

Thoughts on perfume: luxury and rhythm

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Abstract

The paper situates the importance of dedicated research into perfume, a complex commodity, and the multi-sensorial experiences, practices and memories associated with particular scents. This is done by giving closer consideration to the gendered and ethical discourses associated with the consumption of luxurious commodities, and the prosaic rituals and rhythmic practices that individual bodies construct around the use of perfume. Focusing on perfume as both luxurious and ordinary, understanding this commodity can be done by investigating the ways in which individuals embody the materiality of perfume in everyday life through its olfactory effects and the rhythms that become associated with its use.

Keywords: luxury; rhythm; materiality; embodiment; olfaction; consumption.

1: Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to introduce perfume as a material object and luxurious commodity that, through smell or 'olfaction', influences the bodies that wear it in profound ways that are, presently, poorly understood. The paper situates the importance of research on perfume and its olfactory effects in everyday consumption, and raise questions about how such research can be undertaken. The aims of this paper are three-fold: (1) to situate perfume as a material object that possesses a generative and transformative agency, (2) to illustrate the ways in which perfume can influence the individual body through symbolic attachments, and (3) to identify some of the ways in which perfume is embodied, practiced and remembered. The paper compliments this special issue by highlighting the importance of perfume as commodity that is embodied, practiced and attached to gendered and ethical discourses.

The material-turn in the social sciences argue for the centrality of material objects in research precisely because materials mediate human activity in everyday life, and the use of objects transforms the human and non-human actors in potentially unforeseen ways (Latour, 1994). Consumable material objects have consistently featured throughout history and "they continue to determine struggles and contradictions within man's activity... from the general rivalry emerge the struggles of certain powerful groups: the social classes" (Lefebvre, 1968: p.134).

Little is known about the classed and gendered experience of perfume consumption, let alone whether or not perfume is ethically consumed. However, it is acknowledged that women's bodies are synonymous with the consumption of luxurious goods and the accompanying narratives forged by brands (Calefato, 2014). Time and again semiotic analyses of signs (e.g. advertising campaigns) with perfumes have demonstrated these associations (see Mazzeo, 2010; Williamson, 1978) but they

only provide a partial insight into the social-life of perfume when it is bought or gifted. The centrality of signs in previous research with perfume has negated both the emotional and lived experience of the perfume wearer and any material environmental implications of producing and consuming perfume. Yet, this paper does not seek to dismiss luxurious discourses but rather situate those narratives as one component that can be used to understand the ways in which perfume becomes embodied by the affectual wearer, and by which perfume becomes attached to gendered and ethical discourses. This paper is an invitation to examine the effects of perfume (the material object) in everyday life through olfactory encounters (the body) and present a case for researching complex commodities.

2: A critique of the thing

The interdisciplinary scope of the material-turn in the social sciences is vast. Throughout much of the 20th century matter and materiality was dismissed in favour of the linguistic-turn that reduced bodily experiences to a series of signs, images and symbols. A fundamental proposition of the material-turn is that, as Iovino (2012: p.52) argues, is a “reaction against some radical trends of postmodern and poststructuralist thinking, which it regards as “dematerialising” the world into linguistic and social constructions”. Here, neo-materialism interprets the world as a “densely intertwined... tissue of experience” (Abram, 2010: p.143) which permits new interpretations of how material objects are mobilised and mediate everyday lives.

A significant contributor in elevating the status of material objects in the social sciences has been actor-network theory (ANT). It is argued in ANT that non-human entities, such as ‘materials’ (stone, wood, leather) and the ‘materiél’ (language, agendas, discourse, instructions) are mobilised everyday to ensure that a productive activity meets the objective set by the individual (Lefebvre, 1991: 71). The ‘material’ and ‘materiél’ are conceived of as ‘actants’ with a generative capacity to influence and transform how humans and non-humans interact and change one another through practice (Latour, 1988; 1994; 1999). A fundamental position of ANT is that material objects mediate action in everyday life, and the basis for understanding the ‘social-world’ is through the associations between humans and non-humans and their relational effects (Latour, 1994). Placing emphasis on neither a ‘subject’ nor ‘object’ as with classical social theories, ANT challenges the traditional dichotomy and is a clear example of a theoretical approach to understand the role of non-human actants in the everyday lives of humans. However, ANT is resigned to describing the associations between humans and non-humans which is uncritical and has been regarded of as a flat ontology that pays little attention to the inequalities between actants (Harman, 2009).

More recently, objects have been conceived of as emergent - matter is not a “blank slate” but it is involved in a process of intra-activity (Barad, 2007: p.151) that mediates human activity and can affect changes in the human - which permits non-humans to enter and withdraw from relations that exist as a part of heterogeneous networks. In this case objects should be understood as “permanently mysterious and to some extent inexhaustible... allows material-semiotic researchers to progress (slowly) by maintaining a tension that a flat ontology too quickly relaxes” (Pierides and Woodman, 2012: p.675). Thus, to understand the interactions and grasp the multi-sensorial experiences between individual bodies and perfume requires material objects to be understood as possessing a generative agency.

A unique argument introduced by the pioneering work of Karen Barad in her book, *Meeting the Universe Halfway* (2007), challenges the commonplace ontological understandings of matter which is poignant for grounding vibrant materialism in

upcoming research with perfume. For Barad, matter “does not refer to an inherent, fixed property of abstract, independently existing objects; rather, ‘matter’ refers to phenomena in their ongoing materialization” (2007: p.151). Matter “is not a blank slate”, it is not “immutable or passive”, but is a “stabilising and destabilising process of iterative intra-activity” (Barad, 2007: p.151). Conceiving matter as “a doing, a congealing of agency” (Barad, 2007: p.151) grants an appreciation of the materiality of objects and how those objects influence and mediate human activity. Matter is “neither fixed and given nor the mere end result of different processes. Matter is produced and productive, generated and generative. Matter is agentic, not a fixed essence or property of things” (Barad, 2007: p.137).

The generative becoming of material objects is an act of “absolving matter from its long history of attachment to automatism or mechanism” (Bennett, 2010: p.3) and in the case of perfume involved human actants. For example, wearing perfume is often remarked of as a ‘final touch’ in getting ready before leaving the home where it’s potency is at its peak, however, for others perfume is applied directly after other bodily cleansing rituals so the scent is absorbed directly into the skin becoming an olfactory extension of their individual identity. Both the individual and the perfume are engaged in a generative becoming with the perfume’s agency being transformed from existing in the bottle to the skin, and the body experiences emotional, symbolic and olfactory effects with using perfume. Very little is known about how perfumes - an intimate and emotive worn cosmetic - are embodied by the affectual wearers. Acknowledging the generative agency of perfume reveals the commodity to be more complex than previously assumed. Neo-materialism allows the vibrancy of objects and their influence on human bodies to be grasped. To grant ‘things’ a central position alongside bodies permits a multi-dimensional understanding (see Cook *et al.*, 2017) of the ways in which perfume is consumed and practiced in everyday life, but more importantly how perfume is embodied and remembered.

3: Luxury and ethical consumption

Luxury is complex term – despised and adored in equal measure – steeped in myth and discourse spanning centuries, and communicated through a variety of mediums, such as images and material objects (e.g. advertising campaigns from luxury brands to the rarity of a mink fur coat). The discourse of luxury maintains its aura in everyday life when those material goods are worn, possessed and coveted. They imbue status and power where rarity implies limitation, uniqueness and elegance (Kapferer, 1997). For Calefato “luxury is intrigue and deceit, domination and abstraction” (2014: p.1). To be luxurious is to be at the forefront of modernity: possessing the latest material goods, such as space (exclusive addresses), technology (cars, smart phones, home appliances etc.), worn goods (clothing, cosmetics etc.) and beyond. However, this is not to say that the historic narratives of luxury, such as the opulence and grandeur of European aristocracy throughout the centuries have dissipated; rather luxury represents a classed experience which is inherently embedded in struggle.

European liberalism of the 19th century was concerned with the morality of consumption practices at a time where capitalist modes of production were revolutionising everyday life. A classic definition of luxurious consumption is a practice of denoting an individual’s wealth. Veblen argued that “throughout the entire evolution of conspicuous expenditure, whether of goods or of services or human life, runs the obvious implication that in order to effectually mend the consumers good fame it must be an expenditure of superfluities. In order to be reputable it must be wasteful” (2007[1899]: p.49).

The practice of luxurious consumption in the 19th century, not unlike the present, represents the struggle and

disconnection from labour in the production of these goods. This raises questions regarding the ethical and moral consequences of producing such material objects to be possessed by the few:

The study of history leads me continually to contemplate with sympathy and satisfaction the opulence and luxury of the few amid the hard lives of the many, because it presents itself as the practically necessary soil in which beauty and the love of beauty grow and develop... and become abiding possessions of the race (Sidgwick, 1894: p.16)

Of course, luxurious consumption has not always been justified through the aesthetics of love and beauty that the practice has been used to imbue. A more critical account of luxurious consumption suggests that the practice is detrimental to the corporeality of everyday life, for instance:

It is the end that justifies, and the noblest end is not the only end. There may be occasions when expenditure on champagne may be justified. Yet we rightly condemn as luxurious the man who drinks champagne or Benedictine at every meal; for in this case the end does not justify the means, which involve the destruction of the labour of many days and many years for the gratification of an unimportant moment (Davidson, 1898: p.73)

The repetition of consuming luxurious commodities, from champagne to glamorous gowns, reduces the extravagance, opulence and uniqueness of the 'moment' to something which seems banal. If prosaic practices and rituals with material objects are negated then we deny the complexity of the relationship between the body and material objects at their most ethereal level. On the practice of ethical consumption, Szmigin and Carrigan argue that "ethical purchasers have political, religious, spiritual, environmental, social or other motives for choosing one product over another but that what unites them is a concern regarding the effect their purchasing has on the external world" (2005: p.608). However, perfume is an intimate worn cosmetic, whilst its use generates olfactory effects for the wearer and other individuals encountered, thus the purchasing and practices of perfume use is almost exclusively contingent on bodily practices, memories and interpersonal experiences.

The construction of a luxury brand often involves forging mythical narratives that imbue the uniqueness and rarity of the goods that they produce. These mythical narratives typically mobilise imagery reflecting beauty and sensuality to convey to the consumer that their goods will confer this type of identity for the consumer in their everyday life. For example, in the creation of legendary brands Vincent (2002) argued that these narratives are timeless and captivating and their meanings are sustained across cultural borders. In a classic example of a semiotic analysis of branded advertising materials, Williamson (1978) suggested that visual association of celebrities with luxury goods symbolises a beauty that is obtainable by the consumer. Beyond the obvious effects of celebrity association luxury brands often seek to transcend the personification of beauty (Rutherford, 1994) which is particularly relevant for the consumption of perfume.

Perfume use is ephemeral by nature – existing temporarily on the skin and in dialogue with the air – generating olfactory effects for the affectual user and the individuals that they encounter every day. For example, Chanel N°5 is the perfume that defined the 20th century (Mazzeo, 2010), and the branding of the scent has forged a legendary brand. Perfume is embodied and emotional: "N°5 encourages dreaming, fantasising, and remembering all those elusive, annoying, frustrating things about love and sex" (Lippert, 1999: p.28). Generally focusing on language and images that brands use these studies have sought to identify the meanings constructed by brands for their products, and what these materials are intended to imbue and evoke in consumers. Brands buttress their stability and image by crafting narratives and myths imbuing the rarity, uniqueness and corporeality of their products. The narratives and myths deployed by brands are beholden to a myriad of geographical,

temporal and material entanglements that appear pervasive, but can be elucidated with a degree of sophistication that considers the spaces that commodities, like perfume, occupy (see Pike, 2015). However, interrogating the narratives that brands construct provides only a partial insight into the how luxury goods are embodied and appropriated by the consumer in their everyday lives.

4: On the body and rhythm

To appreciate the materiality and narratives which are intertwined with perfume will only ever provide a partial insight into the complexity of this commodity. The lived experiences with perfume in everyday practices involve two essential components: the body and temporality. Here, the relationship between the body and perfume is emergent, unfolding over time, and are synonymous with one another and cannot be separated in analyses.

Olfaction, the human sense of smell, has been neglected and betrayed by Western philosophy being characterised as a mute sense (Ackerman, 1990). For example, Plato remarked in *Timaeus* that “the faculty of smell does not admit of differences of kind; for all smells are of a half-formed nature, and no element is so proportioned as to have any smell” (1892: p.488). Olfaction has since become embedded in a hierarchy of senses; falling behind chromatic and auditory sensory perception. However, sensory perception does not occur separately as “the five senses do not travel along separate channels, but interact to a degree few scientists would have believed only a decade ago” (Cytowic, 2010: p.46). A hierarchy of separately functioning senses, it is argued, betrays the body:

“Western philosophy has betrayed the body; it has actively participated in the great process of metamorphization that has abandoned the body; and it has denied the body. The living body, being at once ‘subject’ and ‘object’ cannot tolerate such conceptual division, and consequently philosophical concepts fall into the category of the ‘sign of non-body” (Lefebvre, 1991: p.407; emphasis in original)

“Anyone who is wont... to identify places, people and things by their smells is unlikely to be susceptible to rhetoric...the sense of smell had its glory days when animality still predominated over ‘culture’, rationality and education – before these factors, combined with a thoroughly cleansed space, brought about the complete atrophy of smell. One can’t help feeling, though, that to carry around an atrophied organ which still claims its due must be somewhat pathogenic” (Lefebvre, 1991: p.198)

Odours have a spatial existence and consistently generate olfactory effects, whilst philosophy has characterised the sense of smell as ineffable, representative of a bygone era of human evolutionary history, odours feature in our everyday lives. The “abhorrence of smells produces its own form of social power. Foul-smelling rubbish appears to threaten the social order, whereas the reassuring victory of the hygienic and the fragrant promises to buttress its stability” (Corbin, 1986: p.5). The ineffability of scents does not detract from their presence in everyday life, nor does it detract from the complexity of the relationship between the body and perfume, as “transitional objects to which desire becomes attached in seeking to escape subjectivity and reach out to ‘the other’ are founded primarily on the olfactory sense; this is true also for the erotic object in general” (Lefebvre, 1991: p.198). To understand the corporeal relationships that individuals construct with perfume it is pertinent that the body is the first point of analysis as sensory perception is the basis for lived experience.

There are multiple aspects of temporality that are particularly relevant with perfume use, such as the temporalities of everyday rituals with perfumes to the breadth of olfactory memories acquired throughout the lifecourse. The everyday rituals and rhythms will be discussed here and their relevance to prosaic perfume practices will be elucidated. Everyday life is associated with the rhythmic routines practiced by an individual at a particular point in both time and space (Lefebvre, 2014), and involves the symbolic attachments to the ideas, objects and spaces that accompany the practice of everyday life. The concept can be understood dialectically as “illusion and truth, power and helplessness; the intersection of the sector man controls and the sector he does not control” (Lefebvre, 2014: p.40). The everyday is therefore:

“The most universal and the most unique condition, the most social and the most individuated, the most obvious and the best hidden. A condition stipulated for the legibility of forms, ordained by means of functions, inscribed within structures, the everyday constitutes the platform upon which the bureaucratic society of controlled consumerism is erected” (Lefebvre, 1987: p.9)

Everyday life and rhythm are inseparable concepts and both vitally important to make lucid the complexities of the relationships between human bodies and the material object of perfume. Perfume is a complex commodity perceived through a sense that is under-represented in social science research and this can be remedied by exploring and elucidating upon the symbolic attachments, practices and rhythms with perfume.

Rhythm can be defined succinctly as “everywhere where there is interaction between a place, a time and an expenditure of energy, there is a rhythm” (Lefebvre, 2004: p.8). Rhythm cannot be understood as an abstracted concept concerned with the simple allocation of ‘clock-time’ to the performance of productive activities, but rather an embodied understanding of the temporality of everyday lived experiences involving bodies and materials. Rhythms are formed through repetitive practices and allude to how materials mediate action and the process of embodiment. For example, the generative agency and materiality of perfume is transformed from when it is on display in the bottle on a dressing table to when it is sprayed upon the body and in dialogue with the skin. Perfume becomes embodied through rituals over time, generating a multitude of personal meanings and narratives. For the affectual wearer finding the ‘right’ perfume for them is a way of articulating their personal identity on an olfactory level which alludes to the multi-sensorial complexity of wearing perfume. Thus, to understand the complexity of the relationships that individuals undertake with perfume requires an embodied notion of both rhythm and materiality which are manifested in experiences of everyday life.

The opulence and rarity that accompany narratives of luxuriousness have been evidenced in a historiography of capitalism, written by men, that often presumes (and emphasises) that there is a feminine propensity for unproductive expenditures on commodities such as clothes, jewellery, flowers and perfume, to name a few (Calefato, 2014: p.57). Here, the female body is the personification of luxury with a mark of veridiction (Greimas, 1985: pp.101-110). The tantamount symbolic associations with luxuriousness and the aestheticisation of the womanly body; the consumption of perfume is personal, embodied through rhythmic practices and generating olfactory effects that are stored in long-term memory. The modern world aspires to be odourless – a dressage on the sensory organ; rhythms are conditioned in the external spatial environment where everyday life is practiced (Lefebvre, 2004), but these rhythms are then inscribed upon the body. In our attempts to be hygienic, clean and odourless the physical body is positioned as an entity with personal bodily rhythms of cleanliness (e.g. showering, deodorants etc.); however, perfume becomes a material object used for aesthetically distinguishing individuals, on an olfactory level, from one another. It is through the body, female or male, that the concepts of life, materiality and

temporality “cohere become essential attributes of what they are” (Ollman, 1990: p.37). By situating the body as the first point of analysis, mobilising the multi-dimensional ontology from the material-turn and introducing the temporalities of rhythm can reveal the social life of scents in everyday life.

5. Conclusion

The literature and ideas discussed here provide new insights to the corporeal relationships with complex commodities that are experienced through under-researched form of sensory perception: olfaction. Olfaction has been conceived of as a mute sense (Ackerman, 1990), but this should not deter research on everyday encounters with scents. Far from an atrophied organ, olfaction and odour memory demonstrate an abnormal excellence (Engen, 1983). Appreciating the materiality of perfume – and its ability to influence the affectual wearer – alongside the multi-sensorial experiences (e.g. the bottle shape, the textures, the colour and feel of perfume) of olfactory encounters and the symbolic narratives constructed by brands is an essential first step in elucidating the social life of perfume. Perfume is an apt example of a conspicuously consumed luxury good and worn cosmetic that is intimate, embodied, and emotional. Perfume is more than just a consumable commodity and understanding the narratives that affectual users construct with scents – involving emotions, spaces, interpersonal experiences and memories – can reveal the importance of olfaction in the everyday. Dedicated research on the many fascinating aspects of perfume can reveal the complexity of the commodity, the ethical and gendered discourse mobilised and embodied during consumption and narratives of luxuriousness that accompany the everyday experiences of our sense of smell.

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For Citation

Greehy, L. (2017). Thoughts on perfume: luxury and rhythm. *Journal of Consumer Ethics*. 1(2), 63-71.

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