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Sensorial Aesthetics: Cross-Modal Stylistics in Modernist Fiction

ABSTRACT

This article argues that modernist fiction pointedly involves all our senses as part of its reaction to the project of modernity and progress, as well as to Victorian realism; it is not just a response to a heightened sensibility towards new soundscapes, new perceptions of motion and new olfactory experiences in the aftermath of industrialization and modernization. This “rebellion” involves a shift of focus from outer, rational and objective reality to inner, irrational and subjective consciousness, which drives the emphasis on emotional and sensational experience. The article suggests that in light of recent important developments in cognitive, psychological and neurological research, as well as in affect studies and intermedial and multimodal studies, there is reason to revise modernist stylistics. This could predominantly be done within the theoretical field and taxonomy of intermediality, as proposed by Lars Elleström. The latter half of the article discusses some textual modernist samples to more convincingly establish a theory of modernist sensorial aesthetics.

Keywords: modernism, sensorial aesthetics, cross-modal iconicity, senses.

INTRODUCTION

In William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*, there is the recurring smell of honeysuckle, the "saddest odour of all" (143). Quentin associates this peculiar smell with the August night when Caddy loses her virginity and it thus symbolizes sexuality, and particularly Quentin's disgust for, or fear of, female sexuality. It is also the decisive smell of Faulkner's romanticized South, adding local colour and atmosphere to his narrative. Its recurrence becomes part of the structuring of themes and symbols throughout the novel. The smell of honeysuckle has a forefronted position in the reading experience, but it is just one out of Faulkner's many references to sensations other than the visual. Faulkner's novel includes excessive descriptions of a variety of sensations, primarily the olfactory and the auditory. This is obviously no news to critics of Faulkner, but could Faulkner's desire to describe sensations other than the visual be part of a more general stylistic tendency and ambition in modernist fiction? Could this attention given to sensorial descriptions even be part of a deliberate sensorial aesthetic?

Modernist fiction occupies an ambiguous space between a desire to be considered monomedial and a desire to be considered multimedial. Modernist authors' search for a pure, absolute literary form has been well documented since Clive Bell's *Art* (1914). Since the publication of Bell's aesthetic criticism, as Sara Danus states, there has been a desire among modernist writers "to project themselves as literary equivalents of Wagnerian *Gesamtkunstwerk*, as synaesthetic works of art seeking to transcend genre" (3). A Wagner opera is composed of words, music, acting and staging and as such can definitely be considered truly multimedial, whereas a modernist literary work consists of words and words only. Or does it?

This article argues that modernist fiction pointedly involves all our senses as part of its reaction to the project of modernity and progress, as well as to Victorian realism; it is not just a response to a heightened sensibility towards new soundscapes, new perceptions of motion and new olfactory experiences in the aftermath of industrialization and modernization. This "rebellion" involves a shift of focus from outer, rational and objective reality to inner, irrational and subjective consciousness, which drives the emphasis on emotional and sensational experience. In light of recent important developments in cognitive, psychological and neurological research, as well as in affect studies and intermedial and multimodal studies, there is reason to revise modernist stylistics. Re-examining modernist fiction through the prism of perceptions and sensations is a way of understanding this particular period's stylistic and political significance and its blatant critique of Victorian realism. This article, first, aims for a more general discussion,

situating modernism within ideas about multimodal media products as developed primarily by intermedialist Lars Elleström. It will then discuss some textual modernist samples in order to more convincingly establish a theory of modernist sensorial aesthetics.

MULTIMODALITY AND CROSS-MODAL STYLISTICS

A modernist conception of literary text as having a purity of form is deceptive and false; the act of reading triggers auditory sensations through the use of phonemes. This is why we laugh at Mr. Bloom's cat in *Ulysses* when she makes the noise "Mrkgnao" (106) and we interpret it as both *meow* and *milk now*. At first, this has no textual meaning but is purely sensational and something that has been created by our hearing faculties. The semiotic reflection comes when we perceive that the sensation is indeed similar to the signified sound of the cat and something similar to English: milk now! In the end, all meaning is semiotic (at least when meaning is identifiable), but the initial phase of sensations that lead to perception varies. There is quite a difference between writing "Mrkgnao" and "The cat meowed as if it wanted milk."

Even if literature on paper is a medium of symbolic images, and hence visual, sound is an active part of literature's realization: when we read, we utter sounds, either explicitly or quietly within our brain. If the book is one medium, the medium of realizing it is our body. Quite extensive critical work in the 1920s and onwards has been dedicated to what is sometimes referred to as sound symbolism, such as onomatopoeia, different functions of ascending and descending sound patterns, and ideophones (Ahlner and Zlatev 305–10). Ahlner and Zlatev propose calling these phenomena *cross-modal iconicity* since they are based, they argue, on the Peircian concept of similarity (312). Ramachandran and Hubbard even argue that reading text evokes haptic sensations through "certain lip and tongue movements" which might have consequences for spatial perception of certain sounds (10).

With the exception of haptic experiences of forming sounds in the body, matters become much more complicated when we discuss the other parts of the sensorium—the olfactory, the gustatory and the somatic—since they cannot, directly and explicitly, be triggered by the text itself. Sensational feelings linked to smell, taste and touch are not immediately linked to the medium of literature. In short, the medium *literature* does not consist of the olfactory, gustatory and somatic modalities (unless we include the very materiality of the book—touching the book, smelling it, turning the pages, etc.). Instead, these modalities are triggered by words and sounds and, for lack of a better term, simulated through the

sense organs of seeing and hearing. This process resembles the sense of tactility that viewing a statue without touching it still evokes. It seems, as Elleström confirms, that sensations can be triggered and *reactivated* in a complex manner: “This is because our mind, to a certain extent, has the ability to perceive resemblances not only within the same but also across different sensory areas and different mental realms” (“Identifying” 25). Thus, the visual receptors trigger personal tactile memories that relate to the information that is provided visually and, to some extent, sonically. Obviously, research has shown that sense organs do not operate in isolation from each other. Elleström exemplifies by explaining how vibrations can be both heard (as sound vibrations) and felt (25). Furthermore, Elleström claims, drawing from research by Calvert, Spence and Stein (2004), as well as Martino and Marks (2000), that “[t]he perception of one sense faculty may be different if combined with perception from another,” which means that senses can fortify each other (25). There also appears to be a certain habituation involved. Therefore, even if not *every* reader experiences similar cross-modal sensations, one can conclude that more often than not, readers might share such experiences depending on their biographical similarities and experiences.

The sense of perceiving a sensational effect through similarities in sensations that cross sensory borders is what can truly be called multimodality. In linguistic terms, according to Charles Forceville, the modes of multimodality refer to different communicative types such as written language, music, visuals, gestures, smells and touch (21–23). A multimodal media product is thus a product that uses more than one type, such as opera, film or dance in contrast to a monomodal product such as a novel (written language) or a song played on the radio (music). Elleström’s significant contribution to the study of multimodality in media products is his division of media into four modalities: the material, the spatiotemporal, the sensorial and the semiotic modality (“The Modalities” 17–24). These modalities include several modes. For example, the modality that concerns us, the sensorial modality, includes the modes of smell, touch, taste, vision and sound. In Elleström’s scheme, and in line with Bruhn’s definition of heteromediality (Bruhn 27), all media products are in fact multimodal—they all comprise the four modalities, but the modes within these modalities are what separate one media product from another. In “Bridging the Gap Between Image and Metaphor Through Cross-Modal Iconicity: An Interdisciplinary Model,” Elleström advances Ahlner and Zlatev’s term *cross-modal iconicity* to include not only linguistic crossings but also C. S. Peirce’s concepts of semiotics overall. By looking in particular at the icon and how it is transported through different sensorial modes, Elleström creates an understanding of how media products can

utilize sensorial modes that are not really part of their medium. “Cross-modal iconicity,” writes Elleström, “is iconicity that crosses the borders of different kinds of material, spatiotemporal, and sensorial modes—and between sensory structures and cognitive configurations” (“Bridging the Gap” 167).

Hence, studying the representation of sensations and the sensational effect they have on readers is a complicated matter. Sensational effects can be considered pre-mediated, low-cognitive, affective effects, but in order to create a coherent theory of these differentiated approaches, I suggest the following oppositional paradigm: mediation (sensation/affect)—representation (perception/emotion). There is a fine line between mediation and representation, and the two concepts are defined by Elleström as follows:

Mediation, as I define it, is a pre-semiotic, physical realization of entities (with material, sensorial, and spatiotemporal qualities, as well as semiotic potential) perceived by human sense receptors within a communication context. . . . Representation, as discussed here, is the creation of meaning in the perceptual and cognitive acts of reception. (“Transfer of Media” 668–69)

This division, to me, supports the separation of sensation and perception, even if Elleström indicates that the mediation also involves a “semiotic potential.” Much recent research on emotions has argued that emotions are cognitively wired (Lyons, de Sousa, Solomon). Noël Carroll, however, prefers to see emotions as

made up of at least two components: a cognitive component, such as a belief or a thought about some person, place, or thing, real or imagined; and a feeling component (a bodily change and/or a phenomenological experience), where, additionally, the feeling state has been caused by the relevant cognitive state. (196)

Similarly, Derek Matravers contends that emotions have “both cognitive and affective components” (4). Affect theory invites a more nuanced analysis of emotions by relating emotions as cognitive and semiotic, whereas affect consists of embodied feelings in a pre-semiotic, pre-perceptive context involving, in Elleström’s words, different types of receptors: “Exteroceptors register changes in the external environment, interoceptors are sensible to the internal conditions, and proprioceptors give us information regarding length and tension in muscle fibers and sinews” (“Bridging the Gap” 171). Marta Figlerowicz describes this distinction precisely:

I can become angry at or attracted to another person without knowing that my attitude toward her has changed. This is to experience an affect un- or preconsciously. I can also be aware of my anger or attraction and weigh it as a potentially reliable phenomenology, as a potentially true indication of what this other person is like and how I should treat her. This experience is what most theorists understand under the term emotion. (5)

Most studies of the sensorium *and* modernism that have been published in the last decade have been occupied with representation rather than sensation. The description of how Babbitt's "relationship with women . . . are mediated through the touch of his hand" in Abbie Garrington's *Haptic Modernism* (3) does not reveal anything about whether this description of the tactile transfers to the reader or not. As Elleström acknowledges, "it is difficult to separate sense perceptions from cognitive operations" ("Bridging the Gap" 185). In the process of triggering sense impressions through similarities or memory banks, both perceptive and cognitive actions might be present and affect each other. Cross-modal stylistics, for me, is not representation, it is affect. Representation, however, can lead to affect and sensorial reactivation. Sara Crangle writes in *A Handbook for Modernist Studies* about modernist affect and sulking in "Phenomenology and Affect: Modernist Sulking" but does not emphasize how the sensorium is operating in terms of the affect and the phenomenology of readers. Similarly, Vicki Mahaffey in the same anthology fails to incorporate the radical approach to sensorial impressions that the modernist stream of consciousness is receptive to. The essays in Julie Taylor's (ed.) *Modernism and Affect* display considerable wealth in their discussion of modernism and affect in historical, social and psychological conditions but do not discuss senses beyond representations of them to any greater extent. Correspondingly, brilliant analyses that more explicitly engage in discussing modernism and the sensorium are not occupied with the sensorial impression that modernist aesthetics have on readers; examples of such analyses are Louise Westling's "Virginia Woolf and the Flesh of the World" (1999), Brad Bucknell's *Literary Modernism and Musical Aesthetics: Pater, Pound, Joyce and Stein* (2002), Jed Rasula's "Listening to Incense: Melomania & the Pathos of Emancipation" (2007), Angela Frattarola's "Developing an Ear for the Modernist Novel: Virginia Woolf, Dorothy Richardson and James Joyce" (2009), and Michel Delville's *Food, Poetry, and the Aesthetics of Consumption: Eating the Avant-Garde* (2008). Consequently, this essay attempts to discuss a particular approach to cross-modal stylistics in modern fiction that is less focused on representation and more on mediation and sensing.

CROSS-MODAL STYLISTICS IN MODERNISM

Cross-modality was perhaps not what Viktor Shklovsky had in mind when he wrote almost one hundred years ago that some art makes one “recover the sensation of life” (12). His famous remark that art exists “to make the stone *stony*” (12) refers, in my mind, to the very concept of a sensorial aesthetic; objects should be described as they are sensed, not as they are perceived. This in itself signals a departure from more realistic aesthetics to more phenomenological ones that are part of the development of style in modernist writing, and this is demonstrated in Joseph Conrad’s famous preface to *The Nigger of Narcissus*: “My task which I am trying to achieve is, by the power of the written word, to make you hear, to make you feel” (xiv). This seminal line suggests a change in attitude towards the function of prose that is echoed in Shklovsky’s remark. Conrad’s “magic suggestiveness” inspires a reaction, perhaps not towards realism as a concept, but as a literary movement. His emphasis on sensations signals a transition from outer to inner reality, from perception to sensation, and a need for the multisensory in order to grasp the emotional, subjective experience, a process that had already been initiated by the French symbolists. For Baudelaire, there had to be a mingling between the interior and exterior world in poetic language. His exacerbated sensibility, his ecstasy, impelled future poets to use excessive emotional and sensational poetic language as a means to understand the relationship between interior and the exterior worlds. This change of perspective, which also includes a destabilization of normative distanced objectivity, suggests Marcus Bullock, is why Walter Benjamin considers Baudelaire to be an aesthetic that marks “the essential break of modernism with the previous tradition of literary aesthetics” (62). Baudelaire and Rimbaud created a poetic language that lent itself very well to the explorations of inner consciousness that became a trademark of high modernism not only in the obvious examples of Gertrude Stein and James Joyce but also in prose that has less evidently engaged in cross-modal sensory triggering.

In her essay “Modern Fiction” Virginia Woolf claims that “[l]ife is not a series of gig lamps symmetrically arranged; life is a luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end” (160). This truly Bergsonian concept of duration and flux is a harsh critique of the realist tradition, the ideas about progress and clock time, and the focus on consciousness also suggests a focus on the complete sensorium of *a* consciousness. This is an attitude that Merleau-Ponty would later describe as *being in the world*—the “primacy of perception”: we first perceive the world (221). One could add, though, that we first sense the world before we perceive it. In any case, these sentiments call

Cartesian dualism into question, as well as general Enlightenment ideas about rationality and objectivity. Consciousness becomes the dominant idea regarding how the world is perceived and should be described.

These ideas are of course not unique to the French symbolists, nor to high modernism, but are symptomatic of a whole change of “world order” that is in concordance with the then new scientific and philosophical approaches, such as phenomenology and gestalt theory, of Bergson, Freud, Nietzsche and Einstein, to name a few. This transition also gives emotions a renewed status. In the rational post-revolutionary world, there was just not space for emotions; encouraging them was another “mutiny” against the captaincy of rationality.

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ANGLO-AMERICAN HIGH MODERNISM AND SENSATIONS

Anglo-American high modernism (as opposed to futurism or surrealism) seems unenthusiastic about the time it existed in, the Great War serving as a symbolic rupture between a utopian past and a disturbing present. There are many examples from high modernism in which the olfactory and auditory senses are used to enhance the phenomenological experience of a doomed present and a likewise idealized past as a strategy to convey an inner experience and manifest a critique against progress and modernity. The simultaneous effect of these two strategies is a reading experience that is more sensational, physical and personal. The use of cross-modal sensorial aesthetics elucidates a more subjective involvement in the fictional experience.

In conjunction with their nostalgic sentiments, the proximate senses are more than useful to recreate a sensorial modality that longs back. Olfactory sensations more than others seem to be profoundly connected with memory. There are neurological explanations for this: the relationship between our olfactory sense and our memories is complicated. The recent consensus among neuroscientists is that the olfactory “bulb” is situated next to our limbic system, which is responsible for memory and emotions. Smells, particularly new scents, are linked directly and strongly to an event or person through a conditioned response. These smells then become associated with that event or person and once we are exposed to a similar scent or odour we remember the past event and person. The proximity between the olfactory centre in the brain and our memory functions would explain why the olfactory sense is strongly related to memory functions. Hans J. Rindisbacher provides an additional textual reason for this in his book *The Smell of Books*: “Smell’s very linguistic structure brings

up an Other, a reference to the outside” (15). Thus, the lack of abstract terminology for the olfactory and avoiding a linguistic structure such as “it smells like” invite external personal associations. These associations, in turn, pull the reader into the textual atmosphere of the setting.

The olfactory strategy, though, can also be found in earlier modernist fiction. Willa Cather, for example, writes in *O Pioneers!* (1913) about “spring plowing” and how “the brown earth, with such a strong, clean smell, and such a power of growth and fertility in it, yields itself eagerly to the plow” (29). In this remarkable memoir of the prairie, the clean smell of earth, a smell we can all relate to, stands out. Olfactory sensations, as just mentioned, seem to be profoundly connected with memory. Hence the imagination of past autumns in Evelyn Waugh’s *Brideshead Revisited* (1945) is strongly built up around the scent of the gillyflowers that “yielded to the damp leaves” (95). Smell can be activated less explicitly through associations with smell rather than descriptions of the smell itself. Such is the case in the description of the orchard in *O Pioneers!* where the enumeration of flowers also forcefully conveys olfactory aspects of summer (58). Although this could be considered pure representation, its sensorial, phenomenological impact lies in the enumeration—its quantity and repetition. This is similar to the opening of Hemingway’s *A Farewell to Arms* (1929). Hemingway’s barren and repetitious style actually reinforces the sense of cold autumn weather by stressing words that are associated with landscape and weather. Feelings of being freezing, hungry and tired are usually conveyed. In the opening paragraph we encounter the words “dust” and “leaves” with such regularity that these keywords are hammered into our reading consciousness (3). We not only read about autumn, we feel it. And feeling it allows us to emotionally connect this literary autumn with any strong memory of our own past autumns. Similarly, the presence of rain and fog in chapter twenty-four, when Henry spends a last evening with Catherine before boarding the train to the front, reinforces how this event becomes a particularly emotional one. Hemingway manages to allow the reader to share his characters’ longing for a time and space outside war and winter through his physical prose, and this longing inhabits the nostalgia for the future in an almost ontological way.

In Malcolm Lowry’s *Under the Volcano* (1947), we can identify a strategy that uses a romantic, nostalgic trope, the ruin, as a prime symbol of decay and past time in addition to a potent sensorial aesthetic to develop a phenomenological experience of decay. In the first chapter we are thrown into an atmosphere of decay and ruin. This chapter forms the springboard for past times since it is the last segment of the story and describes remembering but also wanting to forget the events that took place exactly one year previously. M. Laurelle walks around “deserted

swimming pools” (10), “dead tennis courts” (11), a sleeping platform (13) and “a faded blue Ford, a total wreck” (19). The desolation is further enhanced by “small, black, ugly birds” (19), “[w]indy shadows [sweeping] the pavements” (29) and a “crash of thunder” which switches off the street lights (30). These ruins, gloomy images and sounds contain the sentiment of change and something lost but they also illustrate metaphorically the destruction of a man, Geoffrey Firmin. The perception of this angst reaches a climax in two images: a deserted plough and an abandoned palace. The image of the plough, more emblematic in its presentation as a silhouette, clearly indicates the decayed spirit of the consul through its allusion to a human form: “there was a row of dead trees. An abandoned plough, silhouetted against the sky, raised its arms to heaven in mute supplication” (15). The deserted palace creates an even stronger sense of decay through the heavy use of negative adjectives and a prose that primarily stimulates the olfactory senses:

The broken pink pillars, in the half-light, might have been waiting to fall down on him: the pool, covered with green scum, its steps torn away and hanging by one rotting clamp, to close over his head. The shattered evil-smelling chapel, overgrown with weeds, the crumbling walls, splashed with urine, on which scorpions lurked—wrecked entablature, sad archivolt, slippery stones covered with excreta—this place, where love had once brooded, seemed part of a nightmare. (20)

The insertion of the positive, past love, is an effective juxtaposition and accentuates the decay which becomes a more pleasant alternative to the present. It reinforces the nostalgia by creating alternatives to the unpleasant present. The use of binaries and the sensorial modality focus on the decay and make it darker and stronger. This can be read as *one* man’s recollection of a utopian ideal, but it can also be interpreted as a general critique of the modern world.

Returning to Faulkner, a modernist emphasis on sensorial experience and the flux of modern consciousness become evident in the use of stream of consciousness, particularly in Quentin’s section. The lack of punctuation, capitalization, indentations and apostrophes seems to be “indicative of Quentin’s fractured narrative control” (128). For once, the term *stream of consciousness* seems highly appropriate, since it is a flow of emotions, sensations, flashes of memories, poetic images and allusions that forcefully propels the reader into the same dream world of involuntary memory that Quentin experiences phenomenologically.

This technique allows for the inclusion of the olfactory and auditory senses. For instance, in the phrase “crickets sawing away in the grass,”

the image and the sound of the crickets seem to constantly interfere with Quentin's memory, like some reminder of the past in its symbolic value of childhood summers. It is a sound that neither comforts nor troubles Quentin, but reminds the reader of the physicality of memory through its recurrence. It is in the way it addresses primarily the senses of the reader that it constitutes the possibilities of transporting the readers into their own pasts. As we see with the crickets, it is mainly their sound that creeps into the text: the crickets are "sawing," and later "... I could hear the crickets watching us in a circle" (130) and "I got up and followed we went up the hill the crickets hushing before us" (129). If we study the latter part of Quentin's section, we find that it is constantly charged with auditive references; sometimes simple auditive verbs like "hear," "sound" or "singing" are used, but more often it is onomatopoeic verbs that are charged with an action that makes sounds, such as in descriptions like "she rose her skirt **flopped** against her draining" (126, emphasis mine), "the water **sucked** and **gurgled** across the sand spit" (126, emphasis mine) and "her clothes **rustled**" (132, emphasis mine). These sounds, as recognized by Karl F. Zender in "Faulkner and the Power of Sound," seem to produce "a heightened awareness of the destructive power of time. Implicit in his effort at preserving the vanishing world of his youth is a sense of the evanescence of reconciliation" (91). Quentin's memories are also crammed with the smell of "damp clothes" (Faulkner 129), "damp grass and leaves" (130) and the "odour of summer and darkness" (143). This last example is especially interesting in its non-specific quality, which encourages the reader to fill in his own smells of summer and his interpretation of darkness into his experience of the narrative.

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In the opening of *Lord Jim*, Conrad writes: "He was an inch, perhaps two, under six feet" (1). This early modernist narrative's uncertainty emblemizes the whole project of modernity and its reluctance to use rational thought and objective reality. Unreliable narration and variable focalizations in Conrad; psychoanalytical, inner landscapes in Lawrence; free indirect discourse in Woolf; interior monologues in Joyce; stream of consciousness in Faulkner; the death of authority in Nietzsche; Bergsonian *durée*; and Einsteinian relativity all point to a distrust of the project of describing *one* reality. Objective reality lacks emotions and discourages subjectivity and sensations. Our experience of the world cannot be satisfied or complete by only addressing one or two senses. As Per Bäckström writes, it is a combination of "senses that makes the world

more magically complete than either of the senses could accomplish alone. Life is a whole before the ‘fragmented bits’ are given sense by the senses” (98). It is true that we are all multisensory creatures; our phenomenological experiences are constructed by our five senses unless our senses have been incapacitated. Cross-modal stylistics in modernist fiction is thus, in a paradoxical way, a step towards realism rather than a step away from it. The higher the number of sensorial modes that are activated, the richer the representation and experience of reality becomes. The choice of modernist fiction to favour a phenomenological, inner experience of the world in which all five senses are involved renders more objective analysis impossible but yields what could be termed a more *sensorial realism*. The use of a cross-modal sensorial aesthetics also makes the overt critique of progress more emotional for the readership.

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