

Handbook of

Cultural Geography

Edited by

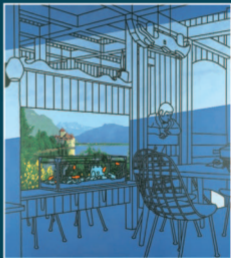
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engagement, cultural geography is rightly seen as ‘empirical’ in some sense, but this is no naive stance. In many ways, geographers have attempted to describe, to understand, to explain, and to intervene in the world. ‘Case studies’ have performed a very particular role: part evidence, part validation, part intervention.

We would like to add to this, part evocation. Contrary to the lingering legacy of positivist thinking with which ‘case studies’ grew up, we do not conceive of them as simple descriptions of the world as it is. For cultural geographers, the case study is not a local application of an abstract model, or a ‘micro’ statement of a ‘macro’ series of events. Rather, case studies are passionate evocations of the world and an engagement in it. In what follows, we present accounts of different worlds: worlds through the nose; the worlds of Victorian literature; worlds gathered into a display of nature’s resources; and worlds that collide in protest. In the case studies, we do not attempt to unfold all the worlds we can find there, but seek to drive a certain purpose through the evocation of very particular worlds. In that sense, this part of the introduction takes its shape less from an explication *about* cultural geography (something that might not have been possible but for the introductions to each section by the section editors, and for the work of the authors themselves) than from an immersion *in* it.

In the four case studies or vignettes that follow, we seek to show how different lines of argument and thought can be played out under the umbrella of cultural geography. In doing this, we seek to show that how cultural geographers go about telling their stories differs from person to person, and that they use different voices and evidence to do so, with different purposes in mind. We are, nevertheless, all trying to say something about the world, and to expand the possibilities for unfolding and engaging that world differently. To be sure, the four case studies do not provide four corners of a map within which cultural geography is to be found. Instead, these vignettes are intended to be evocative of the diversity of possible cultural geographies. Each case study offers an analysis of different kinds of ‘focus of attention’ or ‘object’: from smell, to a novel, to an agricultural show, to a site of protest. From these ‘objects’, different geographies are unfolded to provide arguments about the world. In this sense, these case studies are more than examples: they are invitations to explore the world, to focus attention differently, to open the world out.

‘All nose’ *Nigel Thrift*

The world is populated by what Bruno Latour calls ‘mediaries’ – active means of crossing and linking, means of making new ‘wes’ and ‘its’, which share in so much of the agency we so often ascribe only to ourselves. Mediarities can make unexpected connections as they produce new means of holding things together, connections which not only code but also produce wonder and enchantment. Here I want to write about a set of mediaries which we constantly construct and inhabit but which are rarely written about, mediaries that force us to think in new ways about how the world is: aromas, smells, scents – the entities that impact our 6–10 million nasal neurons and set off all kinds of bodily reactions, some explicit, some veiled.

Aromas inhabit our world like a second skin. They are so familiar that, much of the time, we seem to hardly register them at all. Yet just like skin, they can also stimulate, and transmit love and distress. Aromas can create an ambience of wellbeing, they can evoke past

situations, and they can produce reactions of disgust and shame. It is no surprise that aromas have been central to human practices for many thousands of years, as boosts to sensual desire, as gifts, even as an element in the intercession between God and human.

In current cultures, aromas surround us, from the body scents we secrete and wear, to the cooking smells purposely introduced into the air of supermarkets in order to stimulate purchases. Indeed it is possible to argue that the contemporary world plays host to a spectrum of smells even greater than those of Ancient Egypt (renowned for its smell culture) or Ancient China (which went as far as inventing incense clocks), the result of the chemical engineering of aroma that has been characteristic of the last 150 years.

Certainly even though contemporary cultures may still privilege the visual register, they cannot imagine worlds that exist without smells; just as most religious paradises were imagined as being sweet-smelling, and even some utopias (like that of Fourier) are conjured up complete with complex registers of smells (Classen, 1998), so an essential part of today's consumer paradises is the articulation of smell.

Aroma then is central to human activity, and yet somehow it is off-centre to how we write that activity. Its quiet intensity dislocates our abilities to describe it. Why this disjuncture? Well, to begin with, it is because aroma automatically conjures up the kind of sensuality which many academics are exactly trying to dispel. Written argument, it seems, has to be divorced from the whole body. Then again aromas, though readily detected and differentiated, are not easily described in language. They are difficult to 'read', though so frequently displayed. They lend themselves not to semantic reductions but rather to somatic reactions. Aromas are not easily made specific in ways which lend themselves to written categorization. And, finally, aromas seem to escape our cognitive consciousness. They belong to a realm of 'peripheral' psychomotorial actions, an insistent substrate of incessant movement that makes up so much of what we are, but which we so often choose not to register as thought, even though the stamp of the impressions of this movement constantly influences us. They are a part of the landscape of the body which we have so often tried to suppress (Dagognet, 1992).

So how can we register aroma? And, more to the point, what has this got to do with cultural geography now? To answer these two questions, let me move to a brief history of the economy of smell which shows its centrality, and then draw some 'sensational' conclusions.

Smell has always had economic value. In the ancient, classical and medieval worlds, that value was found in the trade in 'spices', a category that includes all kinds of aromatic items that now might well be traded separately: drugs, condiments, perfumes, incense and even dyestuffs (which might well be aromatic) were never clearly distinguished from each other. However categorized, these aromatics provided one of the economic pivots of the world economy, being used in religious ceremony, in perfumery, in diet and increasingly in medicine. 'In the medieval west, different kinds of aromata were purchased from apothecaries, spicers, pepperers, perfumers (*aromarii*), grocers and *pigmentarii*' (Donkin 1999: 2). The travels of aromatics were one of the keys to world trade, as they were moved from their source areas through major entrepôts like Constantinople (which by the seventeenth century had 600 apothecaries in 500 shops, 115 perfumers in 80 shops, 3000 grocers stocking items like juniper, cloves, pepper and cinnamon, and numerous 'merchants of rosewater') to their final landing places on the tables, in the ceremonies or on the bodies of the rich and middling sorts. They brought China, Central Asia, Russia, Iran and Iraq, Indonesia, Malaysia, India, Sri Lanka, Madagascar, Arabia, Egypt, West Africa and many European countries into

conjunction with each other. The explosion of new spice routes post-Columbus brought even more regions into the story – Florida, Mexico, the Caribbean, Ecuador, Brazil and Peru (Dalby, 2000).

The effects of the spice trade on the landscapes of sensation that were available to the average European were considerable. For example, in seventeenth-century England whole new orders of worth (Thévenot, 2001) were established based on aroma. Take just gum benzoin, one of the products of the Malayan archipelago, and a favourite of the Chinese, which had become an important ingredient for perfumers by the time of Ben Jonson's play *Cynthia's Revels*, written in 1600.

Amorphus: Is the perfume rich in this ...?

Perfumer: Taste! Smell! I assure you, Sir, pure beniamin, the only spirited scent that ever awakened a Neapolitan nostril. You would wish yourself all nose for the love on't. I frothed a jerkin, for a new-revered gentleman, yielded me threesome crowns but this morning, and the same titillation.

The phrase 'pure beniamin' here does not mean that gum benzoin was the only ingredient present in the perfume, for

There follows a discussion and a list of them all – musa, civet, amber, turmeric along with thirteen others that came out of Ben Jonson's Latin books – but, as the perfumer says, 'it is the sorting, dividing, and the mixing and the tempering, and the searching, and the decocting' that make for success. The result is praised by Amorphus and his friends, as 'most worthy of a true voluptuary'. For courtship is in view, and in the England of 1600 men were still ready enough to discuss with one another the perfumes they wore on such occasion. (Dalby, 2000: 61)

The skills of sorting, dividing, mixing, searching, tempering and decocting smells still exist, of course, but now transformed into the modern global fragrance industry, worth, at current estimates, some \$20 billion per annum. The industry manufactures smell from a vast array of sources: the 200 or so plants raised commercially for their perfume (plants as different as roses, jasmine, lavender, iris, ginger, laurel, geranium, orange, lemon, grapefruit, balsam, olibanium (better known as frankincense), galbanium), animal products and, increasingly, synthetics. In turn, development, packaging and marketing add massive value to products which are sometimes worth only a few dollars at source.

Any one fragrance will be complex, involving at least 60 to 100 ingredients; some fragrances can have more than 300, and one scent reportedly has 700. So producing aroma is complex and its applications are wide-ranging. After all, most smells are produced not for perfumery but for much more mundane uses: for soaps, detergents, air fresheners, fabric softeners, cat litter, shaving cream, baby powder, nappies – the list goes on almost endlessly. Wander down the aisle of a supermarket and note just how many products are scented.

But how can this ocean of smell be understood and worked with? There are three ways, each of which has its geography of cultural 'representation'. One is through language. But one of the most problematic aspects of the process of producing smell is precisely language.

Speaking about fragrance can be like trying to get a toe-hold on a cloud ... There's even a term for it – the olfactory verbal gap – according to Dr Harry Lawless, a psychologist and professor of food sciences at

Cornell University. Lawless also coined the term ‘tip of the nose phenomenon’. Take away the rose, he says, and 25 to 50 per cent of those smelling its scent might not be able to identify it as a rose.

Tongue-tied, we compensate and translate description of fragrance into the language of other sensory experience. The language of fragrance employs color, for example, using the term ‘a green note’ to denote grass-like scents that derive from leaves, and shrubs. Another means is using the imagery of music, ‘a top note’ refers to substances that evaporate off the skin and hit the nose first, like citrus oils do. (Newman, 1998: 12)

A second means is through the vast network of science as it is laid out in spaces like laboratories. After all, all aromas can be represented as chemical formulae. Most particularly, gas chromatography mass spectrometers measure chemical traces in parts per million via spiked graphs. Some spikes will be irrelevant: they contribute nothing to smell. But others are easily identifiable aromas. Using such a method, 90–95 per cent of a scent’s components can be captured (though significantly, the last 5 per cent or so still need to be picked out by a nose).

A third means is habituated experience. So, perfumers are trained very carefully over many years and they are perhaps best described as artists of smell – like musicians or painters or wine tasters. Over many years they come to be able to identify and mix smells (‘notes’) in new combinations. The 400 or so expert perfumers in the world build up their expertise scent by scent, usually associating each scent with an event, a memory, a picture. And for the best perfumers it is

Imagination – Fantasy. It’s the difference between a chemist and a perfumer. You dream your perfume before you write the formula. It’s not just chance. It’s not just exact science. There will always be things that won’t work. You begin your fragrance as a composer, putting elements together. You finish your fragrance as a sculptor, shaping and paring down. (1998: 49)

Some perfumers still use ‘perfume organs’ – vast arrays of different fragrances which allow different combinations to be built up note by note.

This economy of smell lays down a series of challenges to our understanding of the spaces of the world. Quite clearly smell is a powerful force in human life. It can become the subject of economic empires. It can produce a symphony of sensibility. It can conjure up particular conducts and stimulate memories that are often peculiarly evocative. And yet we seem unable to say much about it that isn’t either trite or obvious. And, of course, smell is hardly the only sense to which this complaint can be applied: we have similar problems with taste, or touch, and even some aspects of vision and hearing (Marks, 2000). Why might this be? Almost certainly, it is because our ‘vocabulary’ (a word I will come back to) is too restricted to encompass anything other than certain dogmatic ways of thinking which arise from a scholastic way of life. Think of the typical model of the scholar. She is static. She usually inhabits a quiet space. She sits and contemplates the world through processes of ‘internal’ thought. She writes or taps a keyboard that both embodies and twists that thought. This way of thinking is culturally and historically specific. It has to be learnt at school and then as an adult. It comes generally from the time when the practices of reading first became internalized and reading aloud came to be considered as a childish thing (Johns, 2000).

Of course, this way of thinking is very powerful. Its mode of abstraction (quite literally) from the world produces a particular highly absorbed grip in which coherence and signification

are all. It therefore values the emblems of its way of life: considered writing, the interpretation of images and signs, long periods of gestation, in ways which can too easily come to be seen as the only means of thought (Bourdieu, 1999). But it is not the way most people live most of the world. They live absorbed in the cares of the moment, reacting to embodied presentations not disembodied representations, to *events* not historical structures. And these events are an emotional wash in which tears and smiles are just as much of an intellectual currency as ideas and concepts. In other words, they live in a world in which space and time are means of inhabitation, not just metrics (Thrift, 1996; 2000; 2002).

What does this world look like? Fortunately, since the mid nineteenth century many writers have tried to describe its key features, using traditions as diverse as phenomenology, various forms of micro-sociology, and anthropological studies of the everyday. So we know that this world thinks through the body's 'non-representational' capacities for reaction to sensation as much as its capacities for cognition. In particular, it is profoundly affective. And we know that it thinks through objects which are not separated beings but are a part of general ethologies which think the body as much as the body thinks them, questioning what we regard as life by expanding what can count as the nerve centres of the world. And we know that the world thinks through an ethos of engagement. It works not to abstract moral rules but to ethical modulations which vary according to circumstance.

In turn, such a view of thinking has some consequence. First, the world is no longer conceived as full of large or small things. The world does not consist of the clash of 'big' forces, surrounded by mere detail. Rather, as Gabriel Tarde noted so long ago, the devil is precisely in the detail. Second, the world is patiently constructed by fixed mechanisms of regimentation which exactly play on detailing the public flesh. But it also consists of numerous spaces, very often those which are born out of unruly senses like smell, in which new elements of the world can live and work, spaces we are only now learning how to map. Third, it follows that the world is prodigious: it constantly overruns static categories of thought, because it is virtual, tending towards actualization without producing a fixed resolution. The world can produce solutions not previously contained in their formulation. The world is artful.

Some writers go further still. They conjure up new kinds of inhuman landscape, which consist of sweeping planes of sensuality which mobilize both flesh and stone, or 'universes' of becoming which coalesce (or 'concesce') in unpredictable ways and routinely bleed into each other (rather like smell), and interactions which may well exist outside the realm of subjectivity. They need to produce a vocabulary of movement and emergence which can form, couple and break apart just like the world itself, and can actually intercede by producing new expressive resonances, including new kinds of people which can make new senses (Bennett, 2001; Law and Mol, 2001).

Interestingly, such a dynamic vocabulary has an analogue in the vast archive of work on performance which consists primarily of knowledges which attempt to conjoin and articulate the unlike in order to produce new effects which function at not just an intellectual but also an affective level. So performance has produced a whole repertoire of knowledges of engagement of the body and other hybrids which understand how little can rapidly become large, how space can rapidly become time, and how sensation can rapidly spread its wings, touching so many as it constructs its refrains: singular and plural in one.

The refrain is a prism ... it acts upon that which surrounds it ... extracting from it various vibrations, or decompositions, projections, or frustrations. The refrain also has a catalytic function, not only to increase the speed of the exchanges and reactions in that which surrounds it, but also to assure indirect interactions between elements devoid of so-called natural affinity. (Deleuze and Guattari, 1988: 349)

And so we come back to smell. For smell is previously a means of synthesizing affective engagement with the world which requires this kind of performative knowledge to understand, in that it aids or stimulates artful shifts from one pragmatic orientation to another using a sensual resource which operates as a foundation for conduct while remaining 'outside the foreground of our self-awareness' (Katz, 1999: 7).

In other words, smell is an affective shape-shifter which adds to our experience of the world, by producing new means of engaging the moment, and so new kinds of eventfulness (Foucault, 2000). And it does so through geographies of emotional labour that we are only now beginning to get to grips with as we begin to derive a new kind of spatial vocabulary. So cultural geography takes another turn, towards the world of affect.

Anxious geographies

Mona Domosh

Few evocations of the cultural geography of late nineteenth-century New York can rival the intricate and multilayered portrayal found in Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth*. Published in 1905, the novel portrays the 'gilded age' city of the 1880s through the eyes of Lily Bart, an ingenue of precarious social standing whose economic stability resides solely in finding the right husband, a search that requires an intimate knowledge of the social and geographic codes of the city. As a woman, and particularly one of dubious background, she knows that appearance means everything, and she understands that appearance comprises not only her body but the spaces around it – the rooms, homes, streets and settings in which she is seen. As such, the city's landscape is more than a background for her performances – it is an integral part of that performance. She must be 'seen' in particular locations in the city and not in others to maintain her moral standing, 'framed' by elegant surroundings to highlight her beauty, and portrayed within a landscape that reflects that beauty. Knowing and using the correct codes of appearance, whether that pertains to her dress, hair and makeup, her actions or performances, or the stages on which those performances occur, are critical to Lily's survival, and are her one source of power. The one thing that she cannot control is how people interpret her actions, and this eventually leads to her demise. In scenarios repeated throughout the novel, Lily's actions and appearances are misread by others who assume the worst of her. Appearances, she learns too late, can deceive.

The House of Mirth is a powerful commentary on what it was like to be a middle-class white woman in turn-of-the-century New York: as visual objects, women had to play by the prescribed rules of appearance and performance; yet without a forum for expressing their subjectivity, this superficiality left them vulnerable to misinterpretation. It is also a powerful commentary on the geographies of late nineteenth-century New York, a city where surface appearances were all that mattered, and where, as Mr Selden (a main character in the novel) remarks about the drawing room of a member of the *nouveaux riches*, 'one had to touch