
Aroma

The cultural history of smell

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London and New York

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Introduction

The meaning and power of smell

Smell is powerful. Odours affect us on a physical, psychological and social level. For the most part, however, we breathe in the aromas which surround us without being consciously aware of their importance to us. It is only when our faculty of smell is impaired for some reason that we begin to realize the essential role olfaction plays in our sense of well-being. One man who lost his sense of smell due to a head injury expressed this realization as follows:

when I lost [my sense of smell] – it was like being struck blind. Life lost a good deal of its savour – one doesn't realize how much 'savour' is smell. You *smell* people, you *smell* books, you *smell* the city, you *smell* the spring – maybe not consciously, but as a rich unconscious background to everything else. My whole world was suddenly radically poorer.¹

A survey conducted by Anthony Synnott at Montreal's Concordia University asked 270 students and professors to comment on the role of smell in their lives.² The question, 'What are your favourite smells?' elicited a wide range of responses, from the expected – 'the smell of babies', 'freshly mown lawn', 'roses', 'home-made bread' – to the unexpected: 'the odours of the Montreal Forum and the Olympic Stadium', 'body perspiration', 'dogs', 'gasoline'.

The question, 'Which smells do you dislike?' evoked a similar variety of responses: 'smelly men on the bus', 'pig farms and chicken coops', 'cigarette smoke', 'hospitals', 'raw meat'. Interestingly, while for many people commercial perfumes had fond associations, many listed them among the odours they disliked. Some stressed the physical discomfort perfumes gave them: 'instant headache and nausea', said one respondent of her

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reaction; 'perfumes make me sneeze', said another. Others complained that perfumes obscured natural odours and desensitized the senses in general.³

Smell can evoke strong emotional responses. A scent associated with a good experience can bring a rush of joy. A foul odour or one associated with a bad memory may make us grimace with disgust. Respondents to the survey noted that many of their olfactory likes and dislikes were based on emotional associations. Such associations can be powerful enough to make odours that would generally be labelled unpleasant agreeable, and those that would generally be considered fragrant disagreeable for particular individuals. The smell of gasoline, for example, usually thought to be unpleasant, was enjoyed by one respondent because '[it] reminds me of all the places I can go and have been in my car, i.e. freedom'. The smell of sports stadiums was a preferred scent of another because he associated it with his favourite sports. Likewise some seemingly innocuous or pleasant scents, such as carrots, cantaloupe and flowers, were strongly disliked by certain respondents because of the bad experiences associated with them:

When my father passed away two years ago, we put a certain kind of flower in front of his picture. That same kind of smell reminds me of the sadness, the helplessness, worst of all my mother's crying.

The perception of smell, thus, consists not only of the sensation of the odours themselves, but of the experiences and emotions associated with them.⁴

Odours are essential cues in social bonding. One respondent to the smell survey noted, 'I think there is no true *emotional* bonding without touching and smelling, burying one's nose into a loved one.' In fact, infants recognize the odours of their mothers soon after birth and adults can identify their children or spouses by scent. In one well-known test, women and men were able to distinguish t-shirts worn by their marriage partners – from among dozens of others – by smell alone.⁵ Most of these subjects would probably never have given much thought to odour as a cue for identifying family members before being involved in the test, but as the experiment revealed, even when not consciously considered, smells *register*.

In spite of its importance to our emotional and sensory lives, smell is probably the most undervalued sense in the modern

West.⁶ The reason often given for the low regard in which smell is held is that, in comparison with its importance among animals, the human sense of smell is feeble and atrophied. While it is true that the olfactory powers of humans are nothing like as fine as those possessed by certain animals, they are still remarkably acute. Our noses are able to recognize thousands of smells, and to perceive odours which are present only in infinitesimally small quantities.

Smell, however, is a highly elusive phenomenon. Odours, unlike colours, for instance, cannot be named – at least not in European languages. ‘It smells like ...’, we have to say when describing an odour, groping to express our olfactory experience by means of metaphors. Nor can odours be recorded: there is no effective way of either capturing scents or storing them over time. In the realm of olfaction, we must make do with descriptions and recollections.

Most of the research on smell undertaken to date has been of a physical scientific nature. Significant advances have been made in the understanding of the biological and chemical nature of olfaction, but many fundamental questions have yet to be answered: is smell one sense or two – one responding to odours proper and the other registering odourless pheromones (air-borne chemicals)? Is the nose the only part of the body affected by odours? How can smells be measured objectively? There is also a body of research in the psychology of smell. Various experiments have been done in an attempt to find out the effects of odours on the performance of tasks, on mood, on dieting, and so on.⁷

Smell is not simply a biological and psychological phenomenon, though. Smell is *cultural*, hence a social and historical phenomenon.⁸ Odours are invested with cultural values and employed by societies as a means of and model for defining and interacting with the world. The intimate, emotionally charged nature of the olfactory experience ensures that such value-coded odours are interiorized by the members of society in a deeply personal way. The study of the cultural history of smell is, therefore, in a very real sense, an investigation into the *essence* of human culture.

The devaluation of smell in the contemporary West is directly linked to the revaluation of the senses which took place during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The philosophers and scientists of that period decided that, while sight was the

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pre-eminent sense of reason and civilization, smell was the sense of madness and savagery. In the course of human evolution, it was argued by Darwin, Freud and others, the sense of smell had been left behind and that of sight had taken priority.⁹ Modern humans who emphasized the importance of smell were therefore judged to be either insufficiently evolved savages, degenerate proletariat, or else aberrations: perverts, lunatics or idiots.

This powerful denigration of smell by Europe's intellectual elite has had a lasting effect on the status of olfaction. Smell has been 'silenced' in modernity. Even on those rare occasions when it is the subject of popular discourse – for example, in certain contemporary works of fiction – it tends to be presented in terms of its stereotypical association with moral and mental degeneracy.

Patrick Süskind's enormously popular book *Perfume* is a case in point. The keen-scented protagonist of the book, Jean-Baptiste Grenouille, is both 'idiot' and 'pervert' – as well as an offspring of the 'degenerate' lower class. Grenouille exercises his abnormal passion for scent by murdering maidens in order to sniff up their sweet fragrance. In the end, through his de-scenting of maidens, Grenouille is able to invest himself with an odour so attractive that he is torn to pieces and eaten by a frenzied crowd.¹⁰

If *Perfume* makes for a 'good read', it is not only because of its unusual topic and engrossing story line, but also (and perhaps more fundamentally) because of its confirmation of the validity of many of our most cherished olfactory stereotypes – the maniac sniffing out his prey; the fragrant, hapless maiden; the dangerous savagery inherent in the sense of smell.

Why this cultural repression and denigration of smell? Generally speaking, those elements which are systematically suppressed by a culture are so regulated not only because they are considered inferior, but also because they are considered threatening to the social order. In what ways, one wonders, could a heightened olfactory consciousness be dangerous to the established social order in the West?

For one thing, in the premodern West, odours were thought of as intrinsic 'essences', revelatory of inner truth. Through smell, therefore, one interacted with *interiors*, rather than with surfaces, as one did through sight. Furthermore, odours cannot be readily contained, they escape and cross boundaries, blending different entities into olfactory wholes. Such a sensory model can be seen

to be opposed to our modern, linear worldview, with its emphasis on privacy, discrete divisions, and superficial interactions.

This is not to suggest that an olfactory-minded society would be an egalitarian utopia with all members harmoniously combining into a cultural perfume. As we shall see, olfactory codes can and often do serve to divide and oppress human beings, rather than unite them. The suggestion is rather that smell has been marginalized because it is felt to threaten the abstract and impersonal regime of modernity by virtue of its radical interiority, its boundary-transgressing propensities and its emotional potency. Contemporary society demands that we distance ourselves from the emotions, that social structures and divisions be seen to be objective or rational and not emotional, and that personal boundaries be respected. Thus, while olfactory codes continue to be allowed to reinforce social hierarchies at a semi- or subconscious level, sight, as the most detached sense (by Western standards), provides *the* model for modern bureaucratic society.¹¹

Academic studies of smell have tended to suffer from the same cultural disadvantages as smell itself. While the high status of sight in the West makes it possible for studies of vision and visuality, even when they are critical, to be taken seriously, any attempt to examine smell runs the risk of being brushed off as frivolous and irrelevant. None the less, the role of odour in culture is such a profound and fascinating subject that a number of scholars in different fields – including history, sociology and anthropology – have sought to explore it in their work. The present book brings together some of the contributions of these ‘pioneers’ in the cultural study of smell, as well as integrating relevant data from a wide range of other sources, with the purpose of providing a historical and cross-cultural account of beliefs and practices concerning smell. *Aroma*, indeed, offers the first comprehensive exploration of the *cultural* role of odours in different periods of Western history up to and including the present, and in a wide range of non-Western societies.

The first part of *Aroma*, ‘In Search of Lost Scents’, presents an ‘archaeology’ of smell in an attempt to recover – under the many layers of contemporary Western visualism – the olfactory world of the premodern West. Chapter 1, ‘The Aromas of Antiquity’, deals with the role of odour in classical times. Paul Fauré writes in *Parfums et aromates de l’antiquité* that our sense of smell is so underdeveloped in the modern West that we can

no more appreciate the importance of odour in the ancient world than the blind can describe a colourful scene.¹² The ancients made rich use indeed of aromatics, from the spiced pageantry of royal parades through the perfumed banquets of the wealthy to the incensed temples of the gods.

Just as important as the actual use of odour in the ancient world, however, were its metaphorical and literary uses. The range of classical olfactory expressions – in the form of quips, paeans, and condemnations – comes through vividly, even after so many centuries, in the writings of contemporary playwrights and poets. Consider, for example, the lyrical beauty of the following olfactory evocation of a kiss by the Roman epigrammatist Martial:

Breath of balm from phials of yesterday, of the last effluence that falls from a curving jet of saffron; perfume of apples ripening in their winter chest, of fields lavish with the leafage of spring . . . ¹³

These lovingly crafted lines on scent are an indication of the intimate meaning odours had for the ancients.

The second chapter, 'Following the Scent: From the Middle Ages to Modernity', picks up the scent trail of the West after the fall of the Roman Empire. The combined influences of Christian asceticism and barbarian austerity led to a decline in the use of perfumes after the collapse of Rome. With the Crusades, however, the peoples of the West were once again brought into contact on a large scale with the spices and perfumes of the East which had so entranced the Greeks and Romans. Aromatics were an essential part of the good life of medieval to Enlightenment Europe. So much so that court etiquette in seventeenth-century Versailles, for example, demanded that a different scent be worn each day of the week.

At the same time, fundamental spiritual and curative powers were attributed to scent by Christendom. These special powers of smell can be seen in such contemporary concepts as 'the odour of sanctity' and in the role played by aromatics during periods of plague, when the battle against disease must often have appeared to be a war waged between fragrant and foul scents. By the nineteenth century, however, following what Alain Corbin has called the 'olfactory revolution',¹⁴ fragrance had moved out of the realms of religion and medicine into those of sentiment and

sensuality. This move is brought out in the works of many writers of that period, such as Baudelaire and, later, Proust, who used olfactory symbolism in their writings to create an evocative atmosphere. The final section of Chapter 2 examines the attitudes of nineteenth-century thinkers – from Darwin to Freud – towards odour and explores their influence on the olfactory norms of the modern West.

Part II, entitled 'Explorations in Olfactory Difference', compares the role of smell in various non-Western cultures. It opens with 'Universes of Odour'. This chapter deals with how smell is used to structure and classify different aspects of the world, from time and space to gender and selfhood. Examples are drawn from the 'osmologies', or olfactory classification systems, of cultures ranging from the Bororo of Brazil to the Dassanetch of Ethiopia. The chapter begins with an account of the 'calendar of scents' used by the aboriginal inhabitants of the Andaman Islands to reckon time, and moves on to examine the 'smellscapes' of various peoples of the rainforest. Other topics considered include the smell vocabularies of non-Western cultures and the use of olfactory codes as models for social organization. The chapter concludes with a discussion of how smell symbolism is linked to other sensory symbolic systems in certain cultures.

Aromatics are employed across cultures for a variety of purposes, including seduction, healing, hunting and communication with the spirits. Chapter 4 offers a comparison and analysis of some of the diverse 'rites of smell' which have been elaborated around these activities. Among the Umeda of New Guinea, for example, a hunter sleeps with a bundle of herbs tucked under his pillow, the aroma of which is supposed to inspire dreams of the chase. The next day he has only to act out his scent-inspired dream to enjoy a successful hunt. The Warao of Venezuela, who have developed a complex system of aromatherapy, enlist powerful herbal scents to combat the evil odours of disease. The Amazonian Desana use scents, along with other sensory stimuli, to help direct hallucinogenic visions. These and other ritual uses of scent translate the olfactory classification systems discussed in the previous chapter into practice.

The final part of the book is called 'Odour, Power and Society' and deals with the olfactory traits of the modern West. Through having developed an understanding of the social history of smell in the West and an appreciation of its cultural elaboration in non-

Western societies in the two previous parts, we are better able to penetrate the olfactory symbol systems of the contemporary West in this concluding section.

Chapter 5 is concerned with documenting 'the politics of smell'. The interrelationship between the olfactory and the political was highlighted by George Orwell in the early twentieth century when he proclaimed that the 'real secret' of class distinctions in the West could be summed up in 'four frightful words . . . *The lower classes smell* . . . No feeling of like or dislike is quite so fundamental as a *physical* feeling.' Orwell went on to assert that race hatred, religious hatred, differences of education, of temperament, can all be overcome, 'but physical repulsion cannot', whence the persistence of class distinctions.¹⁵

Orwell's point is striking, but while the feeling of physical repulsion to which he alludes appears fundamental, it is important to understand that its basis remains social rather than physical, since class divisions are given in society, not in nature. As olfactory preferences and aversions tend to take root deep in the human psyche, evoking or manipulating odour values is a common and effective means of generating and maintaining social hierarchies. This may explain why smell is enlisted not only to create and enforce class boundaries, but also ethnic and gender boundaries. Such olfactory social codes often pass unnoticed by us, for they tend to function below the surface of conscious thought. Our study of the politics of smell in modernity brings the interrelations of odour, power and society very much to the fore, however, by examining such topics as the 'scent-typing' of women, the olfactory symbolism of the Nazi concentration camp and the regulation of the odours of public space.

Chapter 6, 'The Aroma of the Commodity: The Commercialization of Smell', explores the production and regulation of odours in today's consumer culture. Olfactory management takes place on numerous levels: the body, the home, the workplace and the marketplace. At the level of the body, for instance, deodorants suppress unwanted odours while perfumes and colognes allow for the creation of an ideal olfactory image. At the level of the workplace, the concern is with how to develop an attractive olfactory atmosphere that will stimulate and refresh workers, as opposed to the stale air that is usually found in the enclosed modern office building. In the marketplace, businesses are increasingly concerned not only with new ways of marketing

perfumes, such as home fragrance products and aromatherapy, but with the addition of synthetic fragrances to a variety of products, from processed foods to house paints. The chapter ends with a discussion of how odour, as it is increasingly simulated by fragrance engineers and commercialized by marketers, is passing from the realm of modernity to that of postmodernity.

When considered as a whole, the three parts of *Aroma* offer intriguing juxtapositions of olfactory beliefs and practices from different cultures and eras. In classical Greek cosmology, for example, an odour of spices was associated with the sun. The present-day Desana of Colombia attribute a honey-like sweetness to the sun. Among the Batek Negrito of Malaysia, however, the sun is thought to emit pathogenic foul odours. In modern Western cosmology, of course, the sun is basically a visual entity, with no olfactory identity.

At times such different beliefs and customs are seen to overlap as cultures interact with each other. Thus, while in Chapters 3 and 4 we learn of the traditional olfactory concepts and rituals of peoples of the Amazon, in Chapter 6 we read of Amazonian 'Avon ladies' who tour the isolated towns and villages of the Amazon trying to sell or barter such popular Avon products as 'Crystal Splash' cologne and 'Bart Simpson' deodorant. It is important to keep in mind, indeed, that the olfactory ethos of the modern West is by no means confined to the 'developed' countries of the First World, but is carrying its message across cultures on the wagon of consumer capitalism.

As an essay on the history, anthropology and sociology of odour, *Aroma* is necessarily restricted in the amount of space that can be devoted to any one topic. Our objective has been to be comprehensive rather than exhaustive. We hope that the present work will stimulate further research into the cultural construction of smell and, indeed, of all of the senses.

It might be argued that by focusing on smell to the exclusion of the other senses we have been guilty of sensory bias, and that the role of smell in culture can only be understood within a multisensory context. However, historians, anthropologists and sociologists have long excluded odour from their accounts and concentrated on the visual and the auditory, without being accused of any sensory biases. The argument must, therefore, be turned around. Our singling out of scent for attention serves to redress this long-standing imbalance, for we in the West tend

to be so 'odour-blind' that unless smell is placed right under our noses, so to speak, it usually gets lost in the shuffle. By demonstrating the importance of odour and olfactory codes in both Western and non-Western societies, we wish to bring smell out of the Western scholarly and cultural unconscious into the open air of social and intellectual discourse. It is only when a form of sensory equilibrium has been recovered, that we may begin to understand how the senses interact with each other as models of perception and paradigms of culture.

Notes

Introduction

- 1 O. Sacks, *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat*, London, Duckworth, 1987, p. 159.
- 2 A. Synnott, 'Roses, Coffee, and Lovers: The Meanings of Smell', unpublished manuscript, 1993.
- 3 This last complaint was expressed in verse by E. B. White in his poem 'To a Perfumed Lady at a Concert':

Madam reeking of the rose,
Red of hair and pearl of earring,
I came not to try my nose,
I was there to try my hearing.
Lost on me the whole darn concert.

E. B. White, *The Fox of Peapack and Other Poems*, New York, Harper & Brothers, 1938, p. 63.

- 4 See T. Engen, *Odor Sensation and Memory*, New York, Praeger, 1991, p. xii. On private codes of olfactory meaning see U. Almagor, 'Odors and Private Language: Observations on the Phenomenology of Scent', *Human Studies*, 1990, vol. 13, pp. 253-74.
- 5 See B. Schaal and R. Porter, '“Microsmatic Humans” Revisited: The Generation and Perception of Chemical Signals', *Advances in the Study of Behavior*, 1991, vol. 20, pp. 135-9; R. Doty, 'Olfactory Communication in Humans', *Chemical Senses*, 1981, vol. 6, no. 4, pp. 351-76.
- 6 For instance, respondents to the Concordia smell survey ranked smell as the sense which was least important to them, making comments such as 'Makes no great difference whether I can smell things or not,' and 'I am not very dependent on this sense, and I don't smell things very well.' After having their olfactory consciousness raised by the survey some respondents changed their minds about the importance of smell. One wrote, for example: 'Ironically, after completing this questionnaire I realize how important smell is to one's life.'

- 7 See E. C. Carterette and M. P. Friedman (eds), *Handbook of Perception*, vol. 6A: *Tasting and Smelling*, New York, Academic Press, 1978; S. van Toller and G. Dodd (eds), *Perfumery: The Psychology and Biology of Fragrance*, London, Chapman & Hall, 1988.
- 8 The way in which olfaction is treated as a biological and psychological phenomenon in the modern West is itself a cultural phenomenon.
- 9 For a recent attempt to rationalize the 'decline of smell' among humans in evolutionary terms see D. M. Stoddart, *The Scented Ape*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1990.
- 10 P. Süskind, *Perfume: The Story of a Murderer*, J. Woods (trans.), New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 1986.
- 11 See D. Howes and M. Lalonde, 'The History of Sensibilities: Of the Standard of Taste in Mid-Eighteenth Century England and the Circulation of Smells in Post-Revolutionary France', *Dialectical Anthropology*, 1992, vol. 16, pp. 125-35.
- 12 P. Fauré, *Parfums et aromates de l'antiquité*, Paris, Fayard, 1987, p. 13.
- 13 Martial, *Epigrams*, W. Kerr (trans.), Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 1961, vol. 2, bk. 11: 8, p. 245.
- 14 A. Corbin, *The Foul and the Fragrant: Odor and the French Social Imagination*, M. Kochan, R. Porter and C. Prendergast (trans.), Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 1986.
- 15 G. Orwell, *The Road to Wigan Pier*, London, Victor Gollancz, 1937, pp. 159-60; emphasis in original.

1 The aromas of antiquity

- 1 Pliny, *Natural History*, H. Rackham (trans.), London, William Heinemann, 1960, vol. 4, bk. 13, p. 99. As this chapter is intended for a general readership, rather than classicists, all references to classical sources are from English translations.
- 2 On this see C. Classen, *Worlds of Sense: Exploring the Senses in History and Across Cultures*, London, Routledge, 1993, pp. 15-36.
- 3 Athenaeus, *The Deipnosophists or Banquet of the Learned*, C. D. Yonge (trans.), London, Henry G. Bohn, 1854, vol. 3, bk. 15, p. 1090.
- 4 *Ibid.*, bk. 12, pp. 886-7.
- 5 Pliny, *Natural History*, vol. 6, bk. 21, p. 187.
- 6 *Ibid.*, vol. 3, bk. 11, p. 175.
- 7 *Ibid.*, vol. 5, bk. 17, pp. 27-9.
- 8 J. I. Miller, *The Spice Trade of the Roman Empire*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1969; N. Groom, *Frankincense and Myrrh: A Study of the Arabian Incense Trade*, London, Longman, 1981.
- 9 See P. Fauré, *Parfums et aromates de l'antiquité*, Paris, Fayard, 1987.
- 10 J. G. Griffiths (ed.), *Plutarch's 'De Iside et Osiride'*, Cardiff, University of Wales Press, 1970, ch. 80, p. 247.
- 11 Pliny, *Natural History*, vol. 4, bk. 13, pp. 101-9.
- 12 *Ibid.*, p. 101.
- 13 Athenaeus, *Deipnosophists*, vol. 3, bk. 15, p. 1102.

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