



LUDWIG-
MAXIMILIANS-
UNIVERSITÄT
MÜNCHEN

FAKULTÄT FÜR KULTURWISSENSCHAFTEN
INSTITUT FÜR ETHNOLOGIE



STUDIEN AUS DEM MÜNCHNER INSTITUT FÜR ETHNOLOGIE, Band 18
WORKING PAPERS IN SOCIAL AND CULTURAL ANTHROPOLOGY, LMU MUNICH, Vol 18
Herausgeber: **Eveline Dürr, Frank Heidemann, Thomas Reinhardt, Martin Sökefeld**

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SOCIAL AESTHETICS AND EMBODIED CINEMA

MÜNCHEN, 2015

ISBN 978-3-945254-12-7

PREFACE

This manuscript is based on the keynote given by David MacDougall at the Conference “The Challenge of Atmospheres”, at “Internationales Begegnungszentrum der Wissenschaft” in Munich on October 4, 2014. The point of departure, and the focus of the discussion, was the making and the working of atmospheres. Due to the multisensory dimensions of perception their description and interpretation poses a particular challenge for anthropological research and representation. At the same time it becomes apparent that the role of the recipients of these representations and their perception is often treated as an unknown factor. The field of Visual Anthropology, in particular, lacks empirical studies concerned with concrete atmospheric reception contexts. The workshop aimed to problematize this paradoxical point of departure and therefore asked how complex multisensory experience can be translated and mediated in and through audiovisual and textual representations and how it is negotiated in discursive reception contexts. The discussion leaned on two concepts: first, *social aesthetics* as it is formulated by the anthropologist and filmmaker David MacDougall and which is concerned with the aesthetics of everyday life. MacDougall’s films shine a light on relationships and experiences, and aim to mediate atmospheres and to provide a sensory experience for the viewer. The second concept, *atmosphere*, was presented by Gernot Böhme in his conference keynote. He explored the role of atmosphere for a general theory of perception. In Böhme’s “New Aesthetic”, *atmosphere* is the main term as well as the object of study and refers to the relationship between the shared reality of the perceiver and the perceived. We are grateful for David MacDougall’s generosity in providing us with the manuscript of his keynote address. We would like to thank the German Research Foundation and the University of Munich for their financial support.

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SOCIAL AESTHETICS AND EMBODIED CINEMA

I have been asked to speak at this workshop about my work as a filmmaker, particularly in relation to the role of the senses in cinema and what I have called “social aesthetics”.

Let me start, however, with the idea of diversity. Diversity has become a catchword of our times, so that we look for it everywhere—cultural diversity, social diversity, ideological diversity. And the idea of diversity is constantly reinforced in the public media and by our exposure to the multiculturalism of our cities. But diversity can also be a kind of intellectual dead end, as I discovered several years ago.

I had begun to make a study of one of the most famous schools in India, an elite boarding school for boys called The Doon School. At the time, the idea of diversity was uppermost in my mind. My approach to the school was that it was a kind of crossroads, a meeting-place for boys from all over India, coming from a variety of cultural backgrounds. The main question I was asking myself was what kinds of personal relationships could be forged in the midst of these differences. Could boys form friendships across the divides of language, caste, class, and religion?

It took me some time to realize that I was asking the wrong questions—or perhaps the least interesting questions—because in fact the school drew its students from much the same segment of Indian society—the well-to-do middle class of the major cities. Most of the boys already spoke good English when they arrived at the school, and quite a few customarily spoke English at home. In many ways the students were very much alike, and the school was making them even more so. So I began to regard the school differently. What changed my thinking most were the everyday experiences that I began to have as I walked around the school. A bell would ring and suddenly a group of students would rush out of a building, all dressed in the same kind of uniform. Then, just as suddenly, they would disappear. An hour or two later the bell would ring again and they would rush out in a different uniform. I began to feel that a theatrical performance was going on. The boys were clearly the major players in this performance but they were also, it seemed, its main audience. I began to wonder if it was possible to think of the school as a kind of created object—as you might think of a work of art, with its own distinctive stamp of authorship.

This was the beginning of what I started to call the school’s “social aesthetics”. By aesthetics I did not mean matters of beauty or art but rather the specific combination of rituals, customs, colours, textures, and physical surroundings that peculiarly defined the school and made it familiar to its occupants. When you went away from the school for a few months and then returned, this uniqueness and consistency immediately struck you. So instead of diversity, I became much more interested in the homogeneity of what might be called the school’s social landscape, as a sensory environment. And I gradually realized that this homogeneity, this particular social aesthetic, played an important part in the decision-making of the school, perhaps just as important as the more usually recognized social forces of ideology, economics,

and politics. I came to believe that aesthetics was more than simply an expression of other social forces. It should be considered an important social factor in its own right.

This of course was not a new idea. It had been discussed extensively by Erving Goffman in his studies of what he called “total” institutions: that is, closed communities such as hospitals, asylums, and prisons (Goffman 1961). It seemed to me that the idea could equally well apply to many other communities—religious orders, military organisations, ships at sea, and (not least) boarding schools. And if this was so, perhaps the principles of social aesthetics might be more applicable than we had previously thought to the rest of human society.

In studying this aspect of the school, I began to use a video camera as my primary research tool. Filming seemed to me to be one of the best ways of approaching a subject that was both difficult to isolate and yet seemed all-pervasive in the behaviour of the students and the material world surrounding them.

The challenge, however, was how to film such an elusive and generalized phenomenon. The problem was that social aesthetics was part of everything, and you couldn’t simply film everything. It was possible, of course, to make a filmic inventory of specific aspects of the school—its formal and informal rituals, its buildings and grounds, its sounds, its colours, the particular postures and gestures adopted by the students, and all the familiar objects and implements used in eating, sleeping, bathing, studying, playing sports, and so on. However, it was not these characteristics considered *individually* that mattered so much as these characteristics taken in combination, as a *complex*. This was what created the school’s distinctive atmosphere. It is much the same in cooking. The final dish has a flavour that is quite different from any of its individual ingredients.

The approach that seemed most feasible was to try to film the school as the students themselves encountered it—through their own individual and collective experiences. And so I began looking at the routines of the school that affected the students most immediately and personally. To take an example: clothing was of major importance in the school. There were elaborate systems for managing and regulating clothing. Five or six changes of uniform were required throughout the day, and the school used clothing both as a means of punishment and reward. Clothing was therefore something close to the students’ skin, and it loomed large in their consciousness.

From this somewhat thematic approach I shifted my attention to the newcomers to the school, my reasoning being that as the new boys learned the rules and manners of the school, and became familiar with its surroundings, the audience could learn these same things along with them. As a result, three of the five films I eventually made at the school focused on the experiences of students in their first year.

In making films I have often been struck by the power of cinema to convey not only images and sounds but a much wider range of sensory experience. A number of critics, but especially Michel Chion, have made the point that the effect of combining sound with an image is not merely that of adding one element to another: the result becomes a wholly new phenomenon. In this *sound-image*, image and sound are each inflected and transformed by the other, a process that Chion calls *synchresis* (Chion 1994: 5). The effect is a synthesis possessing new qualities of spaciousness and immediacy. The sound-image, moreover, has the power to evoke the other senses, particularly the sense of touch. If you can imagine watching a film of a small child handling a tightly inflated balloon, then you may see what I'm driving at. The friction of the child's fingers on the surface of the balloon is evoked so tactilely that we expect an explosion at any moment.

Films act upon us through our vision and hearing, but our responses are by no means limited to just these two of Aristotle's five original senses. And what a film does not evoke directly we tend to create for ourselves, out of our own past experiences of touch, taste, and smell. But even Aristotle's five original senses are too restrictive, for since his time other senses have been proposed to add to the list, such as the sense of time, the sense of balance, the sense of pain, and so on.

Then again, there is no guarantee that different individuals or members of different societies give equal weight to the senses or even experience them in the same way. The deaf and the blind certainly compensate for deficiencies in one sense by the hypertrophy of others. In such fields as perfumery, wine tasting, and haute cuisine, a high degree of aesthetic awareness of one particular sense may give it precedence over another. The anthropologist Jack Goody has argued that in literate societies, vision has been awarded a heightened importance because of the intensive discrimination of shapes that reading and writing requires (Goody 2002: 19).

Nevertheless, the range of the senses seems to be a relatively closed biological system, although with some cultural and individual variation. The range of *sensations*, on the other hand, is quite a different matter, and far more open. The cinema makes possible an almost endless number of combinations of sight and sound to evoke an equally endless number of sensory impressions. To the five senses can thus be added such further perceptions as those of temperature, space and distance, weight, pressure, and texture. These should perhaps properly be considered derivative senses, from touch and vision, but they are no less distinct or real for the person experiencing them. For example, where should we place the perception of wetness or dryness, the perception of viscosity? Each surely involves something more than touch.

Then there is the question of the unevenness of our responses. I have often wondered about the variability of our sensory responses to films. Why is it that films seem much better at evoking some sensations than others? Touch and texture seem to be the most easily evoked—and smell and taste less easily so, although this varies with individuals. Most of us do not experience a sensation of sweetness when viewing a film of someone eating chocolate. Then again, certain images may arouse disgust—images of excrement, for example—but we respond as much to the idea of its

texture and other associations as to its smell. This disparity is especially puzzling when you consider that smell and taste are proximate senses—that is, they are both triggered by direct contact with some substance, whereas vision and hearing both depend upon receiving waves propagated or reflected from some more distant object. Why such a differential response should exist is one of the more intriguing questions in cinema, and one too rarely asked.

I should now like to turn to another question which emerged in my attempts to study the social aesthetics of a closed community. Several years after filming at the Doon School I made a similar study of another institution for children, this time at the opposite end of the socio-economic spectrum. It was a shelter for homeless children in New Delhi, and it housed the human cast-offs of urban and rural poverty: abandoned and orphaned children as well as children the police had picked up off the streets for minor crimes. As at the Doon School, part of my aim was to study this place as a unique sensory environment.

I had found the camera to be a useful tool for exploring such institutions. But finally this only had meaning in relation to the experiences of the people who lived there. And this kind of filming necessarily involved the human body—not only theirs but also, as I will try to show, that of the filmmaker and the viewer.

In 1906, Charles Sherrington identified a new sense which he called “proprioception” — that is, the physical awareness we have of our own bodies (Sherrington 1906). Proprioception can be a useful concept in discussing the relation between the filmmaker’s body and the bodies of the people filmed. In a film the sensory environment is evoked not only directly but also through the experiences of the film subjects. The camera evokes this subjectivity by remaining physically close to certain individuals who are being filmed. And this also requires a certain physical closeness and sympathy on the part of filmmaker. Here it is worth mentioning a notion put forward by the Viennese art historian Alois Riegl. Riegl noted the difference between “close-range” vision and long-range vision, and then proposed a connection between “close-range” vision and what he called “tactile space”—in effect, the ability of vision to evoke the sensations of touch that I discussed earlier. Riegl’s important theoretical point was that although the eye can fulfil the functions of touch, it can only do so when it enters into the space of “close-range” vision (Riegl 1987:543).

I would therefore suggest that the act of evoking sensory experience in film—and particularly the sensation of touch—leads inevitably to what I would call a “cinema of proximity.” This has two components, the first being the filmmaker’s closeness to the sources of sensation, as an extension, or as a kind of surrogate for the viewer, and secondly the filmmaker being close to the people in the film, as a means of evoking their subjective experience. Ultimately I believe the two kinds of closeness become merged in an intersubjective relationship linking the bodies of the filmmaker and the film subjects.

At this point we have moved from a comparatively simple discussion of the senses to something more elusive. In viewing films I have sometimes become profoundly aware of the physical presence of another human being—beyond anything that I can simply attribute to the film’s sensory evocation. The person’s being seems to be inscribed in the film, independent of any of the obvious intentions of the film itself.

In writing about sound recordings of music, Roland Barthes once described what he called *the grain of the voice*—an intimation of a person’s existence beneath the surface impression of that person speaking or singing (Barthes 1977). We have seen how film is capable of bringing to life a wide range of sensations beyond merely seeing and hearing. And if this is so, is it too much to suggest that film can also bring to life one other sense—that of a person’s sense of his or her own physical being?

We know from the work of V.S. Ramachandran and other neuroscientists that specialized cells in the brain—the so-called “mirror neurons”—allow us to imitate and thereby understand the point of view of other persons (Ramachandran 2010: 163 ff.). This not only allows us to have empathy for others but can also, in some cases, generate actual physical sensations in us that mirror their own. I think it is at least possible, then, that viewing another person on film can also generate a sensation of that person’s bodily existence in the body of the observer—in effect, a sharing of their proprioception.

We are on more dangerous ground here because in films this sensation of the presence of another person, which I believe is not unusual, may force us to confront an aspect of cinema that escapes from accepted ideas of filmic representation and signification. In most films the representation of human beings is nothing more than that—a visual record, comparatively neutral, comparatively conventional, comparatively predictable. It may be somewhat complicated by the expressiveness of a particular actor or by various symbolic and cultural meanings. But at other times we sense something more than this surface presentation—not simply the delineation of someone’s “character,” more or less efficiently rendered, but an independent existence outside the film and beyond its primary interests. In these images some more fundamental quality of the person persists, which we feel in our own mind and body. It is like a residue that remains when all else—all verisimilitude, all cinematic syntax, all adornment—has been stripped away. You might argue that this is nothing more than an indexical imprint of the moment of filming, which could equally well have been produced by a surveillance camera.

But I believe it depends on something that a surveillance camera would not register—a grasp of another person as a complex entity that is expressed in the filmmaker’s particular use of the camera. For this to happen, a certain affinity must exist between filmmaker and film subject, a physical and emotional closeness. Thus, if we are to speak of an embodied cinema—a cinema in which the images are deeply inflected by the encounters between filmmaker and subject—then I think we must acknowledge this persistent sense of the physical being of others as one of its defining characteristics.

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