

## A Brief History of the Concept of Sensibility

Alexandra Ivanova for *The Conversation* – Sensibility as Media, 6<sup>th</sup> May 2017, Luxembourg

1. The term *sensibility* stems from Latin: It derives from the Late Latin word *sensibilis*, meaning "having feeling: perceptible by the senses," which in its turn goes back to *sensus*, past participle of *sentire* – "to perceive, feel". Via Old French (*sensibilite*), sensibility as a term arrived in the English language in the late 14<sup>th</sup> century with the meaning of "capability of being perceived by the senses; ability to sense or perceive".

2. Therefore, the concept of sensibility could be understood as an outstanding *aesthetic* capacity, turning parts of the human body to leading factors in gaining information that differs from information for sheer rational analysis. Perceiving the world by smelling, seeing, tasting it, by hearing, by touching it addresses and produces feelings that allow a deeper response to the materiality of the surrounding. Perceiving the world with all senses instead of only one promises richness of sensation (something advertisement companies have discovered long ago). Also, we might think of sensibility as categorially separated from knowledge, thoughts, or understanding. The more we might wonder, why and how *sensible* became an English synonym for *reasonable*. Maybe there was a time when the line between feeling and reason was not as defied and firm – as we are used to, nowadays.

3. Curiously enough, the late 14<sup>th</sup> century since which the term sensibility is known in the English-speaking sphere marks the beginning of the Renaissance. In this era, as we remember, the holistic order of the European Middle Ages commenced vanishing. Technical innovations in communication and logistics, inventions like book printing or shipping, resulted in a new economic and political class of merchants, bankers, and craftspeople that supported artists and scholars with new ideas. Thus, thinkers of Humanism began to evolve a vision of an individual human that could shape her or his own destiny and culture with less and less of divine providence to worry about. Subsequently, we can think of the emergence of certain concepts of human abilities like sensibility as one expression of this new approach to questions regarding the essence of human matters. Modern rational philosophy, starting usually with the name of René Descartes in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, struggled with epistemology: If the world cannot be sufficiently explained by God, what can humans know about it and how can they know? While Descartes split the senses from the mind, John Locke simultaneously explored how the senses lead to understanding, claiming that any understanding must be based in sensational experience, not in abstract concepts. Above mentioned remarkable use of the word *sensible* as *rea-*

*sonable* might be a trace to that state of blurred borders and ambiguity in epistemological quarrels about how humans could gather information for their knowledge of the world.

4. Sensibility then became prominent as a literary genre in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, above all in Great Britain but, with the key term of *Empfindsamkeit*, also in Germany and other European countries. The new genre of the novel allowed to describe inner proceedings of the story's characters with depictions of extreme emotions. Having and showing off feelings was regarded as cultivated and decent. During this time, gender characteristics gained relevance. Heroines suffered from "hysteria", heroes like Goethe's Young Werther from over-exaggerated romanticism. Sensibility began to melt with sentimentalism, provoking witty criticism by authors like Jane Austen. In her early novel *Sense and Sensibility* from 1811 she presents two major female characters, Elinor and Marianne Dashwood, who personify the two poles of rational control over feelings (sense) and over-emotional expression (sensibility). Firstly, Austen decides to portray different kinds of femininity. Secondly, the novel ends with Marianne's, the emotional little sister's, decision to strive for Elinor's way of being in order to prevent herself from too excessive emotional chaos. Novels like these slowly but surely resulted in the end of this literary hype. However, excessive emotionality has been regarded a female hysteric trait for centuries – Sigmund Freud being only one example for those physicians who tried to find a cure for this malady.

5. What does sensibility mean today? Clearly, feminist movements have shown the nonsense of ascribing emotionality as hysteria and as an *a priori* trait to persons who were brought up to be females. Yet, sensibility still has its particularly female place in capitalist political economy, (pop)culture, and school education. Females are being perceived as more capable of perceiving "the world" through their senses, meaning first and foremost: perceiving other beings that they take *care* of through their senses. Feelings like compassion, reconciliation, love, or gentleness appear to be closely tied to the senses, thus to sensibility. Even if or when females leave the sphere of reproduction, their sensibility is more likely to be addressed as a value that should be put into the labor process and by this into productivity. Sensibility, for females more than for those who were raised to be males, tends to become a commodity that can be used in neo-liberal labor, above all in service or consulting, where abilities to handle feelings in a "good way" are highly ranked.

6. What could *sensibility as media* mean today? Sensibility as media takes us back to the era of Enlightenment. What can sensibility be a carrier, a transmitter, a medium for? If we tried to imagine escaping the trap of letting our sensibility being commodified for a market, which we

can so only in our thoughts, then we could use it for self-reflection. Sensibility – as media for more sufficient realization of the misery of being commodified for a market. Or the misery of only wrong *praxis* left. Tonight's conversation could be about how our ability to perceive the world through our senses should stay a reminder of the fact that there is no right life in the wrong one. In this insight unfolds unconditional hope and beauty, returning to sensibility as an *aesthetic* capacity some of its original mission.

7. Some sources:

Theodor W. Adorno. *Minima Moralia*. 1951

Jane Austen. *Sense and Sensibility*. 1811

John Locke. *An Essay Concerning Humane Understanding*. 1690

Online Etymological Dictionary.

Janet Todd. *Sensibility: An Introduction*. 1986

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