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Stud.Zhl.: A 307
Geb.: 05.12.1978

15 February 2007

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UE: Die Zukunft der Sinne - unerhörtes Radio (170136)

WS 2006/2007



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“All knowledge takes its place within the horizons opened up by perception.
There can be no question of describing perception itself as one of the facts thrown up in the world,
since we can never fill up, in the picture of the world, that gap which we ourselves are,
and by which it comes into existence for someone...”

(Maurice Merleau-Ponty 1998 [1962]: 207)

Hearing and Seeing

Reflections upon the sensory experiences, anthropology, and film

Sensory experiences are the most fascinating elements of human life. How do we perceive and experience the world around us? How do we understand the life we and others live? Besides seeing and hearing we also touch, smell and taste the things in the world. We remember them and we can recall them. Moreover, we question their existence, analyze them, our perception is constantly seduced by the multiplicity of images, sounds, tastes, colours, and textures, and by perceiving them again and again, we try to understand their being as an inseparable part of our life experience. In anthropological research the term 'experience' has many times been discussed as an empirical, theoretical and methodological entity. Along with the insights provided by other human sciences, such as sociology, psychology and philosophy, we continually try to broaden our understanding of it. "But how well we perceive the experience of others depends upon fields of consciousness we share with them" (MacDougall 1998: 272).

The founder of the anthropology of experience was a renowned British anthropologist Victor Turner who distinguished between 'mere experience' and 'an experience'. In the former case it is "simply the passive endurance and acceptance of events" while in the latter it "is circumscribed with a beginning and end and thus a defined event" (Turner and Bruner 1986: 35; in Pink 2006: 42). Contrary to this perspective, in the same book, Clifford Geertz - suggesting that culture might be read as a text - "proposed that 'mere experience' does not exist, but experience is always interpreted - that is 'an experience' " (1986: 380; in Pink 2006: 43). Csordas and Katz approached 'an experience' from a different angle. For them "the adjectives experiential and phenomenological are in effect synonymous" (2003: 277). Here the ethnographer's embodiment is crucial in the research itself. He or she uses both intellectual body and embodied intellect as research instruments. The studied cultural concepts are understood differently where experience as an elusive process, culturally and situationally dependent, reveals the differences and commonalities which would otherwise be untranslatable. While discussing the notion of experience, senses and anthropology, Sarah Pink writes that "[t]heoretically, however, experience can occur at different levels of human consciousness and be evidenced at different levels of individual, group or cultural specificity. Methodologically, experience, at the different level the ethnographer encounters it, might in different forms be accessible through interviews, participant observation, video recording and attention to the embodied forms of consciousness and learning that are part of fieldwork" (2006: 44). These descriptions of experience in social and cultural context are interconnected

with the everyday life and with embodied sensory experiences *there* in a New Guinean rainforest, for example, or *here* in a European city. Experience is inseparable from communication between people in general. It is based, regarding any culture or social organization, on a particular representation of human history, on sensory virtues of everyday life and on the ways of understanding a perceptual being. Here, in the Western world, using mainly text and language we try to make a sense out of our experiences and reflect upon them within our cultural particularities. We use structured and rather rigid cultural categories to define our existence in terms of vision, sound, touch, smell, and taste. The inseparability of the senses or, in other words, their interconnectivity as it was already emphasized by Merleau-Ponty, provides a human being with a total impression about his or her sensuously lived-perceptual-body. “The sight of sounds or the hearing of colours come about in the same way as the unity of the gaze through the two eyes: in so far as my body is, not a collection of adjacent organs, but a synergic system, all the functions of which are exercised and linked together in the general action of being in the world ... When I say that I see a sound, I mean that I echo the vibration of the sound with my whole sensory being ... For the spectator, the gestures and words are not subsumed under some ideal significance, the words take up the gesture and the gesture the words, and they inter-communicate through the medium of my body ... my body is a ready-made system of equivalents and transpositions from one sense to another. The senses translate each other without any need of an interpreter, and are mutually comprehensible without the intervention of any idea” (Merleau-Ponty 1998 [1962]: 234-235).

Film works with a mind-body representation that is visual, aural, verbal, narrative, and enactive. It is a mature tool in anthropological research which offers something that written accounts cannot. “The reduction of culture to text systematically excludes the embodied and the sensory knowledge that is at the core of culture” (Ruby 2000: 246). It means that what we see and hear, what we experience through our auditory and visual perception, works as a 'giant metaphor' for life as an audio-visual representation which has a “capacity for synaesthesia” (MacDougall 1997: 287).¹ What does it mean 'to sense' and 'to perceive' when we talk about a film? In the era of a silent film, hearing and seeing were separated. The invention of the sound brought spectators into a different dimension. In 1920s, just before the appearance of sound film, the Russian 'cinematographic griot' Dziga Vertov developed two concepts in documentary filmmaking: Kinopravda and Radiopravda (cinema truth and radio

¹ “The co-operative modalities and commutative system of the bodily senses that structure existential perception are called *synaesthesia*. As a perceptive body, I am able to see texture. My sense of sight is pervaded by my sense of touch. Smell is cooperative with taste and taste with sight...” (Sobchack 1992: 77)

truth).² One of his films *A Sixth Part of the World* ('Shestaia Chast Mira', 1926) is more than just an ordinary film. It is "the multi-voiced noise of unseen life, the unheard rhythm of the stream of life which throws open the borders of the individual personality" (Tsivian 2004: 150). Following the experiments with the moving pictures and poetic expressions, Kino-Eye and Radio-Eye received a concrete definition: "Radio-Eye [is] the destruction of the distance between people ... [non acted sound cinema moves] from the montage of visible facts which are noted down on film (Kino-Eye) to the montage of visible-audible facts which are transmissible by radio (Radio-Eye)" (Vertov in Tsivian 2004: 319). Later on, in 1960s, Jean Rouch – renown as the anthropologist-filmmaker of Africa – recalled Vertov's ideas and applied them to anthropology and ethnographic filmmaking. From his films one learns about the culture of the Dogon people in Mali and about migration of Nigerians to Ghana. Moreover, one sees the use of 'the mechanical eye' in everyday actions. As an invention and a turning point in 'talking heads style' documentaries he brought a reflective ethno-fiction into the cinema. For example, his film *Jaguar* was made over a period of ten years, from 1957 to 1967. The process of editing, comments of the actors upon themselves, and their use in the final footage, created a spectacular experience for the filmmaker, the filmed people and the spectators. Regarding the ethnographic films generally, David MacDougall writes that it "links visual anthropology more closely to linguistics and sociolinguistics. Instead of presenting transcriptions of speech, film is able to reproduce almost the full visual and auditory range of verbal expressions. This includes gestures and facial expression, but perhaps even more importantly, the voice. Voices are more completely embodied in a film than faces, for the voice *belongs* to the body. Visual images of people, by contrast, result only from a reflection of light from their bodies. In corporeal sense, then, these images are passive and secondary, whereas a voice emanates actively from within the body itself" (1998: 263, italics in original). However, an ear and an eye, that is, two different 'receivers', together create an image of the world, a kind of a shared sensory experience, through which both anthropology and film were established.

In which way and how well and deep we perceive the experiences of others depends on shared time and, as MacDougall says, "involves a transcultural process ... a willingness to enter into a sympathetic contract with others" (1998: 272-273). In the era of digital television, thousands of radio stations, the fast flow of data through the satellites and optical cables, overwhelming DVDs, CD-ROMs and audio-visual communication through the internet, one perceives the world and lives the senses in a different way and on a different level than one

² Denis Arkadievich Kaufman alias Dziga Vertov was born in 1896 in Bialystok (now Poland, then part of Russia) and died in 1954. For more about his life and the article Kinopravda & Radiopravda see Michelson Annette (ed.) (1984). *Kino-Eye: The Writings of Dziga Vertov*. Berkeley: University of California Press, pp. 52-56.

did in the past. The age of virtual realities modulates perceptions, something that Merleau-Ponty, for example, could not imagine. Time and frequency – in technological progress – moved to a higher turbulence. The fact that we produce much more than we are capable to perceive and absorb creates the gaps and a high selection of surrounding sounds and images. The synchronized becomes unsynchronized and wholeness is all the time cut into detailed pieces (digital frames). It is a never ending repetition of construction for deconstruction. I do not have it clear where the experimentation with human senses leads and how the future of sensual body will look like, but I fully support the statement that “[m]ore than any other medium of human communication, the moving picture makes itself sensuously and sensibly manifest as the expression of experience by experience. A film is an act of seeing that makes itself seen, an act of hearing that makes itself heard, an act of physical and reflective movement that makes itself reflexively felt and understood” (Sobchack 1992: 2-3). I sincerely hope that the visual and auditory phenomena will not be absorbed by the constant changes in audio-visual technology and pertaining market, which in a particular hegemonic way directs our senses and imprisons them within its own specific mode of existence.

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