Call for articles

Sensorium commune. The senses as the common basis of language

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Presentation[1]:

Our senses form the foundation of our communicational acts. They are the basis of our receiving apparatus, the flesh of our messages, the experiential grounding of our cultures and our societies. Whether regarded as a silent language (E. T. Hall), as archaisms that govern us (F. Nietzsche) or deep predispositions (C. G. Jung), it is our senses that bear the actual messages of our languages, sometimes bypassing the written or spoken word and inventing new means of expression that allow us to renew the ways in which we communicate (J. Habermas).

Recent progress made by researchers in the field of sensory studies (notable examples being the network set up by D. Howes, and issue 86 of the journal *Communications* : 'Langages des sens') shows that our senses, in their capacity as underpinnings for language, can no longer be considered in isolation from one another. The impression of a hierarchy and an organic embodiment of the senses is now increasingly being challenged. We should instead consider them in the light of such fresh notions as experiential or cultural reservoirs, performances, or motivating impressions that function as interfaces or networks through which our sensory apparatuses may interact.

The linguistic turn: Alongside Kantian anthropology, which made the senses and lived experiences a nodal point of language and knowledge, emerged a sensorial linguistics that was in large part inspired by the philosophical works of Herder. Herder was one of the first thinkers to talk of the *sensorium commune* as a means of showing the intertwined nature of our senses, and their inscription within an intricate relationship between flesh, matter and the social

[1] Works cited:
Jurgen Habermas, *The theory of communicative action*, Polity Press, 1987.
Edward T. Hall, *The sillent language*, Anchor, 1973.
Gershon Weiler, *Mauthner's critique of language*, Cambridge University Press, 1971.

world. This idea was taken up by F. Mauthner, who drew an analogy between sensations and the languages of peoples (seen as organs linking the thoughts of human beings). The sensorium commune was seen as being both the organ through which the senses were articulated and the cultural expression of the shared experience of a given social group. This brilliantly intuitive insight was developed in multiple directions by sociolinguistics (M. Buber) and the textual philosophy of the 1960s. It thus became possible to consider the possibility of a generative grammar which creates meaning (Chomsky), or a sensorial grammatology (Derrida).

Sensory experience as a new 'turn': the languages of the senses are blended in the various facets of sensory experience. This is revealed by the work produced in and on the margins of the Chicago school at the end of the nineteenth century. The intercultural mix of multiple ethnic groups and roaming gangs of youths, along with social projects led by the Ethical Culture movement, turned sensorial language into a producer of culture and utopias. The new pedagogical approaches to the body which focused on bodily expression and silent language, or the inscription of the body within nature, opened up new perspectives for culture and communication. The findings of the pragmatists still have a significant bearing on our understanding of alternative means of communicating and producing culture: tagging, graffiti, techno, krumping… These act as a primitive grammar, rhythmically structuring society. The careful study of sensorial messages allows them to be thought of as tools of communication, of information and exchange, and in particular of emotional exchange. The senses are thus a form of media: smell, for example, informs, signifies and embodies non-verbal communication.

The sensorial incorporation of technology: the massive growth of new information and communication technologies is transforming our methods of bricolage and our structuring of sensory data (possibly forming the basis of a process of individuation). Have other linguistic and cultural forms therefore reached their apogee? It is an inescapable fact that the material we handle is changing (electrical current, electromagnetic waves…) and, in return, is changing us. Following the insights that, in their time, L. Febvre and M. McLuhan brought to this area, it is necessary to examine the historical inflexions both of our sensorial languages and of the development of our sensorium commune. Is the latter plural or structural? Is it becoming embodied in the technological objects and apparatus that are transforming the lives of our senses?

Sensory language is complex and subtle. It requires a deep grasp of the universe of sensations that brings colour to the specific expressions of identity found in manifestations of the self. This project aims to address these forms of language through an examination of manifestations of sensory bodies. Looking at the ways in which individuals deal with the world of the senses will thus provide us with a better understanding of how we deal with the social world.

Proposals, including an abstract of 500 words and short CV to be sent **before 15 may 2013** to:

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