

## BOOK REVIEW

## Masiello, Francine R. (2018). *Senses of Democracy, Perception, Politics and Culture in Latin America*. Austin: University of Texas Press. 325 Pages

Ernesto Semán

---

Review of Francine R. Masiello, *Senses of Democracy, Perception, Politics and Culture in Latin America*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2018.

---

**Keywords:** Latin American culture; Democracy; History of senses; Literature; Modernity in Latin America

---

With a focus in Latin American cultural production over the last two centuries, Francine Masiello has composed an extraordinary book that tells the history of what she describes as “sense work”. Conceiving the evolution of the sensorium as part of political transformations and, fundamentally, as a way of perceiving and being part of political and social changes, the author explores senses (feeling, looking, smelling, hearing) how they have changed and how they have been affected by technological transformations. The combined impact of these dimensions provides a unique understanding of the region’s collective political body and its hidden mechanisms.

Masiello’s goals are ambitious. She puts Latin American cultural production in a larger global context in which Melville and Paul Klee might be brought into the conversation in order to stress how specifically regional processes connected Latin America with the world. The author assumes at least three simultaneous tasks in order to understand the place of the sensorium in the history of collective action: its centrality in the creation of the polity, its ambivalent relation with technological transformations, and the cultural production reflecting (and producing) the changes in those two realms. The introduction and five chapters are a journey through the inner workings of modernization.

The introduction presents the book’s broad goal of analyzing the contentious and vital place of the body in politics, from the support of the mission of nations of training citizens to perceive with a shared and uniform ear and mind to the perception of violent abjection exerted against the body and to the ways in which the sensorium puts spectral presences into an intelligible perspective. Though Masiello’s reflection is about Latin America, the focus of her exploration is mostly Argentine

political and intellectual life. Chapter I analyzes the centrality of the senses in defining virtues and vices of public life and power in Latin American early republican period. The works of the Argentine writer Esteban Echeverría, his obsessive overlapping of the slaughterhouse with the political body, express how elites in the region incorporated the ideas of the French ideologues, different from the rather cold approach to them by Thomas Jefferson in the United States. Chapter II, probably the most fascinating one, explores the way in which the irruption of technology challenges the sense work, but focused mostly in the way women are represented under these changes and in the way female writers revealed this conundrum. People are slaves of their eyes and ears, yet women (above all Juana Manuela Gorriti) point out how as people develop a relation with technological advances as their new master, under which they also miss the more immediate opportunity of the now. Chapter III explores the forceful engagement with technology in the early twentieth century. Horacio Quiroga’s vision of “bodies of abnormal speed”, Masiello sees not only the perplexity and fascination with accelerated technological changes but also the reserved attitude towards an embodied knowledge that is muddling a desired form of communal life. In chapter IV, “A Politics of Perception”, the author dissects the penetrating and prescient ideas of León Rozitchner about politics, violence and the individual. As technology perfects forms of power and state oppression in the second half of the twentieth century, it also leaves exposed the bare Latin American truth of the body as the locus of a prolific relation between politics and violence. The last chapter and conclusion start by reflecting on the work of Brazilian artist Nuno Ramos and his search for a sound (or lack of it) that expresses not only the deprivations of life in the sertão, but also how technology transports those social relations over time so to become the now and here. It ends with a brief study of Chilean writer Diamela Eltit and with how her work during the last years offers us the landscape

an electronic environment that is increasingly self-sustaining, and where that same alienation might be the source for new creativity. According to the book's topic, and the sophisticated exploration of the place of senses in history, the book includes magnificent and excellently reproduced plates and illustrations covering hundred years of cultural production.

As technology boosts state power over social life, the body produces forms of resistance. We can read the book as an attempt to reconstruct, through the senses, the history of the masses in Latin America, a study about how their irruption and the bodies, environments and preferences that make up their own sense work have been describe, dissected and also violently repressed. In the analysis of historical politics from a literary perspective, *Senses of Democracy* moves one step further from Masiello's previous work about the Latin American polity. And as such, it is also a valuable addition from literary studies to the vibrantly growing field of the history of the senses. For example, in history books like Adamovsky and Buch's *La marchita, el escudo y el bombo. Una historia cultural de los emblemas del peronismo*, processes that have been widely analyzed in the past reemerge under a new and vivid light as authors see how political players felt (smelled, heard and saw) masses in different and opposite perspectives.

Fundamental for Masiello's ideas is to locate cultural production in Latin America in connection with debates

and taking place elsewhere: Echeverría meeting Antoine Destutt de Tracy, Xul Solar departing from Paul Klee in the connections between nature and geometry prompted by his spiritualist calling, or Rozitchner's elaboration on fear as a human engine emerging from his work with Maurice Merleau-Ponty. They all describe an intellectual journey that has little to do with an absorbing of European ideas and more with mapping out a dynamic intellectual field.

Throughout the book, the author pays attention to Oscar Masotta and his work on perceptions and the senses as a field of critical studies. Along with Rozitchner and David Viñas, Masotta explored the perceptual space as part of the *Grupo Contorno* and then as part of the avant-garde of the Instituto Di Tella. A psychoanalyst himself, he wore a hearing device that he would famously switch on and off whenever he deemed necessary or convenient, both publicly and private. Technology and agency allowed him to disconnect himself from hearing without losing the capacity of being able to hear. Regardless of his personal reasons for this, few people could have understood more clearly than him the mighty power of managing one's own senses, whether to enhance them or to cancel them. Masiello's book is a beautiful exploration of the long history of that power in Latin America.

#### Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

**How to cite this article:** Semán, E. 2019. Masiello, Francine R. (2018). *Senses of Democracy: Perception, Politics and Culture in Latin America*. Austin: University of Texas Press. 325 Pages. *Iberoamericana – Nordic Journal of Latin American and Caribbean Studies*, 48(1), pp. 146–147. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.16993/iberoamericana.478>

**Submitted:** 15 October 2019    **Accepted:** 18 October 2019    **Published:** 12 December 2019

**Copyright:** © 2019 The Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC-BY 4.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited. See <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.



*Iberoamericana – Nordic Journal of Latin American and Caribbean Studies* is a peer-reviewed open access journal published by Stockholm University Press.

**OPEN ACCESS**