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Marta Tafalla

*Universidad Aut3noma de Barcelona, [marta.tafalla@uab.es](mailto:marta.tafalla@uab.es)*

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## Smell and Anosmia in the Aesthetic Appreciation of Gardens

Marta Tafalla

### Abstract

In his *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, Kant defined the garden as a visual art and considered that smell plays no role in its aesthetic appreciation. If the Kantian thesis were right, then a person who has no sense of smell (who suffers from anosmia) would not be impaired in his or her aesthetic appreciation of gardens. At the same time, a visually impaired person could not appreciate the beauty of gardens, although he or she could perceive them through hearing, smell, taste, and touch. In this paper I discuss the role of smell and anosmia in the aesthetic appreciation of gardens. I accept the Kantian idea that the appreciation of a garden is the appreciation of its form, but I also defend that, at least in some cases, smell can belong to the form of gardens and, consequently, the ability or inability to smell influences their aesthetic appreciation.

### Keywords

aesthetic appreciation, anosmia, beauty, David E. Cooper, form, garden, home, Kant, meaning, Mara Miller, smell, transience

### 1. Introduction

In the first pages of *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, Kant considered gardens together with painting, sculpture, and architecture and affirmed that aesthetic appreciation of these arts consists in appreciating the drawing; that is, the formal pattern that sight can discriminate.<sup>[1]</sup> In a later passage, he maintained that gardens are a subclass of the art of painting and, as such, are created to be seen. He added that the sense of touch plays no role in the aesthetic appreciation of a garden because touch cannot allow us to perceive its form.<sup>[2]</sup>

At no point does he even mention smell. The overall implication is that smell plays no role in the aesthetic appreciation of gardens.

Of course, Kant was fully aware that a garden is a multisensory environment, especially full of scents, but he considered that these smells, no matter how fragrant or suggestive they are, cannot be aesthetically appreciated; smells can be agreeable but not beautiful. This is because Kant accepted the traditional Western conception of a specific hierarchy among the senses. According to that traditional view, defended by most philosophers for centuries, sight and hearing are our intellectual senses. They are able to offer us knowledge of the world and provide us with the information we need to develop science and philosophy and to appreciate the beauty of nature and art. In contrast, smell, taste, and touch belong to the lower level of biological needs and pleasures.

These inferior senses offer us the subjective bodily sensations necessary for survival but no objective knowledge of the real

world or any disinterested appreciation of its beauty.

This hierarchy of the senses corresponds to the traditional metaphysical distinction between primary and secondary qualities. According to that distinction, primary qualities are intrinsic properties that an object possesses independently of us and can be measured quantitatively: size, shape, position. The drawing of a garden belongs to this category; it can be described in mathematical terms as a set of geometrical forms.

In contrast, secondary qualities are the result of the relation between the object and the subject who perceives it; they are generated by the process of perception. Secondary qualities, such as the sweet taste of a cherry, the aroma of jasmine, or tactile sensations, are merely subjective and, because of this, they have no place in the realm of aesthetics.

According to this traditional view, the information about the world that sight and hearing provide us with can be expressed in words and shared with others. This allows Kant to defend the idea that aesthetic judgment, based in these two senses, aspires to universal communicability and agreement. In contrast, the sensations of smell, taste, and touch cannot be clearly expressed in words; we cannot expect communication and agreement. Therefore, these inferior senses keep us enclosed in our subjectivity.<sup>[3]</sup> Kant claimed, "To someone who lacks the sense of smell, this kind of sensation cannot be communicated; and, even if he does not lack this sense, one still cannot be sure that he has exactly the same sensation from a flower that we have from it."<sup>[4]</sup>

If the Kantian thesis were right, then a person who has no sense of smell, who suffers from anosmia, as in my case, would not be impaired in his or her aesthetic appreciation of gardens.<sup>[5]</sup> At the same time, a visually impaired person could not appreciate the beauty of gardens, although he or she could perceive them through hearing, smell, taste, and touch.

In this paper, I accept that the aesthetic appreciation of a garden is the appreciation of its form, and concentrate on analyzing what the form of a garden is by following some Kantian intuitions and discussing others. I also defend the idea that, at least in some cases, smell can belong to the form of gardens and, therefore, the ability or inability to smell influences their aesthetic appreciation. In this defense, I invoke my personal experience. As an anosmic person, I cannot properly appreciate the form of some gardens because I do not receive a certain kind of relevant information. In such cases, I have to rely on the words of people who try to translate what they perceive. I think Kant was right about the extreme difficulty of transmitting the experience of smell to a person who has never undergone it, but some explanations help me to understand, more or less, the rational ideas behind some uses of smells in gardens. That is how I describe the examples I offer in this paper, because I have been told about this kind of use of smells. Without the help of people who can smell, I could never have imagined that all this was going on in gardens. Nevertheless, despite their words, I cannot enjoy the overall experience or aesthetic appreciation. This is precisely what I hope to highlight.

## 2. Form

The form of a garden is a creation of reason and imagination that organizes a piece of land and some natural elements within a structure. To give form means to establish the limits of the garden and organize it into different areas that have relations of harmony, balance, or perhaps contrast between them. To give form is also to decide which plants to grow in each area of the garden and how to arrange them. This ordering of the land has not only a practical aim but, above all, an aesthetic one, and it is similar to the form that constitutes a painting, a sculpture, or a building. Nonetheless, this comparison with visual arts does not mean that all gardens are intended to be works of art. I think that all gardens can be the subject of aesthetic appreciation but only some aspire to be works of art. In this paper, I consider such artwork gardens to be a subclass of the class of gardens.

Now comes the question, can smell belong to the form of a garden? To answer this, I propose an example. Suppose a gardener wants to design a form that plays with the ideas of intimacy and withdrawal. The gardener does not want to design a garden with large spaces and broad views or develop a botanical exhibition. He or she wants to focus on creating enclosed spaces that will offer an aesthetic experience of intimacy and retreat, spaces suitable for reading or meditating or for a meeting with a close friend or lover. With this aim, the gardener decides to create some small rooms enclosed by high walls of greenery and covered by honeysuckle and roses.

The small size of the enclosures, the fact that the sight and sound of what happens beyond is limited by the walls but also that the visitor cannot be seen or heard from outside, the delicate flowers, and maybe a fountain and a comfortable bench to sit on are all elements that contribute to this hidden paradise that is withdrawn from the world. Can smell enhance this form? After listening to some gardeners speak about smell, I think that the answer is yes. If the designer selects pleasant smelling flowers, when a visitor enters the space the fragrance will welcome and surround him or her, stressing the sensation of being within. In this way, smell, as a formal element, can help highlight the experience of immersion.

Smell has the capacity to fill a space and give it a tone, thereby stressing some aspects of the form of the garden and, especially, surrounding visitors to make them feel inside. This helps to enhance the form of the garden.

If the visitor cannot smell, fragrance cannot reinforce the experience of immersion. Without smell, sight is more predominant. Sight tends to stress distance, not intimacy, because sight is a distance sense. As a consequence, an anosmic person would have a poorer experience of such a garden. In general, an anosmic person will always experience less intimacy and immersion in gardens. Often, people who have lost olfaction in adulthood say that they feel as if they have been moved away from reality, that they are more like distant spectators than participants, and even that they are experiencing the world from behind glass.

Form is the principal factor that defines a garden, but if we analyze this deeper, we will see that the form of a garden is different from form in other arts, such as painting or sculpture, and also different from other forms applied to land, such as that of large-scale agricultural fields. For this reason, and for

a proper analysis, I think that we have to appeal to four factors that act as adjectives, namely: transience, home, beauty, and meaning, that refine the form of a garden and differentiate it from other kinds of form. For each of these four factors, I will again analyze the role of smell.

### 3. Transience

The first factor is transience. Form is the rational structure applied to the land, but to make it possible for the land to retain that form, a gardener has to take regular care of the garden so that the spontaneity of nature does not undo its form in a few weeks. The plants have to be kept in good health by protecting them from pests and enriching the soil. Likewise, it is necessary to maintain the designed form, by mowing, pruning, weeding, or cleaning. This necessity for care differentiates the form of a garden from the form of a painting, sculpture, or building, although Kant placed them all in the same class. This need for care is due to the fact that gardens are characterized by a special temporality: the form of the garden is always changing and can never be finished. If the gardener stops working, the garden will disappear.

Gardens cannot be finished, as paintings are, but they can die, as people do. They need regular care during their whole existence. Thus, gardens offer us an interesting contrast between *form as a rational idea*, which has a kind of permanence, in our mind or when drawn on paper, as a set of mathematical proportions and geometrical structures, or as a kind of score; and *form incarnated in the life of the garden*, which embraces the temporality of growth and decay, birth and death.

Mara Miller, in her book on gardens as art, affirms, "Gardens are the only art in which changes occur not only gradually over long periods of time, but rapidly; not only by decay or decline of materials but by their increase; not only at the deliberate intervention of an artist-performer, but regardless of whether any human agency is concerned with them at all."<sup>[6]</sup> Changes that take place continuously in a garden are of different kinds.

We may try to categorize them, although some overlap:

- processes of birth, growth, and blooming, yielding fruit and decay;
- the annual cycle of the seasons;
- the lunar cycle that illuminates nights, more or less;
- the cycle of day and night, with its changing light;
- daily changes in the weather;
- interactions between different animals and the garden, such as birds nesting; cats visiting; small wild mammals, such as rabbits or foxes, taking refuge; fish living in ponds; all kinds of insects performing vital tasks of fertilization of flowers and decomposition of dead plants; and also insects eating plants;

- fountains or streams, which introduce a source of permanent movement;
- the tendency of the garden, via all the preceding kinds of change, to undo the form designed by the gardener;
- the struggle of gardeners to preserve the form of the garden, by pruning, mowing, weeding, and cleaning;
- the fact that a gardener can decide to change some aspects of the designed form; can “correct” mistakes, for example, substituting some plants for others that are better adapted to the weather; or can even accept a change introduced by nature;
- the fact that gardeners and visitors usually experience gardens while moving. Art is usually contemplated from a fixed position, as we sit or stand still; but with gardens it is appropriate to walk through them to appreciate them, so we are constantly changing our perspective within the changing garden.

Some of these changes are more or less predictable but others occur unexpectedly. David E. Cooper affirms:

Familiar as the environment of the garden is, there’s always something going on in it, much of it novel and unpredictable. In my study, nothing ever happens—nothing to be alert to, to be “vulnerable” to, in the sense of being open to and ready to be affected by. It’s different in the garden, with its unexpected smells, sounds, and movements, and where more “global” changes—like “the touch of autumn” discerned one morning—bring something new to one’s surrounds.<sup>[7]</sup>

Some unexpected changes are like surprise presents that can be enjoyed wholeheartedly. The wind or birds may bring seeds from plants that the gardener had not selected, which may grow and flourish; they could fit in well in the garden and offer unexpected beauty. A pair of blackbirds may come to nest and fill the garden with their song; or some escaped parrots may fill the garden with a more raucous sound. A fox may decide on a hidden dark corner in the garden as an ideal place to construct an earth and raise a family. The jasmine cultivated by a neighbor could appear discreetly some day, climbing over a wall. A spider may construct a large web just where the evening light catches it and makes it sparkle beautifully. One night, a lizard may climb over the lantern that lights the garden, projecting its form onto the nearby wall. None of this was planned or foreseen by the gardener but may be welcomed with joy. This type of occurrence is less frequent in other arts, though commonplace in gardens. The garden may also, however, provide us with unpleasant experiences. A skunk may enter our garden, have a difficult encounter with our dog, and give our garden a pungent

stench, an effect that would, of course, pass unnoticed by anosmics. Because all of these events belong to the life of gardens, gardeners need to be open-minded and accept that some may enhance their work. Cooper speaks of “creative receptivity.”<sup>[8]</sup>

Most authors agree that gardens offer us a special aesthetic experience of the flow of time. It is as if they offer us a gazebo looking out on time itself; inside a garden people contemplate the form of the garden being transfigured by the passing of minutes, hours, days, or years. Because of this, some philosophers have defended the similarity between gardens and music and claimed that in a garden we can find patterns of change that are the counterpart of musical rhythms.<sup>[9]</sup> Nonetheless, I think that there is a clear difference. Although every piece of music develops in time and gives us the opportunity to appreciate the passing of time aesthetically, a piece of music never changes on its own, without the will of the composer or performers. The case of gardens is very different; it is the life of the garden itself that continuously changes its form and even tries to obliterate it.

Kant was interested in gardens and accepted them as art but, by considering them a subclass of the art of painting, he unfortunately reduced their significance. Kant stressed form as the central factor of gardens but did not consider their ephemerality at all, and ephemerality and the need for care are features that make gardens so different from other arts. In artwork gardens, what we encounter is the art of transience.

Mara Miller maintains: “Gardens violate a number of implicit preferences upon which most theory of art is premised— preferences for a single final form of a work of art (for uniqueness and perdurance), for artistic (or authorial) control by a (single) (human) agent, for immateriality, and for what is known as ‘disinterest’ or ‘distance’ or ‘autonomy’.”<sup>[10]</sup>

Multisensoriality and ephemerality, rejected by traditional views of art, fit together well and characterize gardening as a practice that straddles life and art. This idea is related to what I said at the beginning of this paper, that not all gardens are intended to be artworks; many of them simply belong to the realm of life. But those that are works of art are a special kind of art that connects with life in a way no other artistic discipline can. And for those, smell plays an important role because it can highlight the transience of gardens by accompanying most changes with different aromas. Of course, sight can also show us these changes, like the change of colors when the different species blossom at successive times of the year, or when the arrival of autumn overwhelms our green summer garden with shades of brown, red, and gold. Sight and also touch can reveal to us how plants grow every day, or how the wind and rain bring disorder. But smell is special in its capacity to accompany changes because it is so changing and so volatile. One aroma mixes easily with others and thereby transforms its identity; it is not something that can be captured and forced to remain stable. This transient nature of smell makes it well suited to stressing the changing character of a garden. We should remember that another of the reasons why Kant rejected the aesthetic appreciation of smell was because of its ephemerality:

Which organic sense is the most ungrateful and also seems to be the most dispensable? The sense of smell. It does not pay to cultivate it or refine it at all in order to enjoy; for there are more disgusting objects than pleasant ones (especially in crowded places), and even when we come across something fragrant, the pleasure coming from the sense of smell is always fleeting and transient.<sup>[11]</sup>

I would like to offer some cases of the use of smells in giving form to gardens that help to highlight transience. For example, a gardener can design a piece of land as a scent calendar, selecting plants that blossom at different moments of the year, offering different fragrances. Monet's garden at Giverny was designed so that the flowers bloomed in succession from spring to fall.<sup>[12]</sup> In fact, this is common in gardens, not only in large artistic ones but also in small gardens designed by amateurs. This is interesting because, in the big cities of industrial societies, many people no longer know which flowers and fruit belong to which season and have lost the sense of annual cycles. A garden planned to offer different flowers every month allows people to rediscover successive pleasures throughout the year and to enjoy them with all their senses. As I stated above, however, the volatile character of aromas stresses this permanent change of the garden in a particular manner.

Another important fact is that smell stresses not only the cyclical changes but also the most ephemeral ones. One day, with specific temperature and atmospheric conditions, it begins to rain; this gives a special fragrance to the garden, different from that of other days. Smell reveals that every moment is unique and, therefore, reinforces the aesthetic appreciation of gardens as a transient experience. For anosmics, who can only appreciate the changes through our other senses, the garden seems to be more permanent and stable.

If the death of an animal, in particular, occurs in a garden, it may well be the stench that first informs of the event. It provokes an unpleasant bodily experience because stench performs a biological function by alerting people to possible dangers, similar to the function of pain. It is stench that has a special capacity to awaken thoughts regarding the transience of every living being. For our sense of sight, which is a distance sense, an encounter with a dead animal is something less disturbing or impressive. We see the animal is there, not moving any longer, not living, and beginning to decompose, but this is a serene process that does not cause any bodily unpleasantness.

If we consider a visually impaired person, the garden designed as a scent calendar may help him or her to perceive and enjoy the annual cycle of the garden. Such a person can recognize each plant in blossom through its fragrance and, furthermore, associate it with the appropriate season. Because smell is the sense with the strongest connection to memory, it will be easier for him or her to remember which plants blossom at each moment of the year. The aromas that can be sensed provide not only bodily pleasure, which is merely subjective,



but they indicate which plants are in the garden and when they are in flower. In this way, a visually impaired person can perceive and remember how the passage of time changes the form of the garden throughout the yearly cycle.

#### 4. Home

The second factor is home. Most authors agree that when we cultivate a garden, we attempt to create a home in nature for ourselves, a place where we can feel and be safe from the multiple dangers of the wilderness. It is the form that creates this home. Creating a garden begins by enclosing a piece of land, thus separating it from the outside world. Then we select which plants, animals, and other natural or artificial elements to allow into this space and how to arrange them.

Through the selection of the elements and the spatial structure we assign them, we try to disarm nature of its possible threats and to pacify it. At the same time, we make a place for ourselves on our own scale; everything is adjusted to our size, senses, and body. We often cultivate trees and shrubbery so that their blossoms and fruit are at the height of our eyes; trace out paths of an adequate size of us; or place a pergola in our favorite corner to avoid too much sun. If there are different levels, we design comfortable stairs. Recalling the classical phrase that the human being is the measure of everything, we can affirm that human beings are the measure of gardens.

Nevertheless, there is a limit to this attitude. We cannot impose our will in a monological way; in order to exist, gardens require the spontaneity of nature. Consequently, we need to strike a compromise; we require a dialog. And this dialog reinforces the idea of home. Gardening is an activity through which we learn to collaborate, to listen to other ways of life, to accept difference, and to solve conflicts. In gardening, we learn that making a home in nature is not a matter of domination but of reconciliation.

The fact that gardens are a kind of home means that they offer satisfaction of the most basic biological needs: shelter, water, and usually some kind of food. This is why they are so tempting to animals! Many even offer medicinal herbs. But 'home' here has a broader meaning. Gardens are intimate places where we can find peace and freedom, far removed from outside activity. At the same time, this means they are hospitable. They are places to share, especially suited to welcoming friends, holding parties, letting children and animals play, and holding concerts and theater performances.

Regarding the hospitality of gardens, David E. Cooper affirms: "Gardens are especially hospitable to practices which require, or are enhanced to the point of being transformed by, a combination of conditions: first, those such as light, open air, and sufficient space to allow for easy movement and social gathering; and second, those of relative seclusion or privacy and familiarity." He also insists that in gardens we find security: "Security, not only or mainly in the sense of physical safety, but in the dual sense of immunity to the outside world's intrusion and the confidence that goes with 'knowing one's way about' an intimately familiar place."[\[13\]](#)

In this sense, a garden is not simply a home but an ideal of

home, a dream of how we would like nature to be. Gardens are not only the product of reason but also of imagination and fantasy. Perhaps some gardens are even real attempts at creating utopia. Mara Miller maintains, "Every garden is the embodiment of someone's vision of how life should be, the creation of a realm at once idealized—and often to a large extent imaginary—and livable. It creates an ethos in which the terms of life as we feel it ought to be lived may all be included."[\[14\]](#) And also:

If it survives, it seems to prove something—that this is possible, that we (or someone) could control this place, that this kind of life is possible. This fact about the garden makes it an extraordinarily compelling and convincing sort of vision, quite different from what can be achieved in painting or fiction. For insofar as the garden represents an ideal world or an ideal life, it seems by its very existence to prove that world valid.[\[15\]](#)

For this reason, gardens are a privileged space where we focus on our ethical relation with nature and try to find new ways to solve our environmental problems. In his paper, "Thinking through Botanic Gardens," Thomas Heyd poses botanic gardens as archetypes of collaboration with nature and defends the notion that they can be places where we attempt alternative ways of achieving a better relation with it.[\[16\]](#)

Marcello di Paola has recently made a similar claim, stressing the point that the magnitude of our environmental crisis can make us feel impotent, hopeless, and provoke disengagement, whereas gardening offers us an activity through which we engage with nature and attempt to forge a new relation with it based on stewardship.[\[17\]](#)

Now, let us return to the question at hand. What could the role of smell be in the form of a garden in relation to home? An initial idea clearly emerges here. Home is a place where we are protected from danger, and one of the fundamental biological functions of olfaction is to detect dangers such as fire, polluted air, or rotten food. Usually, olfaction is the first sense to warn of these kinds of threats, in the form of stench.

That the garden offers pleasant fragrances reassures people that it is a safe place. The aromatic smell of a garden is not only a delight for the body, a mere subjective sensation; it is also a signal that olfaction is not detecting any threat.

Anosmics, especially people who have lost olfaction in adulthood, often have a feeling of insecurity, because we know that we cannot perceive such warnings. For us there are no aromatic smells demonstrating that the garden is free from danger.

In a more general way, the feeling that we are safe depends on what we can perceive. We do not usually feel safe in dark forests or thick jungles, because we cannot see what is happening around us. Consequently, when we design the form of gardens, we usually take into account what we can see and hear from every area of the garden. Mazes introduce a feeling of danger and adventure because they limit our sight and we have difficulties finding our way out. Reflecting on all this, we should consider the case of disabled people and especially

visually impaired people. In order for them to feel safe and to feel at home, they need to receive relevant information through their other senses. Thus, gardens designed for visually impaired people offer information about their form, the kind of plants that conform to them and the activities taking place, by appealing to touch, hearing, and smell.

A gardener can design the form of an entire garden to make it perceptible for visually impaired people. A tactile map at the entrance and in different parts of the garden allows people to have an idea of the structure of the garden by touching it.

The garden may also have designed paths for the visitors to follow. The use of different textures on paths, that can be perceived by walking on them and with a cane, can signal the different areas of the garden. We can also add information through the sense of hearing; fountains and waterfalls help in orientation, as do other sonorous elements, such as chimes, with different sounds, hanging from trees. Nowadays smartphones offer several apps for visually impaired people that help them to move through different environments and can orient them in a garden. I am sure that in the near future such individuals will have amazing technologies at their disposal, perhaps in the form of robots.

Furthermore, we can also add smell. For example, the designer could decide that each area of the garden will have different kinds of plants that produce different kinds of fragrances, such as aromatic herbs in one place, roses in another, and fruit trees in yet another. In this way, visually impaired visitors can get an idea of the different areas of the garden and the variety of plants that grow there. And because smells are easier to remember than other sense information, visually impaired people may form a mental scent map of the garden. Experts warn that this is not easy to achieve because smells tend to mingle, so that the designer will need a large area to effectively separate scent zones from one another, or to use different enclosures protected by barriers. It is also important to avoid saturating the air with strong smells, as visually impaired visitors could feel overwhelmed. If designers can resolve these technical issues, however, it could be good for a visually impaired person to walk through the garden recognizing plants by their scent and getting an idea of the spatial form of the garden, thanks to the distribution of the aromas.

In this way, the combination of smell, touch, and hearing can give a visually impaired visitor relevant information about the form of the garden and the kind of plants that grow there. This could be practical information, so that visitors do not get lost, but it also allows them to appreciate the garden aesthetically. Although Kant believed that only sight provides information about form, a person with a lack of vision can still perceive and understand it. A combination of touch, hearing, and smell allows a visually impaired person to aesthetically appreciate the form of the garden.

## **5. Beauty**

Most authors also agree that when gardening, we attempt to improve natural beauty, and this is another of the factors that defines the form of a garden. Gardens are designed to be beautiful; and beauty is what we expect when anticipating a

visit to a garden. In contrast, it is unusual to encounter ugliness, deformity, fear, horror, disgust, and other negative aesthetic properties in a garden. Even irony and sarcasm are not typically encountered in gardens. Perhaps mazes are one of few examples of the use of fear, a negative aesthetic property; but although horror films sometimes use mazes in such a way, the mazes in gardens are not usually created to provoke fear but as an opportunity to play innocently with the senses and the orientation abilities of visitors. There are, of course, some exceptions: the *E.T.A. Hoffmann Garden of Exile and Emigration*, designed by Daniel Libeskind for the *Jewish Museum of Berlin*, inaugurated in 1999, is an intelligent example of a garden that provokes a disturbing experience of disorientation, dislocation, and loss in visitors to convey an ethical and political meaning. However, I must say that I doubt the willow oaks that constitute that garden are particularly happy growing inside concrete columns.

A paradigmatic example of how gardens can enhance natural beauty is the work of the Spanish philosopher and gardener Fernando Caruncho.<sup>[18]</sup> One of the principal characteristics of his gardens is the use of typical Mediterranean plants, so that his gardens evoke landscapes found in Spain, Italy, or Greece. Moreover, he uses plants from traditional agriculture activities, such as wheat, vines, and olive trees, that we normally relate more with practical activities than with gardens and beauty. How can he then distinguish his gardens from agricultural fields? Thanks to form.

In the garden he designed for *El Mas de les Voltes*, on the Costa Brava, Spain, he cultivated amazing geometrical wheat fields, framed by straight paths, with cypress and olive tree borders. It would be impossible for them to be agricultural fields because the lines are so straight and the proportions so harmonic that they resemble sculptures. Wheat, cypresses, and olive trees alternate as if they were a combination of basic forms and colors in a minimalist installation. Caruncho takes these plants, which we normally relate with food production, and reveals their beauty to us through the form in which they are arranged. We see that this is not nature but a realm of order, harmony, and balance governed by reason. We see also that it is no place for practical activities but a place devoted to art, offering us an opportunity for contemplation and admiration. All this produces a mixture of familiarity and surprise; tradition and innovation; reason and dream.

*The Oxford Companion to the Garden* summarizes his style with these words:

Simple geometric forms, with frequent references to grid patterns, glassy water, and clean, light-filled spaces delineated by dense evergreen planting. While the overall impression is of minimalist modernism, inspiration from sources as diverse as Islam, Zen, and European classicism is clearly in evidence. ... His use of light is one of the most remarkable features of his work. Light, he believes, makes the language of geometry intelligible. ... The decorative use of color is shunned, as in Caruncho's construct it serves only to distract from the essential truth

disclosed by light, which is why he uses a very limited palette of flowering plants.[\[19\]](#)

This last idea is particularly interesting. His gardens are not an explosion of colorful flowers and not an exhibition of a great variety of plants. He limits himself to a reduced palette of colors in order to concentrate on light, in a way that Kant would probably have appreciated. This helps to make his gardens deeply austere, ascetic, and serene.

Let us return again to the question at hand: Can smell play a role in the form of gardens in relation to beauty? For example, does smell play a role in the beauty of Caruncho's gardens? As we know, Kant considered that only sight and hearing allow us to perceive the beauty of nature or art because beauty, for him, is a matter of rational order, harmonic proportions, and mathematical structures, and only sight and hearing can perceive this. Smell, in contrast, cannot belong to the realm of beauty because aromas do not have this rational order, and also because they are intimately linked to biological needs and pleasures so they cannot be contemplated in a disinterested way.

Contemporary philosophy, however, tends to take another direction. Cooper affirms:

Nor, one might add, are the senses separately engaged, in the sense that one could abstract a visual pleasure, say, or a tactile one from the *gesamt* experience. I wouldn't enjoy the feel of a wet stone beneath my bare feet in a Japanese garden in just the way I do unless I could see its glistening dampness studded with the matt green of the moss.[\[20\]](#)

What Cooper is telling us is that we cannot separate the information we receive through each sense because all our senses collaborate in providing us with the experience of a multisensory environment. Although we can try to abstract and isolate only visual information in our minds, in the real experience of gardens all our senses work together. The rational ideal of Kant, who separated the role of each sense, responds to an enlightened project of abstraction, analysis, and classification, not to our real experience of the world.

Contemporary science supports this idea. For example, in "The Effect of Visual Images on Perception of Odors,"[\[21\]](#) the authors summarize different research into how color and visual images influence the perception of odors. Could this interaction of the senses influence our aesthetic appreciation?

The paper, "The Crossmodal Influence of Odor Hedonics on Facial Attractiveness: Behavioral and fMRI Measures,"[\[22\]](#) tries to shed light on this issue. The authors tell us, "The main aim of the present study was therefore to investigate, both behaviorally and using fMRI, whether olfactory cues can modulate visual judgments of facial attractiveness. In particular, we investigated whether olfactory cues of differing hedonic value (i.e., pleasant vs. unpleasant) enhance and/or reduce the perceived attractiveness of male faces to female participants."[\[23\]](#) The results show that the participants rated faces as being significantly less attractive when they were presented together with an unpleasant body odor than with a

pleasant odor or in the absence of any odor.

Of course, face attractiveness may be something quite different from aesthetic appreciation, and, in general, the scientific evidence in these matters is still scant. We should be prudent and wait for more conclusive studies while noting that contemporary neurology and psychology research shows a common trend towards evidence that all the senses influence each other in perception and in appreciation.<sup>[24]</sup> Because of this I think it is legitimate to raise the following questions: Do the smells in a garden modulate the vision of it? Is it possible that smell is influencing what people see in a garden, although they are not clearly conscious of such an influence?

What makes me think that these questions could have positive answers is that in the design of gardens, some plants are selected precisely because they have pleasant, familiar, or strong smells. Garden designers select plants for a mixture of reasons, both practical, such as adaptability to the weather and soil, speed of growth, and so on, and aesthetic, including form, color, the period when they bloom, and the like. Within the latter group, aroma has a place. Aromatic herbs, such as laurel, thyme, or rosemary, are much loved and frequently cultivated in Mediterranean gardens by both professional and amateur gardeners. What role does their aroma play in the preference for these plants? For me, who cannot smell them, they are not particularly beautiful. Visually, they are not very interesting. Aesthetically, I would rate them as boring. Would gardeners cultivate these species so often if they did not have their characteristic aromas?

Do the aromas of the plants used by Caruncho influence appreciation of them? Does the sweet aroma of the cypress play a role? Does the strong fragrance of olive flowers play a role? Am I missing something important in the appreciation of the beauty of his gardens because I cannot smell them? I also suspect affirmative answers here.

I asked these questions, by email, to Fernando Caruncho, and this is the answer he gave me:

My grandfather was a magnificent perfumer all his life, and probably I became a gardener, in part, thanks to the experience I shared with him in my children years in Ronda, where he had a laboratory at home and another one in his factory. I learned lots of things from my grandfather and his work as a perfumer, and probably also inherited many more without being conscious. This is what I call the "unseen," the things you learn without intending or knowing, but that are given to you. For me, the sense of smell is intrinsically connected to the garden.

Likely, I am a gardener because of my memories of the aromas of the jasmine, the boxwood parterres, the Judas trees (which in Spanish are called Love trees) in the alameda in Ronda, the almond blossoms in spring, and the breathtaking view and smellscape that can be enjoyed from the balcony of the Tajo river.

## 6. Meaning

And finally, some authors claim that a gardener can design the form of a garden to introduce an idea or a thought in the same way that a painter can embody a meaning in a painting. In her definition of a garden, Mara Miller affirms:

A garden is any purposeful arrangement of natural objects (such as sand, water, plants, rocks, etc.) with exposure to the sky or open air, in which the form is not fully accounted for by purely practical considerations such as convenience. ... In a garden, there is in some sense an "excess" of form, more than can be accounted for by physical necessity, and this form provides some sort of satisfaction in itself, and some sort of "meaning" or "significance"—whether aesthetic, or sensual, or spiritual or emotional ... This "excess" is not meant to entail quantitatively "more" form—it may mean less, and it would certainly include minimalist types of form.[25]

What kind of meaning could be conveyed by the form of a garden? Could gardens embody deep, complex, philosophical, conceptual meanings as poems or paintings can? Could they articulate meanings so rich that they would open a never-ending field of interpretations, as happens with great works of art? Could they offer meanings that invite the audience, critics, and academics to engage in passionate analysis and endless discussions?

In her book *What Gardens Mean*, Stephanie Ross revisits the eighteenth century to describe, in detail, some classic gardens that conveyed elaborate and complex meanings. The gardens of Twickenham, Stowe, Stourhead and West Wycombe, according to Ross, offer meaning in a way similar to how poems do; they "present complex iconographical programs for their viewers to read, discourses about literature, politics, morality and religion." [26]

One could think that these gardens, with such baroque meanings, belong to the past but there are contemporary gardens that offer deep complex ideas. One of them is *The Garden of Cosmic Speculation*, designed in 1990 by the architect Charles Jencks and the expert in Chinese gardens, Maggie Keswick, at their home in Scotland. It reflects on the laws of nature and illustrates some principles of contemporary physics and biology. Patrick Taylor describes it as follows:

As 18th-century landscapers took their inspiration from the ancient world and mythology so Jencks and Keswick sought theirs on the frontiers of scientific theory, especially of cosmology and of the origins and structure of the universe. ... The motif of the helical structure of DNA, the evolution of the universe symbolized in a cascade, the mysterious orderliness of biological growth are all woven into the pattern of the garden.[27]

Charles Jencks has devoted an interesting book to describing the garden. In his book, he affirms that the aim of the garden was to celebrate scientific discoveries and offer metaphors of

them that can be enjoyed via the senses.<sup>[28]</sup> The goal of illustrating complex scientific concepts and theories by means of multisensory metaphorical representations, appealing to the senses, explains why *The Garden of Cosmic Speculation* includes a small Garden of the Senses. In it, plants, arranged in symbolic forms and accompanied by sculptures, are devoted to experiencing and enjoying each sense. Thyme is the plant selected to appeal to smell, and it grows around a sculpture representing a nose. Although this Garden of the Senses is a modest project, it could inspire a larger and more complex one. Just as Brueghel, in collaboration with Rubens, painted a series devoted to *The Five Senses*, so a garden could be structured along similar lines. In that case, we would have a garden whose form explicitly reflected on all our senses and appealed to them. I think that the small Garden of the Senses, by Jencks and Keswick, and the more complex, hypothetical garden inspired by Brueghel's paintings could be good counterexamples to the Kantian thesis because visitors would need all their senses to appreciate their form and meaning.

I would like to comment on a second example where smell helps to convey a meaning. In autumn 2010, La Capella, a fifteenth-century church in the center of Barcelona now used as an art gallery, hosted a work of art by Marc Serra called *Inexplicable Odeur*. Visually, the visitor could enjoy the beautiful space of the old church with some plants distributed throughout it, resembling the patios full of plants that are so typical in Spain. However, as visitors got up close and could smell them, they discovered that, thanks to small bottles of scent hidden in the flowerpots, the plants smelled like unpleasant urban odors. The contrast between the vision of the pretty plants and the smell of unpleasant odors was an attempt to focus attention on the neglected olfactory sense and to foster discussion about the bad smells in our cities.

The visitor was given a handout with the names of the plants and the corresponding bad odors, for example, "club before closing doors," "fitting-room," or "underground tunnel essence."<sup>[29]</sup>

Serra's was a modest small artwork but a good example of how smell can play a role in articulating the meaning of a garden. In that case, the meaning was a complex one. It was based on a contrast between vision and smell and played with surprise, irony, and humor to invite reflection on scent and stench, beauty and ugliness. That work is also a perfect example of how, when you are anosmic, you do not receive the meaning. When I visited the artwork, I could only see the plants beautifully arranged in the space; I could not perceive the contrast with the bad odors. I needed a person with good olfaction to explain to me what he perceived; but anosmics inhabit a world where stench does not exist, and it is difficult to imagine what a stench really is.

As a conclusion, I think that, contrary to the Kantian thesis, smell can participate in the form of gardens and even in the meaning that forms convey; and, in such cases, anosmics cannot perceive and appreciate significant elements of the gardens. Anosmics need someone to describe the smell to us, and then, thanks to the words of the "translator," we try to understand the idea and even speculate about it. For us, it



remains impossible to experience it or to enjoy a complete aesthetic appreciation of the gardens.

I think that more research is needed about the relationship between perception and aesthetic appreciation, with special attention paid to sensory disabilities. The garden reveals itself as an extraordinary laboratory to host this kind of research because of its multisensoriality. On the other hand, its hybrid nature between life and art makes it a fertile place for reflection. We should not forget that the garden had its role at the beginning of philosophy. Hopefully, philosophy will often return again to cultivate its ideas in the garden.<sup>[30]</sup>

Marta Tafalla  
[Marta.Tafalla@uab.es](mailto:Marta.Tafalla@uab.es)

Marta Tafalla is lecturer on Philosophy at the Universidad Aut3noma de Barcelona. Some of her recent publications are "Rehabilitating the Aesthetics of Nature: Hepburn and Adorno," *Environmental Ethics*, The University of North Texas, 33 (2011), 45-56; "A World without the Olfactory Dimension," *The Anatomical Record. Advances in Integrative Anatomy and Evolutionary Biology*, University of Utah School of Medicine, 296, 9 (2013), 1287-1296. She also writes novels.

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#### Endnotes

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[2] *Ibid.*, § 51

[3] I offer a systematic analysis of the traditional reasons for neglecting olfaction in aesthetic appreciation in: Marta Tafalla, "Anosmic Aesthetics," *Estetika. The Central European Journal of Aesthetics*, L / VI, 1 (2013), 53-80.

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[7] David E. Cooper, *A Philosophy of Gardens* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 78.

[8] *Ibid.*, p. 146.

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[10] *Ibid.*, p. 72.

[11] Immanuel Kant, *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*, eds. Robert B. Loudon and Manfred Kuehn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006 (1798)), § 22, pp. 50-51.

[12] *Ibid.*, p. 38.

[13] *Ibid.*, pp. 76-77.

[14] *Ibid.*, p. 130.

[15] *Ibid.*, p. 60.

[16] Thomas Heyd, "Thinking through Botanic Gardens," *Environmental Values*, 15, 2 (2006), 197-212.

[17] Marcello di Paola, "Environmental Stewardship, Moral Psychology and Gardens," *Environmental Values*, 22, 4 (2013), 503-521.

[18] You can see images from his Gardens at:  
<http://www.fernandocaruncho.com/>.

Watch an interview of Caruncho by Sabrina Merolla at:  
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jdjIVAjFUYQ>,

See his home garden in Madrid, in Monty Don's documentary for the BBC "Around the world in 80 gardens," episode 7, "Mediterranean."

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.5772/56504>

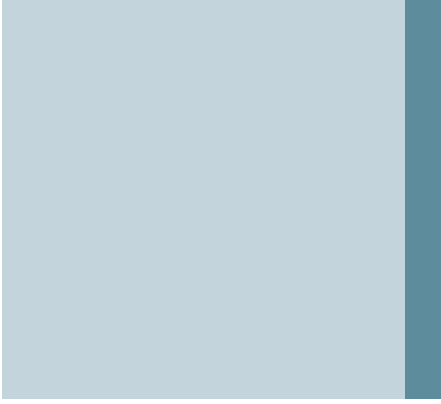
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[27] Patrick Taylor, "Portrack House," in *The Oxford Companion to the Garden*, ed. Patrick Taylor (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 390.



[28] Charles Jencks, *The Garden of Cosmic Speculation* (London: Frances Lincoln, 2003).

[29] See [www.inexplicableodeur.com](http://www.inexplicableodeur.com); accessed 10/10/2013.

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