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# Liquid Wardrobes and Sensing: A Phenomenological Approach to Digital Perfume Communities

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**Abstract.** The fact that perfumes have been regarded as enhancing one's appearance opens up questions about knowing and wearing fragrances. The connections between fragrances and fashion are being reviewed first according to the notion of embodiment as applied to the understanding of clothing fashion (Entwistle 2000, 2015); then, the lens of "mediatization", as applied by Rocamora (2017) to grasp the contemporary entanglement of fashion and digital media, further serves to turn to digital perfume communities. These constitute an essential resource to the extent that they share experiences while producing data about wearing and collecting fragrances. By tracing the recent insurgence of perfume criticism and by mapping certain techniques of entering into relation with fragrances through community members' perfume reviews as well, the study argues that their idiosyncratic and often artistic language is countering the impersonal language of perfume advertising; ultimately, the study suggests unravelling perfume consumption patterns via an aesthetics of attention.

**Keywords:** perfume connoisseurs, smelling, sense, aesthetics, digital community

## Introduction

Smell is the olfactory sense that acts invisibly among bodies of various kind; in physiological terms, it acts like an inward muscle, while given the proximity of smell receptors to those belonging to taste, we may speculate that anything that has a taste has also a smell. As such, in the case of both senses, connections to the limbic system have been found accountable for the triggering of memories. The subjective experience of smelling becomes prevalent and may even appear as having explanatory potential in conjunction with matters of taste once fragrances or perfumes come to mind. In what follows, the notion of taste will

recall either the palate or nutrition only in terms of scents that feature so-called food notes in their olfactory pyramids. As the sense of smell enables experiences which widen the realm of the olfactory, using fragrances have been linked to an enhancement of the senses; as such, aesthetical concerns and fashion discourses need to be acknowledged at once. First, we should remind ourselves of the explicit connection between fragrance use and fashionable clothing, an aspect made evident by social history (Corbin 1986). Subsequent difficulties arise to the extent that fashion phenomena now can be interpreted in a variety of ways (for a more recent overview of various fashion notions, see, for ex., Bruggeman 2014). Therefore, I propose a shortcut that will lead to my argument and eventually bring fashion theory into debate.

The complexities underlying the creation of perfumes, but even more so the smells, by virtue of their intimacy, call for a close reading-type of practice. Once the privilege of critics to decipher or translate aesthetic sensibilities, idiosyncrasies, and the functionality of the digital culture now make for a plethora of information created and spread about perfumes. Reviews (either anonymous or signed) as well as forum chats about perfumes as objects outline an enlarged phenomenology in terms of perceptions of human bodies, their ways of acting and relating to each other. The notion of wardrobe, or the personal collection of one's clothing items enables different facets of oneself or marks an extension intertwined with a distribution of personhood (Woodward 2007: 18); the parallel holds to the extent that inquiry should regard the contents of perfume wardrobes as indispensable.[1] However, in what follows, the thread of the analysis will gradually unfold from the material aspects and turn to the immateriality of concerning sensual experiences. By doing so, not only the so far under-analysed aspect of fragrances as merely completing looks would be reconsidered, but eventually an argument is being proposed for unravelling perfume consumption patterns as making sense via an aesthetics of attention.

## Fragrance and Fashion

As noted above, historical perspectives have extensively dealt with smells and body odours, as well as with the related function(ality) of fragrances in terms of adornment. Needless to say that, to a significant extent, when applied to human bodies in various concentrations (as cologne waters, eau de toilettes, eau de perfume, perfume extracts, and oils), fragrances have been intertwined with

1 While I do not dismiss matters of perfume collection as unworthy of research, the attribute "liquid" used in the title (both in the literal and figurative sense) alludes to the necessity for zooming-out of the lenses in order to grasp connections with fashion and turn the focus onto the experiential.

glamourous, fashionable objects (i.e. clothing and similar), and appearance ever since (see Corbin 1986, Beaulieu 2013). In parallel, from the point of view of fashion studies, the widely acknowledged theoretical benchmark has emphasized the aspect of signification via codes and signs: specifically, both tangible and intangible objects may have been expressing a fashion sense while being already part of the fashion industry or progressively incorporated by the latter (to be observed, "fashion industry" has been the operational term from (both) a structuralist and cultural studies approach; see Bruggeman 2014). Fashion draws on the novelty aspect with a notion of change marking either the incorporation and/or dismissal of something as being in or out of fashion.

Moreover, it implies the *wearing* of clothing designed as such, but in an enlarged sense it depends on being "displayed" in retail stores, magazines, or digital media, meaning that fashion is visually communicated. Thus, with regard to garments, fashion emerges through wearing/display (both physically and digitally); it is visually effected. In my view, this particular aspect needs to be noted when looking at (dis)similarities in connection with the proximate field of perfumery. We may observe an emphasis on the visual components also in the case of perfumery, namely the perfume bottles as well as the corresponding advertisements that act as, indeed, signifiers. Then, if we take into consideration either the recipients carrying the liquids or the connected imagery, fragrances or perfumes are very much representational.

Nonetheless, a closer look may reveal a gap, a hiatus, or a break in the circuit, as the visual is actually relegated to the domain of packaging. In its place, the olfactory experience is that which underpins contextually changing meanings of fashion(ability), even if being in harmony or in contrast with appearance will be ultimately sought after. That attractive looks coupled with great smell should be overwhelming reveals a common-sense inference. The complementary functionality of perfumes reflects the dominant fashion discourse, as it is presented in magazines, boutiques/retail stores. In other words, a person's appearance has different components (not just clothing items but also hairstyle, footwear, and so on), each entering into relationship with or bearing the marks of current or past fashion trends. In particular, given the proximity of fashion objects (clothes, garments) and the abovementioned bodily intimacy conveyed by or through smell molecules, the understanding of fashion as a "situated bodily practice" (Entwistle 2000, 2015) may serve as a valid starting point to grasp perfume wearing.

To be fair, the complementary relationship between perfumes and outfits has evolved so as to appear straightforward, as one may link, for ex., so-called leather fragrances with leather outfits to be worn in colder seasons or lighter, citrusy fragrances to be worn with warm-weather clothes. A more ubiquitous argument concerns fragrance classification according to the evaporation rate of smell molecules correlated with weather temperature and body heat (i.e. heavier

fragrances to persist in cold weather or to be worn during the cold seasons, and lighter ones suitable to wear in warm(er) weather and hot climates). And we may also encounter a "morphing aspect" with one's physical body, and so fragrances are conferred a second-skin functionality, which is albeit different from the second-skin feature talked about with regard to clothing.[2] If anything, this provides claim to the synesthetic nature of human sense.

On the one hand, leading fashion designer houses have capitalized on this aspect early on (see the textbook example of Chanel by being the first fashion designer house to introduce perfumes), so today virtually any fashion clothing company has a scent line as well. Notwithstanding global inequalities, the seductive power of the likes of Chanel or Dior may lie in the fact that their cosmetic products are more accessible to mass consumers than their fashion clothing collections.[3] While such a pull may be (dis)comforting, I find that fragrance enthusiasts also endorse the slightly differing logic of perfume consumption. Accordingly, craftsmanship or excellent perfume creation is recognized as being different from fashion design practice, and, by extension, it has less to do with fashion designer houses or brands or with the luxury garments those may offer. A closer look at creative processes may encounter a few notable exceptions, as the case of certain iconic, male-oriented perfumes created out of a synergy between perfume creators and fashion designers; before establishing his own brand, the activity of Tom Ford first at Yves Saint Laurent and then at Gucci or the creation of *Dior Homme* fragrance by Olivier Polge involving Hedi Slimane make well-versed arguments in this regard (such examples are rather the exception than the rule, and they might be useful for analysing other aspects, for ex., gender issues at different scales).

Therefore, on the other hand, the connection between fragrances and fashion clothing items appears arbitrary, especially from the perspective of fragrance literacy. The enlarged view on the wide pool of the fragrances often means having a different time scale, so preferences may go beyond mass-market options, towards higher-priced vintage perfumes or towards equally or even more highly-priced niche perfumes (whose creators do not offer other types of luxury fashion items). To the extent that owning and/or wearing fashion items betrays conspicuous consumption in a Simmelian sense, perfumes are also ambiguous. At the outset, spaces of display or acquaintance with perfumes / the initial consumption thereof appear superimposed onto department stores (what is more, large perfume chain

2 Although this perspective has been constantly refined through a lens onto the embodied experience of wearing clothes, it appears as a commonly accepted starting point in many theoretical discussions of fashion phenomena; though media and cultural theorist Giuliana Bruno is not credited for introducing the notion of "second skin", she gives a straightforward description as it applies to clothing as fashion (Bruno 2008: 147).

3 Investigating the relationship between the clothing and perfume lines of leading fashion designer houses should be, however, the subject of another inquiry.

stores now have their niche perfume sections, and strictly "niche" perfume boutiques have also found their place nearby). However, perfumes as collectible stuff, as kept in tangible glass objects are confined to the sanctuary of home. Though the liquids become invisible following the act of spraying oneself, the purposefulness of the act entails a need or demand to recognize perfumes as having exquisite value. This aspect, together with the previously mentioned "second-skin" feature belies a kind of value transference, thereby designating the route towards perfecting one's appearance. Certainly, what is in or out of fashion becomes, then, personal, or a self-aestheticizing project: it is highly influenced by perfume consumption habits, which range from well-informed, self-conscious manner to less reflective ways (identified as visceral sense by some).

Since the present study envisages a collective context where perfumes are assigned the main role, a further aspect to be taken into consideration concerns trends of smell as having their own fashionability. Accordingly, given the scales of dynamics and constraints, we can refer to both specific perfumes as end-products and certain smell molecules that come to be regarded as contemporary, meaning here, for the sake of brevity, being in fashion (a thorough investigation in this regard should inquire into fragrance chemistry and the relevant economic actors). Whatever conceptual means are salvaged or at disposal to convey meaningful sense for the olfactory, the notion of the contemporary may be contrasted with the datedness of either fragrances and/or certain smell notes. In other words, that certain perfume smells are regarded as either "contemporary" or dated is obviously subject to interpretation.[4] Similarities with fashion design practice occur, but only to the extent that we draw an analogy between perfume accords and basic elements of gendered attires.[5] While the latter are reworked, tweaked twice a year, the creation of successful perfumes may (and usually) take up more time; and, in the case of successful fragrances, "fashionability" is certainly longer than one season (even if shelf life is fixed to 3 years). Here I would mention a gendered sub-aspect that appears to synchronize perfumes and fashion garments: menswear fashion is considered as slowly evolving and not so prone to change (as opposed to womenswear).[6] This may correlate with my observation that many male perfume enthusiasts are into vintage perfumes, so vintage perfumery may be either a starting point or an endpoint of the "fragrance journey", as it is voiced affectionately by many. However, I would not venture so far as to generalize by

4 For ex., see agarwood (oud), then rose and oud combo, or specific notes like coffee, incense, or artificial new smell molecules like ambroxan, which do not have historical or real-world material resemblances.

5 However, in the case of fashion design, the cuts, shapes, materials, motifs, etc. are presented as ideas to be translated into garments for the next season; thus, fashion is more like a provider of "raw material" for what eventually will be worn in everyday life (Entwistle 2015: 118).

6 *Why Tom Ford Puts the Logo at the Tip* – interview with Tom Ford by Rachel Tashjian https://tinyurl.com/y2jt2xrd (last access: 05.11.2022).

crediting an ancestral male attitude unwilling to accept nuanced changes; rather there is a sense of "intergenerational growth" (Robertson 2004) that appears to be guilty of the spikes of interest and praise in the vintage market and relevant for niche as well (to the extent that the latter reworks perfume trends from the past); it strikes me as more valid argument than, say, nostalgia.

Finally, a significant differentiating aspect acts like a lower threshold of admission in the case of perfumes (as opposed to interest in other types of fashion items to be worn). Assuming one is not shy to test perfumes means engaging in thorough and systematic investigation of the perfumes offered by boutiques or retail stores at disposal. Such a strategy is different from a rushed moment of buying, and, by doing so, one can arguably gain a fuller sense of the desired object as opposed to putting on any number of garments/dresses in the fitting room. However, as I hinted at, this aspect reflects a difference in degree only, as the ultimate goal is, in case of being satisfied with the scent sample, still about entering into possession of the object. Thus, by taking note of technicalities (for ex.: does spraying on clothes affects one's bodily appearance?), the question whether perfumes are completing looks/appearance should be reformulated by turning to wearers' subjective accounts. In what follows, I will focus mainly on the multi-faceted experience of *wearing* in the sense that it serves (albeit not exclusively) as the third angle of the imaginary triangle, or the dot connecting garments of fashion and perfumes.

## Perfume Media

The point of departure for my analysis has been defined by my perspective anchored in the present. Therefore, a positive consideration of the ever-expanding perfume industry (including the proliferating number of various fragrance-making companies, trained perfumers, and consumption on a planetary scale), i.e. as enabling diversity, as well as its "taste cultures" need to be acknowledged both via *and* in connection with the digital realm. Particularly, my starting point has been that any diversity in terms of consumption practices could be grasped by the countless ways of how people relate to fragrances. Thus, while popular labels like "perfumista", "fragbro", or "fragheads" suggest the degrees of engagement (with such labels being used increasingly without negative connotations), the perspective of viewing consumption communities through the lens of mediatization as proposed by fashion researcher Rocamora (2017) lays claim to a somewhat close connection or overlapping with the fashion industry.

The contemporary entanglement of fashion and digital media is useful to sketch an overview of perfume media. While most books on perfumes take historical perspectives on the subject, I think of perfume media in terms of digital media

environments that create, publish, and/or update perfume-related content – from various YouTube perfume reviewers (most having been assigned the status of influencers) and other social media environments (mainly on Instagram but also Facebook and Tumblr). Given, however, the reliance of those on the visibility or the visual, as well as an exploitation of the affordances of the specific form of media all those have been using should also include an analysis of the visual content produced as such.[7] In parallel, there has to be also an acknowledgement of the circulation or flow of transindividual affects as not only enabled by contemporary forms of media but actually what the media are about and for (McKenzie 2020). As I understand, the media tools available mean that we are less relying on the reproduction of definite, clear-cut tastes; next to a positively inclined, evolving, ever-mutating, geared towards the future, an overcoding practice (in a Deleuzian manner) needs to be addressed as well. This understanding of the functioning of media is, in my view, necessary to be aware of.

Therefore, I intended to pay attention to perfume-related diversity as it has been reflected in its very own knowledge-generating potential (as briefly mentioned by Beaulieu 2013). So, I looked first at individual blogs that had an emphasis on the textual content. Such blogs or mini-websites and their creators (often professionally trained perfumers with interest in visual arts as well as other creative-artistic practices) appear as nodes of loose networks, and they also command(ed) many individual followers.[8] Some of these blogs may still be active, but many have been outdone by the different magnitudes by which forums or community sites operate. Of particular interest have been the intricacies of endlessly dissecting hard-to-find, no-longer-produced perfumes as well as contemporary ones (in more usual words, those referred to as vintage or semi-vintage and niche perfumery),[9] as they have resulted in "community-generated" content.

7 So, not only would it be difficult to outweigh the significance of the visual, but I cannot see examining such output without paying attention also to the inherent algorithmic regulations. All such aspects call for a different scope and method of analysis; in other words, by dwelling upon the better consumption/purchase suggestions equal better rankings, I have envisaged diminishing gains.

8 Some of the first wave of blogs are extinct (such as ntsperfume.com or raidersofthelostscent.blogspot.com), while others are still functional (like kafkaesqueblog.com). Even the much-cited Turin and Sanchez have been updating their blog until recently (https://www.perfumestheguide.com).

9 The fragrance world is rather straightforward in its classification; accordingly, the labels vintage or semi-vintage have been applied to perfume products marketed during the 20th century and the early 21st century by fashion designer houses and a few traditional, only-perfume-producing houses; several factors (like changing consumer trends coupled with temporary failure to sell) contribute to such products becoming hard-to-find and therefore collectible stuff, i.e. vintage as it applies to other types of, once mass-produced artefacts that have been culturally endowed in hindsight. To be noted, some vintage perfumes also fall in the category of niche, but in most cases niche means a contemporary take on perfumery by perfumers with one-of-a-kind artistic style, complemented with the use of natural raw materials in spite of global scarcity and restrictions.

As I have been engaged in extensive online research, two self-entitled digital perfume encyclopaedias have consistently popped up, namely *basenotes.net* and *fragrantica.com*. I narrowed my focus to *Fragrantica*, since it appeared as more diverse and also because of making content available in several other languages, apart from the global English. (While both are originated in the US, *Fragrantica* has been gaining more traction among users based across Europe; I should also mention that many use both).[10]

When asking what the role of online fragrance communities is, we should reckon that they are obviously influencers of consumption. Moreover, we can loosely map the reasons why and how online fragrance communities are functional; perfumes are considered as ideal objects for community debates given their varied and often subversive compositions in olfactory terms (Herman 2013). Within fragrance communities, we can easily distinguish general aims like searching for a signature scent, building or expanding one's perfume collection by communicating with fellow connoisseurs. The general effect is an enrichment of one's knowledge about the subject, and by being positioned specifically, becoming informed to debate about issues and giving advice for matters related. This aspect, however, is not what makes perfume-connaissance specific, as it merely reflects the intended use of media platforms, i.e. it puts an emphasis on the mediation aspect, or on the way how knowledge is communicated/circulated, and not so much on the knowledge itself (although any knowledge is modelled by such noisy factors as the affordances of a specific interface of communication). Accordingly, the self-aestheticizing features enabled to users have contributed to the specific illusion of bringing face-to-face the breadth of fragrances with the wealth of consumers (whereby members tailor their perfume collections as quasi-public wardrobes and communicate their level of experience).

Such operating conditions of the new-comer perfume houses (i.e. those established towards the end of 20th century or that started to produce perfumes at that time) are now being copied by mainstream designer houses. Therefore, niche as an umbrella term appears as endemic to the perfume industry as the latter developed throughout the 20th century. And, to further complicate the picture, niche has its own mainstream, compared to which perfumers labelled "independent" are considered to be different to the extent that they evade certain regulations set for perfume industry professionals; pushing further limits in terms of perfume-creating concepts, ideas and even more limited distribution/availability, indie perfumery remain inversely proportional to mass appeal.

10 *Fragrantica*.com presents a comprehensive database of perfumes (over 72,000 perfume entries listed, although including different editions of supposedly same formulas) and has a fairly large number of users/members across the continents, with a bigger proportion from the English-speaking countries (over 700,000 registered members with active or online members fluctuating most likely according to working hours in the global North). While its own journal-like main page content is produced by its own perfume-loving editorial staff, they also recruit contributors from among the members (which, if anything, it constitutes a further evidence in support of my own endeavour in the sense that Fragrantica editors have also noticed the writing skills of certain members).

Thus, I have put a focus on user input about fragrance entries where members share written experiences and give their opinion. In other words, the performance of fragrances is voiced or assessed individually, as well as submitted to quantitative analysis according to certain parameters.[11] Tracing back such practices to perfume criticism as having emerged through various informed texts which had been published earlier (see, for ex., Edwards 1996; Turin–Sanchez 2008, 2018) may have had its appeal in terms of writers' practical advices (for ex., training one's nose) and general encouragement or invitation to get acquainted with this field of sensual beauty and precision chemistry. In other words, a specific genre of writing piece, namely reviewing and assessing particular fragrances, has fared well with the affordances of the digital realm. In other words, what interested me was the way in which highly idiosyncratic expressions have been emerging through common parlance but without repeating or reiterating the stereotypical language of perfume marketing; thereby, knowledge-bases created by and for perfume enthusiasts and perfume criticism as practised independently (the inherent consumer aspect aside) cannot be separated neither from each other nor from the heritage line of perfume criticism, as literate consumers took heed of the advice of the so-called first generation of independent perfume critics.

Looking at such a diffuse canon of perfumery by skimming through the reviews, I have occasionally stumbled upon insights that seemed remarkable (a subjective bias, I admit) by way of their style of formulation/expression as well as by individualistic sense that came through, in the sense of "added" quality that both resonated with artistry and pointed to a functional knowledge of a kind.[12] In spite of counterarguments against hand picking and indirect interpretation, an overview of both perfume history and the contemporary conditions makes it rather obvious the prevailing of artistic quality. So, a focus on qualitative aspect appeared useful while I have gathered an initial overview of differences among perfume-evaluating criteria or perspectives (priming various factors in terms of sensory, perfume-historical, quantitative or scaled approaches, and so on). In other words, connection to the intellectual discourse of past and contemporary perfumery has been followed by gathering information about perfumes that have been given steady attention to by the already mentioned first wave of "independent" perfume critics and bloggers (see Turin–Sanchez 2018). The fact that I have been more familiar with perfumes for men has obviously influenced

11 On their turn, these are also indexed by specific notions: the appropriate seasons of wearing, longevity of wear, the "ideal" gender of the wearer of the perfume in question, as well as evaluation of price and quasi-technical variables such as projection, silage. All the previously mentioned amount, eventually, to an immense and constantly growing pile of data on both perfumes and users; thereby, both quantitative and qualitative analyses may be conducted (as of Spring 2022, over 1,200,000 reviews have been listed).

12 A similar observation has been thematized also by a journal report, albeit in the context of leisure time within the pandemic restrictions (see Syme 2021).

my inquiry. A narrowing of the vast subject area or a point of departure has been constituted by paying attention also to users who have been reviewing so-called genderless perfumes; therefore, my investigation was not blind to any gender scale but was not interested in user profiles categorized in terms of gender either.[13] Thus, I have contacted initially a few Fragrantica members who have been reviewing and referring to both vintage and contemporary fragrances (although to varying degrees). The number of reviews posted, together with a certain consistency of reviewers to deal with perfumes in an ongoing manner, has been telling in terms of their engagement with the topic; the number of reviews as well the consistency of the input or postings have been also decisive for my sampling. Subsequently, I have conducted structured e-mail discussions about how they relate to perfumery and fashion, as well as details about reviewing practices. Recommendations of certain reviews and/or reviewers as well as user profiles highlighted by Fragrantica's own editorial staff (one of the respondents has drawn my attention to this feature of the Fragrantica portal) have constituted further criteria for reaching out to subsequent community members.

## Perfume Experience and Critics

While perfumes are conveyed in terms that are similar to those concerning (fashion) clothes, we are reminded that "fashion articulates the body, producing discourses on the body" (Entwistle 2000: 4), and so fashion theorist Joanne Entwistle (2000: 10–11) has been calling attention to "…consider dress in everyday life as embodied practice: how dress operates on a phenomenological, moving body and how it is a practice that involves individual actions of attending to the body with the body". Considering this emphasis on the phenomenological, embodied dimensions of wearing clothes, how does it translate to the wearing of perfumes?

13 A slightly different but common path made it clear that the blurring of gender boundaries would be characteristic to a certain extent for lovers of both vintage and niche; here, we should note that a handful of classic perfumes have been increasingly regarded as wearable by the other sex, i.e. feminine perfumes by men and vice versa. In parallel, there has been a growing trend of genderless perfume products that remains characteristic of both niche and the more expensive, exclusive scent lines of the leading fashion designer houses. In most cases, one should not view this phenomenon of consumption as something that eventually applies equally to both sexes; an overview of quantified opinions or user data/input on wearing genderless or "universal" perfumes should suffice. It should be more interesting, however, to disentangle any such unintended causalities/consequences by taking into consideration, besides the gender/culture aspect, a variety of patterns, such as skin chemistry, as well as geographic location and climate (one may wonder, however, about any additional benefits of drawing anthropological maps of perfume usage beyond marketing value or further academic text output). Moreover, emphasizing such an aspect should also entail a recalibration of the research focus in terms of class- and income-related affordances.

The claim of diversity, therefore, will necessarily map onto a knowledge base to be understood as communication and inquiry about fragrances: what to wear on specific occasions but also beyond, specifically in the sense of being able to participate in the fragrance discourse meaningfully. Consequently, what interests me is rather post-phenomenological, since – to the extent that it becomes knowledge – it is recognized as such via multiple *mediations* of phenomenological experiences, especially when we consider it as being coupled also with, for ex., technical or scientific data from the realm of chemistry. It is at once "attending to the body", as Entwistle has suggested, but also different. Significantly, such knowledge is built on "wear time" to the extent that smell molecules have a life span or duration that depends on / varies according to the surfaces those are sprayed upon. Similarly, by making use of the suggestion that the sense of smell may provide a basis for aesthetic critical reflection (Shiner 2020), we may turn to a Friedian conceptual distinction between "objecthood" and "art objects", which in our case may resonate with the ways in which certain perfumes achieve status or are conferred such by fragrance connoisseurs.

Accordingly, some perfumes could be discerned as novelties by bearing a close resemblance to domains where creative output is essential, namely arts and fashion design. In this sense, it has been rather obvious that the common thread of artistic quality could be seen as the defining feature of what has made certain perfumes outstanding during the past decades and up until our day. The same move glued the artistic quality to the perfume creator, or to the artist (Turin 2006; Turin–Sanchez 2008, 2018). However, the defining benchmarks of the aesthetically inflicted reflections appear to be set by the very character of fragrances where the former involves synaesthesia by default. According to the now common insight that senses are intertwined so that making sense of oneself and/or the world should be considered a synesthetic act, in the case of perfumes their inherent synesthetic character is even argued to lend itself to at times elusive subversiveness, which is prone to elevate/dethrone them as the very objects of pop culture (Herman 2013). While this view may not deprive the olfactory experience of perfumes from its classical Kantian undertones (with its components broken down into the distance, spontaneous play and disinterested pleasure of the senses, as it has been reflected by the community members whom I contacted), such contradictory approaches certainly needed balancing for the sake of a feasible inquiry.

On the one hand, there has been a proliferation of perfume connoisseurship ever since the much-referenced perfume criticism of Turin and Sanchez, which can be viewed as propagating an autodidact way of relating to perfumes, or enabling for anyone to voice her or his opinion and argue for a reboot of the discourse about fragrances. On the other hand, the advent of the digital media has enabled/driven most people to create content, or be the content themselves, a fact that still makes place for the amateur vs. professional debate. Nonetheless, an understanding of

what is considered professional appears as fleeting and/or context-dependent; it should be limited neither to the language of marketing nor to the interviews taken from perfume creators. Therefore, I have been doing away with the binary categorization of amateur and professional approaches; moreover, the literary or fictional component triggered in such a highly idiosyncratic and aleatory manner appears to me as a way more professional approach in terms of language use.

Perfume connoisseurship can be grasped as a very individual project (at least so far), and it has been tapping into professional knowledge that goes into perfumery making (i.e. fragrance chemistry) and simultaneously developing a different vernacular approach about perfumery. On its turn, such language should not fall for the seduction of advertising or marketing while maintaining its rather different building blocks, which are to be viewed in terms of the experiential and the comparative dimensions. However, we should also observe that this claim by no means amounts to saying that the *experiences* of perfumes have been irreconcilably different ever since (except for experiencing the new or reformulated versions of vintage perfumes). Such concerns may be simultaneously positioned in a causal chain (which is an argument for perfume history). To sum up, the possibility to reconceptualize and relocate the artistic quality as becoming the proprietary feature/marker of written texts or reviews posted by registered members appeared as being not so much a translation/mirroring of the perfume creator's perfume concept but rather autonomous from any supposedly inherent feature of the perfumes considered as "art objects".

## Sensing Bodies and Attention

Going back to the observation of social historian Richard Sennett – according to whom a change is one's outer appearance; starting from the 19th century, it has been equated with a change of the "self" (Sennett 1974 quoted by Bruggeman 2014: 39–40) –, we may note that, apart from (im)perceptible mood changes, it has been implied that the scent someone is wearing/or the body odour that he or she emanates may have such communicative powers as well, if not quite in terms of a self, then at least with regard to one's disposition.

More recently, individual actions or practices in terms of wearing fragrances have been reviewed in depth to the extent of emphasizing so-called cross-modal or intersensory valences related to the perception of both the self and others, as well as the function of fragrances in connection to those, e.g. mood, attraction (cf. Spence 2021). This is a reasoning from a cognitive and social psychological perspective that builds on the recognition that bodily experiences cannot be characterized as being homogenous, but they clearly have aspects linked to the subjective nature of smelling and to how a smell "feels".

As such, communicative situations dependent on first-person and third-person perspectives ultimately reveal an anchoring in the paradigm of "body representations", whereby bodies are to be conceived in terms of both schema (or the capacity to act, in a Spinozan/Deleuzian paradigm) *and* body image. While it is plausible to suggest their overlap in order to make sense (at all), the notion of "body schema" underneath the "body image" appears to guide a departure from the "objecthood" of scents, whereby dissipation or evaporation is ultimately meaningful only if phenomenologically felt. I believe this functionality is the core component of the critique against the representational understanding, or the subtext that invariably lingers when including fragrances in the mainstream fashion discourse (i.e. as *invisibly* completing one's look). Fragrances or perfumes are surely invisible throughout the acts of wearing: not only in the sense that they are not representational in a Barthesian allusion but rather perceptible along different "lines of flight" and therefore in need of interpretative keys.

The abovementioned body schema (which is dependent on the capacity to act) is relevant here as the intertwining of the sensory and the somatic, and which, joined by the cognitive aspect or goal, is – by way of the notion of "embodiment" as performance (as applied by fashion studies, see Entwistle 2000, 2015; Bruggeman 2014) – locked into a sort of performativity that appears valid for each "body" emerging in a fragrant encounter.[14] As such, reminding ourselves that the notion of performativity is clearly indebted to the performative aspect of language itself, we should attend to and disentangle the construct that is the performing bodies in our context.

Thus, when asked about the dynamics between wearing vs owning/collecting fragrances, as well as having knowledge about them, one of the Fragrantica members replied that: "I don't see myself as a collector but a reader, although fragrance isn't really 'read' so much as listened to…" (L. J.).[15] Crediting the writing of perfumer and blogger Victoria Frolova for bringing the Japanese expression of "listening to incense" to perfumers' attention, we may witness a shift of registers, whereby fragrances are not to be read like (spoken) language. You cannot read it, that is, your eyes and/or fingers are not much of use, but it requires a different sense. In a different note, we may remind ourselves of the subsequent parts of Roland Barthes's argument for fashion as a system of signification, or reading fashion as language, where identities and bodies function as signifying surfaces (Bruggeman 2014: 12–44): bodies in our context do have surfaces, and they do signify; the task is, however, to grasp the different terms of signification. To be fair,

14 As stated by one Fragrantica member, "there is an aspect of both perfume and fashion that is performative, and performance is always critically bound to the present" (L. J.).

15 Although the community members use aliases, I have changed their names to preserve their relative anonymity.

perfumery has a very elaborate system of signification of its own (the language input system referred to by Turin (2006) is a case in point).

The "essence" that is contained in the form of liquid is, nevertheless, not identical to it since the liquid acts as a carrier or container of various components to be released as layered (as "tete", "coeur", and "fond") and/or on a finite time scale. As a complementary way of approaching scents, we may have visual cues in terms of advertising as well as packaging where the original bottles or recipients carry design features. And, one may equally argue for the relevance of the tactile, which may be further enhanced through bottle design, shape, its surface, and labelling. Furthermore, we should also mention the proprioceptive sense that is necessitated to either put on a perfume or lend one's hand or another body part of choice to be sprayed or splashed upon, as well as subsequently examining the evolution stages of perfumes. Being, as noted before, a common and idiosyncratic practice, we should also emphasize the differing running order of senses, as for some the passion is not about collecting full bottles (which cannot be used in a lifetime) but the smell itself. This fact then leads to reconsider besides perfume wearing also the phenomenon of collecting fragrances. The extent to which the two aspects may be either uncoupled or differentiated would be, however, the subject of another study.

The visual loses its appeal when perfumes are acquired in smaller quantities: while miniature bottles that still carry the perfume creator design are not a ubiquitous practice, decanted samples or vials as well as "discovery sets" are the way to go. On the one hand, this practice may serve as evidence for the smell to retain its primacy. On the other hand, acquiring perfume samples is cost-effective and is the necessary step if the subjective interpretation/evaluation of smells is both the goal and the denouement. The term "blind buy" is commonly used in fragrance communities although it appears as a rather unfortunate expression or misinterpretation of the warning that one should buy a bottle only after having smelled and worn it. If anything, this aspect reinforces the commodity fetishism as emerging through the visual imagery, as it (mis)places the value onto which is seen, or the container, i.e. the perfume bottle. The different strategy of perfume sampling is obviously beneficial in terms of refining one's olfactory sense by enabling to compare and wear many fragrances in order of hundreds or thousands.

While bearing resemblance to the sampling practice as celebrated by contemporary cultural and art theorists (e.g. Bourriaud 2002), the practice of sampling in our case has various meanings: it may refer to the layering or wearing of different perfumes at one time or, conversely, having a kind of rotational use which does not suppress wear time (via the aforementioned layering) but dilates it, as a kind of "mixtape" approach in the context of which by wearing different perfumes for different periods of the day, or even envisaging durations, different perfumes follow one another so that specific olfactory notes punctuate different

timespans or the passing of time. Needless to say, this aspect could be easily conflated with a person's lifetime as being marked by the use of specific scents, where taking the already mentioned "fragrance journey" from youthful scents to acquired taste becomes a popular metaphor of life experiences. However, I wish to emphasize here the fact that acquaintance with perfumes is very much an issue of (constantly paying) attention, not dissimilar to the fleeting, receding, and coming to the fore instances of awareness or consciousness level. There is an act of "…individuating of ourselves through the act of attention" (McKenzie 2020: 68) but which act, because of the fluidity of its synesthetic object, wants to individuate the object itself.

So, where stimuli and habits or schemas form different concoctions, there emerges an "aesthetics of attention" with its own distinctive "ecology" according to a concept of attention subdivided into alertness, loyalty, projection, and immersion (Citton 2016 quoted by McKenzie 2020: 66–79). While the authors cited seek to deal with the conditions provided by attention economy (in the sense of abundant information and limited capacity of attention), I suggest that by pointing to the "listening phase" as an active engagement of the senses such cognitive endeavours may be viewed as individual reverse-engineering efforts, which also manage, for a brief period of time, the distraction sought by attention economy. Specifically, even one remarkably characteristic feature of the latter – which is attraction – here cannot be conceived in a traditional model of communication anymore (see the sender and receiver couplet) but has many elements that are not individualized but become as such through transitory processes; e.g. the air needed to transport smell molecules, the heat wave needed to lift off molecules from the skin; then, one should take into account even the folded objects like scented clothing pieces (which have also their own individual histories, as from boutique shelves or wardrobes and then put on, etc.); and, ultimately we even re-individualize the scent molecules, as those play an olfactory mimicry on either various natural resources or (semi-)artificial, man-made materials by lending the impression, for varying periods of time, of enveloping the wearer and thus considered as defining/marking human bodies (see, for ex., so-called animalic fragrances). Moreover, in this regard, it is to be observed that many seek fragrances that meld with their perceived body odours (see the second-skin feature mentioned earlier). The variations here are like a box of Pandora – so, instead of dwelling on apparently eternal differences, I would return to the issue of attention whereby, in lieu of the rules set forth by any attention economy standards, the maximum attention is garnered, or remains an effort to be pursued; and, by doing so, the deficiency of information is handled or grasped. Subsequently, the next step is to create/reveal a wealth of data (again, it is debatable as to what reviewers' contributions amount to, generally speaking, in terms of unearthing already existing information about perfumes and their creators

or channelling hitherto inexistent perspectives). In a way, voicing/testing a new language, or even the "mechanic" acts of translating existing information, say, for ex., from French or Italian into the global English, should be considered as (re-) creating practices. Therefore, asking whether these accounts relate to perfume concepts appears as a path to analytic endeavours leading nowhere. Instead, the key moment is to stress the role of aesthetics as attention where alertness in the sense of excitement to smells is either exhausted or brought to the limit of fatigue/ exhaustion: "What a [good] perfume triggers must be sensory and emotional and intellectual and social. The challenge of processing these experiences is exciting because it involves connecting a non-narrative experience like smells to feelings and perceptions experienced as abstractions back to the body…" (L. J.).

Creating a narrative in connection to perfume experiences in the form of reviews is the overall effect; the acts which involve media usage are acts of projection in an inherent manner (for our purpose, we may note acts of the intellect, specifically those of writing and/or reading about perfumes). In other words, if not quite genuine acts of creativity in some cases, these convey self-expressions through reflective practices, whereby "noting down what I smelt has helped me to understand and appreciate the scent better" (as remarked by B. W., another Fragrantica member to whom I spoke). Language then, either written or spoken, appears as the most adequate tool of communication whereby, in our context, a different dimensionality of experience appears – in spite of/or through capturing or referring to fleeting or temporary perfume characteristics: see, for ex., the aura of the wearer, which is not to be confused with the "scent bubble"; the bodily awareness as an olfactory tracing of body movements in space; a heightened sense of body postures, codified between the extremes of work and leisure times, or onto the spectrum thereof. In addition, perfume wearing may bring into focus or give rise to different facets of experience such as verticality in connection with so-called bold, statement perfumes, as well as one's shadow superimposed by the phenomenon of "scent trail".

Thus, in accordance with the typology of attention sketched before, we have an aspect of immersion which is not (and cannot be) a constant, as it alternates with loyalty (i.e. signature scents / favourites) or with the perfume references which serve to "frame one's writing", as stated by another Fragrantica member (H. F.). In a different ordering, a projection of attention is finally needed to give meaning to one's perfume experience, which may then harvest its own digital attention when read or up-/downvoted. Ultimately, apart from the *countable* terms related to the forum profiles of either perfume connoisseurs or fragrance entries, what the senses effectuate may be cast to those in-between spaces as connections to be explored (as proposed by McKenzie 2020: 78–79).[16] Therefore,

16 In this sense, cultural theorists such as Wark Mackenzie argue for the communal, shared feelings that evade being captured by any media form, although such transindividual affects appear to be the ultimate concern of media outlets.

with the qualitative aspects being both the burden and the benefits of their respective lenses and situated perspectives, at least such accounts do not reiterate the importance of one specific skill of attention and are wary of the promise of being served feasts for the senses.

So, paying attention to scents may come as an activation of the senses with the priming of the olfactory; it is a conscious practice that should eventually give rise, in the case of perfumers, to "olfactory consciousness" (as proposed by Edmond Roudnitska, one of the most acclaimed perfumers of the past century; see Roudnitska 1991: 38). Therefore, we may sense the intertwining of the olfactory sense and smells (or the "distribution" of the olfactory dimension in terms of sensing organ and pleasant/unpleasant odours). While the historical perspective has identified a reconfiguration from provoking sensation to receiving it (i.e. towards the (aesthetically) pleasing (see Corbin 1986: 81)), a new shift has been reinstantiated to mark a return to evoking sensation. Not so much a desire to provoke by malodours of past centuries due to lack of personal hygiene, and neither in terms of the skunk or various animalic perfume notes. Conversely, sensations are to be elicited both in place of actual smells (and therefore abstract and subject to imagination) *and* also in parallel with those – precisely because, as the historical argument proceeds, the sweet odours could not be distinguished or defined as opposed to strong ones (ibid.). Therefore, any such distinctions are revealing particular perspectives that, falling back to the material background, appear to multiply tastes depending on affordances and popular consumption patterns. By reviewing the connections between fragrances and fashion, I have turned to the media platforms that perfume enthusiasts use along the vein of the more recent trend of perfume criticism. I have suggested a contemporary take on this popular phenomenon of consumption by drawing on the notion of attention as both conditioned by the contemporary media and being necessary for the acts of synaesthesia.

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