
ON DISPARITIES OF PERCEPTION

Musings on, and Implications of, a Culturally-Determined Sensorium

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Anthropology of Perception

Spring 2005

<http://rhizomatic.subconscience.org/>

Cemeteries in Bohemia are like gardens. The graves are covered with grass and colorful flowers. Modest tombstones are lost in the greenery. When the sun goes down, the cemetery sparkles with tiny candles. It looks as though the dead are dancing at a children's ball. Yes, a children's ball, because the dead are as innocent as children. No matter how brutal life becomes peace always reigns in the cemetery ... When [Sabina] felt low, she would get into the car, leave Prague far behind, and walk through one or another of the country cemeteries she loved so well. Against the backdrop of blue hills, they were as beautiful as a lullaby.

For Franz a cemetery was an ugly dump of stones and bones.

Milan Kundera

There is a long passage in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* called "A Short Dictionary of Misunderstood Words." Kundera uses this passage to discuss a number of concepts and phenomena; light and darkness, music, cemeteries, parades, strength, et cetera, which are understood in vastly different and often opposing ways by the characters in his novel. By pointing out the often overlooked disparity of meanings people assign to places, objects or events the reader is provided with a glimpse of how vastly personal human perception and interpretation can be.

Kundera's prose offers a starting point for my ideas by juxtaposing the differing history and emotional makeup that informs our personal interpretations of the world. A partial understanding, perhaps, of how these disparities arise can be found in the cultural embeddedness of perception itself. As perception is an essential yet often transparent part of our daily existence, I find reflection on its mechanics and workings an important subject of both scientific and philosophical inquiry.

I. A Theoretical Backdrop

It is not we who perceive, it is the thing that perceives itself yonder - it is not we who speak, it is truth that speaks itself at the depths of speech -- Becoming-nature of man which is becoming-man of nature -- The world is a field, and as such is always open.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty

When considering perception as a topic of speculation my thoughts are rooted in C.D. Broad's theory of brain function as "eliminative and not productive." Based on the work of Bergson and later popularized by Aldus Huxley, Broad concludes that "The function of the brain and nervous system is to protect us from being overwhelmed and confused by this mass of largely useless and irrelevant knowledge, by shutting out most of what we should otherwise perceive or remember at any moment, and leaving only that very small and special selection which is likely to be practically useful." Essentially, Broad sees the brain as a kind of valve that reduces an infinite field of stimuli to a reasonable amount of information that can be handled by human consciousness. Huxley adds that "in so far as we are animals, our business is at all costs to survive. To make biological survival possible, Mind at Large has to be funneled through the reducing valve of the brain and nervous system. What comes out at the other end is a measly trickle of the kind of consciousness which will help us to stay alive on the surface of this Particular planet."

Complimentary to the "eliminative" interpretation of brain function is a widely held premise of cognitive science, the idea that conscious thought requires approximately five percent of the brain's actual mental activity. For the brain to perform its unconscious work of sensory filtration a large amount of sensory information must be processed, examined for usefulness or validity and then reported to the conscious mind in the form of thought. What results, then, is a kind of mental summary of the current sensory landscape. The amount of information that becomes accessible to the conscious mind is necessarily limited, but the brain still retains much of the unfiltered information as a kind of storage heap of unprocessed, or unthought, sensory data. While this 'storage heap' remains mostly inaccessible and unorganized, at least in any conscious way, it nonetheless remains to some degree as the raw data used by the brain in its ongoing mental processes.

As Huxley points out, this is most likely the result of biological need and evolution. The human being has developed the tool of cognition in order to process and evaluate sensory stimuli in the way most efficient for its survival on the surface of planet earth. But while this cognitive filter has served our biological needs incredibly well, in the early 21st cen-

tury our basic survival is rarely dependent upon immediate sensorial experience. In order to fully understand our sensorium and its relation to the 'reality' in which we live, think and act, a consideration of the role of survival in perception and consciousness appears to be vital. In my opinion, this 'storage heap' of unthought sensory data is equally important and relevant, especially when venturing into the world of metaphysics and the meta-sensorial.

II. A Personal Model of Perception

Language is not merely a more or less systematic inventory of the various items of experience which seem relevant to the individual, as is so often naively assumed, but is also a self-contained, creative symbolic organization, which not only refers to experience largely acquired without its help, but actually defines experience for us."

Edward Sapir

In the theory proposed by Broad, the brain can be assumed to possess a kind of filtration system capable of screening out those details of the sensory landscape most useful for survival. But "survival" in a 21st century world requires fundamentally different information than in most of human history and consists of an incredible variety of skills and knowledge depending on one's living environment. In industrialized societies, for instance, the skills and information necessary for survival are mostly social norms and protocol. Take eating as an example; finely tuned senses of hearing or smell which were once essential in a search for food are no longer required. Primal sensory experience has been replaced with the ability to understand product labels, scientific principles of nutrition or the social and societal mechanisms of shopping at a grocery store. "The kind of consciousness," about which Huxley speaks, "which will help us to stay alive on the surface of this Particular planet" is no longer immediate knowledge of a natural environment so much as a comprehension and understanding of the symbolic structure of our societies.

The information man requires today is most often what Ward Goodenough described as a society's culture; "whatever it is one has to know or believe in order to operate in a manner acceptable to its members." This 'cultural' knowledge, the classical focus of anthropology, can thus be seen as the criteria for which mental filtration occurs. Kathryn Geurts, in her article *Culture and the Senses* discusses a similar idea to that of Broad and Huxley. Geurts refers to the principle of "sensory gating," a term borrowed from neuro-science, as "a feedback system between the brain and sense receptors themselves that functions as a kind of damper or regulating mechanism on sensory activity." Geurtz comes to a similar conclu-

sion as myself when she suggests that “it is in sensory gating that a certain amount of cultural variation occurs.” In addition to the vast amount of “cultural variation” that exists across this planet, and the link between cultural survival and conscious perception discussed above, I find a brief discussion on the role of language in this equation provides valuable insight into mechanistic workings of this process.

Plenty of words have been strung together by anthropologists and other thinkers in attempts to explain the link between language and culture. Less, however, have been applied to the link between language and perception. In a notable exception from the 1940s, Alfred Korzybski wrote about how the structure of language profoundly effects our perceptions. According to Korzybski, what is often overlooked in our model of perception is an “interpretive” or “emotional” phase that takes place when we experience an event or sensation. This “interpretation” happens between, or alongside, an event’s physical registration on our senses – before sensation becomes part of our conscious awareness. According to Korzybski this is due to the linguistic nature of consciousness. In order to see a tree, for instance, I must interpret the shapes, colors, smells and motion that my senses collect into a semantic concept. Basically, there seems to be a type of cognitive filtering going that is intimately related to the “sensory gating” spoken of by Geurts. Korzybski argues persuasively that our perceptions are informed by both physical stimuli and mental interpretation before ever becoming conscious and that our perceptions are often a matter of simplifying complex emotional reactions into words and language, with which we can then think. “Thus, all our fundamental deeper knowledge must be, and can never be anything but, hypothetical, as what we see, hear, feel, speak about, or infer, is never it, but only our human abstractions about ‘it.’ What kind of linguistic form our inferential knowledge is cast in thus becomes of utmost importance,” he writes. In other words, our language is a fundamental aspect of our perception because it is directly involved in the process by which raw sensory data eventually enters our consciousness.

Given the considerable emphasis made by anthropologists on the linguistic and symbolic elements of culture and Korzybski’s suggestion that they are a fundamental part of our sensory awareness, it seems plausible that “sensory gating” and “cultural variation” are at least interdependent. My guess is that culture provides the bulk of the criteria by which sensory information is conceptualized and made conscious. It follows that perception is not just culturally informed, but culturally *limited* as well. We are literally able to ‘see’ or ‘hear’ only what we have the requisite cultural language and concepts to understand. We

are, in a sense, living in a culturally-shared interpretation of an infinite field of sensorial information.

III. A Disclaimer of Sorts

The point of this paper is not to present a concrete, or exhaustive, model of perception. I have no authority or desire to even attempt such a project. My goal is simply to elaborate my personal interpretation of how perception, language and culture are inherently inter-linked and codependent. I consider 'culture' to be a set of interpretations which is usually similar within a group of people but is ultimately uniquely personal. Every individual should be considered to have a unique cultural composition. What I find most important in my discussion of this topic is the inherently personal aspect of perception itself. If our perceptions (and thus our interpretations and understandings) of the world are culturally-determined then we basically only experience 'reality' as it has been shaped by our lived experience. Our unique life experiences, both cultural and linguistic (but also bodily and emotional), are involved in a constant feedback loop with our brain that reinforces the "reducing valve" spoken of by Huxley. It's from my own personal 'reality,' the only one from which I can speak, that I hope to present a few ideas and speculations which I find useful in my often awkward attempts to understand the world of which I am a part.

IV. A Few Implications

Clifford Geertz referred to culture as "**a system of inherited conceptions** expressed in symbolic form by means of which men communicate, perpetuate, and **develop their knowledge about and attitudes towards life.**" Culture, it seems, can be seen as a collective system of symbolic interpretation. What I am arguing here is that this "interpretation" is taking place as part of the process of "sensory gating," pre-consciously, and impacts what sensory data actually reaches conscious awareness in the first place. I notice the details of a scene which I am *culturally* conditioned to notice, and I understand the meaning of an event in the same way. Even more concretely, I suspect that we may only see, hear or otherwise perceive those aspects of our immediate environment which our unique cultural-linguistic condition is able to understand. This is largely a matter of value judgments and symbolic meaning in most cases, I see 'destruction,' for example, where others see 'progress.' But when discussing the so-called 'paranormal' the subject matter changes dramatically. A person with a cultural make-up that involves a belief in angels may very well see them in favorable conditions, and many certainly have made that claim. The thousands of UFO sightings that take place in societies with no firm belief in angels may be

a different interpretation of the same phenomenon. And while such subjects are avoided in most 'Western' academic situations, they are certainly part of the collective cultural knowledge in many parts of the world and across most of recorded time.

This brings us back to that 'storage heap' of raw sensory data discussed earlier. According to my model of perception (we must heed the warnings of many theorists from Korzybski to McLuhan, namely, 'The Map is not the Territory,' or, my *model*, my mental scheme of something, is *only* a model, is never complete and is always in need of continuous revision), while conscious awareness is limited in the process of "sensory gating," mental processing and memory may very well not be. Put more simply, just because I don't think something, or notice something, doesn't mean that it didn't register somewhere in my brain. "Mind at Large" continues to impress us. And it is this 'un-perceived' (yet sensed) world of information that can be useful to help understand much of the 'paranormal' phenomenon reported in the claims and stories of people from nearly all times and places.

V. Some Philosophical Musings

The border between the Real and the Unreal is not fixed, but just marks the last place where rival gangs of shamans fought each other to a standstill.

Robert Anton Wilson

Let us presume, for the sake of speculation and amusement, that the model of perception and cognition I've advanced here is a useful one. Does it offer any insight into phenomena usually considered 'paranormal' or 'meta-sensorial'? A useful phenomenon for consideration is intuition. Many persons, myself included, have noticed a tendency for random thoughts or feelings of something to surface in their minds before it actually happens. Whether it be a police officer around the next corner, a phone call from a friend or simply an instinct of which turn to take on a walk around an unknown city; I often feel like an 'unconscious' intelligence finds its way to the forefront of my mind. While this used to leave me rather perplexed I've found that the ideas presented above gave me a way to understand such experiences. If our mind is able to process even a small amount of the "World at Large," most likely with that 90+% of our brain that isn't actively used in conscious thought, then perhaps there is a part of me that has the 'sense' to know what is about to happen. Perhaps this 'storage heap' of information provides clues and insights for my thoughts in some indirect way. It does not surprise me that the requisite clues for a bit of foreknowledge are present in the immediate sensory field, unconscious but nonetheless noted, and processed by our incredibly powerful human brains.

An intuition of a police car ahead on the highway is a good example. While I may never consciously 'know' that it's there, clues too subtle to be noticed consciously, such as slowing traffic in the distance or even a slight nervousness 'in the air,' could trigger a kind of intuition. This is a simple example, of course, but the same influence of unconscious awareness may very well function in more powerful ways which are difficult to explain but operating transparently nonetheless. Armed with the concepts of "sensory gating" and mental 'storage heaps' I am more easily able to think of intuition as a process where the conscious and unconscious parts of my mind work in tandem.

Hallucination, likewise, can be more easily understood with these same principles. While hallucination has been a difficult occurrence for scientists and theorists to pin down, it can be more easily grasped by simply thinking of it as an alternatively functioning mental filter; hallucination as a different interpretation of "mind at large." It's important to note that I do not draw the conclusion that everything one might hallucinate actually exists. One of the epistemological implications of such thinking is that nothing can really be said to *exist* in any absolute sense at all. We must resort to explanations such as "My mind has interpreted the landscape around me as a forest." Or, "My brain has categorized the sensations in front of me as a delicious meal." While this kind of language is awkward and inefficient in day-to-day communication it is essential to understanding just how language, culture and perception effect our experience of the world around us. Basically since Aristotle there has been a philosophical assumption running through 'Western' thinking which reinforces the idea that the world at large is made up of things which we all perceive in the same way. But much of the research and thinking of the 20th century, from cognitive science and philosophy to theoretical physics, has brought this assumption into serious doubt. From this perspective hallucination should not be seen as a 'meta-sensorial' phenomenon at all, but simply a more radically personal interpretation of one's surroundings. Considering the conditions that often accompany hallucination, such as extreme fever, shock or prolonged ascetic practice such as fasting, this radical interpretation may be simply a result of a brain who's "filter" is no longer functioning in a typical fashion.

Huxley was able to gain access to the "mind at large" by taking large quantities of mescaline. According to his stories the drug weakened his brain's ability to filter out sensations and the result was an increased spectrum of light and colors along with new ways of experiencing time and space. These experiences are not unique to the drug user, in fact they have been recorded for centuries, by religious adepts and mystics as often as by those in altered chemical states -- chemicals and mystics are, after all, historical bedfellows.

Alan Watts alludes to similar ideas in his work on the history of Christianity. According to Watts' mental scheme, the historical Jesus most likely had a deeply profound cosmic or mystical experience in which he 'saw' or 'felt' the wholeness of the universe. Since this was likely too profound a vision to explain in the language of ancient Judea, Watts speculates that Jesus interpreted his experience in terms of the Jewish religious traditions of the time. While I do not wish to carry this discussion into theories about the roots of religion, I do consider this interpretation an excellent example of how alternative mental concepts, and cultural limits to interpretation, can profoundly effect our understanding of history and spirituality in the same way they effect our more immediate sensory experience.

VI. An Attempt at Closure

I began this essay with a focus on perception, but I have tried to present some more abstract ideas throughout the discussion. While perception is most often considered to be the ability to become aware of something outside oneself, I have attempted to clarify the personal and cultural nature of this process in order to reinforce the idea that our experience of 'reality' or 'the external world' differs significantly from person to person. This is not a new idea, but I feel its gravity is rarely appreciated. There is an inherent difficulty in attempting to explain how vastly unique our conceptual composition really is, namely the inability to communicate outside one's own particular mindscape. It is for this reason that I consider personal reflections such as this one worthwhile as part of a larger project to help clarify the way we think as individuals and, thus, how we can best learn to communicate and prosper as a species and a planet.

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