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Afterword:

War on the Senses

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War is hell on the senses. It assaults sight, smell, hearing, taste, and touch. It activates nociception. Combatants and their victims feel abnormally hot or cold; they are physically unbalanced and often disorientated, failing in their attempts to “make sense” of what they are feeling. This was what journalist Fritz August Voigt discovered, when he struggled to describe working as a medic in a Casualty Clearing Station during the First World War. The stench of gas gangrene was “almost unendurable”, he stammered. He was profoundly disturbed when a soldier who was having his wounds dressed “threw back his head, bared his teeth, and uttered shrill, piercing cries in sudden blasts”. He was shocked when he noticed that a soldier who was having his shattered, gangrenous knee amputated had woken up halfway through the operation. Voigt was tormented by the sight of this patient’s face: it was “ashen pale and the sweat ran down it in big drops”. The man was “too weak to struggle, but his eyes were staring in a way that was terrible to see”. While Voigt held the patient’s foot, he heard the surgeon’s blunt saw “grated harshly as it cut through the bone”. He heard the man moaning “in piteous drawling tones: ‘Jesus

Christ have mercy on me, God Almighty have mercy upon me, and forgive me all my sins’.”¹

Nothing prepares sentient creatures for war’s devastation. Within less than an hour into battle, thousands of normally robust men would lose their limbs. In the days, weeks, and years to come, perhaps a phantom one would take its place, itching or burning like fire. Many of the senses-at-war have no counterpart in the civilian world. The sound of a grenade detonating and the stench of high explosives are unique to war. Horses and dogs trembled uncontrollably; some birds learnt to imitate rifle fire. The metallic smell of blood was shared by all those in the trenches, as was the sight of human bone, muscle, tissue, skin, hair, and fat strewn around.

Such assaults on the senses are not incidental to the warring enterprise. Mobilizing human and animal sensibilities are intrinsic components of militarisation. From the moment war is declared, the sensual worlds of all protagonists are marshaled to the cause. In training camps, bodies are redesigned. Muscles materialize. Scars appear; fat disappears. The mess hall plays havoc with smell receptors and taste buds. During drills, recruits become accustomed to marching in rhythm, being yelled at, and staggering fatigue. Weapon drills are repeated over and over until the metallic “arm” becomes indistinguishable from the sensing body. Airmen are trained to hear subtle changes in the roar of their engines. Naval personnel learn to ignore the taste of salt on their lips. In “realism training”, soldiers gradually become inured to the acrid smell of sulfur, charcoal, and paltperer.

This initial mobilization of bodily functions is followed by uncompromising, calculated violence. This could excite the senses. As a state of exception, war can enliven people, making them exquisitely attentive to their environment. Artists

¹ “F. A. V.” [Fritz August Voigt], Combed Out (London: The Swarthmore Press, 1920), 56-7.

might portray war as a heroic adventure; the sun felt warmer; flowers, more colourful; a lover's kiss, sweeter. For others, war was – literally – shit. It could be overwhelming. The sight of so much death caused people to shake, vomit, even faint. Pain, anxiety, and terror could also eradicate the sense of self, as in the muselmann of the Nazi concentration camps or the catatonic, thousand-yard stare of the shell-shocked. In the end, the senses are hushed and then razed in death.

Precisely because war purposefully mobilizes, assaults, and then destroys sentient life, it provides a unique context within which to study the senses. Wartime experiences are extreme, highlighting the complexity of human and animal feeling-states. Whether we adopt an Aristotelian classification of the five senses or more recent neuroscientific ones, it is important not to take for granted that we know what the senses are. Most cultural theorists, anthropologists, and historians reject universalist, physiological claims of a straightforward association between sensory cell types that respond to specific physical phenomena and then send signals to regions within the brain for interpretation. This is not to doubt that physiological processes are necessary for sensual experiences: to see an object, two distinct types of receptors (one for color and one for brightness) have to be present; to taste, a person needs hundreds of taste receptor cells; and so on. Rather, it is to suggest that there is no such thing as raw sensation; sight, smell, hearing, taste, and touch exists in acts of evaluation. It is simply not the case that a person “feels” something, after which affective, cognitive, and motivational processes “kick in” – responding and interpreting the “feeling”. The mind and the body are integrated.

Furthermore, the body is itself social. Although senses are experienced by the individual – they have what the French phenomenological philosopher Paul Ricoeur calls a “mine-ness”² – they emerge from, are recognized by, and belong to the

² Paul Ricoeur, Oneself as Another, trans. Kathleen Blamey, Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1992), 132.

collective. The senses materialize in negotiation with social worlds. From the moment of birth, infants are initiated into cultures of sensuality. They are taught and they learn about their body and its relationship with the world in culturally variant ways, all of which affect the way they see, smell, taste, touch, and hear. Another way of expressing this is to note that the physiological body is not a culture-free object. At every point, the facts of physiology are given cultural meanings and these meanings are not something that exist in a pre-social universe, but are an integral part of the very organization of that physiology. In other words, it is not simply the case that culture “inscribes” something on a “natural”, pre-social physiology, but that physiological processes cannot be separated from the various and varying cultural meanings given to those senses. As such, the senses are historically constituted and reconstituted in relation to language, social and environmental interactions, and bodily comportment.³

There are many advantages to this approach. I have already mentioned the first one: it historicizes the senses, enabling us to analyze changes within and between different historical communities. Because people learn how to frame their descriptions of senses and because these conventions change over time, attention must always be paid to genre, audience, and context. For example, I began this afterword by discussing the way Fritz August Voigt described the painful assault on his senses while working in a Casualty Clearing Station. It is essential to note that his memoir was written at the end of a disillusioning war and published by a pacifist press. A very different sensual account of gas gangrene and amputation emerges in a memoir written by a surgeon who worked in a field hospital during the American Civil War. Unlike Voigt, he recalled that “I do not think I heard a groan or a cry” throughout his time at the hospital. He even conjured up a picture of one “poor fellow... walking up and down holding the freshly amputated stump of his forearm in the remaining arm”. The soldier’s jaw was “firmly set, and his face wore the hard,

³ For an extended analysis, see my [The Story of Pain: From Prayer to Painkillers](#) (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).

fixed expression of pain, yet he made no complaint”.⁴ Not only was this later sense-memoir published to stimulate patriotic pride, but it also arose in the context of a civil war in which suffering itself was assumed to be redemptive

The second advantage of understanding the senses as historically constituted is that it acknowledges that they are collective entities. The way an individual sees, smells, hears, tastes, and touches affects the way other individuals see, smell, hear, taste, and touch. The senses are not internal to themselves but move outward, affecting witnesses. Bodies communicate with other bodies. Sensations are contagious. They can even be transmitted between generations, surviving either as ghostly spectres or somatic remnants in the minds and bodies of people who weren't even present during the initial event.

The final advantage is that it draws attention to the ways in which the senses are deeply enmeshed in political relations. There is no such thing as individual senses because ways of being-in-the-world are always already embedded in inequitable social and economic relations. Individuals are born into worlds not of their own making; they accommodate and acquiesce, struggle and submit, to the environmental and social contexts within which they find themselves, but always from a starting point that is not of their own choosing. Most soldiers did not choose the visual, auditory, and tactile horrors of trenches. Being a woman in Berlin as the rapacious Red Army advanced was not a choice. The poor, minority groups, and those working in the most hazardous military positions are more likely to have their sensual worlds assaulted. The senses are indelibly entangled in human and environmental interactions, and can never be abstracted from wider, political relations.

⁴ John A. Wyeth, With Sabre and Scalpel: The Autobiography of a Soldier and Surgeon (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1914), 256.

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This volume contributes to the multiple ways in which the senses are filtered through emotion, cognition, and environment. It emphasises the importance of culture in collaborating in the creation of physiological bodies. Perception of the senses always occurs in social worlds, filtered through the prism of the entirety of a person's lived experiences, including their sensual physiologies, emotional states, cognitive beliefs, and relational standing in various communities.