

Smell as an atmospheric medium. Perfume, imagination and the affective construction of social space

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Abstract

This article explores the role of olfaction as an atmospheric medium in the formation of collective imaginaries. Drawing on the convergence of smell studies, the sociology of emotions, and atmosphere theory, the paper proposes a reading of olfactory experience as an affective force capable of transforming topological space into experiential space, contributing to the production of socially shared atmospheres. The analysis unfolds along three lines: a critique of the oculo-centric paradigm in sociological modernity and the recovery of proximity senses; the atmospheric function of perfume in the sacred and ritual domain, where it operates as a generator of collective effervescence and a producer of symbolic imaginaries structured along archetypal polarities; the mnemonic and affective potency of smell, revealing the deep nexus between sensory perception, embodied memory, and the social construction of meaning.

Keywords

Affective Atmospheres | Olfaction | Social Imaginary | Sociology Of The Senses | Quasi-Things



Introduction

There exists a paradoxical asymmetry in the history of the social sciences: the sense that more than any other immerses us in the world — one that knows no distance, that penetrates bodies before the mind can process it, that survives as a mnemonic trace when every other perception has dissolved — has long remained at the margins of theoretical and academic reflection. Smell has occupied, within the epistemic economy of sociological modernity, a subaltern position, almost unworthy of systematic analysis (Vannini, Waskul, Gottschalk, 2013; Largey, Watson, 1972; Synnott, 1991; Waskul, Vannini, 2008; Low, 2006; Cerulo K. A., 2018).

It is precisely this marginality that makes smell a theoretically relevant object. To work "on the nose" means to interrogate a dimension of collective experience that the social sciences have long repressed, yet which continues to operate below the threshold of explicit representation, interweaving with imaginaries, practices, and forms of tacit knowledge.

The reason for this exclusion is not accidental. For much of its history, sociology has structured its epistemology around an implicitly visual paradigm, in which knowing the world meant essentially observing it: maintaining a distance from the object, representing it, and neutralising its bodily opacity through the analytical gaze (Fjellestad, 2001). This orientation has progressively marginalised not only smell, but more broadly the senses of proximity — such as touch and taste — deemed too closely bound to bodily contingency and subjectivity to be recognised as legitimate sources of knowledge. The hierarchy of the senses within contemporary academic knowledge thus appears not as a natural given, but as the outcome of a historical and social process that has progressively distanced scientific knowledge from the emotional and sensory dimensions of experience.

Norbert Elias demonstrated with rigour how this process is inscribed in the long duration of Western civilisation. The gradual consolidation of models of bodily self-control and emotional regulation entailed a hierarchical redefinition of the senses, in which sight was elevated to the privileged organ of rationality and distance, while the senses of physical proximity were disciplined and culturally devalued (Elias, 1998). From this perspective, the theoretical marginalisation of smell reflects a broader cultural marginalisation, intensified by the rise of a scientific mentality dominated by measurability and predictability — constitutive traits of reflexive modernity (Beck, 2001).

In recent decades, historians, anthropologists, and social psychologists have begun to re-examine the sensory dimension — and smell in particular — in its cultural implications, restoring its analytical complexity and density. Pioneering studies such as those of Classen, Howes, and Synnott (1994) have shown how odour plays a far from secondary role in cultural processes and in the construction of collective identities. Harvey (2006) and Reinartz (2014) show how olfactory perceptions can be interpreted as cultural devices through which societies draw symbolic boundaries, distinguishing the pure from the impure, the familiar from the foreign. Contemporary society carries this logic to its extreme consequences, producing a progressive erasure



of olfactory identity and outlining a context increasingly characterised by odorophobia (Howes, 1986: 30), in which the deodorised body and space become sites of representation, control, and distinction. In this sense, smell reveals its deep connections with the disciplinary society that Foucault (1976) analysed on the terrain of the body, space, and the norm.

Alongside these developments, the social sciences have undergone a broader theoretical shift that has contributed to challenging the primacy of the rational and the visible in the analysis of experience: the so-called affective turn. From the 1970s onwards, the sociology of emotions demonstrated that feelings and affective states are not purely individual or biological phenomena (Gandy, 2017), but socially structured and culturally regulated processes (Hochschild, 2013; Kemper, 1978; Shott, 1979). The separation between reason and feeling, mind and body, which had grounded the classical Cartesian paradigm, has progressively eroded, making room for a conception of social experience in which the affective and corporeal dimension does not represent an irrational residue to be controlled, but a constitutive component of practices, bonds, and collective imaginaries (Cerulo, 2009). The present contribution is situated at the convergence of three theoretical domains that have only recently begun to come together: smell studies, the sociology of emotions, and the so-called atmospheric turn. The latter, developed from the work of Schmitz (2019), Böhme (2020), Bollnow (2009), and Griffero (2010), has provided the conceptual tools for thinking atmospheres not as neutral backgrounds of experience, but as affective forces capable of structuring perception and orienting behaviour prior to the intervention of conscious reflection. Within this framework, smell emerges as one of the atmospheric senses par excellence. Unlike sight, which presupposes a distance between observer and object, olfactory experience implies a relation of radical proximity, in which the subject is literally traversed by the surrounding environment. As Kant observes, smell is perhaps the most immediate and most intimate of the senses — and therefore the most invasive and antisocial (Kant, 2006) — since it implies a relation of proximity that can prove as attractive as it is disturbing and intrusive (Simmel, 2009: 578). One does not observe a smell: one inhabits it, is subjected to it, is suffused by it.

Olfactory experiences do not merely qualify the environment, but actively contribute to the constitution of social atmospheres through which imaginaries take shape and become shareable. In this sense, scent operates as what Castoriadis (1975) defines as radical social creation: it does not reproduce already given meanings, but generates new forms of imaginary signification that are embodied in ritual practices, sensory codes, and the spaces of collective life. The analysis draws on a critical review of interdisciplinary literature from sociology, anthropology, phenomenological philosophy, and the cultural history of the senses. Odours and scents are here interpreted as a sensory and symbolic medium operating in the intermediate space between body, environment, and culture, contributing to the structuring of forms of affective resonance and socially shared configurations of meaning.

The methodological approach adopted here is that of an integrative theoretical synthesis (Torraco, 2005): rather than a systematic review of the empirical literature,

the article builds a cross-disciplinary conceptual framework by bringing into dialogue traditions that have rarely been addressed in conjunction — atmospheric aesthetics, the sociology of the imaginary, and olfactory studies. The selection of sources reflects three guiding criteria: theoretical relevance to the problem of olfactory experience as a social phenomenon; capacity for cross-disciplinary dialogue; and contribution to the construction of an original analytical framework. The aim is not to survey a field exhaustively, but to identify a set of conceptual tools, quasi-thing, affective resonance, imaginary signification, atmospheric turn, capable of illuminating dimensions of collective life that conventional sociological approaches have tended to overlook.

Smell between the visual paradigm and the atmospheric turn

The renewed academic interest in smell is situated within a deeper crisis of the visual primacy that has long governed not only social theory, but the entire oculocentric architecture of Western modernity. To understand the scope of this crisis, it is necessary to trace it back to its roots. With the rise of scientific rationality and the modern subject, sight progressively established itself as the sense of distance, measure, and control: the sense that allows one to observe without being touched, to know without being implicated, to represent without being transformed by the object of representation.

Sociology has internalised and reproduced this sensory hierarchy. By privileging the gaze as an analytical instrument — through observation, visual representation, and the analysis of images and visual media — it has contributed to consolidating a model of knowledge in which what cannot be seen struggles to exist as a theoretical object. McLuhan had identified in this centrality of visual culture one of the distinctive traits of the third media age, characterised by the technological extension of sight through cinema, television, and more recently, social media (McLuhan, 1976). In this context, smell has remained at the margins not for lack of social relevance, but because its radically non-visual and barely digitisable nature rendered it inassimilable to the dominant paradigms of cultural analysis.

It is precisely this resistance of smell to rationalisation, cataloguing, measurement, and even naming (Alač, 2017) that, paradoxically, constitutes its most significant theoretical value. This resistance of smell to rigid classificatory schemes also suggests the need for a less reductionist sociological approach, one capable of recognising the generative and imaginative dimensions of social experience rather than reducing them to fixed analytical taxonomies (Marzo, 2023). Unlike sight, which presupposes a separation between subject and object, olfactory experience is by definition immersive: a smell is not observed — it is inhabited.

Böhme, although not directly addressing the olfactory question, forcefully raised the underlying epistemic issue by asking what the most authentic means of perceiving architecture and space might be, and what it is that actually gives shape to space: matter, or something else (Böhme, 2002: 399). His answer is unequivocal: space is authentically experienced by being inside it, through physical presence (ivi: 402). This



is therefore not a neutral perception, but an embodied experience, mediated by language, affect, and the subject's personal history (Spackman, Yanchar, 2014). With the transition into the twentieth century, the conception of the human being as "pupils of the air" takes on an increasingly pragmatic character: it is progressively understood that the human being is not only what they eat, but also what they breathe and the atmospheric medium in which they are immersed (Sloterdijk, 2009: 84).

The convergence between phenomenology of space and olfactory studies is particularly evident in the reflection of Juhani Pallasmaa, for whom a specific smell has the capacity to evoke a space completely forgotten by visual memory: the nostrils awaken a dormant image and induce a kind of vivid daydream (Pallasmaa, 2005: 54). Smell, from this perspective, is not simply one sense among others: it is the door through which the past re-enters the present as lived atmosphere, as space reactivated in the flesh before the mind. An experience that engages the entire perceptual apparatus, shapes culture, and nourishes the aesthetic imaginary (Stoddart, 1988). Human interaction, as Simmel intuited, can be understood as a reciprocal sensory process, in which individuals observe one another, listen to one another, but also — quite literally — smell one another. Scent acts in this intercorporeal space as a primary affective marker, capable of arousing attraction or rejection, familiarity or distance (Sabido Ramos, 2017).

This capacity to bring memory forth as bodily atmosphere — thanks to smell's faculty of evoking exceptionally personal narratives, memories, and emotions (Papagiannis, 2017: 55) — reveals one of the most singular properties of this sense: its mnemonic power is inseparable from its atmospheric power, since it is precisely sensory experience that renders the very existence of atmosphere manifest (Minkowski, 1999: 115). The various approaches to research on affective atmospheres — from German aesthetic philosophy (Böhme, 2020; Schmitz, 2019), to Francophone phenomenology of urban space, to Anglo-Saxon human geography studies (Anderson, 2009), through to Griffero's atmospherological neo-phenomenology (2010; 2017; 2021) — converge in defining atmospheres as diffuse, transpersonal, and unstable affective qualities. As Griffero has specified in his typology of atmospheres, they can be prototypical — that is, quasi-objective feelings diffused in space — or derivative-relational, arising from the interaction between subject and environment (Griffero, 2024). In both cases, they act as invisible yet material forces capable of orienting perception and structuring collective experience.

Smell, understood as a kind of constantly perceptible sensory envelope surrounding the individual as an emanation of their *sinnliches Bild*, was already an intuition of Simmel, who recognised the existence of impersonal atmospheres emanating not from individuals but from places and social contexts (Carnevali, 2017: 23). The olfactory qualities of a place are not mere contingent attributes: they become identifiable characteristics, distinctive traits that contribute to the symbolic production of the place itself (Urry, 2011). An urban space can be characterised and recognised by its smells (Diaconu, 2021), and as Böhme has put it, "a city without smell is like a person without character" (Böhme, 2006: 129). The olfactory landscape of a city, from this perspective, is not a mere feature of urban life: it is one of its fundamental affective



grammars, one of the ways in which space becomes experience, experience becomes memory, and memory is transformed into collective imaginary. Domestic atmospheres, too, can be understood as syntheses of multiple sensory emanations: what we call "familiar atmosphere" represents the condensation of the individual atmospheres produced within the home, just as the atmosphere of a city can be understood as the sum of the social emanations that traverse it (Corbin, 2005: 163).

This proxemic character of olfaction should be read against the transformations of late modernity. As social relations become increasingly disembedded from local contexts and stretched across indefinite spans of time and space (Giddens, 1990), and as this fluidity dissolves the durable structures within which such bonds were once anchored (Bauman, 2000), technologically mediated communication – organised around what Castells (1996) has called the space of flows – increasingly supplants the space of places, extending the senses at a distance (McLuhan, 1976) while depriving experience of embodied co-presence. In this scenario, smell – a sense that resists digitisation and cannot be transmitted at a distance – re-emerges as a site of resistance, perhaps compensating for a diminished bodily resonance with the world and with others (Rosa, 2019).



Scent as quasi-thing: a phenomenology of olfactory experience

Odour and scent can be understood as "quasi-things", in the perspective of atmospheric aesthetics: elements that, while lacking the material stability of solid objects, exert a concrete efficacy within lived space. As Griffero has shown in his quasi-thingly ontology, atmospheres — unlike things in the proper sense — present no sharp boundaries, possess no cohesion, do not endure stably over time, have no hidden sides, and for this reason coincide with their own appearance (Griffero, 2017). Scent displays all these properties in an exemplary fashion: it presents itself as one of the most powerful atmospheric elements in the construction of social space, capable of occupying the environment with a material authority that often surpasses that of tangible objects, enveloping the body independently of individual will (Tellenbach, 1968).

The olfactory atmosphere possesses the capacity to generate an affective space: it does not constitute a neutral background of experience, but an active force that orients perception and modulates the affective situation of the sentient body (Trigg, 2020) prior to the intervention of reflective consciousness (Griffero, 2014). In this regard, it is worth recalling the example proposed by Böhme, according to whom a bad smell is not simply perceived, but provokes an immediate bodily reaction: we do not merely recognise it, but genuinely feel ill because of it, independently of any objective measurement of its intensity (Böhme, 1989: 47). An olfactory atmosphere can be reduced neither to a purely subjective state nor to an objective property of the environment, but occupies instead that space of in-between (Böhme, 2006: 52, cited in Griffero, 2020: 14) — a space of affective resonance that simultaneously envelops body and environment, individual and collectivity.

Odour understood as a phenomenon belongs exclusively neither to the source that emits it nor to the subject who perceives it in isolation. It inhabits places, spreads among bodies, hybridises with other smells, and persists even when its material origin has dissolved. Like atmospheres, which McCormack described as distributed yet palpable, qualities of environmental immersion registered in and through sensory bodies while remaining diffuse and ethereal (McCormack, 2008: 413), odour is a sensory and symbolic event — a subtle narrative that traverses the body, memory, and desire, a liminal space capable, through imagination, of transporting one elsewhere (Rousseau, 1965: 186). Scent thus becomes a transpersonal medium: responding to Böhme's atmospheric definition, it "atmospheres imbue everything, they tinge the whole of the world or a view, they bathe everything in a certain light, unify a diversity of impressions in a single emotive state" (Böhme, 2008: 2).

This atmospheric dimension is closely connected to the vital act of breathing. The nose is not merely the organ of olfactory pleasure: it is the filter through which we breathe the world. The act of smelling coincides with that of breathing (Ackerman, 1990: 6). Breath allows us to perceive the atmosphere of a person or a place through a radically intimate form of knowledge, in which the other reaches and traverses us invisibly, like air. As Serres (1985) suggested, scent has the faculty of generating symbolic places in which social groups can recognise themselves and share a common sense of the world in an eminently aerial dimension.



The olfactory sacred: ritual, imaginary, and the atmospheric production of space

Archetypes, ambivalence, and the ritual production of space

It is within the domain of the sacred that the atmospheric function of scent finds its historically most stratified and symbolically most dense expression. In this context, perfumes and essences, though physically ineffable, exert an immediate and barely contestable atmospheric authority over the sentient body. The interior of a church, for example, imposes upon those who enter it — whether or not they are acquainted with its meaning — a particular emotional tonality and a consequent mode of behaviour, often marked by devotion or, at the very least, by reverence (Griffero, 2020: 5). The sacred employs olfactory atmospheres not only within ritual spaces, but extends their use into urban space as well. One need only think of Catholic liturgical celebrations — such as Corpus Domini or religious processions — which transform the city's streets through flower petals and braziers diffusing incense along the processional route. Urban space is thus literally modified through smell, rendered worthy of the passage of the divine. The burning aromas rise skyward, annulling the originary separation between Heaven and Earth that defines the condition of the modern subject (Dumont, 1993).

Scent acts as a symbolic operator of separation between ordinary reality and ritual reality (Durkheim, 1912/2005), tracing an invisible yet sensorially unequivocal





boundary between the profane and the sacred. What Durkheim recognised in the moments of collective effervescence generated by ritual mechanisms finds in scent one of its most effective affective vectors: an atmosphere that does not merely describe the sacredness of an event, but produces it, renders it perceptible, and institutionalises it in the memory of bodies. Sacred scent functions as what Castoriadis called social imaginary signification: it does not merely represent something that already exists, but institutes a world of meaning through which the collectivity recognises itself and projects itself towards dimensions that transcend the ordinary. Institution, as Castoriadis specified, is an originary creation of the social-historical field, which as form transcends any possible production by individuals or subjectivities (Castoriadis, 1991).

The rising smoke of burning incense, the enveloping aroma, the purifying smell — these are figures of an imaginary that Durand (2009) would analyse in terms of the diurnal regime and the nocturnal regime of the image, applied to the olfactory dimension of collective experience. As the tradition of the sociology of the imaginary has highlighted, the notion of image must be understood in a strong sense, as symbolic image: the symbol possesses a complex structure of meaning that brings together a symbolising element and a symbolised one, following a contradictorial logic in which opposing instances of meaning produce significance precisely through their mutual tension (Marzo, Mori, 2019, p. 90). Sacredness is not a univocal property but a radically ambivalent dimension, capable of attracting and repelling, purifying and contaminating (Camorrino, 2022); by breathing aroma and scent, it becomes possible to enter into contact with the sacred, which is capable of "transforming" existence by bestowing different meanings upon it. The ritual use of aromas — from incense to sage, from palo santo to consecrated flowers — therefore radically transforms space, rendering it participant in a dimension that exceeds the ordinary (Caillois, 2001) and that makes itself perceptible not through arguments or doctrines, but through the skin, the lungs, the flesh.

One of the most powerful formulations of this transcendent function is found in the Pauline corpus. In the Second Letter to the Corinthians, Paul writes: "For we are the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing: to the one a fragrance from death to death, to the other a fragrance from life to life" (2 Cor 2:14–15). Scent here does not describe a sensory quality, but an existential condition. It takes shape as what, in Böhme's perspective (2020), could be defined as an atmosphere generator of extraordinary symbolic efficacy. This spiritual dimension of smell traverses the history of Western mystical and philosophical thought in a transversal manner (Jung, 1996). Montaigne, too, recognised in the use of incense in sacred rites a sensory language capable of preparing the body for the divine (Reinarz, 2014).

Sacred scent thus acts as a genuine direction of the olfactory environment: it does not decorate space — it produces it. The smoke of incense rising upwards materially enacts a vertical aspiration that lies at the heart of the religious imaginary: even the epithet of the Most High, by which many traditions designate the deity, reveals — as Bachelard (2007) observed — a primitive psychism laden with unconscious valences,

an archaeology of the aerial imagination that connects spatial elevation to spiritual purity. Prayers, within this framework, do not ascend to heaven in spite of scent: they ascend with it, through the dense aromatic clouds that render the invisible visible (Reinarz, 2014).

Ritual, temporality, and the regeneration of social bonds

The olfactory sacred possesses a regenerative power that connects it intimately to the temporal dimension of ritual. Through cyclical repetition, scent contributes to periodically regenerating the foundation of social bonds, reactivating — in a circular, eternally repeatable time — contact with the sacred (Eliade, 1975). Each burning of incense reopens the threshold between the world and that which exceeds it, renewing a gesture that previous generations have performed in the same places, with the same aromas, before the same altars. The smell that spreads through the air thus becomes both a metaphor for the divine essence and an instrument for the production of an affective community (Kenna, 2005). It is in this sense that liturgical scent can be read as a powerful generator of that collective effervescence which, in Durkheimian categories reread through contemporary sociology of emotions (Cerulo, 2009), constitutes the founding moment of social bonds.

The body, within this framework, is never a mere passive receiver of the olfactory atmosphere: it is the site in which atmosphere becomes embodied, becomes lived experience, produces resonance. From this point of view, the embodied efficacy of sacred smell can also be read within a sociology of emotions, insofar as affective experience is not merely individual but relationally structured and socially shaped (Tomelleri, 2010; Cattarinussi, 2000). This dynamic — which Rosa (2019) has theorised in terms of a resonance relation between subject and world — finds in sacred scent one of its historically most deep-rooted manifestations. As Griffero has argued in his phenomenology of the lived body, resonance involves "bodily islands": some universal and others culturally variable, some relatively stable and others possessed of an intermittent existence depending on the momentary affective state (Griffero, 2024). Scent never fully reveals itself, never allows itself to be possessed, but leaves a trace that opens: it constructs an other space — spiritual and separate from the everyday (Watson, 2000) — rendering palpable the imperatives of that immaterial domain which Maffesoli (2000) has identified as one of the constitutive traits of contemporary sociality.

This regenerative, embodied function of sacred scent also illuminates why ritual olfactory practices persist, and indeed proliferate, in a society whose social bonds are increasingly disembedded and liquefied (Bauman, 2000; Giddens, 1990) and whose communication is organised around a space of flows rather than a space of places (Castells, 1996). Precisely because it demands bodily co-presence and cannot be delegated to a screen, incense — unlike the image or the sound — resists translation into that space of flows: sacred scent reintroduces a proxemic, situated temporality into a social experience otherwise dominated by simultaneity and disembedding,



which may explain its persistence as a device of re-territorialisation of the religious imaginary.

Memory, emotion, and the olfactory imaginary

Olfactory experience acts as an atmospheric force that modulates the relation between individual and environment, inscribing itself in the perceptual and symbolic fabric of experience — where perception is never a purely mental act: mind and body are indissolubly intertwined, since the mind does not perceive alone but always through the body immersed in its own environment (Merleau-Ponty, 1947).

In the Western religious imaginary, aromas are distributed along a polar axis that opposes the divine to the demonic. Just as the rose evokes the Madonna and incense the Holy Spirit, so sulphur recalls the satanic presence, and stench is associated with moral corruption, decomposition, and damnation (Le Guérer, 1988). This dual structuring of olfactory imaginaries — analysable through the symbolic morphology of the figurative regimes elaborated by Durand (2009) — reveals how scent is not a simple sign, but an operator that organises the experience of reality according to deep archetypal polarities.

The sensory order tends to reflect the social and spiritual order: olfactory disorder can appear as the symptom of a moral disorder (Ramšak, 2024). It is precisely in this relation between odour, impurity, and classification that the logic described by Mary Douglas is revealed: "matter out of place", including olfactory matter, is that which escapes the schema, which breaks a shared classification (Douglas, 2014: 77). Unpleasant smells take on a symbolic value of transgression: they represent what puts the sensory form and code of a society into crisis, acting as genuine "shadows of the social" — zones of alterity and silence that reveal social phenomena and relations in negative (Illouz, 2021; Scott, 2018). Smells tend to be silenced and relegated to a dimension of social shame (Kukso, 2022, p. 14).

As Alain Corbin showed, between 1750 and 1880 excrement, mud, and cadavers provoked a growing sense of repulsion and anguish. Intolerance towards stench spread progressively from the upper reaches of the social pyramid, nourishing new sensibilities and new politics of the body (Álvarez-Barrientos, 2017). In pre-modern medical theories, the air itself was considered one of the principal pathogenic factors (Foucault, 1998, pp. 163–182). Coexistence with bad smells in urban centres was perceived as an ordinary aspect of everyday life (Sorcinielli, 2016).

A further interpretive key is offered by the paradigm of embodied cognition (Clark, 1997). The very act of perceiving a smell is inseparable from the body that breathes it, from the sensory memory that structures it, and from the cultural environment that attributes meaning to it (Spackman, Yanchar, 2014). Understanding these dynamics requires a hermeneutic approach capable of going beyond traditional sociological concepts such as "ideology" or "collective representations" in order to grasp the role of the imaginary in the construction of shared meanings (Thompson, 1982; Baczko, 1991). In this sense, the olfactory imaginary should not be reduced to a merely private





association, but can be understood as part of a broader social process through which shared meanings, memories, and symbolic forms circulate collectively (Ragone, 2015). The notion of atmosphere offers a particularly fruitful interpretive key: atmospheres can be understood as sensory and affective configurations that emerge from the interaction between bodies, spaces, and objects, articulating possibilities of life that are sensually and emotionally perceptible (Seel, 2005). Within this framework one can also situate what Corbin has defined as the "olfactory revolution": from the end of the nineteenth century onwards, scent progressively shifted from religion and medicine towards sentiment, sensuality, and aesthetic experience (Classen et al., 1994, p. 6).

Smell constitutes a privileged pathway into emotional interiority, capable of soliciting and modifying situated emotional scripts and feeling norms (Vespermann, 2024), operating in an immediate fashion and only partially mediated by rational processes. Numerous studies have demonstrated how olfactory stimuli are particularly effective in awakening autobiographical memories (Herz, Schooler, 2002; Willander, Larsson, 2007). The link between smell and emotion had already been recognised in antiquity: in the early decades of the fourth century BC, Theophrastus in the *De odoribus* identified a significant relation between certain aromas and human emotional states (Squillace, 2012). This intuition finds confirmation today in the neurosciences: olfactory signals reach the hippocampus through only three synapses and the amygdala through just two (Krishna, 2012).

From this perspective, memory is not regarded as an objective and stable reality, but rather as an interpretive lens through which significant dimensions of social experience emerge (Bochner, Ellis, 2016). Emotion, cognition, and social behaviour are found to be deeply interconnected: emotional processes actively participate in the organisation of knowledge and action (Corvino, 2021). The imaginary and individual memory condense in the places of everyday, domestic, and sentimental life, which become privileged spaces for the condensation of olfactory memories (Ragone, 2014). Sensory experience thus takes shape as a genuine *taste experience*, in which perception interweaves with memory and produces a form of situated cultural experience (Boutaud, 2011).

From ritual effervescence to the re-enchantment of the everyday

In a modernity marked by the polytheism of values (Weber, 1922) and the progressive erosion of grand religious narratives, scent continues to produce imaginaries and to construct atmospheres of meaning that transcend the codified forms of ritual. Re-enchantment — with its profusion of holistic, mystical, affective, and orgiastic visions (Maffesoli, 1990) — finds in scent one of its privileged vectors: a process of nocturnisation of experience that restores symbolic depth to the sensory surface of the everyday (Camorrino, 2021). Read in this way, contemporary scented practices can be interpreted not only as residual spiritual gestures, but as environmentally and culturally mediated forms of the social imaginary, shaped

through symbolic circulation, sensory environments, and processes of mediation (Marzo, 2015; Ragone, 2019).

Contemporary practices of domestic diffusion of essences, the use of palo santo and sage in new age ceremonies, the success of environmental purification rituals borrowed from indigenous or Eastern traditions: all of this testifies that the sacred olfactory imaginary has not simply survived secularisation, but has been reconfigured, spreading into new forms that preserve intact the original atmospheric and regenerative logic. From the perspective of the sociology of the imaginary (Legros et al., 2006; Durand, 2009), these practices reveal how deep anthropological structures continue to operate beneath historical transformations, re-emerging in renewed and culturally adapted forms.

This intuition finds an echo in the reflections of Peter Sloterdijk, according to whom *air design* represents the technological response to the phenomenological awareness that the human being is always immersed in a condition of "being-in-the-air". At the moment when atmosphere is placed before architecture, one ends up implicitly situating the perfumer before the architect (Sloterdijk, 2009, p. 93).

It comes as no surprise, then, that as early as the seventeenth century smell was orchestrated as an invisible yet powerful element of theatrical staging: hidden machines and theatrical technologies produced odours, regulated their dispersal, and associated them with lights, sounds, and water effects. The baroque architect Romano Carapicchia, in his treatise *Pratica delle machine de' teatri*, describes how it was possible to use sprinklers to simulate rain or to shower the audience with scented water (Tamburini, 1994). In recent years, theatres, museums, artistic installations, and public presentations have increasingly incorporated olfactory dimensions. In commercial contexts as well, so-called olfactory marketing has developed strategies aimed at guiding audiences through sensory pathways capable of evoking emotions, memories, and meanings (Ortuño Sánchez, 2006; Kotler, 1973).

The olfactory atmospheres produced by sacred scent are not mere residues of traditional practices, but *nebulae* in which social imaginaries materialise (Bachelard, 2007), become operative, and can also be subverted. Scent remains, in this sense, an irreducible space of affective resonance: a medium that belongs neither to the past nor to the present, but which continues to produce atmospheres, to connect bodies, to trace thresholds between the visible and the invisible, between the everyday and the transcendent.

Conclusions

As David Le Breton observes, odours take shape as a primary form of the ineffable: not simply perceived, but lived. They prove difficult to verbalise and are deeply intertwined with affective memory, operating in a pre-reflective dimension of sensory experience (Le Breton, 2007). Their power resides not only in chemical composition,



but in the capacity to activate interior images, evoke memories, and generate sensory relations between the subject and its environment.

In the light of the analyses proposed, scent cannot be considered a mere aesthetic or commercial object, but takes shape rather as an atmospheric device capable of producing shared emotional spaces. Odours contribute to modelling those affective configurations that precede conceptualisation and orient our way of perceiving and inhabiting the world, transforming physical space into experiential space. Smell emerges as one of the privileged media through which social imaginaries take form, are transmitted, and become stabilised in collective practices. What Castoriadis (1975) defined as the magma of social imaginary significations finds in olfactory experience one of its most immediate channels of embodiment — one of the least controllable by conscious reflection.

From this standpoint, the study of smell allows us to illuminate a dimension of the social imaginary that is often overlooked: that in which perception, memory, and affectivity interweave in the production of shared atmospheres. As Castoriadis wrote, the reconstruction of the "affective vector" of a society represents the most difficult task, and one that is in principle inaccessible to historical and social knowledge (Castoriadis, 1991). Yet it is precisely in this constitutive lacuna that the study of olfactory atmospheres reveals its heuristic potential: to investigate smells means to explore one of the sites where sensory experience, collective imagination, and the social construction of meaning meet and mutually transform one another — restoring to the dimension of the sensible that foundational role which the oculo-centric paradigm of modernity had long obscured.

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