

‘What’s that smell? A philosophy of the olfactory’ by Simon Hajdini (2024)

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What to say about this collection of essays published as part of the Short Circuits series from MIT Press? As a psychologist interested in the philosophy of the senses, and in particular these days, the chemical senses, then this volume sounded like something that should have been ‘right up my street’. Unfortunately, however, the volume – ‘*What’s that smell? A philosophy of the olfactory*’ – concerns itself not so much with the philosophy of perception, as in Anne Sophie Barwich’s excellent volume *Smellosophy* (Barwich, 2020), but rather with smell’s role at the center of a philosophical critique of the traditional notion of truth. According to the book’s back cover, in the volume Hajdini challenges the idea that smell in the anti-philosophical sense *par excellence*. Given the subject matter, it is obviously less likely that this particular collection of essays was going to capture the interest to the typical reader of, and/or contributor to, *Perception*.

According to the series forward, which opens this volume, Slavoj Žižek suggests that the aim is to be shocking, “in the sense of dealing with a “lower,” less dignified topic”. Žižek continues: “This, then, is not a new series of books on psychoanalysis, but a series of “connections in the Freudian field”—of short Lacanian interventions in art, philosophy, theology, and ideology.” So, rather than a philosophy of olfaction, as seemingly advertised in the title of the book, the truth is that one finds much more of a psychoanalytic approach, with plenty of discussion of Freud, Lacan, and Marx. The focus is more on what smells signify rather than on the way in which they are perceived.

Some of the more accessible, and for me, interesting, content comes when the author connects to various classics in the history and/or literature of smell. As one might expect, there is much discussion of Grenouille from Patrick Süskind’s bestselling novel (and thereafter film) *Perfume: The Story of a Murderer*, Hans Rindibasher’s (1992), *The Smell of Books* (a topic which I myself have become interested in recently; Spence, 2020a), and, of course, Marcel Proust with the *petites madeleines* in his *Remembrance of Things Past* (Proust, 1922, 1960). Interestingly, Hajdani notes how Proust apparently struggled to come up with the right olfactory descriptor, at least at first. Initially describing the smell as ‘honey-mixes toast’, before finally settling on the *petit madeleines* in the third draft (Chrisafis, 2015).

That said, for those of you out there who are fascinated by the psychological meaning of shit, and its passing, or otherwise, then this volume might just be for you (especially the fourth chapter ‘Pecunia—olet’)! That said, for those who are interested in a scatological approach to cultural history, then Muchembled’s (2021) informative and entertaining discourse may be the place to go.¹ Meanwhile, for a cultural history of aroma/smell more generally, I still find

¹ One of the interesting molecules mentioned by Hajdani is trimethylamine. It turns out that humans are exquisitely sensitive to this biologically-relevant volatile molecule, described as smelling like rotting fish, which appears in various nether bodily crevices (Brand & Galask, 1986; Mitchell & Smith, 2016). It has been estimated that we humans can detect the presence of as little as one molecule per billion (Leonardos, Kendall, & Barnard, 1969), so equivalent to the phenomenal sensitivity some people have to the 2-4-6-Trichloroanisol that gives rise to cork taint (Buser, Zanier, & Tanner, 1982). What is more, the fact that trimethylamine is twice as dense as air means that a sufficiently high concentration of material lingers, creating an aura, or envelope, of the fishy smell around an affected individual

Classen, Howes, and Synnott's (1994) classic edited volume a much more accessible place to start.

There is also plenty of discussion of smell and class. This ranges all the way from George Orwell's comment that the problem with the poor is that they smell: "The lower classes smell." (Orwell, 1937) through to the Bong Joon Ho's phenomenal movie *Parasite*, wherein smell, and specifically the smell of the poor, are situated at the heart of class war (Lawless, 2020). This certainly resonates with visiting my dirt poor grandfather on the fairground on the hard standing in Manningham Park, Bradford half a century ago. Paul was rumoured only to take a bath once a year (perhaps unsurprising given the lack of running water), and the smell of DERV (Diesel Engine Road Vehicle), the white diesel used to power on-road vehicles, was ever-present in the wagon. There was always a distinctive odour associated with a trip to see the grandparents. All of that before the dark olfactory terrors of the unlit toilet shed lurking outside; It was always best to try and hold it in till we got home rather than subject oneself to the olfactory shock I seem to remember from being a little boy visiting his wagon in the 1970s.

In the early day of the cinema, which my grandfather's own grandfather first popularized in the North of England back in the 1890s (see 'Death of Randall Williams. A noted showman', 1898; Gashinski, 2011), showing moving pictures in tented enclosures always ensured a draft of fresh air. However, when in the opening decades of the 20th century, films started to be shown in unventilated bricks and mortar buildings, the smell of the populace soon became a problem. In the UK, long intermissions, were needed to provide an opportunity to ventilate the space.

The stench that would arise during movie performances became so unbearable that handheld devices were soon introduced to spray deodorant over the audience's heads a few times per screening. And when this failed to solve the problem, 10-minute 'airing breaks' were introduced in a desperate bid to help clear the air (Payer, 2001). Going further still, in the 1920s, at Berlin's Ufa-Palast, a flying balloon would float in the auditorium in order to spray fragrant cologne water during the intermissions. In fact, so widespread was the problem of malodor that one of the early deodorants, going by the name of *Perolin* (with a distinctive naphthalene-like smell), came to be the characteristic scent that cinema-goers would associate with a trip to the movies in the opening decades of the 20th century.

The problem was that poor folk would come straight from work to the cinema in their smelly work attire. However, it was not just the poor who smelled back in the day. The suggestion was that the rich smelled too (even though they might have the opportunity to change into black tie before a trip to the opera). Nevertheless, the men would still put a gardenia in their button hole as a kind of natural deodorant (Sebag-Montefiore, 2016; Spence, 2020b). All of this to say that perhaps the real difference between the rich and the poor is not that the latter smell more than the former, but rather that the rich can afford to smell of something other than themselves, at least before the introduction of widespread home and personal care (HPC) products (Auxtova, Schreven, & Zyglidopoulos, 2023).

Both Hadjani (2024) and Barwich (2020) mention Democritus. Barwich, for example noting how: "Democritus and the later Roman philosopher Lucretius speculated about pleasantness. They thought that pleasant smells were caused by round particles, while unpleasant ones had edgy shapes like triangles." (Barwich, 2020, pp. 14-15). There has been a recent growth of

interest in the crossmodal correspondences (see Spence, 2011), that is the surprising connections that most people experience between the senses that appear to be consensually shared between groups of individuals. The suggestion that angular-shaped molecules were associated with unpleasant odours (the early shape theory of smell), such as ammonia, whereas pleasant smells were associated with round-shaped molecules instead, might nowadays be framed as one of the earliest reports of a shape- or angularity-smell crossmodal correspondence (see Deroy, Crisinel, & Spence, 2013; Seo, Arshamian, Schemmer, Scheer, Sander, Ritter Hummel, 2010; Ward, Rahman, Wuerger, & Marshall, 2022; Ward, Wuerger, & Marshall, 2021, for contemporary evidence). Generally-speaking, people tend to match pleasant stimuli, such as round shapes and sweet smells/tastes together, while feeling that angular shapes and unpleasant/dangerous tastes belong together, perhaps reflecting the emotional mediation that appears to underlie many crossmodal correspondences.

However, over-and-above the challenging nature of much of the subject matter (at least for a psychologist more interested in the philosophy of perception) in Hajdani's collection of essays is the fact that the four essays essentially stand apart from one from another, with little attempt to create a flowing narrative. What is more, with no introductory chapter, nor any attempt to wrap the whole up into a coherent narrative at the end, we are simply left with a disjointed series of essays that do not, for this reader at least, deliver anything more than the sum of the parts. Furthermore, given that the psychoanalytic approach has little traction in the cognitive neurosciences currently, and given that the cultural history of smell has been thoroughly covered by others (Classen et al., 1994; Muchembled, 2021), there was little of interest for this reader, or one imagines, the readers of *Perception* in this collection of 'shocking' essays.

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