out, but because

the fact is that this dangerous drug not only is of no benefit to patients, as I have seen several times from my experience with those who have been given it, but it also causes extreme stomach pain, mouth odor and vomiting, making the blood agitated and flow more from the blood vessels, rather than stopping it. (Malgaigne 1840: 482)

Paré’s style is very mocking. He doubts whether “ancient Jews, Arabs, Chaldeans, and Egyptians ever thought of embalming their corpses so they could be eaten by Christians” (Malgaigne 1840: 482). He also notes the rampant smuggling of bodies that prevailed in the fabrication of mummies (Le Breton 1993).

This sarcastic text ends on a scintillating note:

However, by this discourse, we see how people are indiscreetly and brutally made to swallow the smelly and rotten carrion of the hanged, or the most vile scoundrel of the Egyptian populace, or the syphilitics, the plague-ridden and lepers, as though there were no other way to save a man fallen from a height, suffering from contusions and wounded but inserting and burying another man inside him, as if there were no way of recovering health, but by a more brutal inhumanity. (cited in Malgaigne 1840: 482)

However, Paré’s incisive remarks could not upend a long and deeply rooted custom. Mummy continued to be consumed in powders, salves, plasters, tinctures, and pastes up until at least the eighteenth century, as a sort of



cure-all. *Pharmacopoeia universalis*, published in London in 1747, still includes a description of the taste of mummy as “somewhat acrid and bitterish” (Gordon-Grube 1988: 406).

Being sublimated through their use, medications made from human flesh were rarely a source of controversy. They reflected a harmonious relation between humanity and the world, an image of death and health that dispelled any feeling of horror. Only time and changing mentalities eventually led to feelings of disgust toward these medicines, which, in the learned tradition, discretely went from being taken by mouth to being given by other bodily means (blood transfusions, organ transplants, cosmetics based on ingredients extracted from placentas, etc.). The same was not true of cannibalism, that is to say, the act of carving into another human being’s body to eat the coveted morsels of flesh. This has always been a source of opprobrium in Western societies, which is what makes the satirist Jonathan Swift’s “modest proposal” so unspeakably horrible to ponder.

“A young healthy child, well nursed, is, at a year old, a most delicious, nourishing and wholesome food, whether stewed, roasted, baked or boiled; and I make no doubt that it will equally serve in a fricassee or a ragout” (Swift 1989: 139). With the humor that characterized his work (as a polite form of despair), Jonathan Swift dished up a good dose of satire in his 1729 essay *A Modest Proposal for Preventing the Children of Poor People from Being a Burthen to Their Parents or Country, and for Making Them Beneficial to the Publick*. Observing the immense poverty in the streets of Dublin, the legions of beggars and children in rags, the destitution of the Irish population and the regular famines, he suggests making these children “sound and useful members of the commonwealth” (1989: 138). Following his ironic proposal, Swift explains the advantages of putting the children of the poor to culinary use, given they are such a heavy burden on the economy. Beyond the gourmandize offered by their flesh, it is clear that

the maintenance of an hundred thousand children, from two years old and upwards, cannot be computed at less than ten shillings a piece per annum, the nation’s stock will be thereby increased fifty thousand pounds per annum, besides the profit of a new dish introduced to the tables of gentlemen of fortune in the kingdom who have any refinement in taste. (Swift 1989: 142)

Swift foresees that the tables of the rich would be well served by this choice food. One child would be enough for at least two dishes at a dinner party and, seasoned with at little salt and pepper, would be delicious, boiled, especially in winter. Swift recognizes that these children would likely be auctioned at a high price, but he sees in this a social logic that is also very modern: “I grant this food will be somewhat dear, and therefore very proper for landlords, who, as they have already devoured most of the parents, seem to have the best title to the children” (Swift 1989: 140). Their

meat would be available all year long, particularly abundant during the month of March,

for we are told by a grave author, an eminent French physician, that fish being a prolific diet, there are more children born in Roman Catholic countries about nine months after Lent, than at any other season; therefore reckoning a year after Lent, the markets will be more glutted than usual, because of the number of Popish infants is at least three to one in this kingdom, and therefore it will have one other collateral advantage by lessening the number of Papists among us. (Swift 1989: 140)

The poor would thus receive a financial manna that would also bring peace to the kingdom.

Slaughterhouses could be built for the purpose in different neighborhoods, allowing butchers to practice their trade, even though Swift recommends, with gourmandize, “buying the children alive, and dressing them hot from the knife, as we do roasting pigs” (Swift 1989: 141). In suggesting that the poor sell their children to the rich, Swift preserves the incest taboo—no family will make a meal of their own child. The manducation of human flesh seems inconceivable in Western societies.<sup>1</sup> Macabre crimes that involve devouring parts of a victim’s corpse, as in the case of the young woman murdered by Issei Sagawa in 1981, are so unbearable to think about that they are dismissed as madness. The culinary art does not lend itself to flavorful preparations of dishes made from human body parts. Freud even considered the taboo against cannibalism a foundation of civilization. However, Western societies are not exempt from this practice in circumstances where food shortages or isolation oblige individuals to nourish themselves with the only food available: their fellow human beings. But in these cases, the various protagonists’ respective tasks, from the killing of the victim, to the cutting, cooking, distribution, and consumption, is neither random nor driven by gourmandize. It is not appropriate to eat anyone, anywhere, under any circumstances.

## Cannibalism in Times of Famine

Cannibalism in times of food shortage is not uncommon in Western societies. The survival instinct erases social rules and transforms others into a food source, desacralizing their mortal remains, even their very life. There have been numerous instances, during severe famines, of survivors eating the flesh of the dead or even killing neighbors or passing travelers to feed off of them. The survivors of the *Medusa* had to eat their dead shipmates. Many other cases of cannibalism in Western societies during sieges, epidemics, and food shortages have been documented by historians and chroniclers. The Thirty Years’ War and the Fronde abound in such stories.

Camporesi (1996: 40) even mentions an “uncertainty” among sixteenth- and seventeenth-century theologians as to whether it was lawful for people to eat human flesh when pushed to extremes of hunger and their lives were at stake. Indeed, one of the questions raised by the resurrection of body in the Christian tradition is what will become of the person who has consumed the flesh of a fellow human or who has inadvertently eaten some human part. Would the bodies not be confused at the time of resurrection? In the same work, Camporesi recalls a village located near Rimini, where “the consumption of dead soldiers took place during the terrible winter of 1944. Their flesh, in part fresh and in part prepared, helped to resolve this crisis of survival within the small indigenous community, supplying a providential ration of food high in protein” (1996: 28).<sup>2</sup>

Times of war produce food shortages and can lead to cannibalism even among those for whom the taboo remains powerful. But the limits of the human condition are called into question, and the horror of transgression cannot hold out against the instinct to survive. Even God is to be summoned to the table for those assured in their Christian heritage. The religious evocation in some cases permits passing to the act. During the siege of Antioch in 1098, the Tafurs, a group of “rogue crusaders,” according to Rouche (1981: 29), were devastated by hunger. They solicited the advice of Peter the hermit, who suggested they eat the Turks killed in battle and whose corpses lay strewn among the fields. The pilgrim beggars thus skinned the bodies of their enemies’ corpses and carried them off to be eaten. They ate them “without bread or salt,” which was a choice, because they were not lacking these. Men who went to combat for their faith based their actions on the *exemplum* of the providential manna provided by God to the Hebrews after their long period of survival in the desert.

Remember how the Lord your God led you all the way in the wilderness these forty years, to humble and test you in order to know what was in your heart, whether or not you would keep his commands. He humbled you, causing you to hunger and then feeding you with manna, which neither you nor your ancestors had known, to teach you that man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord. (Deuteronomy 8:2, 3)

Like the Chosen People, the Tafurs suffered from hunger on the threshold of the Promised Land. Also like them, they benefited from divine generosity after a long period of suffering. Moreover, as though to emphasize how exceptional the act was, this abundant flesh was perceived as a new Eucharist. It was eaten without salt or bread. In this story mixing legend with the historical facts of the siege of Antioch, the biblical and evangelical reference neutralizes the act of cannibalism, but God’s authority is needed to dispel the horror. The warrior pilgrims do not eat bodies but, rather, the manna granted to them by God as a new Eucharist, in anticipation of the city’s conquest in name of the same God. The unthinkable is symbolically

justified, inscribed within a paradigm that not only makes it harmless but even gives it a glorified meaning. Also, they do not eat of the Same but of the Other (the Turks).

A Japanese story by Shôhei Ooka, who experienced war himself as a soldier in the Philippines, illustrates the identity rupture that circumstantial cannibalism causes. In 1944, the Americans surprised the Japanese troops by landing on the island of Leyte in the Philippine archipelago. Thousands of soldiers were isolated, unable to make their retreat, and return to Japan. Surrounded by Filipino guerillas and American troops, they were left to their own devices in the jungle, and most of them died. The rest owed their survival to various expedients, including cannibalism. Ooka was one of the abandoned soldiers. He hid in the mountains and wandered for forty days in the forest before being captured and sent to a prisoner-of-war camp. Profoundly marked by his experience, he recounts in his novel *Fires on the Plain* (1951) the island wanderings of several soldiers, including Tamura who slowly goes mad after having killed a woman “for nothing” and, especially, for having unknowingly consumed human flesh, which his two companions of misfortune presented to him as monkey meat.

Over the course of his solitary wanderings, having been separated from the others and living off of plants and leeches, Tamura often comes across the naked corpses of Japanese soldiers whose buttocks have been stripped of their flesh. He intuits the reason for this dismemberment by recalling the cannibalism practiced by the survivors of the raft of *Medusa* and the soldiers of Guadalcanal. Though he repels with horror the idea of satisfying his hunger by eating another human being, he begins to feel he is being watched every time he crosses another body. More than the fact of having killed the young Filipino woman, it is the temptation to eat this flesh that has him imagining signs of his shame in the hypothetical gaze of an other. To repel this feeling, he consoles himself in thinking that he may have killed this young woman, but he did not eat her.

He eventually encounters two comrades, as worn down as he is, but who have turned to hunting monkeys for food. Tamura shares their meal. Soon after, in seeing one of them cold-bloodedly shoot at another errant soldier, he understands that the so-called monkey meat that he has been eating for days is actually from these slain soldiers. The murderer, seeing his shot miss its mark, simply comments that “the monkey got away!” The animalization of the Other exorcizes the horror of the situation. To justify the unthinkable, the soldier metaphorically replaces the flesh he covets with that of another unappealing meat, that of a monkey, which is acceptable in these extreme conditions, because there is no disgrace associated with consuming animal meat. However, the three men remain watchful of one another for fear of becoming the next meal. In the end the two kill each other, while Tamura flees and descends into madness. The cannibalism that he was an unwitting party to cuts him off from the human condition.

At the military hospital where he is first taken and then later in a psychiatric hospital in Tokyo, he no longer eats without first performing a

ceremony on his tray and offering his apologies to the various foods that he is about to eat. Once released, he is unable to resume living together with his wife. The transgression of two major taboos, killing and eating human flesh, leads him to no longer consider himself human, but rather an instrument of God. "I was seized with anger: if as a result of hunger human beings were constrained to eat each other, then this world of ours was no more than the result of God's wrath" (Ooka 1989: 223). Tamura is haunted by nightmares and hallucinations. Having faced the limits of the human condition, he is living on a razor's edge, drowning in a gulf between barbarism and humanity, without belonging to either one or the other. The work concludes with a Eucharistic vision: Tamura sees a soldier who offers him his own flesh to eat. It is a reincarnation of Christ. Only the Christian religion could provide him with the symbolism needed to think the unthinkable, to cross the ford and find relief by finally turning his back on suffering and horror to go on living.

This association between cannibalism and the Eucharist, which provides a powerful justification for passing to the act *in extremis*, surfaces again among the survivors of the Andes flight disaster of 1972. The body of Christ that symbolically nourishes the believer is transformed into a paradigm for real cannibalism, a model susceptible to erasing feelings of guilt or horror. The first argument was put forward by a young medical student who explained that the recumbent bodies of their friends were nothing but "meat [...] that's all it is. The souls have left their bodies and are in heaven with God. All that is left here are the carcasses, which are no more human beings than the dead flesh of the cattle we eat at home" (Read 1975: 76). Animalizing the human body is a way of dehumanizing its appearance and legitimizing an undertaking that would be considered abominable under any other circumstances. Treating the human body as nothing more than leftover meat is an absolute desecration of the mortal remains, which are demoted to the simple status of "carcass." Considering the other as a pure body and no longer a human being removes the moral obstacle, as the Renaissance anatomists understood (Le Breton 1993). When it came to cutting into the corpses, the survivors closed their eyes. A religious argument was also used: "It was their moral obligation to live, for their own sake and for the sake of their families. God wanted them to live, and he had given them the means to do so in the dead bodies of their friends. If God had not wished them to live, they would have been killed in the accident; it would be wrong now to reject this gift of life because they were too squeamish" (Read 1975: 77). We find here again, as in the case of the Tafurs, the image of the manna provided to the Chosen People by God.

One of the survivors evokes the image of the Eucharist to complete the theological justification. Flesh and blood are no longer metaphors here. Communion is transformed into real cannibalism, but the blessing ingeniously obtained from God legitimizes the cannibalistic undertaking. To further allay the feelings of horror and guilt that were weighing on them,

the twenty-seven survivors pledged an oath: if any one of them died, his or her flesh would serve as food for the others. Certain members, though in solidarity with the moral choice of the group, still felt they could not cross that line.

The moment of initiation, the carving of the first body to be shared and consumed, marked the difficulty in breaking the taboo. It was only undertaken after a long moral deliberation. The pieces of flesh were ingested with disgust, mixed with other things. Some could not bring themselves to eating them raw and began cooking them in spite of the medical student's exhortations explaining that the cooking would destroy the proteins and that they should eat the "meat" raw to benefit from it. Eventually everyone gave in to the imperative to survive, and the bodies were carefully eaten one after the other.

The ritual evocation "God wills it" was repeated regularly to overcome any hesitation. The ritualization of their actions, another way of mitigating the anxiety provoked by the transgression, lead them to outright reject certain organs that were too identifiable as human: the tongue, the brain, the lungs, the sex organs, and so on. Likewise, those closest to the survivors were the last to be eaten. The reduction of the Other to a body ("meat") was easier with non-family, even though they were still friends. The survivors' choice is symbolically compatible with the incest taboo. Table manners echo those of the bedroom. Sexual relations and alimentary relations fall within the same symbolic register. The license to eat the other in a cannibalistic relation (like a sexual relation) demands that the latter not be subject to sexual taboos.

In these few examples, the ultimate transgression would be to eat human flesh for pleasure, with gourmandize. The suppression of horror works in concert with the idea of eating to stay alive and transforms the other into meat, not a delectable meal.<sup>3</sup> Recourse to a neutral vocabulary (meat, protein, etc.) transforms the flesh into a food of no interest. It is no longer a question of gustation but one of survival.

The consumption of human flesh destroys one's ontological status, erasing in an instant any previous individuality. A return to innocence is no longer possible. The individual is thereafter confined to an unavoidable moral category of social discourse, as Tobias Schneebaum brutally describes. Immersed in a Peruvian native community in the Amazon jungle, he took part, not without disgust, in a massacre of the tribe's enemies. His desire to blend in with the group led him to participate in festivities during which the carved up flesh of the victims was roasted and passed around. But the next day he awoke with horror, aware of his personal mutation. "I am a cannibal. That four-word sentence doesn't leave my head. No matter into what far corner of my mind I push those words, they flash along the surface of my brain" (Schneebaum 1969: 110). Schneebaum did not have the alibi of the Christian *exemplum*, his desire to disappear in the Other out of disgust for his society of origin being the only justification for his act. This was a not a Eucharistic communion but a "savage" one, an attempt to shed his identity

and become one with the Other, by crossing the shadow line. But he was overcome by an ambivalence that hit him hard in the hours following his guilty act. And this gesture that was supposed to be the sign of his definitive belonging to the Other, his irreversible assimilation into the native tribe, projected him outside of the world, through a symbolic shock that in turn revealed the undeniable presence of his society of origin within him. Schneebaum made his way back to his despised “civilization,” becoming in the end a man from nowhere, a man suspended in between, who failed to ritualize his passage to the act, because the Christian metaphor had no symbolic effect for him. The cannibal act remained unthinkable to him, in spite of his desire for assimilation in the native community.

## The Taste of Dog Meat

Farb and Amelagos (1985: 168) wonder, with irony, whether “instead of believing that indigenous peoples around the world are the victims of irrational food choices, North Americans and Europeans should look at some of their own prejudices, such as the taboo against eating meat from the sacred dog” (fewer dogs howling at night, taking over sidewalks, and leaving their droppings). With a dose of humor, they examine the numerous social advantages that such a change in alimentary customs would bring. While in Western societies eating domestic animals in full conscience would be regarded as a variant form of endocannibalism, dogs and cats have long been consumed in many societies, albeit sometimes due to the fraudulent practices of butchers or restaurant owners seeking to increase their profits (Milliet 1995: 81, 82).

Beyond times of scarcity, when everything becomes good to eat to stay alive,<sup>4</sup> dogs are regularly consumed in certain parts of Africa, Asia, and the Pacific. Far from the disgust that this provokes in Western societies,<sup>5</sup> dogs are appreciated both for their meat and their symbolic properties. The consumption of dog in Asia is not limited to a culinary principle. According to the Chinese classification of five elements, dog is associated with metal, that is to say, with strength and resistance (De Garine 1990: 1530).<sup>6</sup> The Chinese raise them for gastronomical purposes and privilege certain species, like the Chow breed. As Jacqueline Milliet observes, not all types of dogs are consumed in these societies, only certain ones (1995: 88). Symbolic attributes based on various cultural associations make the selected dogs edible and delicious and not repugnant.

Elsewhere, the change in status from the inedibility to the edibility of close animals is not self-evident. It is not easy to sacrifice an animal that has become a companion (which etymologically means “one who shares bread”). The domestic animal, which has a name and is part of the emotional fabric of the group, is not so easily edible. The pigs of rural France were at one time treated like puppies, named and cuddled, until they got older and approached the fateful moment of their sacrifice. From

that point on, an emotional distance was taken, and they were perceived as “fat,” “dirty,” “unbearable,” and so on. To make the animal appetizing, to transform it from a world of favors to a world of flavors, its symbolic status had to be modified by taking a distance from it and relegating it to a contemptible alterity.

The precariousness of its status seems to be based on its biological evolution. As for the duration of its initial status, this seems to depend first on the place accorded to special races, then on the place reserved for a singled-out favorite, which, selected from the litter, will conserve its special status as an adult. In the absence of these two last elements, it seems that all animals lose their prerogatives as companions as they grow older. (Milliet 1995: 84)

In Vietnam, dog meat is used in a number of different recipes. Jean-Pierre Poulain, having conducted research on the subject, and in the company of a geographer, an ethnologist, and two Vietnamese friends, decided he wanted to experience it for himself. Whether it was a quest for sensations, a rationalist reflex in the face of “prejudice” to consider food from a strictly nutritional perspective, independently of its provenance, a moral obligation as researchers to not shy away from a test of truth, or other reasons, the group found themselves seated around a table, somewhat anxious about how the evening was going to unfold. The festivities began with boiled dog liver and shoulder, served with fermented shrimp, li leaves and rice crepes with sesame. Already, their faces tensed and their stomachs knotted up when bringing tendrils that were too suggestive to their mouths. Still impassive, Poulain observed that the mild flavor was like young goat, thus cleverly putting the substance he was eating at a distance by assimilating it to another meat that belongs to his usual food categories. However, faced with “dog blood sausage and roasted peanuts,” his reluctance grew:

I mobilized my culinary knowledge in front of this blood sausage that reminded me of *boudin antillais*, dissecting it so as to distance myself. I regarded it as a culinary object, looking for the onions, the fat, the rind... It was made with dog’s blood, and I couldn’t eat it. Yet, in French cuisine, blood is often used to thicken sauces: the blood of pigs, poultry, rabbit, lamprey. And later, in the stew, I was going to be tasting dog’s blood. But in the form of blood sausage, impossible. (Poulain 1997: 123)

The “stew of neck in fermented rice water, thickened with blood” seemed less suspect in appearance. It was even good according to Poulain, who would have only, however, gladly taken more if it was not dog meat. Other dishes followed: “steamed dog thighs,” “clear soup with chives,” “dog brochettes seasoned with rieng,” “boiled dog feet” (Poulain 1997: 123). The meal came to an end as one of their Vietnamese friends had the rather copious leftovers wrapped to share later with friends who were fond of this meat.



Back at his hotel, the narrator made a beeline for the bar, where he ordered an almond tart and a double whiskey, and where the fortuitous presence of the embassy's cultural attaché and his wife afforded him an opportunity to "intellectualize" his experience. It was the perfect pretext for taking a distance, covering up ambiguous flavors by other ones whose legitimacy was unquestionable (European dessert, alcohol). The next day, he ran into his geographer colleague who confessed to having awoken suddenly in the middle of the night. Disgusted by the odor of his urine, he had not been able to fall back asleep.

Sailors, like Captain James Cook and his crew, are less difficult. While taking a break in a cove, they were offered dog meat by the islanders. At first they refused in horror before eventually giving in: "and it was the Opinion of every one who tasted it that they never eat sweater Meat, therefore we resolved for the future never to despise Dog's flesh" (Cook 2016: 144).

The consumption of food defined as "disgusting" by one's own culture appears to be the anthropologist's rite of passage, a symbolic way of affirming his or her detachment and insight into the relativity of the world, and also of showing allegiance to the community being studied. Naomichi Ishige once took part in a banquet on the island of Ponape in Micronesia. Fruit from the breadfruit tree, taro, and a freshly slaughtered pig were offered to the guests, who regaled themselves. A man arrived with a burlap sack on his back in which there was a large dog. It was immediately clubbed to death. All the inner organs were removed and it was placed in the earth oven. An hour later, when the dog was shared among the guests, the anthropologist was not left out. The animal "did not taste as bad as its smell would have led one to believe, though it was a bit tough and had to be chewed for a long time, almost like chewing gum. But chewing brought out the rather rich-tasting juices of the meat. The pork had a rather bland flavor by comparison" (Ishige 2009: 222).

Lévi-Strauss demonstrated the same elegant nonchalance in the Amazon jungle. He had heard about the *koro*, pale-colored grubs found in certain rotting tree trunks. Having been jeered at by the whites for eating them, the natives avoided talking about them. Not without difficulty, Lévi-Strauss convinced one of the men to accompany him in the forest.

One blow with the axe revealed thousands of hollow little chambers, deep inside the tree. In each was a fat, cream-coloured creature, rather like a silkworm. I had to keep my word. While the Indian looked on impassively I decapitated my catch; from the body skirted a whitish, fatty substance which I managed to taste after some hesitation; it had the consistency and delicacy of butter, and the flavour of coconut milk. (Lévi-Strauss 1973: 160)

With Lévi-Strauss, as with other ethnologists who have transgressed the taboos of their culture, we find the same euphemization, which consists in associating the taste of the prohibited food with other entirely conventional

foods. This sympathetic magic effects a positive contamination: the repugnant foods are incorporated within the symbolic sphere of the familiar. This collusion of flavors makes it possible to overcome one's disgust.

Food incompatibilities from one culture to another are sometimes radical. Certain dishes that are too suggestive are impossible to force down, even if a person has all the good intentions in the world. Georges Haldas was a guest at a banquet celebrating the end of Ramadan in Algeria. His host, convinced of paying him a singular honor, solemnly presented him with "the best part of the sheep"—an eye (Haldas 1987: 151 sq.). The man praised the delicacy that awaited his guest as the others looked on with envy. Haldas contemplated with horror the greyish, slimy, glaucous ball looming on his plate without concealing its eyeball nature, which made him wonder if it wasn't looking back at him. Surrounded by the beaming—and somewhat jealous—faces of his dinner companions, he cut into the substance, in spite of its physical and moral resistance. He managed to extract a few tendrils, which he chewed on tirelessly, passing them from one cheek to the other, which of course only confirmed for his hosts how much he was enjoying the delicacy, since he was taking so much time to savor it. Haldas, usually such a gourmet, was left speechless, his disgust completely blocking everything else out. He finally devised a double strategy: taking a swig of wine to help force down a few fragments while others were looking on, and then surreptitiously slipping the other morsels in his shirt pocket, thus saving face both for himself and his hosts. Struggling with his growing nausea, he soon found a pretext to get away and he hastened to a nearby establishment, where he consumed several glasses of alcohol (Haldas 1987). As in Poulain's experience, it seems that alcohol is a marvelous detergent for cleansing the lingering disgust from one's mouth and from one's imagination.

## Wariness of Meat

In a founding text, Angyal (1941) analyzes disgust as being essentially related to our confrontation with the remains of a human or animal body. Bodily waste, traces of the organic, or the very form of certain animals remind us of our unbearable fragility, a loss of meaning that brutally recalls us to the humility of our condition, to the animality that we seek to conceal with all the subtleties of our culture. For Rozin, building on Angyal's argument, the primary agent of disgust is the repulsion that arises when confronted with products of an animal or bodily origin in an alimentary context (Rozin 1997). The boundary between humanity and animality is always threatened, to be continually reconquered. Some vegetarians explain their alimentary choice with reference to the disgust they experience eating an animal, a flesh that is in the end so close to their own. Animals are the object of a profound alimentary ambivalence. Their consumption reminds us of our own animality, the infinite fragility of our flesh, its contingency. Though it is a widespread practice, it is also strictly

regulated. It destabilizes our fragile pretensions to rise above our condition by forgetting our precarity and mortality, which remain a constant threat. Only a tiny part of the animal kingdom that makes up a society's ecosystem is considered edible. Sometimes certain parts of the animal are prohibited or strictly reserved for women or children.

The Bible betrays the ambiguity of our relation to meat. Paradise is a world strictly devoted to vegetable-based foods: "I give you every seed-bearing plant on the face of the whole earth and every tree that has fruit with seed in it. They will be yours for food" (Genesis 1:29). God forbade all killing, thus meat eating was not possible, even for animals. After the Flood, which returned humanity for a second time to the Creation, God authorized animal consumption: "Everything that lives and moves about will be food for you. Just as I gave you the green plants, now I give you everything" (Genesis 9:3). Therefore all animals were permitted, with the absolute exception of their blood, which contained the soul. This permission seems to be a concession to the evil inherent in human beings: "Never again will I curse the ground because of humans, even though every inclination of the human heart is evil from childhood" (Genesis 8:21). Moses thereafter introduced the terms of the covenant with the Hebrew people, notably through a rigorous categorization of the foods that were allowed to be eaten. A part of the animal world becomes once again forbidden. The Bible thus lays out a hesitant relation to meat, first prohibiting it, then allowing its consumption, only to then reverse its position and spare a certain number of animals.

Meat eaters are not necessarily comfortable with all animal-based foods. Noëlie Vialles distinguishes between "zoophages," those who like and eat all forms of meat, even the parts most subject to rejection (brains, tripes, eyes, etc.), and who experience no disgust or discomfort in manipulating, preparing, or eating them, and "sarcophages," those who restrict their consumption to "meat," that is to say, "neutral" parts that are less identifiable, adding nuance to the idea of animal consumption (Vialles 1987). "Sarcophagy" also tends to win over the majority of society. Signs of animality are being erased from butchers' shops, skinned animals disappearing from market stalls. Organ meat (liver, brains, etc.) and meat fat top the list of contemporary French aversions (Fischler 1993).

Meats tend to be presented in a neutral way that eliminates any qualms about eating them. The industrialization of food production removes the animal from the social scene. But as animals become infinitely removed in their real dimension, they occupy more and more place in the imaginary, for example, in documentaries, movies, animations, and so on. Keeping animals as pets is ever more common and their presence in the home has contributed to changing sensibilities. The raising and slaughtering of animals is "forgotten" by eaters who prefer to hide their products' real nature by sanitizing their origin. Children, in particular, are loath to eat an animal they are familiar with. Animals are personalized just as humans are sometimes animalized, blurring the boundaries again. Reshaped, wrapped in cellophane,

and already partly prepared, meat thus becomes one dish among others thanks to a clever social redefinition. A cultural varnish converts it into a licit food and even tends to erase the notion of meat. Anecdotes about children asked to draw a chicken or a fish and who reproduce a roast chicken or battered fish fillets, are entirely to be expected. This repression of animality has accelerated in recent years and it completes a process that was set in motion a long time ago in Western societies (Elias 1973; Thomas 1985; Mennell 1996).

## Disgust as Moral Judgment

For many authors (Angyal 1941; Rozin and Fallon 1987; Fischler 1991), disgust is rooted in the aspect of oral incorporation. The intuitive reaction among newborns to reject bitterness is a paradigmatic example (Chiva 1985). The taste of food is the first priority, and the mouth is its privileged site. A food that is completely legitimate is rejected if it seems bitter, unpleasant, or if its texture or color is unusual. The unexpected discrepancy between the food in one's mouth and its traditional taste signals an anomaly. The taste buds play a role in defending the organism in the face of spoiled or contaminated food that could have a toxic effect. The majority of natural toxins have a bitter flavor.

The individual incorporates the food, and the crossing of the mouth's boundaries integrates it into his or her flesh. The limits of outside and inside are erased. Symbolically, people are what they eat, not only on the level of moral equivalence between the food and themselves often affirmed by social representations, but also in that their very substance is modified. If they ingest a prohibited food, or one that is perceived as disgusting or inedible, they lose their human status and belong thereafter to a marginal world, an absolute exteriority. They become Other, they are bestialized. In eating a repugnant food, they are themselves contaminated by the act, transformed into a figure of disgust.

Rozin was the first to make a direct link between the sentiment of disgust and the laws of sympathetic magic outlined by Frazer. The first law, "contagion," holds that things once in contact are always in contact. If an insect falls into someone's glass, often the entire drink is rejected as contaminated, even after the insect has been removed. People never eat food that has been left on a restaurant table, even if it is appetizing, for fear that someone else has touched it or started eating it. Food does not come out unscathed when it has been in contact with an animal, object, or individual susceptible to transmitting traces of its harmful character. In an experiment conducted by Rozin et al. (1986) American students were hesitant to drink the harmless contents of a bottle they themselves filled with sweetened water before labeling it "cyanide." The contagion of meaning, even if only with reference to a name, alters the positive image of a drink and renders it dangerous.

The law of similarity (things that resemble one another are of the same nature) makes foods shaped to look like excrement difficult to eat. Subjects were also reluctant to put a piece of rubber imitation vomit in their mouths, whereas if the shape of the rubber was anodyne, they barely hesitated (Rozin 1994). Individuals fearing the consequences of ingesting a harmful substance remain mistrustful even when they are aware of the make-believe scenario. In another experiment, students were served ground beef at the campus cafeteria. There was nothing wrong with the meat, but they were told it was “questionable” and that they shouldn’t hesitate, if need be, to go to the infirmary, which would remain open for the occasion. During the night, several of them visited the infirmary complaining of unpleasant symptoms (Rozin 1994).

The mouth is the tangible site of exchange with the world and the interiorization of the universe within the self, where an individual’s taste for life can be lost or restored, his or her identity shaken and corrupted. The mouth is one of the most invested zones of the body, not only because of its notable position on the face but also because it is the seat of speech and the primary entryway to the individual’s interior. All that one breathes or eats penetrates inside for better or for worse. The mouth is the threshold of the invisible but essential privacy of the innermost self. Commenting on disgust, Darwin recounts a personal anecdote in which the mouth and food play an essential role:

In Tierra del Fuego a native touched with his finger some cold preserved meat which I was eating at our bivouac, and plainly showed utter disgust at its softness; whilst I felt utter disgust at my food being touched by a naked savage, though his hands did not appear to be dirty. A smear of soup on a man’s beard looks disgusting, though there is of course nothing disgusting in the soup itself. (Darwin 1998: 255)

Darwin, from the outset, situates disgust within the alimentary sphere: “It primarily arises in connection with the act of eating or tasting” (Darwin 1998: 256).

Individuals who have unintentionally eaten a prohibited food or one that they consider inedible become nauseated, whether they perceive it themselves or are informed about it later. In a company restaurant, a woman was seized by uncontrollable vomiting upon discovering an insect in the vegetables she had just eaten. The idea of having ingested an insect was unbearable to her, even though in other societies insects are considered a dish of the finest quality. Things are disgusting not so much for their taste as for the pernicious connotations they carry. Insects are a good source of calories and undoubtedly have an incomparable flavor, but they are culturally inedible. The charge of disgust that they carry is related to their symbolic status. The same woman having discovered a piece of paper in her food may have been bothered by the restaurant’s lack of hygiene, but she would not have experienced nausea, even though, unlike the insect, the paper has zero nutritional value. Yet the

book of *Leviticus* recommends the consumption of insects: “All flying insects that walk on all fours are to be regarded as unclean by you. There are, however, some flying insects that walk on all fours that you may eat: those that have jointed legs for hopping on the ground. Of these you may eat any kind of locust, katydid, cricket, or grasshopper” (*Leviticus* 11:20–23). Even the orthodox today defy God’s word by not consuming them. It is true, however, that *Deuteronomy* repeals this exception and finally forbids all insects. The designation of edibility is not imposed like a biological law, a sort of natural necessity that humans approve with good will and a series of culinary preparations. The rules of edibility are cultural. They are not only based on caloric provision, nor on the painstaking search for the best taste. As Claude Fischler writes, “All that is biologically edible is not culturally edible” (1993: 31).

As omnivores, humans can choose what to eat from a multitude of plants and animals that are available in their environment. The incredible diversity of dietary customs from one society to the next is not only due to the varying ecologies of different regions of the world, but also to the variety of cultural choices, to the values and tastes associated with possible food sources (Fischler 1993: 62). People survive through climatic changes, migrations, and seasonal rhythms because they are surrounded by a profusion of food sources that are sufficient to keep them alive and satisfy their quest for appreciated flavors. If necessary, humans even eat the corpses of other humans. Cannibalism is an institution in some societies for whom the body, which is ritually prepared to be eaten, serves as the tomb of the deceased, or who devour their enemies to incorporate their warrior qualities. “Human beings will swallow almost anything that does not swallow them first” (Farb and Amelagos 1985: 165).

The determination of legitimate and pleasant tastes in any human group simultaneously corresponds to the establishment of dietary norms. What is considered “good” or “disgusting” is not based on a nature but on a social and cultural construction and the way each individual adapts to these. Distastes, like tastes, are the product of a socialization process. It is not so much a fear of toxins that regulates alimentary preferences and abjections as it is the meaning individuals, in relation to their society, attribute to them. The sharing of meals is aesthetic and moral, before being dietary. Certain substances are rejected outright regardless of their actual taste, which is never experienced by the individual who disapproves of them in principle. Their representation determines how they are received. Their organic composition is of no interest.

Edibility is not a biological notion but a symbolic one. If the food is not good to think, it is not good to eat. Lovers of snails do not eat slugs. Not because of their taste, which is unknown to them, but because of the idea they have of them, which transforms them into disgusting creatures. People who enjoy eating rabbit would be nauseated at the idea of having a leg of cat on their plate. In 1808, Grimod described with delectation how to serve veal or beef eyes, dishes that were still appreciated in his time but which,

today, would traumatize the most unconditional meat lover (1983: 15). The same Grimod goes on to explain that the feces of woodcocks “are preciously gathered on toast moistened with a good lemon juice, but eaten with respect by ardent admirers” (1997: 98). The cuisine of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries included little beef, but the wealthy regularly consumed peacock, swan, heron, crane, blackbird, lark, cormorant, dormouse, fox and so on.

People in Western societies are loath to eat insects but they adore eating shrimp, oysters, mussels, or clams, which have a similar texture and, moreover, are often eaten raw. But these are marine elements, *fruits de mer* (“fruits of the sea”), as the French language elegantly describes them, sublimating their status. Some human groups eat foods that are in an advanced state of putrefaction, while others have developed a cuisine based on raw foods. The Chinese and Vietnamese, as we have seen, eat dog meat. Fox was long appreciated in Russia as a dish of quality. The Mexicans prepare fricassees of maggots. Insects are a dish of choice in many societies.

Milk is not unanimously perceived as a beverage to be consumed by humans. In the 1960s, American assistance agencies sent powdered milk to regions around the world that were hit by famine. In Guatemala and Colombia, it was used as laundry detergent. Elsewhere, it was often thrown out. Farb and Amelagos, who report these facts, explain that for some cultures it is inconceivable to deprive animals that are still suckling, and milk, if it is not nurturing and maternal, is not part of the diet (1985: 187). Few foods could satisfy, without repulsing this group or that, all of the world’s peoples united around an immense meal. What is repugnant for one group is a delicacy for the other. “If we consciously overcame our aversion to the point of eating insects, such an effort could lead us to treat foods as we treat medications, as part of our personal hygiene like brushing our teeth or defecating” (Douglas 1979: 165). Eating would then no longer be about pleasure but about the pure necessity of eating to live.

The sentiment of disgust is a sensory limit that contributes to the development of individual and collective identity, a boundary that sets the self apart from surrounding alterity. The other is cast as impure through the establishment of fundamental taboos that are justified by the horror their transgression provokes. Any disrespect for limits, boundaries, and rules creates a breach through which impurity can spread and contaminate one’s sense of identity.

## The Body as a Reflection of/on Disgust

As we have seen, disgust is directly associated with the alimentary sphere. William Miller suspects that the root of this interest lies in the etymology of the word itself in English, French, and many other European languages. On the other hand, Miller wonders whether the German *Ekel*, which has no direct relation to taste, is not at the origin of the Freudian association of disgust with the anal and genital region instead of orality (1997: 1).

Unconsciously, language thus draws attention to types of disgust associated with different parts of the body. Disgust obviously solicits taste, but also touch, smell, hearing, sight, and, beyond these, an individual's moral sense. In his observations on the "savages" of Tierra del Fuego, Darwin focused on the preeminence of food in the emergence of the sensation of disgust. However, other sensory perceptions also come into play. Darwin recounts his disgust in seeing a "savage" put his hand on his food. The physical contact was all the more repugnant to him because the man was naked. The moral dimension added to his repulsion.

Meanwhile, the "savage" was himself disgusted, according to Darwin, by the temperature and softness of the meat, two rather tactile characteristics. Impurity not only alters gustation but is also spread by the contact of a hand perceived as polluting, even though Darwin notes that it was not dirty (Darwin 1998: 255). Darwin's other reference is to the smear of soup on a man's beard. Neither the soup nor the beard is in itself disgusting. It is their incongruous encounter that causes discomfort, because, in principle, the one should not be in contact with the other. As Mary Douglas would say, something is symbolically out of place. But the oral sphere is less affected than the visual one in this case. The disgust is caused by seeing the traces of soup in a place they do not belong. Darwin's anecdote, described by him, due to an effect of language, as implicating "the act of eating or tasting" (Darwin 1998: 256) refers as much to other sensory domains as well.

The limits of the human body, insofar as they are a reflection on and negotiation with the world, are sites where the inside is confronted with the threats of the outside, with the risk of intrusions. They are defended by moral rules. Disgust is a symbolic defense. The body's orifices are vulnerable because of their interface. Excrement, urine, saliva, vomit, blood, milk, sperm, pus, and so on spread beyond the cutaneous boundaries, extending outside all the while conserving the properties related to their place of origin. Likewise, bodily waste, like fingernails, skin, hair, etc. are still part of the substance of the person from whom they are shed. And sorcery knows what use to make of these to in turn strike the person who has been negligent in this respect.

The body is not only a site of material meaning but is also the primary instrument for apprehending the world (Le Breton 1990). The body is a symbol of society, and "the powers and dangers credited to social structure [are] reproduced in small on the human body" (2002: 142), writes Mary Douglas. "Any structure of ideas is vulnerable at its margins. We should expect the orifices of the body to symbolize its special vulnerable points [...] The mistake is to treat bodily margins in isolation from all other margins" (2002: 150). While the body metaphorizes society, its limits manifest its fragility. Thus, depending on the society, menstruation, excrement, and other secretions may be perceived with repugnance, discomfort, or indifference. "To understand bodily pollution we should try to argue back from the known dangers of society to the known selection



of bodily themes and try to recognize what appositeness is there” (2002: 150).

The body primarily manifests a moral of the world. In acting on the physical body, society sustains a discourse on its overall functioning, naming its fears and strengths. While representations of the person engage a representation of the body, in individualist Western societies the body is the bastion of the individual, the site of his or her incarnation and sovereignty (Le Breton 1990). The skin’s limits are the limits of the subject, and anything that transgresses these has consequences for the individuals themselves. The boundaries of the ego in Western societies are organic boundaries. Of course, these extend morally through a sympathetic projection that leads people to distrust anything touched by the body of the other and to defend their corporeal territory beyond the flesh in the substances they shed. Disgust arises when the limits of meaning affecting one’s body or morals are endangered.

The physical proximity of the other is bothersome in itself and quickly becomes a pretext for disgust if the other has bad breath or gives off an unpleasant odor, that is to say, imposes his or her corporeal essence in an excessive manner. Seeing excrement in the hallway or elevator of a building, having to sleep in a hotel in a bed in which the sheets were not changed after the last client, or that are still warm from the previous occupant—these are perceived as repugnant irruptions of an other into one’s more or less personal space. Being touched by someone who is unfamiliar can also be unpleasant, but is more likely to arouse disgust if the person is dirty, full of phlegm, is repellent because of deformities or ugliness, or if the person is considered ignoble because of past or present actions. The other’s moral impurity can spread through physical contact. The same holds true for wearing someone else’s clothes if they have not been washed.

The baker who coughs in his hands or wipes his runny nose before handling the bread renders it inedible. The other remains an Other, outside of the self. His or her symbolic effluvia are unbearable if they threaten to alter one’s ever-unstable and precarious identity. People who are starving become defenseless, the pangs of hunger rendering thoughts of disgust negligible. For those who are not suffering, leftovers of meat on someone’s else plate, a piece of bread that has a bite taken out of it, etc. are only acceptable coming from a close friend or family (unless it is the only choice one has to eat). The imposition of substances or emanations from others’ bodies is a violence, an offense if their bodily products do not remain in their bodies where they belong. They create a contagion of disgust.

## The Attraction of Disgust

That which is disgusting, abject, and dirty can also, however, be a source of strong attraction. The removal of inhibitions can create a desire for transgression and become a pretext for pleasure, as in the case of horror

films and literature that indulge in scenes of disembowelment, dissection, cannibalism, and mutilation (Le Breton 1993). The rupture of repugnance is a form of transgression that produces pleasure, leading one to live the moment of rupture to excess. Referring to the deliberate quest for obscenity in sexual relations, Georges Bataille describes it as an extra loss of control, a broadening of the possibilities of transgression to enhance pleasure:

This repugnant sexuality is really nothing but a paradoxical way of giving greater point to an activity which in essence must lead to loss of control; that leaving out everybody whose social degradation causes it, the attraction of obscenity for those who are perturbed by it as an outside factor has nothing to do necessarily with their low personal qualities: how many indisputably high-minded and disinterested men and women have only looked on it as a way of losing control almost completely? (Bataille 1986: 246)

In Christian history, mortification finds in various deliberately sought-out horrors a privileged path to communion with God. In freeing themselves from their repulsions and transforming them into actions of charity, believers rose above the common lot in a testament to their faith. Hagiographies abound in these stories of men and women who were fond of indulging their aversions. Catherine of Siena, reproaching herself for feeling repulsed by the wounds of the sick she was caring for with devotion, forced herself to drink a bowl of pus. Ignatius of Loyola and his companions were traveling across Italy. They arrived at a hospital in Vicenza, where a patient covered in scabs from a contagious disease asked them to salve a sore spot on his back. One of them put his hand on it,

and recoiled, being naturally repulsed by his infections. Nonetheless, he gathered on his fingers bits of the putrefaction, which he put in his mouth at the price of making a hero of himself. François-Xavier went even further by putting his mouth on an incurable patient's wound, which was festering with worms, and licking up the abundant putrefaction with his tongue. (Camporesi 1995: 169)

Camporesi also recounts the feats of Pierre Claver, who devoted himself in body and soul for over forty years to his flocks in Africa. The apostle of the Ethiopians, as he came to be known,

travelled in this infernal world of diseased bad breath, sores and putrefying fistulas. This daily contact consisted in a continuous, disgusting exercise in treating the foul-smelling sick, putting his mouth to the most worm-eaten sores and sucking out the disgusting festering matter, and cleaning the putrefaction from them with his tongue, and at the same time eating with them from the same plate, squeezing them to his chest, caressing them and kissing them. (1994: 153)

Disgust cedes to charity. Overcoming nausea is a test of faith for those who do so in the name of love for the Other.

The sentiment of disgust protects one from others, from the margins, from that which disturbs the symbolic order and threatens, as a repercussion, to destroy its coherence. Born of hybridity, the disruption of symbolic limits gives rise to the incestuous, the man who beats or sexually abuses a child, the mother who kills her child, the criminal, the rapist, the torturer, and so on, all of which deviate from a humanity that is regulated and codified by principles of reciprocity and responsibility. These transgressors operate on several levels, being both inscribed within the society while surreptitiously violating its founding principles, creating for themselves a double image.

Being both outside (through their actions) and inside (as human beings), living beyond the law all the while remaining part of the community, they seriously challenge the boundaries of meaning. They have transgressed the rules that make the social bond possible and are from that point on contagious. Duplicity, hypocrisy, disloyalty, and pretense give rise to a desire to add to their impurity by spitting on them, insulting them. The sentiment of disgust sometimes applies to the self as well, when regretting something said or done in the past, a moment of drunkenness, and so on.

For this reason we ascribe to disgust an irreplaceable and legitimate ethical-cognitive function that cannot be exercised by contempt alone [...] It is certainly true that disgust does not attain normative certainty, as does contempt. Rather, it manifests an intimate intermingling with extra-ethical emotions of taste. In general it can only serve as a signpost towards a subsequent ethical judgment, and cannot be its immediate determining factor. (Kolnai 2004: 83)

Moral disgust is in effect a visceral reaction, a lack of perspective, very close to nausea.

# Overture

*And then I returned to the hawthorns, and stood before them as one stands before those masterpieces which, one imagines, one will be better able to “take in” when one has looked away for a moment at something else; but in vain did I make a screen with my hands, the better to concentrate upon the flowers, the feeling they aroused in me remained obscure and vague, struggling and failing to free itself, to float across and become one with them.*

MARCEL PROUST, *REMEMBRANCE OF THINGS PAST*, VOLUME I: SWANN'S WAY

The world is made of the fabric of our senses, but it is given through meanings that modulate our perceptions. The task of understanding is infinite. As anthropologists, we can no more claim to exhaust our subject than the painter or the musician can. We graze its surface by raising questions; that is our ambition. A primary necessity of the journey is the joy of having undertaken it but at the same time the melancholy of having to turn the page and deliver the manuscript to the editor and the book to the readers. It is the jubilation of having thus roamed, read, questioned, encountered, traveled, and lived, in the end, a few years immersed in this preoccupation, this jubilation of the senses. We move mountains only to discover, after the fact, they are still in place and that our efforts were in vain, that it was a work in progress, ephemeral.

But what would life be without this taste of inutility, which nonetheless makes sense and fills our relation to others and the world with wonder? The quest is valuable in itself, for the self-reflection it entails. Like Proust, our senses aroused, we come close to the hawthorn bush. We come even closer. We want to wrap our arms around the world so it stops eluding us, but it slips away again.

But it was in vain that I lingered beside the hawthorns—inhaling, trying to fix in my mind (which did not know what to do with it), losing and recapturing their invisible and unchanging odour, absorbing myself in the rhythm which disposed their flowers here and there with the lightheartedness of youth and at intervals as unexpected as certain intervals in music—they went on offering me the same charm in inexhaustible profusion, but without letting me delve any more deeply, like those melodies which one can play a hundred times in succession without coming any nearer to their secret. (Proust 1982a: 151)



# NOTES

## Preface

- 1 The late Umberto Eco had a phrase for this reading and writing on the fly (on the plane, in a train, at a café): “writing in the interstices” See Lévy (2010: 16–18, 56, 57) regarding Le Breton’s writing practice.
- 2 “As we sense we also make sense” and “the senses are interaction” write the authors of *The Senses in Self, Society, and Culture: A Sociology of the Senses* (Vannini et al. 2012), a work deeply informed by the theory and methodology of Symbolic Interactionism. See further Synnott (1993).
- 3 Thus, for example, he treats self-scarification or “cutting” as a way of caring for the self, attempted suicide as “attempted life” (on account of the egosyntonic reaction such an act elicits from others), and extreme sports as a form of *sensation-seeking* in an overly secure, commoditized, sense-less world.
- 4 There are numerous echoes of these other books in the present work, since many of them were being written as Le Breton labored (lovingly) on this one. Since Le Breton’s books are written in tandem, they should also be read in tandem. One pairing I would particularly recommend is *L’adieu au corps* with *Marcher: éloges des chemins et de la lenteur*, which deal with the technologization of the body and reappropriation of the body and senses through walking, respectively.
- 5 Le Breton’s sensual linguistics is akin to Constance Classen’s insightful archeology of the senses in language in “Words of Sense.” See also Levinson and Majid (2011).
- 6 But not just any psychoanalysis. As the reader will find, Le Breton is particularly attracted to the work of Didier Anzieu on the “skin-ego,” or multisensory envelope of the self, and Donald Winnicott’s “transitional object” or *doudou*. For an excellent introduction to Anzieu’s work, from a cultural theory perspective, see Lafrance (2013).

## Introduction

- 1 “The number and order of the senses are fixed by custom and tradition, not by nature. The regular order being subject to occasional change proves its arbitrariness” (Vinge 1975: 7). Some societies distinguish more senses than the canonical five, others fewer; societies also differ in the meaning or value they attach to the different senses, and in the degrees to which they educate or use them (Stoller 1989; Howes 1991; Classen 1993b, 1998). This is what makes

the anthropology of the senses of such great interest. Other senses than the canonical five are also identifiable on physiological grounds. For example, the sense of touch can be broken down into different sensors for pressure, temperature (heat, cold), pain, and kinesthesia and proprioception. The latter two are responsible for detecting bodily position and movement in space, and thus contribute to our sense of self and of individual space.

## Chapter 1

- 1 Boman's thesis is philological at base—that is, grounded in an analysis of the Hebrew and Greek languages. But while mostly concerned with language, it is noteworthy for the way it also delves into what Febvre (1982) would call the “sensory underpinnings of thought” in the Semitic and Hellenistic traditions. In effect, Boman derives the mentalities or “world views” of the two cultures from their contrasting sensory priorities as expressed in their respective languages. This introduces an interesting twist to the linguistic relativity (or Sapir-Whorff) hypothesis, since a specific sensory orientation is posited as coming before (or as informing) language, which in turn influences perception. Of course, the thesis is too simple as applied to Hebrew and Greek thought (the Israelites also had eyes, the Greeks also had ears), but it does shed an intriguing light on the Christian tradition by suggesting that there is an unresolved and dynamic tension between listening and seeing, word and image at the core of that tradition. Boman's thesis regarding Hebrew and Greek language and perception is too simple in the same way that the discussion of “the Western hegemony of vision” in the last part of this chapter is too simple. Both accounts need to be read in light of the discussion of synesthesia in the previous section.

## Chapter 2

- 1 I have already addressed this theme in Le Breton (2004), so I will not elaborate here. See also Paris (1965), Deonna (1965), and, especially, Havelange (1998).
- 2 Oliver Sacks (1996) describes the painful story of a man who had become blind in early childhood and at fifty years of age regained his sight after a cataract operation. Upon waking, he saw a haze and a sudden voice arising from a chaos of forms, that of his surgeon, asking him how he was doing. He only understood then that this disorder of light and shadow was the face of his surgeon. Far from enjoying his entry into the visual world, Virgil found it “confusing” and “scary” to have to get around without using his hands. He had great difficulty grasping the meaning of depth and distance and was continually bumping into things and generally terrified. Five years after his operation, he felt much more handicapped than when he had been blind. Following a period of depression and gradual deterioration of his health, Virgil was happy to revert to blindness.
- 3 Lopez makes the same observation: “Some Eskimo hunters have astounding natural vision; they can point out caribou grazing on a slope three or four miles away” (Lopez 1987: 233).

- 4 I will not address here the important issue of the values attributed to colors or their symbolism. See Pastoureau (2001), Zahan (1990), Turner (1972), and Classen (1993b).
- 5 In his first presentation before The Royal Society of London, Newton divided the rainbow into five distinct colors (red, yellow, green, blue, and violet), but he wanted, in fact, to establish a parallel with musical harmonies. If there are seven notes in the musical scale, he reasoned, there must be seven colors in the rainbow. In the final paper, published in 1728, he added to the list orange and indigo, two colors that are difficult to locate in the rainbow, even for those who study it closely on the basis of Western criteria.

## Chapter 3

- 1 R. Murray Schafer proposed “soundwalks,” auditory explorations of a particular space based on the chance encounter of sounds, and “acoustic itineraries” that orient participants by parsing their sound environment, marking out the sounds emitted over the course of their trajectory (Schafer 1979: 291).
- 2 Italo Calvino (1988) imagines a king condemned to solitary confinement in exercising his power and whose vigilant senses scrutinize every minute sound. With the help of memories, every noise, every movement seems to be a sign. He reconstructs, through the sounds that reach his ear, an existence that his position denies him. Every passing day brings a succession of auditory indices whose order and timbre are familiar to him.
- 3 On Thoreau’s inventory of winter sounds, see *Walden* (1983: 319–327). See also the systematic study undertaken by Brosse (1965).
- 4 The revelation of the child’s deafness is sometimes traumatic for the parents, particularly for the mother, who stops perceiving the child “in anticipation of his or her speech, but, instead, with the painful awareness of the child’s muteness” (Bouvet 1982: 17). The diagnosis plunges the child into an ambiguous situation, while also disorienting the parents, who are inclined to associate deafness with muteness and project this expectation on the child, thus hindering the child’s ability to develop speech.
- 5 Franklin includes in this work a series of poems by different authors on the *cris de Paris* up to the seventeenth century.
- 6 On the anthropology of silence, see Le Breton (1997).
- 7 Emmanuelle Laborit recalls the specialized schools’ resistance to integrating sign language so children could communicate with one another, even outside the classroom (1999: 58).
- 8 “Soon I felt the need of some communication with others and began to make crude signs,” writes Helen Keller. “A shake of the head meant ‘No’ and a nod, ‘Yes,’ a pull meant ‘Come’ and a push ‘Go.’ Was it bread that I wanted? Then I would imitate the acts of cutting the slices and buttering them [...] My mother, moreover, succeeded in making me understand a good deal” (Keller 1996: 4). “I used to call out to my mother all day long so we could talk,” writes Laborit. “She was the only one who truly understood me because of the language we



had invented together ...” (1999: 12).

9 Helen Keller explains:

In reading my teacher’s lips, I was wholly dependent on my fingers: I had to use the sense of touch in catching the vibrations of the throat, the movements of the mouth and the expression of the face; and often this sense was at fault. In such cases I was forced to repeat the words or sentences, sometimes for hours, until I felt the proper ring in my own voice. (1996: 32)

## Chapter 4

- 1 On risk-taking behavior or extreme sports as a quest for physical limits, see *Passions du risqué* (Le Breton 2000) and *Conduites à risque. Des jeux de mort au jeu de vivre* (Le Breton 2002).
- 2 Exceptionally, among individuals deprived of the use of their hands, the feet can be used for touching, feeling, grasping, pushing, breaking, shaping, painting, writing, and so on. The feet are thus dedicated to most of the ordinary functions of the hands even though their osteomorphological structure does not leave them the same margin of maneuver. A good example is Christy Brown (*Down All the Days*, 1970 and *My Left Foot*, 1954), who was born paralyzed and had movement only in his face and left foot, which became his fundamental link with the world. Renaissance literature evokes similar cases. For example, the anatomist Alessandro Benedetti (1450–1512) met “a woman born without arms who was skilled in using her feet instead of hands for spinning and sewing” (cited in O’Rourke Boyle 1998: 150). Ambroise Paré describes a similar case in his work *Des Monstres et prodiges* (1996).
- 3 Studies have shown that when healthcare workers implement a brief routine of tactile stimulation, involving massage, holding and carrying the infants, talking, playing games, and so on, premature babies gain weight, develop more quickly, and are more calm compared to those having not participated in the experiment. For further data, beyond the essential work of Ashley Montagu, see the numerous accounts and debates on this subject in Barnard and Brazelton (1990), Field (2003), and Consoli (2003).
- 4 Sylvie Consoli describes, at the other pole of life, the “senile pruritus” among elderly people who are deprived of affection and contact with others (Consoli 2003: 202). Often at this age, the feeling of being abandoned fuels delusions of skin infections, the feeling of being devoured by parasites, dirtiness, and so on (Consoli 2003: 85).
- 5 Descartes, even though he considered vision to be the “most universal” and the “most noble” of the senses, appeals continually in his *Dioptrics* to the image of the blind person and his stick to explain how light touches the eye: “those who, being born blind, have made use of it all their lives [...] you will find it so perfect and so exact that one might almost say that they see with their hands, or that their stick is the organ of some sixth sense given to them in place of sight” (Descartes 2001: 67).

- 6 Nicolas Vaschide also notes the tactile sensitivity of Marie Heurтин, a young woman deaf and blind from birth: “Sometimes it sufficed to simply touch sister Sainte-Marguerite’s wrist and feel its muscles move to interpret what she was thinking, like a musician who judges a melody, without hearing it, solely by the vibrations of the chords under his fingers” (Vaschide 1909: 208).
- 7 Proust gives an admirable description of the first kiss between Swann and Odette:
- And it was Swann who, before she allowed it, as though in spite of herself, to fall upon his lips, held it back for a moment longer, at a little distance, between his hands. He had wanted to leave time for his mind to catch up with him, to recognize the dream which it had so long cherished and to assist at it’s realization, like a relative invited as a spectator when a prize is given to a child of whom she has been especially fond (255).

On the kiss, see Le Breton (2004).

- 8 This kiss on the mouth is sometimes perceived in other cultures as the height of what is disgusting. Take for example an Indian audience faced with a kissing scene in a Western film:
- The American-style kiss, lips locked, interminable, its appearance on the screen always sets off reactions of great hilarity, and the French kiss, where the lovers mutually ‘devour’ each other’s mouths, as we say here. This also provokes laughter in the theatres, but, in general, it makes spectators uncomfortable, as I have observed many times. Young people became either very quiet or very noisy; they spit on the ground. The older people hold their breath, endure it. Others bury their faces in their laps to avoid looking at it. (Vitold de Golish cited in Dupuis 2007: 177)
- 9 I will not address here the question of proxemics, that is to say, the ritualization of contact with the other, which I have treated in depth elsewhere (see Le Breton 2004).
- 10 These same individuals in another context will try to prevent others from penetrating their intimate space. Other situations involving crowds, where individuals remain isolated, having no connection to those around them apart from the physical proximity, cause a breach of cultural distance. On the subway or bus or at a demonstration or festive gathering, people can find themselves squeezed up against one another. The discomfort is partly dissipated by avoiding eye contact or exchanging glances only briefly. In these moments of promiscuity, the avoidance of eye contact stands in for the prohibition of physical contact that the circumstances erase.
- 11 On all of these points, I refer to the work of Florence Vinit (2001), who has shown that touching during treatment, even if it is an anthropological necessity, should not be praised without considering this ambivalence.

## Chapter 5

- 1 This is a purely cultural feature. Men wore perfume in Europe up until the turn of the eighteenth century. Today, both men and women perfume themselves in many societies.

- 2 History has even known singular characters who perfumed the interior of their bodies. “Clysters were used for voluptuous olfactory perversions: the Cardinal Moncada became famous for administering clysters of fragrant liquids so he could savor, through inhabital channels, the exquisite pleasure of smelling himself perfumed both inside and out” (Camporesi 1995: 89).
- 3 See, for example, Robert Dulau’s olfactory inventory of Pondicherry (1998) or those of Grésillon (the Huchette neighborhood in Paris), Lignon-Darmaillac (Séville), Mainet-Delair (Brest), and Marrou et al. (La Rochelle) in Dulau and Pitte (1998). See also Roubin (1989) on odors in Haute Provence, or, more generally, Porteous (1990).
- 4 In *Adagia*, Erasmus (III, IV: 2) writes: *Suus cuique crepitus bene olet* (each finds that his fart smells good).
- 5 For centuries, people were largely identifiable by the odors related to the practise of their trade. The use of tools or particular materials, their dealings with animals, etc., exposed them throughout the day to specific olfactory emanations.
- 6 With reference to the olfactory imagination of the nineteenth century, Alain Corbin observes how the

model of the rutting animal was an obsession; doctors remained convinced that seduction owed a great deal to the odor of the menses [...] From the viewpoint of the Montpellier school the woman at that point in her cycle was conveying the vitality of nature; she was emitting the products of a strong animality; she was making an appeal for fertilization, dispersing seductive effluvia. (1986: 44)

From this emerged the myth of red-headed women being especially pungent, in a state of permanent sensuality. But while

menstruation increased the young adolescent girl’s seductive power and was a reminder of her creative mission [...] it endowed her with only a discontinuous odor. What gave woman’s smell its ideal quality was male sperm, in the same way that the act of coitus filled the flesh of females of numerous animal species with a specific odor. In every sphere, sexual intercourse was held to complete femininity. (1986: 45)

- 7 This incredible story turns reality into a pure olfactory emanation. For Grenouille, all that exists is the immateriality of odors emitted by things, animals, or people. Their emission is the very essence of their being. Grenouille, when attracted to a woman, has to despoil her body to extract her olfactory essence.
- 8 On the Christian mythology of aromatics, see Albert (1990). Deonna recalls that in antiquity it is not only gods and certain among the deceased who exhale marvelous odors, but also men and women who have the honor of pleasing the gods. The Greek gods supplied their protégés with ambrosia and nectar (Deonna 1939). Also, according to Montaigne, “It is said of some, as of Alexander the Great, that their sweat emitted a sweet odor, owing to some rare and extraordinary constitution of theirs” (1958: 228).
- 9 In the second century, Clement of Alexandria wrote in the *Paedagogus*:  

It is highly requisite for the men who belong to us to give forth the odour not of ointments, but of nobleness and goodness. And let woman breathe the odour of the true royal ointment, that of Christ, not of

unguents and scented powders; and let her always be anointed with the ambrosial chrism of modesty and find delight in the holy unguent, the Spirit. (1884: 233)

- 10 Exceptionally, some saints have been known to give off foul odors, like St. Rita, patron saint of prostitutes and lost causes. The stigmata that she bore on her forehead, hands, and feet gave off a bad odor that she was never able to rid herself of, in spite of all her prayers. St. Lydwine's odors alternated between good and bad in different periods of her life.
- 11 But times change and, just as contemporary mystics are often considered to be suffering from a kind of delirium, as of the turn of the century, the odor of sanctity, as Ellis describes it, was related to an anomaly of bodily secretion: "The perfume exhaled by many holy men and women [...] was doubtless due, as Hammond first pointed out, to abnormal nervous conditions, for it is well known that such conditions affect the odor, and in insanity, for instance, the presence is noted of bodily odors which have sometimes even been considered of diagnostic importance" (Ellis 1905: 62).
- 12 I am providing here but a rough sketch of an inexhaustible subject.
- 13 The interiorization of symbolic violence of the other's depreciative judgment has led some black people to turn to the use of perfumes, accepting without question the idea of their unpleasant bodily odor: "It may be that the perfume is an effort to avoid the odious stigma of being ill-smelling which Negroes know to be one of the beliefs of white people about them" (Dollard 1988: 380).
- 14 People's olfactory sense can even be altered by illness. Cacosmia is a disorder that causes individuals to smell a foul odor emanating from certain foods. Some alcoholics suffer from this and thus refrain from eating due to disgust, at the risk of malnutrition. Anosmia is an inability to smell odors (and therefore also to taste).

## Chapter 6

- 1 Curiously, this old adage is in no way related to the origin of individualized taste but, rather, to a social aspect of taste that required no discussion.
- 2 Children aged between 8 and 12 months and of the same intellectual level who accept bitter flavors are also more socially autonomous (Chiva 1985: 27, 28).
- 3 All of these places were open to the public, to discussions, meetings, or other encounters beyond the private sphere. Food and drink fostered sociability and public deliberations. Habermas has shown their importance in the constitution of public opinion.
- 4 According to Marie Roué this etymology is false. In Montagnais country, the term would in fact mean "the one who braids snowshoes" and would have been used to designate the Indians of the North. This was based on a misunderstanding on the part of Basque whalers who thought the term referred to the Inuit. This false etymology is no less significant, as it indicates a value judgment: "If the Indians did not denigrate the Inuit by calling them 'eaters of raw meat,' Western observers, on the other hand, found the remark

- so pleasant that they repeated it time and again. This imagined opposition between those who ate cooked foods and those who ate raw can be understood as corresponding to another equivalent and implied opposition, that between the civilized and the savage” (Roué 1996: 174).
- 5 In some Algonquian languages, the idea of “bitter” applies not only to food but also to “‘pain and suffering,’ the sensation of ‘burning,’ the ‘sharpness’ of pains and feelings, the ‘heat,’ of the weather, the ‘harshness,’ of the voice, the ‘loudness’ of a color, the ‘sensitiveness’ of the skin, etc” (Chamberlain 1903: 149).
  - 6 The presence of women at men’s tables is not permitted everywhere. Often women are offered a place only insofar as their role as cooks allows them to partake of the meal with the men. Otherwise, they of course prepare food, but they eat alone or with other women so as not to mix with men. Women’s social status determines whether they share meals with men or not.
  - 7 For Grimod, however, a meal of quality did not concern women, and he excluded them from cuisine and the table. They are admitted, rather, at dessert (as dessert?): “because women do not really appreciate what constitutes a *plat de résistance*, they prefer sweets and are themselves sweets to be consumed in many ways.” Or he writes, “During important [gastronomical] occasions, the most stupid goose wins out over the most attractive woman. But after coffee, the fair sex regains all her rights” (Grimod 1997: 34).
  - 8 In Fourier’s utopia, “phalansterians” were both lovers and cooks, combining both pleasures.

## Chapter 7

- 1 A modern form of cannibalistic incorporation is the transplant, which involves assimilating, thanks to another person’s organ, an ability to live better and longer. But there is no manducation of flesh in this case. One finds, however, among transplant patients, the same sentiment of having absorbed the strength and personal qualities of the other. See Le Breton (1993).
- 2 The presence of ogres in Western tales and legends is probably an illustration of this imagination of hunger and the cannibalism that stronger members of society could possibly practice on the weaker.
- 3 See, for example, the theoretical efforts put forward by Jean de Lery or André Thevet to temper the disgrace of cannibalism by explaining that the Tupinamba associate it with vengeance and in no way with the pleasure of eating human flesh. The Eucharistic theme resurfaces among many contemporary scholars, with the same concern for absolving the natives’ customs.
- 4 In these exceptional times, dogs, cats, rodents, and so on are even eaten in Europe. During the Franco-Prussian War of 1870, for example, butchers selling cat, dog, and rodent became commonplace in Paris. The Goncourt brothers write in their journal of a ragpicker who buys for his employer “cats at six francs, rats at one franc, and dog-flesh at one franc fifty, the pound” (1870: 140). Examples of taboos and disgust being transgressed in order to survive are abundant.

- 5 Though this disgust is undoubtedly recent, the Gauls, it seems, sometimes ate them (Ménier 1989: 96).
- 6 It is said that Confucius ate dog. Classical Chinese texts explain that officials ate them, because, like them, they had to show discernment in their relations with people (Orange 1995: 375).



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