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The sensory imperative

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Abstract

With this essay, we identify and resist a sensory imperative in management and organizational research and beyond. We define the sensory imperative as an uncritical embrace of the idea that the senses offer a unique and attractive methodological and political position for studying managerial and organizational life and for challenging dominant forms of knowledge production. By falling in with this imperative, the turn to the senses in management and organization studies risks losing sight of its own mediations. We propose three ways of regaining sight of these mediations, which, we argue, come together as an analytical sensorisation – a study of, rather than with, the senses.

Keywords

Representation, senses, sensorial politics, sensory methodologies

Introduction

In *The Gay Science*, Friedrich Nietzsche ([1887] 2001: §121) expressed a profound scepticism at those systematisers of knowledge who discounted the immediate world of sensory appearance in favour of a permanent (idealized) state of finalities and fixed meanings. They treated life as an argument; their concepts and causal standards were so deeply entrenched in their cognition that they mistook their representations as revealing the true condition of the

world. They failed to appreciate just how cognition bled out from the mind, to the skull, skin, the body, and more broadly still, the environment. Abstract concepts, Nietzsche suggested, are grammatical elaborations of felt, bodily experiences. Juxtaposing representation with embodied situated knowledge, Donna Haraway expresses similar scepticism at the ability to represent while escaping representation. She calls this a 'god trick', a gaze from nowhere that creates unlocatable and therefore irresponsible knowledge claims (Haraway, 1988: 581, 583). Yet, Haraway (1988: 579) also reminds researchers that the ability to recognize 'our own "semiotic technologies" for making meanings' – the body and its senses being one such technology – is not enough because it borders on radical constructionism. Though necessarily contradictory, she argues for the necessity of combining the awareness of semiotic technologies with the insistence on the possibility of providing 'faithful accounts of a "real" world' (Haraway, 1988: 579). This too was Nietzsche's ([1887] 2001: §112) concern, to be aware that in no way does nature wish to imitate the purposive, organized condition of humans, and that the role of inquiry was to naturalize humanity by redeeming nature of the continual attempt to humanize it. Haraway's (1988) reminder is a timely one: without an experimental commitment to faithfully accounting for the real world, the turn to the senses in research risks becoming 'a story that loses track of its mediations just where someone might be held responsible for something' (p. 579). This essay examines the turn to the senses from Haraway's insistence, often overlooked in practical and theoretical appropriations of the senses, that even knowledge from the body should be held responsible for its own mediations. We consider whether reclaiming the sensory system in management and organization studies heeds Haraway's warning or whether, in an eagerness to transcend the dry, representational language of disinterested reasoning, it exposes researchers to 'a perceptual barrage of immediacy' (Jameson, 1991: 412–413), which prevents their studies from saying anything at all (Barnett, 2008).

The 'god trick' of body and feeling

In Haraway's spirit, our essay is cautionary. We caution against what we sense is an equally pervasive 'god trick' in which the dominance of mind and reason gives way to the dominance of body and feeling. We call this the sensory imperative. The sensory imperative is an uncritical embrace of the idea that the senses offer a unique methodological and political position for studying human life and for challenging dominant forms of knowledge production. It is, we argue, the consequence of the turn to the senses losing sight of its own mediations. To regain sight of these mediations, we encourage researchers to disassociate the senses from an *a priori* position of marginality and resistance, to instead review the sensory turn in light of a mainstream

sensorial politics (Davidson and Brash, 2021) and the ordinariness of the senses (Stewart, 2007). While sensory methodologies can constitute a radical break with representation, they can also, by advocating an intensification of feeling and experience, be understood as yet another aspect of social structuring. We are far from arguing that sensory methodologies are merely mediated by aesthetic capitalism, but we do argue that it is not from the margins but from the pervasive sensory and affective structuring of society that sensory methodologies must be exposed, questioned and directed. This leads us to inquire into the intimacy, rather than opposition, between the senses and representation.

The enminded body

We take this essay as an occasion to replace one embodied, situated activity – going along with, moving with the sensory forces – with another embodiment of judgmental interruption. Stepping back from unfolding processes and taking a disengaged position – one of the sins of representational theory (Beyes and Steyaert, 2020: 225; Zundel, 2013: 110) – does not have to be a mental cognitive abstraction. It also involves a body coming into a considered, non-coincidence with itself (Merleau-Ponty, 1968: 148). If perception takes place in ‘circuits that cross-cut the boundaries between brain, body and world’ (Ingold, 2000: 244), then surely thinking does too? Rather than just calling for embodiment, Ingold (2000: 171) talks of the enminded body, something Hayles and Pulizzi (2010) elaborate on in their idea of cognition, consciousness and language being inseparably woven together. This intimacy of meaning, thought, perception and knowledge is further distributed, stored, split and reformed through sensory electrical pathways that are both organic and machinic, processed by layer upon layer of software and operating systems, all at speeds far out of reach to ordinary human perception. We too acknowledge the bodily activity involved in thinking and language yet remain sceptical towards the proposal of bodily activity *as* thinking and *as* language, a proposal which runs through the sensory imperative as an insistence that one can retain a hold on the world while being immersed in it (Merleau-Ponty, 1968: 148). To take hold of the world, in our view, is to sever from it, to cut out from the immersed, networked, endlessly entailed affective exchange of force, and to think. Thinking involves what Hannah Arendt (1978: 227) called a completion of the event, something which Marilyne Strathern (1996) likens to an act of cutting the network, which for Arendt took the form of deliberate, active remembrance and quest for shareable meaning between speaking bodies. Arendt (1978: 334–337) was also thinking of Nietzsche here, of his coruscating attack on the representational theories, but then also of his

reluctance to turn away entirely from the structures of deliberate, active thought (the collective structures of freely exchanged opinions she associates with politics) and immerse oneself into the ever-renewing succession of life's processes that course through sense and feeling. Ridding oneself of Apollo in favour of Dionysius – as though it were a choice, somewhat ironically – discounts utterly the severing, creating role of the thinking subject in favour of submission to biological process. It borders on a carnal intoxication: a lust for connectivity and propinquity that derides the thinking human subject as little more than an anachronistic ontological overthrow from the twilight age of Cartesian doubt.

The senses: objects of or means of study?

To understand the methodological implications of studying the senses through immersion, Wacquant draws a useful distinction: Sensory formations can be taken either as objects of study (he calls this sensual ethnography¹) or as means of study (carnal sociology), his own engagement with the senses being positioned in the latter. Carnality creates an immersive, involved understanding grounded in deep familiarity and care which is necessarily curtailed by contemplation (Wacquant, 2015: 6). Recent years have seen increasing interest in sensory methodologies that develop this carnal sociology based on an immersive research agenda. These methodologies do not just study but actively 'engage the senses' as a way to get to new ways of knowing and thinking (Pink, 2013), such as when autoethnography is taken up for its ability to actively generate experience and empathy (Boncori and Smith, 2019). In turning to their own bodies and to extensive writing about methodology to ground their challenge of representational knowledge production and learning, such as in recent work on the sensuous nature of writing (Brewis and Williams, 2019; Essén and Värlander, 2012) and walking (Michels et al., 2020), management and organization scholars take up Wacquant's carnal sociology uncritically. But why should the study of the senses from the body enjoy such eminence? Isn't this just a new picture being constructed with the old logic of hierarchies in method? Emphasizing walking and writing as ways to immerse researchers in the world of feeling carries potential, but not if it comes with a loss of critical sight into how the senses are themselves being discursively and technically mediated. With the triumph of feeling comes the danger of stopping before – as Haraway would have it – anyone can be held accountable for what is felt.

Aspects of the sensory imperative

Unfolding the arguments from the introduction, we identify two aspects to the sensory imperative. The first aspect is an advocacy of closeness as a methodological ideal with which to challenge the ‘god trick’ of representation: by bringing the world ‘in’ through sensory proximity, studies are presumed to be more real to life. The second aspect is a commitment to a politics of sensory methodologies: it is presumed that sensory research, *ipso facto*, challenges the prevailing rational, heteronormative, industrialized, institutional orders by which subjectification is continually seeded.

First aspect of the sensory imperative: the desire for closeness

A desire for closeness has developed in the field of sensory studies, arguing that, far from being seen as signs of cultural models, the senses should be studied as unmediated, experienced phenomena of life (Ingold, 2000, 2011; Pink, 2009, 2010; Wacquant, 2015). Taken up in management and organization studies, researchers seek methods that are ‘as sensuous as possible’ (Michels et al., 2020: 560) and strive to learn ‘how to write in a more embodied way, with more emotion’ (Essén and Värlander, 2012: 406). While such aspirations are of course not problematic in themselves, they often approach the question of ‘feeling more’ uncritically. To what end should we feel more? What kind of encounters does it produce?

The sensory revolution

Similar to Wacquant’s distinction in the previous section, Pink (2010: 338) describes a transition from an anthropology of the senses to the more carnally direct sensory anthropology, where the representational ‘of’ gives way to experience and practice. The anthropology of the senses, an important driver of the sensory revolution that challenged the linguistic turn of the 1960s and 1970s, is a relational approach to the study of the senses and sensory orders that compares different cultures and studies their ideas and beliefs through sensory characterizations (Howes, 2013: part III para. 5). Emerging in the early 1990s, it was animated by a critical relation to the ways vision and formal classificatory systems had colonized knowledge production, blinding research to understanding other ways of being in the world that were not marked by vision or articulation, but by taste, listening, feeling or smelling.

Paradoxically, while the anthropology of the senses has contributed to the sensory expansion of accepted knowledge forms, it has itself become a battlefield over the question of how and whether to make sense of the senses

(Ingold, 2011; Pink, 2010). The debate is grounded in disputes over a particular sense: vision. For some, the association of sight with rational and mental projection, and its concomitant superiority as a dominant sense that places subjects in distinction to the world, makes vision questionable. Wacquant (2015: 9), for example, likens the detachment of abstract and artificial thinking with the gaze whereas the hands capture the natural flow of life.

Against this anti-visualism, however, Tim Ingold cautions against the idea that vision can possess inherent capacities such as detachment and objectivity. This, he says, is 'to separate out the discourse surrounding vision from the actual practices of looking' (Ingold, 2000: 286). To correct the dominance of vision with the introduction of other senses might not be enough, then, if eyes are separated from looking, ears from listening and skin from feeling (Ingold, 2011: 325). What is left behind by the anthropology of the senses, Ingold (2000: 184) suggests, are practical activities of perception. Ingold is no fan of representational knowledge and remains intensely interested in direct multisensory experience. Yet, proximity is not necessarily found by eulogizing different senses: the job at hand is to understand everyday phenomenal experience, not to coral specific aspects of it.

The desire for closeness in management and organization studies

In management and organization studies, the interest in blurring the divisions between cognition and feeling, or representation and enactment, enjoins itself to a methodological desire for closeness (Beyes and Steyaert, 2020: 227; Brewis and Williams, 2019: 89; Essén and Värlander, 2012: 412). Beyes and Steyaert (2020: 228–229), for example, describe their pedagogy of affect as part of a 'more-than-representational' urge to replace accurate representation with experience through multi-sensory ethnography. The advocacy of embodied practices of learning through techniques such as walking recall Ingold's emphasis on the practical activity of perception (Beyes and Steyaert, 2020; Zundel, 2013). Also addressing the practical activity of perception, Essén and Värlander (2012: 402) argue that access to other researchers' experiences of writing is arrived at through a 'pre-conceptual, pre-discursive and bodily capacity to grasp their emotions, intentions and experiences'. Yet this grasping, and appearance of emotions and so on, is already a conditioning of the world being arranged for the sake of a particular form of structured understanding by which humans are to get ahead. There is little attempt to understand this ontological structuring of the senses. Writing and walking are being invoked here more in the spirit of closeness advocated

by Wacquant and Pink: being close is, evidently, enough. But in giving priority to such embodied ways of knowing, how then do these studies hold on to the ‘self-restraining sobriety’ (Zundel, 2013: 122) needed to obtain ‘insights beyond the self’ (Essén and Värlander, 2012: 415)?

Though aware of the potential dangers of ‘narcissistic accounts’ (Essén and Värlander, 2012: 415) when doing research from the body, Essén and Värlander’s study risks failing to heed its own warning. Writing, in their case, is directed at increased self-understanding (Essén and Värlander, 2012: 404) and at the understanding of an erotic desire involved in academic writing (Essén and Värlander, 2012: 415). While the body is seen as an active force and agent in academic research practices, Essén and Värlander’s concern is less in how the agent-body meets a research field than in how it meets itself. With the walking practice of the *dérive*, Michels et al. (2020: 560) go further still, into the unconscious hidden desires of researchers, in search of new imaginative capacities and with the aim to sensitize prospective managers to their own bodies. It is ‘[t]he drifter’s own experiences [which] serve as the main material for such a spatial analysis’ (Michels et al., 2020: 562). Yet this elevation of a drifting, bodily phenomenology becomes akin to a profound loneliness. If the senses and experience are grounding conditions of knowing, and if, because of this, what appears as the world is an open, restless and sometimes transforming array of things and events, then each body is confined to its own private sensorium.

Encountering the senses through representation

Other sensory management and organization studies continue to see value in representations. While walking can certainly be theorized as a sensuous experience of self-encounter (see O’Doherty, 2013), in Beyes and Steyaert’s (2020) study of Berlin, it is deliberately tuned towards encounters with others: queer movements, squatted houses, homeless persons, street musicians and drug dealers, remnants of working-class culture and bourgeois culture in unexpected places. In short, so many ways in which moving does move you (their pedagogy of affect is predicated on the rule ‘move to be moved’ (Beyes and Steyaert, 2020: 229)), but with an analytical emphasis on *what moves* rather than *being moved*. Sensory regimes are encountered through representations, such as of economy and history: ‘atmospheric and existential consequences of economic theories’ and ‘the way Berlin’s loaded history keeps shaping its affective landscape’ (Beyes and Steyaert, 2020: 234).

Given such sensory attunement to representations that move (as opposed to speaking directly to cognition), what, then, of the claim for affective

pedagogy to be ‘more-than-representational’? What ‘more’ is being hoped for here? In part, it is the ‘process of participating, engaging and imagining’ (Beyes and Steyaert, 2020: 229), but what does analysis then produce, beyond its own performance? Perhaps the ‘more than’ is not an addition to representation, but a concern with its transformation. For sure, the speculative multiplicity that can characterize the hybridity and inventiveness of sensory methodologies is needed to upset the plinths upon which knowledge has been placed, but representation itself can play a full role in this. It can be stygian and uncanny, it can disturb, it can contribute to the challenges of critique. Surely, the ‘more than’ should not confine research to a desire for closeness with sensory worlds that strives deliberately towards less cognition and coherence (Brewis and Williams, 2019: 89).

Lessons for an analytical sensorisation

To recur to Ingold’s suspicion of representation and how it survives even the sensory turn, his critique of the anthropology of the senses is entirely in line with what we have identified as the desire for closeness in the sensory imperative: that we can be freed of the curse of distancing abstraction by refusing to know through representation as a weapon of categorizing. Yet, Ingold’s desire for closeness as a methodological ideal for studying sensory perception is not a rejection of representation as such. Rather, it marks the difference between giving conceptual priority to the senses – cultivating a ‘sensory imagination’ which opens ‘not upon the world itself, but upon a simulacrum, of the world’ (Ingold, 2011: 316) – and giving practical priority to the senses. Stretching his critique of the anthropology of the senses towards the desire for closeness in Wacquant, Pink and in management and organizational research, there is a sensory imagination at play here too when the discourses surrounding senses (contemplation) are separated from the actual practices of sensing (immediacy).

Giving practical priority to the senses as Ingold advocates does claim to be able to access life itself with its problematic connotations of unmediated vision against which Haraway warns, but this is a life which is already riven with representations constantly affecting experience and perception (Ingold, 2000: 286). Thus, to be sensitized towards these practical and sensory experiences of representation would be one way to stall and disturb the sensory imperative. To paraphrase Ingold’s critique of anti-visualism this, however, demands that we give up on seeing distance as an inherent feature of representation. It also demands that we stop taking proximity as a precondition for sensing, especially as sensory lives are constantly technologically mediated at a distance.

Second aspect of the sensory imperative: politics without representations

The second aspect of the sensory imperative poses the senses as forces from the margins with an *a priori* resilience in the face of disciplinary power. Following from the politics of admitting the situated body, research (contrary to Haraway's intention) becomes politicized by virtue of the very position it takes rather than the subjects it analyses. This is 'the politics of forming understanding from a different orientation point' (Dewsbury, 2003: 1914) which has, for instance, led to the elevation of witnessing (as opposed to explaining and making sense of) as a particularly ethical and political position from which to engage with the world (Beyes and Steyaert, 2020: 235; see also Dewsbury, 2003: 1909). And yet, as Haraway (1997: 24) shows, in the history of modernity, the witness is also the one who holds the power to establish the facts, to claim its subjectivity as its objectivity. There is an onus, then, on sensory studies to expand on how such witnessing is more attuned than other forms of relating to things. Similarly, if, as some claim, 'the avowal of disharmony, incoherence, and contradiction amidst ourselves [researchers] is a necessary first step to prefigure non-capitalistic difference, change, and the potential for successful political interventions' (Zanoni et al., 2017: 584), then in what ways is this move from personal disharmony to political emancipation structured, and how is it that a sensitivity to a multiplicity of ungovernable feelings and desires contributes to the success of such political intervention? In other words, the assumed elevation of the body and the embodied subject as a site of resistance ought to raise concerns about whether we slip into an abstraction of politics (similar to Ingold's concern of the previous section) rather than addressing the lived politics of the senses.

The turn to the senses, and the methodological proposals to which it has given rise, ascribe certain values and affects to particular styles of analysis (Barnwell, 2016: 11) – styles that often involve encountering or crossing the limits of language. Framing embodied sensory studies as sites of resistance and opposition, the sensory imperative invokes a politics outside politics, or what Thrift (2008: 3) calls 'politics which are not yet of politics'. The most explicit relation between such emancipatory politics and the senses is established in non-representational theory. Here, standing outside politics is seen as a precondition for exposing the sensory orderings that characterize late modernity and globalized capitalism, to then splinter, dissolve or transform them (Thrift, 2004: 68, 2008: 4). The diagnosis of the centrality of the senses in late modernity leads to an interventionist, experimental political programme which takes the new openness of the world as its licence to

experiment on the sensory dispositions embedded in everyday spaces and subjectivities (Thrift, 2008: 68ff).

Politics without representations in management and organization studies

Drawing directly or indirectly on this non-representational view on politics, proposals for a pedagogy of affect, for the use of the *dérive* in learning, for writing-as-skin and autoethnographies of embodied experiences of writing, are all methodological experiments in management and organization studies that are animated by a wish to challenge the political effects of representation with its disciplining and suppression of the sensing body. On one hand, this makes welcome room for the provocations of indetermination, for a critical approach to creativity and experimentation as both a subject of and means of study, and finally, for forms of language that cannot be corralled by sedentary and disembodied forms of learning (Beyes and Steyaert, 2020: 236–239). On the other hand, and notwithstanding these affordances, the non-representational notion of politics also entertains the idea that it is possible to wilfully frame contributions ‘outside of preconceived and instrumental ways’ (Zundel, 2013: 19–120), which compromises the possibility of these experiments to analyse political structures.

Self-marginalization

Playing with the apparent intimacy between the senses and the marginal, recent work in management and organization studies explores writing as resistance against the way in which scientific norms can silence the sensing body (Gilmore et al., 2019). Boncori and Smith (2019: 75–79), for instance, resist such norms through a detailed autoethnography that deals with the intimate bodily issue of perinatal loss (see also Peretz, in this issue). Here, it is not only ‘writing differently’ (Gilmore et al., 2019) but also the sensing subject which is taken to be a source of resistance. Seeing words as extensions of flesh, and embodiment as a site of resistance to the ‘masculine and patriarchal norms of what is acceptable’ (Gilmore et al., 2019: 80), writing mobilizes the senses from the margins against what is perceived as mainstream. What gets lost in this insistence on the senses as being at the margins of organization, mobilized by individuals, is twofold: First, it overlooks the equally sensuous and embodied practice of silencing bodies in organizational settings. The turn to the senses is no longer only a site of resistance; it is also a source of power (Lash, 2007). Second, with the explicit intention to ‘write differently’, a certain attitude towards the potentiality of thinking as *écriture* (see special issue by Gilmore et al., 2019) takes

individuality itself to be a site of resistance (Berlant, 2011: 124). At best, this overevaluation of what methodological ideas might do politically is an ‘occupational hazard’; at worst, it comes from ‘a certain mode of virtuously intentional, self-reflective personhood’ (Berlant, 2011: 124). Individuality is a much more contrary form, Berlant argues: It encompasses commodity fetishism, psychoanalytic desires and cultural and national modernity. Thus, linking political resistance with specific methodological goals such as ‘writing differently’ is a heroic staging of agency that distracts attention ‘from the hesitancy and recessiveness in ordinary being’ (Berlant, 2011: 124).

Interventions above encounters

The eagerness in the sensory turn to bring about social change (e.g. by challenging the representational spaces of knowing through interventions from the outside) can lead to such dramatizations. Needless to say, it is not that taking up the issue of perinatal loss or silencing of bodies are dramatizations – it is the idea that such issues *become political* when written about differently, when emphasized through the senses. Take the use of the *dérive* in management and organization research as an example, as it displays a tendency to think resistance from the sensing individual (Michels et al., 2020: 563), and to associate this with affect, play and subversion (Beyes and Steyaert, 2020: 233–235). Like writing differently, the *dérive* is a practice that becomes political through the sensing individual: it is the witnessing in movement of the environment, and the subject’s folding of experience into that environment, which to the Situationists made it a political act. Yet, the difference between using the *dérive* for ethnographic encounters that involve dirt and estrangement (Beyes and Steyaert, 2020: 233f), and for playfully opening up spaces of imagination (Michels et al., 2020: 572), is telling. In the first, the senses become political when encounters confront students with places and lives they wouldn’t otherwise see, or when their notion of urban creativity is stretched well beyond their comfort zones (Beyes and Steyaert, 2020: 234). In the latter, the senses become political when the imagination intervenes in a situation to make something of it (Michels et al., 2020: 573). It is the difference between sensory orders seen as something already existing in the field and sensory orders as something which is affirmatively added to the field, or the difference between perceptual practice and sensory imagination (Ingold, 2011: 216). If the latter is all there is, its political heft remains limited to individualized acts of somewhat flippant derangement whose political effects are minimal. In his film *Critique of Separation*, Debord himself was somewhat sceptical of the isolating individualism of *dérive*, alive to how, if left to its own devices, it amounted to little more than a continual adaptation into a network of possible itineraries that achieved very little.

Lessons for an analytical sensorisation

We are thus back at the question of what makes the senses political in sensory methodologies. Is it through sensory interventions, as non-representational theory and methodologies propose, where politics is understood as a matter of intervening in representations from the outside – of writing, walking and positioning oneself differently? Or is it when environments are encountered as sensory orders that shape those, as well as multiple other, encounters? We argue that it is of little political use to take sensory lives seriously if the analysis intervenes to undo social structure and order instead of critically seeking to understand it. The sensory imperative, nurtured by a non-representational politics as described here, emphasizes a political sensorisation aimed at *bringing about* social change, but disregards an analytical sensorisation aimed at *analysing* shifting forms of sensual perception and structuration (Reckwitz, 2012: 256f; Reckwitz, 2017). Thus, it does not capture the ways in which people manage structuring and being structured in everyday lives (Barnwell, 2016: 16), that is, the ordinariness of feeling. An analytical sensorisation, by contrast, encounters structures not as invisible relations and objective distributions we should avoid apprehending for the risk of maintaining them, but as a lived structure (Berlant, 2011: 67) or structures of feeling (Williams, 1977: 132). To locate the senses within social structures instead of outside of – or even in opposition to – them is the starting point for an analytical sensorisation which recognizes the political centrality and ordinariness of the senses.

Ways out

While we caution against the uncritical use of sensory methodologies that privilege the bodily condition, and against the elevation of ‘the margins’ as a starting point for a politics without representations, we do not mean to ignore or repress the senses in management and organizational research. Rather, we ask whether the senses can be made meaningful without being translated into cultural models (as they are in in the anthropology of the senses), and without being confined to an unmediated encounter with life, beyond any need for explanation. We propose three ways out of the sensory imperative, towards an analytical sensorisation. The first takes its cue from the management and organization studies already discussed in our essay. The second way draws on Kathleen Stewart to question the idea that the attempt to make sense of the senses is an academic practice out of joint with lived experience, which we must therefore work against. The third plays with Walter Benjamin’s notion of mimesis, which reveals to us the limitations of the words we have used here

– ‘representation’ and ‘non-representation’ – when trying to understand the bodily implications of composing analysis.

First, moderations of the sensory imperative suggest that we maintain a will to communicate, to reform rather than reject (Brewis and Williams, 2019: 90), that we maintain the need to make sense of the senses (Beyes and Steyaert, 2020: 229) and that we reserve a track for experimentation alongside, but not instead of, the effort to abstract (Brewis and Williams, 2019: 90). But to use these moderations to resist the sensory imperative, we first need to insist on the ordinariness of sensory lives rather than taking the senses to be a source of political resistance from which we can mobilize against representational knowledge production. Taking a more cautionary approach to the experimental wonders of embodied learning, we might lessen the force of the sensory imperative by pointing to the mainstream life of senses, ‘the most usual fact that there is something and not nothing’ (Zundel, 2013: 121, paraphrasing Heidegger, 2000). As the turn to the senses is slowly becoming less antithetical to the fields of management and organization studies, the suggestion to let the senses ‘just be’ seems counterproductive – should we not push this agenda further still, to counteract lifeless analysis? Yet, the sensory imperative encourages the active persuasion and increase of the senses in ways which compromise the realization of its own emancipatory politics. Using the senses to get as close as possible, or even to strive for an ‘enactive ethnography’ (Wacquant, 2015: 5) as a style of immersive fieldwork, seems to us to relinquish the two-in-one contemplative distancing necessary to maintain an experimental sense of the limits by which subjectification is being continually instituted. Rather than simply assume our senses have an innate capacity to challenge systems of power and the classifications and law-like arrangements of representational knowledge, Zundel (2013: 121) suggests an alternative is to conduct research as a ‘non-willing waiting’. As he admits, it is a slow and rather unfashionable position to advocate. Nevertheless, refusing to fall too easily for the infectious eagerness of the sensory imperative to move and be moved might be a better position from which to realize a social analysis of sensory orders: to wait, and to listen, rather than leap.

Second, to nurture the sensory turn in management and organization studies as an analytical sensorisation, we ought to abandon the idea that making sense of the senses is an academic abstraction which stands in opposition to lived practice. By insisting on lived experiences of representation as a field study of the senses, the senses can be studied in a much wider range of phenomena, not just those marked by radical experimentation or immediacy beyond words. Instead of thinking about

closeness as a methodological tool and ideal, we might start to think of analytical sensorisation as the capacity to attune to the practical ways in which the senses are made sense of in experience. This way out draws on the sensibility towards immersive fictions in Kathleen Stewart's work. Here, the researcher's immersion and peoples' lived immersion in compositions, habituations, performances and events are one and the same thing. Stewart (2008: 73) does not operate with different *kinds* of immersion, suggesting that they might get one closer to, or more distanced from, the real, but with one immersive fiction. It is a fiction because the worlds being studied are made up of 'generative modalities of impulses, daydreams, ways of relating, distractions, strategies, failures, encounters, and worldings of all kinds' (Stewart, 2008: 73) and because attending to them takes 'the capacity to imagine trajectories and follow tendencies into scenes of their excesses or end points' (p. 78). But importantly, such imaginative capacities are not methodological tools, they are the very strategies people use to go on living, and all researchers can do is to keep an eye out for those contact zones where these strategies appear meaningful to people themselves – not as mirrors of what is going on but as residues of lived experience (Stewart, 2008: 77). Referring to Barthes' (1985) critical writings on representation, Stewart (2008) calls this a third meaning, a significance which emerges in the way 'something picks up density and texture as it moves through bodies, dramas, and scenes' (p. 76). Making sense of something cannot be reduced to, and then rejected as, an abstracting representational knowledge claim removed from practical perceptual activity. How things jump into form (Stewart, 2008: 75) is also a lived practice and therefore, when analysed, not necessarily added 'on top' of lived, bodily experience (Ingold, 2000: 286). To let the sensory imperative be, we need to attend to practical perceptual activity not only in its immediacy but also in the ways in which sense emerges from the field of the senses, as practical activities of representation, not just of 'being' but of being 'in something' (Stewart, 2008: 77).

Third, and in the spirit of questioning this essay's own reproduction of a sensory imperative by keeping alive the distinction between representation and non-representation, we invoke Walter Benjamin's notion of mimesis – that faculty by which one gets hold of something by means of its likeness – and how it flips the desire for closeness which we have been questioning. Mimesis always involves part copy and part contact, 'a language of the body combining thought with action, sensuousness with intellection' (Taussig, 1993: 20). It is both an immersive performance and an intellectual act of disciplinary thought. Like Kathleen Stewart's immersive fiction, mimesis elides the struggle over how to capture or define what counts as real, and instead works to make apparent the distribution of what can be seen, said and

thought from within these structures. Reminding us that mass culture is the new schooling for our mimetic powers – ‘people whom nothing moves or touches any longer are taught to cry again by films’ – Benjamin (1978: 86) shows how representations too are a matter of the senses, and that getting closer to the real takes on a radically different meaning when that real is itself a screen, an image, a montage, a commodity. They are ‘eyes’ of technology that, just like our organic eyes, function as active perceptual systems ‘building on translations and specific ways of seeing, that is, ways of life’ (Haraway, 1988: 583). Benjamin’s notion of mimesis reveals a kind of ghostly or uncanny movement or manipulation that is not representation (and certainly doesn’t claim to be non-representational), but has a life of its own in the ‘sticky webs of copy and contact, image and bodily involvement’ (Taussig, 1993: 21). Thinking through the notion of mimesis, non-representation, as that moment of sensuous contact (from which the sensory imperative claims to begin), is always a potential, but incidental, effect of careful efforts to represent, moments in which the bodily stakes involved in copying something can lead to contact.

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Note

1. Not to be mistaken with Sarah Pink’s (2009, 2010) sensory ethnography/anthropology or Stoller’s (1997) influential ‘sensuous scholarship’, which are both closer to carnal sociology than to sensual ethnography in Wacquant’s vocabulary. In the anthropological field of sensory studies, we read the confusion about what to call the field as a testament to the failure to distinguish between the senses as an object of and means of inquiry and by extension a disagreement about which one of these gets closer to experience (see debate between Pink and Howes, in Pink, 2010).

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