

**The Five Senses of the City: From the Middle Ages to the Contemporary Period International Conference**

**Veranstalter:** Robert Beck / Ulrike Krampfl / Emmanuelle Retaillaud-Bajac, Université François-Rabelais de Tours

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In the pleasant warmth of an early-summer sun shining into a top-floor room that offered stunning panoramic vistas of the Loire Valley, several dozen researchers gathered on 19 and 20 May 2011 at the Université François-Rabelais in Tours for a highly stimulating conference on „The Five Senses of the City: From the Middle Ages to the Contemporary Period.“ Their senses piqued by the charms of the setting, it was through a multitude of approaches that participants answered the conveners' call to historicise the connection between urban space and the senses, and more specifically to reflect upon the way residents of cities have mobilised and drawn upon their sensorial experiences to give meaning to their environments, to forge identities and to shape communities.<sup>1</sup> Some thirty papers were delivered from a range of disciplinary backgrounds, centring on an eclectic diversity of periods and locations. From this scholarly smorgasbord of sensorial inquiry emerged a set of important questions on the nature of sensory experiences as social and cultural phenomena fraught with issues of power and identity, as well as on the historiographical challenges and possibilities of drawing on bodily experiences to illuminate broader historical processes, in this case the development of the city as a locus of human interaction since medieval times.

The nature of sensory experiences and their role in shaping society have preoccupied scholars since antiquity, but it is only in the last decades that social historians have confronted the problem in a sustained manner. Alain Corbin's innovative studies of nineteenth-century France, focussing on the decreasing threshold of tolerance for urban smells and on the role of church bells in dictating the rhythm of rural life, are widely con-

sidered to have pioneered the field.<sup>2</sup> As such, it was a privilege for conference attendees to listen to his keynote address on the first morning. Drawing on the wealth of his research, ALAIN CORBIN (Paris) reminded listeners that the city constitutes a particularly fertile terrain on which to approach this „sensorial turn.“ Far from forming a still-life of streets and buildings, the city's significance extends far beyond this hard materiality and must be thought of in terms of its smells, its light, the „flows of sensation“ that animate it, and, he insisted, on the perpetual movement and interaction of those who inhabit it. Though his current research has taken him in new directions, Corbin displayed an impressive familiarity with recent scholarship identifying new tendencies in the field, and suggesting avenues for further exploration, in particular the way individuals interiorise the urban spectacle through diverse sensorial habits, emotional geographies, thresholds of tolerance and vigilance, norms, and aesthetic codes.

Following on these exploratory lines, ARLETTE FARGE (Paris), another revered figure in the study of the urban sensorium,<sup>3</sup> chaired the opening panel on „Approaches.“ Here the objective was to examine broad theoretical and methodological problems that underlie the vexing matter of how to problematise sensory experiences that are necessarily fleeting and ephemeral. How, asked OLIVIER BALAY (Lyon), does an „atmosphere,“ something as ubiquitous as it is intangible, become a definable object of study? While sources constantly demonstrate urban dwellers' receptivity to the atmosphere of their living environment, as well as its role in shaping contact and interaction within it, Balay, an ar-

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<sup>1</sup> The conference was organised by Robert Beck, Ulrike Krampfl and Emmanuelle Retaillaud-Bajac. The original call for papers in which these objectives were laid out can be seen at <<http://www.h-net.org/announce/show.cgi?ID=177503>> (15.07.2011).

<sup>2</sup> Alain Corbin, *Le miasme et la jonquille : l'odorat et l'imaginaire social, XVIIIe-XIXe siècles*, Paris 1986; Alain Corbin, *Les cloches de la terre : paysage sonore et culture sensible dans les campagnes au XIXe siècle*, Paris 1994.

<sup>3</sup> Arlette Farge, *Vivre dans la rue à Paris au XVIIIe siècle*, Paris 1979; Arlette Farge, *Effusion et tourment, le récit des corps. Histoire du peuple au XVIIIe siècle*, Paris 2007.

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chitect by training, noted that historians have been slow to conceptualise this „sensitive materiality.“ Doing so, he argued, requires a systematic and quantitative assessment of the city’s spaces and volumes, and a measuring of the flow of light, sound and smell, combined with an assessment of how these were received by residents. Recordings contrasting the contemporary soundscape of Lyon streets dating from the eighteenth century with those built in the nineteenth offered telling examples of the specific types of atmospheres produced by distinct material spaces. For her part, ANNE BARGÈS (Tours) posed the more reflexive question of how the scholar’s own sensorial experiences and physical immersion in the urban milieu intervene in the research process. Rejecting the artificiality of a supposed distance to be maintained between observer and subject, the anthropologist instead drew on her experiences working in two very different urban centres – Tours and Bamako – to urge listeners to consider their own relationship with the environments they study, remaining attuned to how it conditions the questions they pose and the answers they derive.

The next two talks then delved into distinct spatial and sensorial case studies. In an erudite presentation on the architecture of French medieval cathedrals, art historian NICOLAS REVEYRON (Lyon) examined the privileged relationship between light and places of worship in the city. Light is not merely seen, he argued, it is felt and breathed, filtered and reflected by the ornate stones of the cathedral, finding itself at the heart of the spiritual experiences of faithful and passers-by alike. Ways of hearing are also socially and culturally bounded, as DANIEL MORAT (Berlin) then pointed out in reference to the „dynamic acoustic spaces“ that were early twentieth-century German cities. Focussing on anti-noise campaigns, Morat astutely connected Georg Simmel’s proposition of growing nervous intensity to Walter Benjamin’s idea of „innervation,“ showing how modernity ushered in a distinct urban soundscape, provoking urban dwellers’ fear of society’s weakening nerves, particularly among the bourgeoisie. By midday, as participants headed for sensorial pleasures of the buffet, the table was set

for two days of nourishing debates.

This interplay between sensory stimuli as objectified realities – to be shaped and controlled, eliminated or celebrated – and as subjective experiences – that forge identities, communities and conflict – ran through the entire proceedings. Together, the papers demonstrated the contested role of the senses in shaping ideas and ideals about urban space. At the heart of such tensions stood efforts to control and regulate sensory pulses in various urban settings. While Corbin and others have shown that this tendency intensified in the nineteenth century, through attempts to shape and regulate the city, to bring it in line with modern principles of rationality, sanitation, circulation and profit, several speakers traced these tendencies to much earlier times. As far back as the thirteenth century, JUDICAËL PETROWITSE (Paris) showed, the cramped and colourful medieval market came under the moral fire of religious authorities, while DOLLY JØRGENSEN (Umeå) adopted an environmental history approach to demonstrate that medieval urban dwellers also felt repulsed by smells considered to be unpleasant. By the early modern period, Parisian gardeners responded to upper-class sensibilities by creating urban sensory oases (CLÉMENT GURVIL, Paris), while Old Reich municipal authorities worked to regulate the auditory clamour of bustling towns (PHILIP HAHN, Frankfurt). For all of their apparent cacophony, the soundscape of the Italian Renaissance cities were also highly politically and socially structured, noted FLORENCE ALAZARD (Tours).

If these tendencies predated modernity’s regulatory impulse, so too did the modernising body resist attempts to codify and standardise sensorial norms. This was true as much in late seventeenth-century America, where as PAUL MUSSELWHITE (Williamsburg) discussed, colonial realities conflicted with the norms imposed by metropolitan elites, as in turn-of-the-twentieth-century cities on both sides of the Atlantic, where rapid expansion brought urban dwellers into unprecedented haptic contact, challenging bourgeois ideals of the individualised body (NICOLAS KENNY, Vancouver), and of the ritualised city square (VANESA RODRÍGUEZ-

GALINDO, Madrid).

While sensory experiences happen first on an individual level, several papers showed how their significance lies in the shared meanings they acquired through contact among occupants of urban spaces. Some speakers explained how space is deliberately imagined and constructed with the senses in mind, as in DANIEL SIRET'S (Nantes) discussion of evolving conceptions of sunlight in architecture, or STÉPHANIE GUILMEAU-SHALA'S (Paris) look at the importance attached to perception in Louis Bonnier's writings on urban design. Other participants focused instead on how spatial significance is itself borne out of striking sensory encounters, such as in ERIC FOURNIER'S (Paris) work on the sights and sounds of the 1871 Commune, in ANNE-EMMANUELLE DEMARTINI'S (Paris) analysis of the sensorial impulses of the spectacle of public executions, or in MYLÈNE PARDOEN'S (Lyon) account of how military music shaped the rhythms of daily life for seventeenth-century urban dwellers.

Scholars have long taken note of western sensorial hierarchies through which sight and sound have been deemed the most rational and masculine forms of perception, casting smell, touch and taste as feminine, animalistic and perfidious. While sight and sound did take a prominent billing over the two days, though often as part of a broader sensorial whole, several papers delved specifically into what VIKTORIA VON HOFFMAN (Liège) called the „lower senses“ in a nuanced examination of taste and touch in Casanova's lascivious memoirs. ALLAN KISSANE (Nottingham) concentrated specifically on touch in analysing contested claims of church sanctuary in medieval Lincoln. Smell featured prominently in talks by LUCILE GRÉSILLON (Caen/Alençon) on the contentious emanations of Kebab restaurants in the contemporary Parisian neighbourhood of la Huchette, and by MARIA PIROGOVSKAYA (St. Petersburg) on the changing olfactory memories associated with chlorine and cleanliness in Soviet Russia.

Scholarship on the senses has also noted the extent to which these bodily automatisms intervene in the construction of social identities, an issue also discussed in Tours, though

to a lesser degree than what one might have expected, and with practically no discussion of how physical disabilities might modify the sensorial experience of the city. Gender roles and identities featured prominently in two papers on archetypes of Parisian women. ANNE MONJARET (Paris) and MICHELA NICOLAI (Montreal) showed how all five senses were instrumental in defining the norms of working-class femininity that were inculcated in the young women of the Belle Époque known as „midinettes.“ For her part, EMMA-NUELLE RETAILLAUD-BAJAC (Tours) examined masculine travel writings to deconstruct representations of Paris itself as feminine, a tourist destination of gastronomic delight and sensuous discovery. One paper, by MATHILDE ROSSIGNEUX-MÉHEUST (Paris), concentrated specifically on age, examining the desensitising of old-age hospices in nineteenth-century Paris. Questions of how sensory experiences shaped racial and ethnic otherness were raised primarily by SOPHIE CHEVALIER'S (Besançon) study of the spatialisation of apartheid in Durban, by NICOLAS PITLOS (Paris) who examined the orientalist discourse of French travel writers visiting nineteenth-century Constantinople, and by ANNE BROGINI (Nice) whose colourful depiction of the port of Malta in the modern period pointed to the sensorial surveillance to which were subjected the city's residents and visitors, particularly its religious minorities.

A high point of the conference came at the end of the first day, when JEAN-MARIE MOINE (Tours) entertained the participants with an animated barrel organ performance of several old French songs that vividly and humorously evoked the sensorial intensity of a crowded and bustling nineteenth-century Paris. The laughter and enthusiasm generated by the music reflected the richness of the exchanges that marked the entire symposium. Covering a wide range of periods and places, the event offered a dynamic meeting of approaches, methods and disciplines, going beyond history to include architecture, anthropology, geography, and musicology. This intellectual diversity, noted Emmanuelle Retailaud-Bajac in her concluding remarks, was reflected in the truly international character of the meeting, and reinforced by the auditory delight of

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hearing discussions flow remarkably smoothly from French to English and back. The array of themes testified to the sustained relevance of the topic and the breadth of interpretive possibilities it offers, the extent of which will undoubtedly be confirmed in the planned publication of the proceedings.

### **Conference overview:**

#### *General Introduction*

Robert Beck, Ulrike Krampfl, Emmanuelle Retaillaud-Bajac (Université de Tours)

#### *Introduction*

Alain Corbin

#### *Approaches*

Chair: Arlette Farge

Olivier Balaÿ (ENSA Lyon/CRESSON): L'ambiance comme objet historique ?

Anne Bargès (Université de Tours,): L'incorporation sensorielle du terrain par l'ethnologue

Chair: Philippe Chassaing (Université de Tours)

Nicolas Reveyron (Université de Lyon 2/IUF): Les lumières de la ville médiévale. Essai sur la perception de la lumière architecturale dans le filtre de la ville

Daniel Morat (Freie Universität Berlin, Allemagne): Urban Soundscapes and Acoustic Intervention around 1900

#### *Workshops A*

##### *Sens Control*

Chair: Nicolas Reveyron (Université de Lyon 2/IUF)

Dolly Jørgensen (Umeå University, Suède): The Medieval Sense of Smell, Stench and Sanitation

Philip Hahn (Universität Frankfurt am Main, Allemagne): Sound Control: Policing Noise and Music in German Towns, ca. 1450-1800

Anne-Emmanuelle Demartini (Université de Paris 7): L'expérience sensorielle de l'échafaud dans la ville du XIXe siècle

##### *Urban Social Identities*

Chair: Bruno Judic (Université de Tours)

Sophie Chevalier (Université de Franche-Comté/IAC-EHESS): La construction des altérités sensorielles à Durban

Lucile Grésillon (Université de Caen/IUT d'Alençon): Le Paris qui sent. Les odeurs du quartier de la Huchette : entre arômes et remugles

Mathilde Rossignaux-Meheust (Université de Paris 1): Tranquilliser les vieux, aseptiser l'hospice. La désensibilisation de l'espace sensoriel des vieillards en institution à Paris au XIXe siècle

#### *Workshops B*

##### *Senses and Urban Development*

Chair: Denis Martouzet (Université de Tours)

Paul Musselwhite (The College of William and Mary, Williamsburg, Virginia, USA): 'Like a Wild Desert': Building a Contested Urban Sensescape in the Atlantic World

Stéphanie Guilmeau-Shala (INHA, Paris): Rendre la rue au citadin : Louis Bonnier et le(s) sens de la ville (1900)

Daniel Siret (ENSA Nantes): Les sensations du soleil dans les théories architecturales et urbaines : de l'hygiénisme à la ville durable

##### *Sensorial Identities of the City*

Chair: Bernard Heyberger (Université de Tours)

Éric Fournier (Paris): Le bombardement et l'incendie, la vue et l'ouïe : les perceptions sensorielles des Parisiens durant la 'semaine sanglante' de 1871

Nicolas Pitsos (INALCO, Paris): De Paris à Istanbul : représentations d'un ailleurs sensoriel sur les rives du Bosphore, au temps de la Question d'Orient

Vanessa Rodríguez-Galindo (UNED, Madrid, Espagne): Visuality and Practices of Looking in Nineteenth-Century Madrid. Representations of the Old and Modern City in the Illustrated Press

##### *The City as a Place of Sensorial Experience*

Chair: François-Olivier Touati (Université de Tours)

Judicaël Petrowiste (Université de Paris 7): Au carrefour des sens. Éléments pour une histoire

sensible du marché urbain médiéval (XIIIe-XVe siècles)

Viktoria von Hoffmann (Université de Liège - FNRS): Le goût et le toucher de la ville. La perception sensible de la ville par les sensorialités basses (XVIIIe siècle)

*Administrating the Senses*

Chair: Pascal Briost (Université de Tours)

Alan Kissane (University of Nottingham, UK): Sanctuary and Touch in Medieval Lincoln

Clément Gurvil (Paris): Les faiseurs de sens. Des jardiniers organisateurs des aspirations sensorielles des Parisiens au XVIe siècle

Anne Brogini (Université de Nice): Voir, entendre, être vu, écouter. Une gestion politique et religieuse des sens dans le Grand Port de Malte à l'époque moderne

*Urban Social Identities*

Chair: Daniel Siret (ENSA Nantes)

Nicolas Kenny (Simon Fraser University, Vancouver, Canada): Changing Cities, Moving Bodies: Corporeal Experiences of Industrial Modernity

Anne Monjaret (CNRS) / Michela Niccolai (Université de Montréal, Canada): Le bon sens de la Parisienne : apprendre à être femme quand on est ouvrière (entre la fin-de-siècle et la Belle Époque)

Maria Pirogovskaya (European University at St. Petersburg, Russie): Chlorine and Musk in Russian Urban Reality: Notes on Olfactory Petroika

*Sensorial Identities of the City*

Chair: Alessandro di Profio (Université de Tours)

Emmanuelle Retaillaud-Bajac (Université de Tours): Le mythe de 'la Parisienne' au XIXe siècle : Paris, ville des plaisirs, capitale des sens

Mylène Pardoën (Lyon): Et la Diane retentit !

Florence Alazard (Université de Tours): 'Ogni luoco ribombava' : la ville italienne de la Renaissance, un écrin et un instrument sonore

Conclusions

Tagungsbericht *The Five Senses of the City: From the Middle Ages to the Contemporary Period International Conference*. 19.05.2011-20.05.2011, Tours, in: H-Soz-u-Kult 26.07.2011.