

Some olfactory-writerly theoretical conceptualizations

“*Perfume, Travel, and Memory: Scented Trails of Female Self-Realization.*” *Theoretical underpinnings*

I want to address three themes here: the first is the one promised in the title, the establishment of a generic and historical connection between olfaction, travel, and memory; the second is the broadening of this connection and its extension from the real world into the Internet, i.e., a shift into a different medium; and the third deals with theoretical aspects of an olfactory aesthetics that I will frame through Jean-François Lyotard’s *Libidinal Economy*, Michel Serre’s *Les cinq senses*, and James Hillman’s *The Soul’s Code*. I’m developing, and drawing on, these three themes specifically in support of what I see as “a feminine turn” in olfactory narrating.

I have been thinking and writing about olfaction and literature for a while now, and the interdisciplinarity of that inquiry is what has always fascinated me: the diversity of the sensory material itself (in principle, this can be any object, any odor); the growing knowledge about the mechanisms and processes of perception and cognition (the physiology, the neurology, the chemistry of perception); the social and historical contexts of smells and smelling (anthropology, history, geography, cultural studies); and, of course the textual representations (not all of which are literary) and the linguistic and rhetorical tools deployed in the effort.

With regard to literature and realist(ic) narrative, broadly speaking, I have found that there is a key bifurcation between smells appearing as *descriptive* elements in texts; and smell used as a *narrative* engine, driving the plot. Classic examples of this type are Roald Dahl’s raunchy short story *Bitch* (1974); Patrick Süskind’s popular bestseller *Perfume* (1985); and, more subtly and finely tuned, Italo Calvino’s sketch, *The Name, the Nose* (1986).

Historical precursors were perfumistic, ethnographic accounts, focused on raw materials and manufacturing processes that often had a geographical and anthropological bent, such as Eugene Rimmel’s *The Book of Perfumes* (1865) or Septimus Piesse’s *The Art of Perfumery and Methods of Obtaining the Odors of Plants* (1875). In this regard they prefigure the travelogue element found in modern women olfactory writers.

In contrast, the modern stories by male narrators often foreground hedonism and the erotic and invoke a purported ancient evolutionary pattern of the male pursuing the female along olfactory traces for procreative purposes. In other words, it’s about sex; and Sigmund Freud, although speculatively, theorized this aspect in a footnote to *Civilization and its Discontents* that elucidates the rise of vision over smell as humans’ lead modality. The underlying plot is a story of pursuit: attraction, chase, fulfillment – and death. In other words: a fundamental, classic narrative pattern.

But as with all classical, traditional narratives, there arrives a moment when they come under fire. And this heteronormative tale of male pursuit and female subjugation is no exception. It’s certainly not a story in tune with the sensibilities of our age; and as it turns out, wrestling over the narrative of smell has become just another of the many battlefields between the sexes over interpretive authority, agency, and self-determination. My critical approach is based on what I see as a trend in recent years: women developing their own olfactory narratives where they have agency and can shape their interest in perfumery and scent into their own story. As it happens, this is *also* a story of a pursuit, a search for one’s own personal, individual scent, a perfume that becomes the hallmark of personal identity. As such, the narrative works as a form of (self) *expression* instead of making an olfactory *impression* on others, mostly males. For the time being I call this emerging female narrative *perfumoirlogue*, an often autobiographical account by a female narrator who sets out on a journey to have a personal fragrance made whose

ingredients have to do with her own life and are tied to specific geographies. The portmanteau term thus denominates writings that blend the genres of the memoir and travelogue with writing about perfumery and olfactory perception in a way that serves a specific emancipatory *Erkenntnisinteresse* that is different from the male model.

This narrative, however, often a genre mix between literary, autobiographical, and non-fictional elements, leaning toward popular culture rather than highbrow is, as it turns out, only a stepping-stone toward a more avant-garde form of (female) olfactory-textual integration: blogging in the medium of the Internet. With its dialogic discursive structure, personal, perfume-related blogging is shifting the constellation of the *perfumoirlogue* away from individual, self-centered, and self-seeking travel toward a broader, multi-voiced conceptual discussion of perfumery and female self-definition. Authors self-identify as writers, bloggers, influencers, perfumers, etc.

The emergence of this perfume/text-related phenomenon and the observable discursive shifts of (female) olfactory narration are occurring in the broader context of growing interest in things sensory at a time when our world is becoming ever more technologically shaped and virtually approached and mediated; olfactory narrative is part of what David Howes has labeled (from an anthropological-historical angle) “the sensory turn.”¹ It is not without irony that in this increasingly virtual, disembodied, and vision-centric space, the sense of smell, long the poor relative among the senses in philosophical aesthetics and, if acknowledged at all, an indicator of lagging cultural standards in the grand narrative of the civilizational project of the enlightenment – that this very sense has gained increasing discursive space and material presence. It is true that its material presence is longstanding in the art, craft, and industry of perfumery, but is now also gaining a foothold in museums, exhibits, a presence at events and in studios, workshops, seminars, etc. For the first time in Western society, there is now high-cultural interest in the histories and practices of scent and in teaching and learning about smells and our perception of them, an engagement never afforded this sensory mode before.² The necessarily trans-corporeal mode of perception (breathing, inhalation) gives it its material *frisson* that has helped to interject it into many contemporary cultural and scholarly realms from urban exploration to issues of race relations and environmental justice. Conceptually, the very trans-corporeality raises the question of olfaction’s status as an object of aesthetic theorizing. I will return to this point.

While the Internet provides very much a visual environment, it has also become the central venue for the telling of the new, female-focused olfactory narrative of deliberate, non-essentialist, aesthetic scent choices and definitional scent self-ascriptions – the updated version

¹ David Howes, “The Expanding Field of Sensory Studies.” Online at <http://www.sensorystudies.org/sensorial-investigations/the-expanding-field-of-sensory-studies/> (accessed 01-03-2020).

² Jim Drobnik, ed., *The Smell Culture Reader* (NY, Oxford: Berg, 2006) is a seminal compilation of various new manifestations of scent. The historical lack of engagement with the olfactory modality has been the central obstacle to its achieving aesthetic, philosophical, institutional, socio-cultural, and educational recognition in Western society. We are really only beginning to fill in the lacunae for the sense of smell in the social space that Karl Marx envisioned more than a century and a half ago, when he wrote that “[t]he forming of the five senses is a labor of the entire history of the world down to the present.” Alyssa Harad agrees and thinks that the present moment reflects “where we are: at the beginning.” <https://alyssaharad.com/2012/11/perfume-is-not-an-object-a-few-thoughts-about-perfume-and-art/> (accessed 01-03-2020).

of the *perfumoirlogue*, in the new medium of the blog. It has been a dialectical development from the start.

For a moment in the 1990s, having outgrown its military origins and increasingly available to individuals, the Internet offered the possibility of egalitarian ways of personal interaction in a space where defining physical categorizations, among them sexual identity, seemed to fall away. That moment, however, was soon lost, the Internet commercialized. Personal information was sought out (again) for advertisement and corporate profit making, and listing age, sex, location, etc. became required fields in many online forms as a condition for joining discussions. Identities were back in force! Nevertheless, there remains the potential for “significant slippage ... between gender and sex – between the body and the performance of identities,”³ as danah boyd phrased it in 2001. The potential for sexual non-disclosure in the new medium was also theorized by Jodi O’Brien who notes that such performance was essentially linguistic: “(Re)embodying the self in a disembodied realm is an exercise in textual production.”⁴

This is one field where the world of perfumery and the Internet meet: in the language space between sex and gender, the territory of “having bodies, crafting selves,” in boyd’s words (6), where the question: “Who shall I be today”? can be answered in perfumery: in perfumery you *can* be someone other than yourself! Unisex perfumes, for one, fit the fluid space of “slippage” between sex and gender. This is also the territory where women finally have become able to liberate themselves from the essentialist, sexual older odor narrative, discussed above. It is the field where textual (self) production, the invisibility of scent, the avoidance of images, and free imagination intersect in ways that map the experience of scent onto online presences. Gender is a cognitive-emotive category; and there was hope that if one could be “floating free of corporeal experience, the mind [would] generate new forms for rendering self and other and for organizing interpersonal communication.” But gender is also an *evaluative* category for self and other, resistant to change. O’Brien is skeptical that we really can “separate gender as a social accomplishment from gender as the manifestation of embodied sex” (78).

Scent, invisible and liminal between essence and sign, finds the Internet a homologous space that allows for the olfactory performance of gender as both chosen identity and social accomplishment, communicated as textual production. Alyssa Harad points in this direction in a blog entry from 2012 by suggesting that perception in perfumery should not be seen as centered around *objects* (liquids in bottles), but as a *process*.⁵ The act of smelling a perfume is not the inquiry into a thing and its qualities, but is an experiential process that happens in clear temporal phases and in tune with the classical tri-level construction and unfolding of perfumes themselves: the top notes, the heart notes, the base notes – with *sillage*, the sensuous-material as well as imaginative-emotional lingering as an additional important moment in the process of unfolding a perfume in space and time and around a personality. For Harad, “Perfume ... is a site-specific performance or narrative”; and as the site of this performance traditionally is a woman’s skin, she adds, “[p]erfume’s history is also, to this extent, women’s history.”

³ danah boyd, “Sexing the Internet: Reflections on the Role of Identification in Online Communities,” 2000, p.5. online <http://www.danah.org/papers/SexingTheInternet.conference.pdf>

⁴ Jodi O’Brien, “Writing in the body: gender (re)production in online interaction” in: *Communities in Cyberspace*, ed. Marc A. Smith and Peter Kollock (NY: Routledge, 1999), p. 76-104, here p. 87 (quoted in danah boyd).

⁵ Alyssa Harad, <<https://alyssaharad.com/2012/11/perfume-is-not-an-object-a-few-thoughts-about-perfume-and-art/>> (accessed 01-03-2020).

Let me turn to the third area beyond the proposed re-framing of olfactory perception as narrative, blog, and as feminine or feminist history: it is the space where the sense's materialism and semiotics meet –aesthetic theory. The crux here is the dualist nature of olfactory perception as a chemical sense. If we privilege the modality's *essentialism*, that is, the fact that in the act of perception the object interacts materially with the perceiving subject and is apt to trigger relatively predictable percepts, then we are heading in the direction of positing smell universals and a taxonomy of odors of considerable robustness. Identical interaction at the molecular level will lead to at least similar perceptual results or, more precisely, cognitive assessments, across a broad spectrum of individuals. Accordingly, key conceptual demarcations such as between good/bad or pleasant/unpleasant, should be (relatively) consistent. Just *how* universal across cultures is open (with the linguistic encoding of the olfactory modality playing a crucial role), while the fact that there exists, beyond individual perception, a history of broad cultural formation of the senses, is not. Marx is right when he notes that the formation of sensory perception has been the work of culture and long time frames.⁶ The essentialist, strictly biochemical model, however, omits the idiosyncratic encoding that olfactory perception exhibits in each individual, the well-known “Proust-effect” of highly specific and individual memory triggering and remembering.

If we aim, however, for a classification of smells in a semiotic system, then we are forced to abstract olfactory input from its source, severing a predictable biological stimulus-response pattern, and moving to an arbitrary and conventional relation between signifiers and signifieds. Any odor can then, in principle, be made to mean anything. Everyday experience tells us that this is likely not the case. The recent fad of “skankiness” in artisanal perfumery is a deliberate aesthetic play on this duality. But semiotic arbitrariness is, with a clear privileging of youthfulness, sexiness, and mystery, the aspirational premise of perfumery – it always has been.

The semiotic then is the much more interesting model than the essentialist and a *sine qua non* for any *aesthetics* of olfaction. The step that needs clarification in order to produce a fuller understanding of how the sense of smell has become an internet-capable means of (female) self-representation is in the plausible linking of the essential to the conceptual as given in language and imagery.⁷ Jean-François Lyotard's “energetic dispositive,” that is the transformative space of a Moebian loop, helps elucidate this link as a negotiation between materialism and semiotics.

Beyond the classical phenomenological concepts of Merleau-Ponty there are the radical suggestions in Jean-François Lyotard's *Libidinal Economy* that I want to draw on for an olfactory aesthetics. The book draws attention to something crucial in the trans-medial and trans-corporeal experience of perfume. Lyotard's appropriation of the Moebian loop as both metaphor and concept manages to plausibly connect the performative, the material, and the semiotic dimensions of the process. He puts forward a model of the transition from life to text that enlightens the virulent quality that sensory experience, olfactory in particular, deploys within and *qua* text. Lyotard suggests that this transition is less an encoding of one in the terms and concepts of the other, that is, less a semiotic system, than, *beyond* semiotics, a *mingling* of both, where the

⁶ “Die Bildung der fünf Sinne ist eine Arbeit der ganzen bisherigen Weltgeschichte.“ Karl Marx, „Oekonomisch-philosophische Manuskripte,“ 1844. Online <http://www.mlwerke.de/me/me40/me40_533.htm> p. 542-43, (accessed 01-03-2020).

⁷ The olfactory association in the visual image and its representational force needs to be pursued elsewhere. Central thinkers here are Gaston Bachelard, *Air and dreams* (1943), trans. E. C., Farrell (Dallas, TX: The Dallas Institute Publications, 1994); and James Hillman, *The Soul's Code: In Search of Character and Calling* (NY: Random House 1996).

experience as *cognition* co-emerges with and is indistinguishable from, its linguistic formulation. As there is no “notable difference between a libidinal formation and a discursive formation, insofar as they are both formations, *Gestaltungen*,” Lyotard offers a model for the interpenetration of smell and text, where *senses* and *sense* (meaning) are the same thing, the two sides of a Moebius strip that are actually *one*.⁸ The sense experience carries over into the text, the text carries back into (remembered or imagined) experience and emotions. In realist literary usage of the sense of smell, in biographical, autobiographical, and fictional accounts, the triangulation between experience, memory, and present context, all as *language* events, forms the central mechanism of both encoding and decoding, of creating meaning and communicating it. This is no different for other (sensory) experience, of course, but for odors, with their tenuous primary linguistic encoding (Dan Sperber, *Rethinking symbolism*, 1974), there is little lexical referentiality; instead, there is predominantly memory and imaginary *inferentiality*. Lyotard elaborates on the function of his Moebian band as a space of “[t]heatricality and representation” that result from a certain “labour on the labyrinthine and Moebian band . . . , the effect of which is a box closed upon itself, filtering impulses and allowing only those to appear on the stage which come from what will come to be known as the exterior, satisfying the conditions of interiority. The representative chamber is an energetic *dispositif*” (3), a force field that I am suggesting here as olfactory-aesthetic space. It is the space of everyday language, the theatrical forum in which the dual-one-sided Moebius band loops around, with the sensory impression and the molecular formula (of an odor, notably a perfume) interpenetrating each other, finding each other in the terminology of everyday olfactory terminology and thereby creating imaginative (theatrical) free play that acts out on stage the exteriority of associations, memories, imaginations, etc. This Lyotardian notion can also be made to incorporate Harad’s “performance” of perfume on skin; and it squares well with Michel Serres’s *Les cinq senses*, explicitly conceived as a “philosophy of mingled bodies,” with skin a Moebian ambilateral space, hanging “from the wall as if it were a flayed man.”⁹ Personal, identity, scent then, both perfume and body odor, appears as a kind of “skin at a distance,” an atmosphere of materiality, language, sensuousness, and imagination.

In conclusion I want to re-emphasize the structural analogy of perfume, the internet, and narrative: all three are diffusing, expanding, and nearly immaterial textures – but not completely so; there is materiality and there are indisputable material facts about each; all offer a space for self-creation, self-definition, and self-representation; room for imagination, fantasy, and desire. What this presentation leaves out is the visual dimension of the olfactory modality and the function of (mental) images in olfactory memory and recall processes. The *parfumoirlogue* narrative, as does the *perfumery blog*, derives a large part of its attraction, both for readers and narrators/authors precisely from the image and imaginative free play and descriptive possibilities associated with the sense of smell. An odor is never unattached; it is an attribute of something else, (an environment, a memory, a person); it is relational – as is the Internet, the blog. Projection and imagination, therefore, longing, desire, and their evanescent fulfillment; self-fashioning and self-empowerment in a new, near-immaterial realm – these are salient points of the world of scent and text and of the universe of scent in texts.

⁸ Jean-François Lyotard, *Libidinal Economy*; transl. by Iain Hamilton Grant (French 1974; Bloomington and Indianapolis: IUP, 1993), 25.

⁹ Michel Serres, *Les cinq sens* (Paris: Grasset, 1985). Michel Serres, *The Five Senses: A Philosophy of Mingled Bodies*, trans. Margaret Sankey and Peter Cowley; introd. Steven Connor (London & New York: Continuum, 2009), here p. 60.