

# *Anosmic Aesthetics*

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ABSTRACT. Anosmia is a sensory disability that consists of the inability to perceive odors. The sense of smell can be lost at any time during life, but people suffering from congenital anosmia, as I do, have never had any experience of smelling. My question is whether such an impairment of olfaction impoverishes aesthetic appreciation or makes it different in any way. I hypothesize that congenital anosmia entails two different kinds of loss in aesthetic appreciation. In order to test my hypothesis, I address aesthetic theory. First, I look back at modern aesthetics, and second, I focus on contemporary aesthetics. Finally, I claim that congenital anosmia constitutes an impoverishment, but also ask whether it can be compensated for by dialogue and imagination. I further inquire as to whether it can foster a more self-critical aesthetic appreciation, more conscious of the powers and limits of our senses.

## ***1. Congenital Anosmia and Aesthetic Appreciation***

Does congenital anosmia have any kind of influence on aesthetic appreciation? Anosmia is a sensory disability that consists of the inability to perceive odors, and it is estimated that some 2% of the population suffer from it. The sense of smell can be lost at any time during life due to a wide variety of causes, but people suffering from congenital anosmia, as I do, were born without the ability to smell, and therefore we have never had any experience of smelling. My question then is whether such an impairment of olfaction impoverishes aesthetic appreciation or makes it different in any way.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> There are not many studies of how sensory disabilities influence aesthetic appreciation, but a very good exception is Feeney, David, 2007. *Towards an Aesthetics of Blindness*. New York: Peter Lang Publishing.

My first attempt to answer this question is based on my personal experience. I have taken the case of aesthetic appreciation of natural environments, which is a multisensory appreciation, and have compared my appreciation of some particular environments with the appreciation of people who can smell and have described to me their experiences of these same places. I will begin by presenting two cases that I think can be considered paradigmatic.

In the first case, some friends and I went on an excursion, and spent some hours walking across hills covered in oaks and pines. In the afternoon, when we were in the middle of a pine forest, my friends suddenly said that we were getting near the sea. I stopped and looked around, but neither sight nor sound allowed me to perceive this proximity. To me, the place looked just like the other places we had been to in the morning: I was still seeing the same familiar landscape. However, for my friends it was a very different place. They saw the forest, as I did, but they could also perceive the sea a few kilometers away, and this perception changed their comprehension of the entire environment. The smell had enlarged their horizon and gave them a new orientation: it instilled in them a desire to keep heading towards the beach. The contrast between what they could see and what they could smell made it a more interesting place, because we were in the middle of a forest, but with the promise of the sea. That contrast made the forest more suggestive: for them, it was more beautiful than for me.

In the second case, my friends and I were walking in an oak forest near Barcelona, one bright spring morning. We were in a very beautiful place when my friends began to gesture and express their displeasure. We soon found the cause: a dead fox decomposing near the path. It was half eaten and covered in maggots. It made me feel sad, because death always reminds us of the brevity of life, and it provoked in me a melancholy mood. But my friends said that they were experiencing the most horrible odor that exists: the stink of decomposing rotting flesh. They complained that it was so unpleasant that they could hardly breathe. The smell made them feel sick and it also provoked some kind of experience of fear in them. They left the place covering their noses. For them, the whole of the surroundings were impregnated with something that was worse than ugly, it produced unpleasant bodily sensations in them. For me, the dead fox was

sad, but not unpleasant, and it did not spoil the beauty of the place.

I mention only two examples here, but in different situations I have observed the same pattern, which I think I can generalize. What I have observed is that in the aesthetic appreciation of a natural environment, the inability to perceive odors entails two different kinds of loss. On the one hand, it implies an impossibility to receive a certain quantity of information, which can be a great deal. On the other hand, it involves a qualitative loss: the anosmic person cannot experience the environment from the perspective of olfaction, which is very different from the perspective that the senses of sight, hearing, taste or touch can offer. The first loss can be compensated by the words of other people who can transmit the same information; so, I can *be informed* that the sea is near. The second loss, however, is irreparable: I cannot breathe and *perceive* the sea kilometers away; I cannot *feel* bad in the presence of a dead animal decomposing. And the attempts of my friends to describe these experiences are always in vain: smell seems to escape any intent to capture it in words.<sup>2</sup>

My hypothesis is that these two losses do impoverish the aesthetic appreciation that anosmic people can have and in some cases make that appreciation very different. This can even lead us anosmics to appreciate something as beautiful which for other people just is not (a pile of dung in the sunshine; a skunk secreting its scent) or to conceive as boring something that is beautiful for other people (aromatic herbs). That is, in some cases, anosmia can actually invert aesthetic judgment.

My hypothesis, then, is that we anosmics can never fully enjoy a forest or any natural environment as people with a sense of smell can. We can contemplate the landscape and listen to the soundscape, we can touch and taste, but the *smellscape* is out of reach. As a consequence, the world is *not so beautiful* for us, and also *not so ugly*. The world, aesthetically speaking, is *less* for us, because we have no access to its *olfactory dimension*.

But, is my hypothesis right?

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<sup>2</sup> On the difficulty of describing smells, see the first pages of Teixeira, Miguel A., Rodríguez, Oscar, and Rodrigues Alírio E., 2010. Perfumery Radar: A Predictive Tool for Perfume Family Classification. *Industrial and Engineering Chemistry Research*, 49, pp. 11764-11765. I am grateful to David Casacuberta for bringing this article to my attention.

## **2. Modern Aesthetics and Voluntary Anosmia**

In order to test my hypothesis, I now consider aesthetic theory and look back at the great foundational theories of the 18th and 19th centuries. What I find is the thesis that aesthetic appreciation can only be exercised through the senses of sight and hearing, and not through smell, taste or touch. That is, it seems that my hypothesis should be wrong.

According to modern aesthetics, the senses of sight and hearing are bound to knowledge, communication and imagination. They are the senses of intellectual life: they are our windows on the world; they make science possible; and they also allow us to have an aesthetic appreciation of nature and art. Therefore, traditionally, works of art were created to be seen and to be heard. In contrast, smell, taste and touch are not contemplated as having such a link with knowledge, communication or imagination. They are the senses of biological life: tied too closely to bodily functions and to our organic matter. Instead of opening us to knowledge of the world, they close us into our subjective sensations. And they are not able to recognize and enjoy beauty.

According to this view, smell does not have any influence on the aesthetic appreciation of a natural environment. Therefore, in the examples I explained above, my aesthetic appreciation could not have been poorer: I did not miss anything. In the same way, according to this conception, it is not possible to aesthetically appreciate an odor in itself, be that a natural aroma such as lavender or a manufactured perfume like Chanel N° 5. Neither is it possible to create works of art for the olfactory sense or for a multisensory experience including olfaction.

In modern aesthetics, we find a number of reasons that justify the notion that an odor cannot be aesthetically appreciated, reasons that can be summarized in four different arguments.

The first and most important argument maintains that smells cannot be aesthetically appreciated because they cannot be contemplated in a disinterested way. Kant gives this argument an important place in his *Critique of the Power of Judgment*<sup>3</sup>, and Hegel develops it further in his *Aesthetics*:

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<sup>3</sup> Kant. *Critique of the Power of Judgment*. Paul Guyer ed., Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews trans. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000, § 5, 8.

*Lectures on Fine Art*<sup>4</sup>. As is well known, Kant defines beauty by differentiating it from what is merely agreeable. The agreeable awakes our desire to consume the object, and therefore maintains us in what Kant calls an interested relationship with the object. The food or wine that we consume is agreeable. Beauty, in contrast, is contemplated in a disinterested way, with our bodily desires removed; we do not desire to consume beauty, we only aspire to contemplate it.

We share the pleasure derived from the agreeable with animals, but beauty can only be appreciated by human beings. The distinction between what is merely agreeable and beauty reflects the distinction between biological and intellectual life. Therefore, to admire the beauty of nature or art is to free ourselves from our animal part and to raise ourselves to intellectual life.

Kant maintains that smell belongs to the realm of the agreeable, which means that it is impossible to contemplate a smell in a disinterested and serene way, because when a person perceives an odor, she cannot remove the desires it provokes. If the smell is pleasant, it awakes hunger, thirst or sexual desire. If the smell is unpleasant, it annoys and provokes a desire to escape its effects. The sense of olfaction is too bodily, too biological, to allow aesthetic appreciation. Consequently, we can say that the smell of a rose is agreeable, but we cannot say that the smell of a rose is beautiful. We can contemplate the beauty of a rose through the sense of sight, but not through the sense of smell.

Kant offers another, very similar idea: smell does not provide objective information about the exterior world, but encloses us in our own subjective sensations, which are very difficult to communicate to others. Thus, in section 39, “On the communicability of a sensation”, Kant claims:

To someone who lacks the sense of smell, this kind of sensation cannot be communicated; and, even if he does not lack this sense, one still cannot be sure that he has exactly the same sensation from a flower that we have from it.<sup>5</sup>

These two ideas together have a very important consequence for Kant.

<sup>4</sup> Hegel. *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*. T. M. Knox, trans. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988, vol. I, pp. 32-41.

<sup>5</sup> Kant. *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, p. 171.

What is agreeable, a glass of wine, is agreeable for me, but I cannot expect others to agree with me. In contrast, when I affirm that a rose is beautiful, when I make such a judgment of taste, I am committed to the view that everyone else ought to agree with me. The judgment of taste aspires to communicability and universal agreement. Beauty is contemplated in a disinterested way and by means of the objective senses of sight and hearing and precisely because of this, it should be appreciated by everyone. We claimed above that beauty frees us from desire, from our biological part, and we can now claim that beauty also frees us from our pure subjectivity, from solipsism, because it raises us to the level of universality, of what we can share with others.

Meanwhile, the pleasures that smell can provoke cannot be seen as sharing in this potential elevation to universality. The same smell can please some people and be annoying to other people: we cannot expect agreement.<sup>6</sup>

The second argument that Kant offers us is that what we appreciate aesthetically in an object is its form: the formal pattern that structures the different elements of the object and creates between them relations of symmetry, balance, contrast, rhythm or progression that sight and hearing can discriminate. Kant affirms that, in the case of the visual arts—in painting, sculpture, architecture and gardening—what is essential is the drawing: the form. He makes it explicit that color is not essential, and he does not even mention smell, which could be considered an element at least in the case of gardens. Color is not essential because it cannot be analyzed in terms of form. Like color, smell seems to lack a form that could be discriminated, because it is diffuse and without structure. If we accept this argument, then we have to admit that it is not possible to aesthetically contemplate natural aromas, and that it would be even less possible to create works of art with odors, because it is not possible to construct out of smells the formal patterns of symmetry, balance, contrast or progression, that constitute a picture or a symphony.<sup>7</sup>

Kant gives us a third argument: smell does not respect the distance between the contemplated object and the subject who contemplates it,

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<sup>6</sup> Kant. *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, § 32.

<sup>7</sup> Kant. *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, § 10-15.

because an odor lacks boundaries that contain it. The subject who aims to perceive an odor finds that she is intimately involved, surrounded by the smell she wanted to admire, and this can be very unpleasant. Furthermore, if the smell impregnates her clothes and skin and hair, and if she is obliged to carry it around, then it can be experienced as something contaminating.

Even worse is the case of a smell that is imposed on a subject who had not decided to contemplate it. Kant criticizes people who, in order to enjoy their scented handkerchief, take it out from their pocket in public. Other people are forced to perceive it only in the mere act of breathing. For Kant, who also found it unpleasant that neighbors played music, this was especially annoying. It limits the freedom that Kant is searching for in the realm of aesthetics.<sup>8</sup>

Hegel adds a fourth argument: a smell does not remain stable so that a person can contemplate it, but it is always undergoing some process; it changes with every moment and in the end, vanishes. If we take this argument and develop it further, we can add that this feature of smell has to do with the fact that it is not autonomous of its environment, but interacts with every other smell and mixes with them all. As professional perfumers know very well, the same scent smells different on the skin of different people, or indeed in different places and it changes with the passage of time. The ephemeral character of a smell supposedly prevents people from contemplating it, because it escapes all their attempts to fix their attention on it. It is totally different from contemplating a picture or a sculpture which remains stable in front of us, and which we can visit again whenever we want. It is true that music, dance and performances are also ephemeral; but there can always be another performance and technology has made it possible to record them, something that we are not able (at least for the moment) to do with smells.<sup>9</sup>

If we summarize all these arguments, we can see that for modern aesthetics, smell does not meet the conditions that are necessary for it to be an object of aesthetic appreciation. This has three different consequences:

*First:* it is not possible to aesthetically appreciate an odor in itself.

<sup>8</sup> Kant. *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, § 53.

<sup>9</sup> Hegel. *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, vol. II, p. 622.

*Second:* smell has no influence on the aesthetic appreciation of natural environments.

*Third:* it is not possible to create works of art for the sense of olfaction. Kant claims explicitly that gardens, which he considers to be art, are made only to be seen. He adds that they are not made to be touched, and he does not even mention smell.<sup>10</sup>

Therefore, according to modern aesthetics, people suffering from congenital anosmia do not have a poorer or reduced aesthetic appreciation, because the sense of olfaction plays no role in aesthetics. Olfaction is something you leave behind when you raise yourself up to aesthetic appreciation. Perhaps to be anosmic only makes it easier to have an aesthetic experience, because anosmic people do not need to dominate and subjugate their sense of smell. It should be easier for them to move beyond biological life to intellectual life. Perhaps, in relation to aesthetics, anosmia is not a disability, but a gift. In this sense, we could even claim that modern aesthetics preferred to be anosmic. Modern aesthetics assumed a *voluntary anosmia*.

### **3. *Discovering Smell in Contemporary Aesthetics***

If this was all that aesthetics had to say, I confess I would feel very disappointed. However, fortunately, over the last few decades, some things have begun to change, and smell is now claiming its place in the realm of aesthetics, in three different ways.

In the first place, aesthetics, which throughout the 19th century and for most of the 20th century had been reduced to philosophy of art, has recovered its original ambition; it has been expanded to include more issues, and has fostered disciplines such as the aesthetics of nature and everyday aesthetics. In both these disciplines people have begun to argue that smell plays a specific role in aesthetics.

In the aesthetics of nature, several authors such as Ronald Hepburn, Allen Carlson, Arnold Berleant and Emily Brady, have condemned the model of aesthetic appreciation of nature that was created in the 18th

<sup>10</sup> Kant. *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, § 51.

century and is still centered exclusively on the sense of sight. They maintain that this primacy of sight, together with the concept of a distanced, detached contemplation, reduced the appreciation of multisensory and three-dimensional environments to the appreciation of images. Environments were seen as mere landscape paintings, or today, as mere postcards. In order to develop a more appropriate model for the aesthetic appreciation of natural environments, all these authors claim that our appreciation must be more bodily engaged and it should include all our senses.

Carlson says:

Aesthetic appreciation of the natural environment is not simply a matter of looking at objects or 'views' from a specific point. Rather, it is being 'in the midst' of them, moving in regard to them, looking at them from any and every point and distance and, of course, not only looking, but also smelling, hearing, touching, feeling. It is being in the environment, being a part of the environment, and reacting to it as a part of it. It is such active, involved aesthetic appreciation, rather than the formal mode of appreciation nurtured by the scenery cult and encouraged by photographs, that is appropriate to the natural environment.<sup>11</sup>

Such authors defend the special role of smell and argue that it not only provides important information about the environment, but also contributes to generating the sensation of an environment, of being surrounded and involved, that forms an essential part of an appropriate aesthetic appreciation of nature.

Meanwhile, in the field of everyday aesthetics, authors such as Yuriko Saito have defended the importance of smell: odors of people, of food, of the home, belong to the aesthetic appreciation of everyday life. Saito holds that smell contributes to creating ambiances, to generating the sense of place. She asks:

How many of us have experienced going to New York City and absorbed its 'sense of place' by walking on the street, which sometimes vibrates under our feet with the subway passage, noisy with honking

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<sup>11</sup> Carlson, Allen, 2000. *Aesthetics and the Environment: The Appreciation of Nature, Art and Architecture*. London: Routledge, p. 35.

taxis, surrounded by skyscrapers, with aroma of burned chestnut and pretzels and the saxophone melody by a street musician wafting in the air? These ingredients together give rise to the atmosphere of vibrancy and zaniness.<sup>12</sup>

Olfaction can also play a special role in everyday life through the way in which it can enlarge the temporal and spatial frames. It can anticipate some events, for example, when a person smells the food that is being prepared before entering home. Or it can vividly evoke events from the past, as when a person visits the home of their grandparents, and the smell awakens childhood memories. Odors are sometimes ambassadors from other times and places. With this capacity, smell enriches aesthetic appreciation because it enlarges its temporal and spatial dimensions.

Richard Shusterman has claimed that odor is also important in defining what he calls *somatic style*: the way our body expresses our personality. Although somatic style is preeminently visual, senses other than sight also have roles to play, and Shusterman maintains that our personal odor embodies our spirit. He distinguishes between unintentionally exhaled odors—like the different smells produced by different diets—and the effort we can invest in self-styling our odor with artificial perfumes. Both are perceived by other people (those who can smell, that is) and influence the aesthetic appreciation that people have of each other. He says:

One's choice of fragrance is not simply a choice to attract others by satisfying their tastes. Like clothes fashion, it is an assertion of one's own taste and an appeal to be appreciated not just sensually but also cognitively for having and expressing one's singular taste in style. This is one reason why the most successful clothes designers are also perfume designers. Moreover, 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.<sup>13</sup>

The second way in which smell is claiming a place in aesthetics is through art. Since the 70's, artists have begun to create works of art which include

<sup>12</sup> Saito, Yuriko, 2007. *Everyday Aesthetics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 123.

<sup>13</sup> Shusterman, Richard, 2011. Somatic Style. *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 69:2, pp. 153.

smells, or even which consist only of smells. The aim of bringing art nearer to life, of offering a more bodily, more physical experience, of exploring new materials and conditions of perception, is attracting some artists to these new art forms.<sup>14</sup>

In the spring of 2009, the Mies van der Rohe Pavilion in Barcelona exhibited an artwork by Antoni Muntadas. The exhibition space was almost empty, but according to visitors, it smelled like a closed room full of musty papers, ink, dust and humidity. This artificial smell was created by Ernesto Ventós, a professional perfumer who is also an artist and an art collector.<sup>15</sup> The work was called *On Translation: Paper BP/MVDR*, and it was a reflection on the passage of time and our attempts to save memories thanks to the papers we accumulate in archives. The work was also a reflection on the history of the building, the Mies van der Rohe Pavilion; the original was dismantled in 1930, but the memory of it was saved for decades in documents and plans kept in an archive, until it was reconstructed in 1986. Considering that smell is the sense most intimately related to memory, it was very suggestive to create a smell that evoked an archive: a place created to help save the past.

In the autumn of 2010, in La Capella, also in Barcelona, the work by Marc Serra called *Inexplicable Odeur* was exhibited. Visually, it consisted of some elegant flowerpots containing beautiful plants distributed around the space. However, as visitors got up close and could smell them, they discovered that, thanks to small bottles of scent hidden in the flowerpots, the plants smelled like unpleasant urban odors. The contrast between the vision of the beautiful plants and the smell of annoying odors that had nothing to do with the plants, was an attempt to focus attention to the neglected olfactory sense and to foster discussion about the bad smells in our cities.<sup>16</sup>

These two works, the first more austere, emotive and poetic, the sec-

<sup>14</sup> For an analysis of the potentialities of smell for art, see: Drobnick, Jim, 1998. *Reveries, Assaults and Evaporating Presences: Olfactory Dimensions in Contemporary Art. Parachute* 89, pp. 10-19.

<sup>15</sup> His own artistic creations, which are a reflection on the nose and the sense of olfaction, can be visited at this web site: [www.nasevo.com](http://www.nasevo.com); and his collection of art related to smell, here: [www.olorvisual.com](http://www.olorvisual.com).

<sup>16</sup> The web page is at: [www.inexplicableodeur.com](http://www.inexplicableodeur.com)

ond more ironic and critical, are two examples of intelligent and suggestive works of art that have been created for the sense of smell. It can be affirmed that these works provoke an aesthetic experience in people who can smell them, that they communicate ideas, and arouse emotions and imagination. They can even stimulate the imagination of people who cannot smell them.

Smell is also claiming its place in aesthetics in a third and different way. In recent decades we have witnessed a heated discussion about the boundary that has traditionally separated art from other disciplines that had artistic features but were dismissed as mere crafts. Some of them, perfumery, gardening, cooking and oenology, are clear examples of disciplines that are creative, provoke aesthetic experiences, arouse emotions, communicate ideas and generate criticism, but were not accepted as art, or were seen only, as Hegel says of gardening, as imperfect arts. Nevertheless, nowadays debate flourishes in the fields of philosophy and contemporary art concerning whether perfumery, gardening, cooking and oenology deserve to be considered arts. In all four cases we have works that are created, to a great extent, to be appreciated with the nose. Therefore, in all these disciplines a defense of aesthetic appreciation of odors is being developed. They emphasize some of the specific features of smell, such as its ephemeral nature or its enveloping effect, as positive values.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>17</sup> Garden as art is defended in depth in Miller, Mara, 1993. *The Garden as an Art*. New York: State University of New York Press, and in Ross, Stephanie, 1998. *What Gardens Mean*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press. Also very interesting is: Cooper, David E., 2006. *A Philosophy of Gardens*. Oxford: Clarendon Press; although this is not a discussion about the question of whether gardens are art, it is a very suggestive inquiry into aesthetic appreciation and other kinds of experiences we enjoy in gardens.

On the defense of perfumery as an art, I highly recommend: Shiner, Larry and Kristovets, Yulia, 2007. The Aesthetics of Smelly Art. *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 65:3, pp. 273-286.

Relating to the question of food as art, see: Monroe, Dave, 2007. Can Food Be Art? The Problem of Consumption. In: *Food and Philosophy*. Fritz Allhof and Dave Monroe, eds. Malden: Blackwell, pp. 133-143. An important moment in the contemporary art debate was the invitation to the cook Ferran Adrià to participate in *documenta 12* in 2007, which generated a great controversy. About this discussion see: Todolí, Vicente and Hamilton, Richard, 2009. *Food for Thought. Thought for Food: A Reflection on the Creative Universe of Ferran Adrià – A Reflection on the Worlds of Avant-Garde Cooking and Art*. Actar. For a broader discussion about food, a very useful analysis of the sense of taste and the

The intense defense of smell in these three different ways, has brought several authors to revise the old arguments by Kant and Hegel which justified the neglect of olfaction. The new answers to these old arguments are deeply insightful.

With regards to the argument of disinterestedness, the general answer is that it is possible to learn to appreciate an odor in a disinterested way. Professional perfumers or oenologists spend time every day aesthetically appreciating odors. They do not do this from any desire to consume the object they are smelling, but in an aesthetic way. Emily Brady says:

The aroma of a ripe stilton cheese can be appreciated without wishing to consume it (or in the moments before we do in fact consume it in order to satisfy hunger). The same is true in the most sophisticated kinds of olfactory and gustatory appreciation, like wine-tasting, where only a sip of wine is savored.<sup>18</sup>

Larry Shiner and Yulia Kristovets draw the following conclusion:

The older objection that odors do not merit our attention because they supposedly appeal primarily to our ‘animal’ nature seems to have been based in idealist or moralist prejudice.<sup>19</sup>

With respect to the argument of form, in contrast, the answers diverge in two opposite directions. Some authors, such as Frank Sibley and Emily Brady, maintain that many odors, and especially perfumes, consist of several components that have relations of balance, harmony or contrast between them. Furthermore, professional perfumers, such as Jimmy Boyd, claim that perfumes have complex structures, which can be designed to

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aesthetics of food (although not considered as art) can be found in: Korsmeyer, Carolyn, 1999. *Making Sense of Taste: Food and Philosophy*. Cornell University Press.

A diversity of questions in relation to wine and aesthetics are addressed in Smith, Barry C. ed. 2007. *Questions of Taste: The Philosophy of Wine*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, and in Todd, Cain, 2011. *The Philosophy of Wine*. McGill Queens University Press.

<sup>18</sup> Brady, Emily, 2011. Smells, Tastes and Everyday Aesthetics. In: *Food and Philosophy*. Kaplan, D. ed. Berkeley: University of California Press, p. 9.

<sup>19</sup> Shiner, Larry and Kristovets, Yulia, “The Aesthetics of Smelly Art, p. 275.

develop with the passage of time.<sup>20</sup> In this vein, Larry Shiner and Yulia Kristovets affirm:

The lack of complexity and structure objection probably gets its initial plausibility from the little training most of us have had in distinguishing and analyzing odors. First-year students studying to be perfumers, for example, must work hard to learn to distinguish and name over one hundred and sixty different odors before going on to learn the analysis of structure.<sup>21</sup>

However, we can also answer the old argument by moving in the opposite direction. Even if smell does not have a formal pattern, that does not prevent people from appreciating it aesthetically, because, in recent decades, the art world has accepted many works that do not have a form in the traditional sense. We only need to think of the *Partially buried woodshed* by Robert Smithson, or the works of art made with steam by Robert Morris, or some works made of light by James Turrell. Gernot Böhme draws attention to the fact that we have learned to find beauty in things that are indefinite and indeterminate. In opposition to the thesis defended by Kant, we can appreciate color more than form, as in the pictures of Rothko. We have also developed an appreciation of the sky thanks to the everyday experience of flying; and of water, thanks to the practice of diving.<sup>22</sup>

In the case of distance, as I mention above, the disciplines of the aesthetics of nature and everyday aesthetics accept the impossibility of distance as a positive value, because it helps to create a sense of place or the sensation of being involved by an environment. We can also add that art could benefit from the creation of works that explore the sensation of being surrounded by a pleasant smell, a mysterious smell or even a stinking odor. This could be suggestive for an art world that already has decades of experience working with installations and performances, with works that do not have precise boundaries, and with different ways of involving the audience in the work.

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<sup>20</sup> Jimmy Boyd, a Scottish perfumer living near Barcelona, affirms that he composes his perfumes so that they develop over time. Some of his creations are expressions of emotions, and he also has a line of perfumes that embody the personality of cities and landscapes (see: [www.perfumesjimmyboyd.com](http://www.perfumesjimmyboyd.com)).

<sup>21</sup> Shiner, Larry and Kristovets, Yulia. *The Aesthetics of Smelly Art*, p. 276.

<sup>22</sup> Böhme, Gernot, 2010. On Beauty. *The Nordic Journal of Aesthetics*, 39, pp. 22-33.

With respect to the forth argument, about permanence, we have to accept that today what is ephemeral has found a place in aesthetics. Many artists have created ephemeral works of art, such as the sculptures that Andy Goldsworthy constructs with fragile materials that the wind or the water destroys; or some of the works of Richard Long that consist of drawings made with his feet in the sand. At the same time, aesthetic appreciation of nature or everyday life can enjoy the beauty of events that are as ephemeral as a Mediterranean cloudburst or the song of a blackbird after the rain.

However, it is also important to mention that smell compensates for its fleeting character by being a powerful awakener of the past, and therefore stimulating memories and the imagination. Emily Brady says of this:

Smells and tastes, like paintings and poems, evoke images and associations. Smells are notorious for bringing to mind particular times, places, or experiences of the past, so memories may also become part of the reflective activity. Many of our associations will be particular and personal, while others will be more generic and communicable.<sup>23</sup>

In fact, the special capacity that odors have to evoke memories has a physiological basis. While the information perceived by sight and hearing goes to the neocortex, the information perceived by olfaction goes first to the limbic system, which is responsible for memory and emotions. Because of this, smells awaken the kind of emotional memories that Proust described so magnificently and which no other sense can arouse. The sense which perceives the most ephemeral things, odors, is the same sense that brings forth the most reliable memory.

We can see that this re-evaluation of smell by such different means takes place at the same time as many of the most important concepts in aesthetics are being discussed and new ideas and forms of experience are broadening the field.

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<sup>23</sup> Brady, Emily. *Smells, Tastes and Everyday Aesthetics*, pp. 12-13.

#### **4. From Perception to Imagination**

According to the new discourses in contemporary aesthetics, to be anosmic entails a significant loss in one's aesthetic appreciation of natural environments, everyday life (including appreciation of oneself and others) and both old and new art forms. Although anosmia is not explicitly a subject of these discussions, they allow us to draw clear conclusions about it; and those conclusions confirm my initial hypothesis.

It may seem to be a sad conclusion, because it recognizes a loss suffered by people who cannot smell. Nevertheless, I also believe that being aware of this loss can help us anosmic people to improve our aesthetic appreciation in other ways. Aesthetic appreciation begins with perception, which is the most passive part, but it continues with imagination, which is creative and constructive, and can also be enriched by dialogue with other people. When I am aware of the limits of my perception, I can foster both imagination and dialogue.

Anosmia transforms aesthetic appreciation, but to become aware of that fact transforms the appreciation even more and in a different way. When I appreciate a forest, I wonder what exists in that environment that I cannot perceive, and ask other people what the smell of the forest is. People usually answer that smells are very difficult to describe; they try with some words, then doubt, enter into discussion about them and look for metaphors. Through their half sentences, their doubts, gestures and facial expressions, I try to imagine smells as colors or as tactile sensations or through the emotions they arouse.

I also reflect upon my senses, and wonder how the forest could be perceived if my senses were not so limited, if I could hear infrasounds or ultrasounds; or if I lacked some other sense. I try to imagine what it would be like to walk under pine trees on a cold morning without being able to hear or to see. I try to understand how people who suffer from achromatopsia enjoy this same place, and remember that Neil Harbisson, an artist who suffers from congenital achromatopsia, uses a small camera that he wears on his head to capture the different colors and translate them into sounds, so that he can perceive the variety of colors before him. He calls himself a *sonochromatic cyborg* and defends the idea that technology can help us to

enhance our senses.<sup>24</sup>

I also wonder how the different animals that inhabit the forest perceive it. I try to imagine how a fox, a blackbird, a skunk or a bat perceives the same place. I even try to invent totally new and different senses which would show us the forest in an innovative way. For example, a sense which allowed us to see the age of every living being, every plant and animal, would lead to us experiencing the temporal dimension in a new way. Likewise, a sense which allowed us to know how much time is left for every creature would also radically transform our perception of the forest and our emotions.

After these exercises of imagination, I can affirm that the forest *is beautiful for me*, and I can give the reasons why it is beautiful for me, but I know that there are other ways to perceive it and the aesthetic appreciation they lead to could be very different. I become more prudent in my judgment, more conscious of how the limits of my perception enclose my appreciation; but also more curious about other experiences, more eager to listen to other descriptions and to enter into dialogue. That I recognize the plurality of experiences is in no way to renounce communicability or agreement; on the contrary, we can share a dialogue about these experiences, and I can agree with the judgment of others and also learn from the experiences of others. Such dialogue is food for the imagination.<sup>25</sup>

In the end, becoming aware that my perception is limited stimulates a more conscious, more self-critical, more imaginative appreciation. Precisely at the moment when aesthetics is reflecting on many traditional concepts and enlarging itself in order to include new experiences, it is the moment, not only for including olfaction, but also for analyzing what the inability to enjoy it implies.

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<sup>24</sup> See his webpage: [www.harbisson.com](http://www.harbisson.com)

<sup>25</sup> On the role of imagination in aesthetic appreciation of natural environments, see Hepburn, Ronald, 1996. Landscape and the Metaphysical Imagination. *Environmental Values* 5, pp. 191-204. See also Brady, Emily, 2003. *Aesthetics of the Natural Environment*. Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press.

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