

Smell

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Smell and sensory hierarchies

Among all of the senses, smell has been presented as occupying an ambivalent position, regarded as a brute sense, or as a sense modality that is linked to animality. Such pronouncements may be found in the works of figures including Plato, Aristotle, Immanuel Kant, Georg W. F. Hegel, Karl Marx, and others. In his theory of perception, for example, Aristotle situated smell in an intermediate position between contact and distance senses. He also made a connection between odor and taste, where the former is a distance sense and the latter is a contact sense. Smell, for Aristotle (and for Kant), is a lower and coarse sense and hence the most dispensable. It is situated in opposition to the senses of sight and hearing, which Aristotle associated with the aesthetic pleasures of humanity. Similar olfactive denigration is found in Marx's (1954) discussion on labor conditions and capitalist structures. He positioned smell alongside taste and touch as associated with animality, in opposition to sight and hearing, which in his interpretation denoted civility. For Marx, the only sense that featured in his discussion was sight, as he identified a collocation with reason and science. His later works, however, reflected an absence of the senses as he did not see their intellectual value, rendering them incongruous with the pursuit of scientific discourses and debates (see Howes 2003). Émile Durkheim, who was considerably less explicit about the senses in his work, formulated a distinction between what he termed "muscular sense" and "vital sense" and placed smell and taste at the bottom of his sensory hierarchy; for him, they were meager senses bearing little potential for appreciation or aesthetics (Gross and Jones 2004).

Departing from these early debates that devalued smell and consigned it a low status within the context of Western social thought and culture, the olfactive sense has been decisively interpreted in the wider social–scientific literature as an intermediary that sheds light upon a wide-ranging spectrum of sociality. Aspects of this sociality include personhood and self-presentation, social memory-making, group membership, kinship, cosmology, morality, ethics, ethnicity, and religion, among numerous other spheres of social life and social relations. In an important precursor work of anthropological studies attending to senses and the body, Bronisław Malinowski (1929) focused on the role of genital odors among Trobriand Islanders in the context of sexual interaction and excitement, and also noted that the most extreme or repulsive olfactory register was that of excrement as a source of olfactive pollution in relation to childcare giving and group membership. Claude Lévi-Strauss documented his smell experiences in Brazil in *Tristes tropiques* (1973), noting the offensive odors of particular

The International Encyclopedia of Anthropology. Edited by Hilary Callan.

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DOI: 10.1002/9781118924396.wbiea1752

foods as well as of the ship that he was traveling on, and later also highlighted the pertinence of smell and other senses in his *The Raw and the Cooked* (1983). Smell has since been analyzed in terms of its sociocultural significance across various spheres of social life in both industrial and nonindustrial societies. Such multifarious fields of analysis therefore bring to light the sociocultural salience and significance of olfaction in everyday-life encounters and contexts. Where scholars used to deliberate on the hegemony of vision and where other senses are relegated to a position of lesser importance in the Western world, such visualist bias and exaltation in the hierarchy of the sensorium has also been critically examined. The relevance of other senses, such as smell, was examined in an attempt to draw forth olfactocentrism (Drobnick 2006) and to depart from privileging vision and the sense of sight. Societies are not only and not always sight oriented. Other works have also engaged with intersensory practices, elucidating how the senses do not operate as stand-alone modalities. All of these theories of course need to be contextually determined, as different cultures manifest different interpretations of the senses in cosmology and practice. Smell cultures across the globe—including those of groups in Amazonia, the Bay of Bengal, Brazil, Ethiopia, France, India, Malaysia, Mexico, New Guinea, Niger, the Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand, just to name a few—have been systematically (yet also unevenly) investigated since the closing decades of the twentieth century. These various olfactive endeavors indicate that there is no universal positioning or unitary phenomenology of olfaction, given different olfactive ontologies and their situated meaningfulness evidenced through these varying smell cultures.

An important work on olfaction and cultural perception is Gale Peter Largey and David Rodney Watson's "The Sociology of Odors" (1972). In this seminal text, the authors discuss through secondary data analysis the social relevance of scents and how olfaction influences social encounters that cut across the identity categories of race, class, and gender dynamics. Largey and Watson also deliberate on the various ways in which smell mediates social distance or proximity, in such contexts of olfactive violations including a lack of proper hygiene, flatulence, and bodily odors. They posit that moral identities are conferred upon individuals or groups in the undesirable context of malodors being present. Such a proposition lead them to suggest that it is paramount to therefore present oneself vis-à-vis a "socially acceptable olfactory identity" (Largey and Watson 1972, 1027). Since their work was published, there has been a burgeoning sensory-olfactory literature that ruminates on the social salience of smell across aspects of social and everyday life. The Canadian trio of anthropologists Constance Classen, David Howes, and Anthony Synnott also paved the social-scientific path not only for olfaction but also for the senses in general in their various anthropological and historical studies on sensoria, addressing a whole host of historical environments and presenting an array of cross-cultural comparisons in their coauthored work on *Aroma: The Cultural History of Smell* (1994) and others. Drawing from their research and that of others, smell is regarded as a cultural entity contingent on the sense-script of a particular culture in question, thereby serving as a medium of perception and as an expression of values and practices in varying degrees. This relates to what David Howes (2005, 11) has termed as "sensory models," which are context dependent and predicated upon culture-specific sensory epistemologies.

In one of his earlier works, Howes (2003) also notes that cultures differ in their identification of the number of categories or classes of smell, with the Weyéwa of Sumba employing three, the Japanese counting two, and the Serer Ndut of Senegal recognizing five odor categories. The field of sensory studies, and that of olfaction in particular, is thus no longer neglected and devalued and now undertakes manifold investigations, including explorations of sense hierarchies that do not consider sight to be dominant, explorations of how views on the numbers of each sense modality differ and what these differences mean in terms of everyday practice and social significance, and explorations of how the sense of smell works alongside other senses that thereby illuminate social distinctions, values, and ethics. One can therefore conclude that, apart from the value of studying olfactocentrism, the smell sense has been fruitfully studied in cultures and societies across a range of temporalities.

Olfactory terminology and theoretical approaches

Olfactory terminology may differ from one culture to the next, reflecting contrasting olfactive environments, terms, and categories that are contingent on context. Apart from the usual dichotomous “scent” and “stench,” for instance, Bettina Beer (2014) identifies at least 259 distinct odor lexica among the Boholanos of the Philippines. In her work, she demonstrates the social salience of smell—its presence, absence, and intensity—which has to do with individual identities and presentations that thread across race, gender, and class dimensions. Olfactory parlance and smell categories are therefore not only about enumerating varying nuances of odors. Olfactory vocabularies as deployed in everyday interaction also reflect ethnographic distinctions that illuminate gender and class differences, social control, hierarchy, conflict, and differentiated experiences of space and place. Language and olfaction therefore share a lexical relationship that is more prescriptive than descriptive in terms of articulating sociocultural signification as well as providing evaluative referents and symbolic clues regarding the workings and social order of a culture or society, for example by marking social position and status through olfactive sensibilities. These in concert demonstrate how social actors structure experience through smells as carriers of meaning. In other words, smell, not unlike the other senses, serves as an important conduit of knowing and as a discursive resource that has significant sociocultural import.

One theoretical approach toward interpreting olfactive symbolism across different smell cultures is that of structuralism, or polemic constructions, though these should and are certainly not received as unproblematic in the wider sensory literature in terms of categorical meaning attribution in context. Binaries or polemics mark the social significance of scent in traversing various aspects of social life, throwing light upon boundaries or spheres in the Lévi-Straussian approach (e.g., clean/dirty, good/evil, self/others, and fragrant/foul). Structuralist–olfactive categories make clear dichotomous distinctions in terms of social positioning and experience. For example, in rites of passage (which are one of the mainstays of many cultures), the enactment or transition from childhood to adulthood has to do with odorification, including the use of incense and smoke inhalation, among other olfactive ritual practices. Other opposing odor

categories may be located in the realm of religion, where scents or fragrances indicate the presence of gods and connote sanctity and where bad smells, in contrast, signal associations with the devil and with moral corruption. Such odoriferous–religious bifurcations have been identified through studies engaging with various religions (including Christianity, Hinduism, and Islam) and have also been referred to in studies of discourses revolving around the supernatural. Smell polemics furthermore shed light on gender divisions and hierarchy, where men are assumed to be bland smelling and women assumed to be strong smelling. Such gender–scent distinctions thereby manifest the culture/nature dichotomy, rendering women as problematic and thus othered from and by their male counterparts. In the commercial sphere of perfumery, gender–scent differentiation also applies. Names and typographies mark gender distinctions, thereby translating biological difference into gender divisions and hierarchy.

Managing and erasing effluvia

Olfactive–spatial associations and the notion of smellscape in both urban and rural settings have been addressed in various works by historians and anthropologists alike. Miasmas and other olfactory excesses have come under much scrutiny in relation to public health concerns and the association between odors, disease, illness, and contagion. In the various public health sanitation projects in East Asia, Europe, the United States, and elsewhere during the sixteenth through to the early nineteenth centuries, the control of offensive odors emanating from both social groups (such as immigrants and colonial subjects) and from public and domestic spaces (including towns and streets, slaughter houses, hospitals, prisons, and public abattoirs, not to mention sewers and slums) indicates how abject smells were perceived as a threat to modernity and to the social order of things in general. Three streams of theorization may be identified. First, odor pollution was often linked either to the lower strata or to immigrant bodies, signaling social othering through presumed olfactive filth and other associated bodily practices that were deemed deplorable. As a corollary, the second stream draws attention to the hegemony of cleanliness, demanded by those in power (such as the ruling elite or colonialists), who instrumentalized it to justify the disciplining of colonial subjects in the name of civility and of urban development. Third, the premium placed on smell hygiene and other related practices was presumed to eventually bring about a productive society, given how reliability and competence were collocated with non-smelly bodies. This was supposed to work in tandem with places that were rid of odoriferous substances and that thus eradicated smells in the path toward modernity and civilization.

To take one example, urban stench was managed in the context of eighteenth-century Paris, where dirt and stench were considered to be coterminous (Vigarello 1988). Emanating from both bodies and places, foul smells sparked concerns over public hygiene that took center stage. Various measures were undertaken, such as removing cemeteries in order to eliminate putrid smells, changing both the architecture and the location of hospitals, improving overall air circulation, and increasing the supply and

circulation of water within towns; these measures transformed public space through the attention paid to hygiene. Where such sanitary measures were put in place in order to manage and remove rancid odors, they were implemented with specific groups in mind, namely the poor and those of a lower status, such as colonized populations. Filth and dirt were associated with poverty and the working classes. Whereas “well-off” Paris was deemed to be less susceptible to contagion given that it was less crowded, Lyon was characterized by “poverty, dirt and sickness” due to workers being generally “thin and emaciated” (Vigarello 1988, 149). In Lyon, wash houses and public baths were built for the working classes so as to eradicate their dirty practices. Clearly, the links between diseases, malodors, and infection were traced to marginalized social groups, with smell being perceived as a marker of social status. Following this logic, then, the bodily habits and vices of the “most deprived sector of the population” in France were subject to cleaning projects that were intended to produce bodies that were then deemed to be disciplined, morally upright, and orderly (Vigarello 1988, 192). Being clean was tantamount to social and moral salubrity.

A parallel case may be found in the context of nineteenth-century London, concerning which Otter puts forward a similar proposition regarding how intimately tied London’s masses were with the “urban environment and the physico-moral condition” (2004, 41). As with the French case, corporeal practices were yoked to moral selfhood. Sanitary environmentalism meant that technology was harnessed in both positive and negative manners. When employed positively, human capacities, in terms of the aural and the ocular, were stimulated and maximized through large-scale electric lighting systems and sound that lit up such places as Buckingham Palace, churches, theaters, and banks, and also transportation networks. As a result, electric lighting replaced gaslight, which liberated workers from inhaling noxious gases as they worked into the night. Such use of aural and visual technological machinery therefore provided material comfort and was regarded as having aided in the advancement of civilization. In contrast, when used negatively, technology aimed to “delimit sensory experience” (Otter 2004, 43) where domestic facilities became enclosed. Bedrooms and toilets made possible the separation of the physical body from both the family and society. This meant that stench, blood, spitting, and defecation as sources of physical contamination were contained through domestication. Beyond the domestic realm, public places such as slaughterhouses also came under the purview of sanitary policing. Similar to sewers and slums, slaughterhouses were sources of fetid emanation, with offal and blood trickling into public sewers, which stank and generated septic diseases (Otter 2004). Without proper management (e.g., where back rooms and old wooden sheds were used as places of slaughter), slaughterhouses were typically condemned by health officials as rancid and antiquated and as threatening sources of animal effluvia. As a solution, public abattoirs subsequently replaced slaughterhouses, and the former became thoroughly lit through the use of technology, veiling and containing animal deaths away from the gaze of the public under more stringent supervision and hygienic killing regimes. Artificial illumination, Otter (2004, 53) argues, therefore made “cleanliness clearly visible” with the removal of dark corners, and proper carcass-chilling practices now took place in deodorized environments and under sootless light.

Sanitary othering may also be found in the colonial context of Korea under Japanese rule in the early 1900s. Henry (2005) describes how the “dirty” Korean was perceived as in need of Japanese colonial reconfiguration and discipline. The use of essentialist and discriminatory language in descriptions of Koreans as characterized by “laziness and filth” and the portrayal of Koreans as nicotine addicted were often juxtaposed with the “productive” and “healthy” Japanese settlers in the country. Moreover, Seoul was labeled as a “shit capital” during this period, containing inescapable foul smells of both human and animal waste—supposedly strewn all over the streets—which assaulted visitors to the country. Water pollution and the careless disposal of human wastes in the city’s waterways led to the waters having a yellowish hue. Other ethnographic records describing the country as squalid, filthy, and rank—what Henry (2005, 653) has called the “imperial representations of urban filth”—therefore justified further colonial interventionist projects that ameliorated the city’s unkempt state through human waste disposal, garbage collection, and the dredging of sewerage ditches.

If these earlier historical smellscape demonstrate the containment and erasure of odoriferous substances and practices, smell in the contemporary context has shifted to the production of artificial scents in consumerism, advertising, and the fragrance industry. Whereas natural scents and odors are a threat to social order, manufactured smells in contrast connect to cleanliness and freshness. Through imitations and simulations (Classen, Howes, and Synnott 1994), synthetic smells are created and used in the various realms of educational instruction, the museum-going sensuous experience, travel (e.g., the use of scents such as lavender to calm travelers’ nerves at airports), and a whole host of business outfits including hotels, theaters, boutiques, coffee joints, and other lifestyle shops. The postmodern manipulation of smells represents a further attempt to contain rancid smells. In these various contexts of capitalist sensualism (Howes 2005), the ideology of cleanliness and the embodied experiences of consumers become key pillars in the containment and production of scents.

Studying smell

The sensuous turn (Howes 2003) in anthropological research and writing since the late twentieth century has prompted innovative ways of studying sensory experiences and articulating sensorial data. Beyond the usual social–scientific methodologies (including narrative interviews, participant observation, and visual methods), sensory studies require various other methodological approaches so as to both collate and express the social life of the senses. In exploring how smells are spatially ordered and related to place, smellscape walkabouts (Low 2009; Porteous 1985) have been a useful method for studying the connections between olfaction and sociality. Together, these varied sensory strategies imply that the field researcher’s body is emplaced and directly involved in sensory endeavors (Pink 2009; Vannini, Waskul, and Gottschalk 2011). Whereas language is a key medium in explicating sensorial experiences (Howes 2005) through the use of metaphors and other related literary styles, presentations through the employment of flash forwards, autoethnographies, teasers, and stories are also used to construct sensory portraits of everyday life (Vannini, Waskul, and Gottschalk 2011).

SEE ALSO: Caste; Corporeal Vision; Cultural Relativism; Culture, Concept of; Embodied Cognition; Ethnography; Gell, Alfred (1945–97); House Societies; Senses, Anthropology of; Sound, Anthropology of

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