Introduction

Nicolas Kenny, Daniel Morat & Maarten Walraven

To cite this article: Nicolas Kenny, Daniel Morat & Maarten Walraven (2017) Introduction, The Senses and Society, 12:2, 127-131, DOI: 10.1080/17458927.2017.1310452

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/17458927.2017.1310452

Published online: 16 Jun 2017.

Submit your article to this journal

Article views: 381

View related articles

View Crossmark data
Introduction

Nicolas Kenny\textsuperscript{a}, Daniel Morat\textsuperscript{b} and Maarten Walraven\textsuperscript{c}

\textsuperscript{a}Simon Fraser University, British Columbia, Canada; \textsuperscript{b}Freie Universität Berlin, Germany; \textsuperscript{c}Independent Scholar

When Richard Sennett famously deplored \textit{The Fall of Public Man} in 1977, he did so in a time of urban crisis in many parts of Europe and North America. But Sennett did not primarily blame urban flight and rising city crime rates for the decline of the urban public realm. Rather, he saw a long development of capitalism and privatization culminating in an urban design that structurally obstructed lively exchanges between city dwellers. Through the glass facades of modern skyscrapers and the windowpanes of their cars, urbanites could see each other, but they could not be in touch – literally and figuratively – with each other. Modern city planning, in Sennett’s eyes, conceived of public space as mere transitory space and not as a place for sensory and bodily interaction among strangers. Yet, according to Sennett, social interaction among strangers is vital in order to transform urban public space into a public realm. Without it, it is merely “dead public space” (Sennett 1978, 12).\textsuperscript{1} As Sennett claimed in his later work, this deadening of urban public space also led to “sensory deprivation” in an increasingly sterile and socially segregated urban environment (Sennett 1994, 15).

One does not have to share all of Sennett’s sometimes overly pessimistic views on the public space of modern cities and his Habermasian idealization of the public realm of the eighteenth-century urban coffee house in order to agree with him on the importance of sensory perception and bodily interaction for the creation of an urban public realm. Many urban renewal measures undertaken in cities around the world over the past decades have aimed to breathe new life into urban public space by making it more accessible for pedestrians and more inviting for social interactions. Symbolizing their desire to combat the perception of their cities as morbid and wasted, urban planners proudly refer to these initiatives as ‘revitalization,’ implying that abandoned, neglected and deadened spaces can now live again through new social, cultural, and economic activities. At the same time, critics of contemporary urbanization projects note that to define certain spaces as empty and dead means to whitewash the presence of certain groups in these areas and to deny the legitimacy of uses they have made of their surroundings. In many cases, the language of renewal and revitalization has come to be equated with the removal and dispossession of poor, indigenous, minority or otherwise marginalized populations in order to satisfy middle-class conceptions of appropriate uses of urban space. Indeed, the creation of urban pedestrian zones, public markets or historical districts have tended to cater to the desires and tastes of affluent residents and tourists, creating a sensorial environment and expectations of bodily deportment that are appealing to a public with the means to enjoy it, while excluding from these
areas of the city, either forcefully or subtly, those whose identities do not correspond to this ideal (Ley 1995; Smith 1996; Blomley 2004; Osman 2011).

These recent developments, and the tensions they engender, make clear that one should not buy into the historical narrative of the rise and fall of a lively and sensuous urban public realm too easily. What these debates reveal is that rather than following a single historical trajectory, the spaces inhabited by urban dwellers and the sensory experiences through which they have experienced these spaces, and given them meaning, have crystalized in countless ways across times and in cities around the world. It is this interaction between embodied individuals and the material spaces they occupy on one hand, and the ensuing discourse about the form the city should take on the other, that produces the urban public realm. This is a realm that is both physical and symbolic, characterized at once by community and conflict. As the articles in this special issue demonstrate, the very notion of urban public space is a deeply contentious and contested one, involving competing claims to the city, to how it should be used and to who should have access to which parts of it. By interrogating the way urban dwellers have moved through their cities – walking, writing, dreaming, remembering, shopping, and even rioting – these papers show how the senses intervene in shaping these spaces in which diverse publics come together to forge urban society.

With this in mind, the articles gathered in this special issue turn to the question of how the senses and the public space of the city shape one another in four different case studies that span the late eighteenth century to the present. In light of growing scholarly interest in the historical specificities of sensorial experiences in various times and places, they reflect on the ways in which the construction of public space is fundamentally bound up to people’s bodily engagement with the urban environment. Sensing, the action of our eyes, ears, nose, mouth and skin is an intimate and personal experience, through which we navigate the world we inhabit. At the same time, sensing is an eminently public phenomenon, the meaning associated with different sights, smells and sounds governed by social and cultural context. As the sociologist Henri Lefebvre has noted, the connections human beings develop with space by seeing, hearing, touching, and even tasting it are fundamental, ‘anthropological’ elements of the ‘social needs inherent to urban society’ through which individuals define their place in the city and lay their claim to feeling at home within it (Lefebvre 1996, 147).

How these sensory experiences, privately felt but publically mediated, inform ideas and decisions about the construction, use and symbolism of urban public space is the underlying question of this special issue. In light of the works of sociologists and geographers – such as Henri Lefebvre (1991), David Harvey (1989), Martina Löw (2001) or Yi-Fu Tuan (1977) – who stress the social construction of space, the articles collected here investigate the bodily and sensory practices involved in this process. They builds on previous work on the city and the senses (Adams and Guy 2007; Cowan and Steward 2007; Urry 2000; Zardini 2005; Diaconu et al. 2011; Kenny 2014) and ask how the particular layout, form and human interactions within cities produce the sensory experiences through which people find meaning in urban public spaces. Throughout the articles, we see how specific and extraordinary events, such as a riot, or the day-to-day interactions of literary flaneurs and ordinary walkers, give rise to experiences and interactions that stimulate all of the senses. In some cases, urban dwellers derive significance from their movement through and contact with the city, and with those with whom they coexist within it. In other cases, however, we see how urban spaces, particularly those designed for commerce and consumption, are designed to produce and privilege specific sets of sensory experiences, which are in turn interpreted according to
larger social and political processes. Though each treating distinct cities and different historical contexts, these articles, taken together, vividly illustrate how the function of public space in fostering human interactions and gatherings, political debate and violence, leisure and consumption, or simply observation and reflection, is determined by its sensory qualities.

We begin in Copenhagen in the winter of 1793 when an argument over a student’s perceived lack of respect toward a military officer as the two passed each other on the street degenerated into a short but violent riot marked by the storming of the post office and city hall, an attack on the Chief of Police, followed by violent police and military repression. Drawing on the concept of intersensoriality, and on recent emotions history literature, Ulrik Langen analyses what became known as the Post Office Feud through the lens of the powerful sensorial and emotional experiences created by the uprising. As Langen argues, both the attempt to regulate public space, as well as the breakdown in social order that this riot symbolised, were bound to the ways in which the city was sensed. When loud noises, frightening sights, and violent physical contact erupted, the resulting mayhem and repression challenged accepted uses and understanding of public space and gave rise to fear, anger and panic, resulting in tighter police control and diminished individual liberty in the city. Two centuries later, the intense sensory experiences associated with urban public space would remain deeply imbued with political meaning. As Lauren Pikó demonstrates in her analysis of the shopping centre and cinema multiplex opened during the late 1970s and 1980s in the English new town of Milton Keynes, the meanings attributed to sensory ‘overwhelm’ to which these spaces gave rise changed in response to the shifting British political landscape of the period. Operating in the midst of the neoliberal turn initiated by the Thatcher government, the town’s promoters seized upon the individualistic and consumer-oriented discourse of the period to rebrand the image of these spaces of consumption, and of the town as a whole. Through a close reading of the advertising and marketing materials produced by the town’s development corporation, Pikó shows how this organisation was able to counteract critiques of Milton Keynes that represented the town alternatively as a failed experiment in technocratic, socialist urban planning, or as a desensitising and dehumanising space of sensory overload. By recasting the sensory experiences produced by the mall and the cinema, the public spaces of Milton Keynes became associated with private and pleasurable sensations, favouring consumerism and thereby more amenable to the dominant ideological precepts of the day.

While the urban sensorial musings of the literary greats that Estelle Murail analyses remained more serene, though not necessarily less troubling, she too emphasises how the meanings attributed to public space derive from intersection of all of the senses. As Murail points out, the predominant image of the masculine flaneur assessing the city primarily through his sense of sight is complicated by the writings of women who sensed and observed the city differently from their male counterparts, as well as by the fact that both male and female observers used their entire bodies to interpret the urban spaces they inhabited. Analysing the writings of Balzac, Dickens, Woolf, and Charlotte Brontë, Murail seeks to ‘resensualise’ the flaneur. Flanerie – observing the movement and flow of the city and recording these impressions in writing – was the product of a complex interaction between the eye, the mind, and the body, she notes. By considering the body of the flaneur as a ‘seismograph’ that records the impressions it receives as it moves through urban space, Murail demonstrates how these sensory experiences ‘endlessly reconfigure the construction of the city.’
Once again, the articles gathered in this special issue speak to the historical continuities underlying the way sensory experiences shape the meaning of urban public space. Though the social and cultural contexts are different, and the people whose sensory experiences we hear are anonymous, Dimitra Kanellopoulou’s contribution explores how the act of walking remains central to the formation of personal narratives through which the city is rendered meaningful and imbues the identities of its inhabitants. Strolling through the streets of contemporary Athens with six different individuals, Kanellopoulou reflects on the social dimension of walking, and, following Certeau and other theorists, examines the shared negotiations and meanings through which walking participates in forging the public realm of the city. By listening to her participants describe the ways in which walking makes them ‘feel’ the city, Kanellopoulou delves into the complex assortment of rhythms, emotions, memories, annoyances, routines, surprises and interpersonal encounters through which walking makes the shared spaces of daily life come alive. In a city long planned around the perceived supremacy of the automobile, where pedestrian friendly areas have typically been limited to the historic centre, the case of Athens reminds us of the ways the legacies of the past are felt, sensorially and emotionally, in the present, and how they can be reimagined to make the cities of the future more accessible and inclusive.

Each of these articles tells a distinct story rooted in unique historical circumstances. Collectively, however, they show us how living human bodies infuse the urban public spaces they traverse and occupy with life and vitality, often in defiance of the intended uses of these spaces. Through conflict and conciliation, contemplation and consumption, urban dwellers rely on their senses to understand, navigate, and lay claim to their cities. The lessons we learn from these past experiences can, we hope, nourish our reflections on the organisation and transformation of public space in the cities of today and tomorrow.

Note

1. In a similar vein, Lyn H. Lofland defines the public realm of the city as a “world of strangers”, distinguishing it not only from the private realm of the household, but also from the “parochial realm” of neighborhoods and urban communities. Whereas villages and small towns “are composed simply of the private and the parochial realms”, the public realm is “the city’s quintessential social territory” (Lofland 1998, 9–10).

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Notes on contributors

Nicolas Kenny is a member of the History Department at Simon Fraser University. His research examines sensorial and emotional interactions with urban space in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, with a particular emphasis on Montreal and Brussels. He is the author of The Feel of The City: Experiences of Urban Transformation (University of Toronto Press, 2014) and co-editor, with Rebecca Madgin, of Cities Beyond Borders: Comparative and Transnational Approaches to Urban History (Ashgate, 2015).

Daniel Morat is a research fellow and lecturer at the History Department of the Free University Berlin. He received his Dr. Phil. at the University of Göttingen in 2006. His major research interests are urban history, history of the senses, intellectual history, and public history. He is currently writing a book on ‘Acoustic Mobilization and Political Communication in Imperial Berlin, 1890–1918’.
Maarten Walraven is a channel manager for Stingray EMEA, working on the programming for a variety of channels such as Classica, DJAZZ & Festival 4K. His academic research interests focus on the sounds of everyday life and work and the importance of their role on the organization of urban space and social order.

References