

ONTOLOGICAL ANOSMIA

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Anosmia, or the absence of smell, is not just a subjective experience but, as I argue in this text, an ontological affect. Anosmia in the form of deodorisation and hygienisation, is the projected aim for many institutions, indeed often societies as a whole, that try to direct individual affects along prefabricated targets of racial, ethnic and class discrimination, rampant consumerism and unconscious participation in atmospheric engineering. Odours consist what I would like to call *the olflow*, the incessant flow of odours in which human and nonhuman bodies are agents of odour generation and consumption. Odour engineering directs the *olflow* and reinforces olfactory discrimination. I conclude with a call against the threat of what I call 'ontological anosmia', namely the flattening of multiplicity of desire and the engineering of emergence as spontaneity.

Keywords

Anosmia, atmosphere, covid, ontology, *olflow*, phenomenology, smellscape

1. Is this how nothing smells, she wondered.

She has a severe cold. It isn't the first time of course. She has had bad colds in the past and has always recovered. This time, however, it is different. As if the world has been placed out of bounds. Her breathing is still impaired – not the lungs. They seem to be working fine. It's the nostrils that stop the flow, as if they try to keep her isolated, protected, immune. The damage, however, is already done. She has lost her sense of smell. Not her taste, strangely. She can still taste food although not as clearly and acutely as before. But the loss of smell has been incapacitating. For years now, deodorised dangers have been attacking her from all sides: gas leaks, spoiled food, fire smoke. The world is deprived of its olfactory aureole. She is feeling "empty, in a sort of limbo."² Her life has lost its direction.³

A lingering sense of unbelonging. Is this how nothing smells?

¹ I would like to thank the editors of the journal for the invitation and inspiration. Thanks also to Lorenzo Marinucci for the literary inspiration and Yusuf Patel for comments.

² Ackerman, 1991: 41, leads the section on anosmia in her sense book with a 33-year-old man who used to be a food connoisseur and whose life changed dramatically after the loss of smell.

³ Ogle, 1875.

2. Is this how nothing smells, she wonders.

She has recovered from the other symptoms without the need for hospitalisation. But the loss of smell lingers on, 127 days since her original diagnosis. She learned a new word: anosmia. Apparently one of the main symptoms of the virus. Her world is out of joint. She feels miserable, depressed: “can’t smell my clothes, my daughter’s hair, my dogs.”⁴ Everything is “cocooned under an impenetrable layer of clingfilm.”⁵ “Eating anything is most unpleasant, even repellent.”⁶ Is it actually food? Is it something else? Who has invited this unknown consistency in my mouth? Everything has been blanketed. She feels “powerless and scared.”⁷

A sense of forgetting. Is this how nothing smells?

3. Oflowing

One hundred and fifty years separate the two women of the above brief narratives. The first is my retelling of an 1870s case reported by William Ogle in one of the first medical texts on anosmia; the second, a liberal reconstruction of the 2020 COVID-19 induced anosmia based on patients’ comments posted online. The effect, however, remains the same: an existential disorientation, a feeling of being adrift, a Kierkegaardian anxiety: “I stick my finger into the world - it has no smell. Where am I? What does it mean to say: the world? What is the meaning of the world?”⁸

Although the “forgotten sense”,⁹ the olfactory is the most potent way of anchoring ourselves to the world. We subconsciously find our place in it by sniffing our body, the body of the one next to us, the room in which we are, the culture with which we are familiar. We are part of what I would like to call the *olflow*: the incessant olfactory flow consisting of bodies, human and nonhuman, that are agents of generation, consumption, diffusion, reproduction and dissolution of odours. As they move or pause, as they cluster with others or try to move away, these bodies constantly partake in the olflow, a dense planetary swirl that leaves nothing outside.

One cannot intentionally stop smelling. To not want to smell is to stop breathing. It is tantamount to becoming asphyxiated in one’s own immunitas, intentionally to stop living,¹⁰

⁴ Posts on the Covid-19 facebook group, <https://www.facebook.com/groups/anosmia.covid19>

⁵ <https://www.elle.com/uk/beauty/body-and-physical-health/a34370068/perfume-anosmia-smell-covid/>

⁶ Posts on the Covid-19 facebook group, <https://www.facebook.com/groups/anosmia.covid19>

⁷ <https://wtop.com/coronavirus/2020/04/people-who-lost-their-sense-of-smell-weeks-ago-still-waiting-for-it-to-return/>

⁸ Kierkegaard, 1983: 200.

⁹ Stevenson, 2014: 151. See also Serres, 2008: 34.

¹⁰ Yoo, 2020.

to go against the Spinozan *conatus* that characterises every single body. But the will to carry on living (breathing, smelling) relies on the need to let the outside world come in. Even when you cannot smell (something), you still smell (*of* something). Whatever one does or does not do, one always remains an olflow agent, regardless of intention, consciousness or life. To smell, actively or passively, is to be flowing along that pulsating olflow of life and death, rush and rot, and to co-produce it along with everything else.

To stop smelling (actively or passively), that is to stop being an agent of the olflow, is also to entertain that strangely theological dream of going beyond judgement.¹¹ To be beyond smell is to hover somewhere over materiality, in defiance not only of the laws of physics, biology and society, but of the very nature of laws. This latter dictates that laws emerge even when laws are defied. Perhaps different laws, perhaps unrecognisable laws, perhaps even not established laws. But laws nevertheless. Laws are judgement are smell. Nothing in the olflow is there for passive, unaffected observing. Everything is contributing to the emergence of the olflow. Everything takes part in the judgement of the olflow.

Here is the difference between smellscape¹² and olflow: to put it succinctly, the phenomenology of smellscape is not enough to capture the ontology of olflow. In fact, nothing is enough. Smellscapes rely on the one that does the smelling while at the same time excluding her own odorous emissions. Smellscapes only incidentally consider the way the odoriferous assemblages of bodies move and what they generate when they do – there is an agential monopoly in smellscapes. Smellscapes still rely on a vantage point, an impression, a nose. Smellscapes are often flattened olfactory representations that emulate the distant, curated visuality of landscapes. Escape is too easy from a smellscape.

Olfow, on the other hand, is ontological. It is, properly speaking, atmospheric (at least the way I define atmosphere below). It has no perceiver and no vantage point. Everyone and everything is swimming in its flow, all odours are coemerging, all bodies are co-decaying. Olfow does not wait for resolution or enlightenment. It has no aim or direction. It is just movement, whirl, turbulence, cumulus, molecules. It radiates, it does not dwell.¹³ It has no external boundary, no periphery, no outside. But it has internal boundaries, volatile and airborne, eluding even the most distinguishing nose yet set by all participating bodies in ways that directly affects in the service of the olflow. Olfow is replete with judgement, olfactory judgement that is multidirectional yet located in the here of olfactory production. And we human animals, we take in air replete with odoriferous molecules, we breathe in the world at large, an olflow of judgement passed and judgement received. We release air of intestinal and oesophagic processes, of sweaty pheromones and class-determined deodorant choices: this is our own contribution to the olflow, our own invitation to be judged.

This is also the way in which the world finds us and accommodates us in its folds. We are constantly categorised by our smell. We are being assigned our ‘proper’ location in strict

¹¹ “‘Of the messiah it is written that he smells and judges.’ When they saw that he was unable to judge by scent, they killed him.” Green, 2011: 93 quoted in Howes and Classen, 2014: 93.

¹² Douglas Porteous, 1985.

¹³ An olflow is a lawscape, where laws of smell and smell of laws are generated with the movement of pause of the bodies in it. Philippopoulos-Mihalopoulos, 2015.

hierarchies of propriety, we are offered a seat or refused entry. Our bodies are being allocated along the olflow. How one smells determines the nomic gesture of one's ontological distribution across space: he will not sit next to the homeless on the bus. She would not sit next to the black man on the bench. They would not move to this area of town where the streets smell of Asian cooking.

4. Forgetting

Anosmia deprives the anosmic of the olfactory exchange with the world. It cuts short the breathing interface between the inside and the outside.¹⁴ It all becomes unilateral, and the world becomes indistinguishable. There is no room for judgement on behalf of the anomic. Anosmia equals anomia – we are no longer nomically positioned. We then realise how existence is intimately connected to judgement, to law and to our position in relation to them. Is this how nothing smells? When one's nostrils are obstructed, when smells do not reach one's brain, one is left in the middle of a plane, directionless and locationless, deprived of guiding judgement (which way to move?) and excluded from locational judgement (where am I judged to belong?). We are left adrift. We fumble for judgement, but we only find the one that our bodies invite ("I couldn't smell myself at all, I hope I didn't cause offence"¹⁵), unable to respond or react to it.

Anosmia does not emerge only as a medical condition. It is something we experience every day, although to a less dramatic extent. It comes through habit, olfactory flattening, sedimentation, normalisation. Smells are of course constitutive of an atmosphere, of the broader olflow, both physically and phenomenologically. Their airborne nature makes this natural and obvious. But what is important is that smells become incorporated in the atmosphere much faster than other sensorial stimuli. They become absorbed, atmospherically normalised, forgotten.¹⁶ Atmospheres, at least the kind of atmospheres I refer to here, namely the engineered atmospheres that make bodies and affects move in predetermined directions,¹⁷ excel in erasing memory and replacing it with an illusionary perpetuation of an illusionary present. Atmospheres are loci of mnemonic reconstruction and affective flattening: most odours become quickly normalised in the atmosphere which one has entered. What's more, most odours become normalised (indeed unconscious) in the atmosphere in which one has been born and the olflow with which one is familiar. We are all "steeped in the aura of family atmosphere, which becomes [our] own like the smell of the nest clings to the baby-bird."¹⁸ We carry the smell in our skins but not in our minds. This is the olfactory paradox: it triggers memory more than other sensorial stimuli, but it is also the one that can be more rapidly forgotten.

So I finally arrive at the sushi restaurant in Tokyo I reserved weeks ago. Tired after hours of sightseeing, I am shown to a bar stool with full view of the fish spread, ready to dine on the

¹⁴ Marinucci, 2017: 107.

¹⁵ Post on the Covid-19 Facebook group, <https://www.facebook.com/groups/anosmia.covid19>

¹⁶ Rodaway, 1994: 69.

¹⁷ See Philippopoulos-Mihalopoulos, 2015, especially Chapter Three.

¹⁸ Tellenbach 1981: 229.

delicacies I was dreaming even before arriving to Japan. Alas, as soon as I remove my jacket, the sushi chef starts coughing in what I thought was a slightly theatrical and exaggerated way, eventually showing me the door while vehemently cradling his sharp fish knife. I am to be kicked out. Why, I am desperately asking around for any English-speaking customer, any floor-looking shuffling waiter who would dare meet my gaze. No one does until one customer, clearly taking pity of me, said, 'he does not like your aftershave'. I have been walking for ten hours, what aftershave are they talking about. I have forgotten about my morning London-infused ablutions (that include an all-natural deodorant, a light face cream, a touch of rose oudh on my neck, and a few drops of Arabic almond oil in my hair. London because I am proud of my scent choices, cosmopolitan and confused but happily blending, lavender and cardamom, rose and oudh, with my Mediterranean skin absorbing it in and bringing out what I hope is an olfactory aura of thoughtful curation. Which clearly did not work in Japan). I have forgotten about this olfactory tapestry, or perhaps normalised, properly embodied, allowed it to become part of my skin and my clothes. There is no point arguing. I have no choice but to accept the judgement. On that trip, I spectacularly fail to have sushi in Japan.

5. Beyond phenomenology

My personal olfactory approach might have worked in the 11th century world of Murasaki Shikibu's *Genji Monogatari*, the famous novel/Bildungsroman/educational tool that revolves around the scents of its many protagonists. But it clearly failed to work in contemporary Japan. Let me, however, suggest something: while this encounter can be explained through phenomenology, say in the differential adumbration of the same smells by the chef and by me, or the culturally-specific intentionality of the bearer and the receiver of the scent, such an analysis would miss the greater atmospheric point I would like to make here. For, although the scents of my body were forgotten by the time I entered the sushi restaurant, they would not have been forgotten by the olfactory atmosphere of Japan to which I really wanted to belong, and which quite clearly has little patience for my extravagances: "Japanese olfactory culture is indeed to be found at the deodorizing, rather than odorizing, end of the olfactory continuum."¹⁹ I will not venture into a discussion on Japanese sensitivity towards what is often described as Western aromatic overload, because that is beside the point. Nor will I go into the truly spectacular and duly respected exigencies of a sushi chef's nose which I no doubt offended. What is important here is the way the specific (restaurant/chef/japan) olflowing atmosphere needed me (Westerner/oudh-smelling/non-japanese speaking) to remain outside its confines in order to perpetuate its settled state. This is the *ontology* of the olflow.²⁰

¹⁹ Moeran, 2005: 103 "Japanese have been concerned to get rid of smell, rather than add it in the way that Westerners do." See also Marinucci, 2019.

²⁰ The move from phenomenology to ontology is important because of the need to move away from anthropocentrism, from subject/object distinctions, from illusions of in-between and Hegelian third-space syntheses which simply confirm the dualities that are supposed to overcome. But also because of the need to come to terms with ontological occlusion and withdrawal, and the consequent limits of human exceptionalism. See my 2016 text on this.

Oflow is a category of atmospheres, a sensorial subset if you will. While all oflows are atmospheric and all atmospheres are also oflows, oflow is that foamy slice of the atmospheric pie populated exclusively by the olfactory. But because it is part of an atmosphere, it follows all the usual laws of atmospheres. I have written extensively on atmospheres,²¹ so a few somewhat axiomatic statements will have to suffice. An atmosphere is not only a phenomenological encounter. It is not the usual simplistic subject meets object/mood/ambience.²² It is not an in-between or a common reality of perception.²³ Rather, an atmosphere is an ontological emergence that collapses all boundaries between subjects and objects and takes up all available space and bodies. Atmosphere is the absolute subject to which we are all subjected.²⁴ Atmosphere is the absolute object that is allowed to emerge from within our desires, as they are willed into form with our breaths. An atmosphere relies on the bodies of its emergence. But it then turns these bodies into its own conative dispositifs. We are all complicit. Beware of atmospheres.

Atmosphere is a seductive thing, an earthly force of attraction that does not let bodies escape. It appears as air enclosure, a *sphere* of *air* and *mist* as the etymology shows, that makes it difficult to break away and leave behind. Atmosphere attracts. Partly because of what Sloterdijk finds in them, namely the immunity and defensibility of the atmospheric space (such as the domestic unit); but also partly I think because of its pulsating velocity, its continuous yet imperceptible movement, a static yet vertiginous movement as the second etymology of the word shows, where *sphere* stands for *missile* or *bullet* (in Greek σφαίρα, 'sfaira' meaning sphere and in its more contemporary evolution, pellet,). The velocity of atmosphere is faster than that of individual bodies, despite the fact that bodies make up atmosphere. This is what Serres means with "the body exceeds the body."²⁵ The body is already there, before the body as it were, exposed to and consisting the atmosphere on the skin of the world. This is why atmosphere consists not merely of affects but importantly of the excess of affect, the trailing tails of affect that no individual body can control, the unconscious gestures, the subconscious choices of perfume, the unexamined aesthetic preferences. One of the most sophisticated atmospheric tricks is its ability to absorb the excess of affect, mop around its contingent leakage, tidy up anything that can go differently, and engineer the already given direction of affects in a collective, often irresistibly comfortable way. If as Lyotard suggests, affect is desire directed,²⁶ then atmosphere is affect castrated, de-excessified, normalised.

Atmosphere, this heady bubble of senses, emotions and information, this self-assembling, self-perpetuating autopoietic emergence that employs affects and the bodies of their emission as boundary markers, this sphere of borrowed life and perpetual stillness, cannibalises all distinctions between subject and object, material and immaterial, human

²¹ E.g., Philippopoulos-Mihalopoulos, 2013 and 2015.

²² Anderson 2009: 78; but see Griffero, 2017 on atmosphere as quasi-object. Griffero's ontological categories are consonant with Heidegger. Here, I use ontology in the new materialist sense. See for example Bryant, 2011.

²³ "the common reality of the perceiver and the perceived." Böhme, 1995: 34, my translation.

²⁴ Properly speaking, a hyperobject. Morton, 2013. See also McCormack, 2018.

²⁵ Serres, 2008: 307.

²⁶ Lyotard, 1993.

and nonhuman. But not in an explorative, new-materialist, liberating-from-distinctions way. An atmosphere contains all distinctions within the only distinction that counts: inside or outside. Whoever is within the atmosphere, protected and belonging, is numbed by the promise of perpetual constancy. Whoever is outside, is invisibilised, their position normalised or turned into a threat.

The olflow was churning. My narcissistic, western/eastern presence was perfect for the reinstatement of the supremacy of the specific olflow. I was more necessary outside that restaurant than inside.

6. A balmy atmosphere

Atmosphere is a rupture of the air. Atmosphere severs and limits air in order to emerge. Air is placed in containers characterised by an interplay between interior and exterior, closure and openness. Perhaps the best depiction of such containers are Tomás Saraceno's art installations. In his work, baubles made of glass or plastic float about space. Air is not transmitted but rests safely folded in the transparent wombs resembling miniature glasshouses. Saraceno sets internal boundaries in the olflow, isolating sides, immunising odourspheres from each other. These glasshouses appear perched precariously in the verticality of the vista, in a way that brings to mind Italo Calvino's imaginary city *Ottavia*: there, everything is suspended over the abyss in a structure which "will last only so long"²⁷ - luckily, atmospheres are brittle things. Engineering does not necessarily work out in the intended way. Collective, inherent, emergent engineering means that atmosphere is a contingent event. This is why we should think of an atmosphere as, paradoxically, both *engineered* and *emergent*. It emerges from within bodies, indeed the bodies that engineer it. Yet, another great trick is to dissimulate its engineering and appear only as emergent.

This is the secret of 'successfully' engineered atmospheres. Timothy Choy talks about how atmospheric governmentality amounts to a suspension of ordinary forms of experience.²⁸ In discussing Nazi politics, Christian Borch has shown how atmosphericics manipulate air conditions and senses,²⁹ reminding us how atmosphericics as rupture is an integral feature of any totalitarian regime.³⁰ Air is given to control, manipulation, compulsive desiring, communal identities and spatial partitioning. Air comes with property and fits snugly in rupturing partitions. For Frantz Fanon, "the colonial world is a world divided into compartments."³¹ Atmospheres are good for inclusion but terribly good at exclusion. Racial violence has often been in the core of atmospheric engineering in the form of racial threat (when in white atmospheres) or racial exclusion, discrimination and oppression (when in non-white atmospheres). Tayyab Mahmud shows how in slums "surplus humanity" is piled up and kept inside through atmospheric techniques of accumulation and dispossession

²⁷ Calvino, 1993: 72.

²⁸ Choy, 2011.

²⁹ Borch, 2014.

³⁰ Closs, 2015.

³¹ Fanon, 1963: 37.

(namely Marx's concept of deprivation of the means of subsistence).³² These techniques define the exterior of the slum as a non-possibility, thus strengthening what can be described as negative belonging, that is, belonging because of the impossibility of belonging anywhere else. Far from being harmed by technology and digitisation – its medium traditionally being the molecular, rather than the digital³³ – the olfactory has gone through a technological development, and smell has become instrumentalised into electronic noses, odour biometrics, artificial fragrances and flavours, as well as militarised smell (stink bombs).³⁴

The olflow is easy to engineer for at least three reasons. First, as I said, wherever we are positioned, however we move or stand, we are part of the incessant olflow, this infinite plane of immanence on which odours are generated and circulate. Nothing separates us from the olfactory. We are odoriferous agents, donning our desires for belonging to our planetary odoursphere as if it were pearls of perfume. Second, it carries on regardless of our phenomenological or even ontological presence: this never-ceasing aroma production needs no recipient nostrils to validate its existence, as Marina Barcenilla has shown in her work on reconstituting odours of other planets based on what we know about their biochemical composition of their terrains.³⁵ These odours linger there on the surface of the planets, pure chemistry, pure flow. And third, the olflow addresses mainly the human subconscious, allowing therefore for solid atmospheric engineering to take place – what is frequently referred to as subliminal odours.³⁶

The world has traditionally been categorised and separated according to its smells. African slaves were thought to be carriers of miasma, as Andrew Kettner shows in his new study on slavery and olfactory racism.³⁷ “The East is just a smell!” said a British voyager in the early 20th century; the developing world has always been thought of as an “open sewer”; and the line of demarcation between colony and metropole was soap.³⁸ The lessons from colonial olfactory divisions that enable atmospherics of intense seclusion and exclusion to become normalised on the basis of smells and such simple dispositifs as that of a soap bar, were eagerly adopted by the Nazis. Rindisbacher, quoting Gisella Perl, a Jewish doctor and prisoner at Auschwitz, writes: “The air reeked with the penetrating smell of dirty bodies, pus-filled wounds which covered rotten extremities”. Perl met the infamous Dr Mengele in person: “He took a piece of perfumed soap out of his bag and whistling gaily, with a smile of deep satisfaction on his face [after beating a woman prisoner into a bloody pulp], he began to wash his hands ...”³⁹

These odoriferous objects are not merely symbolic. Just as odours were and still are believed to have material qualities that inform the symbolic (cleansing, purification, communication with the divine), in exactly the same way the olfactory lines of

³² Mahmud, 2010.

³³ Chalmers, 2014.

³⁴ Drobnick, 2006a: 2.

³⁵ Barcenilla, 2019; see also Straughan, 2015.

³⁶ “an odor is more effective when it is not consciously perceived.” Keller, 2014: 169.

³⁷ Kettler, 2020.

³⁸ Reinartz, 2014: 88-90.

³⁹ Rindisbacher, 2015: 26.

discrimination rendered the other less human and the particular slice of the world more vulnerable. Susan Harvey Ashbrook puts this crossing between the symbolic and material clearly: “These codes were not based on symbolism as a disembodied language, but on the concrete view that smells participated in effecting the processes they represented. Odors could cleanse, purify, ward off, or heal; they could contaminate, pollute, endanger. Medical science, mythology, social systems, and ritual practices converged to sustain this olfactory orientation across the world.”⁴⁰

These are not exotic moments of bygone olfactory eccentricity but enduring racial, geographical and ethnic constants, with whose atmospheric perpetuation we are all complicit.⁴¹ Atmospheres are our collective emanations, relying on our permissiveness, lack of resistance, indifference or unquestioned compliance. These instances are not mere phenomenological encounters but ontological emergences. They are the outcomes of institutional affects, organised in prefabricated niches of belonging for the ones inside and in junkspaces of exclusion for the ones outside. They have nothing to do with individual perception. They are so embedded, rotting ulcers under our collective skin, that are impervious to whether they are perceived or not.

We are molecules of an atmosphere whose pungency emerges somewhere overhead, somewhere else, not quite here, yet relying on our emitting pores right here, a construction that climbs on the putrefaction of our freedom. We are all complicit with the sedimented ontology of olfactory discrimination.

8. Scratch but no sniff

From the constitution of a disorientated subjectivity to the ontological emergence of a deodorised atmosphere, anosmia has always been around. It has become abruptly relevant with COVID-19: at the time of writing (October 2020) anosmia has been finally recognised as one of the identifying symptoms of the disease. COVID anosmia has caused a flurry of journalistic activity on the importance of smell,⁴² but not yet a great deal of academic writing. The most benign reason might be that academic writing always takes longer to reflect on current conditions. A less benign reason might be the reluctance on behalf of humanities and social sciences to do research on smell. While the other senses are enjoying a tremendous flourishing, olfactory engagement, although certainly improved since the beginning of the century, it remains hesitant. The link that smell provides to our interiority is still not considered a useful source of knowledge.⁴³ Our animality is still too close for comfort. Our current “abstract and impersonal regime” that marks our social places

⁴⁰ Harvey Ashbrook, 2006: 2.

⁴¹ “In fact, it has only now, in postmodern consumer culture, developed its full force through all-around pleasant atmospherics within which, to take smell as our example, the odors and stench of the past linger only as texts. Yet their force is remarkable.” Rindisbacher, 2015: 29.

⁴² Notably in what is traditionally thought of as women’s press, and often in connection to perfume appreciation. See <https://www.elle.com/uk/beauty/body-and-physical-health/a34370068/perfume-anosmia-smell-covid/> and <https://www.vogue.com/article/lost-sense-of-smell-covid>

⁴³ Mancioffi and Perullo, 2020: 119.

according to our emissions must not be upset.⁴⁴ We can go even further: we need to keep smell out of bounds, in that research-light zone. Smell must remain the arsenal of our preconceptions, our racist or classist refuge, our bourgeois self-forgiveness of our ingrained tendency towards othering whoever we can sniff as uninterestingly other.

The solutions to ensure this are ingenious and context-dependent: Saraceno's glass partitions that interrupt the olflow find tangible expression in separation or indeed segregation – think of South African apartheid or the racist US segregation in transport, education, accommodation etc. Indeed the latter was the only way of making sure that the “white-looking mulattos” who could also deodorise enough to smell like whites, were properly identified and assigned their expected place.⁴⁵ Whenever separation is not possible or practical, we can always other techniques, such as deodorisation, scenting, or masking. The variations are endless, as Victoria Henshaw shows in the context of the urban hygienisation process but abounding in undertones of atmospheric engineering.⁴⁶ Particular smells are “heavily associated with dirty, unhealthy and run-down areas, illustrative of places that are uncared for and out of control through their apparent lack of cleaning and maintenance activities.”⁴⁷ The immediately available social aetiology of smells is part of the olfactory ontological prefabrication. Scents are never just scents. They are always an invitation to discover their origin, their emitter, their context. And at those points, in those inner folds of the olflow, stereotypical atmospheric constructions nestle.

This is why, to avoid surprises, deodorisation is libidinal society's version of ceremonial purification, operating across the symbolic and the material and ushering everyone towards a predetermined direction of desire.⁴⁸ Henshaw again: “More prosperous commercial areas are zealously controlled in olfactory terms. Such areas have potentially antisocial odour sources separated from them...Commercial areas frequently undergo enhanced cleansing and maintenance regimes as public and private resources focus on keeping key public areas clean, with cleanliness occasionally being prioritised above the wider aesthetics of an area.”⁴⁹ An atmosphere that serves the market needs to be as purified as possible, “invisible to the nose, a space with no chemical content, a place of olfactory purity.”⁵⁰ An atmosphere that serves purposes of subliminal control needs to be as ‘neutral’ as possible. As Elena Mancioppi and Nicola Perullo find, the individual “disappears in the anonymity of an ascetic space, apparently uniform and neutral but in reality open to manipulation and engineering on demand.”⁵¹ Finally, an atmosphere that serves the art market needs to be escapist and immunised from the vicissitudes of the economy, the headache of unfiltered social diversity, the unnecessary details of the particular. It needs to be the “zero-degree status of display, the mythic fundament out of which art objects emerge ex nihilo. The olfactory nowhere-ness

⁴⁴ Classen, Howes and Synnott, 1994: 4-5.

⁴⁵ Reinartz, 2014: 103.

⁴⁶ Henshaw, 2014.

⁴⁷ Henshaw, 2014: 151.

⁴⁸ Lyotard, 1993.

⁴⁹ Henshaw, 2014: 165.

⁵⁰ Fletcher, 2005: 382.

⁵¹ Mancioppi and Perullo, 2020: 126, my translation.

of the white cube justifies its authority and defends a pretence towards universality; for to express an identifiable odor would be to admit to particularized interests.”⁵²

These forms of ontological anosmia are the result of standard atmospheric techniques achieving both the aims of an atmosphere and its perpetuation. Again, this does not imply top-down control. Quite the opposite, following the transition from a Foucaultian disciplinary society to a Deleuzian control society, it is the inter- and intra-individual control that is the atmospheric trump card. As Marcuse writes, “smell and taste, give, as it were, unsublimated pleasure per se (and unrepressed disgust). They relate (and separate) individuals immediately, without the generalized and conventionalized forms of consciousness, morality, aesthetics.”⁵³ Thus, the olfactory is unifying beyond convention, and for this reason, is much more visceral than regular societal conventions. This is why members of the same atmospheric community check on each other on the basis of aspirational criteria, prefabricated and received through the inhaling of the atmospheric conditions.⁵⁴ Likewise, the individual checking on herself: “Before her non-Indian friends would come over to play, Kalita [a North Indian journalist living in New Jersey] attempted to conceal the “Indian Food Smell” by spraying air freshener throughout her home.”⁵⁵

This “olfactory silence”⁵⁶ is necessary in order for affects to be directed towards the specific atmospheric aims. Whatever the aim, one thing is certain: aesthetics must be reconstructed to match the direction. Deodorisation does all the groundwork: as Michel Serres writes, “anaesthetic robs us of aesthetics.”⁵⁷ On the ground zero of robbed aesthetics, that “white wall”⁵⁸ of the aspiring odourless image of our age, a new aesthetics is erected that conditions the olflow by rupturing the air, thereby directing affects and the bodies of their emergence towards an atmospheric horizon of fabricated internal desires and external threats.

9. Anosmic ontology

The greatest risk currently is for the deodorising processes to saturate ontology itself. This would mean a replacement of ontology with an atmospheric flattening. The multiplicity of the ontological plane, where folds and lines of flight radiate in all directions, and olflows populate even the most vertiginous velocities and the most nested pauses, would be razed, robbed from us, and replaced by an air-conditioned bubble where movement takes place only along predetermined corridors, and where atmospheric dispositifs pass for spontaneous emergences.

⁵² Drobnick 2005: 267.

⁵³ Marcuse 1962: 36.

⁵⁴ Classen, Howes and Synnott, 1994, especially Chapter Five.

⁵⁵ Reinartz, 2014: 93.

⁵⁶ El-Khoury 2006: 27.

⁵⁷ Serres, 2008: 154.

⁵⁸ El-Khoury, 2006: 27.

The need to think ontologically is not just a philosophical divergence. It is a political demand. We need to move away from the anthropocentric, consciousness-centred, individually-focused, dialectically-incarcerated phenomenological approaches, and into ways of opening up to the nonhuman, the non-conscious, the collective, the non-dialectic and consequently non-messianic thinking that new material ontology is auguring. There is no time to wait and no time to waste. The more-than-human ontological plane which we have always inhabited is becoming avidly colonised by a renaissance homunculus that thinks of himself (indeed, usually a 'he') not just anthropocentrically *everywhere* but also anthropocentrically exceptional. We must at all cost avoid an anosmic ontology.

Ontology affords us a humility because it allows us to realise our limits of comprehension. It also, however, affords us spaces of resistance, escape routes from our phenomenological attitude of subjects versus objects and towards lines of flight touching other atmospheres.

This is indeed how nothing smells, to return to the anosmic narratives at the beginning of this text. And there is nothing there to nourish us, help us reconstruct or recollect, help us move away or on. The smell of nothing is the ontological condition of our era, an anosmic invasion that partitions the olflow and shuts our compliant and apathetic bodies into atmospheres of fabricated desires.

We need to break those glasshouses and allow the olflow, that majestic whiff of other planets, the scent of our unexceptionalism, to wake us up.

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