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## Introduction: Sense(s)

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## Introduction: Sense(s)

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On March 20, 2023, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change delivered its “final warning” that governments must act now on the climate crisis.<sup>1</sup> Six days earlier, the research corporation OpenAI released the latest version of its artificial intelligence-powered chatbot, ChatGPT, promising to further revolutionize an accelerating era of technological transformation.<sup>2</sup> Critical to both these events is the concept that forms the theme of this special issue of **LEAP**: sense. The multiple meanings inherent in the notion of “sense” are expressed in a climate catastrophe experienced both sensorially—as, for example, heat, rain, and wind—and as a transformation in humanity’s sense of its place in the world. The virtual also plays with sense’s fertile multivalence, with virtuality appearing as simultaneously a refuge from the sensory overload of climate collapse, a transformation of sensory experiences in new contexts, and a space in which to make sense of the world.

The development of the field of sensory studies parallels and reflects developments in climate and technology as defining themes of (post)modernity. Approaching culture through the senses and the senses through culture, sensory studies has drawn from across disciplines, challenging purely scientific approaches to the study of the senses.<sup>3</sup> In an overview of the field’s development, the anthropologist David Howes foregrounds the key role played by Steven Feld’s *Sound and Sentiment*, a sensory ethnography of the Kaluli people of Bosavi in Papua New Guinea.<sup>4</sup> Focusing on the year of this work’s release, 1982, showcases how the emergence of “the senses” as an object of academic study is entangled with the

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<sup>1</sup> Harvey, “Scientists deliver ‘final warning’.”

<sup>2</sup> Bhuiyan and Hern, “OpenAI says new model GPT-4 is more creative.”

<sup>3</sup> Howes, “The Expanding Field of Sensory Studies,” 1–34.

<sup>4</sup> *Id.*, 2.

development of contemporary technology and shifting understandings of the human relationship with the environment. Most resonantly, 1982 was the year in which the protocols that today underpin the internet were adopted by the United States' Defense Communications Agency, laying the foundations for the internet as a worldwide network.<sup>5</sup> Meanwhile, the early 1980s were a key transitional period on the path to recognizing the human impact on the environment and the necessity of transnational collaboration to mitigate this impact, an understanding that was being developed between major climate conferences in Stockholm (in 1972) and Rio de Janeiro (in 1992).<sup>6</sup>

A similar embroilment with the virtual can be seen when tracking the so-called “affective turn” in the humanities, which has produced a theoretical framework that privileges the intersection between the “‘lower’ or proximal senses . . . such as touch, taste, smell, [and] rhythm” and “the ‘outside’ realms of the pre-/extra-/para-linguistic.”<sup>7</sup> This theoretical framework is critical to a number of the essays in this special issue. The affective turn is generally dated to 1995 and the publication of two key works, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Adam Frank’s “Shame in the Cybernetic Fold” and Brian Massumi’s “The Autonomy of Affect.”<sup>8</sup> That same year, Bill Gates wrote his “Internet Tidal Wave” memo, transforming Microsoft into a company focused on the Web.<sup>9</sup> The interpolation of the abstract and the physical, the idea and the body, the (in

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<sup>5</sup> Ryan, *A History of the Internet and the Digital Future*, 90–1. These protocols were Transmission Control Protocol/Internet Protocol (TCP/IP), which were fully adopted by the entire US military network by June 1983.

<sup>6</sup> The field of literature on the history of climate change and environmentalism is vast. Some useful accounts of this period include Ebbesson, “Getting it Right,” 79–83; Macekura, *Of Limits and Growth*, 91–317; and Attfield, *Environmental Thought*, 143–215.

<sup>7</sup> Seigworth and Gregg, “An Inventory of Shimmers,” 8. See below for the articles in this special issue which most explicitly draw on affect theory.

<sup>8</sup> *Id.*, 5. Massumi’s article went on to be a part of his *Parables for the Virtual*, 23–45.

<sup>9</sup> Weber, “Browsers and Browser Wars.” The IPCC also released its Second Assessment Report, which cautiously confirmed for the first time that “the balance of evidence suggests that there is a discernible human influence on global climate”—Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, *IPCC Second Assessment*, 22.

Massumi's terms) "virtual in the actual and the actual in the virtual"<sup>10</sup> are recurring arguments in the work of Sedgwick and Frank, as well as Massumi.<sup>11</sup>

The arguments advanced by these early affect theorists are explicitly framed against the rise of a digital paradigm only just becoming apparent in 1995, in particular through the linkage of the growing digital hegemony to the then dominant position of poststructuralist theory.<sup>12</sup> Sedgwick and Frank, for example, draw on the analogy of the digital in their critique of twentieth-century poststructural theorists' attempts "to detoxify the excesses of body, thought, and feeling by reducing the multiple essentialist risks of analog representation to the single, unavowedly essentialist certainty of one or another on/off switch."<sup>13</sup> Their critique is not aimed at denying the value of poststructuralist thinking, but to suggest the ways in which poststructuralism, by resisting the essentialist risks inherent in biological thinking—for example, of race—has imposed a set of fixed subject positions that reinscribe a different but newly essentialist discourse. The sensorial and the affective offer not only a critique of a poststructuralist approach that continues to occupy a central position across much of the humanities, but also a way to understand the genealogy of that centrality in relation to the digital. This issue's contributors draw throughout on the sensorial as a theoretical approach that troubles the discourses of race, language, and identity that are central concerns of the debates into which all the pieces intervene.

While the senses have been studied in diverse cultures throughout history as fundamental instruments through which humans experience the world, it was not until recent decades that scholars in the humanities took the senses as a subject of investigation. From food to music, visual arts to oral tradition, scholars have drawn on insights from anthropology and sociology to examine the five senses of the human body.<sup>14</sup> Through an

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<sup>10</sup> *Parables for the Virtual*, 35.

<sup>11</sup> "Shame in the Cybernetic Fold," 518-21; *Parables for the Virtual*, 30-5.

<sup>12</sup> Sedgwick and Frank, "Shame in the Cybernetic Fold," 511-8; Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual*, 1-4.

<sup>13</sup> "Shame in the Cybernetic Fold," 517.

<sup>14</sup> Howes, "The Expanding Field of Sensory Studies," 2-4.

ethnographic lens, scholars have considered how our senses pertain to deeper structural questions in social issues, politics, the economy, and diplomacy. The influential work *Sweetness and Power* (1985), by anthropologist Sidney Mintz, for instance, elucidates how sugar—a sought-after substance because of its pleasing taste—has factored in the history of industry and capitalism. This paradigm-shifting work has inspired subsequent research on the history of particular sensations and foregrounded the incipient field of sensory studies, which has grown in relevance and reach since the 1980s. With the establishment of journals such as *The Senses and Society*, founded in 2006, and a wide range of articles and monographs dedicated to the study of the senses, sensory studies has become a burgeoning field in its own right.<sup>15</sup>

The definition of “sense” in this issue, however, goes far beyond our bodily senses. Indeed, the word “sense” is highly ambiguous and carries within it a number of different definitions that deserve more investigation. One of these sites of inquiry emerges from the understanding of sense as “meaning,” a theme that can be found throughout philosophical history. For example, German philosopher Kant distinguishes three mental faculties in the *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781): sensibility, understanding, and reason. Sensibility (*Sinnlichkeit*), to Kant, is the vehicle through which sensory representations are generated. Instead of being material and physical, like a sensory experience, sensibility is the cognitive capacity of human beings to receive and apprehend sensations. French philosopher Gilles Deleuze’s work *The Logic of Sense*, on the other hand, uses “sense” as a tool to examine metaphysical, epistemological, and psychoanalytical questions, putting various preceding philosophical discussions of sense (such as Frege’s “Sense and Reference”) into dialogue. Their philosophical usage of the word “sense” understands the word’s connotation of “meaning” as abstract and hypothetical. This connotation, however, is also ubiquitous in our everyday language: think of how often we use the phrases “in a sense” and “that makes sense.” This extends to the dictionary itself, in which each entry carries a “sense” of the word that can be divided into different sub-

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<sup>15</sup> Howes, “The Expanding Field of Sensory Studies,” 1.

senses to, ultimately, make “sense” of the world through the acquisition of language and the exchange of these linguistic symbols with others.

In addition, the word “sense” also carries a connotation of feeling, or, more precisely, the feeling of being or identifying oneself. French philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy defines “sense” as “being-toward-the-world,” which “does not take place alone.”<sup>16</sup> The word is a notion of multiplicity because sense as “being-toward-the-world” is also always “being-toward-more-than-one.”<sup>17</sup> In other words, “sense,” to Nancy, is a collective consciousness of being together with other people in and toward the world. Indeed, throughout history, constructing an imagined, shared, and collective identity was always enacted through appropriating this sense as being-toward-the-world and being-toward-more-than-one. Take the Cultural Revolution in China as an example: the extreme homogeneity of people in this turbulent political period was sustained through ideological operations that fabricated a sense of being the same and being a single whole. This “sense” of commonality has been utilized and appropriated throughout history by different regimes. It is often intertwined with our sensory experience, since this collective sense is manufactured through visual, aural, oral, and even tactile propaganda.

Contributors to this special issue of **LEAP** put all of these meanings of “sense” to work across a wide range of disciplinary approaches and topics. The broad notions of “sense” sketched above organize the diverse contributions into three groupings: sense-making, affect, and belonging. Clearly, however, this structure is one of many possible ways to organize the contributions, a fact which itself points to the multiplicity within the notion of sense.

The first set of articles collected in this issue study the interpolation of the sensational and sense-making, focusing on how actions can create an emotional response because of sensorial experiences. Oscar Man’s article “The Sense(s) of the Law” puts the diversity in meanings of sense at the heart of his argument, playing with the term’s ambiguity in his examination of the Hong Kong court

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<sup>16</sup> *The Sense of the World*, 24.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

case of Foo Hoi-ching. Man's article looks into the diversity of the senses through the word "sensational," exploring the bodily experiences and performativity inherent to a courtroom by studying a mitigation plea letter by Foo Hoi-ching written in 2019, who used this courtroom tradition to condemn the Hong Kong court system rather than to plead for leniency. Man also analyzes the drawings of Pak Sheung Chuen, who used what he saw and heard in court proceedings to fuel his art and show his impressions of a courtroom's sensory experience.

Adrian Krieger's article "The Sensory for Sale" engages with sense and meaning through an examination of Dubai Global Village, a Dubai shopping center built in 1997 that seeks to represent all cultures of the world in one space. Krieger links the sensory experiences in Dubai Global Village to a desire for a commodified pseudo-cosmopolitanism, to a notion of Dubai as both center and representative of the entire world, and to the idea of hyperreality, a condition in which it is impossible to differentiate between reality and fiction. Krieger's article reads Dubai Global Village through these concepts to generate fresh understandings of the cultivated sensory experience it offers and the broader ontological fracturing within the Gulf.

Engaging with similar themes, Martijn Rem's article "Making Sense of Tradition" is a study of how senses play into the portrayal of tradition in Japan's Kakunodate samurai district. After World War II, there was a rise in interest in the preservation of heritage sites across the world. The Kakunodate samurai district is an area that many people visit to experience traditional Japanese architecture. Rem posits that the idea of tradition in the district is expressed through the sensory experiences it offers to visitors, a further example of the way in which meaning is generated through the sensorial.

Photography represents another site in which the senses are in dialogue with ontology. In "Escaping the Eyes of Empire," Emma Cardol discusses representation in the recent African disease photography of photographers Eric Gottesman and Geert van Kesteren. Cardol also examines projects by researchers studying self-representation in relation to the AIDS epidemic. Cardol suggests that while recent photography has attempted to provide

more diverse possibilities for African self-representation, colonial trends continue to resurface in the depiction of disease and African bodies.

While the first set of articles in this issue begins from the way in which external stimuli can generate meaning, the second set reverses the starting point by beginning with affect, a form of relations inside and between bodies. The first article in this set is Verónica Copello-Duque's review of *Cochina Envidia* (2022), a Colombian television series revolving around the friendship between four upper-middle-class women in Bogotá. Copello-Duque reads envy in the series as an affective and sensory experience embodied in the preparation of a dinner party. She suggests that *Cochina Envidia* provides a novel approach—a sensory exploration of affect—to understanding envy and class conflict in Colombia.

Coming from the field of linguistics, Jelle Christiaans reminds us that affect resides not only in fields of history, politics, and art but can also emerge through the grammatical structure of language itself. In his article, "How Verbal Aspect Structures Stories," Christiaans argues that verbal aspect in Ecuadorian Siona can transmit emotion, affecting the audience response to a story. His analysis focuses on imperfective verb forms that, besides announcing that an action or conversation has not yet been completed, can be used to create a sense of suspense.

Completing this section's complication of the relationship between affect and its structural expressions, Athena Stefanakou examines Carmen Maria Machado's experimental memoir *In the Dreamhouse* (2019). Machado's memoir, which recounts a same-sex psychological abuse, disrupts normative ideas about truth and fiction in trauma writing. Central to Stefanakou's argument is the suggestion that the formal presentation of fictional elements in a memoir can help a reader understand and interpret the reality of another's pain.

While the first two sets of articles take as their starting point the question of how a person makes sense of the world through sensory and affective experiences, the final set of articles examines the role of the senses in constructing identity. This movement from affect to identity is introduced through an interview with the literary scholar and writer Piet Devos. Devos' work, which centers on the



relationship between sensory perception, literature, and visual culture, includes both scholarly texts and creative projects. Devos lost his sight when he was five, and, as he reports, this has had a lasting impact on how he interacts with the world and conducts his work. Devos seeks to engage with sensory studies through both an academic approach and by deliberately breaking the boundaries of traditional academic writing. In doing so, he challenges our perceptions of sensory studies and what it could become.

In “Defying the Binaries of Passing,” Maaïke Siemes analyzes how the duality of passing between two African American sisters is visualized in Britt Bennett’s novel *The Vanishing Half* (2020). Siemes understands passing in the novel as both mimetic and performative, arguing that while the mimetic approach propagates ideas of white supremacy by reproducing racial stereotypes, the performative approach is potentially subversive because it can disclose the social construction of race.

Paulina Bastián Alvarado is similarly interested in questions of hybridity and performativity in her examination of Lucia Berlin’s short story collection *A Manual for Cleaning Women* (2015). In her article, “Of Course I Have a Self Here,” Bastián Alvarado argues that the cultural and linguistic dislocation often associated with the migration experience is reflected in the main character’s dislocated sense of self and identity, showcasing how the narrative’s fragmented subjectivities and structure emerge as a consequence of the narrator’s position living in an “in-between” state.

The theme of identity is further developed in Nicole Molinari’s article, “Collective Identity in a Microstate.” In her investigation, Molinari studies a set of petitions called the *Istanze d’Arengo* to identify characteristics of a coherent national identity among the people of San Marino. Molinari’s analysis of the themes raised in the petitions suggests that San Marino’s residents express and feel a distinct identity as Sammarinese, rather than Italian, despite the closeness between the two countries and their overlapping cultural and historical heritage.

In this issue’s closing article, “Making Sense of America’s Post-War Racial Landscape,” Nicolas Turner examines two works by Philip Roth to explore how the category of Jewishness has functioned as an object of affective “desire” in constructing ideas of

Jewish identity and the field of Jewish American studies. Putting Roth into dialogue with the African American author Ralph Ellison, Turner showcases how this desire is expressed through senses of nostalgia and primitivism in Roth's semi-autobiographical *The Facts* (1988) and short-story collection *Goodbye, Columbus* (1959). His analysis points to the ways in which the lens of the sensorial can provide new perspectives on the construction of seemingly stable and deep-rooted identities, be they racial or cultural. This finding is emblematic of a special issue that uses the many meanings of sense to problematize understandings of culture, language, and heritage across a wide range of disciplines and approaches.

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