

Approaches to Sensory Landscape Archaeology

Adapted from an article by Jessica Faycurry,
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As the medium through which humans interact with the physical world, senses are crucial to explore when trying to understand the beings that embody them. Senses are the middlemen through which humans register their surroundings, perform activities crucial for survival, and interact with the world and its inhabitants. The phenomenon of senses, although shared among all humans, can be very personal and informative of individual life histories. The scent of cinnamon, for example, can evoke memories of childhood for some, while for others there is no connection. Senses are physically natured but culturally constructed. Colors, tastes, and sounds can hold completely different meanings to different peoples and cultures. Altogether, senses are an undeniably important component of human existence. As such, sensory discourse has led to an interesting accumulation of data, literature, and discoveries. Emerging from this mass of literature is sensory archaeology bringing with it much potential.

The Center for Archaeological Investigations (CAI) defines sensory archaeology as, an umbrella term for ways of understanding the past by investigating the effects of places and things on people's senses. It considers the potential roles that textures, smells, sounds, tastes, and other less tangible visual qualities, like shimmer, played in informing the choices people made in past societies (2009). Sensory archeology is an interdisciplinary endeavor, which sprang from a number of interrelated fields including sociology, psychology, geography, and of course anthropology. Scholars from such fields wanted to gain an understanding of the roles that senses play in human action and interaction. For example, how do hearing, vision, smell, taste, and touch inform how individuals engage with their surroundings? Archaeologists have been incited by such inquiries. Their recognition of the need for sensorial investigations in the study of past societies has resulted in some fascinating observations to date (CAI 2009).

The bulk of sensorial case studies in the archaeological field have focused primarily on "western" senses including touch, smell, taste, hearing, and to the largest extent vision. As a result, the ethno-

25 and ocular-centric focus in sensory archaeology has concealed other culturally recognized senses. For example, contemporarily among the Anlo-Ewe of West Africa balance is recognized as a sense that is, along with hearing, at the top of their sense hierarchy, or sensorium (Geurtz 2002:50). Certainly societies of the past would also have recognized other senses. This in turn would have had an impact on how people conducted their daily lives and interacted with their surroundings.

30 The neglect of additional senses limits the full potential of sensory studies instead looking at past societies through a more restricted lens. Such attention to other types of senses will hopefully emerge in the near future.

Luckily, archaeologists have been more fastidious in terms of culturally specific sense hierarchies acknowledging the possibility that certain past cultures may have valued sound, taste, touch, and

35 smell as much as or more than vision. However, senses such as taste and smell are less tangible in a material sense and are therefore more often neglected. For instance, you can see and touch monuments or artifacts but trying to recreate the taste and olfactory environments of ancient peoples is much more problematic due to the lack of material traces. Archaeologists and fellow scholars are yet to address this issue.

40 There have been diverse themes in the study of sensory archaeology thus far, with landscape being one of the most recent topics of inquiry among archaeologists and anthropologists alike. Landscape archaeology specifically focuses on the ways in which past individuals and societies shaped and were shaped by their surrounding landscapes. Sensory landscape archaeology, then, addresses the roles that senses play in this interaction. Amazingly, archaeologists have been able to

45 observe sensory applications in the landscapes, natural features, and architecture of past societies. It seems that past societies were indeed influenced by their sensory perceptions, especially when it comes to the choices they made regarding their surrounding environments and how they changed these environments. With senses being such a large part of humanly interaction it is logical that people in the past would have manipulated and utilized their surroundings to achieve desired

50 sensory effects. Senses also play the important role of informing individual and social connection to landscapes.

I. VOCABULARY

3 points

Find the words matching the following definitions in the article.

Between ll. 1 and 11:

Definition 1: a noun that means “a person who acts as a go-between between other people”.

Definition 2: a noun that means “the environment around someone”.

Between ll. 12 and 22:

Definition 3: an adjective that means “perceptible by touch”.

Definition 4: a noun that means “a soft light”.

Between ll. 23 and 32:

Definition 5: a noun that means “the greater part of something”.

Definition 6: a noun that means “the sensory qualities as a whole”.

II. COMPREHENSION QUESTIONS

5 points

- 1. True or false? Are the following statements true or false? Indicate whether these statements are true or false and give a quote from the article to justify your answer.**

3 pts

- a) The way we perceive through our senses is universal.
- b) There have always been only five senses.
- c) All the senses are not treated equally by archaeologists.

- 2. According to this article, what does the study of senses bring to archaeological research?**

2 pts

III. ESSAY

12 points

Choose one of the following questions and give a structured answer in 250-300 words.

- 1. Comment the following quote by analysing examples drawn from your research or general archaeological knowledge: “Senses are physically natured but culturally constructed” (l. 7).
- 2. According to you, do senses need to become a central part of archaeological studies?