

PETER CALDWELL

## sensational **studies**

DAVID HOWES (ED)

*Empire of the Senses: The Sensual Culture Reader*

Berg, Oxford, 2005

ISBN 185973863X

RRP \$68 (pb)

CONSTANCE CLASSEN (ED)

*The Book of Touch*

Berg, Oxford, 2005

ISBN 101845200594

RRP \$84.44 (pb)

These books come from Berg's 'Sensory Formations' series, and demand and deserve the attention of cultural theorists of every stripe: both contain numerous fascinating and thought-provoking articles and extracts, many of which pose powerful and serious challenges to mainstream cultural studies. Each of these books is a welcome addition to the growing body of sensory studies literature. *Empire of the Senses* (afterwards *Empire*) puts the most cogent case I have encountered for a radical 'sensory' opening up and reformation of a wide variety of cultural, sociological, political and historical approaches to understanding the human condition and understanding what we can know about the worlds we live in. *The Book of Touch* (afterwards *Touch*) concentrates on providing multifaceted accounts and analyses of just that one sense, but does this extensively and in depth. Both books spring from a conviction that there has been a revolution in approaches to cultural theorising that has brought sensory, sensual, sensorial issues to the fore. Both editors write as if this 'sensory turn' in cultural studies was both much more widely known and accepted than it is, I fear. They are very different books, however, in a number of important ways, and while they provoke some joint considerations and comparisons, they also merit being considered separately.

It is sadly necessary to raise the question of whether or not there really has been a 'sensual revolution' in cultural studies. David Howes talks of this revolutionary turn having decisively been taken, as if everyone everywhere acknowledges this is the case and that he is on safe ground assuming that the burning question

facing us all in approaching contemporary cultural analysis and theory is how to get away from and beyond the 'it's all a text—learn to read it' approach towards one that will be, in the old Marxian phrase, 'adequate to the real'. Yet almost every introductory course in cultural studies around this country seems still to be textually fixated (in the widest sense, of course, of 'text'), and very few social and cultural theorists at any level seem to be attuned to the cry to which Howes is responding to free cultural studies from its monosensory, ocularcentric, and yet simultaneously blinkered, stance.

Despite such an assumption on Howes' part, which might be thought of as allowing him to see his task of persuading his readers to take up the cause of truly 'coming to their senses' as therefore easier than it actually is, Howes manages to construct a powerful and impressive case for the necessity of taking the sensory, the sensual, the sensorial, more seriously—for giving the feels, and scents, the tastes and the sounds of our lives at least an equal place with the sights, in all our attempts to comprehend and understand our worlds and the worlds of those sensing differently. *Empire* goes a long way to establishing the absolute necessity for a new direction in cultural studies, and moreover, to giving us concrete examples of what going in the 'right' new direction would be like.

Unfortunately—and of course—it cannot do what it most wants done: it cannot make us switch on to our senses fully, make us feel, hear, taste, smell, sense through all our pores and all over our bodies what can be sensed if we displace, transcend, abandon, overcome the

limitations of our eye-mindedness, of our visually tyrannised culture.

Underlying Howes' main discipline-changing, life-changing, mission, are less startling claims, claims perhaps even commonly acknowledged, but here very well explicated, about how our senses themselves are culturally constructed, differing in their operations and results from one time period to another and from one geo-cultural space to another, producing and functioning in a huge variety of different sensoria, while always exhibiting and concealing in their own hierarchical structures, ambient power structures of every kind. On the whole the articles collected in *Empire* are very instructively sensitive to different cultural constructions of sensation and to the historical development of sensation, exploring incisively a huge range of sensory formations in a great variety of contexts.

Not all the contributors to *Empire*, particularly those whose work is taken from previous decades, explicitly argue, or even implicitly suggest, that the cultural studies model has been inordinately prioritising visual sensory experience and vision-derived information, but Howes does succeed in integrating their ideas and contentions into the overarching argument he constructs in support of his view that a pan-sensual input is needed for any adequate general cultural analysis.

*Empire* provides a powerful critique of the whole gamut of semiological approaches to understanding our culture, challenging assumptions still often held that our conscious minds, and indeed our unconscious minds, are

structured like languages. Howes organises his twenty-two substantial articles into five sections, which lead the reader progressively through a developing line of reasoning, from the way culture structures our senses, through historical developments in the sensorium, and a wide variety of 'sensescapes', to heightened awarenesses of the sensory in daily life, and finally to 'disordered' sensories.

*Touch* is organised quite otherwise. With forty-two main articles, introduction, editorial glosses on each of the nine sections of the book, and forty-three additional 'interludes' typically containing three or four arresting extracts, the range of the contents of this anthology is such as both to defy any useful summary or survey in a review of this length, and also to defeat any but the most dedicated from reading the book cover to cover. It will be most valuable as a dipping-into resource: plunge in here, there—skim a bit—pause—before a guaranteed assault by ideas lays you out. As a barrage of information and provocation about touch, practically any selection of the elements that make up this book will rock any but the most complacent mainstream cultural student into rethinking the need to attend more to the experience of the tactile. What it cannot do either, of course, is what it too most wants to do: actually ratchet up the readers' attention to what they are touching, being touched by, inside and out.

Perhaps it is surprising in itself that the least surprising and revelatory parts of *Touch* are the two quite large 'gender' sections—the thrust of the articles in the 'male and female touch' components conforms to pretty orthodox views

about masculinity and femininity in prevalent cultural theory. It is not that the articles are not good ones in themselves—several are quite engrossing—but they do not have that edge for foregrounding the deleterious effects on our understanding of culture that result from neglecting the sensuous qualities of tactile experience, which some other sections have—such as the ones on control and technology.

The most challenging section for cultural studies is the one entitled 'Uncommon Touch', where some of the extremes of tactile deprivation and deviations are touched on. While a number of them are so short that they merely draw attention to fascinating aspects of the experiences of people deprived of touch sensation or restricted to it alone, the section as a whole leaves the reader vividly aware of the need to explore the roles played by tactility in every variety of human culture in ways seldom if ever done to date. In other sections too, many of the interesting and intriguing articles in *Touch* pull up short—they end dangling before us fascinating ideas and questions—'Oh for more', I muttered over and over; no bad thing, perhaps.

Classen says she decided to omit writings on touch emerging from academic philosophical approaches since in the hands of philosophers 'tactility often becomes desensualized and dematerialized as it is removed from its specific social and personal context'. (4) While one might agree wholeheartedly with this contention (and indeed in regard to any and all of the senses), it is arguable that philosophers have traditionally not been any more dismissive

or neglectful of the 'thisness' of touch experience than their colleagues in all of the other social and humanistic disciplines. Classen seems to regard philosophers as the worst of the whole academic bunch in this regard, and her decision to exclude them here might itself give rise to useful pondering regarding who has been worst among the different varieties of social and cultural theorists in failing to get to grips with the raw feel of touch experience; but she seems inconsistent in saying she will exclude philosophers and then including articles by philosophers such as Penny Deutscher, and articles relying on or appealing to philosophers such as Levinas and Benjamin. Her points about the danger in the prevailing practice of so many academic disciplines of treating the tactile as in opposition to the intellectual, and about the effect this has had of rendering overly sterile the abstracted and detached theorising of thinkers in our academies, are fair enough, and illustrated tellingly here and there in *Touch*; but the parallel and more general argument Howes builds up throughout *Empire* is much more cogent and persuasive.

Classen's introductory remarks and overview are very different from Howes'; they reveal her approach as being a multi/poly/sampling one, rather than the through-thought argument-building approach of *Empire*. Some of her remarks seem at odds with others: for example, she speaks of a 'certain language of touch' with 'what could be called a vocabulary and a grammar'; she does add that 'language seems too formal and linear a model for tactile communication', yet it seems a claim of a different order to go on to state that 'Touch precedes,

informs and overwhelms language'. (13) This last, much more interesting, proposition is not quite substantiated in the articles that follow.

Nevertheless, *Touch*, especially when taken in conjunction with *Empire*, constitutes an important collection of mind-pricking demonstrations of ways in which the domination of modern culture by eye-centric world-views damages our capacity to understand ourselves and our worlds. You put down *Touch* after each and every episode of dipping into its contents, struck by how knowledge of the world acquired through our skins is under-noticed, undervalued. How far knowing-via-the skin can reach in supplying new ways of understanding is brought out with exemplary clarity by the progression from Ruth Finnegan's consideration of the communicative potential of Braille-based symbol systems to David Howes' discussion of the multiple meanings of incisions and scarifications in 'Skinscapes', his contribution to *Touch*. These early articles in *Touch* begin to put a case for the need to go far beyond usual ways of paying attention to the tactile—a case which gets intermittently returned to and even strengthened later in the book, without quite being made to emerge as a coherent argument in the way Howes makes his collection work through his unfailing, consistent editorial guidance.

*Touch* is a much easier book to read than *Empire*, but in the end a touch less satisfying. *Touch* is a valuable and rewarding book; *Empire* is even more. *Empire* is a demanding book, but one that will leave an indelible impression on the open-minded reader. Both books put forward convincing reasons for accepting that the

'examined life', if it is to be worth living, needs to be examined by a good deal more than the intellect. It is not just traditional detached philosophical analysis that is shown to be wanting in this regard. Howes in particular shows in *Empire* how linguistic models of all kinds, along with later semiological models, and their successor cultural studies textual models, are insufficient as well—worse than that, they can all be seen to have distorted and retarded our understanding of ourselves as multisensual beings, and in doing this, they have gone on implicitly promoting a type of understanding of culture that has, in being intractably video-centric, remained also first-world privileging, unable to escape the limits of linking civilisation with the ocular, despite the best intentions of practitioners. When editorialising, Howes and Classen give glimpses of sensory epistemologies and sensory ontologies across diverse cultures and within our own culture that currently receive scant attention in any of the human studies disciplines.

Howes does a spectacularly successful editorial job: in fact, not only is his Introduction to *Empire* the most pellucid summary of his case for 'sensual studies' and of the general line of reasoning he sees threading through his selection of articles, but at the head of each section he gives a succinct account of what is coming in such a way as to provide a progressing and cohesive argument for his main position on the centrality of the senses for cultural studies. More than this, in his précis of each section's articles, Howes often states in such a concise and pithy manner the case he sees his authors making that his précis remains in the

mind more clearly than the fuller versions presented by the contributors themselves. This is no mean feat—most of the articles are very good indeed, and they are extremely varied in kind—yet the series of Howes' summaries adds up to a stronger and more vividly presented case than that found in many of the original articles.

Both books, though pre-eminently *Empire*, are anti-textualising texts; and therein lies their principal paradox. As stressed above, these anthologists fervently want to turn us aside from our obsessive concentration on the interpretation of everything-seen-as-texts, they want to take us by the scruffs of our necks and force us to experience a felt need to open ourselves up to the wealth of experiences available via all of our senses, and to begin to know first-hand all that the full five-sense sensorium yields—and then to begin to understand ourselves, our culture, the cultures of others, using this vastly augmented array of evidence. The cynic might reply, 'Maybe you have a big point, but writing more texts for us to decipher surely can't be the best way to make it'. Yet what more, in a book, could anyone do than Howes, and in her very different way, Classen, do? Many of the articles Howes has assembled in this collection do make me feel bodily the urge to go and do what the book exhorts us to—which entails abandoning mere book-learning and plunging directly into the empire of the senses, perhaps surfacing some time later able to do more and better at communicating in new sensory, sensual, sensorial ways, what the heightened, broadened, enlarged, experience of being a fuller, better 'sensor' will give the capacity for. If the book could get more and more of us to yield to this

impulse it really could bring about a sensory revolution in cultural studies. *Empire* is a very powerfully constructed cultural theorists' 'Life. Be in it' campaign.

In the (small but expanding) empire of sensory studies, if not in the empire of the senses, it has long been clear that Constance Classen occupies the status of a very High Princess, and in both of these volumes she demonstrates why she deserves such a position; and through his riveting contributions in both of these volumes (though especially, of course, in the volume he edits in such a truly distinguished fashion), David Howes makes clear that he too deserves to rank up there alongside Classen. Howes can have few peers in the empire of sensory studies. Long may they both flourish while they can produce editions as compelling as these.

---

PETER CALDWELL is a Senior Lecturer in Social Inquiry at UTS.

---