

Sensescapes: or a Paradigm Shift from Words and Images to All Human Senses in Creating Feelings of Home in Landscapes

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Abstract. A literary essay, it begins with a reverie about the well-worn aphorism, “Home is where the heart is.” The heart, thus home, can be anywhere, provided there are values and feelings of home. In this instance it is in wilderness mountains that such values are found. Wilderness landscapes may become home landscapes when one learns to become competent in using all the senses -- touch, smell, taste, hearing, sight, and proprioception (i.e., the human body in its entirety as a sensor). It is a “coming to the senses,” which echoes the type of childhood learning advocated by Jean-Jacques Rousseau [14].

The point of the essay is neither wilderness landscapes as such, nor a return to a Rousseauian childhood. It is about including all the senses in theorizing and planning landscapes, as well as individual and group behaviors in them (e.g., travel and tourism). The senses are briefly described, with truisms about them. One is synesthesia-- the combination of two or more sensed phenomena; another, the fact that touch, taste, smell, and proprioception are earthbound, placebound, or landscape-bound senses, thus difficult to universalize conceptually and difficult to communicate precisely and unambiguously. How then to include them in planning debates, narratives, and theories? The only recourse is by exact, precise stories. At this point in time that is the only way to overcome the historic relegation of the earthbound senses to a secondary position to sight and hearing in Western culture. More specifically, to broaden the narrow visual and textual biases in geography, landscape architecture, planning, and related fields.

Today there is ostensibly a paradigm shift taking place in cultural studies — “a sensory turn”-- from semiotics and the world as text and image, to the world based on sensory perceptions. It means changing the concept of landscapes to sensescapes; instead of reading the landscape it means sensing it. The essay concludes with thoughts about the application of the sensory turn to Latvian contexts.

Key words: ideas of home, earthbound senses, sensory turn, sensescapes.

“Home is where the heart is.” An old Anglo-Saxon proverb, which captures some essential truths. If hung in a family kitchen as a plaque or as words on a piece of embroidery it may indeed affirm an essential truth of domestic bliss. Or it may express the hope of such bliss, even if it is absent.

But the heart is a complicated thing, both as an organ and as metaphor. As an organ, it is largely predictable and reliable, up to a point. As metaphor it is unpredictable. The “tars” (sailors) of the Royal British Navy were said to pose “hearts of oak.” Given the many victories against Napoleon’s fleets, there was some truth in that proverb. But the heart is metaphorically bound up with love, and love, as the modern Spanish philosopher, Jose Ortega y Gasset (1883–1955) said, is an unpredictable illness.

Coming to the senses

In my own many sojourns in Canadian and American wilderness landscapes the heart felt at home once I had acquired expertise and a tent in which one did not have to sit in water all night long. A dry tent-- especially on rainy, windy, or snowy nights-- a campfire, and simple mountain food make for the best home imaginable. Indeed, the more adverse the conditions, the more profound have been the values of the tent-home. But at the same time I have been fully cognizant that there are landscapes

The heart can be found in many different places and situations. The home is certainly a powerful location for it, true for probably a large majority of ordinary humans. The home is, after all, where most humans nest, the place most wish to have, and for which we search, when we do not have one, are driven into exile, or are on the road. But the heart can be in one’s work, in music, in art, it can even be not in a home at all--for some perennial vagabonds home is on the road. The late Bruce Chatwin (1940–1989) even claimed that in reality “It’s a Nomad, Nomad World” [5]. The heart can be in wild, inhospitable landscapes, lacking rudimentary comforts, even in dangerous landscapes. It can be in run-down places in a city, when one is tired of the glitz of modern landscapes.

in which I would survive for only as long and far as I could carry food on my back. And in case of the desert-- water.

I found a great value in the wild, that made those temporary tent- domicile experiences so powerful: the alertness of all the senses and intuition of possible sensory experiences beyond one’s immediate vicinity. Touch was of especial importance. There were textures underfoot--water, mud, gravel, sand, scree, snow, ice, slippery logs and rocks.

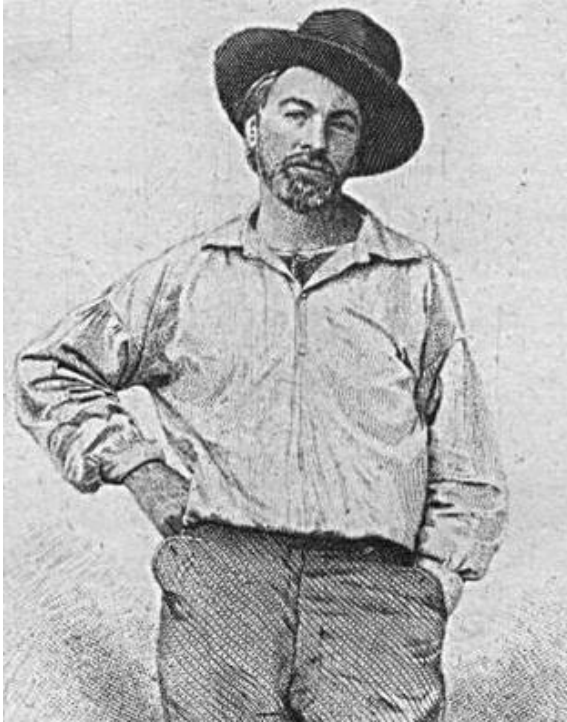


Fig. 1. Walt Whitman (1819–1892) [10]

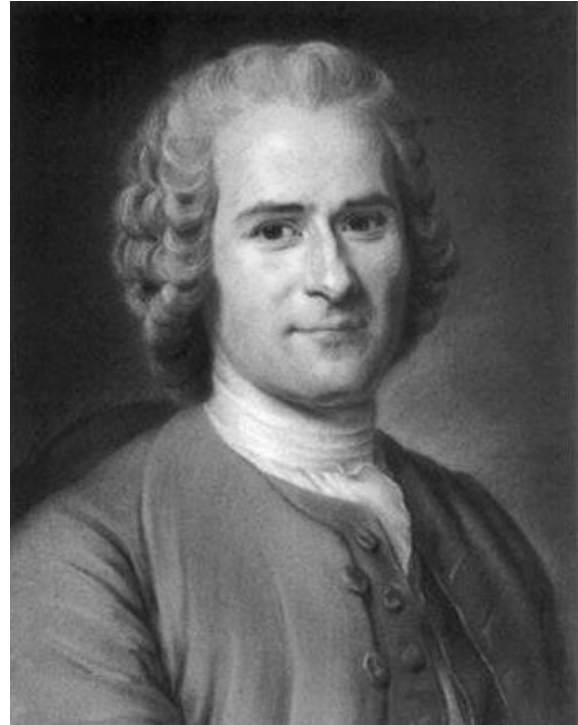


Fig. 2. Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–1778).
By Maurice Quentin de la Tour
[Source: danassays.wordpress.com]

There were textures in landscapes that I touched: the pliant branch of a willow bush, the solid bark of an alder, the smooth bark of a birch, the roughness of a weathered granite wall.

Not all touch experiences were welcome. Very unpleasant were the dozens and dozens of fine, long, spiny needles of a devil's club (*oplopanax horridum*) that painfully stuck my palm. It happened on a muddy trail in the rainforest of British Columbia, Canada. I was portaging a kayak, my feet slipped, I grabbed for the nearest handhold--a devil's club. Thus I learned about the awful, hairy stems of a plant that resembles a giant fern with big, beautiful, photogenic leaves and a red blossom or two at the top. A much more pleasant sensory experience came after a hot afternoon climb up a mountainside. It was a dive into an icy tarn (little mountain pond), with snow still clinging on its uphill side. That plunge gave me one of the most luxurious feelings that my entire body and mind, my soul, has ever experienced (as Walt Whitman defined the soul¹ [11]). I was completely a part of the landscape (Fig. 1).

The scents of balsam firs, or that of the dry pine needles in a hot desert sun define the feel of entire landscapes. Most memorable is the powerful mix of scents one encounters on a mountain trail passing through an avalanche path. Small mountain rivulets

running down such an avalanche track make the air heavy with moisture when the afternoon sun is out. There one enters into a cornucopia of scents: the rich mix of new, leafy brush, together with the sweetish scents of sap from the fallen, broken trunks of mountain firs. A profusion of berry bushes growing there makes it a favorite place for *ursus horribilis*, the grizzly bear. After many years of learning to appreciate the ubiquitous sagebrush of Western North America, the scent of this visually humble plant also gives the sense of an entire landscape (especially if one is lucky to encounter it after a rain-shower).

Risking a walk on a fallen tree across a mountain stream is not only a test of foolishness, but of balance and *proprioception*; as is jumping from boulder to boulder down a dry stream bed with a heavy back pack. Proprioception involves muscles, sinews, and deep structures within the body that guide us through landscapes. Not least in importance is the inner ear, the sinuses, touch, and vision working together to insure balance.

Picking sweet and sour blueberries adds to the often plain mountaineering evening meal. Hearing the sudden flareup of howling coyotes in the far distance of a big valley gladdens the heart, that there are such wild, free beings. It also illustrates the notion that hearing is a "geographic sense," giving a feel for

¹ René Descartes initiated the idea that the body is separate from the mind in the seventeenth century. The brain was the source of rational thought ("I think therefore I am."), science, and morality. It was Walt Whitman who concluded that the human soul consisted of the entire body, not just the mind. As a young man Whitman was witnessing a slave auction in New Orleans. "The whipping of a slave, the overall pain that this caused, made Whitman realize that the soul is the entire human being. To whip a man's body was to whip a man's soul" [10]. Today neuroscientists, although not generally concerned with metaphysics of the soul, regard the entire human body as a single sensing entity.

space, direction, and distance [1]. This is emphasized while lying awake on a quiet, dark night in the tent, listening for the sounds of an approaching grizzly bear. Then there is tension and fear. Once one has gained the heights above a valley, there are always the faraway sounds of waterfalls

Earthbound and skybound senses

Diane Ackerman calls touch, smell, and taste, appropriately, the “earthbound senses” [1]. Proprioception clearly belongs to the earthbound senses. Hearing and vision are, in her definition, “skybound” senses. Jean-Jacques Rousseau (Fig. 2) did not quite have in mind such a taxonomy of the senses when he wrote *Emile, or On Education* [14]. What he did propose was that a child’s

Truisms

First, to the brief description immediately above should be added *synesthesia*, that is when two or more senses are combined in describing or evoking sensory experiences. Smell and taste combine almost always; so does sight and proprioception; the others combine, more rarely, depending on the particular perceptual talents of an individual. One of the more remarkable examples has been the musical compositions of the Lithuanian composer-artist M.K. Ciurlionis (1875–1911), who combined his compositions with paintings of fantasy landscapes.

Second, and most significant, is the fact that *the earthbound senses are largely place-bound or landscape-bound*. “You have to be there” to experience them. This fact severely restricts them from being included in planning narratives and theories of landscapes. They do not travel well. That is because symbolic language expressing the specific character of each earthbound sense is weakly developed and because they resist digitalization. Touched surfaces may be termed rough, smooth, squishy, slippery, wet, but it is not possible to get very good particular verbal descriptions or evocations. Visual images a la paintings of muddy roads or a frozen pond and the like do give a certain experiential sense, but what would an image of a frozen pond mean to a child or to most adults on the island of Samoa? The problems with taste are most vividly, and sometimes ludicrously, expressed in descriptions of various

The “sensory turn”

I do not mean to imply that Rousseau’s *Emile* should be a handbook for designers and similarly employed individuals. Like the sensory experiences with which I opened this essay, I present it here only for *orientation*. More exactly, I would like to bring home those experiences in the wild that I evoked above, together with Rousseau’s philosophy. Rousseau’s idea of education starting with the senses

down in the valleys below. All these are the sounds of sublime experiences.

And always, there are the views of snow and glacier-covered peaks and the valleys and lakes that often have served as invitations to go into the wild in the first place.

education should be that of “a natural human”, before she or he becomes a socialized, boxed-in being. This can be only brought about by an education whereby the world is first known through the senses and through inferences thus made, which then are followed by learning from books and teachers. That then is the point of departure for this essay.

wines (what can a “dry” wine mean to an amateur?). The sense of smell is similarly limited (although it is somewhat promising in digitalization). Marcel Proust’s famous description of the taste and scent of a madeleine illustrates the fact that the earthbound senses need excellent stories to bring them close to an actual experience.

The skybound senses of sight and hearing are not placebound, they are well represented symbolically, and what is seen or heard can be recorded and duplicated [1]. Vision is the most ubiquitous symbolically and representationally; and in terms of reproductions we are under constant bombardment of images in all guises (as Andy Warhol so well recognized with his pop art reproductions). Indeed our modern culture and life is thoroughly saturated with images, as are our landscape studies, narratives, and plans for landscapes and tourism. We accept, often unquestionably, that “seeing is believing.” Hearing, the second skybound sense, is somewhat less easy to transfer from a place and time. Still, recording and transmission of music and of sounds in nature, or anywhere can now be most accurate and virtual soundscape realities can be thus created and broadcast in various formats. And music notation has allowed music from the past to be performed today. Although in this regard the music of the distant past becomes problematic as to how exactly it was played.

was intended to nurture a natural man’s or woman’s mind. That idea may be hopelessly outmoded, but there is now a *zeitgeist* developing, which shows that the dictates of sight, and to a lesser extent hearing, are also outmoded.

A major shift in paradigms is said to be taking place in the fields of cultural studies. David Howes [8], a leading figure in this movement,

terms it a revolution in the humanities and social sciences. Just as there had been “a linguistic turn in the 1960’ s, now a new turn is occurring, which Howes calls “a sensory turn”. In the 1960’ s culture became a discourse with the world as text. Semiotics was the guiding light. An imperium of signs was developed, with Ricoeur [12] and Barthes [2] among the leaders. It was assumed that all human thought and behaviors could be understood in terms of linguistic structures. The cultural world could be read as one would read a text. The word, and in fields such as geography and landscape studies, the word and the image were -- and continue to be -- of paramount importance.

It means a narrow specialization in the fields of cultural studies. In a recent essay, the anthropologist

The experiences in geography

In human geography the late Denis Cosgrove [7] has been a significant pioneer in showing the narrow intellectual structures of the field insofar as landscape studies are concerned. He has traced the intellectual history of the idea of landscapes as representations in paintings, the theatre, in landscape gardens (so called in the UK, parks elsewhere), and in landscapes in general. The most powerful tool in this has been the Renaissance invention of the single point perspective. It inspired the representation, design, and creation of landscape gardens, the design of large boulevards and avenues, and in general has aided in what an unnamed landscape architect has termed “the framing of nature”. For Cosgrove, as for myself [3, 4], the visual landscape has meant an imposed four hundred year long tyranny, allowing few other choices, and certainly a denial of human nature as expressed in how the senses other than sight and hearing were marginalized. Moreover, semiotics became a leading approach: in reading landscapes and perceptions as texts.

The aesthetic landscape ruled in human geography. Scenery “was literally that which is seen”,

Sensescapes as home

In the emerging paradigm shift from word and image to that of the senses lies a path to a sense of home in the landscape. As David Howes [8, 143] writes:

“The challenge of the anthropology and geography of the senses is to apprehend the world anew by attending to “local ways of sensing”. The idea of a “sensescape” might prove useful here. It is the idea that the experience of the environment, and of the other persons and things which inhabit that environment, is produced by the particular mode of distinguishing, valuing and combining the senses in the culture under study.”

Gillian Tett [19] has called narrow specializations “intellectual silos”, a much more profound metaphor than mere walls, which have been torn down, at least in history. Silos for military rockets are more tightly isolated and must be “busted”, says Tett, using a metaphor common in current warfare.

Today the word and the image are being replaced by the senses and sensibilities of the human being, which are studied not only as particular characteristics of human nature-- they are studied in their cultural and landscape contexts, which vary from culture to culture and over time. There is a “sensory turn” in anthropology, the humanities and related fields of cultural studies. However, at this point in time the “turn” is arguable and not yet widely accepted.

what a viewer looks at. Seeing was truth. In order to secure that truth, technological inventions came to the aid: the single point perspective, microscope, telescope, camera. A landscape in geography was the integration of nature and culture, “which can be analyzed within a specific territory” [7]. For geographers a landscape was not *landskip*, a usage during the Medieval Age--i.e., meaning a certain, small rural piece of land-- but instead a combination of the aesthetic and the geographically “objective”. The gaze was considered as objective, as was abstraction and geometry on the land. Just as important was landscape representation in pictures: in drawings, paintings, plans, diagrams, visual calculations [7]. Numerical landscape perception studies became, and continue to be, important, with varied indexes of “scenic beauty”. The results are abstract. Moreover, reading the landscape, both historic and current, has been much in vogue and continues to be so.

The question arises, if such narrow approaches can develop landscape perceptions or planned designs that would give landscapes the feeling of home?

Sensescape includes both urban and all other landscapes, parks as well as any other urban-built landscapes (which landscape architects should include in their expertise). It provides a rich opening in that it is not only the province of disciplines involved in cultural studies. For several decades, neuroscientists have been involved in understanding the sensory worlds of humans. Oliver Sacks [15, 16, 17, 18] has been one of the early, prolific pioneers in this field. To him we owe the ideas about proprioception, the sensory world of the blind, and other studies. The architectural theorist Mallgrave [12] has used the findings of neuroscience to interpret architectural designs and thus implicitly

updating Rousseau's ideas of natural human beings in terms of architecture:

What neuroscience and the broader field of cognitive investigations are once again reminding us is that we are still creatures imbued not only with aspirations but also with vestigial biological needs. If culture is the social edifice constructed on the footings of this heritage, it must therefore respect the primal nature of our existence.

By recounting a few multifaceted sensory experiences in wild landscapes I intended to suggest

Epilogue

Because this will be the first introduction of the idea of sensescapes in this journal, it leads me to think about how we Latvians can come closer to our senses in our landscapes, both urban and rural-- in visiting, designing, theorizing them. A principal truism in this quest is to recognize, as implied earlier, that the senses and sensory perceptions exist in cultural contexts; and that such contexts vary over time and place. It means that a particular sense may be cultivated in a particular culture. In turn it means that in children's minds in that culture particular neuron associations are connected, according to the particular senses emphasized.

What follows are some brief cultural-historical examples for the sake of orientation of these ideas.

Constance Classen [6], an anthropologist-sociologist has studied what she terms "thermal symbolism" which exists among the indigenous people who are descendants of the Maya, living in Mexico and Central America. Ideas of hot and cold dominate the world views and behaviors of these people, probably derived from the fact that it is warm along the ocean lowlands, but cold in the central uplands. Therefore east and west are regarded as the important cardinal directions. Such macro perceptions influence ideas about youth, old age, death, as well as the life patterns, seen, for example, in seating arrangements at meals.

As for historic studies in the importance of particular senses, Susan Stewart [19], a professor of English, examines changes in Western sense hierarchies. For Aristotle sense hierarchy was determined by cultural coarseness and refinement of thought. Touch and taste are therefore the lowest senses, sense of smell in between, but hearing higher, with vision as the most powerful sense of cultural development. Susan Langer [10], a twentieth century philosopher, supports the Aristotelian hierarchy: the lowest senses are taste and touch because they are closest to the earth, sense of smell is situated in between, hearing and sight are paramount-- they are important in philosophy and the creation of abstractions.

that contact with our primal nature is in more than pretty pictures or designs of landscapes. Pictures are abstractions, we do not enter the landscape by gazing at it and taking ever more pretty pictures of it. Having a handful of thorny needles from a devil's club may hurt for a week, but it is thus that one becomes a part of a landscape. It is how familiarity is acquired with many other sensory aspects of wild landscapes that Canadians fondly refer to as the "bush". And familiarity makes the heart fonder. It then feels at home.

In effect, vision is entrenched in Western culture. It is significant to note that if there is indeed a paradigm shift taking place in cultural studies, then at the very least the senses are coequal and should enter into processes of theorizing and landscape formation. If the landscape is to be perceived and made into home, if it is not merely to be „occupied” but “inhabited” [9]. Then the earthbound senses are as important as the skybound ones. In other words, the soul is in the landscape, not in texts.

In this essay I have argued for a serious consideration of the ostensible paradigm shift in cultural studies. If this is indeed taking place (and there is yet to be established unanimity in this), then it means sensing Latvian landscapes in new and fresh ways.

Our fondness for landscapes is more than visually informed. We have excellent knowledge of ecology and rightful pride in the health of our nature. And we have an advantage in our language, for we do not join the ideas of land with the ideas of scape, as it is in some other languages. Nonetheless, we approach our landscapes in the same visual ways described above. I thrill in seeing cloud mountains (cumulonimbus-- or *gubu mākoņus*, as they are popularly called in Latvian) in the Irbe Strait of Latvia. But a few years ago, at night, in a driving rainstorm, without a flashlight, I had to pitch a tent in a Latvian meadow full of young thistles. I was barefoot. Stung and wet, I came down to earth. I had finally returned home after a lifetime in exile.

Since landscape and nature are important in Latvia, I think there are many opportunities to discover our true sensory natures--true insofar that we have developed them within our particular cultural history. There are many anthropologies, geographies, histories, art and literature histories of our sensory culture waiting to be discovered.

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Kopsavilkums. Kā literatūras eseja, raksts sākas ar pārdomām par seno angļu–sakšu sakām vārdu: “Kur atrodas sirds, tur ir mājas.” Sirds un mājas var būt daudzās vietās, ja var radīt vai atrast mājīgumu. Kā piemērs tiek izmantoti mājīguma sajūtu piedzīvojumi neskārtas dabas ainavās. Mājīgums tiek sasniegts, kad cilvēks apgūst neskārto vidi ar visām savām maņām. Tas nozīmē sešas maņas: tausti, ožu, garšu, dzirdi, redzi un *proprioception* (t. i., viss cilvēka ķermenis kā uztvērējs, no matu līdz kāju pirkstu galiem). Tā ir atgriešanās pie mācīšanās par pasauli vispirms ar maņām, kā to ieteica darīt bērnu mācībās Žans Žaks Ruso (*Jean-Jacques Rousseau*) [14].

Esejas galvenās tēmas nav nedz neskārtā daba, nedz Ruso bērnu mācību filozofija. Galvenā tēma ir visu maņu ieviešana teorijās par ainavām, to plānošanā un izmantošanā (kā piem., teorijās par tūrēm vai, pretstatā, ceļojumiem). Seko īss apskats par katru maņu un kopējām raksturībām. Viena šāda raksturība ir *synesthesia* (divu vai vairāku maņu uztvertie fenomenoni). Otra ir fakts, ka tauste, oža, garša un *proprioception* ir saistītas galvenokārt ar zemi, specifisku vietu vai ainavu. Tas nozīmē, ka ir grūti izveidot universālas koncepcijas vai dot neapstrīdamus nosaukumus ar šīm maņām uztvertiem ainavu faktiem. Rodas jautājums, kā ieviest piedzīvoto plānošanas diskusijās un naratīvos. Atbilde ir: precīzu stāstu veidojumus.

Tiek argumentēts, ka šodienas kultūrpētījumos notiek paradigmu maiņa, kuru dēvē par pagriezienu uz maņām. Pasauli nevērtē semiotiskos rāmjos kā tekstus un attēlus, bet gan kā pamatotu uz maņu uztverto. Šādos kontekstos jēdziens ‘ainava’ tiek pārlūkts uz *sensescapas* – ko latviski varētu saukt par *izjūtu ainu* (vai arī paturēt valodā kā netulkojamu *sensescapas*). Noslēgumā tiek sniegtas dažas pārdomas, kā varētu iesaistīt pagriezienu uz maņām Latvijas kontekstos.