

6.4 Critique of Humanism

Reading and Doing Ethnography
Social Anthropology 314

Ethnography isn't just about
language, speech, and writing. It's
all the senses.

The senses have histories and
emerge in cultures.

Objectification

The term "objectification" has two separate but related meanings. The first refers to a capacity to make external and concrete, and hence situate as perceptually "objective." The second relates to the tendency to regard a being as an "object," hence treating it impersonally and abstractly and rendering it liable to manipulation or control. Visual perception has been linked to objectification in both these senses.

— Rice (294)

Sight and reason

For instance, it has been argued that vision by necessity involves the creation of perceptual distance, so externalizing that which is perceived and making it objective. At the same time, vision and acts of gazing have become integral to theories of the objectification of persons. For instance, the male gaze has been implicated in the objectification of the female body, reinventing it as a sexualized being-for-men rather than a being-for-itself. ... Whereas vision is imagined to create distance and disengagement, hence permitting the production of detached perceptual objects, hearing has tended to be conceptualized as a uniquely processed immediate sensation, intimate and enveloping. (294)

Rice goes on to show that when
doctors listen through
stethoscopes, sometimes patients
do feel pretty objectified.

Normally, when blood flows across the valves as the heart pumps it does so smoothly, meaning that the only sounds that can be heard are the two closing snaps of the valves which create the heart beat.

Damage to the valves, or valve dysfunction, however, can cause the blood flow to become turbulent, and this turbulence produces a sound known as a "murmur." By noting the area(s) of the chest in which a murmur is heard, its place in the cardiac cycle, its volume, its dynamics and so on, an experienced stethoscopic listener can deduce the nature of any valve disease or damage that might be present. Murmurs are hence of great value as diagnostic signs, and learning to identify them quickly and accurately is an important part of medical training. (298)

Patients with "good" murmurs tended to attract considerable attention. Doctors sometimes referred to such patients metonymically as, for instance, "the beautiful aortic stenosis is bed nineteen" or "the wonderful mitral reegurgitation in bed six." There is clearly already a type of clinical objectification taking place here, with patients being identified through their diagnostic signs rather than by their names or other non-medical attributes.

Patients with exemplary murmurs were also sometimes referred to as "celebrity" patients because of the amount of attention they received. "I have been examined by thirty-six medical students today!" one man responded when I asked him if many people had asked to listen to his chest. (302)

This was an unusually high number, but it was common for a patient with "good" clinical signs to be visited by two or three groups of seven or eight medical students, accompanied by teaching doctors, in a single day.

Interestingly, while patients were selected because of their exemplary heart sounds, teaching doctors also considered, for instance, whether or not patients were overweight, as the heart sounds can be muffled by subcutaneous fat making them difficult to hear. Thin patients were preferred, with young men being ideal as they tend to have very little fat or breast tissue. (302)

Seremetakis and the peach

I grew up with the peach. It had a thin skin touched by fuzz, and a soft matte off-white color alternating with rosy hues. Rodhákino was its name (ródho means rose). It was well rounded and smooth like a small clay vase, fitting perfectly into your palm. Its interior was firm yet moist, offering a soft resistance to the teeth. A bit sweet and a bit sour, it exuded a distinct fragrance. This peach was known as "the breast of Aphrodite." A relation of this peach appeared eventually in the markets, which was called yermás. It was a much softer, watery fruit with a yolkish yellow color and reddish patches. Its silky thin skin would slide off at a touch revealing its slippery, shiny, deep yellow interior that melted with no resistance in the mouth. Both fruits were very sensitive, easy to bruise. I learned to like them both but my heart was set for the rodhákino.

... A few years ago, I realized that the peach was nowhere to be found in the markets, in or outside of Athens. (1)

Memory of the senses

The absent peach became narrative. It was as if when something leaves, it only goes extrernally, for its body persists within persons. The peach was its memory, and as if both had gone underground, they waited to be named.

The senses are entangled with history, memory, forgetfulness, narrative and silence. That first peach of my childhood carried with it allusions to distant epochs where the relation between food and the erotic was perhaps more explicit, named, and sacrilized; a relation that although fragmented and gone underground, was carried over through the centuries by the rodhákino, a fruit bearing myth in its form. (2)

Touch and sound

Let's see everybody take out your
mobile device.

Can your mobile device make a
noise?

Questions

1. What did your mobile device sound like? What were the qualities of its sound?
2. What does it feel like to the touch? How does it fit in your hand, or not?

Interviewing objects

Suppose you interviewed your mobile device and it could recount its history.

- >> How is your day, small creature?
- >> If you could hear, what would have been the first sounds you'd have heard this morning?
- >> The first smells?
- >> Have these sounds changed a great deal since you were younger?

[...]