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DEATH SMELLS LIKE STRAWBERRIES: THE OLFACTION SIMULACRA²

By regarding the smell as a cultural, social, historical, and political phenomenon, and by positing the sense of smell within the broad framework of scientific, philosophical and literary Western thought, the paper attempts to reexamine the status of olfaction as a marginalized constituent of human anatomy, cognition, and ontology. Relying on the hypothesis that the advent of late Capitalism and subsequent development of consumer society logics lead to further sterilization of Western civilization, we analyze olfaction in the light of Baudrillard's simulacrum theory, inferring that the smell has shared the fate of other signs: the radical symbolic transposition into hyperreal. What is necessarily affected by the precession of simulacra is the intimate relationship between olfaction, emotions, memory, imagination, and intuition, which is a phenomenon that paper tries to further explore and exemplify within the context of contemporary American culture and fiction, most notably Jeffrey Eugenides' novel *The Virgin Suicides*.

Keywords: olfaction, simulacra, contemporary American culture and literature

“Civilization is sterilization.”
Aldous Huxley

In 2004 the Nobel Assembly at Karolinska Institutet issued a press release stating that the Nobel Prize for Physiology or Medicine was awarded to Richard Axel and Linda B. Buck for their research of odorant receptors and the organization of the olfactory system. It went on to point out that human sense of smell had long remained unexplained, and that the Laureates have managed to solve “the problem in a series of pioneering studies that clarified how our olfactory system works”³. Olfaction, arguably the most enigmatic and elusive of all our senses, has long been a subject of contestation, so it comes as no surprise that in as late as 2004 scientific community has begun to gain some sense of deeper understanding of its organizational and functional properties. This fact, however, is an implicit testament to the persistent and systematic marginalization of olfaction, phylogenetically the most ancient of all human

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3 <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/medicine/2004/summary/>

senses, by Western scientific and philosophical discourses alike: in most cases, regarded primitive, second-rate, or inferior to sight or hearing, the sense of smell has been grossly overlooked and disregarded.

Anatomical and physiological organization of the olfactory sensorium is surprisingly simple yet efficient. Unlike the information gathered by other senses, conveyed to the brain via series of intermediary synapses, the transmission of olfactory sensory data to the brain is fairly direct. Incoming chemical stimuli are first processed by the olfactory bulb, which is neuroanatomically intertwined with the following constituents of limbic system: the amygdala, hippocampus, and orbitofrontal cortex. Also known as paleomammalian cortex or “primary emotion areas”, these cerebral structures are among the oldest parts of the brain, responsible for generating, regulating and processing long-term memory, mood and mental disorders, motivation, as well as emotional and behavioral responses (Krusemark, Novak, Gitelman, Li 2013). Or: “in other words, the ability to express and experience emotion grew out of the ability of our brain to process smell” (Herz 2007: 4). Interestingly, data gathered by visual, auditory, and tactile senses do not traverse through these brain areas. Furthermore, the study conducted at Karolinska Institute’s Department of Clinical Neuroscience found evidence suggesting that memories triggered by an odor were accompanied by greater activity in the limbic system than memories triggered by the verbal sign or an image of that odor (Arshamian et al. 2013). Visual images, irrevocably enmeshed in the subsequent process of memory narrativization, are far less affecting, easily distorted and thus unreliable. On the other hand, smell-based memories remain unfaltering, highly evocative and emotionally poignant⁴. However, despite being not only evident but also experimentally confirmed, the inextricable link between olfactory perception and emotions, founded on the evolution of the brain, still defies definite explanation.

Let us briefly consider the following facts:

- The olfactory connection between a mother and a child is formed in utero⁵.
- Impaired olfactory function is an early symptom of dementia and Alzheimer’s disease; it is also a major cause of depressive and anxiety disorders⁶.

4 Literature’s most iconic example of how productive the mentioned olfactory-emotional-memory feedback loop can be is the aroma of a simple Madeleine dipped into a cup of lime tea that inspired Marcel Proust’s novel *In Search of Lost Time*, which, by the way, entered The Guinness World Records Book as the longest novel ever written. Source: <http://www.guinnessworldrecords.com/world-records/longest-novel>

5 Furthermore, accurate olfactory recognition of offspring as early as 10-60 minutes post-partum has been reported by 90% of the mothers. Offspring-odor discrimination percentage increases to 100% with women who had the chance to spend minimum one hour with their newborn. Similarly, tests conducted on three-day old neonates indicated the ability of infants to discriminate their mother by the unique odor of her breast. However, bottle fed infants of the same age appeared to be unable to identify the smell of their respective mother (Schaal, Porter 1991: 167-168).

6 For more see: Yong-ming Zou, Da Lu, Li-ping Liu, Hui-hong Zhang, and Yu-ying Zhou, “Olfactory Dysfunction in Alzheimer’s Disease”, in: *Neuropsychiatr Dis Treat.* 2016; 12:

- Physical presence of your romantic partner is not a necessary prerequisite in stress moderation. Sensing their smell significantly reduces the level of cortisol⁷.
- Humans can smell the fear or disgust felt by other humans⁸.

It comes as a surprise, then, that a commonly held belief that humans have a comparatively poor sense of smell has long informed the Western perspective on olfactory perception. What is more, despite the scientific advances and findings made in the field of human sensorium, this preconception has survived to the present day, continuing to mislead olfactory scientists as much as non-specialists (McGunn 2017). It is understandable, then, how Paul Broca, a prominent nineteenth century neuroanatomist and anthropologist, could have put forth the following hypothesis: the evolution of human free will required a reduction in the proportional size of the brain's olfactory bulb, for humans were no longer led by their sense of smell – the intellect took primacy (McGunn 2017). In the process of making room for the “enlightened intelligence”, the olfactory bulb, a primitive, subsidiary and subservient organ performing little more than the transmission of chemical stimuli, needed to atrophy. To put it differently: if cognitive evolution and rational emancipation were to take place, humankind needed to sacrifice those parts of the brain deemed significantly less important. According to Broca, that was exactly what happened to us. However, his theory is only a speck in the vast sea of similarly oriented discourses, all advertising the same worldview – that of simulacra. Olfactory, audio-visual, tactile, sensual, sexual, emotional, ontological simulacra.

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Contemplation, reflection, speculation, observation, words commonly used to denote intellectual activity, all stem from Latin roots referring to the act of seeing or looking. Equating the visual with the rational is an enduring practice that was carefully developed and dutifully exercised within the Western philosophical tradition. Often bearing the added religious connotation, the mentioned lexemes allude to the almost sacred union of human spirit, intellect, and eyes as a crucial prerequisite in any epistemological endeavor. When philosophers speak of the “natural light of the soul”, “eye of the soul”, “mind's eye”, or “light of reason”, when they devise lofty concepts such as

869–875., <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4841431/>, and: J. Alves, A. Petrosyan, R. Magalhaes, “Olfactory Dysfunction in Dementia”, in: *World J Clin Cases*, 2014 Nov 16; 2(11): 661–667., <<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4233420/>>

7 For more see: M. Hofera, H. Collinsa, A. Whillansa, F. Chen, “Olfactory Cues from Romantic Partners and Strangers Moderate Responses to Stress”, in: *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 114(1):1-9 · January 2018, <file:///C:/Users/Win10/Downloads/Olfactory%20Cues%20from%20Romantic%20Partners%20and%20Strangers%20Moderate%20Responses%20to%20Stress%20in%20Humans.pdf>

8 For more see: J. de Groot, M. Smeets, A. Kaldewaij, M. Duijndam, G. Semin, “Chemical signals Communicate Human Emotions”, in: *Psychological Science*, Vol. 23, issue 11, 1417-1424., <<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/0956797612445317>>, 19.01.2019.)

“Enlightenment”, they directly associate vision with humanity’s most noble pursuits thus reinforcing the staunchly ocularcentric position of Western metaphysical discourse. Consequently, by constructing an exclusively visual, or, to a degree, audio-visual model of perception, other senses are marginalized, or, dare we say, radically excluded and silenced.

Yet again, it comes in handy to blame the Greeks... And, indeed, it can be claimed that both Classical Greek metaphysics and aesthetics are deeply reliant on that which can be perceived by the eye or that which pleases it. According to Aristotle, the inherent human desire to obtain knowledge is indicated by the delight we take in our senses, primarily our sense of sight, which “makes us know and brings to light many differences between things” (Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, Book 1, Part 1). It would be a gross overstatement, however, to claim that the Ancients were completely unaware of the pleasing, even enchanting, effect scents might have had on human psyche. For example, by depicting Aphrodite and Eros as fragrant entities, the connection between love and smell is often highlighted. When contemplating the issue, Plato writes: “Love will not settle on body or soul or aught else that is flowerless or whose flower has faded away; while he has only to light on a plot of sweet blossoms and scents to settle there and stay” (Plato 1925: 155). Albeit pleasing, the “half-formed nature of smell” (Plato 1888: 243) prevented it from playing the pivotal role in human intellectual activities – sight, humanity’s greatest blessing and our direct connection with both immediate surroundings and celestial bodies, is inaugurated as an indispensable tool of human betterment:

“God discovered and bestowed sight upon us in order that we might observe the orbits of reason which are in heaven and make use of them for the revolutions of thought in our own souls, which are akin to them, the troubled to the serene; and that learning them and acquiring natural truth of reasoning we might imitate the divine movements that are ever unerring and bring into order those within us which are all astray. And of sound and hearing again the same account must be given: to the same ends and with the same intent they have been bestowed on us by the gods.” (Plato 1888: 163-165)

According to Plato, who immeasurably influenced the trajectory of Western thought by identifying the correlation of vision and philosophical contemplation in “Allegory of the Cave”, olfaction can be regarded as an auxiliary sense, even frivolous and trivial. What is more, he insists that no further classification of smells can be made since they fall under one of two categories: pleasant or unpleasant. They can either irritate the bodily cavities or soothe them (Plato 1888: 247). As simple as that. Being unambiguous, merely binary in nature, our sense of smell is insensitive to subtle nuances of meaning, unable to compute the complexities of the mind and spirit. Plato’s observation is telling of yet another problem that has plagued the Western understanding of smell: languages of “the civilized world” are notoriously ill-suited for reflecting the manifold nature of the olfactory universe. Namely, when it comes to linguistic signification of smells, European languages are limited to tropes – similes or metaphors: “it smells like...”, “floral scent”, “odor of burnt toast”,

etc. Approximations in any case... Few words we have are mostly “borrowed” terms, used primarily when talking of taste. On the opposite side of the spectrum, the olfactory semantic fields of many non-European languages, those of the so called primitive communities in particular, are extremely well-developed. For example, the language of Kapsiki tribe from Cameroon has separate lexemes to refer to the smell of animal and human faeces; the smell of edible, spoilt, or roasted food, or even a fleeting smell of any kind are a part of the Kapsiki olfactory vocabulary. In English, as in Serbian, the same lexeme is used to denote both the act of sensing and emitting smell: to smell / mirisati, whereas Quechua, ancient Incan language still spoken in the Andes, boasts a wide variety of words referencing the subtleties of the olfactory process: to smell a good odor, to smell an unpleasant odor, to secretly sniff something, or to have / let oneself be smelled, etc.⁹ (Classen, Howes, Synnott 2003: 111). One might claim that European cultures and those that have stemmed from them suffer from a functional olfactory illiteracy, which might have resulted from the systematic marginalization of olfactory perception perpetrated by the power/knowledge complex that has long insisted not only on the supremacy of reason, but also on the superiority of the European over non-European, or culture over nature.

The Enlightenment, the etymological origin of the term being more than evident, to use yet another visual metaphor, further stabilized the position of sight as a privileged sense due to its intimate connection with the rational structures. Understandably, Descartes, a progenitor of Enlightenment ideology notoriously distrustful of sensual perception in general, posits optics, a strictly visual inquiry into the nature of things seeable and thus knowable, as a critical epistemological instrument (Descartes 2001: 65). That which can be measured, carefully and precisely located within the spatial coordinate system, and hence scientifically quantifiable, can surely serve as a basis of stable ideology. If seeing is believing, than all the things unseen and unseeable should not be trusted. Consequently, what is unreliable is disposable. Or, to quote Kant:

“Which organic sense is the most ungrateful and also seems to be the most dispensable? The sense of smell. It does not pay to cultivate it or refine it at all in order to enjoy; for there are more disgusting objects than pleasant ones (especially in crowded places), and even when we come across something fragrant, the pleasure coming from the sense of smell is always fleeting and transient” (Kant 2006: 50-51).

Seemingly, Kant’s insistence on exclusively visual epistemology and aesthetics is lofty, abstract and politically neutral. Yet, his elitist squeamishness bears an implied ominous layer. It is highly symptomatic of the growing urge to sanitize and deodorize the society. The prevalence of “disgusting objects”, the stench permeating “especially crowded places”, must be carefully controlled if progress and intellectual emancipation is to be achieved. It appears that an additional semiotic layer was added to an already highly polysemic binary opposition vision – olfaction (intellect – instinct, rational – irrational,

9 For more see: Classen, Howes, Synnott 2003: 95-122

truthful – unreliable, permanent – ephemeral, culture – nature). Smell, even that of a human body, began being perceived as something impure, improper, corruptive, or even socially dangerous¹⁰: something that needed to be neutralized in order to ensure further evolution of the enlightened human spirit as the bearer of rationally grounded progress and beacon of free will. Later, Darwinism and Freudian psychoanalytical theory will build upon these foundations, solidifying the established sensual hierarchy and expanding the political horizon of the binary paradigm. Both Darwin and Freud propagated what is even nowadays regarded as a scientific fact, despite of the build-up of challenging evidence¹¹ – the atrophy of the olfactory sense is an evolutionary given that occurred upon humans assuming erect posture. The passage from *The Descent of Man, And Selection in Relation to Sex* addresses this shift:

“But the sense of smell is of extremely slight service, if any, even to savages, in whom it is generally more highly developed than in the civilized races. (...) Those who believe in the principle of gradual evolution will not readily admit that this sense in its present state was originally acquired by man, as he now exists. No doubt he inherits the power in an enfeebled and so far rudimentary condition, from some early progenitor, to whom it was highly serviceable and by whom it was continually used.” (Darwin 1981: 24)

In his vast body of work, Freud mentions this phenomenon fairly briefly, usually as a parenthetical remark or a footnote. Commenting on Wilhelm Stekel, one of his earliest followers and supporters, with whom, later, as things go, Freud had an altercation, he pointed out that Stekel’s psychoanalytical method had been “scientifically untrustworthy” stating:

“Stekel arrived at his interpretations of symbols by way of intuition, thanks to a peculiar gift for the direct understanding of them. But the existence of such a gift cannot be counted upon generally, its effectiveness is exempt from all criticism and consequently its findings have no claim to credibility. It is as though one sought to base the diagnosis of infectious diseases upon olfactory impressions received at the patient’s bedside – though there have undoubtedly been clinicians who could accomplish more than other people by means of the sense of smell (which is usually atrophied) and were really able to diagnose a case of enteric fever by smell” (Freud 2010: 364).

In a footnote to the fourth chapter of *Civilization and Its Discontents*, when discussing the changes in the periodicity of human sexual behavior brought about by evolution, Freud observes that the change

“seems most likely to be connected with the diminution of the olfactory stimuli by means of which the menstrual process produced an effect on human psyche. Their role was taken over by visual excitations, which, in contrast, to the intermittent olfactory stimuli, were able to maintain a permanent effect. (...) The diminution of the olfactory stimuli seems itself to be the consequence

10 On a side note: Spanish word *puta* and French *putain*, used to refer to a prostitute, are derived from Latin: *putrere* “to rot” *putris* “rotten, crumbling”, related to *putere* “to stink”. Etymological information: <https://www.etymonline.com/word/putrid>, 03.02.2019.

11 See: McGunn, “Poor Human Olfaction is a Nineteenth Century Myth”, referenced below.

of man's raising himself from the ground, of his assumption of an upright gait" (Freud 1962: 46).

Eventually, continuing the same argument, Freud would come to draw an analogy between the infancy of an individual and evolutionary infancy of the entire species. Changing attitude towards bodily functions, producing excrement, in particular, or "a reversal of values" became possible because these substances were "doomed by their strong smells to share the fate which overtook olfactory stimuli after man adopted the erect posture. Anal erotism, therefore, succumbs in the first instance to the organic repression which paved the way to civilization." (Freud 1962: 47)

According to Darwinism and Freudian psychoanalytical theory, the fateful evolutionary turn is, simultaneously, a birth place of civilization. Upright position brought about the change of perspective, so it only came as natural to abandon the "powers" our ancestors had relied on, but which no longer served us. An infant matures, so does humankind – logical and sound reasoning. However, one cannot help but sense that behind the guise of objective scientific discourse, hidden under the pretext of olfactory atrophy as an evolutionary fact, an agenda was being pushed. Firstly, when intuition is analogized to the sense of smell (both supposedly being ephemeral, mutable, unstable, malleable, and highly subjective), the rule of intellect becomes an absolute tyranny denying us the right to exercise other natural faculties, be them bodily or spiritual¹². What is more, a far more dangerous ideology is being engendered – that endorsing the supremacy of "the civilized" over "the savage", of those who base their reasoning on resources other than olfactory over those who not only sense smell but also emit it. Accordingly, metaphysical, epistemological and aesthetical, and more importantly political, social and ethical value and significance was denied to both our oldest sense and the innate olfactory properties of our physiology. The sanitized worldview aggressively advocated by philosophical, political and scientific Grand Narratives instructed humans to distrust smell, to fear it, and combat it by all means possible. By physically distancing ourselves from the Earth's surface, by exclusively relying on the visual

12 It would be wrong to conclude that the presented philosophical paradigm remained uncontested. Namely, a dissonant voice in this debate was that of Nietzsche, who argued that social mores taught humans to feel guilt and shame when sensing and taking heed to natural instincts and intuition (Nietzsche 2007: 56). He, also, famously exclaimed: "I was the first to discover the truth, in that I was the first to sense – smell – the lie as lie. My genius is in my nostrils" (Nietzsche 2004: 96). The birthplace of Nietzsche's epistemological metaphor lies in his revalorization of the binary opposition vision – olfaction: regarding the sense of smell as instinctive, profound, sensitive to the complexities and nuances of phenomena, not squeamish, permanent, and sight as superficial, selective, influenced by preconceptions, unreliable, treacherous. Nietzsche's speculative method was later adopted and further developed by Derrida, who also used an olfactory metaphor to describe his interpretative strategy. When discussing *supplement*, the textual not easily seen or heard, he suggests that the "text's constructive blindness" should be identified or detected via "smelling out", "sniffing out" – from French *flairer*: a) to use the nose in seeking or tracking prey, especially of dogs and other animals; and: b) to foresee something by relying on senses rather than reason (Derrida 1997). Interestingly enough, elsewhere, Derrida suggests that Freud had used his nose to "smell out" the origin of the law (Derrida 1992: 197).

perception, we erected insurmountable obstacles between “us” and “them”. The Other smells: animals, other races, menstruating or lactating women, proletariat, morally devious, the poor, the perverted, the sick, the insane... As one would suspect, their marginalization and exclusion went hand in hand with olfactory repression. Smell was never a merely chemical phenomenon – it is cultural, social, historical, and political. Reduced to a discursive function, an object of symbolical exchange, unstable and open to interpretation, caught up in fluctuations of meaning... The olfactory condition, or anamnesis, of the modern West is a product, a collateral damage even, of a complex ideological framework which has systematically, persistently, and uncompromisingly equated civilization with sterilization.

* * *

“The community has an almost antiseptic air. Levittown streets, which have such fanciful names as Satellite, Horizon, Haymaker, are bare and flat as hospital corridors. Like a hospital, Levittown has rules all its own. Fences are not allowed (though here and there a homeowner has broken the rule). The plot of grass around each house must be cut at least once a week; if not, Bill Levitt’s men mow the grass and send the bill. Wash cannot be hung out to dry on an ordinary clothesline; it must be arranged on rotary, removable drying racks and then not on weekends or holidays.”¹³

The passage above is an excerpt from a 1950 article published in *Time Magazine*, describing Levittown, the first housing development of its kind in the post-war United States. The utopian project of a middle-class suburban paradise seemed to have materialized on Long Island, as an ultimate testament to the American Dream, yet another in the long line of the “enlightened” ideologies. Still, its fenceless yards and carefully manicured lawns also bore witness to all the preceding Grand Narratives that had engendered it – Levittown USA appeared to have become a metaphorical, yet all too material confluence of various exclusion discourses promoting one thing: rational, relentless, and all-encompassing civilization. And so, within the heart of American suburbia, the next phase of the olfactory suppression was to take place. With the advent of late Capitalism and subsequent development of consumer society logics, which seemingly catered to suburban tastes and desires while, in fact, instigating and shaping them, the ideologically established paradigm of socially acceptable and desirable smells presented itself as the only viable option. Because antiseptic came to equal safe, disinfectants, deodorizers, and synthesized smells first obscured, than neutralized, and ultimately replaced the natural. The big business capitalized on this call to individual and societal sterilization that was to be conducted via the suppression of “bad” odors, simultaneously working hard to satisfy and further incite the growing demand for artificial fragrances. However, in contrast to systematic neglect and repression of the olfactory that characterized the ideological discourses of the past, consumer goods manufactures in cooperation with marketing agencies have

13 From an article: “Up from the Potato Fields”, *Time Magazine*; 7/3/1950, Vol. 56 Issue 1, p69.

recognized that smell plays a significant role in governing human behavior, or, more relevantly, spending habits¹⁴. Highly processed, canned or frozen, brightly packaged, bright-colored, tasteless and odorless food would sell better if artificial favoring was added. Instead of discussing the issue in depth and delving deeper into mass marketing strategies, we will just offer a disturbing, yet all too demonstrative example:

“Odors, in fact, are increasingly being promoted as behavior modifiers. In 1991 it was widely reported that researchers working for the British company Bodywise had discovered a scent that makes debt collection more efficient. It appears that persons who received bills treated with adrostenone, a substance found in men’s sweat, were 17 per cent more likely to pay up than those who received odor-free bills. Bodywise reportedly patented the odorant and was already offering it to debt collecting agencies for some 3,000 pounds sterling a gram.” (Classen, Howes, Synnott 2003: 196)

And now on to strawberries... Before we discuss how their smell became a powerful olfactory metaphor of the increasingly sterilized world, it is necessary to note that traditionally the fruit symbolized fecundity and vitality. In medieval Christian art, Virgin Mary was sometimes depicted clad in a gown embroidered with clusters of strawberries which is why the fruit came to be associated with purity, modesty and humility (Ferguson 1961: 38). Moreover, because of its tripartite leaves, the image of strawberries was used to communicate the Holy Trinity, and their intense red color blood spilled by Christ or the martyrs. Apart from the religious implications, the symbol also conveyed the meaning of female fertility: ripe strawberries were considered the sign of a young woman’s readiness for marriage and motherhood (Becker 2000: 248). Interestingly enough, another medieval work of art, a triptych by Hieronymus Bosch *The Garden of Earthly Delights*, offers a seemingly disparate semantic representation of the berry, namely that of lust and worldly desire. Allegorical perception of strawberries is highly potent and polysemic, denoting virginal purity and physical sensuality, spiritual virtue and vitality of the nature principle.

Evocative potential of olfactory stimuli, already discussed in the article, serves as a major trigger of memories supposedly lost yet undeniably formative. In the light of that hypothesis, it would be virtually impossible to write this paper without mentioning *Wild Strawberries*, Ingmar Bergman’s Proustian rumination on the importance of human communication, old age, introspective process and nature of reminiscence. Film’s title directly refers to a Swedish idiomatic expression “Smultronstället” or: “Var är ditt smultronställe?” (literal translation being: “Strawberry patch” or: “Where is your wild strawberry patch?”), denoting a physical or psychological space in which nostalgic evocation of private secrets or pleasant memories happens (Archer 1959: 44). Despite cinematographic language being primarily visual, Bergman finds a way to implicitly activate the olfactory potential of the fruit by juxtaposing a basket of berries, picked by a young, virginal woman as a birthday present for

14 2001 data: The American artificial odorant and flavor industry now has annual revenues of about \$1.4 billion (Schlosser 2005: 124).

an old, stone-deaf uncle, to drawings, poems or songs prepared by other family members, that is to say offerings meant to please senses other than olfactory. Featured not only in the mentioned film, but also in *The Seventh Seal*, wild strawberries are a powerful sign within Bergman's poetics, simultaneously functioning as an agent of memory stimulation and a vehicle for human kindness and innocence. A basket of freshly picked fruit, thus, becomes a bridge between the self and the other, a mediator in an unobstructed communication between ontological entities. At the same time, a strawberry field comes to signify an intersection of psychological and imaginative trajectories, an intimate olfactory and emotional landscape. For Bergman, just as it was for Proust or Bachelard, imagination creates memory, and memory exists only as imagination, their subtle and complex interplay unfolding in the realm of smell. If "even a slightest odor can create an entire environment in the world of imagination" (Bachelard 1994: 174), than olfaction transcends the chemical, physiological or, for that matter, psychological dimension: it is profoundly creative, even ontologically crucial.

Bergman filmed *Wild Strawberries* in 1950, Bachelard wrote *The Poetics of Space* in 1958, but what happened to the smell of strawberries in the meantime? Unsurprisingly, the shift in cultural paradigm brought about by the rapid expansion of global capitalism and consumerism caused a radical transformation and reevaluation of the aforementioned olfactory metaphor. Interestingly, in relevant scientific literature on artificial odors, examples concerning the flavoring agents and odorants simulating the smell of strawberries are astoundingly abundant. So, when in 1979 Ruth Rosenbaum wrote a paper titled "Today the Strawberry, Tomorrow...", she quoted a renowned flavorist who, commenting on the poetic aspects of his profession, directly compared his work to that of a composer (Rosenbaum 1979: 83). He went on to infer:

"In 20 years I'll bet that only 5 percent of people will have tasted fresh strawberry, so whether we like it or not, we people in the flavor industry will really be defining what the next generation thinks is strawberry. The same goes for other foods that will soon be out of the average consumer's reach." (Rosenbaum 1979: 90)

In the same vein, Eric Schlosser, an American journalist, in his telling expose on fast-food industry, noted:

"The smell of a strawberry arises from the interaction of at least 350 different chemicals that are present in minute amounts. The ubiquitous phrase *artificial strawberry flavor* gives little hint of the chemical wizardry and manufacturing skill that can make a highly processed food taste like a strawberry" (Schlosser 2005: 124)¹⁵.

15 Schlosser is quite detailed: "A typical artificial strawberry flavor, like the kind found in a Burger King strawberry milk shake, contains the following ingredients: amyl acetate, amyl butyrate, amyl valerate, anethol, anisyl formate, benzyl acetate, benzyl isobutyrate, butyric acid, cinnamyl isobutyrate, cinnamyl valerate, cognac essential oil, diacetyl, dipropyl ketone, ethyl acetate, ethyl amyl ketone, ethyl butyrate, ethyl cinnamate, ethyl heptanoate, ethyl heptylate, ethyl lactate, ethyl methylphenyl-glycidate, ethyl nitrate, ethyl propionate, ethyl valerate, heliotropin, hydroxyphenyl-2- butanone (10 percent solution in alcohol), α -ionone, isobutyl anthranilate, isobutyl butyrate, lemon essential oil, maltol,

The above is not merely a description of a technological process – it is a minute and sinister description of how synthetic signifiers came to obscure the death of the real. “Death made in laboratory, defined and measurable” (DeLillo 1986: 127). Something not even Descartes couldn’t have dreamed of... Synthetically recreating odors in laboratories, mass-producing them in chemical plants and, subsequently, reinventing them as a commodity can be interpreted as a process of radical symbolic transposition: smell becomes the ultimate non-referential structure. The building blocks of olfactory, or any other reality for that matter, are now being manufactured from “miniaturized cells, matrices, and memory banks, models of control (...), then reproduced an indefinite number of times from these” (Baudrillard 2006: 2). “Completely cataloged and analyzed, then artificially resurrected under the auspices of the real” (Baudrillard 2006: 8), reality is plunged into an “implosion of meaning – a birthplace of simulations that engender a total simulacrum: simulated spaces, temporalities, and identities” (Lojanica 2017: 74). What is at stake here is not merely our ability to sense smell or differentiate between natural and man-made odors. Being caught up in the precession of simulacra, the intimate relationship between olfaction, emotions, memory, imagination, and intuition is necessarily affected. The entire sensorial-psychological-ontological system is knocked off-kilter and threatened with disintegration, while the constituents, having lost their connection with one another, spiral into hyperreality.

One thing, however, did not change. Just like the subtle interplay of the olfactory perception and human psychological structures inspired artistic discourses of the past, so is the new generation of artists intrigued by the disappearance of natural odors from our lives. Contemporary American fiction is often criticized of becoming as antiseptic and deodorized as American society itself; if smell is present as a prolific literary sign, it consistently functions as race or ethnicity identity marker. Yet, on the other hand, it can be claimed that the works written since 1950 onwards do not only acknowledge the olfactory absence, or simulacrum for that matter, but they also examine it, either by criticizing or celebrating this novel civilizational condition. In a culture that has come to experience even the artificiality of death itself, literature cannot but become fascinated by sterilization – or, as the protagonist of DeLillo’s *White Noise* would notice: “They should carve an aerosole on my tombstone” (DeLillo 1986: 283). To further exemplify the phenomenon at hand, the paper will turn to *The Virgin Suicides*, a 1993 novel by Jeffrey Eugenides, set in an upper-middle class suburb, centering on the life and death of five adolescent sisters. In Eugenides’ Grosse Pointe, Michigan, girls smell of sugary candy and orange soda, jasmine soap and watermelon chewing gum, boys of cheap cologne and musk, housewives of hair spray, furniture polish and alcohol, cars of “Boots and Saddle” air freshener, and carpets of “pet deodorizer and,

4-methylacetophenone, methyl anthranilate, methyl benzoate, methyl cinnamate, methyl heptane carbonate, methyl naphthyl ketone, methyl salicylate, mint essential oil, neroli essential oil, nerolin, neryl isobutyrate, orris butter, phenethyl alcohol, rose, rum ether, γ -undecalactone, vanillin, and solvent.” (Schlosser 2005: 124-125)

deeper down, of pet” (Eugenides 2019¹⁶). Even libidinal urges and adolescent lust have an artificial aroma – interestingly enough, that of strawberries – the same, non-referential mass-produced scent that incites desire, stirs imagination, and informs memory¹⁷. However, this postmodern rendition of the symbol does not convey the semantic layer of spirituality and virginal purity – the two become odorless, suspended in plastic, epitomized by a laminated picture of the Virgin Mary carried by Cecilia, the youngest and the first of the sisters to commit suicide. Throughout the novel, the semblance of a near utopian wholesomeness is kept up by the profusion of artificial odors, which, at the same time, function as a symbolic veneer carefully crafted to obscure the underlying moral, emotional, societal and cultural decay. This narrative of hidden suburban tensions and anxieties, of memories preserved and repeatedly reconstructed, of unrequited love and unresolved trauma, is constructed around the central mystery concerning the unclear and undisclosed motives behind the suicides of the Lisbon girls, which shatter the delicate olfactory façade of civilization and prosperity into pieces, releasing an “airborne virus”, a “toxic smell” of death into the community. As sisters gradually descend into depression, as the repression of their burgeoning sexuality strengthens, the family house begins to disintegrate, reeking of “wet plaster, drains clogged with the endless tangle of the girls’ hair, mildewed cabinets, leaking pipes” (Eugenides 2019). Eventually, the neighbors start regarding the household as the radical Other, a dangerous, toxic particle, threatening to infect the entire suburb. So, after the last sister dies, after the house is sold to an unsuspecting young couple from Boston, in an attempt to quarantine death, the Lisbon house is sanitized, “transformed into a clean spacious area smelling of pine cleaner” (Eugenides 2019). However, the process of putrefaction, inherent and irreversible, cannot be contained, and, a year after the first suicide:

“A spill at the River Rouge Plant increased phosphates in the lake, producing a scum of algae so thick it clogged outboard engines. (...) The swamp smell that arose was outrageous amid the genteel mansions of the automotive families and the green elevated paddle tennis courts and the graduation parties held under illuminated tents. Debutantes cried over the misfortune of coming out in a season everyone would remember for its bad smell. The O’Connors, however, came up with the ingenious solution of making the theme of their daughter Alice’s debutante party “Asphyxiation.” Guests arrived in tuxedos and gas masks,

16 All quotations are from an online edition of the novel available at: <https://www.pdfdrive.com/the-virgin-suicides-d14980993.html>

17 “In fact, despite her convulsions (she was clutching her stomach), Lux had dared to put on a coat of the forbidden pink lipstick that tasted – so the boys on the roof told us – like strawberries. Woody Clabault’s sister had the same brand, and once, after we got into his parents’ liquor cabinet, we made him put on the lipstick and kiss each one of us so that we, too, would know what it tasted like. Beyond the flavor of the drinks we improvised that night – part ginger ale, part bourbon, part lime juice, part scotch – we could taste the strawberry wax on Woody Clabault’s lips, transforming them, before the artificial fireplace, into Lux’s own. Rock music blared from the tape player; we threw ourselves about in chairs, bodilessly floating to the couch from time to time to dip our heads into the strawberry vat, but the next day we refused to remember that any of this had happened, and even now it’s the first time we’ve spoken of it.” (Eugenides 2019)

evening gowns and astronaut helmets, and Mr. O'Connor himself wore a deep-sea diver's suit, opening the glass face mask to guzzle his bourbon and water. At the party's zenith, when Alice was rolled out in an artificial lung rented for the night from Henry Ford Hospital (Mr. O'Connor was on the board), the rotting smell pervading the air seemed only a crowning touch of festive atmosphere." (Eugenides 2019)

What seems as a gesture of ironic appropriation of toxicity, an enlightened acceptance of the true nature of suburbia, is, in fact, just a step further down the olfactory and ontological rabbit-hole. Stench can no longer be perceived as a warning sign, it cannot communicate the impending environmental catastrophe – perversely, it is turned into a cheap, albeit effective piece of pageantry. In the novel, like elsewhere in Western literary and theoretical discourse, smell, sharing the fate of all other signs, has become yet another empty signifier, floating aimlessly within the increasingly imploding network of hyperreality.

* * *

Having posited sense of smell within the broad framework of scientific, philosophical and literary Western thought, the paper attempted to reexamine the status of olfaction as a marginalized constituent of human anatomy, cognition, and ontology. While contemplating the issue, it soon became apparent that advocating the renewal of interest in our sense of smell is not that much different than seeking absolution for each and every banished and silenced structure of our being. The history of the West is an ever-evolving narrative on the clandestine and not-so-clandestine workings of the oppressive power/knowledge complex, and there will never be a shortage of the disenfranchised to champion. However, what makes our right to smell and be smelled particularly important to defend is the ever so intricate and delicate link between our olfactory perception and our ability to communicate, imagine, remember, feel – arguably the very things that make us human. For if, as Baudrillard proclaimed, the real is no longer possible, if the hyperreal is the current evolutionary stage of our civilization, our ontology will become reduced to a sum total of self-contained non-referential informational codes: genetic, chemical, biographical... This hyperreal evolutionary descent, or ascent, which ever phrasing one might prefer, might, on one hand, finally put an end to our profound fear of how the Other smells, for olfactory information would thus lose its political connotation, but, on the other, it might, once and for all, push the natural into the realm of the radical Other. Questions swarm: if Kant denied us the right to an aesthetics of smell, can we ever reclaim it, or should we abandon the idea altogether, transcend it and start developing the aesthetics of simulation; what will happen to our ability to process emotions or form memories in the age of olfactory simulacra; will human memory spiral into a never-ending succession of states resembling déjà vu lapses; or, if "reality" is caught in the loop of perpetually repeated synthetization, will memory itself become redundant; and: why don't our psychostabilizers smell; will they smell of strawberries in the future – will, eventually, everything start smelling of

strawberries; or, will we collectively succumb to aromaphobia, fearing smell as if it were a horseman of a toxic, chemically engineered apocalypse. Biologically speaking, there is nothing remarkable in the fact that all species transform their environment, which, consequently, provokes the change of the species itself. Now more than ever, humankind, as the most influential agent of ecological change, is inevitably and increasingly becoming susceptible to transformational force of its technological and ideological activity. At this point, it remains to be seen how our potential adaptation to the newly-created circumstances will play out. Still, instead of contemplating the possible outcome of our hyperreal evolution, a quite opposite option presents itself. After millennia of systematic neglect, maybe it is high time we took heed of the ever-increasing fissure between our physical and emotional life, between our rational and intuitive structures, and, ultimately, between ourselves and those around us. Developing a Poetics of Scents, an epistemology, and maybe phenomenology of olfaction, might be a step in that direction. But, to begin with, we might consider finally compiling an Olfactory Dictionary and The Inventory of Lost Smells.

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**СМРТ МИРИШЕ НА ЈАГОДЕ:
ОЛФАКТОРНИ СИМУЛАКРУМИ**

Резиме

Сагледавајући мирис и чуло мириса као културне, социјалне, историјске и политичке феномене, а у широком контексту западних научних, филозофских и књижевних дискурса, рад настоји да преиспита статус олфакције као магинализованог конституента људске анатомије, когниције и онтологије. Ослањајући се на хипотезу да је убрзани развој позног капитализма и логике потрошачког друштва додатно допринео даљој стерилизацији западне цивилизације, чуло мириса анализирамо у светлу Бодријарове теорије симулакрума, што нас је довело до закључка да је мирис задесила судбина осталих знакова: радикална симболичка транспозиција у хиперреално. Ово је нужно утицало на инхерентни однос олфакције, емоција, сећања, имагинације и интуиције. Поменути феномен рад испитује у контексту савремене америчке културе и литературе, с тим што је посебна пажња посвећена роману Џефрија Јудинидиса *Самоубиство девица*.

Кључне речи: чуло мириса, симулакруми, савремена америчка култура и литература

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