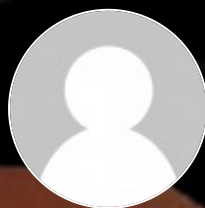


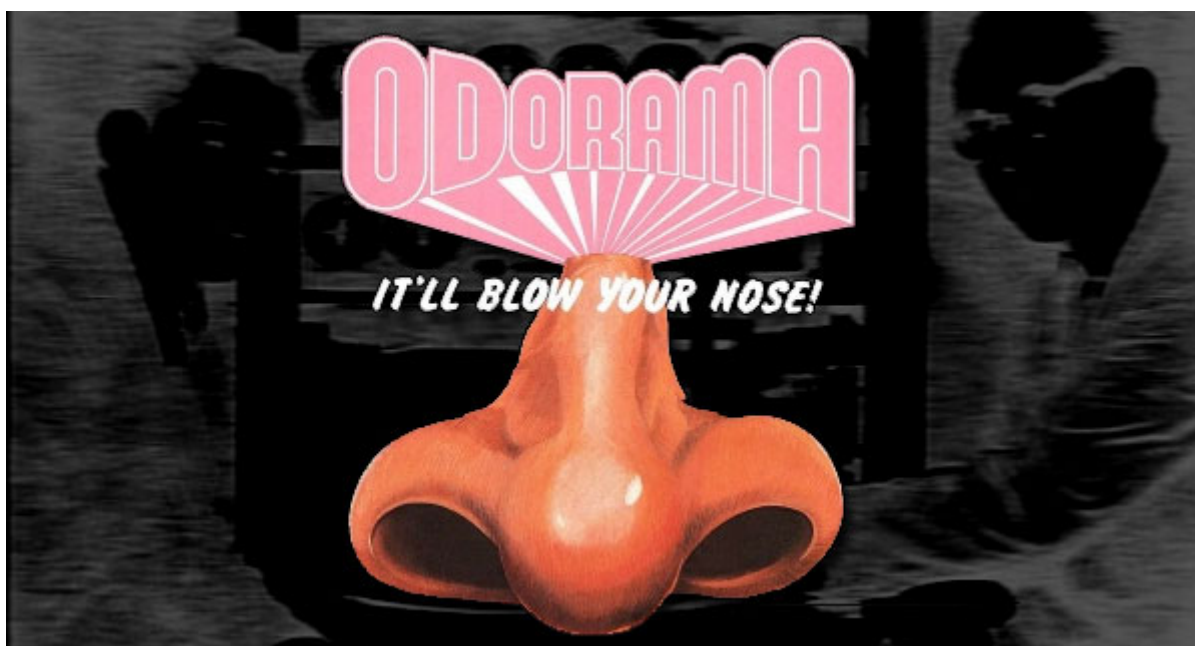
A Brief History of Scent Technology

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[KWASI ALUMNI](#)

For more than half a century eccentric inventors have been experimenting with ways to captivate our sense of smell. From Hans Lube's 'Smell-O-Vision to David Edward's oPhone, the history of scent technology is littered with weird and wacky attempts at engaging our third sense.



The Third Sense

To most of us – myself included – the idea of transmitting smells digitally is absurd. But despite scent tech's rich history of failure, a handful of contemporary researchers remain steadfast in their commitment to trying to capitalise and monetise our illusive third sense.

The emotional power of smell is what's driven people like Michael Todd Jr. and Hans Lube (the inventors of Smell-O-Vision) to go beyond sound and vision. And since we remember smells with much greater accuracy than we do vision, theoretically it makes perfect *sense* for inventors to try to create devices that exploit our emotional connection to smell. But so far, all have failed.

First they Moved! Then they Talked! Now they Smell!

By no means the first attempt, Smell-O-Vision was indeed the most ambitious and comprehensive attempt at adding the third sense to the cinema going experience.

Smell-O-Vision involved a complex system of pipes connected to individual seats that released odors (roses, tobacco and perfumes) at particular moments during a screening so that the viewer could “smell” what was happening on screen. However, the short-lived technique was slammed by movie-goers and only ever featured in one film, *Scent of Mystery*; produced by Mike Todd, Jr., the son of Academy Award winning film producer and third husband of Elizabeth Taylor, Mike Todd.



As the New York Post’s chief film critic, Lou Lumenick notes,

“reviews from 1960 suggest the system didn’t work very well. Some audience members weren’t able to detect the scents at all, while others complained the scents were released prematurely, or griped about a hissing sound preceding their release”.

In short, Hans Laube’s complex technique of injecting odors into the theatre when triggered by the film’s soundtrack was an unqualified failure, but for those with an interest in B cinema this hard to find jewel has [recently been released as a region 1 Blu-ray](#) in the US.

John Water’s Odorama

Following the demise of Smell-O-Vision the quest to add smells to the film-going experience was largely abandoned until 1981.

Twenty years after the failure that was *Scent of Mystery*, the idiosyncratic cult filmmaker, John Waters came up with the idea of Odorama. Whilst Hans Laube’s Smell-O-Vision was far more involved, Odorama was a much greater success. For his sixth feature, *Polyester*, Waters decided to create scratch and sniff cards, a concept that required the audience to scratch a hand-held card when cued by a number appearing at the top of the frame.

There were no bells and whistles, and no complex machinery, the viewer simply scratched their card and sniffed.



Introducing the oPhone

Moving on to more modern inventions, last year saw the first commercial version of the oPhone unveiled by the [innovative laboratory](#), Le Laboratoire. Invented by Harvard Professor, David Edwards, this queer looking gadget is designed to transmit scented messages via a specially designed app and two futuristic looking cylindrical contraptions.

So how does it work? First, you’ve got to download the oSnap application. Then you take your picture – let’s say you snap a pic of a cheesecake you’ve just ordered from the hip new bakery in your neighbourhood. Inside the app you then tag the image with any number of the 32 available scents. Once you’ve selected the scents that best describe your cheesecake you simply hit send. The recipient is then able to smell the sweet aromas of your cheesecake via the oPhone itself.



As you can see from the above video, this device is a little ridiculous. And i can’t really see it becoming widely adopted until it becomes mobile. As [Liz Stinson from Wired](#) highlights,

“the oPhone’s promise is obvious, but more important than that is how cool this could be once the technology shrinks down enough to put something like the oPhone in our pocket or embed it directly into our phone. Once that happens, and the catalog of smells becomes robust enough to include the aromas of something more personal... the applications start to become much more exciting.”

The Return of Smell-O-Vision

While scented text technology may be just around the corner – courtesy of the oPhone – the Japanese startup, Aromajoin, has been experimenting with a new take on Smell-O-Vision. The companies chief engineer, Dong Wook Kim, has been busy developing what he calls “solid scent cartridges”; contraptions that shoot smells at you while you’re watching the telly.

As [Ryan Whitwam from Extremtech](#) states, “that part isn’t anything new – there are plenty of prototype systems that can puff smells at you, but they all rely on some sort of inconvenient liquid reservoir to do it.... That’s why the solid cartridges employed by Aromajoin’s Aroma Shooter could finally work as more than mere novelty. The carts created by Kim can provide three second bursts of aroma more than 45,000 times each. You could therefore trigger a single cartridge 250 times per day and it would still last six months.”

As it currently stands the Aroma Shooter is just a prototype, but Dong Wook Kim envisions a near future when the *smelltrack* of our favourite television shows and movies is as important as the sound and vision.

Wake Up & Smell the Bacon

If the oPhone and Smell-O-Vision aren’t stupid enough for you, get a whiff of Scentee. This downright ridiculous technology, first released in Japan last year and developed by Professor Adrian Cheek from City University London, is yet another example of a seemingly useless exploration of scent technology.

This kitschy app is accompanied by a dongle that plugs straight into the headphone jack of your iPhone that according to its manufacturers, “can be used in a range of commercial applications, from diet programs, advertising and health care, to cooking recipes and personal communications.” But the only intelligent use for this aromatic communication device that I’ve come across has come from Kraft Food’s Oscar Mayer brand .

While I can’t see this device taking off at \$US35 for the plug-in, Oscar Mayer exploited it to great effect with their [‘Wake Up and Smell the Bacon’](#) campaign.



Conclusion

According to the British invention charity, Nesta – an NGO with a mission to help people bring great ideas to life – 2015 is set to be the year [scent tech loses it stench](#). However, despite well respected researchers like Professor Adrian Cheek from City University London and Harvard’s David Edwards, as well as engineers like Dong Wook Kim being committed to the cause, I’m not convinced.

For my mind the oPhone, Scentee, and even Aromajoin’s new take on Smell-O-Vision, are all destined for the great scrap heap of entrepreneurial failure. Much like Hans Laube’s original Smell-O-Vision more than five decades earlier, all three of these costly inventions (as they currently stand) are pure, unadulterated gimmick.

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