
Olfactory Ontologies
by Stephen Fortune
Illustration: Pedro Covo
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Scent and fragrance are diffuse and ephemeral, yet paradoxically potent at evoking emotion and memory. The act of creating meaning through scent is equally in flux, as uncovered by **Claus Noppene**y, a Research Professor at both, the University of the of Arts and the Business Department at Bern University of Applied Sciences. From a perfume's conceptual inception right through to its dissemination to the public, meaning is co-mingled and highly subjective. Stephen Fortune spoke with Claus to illuminate the inner workings of this mysterious sense.

Claus, what compelled you to research the perfume industry?

In terms of social sciences, scent and the sense of smell are highly under-researched and, as a discipline, perfumery is a closed shop: Very few people have really, empirically, worked on perfumery. So we were very excited when we got access to this field, beginning in 2010, thanks to Sebastian Fischenich, the Creative Director of Humiecki & Graef. Incredibly, we had access to each step of the meaning making process, especially to the practices of the perfumers Christophe Laudamiel & Christoph Hornetz (aka Les Christophs). Above all, we wanted to understand how the encoding of a perfume's meaning is organised by imagery.

Why does the process begin from imagery rather than another medium like words?

The process actually begins with an emotion. Each scent is about a certain emotion sampled from their broad spectrum, some of which are rather special, like the 'tears of a man' or 'a mother's pride'. In our case, the process began from the emotion of 'trust'. The Creative Director looked for visual representation of this emotion and distilled the concept into three images and a few sparse lines of descriptive text. We learned that the visual representation

of this emotion was highly related to his own experience. It's a personal interpretation of trust, not an encyclopedic definition. When Les Christophs received this very visual brief, the images activated a different set of personal experiences on the perfumers' side. The images are not interpreted objectively as information; instead they are used to stimulate recollection of memories, experiences and personal stories. This enables the perfumers to work on the perfume based on their own life experiences. The scent is highly personal and subjective at each step of its production. I doubt that this central quality of the images – the subjective, experience-activating quality – could be achieved on a purely narrative basis, for instance. In our case, the images' ability to stimulate thoughts and ideas, to provoke associations and to remain open to interpretation gave them their meaning making power.

Your research is very concerned with how meaning is made in the production of an artistic perfume. Is meaning making through perfumery really so different from the process of meaning making in other media?

I would say, yes. Let's compare an advertising image and a scent along the trajectory of meaning making. If you were to interpret an advertising image, there's always distance between you, as 'interpreter', and the image, as 'object'. You and I could try to make sense of the image together or individually, and the object itself is not changed. But interpreting a scent is a completely different story. As soon as we smell something, the molecules we smell disappear because we incorporate them, they become part of our body – this is pure material, pure metabolism – and, as such, highly subjective. Even smelling the same scent, we might sense different particles at a molecular level. Meaning making is highly discursive: We need language, listening and discussion to make meaning. In addition, it's hard to exchange and discuss our scent experiences because we cannot refer to a common language, whereas, when talking about images, we have a vocabulary and conventions to describe colours, position and perspective. Compared to the field of scent, we can only talk indirectly and meta-



phorically about a scent. This is a source of confusion and misunderstanding: Such ambivalence is one of the fascinating aspects of the scent meaning making process.

Yet your research notes that, when the perfume is reviewed by expert bloggers, the appeal to descriptive language is very prominent. Why do you think that is? At the end of an artistic perfume's release cycle, there's a kind of olfactory meaning making on the part of consumers and bloggers. The latter talk about the different olfactory notes they perceive in a scent, and the language used is highly descriptive. But there's little agreement when talking about a certain scent: Some bloggers might wax lyrical about the walnut smell they discern in the scent, whereas others might speak of the orange flower they have perceived therein. What excites me is that some blogs are able to conceptualise scent as a cultural form, as a form of art, as they contextualise scent in the broader sphere of cultural and aesthetic references. They speak of a perfume containing a Bauhaus scent. Everyone has an idea of what Bauhaus might look like, but it's questionable whether you have an idea of how Bauhaus might smell. Yet, there are bloggers out there who possess the skills to contextualise scent and relate it to aesthetic criteria. This is crucial to moving scent and perfume into the field of art and to discuss it as a new and emerging art form. In fact, artistic perfumery increasingly influences mainstream industry.

Does art or industry bear the most responsibility for organising our aesthetic sense of smell?

The sense of smell is particularly difficult to organise

because, scientifically, so little is known about smell: Even chemists cannot predict the olfactory consequences of changing a molecule's structure. Until now, I would have made the case that the sense of smell hasn't been systematically organised, but we're at the stage where this process is advancing; we see a new field expanding into the art market. Les Christophs opened 2013 with a show at Dillon Gallery NYC (Iconosms), there is the new Institute for Art and Olfaction, an experimental institute in Los Angeles linking the sphere of art to the world of scent, and the Museum of Art & Design in NYC hired Chandler Burr to be their curator for olfactory art. Scent art is an emerging field expanding into the art market, but has yet to establish itself. The perfume industry, on the other hand, has a long tradition of working with scent. It refers to categories of aesthetic appreciation that differ from the established art market. Simultaneously, one could make the point that the capitalist forces striving for domination of the senses are now trying to get into the field of smell. For instance, Abercrombie & Fitch or Lush – their enterprises are about organising the sphere of smell. They use smell imperialistically: intending for molecules to get into the protected geographies of their neighbours. It's fascinating to think of brand competition at a molecular level. However, we're not mere disempowered consumers exposed to these economic forces and scientific industries organising our senses. There are lots of examples in visual advertising demonstrating that the consumer finds unforeseen ways to respond to and operate with what has been imposed on them.

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Special Thanks to
British Fashion Council,
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ISSN 2049-1808
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Courtesy of Balenciaga

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