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INTERVIEW

Interview with Piet Devos: “We Are All Multisensory Beings”

Paulina Bastián Alvarado and Mahtab Fazlali

To the writer, literary scholar, and lecturer Dr. Piet Devos (Kortrijk, 1983), sensory perception has a richness that is often overlooked in our visual culture, where the sense of sight is considered not only the most important sense but also the main source of knowledge. Taking a different approach, Devos has dedicated his career to sensory analyses of culture from the perspective of literary studies, exposing how language and culture influence our perception of the world. His work is characterized by a sensory approach to literature that stems from his personal history of visual disability. Having gone blind at the age of five, the experiences both of seeing and not seeing have shaped Devos’s critical thinking and creative writing, leading him to a multisensory perception of reality. In his research, Devos studies the relationships between language and perception, and between disability and the arts. Furthermore, he tackles topics such as the hierarchy of the senses, foregrounding the importance of haptics, a concept that relates to the sense of touch.¹

Devos is a Leiden University Master’s graduate (2009) and holds a Ph.D. from Groningen University (2013), where he wrote his dissertation on the visual and haptic perception in the avant-garde poetry of Vicente Huidobro and Benjamin Péret. Earlier this spring, we met Piet for a conversation about how literature and philosophy can broaden our perspective on what it means to be human and offer new approaches to thinking about the senses.

¹ See Devos, “Themes.”

Your personal story plays a substantial role in your academic and creative work. How has your blindness influenced your experience of the world and shaped your work?

In many ways, I think. But before coming to this, it is important to know that I was sighted before the age of five, so I also know the world, so to speak, from a sighted perspective. I still have lots of visual memories of the time when I was sighted, like colors, animals, people, places I have seen, pictures, and many other things. The combination of both perspectives [the sighted and the unsighted] was quite important for me, shaping me as a person and later shaping me as a thinker and a writer. It made me curious about sensory perception and the different ways we can perceive the world, to which there are many aspects. One is synesthesia.

At the age of eight, I realized that for me, every letter had a color, and every number and every piece of music evoked colors in me. I came to that conclusion because I had written a text in braille, with dots on a special typewriter. There was actually no ink on the paper, but I said to my teacher that I really liked writing and reading because texts are so colorful. And she didn't understand. She said, "You know, this page is just completely white. There are only white dots on it." And I didn't understand because, for me, every letter had a color. And then I suddenly realized that I perceived the text and language differently than she did. I obviously did not know the name for this at the time.

I discovered many years later that it is a neurological phenomenon called synesthesia, the effect of certain neuronal networks in the brain that intertwine and become mixed up. In most people, they are separated. In my case, my sonic or auditory perception is intertwined with my visual perception. So, when I hear music, I see colors for the instruments, for melodies, and for tones. When a tone is high in pitch, I see bright colors, and when it's low in pitch, they are darker in color. This influences not only my perception of music but also of letters, numbers, days of the week, and many other things, actually.

Could you explain more about synesthesia and how you understand the concept of haptics?

Before I come to haptics, it is important to know that synesthesia is the filtering of one sense through the other. The estimate is that one in 5,000 people have it. They are mostly creative people, so synesthesia is more common among artists. The most common form of synesthesia is this sound-coloring synesthesia, like in my case. But there are other forms as well. I once met a perfume maker whose perfumes were inspired by music. So, when she listens to

music, all kinds of imaginary scents come to her mind. Her perfumes are based on particular sounds.

“We often overestimate sight as a source of knowledge. We often think that if we lose sight, we are also excluded from the world.”

Haptics is another wide range of sensory modalities, I would say, like synesthesia. Haptics is, very simply put, the sense of touch. But if we speak about touch in common daily

speech, we often only mean the sense of the skin. We mean touching by hands, touching your skin, touching a surface, touching a table, or touching anything else. But touch is so much more complex than just the skin and the hands. That’s why we use the word haptics in academia. Haptics covers all these complex layers of touch. You have the tactile level of the skin, but you have also, for example, proprioception. Proprioception is our sense of being in space. When you move through space, you know, you feel, that you’re standing upright, or you know that you are seated, or you feel that you’re on a slope, that the floor is going down or up. These are all sensations that are communicated through our proprioceptive faculties in the body. Proprioception is the perception of the complete body, so that is another layer of haptics. But there is much more to haptics because it’s also about our reception of temperature, for example. Haptics is about cold and heat, and also softness, when something is soft or hard. Haptics involves sensory modalities of tactility, and also of weight. When you lift something,

like a box from the table, you can estimate its weight. That's also part of haptics.

Speaking of your background, would you tell us why you chose literature as your object of study and means of expression?

This brings me back to my experience of losing sight. First of all, I can say I was born in the library, almost literally. My father's house was full of books, from the bottom to the roof. He didn't count them anymore, but the house must have contained close to 15,000 books. It was really a huge library. He always talked about literature, writers, and philosophers, so I certainly picked up a lot from him. But it was also the fact that reading really stimulated my sensory imagination. Reading detailed descriptions triggered not just my visual imagination but also, obviously, my other forms of imagination. It also stimulated my inner visuality, so to speak. Literature was a passion from a very early age.

How do you read poetry as a non-sighted person? Do you read it in braille, or do you listen to it?

I usually prefer to read it in braille, to feel it on the page, because then I have the same chance to interpret it in my own way. Sometimes nowadays, more often even, I read it in digital form with my braille display, which is a little device I connect to my computer that shows in braille what is on the screen. When I have a digital version of a poem or a collection, I can read it with this device. I also often listen to poetry, which I love, but obviously, this introduces the interpretation of the performer. This can be very nice, and it can even help you to understand the poem. But obviously, it's the coloring. It's like someone playing the violin. When he plays Beethoven, he will have a different interpretation of Beethoven. So I read poetry in several ways.

In your work, you point out that we live in both a highly visual culture and a sight-oriented society. Implicit in this is a hierarchy of the senses, with the sense of sight at the top. Why do you think that this hierarchy exists?

If we look at Western thought and philosophy, this hierarchy is a very old idea. We find it in Aristotle. Humans already discerned five senses: sight, hearing, smell, taste, and touch. Western philosophers and thinkers considered vision and hearing as the highest senses because they don't require any immediate bodily interaction. These are distant senses. Sight, especially, creates an illusion that the spectator is looking at the world with an objective separation between the viewer and the world. It gives us the illusion of having a stable image or overview of our surroundings that gives us the most reliable kind of knowledge of the world. This has stimulated the idea in philosophy and science that sight is the most objective sense. In the last couple of hundred years, many technologies have strengthened the importance of sight. Think of photography, film, imagery, and the whole visual culture we live in that has strengthened the supremacy of sight. I think the hierarchy of the senses is a question of philosophical ideas and technological practices.

What are the consequences of this hierarchy, and how do you think it can be challenged?

The consequence is that we often overestimate sight as a source of knowledge. We often think that if we lose sight, we are also excluded from the world and have a very poor worldview. But actually, we are all multisensory beings. It is too limited to see a human being as just sighted. But it is a common way to approach sensory perception. Many people ask me, "Why would you travel to another country if you don't see?" I always emphasize that there are so many other things to experience when I am abroad. I can talk to people; I can listen to the stories and to the musical plays; I can taste the food and touch the buildings. There are so many ways to experience a country. It is a strange question, but you cannot imagine how many people have asked me this.

There is an overestimation of sight as a source and transmitter of knowledge. Our education is mainly audio-visual. We use listening and talking, fortunately, but apart from that there is a lot of imagery and PowerPoint nowadays, so it's very audio-visual. Especially in education, at least in Western countries like the Netherlands and Belgium, the lower senses, as they are called, are

not trained. We do not develop our vocabularies for taste or smell. We are very poor at describing our senses. That is really a pity, I think. It's another consequence of this old hierarchy of the senses.

It seems that in the humanities, too, all we do is read and write. We are not trained to develop other senses, other skills.

Absolutely. But I also hear it from other scientists who are, for example, just in the laboratory studying. Nowadays they often use only computer imagery. Anthropologists and biologists are the only ones who still go into the field and make observations with their own senses. Even in medicine, doctors nowadays don't use all their senses anymore. They use a lot of scans and imagery. It is really impoverishing, making us poorer as human beings and observers, to not use all of our senses.

Would you say that your work presents a different approach to this hierarchy of the senses?

It certainly tries. In my research as a literary scholar, I try to emphasize the importance of haptics, for example. My Ph.D. thesis was about haptic perception in surrealist poetry, so I wrote about all kinds of tactile descriptions. I also wrote about movements and proprioception in literature. More recently, I wrote about touch and sound in the writings of blind authors, showing exactly the richness of the sensory world and how they [the senses] are being translated into literature in metaphors, sonic poetry, descriptions, and many other ways. There are so many ways we can deal with senses in literature. I say this as a researcher, but also as a creative writer. In my short stories and poetry, I really try to write from my own authentic experiences. My own writing is also very multisensory. I try to express my own haptic experiences and sonic experiences and my inner visuality. But also smell. I try to be as multisensory as I can, and this is often a challenge. As I said, in our culture we often lack new words and other terms to speak about smell and taste. But I certainly try to do that. If you want to have an example, on my website there is a short story that has been translated into English. The story, called "The missing child in the mirror," is about a

sculpture in a museum that must be explored by touch. It is really one of those stories where I tried to be very haptic.

In your work, you talk about the concept of “blind phenomenology.” Could you explain what this notion entails and what its implications are?

Phenomenology is the branch of philosophy where we try to describe as authentically as possible what comes to our consciousness. When you walk in the street, you have all kinds of sensations, but what we usually do is immediately translate those sensations into words and concepts and say, “there is a car passing,” “there is my friend,” or “what a beautiful day.” We don’t pay attention to the stream of consciousness, which is mainly a stream of sensations. As a sighted person, you see patches of light, you see coloring, and you see objects from a certain perspective. We are hearing sounds, smelling a shop. As phenomenologists, we try to describe this bunch of sensations, first of all, as sensations, and to make notes of the descriptions before interpreting them. So, we try to return to fresh consciousness.

Phenomenology was first done at the beginning of the twentieth century, as is usually the case, by middle-aged white males. The classical philosophers. Later on, there were fortunately female philosophers and philosophers of color who started to do phenomenology. And now, there are also disabled and, as in my case, blind writers who try to do it. This is what you can call blind phenomenology, where you try to describe your blind experience as accurately as you can. And you really try to bring your subjective perspective into the open, to share it with other people, to disclose your own subjectivity, and to make it into an orchestra of analyses.

Taking into account the great importance of the senses and perceptions in the development of art and culture throughout history, what do you think will happen to human creativity with the overuse of technology, social media, and artificial intelligence, especially nowadays with ChatGPT?

I'm not a cultural pessimist in the sense that I think this will destroy all our imagination. I really think that the human being is way more creative and imaginative than any machine will ever be. I am not so afraid of technology in many respects. I think it's certainly true that technology does affect our perception and our practices, so it's not that it will change nothing; it will, and it does. But I think it is more of an interconnection. The interesting experiment, even if it was also a tragic experiment, occurred during the pandemic, because then we were all doomed to use screens and to have chats with each other via online services. We had no choice. But we also noticed that we missed life, interconnection, and live meetings. We noticed that we wanted to touch and smell each other and be at the table with other people.

It also showed us, I think, the richness of our other senses. I think that such technology and technological development often show us the importance of our other senses. I also noticed that many artists nowadays turn to the lower senses, so to speak, and "lower" is always between brackets, because obviously they are not lower but perceived to be in the traditional hierarchy. When I notice that many artists are nowadays experimenting with smell, sound, taste, and touch, I think in the art world there is certainly a revival of the other senses. So, I am not so pessimistic about technology.

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When you go to an exhibition, you will find a lot of multisensory installations. In the Netherlands, museums are still a bit afraid of touching. But there are other museums abroad where you are allowed to touch artworks like sculptures. I think these are very interesting tendencies. So, I am not so pessimistic about the future in this sense. Maybe we will also develop technologies that are more interesting in relation to touch. Nowadays, these technologies are still rather rudimentary and functional, but maybe in the future they will be more complex and relate to the other senses. I think that technology can also mean stimulation, but obviously, we also need to be critical. It's not that technology is a solution to everything and

everything technological is wonderful. We need to be critical. But once again, I don't share, let's say, the doomsday prophecies of certain cultural analysts who say that technology will kill all our imaginary power. I don't think so.

[This interview has been edited for length and clarity.]

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