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Book Review: Sensing in Social Interaction

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Lorenza Mondada. 2021. *Sensing in Social Interaction. The Taste for Cheese in Gourmet Shops*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. ISBN 978-1-10870613-1.

Although a “sensorial turn” in the humanities and social sciences was already announced in the late 1980s with an approach called the “anthropology of the senses,” senses from an interactionist perspective only came into view at a late stage. This is particularly true for senses other than vision. Most of this research dates no earlier than the last two decades². Lorenza Mondada was one of the first researchers engaging in the relevance of other senses such as smell, touch, and taste in situationally emerging and temporally enfolding interactions with a praxeological approach. With her book “Sensing in Social Interaction” she dives deeper into the possibilities of an analysis of sensing and multisensoriality of and in social interaction. This closes a crucial gap in the existing literature on senses and sensing, which is particularly

¹ David Howes, ed., *Varieties of Sensory Experience: A Sourcebook in the Anthropology of the Senses* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1991).

² Will Gibson and Dirk vom Lehn, “Introduction: The Senses in Social Interaction,” *Symbolic Interaction* 44, no. 1 (2021), <https://doi.org/10.1002/symb.539>.

interesting for scholars from the multidisciplinary field of praxeology including linguistics, anthropology, sociology as well as communication and media studies.

Lorenza Mondada uses one type of action to demonstrate how the senses are a critical part of interaction, in a double sense: She distinguishes the ‘sensoriality *of* interaction’ from ‘sensoriality *in* interaction’. Sensoriality *of* interaction refers to the inherently sensorial nature of human interaction. A mutual gaze or the gaze into a certain direction can as well as a light touch on the upper arm be important resources in an interaction. More important for the analyses presented in Mondada’s book is the sensoriality *in* social interaction which refers to the manifold sensorial practices in which humans engage with the materiality of their environment in social situations. Mondada states that sensing practices are always situationally embedded in the course of other actions, such as museum visits or wine tastings – or, as demonstrated in the book – in the process of buying cheese. This conceptual distinction is already one of the important achievements of the book as it helps to distinguish making use of sensoriality in interaction (*multimodality*) from sharing sensorial experiences in variously configured sensing practices in interaction (*multisensoriality*). Applied to cheese, this means that the analyses provided by Mondada focus not only on how costumers and sellers make use of multimodal resources in their interactions, but also how they share sensorial experiences.

Mondada divides her book into four sections, each of them consisting of two to three chapters. *Part I “Sensoriality in Interaction”* lays the theoretical and methodological foundations that underpin the entire study. She situates her work within a rich intellectual tradition (*chapter 1*), discussing the traditional approaches to sensoriality in philosophy and the social sciences, contrasting these with Mondada’s interactionist perspective. She introduces the multidisciplinary “sensorial turn” in the humanities and social sciences and gives an overview on, e.g., the anthropology of the senses and on different streams considering sensoriality as research focus but also as a methodology (e.g., Sensory Ethnography³). She provides a critical overview of how different fields have approached the senses, from the neurophysiological focus on sensory receptors to the anthropological interest in the cultural construction of sensory experiences. Mondada critiques these approaches for either reducing the body to a set of sensory mechanisms or abstracting it into a purely cultural construct. *Chapter 2* introduces the methodological framework of the book, grounded in conversation analysis and ethnomethodology. Mondada explains how these approaches, which prioritize the detailed examination of social interactions, provide a framework for studying sensoriality. Mondada’s methodological approach is one of

³ Sarah Pink, *Doing Sensory Ethnography: 2nd Edition* (London u.a.: Sage, 2015).

the most innovative aspects of the book, particularly her use of video recordings to capture sensory practices in situ. This method allows her to document how sensory experiences unfold in real-time, offering a vivid depiction of how people engage with their senses within specific social contexts. Throughout the course of chapter 2 she also describes an impressive data base of video recordings, including reflections on how to record and transcribe multisensoriality (see below). The data collection involved recording interactions in cheese shops, focusing on how customers and sellers engage with products through the senses.

The three following parts are structured along the steps of a certain action type, the purchase of cheese, focussing on involvement of different senses in different micro-situations. *Part II “Looking and Knowing”* concentrates on the visual sense, taking into account the stage of ‘looking around’ and initiating a sales situation between customer and seller. It highlights how the first sequences of a purchase situation can set the tone and can be consequential also for the involvement of other senses in what follows the first encounters. Hence, Mondada structures this part of the book along two epistemic stances that are claimed or displayed by the customers: One with the customers revealing lack of knowledge about cheese (*chapter 3*) and a second one with the customers being persons ‘in-the-know’ with a certain degree of connoisseurship (*chapter 4*). These epistemic stances in both cases can either be explicitly claimed or displayed using various strategies. For both of the epistemic positions (not-knowing and knowing) and for both of the performed actions (claiming and displaying) various multimodal resources and strategies can be identified, which are located primarily in the areas of language, body position and gaze.

The next part – *Part III “Sensing Together”* – continues the distinction between the different epistemic stances and makes them even more explicit: Mondada considers two senses – touch (*chapter 5*) and smell (*chapter 6*) – and researches how they are interactionally accomplished as “professional” and “lay” touch/smell. As Mondada points out, touch is not just a simple physical interaction but is embedded within a web of social norms and expectations. In a cheese shop, touching a product involves negotiating permissions and adhering to norms about who can touch what and when. The chapter underscores the idea that touch, much like sight, is a social act, deeply intertwined with the cultural and social fabric of interaction. Smell, like touch, is shown to be both a personal and a collective experience, shaped by social interactions and cultural norms. Mondada’s analysis highlights how these sensory experiences are not isolated but are part of the course of action.

Tasting is introduced in *Part IV “Tasting, Assessing, and Making Decisions”* as the last of the considered senses in this book. Tasting is described as distinct from the other senses – it is only possible in certain “sequential environments”, which are

described in *chapter 7*: Tasting can be requested by the customer or offered by the seller. Moreover, an offer to taste can be a customized action by the seller or a standardized procedure, often times with pre-cut samples. The sequential environment that leads to a tasting of the products is strongly connected to the epistemic stance of the customer. While connoisseurs often reject the offers to taste, persons ‘not-in-the-know’ rather accept them – with different ways leading to the tasting depending on whether it was *claimed* or *displayed* ‘not to know’. Tasting is considered to be the final step before the final decision about the purchase is made by the customer (*chapter 8*). Mondada points out that tasting moments are highly staged including an interactional display of tasting while turn-by-turn-talk is suspended. As it is the last assessment before buying the cheese or rejecting the offer, an evaluation gets interactionally relevant. Hence, in *chapter 9*, Mondada discusses the outcomes of tasting, particularly focusing on how it leads to assessments and decision-making. She explores how these outcomes are not simply the result of individual sensory experiences but are shaped by the broader social context in which tasting occurs. In sum, Mondada argues that sensorial practices are not isolated actions but are deeply embedded in the sequential and multimodal structure of social interactions. Mondada’s concluding thoughts (*chapter 10*) invite further reflection on how the senses operate not only as individual experiences but as integral parts of social life.

In this book, Lorenza Mondada spells out what it means to dissolve the primacy of sight and vision, and adopt a consistently situational, empirical perspective on sensing and multisensoriality. The methodological reflections in the book include an interesting take on the relationship between ethnomethodological conversation analysis (EMCA) and ethnography: Mondada (p. 69–70) states that the two approaches share an interest in the “specificity” of social activities and the organization of social order. However, other than ethnography, EMCA is focussed on contexts with recurrent activities and “enables a systematicity of its observations across singular events” (p. 70). Mondada’s detailed transcription of the recorded interactions, which includes not just spoken language but also gestures, gaze, and other non-verbal cues, is crucial to her analysis. Her transcription method, which captures the minutiae of interaction, including pauses, overlaps, and the timing of non-verbal actions, is essential in revealing the complex ways in which sensory experiences are embedded in social interaction. Using an example of just a few seconds of video footage, she impressively demonstrates how differently detailed the transcription and therefore the analysis can be. Mondada’s transcription work once again sets standards for interaction research and can serve as a model for other studies.

In discussing the challenges of multimodal transcription, Mondada touches upon challenges with temporality and sequentiality (p. 93–95) in interaction: While

stressing these as basic principles of sociality, she contrasts the “relatively linear unfolding of verbal turns” (p. 94) with “embodied courses of action emerging and expanding at the same time” (ibid.). A praxeological approach as claimed by Mondada must take into account “social events as dynamic, emergent, intertwined totalities, not as aggregations of individual acts that are sequentially performed [...]”⁴ – as demonstrated by Charles Goodwin everywhere in his oeuvre⁵. Mondada attempts to make both accessible for an in-depth-analysis: The temporal unfolding of the action including its sequential character (including its retractive as well as its projective nature) as well as the simultaneity and entanglement of verbal and non-verbal utterances, sensing-practices, body movements, positions and postures as well as gaze and any other resources that might be used in multimodal interaction for the process of sense-making. This ambition is clearly reflected in the analyses.

Besides the interest that scholars from interactional linguistics, EMCA, and related research fields should definitely have in this book, it is particularly relevant also for media and communication scholars that have an interest in sensory processes/practices and work with a praxeological approach or at least empirical. In the light of an increasing equipment of the world with technical and networked sensors of all kind (light, movement, temperature, humidity, etc.) in very different use cases that have a global impact on everyday life⁶, such research is foundational for media research. In this regard it is not so much the mere course of action of buying cheese that interests here, but it is rather the theoretical and methodological framework: Mondada describes ‘sensing’ as a cooperatively accomplished practice (“sensing practices”). This notion has implications also for more complex multisensorial configurations including human and non-human sensing/sensoring practices. Mondada shows in her detailed analyses how human perception processes become social reality and part of a social environment. This raises the question how human and non-human sensing practices are intertwined and how they both become part of social reality. Lorenza Mondada’s groundbreaking work can be an important step and an inspiration to find answers to these questions.

⁴ Erhard Schüttpelz and Christian Meyer, “Charles Goodwin’s Co-Operative Action: The Idea and the Argument,” *Media in Action. Interdisciplinary Journal on Cooperative Media* 1 (2018): 174.

⁵ Charles Goodwin, *Co-Operative Action* (Cambridge University Press, 2018).

⁶ Chris Salter, *Sensing Machines. How Sensors Shape Our Everyday Life* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2022).

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