The Smell Report

Culture

Smell is not just a biological and psychological experience, it is also a social and cultural phenomenon.

Western cultures

Smell is probably the most undervalued of the senses in modern Western cultures. Yet cultural historians have shown that this was not always so: the current low status of smell in the West is a result of the 'revaluation of the senses' by philosophers and scientists of the 18th and 19th centuries. The intellectual elite of this period decreed sight to be the all-important, up-market, superior sense, the sense of reason and civilisation, while the sense of smell was deemed to be of a considerably lower order – a primitive, brutish ability associated with savagery and even madness.

The emotional potency of smell was felt to threaten the impersonal, rational detachment of modern scientific thinking. This demotion of smell has had a lasting effect on academic research, with the result that we know far less about our sense of smell than about more high-status senses such as vision and hearing.

The low status of smell in Western culture is reflected in our language: colloquial terms for 'nose', for example, are almost all derogatory, or at the very least disrespectful (schnozzle, conk, hooter, snoot, snout, etc.) – and large or distinctive noses are considered ugly.

All of the other senses have positive, complimentary associations in everyday language. We may speak of a person as 'visionary', 'keen-eyed', 'having a good ear', 'a good listener'. We praise 'dexterity', 'a light touch' and 'good taste', etc. There are no equivalent terms of approval for smelling ability. In fact, the only common expression which implies olfactory prowess is 'nosy' – a term of abuse rather than commendation.

When we wish to insult people, we often accuse them of deficits in their sense sight, hearing, touch or taste (myopic referees, deaf politicians, cack-handed goalkeepers, and tasteless artists spring to mind). Yet the sense of smell is so unimportant to us that terms for olfactory deficits, such as 'anosmic', are not even understood by the majority, let alone used to express disapproval. Outside certain specialist domains such as perfumery and wine-tasting, a keen sense of smell attracts few admiring comments, and there is no stigma attached to the olfactory equivalent of tone-deafness or tunnel vision.

Most Western languages are so impoverished in olfactory terminology that they cannot even distinguish between the perception of odours and the odours themselves: the word 'smell' is forced to do double-duty, resulting in considerable confusion and tiresome jokes about dogs with no noses. As if this were not degradation enough, the verb 'to smell', when used descriptively, has a negative meaning unless qualified by a commendatory adjective. If we simply state that something or someone 'smells', we mean that they smell bad; to give praise, we must specify that they 'smell good' or 'smell nice'. Smells are guilty until proven innocent.

When we wish to praise, we are far more likely to refer to a person's effect on our visual sense than to any pleasant olfactory impact. The poor judge who attempted to convey the attractions of a woman by describing her as 'fragrant' was subjected to endless ridicule by the press and public. The Western devaluation of our sense of smell is, in historical terms, a fairly recent phenomenon. From classical times until the Enlightenment, perfumes and aromatics played a central role in European cultures (see **History (smell_hist.html)**).

It is also possible that the second-class-citizenship of smell will be short-lived. Here are a few preliminary indications of the forthcoming sensory reshuffle:

- The study of olfaction, previously of interest only in specialist medical research and experimental psychology, is now attracting ever-increasing numbers of anthropologists, sociologists and historians.
- In popular culture, the current aromatherapy-boom indicates a similar revival of interest in the powers of perfume. Once regarded as obscure hippie/new-age mumbo-jumbo, aromatherapy is now respectably 'mainstream'. (Scientists insist that there is still no

proof of the benefits of aromatherapy, but the fragrances are undeniably pleasant, which may be enough for most ordinary mortals.)

- The findings of research on olfaction, previously reported only in obscure academic journals, now appear regularly in popular newspapers and glossy magazines.
- Even the world of technology, so long obsessed with audio-visual-tactile processes, has recently turned its attention to the mysteries of olfaction (see High-tech noses and High-tech smells, above). In the last decade, scientists at Warwick University developed the first electronic nose, and companies with names like 'Aromascan PLC' are now competing for a slice of the lucrative high-tech sniffer market.

If these academic, popular and technological trends continue, perhaps the 21st century will see the restoration of smell to its former prominent position in the Western hierarchy of the senses. (If so, cosmetic surgeons may lose a substantial source of income, as large, distinctive noses, which were considered attractive before the discrediting of the sense of smell in the 18th century, again become the height of fashion!)

Other cultures

In many non-Western cultures, smell has long been established as the emperor of the senses. For the Ongee of the Andaman Islands, the universe and everything in it is defined by smell. Their calendar is constructed on the basis of the odours of flowers which come into bloom at different times of the year. Each season is named after a particular odour, and possesses its own distinctive 'aroma-force'. Personal identity is also defined by smell – to refer to oneself, one touches the tip of one's nose, a gesture meaning both 'me' and 'my odour'.

When greeting someone, the Ongee do not ask 'How are you?', but 'Konyune onorange-tanka?' meaning 'How is your nose?'. Etiquette requires that if the person responds that he or she feels 'heavy with odour', the greeter must inhale deeply to remove some of the surplus. If the greeted person feels a bit short of odour-energy, it is polite to provide some extra scent by blowing on him or her.

The Bororo of Brazil and the Serer Ndut of Senegal also associate personal identity with smell. For the Bororo, body odour is associated with the life-force of a person, and breath-odour with the soul. The Ndut believe that each individual is animated by two different scent-defined forces. One is physical, associated with body and breath odour; the other, spiritual, scent is claimed to survive the death of an individual to be reincarnated in a descendant. The Ndut can tell which ancestor has been reincarnated in a child by recognising the similarity of the child's scent to that of the deceased person.

In India, the traditional affectionate greeting – equivalent of the Western hug or kiss – was to smell someone's head. An ancient Indian text declares "I will smell thee on the head, that is the greatest sign of tender love".

Similar practices are found in Arab countries, where breathing on people as you speak to them signals friendship and goodwill – and to 'deny' someone your breath-smell conveys a shameful avoidance of involvement.

In cultures where the sense of smell is highly valued, and odour is considered to be the essence of personal identity, interpersonal 'exchanges' or 'mixing' of odours is often carefully regulated. Many of these olfactory regulations serve important social functions, such as preventing sexual intercourse between close relatives.

Among the Amazonian Desana, for example, all members of a tribal group a believed to share a similar odour. Marriage is only allowed between persons of different odours, so spouses must be chosen from other tribal groups. This belief is expressed in rituals involving the exchanges of goods with different odours: one group will present the other with a gift of meat, for example, and receive fish in return. Some rituals involve the exchange of differently scented ants.

The Batek Negrito of the Malay Peninsula take the same taboo on the odour-mixing of close relatives a stage further: not only is sexual intercourse between those of similar odour prohibited, but even sitting too close to one another for too long is considered dangerous. Any prolonged mixing of similar personal odours is believed to cause disease in the people involved and in any children they may conceive.

The dangers of odour-mixing are even more extreme for another Malay Peninsula people, the Temiar. The Temiar believe that each person has an odour-soul, located in the lower back. If you pass too closely behind a person, the odour-soul is disturbed and mingles with your body, causing disease. This must be prevented by calling out 'odour, odour' whenever you approach a person from behind, so that the odour-soul is forewarned of the intrusion.

For the Dogon people of Mali, odour and sound are believed to be intrinsically related because both travel on air – the Dogon speak of 'hearing' a smell. In addition, speech itself is believed to be scented: good speech – with appropriate grammar and pronunciation – smells pleasant (in Dogon terms, this means an odour of oil and cooking, which are highly valued), while nasal, indistinct or ungrammatical speech has an unpleasant, stagnant odour. Ten-year-old children who persist in making mistakes of grammar or pronunciation will have their noses pierced as a corrective. (One cannot help wondering, however, whether anthropologists sometimes mistake the metaphorical expressions of the peoples they study for literal beliefs. After all, a Dogon visiting us might just as easily conclude that we believe ideas to posses odours – some of them 'stink' – and that we believe washing a child's mouth out with soap to be an effective means of driving away 'bad words'!)

Scent preferences

Western notions of aesthetically pleasing fragrances are by no means universal. For the cattle-raising Dassanetch of Ethiopia, no scent is more beautiful than the odour of cows. The association of this scent with social status and fertility is such that the men wash their hands in cattle urine and smear their bodies with manure, while the women rub butter into their heads, shoulders and breasts to make themselves smell more attractive.

The Dogon of Mali would find these customs incomprehensible. For the Dogon, the scent of onion is by far the most attractive fragrance a young man or woman can wear. They rub fried onions all over their bodies as a highly desirable perfume.

The most complex aesthetics of scent are to be found in Arab countries, where women use a wide range of scents to perfume different parts of their bodies. In the United Arab Emirates, musk, rose and saffron are first rubbed over the entire body (which must be scrupulously clean). Hair is perfumed with a blend of walnut or sesame oil and ambergris or jasmine. The ears are scented with mkhammariyah,a blend of aloewood, saffron, rose, musk and civet. Ambergris and narcissus are among the scents used on the neck, sandalwood in the armpits and aloewood on the nostrils. Perfumes are only used, however, in private situations, when a woman is in the company of other women, or of her husband and close family. To wear perfume in public or in the company of men is to be 'like an adulteress'.

Arab men may also wear perfumes: they use rose and aloewood behind their ears, on their nostrils, in their beards and in the palms of their hands.

The African Bushmen would probably regard the olfactory preferences of almost all other cultures, including our supposedly sophisticated Western tastes, as distinctly lacking in subtlety. For the Bushmen, the loveliest fragrance is that of rain.

Smell rituals

In Arab countries, a person whose perfumes smell particularly pleasant may well be asked 'who have you been visiting?'. This is because a perfuming ritual marks the end of every social meal. After the food-trays have been removed and coffee has been served, the host or hostess (men and women eat separately) will bring out the perfume box. For women, this contains four to eight bottles of perfume and an incense burner. The bottles are passed around and each guest anoints herself with the different scents on different parts of her body or clothing, using a glass applicator. Then the incense burner is passed around, allowing each guest to perfume herself with the fragrant fumes.

The appearance of the perfume-box signals the end of the visit, and the guests depart as soon as the perfume ritual is completed. The ritual serves several important social functions. Guests arrive wearing their best perfumes to honour the hostess, and leave honoured in return by the hostess, whose social prestige is enhanced by the pleasant smells she imparts to her guests. The ritual also promotes a feeling of bonding and unity, in that guests arrive differently-scented, but by the end of the visit are bound together by a shared fragrance.

In many cultures, the gift of perfume is an honour worthy of the gods, as well as one's guests. Aromatic shrines or other media, offering up scents for the pleasure of the gods, are an integral part of the rituals of most religions.

The Tzotzil people of Mexico dedicate scented candles and incense to their deities, which they call 'cigarettes for the gods', while the Dakota of the Western Plains burn sweet-smelling grass to send smoke-signals to their gods. Hindu temples are scented with sandalwood, and the altars of the Nigerian Songhay are drenched with perfumes.

The Chewong of the Malay Peninsula consider odour as the primary means of communication with 'good spirits', who are attracted by nightly offerings of incense – and the most effective means of deterring evil spirits, who are repulsed by the pungent odour of wild ginger.

Rites of passage, which mark our transitions from one physical, social or economic condition to another (such as the rituals of birth, puberty, marriage and death), also involve the symbolic use of odours in many cultures.

Among the Colombian Desana, for example, a shaman must blow strong-smelling tobacco smoke over a girl on the occasion of her first menstruation, to initiate her as an acceptable member of the civilised, adult community.

At weddings in Northern Sudan, both the bride and the other women attending the ceremony are ritually perfumed with fragrant incense containing a blend of 'cold', masculine, scents and 'hot', feminine aromas, to symbolise marital unity and promote fertility.

Personal odour

The complexities of personal odour, of which the average Westerner is largely unaware, are the subject of sophisticated classification systems in many other cultures. The average member of the Amazonian Desana community, for example, will readily explain that an individual's unique odour – oma seriri – is a combination of natural personal odour, odours acquired through the food he or she eats, odours caused by emotions and periodic odours related to fertility. Not only is their assessment of the components of personal body odour scientifically accurate, but, unlike Western scientists, the Desana are able to describe each of the smells involved in minute and vivid detail.

In other parts of the Amazonian region, however, 60,000 Avon ladies are busily engaged in the hut-to-hut selling of deodorants and perfumes. In remote villages, only accessible by canoe, these products are often exchanged for local produce: two dozen eggs buys you a Bart Simpson roll-on deodorant, and for 20 pounds of flour, you can buy a bottle of perfume called 'Charisma'.

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SIRC, 53 Blandford Avenue, Oxford UK OX2 8EB Tel: +44 (0)1865 600494 infoATsircDOTorg