ANOSMIC AESTHETICS

MARTA TAFALLA

Anosmia is a sensory disability that consists of the inability to perceive odours. The sense of smell can be lost at any time during life, but people suffering from congenital anosmia, as I do, have never had any experience of smelling. My question is whether such an impairment of olfaction impoverishes aesthetic appreciation or makes it different in any way. I hypothesize that congenital anosmia entails two different kinds of loss in aesthetic appreciation. In order to test my hypothesis, I address modern and contemporary aesthetic theory. Finally, I claim that congenital anosmia constitutes an impoverishment, but also ask whether it can be compensated for by dialogue and imagination. I further inquire as to whether it can foster a more self-critical aesthetic appreciation, more conscious of the powers and limits of our senses.

Does congenital anosmia have any kind of influence on aesthetic appreciation? Anosmia is a sensory disability that consists of the inability to perceive odours, and it is estimated that some two per cent of the world's population suffer from it. The sense of smell can be lost at any time during life due to a wide variety of causes, but people suffering from congenital anosmia, as I do, were born without the ability to smell, and therefore we have never had any experience of smelling. My question, then, is whether such an impairment of olfaction impoverishes aesthetic appreciation or makes it different in any way.[1] For the purposes of answering this question, I offer here an overview of the treatment of smell in aesthetics. The article is structured in four parts: first, I present my hypothesis as an answer to the question, and offer examples that support it. In the second part, I examine the consideration of smell within the two principal modern aesthetic theories, those of Kant and Hegel, which are contrary to my hypothesis. Third, I present some discussion by contemporary authors of those aesthetic theories; and in the last part I follow the path that leads from perception to imagination.

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1 There has been little research on how sensory disabilities influence aesthetic appreciation, but a fine exception is David Feeney, *Towards an Aesthetics of Blindness* (New York: Peter Lang, 2007).

I. CONGENITAL ANOSMIA AND AESTHETIC APPRECIATION

My first attempt to answer this question is based on my personal experience. I have taken the case of aesthetic appreciation of natural environments, which is a multisensory appreciation, and have compared my appreciation of some particular environments with the appreciation of people who can smell and have described to me their experiences of these same places. I will begin by presenting two cases that I think can be considered paradigmatic.

In the first case, some friends and I went on an excursion, and spent some hours walking across hills covered in oaks and pines. In the afternoon, when we were in the middle of a pine forest, my friends suddenly said that we were getting near the sea. I stopped and looked around, but neither sight nor sound allowed me to perceive this proximity. To me, the place looked just like the other places we had been in the morning: I was still seeing the same familiar landscape. For my friends, however, it was a very different place. They saw the forest, as I did, but they could also perceive the sea a few kilometres away, and this perception changed their comprehension of the entire environment. The smell had enlarged their horizon and given them a new orientation; it instilled in them a desire to keep heading towards the beach. The contrast between what they could see and what they could smell made it a more interesting place, because they were in the middle of a forest, but with the promise of the sea. That contrast made the forest more suggestive: it was more beautiful for them than for me.

In the second case, my friends and I were walking in an oak forest near Barcelona, one bright spring morning. We were in a very beautiful place when my friends began to gesture and express their displeasure. We soon found the cause: a dead fox decomposing near the path. It was half eaten and covered in maggots. It made me feel sad, because death always reminds us of the brevity of life, and it provoked in me a melancholy mood. But my friends said that they were experiencing the most horrible odour that exists: the stink of decomposing rotting flesh. They complained that it was so unpleasant that they could hardly breathe. The smell made them feel sick and it also provoked some kind of experience of fear in them. They left the place covering their noses. For them, the whole of the surroundings was impregnated with something that was worse than ugly, it produced unpleasant bodily sensations in them. For me, the dead fox was a sad encounter, but not unpleasant, and it did not spoil the beauty of the place.

I have mentioned only two examples here, but in different situations I have observed the same pattern, which I think I can generalize. What I have observed is that in the aesthetic appreciation of a natural environment, the inability to perceive odours entails two different kinds of loss. On the one hand, it implies an impossibility to receive a certain quantity of information, which can be a great

deal. On the other hand, it involves a qualitative loss: the anosmic person cannot experience the environment from the perspective of olfaction, which is very different from the perspective that the senses of sight, hearing, taste, or touch can offer. The first loss can be compensated by the words of other people who can transmit the same information; so, I can *be informed* that the sea is near. The second loss, however, is irreparable: I cannot breathe and *perceive* the sea kilometres away; I cannot *feel* bad in the presence of a dead animal decomposing. And the attempts of my friends to describe these experiences are always in vain: smell seems to escape any intent to capture it in words.[2]

My hypothesis is that these two losses do impoverish the aesthetic appreciation that anosmic people can have and in some cases make that appreciation very different. That is to say: we anosmics appreciate the same environment, with the same aesthetic qualities, as people who can smell do; but we have no access to a certain kind of information or to a certain kind of experience. That type of information and type of experience are both relevant to aesthetic appreciation; and therefore, because of the lack, our aesthetic appreciation is different. This can even lead us anosmics to appreciate something as beautiful which for other people is simply not (a pile of dung in the sunshine; a skunk secreting its scent) or to conceive as boring something that is beautiful for other people (aromatic herbs). That is, in some cases, anosmia can actually invert aesthetic judgement.

My hypothesis, then, is that we anosmics can never fully enjoy a forest or any natural environment as people with a sense of smell can. We can contemplate the landscape and listen to the soundscape, we can touch and taste, but the *smellscape* is out of reach. As a consequence, the world is *not so beautiful*, and is *not so ugly* either. The world, aesthetically speaking, is *less*, because we have no access to its *olfactory dimension*. But is my hypothesis right?

II. MODERN AESTHETICS AND VOLUNTARY ANOSMIA

In order to test my hypothesis, I now consider aesthetic theory and look back at the great foundational theories of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. What I find is the thesis that aesthetic appreciation can only be exercised through the senses of sight and hearing, but not through smell, taste, or touch. In other words, it seems that my hypothesis should be wrong.

According to modern aesthetics, the senses of sight and hearing are bound to knowledge, communication, and imagination. They are the senses of intellectual

[2] On the difficulty of describing smells, see the first pages of Miguel A. Teixeira, Oscar Figueiras, and Alírio E. Rodrigues, 'Perfumery Radar: A Predictive Tool for Perfume Family Classification', *Industrial and Engineering Chemistry Research* 49 (2010): 11764–65. I am grateful to David Casacuberta for bringing this article to my attention.

life: they are our windows on the world; they make science possible; and they also allow us to have an aesthetic appreciation of nature and art. Traditionally, therefore, works of art were created to be seen and to be heard. By contrast, smell, taste, and touch are not contemplated as having such a link with knowledge, communication, or imagination. They are the senses of biological life: tied too closely to bodily functions and to our organic matter. Instead of opening us to knowledge of the world, they close us into our subjective sensations. And they are unable to recognize and enjoy beauty.

According to this view, smell does not have any influence on the aesthetic appreciation of a natural environment. Therefore, in the examples I explained above, my aesthetic appreciation could not have been richer: I did not miss anything. In the same way, according to this conception, it is not possible to aesthetically appreciate an odour in itself, be it a natural aroma such as lavender or a manufactured perfume like Chanel Nº 5, nor is it possible to create works of art for the olfactory sense or for a multisensory experience including olfaction.

At this point, it is useful to differentiate briefly between the roles of smell in nature and in art. Nature was one of the central topics of aesthetics in the eighteenth century, especially for Kant. Natural environments are multisensory and therefore invite us to contemplate them with all our senses. In fact, in some natural environments, scents are highly relevant: fields of lavender, aromatic gardens, or a pine wood by the sea, for example. Because of the multisensory character of nature, it is necessary to begin any analysis of the aesthetics of nature by discussing the role of the senses. Kant offered a normative view: only two senses, sight and hearing, were relevant in the aesthetic appreciation of this multisensory reality.

Works of art, by contrast, are humanly created following cultural conventions and artistic norms. Throughout most of Western history, they have been created to be enjoyed with only two senses: sight and hearing. For example, a painted landscape was made to be looked at, not to be touched, tasted, or smelled. And if in fact the paint smelled, that scent had not been created with any artistic purpose; it did not belong to the meaning of the work and it was therefore irrelevant to the contemplation of the object. At best, it was a nuisance that interfered with aesthetic appreciation.

When, in the second half of the twentieth century, smell began to enter into the realm of aesthetics – as we will see in the next part of this article – its entrance was easier in the aesthetic appreciation of nature: odour was already there calling out for our attention; it only needed to be accepted. However, in order to introduce smell into the artworld, it was necessary for artists to begin to create works of olfactory art. At the same time, in the twentieth century, philosophical

aesthetics was more focused on art than nature; so the discussion of olfactory art was more intense than the discussion regarding the role of smell in the aesthetic appreciation of nature.

After this brief mention of the difference between nature and art, I will now concentrate on the reasons for the rejection of smell in modern aesthetics, which refers both to nature and art.

In modern aesthetics, we find a number of reasons that justify the notion that an odour cannot be aesthetically appreciated. This is not the place to explore all the modern authors in detail, so I will focus on the two principal modern aesthetic theories, those of Kant and Hegel. In their work, we find four fundamental reasons for rejecting smell.

II.1. THE ARGUMENT OF DISINTERESTEDNESS

The first and most important argument maintains that smells cannot be aesthetically appreciated because they cannot be contemplated in a disinterested way. Kant gives this argument an important place in his *Critique of the Power of Judgment*,[3] and Hegel develops it further in his *Aesthetics*.[4] As is well known, Kant defines beauty by differentiating it from what is merely agreeable. The agreeable awakens our desire to consume the object, and thus maintains us in what Kant calls an interested relationship with the object. The food or wine that we consume is agreeable. Beauty, by contrast, is contemplated in a disinterested way, with our bodily desires removed; we do not desire to consume beauty, we only aspire to contemplate it.

We share the pleasure derived from the agreeable with animals, but beauty can only be appreciated by human beings. The distinction between what is merely agreeable and beauty reflects the distinction between biological and intellectual life. Therefore, to admire the beauty of nature or art is to free ourselves from our animal part and to raise ourselves to intellectual life.

To try to explain more clearly the difference between beauty and what is merely agreeable, I offer an example. Suppose we were walking through the country on a hot day, feeling hungry and tired, and then, in the middle of a meadow, we came across a cherry tree weighed down with fruit. If we perceived the tree from an interested perspective, we would be happy to have found food to assuage our hunger and a nice place to rest under the branches. We would consider the tree as an instrument for us to use to satisfy our biological necessities.

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3 Immanuel Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, trans. Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), §§ 5, 8.

4 G. W. F. Hegel, *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, trans. T. M. Knox (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), 1:32–41.

The cherry tree and its fruit would be agreeable to us. Animals could share this kind of relationship with the tree.

But we could also see the cherry tree from a disinterested perspective; we could appreciate its harmonious form, the elegant disposition of the branches, and its brilliant colours under the sun. We may then forget that we were hungry and only appreciate it for its own sake. In this case, we would not want the tree to serve us in any practical way, we would not want the tree to satisfy our desires, we would only want to enjoy its beauty. This would be a properly aesthetic appreciation. In this case, the experience of the tree is not even concerned with its actual existence; it does not matter if the tree exists or does not; we could just as well admire the beauty of a depiction of a tree. That is why we can aesthetically enjoy things that do not really exist: representations in pictures or sculptures. However, if we are hungry, we need the cherries to be real so that we can eat them.

Having established this difference between beauty and what is merely agreeable, Kant maintains that smell belongs to the realm of the agreeable, which means that it is impossible to contemplate a smell in a disinterested and serene way, because when a person perceives an odour, she cannot remove the desires it provokes.

According to Kant, with the senses of sight and hearing we can have both perspectives: we can perceive the world in either an interested or a disinterested way. But with smells, we cannot perceive without interest; we cannot separate the perception from the desire it awakens; we cannot step back from our own desires and remove ourselves from them. They appear in a biological reaction that we cannot control. If the smell is pleasant, it awakens hunger, thirst, or sexual desire. If the smell is unpleasant, it annoys and provokes a desire to escape its effects. The sense of olfaction is too bodily, too biological, to allow aesthetic appreciation. Consequently, we can say that the fragrance of a rose is agreeable, but we cannot say that the fragrance of a rose is beautiful; we can contemplate the beauty of a rose by the sense of sight, but not by the sense of smell.

The thesis that such a difference exists between the senses is the result of metaphysical dualism: one of the oldest doctrines in Western philosophy, strongly defended by Plato, reformulated by Descartes, and a key point in modern philosophy. Reality is divided between the material and the spiritual worlds, and this division also separates human beings into body and soul (or mind), each with different functions. The function of the body is biological survival in the material world. The functions of the soul (or mind) are intellectual and moral. Our freedom, our reason, our morality, our virtues, our artistic and aesthetic capacities, and our personal identity reside in our soul (or mind).

The hierarchy of the senses is a consequence of that dualism. Sight and hearing seem to have a strong relation to our intellectual part. By contrast, smell, taste,

and touch are only part of our body; part of the mechanisms that allow our body to function properly. This dualism also differentiates between biological pleasure, what is agreeable, and intellectual pleasure. One kind of intellectual pleasure is aesthetic appreciation. So, the modern conception of aesthetic appreciation is one of the consequences of metaphysical dualism, of human division between body and soul.

According to this view, in order to enjoy a properly aesthetic appreciation, we should forget our body and all its biological desires. We could even affirm that aesthetic appreciation is for Kant a form of asceticism, intellectual enjoyment free from biological pleasure. This is an idea that the Kantian Schopenhauer later develops further. In his book *The World as Will and Representation*, published in its definitive version in 1859, he defends that there are three philosophical ways of calming the *will to live* (the tyranny of biological life) and adopting a more intellectual, free, and peaceful form of life. These three ways are aesthetics, ethics, and asceticism; and in principle aesthetics seems to be a different and independent way from the other two. But when Schopenhauer describes his aesthetics, he claims that dance cannot be an art, because it awakens bodily desires; and he maintains that, when faced with a very beautiful landscape, we forget whether we see it from a palace or a prison. Then we realize that aesthetics is, in fact, already a first step towards asceticism.[5]

Returning to Kant's position regarding smell, he offers another, similar idea: smell does not provide objective information about the exterior world, but encloses us in our own subjective sensations, which are difficult to communicate to others. Thus, in section 39, 'On the communicability of a sensation', Kant claims: 'To someone who lacks the sense of smell, this kind of sensation cannot be communicated; and, even if he does not lack this sense, one still cannot be sure that he has exactly the same sensation from a flower that we have from it.'[6]

The idea that odour does not provide objective information stems from the distinction between primary and secondary qualities. That distinction goes back to the Greek atomists, and is drawn again in modern philosophy as a key point at the birth of modern science, the mechanical conception of the material world. Galileo, Descartes, Boyle, Locke, and many others contributed to the study of this distinction, which was central in both philosophy and physics during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

According to the distinction, primary qualities are intrinsic properties that an object possesses independently from us: extension, shape, size, position, and

5 Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, vol. 1, trans. Christopher Janaway, Judith Norman, and Alistair Welchman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

6 Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, 171 (AA 5:291).

motion. When we perceive the shape of an object, for example, the round shape of a cherry or the rectangular shape of a table, we perceive a quality that really exists independently of our perception. Such qualities can be quantitatively measured and expressed mathematically; they are therefore the fundamental properties of objects and can be scientifically studied to understand the material world. They are key concepts in physics.

Secondary qualities, by contrast, are the result of the relation between the object and the subject who perceives it: they are generated by the process of perception. Colour, smell, taste, or tactile sensations are examples of these sensory qualities. When we perceive the colour of an object, the colour does not objectively exist in the object: the colour only exists as a sensation in us. The properties of the object that cause the sensation in us are not colours, but other properties. Secondary qualities are relational, dispositional, and subjective. Colours or tastes, such as the red colour and the sweet taste of the cherry, are only sensations in us, and as such they cannot be expressed mathematically, according to the science of that time. Colours, tastes, and smells are not fundamental physical properties of objects, although they can be explained secondarily by some primary qualities.

The discussions on this topic were intense and complex, and we cannot explore them here more closely. The list of qualities was not identical for every philosopher, and there existed many different conceptions regarding the relation between reality and perception, and fierce disagreements in the philosophical community. But the very idea of a distinction between primary, intrinsic qualities on the one hand and secondary, relational qualities on the other, was at the heart of philosophy and physics in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Although Kant introduced revolutionary new ideas into epistemology and the philosophy of science, and his transcendental idealism would transform modern philosophy, he continued to endorse the idea that primary and secondary qualities were not equivalent, and this distinction influenced his aesthetics. He considered that secondary qualities such as smell, taste, tactile qualities, or colour did not offer objective information about the world, because they were only subjective sensations.[7]

These two ideas together (that smell cannot be contemplated in a disinterested way and that smell does not provide objective information about the world) have an important consequence for Kant. What is agreeable, a glass of wine, is agreeable for me, but I cannot expect others to agree with me. By contrast, when I affirm that a rose is beautiful, when I make such a judgement of taste, I am

[7] Lawrence Nolan, ed., *Primary and Secondary Qualities: The Historical and Ongoing Debate* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

committed to the view that everyone else ought to agree with me. The judgement of taste aspires to communicability and universal agreement. Beauty is contemplated in a disinterested way and by means of the objective senses of sight and hearing, and precisely because of this, it should be appreciated by everyone. We claimed above that beauty frees us from desire, from our biological part, and we can now claim that beauty also frees us from our pure subjectivity, from solipsism, because it raises us to the level of universality, the level of what we can share with others.

Meanwhile, the pleasures that smell can provoke cannot be seen as sharing in this potential elevation to universality. The same smell can please some people and be annoying to others: we cannot expect agreement.[8]

II.2. THE ARGUMENT OF FORM

The second argument that Kant offers us is that what we appreciate aesthetically in an object is its form: the formal pattern that structures the different elements of the object and creates between them relations of symmetry, balance, contrast, rhythm, or progression, which sight and hearing can discriminate. Kant affirms that, in the visual arts – in painting, sculpture, architecture, and gardening – what is essential is the drawing: the form. He states explicitly that colour is not essential, and he does not even mention smell, which could be considered an element at least in the case of gardens. Colour is not essential because it cannot be analyzed in terms of form. Like colour, smell seems to lack a form that could be discriminated, because it is diffuse and without structure. If we accept this argument, then we have to admit that it is not possible to aesthetically contemplate natural aromas, and that it would be even less possible to create works of art with odours, because artists cannot construct out of smells the formal patterns of symmetry, balance, contrast, or progression, which constitute a painting or a symphony.[9]

The fundamental view that sustains this argument is, again, the distinction between primary and secondary qualities, which I outlined in connection with the previous argument. The form or the shape of an object is a primary quality, which objectively exists and can be expressed geometrically. Form is a rational and mathematical quality. By contrast, colour and smell were considered to be secondary qualities, that is, mere subjective sensations that could not be expressed mathematically and were not rationally structured.

In this argument, we find a rationalistic conception of aesthetics. According to Kant, what we appreciate is form; that is, rational structures, proportions, geometry, and order. In the end, what we appreciate is the mathematical structure of reality. This is of course a very old idea in Western philosophy, which stems from

8 Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, § 32.
9 Ibid., §§ 10–15.

Pythagoras, Plato, and Aristotle, and was further developed during the Middle Ages, the Renaissance, and the whole of the modern age.

II.3. THE ARGUMENT OF DISTANCE

Kant gives us a third argument: smell does not respect the distance between the contemplated object and the subject who contemplates it, because an odour lacks boundaries that would contain it. The subject who aims to perceive an odour finds that she is intimately involved, surrounded by the smell she wanted to admire, and this can be very unpleasant. Furthermore, if the odour impregnates her clothes and skin and hair, and if she is obliged to carry it around, then it can be experienced as something contaminating.

Even worse is a smell that is imposed on a subject who had not decided to contemplate it. Kant criticizes the person who wants to enjoy her scented handkerchief and takes it out of her pocket in public. Other people are forced to perceive it only in the mere act of breathing, and for Kant this is especially annoying. It limits the freedom that Kant is searching for in the realm of aesthetics.[10]

Smell shares this annoying behaviour with sound, and this seems to have been one of the reasons why Kant was not particularly fond of music, especially when played by his neighbours, as he tells us. Nevertheless, smell and sound are different in many other aspects. Sound, especially music, can be rationally structured; music is an art where we can appreciate the form. Moreover, music without text is for Kant a good example of 'free beauty'.[11]

Of course, the *physical* distance that Kant considers necessary for aesthetic appreciation is related to the *psychological* distance that disinterestedness consists of.

II.4. THE ARGUMENT OF PERMANENCE

Hegel adds a fourth argument: a smell does not remain stable so that a person could contemplate it, but it is always undergoing some process; it changes with every moment and in the end vanishes. If we develop this argument further, we can add that this feature of smell has to do with the fact that it is not autonomous of its environment, but interacts with every other smell and mixes with them all. As professional perfumers know very well, the same scent smells different on the skin of different people, or indeed in different places and it changes with the passage of time. The ephemeral character of a smell supposedly prevents people from contemplating it, because it escapes all their attempts to fix their attention on it.[12]

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10 Ibid., § 53.
11 Ibid., § 16.
12 Hegel, *Aesthetics*, 2:622.

The ideal of permanence was very important in art: when we contemplate a picture or a sculpture or a building, it remains stable in front of us and we can visit it again whenever we want. It is true that music, dance, and performances are ephemeral; nonetheless, many such works have a score or some notes on paper or some concepts that remain stable, and the work can be performed again and again. Moreover, if we leap forward to the present day, technology has made it possible to record these kinds of performative works of art, something we have not been able to do with smells (at least for the moment).

To understand this Hegelian argument better, however, I need to clarify one point. The necessary condition for permanence is not a rejection of every kind of movement or change. To the modern way of thinking, movement and change can be aesthetically appreciated. Some dynamic natural phenomena, such as ocean waves, waterfalls, and storms, are examples of beauty or the sublime in modern aesthetics (though they were not for Hegel, who excluded nature from his aesthetics; for many other modern thinkers, such as Kant, they were). Nonetheless, the kind of movement found in ocean waves or storms was considered to be very different from the ephemeral essence of smells. We can highlight two important differences.

On the one hand, when we contemplate ocean waves, we contemplate the object, the ocean, which remains there. The ocean is moving, changing, but remains. In every new wave we see a change, but we also see the ocean. By contrast, when a person smells an odour, she perceives an emanation from the object, not the object itself. She perceives something that is not supported by the object, because it has already escaped it, and can mix with different smells that have emanated from other objects.

On the other hand, the change we see in the ocean has a pattern, it has a rhythm, which could even be expressed mathematically. By contrast, the fact that an object gives off an odour, and that the odour usually begins to change and intermix with other aromas, and ultimately vanishes, has no rational pattern. It offers people a transient experience, which cannot be reduced to mathematical formulae. Here again we find the distinction between primary and secondary qualities so important for modern philosophy.

In the end, if we summarize all these arguments of *disinterestedness, form, distance*, and *permanence*, we can see that, for modern aesthetics, smell does not meet the necessary conditions to be an object of aesthetic appreciation. This has three different consequences:

First: it is not possible to aesthetically appreciate an odour in itself.
Second: smell has no influence on the aesthetic appreciation of multisensory natural environments.

> *Third*: it is not possible to create works of art for the sense of olfaction. Kant claims explicitly that gardens, which he considers to be art, are made only to be seen. He adds that they are not made to be touched, and he does not even mention smell.[13]

Therefore, according to modern aesthetics, people suffering from congenital anosmia do not have a poorer or reduced aesthetic appreciation, because the sense of olfaction plays no role in aesthetics. Olfaction is something you leave behind when you elevate yourself to aesthetic appreciation. Perhaps to be anosmic only makes it easier to have an aesthetic experience, because anosmic people do not need to dominate and subjugate their sense of smell. It should be easier for us to move beyond biological life to intellectual life. Perhaps, in relation to aesthetics, anosmia is not a disability, but a gift. In this sense, we could even claim that modern aesthetics preferred to be anosmic. Modern aesthetics assumed a *voluntary anosmia*.

III. DISCOVERING SMELL IN CONTEMPORARY AESTHETICS

If this were all that aesthetics had to say, I confess I would feel very disappointed. Fortunately, however, over the last few decades, some things have begun to change, and smell is now claiming its place in the realm of aesthetics.

The most fundamental reason for this shift is the crisis of metaphysical dualism. In the second half of the twentieth century, and especially since the 1970s, with the beginning of so-called 'postmodernity', the old metaphysical dualism, the human division between body and soul, and also the hierarchy of the senses, have been brought into question. Important developments in biology, ethology, psychology, and neurology were some of the forces that brought this about. Others causes include the necessity to renew a philosophical tradition that in some aspects had remained too conservative for a society that demanded more critical thinking and freedom. Some thinkers, especially the advocates of Critical Theory, denounced philosophy for being devoted to spiritual questions and neglecting the body, and thus neglecting the real life of people in our material world. Theodor W. Adorno, for instance, affirmed that philosophy had forgotten some of the most important themes there are to think about: the body, pain, pleasure, death, and also our relations with nature, animals, and landscapes; and he called for a new materialist philosophy.[14] Following this, the body became one of the central focuses of postmodern philosophy. New trends in ethics, such as

[13] Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, § 51.

[14] Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E. B. Ashton (1966; New York: Continuum, 2007).

practical ethics, bioethics, and food ethics, placed the body at the core of their analysis. Gender studies examined the body by a variety of approaches. At the same time, the artworld opened itself up to innovative depictions of the body and even to a new discipline: body art.

The ecological crisis was the other major force that stimulated thought in a new way. Human beings had been unable to comprehend their relation with nature, and this caused the environmental crisis that entails losses of species and environments, and at the same time endangers the health of many people. New attempts to examine our relationship with nature have mainly focused on practical environmental problems; but they have also led to innovative metaphysical views and a new conception of the human being as an animal species among other living creatures. For many contemporary scientists and philosophers, the traditional division between body and soul is a deep mistake. According to them, our intellectual part is integrated within our biological part as an indivisible whole, which is studied scientifically in comparison with other animal species. Emotions, pleasure, pain, and sensuality are now considered fundamental and the object of many philosophical inquiries. Different theories try to foster a more intense consciousness of our own bodies and a deeper involvement with nature.[15] This vindication of our biological life in relation to nature offers new insight into the so-called bodily senses: smell, taste, and touch.[16]

Of course, dualism has not been completely eliminated, but it has been deeply questioned, leaving the old paradigm no longer a secure foundation for philosophy. Some thinkers try to renew it, but its fractures allow new ideas to emerge. Innovative conceptions have developed in science, philosophy, and art and today they permeate our whole society. Among these new ideas, we find a vindication of smell. So, finally, smell has found a way into the realm of aesthetics; indeed, it has found three different ways to enter it. Let us consider these three different ways.

III.1. AESTHETICS OF NATURE AND EVERYDAY AESTHETICS

In the first place, aesthetics, which throughout the nineteenth century and for most of the twentieth century had been reduced to philosophy of art, has nowadays recovered its original ambition; it has been expanded to include more

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15 See, for example, Jared Diamond, *The Third Chimpanzee: The Evolution and Future of the Human Animal* (New York: Harper Collins, 1992); Antonio Damasio, *Descartes' Error: Emotion, Reason and the Human Brain* (New York: Putnam, 1994); Daniel C. Dennett, *Darwin's Dangerous Idea: Evolution and the Meanings of Life* (New York: Penguin, 1996); Stephen Pinker, *The Blank Slate: The Modern Denial of Human Nature* (London: Penguin, 2002).

16 See the topics of the conference held at the University of Edinburgh, in 2011, 'Sensory Worlds: Environment, Value and the Multi-Sensory' at http://www.iash.ed.ac.uk/Sawyer/Conference.html.

topics, and has fostered disciplines such as the aesthetics of nature and everyday aesthetics. In both these disciplines philosophers have begun to argue that smell plays a specific role in aesthetics. Let us begin with the aesthetics of nature.

Nature was one of the central topics of aesthetics in the eighteenth century, and authors such as Shaftesbury, Hutcheson, Burke, Gilpin, and Kant, among others, contributed to the development of the aesthetics of nature as a rich, complex discipline. But the Hegelian claim that aesthetics should devote itself to art caused most aestheticians to neglect nature for decades. Finally, in the 1970s, nature was recovered. Nevertheless, the contemporary rehabilitation of an old area of the discipline involved some important changes in relation to modern theories.

In the contemporary aesthetics of nature, several authors, such as Ronald Hepburn, Allen Carlson, Arnold Berleant, and Emily Brady, have condemned the model of the aesthetic appreciation of nature that was created in the eighteenth century, and which was centred on the sense of sight. They maintain that the primacy of sight, together with the concept of a distanced, detached contemplation, reduced the appreciation of multisensory and three-dimensional environments to the appreciation of images. Environments were seen as mere landscape paintings or postcards. In order to develop a more appropriate model for the aesthetic appreciation of natural environments, each of these authors claims that our appreciation must be more bodily engaged and should include all our senses. Carlson says:

> Aesthetic appreciation of the natural environment is not simply a matter of looking at objects or 'views' from a specific point. Rather, it is being 'in the midst' of them, moving in regard to them, looking at them from any and every point and distance and, of course, not only looking, but also smelling, hearing, touching, feeling. It is being in the environment, being a part of the environment, and reacting to it as a part of it. It is such active, involved aesthetic appreciation, rather than the formal mode of appreciation nurtured by the scenery cult and encouraged by photographs, that is appropriate to the natural environment.[17]

Such authors defend the special role of smell and argue that it not only provides important information about the environment, but also contributes to generating the sensation of an environment, of being surrounded by and involved in it, which forms an essential part of an appropriate aesthetic appreciation of nature.

If we want to understand the reasons behind this change, we have to remember that in the eighteenth century the theory of the aesthetic appreciation of nature was based on the constellation of disinterestedness, distance, and the primacy

[17] Allen Carlson, *Aesthetics and the Environment: The Appreciation of Nature, Art and Architecture* (London: Routledge, 2000), 35.

of sight. This theory was inspired by the model of aesthetic appreciation of painted landscapes and the visual arts in general. This constellation of ideas is criticized nowadays, using two arguments.

The first argument was proposed by Allen Carlson and is the core of cognitive aesthetics, a leading trend in the contemporary aesthetics of nature. Carlson defends the idea that the appropriate aesthetic appreciation of nature needs to be based on scientific knowledge of the environment and the living beings contemplated. This scientific knowledge implies a different relation with nature: the model for aesthetic appreciation of natural environments is no longer the artist or the museum visitor, but the scientist and the amateur naturalist. Appealing to the American tradition of Emerson, Thoreau, Muir, and Leopold, Carlson defends the attitude of the naturalist who walks through nature and learns from it; who knows the best way to climb a mountain; who knows how to make fire and spend the night under the stars; who kneels to observe insects and becomes dirty collecting plants; who knows the names of the birds, and can recognize their songs. Ultimately, it is the attitude of someone who knows how to live in nature and gains an understanding of different forms of living from different creatures. The naturalist not only sees nature as a beautiful environment, but understands it; and this knowledge enables her to enjoy appropriate aesthetic appreciation.

The second argument affirms that aesthetics of nature cannot develop independently of ethics. This relation between the aesthetics and the ethics of nature is defended by many philosophers, and each of them has their own particular theory, but we can try to synthesize what they have in common. According to this view, to admire the beauty of nature stimulates an ethical concern for environmental conservation; moreover, the beauty of nature can be a fundamental argument in favour of environmental-protection measures. This idea has its roots in the same American tradition, but has now gained new strength and a sense of urgency because of our present environmental crisis. This view links aesthetic appreciation with ethic engagement; because of that, the old ideas of disinterestedness, and both psychological and physical distance, become problematic. Every philosopher has his or her own way of dealing with the problem, but they all rework these concepts.[18]

These two arguments call for a more bodily engaged appreciation of nature, and consequently the senses of smell, taste, and touch are powerfully vindicated.

Meanwhile, in the field of everyday aesthetics, authors such as Yuriko Saito have defended the importance of smell: odours of people, of food, of the home,

[18] Allen Carlson and Sheila Lintott, eds., *Nature, Aesthetics, and Environmentalism: From Beauty to Duty* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008).

belong to the aesthetic appreciation of everyday life. Saito holds that smell contributes to creating ambiences, to generating the sense of place. She asks:

> How many of us have experienced going to New York City and absorbed its 'sense of place' by walking on the street, which sometimes vibrates under our feet with the subway passage, noisy with honking taxis, surrounded by skyscrapers, with aroma of burned chestnut and pretzels and the saxophone melody by a street musician wafting in the air? These ingredients together give rise to the atmosphere of vibrancy and zaniness.[19]

Olfaction can also play a special role in everyday life through the way in which it can enlarge the temporal and spatial frames. It can lead to the anticipation of some events, for example, when someone is baking something special, such as a surprise birthday cake for a friend, but the guest smells it from the street and thereby discovers the surprise before entering. Or it can vividly evoke events from the past, as when a person visits the home of their grandparents, and the smell awakens childhood memories. Odours are sometimes ambassadors from other times and places. With this capacity, smell enriches aesthetic appreciation because it enlarges its temporal and spatial dimensions.

Richard Shusterman has claimed that odour is also important in defining what he calls *somatic style*: the way our body expresses our personality. Although somatic style is pre-eminently visual, senses other than sight also have roles to play, and Shusterman maintains that our personal odour embodies our spirit. He distinguishes between unintentionally exhaled odours (like the different scents produced by different diets) and the effort we can invest in self-styling our odour with artificial perfumes. Both are perceived by other people (those who can smell, that is), and influence the aesthetic appreciation that people have of each other. He says:

> One's choice of fragrance is not simply a choice to attract others by satisfying their tastes. Like clothes fashion, it is an assertion of one's own taste and an appeal to be appreciated not just sensually but also cognitively for having and expressing one's singular taste in style. This is one reason why the most successful clothes designers are also perfume designers. Moreover, the style expressed is more than a mere superficial matter of surface body scent or olfactory connoisseurship but also an expression of one's deeper character or ethical style.[20]

After so many decades devoted almost exclusively to art, the fact that aesthetics now discusses everyday life, as Saito or Shusterman do, can be very surprising. But it is not so astonishing in relation to modern aesthetics. The British empiricists who worked on aesthetics in the eighteenth century, and the same is true of Kant,

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19 Yuriko Saito, *Everyday Aesthetics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 123.

20 Richard Shusterman, 'Somatic Style', *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 69 (2011): 153.

did not define aesthetics by the kind of object contemplated (nature or works of art or everyday objects) but by the kind of experience and the kind of judgement made, which were considered different from other kinds of experiences and judgements. We should also remember that most of the examples that Kant uses in his aesthetics are from nature, but he also uses examples of everyday objects, such as textile designs, furniture, and foliage for borders or on wallpaper.

In the same way, twentieth-century philosophers who have established the foundations for the expansion of aesthetics to include the everyday (such as John Dewey, Monroe Beardsley, Jerome Stolnitz, Paul Ziff, Thomas Leddy, Yuriko Saito, Richard Shusterman, and many others) do not define aesthetics by the kind of object contemplated, but by the kind of experience it is. Every philosopher has his or her own theory, but they all characterize aesthetic appreciation as a particular way to contemplate objects; as a particular attitude; as a kind of experience; or as a kind of judgement. In order to capture the specificity of the aesthetic attitude or point of view, it is often contrasted with a practical approach; this is a distinction which has its roots in the Kantian distinction between beauty and what is merely agreeable.

III.2. ARTWORLD

The second way in which smell is claiming a place in aesthetics is by means of art. Since the 1970s, artists have begun to create works of art which include smells, or even which consist only of smells. The aim of bringing art nearer to life, of offering a more bodily, more physical experience, of exploring new materials and conditions of perception, is attracting some artists to these new art forms.[21]

In the spring of 2009, the Mies van der Rohe Pavilion in Barcelona exhibited an artwork by Antoni Muntadas. The exhibition space was almost empty, but according to visitors, it smelled like a closed room full of musty papers, ink, dust, and humidity. This artificial scent was created by Ernesto Ventós, a professional perfumer who is also an artist and an art collector.[22] The work was called *On Translation: Paper BP/MVDR*, and it was a reflection on the passage of time and our attempts to save memories by means of the papers we accumulate in archives. The work was also a tribute to the history of the building, the Mies van der Rohe Pavilion; the original was dismantled in 1930, but the memory of it was saved for decades in documents and plans kept in an archive, until it was reconstructed in 1986. Considering that

[21] For an analysis of the potentialities of smell for art, see Jim Drobnick, 'Reveries, Assaults and Evaporating Presences: Olfactory Dimensions in Contemporary Art', *Parachute*, no. 89 (1998): 10–19.

[22] His own artistic creations, which are a reflection on the nose and the sense of olfaction, can be visited at the website www.nasevo.com, and his collection of art related to smell, here at: www.olorvisual.com.

smell is the sense most intimately related to memory, it was very suggestive to create a scent that evoked an archive: a place created to help save the past.

In the autumn of 2010, in La Capella, an art exhibition centre also in Barcelona, a work by Marc Serra, *Inexplicable Odeur*, was exhibited. Visually, it consisted of some elegant flowerpots containing beautiful plants distributed around the space. However, as visitors got up close and could smell them, they discovered that, thanks to small bottles of scent hidden in the flowerpots, the plants smelled like unpleasant urban odours. The contrast between the vision of the beautiful plants and the smell of annoying odours that had nothing to do with the plants was an attempt to focus attention on the neglected olfactory sense and to foster discussion about the bad smells in our cities.[23]

These two works, the first more austere, emotive, and poetic, the second more ironic and critical, are two examples of intelligent and suggestive works of art, which have been created for the sense of smell. It can be affirmed that these works provoke an aesthetic experience in people who can smell them, that they communicate ideas, and arouse emotions and imagination. They can even stimulate the imagination of people who cannot smell them.

III.3. NEW ARTISTIC DISCIPLINES

Smell is also claiming its place in aesthetics in a third and different way. In recent decades we have witnessed a heated discussion about the boundary that has traditionally separated art from other disciplines that had artistic features but were dismissed as mere crafts. Some of them, perfumery, gardening, cooking, and oenology, are clear examples of disciplines that are creative, provoke aesthetic experiences, arouse emotions, communicate ideas, and generate criticism, but were not accepted as art, or were, as Hegel says of gardening, seen only as imperfect arts. Nevertheless, debate now flourishes in the fields of philosophy and contemporary art, concerning whether perfumery, gardening, cooking and oenology deserve to be considered arts. In all four cases we have works that are created, to a great extent, to be appreciated with the nose. Therefore, in all these disciplines a defence of aesthetic appreciation of odours is being developed. They emphasize some of the specific features of smell, such as its ephemeral nature or its enveloping effect, as positive values.[24]

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[23] The website is www.inexplicableodeur.com.

[24] For an in-depth defence, see Mara Miller, *The Garden as an Art* (New York: SUNY Press, 1993) and Stephanie Ross, *What Gardens Mean* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998). Also very interesting is David E. Cooper, *A Philosophy of Gardens* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2006); although not a discussion about whether gardens are art, it is a very suggestive inquiry into aesthetic appreciation and other kinds of experiences we enjoy in gardens. On the defence of perfumery as an art, I highly recommend Yulia Kristovets

The intense defence of smell in these three different ways has led several authors to revise the old arguments by Kant and Hegel which justified the neglect of olfaction. The new answers to these old arguments are deeply insightful.

III.4. THE ARGUMENT OF DISINTERESTEDNESS

With regards to the argument of disinterestedness, the general answer is that it is possible to learn to appreciate an odour in a disinterested way. Professional perfumers, gardeners, or oenologists spend time every day aesthetically appreciating odours. They do not do this from any desire to consume the object they smell, but in an aesthetic way. Emily Brady says: 'The aroma of a ripe stilton cheese can be appreciated without wishing to consume it (or in the moments before we do in fact consume it in order to satisfy hunger). The same is true in the most sophisticated kinds of olfactory and gustatory appreciation, like wine-tasting, where only a sip of wine is savoured.'[25]

Nevertheless, if it is indeed possible to contemplate an odour in a disinterested way, as seems to have nowadays been shown by the professional practice of perfumers, gardeners, oenologists, and other experts in the field of smells, why did modern aesthetics reject it? Larry Shiner and Yulia Kristovets offer the following answer: 'The older objection that odors do not merit our attention because they supposedly appeal primarily to our "animal" nature seems to have been based in idealist or moralist prejudice.'[26] That is to say, the traditional idea that people could not contemplate an odour disinterestedly was mostly, according to Shiner and Kristovets, a consequence of the old metaphysical dualism, which considered that smell belonged to our animal part. Precisely for that reason, it could not participate in aesthetic appreciation, which belonged to our intellectual part. Those authors

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and Larry Shiner, 'The Aesthetics of Smelly Art', *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 65 (2007): 273–86. Concerning the question of food as art, see Dave Monroe, 'Can Food Be Art? The Problem of Consumption', in *Food and Philosophy*, ed. Fritz Allhof and Dave Monroe (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2007), 133–43. An important moment in the contemporary art debate was the invitation to the cook Ferran Adrià to participate in *documenta 12* in 2007, which generated a great controversy. About this discussion, see Richard Hamilton and Vicente Todolí, eds., *Food for Thought, Thought for Food: A Reflection on the Creative Universe of Ferran Adrià; A Reflection on the Worlds of Avant-Garde Cooking and Art* (Barcelona: Actar, 2009). For a broader discussion about food, a very useful analysis of the sense of taste and the aesthetics of food (although not considered as art) can be found in Carolyn Korsmeyer, *Making Sense of Taste: Food and Philosophy* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999). A variety of questions related to wine and aesthetics are addressed in Barry C. Smith, ed., *Questions of Taste: The Philosophy of Wine* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007) and Cain Todd, *The Philosophy of Wine* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2011).

25 Emily Brady, 'Smells, Tastes and Everyday Aesthetics', in *The Philosophy of Food*, ed. David M. Kaplan (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), 73.

26 Kristovets and Shiner, 'Aesthetics of Smelly Art', 275.

criticize the argument of disinterestedness for not being a properly aesthetic argument and being based instead on metaphysical and moral ideas.

III.5. THE ARGUMENT OF FORM

With respect to the argument of form, by contrast, the answers diverge, a fact that generates complex discussions. Some authors, such as Frank Sibley and Emily Brady, maintain that many odours, especially perfumes, consist of several components that have relations of balance, harmony, or contrast between them. Furthermore, professional perfumers, such as Jimmy Boyd, claim that perfumes have complex structures, which can be designed to develop with the passage of time.[27] This argument is upheld by current scientific knowledge about the nature of smells. Nowadays, chemists are able to study the structure of smells and compare the structures of different odours, and even work with classifications of them.[28] This contemporary scientific practice puts an end to the modern idea that smells were only subjective sensations, that science could not examine and describe them in objective and mathematical terms.

That is the vein in which Shiner and Kristovets criticize the modern argument of form:

> The lack of complexity and structure objection probably gets its initial plausibility from the little training most of us have had in distinguishing and analyzing odors. First-year students studying to be perfumers, for example, must work hard to learn to distinguish and name over one hundred and sixty different odors before going on to learn the analysis of structure.[29]

Furthermore, experts on wine claim that learning to distinguish and value the different qualities of each wine requires much time and attention to be devoted to the endeavour. The same is said by the producers of artificial aromas for the food industry, or by gardeners, who by means of training learn to recognize and remember many varieties of similar scents.[30]

Several authors, however, answer the old argument by moving in the opposite direction. They affirm that, even if smell does not have a formal pattern, that does not prevent people from appreciating it aesthetically, because, in recent decades,

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27 Jimmy Boyd, a Scottish perfumer living near Barcelona, affirms that he composes his perfumes so that they develop over time. Some of his creations are expressions of emotions, and he also has a line of perfumes that embody the personality of cities and landscapes. See www.perfumesjimmyboyd.com.

28 Teixeira, Figueiras, and Rodrigues, 'Perfumery Radar'.

29 Kristovets and Shiner, 'Aesthetics of Smelly Art', 276.

30 Smith, *Questions of Taste*.

the artworld has accepted many works that do not have form in the traditional sense. We need only recall *Partially Buried Woodshed* (1970) by Robert Smithson or the works of art made with steam by Robert Morris, or some works made of light by James Turrell. Gernot Böhme draws attention to the fact that we have learned to find beauty in things that are indefinite and indeterminate. According to Böhme, and in opposition to the thesis defended by Kant, we can appreciate colour more than form, as in the pictures of Rothko. He also affirms that we have developed an appreciation of the sky, thanks to the everyday experience of flying, and of water, thanks to the practice of diving.[31]

Along these lines, several authors claim that the vindication of indefiniteness, as opposed to a rational and mathematical form, is a cultural change of taste, which marks the transition from modern to postmodern aesthetics. According to Mark Graham, sight is the paradigmatic modernist sense, because it discriminates, divides, and orders the world into mutually exclusive categories. By contrast, Graham maintains that smell is the sense of postmodern aesthetics, because it is a sense 'that confuses categories and challenges boundaries. It is difficult to localize, hard to contain and has the character of flux and transitoriness.'[32]

III.6. THE ARGUMENT OF DISTANCE

What was considered a problem and a nuisance by modern thinkers, because the impossibility of distance was experienced by the subject as a loss of freedom, is now accepted as a source of new kinds of aesthetic experiences. Behind this shift there is a transformation in the relationship between the subject and the contemplated object; nowadays, the postmodern subject looks for a more participative relationship with the object, for immersion, experimentation, collective creation, and play. This is especially clear in the artworld, which already has decades of experience of playing with installations and performances, with works of art that do not have precise boundaries and with different ways of involving the audience. In this new kind of art, smell is very promising, because it allows artists to create works that explore the sensation of being surrounded by a pleasant fragrance, a mysterious smell, or even a stinking odour.

In a similar way, in the disciplines of the aesthetics of nature and everyday aesthetics, as we have seen, the lack of distance is accepted as a positive value, because it helps to create a sense of place and the sensation of being involved. This surrounding smell is experienced as an ingredient of a more participative relationship with the environment.

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31 Gernot Böhme, 'On Beauty', *Nordic Journal of Aesthetics* 39 (2010): 22–33.

32 Mark Graham, 'Queer Smells: Fragrances of Late Capitalism or Scents of Subversion?', in *The Smell Culture Reader*, ed. Jim Drobnick (Oxford: Berg, 2006), 305.

III.7. THE ARGUMENT OF PERMANENCE

With respect to the fourth argument, about permanence, we have to accept that what is ephemeral today has found a place in aesthetics. Many artists have created ephemeral works of art, such as the sculptures that Andy Goldsworthy constructs out of fragile materials that the wind or the water destroys, or some of the works of Richard Long, which consist of drawings made with his feet in the sand, and are condemned to disappear. At the same time, the aesthetic appreciation of nature or everyday life can enjoy the beauty of events that are as ephemeral as a shooting star crossing the heavens in a few seconds. For this reason, the transient experiences that a smell can offer, such as the aroma of morning coffee or the smell of a forest after the rain, are very much appreciated today. Also, the smells associated with death and decomposition can be very interesting, since the fleeting smell reminds people of the transience of our existence, and we can find a suggestive coherence between the messenger and the message.

But it is also important to mention that smell compensates for its fleeting character by being a powerful awakener of the past, stimulating memories and the imagination. Emily Brady says of this: 'Smells and tastes, like paintings and poems, evoke images and associations. Smells are notorious for bringing to mind particular times, places, or experiences of the past, so memories may also become part of the reflective activity. Many of our associations will be particular and personal, while others will be more generic and communicable.'[33]

In fact, the special capacity that odours have to evoke memories has a physiological basis. While the information perceived by sight and hearing goes to the neocortex, the information perceived by olfaction goes first to the limbic system, which is responsible for memory and emotions. Because of this, smells awaken the kind of emotional memories that Proust described so magnificently and no other sense can arouse. The sense which perceives the most ephemeral things, odours, is the same sense that brings forth the most reliable memory. This has of course a great potential in aesthetics and art.

Here it may be necessary to clarify another point, because sometimes people mistake smell and taste, and believe that taste was responsible for the 'Proust effect'. To understand it properly, it is necessary to know how the flavour of food and drink is perceived by our brain. All our senses contribute to the perception of the flavour of what we eat or drink. Sight is important, because we appreciate food by its colour and form. Hearing is also relevant, because French-fried potatoes that are not crispy are not experienced as proper French fries. Taste is the sense that allows us to perceive sweetness, saltiness, sourness, bitterness, and umami; and the organ

[33] Brady, 'Smells, Tastes', 76.

enabling that is the tongue. The trigeminal system provides for the perception of spiciness, texture, and temperature. Finally, then, we come to smell.

Smell consists, properly speaking, of two different kinds: orthonasal and retronasal. Orthonasal smell allows people to perceive the environment, whereas retronasal smell offers information about what they have in their mouths. So, when a person approaches the kitchen where food is being prepared and smells it, this is orthonasal smell, which offers information about the ingredients that are being cooked and also awakens the appetite. But when that person begins to eat, and has a piece of food or a gulp of tea in his or her mouth, then retronasal smell begins its job. Retronasal smell perceives the aroma of food while the person is chewing and swallowing it, and the aroma that retronasal smell perceives is the most essential part of the flavour of food and drink.

It is not easy to differentiate clearly between all these particular sensations, because when we are eating, our brains integrate all the information received by the different senses and we perceive the flavour as a whole. A good way to experience the relevant role of retronasal smell is this exercise: put on a swimming noseclip, so that it completely prevents nasal breathing (it is very important that it completely blocks the entrance of air) and then eat your favourite dish with a glass of good wine, indulge yourself with an ice cream for dessert, and, after that, enjoy a cup of tea or coffee. In this way you will perceive food and drink without retronasal smell, and will see how terribly different it is. (If you find it uncomfortable to have lunch with a clip on your nose, waiting until you next have a nasty cold will produce the same experience.)

Although we perceive all these different kinds of information as a whole and have many problems disassembling it, every sense has its own particular path to the brain. Smell follows a very different route from the other senses. Both orthonasal and retronasal smell, as I have mentioned, first go to our limbic system, where they are processed before going to the neocortex. The limbic system, which is the oldest part of the human brain and may be identified as our animal part, is responsible for memory and emotions. That is why smell is able to arouse the special emotional memories that Proust describes. This phenomenon is being intensively studied today by neurologists, biologists, and psychologists.[34]

The neurologist Gordon M. Shepherd has affirmed that orthonasal smell plays an important role in the lives of most mammals even though they do not have a very developed retronasal smell. Human beings, by contrast, are not as good as other mammals at smelling their environment, but they have a highly developed

[34] Rachel Herz, *The Scent of Desire: Discovering Our Enigmatic Sense of Smell* (New York: HarperCollins, 2007); Avery Gilbert, *What the Nose Knows: The Science of Scent in Everyday Life* (New York: Random House, 2008).

retronasal sense of smell. It seems that the human sense of smell is well specialized for the perception of food and drink; a specialization that probably has some kind of relationship with the fact that human beings are the only animals that cook their food.[35]

In conclusion, we can see that this re-assessment of smell by such different means takes place at the same time as many of the most important concepts in aesthetics are being discussed and new ideas and forms of experience are broadening the field.

IV. FROM PERCEPTION TO IMAGINATION

According to the new discourses in contemporary aesthetics, to be anosmic entails a significant loss in one's aesthetic appreciation of natural environments, everyday life (including appreciation of oneself and others), and both old and new art forms. Although anosmia is not explicitly a subject of these discussions, they allow us to draw clear conclusions about it; and those conclusions confirm my initial hypothesis.

It may seem to be a sad conclusion, because it recognizes a loss suffered by people who cannot smell. Nevertheless, I also believe that being aware of this loss can help us anosmic people to improve our aesthetic appreciation in other ways. Aesthetic appreciation begins with perception, which is the most passive part, but it continues with imagination, which is creative and constructive, and can also be enriched by dialogue with other people. When I am aware of the limits of my perception, I can foster both imagination and dialogue.

Anosmia transforms aesthetic appreciation, but to become aware of that fact transforms the appreciation even more and in a different way. When I appreciate a particular forest, I wonder what exists in the environment that I cannot perceive, and I then ask other people what the smell of the forest is. People usually answer that smells are very difficult to describe; they try with some words, then doubt, enter into discussion about them, and look for metaphors. From their half sentences, their doubts, gestures, and facial expressions, I try to imagine scents as colours or as tactile sensations or by means of the emotions they arouse.

I also reflect upon my senses, and wonder how this forest could be perceived if my senses were not so limited, if I could hear infrasounds or ultrasounds or if I lacked some other sense. I try to imagine what it would be like to walk under pine trees on a cold morning without being able to hear or to see. I try to understand how people who suffer from achromatopsia enjoy this same place, and remember that Neil Harbisson, an artist who suffers from congenital

[35] Gordon M. Shepherd, *Neurogastronomy: How the Brain Creates Flavor and Why It Matters* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012).

achromatopsia, uses a small camera that he wears on his head to capture the different colours and translate them into sounds, so that he can perceive the variety of colours before him as a variety of sounds. He calls himself a *sonochromatic cyborg*, and defends the idea that technology can help us to enhance our senses.[36]

I also wonder how the different animals that inhabit this forest perceive it. I try to imagine how a fox, a blackbird, a skunk, or a bat perceives the same place. I even try to invent totally new and different senses which would show us the forest in an innovative way. For example, a sense which allowed us to see the age of every living being, every plant and animal, would lead to us experiencing the temporal dimension in a new way. Likewise, a sense which allowed us to know how much time is left for every creature would also radically transform our perception of the forest and our emotions.

Based on my perception and these exercises of imagination, I can affirm that this particular forest is beautiful and I can give the reasons why it is beautiful. But I know that there are other ways to perceive it and the aesthetic appreciation they lead to could be very different. I become more prudent in my judgement, more conscious of how the limits of my perception enclose my appreciation, but also more curious about other experiences, more eager to listen to other descriptions and to enter into dialogue. That I recognize the plurality of experiences is in no way to renounce communicability or agreement; on the contrary, we can share a dialogue about these experiences, and I can agree with the judgement of others and also learn from the experiences of others. Such dialogue is food for the imagination.[37]

Here, an interesting question could arise that it is beyond the scope of this article to consider in detail, so I will only mention it briefly. In his aesthetics, Kant maintained that the testimony of others is never sufficient to convince a person of the beauty of an object; that is, the fact that one person or many people pronounce their judgement of taste by saying that this particular forest is beautiful is not a proof of the beauty of the forest for another person.[38] I completely agree with Kant in this particular case: the words of others do not allow me to aesthetically appreciate something I cannot perceive by myself, as happens in my case with smells. Aesthetic appreciation is based on personal perception and personal experience: it is based on the pleasure one feels contemplating the object, and this cannot be substituted for by the judgements of others. That is to say, aesthetic

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36 See his webpage at www.harbisson.com.

37 On the role of imagination in aesthetic appreciation of natural environments, see Ronald Hepburn, 'Landscape and the Metaphysical Imagination', *Environmental Values* 5 (1996): 191–204. See also Emily Brady, *Aesthetics of the Natural Environment* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2003).

38 Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, § 33.

appreciation is subjective, and cannot be based on the experience of someone else. It is true that, for Kant, the judgement of taste aspires to universality and agreement, but its basis is always subjective; it is each individual subject who aesthetically appreciates an object and then pronounces a judgement of taste, which, it is hoped, will comport with the judgements of others. The experience in the first person cannot be eliminated from the process.[39]

Once we have accepted this, however, I would defend the notion that the words of others help me in another sense. Their words teach me that there are different ways to experience the same forest, and try to communicate some features of those different experiences. Although I cannot enjoy these experiences myself, to know that they exist makes me reflect critically on my own experience. This process stimulates the consciousness of my limitations and at the same time opens up my imagination, which tries to spring free of the limits of my perception and to figure out what those other experiences are like. It may also occur that the words of others when they try to describe smells are in themselves a suggestive object of aesthetic appreciation. Several times I have found myself completely fascinated by other people's words when they talk about smells: what I am aesthetically appreciating in these cases is not the smells but the words about smells, as if they were a special case of poetry.

In the end, becoming aware that my perception is limited stimulates a more conscious, more self-critical, more imaginative appreciation. Precisely when aesthetics is reflecting on many traditional concepts and enlarging itself in order to include new experiences, it is the moment, not only for including olfaction, but also for analyzing what the inability to enjoy it implies.

Marta Tafalla
Department of Philosophy, Universidad Autónoma de Barcelona,
Campus de Bellaterra, Cerdanyola del Vallés, E-08193, Spain
Marta.Tafalla@uab.es

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[39] Robert Hopkins, 'Beauty and Testimony', in *Philosophy, the Good, the True and the Beautiful*, ed. Anthony O'Hear, Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplements 47 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 209–36.

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