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Introduction

My work originally grew out of thinking about the notion of sensation, and being intrigued by whether, or how, the two meanings of the term – as sensory feeling, and as media event – might be connected. On further investigation, I found the links to be quite strong, and this in turn brings into play important controversies over whether sensationalism distorts our ability to acquire self-knowledge, to understand events around us and to relate to others, controversies that have been around for at least two centuries. In probing this, it seemed important to get beyond tired academic debates about the interests of powerful groups and their capacity for ideological manipulation, so as to gain a sense of the matrix out of which such individuals and groups develop their sense of their ‘interests’ in the first place. In this book, then, the development of this culture of sensation is explored by examining the dynamics of sensation as experience, as encountered in the embodied effects of shock and the dramatic impact of media events, and in doing this we are drawn to the idea of a ‘circuit of sensation’. This is conceptualized in terms of forces, fields and flows, of energy and intensity, that can be variously glossed in the language of ‘nerves’ and nervous energy (from early on in the period), or of electrical and electromagnetic energy (from rather later), all amounting to a distinctive vision of the connections between the sensory experiences that both connect and separate us, and that can be reinforced by the intensity of media sensationalism. In effect, we display the relations between some of the terms whereby the modern world tries to make sense of the experiences that it does, itself, produce, often in unforeseen ways and with unexpected consequences, hence producing and reproducing the distinctive cultural configuration of ‘sensationalism’.

This configuration turns out to have wide ramifications. It suggests, for example, that any notion of isolating ‘high art’ from these cultural currents, resting as it does on a notion of sensation purified of contamination by popular culture and the mass media, is not only unrealistic but shows a

misunderstanding of the way art is itself embedded in these currents. Film, in particular, has had an engagement with 'sensation' from the start, raising the possibility that this is not just a matter of film content but of the cinematic experience itself, encapsulating the dynamic relation between concentration and distraction that is central to the experience of modern life. For a further example, developed later in the book, the intriguing contemporary revival of interest in 'evil' is addressed, and it is argued that the distinctive conjunction of sensationalism and sentimentalism present here enables us to position this in terms of a theory of melodrama, which helps cast light on reactions to contemporary phenomena like 9/11.

Main themes

Sensational events, sensational experiences: we variously enjoy them, suffer them, are overwhelmed by them; but what makes them count as *sensational*, and what is 'sensational' in sensation, is not something we reflect on much. It is apparent that the modern world presents each of us with a plenitude of 'sensational moments', concentrations of experience that are already potentially public, poised for further intensification through media reproduction, and a potent, arguably fundamental, resource for exploration in the arts. And it seems likely that such events and experiences help to construct us as subjects, able to endure, survive and even seek out such experiences. We experience sensations, just as we are presented with them through the media. 'Sensational subjects' are produced and reproduced in modernity both as the agent having the experience and as the topic experienced, both subjective and objective dimensions of the modern spectacle.

It is not so easy to avoid this, either. In a culture of hyperbole, even the normal has to become extraordinary if it is to be noticed, and no problem is worth announcing, no misfortune worth proclaiming, unless one can claim to have been traumatized by it. Nor does trying to be resolutely ordinary and inconspicuous, creeping through life in a humble station, necessarily work. If striving to make an impact can indeed make it all the more likely that you will succeed, there is no escape the other way: straining to avoid this fate can have the same effect – the media will find you anyway. We all have some 'other side', we all have some secret; and secrets revealed, transgressing the boundary into the glare of publicity, become sensational. Besides, the very ordinariness of the ordinary, and ordinary people, can be rendered spectacular, hence enhancing

and dramatizing that very ordinariness, reminding us that this is, after all, the age of reality television, and the logic of celebrity. 'Sensational subjects' indeed.

This already suggests that there may be a relationship between the two senses of the term 'sensation' – as embodied feeling and as dramatic media event – and indeed this becomes the central theme of the book. The association had become very clear by the time of the 'sensation novel' of the 1860s, when sensational events in the stories were troublingly translated into symptomatic responses in the body of the reader – physical signs of excitement and distress, nervous palpitations – and such 'sensationalism' had already become controversial in the culture. But we can perhaps point to a rather different response by the reader here. This response can be one of sympathy with the plight of the hero or heroine, whether in these fictional adventures or in real-life scenarios. This sympathetic engagement also involves the feelings, but is more nuanced, involving mind and emotion as well as the immediacy of feeling. This response is more other-oriented, whether through strong identification or imaginative involvement, and assumes a degree of distance even as it seeks to overcome it.

These responses are not mutually exclusive, or at least can both be present in quick succession. Initial reactions to viewing the unfolding drama of the terrorist attack of 11 September 2001 tended to run along 'sensational' lines; but sympathy – and alternative responses that could occupy the same emotional 'space', such as anger – could kick in quickly thereafter. Nevertheless, these responses point in different directions, and have different cultural forms, implications and histories. So 9/11 reminded us of Hollywood special effects, of disaster movies, just as it reminded us of other dramatic 'spectacles', encountered by most of us primarily as media events, such as volcanoes, earthquakes and battles. In the broad sense, such spectacles are thereby treated as *engrossing*, even entertaining when presented explicitly in these terms, as in film, but always implicitly so, too; often in ways that make us feel queasy or guilty (tourists at volcanoes, drivers slowing down when passing a road accident to see it better ...). In these cases, it is as though the aesthetic sense short-circuits the moral one, whereas when our engagement is primarily sympathetic, it is the other way around. As these examples show, all this presents problems for us in the age of mass media spectacle: one may wonder to what extent sympathetic engagement is still possible, for example.

Here, it is important to mention that it is only the 'sensation' strand that will be considered in this book; the other strand, relating to sympathy, is discussed in a second book, to be published simultaneously, entitled *Sympathetic Sentiments: Affect, Emotion and Spectacle in the Modern World*. The two books stand on

their own, but there are of course links and overlaps. It is also necessary to add that while *Sensational Subjects* traces the history of the sensational back to the early nineteenth century, the sources of this strand can be found in eighteenth-century 'sensibility', which is also the source of the 'spectacle of sympathy', and the ramifications of this originating cultural pattern are explored in the other book, which also examines some of the problems of relating the two strands in their subsequent development through the nineteenth century and beyond.

Returning to this book, we can already see, with the Gothic, how 'sensation' could indeed be 'sensational', aligning feelings of the self with events beyond; one also sees that if this is one pole into which sensibility fractures, the other pole is constituted by the emergent cultural experience of the sentimental, reconstructed as a sensibility 'to excess', available for critique and denunciation. Gender politics is implicated here, together with a not unconnected interest in exploring the presuppositions of rational action and the factors – both cultural and psychological – that could inhibit it. 'Affect', now reconstructed as recalcitrant, a threat to rationality, and in need of discipline, is indulged and controlled in the domestic sphere yet is also allowed a problematical role in fantasy, in Gothic and its successors (although even here an attempt is made to recuperate the rational-scientific model by providing 'answers' to the mysteries). Here, and concentrating henceforth on the sensation strand, we find that boundaries between 'reality' and 'fantasy' are always troublesome, in that 'fantasy' must in some sense be part of reality, despite being set up as 'opposed' to it; and in the nineteenth century, an age increasingly influenced by the mass media, these boundaries become threatened by the media's capacity to appropriate and magnify real-life events.

These events classically include physical violence, notably murder – and it is above all here that the era of mass sensationalism is born, always carrying with it this link to the fundamentally *embodied* nature of experience. The body is now positioned decisively as the site, or switch-point, of a 'circuit of sensation' that exists on the cusp of the relation between physiology and culture, implicitly questioning their mutual independence in a world that is increasingly media-inflected, with channels of communication increasingly seen as structuring and 'mediating' these ostensibly separate spheres. And it is the body in its most gruesome form, both threatening and abject, that constitutes the pulsating heart of this cultural transformation. Overall, then, we can say that this distinctive cultural configuration involves quasi-physical circuits of both continuities and breaks, manifest in shocks, and defences overwhelmed, seen as producing a culture that encompasses both restless energy and nervous stress, linked to

tension, but also pleasure and release. Sensations involve processes, and indeed cycles, with a tendency to inflation: yoked together with the impact of consumerism, one is constantly in search of 'newer' or 'better' sensations. Sensation engages us as organic and physical beings, through energy, force and flow, but these are also processes that are channelled through culture, shaped by it and grasped reflexively *as* cultural.

The ramifications of all this work themselves out through the later decades of the nineteenth century. By then, it was widely assumed that the shocks and jolts of everyday life, both literal and metaphorical, the endless new sensations and stresses of modern city life, constituted a threat of ill-health, of 'nervous exhaustion' (neurasthenia), but that consciousness itself could constitute a defence mechanism, a kind of 'stimulus shield'. Consciousness could register shock while diminishing its impact, making everyday experience manageable while building up a submerged layer of impressions and images that had escaped this, or been repressed, hence constituting an unconscious, existing as a potent resource for neurosis but also for artistic creativity. A corollary was that for something to be truly 'sensational' it needed to break through the shock defence altogether – but in this case, it is always potentially traumatic. As it cannot be merely 'filed away', in safe form, and is beyond any control by the subject, it is always liable to 'unmotivated' returns, as devastating as the initial impact.

While it is the potential of the 'mass spectacle' to transmit 'unconscious' influences that tends to be emphasized by psychoanalytical and other critics, there is a subtly different angle. That the audience should 'pay attention', at least to some extent, would seem to be a necessary presupposition for all this, after all; and that the sensational 'grabs our attention' is crucial to how it works in normal contexts, where it can be dramatic without being traumatic, as it were. 'Attention' has indeed been of considerable cultural interest since late nineteenth-century psychology positioned it as an issue. People can pay too much attention, or too little, and not necessarily to the right things; our attention can become 'distracted', both by losing concentration and by wandering to 'distractions'. One can, indeed, pay more attention to the 'distractions' of popular culture, to which indeed a 'distracted consciousness' may be better suited. By implication, such 'distraction' contrasts with the 'absorption' that allegedly characterized the attention we pay to great art, but we may find that the implications of the relation between distraction and attention subvert conventional distinctions between 'high' art and 'popular' or 'mass' culture.

All this in turn focuses our own attention on those distinctive sites of cultural transmission, particularly film and television, where audiences are

positioned in 'concentrated' fashion to experience 'distraction'; places where the bombardment of stimuli, now reconfigured as the reception of currents and waves in the form of messages and images, offers possibilities for proactive response, for degrees of involvement and choice by the experiencing subject – an arena of opportunities that could be used to navigate through the interpenetrating worlds of leisure, entertainment and even work. This zone of diffusion and concentration thus includes the technologies of mass communication and broadcasting whereby sounds, images and messages are dispersed through space and time, available for concentration in specific sites but always existing beyond these, hence transforming our experience of space, time and presence, indeed transforming 'communication across distance' so that it entails 'co-presence', thus forcing us to rethink boundaries of public and private, virtual and real. It is on this terrain that we increasingly encounter the subtly reconfigured relations between sensation, spectacle and the possibility of sympathetic engagement. In the light of this, we can also ponder the possibility that the contrast between shock or sensation, on the one hand, and the everyday world of routines, on the other, suggests two modes of experiencing the world of modernity and modern individuality: intensity and concentration, the visceral experience of the body, yet linked to the risks and hopes of insight and artistic inspiration; and distraction, diffusion, expansiveness, relaxation, perhaps with a certain superficiality, or the risk of boredom.

That sensationalism does indeed become more 'spectacular' seems clear enough, as we move again towards emphasizing the contemporary. Indeed, in everyday parlance 'spectacular' and 'sensational' are barely distinguishable; and they are frequently conjoined in cultural criticism as twin pathologies of the modern, twin embodiments of the pervasive power of the mass media. In the contemporary world, we can certainly be aware of a 'spectacle of sensation', always straining for greater impact, for dramatic new effects, always desperate to escape the death of submergence back into the sea of the undifferentiated, the boredom and inertia of a world where 'too much' can also become boring, where consumerism both feeds on sensation, in the endless promises, shocks and spills of the new and the transgressive, along with the dreams of pleasure and plenitude these can encompass, just as it subverts their realization in the drabness of the everyday.

In these possibly postmodern times, when rationalist ideologies of social transformation have fallen away, we are left with media-influenced hunts for scapegoats, for someone or some group to blame; and we can see, looming into view, another mode of presenting, experiencing and reacting to these

events that has actually been around since the early nineteenth century – namely, melodrama. This is a culminating form of the ‘spectacle of sensation’, engaging the audience’s sympathetic response to the necessarily innocent victim, together with anger at the villain, but in a context of sensationalism and the spectacular: it is about moral absolutes, battles of good and evil, in an arena of ‘special effects’ that incorporates the full resources of visual technology. This, again, offers a perspective on 9/11. Melodrama seems to have become a crucial factor in shaping our contemporary perceptions, corresponding as it does to the sense of diffuse threats and conspiracies, the imperative to blame, the escalation of moral dilemmas to simplified moral absolutes, the stigmatization of unacceptable otherness, and the sense of excess that have become central to mediated culture. The great promise of melodrama is that of a unification of experience in its practical, aesthetic and moral registers: melodrama reacts to the profound contingency of the world by attempting to render it intelligible as *drama*, as cosmic struggle and resolution. Its ‘over the top’ quality both reinforces its impact, helps to hold it together, and papers over the instability of its own fusion of forms. Exploring this, we can say that our world comes to present *itself* in ways that invite characterization as melodrama; it doesn’t require much help from newscasters, novelists or film-makers (though doubtless gets it anyway).

Briefly, then, the implications of my argument can be summarized as follows. There is no point in harking back, or looking forward, to a golden age in which sensation, sensationalism and spectacle would no longer corrupt our rational appraisal of the world, which they allegedly do either by distorting the content of what is being said or shown, or by overcoming our defences against the overflow of undisciplined feeling. Since the eighteenth century, Western modernity has been deeply embedded in a body-focused culture of spectacle and sensation; they appear as inherent concomitants of mass literacy and the mass media, and have evolved with them, being present from very early on in the way we both conceive of, and experience, our relations with each other and the wider world. They are not inherently good or bad, but they are *there*. Of course, there are important issues to be confronted, ‘culture wars’ and important political battles to be fought, over power, inequality, exploitation and discrimination, but these have to be fought out on *this* terrain, and using its weapons, not somewhere else – for this is inescapably the world in which we now live.

General approach and assumptions

This book is a multi-layered history of modern experience as it has been ‘sensationalized’ over the period since the nineteenth century, and subjected to theoretical reflection. It draws on literature, art, film and other cultural resources, including the ideas of Benjamin and Deleuze, to develop a distinctive cultural framework for understanding these controversies and their contemporary implications; through drawing on a range of disciplinary perspectives, the hope is that this will further the development of a historically informed theoretical framework for cultural studies. Such a ‘cultural aesthetics’ would complement the study of socio-economic processes, and the discipline-focused study of the specific arts, with an emphasis on ‘culture’ as inclusive, refusing any constitutive distinction between ‘high’ and ‘mass’ culture, and on ‘aesthetics’ as incorporating the whole dimension of ‘feeling’ as a response to the world that includes the sensory but also the sense of reaction and orientation to – and in – a world we encounter yet which also encompasses us, hence an orientation that necessarily includes the embodied imagination. This would entail an approach to ‘mind’, ‘body’ and ‘culture’ that would be evocative of that relatively undifferentiated flux of ideas and impressions that constituted early modern culture before the Enlightenment philosophers began tidying it up. Academically, if this is an ‘interdisciplinary’ study, then it seeks to establish that the ‘inter’ would necessarily be a reference to the ‘culture’ that is the implicit, missing term in all this.

There is much here that could do with further elaboration – and to some extent this is done in the introduction to *Sympathetic Sentiments* – but enough has been said to make it clear that this is *not* a book about sensationalism as media manipulation, or ‘mass culture’ as reflecting the interests of competing groups, and underlying socio-economic processes, although there is plenty here that would be *relevant* to such sociological concerns, important as they are. Rather, the emphasis here is on the underlying patterns of meaning and experience embedded in cultural practices and products wherein and out of which emergent individuals and groups can situate themselves in the ideological debates of the time, whether the options offered by everyday consumerism or the ‘grand narratives’ of overarching meaning; and it is only in terms of these that notions like ‘interest’ make sense. In their anxiety to relate power to pre-constituted socio-economic or psychological interests, there is always a risk with these other approaches that they miss these underlying dimensions that constitute culture as irreducible, as a distinctive perspective *on* the world,

rather than simply a part or product *of* it. This is not to say that this book is uncritical; indeed, if cultural aesthetics necessarily involves an orientation, a positioning, *within* culture, it is hardly possible to avoid the fact that such positioning will have implications, and will be embedded in controversies. That is to be welcomed.

We now need to consider more explicitly the idea of sensation as a 'cultural configuration'. As has been suggested, a study of the way 'sensation' works, whether in discourse, experience, or postulated as an underlying physiological reality, suggests the concept of a 'circuit of sensation'. The term is not, however, intended merely as an organizing concept or heuristic device that helps us to understand the world but does not really refer to entities or processes within it. Rather, it refers to ostensibly 'real' processes, linking bodies, minds, technologies and 'others': it is a 'cultural' reality that points to and attempts to incorporate discursive *and* physical dimensions. Only if we make such strong, and potentially troublesome, claims can we be true to the place 'sensation' occupies, the role it plays, in modern culture and experience. This does, after all, seem to converge with, or reflect, a powerful strand of thought from the eighteenth century onwards, namely that there are indeed currents, running through 'nerves', and manifest in 'feelings', that serve as real-enough, quasi-physical circuits, as linkages between minds and bodies and other minds and bodies. Notions of 'contagion' are encountered frequently here. Of course, within this, the concepts have shifted significantly over the period: scientific understanding has evolved in various ways, organic and electrical metaphors come and go, and the idea of media as *themselves* being physical objects or channels that can intervene in these circuits, even be significantly constitutive of them, has become widespread since the mid-nineteenth century. In our time, all this has been shifting again, with new theoretical perspectives opening up as we try to make sense of cyberspace and digital media.

But we need to be careful here. To write *wholly* from within this language of physical circuits, the world appropriated within a specific and changeable scientific discourse, is to allow oneself to treat the latter as unquestioned resource, rather than as part of the topic being investigated. This is an important reason for the critique of central strands of contemporary 'affect theory' offered later in this book, where we find that currently fashionable forms of scientific discourse (such as 'neuroscience') are extended into new areas in a rather dogmatic and uncritical way, rather than finding that this development *itself* is treated as a fascinating subject for cultural reflection. The challenge is to inhabit some branch of science (or other area of culture) while simultaneously indicating a

degree of distance from it – that characteristically ‘modern’ position that is also a constitutive stance of any adequate cultural study.

We find, then, that just as the modern world has presented us with these diffuse but interrelated experiences of mental, organic and physical entities interacting within conventional spatio-temporal coordinates, making sense in everyday terms, so it has also provided us with shifting concepts and metaphors for figuring these, in a range of discourses and representations, through the arts and sciences. Our ‘sensational’ metaphors (burn with passion, melt with pleasure, freeze with terror) are not random individual products but both reflect and manifest this process of figuration whereby the cultural imaginary constructs and reconstructs the world of experience through the framing that makes it meaningful; and it is *within* this that questions of ontology, of reality and truth, are situated and debated. This is why the concept of ‘figuration’ is useful: it incorporates the figurative, the literary use of tropes, but has the potential to go beyond this, able to question or transgress even the most basic ontological boundaries, such as those that define reality itself, and the coordinates through which we pin it down. It is, for example, misleading to place the circuit of sensation simply within a conventional framework of space and time, since, as process, it has an explosive, fracturing potential that positions time as relative to it, and space as constructed by it; in these respects, it suggests ‘modernist’ (scientific and aesthetic) articulations of space–time disjunctions.

One aspect of this can be developed here. This book reconfigures the contemporary within the modern, and displays the modern *as* contemporary. If the contemporary is the horizon of the present, hence ever-shifting, ever disappearing and reappearing as we move on, it cannot be *identified* with the modern: rather, the latter is that very process of change and stasis itself, both occurring *in* time, time which thereby becomes history, and as the *pattern* of conjunctions and disjunctions that subverts any sense of a single, uniquely identifiable overall process – a process that would ignore the reflexive movement whereby one simultaneously makes sense of it *and* institutes the distance of difference itself in the heart of the same. It is this that enables these patterns to have consequences, to be causes and have effects; but, as patterns, they cannot themselves *have* causes, since patterns only exist as appropriated or figured through reflexive cultural practices. One can add that the implication here of a possible gap between cause and effect, a disproportion, is itself a theme in modern discussions of science and history, just as it occurs in the argument of this book in the context of sensation: any circuit of sensation seems to involve the language and imagery of shocks, disjunctions, jolts and jumps. Always there is this reflexive

gap, inherent in grasping something the subject is involved in, belongs to; and the impossibility of secure knowledge of these currents and feelings that swirl in and around the self, for example, is not due to some mystery of the individual, some irreducible uniqueness of the person, but testifies to the impossibility of reducing reflexive appropriation to causation, in whatever context.

Relative to outcome, the sense of linear development in history has to be grasped as a process of increasing complexity; but relative to origin, this is rather to be seen as diffusion, dispersion. Movement is outwards, as well as onwards, the sense of pattern, of structure, emerging as centrifugal (although individual structures can of course entail depth, as in the model of the self composed of conscious and unconscious 'layers'). All this gives a sense of repetition, of continuity, as well as change: the origin, the impossible first moment, reflexively constitutive of the series, is grasped in and as repetition, but repetition as difference, through diffusion. Such a reflexive grasp of time is a move out of time, projecting it, as figuration or breaking it up, constituting it as pattern in the very act of attempting to grasp it – the reflexive mode of the modern. And we return to the circuit of sensation: this is given reflexively, as a theoretical concept that develops out of these processes and purports to mirror aspects of them; but it can only do this if it also, in a sense, partakes of them, continues them by other means. It can only reflect the real if it reflects the homologies of pattern and process, present in the gaps and disjunctions that *also* constitutes it in its *distance* from the real. As such, the concept attempts to theorize the cultural configuration that suggests it, accepting that it cannot avoid the possibility that it also subtly contributes to it, perhaps indeed to its 'dispersion'. Ultimately, then, through 'sensation', this book rejoins the very processes it reflexively articulates, manifest in its own structure, and the possibilities it thereby opens up ...