MAKING SENSE OF REALITY

CULTURE AND PERCEPTION
IN EVERYDAY LIFE

TIA DENORA

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INTRODUCING SLOW SOCIOLOGY

Thinking about how our senses of reality take shape in daily life involves both general and specific questions. The general questions will be familiar to philosophers. They include matters such as: What is 'the world'? How solid are realities within the world? What does it take to effect change in the nature of reality? Is reality embedded 'in' things, or does it reside 'in' the relations between things? To what extent is reality an outcome of cultural practice? How do we come to know realities? What is the relationship between knowing realities and the realities we know?

To pose these questions is in turn to ask about the *flexibility* of realities, namely: to what extent can reality *change its shape* as it passes from place to place, time to time, perceiver to perceiver and situation to situation? And what kind of relationship is there between our assumptions about (and practices toward) realities and the forms that those realities appear to take? These are general questions but they can be made more specific through worked examples. For example, we can investigate specific situations where realities come to be taken as real, where they are initially experienced as real, and where, once realised, they have consequences for the making of other realities. In this chapter I describe how a focus on these matters requires a painstakingly close form of attention associated with what I will call 'Slow Sociology'.

I call this form of sociology 'slow' because, metaphorically and sometimes literally, it requires a form of attention to minutiae. This attention is akin to the slow motion, wide-lens, long-take techniques associated with 'slow cinema' and with the comparatively time-consuming methods associated with producing and preparing 'slow food'. These techniques − cognitive and empirical but also aesthetic and sensory − are devoted to the cultivation of intimate forms of knowledge and to the detailed features of what happens locally, here and now; and they have an affinity with ethnographic forms of enquiry (Atkinson et al., 2001), and the focus on embodied craft (Atkinson, 2013) and on the skills involved in living together (Sennett, 2008, 2012). Slow sociology is, in other words, an anti-generic mode of enquiry focused on the particularities of

things, rather than the more general and often hypothetical (or indeed metaphysical) there and then. It is perhaps akin to what Goethe knew as 'gentle empiricism', ways of being with the world and learning through unobtrusive observation (see Ansdell and Pavlicevic, 2010), beautifully enunciated by Fox Keller, in her study of the Nobel laureate and cytogeneticist, Barbara McClintock:

'No two plants are exactly alike. They're all different, and as a consequence, you have to know that difference,' she [McClintock] explains. 'I start with the seedling, and I don't want to leave it. I don't feel I really know the story if I don't watch the plant all the way along. So I know every plant in the field. I know them intimately, and I find it a great pleasure to know them.'

This intimate knowledge, made possible by years of close association with the organism she studies, is a prerequisite for her extraordinary perspicacity … Both literally and figuratively, her 'feeling for the organism' has extended her vision … (Fox Keller, 1983: 198)

Slow sociology can, I shall suggest, inhibit our sometimes too-hasty assumptions about the realities that we believe 'must' exist – in society, nature or ourselves (e.g., 'It was like that then, there, so it must be like that now, here'). Taking it slow helps us to consider the moments and devices – linguistic but also enacted through materials (documents, objects, technologies) and forms of embodiment – that sever realities from their histories of production (their origins and growth). Understanding the provenance of realities, whether over the long term or short term, is, as I shall describe, a way of preserving the possibility for critique, for challenging assertions about what is real. (As Inglis [2013: 15] observes, '[a]s Orwell knew, how we think about ourselves and our future is utterly dependent on how we imagine the past'.)

This historically informed understanding includes an understanding of how our idiomatic styles and languages for thinking about ontology, or the nature of reality, themselves have histories, and of how they have been modified over time. (For example, Pollner [1987] has described how the idea of a 'real' and an 'objective' world can be traced within the history of philosophy and science.) It also includes, as we shall see, a concern with the provenance of the objects, materials and tools (MacKenzie and Wajcman, 1999 [1985]; Norman, 2002 [1988]; Bijker et al., 1989), since our material agency takes shape in relation to, and through the media of, these things – as Pickering puts it, a dance or 'dialectic of resistance and accommodation' (Pickering, 1995: 21–2, 52). Step by step, this 'dance' has consequences, as Molotch explains:

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> How we desire, produce, and discard the durables of existence helps form who we are, how we connect to one another, and what we do to the earth. In addition to ordering intimacies, these urges and actions influence the way peoples across large stretches of time, cultures, and geographies align, exchange, and conflict. (Molotch, 2005: xi)

Thus slow sociology is a perspective and a set of methods devoted to recovering the present history of how things 'are' and how our sense of how things are is made, through practices and in relation to, as Molotch calls them, 'the durables of existence'. It is an often-painstakingly detailed form of enquiry that seeks to avoid any jumping to conclusions about how reality 'just is' or 'must be'.

WITTGENSTEIN ON 'MUST'

As a way into what 'more slow' (Marvel, n.d. [*c.* 1650]) forms of enquiry can offer, consider how we come to use the expression 'it must be' and how this expression can lead us to over-assert that which can be known. The philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein is helpful on this point.

As Pleasant puts it (1999: 40, quoting Wittgenstein), '"must"', that means we are going to apply this picture come what may' (Wittgenstein, 1976: 411, quoted in Pleasants, 1999: 40). By contrast, Wittgenstein advises against situations in which we cleave to 'preconceived idea[s] to which reality *must* correspond' (Wittgenstein, 1968: 131, quoted in Pleasants, 1999: 40). As Pleasants notes, Wittgenstein believes we can do better, that we '*look and see ...* don't think, but look!' (p. 122), advocating an open-minded attitude toward reality, 'rather than deciding *a priori*, on the basis of an ontological picture of how things *must*, and can only be' (p. 122). In other words, our theoretical preconceptions about how reality 'must' look run the risk of being overly selective and thus can lead us to impose presumptions about reality on the particular instances of what we remember about the past, and what we encounter and perceive in the present. These preconceptions may excise richer and more sensorial, pre-cognitive dimensions of knowing and remembering and the intimate knowledge associated with these dimensions. While I do not mean to imply that there is a 'purer' or 'better' way of knowing the world that can be achieved if only we overthrow the 'blinders' of conventional categories of perception ('presumptions' versus 'perceptions'), I do mean to suggest that each and every set of preconceptions about reality enacts selective processes of knowing and remembering. The question then is what, as a result of preconceptions, is gained, and what is lost. What, in

other words, is retained as the memory (or relatively fixed idea) of what is, and is not, real?

On memory, the cognitive sociologist Aaron Cicourel (1974) has described how the human mind can only process so much 'on line', as Saferstein puts it (Saferstein, 2010: 115), in any given moment. Our remembrance of things is, Cicourel suggests, dependent upon things external to the mind, such as objects, tools and aesthetic media which frame and elicit selective memories (e.g., when I smell that perfume I remember my mother; when I hear this song I am transported 'back then'). (In this respect Cicourel's work presaged the extended mind perspective in philosophy [Clark and Chalmers, 1998] and the focus on distributed cognition in anthropology [Hutchins, 1995]. It also complements and has informed work on memory artefacts, for example in relation to the representational politics of collective memory [Tota, 2004, 2005] and to self-remembrance [DeNora, 2000].)

On encountering and perceiving aspects of the world, our belief or pre-commitments to what we expect to encounter may excise, or filter out, those things that we do not expect to encounter or which 'really should not be there'. These, at times, incorrigible beliefs may lead us to witness things that were not actually there, and *not* to witness things that are there. Psychologists speak of this filtering as 'inattentional blindness' (Mack and Rock, 1998; Simons and Chabris, 1999). This form of 'blindness' occurs when our expectations of what we should or must see actually prevent us from noticing things that do not square with our presumptions of what must or must not be, to return to Wittgenstein's words, in 'this picture'.

The most famous example used to illustrate inattentional blindness involves an experiment where subjects were asked to view a basketball game in which team members were dressed, contrastingly, in black and white shirts (Simons and Chabris, 1999). The experimental subjects were asked to count how many times the basketball was passed between white-shirted players. During the game, a gorilla-suited figure walked through the court, pausing briefly (see Figure 1.1). Most subjects never noticed the gorilla because they were so intent upon the assigned perceptual task. They were not, in other words, looking for a gorilla and they therefore did not, on the whole, notice a gorilla. The example highlights how at times matters that are literally, in this case, in centre court, can pass unnoticed because of the ways in which attention is selectively devoted to its object. Equally importantly, this experiment showed how attention can be directed and framed (in this case the task and instructions of how to watch), a topic to which we will return in Chapter 8.

While the matter of seeing a gorilla-suited figure in a contrived experiment may seem trivial, other matters of perception and what perception does and does not permit us to sense and know may be more
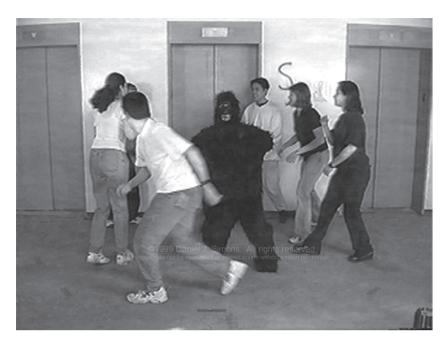
Figure 1.1   Gorillas in our midst: Sustained inattentional blindness for dynamic events (Simons and Chabris, 1999). Figure provided by Daniel Simons. See also: http://www.dansimons.com

serious, as we shall explore momentarily and throughout this book. For now, the example of inattentional blindness helps to highlight why Wittgenstein advised us to '*look and see … don't think but look!*' The trouble with this advice is that looking and thinking are not ultimately separate activities. (As I will discuss much later in Chapter 8, looking and thinking are interrelated and mutually constituting and they are always social activities.) To the contrary: careful, inclusive looking is aided by forms of thinking, or, more broadly, representing, forms that can widen – or narrow – the lens, sensitising us to what is 'in the frame' (what there is to know, experience, do). In so doing, they widen the window or span of conscious attention, *quantitatively*, in terms of the time held in short-term memory, and *qualitatively*, in terms of what is noticed. Jumping to conclusions ('it must be so'), along with over-socialised, over-intent or narrow-focus forms of perception (versus the so-called 'soft eyes' or wider-angle focus that looks but does not stare), can deflect attention from more nuanced appreciation of what there is to know ('what else could this be?').

More insidiously, this kind of haste may push us into forms of categorical, generic thinking that lead to cognitive violence (not doing justice to the phenomena) and which at times may in turn lead on to forms

of physical violence and oppression. On this point it is time to introduce a second key thinker who, while not fully aligned with the perspectives I will be developing, nonetheless helps to establish the project of 'slow' sociology. I refer to the critical theorist Theodor W. Adorno.

ADORNO ON FORM AND CONTENT, OPPRESSION AND CRITIQUE

Adorno's work was devoted to illuminating how we fail to notice that which contradicts our (often implicit) assumptions about reality. Adorno was concerned to show how reality is not reducible to or identical with the concepts by which we seek to know it. Conceptualisation, classification and categorisation, therefore, left what Adorno called 'a remainder' (Adorno, 2005: 5) – aspects or parts of phenomena that do not fit into the shape and terms of the common denominator, or descriptor. For Adorno, the challenge of social life was to achieve a (temporary and always shifting) balance between subject and object, particular and general, so as to minimise the violence (both symbolic and real) of remaindering. This task, Adorno believed, required nuanced attention to detail and a feeling for multiplicity and equivocality.

In Adorno's understanding, one of the most dangerous features of thought was its tendency to be overly generic. As a half-Jewish philosopher working during the early part of his career in Germany during National Socialism, Adorno witnessed first hand the consequences of categorical thinking: the dangers of believing that the contents of the social world were 'really' aligned with the forms that we use to describe and know that world. This is to say that Adorno considered that totalitarian regimes of all kinds buttressed forms of persecution with notions that people could be easily classified into types. Under National Socialism, these 'types' were in turn ranked such that Jews, Slavs, homosexuals, women [*sic* – I use the regime's categorical descriptions] were deemed inferior and/or unworthy of full human rights. These malicious, hasty understandings laid the cognitive foundation, Adorno considered, for behavioural cruelty.

By contrast, Adorno valued modes of understanding that facilitated the perception of difference. The recognition of difference, which is to say the recognition of the 'non-identity' between an assumption of what a category 'must' contain and what is actually encountered in specific instances (e.g., 'My goodness but aren't you strong/intelligent for a woman/child/old person/blond-haired person!'), was a way of accommodating a richer and more nuanced, variegated, complicated and surprising reality. That accommodation was one concerned with formal innovation, with finding formal containers that could 'hold' more of

reality's contradictions and so stretch the span of what could be held within consciousness (as discussed above in relation to thinking and looking). That kind of cognitive capaciousness was, Adorno considered, also the basis for tolerance.

To return to the parallel with the 'slow' movements and further illustrate the point that categories selectively represent reality and may structure perception and evaluation, let's now consider a different example (albeit one that is as simple as it is less urgent). Consider the case of a category of fruit – the tomato, for example. At different times in the history of food in Europe, the tomato was (a) unknown, (b) considered potentially poisonous and thus not a food source, and (c) a staple salad or sauce ingredient. In recent times, the slow food and organic food movements have sought to remind us that not all tomatoes are round and red, or how, in some cases, a tomato might be more like a physalis or even a grape. Now think of all the tomatoes that would be 'remaindered' (and thus wasted) if we used the image of the red, round one as the common denominator of 'tomato-ness'. So too with slow cognition, or ways of accommodating a wider array of things that might not otherwise 'fit' into conventional containers of how reality 'must' be, or look:

> *Horatio:* O day and night, but this is wondrous strange!
>
> *Hamlet:* And therefore as a stranger give it welcome. There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, Than are dreamt of in your philosophy (Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, Act 1, Scene 5)

FORM AND CONTENT, KNOWING AS COMPOSING

It is probably not fruitful to speculate on whether Adorno would have endorsed the slow or organic food movements (Adorno's negative hauteur tended to lead him to disapprove of all popular movements). Nonetheless, the point of describing the tomato and its vicissitudes highlights a matter close to the heart of Adorno's philosophy – the relation between form and content. Adorno was concerned with how overly simplistic forms could trick perception, leading us into too-hasty identifications between instances and categories (e.g., 'this is not a tomato') and – the next move in the game – the danger associated with too-hasty thinking: the ease of moving from 'it must be this' to 'we must do this'.

This philosophy of form was linked to his more general concern with reality's composition or with how specific materials come to be assembled into socially recognisable, conventional forms that can be or are posited as requiring to be shared or known between people (Witkin,

1998; DeNora, 2003). In this regard, Adorno's thinking about composition was in turn linked to, and greatly influenced by, his second professional pursuit, that of musician and composer. It is interesting to follow Adorno's theory of culture, in particular his notion of aesthetic form as an active ingredient of sense-making (a point that will be critical later on, in Part 2, when we consider 'strong' forms of cultural sociology today). And so we come to the first of this book's case study examples.

CASE STUDY Adorno on 'composition'

For Adorno, musical composition, understood as the arrangement of sound, or sonic material, was important for two reasons. First, musical composition (or at least Adorno's own understanding of composition) offered a metaphor or exemplar for cognition. Second, Adorno considered that composition provided an active condition of consciousness (cognition, perception, awareness) and its formation. While one might dispute the ways in which Adorno drew connections between musical genre, composers and styles and their actual uses and interpretations, and indeed question whether Adorno paid sufficient attention to popular musical forms (Witkin, 2000; DeNora, 2003; Rojek, 2011), his work is invaluable for cultural sociology because it develops a theory of how aesthetic materials 'get into' our processes of thought and attention to the world.

As a metaphor or exemplar for consciousness and knowledge production (or knowledge 'composition'), Adorno understood compositional practices to model the ways that difference in other, extra-musical realms could be handled or accommodated. For example, consider the standard pop-ballad love song. Setting aside the question of its lyrics and focusing only on its arrangement of tonal material, the ballad employs a harmonic arrangement that prioritises melody (one voice) over the potential for equal voices. It requires a 'type' of ending, such as a musical climax or a fade-out. It also places certain constraints upon singers, such as that the pitch of the voice 'must' be in tune, and they 'must' be rhythmically entrained and in tempo, or the singer risks being deemed inept (e.g., not worthy of a record contract, an audience, etc.). So the composer 'must' be committed to these conventions if she or he is to be a writer of pop songs, as certain harmonic, melodic and rhythmic arrangements will not be tolerated. By contrast, a composer may attempt to work in forms that admit more of the irregular, misshapen, deformed or, as he puts it in relation to modern ('serious') music which took upon itself, 'all the darkness and guilt of the world. Its fortune lies in the perception of misfortune; all of its beauty is in denying itself the illusion of beauty' (Adorno, 1980: 133).
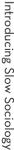
Thus, for Adorno, an over-adherence to pre-given forms involved characteristic practices of handling material, and these practices called for the editing-out of some forms of sonic difference (rejecting 'deformed' material). Because not all sonic material could be accommodated by pre-given, overly familiar forms, those forms could be read, metaphorically, as object lessons in intolerance and, by contrast, less conventional forms as object lessons in how to maintain a delicate empirical 'respect' for those things that did not readily 'fit' into conventional forms. The analogy to food – and the slow food movement – is again apt: just as some supermarkets may remainder or dispose of 'misshapen' tomatoes, so too some compositional practices refused, and therefore were unaccommodating to, 'misshapen' sounds.

But for Adorno music was more than a metaphor. It was also a condition of consciousness and, as such, Adorno conceived of music as a medium by which attentive capacities (the span of consciousness) could be enhanced or diminished. More specifically, forms that admitted the sonically strange or deformed, that found ways of accommodating sonic difference, were forms that could stretch perceptual and cognitive faculties to admit greater nuance, contradiction and rival possibilities. By contrast, highly familiar, predictable forms were the comfort food of the ears, reinforcing simple habits of mind in ways that relaxed the tension required for differentiation. They were associated, Adorno believed, with a 'regression in hearing' that led listeners into forgetfulness of the potentially wider realm of sonic possibility and thus to other possible orientations to the world (including sensibilities). So, to continue with the food analogy, overly familiar, clichéd musical concoctions could, Adorno considered, dull the sense of hearing so that discernment, the ability to *really listen* (recall Wittgenstein above on 'looking'), was suppressed.

To return to the example of tomatoes: the clichéd notion is that a tomato 'must' be round and red, as opposed, say, to the subtle and slightly furry texture of a freshly picked, outdoor-grown, deliberately under-watered Cherokee Purple (Hudson, 2013) or the 'deformed' tomato that is shaped like a nose, or half-nibbled by another animal but picked and eaten anyway. Or think about the taste, smell and texture of a freshly picked tomato, or one that has not been kept under refrigeration as it travels far afield. (For a similar discussion, see Thoreau, 1986 [1854]: 220, on the huckleberry: '[i]t is a vulgar error to suppose that you have tasted huckleberries who never plucked them … The ambrosial and essential part of the fruit is lost with the bloom which is rubbed off in the market cart, and they become mere provender.') Only musical forms that sought to accommodate the 'strangeness' or

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'simultaneous multiplicity' of material (what it was and was not, what it could do, how it sounded) were enriching.

For Adorno, this accommodation involved a dialectical or mutually interactive relationship between form and content. This is to say that while Adorno valued forms that were inclusive of material's diversity, he also valued form, which he understood as socially recognisable and shared ways of containing material. Therefore, and unlike some more 'experimental' composers, such as John Cage, Adorno did not advocate opening up the world of sounds to their fully anarchic possibilities, for example, in ways that would allow 'raw' sound to be classed as 'music', as in Cage's so-called 'silent' piece, 4'33" (where the 'music' is the ambient sound of the location where it is performed, filling the time interval of 4 minutes and 33 seconds). Nor did Adorno value more deterministic methods of composition (where material was arranged according to pre-fixed formulae [see DeNora, 2011: Ch. 1]). Thus, 'composition' had to negotiate between two extremes: on the one hand, if music upheld form over content, it collapsed its potential to present difference; its compass became too narrow. On the other hand, if music allowed sonic content free-rein, the possibility for sharing meaningful forms was missed and with it the importance of musical form as a model or exemplar for collective being. ('Music says We directly, regardless of its intentions' [Adorno, 1997: 167].)

As we shall see, the fitting-together of form and content, general and particular, part and whole, is the work of reality's composition. The study of this composition should, as I have suggested, proceed slowly; and the forms that composition takes, that is, actors' renditions of realities and our accounts of these renditions, when they are tailored to accommodate diverse material, may not bear resemblance to our presuppositions of how they 'must' take shape. Thus, and taking our cue from Adorno on composition, a 'slow' approach is one that tries to admit more into the picture, that allows for greater degrees of possibility and potential, and that therefore risks (indeed courts or flirts with) confusion and uncertainty.

This uncertainty in turn provides some distance from the common-sense understanding of reality and the idea that reality is, as John Law describes (Law, 2004: 23–7) in his five-point summary: (1) 'out there', (2) independent of our actions and our perceptions, (3) standing before or preceding us, (4) definite and (5) singular (i.e., not competing with other versions of the real). And, as I will describe in Chapter 2, while looking and thinking cannot be neatly severed from each other (they are mutually constitutive), we may nonetheless take a step

toward looking for and thinking about that which does not seek to impose a preconceived pattern, one that is interested in what is different, incoherent and, in Law's terms, messy. From there, it is possible to take another step into that mess by acknowledging that the patterns which we perceive are patterns that we ourselves are complicit in assembling, through active perception and through the assembly or furbishing of situations conducive to these perceptions. As we move toward that complexity, we are also moving toward an understanding of reality as open-ended, and toward an understanding of knowing the world as a form of critical praxis. Within those understandings, composed realities are revealed as places and spaces – ecologies – for being in the world.