

From the Hideous to the Sublime

Olfactory processes, performance texts and the sensory episteme

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As more academics involved with non-western cultures are increasingly realizing, our major senses – particularly the tactile, the gustative and the olfactory – have been much maligned in understanding the complex process of semiosis and the dissemination of knowledge in and through performance. The sense of smell remains ignored in some areas of performance semiotics by an academic world distanced by space and in some senses time; we are bound to our age by a set of rules and habitual responses towards the senses that consider smell to be potentially nefarious. Süsskind's *Das Parfum* [*Perfume*] is a perfect example of this phenomenon, where the celebration of smell is demonized by the despicable acts of a maniacal killer. In a recent work on the subject called *Aroma*, Classen, Howes and Synnott demonstrate that we are far removed from an age in our own culture where odours were thought of as intrinsic 'essences' and revelatory of inner truth, in contrast to a present where such an 'olfactory consciousness' is '*considered threatening to the social order*' (Classen et al. 1994: 3). In Balinese culture, smell reflects the dual nature of their society, a world in which the hideously evil and the sublimely beautiful can exist side-by-side at the same time. This paper examines specific examples of performances in which olfaction plays an important role, attempting to gain through this

appreciation a greater insight into how smells can influence signification.

TEXTUALITIES AND THE SENSORY EPISTEME

In particular, this paper discusses olfactory processes in terms of what can be referred to as the *sensory episteme*, i.e. the way individuals within given cultures are socially inculcated to make use of their senses for certain purposes and in specific ways. It is useful here to make some initial observations regarding the theoretical discourse being introduced as it requires the acceptance of a number of assumptions about potentially abstract concepts such as 'knowledge' and 'text'.

First, in proposing the notion of a sensory episteme, I am suggesting that the different forms of information we receive via all our five senses are potential sources of knowledge. The *episteme* is the broad framework – the set of habits, agreements and ways of behaving – we are provided with in a sociocultural context to make sense of our world; I draw here heavily on Foucault's notion of the episteme introduced in his important work *Les mots et les choses* (see Foucault 1966).

Second, it is proposed that 'texts' are the complex cultural vehicles in which such sensory information is communicated, and that 'textualities' are the specific cognitive tools we make use of

to understand such *texts*. This approach is based on important foundational work done by Lotman (1977), Barthes (1984) and, more recently, Kerszenboom (1995). Lotman, for example, considered that everything recognized as being culturally meaningful could be called a 'text', whether that complex cultural object be made up of signs from the repertory of verbal language, or other types of artistic communication such as drawings, behavioural sequences and music. Barthes, undoubtedly extending upon the work of his predecessors, considered text to be a type of non-closed 'social space' which individuals involved in the textual process give new and immediate meaning to. Offering a brief revision of these theoretical ideas, this paper will also address aspects of *textualities* and the *sensory epistemes* they derive from in sources as diverse as the European, the Chinese, and particularly the Balinese culture, discussing particular ritualized or performative practices that involve olfaction, and also conflicts and misunderstandings that can result from contrasting epistemes. In attempting to present a model that considers smell in terms of a broad epistemological and ontological setting, the pervading approach that does not consider these non-verbal elements of the human episteme is challenged. European culture very often inculcates a negative attitude towards smell where constant 'rites of cleanliness and purification' result in a set of strict and regimented 'olfactory norms'.

NON-VERBAL TEXTUALITY FURTHER EXPLAINED

Some of the basic concepts introduced in this paper need some brief explanation. The word epistemology itself has had different nuances throughout western history because it refers to the whole field of 'knowledge' and how it can be experienced or perpetuated by a culture. Western philosophy has kept itself busy exploring the ultimate conditions for the 'truth' of this knowledge. Foucault, however, provided a contrasting platform for viewing knowledge in his work by presenting it not in terms of truth, but instead through particular

culturally inculcated fields for the perpetuation of knowledge; its borders, he suggested, are nuanced by the way a culture teaches its users to treat knowledge, and not therefore knowledge alone. This provided a new impetus for looking at knowledge and understanding the conditions in which it is perpetuated in culture, accepting as a given the fact that many different kinds of 'truths' can and do exist simultaneously. Foucault refers to the conditions with which a culture provides individuals, conditions which they can use to help them conceive of their environment as an *episteme*. Foucault's meticulous demonstrations of different epistemes in western culture and how they have coloured our understanding have brought about a kind of crisis in western philosophy, one which questions the very environment in which we now live.

This paper explores our *sensory* or *musical episteme*, a socioculturally inculcated set of habits, beliefs and actions towards non-verbal information communicated to us via our senses, particularly smells, as well as some of the ways cultures teach their members to experience such 'sensual knowledge', and how we use smells as active tools to interact with and make sense of our environment. The central subject does not revolve around the parameters of such a sensory episteme or the argument as to whether such an episteme should be recognized or not. The intention is instead to view actual textual realizations of olfactory processes and how these texts reflect specific aspects of the episteme. There are patterns of human behaviour that demonstrate an aspect of the sensory episteme that are referred to as *dynamic, cultural, musical* or *sensuous* texts,¹ and the systems individuals use to conceive of these texts referred to as *textualities*. Such textualities are in effect specific activations of the sensory episteme. A 'text' then in this context can refer to any repeated, symbolically engendered interaction with the outside world; and many of the specific texts examined involve some element of ritualization. In much academic writing, the concept of text has been restricted to its realization as static words, actions and/or sounds. In western musical

writing, for example, olfactory processes are rarely considered as part of either a musical text or its possible textualities as realized by the audience members. In fact, the meaning is often considered to inhere within the musical 'text' itself rather than through its participants. In Balinese musical performance, which often takes place in a temple, the use of incense and other means of colouring the olfactory environment with both pleasant and unpleasant smells play a role in the significant process of performative acts.

Another important observation that sets apart occidental hermeneutics is the Ricœurian notion of the *Text* as a static edifice which transcends its contextualization. In Bali, even written texts are *sounded* rather than 'read'. The 'sounding' of such texts involves their recitation followed by direct contextualization or 'interpretation', often in a group setting; the Balinese consider that texts signify when they are 'sounded' or performed in this way (Lansing 1983: 59). In ancient Chinese culture, as well, texts were considered not as objects but as active interactions with the past, involving '*an unending dialogue between the living and the dead*' (Weinberger 2000: 151). Olfactory texts in a similar way have an essentially enactive quality; referring to them after their enaction is difficult without the use of complex sets of adjectives or metaphors. The only real way to communicate the 'knowledge' inherent in such texts is through involving oneself in their realization. They also have a unique communicative power to make that moment of realization a very unique one.

OLFACTION AS AN INTEGRAL PART OF HUMAN CULTURAL PRACTICE

Our sense of smell can be used to achieve particular sociocultural ends in situations we confront as part of everyday existence, many of which are ritualized or performative acts. In examining the sensory episteme and olfactory processes expressed as cultural practice, three major perspectives are proposed as viewpoints on the subject, with the following headings offered as guidelines to assist

understanding of the different influences olfactory experiences can have on our lives:

- Olfaction is firstly considered in terms of *enunciation*, i.e. how it makes the moment of experience vital and new to the individual involved in the performative act.
- After this, olfaction is considered as a vital link connecting us to our past, and various contexts in which it is used as a part of complex multimedial ritualized acts to give new strength to existing cultural texts are demonstrated.
- Finally, the more complex issue of the way olfaction is used as an active tool to express a given culture's *sensory episteme* in specific ways is explored.

Smells can function to enhance the realization of performance texts in specific ways. The end result of the enunciation of acts experienced through the senses involves an element of deictics, pointing specifically towards the ritualized event. Smells, sounds and other sensory information can function to enhance or transform a given area in terms of spatial and temporal factors so that it is set off against any other. Examples of this olfactory process include the smell of smoke, drugs and/or sweat pointing deictically to a disco, or the pungent smell of incense and burning wax pointing towards Russian Orthodox mass services. Most rituals are complex multimedial texts, which function to make sense of, provide an alternative to or enunciate the experience of the exigencies of everyday existence. Smells and other sensory information are often used to highlight specific moments in an individual's life that are celebrated in a ritualized setting. Some of the settings which involve smell include both marriage and funeral ceremonies.

BALINESE RITUAL EXPERIENCE AND SENSUAL ENUNCIATION

Balinese welcoming dances, for either gods or tourists, use smells combined with action, music and dance to provide a strong sense of joy to both participants and audience members; their performance texts often function to close the distance



•Two dancers performing the welcoming dance (*Panyembrama*) in Ubud

between the *Self* and the *Other* through creating a vital sense of communion. Bateson sums up this experience well in his description of certain Balinese performative rituals:

The God will not bring any benefit because you made a beautiful structure of flowers and fruit for the calendrical feast in his temple, nor will he avenge your abstention. Instead of deferred purpose there is an immediate and immanent satisfaction in performing beautifully with everybody else, that which it is correct to perform in each particular context.

(Bateson 1972: 117–18)

It is important to observe here that the Balinese accent themselves as well as their ‘audience’ (both human, subhuman and divine) in sensual enunciation processes. Even in simple ritualized acts such as the laying of offerings, which involve little more than the burning of incense and a moment of reflection, time is taken to *direct* the smell towards

their own noses as they pray. This contrasts to some Chinese forms of Buddhism where the smell is intentionally avoided because the incense is intended only for supernatural consumption.

Some other forms of Balinese ritual experience involve an excess of sensual information as if they are deliberately pushing to the extremes. Just as the music is incredibly loud, so are the smells – both vile and beautiful – particularly pungent. Many western observers who allow themselves to be taken up in these vital sensual thrills leave the performance with a different perspective on the power of multisensuous acts to communicate emotive structures. Timar, for example, comments upon ‘a feeling of sensory saturation, with the senses of sight, sound and smell fully engaged’ after participating in a Balinese performance, echoing my own personal experience.² Balinese multimedial performance texts can clearly produce intense moments of dynamism even in individuals who are not familiar with them.

For the Balinese, smells become a ritualized enunciation or deictical marker giving dynamic signification to performance texts, such as dances, that enrich Balinese existence. Barthes' concept of *jouissance*, which involves the dynamic pleasure attainable through realizing a text, seems appropriate here (Barthes 1978). Herbst comments on the fact that this sense of pleasure is 'very basic to [Balinese] performance', and that it is almost impossible not to notice it, which he describes as 'joy in the physical sensations of resonance and rhythm as well as the kinaesthetic feeling of ensemble' (Herbst 1997: 114). It is interesting to note that the Balinese also have a term that includes this type of dynamic interaction with given cultural texts, the formidable experience of *Taksu*. Actually similar to Barthes' *jouissance* in some respects, *Taksu* also includes an individual's pleasure in experiencing the realization of the text. Olfaction can play an important role in reaching *Taksu*; the enunciation it can provide can function to turn any given moment into a ritualized one, although it should be noted that *Taksu* is far more than this alone. The well-known Balinese dance *Panyembrama* is an appropriate example of a performance text which allows audience members to appreciate the potential *jouissance* inherent in the sounds of the music, the movements of the dance and the smells shared among the performers and the audience alike. Performative texts such as this dance, however, are clearly far more than just existential statements of shared beauty. Olfactory texts can provide us with a unique way of interacting with our past, which takes the signification a step further than *jouissance* alone and into the realms of *Taksu* and *Dasein* where the dynamism of the present moment is related in a contextualized sense to the past.

Audience members and dancers alike who have been involved with the performance of given works in the past use individually created 'textualities' to make sense of given *performance texts*. It is naturally difficult for people who have not been brought up in a given tradition to understand how cultural texts signify for the performers or embedded

audience members. In works like *Panyembrama*, intricate non-verbal structures, involving the union of musical sound, smells, movements and interpersonal communication as the dancers turn to gaze upon one another, are communicated as the *text* is realized. The dance is infused with a strong sense of joy shared among the performers who have a unique relationship to the odours, sounds and movements. Examples of the smells deployed in this particular dance include incense, which is used to consecrate the performance space, the scents given off by the dancers who are adorned with flowers and other natural perfumes, and the smell of the flower petals the dancers throw at one another and the audience during a performance. *Panyembrama*, a title taken from the Balinese word *sambrama* (meaning welcome), was initially composed for welcoming visitors to Bali as a deliberate attempt to keep sacred dances of the inner-temple (*jeroan*) such as the *Gabor* and *Mendet* away from a non-Balinese audience. This 'new' creation, however, shares many movements, sounds and smells from *jeroan*-dances and therefore both performers and embedded audience members interpret it with a similar textuality.

The 'story' externalized in all these dances involves the satisfaction one receives while performing welcoming ceremonies. Messages are communicated 'physically' by the body on a number of different levels including welcoming gestures which function to evoke a great feeling of joy for audience and performers alike. After the performers have finished welcoming, another level of communication is entered into: one of 'playing'. A Balinese dancer Ni Ketut Wirjati describes this aspect of the dance as follows:

we begin to play with one another – oh, you're so beautiful, we enjoy the pleasure of each other's beauty, the lovely scents, they smell so good . . .³

TAKSU AND OLFACTION

It is clear that, because of a complex set of sensual signs emanating from dances such as these which have been built up after a lifetime of participation

in the Balinese culture, performers and audience members alike can achieve unique physical and emotional states not communicable in any other way. This unique linking of the past to the present through dynamic multimedial re-enactment of complex cultural texts has, as stated, its own name in Balinese culture: *Taksu*. Wirjati demonstrates the importance of enacting the elements that go into making up the complex multisensual structures such as *Panyembrama* in the correct order for it to 'signify' in any real sense:

We use movements which have rules. If we can feel them, in specific movements and mimes, then the dance is brought to life. That is one of the most important parts of the dance, to bring it to life in performance.⁴

As is demonstrated in the example of *Panyembrama*, olfactory processes can do far more than simply enunciate the present; they can also function to connect us in a dynamic way with the past. On receiving strong sensual data such as smells and tastes, moments of our past experience are forced into the present in a potentially powerful way. It is unfortunately impossible to define exactly when the past finishes and the recontextualization starts, or how much of the past is recontextualized at any given moment. The human mind and memory work in mysterious – and sometimes quite exasperating – ways. Heidegger's notion of *Dasein* recognizes the important presence of the past in every action we get involved in *now*:

Dasein involves itself in all kinds of projects and plans for the future. In a sense it is always ahead of itself. At the same time it must come to terms with certain matters over which it has no control, an element that looms behind it, as it were, appurtenances of the past of which *Dasein* is projected or 'thrown'.

(Krell 1978: 24)

Every new moment we experience may indeed be new, but the only discourse that allows us to perceive that new experience is based in these 'appurtenances of the past' that loom behind us. And sensual texts, particularly olfactory ones, are

very powerful in this regard: they can sometimes 'throw' us into the past quite forcefully, and yet at the same time affirm our existence in the present tense. The significance of smells and sounds in inscribing the past into the present was made clear to me by my strongly sensual experiences with grave and mystical rituals of the Russian Orthodox faith as a child; we are dynamically linked to the past by interconnections set up by sensual data inscribed in our memories. The Balinese notion of *Taksu* is similar to *Dasein* in that it involves a union of the dynamism of the present and the future, and the past it constantly leaves behind. Interestingly, in Sanskrit there is also a word which refers to the union of the past and present: *Vasana*. Although this word actually means 'scent' or 'residue', it refers to the process by which a given event in the present – such as a smell – can trigger realizations of the distant past, even of previous lives (Weinberger 2000: 141). This is a clear demonstration of the evocative power of smell even in the early days of human culture.

Rather than relating directly to olfaction, however, the Balinese notion of *Taksu* involves a performative state by which a unique union is achieved between the past and the present through linking with ancient tradition. Balinese performers believe that *Taksu* can only be reached by making a unique and dynamic realization of an existing performance text, and it is only because of using textualities which involve dynamic sensual tools such as sounds and smells that such vital recontextualizations can take place. *Taksu* demonstrates that the performer gains an insight through performance that is both unique for the moment and eternally ancient. Such connections with the past are not only restricted to 'traditional' performance texts such as animistic rituals. Contemporary art can also help the Balinese achieve *Taksu* if there is a vital aspect of the performative act that the performer can use to make that unique link with the past. I Made Agus Wardana discussed the way he reached *Taksu* in one of his new compositions that involved improvisations upon traditional rituals.⁵



*I Made Agus Wardana reaches *Taksu* during the performance of a contemporary composition for Gender Wayang and performer, using movements from a ritual offering ceremony with abundant use of incense

INTERCULTURAL ASPECTS OF THE SENSORY EPISTEME

Smells are, then, far more than just signs which provide iconic joy or which connect us to the past; they are also used by culture to influence the way individuals make sense of their universe, and here the *sensory episteme* comes into play. Our interpretation of sensory information can also lead to unfortunate intercultural misunderstandings.⁶ Classen, Howes and Synnott show the different ways European cultures have made use of smells for things as diverse as magical powers and artistic abilities, becoming the building blocks of cosmologies and even political orders (Classen et al. 1994: 123). Smells, however, are repressed in many aspects of contemporary European culture. European cultures have idealized and normalized a complex set of rites involved with cleanliness, hygiene and purification such as putting on

make-up, washing themselves and being groomed by others (when visiting a beautician or a hair-dresser, for example). Such rites often involve the alteration of the way they smell and are smelled so that they are essentially indiscernible in an olfactory sense from those surrounding them.

Although the hygienic advantages of such rites justify their worth as far as they are concerned, the absolute acceptance of this neutralized odourless state can and has resulted in sometimes disastrous intercultural misunderstandings. The European *sensory episteme* generally causes association of this absent or neutralized olfactory state with cleanliness, whereas odour discerning an individual from a crowd is associated with dirtiness; a clear epistemic dichotomy is set up between 'dirty' and 'clean' smells where personal odours are in some way unclean and sometimes even 'evil'. From the first colonial contact between Europe and

Australia, for example, aboriginals who place an emphasis on the importance of personal odour have been unfairly viewed as 'dirty' and in some unexplainable way *different* to the extent that they are even to some 'ungodly'; still today in contemporary Australia the subject of the aboriginals and personal hygiene is taboo – white Australians are often so caught up in their *sensory episteme* that they can't explain why they feel like they do.⁷ Because aboriginals believe that personal smells are important to one's individual identity, the two cultures clash in a potentially unpleasant way; what the one party believes to be a healthy part of their sense of well-being is considered by the other to break cleanliness codes, explaining why aboriginals are so badly treated in a neat and clean Protestant environment. Weinberger comments on olfactory sterilization in American culture as far as he remembers it:

We in the American middle class grew up in a world almost entirely devoid of smells, except for that of household cleaning products, and barely remember our childhood at all, except for the television programs. And worse, Protestantism has given us no neutral word, like 'taste', for smell. 'Stench' or 'fragrance' is exact, as they should be, but 'odour' or 'smell', which should have no value, generally imply a foulness and 'to smell' misleadingly is both a transitive and intransitive verb. They pertain to a world whose Satan has a smell, but whose God does not.

(Weinberger 2000: 142–3)

This aspect of intercultural friction does not, unfortunately, restrict itself to Australia, America or the Protestant cleanliness aesthetic. A recent French film called *Le Bruit, l'odeur et quelques étoiles* (2002) refers to a song called 'Le bruit et l'odeur' based on a notorious speech by French

president Jacques Chirac in 1991, where he complained about the 'noise and smells' which emanated from the homes of immigrants (Goodfellow 2003: 28). As a result of this aspect of the western *sensory episteme*, westerners visiting non-European cultures may find it a truly horrifying experience; the plethora of odours present in many Asian cultures can shock the inexperienced visitor. Taiwan, for example, even celebrates its bad smells; one of the delicacies of Taiwanese cuisine includes the well-known and loved 'stinky tofu' around which a whole mythology has developed. In interviewing Taiwanese people about the origin of the smell which assaults western visitors on almost every corner in many Taiwanese cities, myths as to its origins included the mixing of tofu with horse urine or rotting flesh (when in actual fact it is made from fermented vegetables).

THE BALINESE SENSORY EPISTEME

Relating specific sets of smells to a *sensory episteme* is a complex task, and no result is conclusive or applicable to every individual; it involves general cultural tendencies so impressions and opinions have to suffice in the absence of conclusive facts. Performance texts, in any case, are important cultural tools in Southeast Asia, as Peacock demonstrates in his book *Rites of Modernization* (1968) concerning the Javanese contemporary theatre form *Ludruk*. In this work Peacock demonstrates how this 'rite' is actively used by Javanese culture to bring about cultural change; he uses two parameters presenting sets of alternative dichotomous relationships, one of which is pervading over the other in a gradual process of modernization (Peacock 1968: 7). *Alus* and *kasar* refer to cultural distinctions made between 'refined' or 'clean' and 'crude' or 'dirty' thoughts, actions or things. In contrast the *madju/kuna* distinction refers to another dichotomy which contrasts 'progressive' and 'conservative' understandings. According to Peacock, contemporary Javanese performance actively played a role in perpetuating one set of distinctions above the other because 'the *alus-kasar*

• Two Balinese women prepare offerings out of palm leaves at their local *banjar*



cosmology served to make sense out of a traditional society that is no more, while the *madju-kuna* ideology imbues the process of modernization with meaning and legitimacy' (1968: 7).

Throughout the 20th century Balinese culture has been imbued by a similar set of changes, although through factors associated with the Balinese *sensory episteme*, both contexts have been allowed to exist simultaneously rather than in opposition to one another. In other words, the concepts of clean/dirty, good/evil, high/low and so forth exist in the same way that conservative and progressive do; sending emails and attending tooth-filing rituals are not considered to be forms of behaviour that represent on the one hand progress and on the other stasis. Maintaining both is considered natural and is a representation of the dual nature of existence in Balinese culture. This has to do with the well-known Balinese axes *Kaja* and *Kelod* which refer in a metaphorical way to both height and holiness; it is based on a spatial premise that the higher something is – directed towards the central volcano Gunung Agung which towers over the island – the holier it is. The closer it is to the ocean, however, the closer it is related to demons and dirtiness and that is where *Kelod* resides. In a similar way, pleasant smells are associated with the *Kaja* axis whereas unpleasant smells are associated with 'lowness' in the *Kelod* sense. In a Balinese world, *Kaja* can never prevail over *Kelod*, maintaining balance between the two is most significant, which helps to explain certain aspects of the Balinese olfactory environment.

Attaining a sense of balance between positive and negative forces, then, is a preferred Balinese ontology. This need for balance is reflected in the way the Balinese surround themselves with both sides of the dual spectrum described above, in other words both beautiful and hideous objects to assault their senses, some of which they go to a great deal of trouble to prepare. For the gods, enormous offerings are carefully constructed out of palm leaves and flowers which look beautiful and radiate pleasant smells, whereas for the demons equally as much trouble is made building large and complex struc-

tures out of rotting flesh, which smells terrible. Although they may be created for religious purposes, they are also appreciated by the Balinese who take time to enjoy the smells, sounds and colours of their creations. This reflects both the religious and the practical sides to the lives of the Balinese, who live in close proximity to one another and who have a simple (and smelly) sewage system; it is, in other words, an accepted part of their olfactory environment and reflects their acceptance of the dual nature of their universe. Visitors who are used to a static and uniform olfactory environment can find the dramatic clashing of odours to be quite unpleasant, but the Balinese, whose sensory episteme is conditioned to such, remain unperturbed.

The Balinese *sensory episteme* seems to celebrate the senses in some ways. In many of the dances performed during *odalan* the choreographies are specifically designed so that the performers have a chance to enjoy each other's smells and colours, as in welcoming dances such as *Panyembrama* and *Puspawresti*. This 'celebration of the senses' also influences contemporary composers – in terms at least of their attitude towards their work and the creative process – and the work of two important contemporary performing artists, I Nyoman Astita and I Wayan Sadra, both of whom work at STSI (*Sekolah Tinggi Seni Indonesia: Indonesian Art Colleges*) in Denpasar and Surakarta (Solo) respectively, provides useful examples.

One of Astita's most important works, which won a national composer's award and as such was broadcast across the nation, is based on an important Balinese ceremony which shares the name of the composition itself: *Eka Dasa Rudra*. This large-scale ritual, which is held every hundred years at Besakih (the Balinese 'mother-temple'), is in every sense multisensorial. In 1979 Astita was able to attend this ceremony and he was influenced by the dynamic sensual impressions he picked up: the sounds of chanting, bells and gamelan, the smells of incense, flowers, spices, perfumes and offerings, as well as the striking dance performance and costumes, influenced him enormously. It is not surprising, therefore, that Astita's work *Eka Dasa*

Rudra involves movement on stage, ritualized acts, different forms of gamelan performing at the same time, dance and other elements essential to Balinese theatricality. As such, Astita always considers extra-musical elements as part of his musical vocabulary, creating performance environments which are in every sense multimedial in that they attempt to engage all the senses.⁸

The work of I Wayan Sadra also demonstrates this aspect of the Balinese *sensory episteme*. In an interview with American ethnomusicologist and composer Jody Diamond, Sadra refers to the enormous sensual input a person is confronted with regularly while participating in Balinese rituals. He describes the influence of aural, gustative, visual, olfactory and tactile elements on his contemporary compositions as follows:

It actually reminds me of my own cultural past in Bali. This perception resembles experiences I had when I was very young, when I went to temple festivals, a ritual that I cannot forget. How could I! The moment I entered the temple, my ear was tempted by the sound of gamelan, my eyes were stimulated by the colourful offerings. When I began to pray, the priest sprinkled me with holy water, my mouth tasted the yellow rice and holy water that seems to only make us thirstier. [I could smell] the smoke of the incense and probably the smell of rotten food that had been cooked for the offerings days before. All this opened my senses, the feeling in my skin, ear, eye, nose, so I would be more engrossed in the ritual, and become one with god.

(Diamond 1990: 15)

He relates these influences to a contemporary composition of his, which involves similar sensual dynamics, in the same interview with Diamond. The performance of his work *Lad-lud-an* inundates the audience members with sensory signs in a similar way:

The beginning of my piece *Lad-lud-an* [1981] was not actually on the stage, but outside the theatre. The musicians began playing when they were about 250 metres away. The audience only heard the faint indiscernible sound of the gamelan as it gradually approached, finally entering the hall . . . In one section of

the piece, a performer stood up. In his hand he held an egg, as if to drop it, high above a black oval shaped stone. Very slowly and with full attention the egg was dropped and, *pyakk!* . . . the egg crashed onto the stillness without sound as the egg trickled across the stone. This create a visual effect that was contrasting yet harmonious, against the black of the stone, [we saw] the white of the egg shell and yellow of the egg yolk, and the rest that seemed transparent. Then, the air circulating in the theatre spread a foul smell. I had deliberately chosen an egg that was rotten – and the audience reacted by holding their noses.

(Diamond 1990: 15)

SUMMING UP

I have tried to suggest that contrasting *sensory epistememes* influence the way we interact with our environment. This is reflected in the work of contemporary artists such as Astita and Sadra who in using extra-musical elements as essential parts of their compositions reflect an important set of Balinese textualities. We can also observe it in the ritualized performance texts we use to interface with our environment every day, such as the rites of cleanliness and purification that function to neutralize the way we smell and are smelled. Rites that celebrate olfactory processes are often demonized; because of the epistemic structure supporting our culture, olfaction is often a taboo subject in that smells considered to be ‘unpleasant’ are rarely brought into discussion. In contrast, both terrible and beautiful smells are tolerated in Balinese culture. This is reflected in their offerings that can radiate the smells of flowers or alternatively the sickening odour of rotting flesh depending on who they are intended for. The Balinese also demonstrate that the dance medium is effective for a celebration of olfaction; as Hanna notes, it ‘has communicative efficacy as a multidimensional phenomenon codifying experience and directed toward the sensory modalities – the sight of performers moving in time and space, the sounds of physical movement, the smell of physical exertion . . . has the unique *potential* of going beyond many audio-visual media of persuasion,’ (Hanna 1979: 29).

The intention of this article has been to explore aspects of cultural practice which remain largely uncharted by western academia because of a specific set of beliefs towards olfaction arising from our *sensory episteme*, and it ends with a comment by Wirjati who describes the joy she feels as she performs in dances for both tourists, gods and other Balinese people as well as for her fellow dancers:

I look at my fingers and with a heart-felt movement I welcome you . . . With this situation I feel great satisfaction, and I explain this joy by using my whole body.⁹

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I would like to thank Professor Saskia Kersenboom (Performance Studies, University of Amsterdam) without whose foundational guidance the research could not have taken place on which this paper is based.

NOTES

- 1 Alternative terms for these types of text used in this paper include *performative* and *ritualized acts*.
- 2 Correspondence from Andrew Timar, Canadian gamelan performer, received 2 December 2002.
- 3 Based on an interview with Ni Ketut Wirjati in Utrecht, the Netherlands, 1995.
- 4 Ibid.
- 5 Interview with Wardana, held at his home in Brussels, 14 April 1999. The work was called 'Song for My God' and was composed for a single set of Balinese *Gender Wayang* and a solo performer. The concert took place at the Logos Foundation in Ghent (Belgium) 27 June 1997, and was entitled '*Sesolahan Gender*'.
- 6 This results from clashing 'sensory epistemes'. To reiterate, the *sensory episteme* is the set of socially inculcated rules, beliefs and habits that relate to how we make use of smells as tools to understand or make sense of our environment.
- 7 Examples of my own experience with Australians who try to explain their attitude to Aboriginals include comments like 'well, I'm not really racist, but they smell' or, simply, 'they're dirty'.
- 8 Interview between E. Barking and Astita, 29 August 1990.
- 9 Based on an interview with Ni Ketut Wirjati in Utrecht, the Netherlands, 1995.

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