



AISTHESIS & AN-AESTHESIA

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In this essay I seek to highlight the importance of the ‘knowledge’ of the world we get through *all* our senses, not only the eye and the ear, and to argue that tactility is always more or less implied in the other sensorial modes. Touch is more fundamental in mastering and understanding our social and natural environment than is frequently assumed by rational ocular-centric scholars (cf. Hetherington 2003).

In a recent article on screens, I tried to formulate this rather over-confident viewpoint with regard to the touch as follows:

Finally I think that it would enrich the work of anthropologists, if they paid more attention to the fact that the relations of human beings with their fellow human beings, other animals as well as things, such as screens, always imply tactility. Though we westerners have learned to think that there are only five different senses with sight at the top and the touch at the bottom, because the former is associated with the mind and the latter with the body, we should do everything to get rid of this five-fold, Judeo-Christian and Cartesian type of hierarchical classification. It blinds us to the fact that we relate to the world through the touch of the cornea of our eyes, of the tympanum in our ears, of the receptors in the mucous membrane in our nose, of the papillae on our tongue, of the sensors in our skin and/or our whole body. Instead of the anthropology of the senses, we need an anthropology of the touch and how people have learnt to fragment this basic human experience (Verrips 2002: 39).¹

Before I present the concept that expresses this provocative idea in a succinct way I deem it necessary to first say something about my (religious and therefore particular sensorial) background that can be held responsible for my radically putting upside down the sensorial hierarchy as it became common in the western world.

I was raised in a rather orthodox Calvinist environment, like many people in the Netherlands, where a sharp distinction was made between body and mind, where the flesh, on the one hand, was associated with a lack of reason, distracting and therefore negative emotions, and in its wake with abject practices called sinful, and where the spirit, on the other hand, was associated with the promising presence of reason and rationality, the imprisonment of all kinds of irrational feelings, especially sexual and aggressive ones, and the inclination to behave as if these feelings did not exist. God was an ever-present eye watching over people, seeing each and everything one thought and did, and keeping account of all the times one became a victim of dark bodily desires, irrational longings and thoughts as well as forbidden fantasies cropping up from the crevices of a corrupted and therefore impure mind. Though I managed to say goodbye to this rather depressing type of Protestantism, I guess that it was due to this outspoken dualistic, ocular-centric and reason-oriented religious background that I later developed a keen interest in alternative ways of perceiving the relation between body and mind and especially in the importance and meaning of irrationality, emotion-

ality and other sensorial sensations than the visual, in our relations with the landscape and humanscape we and others are part of.² On several occasions I have tried to come to grips with these intriguing issues, with the importance of the body, unreason, emotions and the other sensorial experiences next to the ones we get through our eyes and in its wake through our rational mind capable of thinking and accumulating so-called 'true knowledge'. Yet I always felt handicapped by the idea that I lacked the concepts to properly express or describe what I was after, in particular with regard to the senses.³

And then, some time ago, I came across – I have to admit rather late in my career – the concept *aisthesis* as it was defined in the preface of the book *Bodycheck: Relocating the Body in Contemporary Performing Art*:

Aisthesis comprises more than just visual perception; it stands for general perception with all the senses, as well as the impression that the perceived leaves on the body. In the original meaning of the concept, tactile and visual perception constitute a whole, and it was not until later (e.g. in the Kantian tradition) that this meaning was reduced to merely an eye that observes, without a body (Bleeker et al. 2002: v).

I really had a kind of *eureka*-experience when I read this passage.⁴ *Aisthesis* is the concept I was looking for, so I thought at the time I discovered it and stored it away in one of my notebooks.

So when I was invited to contribute a concept to put on the stage of the social sciences, I immediately thought about *aisthesis*. I would like to launch *aisthesis* in order to express my idea that the touch forms the cornerstone of our perception of the world and that all the other sensorial modes are in the last instance based on or even reducible to tactility. In a euphoric mood I let the editors know that I would come up with this fantastic concept. However, what I thought to be a rather easy thing to accomplish became an intellectually unsettling kind of endeavour. For I discovered that armies of scholars with divergent disciplinary backgrounds have already,

for ages, written about and worked with this complex philosophical concept and that it would take me more than a lifetime to find out what exactly it meant in the work *De Anima* by Aristotle where it was launched, and in the works of its numerous later interpreters. I nevertheless want to present here some thoughts with regard to *aisthesis* that I think might at least help to critically reflect upon what we learn to take for granted with regard to the dominance of the eye over the other senses in gathering particular knowledge of, and insights to, the world we live in.

In *De Anima* Aristotle deals with the question of how the 'psyche,' conceptualized by him as a non-material entity with specific powers or a kind of life energy with certain potentialities, uses the material body of human beings and other animals to realize these potentialities or powers through and in their bodies. The 'psyche' is the source of: 1) our potentiality to feed ourselves, 2) our potentiality to perceive the world through our (five) senses (*aisthetikon*), 3) the powers to make representations of (*phantastikon*), 4) the power to think over (*nous*) and 5) the power to develop desires in (*orektikon*) this world, on the basis of our sensations.

Of all our senses the touch is considered to be fundamental by Aristotle, because it forms the condition of our survival through reproduction (sex) and defence (violence). Though he did not see the other senses as variations of the touch in the way I suggested above, he saw our perception of the world through our five senses in the last instance as a kind of an undividable whole. And that is what he meant by *aisthesis*, our corporeal capability on the basis of a power given in our 'psyche' to perceive objects in the world via five different sensorial modes, thus in a kind of analytical way, and at the same time as a specific constellation of sensations, as a whole, for instance, an apple with a texture, a taste, a smell, a sound and a visible shape and colour. An apple makes an im-pression or has on im-pact (on us) as a whole as well as in different sensorial ways at the very same moment. *Aisthesis* then refers to our total sensorial experience of the world and to our sensitive knowledge of it.⁵

In the course of history this type of knowledge

has gradually been pushed to the background in the western world. Emphasis came more and more to rest on sensations through the eye, representations based on eyes alone and finally abstract thinking and reasoning based in their turn on these representations. Especially after Descartes presented his *cogito ergo sum*, expressing his sharp division between body and mind, the *aisthesis* of Aristotle, the *aesthetic* way of knowing the world, the knowing through our body, rapidly lost ground in intellectual circles. Baumgarten's introduction to the *aesthetica* in the middle of the eighteenth century as the science of sensitive knowing in the classical sense was a hallmark, but it did not mean the return to a more balanced relation between *aesthetic* and rational 'knowing' of the world.⁶ However, with the rise of phenomenology, especially as it was developed by Merleau-Ponty in his work on perception (2005 [1945]), *aesthetic* experiences and knowing re-appeared on centre stage again (cf. Marks 2000; Mackendrick 2004; Sobchack 2004). Merleau-Ponty's *Causeuses* (2003 [1948]) explicitly dealt with *aesthetic* experience in connection with the rise of modern art.⁷ Artists were after representations of reality that were more in accord with the fact that we do not perceive it through our eyes alone, but with all our senses, our whole body.⁸

It is my sincere conviction that ethnologists, anthropologists and sociologists can enrich their disciplines if they start reusing the Aristotelian notion of *aisthesis* in its original meaning. This would require that more balanced attention be paid to *all* our corporeal sensorial sensations in daily life, not merely the (audio-)visual. These sensations form an indissoluble whole in which the touch seems to be more fundamental than is often assumed. It would imply a break with our ocular-centrism and our heavy emphasis on the role of the mind, reason and rationality, and would bring back an interest in our somatic experience of reality. We would then focus on such difficulty to grasp phenomena as deeply felt emotions and desires (especially those related with *eros* and *thanatos*) as well as the irrational and the fantastic, the absurd and the surreal. In other words, re-using the concept *aisthesis* may generate an interest in a (basically tactile) way of knowing the world

other than the rational one that seems to need no body and fully relies on the capacities of our mind.

An apt illustration of what I have in mind when talking about the relevance of taking into consideration *aisthesis* or the whole spectrum of sensorial sensations in experiencing the world can be found in the work of Milena Veenis (1999), a Dutch anthropologist who did fieldwork in the former DDR. She extensively deals with the perception and experience of material objects before and after the *Wende*. She was struck by the fact that her informants were almost always very explicit about the sensorial impressions of Western products, when they received them as gifts from relatives and friends before 1989, and bought them for themselves thereafter. When comparing them with the products they were used to during the socialist period, they sketched the differences in colour, glitter and glance, their smell and taste as well as in their tactile properties. On the basis of the fact that Western products were said to have made such a strong and multifaceted sensorial impression, Veenis criticizes the approach of material culture studies, especially of consumer goods, as it developed in the last decade of the twentieth century. Next to the meaning of material objects, what they represent, on the one hand, and the role they play in the life of people, on the other, one also needs to take into consideration, so she convincingly argues, the fact that people 'very often "know" material objects through all their senses' or, as I would say, *aisthesis* in relation to these objects or commodities. This broad appeal to the senses also features in the ways they are advertised. In his book *Sensual Relations* David Howes deals with the increasingly conscious use of all sensory stimulation in consumer capitalism:

consumer capitalism, in fact, would make its business to engage as many senses as possible in its seduction of the consumer. The "right look" must, depending on the kind of product being sold, be reinforced by the right feel, the right scent, the right sound, and the right taste (2003: 211).

Using the concept *aisthesis* might also play a useful sensitizing role in the study of processes of in- or exclusion and discrimination of people, for it demands that serious attention be paid to the role of our sensorial experience in classifying and evaluating these 'others'. So far the literature is rather scarce in which the *aesthetic* appreciation of fellow human beings in socially incorporating and expropriating them is dealt with.⁹ If anthropologists pay attention to the sensorial impressions others make, they often concentrate on one in particular, e.g. the role of smell, and not on the whole range, as I think would be necessary for gaining a more encompassing insight in all kinds of discriminatory practices or the micro-politics of human interaction. In this connection the concept of the 'somatic norm image' coined by Harry Hoetink might be helpful.¹⁰ A fascinating project would be to make an inventory of the number and nature of *aesthetic* repertoires as they occur in particular societies, especially multicultural ones. Knowledge about the *aisthesis* of, for instance, classes, ethnic and religious groups could be very relevant for a better understanding of their (friendly, neutral or hostile) relationships and bring us closer to an insight in processes of (dis)integration.

Taking *aisthesis* as a starting point may also generate a fresh approach of the question as to how and under what conditions the total *aesthetic* experience of human beings is formed,¹¹ transformed, deformed, restricted, mutilated or partly put to sleep, narcotized or '*an-aisthetized*.' This brings me to a related concept that I would also like to put in the foreground, namely social or cultural anaesthesia.

While I was pondering the sensitizing value of the Aristotelian concept *aisthesis* for social scientists, I also became fascinated by its counterpart: *an-aisthesis* or anaesthesia. I realized how valuable it could be for finding out more about the particular ways the *aisthesis* of societies, communities or groups is shaped, implying that certain sensorial sensations are pushed to the background where they seem to lie dormant, waiting for awakening and others are, on the contrary, put at centre stage (see Zelinsky 2001).¹² Besides the cultural narcosis of certain sensorial sensations in favour of others (for

instance, the visual ones as these are deemed to be the cornerstone of getting knowledge of and insight into the world), I also thought of this narcosis or anaesthesia in a more general sense. It can refer to the process of making people more or less sensible, and its flipside, making them insensible to certain aspects of the landscapes and humanscapes they live in, for instance, by power elites using a specific ideology, discourse or language.

Here one can think of what Klemperer tried to make clear in his work *LTI or Lingua Tertii Imperii*, published for the first time in 1947, on the poisoning effects of German fascist language. In this book he states, for instance,

...der Nazismus glitt in Fleisch und Blut der Menge durch die Einzelworte, die Redewendungen, die Satzformen, die er ihr in millionenfachen Wiederholungen aufzwang und die mechanisch und unbewusst übernommen wurden. (...) Worte können sein wie winzige Arsendosen; sie werden unbemerkt verschluckt, sie scheinen keine Wirkung zu tun, und nach einiger Zeit ist die Giftwirkung doch da (Klemperer 1999 [1947]: 26–27).

Though Klemperer's work has been criticized as being biased (cf. Maas 1984), I still find it valuable, because it pays attention to how particular language use can play a role in tuning the *aisthesis* or more generally the *habitus* of human beings.¹³ But, of course, next to being anaesthetized by powerful ideologies and discourses, people can also (temporarily) anaesthetize themselves through alternative means.

In this connection the use of drugs and/or various driving behaviours can also be instrumental. As a consequence of utilizing these means people might get differently tuned, so that they end up with radically altered states of consciousness (e.g. Lex 1979). Since anaesthesia does not necessarily imply a loss of all sensorial experiences, as the term suggests, but only of a few, such as the ability to feel pain, and often calls forward a whole range of other sensations, images, and thoughts, there is even reason to look for a more adequate term. In this connection Colás'

article on how nitrous oxide developed in the mid-nineteenth century from a means of having fun at so called 'laughing gas parties,' into a fully accepted narcotic in medical circles, is particularly relevant. In this article he sketches why the term anaesthesia, literally meaning no *aisthesis* at all, was coined and accepted for the application of this narcotic in spite of the fact that Humphry Davy, who experimented with it at the end of the eighteenth century, not only pointed to its analgesic potential, but also and very explicitly to its *aisthesis* transforming capacity.¹⁴ The term implied a diversion of the attention from 'aesthetic knowing through, rather than in spite of, the body' (Colás 1998: 350; see also Lingis 1994: ch.1 and Greenfield 2001: 624) that was being rejected because it was considered unscientific and was therefore relegated to the realm of the arts. Colás uses this case history to emphasize what I also deem important: a re-evaluation of the importance of 'our physicality, our bodies, our senses, our experiences' (ibid.: 352).

Much can be gained by re-appreciating *aisthesis* as a crucial instrument to develop a specific sort of knowledge of the world that is not easy to capture in words, but nevertheless forms an undeniable guide for conduct, as much as the knowledge developed on the basis of our capacity to think and reason. Though Colás signals that anaesthesia can be seen as a misnomer, he does not suggest a more appropriate term such as, for instance, *al-aisthesis* (or *al-aesthesia*) which seems to better cover what happens when people are narcotized in order to not suffer from certain pains.¹⁵ This term could be used in a figurative sense by social scientists for all the phenomena which temporarily transform the normal mode or variety of *aisthetic* experience of a category, group or other conglomerate of people.

I would like to emphasize that others have written about social or cultural anaesthesia as suitable concepts for social and cultural processes. In the late 1970s, almost hundred years after Féré and Binet launched this concept (see note 12), Donald Meyer wrote about social anaesthesia in a work on religion in the USA (see Massa 1997). The historian Barbara Ann Day (1992: 688) used it in passing in an essay on the representation of aging and death in French

culture. In anthropology Allen Feldman came up with the concept cultural anaesthesia in a thought-provoking article in the *American Ethnologist* (1994).¹⁶

While others¹⁷ invented social or cultural anaesthesia, I find it most important that it has enormous sensitizing value, along with its counterpart *aisthesis* (and eventually *al-aisthesis*). It can be useful for a wide range of social scientists in tracing, describing and analyzing certain important facets of the societies and cultures they study. For me the use of these concepts means one step further on the road to a full rehabilitation of the body, in particular of the role of *all* the senses – seen as specific variations of the touch – in creating *in unison*, though sometimes with a different vigour, a mode of perceiving and knowing the world. Westerners have learned to devalue this mode of perception (as in the religious circles in which I was raised), in comparison to rational or scientific types of knowing and perceiving. Against the backdrop of the immense increase of *(n)e(w)motions*¹⁸ and the resulting bizarre fantasies and disturbing behaviours with regard to others which we see in our globalized world, it is most important that we pay more attention to *aisthesis* and social and/or social an-aesthesia. However, if one is prepared to take seriously what I outlined in this essay, then one should realize that our challenge will be to look for and/or to develop a kind of language that will enable us to express more accurately this (*al-*)*aesthesia*, and the social or cultural an-aesthesia of others and ourselves. This might imply the launching of a new literary turn in anthropology, for I think that it will be impossible to adequately describe in scientific terms what we will find.

Notes

- 1 See for a strikingly similar viewpoint Mackendrick, who notices a 'tactile trace in all our senses': 'We move our eyes over surfaces, hear the sounds rippling across our tympani, taste what comes into contact with our taste buds, smell tiny particles that bump the linings of our noses' (2004: 61–62). See also Classen (1993: 54–55) and Harvey (2003) who gave the introductory chapter of her book on the touch in early modern culture the title: 'The "Sense of All Senses."'

- 2 It formed an important part of what I called the anthropology of the wild (in the) west which I began to develop in the early nineties, which focused on the 'dark' sides of Western civilisation (see Verrips 2001).
- 3 One of the books that come closest to what I was looking for is Johannes Fabian's dazzling work (2000) on the drunken encounter of Africa explorers with indigenous populations. This study explicitly tackles the role of the senses and ecstasis (seen by Fabian as a loss of control implying a detachment from the rules of scientific inquiry) in the production of knowledge of the Other. However, it does not contain an 'embodied anthropology' in which all the senses are equally dealt with and does not present the touch as fundamental, whereas the concept ecstasis relates to a rather altered and certainly not normal sensorial state of consciousness.
- 4 I remembered that I had read earlier about the concept in, for instance, the work of Classen (1998: 2), but her reference to it did not arrest me, maybe because it was so casual and the notion did not pop up again in the rest of her book.
- 5 I used the translation of *De Anima* by Schomakers (2000). This work contains a clear introduction and several guidelines for a proper understanding of this difficult philosophical text.
- 6 The aesthetica developed into a science of the beautiful and the philosophy of art; in other words more and more away from the Aristotelian conception. One of the reasons for this development might be that Baumgarten was raised as a pietist and reckoned the senses to belong to the body or the flesh standing at a lower level than the mind (Shusterman 2000: 301; see also Barck et al. 2002 [1990]: 461–62).
- 7 See also his essay on film and the new psychology in which he tersely states: '...ich nehme... eine ungeteilte Weise mit meinem ganzen Sein wahr, ich erfasse eine einzigartige Struktur des Dings, eine einzigartige Weise des Existierens, die alle meine Sinnen auf einmal anspricht' (Merleau-Ponty (1999 [1945]: 230). On the relation between art and the senses see Classen (1998).
- 8 Howes (one of the founders of the anthropology of the senses) propounds a negative attitude towards Merleau-Ponty's work because 'his doctrine of the synergy and intertranslatability of the senses in his *Phenomenology of Perception* covers up the potential disunity of the senses in cultural practice' (2003: 239n6). I disagree with this overly cultural relative viewpoint, for it throws out the baby with the bath water.
- 9 But see the work of Hall, for example his programmatic article on proxemics (1968) in which all the sensorial dimensions relevant in human interaction are brought together in an enlightening scheme. This is why I consider him a pioneer in the exploration of the phenomenon *aisthesis*, though he does not use the term.
- 10 Hoetink defines somatic norm image as the entirety of somatic traits that the members of a specific group have learned to share as norm and ideal (Hoetink 1962: 202) and he uses it in connection with somatic distance, that is the degree to which differences between one's own somatic norm image and another somatic type are subjectively experienced (ibid.: 251). Important somatic traits are, of course, colour and decoration of the skin, hairdo, 'soundscape' and 'smellscape.' However, if one wants to include other traits, such as proxemic behaviour and dress, then the concept somatic *Gestalt* might be more to the point, as I have argued elsewhere (Verrips 2001).
- 11 A culturally patterned *aisthesis* is what has been called a *sensotype* by Wober (in Howes 1991: 33).
- 12 Crary refers to the work of Féré and Binet who in the nineteenth century described 'the simple fact of attention' as 'a concentration of the whole mind on a single point, resulting in the intensification of the perception of this point and producing all around it a *zone of anaesthesia*; attention increases the force of certain sensations while it weakens others' (1999: 39).
- 13 For fascinating reflections on 'the tactility of language,' which is manifest when repetition occurs, see Macken-drick (2004: 50ff.).
- 14 During his experiments Davy had all kinds of pleasurable sensations and saw 'trains of vivid visible images' that 'were connected with words in such a manner, as to produce perceptions perfectly novel. I existed in a world of newly connected and newly modified ideas. I theorised; I imagined that I made new discoveries' (Davy in Colás 1998: 339).
- 15 It would certainly be rewarding to have a look at all the forms of 'aesthesia' distinguished in the medical sciences, such as hypoaesthesia, hyperaesthesia, macro-aesthesia, par-aesthesia, poly-aesthesia, pseudo-aesthesia, and sin-aesthesia. Al-aesthesia does not yet seem to have been coined. See Howes (2003: 211) for the use of hyperaesthesia.
- 16 His sketch of cultural anaesthesia and what to understand by it resembles what I have tried to present, but there are differences. Feldman, for instance, does not work with the concept *aisthesis* in the way I propose. For him cultural anaesthesia is his interpretation of 'Adorno's insight that in a post-Holocaust and late capitalist modernity the quantitative increase of objectification increases the social capacity to inflict pain upon the Other... to render the Other's pain inadmissible to public discourse and culture' (1994: 406). Though he remarks that a political anthropology of the senses can be elaborated upon this insight, his article does not contain such an elaboration, but at most a sketch of the direction it might take. And though he extensively deals with beating up bodies, especially the body

of Rodney King, he does not say anything on the fundamental role of the touch and tactility in our lives in a positive as well as negative sense. In almost everything he wrote thereafter Feldman refers to his seminal article that was reprinted in Seremetakis (1994). See for example his essay on the South African Truth Commission in which he speaks of anaesthesia by alcohol or physiological anaesthesia as a component of a wider socio-cultural anaesthesia which informed the racial treatment of prisoners of the police (Feldman 2002).

- 17 In this connection I would like to point to the lively and thought-provoking discussion that the work of the German philosopher Wolfgang Iser on an/aesthetics has triggered. He stated, for instance, '[K]ein *aisthesis* ohne *anaisthesis*.' (cf. Carroll 2001).
- 18 I coined the term *newmotions* for a number of striking (post-modern) emotions that people air, for instance, after somebody has fallen victim to so-called senseless violence in public spaces.

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