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Sarah Pink, Doing Sensory Ethnography. London, Thousand Oaks, New Delhi, Singapore: Sage, 2009, 184 pp.

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Once upon a time, there was ethnography. It was a methodology rooted in cultural anthropology and its distinctive features was the observation of persons in their “territory,” and the sharing by the researcher of the entire social environment to which “natives” belonged. However (so the story goes), early ethnographic studies started from a functional idea of culture as an internally homogeneous and coherent “system of integration.” Moreover, they were influenced by a Eurocentrism that defined itself as “normal” and accordingly investigated the “abnormality” of other cultures. Finally, the main sensory faculty used was sight: events were “true” because the researcher “saw” them. In fact, whereas taste or touch require first-person participation and involvement, sight introduces distance and guarantees objectivity.

But then, after half a century, the “interpretative turn” made its appearance. Mingling ethnography with phenomenology, symbolic interactionism and semiotics, ethnographers began to look at culture as a negotiated order, constantly created and recreated in (and through) rituals and interactions. The purpose was to catch the fluidity of culture, now framed in terms of a net of interrelated symbols, interpretations and meanings. Sight was still the main sensory faculty implied, but a certain attention for the ways in which the researcher experiences the field (and accounts for the fieldwork) began to raise.

Almost automatically, in a few years, this took to another turn, so called “linguistic.” The point of departure for this new programme of research was that of a conceptual recasting of ethnography from a research method to the product of a process of meaning-attributions, in that every ethnographic account weaves together the different views, voices, actions and rhetorics that combine to yield a plausible definition of “reality.” Thus, ethnographic methodology became a “toolbox,” a lens of inquiry that may develop step by step on the basis of critical reflection on given situations. Its result is a polyphonous and cooperative text, where the focus of attention is on the ongoing interactive processes.

Probably because of the attention devoted to language and to the idea of the researcher as a bricoleur, suddenly another ‘turn’ was invoked. This time (a short time ago), a “reflexive turn” seemed to invest ethnography (and qualitative methodologies at large), so that ethnographies (and ethnographers) concentrated more and more on the subjective dimension of fieldwork, making ethnographic accounts an open arena of experimentation and discussion. But in many cases the attention for the reflexive dimension of fieldworking and note taking took also to embracing a kind of cognitive stance toward everyday life: it was like if interpretation (and even events, sometimes) could take place only through researchers’ reflections and critical understanding of their experience.

Notwithstanding the reflexive process intrinsic in doing ethnography, but as a way to enhance it even more, the book by Sarah Pink calls for a renewed attention for the sensorial dimension of ethnographic experiences, accounts, interpretations and texts. But what does it mean to develop a “sensual methodology” and how to practice it?

To answer these two questions, the author proposes some theoretical and methodological suggestions, mainly referring to the “ecological approach” gradually emerging

at the crossroads of different studies and fields of knowledge (anthropology, sociology, human geography, cultural studies). From this point of view, readers should be warned: this book is not just about ethnographic methodology and techniques, but an exploration of the relationship between sensory perception and culture, with a strong emphasis on the material and sensorial practices involved in knowing processes. Thus, it is a book about how to engage ethnographic research through the senses, more than a dissertation on the ways in which senses should be implied while fieldworking. From this perspective, as Sarah Pink writes [p. 4], the book is programmatic but not prescriptive: “I do not propose a ‘how to’ account of doing ethnography with the senses in mind, but a framework for a sensory ethnography that can serve as a reference point for future development and creativity.”

Instead of discussing sensory categories chapter by chapter, thus, the book is structured through a series of chapters addressing issues and questions relating to ethnographic methods and practices. The first part (“Rethinking ethnography through the senses”) presents the theoretical background and the conceptual tools that define sensory ethnography, situating them in relation to debates about ethnographic method and key theoretical issues; the second one concentrates on doing fieldwork (observing, interviewing and using visuals and media), challenging, revising and rethinking ethnographic practices through the senses; the last part is dedicated on data interpretation and representation, exploring solutions different from the textual one (e.g. visual and audio representations) in order to account for the research process and results.

Although the structure is very similar to that of a traditional textbook on ethnographic methodology, chapters’ contents are quite different from conventional ones. Extensively referring to Gibson’s and Ingold’s ecological approach, as well as to Massey’s human geography, Sarah Pink stresses the inextricable and reflexive connection between action and environment, subject and object, agency and structure, space and time, the self and the senses. This means not only that ethnography is conceptualised as a knowing process, a practical and situated activity, but also as a form of place-making, a process where aesthetic perceptions, sensory memories and imaginaries are at their full force, as the ethnographer tries to account for the phenomenon (and/or the social world) s/he is facing. From an ecological and sensuous standpoint, in fact, subjects make sense of the social “flirting” with it, more than interpreting it, so that perception itself is an activity, more than a requirement for action: the meaning of ‘something’ is not the result of a (cognitive) act of interpretation, but it is rooted in the pattern of practical activities in which the subject and that “thing” are emplaced. To be noted here is also the notion of “emplacement,” which (in the author’s opinion) supersedes that of “embodiment.” In order to go beyond the limits of a body-mind relationship, Pink writes, “I propose an emplaced ethnography that attends to the question of experience by accounting for the relationships between body, minds and the materiality and sensoriality of the environment” [p. 25].

In this idea of ethnography as a theory of place and place-making the book finds probably its most original side and contribution. Introducing the notion of ‘ethnographic places’, Sarah Pink wants to stress the generative and active role ethnographers (and ethnographic representations) perform when communicating about their research. Ethnographic places are not the same actual ones researchers participate in during the field-

work. But they can become actual and “real” in relation to readers, in that the aim of a sensory ethnography is also to invite readers to imagine and situate themselves into the places of both the ethnographers and the research participants represented.

The notion of ethnographic places, thus, contains also an explicit suggestion concerning ethnographic accounts and representations: in a move toward sensoriality, these should be able to switch between different media (a book, a film, an exhibition of scents, pictures, a musical composition) and probably to combine these according to the kind of audience (and representation) ethnographers aim to reach. The established method of academic writing, in particular, is judged by the author as too narrow to enhance ethnographic understandings, participation and representations, so that in the last chapter the reader can find a whole set of alternatives. Given her previous work, Sarah Pink is particularly committed to audio-visual ones, but she also gives examples of how sounds and olfaction can be implied. Besides the sense involved, the call is for an experimentation and appropriation of arts practice techniques, in accordance with the idea that if the written word is the most embedded and developed form of ethnographic representation, artistic representations and performances “might create a sense of intimacy sufficiently powerful to invite empathetic understandings and communicate experiential knowing to audiences” [p. 134].

Finally, the notion of ethnographic places has evidently some consequences also in relation to data collection and interpretation. In ethnography, sight has always constituted the privileged sense for capturing data, as well as analysis has always been seen as a process of abstraction based on the distance that the researcher takes toward the fieldnotes. But reframing ethnography through the senses implies exactly an opposite attitude.

Data are in fact “capta,” in that ethnographers are at work with their whole body, so to become ‘sensory apprentices’. Experiencing the sensory rhythms and material practices of an environment, the ethnographer has the chance not only to participate, but to “be there,” understanding everyday practices through sound, taste, touch and smell. This is (in the opinion of the author) a case of “serendipitous sensory learning” [p. 65], which can invite researchers to analyse from new perspectives what might, on the surface, seem to be standard and/or familiar everyday practices. Activating the senses is thus another strategy for ethnographers to question themselves, their fieldnotes, understandings and interpretations, because as Simmel already noted one century ago, sensory engagements are as much intersubjective processes as they are personal ones. They emerge in the course of interactions and engender a particular, intimate kind of sociability: “Sharing or creating a walking rhythm with other people” – writes Sarah Pink quoting Lee and Ingold – “can lead to a very particular closeness and bond between the people involved. (...) Shared walking produces ‘closeness’, demonstrating how social interaction during walking is a fully bodily experience” [p. 77].

In the same way, when interpreting their fieldnotes, ethnographers could try not just to distance from them, but also to move closer to their experience, using their senses in order to recall and meaningfully interpreting it. At the same time (as it has always been stressed in ethnography), analysing data is not an activity isolated from experience or from the researcher’s embodied (or, better, “emplaced”) knowledge. Analysis does not just happen cognitively, in our heads, but involves all our corporeality and configures

itself as an articulation of the emplaced knowledge reached and produced by the ethnographer. In this respect, a sensory ethnography explicitly seeks to maintain (or construct) connections between the materials and the ways of knowing associated with their production, enabling researchers to evoke and re-encounter the sensorial and emotional reality of research situations.

Personally, I would highly recommend *Doing Sensory Ethnography* to readers and researchers interested in exploring the role that aesthetics and tacit knowledge play in everyday life and in the making of ethnography. At the same time, I would also say this book could be of great interest for those interested in the sociomaterial encounters that perform space, place and time. And I would also say this book certainly represents a useful compendium of the more recent debate on ethnography as a situated, reflexive, emplaced and performative method and on the “tricks of the trade” of such an approach.

At the same time, precisely those attuned with such debates, would probably express some critiques. A very simple one could be: in what way does a sensory ethnography differ from an auto-ethnography, given that ethnographers’ experience is central to both of them? The author mentions just once the “closeness” of these two approaches [p. 64], but curiously without giving any clue to motivate the distinction.

Other critiques could concern the theoretical references. Although full of references, the author never confronts with some very central and influential works, like the one by Polanyi on aesthetic knowledge, Wacquant’s ethnography on embodiment and “carnal connections,” Goodwin’s work on the making of a “professional vision,” Sudnow’s ethnomethodological study on learning to play the piano, not to mention the entire field of gender and feminist studies (which have always devoted attention to the body-knowledge relation).

Finally, one could argue that audio-visual research techniques are already well established in ethnographic practice and that the key issue regarding ethnographic accounts and representations could be framed (in a few words) as follows: what is left of “ethnography” when the practice of writing (Latin, *grafia*) about culture (Greek, *ethnos*) is substituted by a multimedia representation of specific practices based on sensory arts practice? But this is the old “etcetera problem,” meaning that like any description of a concrete object, event, or course of action, however long, will always miss “something,” in reading (and reviewing) a book there will always be the possibility to remark that “something” is missed. By the way, this is the value added by meaningful works: to activate readers and raise a debate.

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