

Sex Smells: Odor, Sexuality, and the Erotic Imaginary

Abstract This paper explores the relation between olfaction and sexuality in the scientific realm, and in our contemporary erotic imaginary. The first part provides a historical overview, starting from the first medical explorations in this field to recent developments in the area of humanities and social sciences; the second part consists of personal accounts on odors and sexuality.

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When I first set out to explore the relation between olfaction and sexuality, more than ten years ago, social scientists had barely started giving attention to this subject. A few exceptions aside, it was the domain of biology, psychology, physiology, and medicine; consequently, most contemporary research focused on the physical effects of odors in humans. I gathered that any other insights on the subject would be scarce, limited in scope, and tentative at best. Unaware of earlier psychological studies on smell – which had largely remained unmentioned in academic literature until recently, as they had indeed lost most of their scientific value in the course of the 20th century – I believed that the relation between sexuality and olfaction represented a novel field of interest, presuming that taboos had long obscured both areas for different reasons. Given my lack of training in the natural sciences, I decided to my focus my attention elsewhere.

This paper shows that my original assumptions were wrong. In my renewed attempt to provide a structured overview of the modern scientific interest in olfaction and sexuality, I discovered a great wealth of books, articles, research papers, and other documents on the subject. My initial preoccupation – that there would be too little material to report about – was soon replaced by the fear of drowning in a *mer à boire*. As Michel Foucault (1998) famously argued, there is no such thing as truly repressed knowledge in matters of moral discomfort, only new forms of discourse. I found that in the case of odor-related sexual practices, what was historically hidden behind the curtains for moral reasons, had indeed awakened the interest of medical specialists at the turn of the 20th century. Doctors and researchers were keen to differentiate sexual normalcy from deviance, and conducted comparative studies on the latter to provide an empirical basis for their assertions.

The first and most elaborate part of this paper reviews the academic interest in olfaction and sexuality throughout the 20th century, and illustrates how the attention has shifted from one discipline to the other. It is followed by a shorter second part, featuring a selection of personal accounts on sex and odor that were collected specifically for this paper. Rather than formulating a distinct research question for this second part, I want to find out if these accounts of real-life sexuality and erotic imagination can be placed in a

sociological context. But before delving into the central subject of this paper, I will start by giving an overview of the main causes for the subordinate role of smell in modern Western culture, as found in current literature.

1.1 The discreditation of the sense of smell

It is a common and widespread view nowadays, that between the rise of the Enlightenment and the early 19th century, little attention was given to the scientific study of odors. The sense of smell was not regarded as a subject of academic interest, and was at best considered a primitive and obsolete feature in humans. In his lectures on anthropology, Immanuel Kant (1798) pronounced it as the least important of the senses, and unworthy of cultivation (see Rindisbacher, 1992: 148-149; Kohl *et al*, 1995: 27). Like many of his contemporaries, Kant rated touch, sight, and hearing as senses of the "first class", whereas he considered taste and smell as "nothing but senses of organic sensation" and "more subjective than objective" (Kant, 2006: 46, 49). This disdain for odors in the realm of science and aesthetics, and the discreditation of the sense of smell in general, have been explained in different ways by different authors.

Levin (1993) and Classen (1993, 1994) both emphasize the centrality of vision in Western culture since the Enlightenment. In their (largely historical) analyses, they argue that sight became the modernist sense by default, as new discoveries in empirical science were based first and foremost on observation. With the dominance of the visual paradigm in virtually all aspects of life, the other senses had gradually become of less importance; smell was thus demoted as the sense of intuition, sentiment, and sensuality, all of which carried negative connotations. According to Classen (1994) any pronounced interest in smell was deemed uncivilized, perverse, and animalic; among members of the higher social classes in particular, it was met with suspicion, and quickly became associated with moral corruption. This sociocultural explanation fits well in the broader context of the ongoing civilizing process in Western Europe, as described by Norbert Elias (2000).

A slightly different take is offered by Le Gu  rer (1990, 2002a, 2002b), who stresses the paucity of the olfactory vocabulary, and the lack of objectivity and abstraction as the main culprits of the disfavored status of smell. She argues that smell has long been regarded as an "intermediate sensorial faculty" in Western thought: "We find this basic belief in the works of many thinkers, from Aristotle to Jean Jaur  s (1891), including Saint Thomas Aquinas, Hegel, and Cournot, who variously described the sense of smell as ambiguous, bastard, vague, and nonautonomous" (Le Gu  rer, 2002a: 4). Terminological limitations, and the inability to create abstract representations of odors, hindered the creation of consistent and universal olfactory classifications. This idea was expressed, among others, by the German sociologist Georg Simmel in his *M  langes de philosophie relativiste* (1912): "The difficulty of translating smell impressions into words is far different from that of translating the impressions of sight and hearing. They cannot be projected on an abstract level" (cited in Le Gu  rer, 2002a: 4). According to Le Gu  rer, this lack of linguistic rigor – a fundamental requirement for scientific precision – made that smell became "more important to sensory pleasure than to knowledge" (Le Gu  rer, *idem*). She echoes Levin and Classen's view that the 'olfactory decline' in modern times is not a manifestation of indifference, but rather of a

hypersensitivity to smell, expressed in the repression and concealment of foul odors. The renewed academic interest in olfaction that emerged in recent decades must be viewed in this light as well (Le Guérer, 1990: 39-40).

In *Les Pouvoirs de l'odeur*, Le Guérer also expands on the role of Christianity in the devaluation of smell. She argues that the division between mind and body (which was absent in the Old Testament, but had already been prominent in Greek philosophy) led to new restrictions and regulations of bodily conduct: whereas purified and sacralised odors became incorporated in Christian ritual, olfactory pleasures were strongly condemned (Le Guérer, 2002b: 161, 166). Although the effects of such religious prohibitions remained tangible until the late 19th century, Le Guérer points out that there were also historical discontinuities and interruptions in the social constraints on smell. She claims, for instance, that olfaction went through a brief period of rehabilitation during the 18th century, when French philosophers such as La Mettrie,¹ Condillac, Rousseau, and Buffon² promoted the notion of 'sensorial education'. In their writings, they generally distinguished between two types of smell – animalic and savage on the one hand, cultivated and refined on the other. By doing so, they displayed a more lenient attitude towards olfaction than their French predecessors (Le Guérer, 2002b: 175-179).³

A different approach is offered by Rindisbacher (1992), whose explanation for the discreditation of smell is based on philological comparisons. In *The Smell of Books* he explores the changing modalities in which olfactory perception has been used to create atmosphere and meaning in literary texts. By combining psychoanalytical insights with discursive analysis, he sets out to unveil a cultural shift that occurred in Western literature: "What is exposed to change [...] is the immaterial semiotic or discursive dimension of sensory perception. [...] It is here that taboos of what may or may not be perceived are created or undone; that thresholds and norms are established or revoked; that sensitivity is honed or blunted. [...] An individual's sensory perception is always social perception. The individual perceives what is socially permitted to be expressed in language" (Rindisbacher, 1992: 5). A similar strategy is adopted by Janice Carlisle in *Common Scents* (2004), which shows how social values, and those pertaining to

¹ Julien Offray de La Mettrie (1709-1751), physician, philosopher, and early Enlightenment thinker, is often referred to as the founder of cognitive science.

² Georges-Louis Leclerc, Comte de Buffon (1707-1788), was a naturalist, mathematician, biologist, and cosmologist. His work influenced that of Jean-Baptiste Lamarck and Charles Darwin, among others.

³ Interestingly, Classen refers to the introduction of Condillac's *Traité des sensations* to illustrate the very opposite, namely that in the latter's view, smell did not offer a significant means to acquire enjoyment or knowledge (Classen, 1994: 84). The original passage, cited partially by Classen, reads as follows: "Nous crûmes devoir commencer par l'odorat, parce que c'est de tous les sens celui qui paroît contribuer le moins aux connaissances de l'esprit humain" ["We believe it is necessary to start with the sense of smell, because of all the senses it is the one that appears to contribute the least to the workings of the human mind" - *my translation*] (Condillac, 1754: 6). While this phrase may be subject to multiple interpretations, however, the treatise appears to be more in accordance with Le Guérer's assessment. Condillac imagines a statue that undergoes a gradual metamorphosis: one by one, its senses are unlocked, thus releasing pleasure and pain in their subject. Memories and emotions play a fundamental role in the olfactory stage, in which the statue is still unable to reflect; once the statue becomes mobile, it discovers its own body and acquires the capacity to think. Ultimately, it is the sense of touch that instructs smell, taste, hearing, and vision; but Condillac suggests that all senses function in symbiosis to make a human being complete.

relations between men and women in particular, are expressed discursively through olfactory metaphors in high-Victorian fiction.

Rindisbacher and Carlisle's emphasis on discourse – or more precisely, on the manner in which people speak about things they rather wish to avoid – is reminiscent of Foucault's take on sexual repression in the first volume of *The History of Sexuality*. While discussing the taboo on children's sex, Foucault comments that "[...] this was not a plain and simple imposition of silence. Rather, it was a new regime of discourses. Not any less was said about it; on the contrary. But things were said in a different way; it was different people who said them, from different points of view, and in order to obtain different results" (Foucault, 1998: 27). Under the guise of objectification and rationalization, such discourses on sexuality were increasingly appropriated by medical and educational institutions. In my view, a similar (albeit not identical) dynamic affects the so-called 'olfactory silence' that characterized Western societies throughout the past two centuries (see Corbin, 1999). Processes of deodorization in the public and private realm were accompanied by new attitudes towards pronounced odors, as well as to the culture and sense of smell in general. The following reconstruction of the relation between olfaction and sexuality in modern science will serve to illustrate this point.

1.2 Early studies on olfaction and sexuality in medicine

Although there are numerous examples of semeiological studies⁴ on the sense of smell since the mid-18th century, the first comprehensive book on human olfaction in modern times is Hippolyte Cloquet's *Osphrésiologie, ou Traité des odeurs, du sens et des organes de l'Olfaction* (1821).⁵ It covered anatomical, physiological, psychological and pathological insights in the sense of smell; Havelock Ellis praised it as a "work that may still be consulted with profit, if indeed it can even yet be said to be at every point superseded" (Ellis, 1927: 51), and Edward Sagarin named it "the classic in the medical literature [...] cited as authoritative on many of the phases of the problem to this day" (Sagarin, 1945: 229). Still, it would take more than half a century for a new and well-documented book to appear on the science of olfaction. In *Les Odeurs du corps humain* (first published in 1886) Ernest Monin extensively discussed the causes of human body odors, and odor-related pathologies such as dyosmia, anosmia, hyperosmia, and cacosmia. His intention was to show that smell was more than the sense of imagination, as Rousseau had once described it: "J'espère énumérer, éloquemment, les immenses services que ce sens est capable de rendre au médecin, en attirant dans la voie de la vérité les efforts de son diagnostic et de son traitement" (Monin, 1903: 8-9).⁶ It was in this work that the medical relation between olfaction and sexuality was first approached in a systematic manner, giving an elaborate overview of the universally accepted knowledge in the field. Monin devoted an entire chapter to genital odors, in which he

⁴ In medicine, semeiology was the science of signs and symptoms of disease. An often cited author in this context is Landré-Beauvais (1806).

⁵ Cloquet (1787-1840) was a French physician, and a pioneer in rhynology. He was a disciple of the physician and anatomist Pierre Jean George Cabanis, and a member of the Académie de Médecine.

⁶ "My aim is to illustrate the great relevance of this sense to medical practitioners, by showing the truth behind the diagnostics and treatments related to smell" (*my translation*).

discussed the "special odor" of sperm and vaginal secretions in relation to onanism and spermatophobia (Monin, 1903: 275-276).

Meanwhile, it was Hendrik Zwaardemaker, a Dutch professor of physiology at Utrecht University and an otorhinolaryngology specialist, who gave new scientific impulses to smell research. Already renowned for his invention of the olfactometer in 1888, he wrote two books on olfaction (*Die Physiologie des Geruchs* in 1895, and *L'Odorat* in 1925) that gained him even greater notoriety, as both titles became international bestsellers (Huizing and Van Wermeskerken, 2005: 68). He attempted to group odors by qualitative resemblance, and to classify them systematically; this was deemed crucial for the acceptance of smell in empirical science, and medicine in particular. His scheme consisted of a combination of seven odor categories listed by Linnaeus (1756),⁷ one by Lorry (1784-1785)⁸ and one by Von Railer (1763);⁹ similar attempts were carried out by Hans Henning (1916), Crocker and Henderson (1927), Amooore (1962),¹⁰ and others. To this date, however, no classification system has gained universal acceptance (Wise *et al*, 2000: 429).

1.3 The turn of the century: psychology and sexuality

The early 20th century marked a growing interest in olfaction from the areas of psychology, physiology, and sexology. Over 220 papers and books were published on the subject of naso-sexual medicine between 1900 and 1912 alone (Stoddard, 1992: 80); disciplinary divisions were not always clearcut, but the interest in smell and sexuality appears to have been remarkably high. Most studies placed odor in the context of sexual dysfunctions and perversity. In *Psychopathia Sexualis* (1886), the Austrian psychiatrist and sexologist Richard von Krafft-Ebing saw any pronounced interest in odors (what he called 'olfactophilia') as a sign of dementia, disease, and moral degeneration (Drobnick, 2006: 257). Like his colleagues and contemporaries Albert Moll in Germany and Charles Féré in France, he felt that the sense of smell was indeed very important to the mating habits of animals, but that it played no significant role in 'normal' human sexuality (Le Guéner, 2002b: 8). Instead, he connected it to a large array of mental illnesses, and to the condition of neurasthenics, homosexuals, and 'primitives' in particular.

A far less elaborate, yet equally influential contribution on the subject-matter was that of Sigmund Freud. While his first professionally documented reflections on sexuality and the sense of smell can be traced back to 1897 (Friedman, 1959: 307), his interest in olfaction was awakened at least two years earlier, in a rather singular event that involved his patient Emma Eckstein and his close friend Wilhelm Fliess. The latter was an otorhinolaryngologist from Berlin, who came to Vienna to perform an operation

⁷ Fragrant, spicy, musky, garlicky, goat-like, foul, and nauseating (Gilbert, 2008: 18-19).

⁸ Ethereal (Doty, 1992: 97).

⁹ Ephreumatic (Doty, *idem*).

¹⁰ Henning devised the so-called 'smell prism', a three-dimensional scheme of smells; in Crocker and Henderson's system, odors were related to 'psychological odor dimensions'; while Amooore's primary odor system was based on the idea that all odors can be traced back to a combination of primary odors (Doty, *idem*).

on Emma;¹¹ she had been diagnosed by Freud as suffering from a combination of hysteria and nasal reflex neurosis, which was thought to be causing her heavy nose bleeds. After Fliess' departure, Emma's nose remained hurting and bleeding, emanating a fetid odor. Several weeks later, after suffering a nearly fatal hemorrhage, Freud sent her to another doctor, who removed "at least half a meter" of surgical gauze from her nose, that Fliess had left there by mistake (Masson, 1985: 116).¹²

This unfortunate incident did not tarnish the relationship between the two. In 1896, Fliess sent his manuscript on *The Relation Between the Nose and the Female Sex Organs* (1897) to Freud, in which he suggested a direct physiological connection between them: he had observed that during menstruation and pregnancy, the female nose is subject to alterations. Furthermore, he claimed that the nose contains erectile tissue, much like the clitoris (Le Guéner, 2002b: 218-219). Based on his convictions, he devised therapies to cure women from onanism and menopausal pains.

Whereas Fliess' theory is nowadays described as delusional (see André, 1999: 29) or pseudo-scientific at best, Freud highly praised his work, and started drawing parallels between olfaction and sexuality in his own work. In a footnote to his *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (added in 1910), he discussed smell in the context of fetishism, and as a passing phenomenon in the anal phase of childhood:

"Psycho-analysis has cleared up one of the remaining gaps in our understanding of fetishism. It has shown the importance, as regards the choice of a fetish, of a coprophilic pleasure in smelling which has disappeared owing to repression. Both the feet and the hair are objects with a strong smell which have been exalted into fetishes after the olfactory sensation has become unpleasurable and been abandoned. Accordingly, in the perversion that corresponds to foot-fetishism, it is only dirty and evil-smelling feet that become sexual objects." (Freud, 2000: 21)

In Freud's view, osphresiologia¹³ is a widespread phenomenon in children, which gradually becomes repressed as they grow older. When this repression fails, it can cause a neurosis in adulthood. The emphasis on pathologies, fetishism and perversion would continue to play a prominent role in the discourse on sexuality and olfaction in the following decades.

While the work of Krafft-Ebing and Freud gave an important impulse to the psychology of olfaction and sexuality, it is the fourth volume of Havelock Ellis' *Studies in the Psychology of Sex*, published in 1905, that provided an elaborate compilation of the latest knowledge on the subject (Kalogerakis, 1963: 422). Ellis dedicated an entire chapter to smell, in which he echoed the general view that the sexual significance of body odors was less important in humans than in animals, adding that "[n]ot only is the significance of odor altogether much less, but the focus of olfactory attractiveness has been [...] transferred to the upper part of the body" (Ellis, 1927: 79). Like his

¹¹ Fliess also performed an operation on Freud, who suffered from rhinitis.

¹² In a letter to Fliess dated March 8, 1895, Freud reassured his friend that it was "one of those accidents that happen to the most fortunate and circumspect of surgeons" (Masson, 1985: 117).

¹³ Osphresiologia is defined as a "paraphilia characterized by recurrent sexually arousing fantasies, sexual urges, or behaviour involving smells" (Colman's Dictionary of Psychology, 2001).

predecessors, and with further reference to the works of Elliot Smith, Edinger, Mayer, and C.L. Herrick, he argued that olfaction only plays a significant role in the life and behavior of neuraesthenics, 'inverts' (homosexuals), and 'primitives'. While their olfactory abilities are not necessarily more developed than in 'normal' civilized humans, smell is "at best an auxiliary"; in its absence, "the life of mankind would continue as before, with little or no sensible modification, though the pleasures of life, and especially of eating and drinking, would be to some extent diminished" (Ellis, 1927: 48).

Ellis posited that people who display a strong personal affinity with odors have a propensity to psychological disorders: "It is certain also that a great many neurasthenic people, and particularly those who are sexually neurasthenic, are peculiarly susceptible to olfactory influences. A number of eminent poets and novelists – especially, it would appear, in France – seem to be in this case" (Ellis, 1927: 72-73).¹⁴ This condition goes hand in hand with a lack of 'sexual vigor', and according to Ellis it explains why old men are more likely to find pleasure in sexual odors. He added that "[h]ere [...] we have the basis for olfactory fetichism. In such fetichism the odor of the woman alone, whoever she may be and however unattractive she may be, suffices to furnish complete sexual satisfaction" (Ellis, 1927: 73).

1.4 The legacy of Iwan Bloch

Iwan Bloch, one of the great promoters of modern sexology, wrote extensively on the relation between olfaction and sexuality. While most of his work (like that of his predecessors) did not stand the test of time, it is worth presenting it here more at length, as it represents the general view of early sexology on the connection between sexuality and odors. In his magnum opus *The Sexual Life of our Time in Relation to Modern Civilisation* (originally published in 1906), Bloch made a clear distinction between the sense of smell in 'higher animals' (where its sexual role can be explained entirely in biological terms) and humans (a far less direct, and more complex relation). In the wake of Ellis and Krafft-Ebing, he argued that "[...] this primitive phenomenon of love has even to-day a certain significance, although, in consequence of the enormous development of the brain and the predominance of purely psychical elements in man, its influence has been very notably diminished [...]" (Bloch, 1928: 16). He explained this diminishment in humans as a result of the refinement of other senses (sight above all) that evolved during the course of civilization, and asserted that natural body odors, such as the glandular and genital secretions mentioned by Monin, have little influence on the sexual life in humans: "civilization has to a large extent replaced the natural sexual odours by artificial scents, so-called perfumes, [...] to an endeavour to conceal these natural odours, especially when the latter are of a disagreeable character" (Bloch, 1928: 17). As for the use of "penetrating perfumes", he added that they are "employed especially by women, above all by professional prostitutes, in order to excite men" (Bloch, *idem*). It is important to note here that the use of heady scents was indeed associated with seduction, promiscuity, and moral corruption in the first decade of the 20th century.

¹⁴ In this context he names Baudelaire, Zola, Huysmans, Milton, Herrick, and Shelley.

Bloch's most elaborate work on the relation between sexuality and olfaction is *Odoratus sexualis*, of which 1,000 copies were published under the German title *Die sexuelle Oosphresiology* between 1906 and 1907. In this book, written under the pseudonym Albert Hagen, the aforementioned relation between olfaction, sexuality, and biology is explored more at length. Like his predecessors, Bloch largely confined the discussion on 'sexual oosphresiology' in humans (such as the role of genital odors in sexual relations) to psychopathologies and dysfunctions: "It is in the opinion of such outstanding investigators of sexual psychopathology as Krafft-Ebing and Moll, that today sexual smells play quite an unimportant role in the life of *normal* people" (Bloch, 1933: 88, *italics added*). Any pronounced interest in sexual odors, be they related to genitalia, hair, feet, or sweat, were viewed in the context of sexual deviance and olfactory fetishism; following Gustave Jäger, Bloch claimed that "the normal man experiences a greater or less repugnance for the majority of these smells, for they belong to the capryl family,¹⁵ i.e. the odors of decomposition, which are commonly held to be unpleasant. There are not many normal people who will find pleasurable the sharp odor of perspiration or of the genital discharges" (Bloch, 1933: 88-89).

According to Bloch, 'uncivilized savages' and 'diseased' people form the exception to this rule, as well as the 'type olfactif' as identified by the French psychologist Binet (1887). The 'type olfactif' is a (usually male) individual who displays a great propensity to odors, and who allows his judgement to be influenced by them. He therefore lives with the consequences of letting his sense of smell prevail the other senses, a phenomenon known as 'petit fétichisme': "Hence, when a rich, distinguished and intelligent man marries a rather old, ugly, and stupid woman who lacks all charm, it is perhaps owing to the fact that there exists between them a perfect communion of smell" (Bloch, 1933: 92). Such behavior is symptomatic of a preliminary stage of pathological olfactory fetishism, and is distinguished from the 'grand fétichisme', in which all sexual desires are expressed through the pleasure of smell alone: "When the olfactive man gets to the point where the only thing he seeks in a woman is her smell, then we have arrived at the genuine stage of fetishism. [...] For the olfactory fetishist, the smell of a woman is not merely a sexual attraction, but the highest sexual pleasure" (Bloch, 1933: 92-93). Here, Bloch echoes Krafft-Ebing's view that 'grand fétichisme' is found primarily among "morbid degenerates", "young voluptuaries", and other "abnormals", as well as being a rather common condition in senility (Bloch, 1933: 93).

In *Odoratus sexualis* Bloch insisted on drawing a sharp line between normalcy and degeneracy in relation to smell. As the citations above show, he attributed many 'conditions' of sexual perversion to men, even though the connection between the nose and the genitalia can be observed in masturbatory psychoses of men and women alike, while "psychoses due to diseases of the genitalia" can only occur in women (Bloch, 1933: 88). Like Krafft-Ebing and Moll, Bloch also saw a correlation between the sense of smell and masochism, homosexuality, and pederasty (Bloch, 1933: 125, 127). These insights appear to be based primarily on anthropological observations, rather than biological or physiological evidence. As we have seen previously in the work of Ellis (1927), French poets like Baudelaire and Zola served as examples of "olfactory

¹⁵ This is the category of hircine (or 'goat-like') odors as found in the classifications of Linnaeus and Zwaardemaker.

fanatics", and their predilection for odors became an object medical scrutiny in the early 20th century (see Bloch, 1933: 135).¹⁶

After *Odoratus sexualis* the scientific interest in olfaction and sexuality rapidly declined. In the academic literature, all pronounced interest in sex and smells was associated with pathological conditions (which were difficult to verify empirically) and deviant behavior. The general attitude towards the subject is perhaps best illustrated by A.A. Brill's (1932) comment in an article for *Psychoanalytic Quarterly*: "Modern man has little need of his sense of smell. The female sex, to be sure, makes use of artificial perfumes, but this procedure has apparently an entirely different purport. As a rule civilized man is not only independent of this sense, but dislikes any odors emanating from human beings" (Brill, 1932: 7). As illustrated in Figure 1, early 20th century research on olfaction and sexuality had primarily taken place on the intersection between psychology and physiology; it wasn't until the 1970s that other disciplines from the natural sciences would get involved in this field, and that the main discourse on the subject would take a different turn.

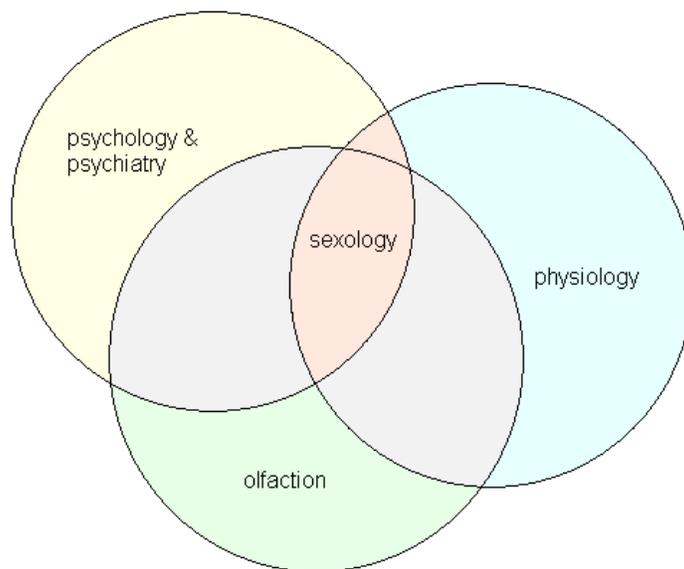


Figure 1 – Study of olfaction and sexuality in the early 20th century

1.5 Olfactory communication: biology, biochemistry, and pheromones

Between Bloch's *Odoratus sexualis* and the early 1960s, little new was written on human sexuality and olfaction. Psychiatrist Irving Bieber published a paper in the *American Journal of Psychotherapy* in 1959, in which he hypothesized that olfaction

¹⁶ Bloch bases his assumptions on an exchange of letters between Zola and Dr. Etienne Tardif, which was published in the latter's thesis *Les Odeurs et les parfums. Leur influence sur le sens génésique*. Bordeaux Imprimerie du Midi (1897)

could play a role in sexual preference in humans, but it proved to be of small importance (Stoddard, 1992: 114). In 1963, his colleague Michael Kalogerakis wrote an article in which he suggested that "smell plays a crucial role in the evolution of the Oedipus complex and in the establishment of sexual identity" (Kalogerakis, 1963: 420); it was based on observations obtained from one of his patients, who had a two year old son with a keen sense of smell. One of the conclusions of his study was that men and women give off odors that are "characteristic of their sex and probably of the person", and that there may be a "basic biological substratum for the development of [a child's] sexual identity and sexual relatedness to the adult male and female" (Kalogerakis, 1963: 431).

After the 1960s, the focus indeed shifted towards biology and biochemistry. The idea that biological features in men and women could play an active part in the relation between sexuality and olfaction gradually gained acceptance: in 1971, Comfort published a research paper entitled 'Likelihood of Human Pheromones'¹⁷ in the reputable journal *Nature*; five years later, Michael J. Russell reported about his experiments on sex recognition through odor in a letter to *Nature* entitled 'Human olfactory communication'. Human body odor was now increasingly studied as an identifier of sex: in her research on olfactory communication and individual recognition, Wallace reported that "[b]oth men and women observers were able to discriminate between two women, two men, and a man and a woman, on the basis of olfactory cues from the hand" (Wallace, 1977: 577). Even in psychological research, the emphasis shifted from sexual practices and behavior to such topics as 'Psychophysical and social ratings of human body odor' (McBurney *et al*, 1976).

An important contributor to olfactory research since this period was Richard Doty, who explored the possibilities of olfactory communication in relation to sex and reproduction (1977), and studied the response of men and women to axillary odors (1978). His main interest was in how biological information is transferred through body odors. In the early 1980s this still represented a new terrain, which raised more questions than Doty or his fellow researchers could answer: "[a]lthough both anatomic and behavioral studies support the notion that humans have the ability to communicate biologic information via odors, additional studies are needed to establish the role of odors in influencing basic human behaviors" (Doty, 1981: 351).

New experiments were conducted by Cain (1982) on olfactive abilities and cognitive differences in odor identification between the sexes, Van Toller (1988) on the relationship between emotion and olfaction, and Kohl and Francoeur (1995) on how 'sex attractants' and pheromones affect human behavior. Biology and psychophysiology had a strong impact on smell research during this period; although much attention was given to sex differences between men and women, sexual practices remained virtually unexplored.

1.6 Social sciences, history, and the cultural of smell

Although it may appear that the social sciences came very late in discovering smell culture, this is not entirely correct. Anthropologists had shown significant interest in

¹⁷ The term 'pheromone' was introduced by Karlson and Lüscher (1959).

olfactory practices in non-Western cultures in the early decades of the 20th century; according to Classen, however, their intention was not to do justice to the sense of smell, but instead to devalue the peoples they studied, depicting them as primitives and savages (Classen, 1994: 91). When this type of studies fell out of favor in the second half of the 20th century, the culture of smell was abandoned in its entirety. In 1972, an essay by Largey and Watson entitled 'The Sociology of Odors' (published in *The American Journal of Sociology*) was meant to explore this vast new terrain, but it had no immediate followup. While sociologists and anthropologists continued to ignore smell culture in the decade that followed, French historians Alain Corbin and Georges Vigarello started writing on the relation between odors, hygiene, and cleanliness.

In Corbin's book *Le Miasme et la jonquille* (first published in 1982, and translated as *The Foul and the Fragrant* in English), occasional comments are made on the relation between odor and sexuality. For instance, the author discusses how the odor of musk, civet and amber fell out of grace in the second half of the 18th century; he refers to Ellis and Bloch, who argued that until that period, women had used musk to emphasize their body odor, rather than to conceal it, and that animalic scents were perceived as vessels of feminine sexuality (Corbin, 1999: 100-101). In general, Corbin's historical perspective on smell culture sheds more light on 18th and 19th century eroticism than on actual sexual practices. A similar interest can be found in philology, such as Rindisbacher's aforementioned *The Smell of Books*, or Christopher Looby's *The Odor of Male Solitude* (1995), in which the author examines a mid-19th century anti-masturbation treatise, and describes how it paradoxically stimulates the male olfactory imaginary. Of recent date is Eugénie Briot's article *De l'Eau Impériale aux Violettes du Czar* (2008), which explores how the rules of olfactive elegance affected the construction of femininity in 19th century Paris.

Classen's work (1993, 1994) opened new doors to the anthropological and sociological exploration of odors. Her book *Aroma* (1994), co-authored by David Howes and Anthony Synnott, revealed the possibilities of a structuralist, cross-cultural analysis of smell. It explored the notion of olfactory difference, the politics of smell, and olfactory classification systems ('osmologies') in several non-Western cultures. Although sexuality plays a very marginal role in Classen's work, anthropologists and sociologists could resort to her concepts as research tools. As of yet, good examples are hard to find. Mark Graham's essay *Queer Smells* contains interesting reflections on the significance of smells to queer theory, which "flaunt gendered and sexed boundaries and scramble the categories that sustain them as everyone partakes aromatically of everyone else" (Graham in: Drobnick, 2006: 318). But with its focus on gender theory, and its frequent references to Jean Baudrillard and Judith Butler in particular, it balances on the border between anthropology and philosophy. Another unfortunate example is Jan Havlicek and Pavlina Lenochova's report on 'The Effect of Meat Consumption on Body Odor Attractiveness' (2006), which can be said to combine the fields of anthropology and human genetics to some extent, although it is primarily focused on the latter.

If the social sciences are yet to fill the void that is left behind by the humanities and cultural studies, a large selection of pop-science and 'self-improvement' books on smell and sexuality is now widely available to the public. Famous examples are Valerie Ann Worwood's *Scents & Scentuality* (1998), which describes how to use essential oils and aromatherapy to improve one's sex life, and Alan Hirsh's *Scentsational Sex* (1998), on the use of scents as sexual stimulants. If their popularity counts in any way as a

measure of the general interest in odors and sexuality, it is all the more surprising that social scientists have so far kept their silence. The small selection of personal accounts in the second part of this paper will hopefully show that there is great potential in a sociological or anthropological approach to sexuality and odors: that it should not be limited to the discussion of theoretical concepts or to historical comparisons, and that it can lend itself to ethnographical research and cross-cultural analysis. It is a space that should not be left unexplored, or confined to the realm of sociobiology.

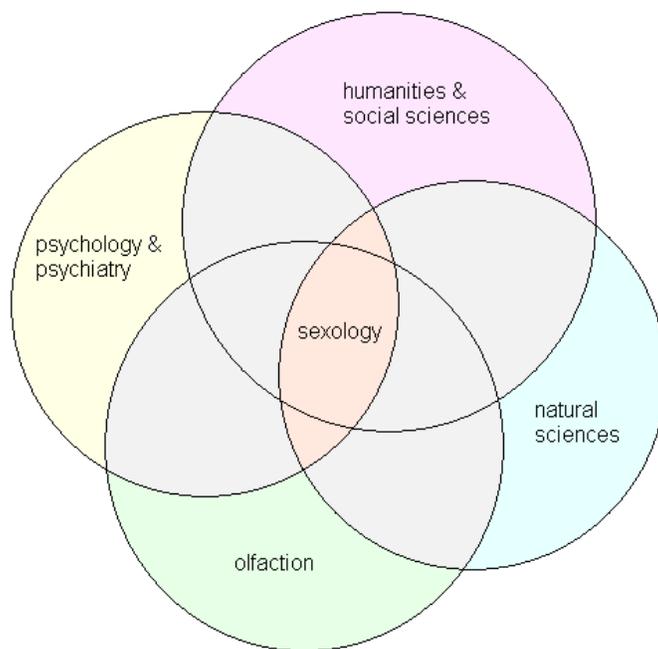


Figure 2 – Study of olfaction and sexuality in the early 21st century

As illustrated in Figure 2, the study of olfaction and sexuality has become more diversified, and more complex in the 21st century. Next to physiology, many disciplines from the natural sciences are now involved in this field; as we have seen, some research takes place on the border between the natural and the social sciences. What needs to be explored by sociologists and anthropologists, is how odors affect and influence the sexual practices of men and women in their daily life, how they become associated with normalcy or deviance, and to what extent those associations are shaped by culture.

2 Sex and odor: a collection of personal accounts

To get a general idea of people's thoughts and impressions about sex and odors, I posted a request on a message board for perfume enthusiasts (see: Appendix) in which I asked people to write about their personal experiences on this subject. Given the private nature of such accounts, respondents were encouraged to send their contributions via 'personal message' (similar to e-mail). I deliberately refrained from using strict definitions in my

enquiry, in an attempt to capture the widest possible response. Since members of this online community are well-versed in writing about odors, sharing their thoughts and feelings about sexuality was probably the bigger challenge to most. Several contributors expressed feelings of shame or guilt about what they described; some were apologetic. Their accounts reflect many preferences that were discussed in part one of this paper; it is obviously not my intention to analyse them as fetishes or psychopathologies, but instead to show different personal perspectives on the role of odor in sexuality. A posteriori, I sorted the data into three categories (sweat/body/skin odors, perfumes, and 'other odors') as these were the main objects described by the respondents.

2.1 Sweat, body odor, and skin odor

The idea that body odors and the smell of sweat play a definite role in our sexual life is widespread in academic and popular literature. Many people are likely to acknowledge their importance in their own life on the basis of this preset notion alone, although most would find it hard to explain why. Whereas in the public sphere body odor (or 'BO') is regarded as the repulsive smell of "the other" (Herz, 2007: 163-165), it often acts a marker of intimacy in close relationships. Many people find the smell of an unshowered body after a day of work arousing, and this preference is not necessarily tied to their own partner: several respondents mentioned that they can be attracted to the body odor of a stranger as well.

Body odor and sweat were described as sexually arousing by six of the ten respondents, which gives some indication of their importance to people. 'Old sweat' was generally regarded as foul; it must be added that sweat resulting from a reaction of fear (secreted from glands that are regulated by the nervous system) is more pungent than that of physical exercise (Herz, 2007: 17, 150). A hint of 'fresh' perspiration, on the other hand, is known to be perceived as sexually arousing by many people. Sylvia (female, 42) writes:

"I still like catching the occasional whiff of fresh sweat, which is very different from body odor. Say someone who has just been playing tennis and is suddenly sweaty, but otherwise clean. With all the deodorant soaps and other products, this doesn't happen very often."

The mixed reaction to the smell of urine, as reported by 21-year old male William ("I'm both aroused and grossed out at the same time with this one. Go figure.") shows that even smells that are identified as foul in one context, can trigger a positive response in another. Moreover, preferences for smells have a tendency to evolve through time: what is unpleasant in childhood can suddenly become pleasant in adolescent or adult life, and viceversa. Sylvia recalls the following episode from when she was 13 years old:

"I remember vividly the first time I found myself sexually aroused by someone's odor. I was 13 and out waterskiing with some friends. One of them I had a crush on, or at least I knew he liked me. He was my first "boyfriend" and I had no experience with what I was feeling, how to act, what to do, etc. We were sitting in the back of the boat and I suddenly

noticed he smelled sweaty. Salty-sweaty, which makes sense since we were in the gulf waters, but also *manly*-sweaty. Children and boys have a dirty sort of smell that parents find familiar and even like (I don't have children myself, so I find it weird and unpleasant), but when I caught a whiff of my friend's odor I became acutely aware that he, while not exactly a man at 13 or 14 himself, was not a boy. I was suddenly very attracted to and aroused by this odor. I became keenly aware that my friend had developed a young *man's* body, with all its mysterious parts and urges that I had heard of and read about. Breathing him in, I felt excited and a little frightened too, because I'd never experienced anything like this." (italics was bold emphasis in original text)

This episode illustrates how smell can mark a transitional phase in one's sexual life, and then become imprinted as an indelible memory. Besides body odors and sweat, two respondents also expressed their preference for the smell of skin. Mark (male, 37) comments:

"The smell of warm skin, especially on a woman that has just emerged from the ocean and is drying is one of the most erotic smells I can think of. I think the combination of skin and saltiness is evocative of sex."

Stephen's account (male, 23) shows that the reaction to a person giving off a particular scent is immediate:

"The scent that I find the most erotic is the smell on a woman's neck, (close to her hairline on the side/back of her neck). If I like it, I'm immediately drawn in, emotionally and sexually. But it can also turn me off, or smell indifferent to me, depending on who's neck it is."

While skin and hair odors are strong markers of individuality in the most literal and biological sense of the term, they also frequently react with scented products such as soaps, shampoos, lotions, and perfumes. It must therefore be taken into account that when people describe body odors, these may not always be completely 'natural'.

2.2 Perfumes

When asking perfume enthusiasts about sexually arousing odors, it is nearly impossible to avoid references to perfumes. That said, over the past five years I have observed that within this specific community, the idea of perfumes as instruments of seduction is not widely supported, and is indeed often challenged. Many perceive perfumes as artistic creations, and argue that they wear scents primarily for their own aesthetic pleasure. While terms like "sexy" are regularly used by enthusiasts to describe perfumes, they are not necessarily considered as an integral part of sexual practices. James (male, age undisclosed) describes this as follows:

"Even though I cannot sample a perfume without wondering if I find it sexy or not (clean ones work best), when it comes to it, perfume does not matter, and I do not recall a single instance where perfume emphasized or flattened the curve of emotions while engaged in sex with another person."

Most respondents in this survey relate perfumes to a specific atmosphere or setting, either real or imaginary. Mary (female, 45) comments on the feeling of transgression that she experiences when wearing the perfume *Avignon* by Comme des Garçons, and describes the precise erotic images it evokes in her:

"Frankincense provokes some strange reactions on me. Some perfumes with frankincense are very calming, but Avignon does something completely different to me. It gives me a feeling of transgression, makes me think of Boccaccio and the Decameron. Makes me think of the papal court of Avignon and having sex inside a church. I only wear Avignon before going to sleep. I cannot wear it in public, it would be a distraction."

Although the smell of incense can bare strong connotations of Christianity (at least in Europe and the United States), it is not always contextualized as such. Stephen lists the smell of "good quality, authentic oud incense" among his preferences, adding that:

"I smelled this for the first time a few weeks ago, and as of yet, haven't even associated it with anything. It just resonates with me. I can't explain *why* I find these scents erotic, but I can say that they just trigger something instinctual, something deeply rooted, probably biological. They're also very calming, yet stimulating." (italics in original text)

This example illustrates the danger of generalizing about olfactory associations. Although they are indeed culturally embedded, olfactory experiences are often complex, and difficult for the individual to consciously link to something else. This only becomes easier on a more abstract level; for instance, the idea that perfumes represent feminine beauty is widespread among men and women alike. Adam (male, 52) says:

"I strongly associate perfumes with female sexual attractiveness. Typically, when a scent is worn by an attractive woman, it becomes associated with arousal/attraction/beauty - often on the very first encounter. The more visually attractive or provocatively dressed (or undressed) the woman is at that time, the more strongly the fragrance will be associated."

In a slightly contrasting view on the same subject, Joseph (male, 25) finds that when a perfume is too pronounced for his tastes, this can raise a feeling of suspicion about its wearer:

"[...] if the scent is too "arousing"- that it is too sweet, provocative, carnal and sensual, it might actually turn me off, as, even by means of fragrance, I'll sense the fact that she is a bit to "desperate", that she is trying too hard. On the contrary, if a woman's scent is sober, mature, restrained and

conservative, this turns out to be way more charming to me, as she exhales more than just sexual desirability to me [...]."

Few respondents made a direct connection between their own use of perfume and sexual practices. James notes that even in the pleasure of wearing perfume as a form of personal foreplay, it is not the scent itself, but the thoughts about one's sexual partner that are most stimulating:

"Yes I can get a hard-on selecting a specific perfume in anticipation of a sexual encounter. But the imagination is really triggered by thinking about the other person, the game of mutual seduction, etc. and happens hours before, maybe while shopping for the evening. If the encounter is very hot, noticing a nice fragrance on the other person will heighten the pleasure. But a good fragrance on whoever will not make me wish to be in bed with them automatically."

Unfortunately, research on perfume preferences is scarce. It is usually conducted by market researchers, who tend to set up large-scale, quantitative surveys for commercial purposes. Even less is known about people's preferences for other odors, a small selection of which is included in the following paragraph.

2.3 Other odors

In popular parlance, the term 'fetish' is often used in relation to odors. As we have seen with Freud, Ellis, and Bloch, it is a phenomenon that in the early years of sexology was not only related to sexual deviance, but also to deeply rooted pathological conditions. The medicalization of sexuality has become such a dominant process in modern Western societies, that it cannot be dissociated from current discourses on sex. The apologetic comments made by some of the contributors can be viewed as a signal of underlying dynamics of repression. Further research is required to determine to what extent biological explanations have permeated the contemporary discourse on odors and sexuality.

The smell of tobacco is often referred to in erotic literature, and was indeed brought up by two respondents as well. William mentioned the smell of cigar smoke as particularly sexy:

I don't smoke so I don't know the right terms, but tinned tobacco and cigars smell sexy. Smelling a slight hint of cigar smoke tends to arouse me a lot.

Catherine (female, 49) gives an elaborate description of the nostalgic power associated with the smell of cigarette smoke, and how the widespread taboo on smoking in the United States has made the olfactory experience more exciting and arousing:

"I have a bit of a fetish for the smell of cigaret smoke on clothes and skin. I imagine this is common; it's not an inherently pleasant smell, but it can be powerfully nostalgic, especially for an American born, as I was, in 1959,

when smoking was still common. I associate the smell with being kissed by adults: my mother, my mother's male friends, and with being near young men I was attracted to as a child. There is a particular smell I like of smoke on oily, rough wool, like the collar of an overcoat. And on skin, I like a kind of slightly-oily-but-still-fresh quality mixed with the smoke -- a masculine smell, but it's hard to describe. Somehow, I don't experience women as smelling that way. This isn't a powerful fetish of the sort some men experience: it's not as if it compels me in the absence of more crucial traits. It is not an erotic object in itself. It does, however, influence me before I identify it. The "fetishistic" element is reinforced by the way smoking has become (with good reason, IMO) almost forbidden in public in the US, so that the olfactory memory seems almost "locked" in the past, which, of course, somewhat heightens the experience of unlocking it. The odor of smoke seems like an ambiguous scent of the past: my own and the cultural past, and this is arousing to me, somehow."

It is precisely this cultural dimension in relation to smell which needs to be explored by social scientists. While the preference for a specific odor can sometimes be traced back to a specific event, olfactory preferences are not necessarily related to the objects that emanate them, or even to specific situations. William, for instance, lists the smell of gasoline, tar, creosote, kerosene, and other petrochemical products as sexually arousing, as well as the smell of leather, and that of alcoholic spirits like rum; yet he makes it clear that he is not interested in the look or feel of leather, and adds:

"I realize this list must seem very odd, but it's true for me. I suppose it might lead one to suspect I'm attracted to refinery workmen who wear leather, smoke and drink, but I can assure you that's not the case."

To explain this (widespread) fascination for leather or petrochemicals, the cultural meanings attributed to such products would need to be further studied in relation to odor. There is a fine line between sexual practices and the erotic imaginary, which mutually shape and influence each other. Although the accounts presented here are merely intended as small illustrations of a much wider range of sexual odors, they reveal the fluidity between imagination and practice in personal olfactory experiences.

Conclusion

Contrary to my original assumptions, the relation between olfaction and sexuality is not a novel field of scientific interest. The earliest disciplines involved in this field were physiology and medicine (around the mid-18th century), and the first comprehensive treatise appeared in France in 1821. At the turn of the century, psychologists such as Krafft-Ebing, Freud, and Ellis gave a new direction to the discourse on olfaction, by linking strong affinities with odors to psychopathologies and sexual deviances that cannot be found in 'normal' humans. The most elaborate books on odor and sexuality were written by Iwan Bloch, whose book *Odoratus Sexualis* was entirely dedicated to this subject. A relatively brief period of great interest in the psychiatry of olfaction was

followed by a long interruption; it was only in the early 1970s that biologists started conducting new research on olfaction and sexuality. Despite this renewed interest in the relation between olfaction and sexuality, little attention has yet been given to smell in the context of sexual practices: although scholars in the humanities and social sciences have become aware of the importance of smell in the 1980s and 1990s respectively, the few projects they have produced so far are of greater interest to philosophy and the natural sciences than to their own field.

The personal accounts reproduced in this paper show that it is possible to explore how odors affect and influence the sexual practices of men and women from a sociological or anthropological perspective. Further research may reveal how their interests and practices have become associated with normalcy or deviance, and to what extent people view their own behavior as the result of biological or cultural processes. The relation between sexuality and odors should not be limited to the discussion of theoretical concepts or to historical comparisons, and can indeed lend itself to ethnographical research and cross-cultural analysis. It is a space that should not be left unexplored, at the risk of losing it to the field of sociobiology.

Appendix

On January 4, 2009 I posted the following request on the 'Fragrance Industry Discussion' board of www.basenotes.net, under the title 'Odor, sexuality, and the erotic imaginary' ^(*)

Hello all,

It's been a while since I last started a thread, I hope that some of you still remember me. I'm currently enrolled in a Master's programme called Gender, Sexuality, and Society, and I'm preparing a paper for a class called Social and Cultural Studies of Sexuality. The subject I chose is 'Odor, sexuality, and the erotic imaginary'. Part one of the paper will be a historical overview of the relation between sexuality and olfaction in science, and in Part two I want to discuss the 'erotic imaginary' of scent in everyday life.

For this second part, I'd like to ask for your help!

I want to know how people describe the relation between odor and sexual attraction or attractiveness. A quick search on the forums turned up a thread called "What fragrances get you sexually aroused?", but that's not quite what I'm looking for. Perfumes aside, are there odors that you find particularly sexy? a body odor, the smell of a specific place, something you would describe as highly erotic? Of course it can be a perfumed product too (like a suntan lotion, shampoo, or similar). Can you describe what it is, that makes that odor sexy or arousing? Is it the odor itself, or perhaps a setting or circumstance in which you smelled that odor? A few sentences will suffice (but more is always welcome!).

I realize that I'm asking for very personal things... but I hope you'll give it a try! Of course, I'll treat all data with the utmost confidentiality. My paper is not intended for publication, but it's a very important assignment for me.

If you want to help me out, please send me your contribution via PM (private message), together with your first name, sex, and age. (As for your name, a fictitious one will do too. I just need it to identify your contribution.)

If you have any questions or comments, do let me know! And perhaps there are related issues or thoughts that we can discuss in this thread.

A million thanks in advance!

10 contributions were submitted in total (6 men, 4 women), varying from a few sentences to around 500 words. I wish to thank all respondents for their eloquent and thoughtful writing, which exceeded my expectations in every way.

^(*) URL: <http://community.basenotes.net/showthread.php?t=221348>

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