

TIM INGOLD

## Worlds of sense and sensing the world: a response to Sarah Pink and David Howes

In a recent debate with Sarah Pink in the pages of *Social Anthropology*, concerning the prospects for an anthropology that would highlight the work of the senses in human experience, David Howes objects to what I have myself written on this topic, specifically in my book *The Perception of the Environment* (Ingold 2000). In doing so, he distorts my arguments on six counts. In this brief response, I set the record straight on each count, and argue for a regrouping of the virtual worlds of sense, to which Howes directs our attention, in the practicalities of sensing the world.

**Key words** perception, anthropology of the senses, phenomenology, visual studies, culture

In a recent issue of *Social Anthropology* (18[3]: 331–40, 2010), Sarah Pink and David Howes debate the potential for an anthropology that attends to the work of the senses in human perception, action and experience. Pink calls this *sensory anthropology*, and is keen to show how it takes us beyond the *anthropology of the senses* that has been energetically promoted by Howes and his collaborators over the last two decades and more. In the course of their debate, both Pink and Howes refer to a chapter, entitled ‘Stop, look and listen!’, which I wrote for my book *The Perception of the Environment* (Ingold 2000: 243–87). But whereas Pink cites the chapter in support of her argument, for Howes it clearly strikes a raw nerve, for he proceeds to launch into a catalogue of disagreements, as though the mere citation of my work were enough to render Pink guilty by association of all the sins and errors he attributes to me. I, likewise, am condemned for referring to the work of Maurice Merleau-Ponty. With Howes, you have to be careful whom you cite, because if they happen to be on his hit list, you’re fired! Since, in the course of delivering his verdict, and not for the first time (e.g., 2003: 239–40, n.8), Howes has distorted my arguments almost beyond recognition, I would like to take this opportunity to set the record straight.

First, Howes asserts as a fact that the ‘environment’ I posit in *The Perception of the Environment* is ‘one in which you can look, listen, and are always on the move, but not taste or smell’ (Ingold 2010: 335). This is simply false. It is true that I chose to focus in ‘Stop, look and listen!’ on visual and aural perception and the relation between them (a relation in which touch and feeling are also implicated). This does not however rule out taste and smell. I do not subscribe to the Aristotelian hierarchisation of the senses, and there is nothing in my argument to suggest that I do. My aim was

to critique the reduction of vision to the triadic relation between objects, images and their interpretations – a reduction that is ubiquitous both in the anthropology of the senses and in visual studies more generally – and to show not only that as a mode of active, exploratory engagement with the environment, looking is akin to listening, but also that just as hearing is an experience of sound, so seeing is an experience of light. Understood as looking (or watching) and seeing, vision has much more in common with audition than is often supposed, and for that matter also with gustation and olfaction. Had I focused more on the latter, it would only have reinforced my argument.

Second, Howes contends that the ‘purely phenomenological perspective’ to which I am allegedly wedded universalises the ‘subjective sensations of the individual’ and thus gives priority to ‘the individual and the subjective over the communal and social’ (Howes and Pink 2010: 335). This is nonsense. In my book I go to great lengths to refute the notion of the human (or non-human) being as an individual subject bombarded by sensation-inducing sensory stimuli from the external environment, and with it the idea – to which Howes himself subscribes – that in order to ‘make sense’ of the world, these induced sensations have to be cognitively assembled (or ‘constructed’) in terms of received cultural categories. Howes appears incapable of thinking outside the box of a representational theory of knowledge production whose walls are set up by the dichotomies between subject and object, between individual and social, and between object and image. My purpose, to the contrary, has been to dismantle the box, starting from the premise that every living being is a particular nexus of growth and development within a field of relations. Skills of perception and action, I argue, emerge within these processes of ontogenetic development. It is because these skills differ from being to being, depending on where they stand in relation to others, that they perceive the environment in different ways.

Third, Howes alleges that from a phenomenological standpoint, ‘culturally informed practices that differ from one’s own are inaccessible’ (ibid.). In truth, they would be inaccessible only if one’s own self and the selves of others were individual subjects of the kind that Howes imagines subjects to be: each locked in a private world of sensations, such that they can communicate with one another, and share their experiences and understandings, only by framing these sensations within a system of collective representations common to a community and validated by verbal convention. If that were indeed the case, then an ethnographer wishing to access the experiences and understandings of people of another culture, and not initially privy to their representations, would face a dilemma akin to that of the would-be map-reader who needs a key to read the map, but has to be able to read the map in order to decipher the key. He or she could never get off the starting block (Ingold 2001: 117). In reality, of course, this dilemma is readily circumvented by means of participant observation, which allows the ethnographer to access other people’s ways of perceiving by joining with them in the same currents of practical activity, and by learning to attend to things – as would any novice practitioner – in terms of what they afford in the contexts of what has to be done. This communion of experience establishes a baseline of sociality on which all attempts at verbal communication subsequently build. It is what makes anthropological fieldwork possible (Ingold 1993: 222–3).

Fourth, Howes (Howes and Pink 2010: 335) maintains that I rely on Merleau-Ponty, and proceeds to vent his objections to the latter as though that were sufficient to invalidate my arguments. In fact I ground my argument in a triangulation of the works

of three theorists, of which Merleau-Ponty is but one (Ingold 2000: 258–66). The others are Hans Jonas (1966) and James Gibson (1979). All three, in different ways, reject the representational theory of knowledge on which Howes founds his anthropology of the senses. That Howes's anthropology is so founded is apparent from the way he reifies 'the senses' as bodily registers that convey messages to the mind of the perceiver. Sometimes, he says, the messages sent by different registers may be contradictory: thus the senses can conflict as well as collaborate. They may even fight with each other (Howes and Pink 2010: 336)! Of course we are sometimes caught out. Appearances can be deceptive. This is not, however, because the mind has to piece together information about external objects delivered by way of different registers. For the senses are not keyboards or filters that mediate the traffic between mind and world. They are rather – as Gibson (1966) always insisted – aspects of the functioning of the living being in its environment. And their synergy lies in the fact of their being powers of the same organism, engaged in the same action, and attending to the same world (see also Merleau-Ponty 1962: 317–18). If we are occasionally deceived, it is because what we find there does not always match our expectations.

Fifth, Howes holds as sacrosanct the principle that as anthropologists, we should attend to and respect indigenous understandings of perception. 'The way should always be left open', he says, 'for indigenous paradigms of perception to "break through" anthropological or philosophical or neurological models of perception' (Howes and Pink 2010: 340). I agree. Howes's anthropological model of perception, however, does precisely the opposite. By insisting that every indigenous paradigm is itself a 'product of culture', he effectively neutralises any challenge it might present to his own approach. As just another cultural product, it can be enlisted as grist to the mill of a universalist and universalising comparative project. Indeed, despite fervent avowals to the contrary, Howes appears to have no more regard for indigenous paradigms than he does for contemporary neuroscience. 'It is important to keep in mind that neuroscience is itself a product of culture', he loftily declares, 'and therefore cannot provide an a-cultural, a-historical paradigm for understanding cultural phenomena' (ibid.: 335). In that case, the same must be true of all indigenous understandings as well. Indeed, it is hard to imagine any paradigm that could be less cultural, and less historical, than one which assumes that everyone else's paradigm, whether indigenous person or scientist, is a product of cultural history.

Finally, and following from this, we find Howes's unequivocal assertion that 'perception is a cultural construct' (ibid.). This literally gives the game away. For an anthropology of the senses that starts from the premise that perception consists in the cultural modelling of received bodily sensations can have nothing to say about how people practically look, listen, touch, taste and sniff as they go about their business. On the other hand, it has everything to say about how experiences of seeing, hearing, feeling and so on feed the imagination and infuse its discursive and literary expressions. In the very objectification of the senses, as things one can have an anthropological study of, it seems that the eyes, ears and skin are no longer to be regarded as organs of a body that, as it makes its way in the world, attentively looks, listens and feels where it is going. On the contrary, they become instruments of playback, capturing moments of experience and relaying them to a reflexive consciousness for subsequent review and interpretation. In this shift of focus, from how people sense the real world they inhabit to how they inhabit virtual worlds of sense, the anthropology of the senses has followed a path already well trodden in the study of what has come to be known

as 'visual culture', within the context of a wider intellectual trend that propelled the inflationary expansion of cultural studies.

For students of visual culture, seeing apparently has nothing to do with observation, with looking around in the environment or watching what is going on. Nor does it have anything to do with the experience of illumination that makes these activities possible. It rather has to do, narrowly and exclusively, with the perusal of images (Elkins 2003: 7). Where there are no images to view, there is no vision. It is as though the eyes opened not upon the world itself, but upon a simulacrum of the world whose objects already bear witness to the experience of sight and return that experience to us in our gaze. Cut adrift in this world of images, in which all one can ever see is itself a reflex of vision, the viewer seems blind to the world itself. A principal claim of the anthropology of the senses, of course, is to have dethroned vision from the sovereign position it had allegedly held in the intellectual pantheon of the western world, and to highlight the contributions of other, non-visual sensory modalities, above all to the sensory formations of non-western peoples. It is, therefore, ironic that in 'rediscovering' these modalities – of hearing, touch, smell and so on – anthropologists of the senses such as Howes have implemented exactly the same manoeuvre as have their intellectual bedfellows in the study of visual culture. To the worlds of images conjured up by the latter, they have simply added worlds of sounds, of feelings and of smells.

A symptom of this manoeuvre is the multiplication of 'scapes' of every possible kind. If the eyes return the world to us in its visual image, conceived in art-historical terms as landscape, then likewise the ears reveal a soundscape, the skin a touchscape, the nose a smellscape, and so on. In reality, of course, the environment that people inhabit is not sliced up along the lines of the sensory pathways by which they access it. It is the *same* world, whatever paths they take. But these multiple 'scapes' do not refer to the practically and productively inhabited world. They refer to the virtual worlds conjured up by capturing the embodied, perceptual experiences of habitation and rendering them back, in artificially purified forms, for interpretation and consumption. The gap between perceptual practice and sensory imagination thus remains as wide as ever. In writing 'Stop, look and listen!', I attempted to close this gap, by showing how what has been thought and written *in terms* of the senses is necessarily embedded in real-life practices of looking, listening and feeling. Howes has greeted this attempt with outright hostility, if not dismissal, declaring that the very worst thing anthropologists could do is base their analyses on the models of 'perceptual systems' proposed by psychologists such as Gibson or philosophers such as Merleau-Ponty (Howes 2003: 49–50).

It is obvious whom Howes has in his sights here! For him, anyone interested in vision and how it works, myself included, is automatically guilty of 'epistemological imperialism' (2003: 240). The accusation is of course ludicrous. Eyesight is quite obviously important to most human beings everywhere, and to accuse anyone who chooses to write about it of having succumbed to western ocularcentrism is about as absurd as banning research on human toolmaking and tool-use on the grounds that it amounts to collusion in the modernist project of technological world-domination! Though I would not be so foolish as to claim to be entirely free from bias, whatever biases come with studies of the ways people use their eyes, ears and skin to perceive, or of the ways they use tools to act, pale into insignificance beside the imperialism inherent in a comparative project that locks the ways of thinking and knowing of 'indigenous cultures' into closed sensory epistemologies that are held up to the overarching purview of the all-seeing, all-knowing western anthropologist. This is the project that Howes

proposes in the name of the anthropology of the senses. The philosophies he so stridently denounces are precisely those that have the potential to take us beyond such an abject cultural relativism towards the recognition that if people differ in the ways they perceive the world, it is precisely because of what they all share, namely their existential grounding in the one world that they, and we, inhabit. To reground the anthropology of the senses, our first priority must be to restore the virtual worlds of sense to the practicalities of our sensing of the world.

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DAVID HOWES

## Reply to Tim Ingold

As a long-standing critic of interpretive or textual approaches to anthropology, I am bemused to find myself ranged by Tim Ingold with those who give primacy to 'discursive and literary expressions'. While I cannot agree with Ingold's characterisation of my position, however, I do consider him to be right in signalling that there are fundamental differences between our approaches to the anthropology of the senses.

Ingold is heavily indebted to Maurice Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of the body and to James Gibson's ecological psychology. From the former he draws (among other things) the notion of the universality of human corporeal experience, and from the latter the idea of the importance of the 'affordances', or possibilities for action, presented by the environment. His anthropology of the senses is concerned, not with 'collective representations' but with how 'people practically look, listen, touch, taste and sniff as they go about their business'.

Ingold's approach has the appeal of being seemingly straightforward and practical, which is not to suggest that he has not put a great deal of effort into elaborating it. However, there is much that I consider to be essential to the anthropology of the senses that is omitted in Ingold's anthropology of the senses. For example, one need not take indigenous theories of what the senses are and how they work into consideration. One can simply agree with Ingold's quasi-truism that 'as a mode of active, exploratory engagement with the environment . . . hearing is an experience of sound [and] sight is an experience of light'. In fact, attending to indigenous epistemologies would display 'abject cultural relativism' according to Ingold. This leaves the anthropologist free to rely on his or her (or Ingold's) own understanding of the nature of perception.

Neither need one trouble with attending to those senses which have customarily been denigrated as 'lower' in the West, particularly smell and taste. For, as Ingold explains in defence of his having little to say about these senses in *The Perception of the Environment*, all of the senses are very similar to each other: 'Vision has much more in common with audition than is often supposed, and for that matter also with gustation and olfaction.' If he *had* considered smell and taste, he asserts, 'it would only have reinforced my argument'. Hence there seems no necessity to take these 'marginal' senses into consideration at all. But, one might ask, may not different senses sometimes convey significantly different information? Not really, Ingold answers, for the senses work together in 'synergy', all 'engaged in the same action'.

Another feature of Ingold's approach (and one which potentially represents another big saving of time and energy) is that it relieves the anthropologist of the need to delve into such fields as religion or aesthetics or take any symbolic systems into account. These fields carry little weight for Ingold whose anthropology of the senses is limited to what he calls practical skills and who, in any case, holds that one learns by doing not by mental engagement. Thus, the often-difficult task of understanding a people's 'system of collective representations' can, Ingold assures us, be 'readily circumvented by means of participant observation which allows the ethnographer to access other people's ways of perceiving by joining with them in the same currents of practical activity.' With this in mind, the Andean weaver who wishes her apprentices to spend days learning the symbolism of designs and colours (Bastien, 1985: 109) can simply be told: 'Never mind all that, let us just get down to the practical business of weaving!' If you were to be so 'impractical' as to employ this approach to religious practices you could likewise say (for instance) to the Christian priest who wishes to instruct you in some basic principles prior to your first Communion: 'No need. Let us take Communion at once and I will learn as we go along.'

Unfortunately, life is not that simple. What if in the process of exploring the environment with all one's senses one were to ingest a hallucinogenic plant and experience visions? Sight here cannot be defined as 'an experience of light' (nor hallucinatory hearing as 'an experience of sound' and so forth). Yet it nonetheless can be, and is in many cultures, profoundly influential. A similar point could be made about dreams. Ingold might argue that these experiences do not properly involve the senses but rather the mind, yet the peoples involved often make no such distinction.

The notion that the senses are all basically the same and all engaged in the same actions similarly belies the diversity of human perceptual experience. To give basic examples which will be familiar to many readers, what of drinking coffee while talking on the telephone, dressing while watching television, or doodling while listening to a lecture? The senses are not in these cases all engaged in the same action, all reinforcing each other by providing the perceiver with variations on a single theme. If one were to focus on just the visual or the auditory one would evidently miss a good deal of what was going on.

One may experience contrasting sensations even when engaged in a single act. This is not just a matter of being 'caught out' as Ingold puts it, as though one of our senses were playing a joke on us. It is a matter of sensory and social reality being complex, multi-faceted, and even at times, at least from the perspective of the perceiver, discordant.

One will also miss a good deal of what is going on in the perceptual life of a society if one confines oneself to the study of the senses as employed in practical skills. While the Inuit, for example, highly value sight for hunting and other activities, hearing has a particular cultural importance for them in that they hold that the world was created by sound. To gain a full understanding of the life of the senses in any particular society one must investigate a range of domains, including practical activities, but also religious rites and beliefs, forms of social organisation, modes of communication, aesthetic representations, and so on (Howes and Classen 1991). Similarly, while participant-observation is a central anthropological technique, it needs to be supplemented with an understanding of the particular significance an act or sensation or representation has for the people concerned. Sometimes this comes out in the doing but sometimes information must be sought elsewhere.

Even when a sensory anthropologist is determined to restrict the field of study to practical actions, difficulties will arise when a phenomenological approach is employed. Ingold, for example, has written on the practical importance of vision in hunting. The Cashinahua of Peru, however, attribute their skill at hunting to the cultivation of what they call 'skin knowledge' and 'hand knowledge'. As far as they are concerned, 'eye knowledge' has little to do with it (Kensinger 1995: 239–43). This example points to the fact that, while many experiences may be shared and understood similarly across cultures, the possibility of significant differences in ways of sensing and making sense must also be taken into account.

It is, therefore, not true that it is unnecessary to attend to indigenous representations of perception because the fundamental universality of human corporeal experience will nonetheless allow us to share the same perceptual experiences with others. Instead, what will happen is that one will fall back on one's own cultural and personal understanding of what and how one is perceiving and interpret one's experiences accordingly. Indeed the notion that due to our 'existential grounding in one world' we all share the same experiences easily becomes a stepping stone to presenting one's own experiences as normative, as we see time and again in Ingold's own work. This is why it is necessary to move beyond a phenomenology of perception which speaks simplistically of 'sensing the world' (Ingold) to an understanding of perception which allows for the cultivation of '*ways of sensing the world*' (Howes 2003: 32–34).

Another potential difficulty for the anthropologist focusing on practical skills is establishing which actions are to count as practical. An anthropologist must be very adept (as well as heedless to what a particular people regard as being 'practical') to separate such things as symbolic agricultural rituals from practical acts of farming, particularly when the two may overlap in the same act (e.g., first harvest). A good example of the difficulty of separating out the life of the senses in this fashion comes from the Desana of Colombia. The Desana continuously sniff the air as they walk through their rainforest habitat. They say they do this to detect scent trails laid down by neighbouring peoples (Classen *et al.* 1994: 98–99). Are they, by picking up on smells present in their environment, taking advantage of an olfactory affordance? Are they practising a perceptual skill which is of particular use in their environment – just as listening and watching for traffic are of particular use in an urban setting? Or is the idea that the Desana can detect human scent trails rather a collective representation, similar to their notion that odours can be perceived with the whole body? Is this, according to Ingold's division of the field, an example of 'sensing the world', and therefore to be studied by the sensory anthropologist? Or is it part of a 'world of sense' and therefore to be eschewed? Who is to tell? The 'sensible' Western scholar, trained in ecological psychology and confident of the universality of human corporeal experience?

A critique levelled by Ingold at the anthropology of the senses is that it 'slices up' a unified perceptual world into separate sensory domains. One could equally well argue, however, that Ingold 'slices' up the world by insisting on separating practical action from all other human endeavours. In my book *Sensual Relations* (Howes 2003), as well as elsewhere, I have emphasised the importance of understanding the interplay of the senses and not simply looking at each sense in isolation. I nonetheless accept that it can be useful to highlight a particular sensory field in order to bring out its distinct characteristics or to redress an imbalance created by its customary omission in scholarship. If it is unacceptable to divide sensation in this way, then let us be consistent and say, for example, that engaging in women's studies is also unacceptable because in



reality women's actions cannot be separated from men's actions, or that the study of art history is unacceptable because aesthetic representations cannot be divorced from the totality of imagery present in the environment.

Ingold claims that I hold 'anyone interested in vision' to be 'guilty of "epistemological imperialism"'. This is an absurd distortion of my position. What I have tried to do is warn against assuming that all cultures will assign the same importance and meaning to vision as prevails in the modern West and to encourage increased exploration and awareness of the non-visual senses. This hardly means that I disdain visual studies. In fact, I consider the study of visual acts and representations to be highly valuable, not only in the West where visual imagery is so influential, but in non-Western cultures, which may well have distinct ways of understanding and employing the sense of sight (Howes 2003: ch. 5). The Desana, for example, have a much more sensuous and integrative understanding of vision – which includes hallucinatory vision – than that which prevails in the West (Classen 1993: 131–3). Problems only arise when the assumption is made that, after one has finished talking about sight, or sight and hearing, one has said everything there is to say about the senses.

In conclusion, while Ingold has done much to show what phenomenology and ecological psychology can bring to social anthropology (for example, an emphasis on perceptual skills), he has done little to show what social anthropology can bring to phenomenology and ecological psychology, namely, an emphasis on the *social*. Ingold (perhaps due to his background in the natural sciences) is at heart a naturalist. He therefore naturalises perception, disallowing any cultural influences. The only reasons for differences in ways of sensing he allows are ones based on differences of environment and skills. His argument, in fact, is not with the anthropology of the senses *per se*, but with the whole notion of culture. Hence his claim that 'the differences we call cultural are indeed biological' (Ingold 2000: 391). Just as naturalists conventionally have not concerned themselves with the 'culture' of the animals they studied or what those animals 'thought' about the world, but rather with how they 'practically listen, touch, taste and sniff as they go about their business', so Ingold would prefer to do with his human subjects.

This approach can produce many interesting results, but it is highly limited. Not the least of the reasons why is because cultural values and symbolic representations constrain the ways in which people act in the world. This becomes immediately apparent if we consider, for example, how cultural constructions of gender have shaped the particular practices engaged in by women and men in Western history. It is also the case that many acts and beliefs that people hold to be deeply important, such as those based on religious values, are not centred on practical activity. Perception may be a sacred act, a moral act, a political act, as well as a practical skill.

For such reasons, when it comes to the anthropology of the senses, I hold it to be counterproductive to create an opposition between 'sensing the world' and 'worlds of sense'. As I hope I have shown in my work, both are essential to understanding the practice, experience and representation of perception across cultures and throughout history.

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TIM INGOLD

## Reply to David Howes

I thank David Howes for his response. As ever, it mixes wilful misquotation with crude caricature, and is delivered with all the finesse and precision of a blunderbuss. In the interests of clarity, I shall try yet again to put the record straight. Whereas Howes remains stuck in the trenches, however, I prefer to move on, and I will endeavour to end on a positive and constructive note.

My overriding aim is to understand how people perceive the world around them, and how and why these perceptions differ. These are among the fundamental questions of anthropology. In the search for answers, we should draw on all the sources of ideas and inspiration we can. We should listen to what so-called 'indigenous people' have to tell us, and in my work I do. We should attend to what people with impairments of sight and hearing have to tell us, and in my work I do that too. And we should also take note of what psychologists, neurophysiologists and philosophers – among others – have to tell us, and I do that as well. What I do *not* do, however, is to treat what others have to say (whatever their training, background or experience) as *objects* of anthropological analysis, or as token exemplars of systems of collective representation specific to particular communities of provenance. On the contrary, I treat them as both catalysts and checks to my own thinking, in an ongoing, critical conversation in which I feel privileged to participate. It is not me but Howes who relies on his own understanding of the nature of perception, deaf to what others say, by insisting that it is a cultural construction of received bodily sensations. And he does so because it is a necessary foundation for a comparative project that hypostatizes the senses as things that we can have an anthropological study of.

I take it Howes would agree that there are no communities in which human beings do not exist as living, breathing organisms, in a world of materials which they perceive by way of sensory engagements of one kind or another. That, in a nutshell, is what the 'universality of human corporeal experience' amounts to. The phrase does not imply, however, that such experience is everywhere the same! I *do* hold that the world we inhabit is a continuous one, of relations and processes, and not primordially divided into mutually unintelligible domains of symbolic representation (Ingold 1993). My contention is that differences are emergent within the unfolding of these relations and processes, rather than superimposed by 'culture' upon a common bedrock of 'nature'.

They are thus grounded in the existential condition of our common immersion in a continuous world. In Howes's hands, however, this contention reappears as the assertion that due to this grounding 'we all share the same experiences'. Of course we do not! Sharing is an achievement, not a state of affairs that is given *a priori*. It is something we have to work at. Specifically, it is an achievement of joint practical activity, of moving and perceiving together with others in the setting of that activity. That is what we do in participant observation.

Howes seems to have a peculiarly impoverished idea of practical activity. I take actions to be practical because they are *performed* – they are things people do, or carry out. Thus sowing seeds in the fields is practical, as is performing a ritual, or sniffing the air for signs of other people (as the Desana of Colombia do), or listening and watching for traffic before crossing a city street. Indeed I find it hard to imagine how there could be actions that are *not* practical. Howes, on the other hand, finds it difficult to establish which actions, if any, *are* practical. His notion of practicality appears to hinge not upon performance but upon purpose. Sowing seeds is practical because it ensures a crop, and looking out for traffic is practical because it saves one from being run over. However if the purpose is symbolic, or framed within the collective representations of a culture, then – for Howes – the action that follows is not practical. Performing a ritual is not practical because it serves what Howes takes to be symbolic ends. And when Desana people sniff the air, this is not practical either, because the notion that neighbouring people can be identified by their smell is supposed to be given in their collective representations. Indeed the 'practical', in Howes's terms, appears to be little more than a residual category into which to place any activity that cannot be attributed to ostensibly 'cultural' motives or design. It is what is left after 'religious rites and beliefs, forms of social organisation, modes of communication, aesthetic representations, and so on' have all been siphoned off.

This is the only way to make sense of Howes's otherwise bizarre charge that according to my kind of anthropology, 'one learns by doing and not by mental engagement'. That we learn by doing is indeed a claim I would defend. To set up such learning *in opposition* to mental engagement, however, is absurd. Following in the footsteps of such luminaries as A. Irving Hallowell, Gregory Bateson and Andy Clark, I hold that mind is not an interior domain of representations, set over against an external world in which they find behavioural expression, but is rather immanent in the multiple sensory pathways along which activity spills out into the environment. Learning and doing are as much mental as they are bodily, if indeed the two can be distinguished at all. This leads me, in *The Perception of the Environment*, to reject the epistemology that drives a wedge between the world of practical activity on the one hand and, on the other, the world of symbolic representation – which Howes appears to identify with religion and aesthetics. Hunting, for example, is for many indigenous people an intensely spiritual practice as well as yielding the wherewithal for survival (Ingold 2000: 57); likewise weaving – at least among the Andean peoples to whom Howes refers – is a practice that is as aesthetic as it is technical. But it demeans both spiritual and aesthetic practice to reduce it to the output of a symbolic culture.

By placing practical activity and mental engagement on opposite sides of an epistemological divide, Howes conspires to reduce the former to mindless, gut responses driven only by the imperatives of subsistence and survival. It is this reduction that leads

him to the curious conclusion that my focus on practical enskilment, inspired as it is by work in both phenomenology and ecological psychology, amounts to a denial of the social. It does so only if we equate the social, as Howes does, with 'cultural values and symbolic representations'. He may be, by his own admission, an inveterate critic of interpretative and textual approaches in anthropology, but here as elsewhere, Howes also emerges as an unreconstructed Durkheimian. As I have shown throughout my work, what anthropology can bring to ecological psychology and phenomenology is a focus on the *relational*. 'Social', here, refers not to a domain of phenomena, as opposed – say – to the 'natural', but to a certain ontology wherein every being, or every thing, is a certain gathering together of the threads of life. All life is social in this sense, in so far as it is an ongoing polyphonic composition of multiple lines in counterpoint. But it is also natural, in so far as it is generated in the energetic flows of materials in movement. Howes tells me that I am, at heart, a naturalist. Perhaps he is right. But if that is so, then my kind of naturalism is one that takes the world we human beings inhabit, alongside manifold non-humans, to be social in its very constitution (Ingold 2011: 236).

Turning to the issue of the relations between the senses: I have argued that vision has in common with hearing, touch, taste and smell that it is a mode of active engagement with the world, rather than of detached speculation. Some indigenous hunters, such as the Inuit, may attribute their skill in hunting to eyesight; others – such as the Umeda of Papua New Guinea (Gell 1995) – to hearing, and yet others – such as the Cashinahua of Peru (to whom Howes refers) – to the tactile sensitivities of hand and skin. Many, in practice, would acknowledge the importance of all these sensory modalities, and of scent as well. But the recognition that these are all modalities of *engagement* does not imply that such engagements are identical. I do not claim, as Howes would have it, 'that the senses are all basically the same'. Far from it! They are different, but not for the reason that Howes offers – because they 'convey significantly different information'. The senses cannot be differentiated according to the kinds of information they transmit for the simple reason that they are not transmitters. Vision, hearing and the rest are aspects of action – ways of attentively going forth in the world; they are not filters in the conversion of external physical stimuli into internal mental representations. True, people often find themselves having to do to many things at once, and these may call for different modalities of attention (you are tasting your coffee, in Howes's example, while listening to what someone is telling you on the phone). But I am not like a commander who, standing above the fray, delegates my different senses to take care of multiple tasks to be conducted simultaneously. *I am*, at once, my tasting, my listening, and the rest. To divide oneself between different activities is not to map that division onto one between sensory registers.

Since Howes accuses me of distortion in referring to his comments on the alleged 'epistemological imperialism' of my approach, allow me to embarrass him further by quoting the offending passage in full:

It does not appear to trouble Ingold that the 'environment' he describes in *The Perception of the Environment* is basically one of just two senses, sight and hearing. Nor does he appear to be aware of the epistemological imperialism of his position. Ingold insists on the truth of Merleau-Ponty's musings on the senses over against any of the alternative constructions revealed by research on the anthropology of the senses. (Howes 2003: 240)

I am relieved to learn that Howes would now disown these remarks. Quite apart from the fact that the environment I describe in *Perception* is one comprised of people, animals and the land, and not of the senses (whether two or more), Howes now admits that it is perfectly acceptable to isolate particular sensory modalities for inquiry, in order to focus on their particular characteristics, and that to do so is not to suppose that they are divided off, in phenomenal experience, from other modalities. In that case, the fact that in 'Stop, look and listen!' (Ingold 2000: 243–87) I chose to focus on vision, hearing and the relations between them should not trouble him, nor should it warrant the conclusion that the environment I describe is one that cannot be touched, tasted or smelled.

As for his second charge: I am happy to own up to having drawn inspiration from Merleau-Ponty's writings; nowhere, however, do I dogmatically 'insist on their truth'. What did strike me from my reading, however, was the convergences between what Merleau-Ponty had to say about the 'delirium' of vision (Merleau-Ponty 1964: 166) and what is reported in ethnographic literature on shamanic and possibly hallucinogenically induced visions as *experiences of light* (as distinct from the ordinary sight of things *in the light*). I was struck too by the convergence, in both my philosophical and ethnographic sources, on the interchangeability, in this regard, of light and sound (Ingold 2000: 276–81). For this reason I am all the more dismayed by Howes's persistent accusation that in understanding 'there is light' to be another way of saying 'I can see' and 'there is sound' to be another way of saying 'I can hear' (ibid: 245), I am simply taking Merleau-Ponty's word for it, as against what indigenous people have to say, when on this matter at least, they are in perfect agreement! Moreover, had Howes bothered to read what I write about dreams and dreaming in *Perception*, he would not attribute to me the bogus argument that 'dream experiences do not properly involve the senses but rather the mind'. Indeed I devote some space to refuting this proposition, with reference to Hallowell's classic ethnography of the Ojibwa (Ingold 2000: 100–2; see Hallowell 1955, 1960).

The real reason, I suspect, why Howes finds my approach (and indeed that of Merleau-Ponty) so objectionable is that it undercuts the move by which he converts indigenous understandings into objects of comparative analysis. As we have already seen, this move, which divides bodily sensation from mental representation, is crucial for the establishment of an anthropology *of the senses*, of the kind that Howes advocates. But it is a move that flies in the face of everything that indigenous people have been telling us about the nature of perception. Who, then, is the epistemological imperialist? I promised, however, to conclude on a positive note, so here it is. Howes is interested in how sensory experience enters into the ways in which people describe themselves and their worlds, how it is articulated in collective representations, and how these in turn are used to model other domains of experience. Fair enough. This is only half the story however. The other, more fundamental half has to do with how people perceive the world around them. But it is not enough simply to bolt these two halves together. People do not 'make sense' of things by superimposing ready-made sensory meanings 'on top' of lived experience, so as to give symbolic shape to the otherwise formless material of raw sensation. They do so, rather, by weaving together, in narrative, strands of experience born of practical, perceptual activity. It is out of this interweaving that meanings emerge (Ingold 2000: 286). That is why, if we are to understand the production of meaning, then we need to start from the *processes* of social life, and not from the cultural modelling of a given reality.

We should, in short, begin with how people sense the world, and not from worlds of sense.

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DAVID HOWES

## Reply to Tim Ingold

In my initial reply, I summarised Tim Ingold's position and indicated what I hold to be its limitations. Here I will confine myself to commenting on Ingold's response to my reply and to clarifying certain points regarding my own position.

Referring to my work in *The Perception of the Environment* Ingold stated:

To his credit, Howes does recognize that human beings are not simply endowed by nature with ready-made powers of perception, but that these powers are rather cultivated, like any skill, through practice and training in an environment. For this reason, they can vary from one individual to another, even within a single society. (Ingold 2000: 283)

It was a backhanded compliment, but I take it, and my position has not changed (though one would not know that from the way in which I am represented by Ingold).

In the chapter of *The Varieties of Sensory Experience* (Howes 1991) to which Ingold refers, I further argued that just as the 'sensory profiles' of individuals may differ as a result of their social roles demanding different perceptual skills (e.g., cook or musician), so may the sensory profiles of whole societies, relatively speaking. Ingold rejected the latter move because it seemed to him to 'leave lived, sensory experience behind in the search for . . . the incorporeal "ideas" and "beliefs" of a culture' (Ingold 2000: 284). I will admit to being interested in the 'ideas' which people in particular cultures have formed about their senses, and of their universe, but I am also concerned with how those ideas are lived through particular practices. I have already discussed how Ingold entertains a truncated understanding of 'practice' which (despite the lip service he pays in this engagement to ritual activities) limits the latter to 'practical activity'. Hence the chapters in *Perception* consider hunting, building, wayfinding, basketweaving, and so forth, but say next to nothing about specifically religious practices, cosmologies and the like.

Ironically, but tellingly, basketweaving is a prime example of the limited nature of Ingold's approach. Among the Desana, for example, it is at once practical and cosmological, as well as providing a social model and cultural mnemonic. As discussed elsewhere (Howes 2007), the different colours, odours, and textures of the reeds, vines, wood fibers, and palm fronds which are used in basketry refer to elements of Desana



mythology, sexuality and ecology. The act of splitting a cane in three and interweaving the three standards to form an open lattice-work grid pattern of hexagonal elements symbolises the relationship between the three intermarrying social groups, and also models the Desana universe. When Ingold analyses basketry in 'On weaving a basket' (Ingold 2000, ch. 18), by contrast, his account is purely formal, topological: he holds that the same spiral form that occurs in human basketry occurs in the form of a Gastropod shell due to the operation of certain 'fields of force' inhering in the environment, the materials and the activity – be it weaving or growth. This analysis is what one might expect of a naturalist, but the formalism of Ingold's account is belied by Desana attitudes towards their art, in which: 'artistic and technical skills are not of the essence ... What counts is not form but content; not performance but meaning [read: sense] ... In fact, shamans warn people not to be too form-perfect; not to be too impressed by appearances' (Reichel-Dolmatoff cited in Howes 2007: 223).

I hold that people develop perceptual skills through personal and social orientation and through practice, as evidenced by my use of the terms 'techniques of perception' (Howes 1991: 182) and 'ways of sensing' (Howes 2003) to refer to perceptual processes. Furthermore, I share Ingold's interest in 'understand[ing] how people perceive the world around them, and how and why these perceptions differ'. However, I contend that relying on the ecological psychology of Gibson impedes rather than advances this understanding for reasons best stated by Ingold: 'Gibson himself devoted scant attention to the specifically social and cultural dimensions of human life, preferring – if anything – to downplay the distinction between human beings and other animals' (Ingold 2000: 167). Or again: 'For all his emphasis on perception as a process that is continually going on, Gibson assumed that the world which the perceiver moves round in and explores is relatively fixed and permanent, somehow pre-prepared with all its affordances ready and waiting to be taken up by whatever creatures arrive to inhabit it' (ibid: 168). Ingold immediately skips to phenomenology to get out of this impasse, but that only compounds the problem because doing so leaves out of account precisely those 'social and cultural dimensions of human life' that might help to explain the differences.

Ingold claims that what I have called his naturalism (or, tendency to fold the cultural into the biological) is 'social in its very constitution'. In *Perception*, Ingold often speaks of relations, and one might take him to mean social relations, but there is nothing especially social about them, because:

Humans, I argue, are brought into existence as organism-persons within a world that is inhabited by beings of manifold kinds, both human and non-human. Therefore relations among humans, which we are accustomed to calling 'social', are but a subset of ecological relations. (ibid.: 5)

I agree with Ingold that it is important to take human–animal relationships into account. However, dissolving social relations into ecological relations and defining the social as 'a certain gathering together of the threads of life' means jettisoning any concept of social structure. In my view, it is important to understand how society *mediates* our relations with human and non-human others and with the environment.

Social relations and categories also structure how we *experience* or *use* our senses as Constance Classen has shown in her study of the differential socialisation of the senses of men and women in Western history and of the impact of class on sensory

practices (Classen 1998). Significantly, neither gender nor social class are given much consideration in *The Perception of the Environment*. Nor is there any discussion of the moral regulation of the senses in Ingold's book. An example of such regulation can be found among the Kwoma of Papua New Guinea, who traditionally wore no clothes but had strict regulations concerning not looking directly at the genital organs of persons of the opposite sex (Howes 2003: 136–7). This could be considered an example of a physical 'affordance' (Gibson) being *overridden* by a social imperative; however, there is no place whatsoever for such a mental-perceptual operation in Gibson's account of the senses as 'perceptual systems'.

Ingold's minimalist (read: individualist, unstructured or 'processual') understanding of the social is also manifest in his analysis of cultural transmission (or lack thereof). He argues that, to the extent that any skills are passed from one generation to the next, this cannot be by formal instruction (i.e. verbal explanation, visual diagrams) nor simply by imitation, but through a combination of imitation and experimentation 'in context' by means of which the novice practitioner acquires a feel for the skill in question (Ingold 2000: chs. 18 and 19). The emphasis here is all on 'ontogenesis', 'autopoiesis'. This no doubt applies in some cases, but not all. There are many instances in which verbal exegesis or formal instruction is essential to the passing on of a skill. Ingold, for example, seems unaware of the extent to which many people in contemporary society are initiated into skills through how-to guides, appearing either in print or on the Internet. My arguing this point led to Ingold branding me an 'unreconstructed Durkheimian'. I would prefer that label to going over to his brand of individualistic, unstructured naturalism.

Ingold declares that, since I hold that in certain circumstances it can be useful to focus on a particular sensory domain, I have no right to criticise him for basically limiting himself to sight and hearing in *The Perception of the Environment*. He chooses to ignore, however, that I also stressed the danger of suggesting – as he has done – that 'after one has finished talking about sight, or sight and hearing, one has said everything there is to say about the senses'. If one wants to discuss the perception of the audiovisual environment, let him or her say so, but let there be no misleading claim that one is considering the perception of the environment as a total sensory experience.

Furthermore, despite Ingold's contentions, I am not interested in opposing the senses to the mind or in objectifying the senses. In *Varieties* I treat the sensorium as an 'operational complex' (Howes 1991: 167). (And, by the way, 'anthropology of the senses' is a term, not a project description. It does not imply treating the senses as objects any more than the term 'anthropology of the emotions' need imply treating the emotions as objects.) I am, however, interested in learning about how different people experience and categorise perception. Ingold, by contrast, with his single definition of what the senses are – 'ways of attentively going forth in the world' – does not allow for any cultural diversity in this matter. Ingold, indeed, appears to rely on his own perceptual experiences to define everyone else's: 'I *am* at once, my tasting, my listening, and the rest.' Yes, well perhaps you are, but does that mean that everyone's experience must be the same?

When Ingold does refer to 'indigenous people' he does so in a way that is astoundingly monolithic for a social anthropologist. For example, he writes of 'everything that indigenous people [tell] us about the nature of perception'. Do 'they' speak with one voice then? Ingold even claims that, on certain points at least,

Merleau-Ponty and 'indigenous people' are 'in perfect agreement'. How convenient for those anthropologists who wish to simply rely on Merleau-Ponty!

In conclusion, let me state again that I do not believe that there is any one correct way for anthropologists to approach the study of perception – that we need to 'begin with how people sense the world', as Tim Ingold claims, or that we should first look at 'worlds of sense' as he holds that I claim. The two are inextricably intertwined. Wherever one begins, if one is attentive, one will find worlds of sense shaped by ways of sensing and ways of sensing configured by worlds of sense.

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