

*A conference was held in Prague, Czech Republic, in November 2002 that was entitled “Issues Confronting the Post-European World” and that was dedicated to Jan Patočka (1907-1977). The Organization of Phenomenological Organizations was founded on that occasion. The following essay is published in celebration of that event.*

## Essay 7

# The Rebellion of the “Lower” Senses: A Phenomenological Aesthetics of Touch, Smell, and Taste

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### Abstract

Phenomenology has relied on the traditional primacy of the visual (and partially auditory) experience in Western metaphysics; phenomenological aesthetics has concentrated on the visual arts, literature, and music. A comprehensive phenomenological analysis of haptic, olfactory, and gustatory experiences and a phenomenological aesthetics of these senses are still lacking. Are there structures common to these non-“theoretical” senses that justify their treatment as “lower” and “merely bodily” senses? And is it not rather antiquated to maintain such hierarchies in our post-metaphysical age? Furthermore, contemporary developments require the enlargement of the traditional object-centred concept of art.

Guided mainly by Husserl, Heidegger, Tellenbach, and Merleau-Ponty and taking into account recent studies of these senses, scattered in diverse natural, social, and human sciences, I attempt to investigate the haptic, olfactory, and gustatory experiences, stressing their aesthetic dimension, which was traditionally ascribed to women, children, exotic “primitives,” and to persons deprived of the “higher” senses, in order to work out—conversely—the implications of admitting the aesthetic relevance of these senses for the aesthetics generally and, finally, to remind us that important ethical concepts

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have their original model in the experience of touch, smell, and taste. My essay is, therefore, to be understood as summarizing a vast research program I have been engaged in at the Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna; it raises questions, mentions methodological and theoretical difficulties, and sketches the main topics of this project, things that are discussed in detail in other essays.<sup>1</sup>

## Introduction

Western metaphysics has traditionally considered the senses of touch, smell, and taste inferior and mere bodily. Also phenomenology has from the beginning held vision to be the paradigm of perception and generally neglected touch, smell, and taste even more.<sup>2</sup> Finally, as a metaphysically rooted discipline, classical aesthetics has denied the artistic potential of these three senses and banished their experiences into the realm of the merely pleasant sensations.<sup>3</sup> With few exceptions such as Jean-Marie Guyau (who around 1880 ascribed an aesthetic potential to all senses), Étienne Souriau (who held for an art of the olfactory), and Wolfgang Welsch (with his idea of an extended aesthetics as *aisthetics–Aisthetik–*, i.e., as a theory of sensuous perception), philosophical aesthetics has remained true to the theory of artistic and non-artistic senses.<sup>4</sup> Recent artistic and technical developments, such as Land Art, Body Art, Eat Art, *Art Brut*, performances and synaesthetic installations, the renewal of the modern dance, and haptic-organic

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<sup>1</sup> Mădălina Diaconu, “Tastend im Denken die Kunst. Entwurf einer taktilen Ästhetik” (in press in *Anuarul New Europe College*, Bucharest, 1999–2000, 42 p.); “Atingerea. Proiectul unei estetici tactile,” in *Studia Phænomenologica*, Bucharest, Vol. I, No. 1–2/2001, 121–135; “Ein Versuch über den Geruch. Überlegungen zur Durchführbarkeit einer phänomenologischen Ästhetik der Olfaktorik,” in *Studia Phænomenologica*, Vol. I, No. 3–4/2001, 101–135; “Phänomenologie als Speläologie oder Prolegomena zu einer Philosophie des Essens,” in *Studia Phænomenologica*, Vol. II, No. 3–4/2002, 65–85; “»Der Mensch ist, was er ißt.« Selbst, Beziehung und Gesellschaft aus einer gastronomischen Perspektive” (in press in *Topos*, Minsk, 18 p.); “Ent-Fernung. Ist eine phänomenologische taktile und olfaktorische Ästhetik möglich?” (conference, typescript); “Geruch–Identität–Gedächtnis. Die Konstitution des Subjektes durch die Olfaktorik” (in press; an Italian translation will also appear in *La società degli individui*, Padova), 14 p.; “TATTOO. Das Phänomen einer Katachrese” (in press in *Mesotes. Zeitschrift für philosophischen Ost-West-Dialog*, Vienna, 2003, 16 p.); “TATTOO. Fenomenul unei catachreze” (conference, typescript, 16 p.); “Controversies on/in the Aesthetics of the Perfume” (conference, typescript, 12 p.).

<sup>2</sup> The main exceptions from this rule of “academic silence” about these senses are the references to touch in French phenomenology (Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phénoménologie de la perception*, Paris: Gallimard, 1945; *Le Visible et l’Invisible. Suivi de notes de travail*, Paris: Gallimard, 1993; Emmanuel Lévinas, “Phénoménologie de l’Eros,” in *Totalité et infini. Essai sur l’extériorité*, Paris: Kluwer Academic, 286–299; Michel Henry and Jean-Luc Marion in *Colloques Les cinq sens. Le toucher*, Montpellier: Conseil général de l’Hérault, 1992), and Hubert Tellenbach’s phenomenology of the “oral sense” (*Geschmack und Atmosphäre. Medien menschlichen Elementarkontaktes*, mit einem Vorwort von F. J. J. Buytendijk, Salzburg: Otto Müller, 1968; French transl.: *Goût et Atmosphère*, Paris: P.U. F., 1983).

<sup>3</sup> According to Hegel, the only artistically valuable senses are the “theoretical senses” of sight and hearing (*Vorlesungen über die Ästhetik I. Werke*, Bd. 13. Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 1970, 61).

<sup>4</sup> Jean-Marie Guyau, *Les problèmes de l’esthétique contemporaine*, Paris: Alcan, 1884; Étienne Souriau, *La musique des parfums*, lecture held in Paris in May 1951 and published in *Industrie de la Parfumerie*, February 1952; and Wolfgang Welsch, *Ästhetisches Denken*, Stuttgart: Reclam, 1990.

architecture,<sup>5</sup> trends such as aromatherapy and tattoo, research into the psychology and biology of perfumes, experiments around iSmell computer technology, etc.– all these indicate a revival of the so-called bodily senses and, therefore, the necessity of enlarging the subject matter of aesthetics.

What I aim at is: (1) to work out a systematic phenomenological analysis of the haptic, olfactory, and gustatory experience; (2) to stress that the arts based on these senses might be able to counterbalance the increasing tendencies to derealisation (*Entwirklichung*) of our daily life; and (3) to inquire whether concepts like tactfulness, *flair*, *sagacity*, or *sapientia*, whose etymologies stem from touch, smell, and taste, could provide the basis for an ethical understanding.

### **Aspects of the Haptic, Olfactory, and Gustatory Experience**

On the most general level of analysis, we should search for common structures of the experiences in the senses of touch, olfaction, and taste. These senses are essentially discursive, i.e., their representations remain until the end fragmentary and open-ended. The experience proves to have quasi-paradoxical features: On the one hand, representations of haptic qualities, smells, and flavours cannot be produced sheerly voluntarily. (For example, if we want to evoke a perfume, we cannot rely only on our interior remembrance of it, but have to apprehend an actual stimulus, we have to feel it again.) On the other hand, the olfactory and gustatory memories are very persistent and can sometimes last an entire life. The experiencing subject herself seems paradoxical: the patina–designating the traces on the surface of a repeatedly touched object–is both anonymous yet utterly personal insofar as it involves fingerprints, which are unique. A similar paradox underlies one’s own bodily smell.

One is intentional (active) and exposed to the world (passive): we cannot smell something without breathing, feel something without moving our hand along its surface, or taste it without biting or chewing it. But, at the same time, the subject of these sense modalities is far more vulnerable than the seeing and even than the hearing subject. The traditional sovereign ego is dethroned and removed to the periphery of a quasi-autonomous sphere of (un)pleasure. Briefly, the subject is *passible* to experience, in the double sense of the French *passible*, which mediates between mere activity and mere passivity: the subject possesses not only the capacity for touching, feeling, breathing, or swallowing whenever it wants, but is also “*passible*” to suffer intrusions from the outer world, has *das Vermögen* of these senses, but is also *sujet à...*, subject to *Affizierungen*.

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<sup>5</sup>Kenneth Frampton, *Grundlagen der Architektur. Studien zur Kultur des Tektonischen*. München, Stuttgart: Oktagon, 1993 and Juhani Pallasmaa, *Hapticity and Time–Notes on Fragile Architecture* (lecture given initially in the RIBA Architecture Gallery, London, 1999).

The static subject-object opposition (obvious, according to Heidegger, in the German word *Gegenständlichkeit*) is replaced by a reciprocal and dynamic neighbourhood (*Nachbarschaft*). The subject becomes part of its object, which surrounds and gives itself to the subject (*[sich] gibt um*) as an embracing medium; briefly, the world becomes environment (*Um(-)welt*).<sup>6</sup> The modern concept of freedom, understood as a negative autonomy, that is, as an isolating in-dependence of the subject from the world, is replaced here by freedom as a dangerous, yet positive openness to the world. This primordial and an-archic openness of the ego, prior to any concrete experience, testifies to the deep connaturality between me and the surrounding things and, instead of hindering the subject, enriches it. I am no longer free *from* the world, but free *for* an accord (*Einklang* for Tellenbach) with it, the subject *solitaire* becomes *solidaire* with her environment. Subject and object share the same nature and are interdependent.<sup>7</sup> This connaturality of the subject and her object or the subject's embeddedness in a phenomenal field ceases to be a hindrance, but, on the contrary, proves to be a necessary condition for the subject's self-fulfilment.

Not least, the phenomenology of touch, smell, and taste should be a topological theory, i.e., an experiencing thinking (*erforschendes Denken*), that goes through (*er-fährt*, in the Heideggerian meaning of the word) its object, instead of re-presenting it (*vor-stellen*). The principal spatial structures of the experience of these three senses are the map (*Karte*) and consistency/void (*Dichte* or *épaisseur* vs. *Leere*). Compared with the classical phenomenological concept of horizon, the intuitive origins of which in the visual experience certify the priority of the sight in Husserl's theory of perception, the map covers actually the experience of all the senses, from the visual landscape and the "soundscapes" to the "smellscapes," regional cuisines, the tactile relief maps caressed by the blind and lovers, and the body itself as our *carte d'identité*.<sup>8</sup> Following Ute

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<sup>6</sup> I suggest that the main types of non-representational relation, which Heidegger himself drew occasionally in a graphic form, can be successfully applied to the experiences of touch, smell, and taste (see Mădălina Diaconu, *Blickumkehr. Mit Martin Heidegger zu einer relationalen Ästhetik*, Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2000, 39–63, 109–150). Reversibility ("*axolotlische Umkehrung*"), network (chiasm), surroundability (*Um-Relation*), and the fold are also attempts to overcome the subject-object relation, model of which was visual experience. The same relational models underlie the haptic, olfactory, and gustatory experiences and transform aesthetics into a participatory, relational, environmental, and, finally, topological theory.

<sup>7</sup> Already Husserl opened the way to this interpretation when he mentioned the "*Gleichheit*" and the "*besondere Ähnlichkeit*" between the touching subject, and her object (*Zur Phänomenologie der Intersubjektivität II*, Hua XIV, 1973, 518–519). This idea was developed later by Merleau-Ponty (*Le visible et l'invisible*, chap. "L'entrelacs–Le chiasme," 172–204) and Mikel Dufrenne (*L'Œil et l'Oreille*, Paris: Éd. Jean-Michel Place, 1991, chap. "Le tangible," 101–109).

<sup>8</sup> Concrete comparative soundscape studies have been pursued for 25 years, mainly in Canada (the Vancouver Soundscape Study, 1974) and Finland ([www.6villages.tpu.fi](http://www.6villages.tpu.fi)). The notion of "smellscape" was introduced by cultural anthropologists (Constance Classen, David Howes, Anthony Synnott in *Aroma. The Cultural History of Smell*, London and New York: Routledge, 1994, 97–99). Finally, Michel Serres imagined the human body itself as a *corps moiré* and as a unique map of our skin ("la carte sur l'épiderme") that changes in time. Its regions are differently coloured, corresponding to their tactile sensibility. Such a "tattooed" body is the abstract representation of the tactile (*Les cinq sens. Philosophie des corps mêlés, I*, Paris: Bernard Grasset, 1985, chap. "Tatouage," 17–27).

Guzzoni, there is even a *landschaftliches Denken* conceivable, that is, a relational and relative (*jeweilig*) theory of a complex and variable object;<sup>9</sup> thinking becomes walking, Descartes and Gassendi come to a conciliation.

Nevertheless, the concept of map should have both a proper and a metaphorical meaning in a topological theory: Not only is the object of the experience immersed in a phenomenal field, but also the experience shares these spatial structures, being a field of forces, i.e., of directed moods (*Stimmungen*) or vectors. The moods are either centripetal (reliance, nearness, intimacy, openness), as forms of *Einstimmung*, or centrifugal (fear, coldness, alienation, narrowness), as *Verstimmung*.<sup>10</sup>

Already the incompleteness of the haptic, olfactory, and gustatory representations suggests the importance of time in the experience of these senses. The memory of haptic qualities, odors, and flavors is mostly non-verbal and diffuse, imbued with affective impressions and synaesthesias. We recollect odors and flavors spontaneously and involuntarily, as a blissful *kairós*, or only at the end of an often long and painful process of deliberate search.<sup>11</sup> It is well-known that the modern Western philosophy has held memory to be one of the key-factors in the constitution of the personal identity (or rather, following Ricœur, “*ipséité*”).<sup>12</sup> Intentional remembrance connects the actual stimulus to the past moment when we have felt something similar, finding a place for it in the subject’s continuous life-thread. To be a self means to become one, by identifying the present ego with/as the old one, thus by bringing together dispersed biographical episodes into a coherent story. On the contrary, in spontaneous recollection the past itself returns, as if the temporal strata (*Schichten*) of the ego were suddenly levelled and condensed into a story (*Ge-schichte*). A single scene concentrates one’s life essence, time flows no more, but is somehow overcome (*aufgehoben*).

In comparison with the terminology employed for sight and even for hearing, discourse about the haptic, olfactory, and gustatory experiences and their qualities is quite poor and often reaches the boundaries of the language (ineffability). Frequently, qualities of these last senses can be named only by borrowing words and expressions

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<sup>9</sup> Ute Guzzoni, “J’aime les nuages... Landschaftliches Denken,” in: *Wege im Denken. Versuche mit und ohne Heidegger*, Freiburg, München: Karl Alber, 1990, 34 sq. This thinking reflects on its object, “wie sich das Gehen in einer und durch eine Landschaft bewegt, wie es das erfährt, was ihm auf seinem Weg begegnet, wie es das sieht, was sich ihm von seinem jeweiligen Gang und Stand aus in der Nähe oder Ferne zeigt, nämlich als etwas der Landschaft um ihn herum Zugehöriges, einer Landschaft, von der er selbst ein Teil oder Moment ist” (*op. cit.*, 34–35).

<sup>10</sup> See Tellenbach about *Nähe/Weite* vs. *Ferne/Enge* as moods related to the feeling of (non)liberty (*op. cit.*, 35–37), as well as the Heideggerian concept of *Nähe*, as a game of nearness and distance (Emil Kettering – *NÄHE. Das Denken Martin Heideggers*, Pfullingen: Neske, 1987).

<sup>11</sup> Both kinds of recollection were described by Proust in connection with the “aromas” (Marcel Proust, *Du côté de chez Swann. À la recherche du temps perdu*, vol. I, édition présentée et annotée par Antoine Compagnon, avec une préface d’Antoine Compagnon, Paris: Gallimard, 1997 (1988), 8, 49–50, 183; *À l’ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs. À la recherche du temps perdu*, vol. II, édition établie et annotée par Pierre-Louis Rey, Paris: Gallimard, 1993 (1988), 230, 235–236, 409, etc.).

<sup>12</sup> John Locke, *Essay on Human Understanding – Über den menschlichen Verstand*, Bd. I, Hamburg: Meiner, 1962, Book 2, Chap. XVII, §§ 9–10, 420.

from other senses (a “sweet” smell, a “sharp” taste, etc.), by referring to the material source of the sensation or by making comparisons (“it feels/smells/tastes like...”). Moreover, most modern Western languages make no distinction between the transitive and intransitive use of a verb of smelling or tasting (“to smell/taste something,” but also “something smells/tastes”)<sup>13</sup> and therefore between deliberate and non-deliberate acts and processes concerning these senses. Ethnolinguistic studies<sup>14</sup> have, however, pointed out that this scarcity and imprecision are specific to modern Indo-European languages and have warned of extrapolating them to all languages. This is also why asserting the aesthetic value of taste, smell, and touch could seem radical for the heirs of the Western philosophy, while other cultures could find this idea as a *locus communis* of their own tradition.<sup>15</sup> Besides, the inherent metaphorical bias of any discourse on touch, smell, and taste makes it difficult for a phenomenological theory of these senses to keep separate the proper and the metaphorical use of terms, some of which have become so-called “dead metaphors.”<sup>16</sup>

### Tasks of an Aesthetics of the “Lower” Senses

Working out a general phenomenology of the body is the basis for an aesthetics (*Aisthetik*), i.e., for a theory of the finest perception; aesthetics further divides into particular aesthetics of each of the different senses.<sup>17</sup> Wolfgang Welsch has argued that aesthetics should regain its origins in the philosophy of senses, as it was in Baumgarten. However, the controversy between Welsch and Karl Heinz Bohrer concerning the borders of aesthetics makes clear that a broad understanding of aesthetics as *Aisthetik* risks confounding the aesthetic character with the social generally.<sup>18</sup> Therefore, with

<sup>13</sup> See Sigrid Plank and Frans Plank, “Unsägliche Gerüche: Versuche, trotzdem vom Riechen zu sprechen,” in *Das Riechen. Von Nasen, Düften und Gestank*. Hg. Uta Brandes und Claudia Neumann. Kunst- und Ausstellungshalle der Bundesrepublik Deutschland. Schriftenreihe Forum Bd. 5. Göttingen: Steidl, 1995, 59–85, here 69).

<sup>14</sup> *Odeurs du monde: écriture de la nuit*, édité par Diana Rey-Hulman et Michel Boccara, Paris, Montréal: L’Harmattan, Inalco, 1999.

<sup>15</sup> I want to recall here at least the different “ways” (*dô*) of Japanese culture and the close connection between aesthetics and cookery in Chinese (Gang Gong, Paul Ariès, *Le goût*, Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 2000), etc.

<sup>16</sup> E. g. the late work Cézanne’s or Vermeer can be invoked no less than Body Art or the organic architecture as examples for art that awakens tactile representations, patina (as aesthetic value of the tactile art) is produced not only on the surface of the things, but can be found in the old literature, and the atmosphere can be extrapolated to all arts. Not lastly, if we agree that our way to practice *theory* is deeply marked by its visual etymology, one cannot avoid imagining how our way of thinking would look like if we would follow other sensory paradigms.

<sup>17</sup> This theory could be described also as an “analytical” theory, as long as it splits up the natural synaesthesia of our common experience. The division of the aesthetics in aesthetics of the senses is, however, methodological, without contesting the ontological mutual interdependence of their functioning.

<sup>18</sup> Wolfgang Welsch, “Das Ästhetische – eine Schlüsselkategorie unserer Zeit?” and Karl Heinz Bohrer, “Die Grenzen des Ästhetischen”, in: *Die Aktualität des Ästhetischen*, hg. v. Wolfgang Welsch, München: Wilhelm Fink, 1993, 13–47 and 48–64.

Welsch I argue for an extended aesthetics, but at the same time I consider that aesthetics should be defined as the theory of the finest perception or of the highest human creative works, without excluding any sense.

Nevertheless, one cannot ignore the specific difficulties in producing, presenting, and theorizing about works of art and artistic activities based on touch, smell, and taste. For example, the subject's vulnerability, the frequent contamination of these senses with the erotic and synaesthesia, which is often unavoidable in the description of the tactile, odorous, and gustatory properties, have at least an inhibiting effect on the aesthetic apprehension and evaluation. In addition to this, the essential vital and social functions of these three senses and their dependence on the cultural and symbolic system of a society make the border between aesthetic and non-aesthetic phenomena relative and fluid and require an interdisciplinary approach, based on the concrete researches undertaken in a number of cultural sciences such as ethnology, cultural studies, etc. The various contemporary para-aesthetic discourses referring to touch, smell, and taste, often combined with esoteric theories (e.g., Oriental massage, aromatherapy, Ayur-Veda-diet, etc.) deserve special treatment; their increasing popularity recently proves that they have to be taken seriously as legitimate challenges to conventional aesthetic theory, with its limitation to "the higher senses" and "great art."

The possibility of producing, conserving, and "exhibiting" works of art addressed *exclusively* to touch, smell, or taste is to be investigated separately. Hegel already objected to admitting that there are art forms corresponding to touch, smell, and/or taste, because their physical support is ephemeral: a meal is consumed as well as the fragrance we inhale; they leave no traces and, therefore, cannot be repeatedly apprehended by different perceivers (the well-known Kantian condition of aesthetic appreciation).<sup>19</sup>

Working out an aesthetics of touch, smell, and taste might be understood as a special form of "aesthetic correctness," precisely as a feminine and anti-European aesthetics. The reason is the traditional cliché (and partly still existing understatement) that these senses are developed by women, children, "primitives," all of whom are considered in Western metaphysics "inferior" or "incomplete" incarnations of the human essence. The dangerous nearness implied by the physiological experience of these three senses was compensated by banning them into the imaginary, far away from Western civilisation, into half fictive exotic regions; (erotic) touches and furs, precious smells, and condiments were always the privilege of the East and South. Moreover, aesthetics should also include the sensorial deprivations. In the first place, the

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<sup>19</sup> Nevertheless, there are still attempts to create archives for the works addressed to these senses, such as the *Osmothèque* in Versailles, grounded by the French Society for Perfumers (over 1700 perfumes from all epochs are stored there in a place that is special designed in order to guarantee their good preservation), and partly *L'inventaire du patrimoine culinaire de la France*, 12 volumes edited by the Conseil National des Arts Culinaires between 1993 and 2000 (their purpose is to make the inventory of all cooking *recipés* ever known in France and its former colonies).

experience of a blind person, seldom taken into consideration even now in the philosophy and psychology,<sup>20</sup> undermines both the primacy of the seeing subject in aesthetics and the fiction of a pure aesthetic conscience.

Under these circumstances, where can the decisive criterion to judge an object or a situation as aesthetic be found? Since Kant and Hegel, art had to face the dictate of the aesthetic theory that art is something one has to understand and interpret. Against a reductionist hermeneutics, I consider that aesthetics should not only rehabilitate formal analysis, but also emphasise the role that *the fineness of differentiation* plays in defining aesthetic experience and sensibility. Especially the aesthetics of olfaction and taste requires the ability of tracing fine differences and distinguishing aromatic “nuances,” given that new qualities emerge from infinitesimal variations of mixtures. This is, however, no reason to give up completely any semantic dimension of the art forms based on these senses, but rather to claim a “soft” or a “weak” hermeneutics and a contextual interpretation. In particular, the hermeneutics of artificial fragrances presupposes, firstly, the intuitive feeling of a specific atmosphere exhaled<sup>21</sup> and, secondly, has to take into account the specific cultural and social olfactory codes, as well as the particular context of using a perfume. In this case, a *double hermeneutics* of both the blend *and* the personal motivations to wear it is desirable. This concrete aesthetics of flavors and blends underlies the description of the aesthetic phenomenon generally as an aura, understood, however, less in the quasi-cultic meaning of Benjamin<sup>22</sup> than, rather, in a topological aesthetics, as a spatial metaphor, precisely as an enveloping veil or aroma, that radiates all over the environment and makes it aesthetical.

The fundamental values of an aesthetics of touch, smell, and taste cannot be “beautiful” and “ugly” anymore, which are still deeply shaped by their visual origin, but “attractive” and “distractive” (*attraktiv/distrahierend* or *abstoßend*). To be attracted or distracted by something also allows a *topological* interpretation, as centripetal and centrifugal vectors in a field of forces, in which the human subject interacts with the environment. There might also be specific values to the senses, such as the patina and the affective atmosphere; these have their origins in the tactile and olfactory experience, but, taken in a metaphorical sense, can be also generalised for all arts. Besides, because the patina materialises, i.e., makes visible, a repeated touch over a long interval of time, it encodes an own story of the object and therefore implies temporality and narrativity.

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<sup>20</sup> Excepting Diderot’s *Lettre sur les aveugles* bears noting as a detailed investigation on this topic, even if the interpretation is questionable and the examples rather obsolete: G[eza] Révész, *Die Formenwelt des Tastsinnes. 1. Bd. Grundlegung der Haptik und der Blindenpsychologie, 2. Bd. Formästhetik und Plastik der Blinden*, Haag: Martinus Nijhoff, 1938.

<sup>21</sup> This atmosphere is identified by Mikel Dufrenne with the “affective a priori” (*La phénoménologie de l’expérience esthétique*, Paris: P. U. F., 1963).

<sup>22</sup> Walter Benjamin, *Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit. Drei Studien zur Kunstsoziologie*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1963.

### **An Ethics of the Senses?**

The relativity of the aesthetic border of the so-called “lower” senses is undoubtedly confusing, but it could also open the possibility of connecting aesthetics with ethics by the means of aesthetics as a theory of perception. Precisely, if there could be something like an “ambulatory thinking” (the above mentioned *landschaftliches Denken*), why should there not also be possible an ethics based on the metaphorical meaning of the touch, smell, and taste? I will recall here that the *flair*, at work in interpersonal relations, in politics, psychotherapy,<sup>23</sup> and generally a useful and sometimes the only reliable sense of orientation in complex systems, is derived from the French *flairer* (to smell, Germ. *wittern*), that *sapientia* meant originally not only the power of understanding, but also the gastronomic taste, and that the sharpness of *sagacitas* referred also to olfactory discernment.<sup>24</sup> All these virtues, as well as *tactfulness*, are irreducible to any rationalist and utilitarian ethics; rather they consist in judgements and decisions based on fine distinctions—no less than aesthetic behavior—and, therefore, come close to an intuitionistic ethics. One can finally not neglect the possible moral relevance of the “bodily” senses and of the art forms based on them, by enhancing the proprioception as our “sixth sense.”

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<sup>23</sup> About *flair* (“die atmosphärische Spürung”) and taste as essential aptitudes of the psychiatrist in Helmuth Tellenbach, *op. cit.*, 65–67.

<sup>24</sup> Even *voetiv*, before it designated the providential planing (Anaxagoras) and long before it acquired its visual meaning (Plato), meant “to sniff” (a danger, etc.), and the Pythagoreans ascribed *nous* both to humans and animals (Kurt von Fritz, “Der ΝΟΥΣ des Anaxagoras,” in *Archiv für Begriffsgeschichte*, Bd. 9, 1964, 87–102).