Appreciating Perfume in the Air and on the Body

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Abstract: This paper suggests philosophically-significant aspects of perfume, while putting aside the question of whether perfume is (an) art. I have two intertwined projects. First, to suggest areas of focus for perfume appreciation. I highlight perfume’s diverse manifestations on different bodies, the way a perfume unfolds over time, and the opportunities perfume appreciation presents us for cultivating our personal taste. Second, I argue perfume is a particularly efficient and valuable form of self-regarding aesthetic labor. Perfume directs our attention to our own bodies in ways that surprise and delight (as well as shock and appall); represents a component of self-presentation; and can be both highly private and quite public. An aesthetic approach to perfume fuses aesthetic appreciation for the perfume-itself (in as much as there is such a thing) with aesthetic appreciation for the bodies wearing that perfume.

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So, this paper suggests philosophically-significant aspects of perfume, while putting aside the question of whether perfume is (an) art. There is no shortage of writing on perfumes, but relatively little of it falls in philosophy. Olfactory experience is under-explored in philosophy; perhaps the general disinterest in perfume owes something to its treatment in the Republic, where a city’s taste for perfume may be a sign of an unjust society (372-373). Smell is often not
considered a mode of valuable aesthetic experience, often ranking at the bottom of “sense hierarchies,” (Shiner 2015, Korsmeyer 2004). This may also explain aesthetic disinterest in perfume. Finally, perfume is highly commercialized and often aligned with fashion, which probably also contributes to its philosophical neglect. Given that philosophical neglect, I’ll first introduce some terminology people use to talk about perfume and identify some ways my project connects to other philosophical projects. From there, I’ll move on to the novel contributions I’m here attempting.

1. Top Notes: Describing Perfume Experiences

The basic terminology and concepts people use to talk about perfume inflect appreciative practices, and will help give us an idea about the ways people approach perfume. I later suggest the existing conceptual vocabulary under-describes the actual appreciative practices around perfume, particularly its communal and body-centered nature, but it is nevertheless helpful to understand some of the terminology.

Perfume is a massive field, filled with categorical distinctions similar to literary genres. Perfumes may be categorized according to their scent features – chypre, floral, oriental – or their concentration of those scent features – parfum, eau de toilette – and their manufacturers – niche or mainstream. Like other genre distinctions, these only take us so far: conglomerates purchase independent producers, concentrations might not convey anything useful, the ingredients that give a perfume its scent features in 1925 might be banned or prohibitively expensive in 2019. Or, as with Miss Dior and Tabac Blond, a perfume might simply be reformulated out of recognition.

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1 See Hanson 1990 for a discussion of philosophical mistrust of fashion. See Freeland 2011 for a discussion of perfume advertisements.

2 These lists are inclusive, not exhaustive. A brief look around Fragrantica.com will readily demonstrate the diversity of the field.
In addition to the vocabulary for categorizing a perfume, there is a vocabulary for describing the experience of wearing it. “Sillage” describes the degree to which a perfume projects “off” the skin. Solid perfumes, for example, will tend to be “skin scents,” while an eau de parfum sprayed from the bottle should be perceptible to someone standing close. Some scents develop a reputation as “sillage monsters,” announcing their presence to anyone in the vicinity. Longevity, a more intuitive term, describes a scent’s staying power. A scent will not smell the same at hour eight as it did at minute two. Perfumers (“noses”) often structure a scent in three parts: top notes (more volatile aromachemicals, often with citrus scents); heart notes (more stable, lasting for perhaps a few hours); base notes (they stick around). The middle and end stages of a perfume are the most long-lived and, often, form the most distinct aspects of the perfume’s identity. These notes will change their perceptible qualities, and the aesthetic experience they provide, over the course of a day. Even “linear” scents, which purport to give one consistent smell experience, rather than following a triangular development, alter with time. As we will see, that we wear perfumes is vital to our aesthetic response to them, in part because the aesthetic qualities, and therefore the experience, shift with wearers, their environments, and the passage of time.

Treating perfumes as aesthetics objects and/or catalysts for a certain kind of aesthetic experience means engaging an ongoing philosophical project that looks at non-art-centered aesthetic experience – everyday aesthetics. Yuriko Saito identifies interaction with aesthetic objects as one of the hallmarks of everyday aesthetic activity. In an art-world context, appreciation requires separation between the aesthetic object and the audience, everyday aesthetic appreciation often requires interaction: wearing clothes, folding laundry, tasting food. Additionally, because perfumes are experienced through human bodies, investigating the
aesthetics of perfume will bring us to body aesthetics. Perfume appreciation not only directs attention to a perfume in its various manifestations, but to the people wearing perfume.

In section three I discuss wearing perfume as a kind of aesthetic labor: a practice of bodily care that is not simply utilitarian or health-oriented, but aims at aesthetic experience as well. Aesthetic labor can be other-regarding or self-regarding. For example, taking a bath might be self-regarding aesthetic labor, while wearing a uniform might be other-regarding.\(^3\) As the next section’s discussion of appreciative practices surrounding perfume help us establish, perfume, like many other practices of aesthetic labor, is not neatly self- or other-regarding; this ambiguity is, I argue, a partial motivator of its aesthetic and ethical interest.

2. Heart Notes: Time, Taste, and Specificity

Although my primary interest, as mentioned, is not in the “is it art?” question, other philosophers have attended to the question in ways that help me describe some nuances of perfume appreciation. In particular, Larry Shiner’s “Art Scents: Perfume, Design, and Olfactory Art” prepares the way for the question of interest to me: the scope and content of the appreciative practices around perfume. Shiner’s discussion raises the question of the identity of the aesthetic or appreciative object, including its formal and temporal structure. To defend the claim that perfumes do have formal and temporal structures, Shiner notes perfume’s overlap with musical compositions and design objects. Perfume is “an olfactory version of the type/token problem in the philosophy of music. Is the work of art the abstract ‘smell-structure’ (the score/formula’, the odorous substance (the tones/odour molecules), or the olfactory reception (the sonorous/smell experience?” (379) In design, this question occurs through prototypes – consumer goods: “the

\(^3\) For uniforms, see Sherman 2005.
sleek modernist chair that we admire in the Museum of Modern Art in New York or the Victoria and Albert in London is a token of the design created by Marcel Breuer, just as the vapour from a bottle of Trésor, that we test at a perfume counter is a token of the formula created by Sophia Grosjman” (380).

Reformulations and age complicate this question for perfumistas. Miss Dior has changed significantly from the time my mother first purchased a bottle as a teenager, and even Miss Dior Originale isn’t precisely faithful. Nor would a vintage bottle of Miss Dior be the perfume my mother smelled as a teenager. For many perfumistas, however, a vintage bottle that’s had some good luck might retain more of the aesthetic qualities they value than a bottle of Originale. Perfume’s smell-structure changes over time, sometimes with the aim of keeping the olfactory reception consistent, despite changes in the odorous substance – but often for pragmatic reasons. When the formula does remain constant, the odorous substance may change over time. Such change is often hypothetical or theoretical for other art forms (it usually doesn’t matter when a painting loses a few molecules of paint or when shades shift a bit over time), but can be quite profound in perfume.

Here, I want to direct our attention to the “smell experience,” which has its own complications. First, our smell experience of perfume unfolds over time, sometimes over many hours, and follows us into different places. Wearing perfume is an intimate, rich, and highly varied experience – it unfolds, often idiosyncratically, over time. Very often, the full experience of a perfume is available only to the person wearing it, and sometimes it is only over repeated applications – perhaps even over several years – that someone can “understand” a scent. A perfume like Zoologist Bat, smelling of fruit, dirt, and minerals, challenges and expands our judgments about what it is pleasant for a body to smell of. Perfume does not simply mask
“unpleasant” smells – that is, it does not simply disguise corporeality the way deodorant does. Indeed, Richard Shusterman (2012) argues that perfume does not function to disguise, since “the desired olfactory style means more than simply eliminating unpleasant bodily odors. A totally odorless body, if indeed possible, would be unattractively bland, antiseptically devoid of a character. A merely pleasant scent will also not suffice” (328). Sometimes, as with Papillon Perfumes *Salomé*, which has distinct notes of sweat and urine, perfume *highlights* the bodily scents deodorant covers up. Wearing perfume and cultivating a taste for it is like cultivating taste in music, literature, or food. As such, perfume and fragrance “is an assertion of one’s own taste and an appeal to be appreciated not just sensually but also cognitively for expressing one’s own singular taste in style” (Shusterman 2012, 328). Wearing Chanel No.5 today, with its sharp aldehydic opening, means something different than it meant in 1924, when the perfume was introduced, or in 1954.\(^4\) No. 5 is no longer edgy or surprising for its use of synthetic ingredients. Complex, on-going processes like reading novels aesthetically enrich our lives and play important roles in moral agency.

Cultivating a taste in perfume might encourage a kind of joy in and acceptance of our bodies’ complexity and interdependence. For example, in a community of fellow perfumistas, one becomes aware of the nuances and changes of a single scent. Zoologist *Beaver*, with a (synthetic) castoreum note, recently made the rounds amongst four of my perfume-interested friends. Natural castoreum is a secretion from beavers’ castor glands; it smells something like feces and something like phenol. The castoreum in *Beaver*, distinct from the other notes, smelled profoundly unpleasant on two of us, smelled *interesting* on a third, and was totally absent on a

\(^4\) We’ll put to the side issues of reformulation. It may well be that *No.5* is no longer the same thing as it was in 1924, but that’s an empirical or metaphysical question, and outside the scope of this paper.
fourth. Although the fecal note in Beaver was definitely unpleasant on two of us, it occurred simultaneously with a lovely watery linden blossom smell— the composition of the scent made the whiff of shit aesthetically rewarding. On the third wearer, the musk’s fecal and phenol notes balanced beautifully with the aquatic floral aspect.

Second, perfume interacts with the body and the environment to create something new and ephemeral. *Salomé*, for example, may be a sweaty dancer on one wearer and a grand dame on another. Understanding and seeking out these variations is a feature of perfume appreciation. While other aesthetic experiences, such as food or wine, may be prized for the hyper-specific and ephemeral features they provide that specificity is generally considered proper to the food or wine. But, this is not the case in perfume (for reasons we will discuss more in the next section). *Salomé* and *Beaver* smell different on different people for many reasons, but that difference tells us about the way different people wear *Salomé* or *Beaver*, not about different versions of *Salomé* or *Beaver*. It is aesthetically interesting to observe the different effects of a perfume interacting with bodily and other environmental variables.

In this section, I’ve offered two features of smell experience to which perfume appreciation attends: shifts over time and shifts with wearer or context. I have talked about these ways of appreciating perfume in their most “engaged” sense, but we can of course appreciate perfume passively, much as we can read a book (even a very good one) passively or drink a glass of wine (even a very good one) passively. I would maintain that these features of smell experience persist even in passive appreciation, though in attenuated form; I hope that the discussion in the next section, presenting perfume as an efficient and worthwhile form of aesthetic labor, suggests some reasons why.
3. Base Notes: Personal and Communal Perfume

When considered as aesthetic labor, we learn a few things about perfume. First, perfume experience toggles between private and communal. Both aspects matter, though the private aspect is more relevant to questions of aesthetic labor. Second, the communal mode of appreciation means the aesthetic object in perfume appreciation are not simply the smell experience provided by the perfumes themselves, but the bodies and character of the people wearing the perfumes.

Let me clarify what I mean by talking about aesthetic labor. The term generally refers to aesthetic activities that involve self-presentation and bodily care that extend beyond concerns of health or hygiene. For example, styling one’s hair is, for many of us, a form of aesthetic labor. Styling our hair makes us presentable to others and also indicates something about our social position: gender, class, ethnicity, sexual identity. It is also a form of self-expression. Identifying perfume application as a mode of aesthetic labor, rather than simply as an aesthetic experience, helps contextualize the way we experience and discuss perfumes. As noted, many perfumes use strikingly bodily (fecal, musky, urinous) scents, so perfume differs significantly from something like deodorant or antiperspirant. In the case of deodorants, bodily scents are erased; this is not the case with perfumes. Wearing perfume, then, is not necessarily a means of acceding to a culture with oppressive ideas about acceptable ways for the human body to smell (particularly women’s bodies). Perfume does not (necessarily) promote bodily shame. Further, in its intimacy, it frustrates ideas of aesthetic labor as conceding to the pleasures and tastes of other, more privileged groups of people. While certainly no more extricable from such dynamics than any other aesthetic practice, perfume offers as much opportunity for personal self-cultivation as
reading novels or listening to music. Alongside the communal aspects of perfume appreciation discussed in this paper, perfume is aesthetic labor for oneself. It aims

The process of trying, sharing, and comparing the scent with others emphasized the diversity of the perfume’s aesthetic effects. Additionally, it called our attention to features of our bodies that are often elided or treated as shameful, namely their fleshliness. Beaver’s castoreum note, with its more-than-a-whiff of shit, was of course partly responsible for the fleshly orientation. In addition, the act of passing a sample around, applying it, and noticing differences, played a role. We applied Beaver from a spray sample, but dabber samples, requiring skin contact, would have emphasized fleshliness even more. Even the spray sample, which leaves scent molecules in the air as well as on the skin, requires contact: smelling something means it is in contact with you, however attenuated. Smelling someone else’s perfume, while they wear it, is also a reminder of their bodily presence. Unless they are a very inconsiderate perfume-wearer, or they are wearing a “sillage monster,” smelling someone else’s perfume requires proximity. Additionally, people generally apply perfume at pulse points, where blood is close to the skin, so a purposeful investigation of someone else’s scent might mimic gestures that generally only occur in erotic contexts, such as sniffing wrists and necks. Finally, in addition to emphasizing a perfume’s diverse facets, smelling it on other people can remind us of human diversity. Even if a scent smells similar on two bodies, it might not suit them equally. Shusterman, linking perfume with style, suggests “the style expressed is more than a mere superficial matter of surface body scent or olfactory connoisseurship, but also an expression of one’s deeper character or ethical style” (Shusterman 2012, 328).

These experiences of wearing perfume cut against the anti-aesthetic labor view in two cases. In cases of largely self-directed labor, such as wearing perfume to work, perfume can
contribute to our flourishing by enriching our day to day aesthetic experience, providing an outlet for the development of personal taste and a pleasurable experience of everyday embodiment. In cases of inter-relational and collaborative aesthetic labor, wearing and appreciating perfume with other people builds personal relationships, puts individual bodily features in context, and adds depth to one’s understanding of a perfume’s aesthetic effects. Sampling perfume in a group is analogous to other collective aesthetic experiences, where aesthetic appreciation takes place in relation with others. Complex, on-going processes like reading novels aesthetically enrich our lives and play important roles in moral agency. Perfume differs from a seminar or concert, however, because it directs aesthetic attention to the appreciators, who are here participants as well as audience members, as well as to an aesthetic “object.” Though when we discuss artworks with others we may learn as much about others as we do about the works, the works do not themselves direct us (generally) to consider our fellow appreciators. Perfume quite often does.

4. Drydown: Conclusions and Next Steps
I’ve argued here that perfume appreciation tracks the evolution of smell experiences associated with perfumes over time and in different contexts; this interest in a perfume’s evolution is not a tangential aspect of perfume appreciation, but a key component. Additionally, I’ve argued that this appreciation directs our attention to human bodies as olfactory aesthetic objects, and that this olfactory appreciation challenges negative scripts about human bodies, as well as offering a complex notion of what perfume appreciation entails.

There are a few questions I’d like to consider further. For one, perfume appreciation may offer another parallel with gustatory taste, in that it is easy to get carried away with the pleasure
of perfume and cause others pain. What does it mean to be a considerate perfume wearer? And what aesthetic insights are lost or gained through consideration? Another question relates to the use of perfume in non-bodily contexts. Is there anything interestingly different about *Mitsouko* on Diaghilev’s curtains and on my wrist? Third, what other aesthetic experiences invite our attention to our fellow appreciators in ways that enrich our appreciation for them as well as for the focal point of our experience? Finally, how does taste in perfume differ from or align with taste in other aesthetic contexts? What role do subjectivity and personality play, and do those roles differ from perfume, to literature, to furniture?
Bibliography


