

Sensory Profiles

All peoples have the same senses, though not all use them alike. Eskimos have the same eyes as I do, but, though my vision is 20/20, they spotted seals long before I did and continued to watch them long after the seals had disappeared from my sight. Any sensory experience is partly a skill and any skill can be cultivated. Charlie, blind since the age of two, spoke with a West Virginia drawl: 'Well, my daddy and me enjoyed deer hunting every fall. I got to know the sound – twigs breaking – even the weight, just by the way it sounded. My daddy sure was surprised when I got the deer first. He hadn't seen...' Charlie had worked hard to learn to shoot accurately by sound. He used a can with a few pebbles for a target, swinging it just enough to hear. Wilfred Thesiger, in *Arabian Sands* tells of a desert Bedouin reading camel tracks:

A few days later we passed some tracks. I was not even certain they were made by camels for they were much blurred by the wind. Sultan turned to a grey-bearded man who was noted as a tracker and asked him whose tracks these were, and the man turned aside and followed them for a short distance. Then he jumped off his camel, looked at the traces where they crossed some hard ground, broke some camel-droppings between his fingers and rode back to join us. Sultan asked 'Who were they?' and the man answered 'They were Awamir. There were six of them. They have raided the Januba on the southern coast and taken three of their camels. They have come here from Sahma and watered at Maghshin. They passed here ten days ago.' It's simply a question of training, though that training isn't simple. Reading tracks involves far more than just knowing where to look. Everything smelled, tasted, felt, heard, can be as relevant as anything seen. I recall being out with trackers once and when I stooped to scrutinize the trail, they stepped back, taking in the whole. Interpenetration and interplay of the senses are the heart of this problem.

No sense exists in total isolation. Run water into the bath while switching the light on and off – the sound appears louder in darkness and its location is easier to determine. Teach a soldier to strip and reassemble his rifle, then ask him to do it blindfolded and you will find he almost always does it faster without sight. Taste and smell seem stronger in the dark, which may be why good restaurants are candlelit. Darkness certainly makes love-making more interesting. All peoples control their senses, though not always consciously. In our culture, librarians post signs reading SILENCE; concert-goers close their eyes; museum guards warn, 'Don't touch' Most of us know someone who puts on his glasses before talking on the phone.

West African dancers and singers close their eyes partially or wholly. The masks they wear are similarly carved. Masks with open, staring eyes are rare and usually covered by hanging hemp or fur. Sight is deliberately muted. 'If you paint,' said Picasso, 'close your eyes and sing. Painters,' he added, 'should have their eyes put out like canaries, so they'll sing better.' It's easier to discover a hidden design if you squint so that your eyelashes cloud your vision. This is especially true in the case of visual puns where two or more images utilize one design. Only one image may be apparent at first, but cloud your vision and the second image suddenly appears while the first disappears.

I think a great deal of preliterate art is designed by artists who mute sight and that this art is viewed by audiences who perceive it in semi-darkness or through half-closed eyes. Native house

interiors are often dark. Ceremonies outside are frequently held at night by firelight. Costumed performers, which may include just about everyone, are generally masked, with restricted vision, and even when their faces aren't covered, they frequently lower their eyelids, even close their eyes.

When we put primitive art on museum display, isolated, on a pedestal, against a white background under intense light, we violate the intention of the maker and create an effect far removed from the original. Muting sight must have been particularly true of cave art. Paleolithic man worked in the darkness of caverns, his paintings illuminated by flickering torches. Hans Arp, the contemporary artist, drew his curved, inter-penetrating lines, which so closely resemble certain Paleolithic drawings, with half-closed eyes. In describing this experience, he wrote *'Under lowered lids, the inner movement streams untainted to the hand. In a darkened room it is easier to follow the guidance of the inner movement than in the open air. A conductor of inner music, the great designer of prehistoric images, worked with eyes turned inwards. So his drawings gain in transparency; open to penetration, to sudden inspiration, to recovery of the inner melody, to the circling approach; and the whole is transmuted into one great exhalation,'*

Muting sight can increase awareness in other senses, especially hearing. The opposite effect – blotting out other sensory experience – can be achieved by heightening the input of a single sense. Dentists use high-pitched sound to numb pain. Turn up your hi-fi and you may not smell the burning toast until much too late. One can turn sound up by turning sound inward. In New Guinea, singers sometimes plug one or both ears, producing an 'inner voice' effect where pitch is felt as vibration. Singers determine pitch by feel. The experience is not unlike rock music that one feels often through the entire body. What I've said of muted sight and magnified sound are but two examples from a wide range of sensory patterns or profiles. Man everywhere programmes his inner senses with the care and genius with which he programmes his outer environment.

From:

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Questions on Sensory Profiles

1. Give two themes of this article each supported with one example from YOUR OWN LIFE.
2. Why is it often necessary to mute the sense of sight?