

Keeping an Eye Open for Scents and Stenches. Reflections on Combining Smelling with Visual Data in Perspective of Anthropology of Waste

Abstract: The text deals with an issue of reading images as a way of perceiving the osmosphere. The author observes that eyesight might enhance other sensory modalities, provided that the eye no longer is isolated from natural interaction with the environment which has olfactory properties, but also audio and haptic. The analysis is related to two possibilities of reasoning about smells based on visual data. In the first case, the photograph appeals to the olfactory memory and serve as a tool to elicit a narration on scents from a person. In the second case, the use of the olfactory imagination seems to be necessary as a sort of subconscious for the hegemonic eye. The image an individual can see evokes internal representations, which should be taken into account when analysing and interpreting the urban space.

Key words: osmosphere, scents, urban space, anthropology of waste

To begin with, I should explain why I am concerned with documenting scents. It is due to my work as a researcher and lecturer, in which the relationship between the eye and the nose, although not of primary importance, is of substantial supplementary significance. The research I have thus far conducted, and the results of which I have published, pertain to the anthropology of waste and the sanitary culture of Warsaw.¹ The research has often entailed physical contact with waste, and necessitated illustrating my articles with photos of the scatological places to authenticate their stenches. Since filth produces intensive odours, I could empirically experience that urban space is indeed marked and segregated by smell, regardless of the code of the modern culture's obsession with hygiene. The city and cityscapes without scents would be devoid of identity, as was probably first noticed by Georg Simmel.²

¹ W.K. Pessel, *Antropologia nieczystości. Studia z historii kultury sanitarnej Warszawy*, Wydawnictwo Trio, Collegium Civitas, Warszawa 2010.

² G. Simmel, *The Sociology of Senses*, [in:] D. Frisby, M. Featherstone (eds.), *Simmel on Culture: Selected Essays*, Sage, London 1997.

Filth, smelling and cities

It is a different matter when it is a participant of the urban culture who tries to avoid recognising and diagnosing unpleasant smells. Social indifference towards waste is also dependent on the sensory circumstances, which are influenced by social and cultural factors. Filth does not necessarily need to bother people – it may go unnoticed by them, as long as it does not offend the sense of smell, or as long as it does not continuously and intensively excite it. We only react when something reeks under our very nose, which makes it impossible for us not to see it. Stench exposes the presence of particularly repulsive scatological places and refuse dumps. Stenches cause humans to react with disgust, because bad smells make us think of death, degradation, the decomposition of matter, or carrion. The power of stench is based on its ability to confuse, to immediately excite the senses, thus conquering the weakness of osmological cognition stemming from the changes in the customs of the European modern times.

Indifference to the osmosphere generated by waste, as was proven by the aforementioned Georg Simmel, was, and is, continuously deepened by the sensory deprivation inherent to the urban culture, understood as urbanisation as well as the formation of a big city mentality. One must, however, bear in mind the civilisation dimension of the indifference. In metropolises it brought about a cultural shift, which caused the city dwellers to cease their social resistance against the flushing of faeces down underground sewers and entrusting their waste to an arbitrary and communal cleansing system. Simmel classified the municipal infrastructure as an impersonal system of culture. Modernising cities have become the strongholds of reason and money, binding the intellect with monetary economy. The nature of city inhabitants' social knowledge is mental and abstract in character, but at a great expense to the senses. The city bombards the nervous system with numerous stimuli, thus desensitising it to outer visual, auditory, but also olfactory signals. So when it comes to scents in a city as big as Warsaw, the smells are either a part of a hidden dimension of culture, belonging to its silent language, or are perceived with anxiety and disgust when they force themselves upon the noses, when they prove too offensive. Such is the case with the underground passage under the Dmowskiego Roundabout in Warsaw: the nostrils of the people passing through it are overwhelmed by a mixture of odours from stalls with panini sandwiches and bakeries, combined with a scent of coffee from the nearby chain coffeehouse.

The small towers along the Poniatowskiego Bridge may have been refurbished and illuminated by the city magistrate during the bridge's latest general renovation, but it did not protect them from a quick restoration of an exceptionally unfavourable aura of smells. To put it briefly, the towers again serve as the city's nocturnal urinal, and often as a shelter to local packs of revellers. All this puts into question the thesis about the contemporary culture's developing aromatisation and the sense of smell giving way to the sense of sight. Such propositions do not seem to be entirely unfounded, but they are rather premature. True: scents are utilised for marketing purposes or to aestheticise public spaces. Perfumeries open their doors wide to attract customers with pleasant fragrances. Popular coffeehouses use reed diffusers to authenticise the freshness and quality of the coffee they brew. But all this takes

place in what might be called enclaves of cleanliness, spaces pleasing to the eye. In other places, by far not peripheral and neglected, but out of the majority's sight, as is the case with the Poniatowskiego Bridge, it is filth and stench that shamelessly prevail.

When I go to the Powiśle railway station in Warsaw, I am not accompanied by thoughts of the de-odourisation of public spaces as one of the basic dimensions of popular culture at the turn of the 21st century. I do, however, recollect the observations made by Mercier in his celebrated *Tableau de Paris*, published in 1791, which described the needy gathering near the elegant hedges of palaces. Besides, aromatisation, nowadays presented in the context of sanitary culture and urban customs as a matter of the times to come, is not a subject devoid of a rich cultural past. In Paris alone, between 1762 and 1853, several dozens of methods of disinfecting cesspools, or pit toilets, had been devised, most of which relied on strongly-fragranced plant extracts or essences. When in the 1870s Warsaw faeces were extracted from the modernised, hermetical cesspools located on the courtyards of tenement houses using the so called Berger Apparatus, which was manufactured under German licence, the cesspool cleaners would set up a device reminiscent of a censer on the sidewalk. It produced fragrant fumes, which neutralised the stench. The fumes allowed the bystanders to comfortably observe the device's operation and the work of the cleaners.

Employing very strong, oppressive scents in order to overcome other, unpleasant, smells, is a universally used mechanism, and in some respect dubious. Aromatisation can appear where there is a need to discreetly conceal the embarrassing sources of stench. This is something particularly noteworthy for researchers weary of the city's iconography as the seat of evil and ugliness, who are searching for new descriptive categories, thus classifying the sanitary culture's history of origin as exhausted topoi. As far as sanitation is concerned, empirical data can be more resistant, comprehensive, and lasting, than scientific categories.

Cross-disciplinary need for osmosphere

When the scent is strong enough, we can expect that it will be remembered and recollected, even in separation from the particular place in which it originated. If that specific sensation can be documented and achieved at all, we will certainly be forced to achieve it using vision and image. We cannot reflect upon the sense of smell and the perception of fragrances and stenches without recording them with modern media. If a researcher of urban culture and everyday life collects wedding invitations and flyers advertising escort agencies, and later usually converts them to a digital format, he could collect smells in the same way. Qualitative research methodology offers no ready solutions how to do it, and they are still to be developed. Of course, we could traditionally satisfy ourselves with survey notes, that is, exhaustive descriptions. The same approach could be adopted by field researchers of culture investigating various issues in general. Yet, more and more frequently, they use visual data: photos and films. Reading images as a way of reading the osmosphere should all the more so be taken into consideration and made a subject of research and experimentation. What is more, such an appreciation of the osmosphere would be in accordance with the post-modern

vision of culture. Already Michel Maffesoli expressed “street spectacles” in categories of “affinity parishes” and “an architectonic whole”³. Such a “materiality of being-together” is hard to imagine as something having its basis solely in the visual; it is based on multi-sensory communication. What is problematic, is how a theory aspiring to diagnose the empirical reality gives no direct suggestions as to how should researchers take into account, for example, the aromatic dimension of urban culture, or how should they describe smellscape. Phil Macnaghten and John Urry acknowledge in their riveting book that “[the] geography of the nose has not been particularly developed within the western academy”⁴.

I am conducting my current research in the area of the history of culture in Scandinavia, where I inevitably encounter progressive architecture, which decidedly breaks with the primacy of the visual. It grants the skin eyes, as in the title of Juhani Pallasmaa’s essay.⁵ Take the Copenhagen district of Ørestad, for example: some enjoy its forced ultra-modernity, others are intrigued by it, but, by integrating the structures with their natural environment, it dazzles us with tactile and olfactory sensations. On one of the housing project’s blocks, a carpet of green descends in terraces from the roofs of the ordinary blocks of flats and flows down, leading the nose and feet to green spots and streamlets. Besides, students attending my workshops about Warsaw signal their weariness with modern culture’s oculo-centrism and their interest in other senses, which are being weakened by patterns of culture. I share this readiness to question the role of the eye as the only socially recognised sensory organ, and the reduction of the nose to a sensory relic, which is to perform only private functions and to serve only for a person’s individual use. It is as if it was impossible to challenge Freud’s ruling, which is in its essence evolutionistic, that a cultured, upright-walking human being is an individual who looks, whereas the sense of smell is animalistic, fit for a man walking on all fours, who remains outside culture and is controlled by instincts and sexual urges. It is no coincidence that in Richard Wagner’s librettos the socially accepted relationships, particularly a typically bourgeois marriage, bear no mark of a scent, whereas strong odours always appear in some dangerous, erotic context.⁶

But of course, stressing the role of the sense of smell does not necessarily mean provoking an olfactory turn in cultural studies, parallel to the spatial turn, the interpretive turn, etc.⁷ I do not intend to masquerade the laws of biology under a humanistic discourse in this essay. Physiological and neuropsychological facts are indisputable. To name some of the most striking ones: the optic nerve can transmit an incredible amount of information to the brain, whereas smell and other senses are not as functional; although humans possess several million cells responsible for discerning scents, only a fraction of the air flowing through the nasal cavity is subjected to osmological control; human beings are not macrosomatic

³ M. Maffesoli, *The Time of the Tribes: The Decline of Individualism in Mass Society*, transl. D. Smith, Sage, London 1997, chap. 4: *Tribalism*.

⁴ P. Macnaghten, J. Urry, *Contested Natures*, Sage, London 1998, p. 127.

⁵ J. Pallasmaa, *The Eyes of the Skin: Architecture and the Senses*, John Wiley and Sons, Hoboken 2012.

⁶ A. Gilbert, *What the Nose Knows: The Science of Scent in Everyday Life*, Crown, New York 2008, p. 140.

⁷ D. Bachmann-Medick, *Cultural Turns: Neuorientierungen in den Kulturwissenschaften*, Rowohlt, Reinbek bei Hamburg 2006.

animals, i.e. that is, possessing a keen sense of smell allowing them to track scents like, for example, dogs do, whose sense of smell is 11,000 times more acute than that of an average human; we are subject to olfactory adaptation, which operates analogically to visual adaptation, otherwise called accommodation of the eye, observed when, for example, we leave a dark room and go into the sunlight.⁸ The longer we smell a scent, the more neutral, or intangible, it becomes. Hence, Warsaw garbage men with whom I have spoken claimed that for them their garbage trucks do not reek, but if they do smell of anything, it is of a green apple-scented Wunder-Baum.

I believe that to consider the collection and visual documentation of scents, we would need to use the chance, proven by the “white smocks”, that vision can successfully amplify our other sensory modalities. For this to succeed, we would need to cease socially isolating the eye from a natural interaction with the environment, which possesses olfactory, tactile, aural, and gustatory qualities. Sources of inspiration can also be found in social anthropology, as well as philosophy and criticism of architecture. Edmund Leach, in his essay titled *Taste and Smell*, points out the cultural consequences of synaesthetics on the example of the two senses. He stresses how sensory data overlap and interweave, creating an olfactory atmosphere in which man is immersed. As he writes:

If I stroke a pussy in the dark I can feel where her nose begins and where her tail ends. But smell and tastes are not easily separable and segmentable in that sort of way. Without very special training it is hard to determine just where one taste or smell stimulus ends and another begins, and when tastes and smells overlie one another they merge to generate an atmosphere rather than an impression of a set of separable objects.⁹

At this particular point, I would like to remind you of the cinnamon shops described in *The Street of Crocodiles* by Bruno Schulz, which he conceived not only for their fragrance of spices, but also for their colourful quality, thus exploiting the correspondence of the senses and the translatability of the different senses' experiences. For the same reason, another culture text, the recently released *Imagine*, a Polish-Portuguese film directed by Andrzej Jakimowski, should be recognised as a very informative audiovisual treatise on the significance of the olfactory imagination and combining of sensual data. Disclosing the entire plot of the movie would be unforgivable, so I will reveal only the general premise. An instructor arrives at a renowned Lisbon clinic for the blind, headed by an eminent physician. Ian teaches the art of spatial orientation to the young patients using controversial methods that he employs himself, which include walking down busy streets without a cane. To the clinic's director, recognizing a cat or differentiating climbing flowers from all others by their smell, seems to be more of an artistic whim than a technique of spatial orientation. The blind in Jakimowski's film learn to look at the world and to see it with their imagination. To see with one's imagination, one only needs to create a mental representation of the object

⁸ W. Ślęzak-Tazbir, M.S. Szczepański, *W miejskiej osmotece. Próba perspektywy osmologicznej w badaniach miejskich*, “Przegląd Humanistyczny” 2010, no. 3.

⁹ E. Leach, *Taste and Smell*, [in:] S. Hugh-Jones, J. Laidlaw (eds.), *The Essential Edmund Leach*, New Haven–London 2000, vol. 2: *Culture and Human Nature*, p. 238.

actually existing without. Indeed, the same part of the brain responsible for vision is used by people who see and by the blind. They too interpret the world with images. But without imagination, sensitivity to scents, but also sounds and tactile stimuli, they cannot put the images together. Again, the olfactoric sphere becomes more like a subconscious of the vision, the smell successfully outpacing it.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty, a phenomenological philosopher, follows the same notions as Edmund Leach, an anthropologist. In his all-important philosophical tract, he stressed the interactional relationship between the perceiving subject and the world.¹⁰ Only after walking barefoot, as the Finnish tend to do more often than us, on the creaking floor boards of a log cabin, can we truly sense the resinous scent of a cosy home; we can hear its smell. It is definitely worth noting, that in the Old Polish language smells were “heard”.

Two methodical proposals

We arrive at a presumably valid question: how to functionalise what has been written here so far? How to translate it into precise methodological guidelines for utilising visual data in the case of recorded images, particularly photographs?

I see two possibilities of reasoning about smells based on visual data. I stress the circumstance that I do that from my specific point of view of researcher of sanitary culture. In the first case, the photograph would appeal to the olfactory memory and serve as a tool to elicit a narration on scents from a person. It would be required that the person looking at the picture would be its author or in some way a witness to the situation portrayed. In the second case, when the requirement could not be fulfilled, the use of olfactory imagination would be necessary. We thus recognise the sense of smell as a sort of subconscious for the hegemonic eye: the image we see evokes internal representations, which can be taken into account when analysing and interpreting the urban space. As Avery Gilbert, a smell scientist, says: biology equipped man with the abilities of synaesthesia and empathy, which only needs to be stimulated.¹¹

In the first discussed case, the photo would serve as a tool for eliciting memories, a sort of support for the olfactory memory, exploiting the strong natural link between the sense of smell and human memory: olfactory receptors located in the nose transmit signals directly to the limbic system, which is responsible for emotions and storing memories. Hence, even the subtlest scent is unpleasant if it brings back unpleasant memories. Conversely, even the most trivial smells cause enthusiastic reactions if they are linked to some pleasant past experience. Olfactory memories, so named by Paul Rodaway in his *Sensuous Geographies: Body, Sense and Place*, are of particular importance for childhood memories, the recollection of homelands, places of residence, relationships, etc. On the same neuropsychological basis, revulsion operates as a cultural regulator of receptivity. With smell, as opposed to

¹⁰ M. Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, transl. A. Lingis, ed. C. Lefort, Northwestern University Press, Evanston 1969.

¹¹ A. Gilbert, *op. cit.*, p. 131.

other senses, the response is always swifter than the thought. That is why a response to a revolting stimulus is so sudden and automatic. In cultural studies' research, an individual's appeal to their olfactory memory seems particularly useful in the case of oral history. An outline of what Katarzyna Kuzko-Zwierz calls 'spatial sensualness' reveals the memories of Praga district's residents, which are collected by the employees of The Museum of Warsaw Praga. To illustrate: it is a recurring theme in recollections referring to the Wedel chocolate factory that the memories are emotionally charged; Praga residents would go on a stroll in the Skaryszewski Park to smell flowers, as well the scent of chocolate from the nearby factory. The factory still produces the characteristic scent of chocolate which envelops the neighbourhood. When the workers from the factory board the number 9 tram, the chocolate scent often lingers until the tram reaches the district of Ochota, well on the other side of the river.

In the latter of the mentioned cases, we would like to, in a sense, exploit the neurobiology of empathy for the needs of the humanities and social sciences. In other words, we would want to stimulate the olfactory imagination, shape the ability to create the mental representations of scents. All actions performed by others and observed by us, including the ones we read about or, more importantly, see on a screen or a photograph, are also performed by us, except we perform them in our minds. We also mentally reproduce the states observed in others. Laboratory researchers claim that this is the way mirror neurons manifest themselves. Only for the imitation of other people's behaviour are these neurons not responsible, because they are responsible primarily for human empathy: at the sight of someone breaking a rotten egg, we wince as if we were the ones sensing the smell.

A person with a vivid olfactory imagination and who is aware of the surrounding osmosphere can, thanks to empathy, create a mental representation of the scents by looking at a photo, without having directly witnessed the portrayed situation. Let us make a provocative assumption that the sense of vision is also an extension of smell, and not just of touch. Therefore, the eye discovers what is already known to the touch and the smell. When we ask someone to imagine a scent, the person will surely instinctively begin by loudly inhaling air through their nose. But while they smell the imaginary scents, their eyes will surely scan the imaginary surroundings, following the same paths they would follow if the situation was real. The eye discovers what the touch and the smell already see. At the same time, they are all integral elements of perception. Innate empathy allows humans to sympathise with someone else's olfactory situation upon perceiving its visual representation.

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Years ago, surrealists chose to abandon rationalism and logical thinking in favour of the fantasy of inner associations. There is undoubtedly a surreal element in eliciting olfactoric memories with photos, or in appealing to the consciousness, empathy, and imagination, in order to reconstruct scents as if they were images, just as it seems surreal to teach the blind to walk without a cane and to find their way using the senses of smell, sound, and touch. Apparently, the art of the olfactory and the attempt to further the appreciation of the osmosphere together make Art.

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