

ODOUR & ORDER

Smell, Culture and Representation

Conference

13./14.06.2026
Wiener Straße 48/008
& digital on Zoom



Dresden
University of
Technology
CHAIR OF **BRITISH
CULTURAL
STUDIES**

**WEBSITE FOR DIGITAL PROGRAMME,
ZOOM MEETING LINK AND FURTHER
INFORMATION**



ODOUR & ORDER:

Smell, Culture and Representation

"Smell is a cultural phenomenon," writes Jonathan Reinartz in *Past Scents: Historical Perspectives of Smell* (2014). The ways we perceive, categorise, and respond to odours are deeply embedded in the social practices, political discourses and epistemological structures of our culture. Scent, thus, is not simply a biological sensation but it is a site where power structures, cultural hierarchies, and systems of knowledge are (re)produced. Throughout history, olfactory experience has been systematically gendered, raced, and classed. As Andrew Kettler demonstrates, European cultures have constructed specific olfactory stereotypes and attributed them to racialised groups as a means of establishing social hierarchies (2020, 7). This racialisation of scent finds its parallel in gendered olfactory hierarchies: "while men are allowed to smell sweaty, [...] women who don't smell sweet are traitors to the ideal of femininity and objects of disgust" (Classen et al. 1994, 164). Just as scent is implicated in the inscription of gender and race, it also plays a role in maintaining class boundaries through olfactory codes. Historically, especially during the late 1900s, while the working class was labelled as malodorous, the upper-class body was deodorised in political and cultural discourses (cf. Classen et al. 1994, 166; Reinartz 2014, 146). These intersecting olfactory hierarchies and scent as an apparatus of social control have been extensively examined through cultural, historical as well as sociological lenses (see, e.g., Largey and Watson 1972; Jenner 2011).

Since Alain Corbin's seminal study, *The Foul and the Fragrant* (1986), that examines the active deodorisation of public and private spaces through improved sanitation, ventilation and floral perfumes, scholars of scent have also paid significant attention to particular smellscape and how power dynamics operate through the spatial and cultural organisation of odour. Most notably, Hsuan L. Hsu's recent research (2020) has shown how smellscape are not only shaped by hygienic regimes but also function as instruments of social stratification, demarcating between clean and unclean, civilized and uncivilized, desirable and abject. These ideological distinctions do not remain confined to the material world; they bleed into representation. However, while scholars frequently cite Orwell's famous observation that "we were taught – the lower classes smell" (1937, 127) to illustrate the constructed nature of olfactory prejudice, their focus is rarely on the racialised, gendered and classed smellscape that he invokes in his texts. As in Orwell, we observe a limited analytic scholarship that investigates how power dynamics of smell are negotiated, reinforced, or challenged within cultural productions.

This conference, therefore, takes a critical inquiry into the ways cultural productions represent olfactory power dynamics and aims to explore the following critical questions: How do, for instance, literature, film, television, theatre, and visual arts engage with olfactory imaginaries? In what ways do they challenge or reproduce dominant olfactory regimes? How might scent function as a mode of resistance, of intimacy, or of exclusion? How do visual and verbal cues evoke the presence of smell or of those marked as olfactorily othered? What kinds of bodies or spaces are made to carry odour, and which ones are deodorised? Building on these questions, this conference brings together papers that examine the intersections of smell with race, gender, class, sexuality, and (dis)ability, investigating how olfactory meanings are constructed, challenged, and represented across various media forms.



PROGRAMME

SATURDAY, 13 JUNE 2025

9:30-10:00 **Welcome & Arrival**

KEYNOTE: **"Olfactory Encounters: Medical Missionaries and the History of Smell"**

10:00-11:00 **Jonathan Reinarz**

11:00-11:30 **Coffee Break**

PANEL 1: **Olfactory Binaries**

11:30  "Invisible to the Eye, Offensive to the Nose: The Criminalisation of Odours in London's Chinatown"
 Gemma McLean

12:30  "'Scent of a Lobster': *Futurama's* Zoidberg and Representation of Odour"
 Melissa Beattie

12:30-14:15 **Lunch at Wachstube**

PANEL 2: **Deodorisation**

14:15 "Beyond the Fragrance: Smell, Labour, and the Politics of Representation in Kannauj's *Attar* Industry"
 Rumela Chatterjee

 "Visualising Odour: A Critical History of Personal Hygiene Advertising"
 Mica Hilson

15:45 "'Persistent Foul Odour': Prison Smell in *Screw* (Channel 4)"
 Nisan Karaca Odabasi

15:45-16:15 **Coffee Break**

PANEL 3: **Olfactory Thresholds**

16:15  "The Nose Knows: Olfactory Symbolism and Classical Tradition in Rick Riordan's *Percy Jackson and the Olympians*"
 Adrija Mukherjee and Sneha Kundu

 "Odours of Memory and Haunting: Smell, Ritual, and the Feminine Spectral in Kerala's Sacred and Folkloric Landscape"
 Aswathy R

17:15

18:30 **Conference Dinner at Planwirtschaft**

SUNDAY, 14 JUNE 2025

KEYNOTE: "'Must You Have a Part in Everything?': Smell's Indiscretions"

9:00-10:00 Hsuan L. Hsu

10:00-10:30 Coffee Break

PANEL 4: Odourous Hierarchies

10:30 "Cultures of Scent: Gender, Class and Olfactory Order in Sixteenth-Century France"

Océane Fontaine Cioffi

"Among the Odorous: Exploring the Renegotiation of Class Solidarity in George Orwell's *The Road to Wigan Pier*"

Klara Tolic

"Planning, Smelling and the Delineation of Class in Bong Joon-ho's *Parasite*"

Sofiia Davydenko

"Sediments of Floral Scents: From Preventive Medicine to Hierarchy in Nursing or: Orders Based in Flowers (1800-2015)"

12:30 **Monja Schuenemann**

12:30-13:45 **Lunch at CompAsia (Bonsai)**

PANEL 5: Meta Reflections on Smell

13:45 "The Role of Storytelling in Smell Scholarship"

Stephanie Oliver



"Smelling Indian Epistemology: Olfactory Construction of Identities in Select Indian Classical Texts"

Sayantan Ghosh



"Olfactory Museology in Theory and Practice"

Mojca Ramšak

"Smellscapes of Belonging: Olfactory Narrative, Mobility, and Identity in Malayalam Cinema"

15:45 **Muhammed Musthafa KP**

15:45-16:00 **Closing Remarks**

The background of the image features a series of overlapping, translucent, wavy shapes in shades of pink, magenta, and light purple. These shapes flow from the bottom left towards the top right, creating a sense of movement and depth. The colors are soft and ethereal, with some areas appearing more saturated than others due to the layering.

ABSTRACTS

KEYNOTES:

“Olfactory Encounters: Medical Missionaries and the History of Smell”

JONATHAN REINARZ My paper argues that Protestant medical missionary memoirs form a valuable but underused archive for sensory history, challenging accounts that reduce smell to a colonial instrument of disparagement, a tendency I describe as a “catalogue of prejudice.” Using Paul Stoller’s insights on embodied ethnography and the gradual “recalibration of the senses,” the paper shows how missionaries’ perceptions shifted over years of residence, language learning, and medical practice. Drawing on memoirs from India, China, Afghanistan, and Nigeria, the paper highlights how sensory descriptions reveal both the embodied labour of care and the changing diagnostic and moral meanings attached to smell. In contrast to overtly imperial sensory regimes like Katherine Mayo’s *Mother India*, which constructs a totalising landscape of filth, missionary writings show sensory judgments to be contingent, adaptive, and often self-reflective. The paper also uncovers local sensory resistance, including the placement of odorous charms or refuse near mission compounds, signalling unease toward foreign medical authority. Ultimately, these sources enrich sensory history by foregrounding smell, disgust, and embodied experience, illustrating how sensory perception structured colonial encounters while also transforming the missionaries themselves.

“‘Must You Have a Part in Everything?’: Smell’s Indiscretions” (online)

HSUAN L. HSU If racial and colonial capitalism has been sustained by the imposition of hierarchy, separation, and discretion, smell gravitates towards other modes of embodied knowledge and relation. This paper first discusses how differential deodorization and the hierarchization of extracted, appropriated scents have helped naturalize constructions of race, class, and gender. I then consider a range of literary and multimodal works that explore smell’s indiscretions—its queer, unruly capacities to elicit memories, relations, and desires that move against the grain of “colonial unknowing” (Vimalassery, Hu Pegues, Goldstein). I argue for a speculative approach attuned not only to how smell resists containment but also to smell’s capacity to open (or, more precisely, metabolize) a portal to other worlds.

PANEL 1: OLFATORY BINARIES

“Invisible to the Eye, Offensive to the Nose: The Criminalisation of Odours in London’s Chinatown” (online)

This paper explores how odours shaped the policing of London’s Chinatown in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The case study of opium smoking among the Chinese diaspora demonstrates that detecting specific illicit odours serves not just as a sensory act but also as a performative declaration of authority. This act justified xenophobic narratives that reinforced stereotypes portraying the Chinese community as inherently criminal and foreign.

**GEMMA
MCLEAN**

University of
Edinburgh

London’s Chinatown, Limehouse, was not explicitly visible to outsiders; the potency of smell thus served to locate, define, and mark this space, and to accuse residents of illicit behaviour. Smell was routinely used by law enforcement as credible evidence to warrant searches of properties and businesses, even in the absence of any visible proof. These authoritative ‘noses’ relied on odours to expose smoking in private spaces; they elevated odour from a mere sensory cue into a tool of surveillance and social control, with its detection (or lack thereof) shaping the outcomes of policing and legal processes.

Olfactory Sinophobia also intersected with gendered anxieties, particularly through sensationalised narratives involving white women in opium dens, which invoked broader fears around race, miscegenation and social responsibility. Such narratives were amplified in popular discourse, and the notion of ‘sniffing out crime’ became a metaphor for the deeper racial and moral panic of this ‘invisible’ other.

By tracing the utilisation of the ‘Nose’ to warrant investigation by authoritative bodies, this paper argues that olfactory detection was neither neutral nor passive, but rather an active instrument of exclusion and boundary-making. Framing opium consumption and its accompanying scents as distinctively Chinese intensified fears of this invisible diaspora in London.

“‘Scent of a Lobster’: *Futurama’s* Zoidberg and Representation of Odour” (online)

MELISSA BEATTIE Independent Scholar
Animated workplace sitcom *Futurama* (1999-present, Fox, Comedy Central, Hulu) features a number of human and alien characters living and working together at a package delivery company in the 31st century. One of these character, Dr John Zoidberg (Billy West), is a Decapodean, meaning that he is a humanoid lobster who is also a (bad) physician. While Zoidberg’s accent and name clearly code him as Jewish, Zoidberg functions as a subversive, complex and sympathetic character. This contextualises the fact that one of his main characteristics is the fact that he smells bad to his coworkers. While scent has long been a characteristic of anti-Semitic and other racist or xenophobic representations (Geller 1997, Jütte 2012, Smith 2012), Zoidberg’s inherent complexities and juxtapositions – not least of which being that shellfish are not Kosher – help to subvert such a problematic reading in much the same way as the series approaches other characters (Beattie Forthcoming). These include showing Zoidberg as generous, loyal, hapless (like all the characters) and whose accumulated diegetic history provides him with the same level of depth and complexity as the characters around him who similarly problematise the stereotypical representations of non-white/non-Christian characters in animation history (e.g. Cohen 1997). By showing the juxtaposition the production team are engaging with the stereotype – much as they do with stereotypes of Jamaica and East Asia with other characters (Beattie 2025, Beattie Forthcoming) – but are problematising it rather than replicating it.

This (mal)odorous aspect of his character and relationships is particularly focused upon in the episode ‘Stench and Stenchability’ in which Zoidberg finds love with an anosmic woman, the focus of the paper’s critical textual analysis. When she is given a surgical procedure to correct her lack of ability to smell, she tells Zoidberg that she never learnt the difference between a ‘good smell and a bad smell’ but likes how he smells because she likes him. This reinforces not only that the perception of a scent is culturally constructed but positions those who discriminate against Zoidberg in this way – and, by extension, anyone who discriminates against anyone because of how they smell and the associated connotations – as being firmly in the wrong in the series’ preferred reading (Hall 1980).

PANEL 2: DEODORISATION

“Beyond the Fragrance: Smell, Labour, and the Politics of Representation in Kannauj’s *Attar* Industry”

Smells are not neutral; they are as social and cultural as they are physiological. This paper takes the *attar* (a type of perfume oil) industry in Kannauj, Uttar Pradesh (Northern India) to demonstrate how smell becomes entangled with questions of identity, production and representation. The city, often dubbed the ‘perfume capital’ of India, produces *attar* whose history is said to date back to premodern times. Its laborious production process, known as the *deg-bhapka* method, is performed by the *dighas* (distillers) who work in intensely heated conditions where electricity is deliberately avoided to ensure desirable results. Yet, public discourse around *attar*, especially in heritage and tourism narratives, often romanticises the industry through narratives like ‘the beautiful rose fields of Kannauj’, ‘the rustic charm of the traditional workshops’, ‘the artisanal touch’, thereby obscuring the material conditions of its production. This paper examines how localised initiatives such as ‘Perfume Tourism’, local perfume market, social media and various state and non-state actors render perfume not just a product but an experience. These spaces continually reproduce the idea of ‘heritage’ in relation to *attar* through a specific grammar of display and narration. The making of *attar* is associated with ‘good smell’ in contrast to “bad smell” (Synnott 1991; Classen et al. 1994). However, from the perspective of the labouring body, the distinction is not so clear-cut. For the *dighas*, smell is neither distinctly pleasant nor unpleasant. In this context, ‘good smell’ becomes a paradox – it is both the product of labour and the very thing that conceals the conditions of its making. It is through this tension between the aestheticised product and the sweating body, ‘smell’ emerges as a site where the sensory and the social converge, exposing how ‘certain bodies are deodorised while others are made to carry odour’.

**RUMELA
CHATTERJEE**

Shiv Nadar
Institution of
Eminence



“Visualising Odour: A Critical History of Personal Hygiene Advertising”

MICA HILSON As scholars like Juliann Sivulka and Vincent Vinikas have argued, one of the American advertising industry’s greatest early successes came when they were able to manufacture a concern that most of the population did not already have: the worry that their bodies stank, to the point that they risked becoming social pariahs if they did not use the hygiene products the advertisers were pitching. In the 1910s and 1920s, this strategy worked for products as diverse as the mouthwash Listerine and the underarm deodorant Odorono. However, previous scholarship has focused primarily on how the words in the advertising copy persuaded consumers that these new products were essential for modern odourless living. In this paper, I am interested in tracing the development of advertising *images* for deodorizing personal hygiene products. Specifically, I’ll be asking: what strategies evolved for *visualizing odour*, something that by definition cannot be seen?

American University of Armenia

I will be sketching out how the dominant representational strategies for visualizing odour altered over time, especially as a new media form joined the print advertisement: the television commercial. In charting how the common tropes for visualizing odour changed—for the reaction shots of disgusted onlookers common in 1970s commercials to the computer-generated green miasmas used to depict body odour in many 1990s commercials—I will also be considering what these representations tell us about shifting attitudes towards the body. Specifically, I want to examine how these advertisements intersected with emerging discourses of neoliberal self-management, and how these shaped our perceptions of our odour-producing microbiomes.

“‘Persistent Foul Odour’: Prison Smell in *Screw* (Channel 4)”

Scent has been gendered, racialised and classed since the European Enlightenment and has long been used as an instrument to dehumanise and stigmatise marginalised groups. This stigmatisation carries colonial legacies; racialising scent served to deodorise Western spheres from the putrid ‘Other’ (Classen 1992, 133-134). “Deodori[s]ation”, according to Hsuan L. Hsu, “played an important role in ‘the civili[s]ing process’ [...] whereby Europeans developed notions of middle-class manners and civility” (154). Hsu conceptualises deodorised spaces as smellscapes where certain smells are eradicated or confined to ensure a ‘civil’ and odourless society. Following this conceptualisation, prisons can be seen as, both physically and metaphorically, the representatives of confining the ‘fetid’ to achieve an odourless space; they can be considered as apparatuses in the ‘modern’ smellscapes. The term *prison smell*, for instance, despite being obscure for most people, is used as a phrase to convey a sense of confinement and marginalisation (Martin 2021, 483; Kutzler 2021, 39). Accordingly, the marginalisation of incarcerated people is reflected through the olfactory, and the olfactory finds its way into cultural discourse. In this article, I scrutinise the prison drama *Screw* (2022-present), set in a UK prison, arguing that it challenges the ‘purified’ smellscape of society at large in a multi-layered manner by subverting common associations of malodour in carceral contexts; the foul smell in the series no longer signifies the marginalised, incarcerated people but poses criticism of ‘modern’ disciplinary and punitive methods, as well as challenges hypermasculinity and socio-sexual hierarchies among the prison staff.

**NISAN
KARACA
ODABASI**

Dresden
University of
Technology

PANEL 3: OLFACTORY THRESHOLDS

“The Nose Knows: Olfactory Symbolism and Classical Tradition in Rick Riordan’s *Percy Jackson and the Olympians*” (online)

ADRIJA MUKHERJEE & SNEHA KUNDU Rick Riordan’s *Percy Jackson and the Olympians* (2005–2009), a five-volume series, employs olfactory symbolism as a narrative strategy to examine identity and the formation of selfhood. Smell, often marginalized within literary analysis as a sensory register, emerges as a key narrative device in Riordan’s storytelling. Within the young adult hybrid-fantasy, olfaction structures social and interactive boundaries, distinguishing the familiar from the foreign and demarcating the spaces where they interact.

Scottish Church
College

The stimulus of smell mediates identity and regulates actions. Demi-gods are identified by their scents. Monstrous entities, marked by their noxious odour, implicate violence and danger, whereas the homely atmosphere of ‘Camp1’ emanates a perception of security. The strategic assistance of “Smelly” Gabe as an olfactory camouflage – his human stench masking Percy’s physical odour from monsters – casts smell as a medium of protection, while elsewhere olfactory seduction leads to peril, exposing smell as an unreliable guide. Gods in Riordan’s narrative are frequently endowed with a fragrance (for instance Poseidon with that of salty sea breeze), while locations such as the Underworld generate peculiar olfactory sensations, heightening the characters’ emotions.

These prominent olfactory motifs, among others, are not, however, unique to Riordan’s mythmaking, but spring from ritual practices and folktales of classical Greek civilization. Fragrance was a primary identifier, marking the sacred from profane, the divine from the monstrous. Ambrosia and Nectar’s divine aroma prefigure in Riordan’s novels as crucial healing agents, smelling to each demigod of their comfort food. Both in Greek mythology and Riordan’s *Percy Jackson*, olfaction operates as deception—Medea’s potions and the Lotus Casino’s scents masking peril.

This paper examines how olfactory boundaries negotiate identity, distort perception, and evoke security across evolving narrative traditions. It investigates the role of olfactory signification in Riordan’s writing and its reconfiguration and resonance of Greek olfactory heritage.

“Odours of Memory and Haunting: Smell, Ritual, and the Feminine Spectral in Kerala’s Sacred and Folkloric Landscape” (online)

This paper explores Kerala’s sacred groves (*kaavu*) as olfactory archives, sites where smell mediates memory, ritual, and the spectral ecology of the landscape. Drawing on frameworks from Derrida’s hauntology, Paul Stoller’s sensory anthropology, and Timothy Morton’s dark ecology, the study examines how the *kaavu* embodies a layered coexistence of the sacred and the uncanny through scent. The odours of jasmine, alstonia tree blossoms, incense, sandalwood, damp soil, and decaying vegetation do more than evoke atmosphere; they operate as mnemonic and affective traces that sustain collective memory and ritual continuity while also harbouring the ghostly presence of the past.

Engaging the concept of sensory thresholding, the paper interprets smell as a liminal sense, a porous medium that blurs boundaries between human and nonhuman, sacred and profane, devotion and decay. Within this sensory ecology, the figure of the ‘yakshi’, a recurring spirit in Kerala’s folklore often parallel to the ‘femme fatale’ or vampiric archetype, emerges as central to the region’s olfactory haunting. Her arrival is often preceded by scent, which is often described as sweet, seductive, and unsettling by turning fragrance into both invocation and warning. This paper also aims to interrogate the gendered politics of olfaction: how women’s bodies are rendered fragrant, erotic, and ultimately punishable, and how these narratives translate into mechanisms of ecological and social control.

Through readings of selected lore and visual representations of *kaavu*, ‘yakshi’ and the forest spaces, the paper argues that smell performs a dual function. It preserves ritual order and simultaneously disrupts it by recalling what is repressed, like the female desire, ecological loss, and the spectral remnants of pre-modern worship. The *kaavu*’s scented atmosphere thus becomes a living archive of both memory and haunting, where ritual, ecology, and the feminine spirit of the land intermingle in enduring sensory afterlife.

ASWATHY R

Jain
(Deemed-To-Be-
University)
Kochi

PANEL 4: ODOUROUS HIERARCHIES

“Cultures of Scent: Gender, Class and Olfactory Order in Sixteenth-Century France”

- OCÉANE FONTAINE CIOFFI**
University of Tours
- In sixteenth-century France, perfumes and fragrant substances stood in an ambivalent position — both signs of distinction and objects of moral suspicion. While pleasant odours were associated with civility and virtue, excessive or misplaced use could signify vanity, corruption, or social transgression.
- Certain raw materials, particularly costly animal-derived ingredients such as musk, ambergris, and civet, belonged to an economy of luxury and distinction. Royal household accounts record such expenses, including purchases of violet powder for Francis I and Henry II. Yet in moral and literary discourses, these scents were frequently feminised and condemned as symbols of excess. Moralists denounced perfume as a sign of superfluous luxury and moral disorder. But this critique, extending beyond gender, also expressed anxiety about the potential imitation of aristocratic behaviour by the lower classes — a concern also observed by historians such as Alain Corbin, Constance Classen, and Jonathan Reinartz in their studies of olfactory hierarchies.
- Smell thus became an instrument of social regulation. In *Orchésographie* (1589), Jehan Tabourot wrote that a gentleman may kiss his partner so that dancers may “smell” one another and ensure that the breath is sweet rather than foul. He concluded that dancing was “necessary for the good ordering of society,” an observation that recalls Norbert Elias’s study of civility and social discipline. Medical writings likewise linked pleasant odours with nobility: in his plague treatise (*Conseil divin touchant la maladie divine et peste en la ville de La Rochelle*, 1583), physician Olivier Poupard recommended using “cassolettes” such as those found in noble households, specifically mentioning “the chambers of ladies and gentlewomen”.
- Drawing on moral and medical treatises, recipe books, and royal accounts, this paper examines how olfactory practices and representations contributed to the construction of gendered and class hierarchies in early modern French society.



"Among the Odorous: Exploring the Renegotiation of Class Solidarity in George Orwell's *The Road to Wigan Pier*"

Marked as 'the great unwashed', the working class and the working poor were historically associated with dirt and neglect, reinforcing hierarchies through the maintenance of affective economies of disgust. Ahmed explains disgust as an embodied reaction where proximity to disgusting objects threaten the integrity of one's bodily space, representing both attraction and repulsion, which creates a special emphasis on the 'disgusting' object as both repulsive and alluring. Disgust, she argues, isn't merely a private emotion but serves as a social force that creates boundaries between individuals and groups (Ahmed 84–96). Yet, media such as art or literature are spaces in which social hierarchies of sight and smell may be reinforced and subverted. George Orwell's *The Road to Wigan Pier* serves not only as reflection of the lived experience of affective hierarchies marked by disgust and abjection, but opens a space where the sensory politics of disgust are actively addressed and (re-)negotiated. How does a narrative in favor of class solidarity navigate sensory cues that trigger internalized disgust? This paper explores how language and narrative structure position olfactory and other sensory cues as affective tools of disgust and negotiation in *The Road to Wigan Pier*. A close reading of *The Road to Wigan Pier* may establish affective resonances of disgust as sites of resistance, showcasing how renegotiated olfactory hierarchies mediate and (re-)shape class empathies.

**KLARA
TOLIC**

University of
Tübingen

"Planning, Smelling and the Delineation of Class in Bong Joon-ho's *Parasite*"

**SOFIA
DAVYDENKO**

University of
Geneva

Recent scholarship on Bong Joon-ho's *Parasite* extensively explores its portrayal of class struggle, domestic space and economic precarity. While some studies note the film's important olfactory dimension, none address a striking pattern: every scent-related scene in the film is structurally linked, either immediately before or after, to a scene in which the lower-class characters articulate, question, or reformulate a "plan," the self-fashioned script through which they imagine class ascent. These scenes, recurring with careful precision, suggest a deeper link between olfactory cues and plan-formation. In one interview, Bong Joon-ho explains that he wanted "to feature the class gap in...a multi-layered manner," and notes that "by talking about different smells, the film puts the class issue under the microscope" (Jin-hai, 2019). Similarly, in her article for the *Guardian*, Siobhan Lawless points out that "the word 'poor' is never uttered; instead, [...] social standing is revealed through body odors and scents." I observe that on the one hand, only the Parks – representatives of the upper class – interact with odor and discuss or show non-verbally its offending implications. On the other hand, the Kims and other representatives of the lower class are the ones constantly preoccupied with crafting a plan which should grant them upward mobility. This division suggests that class delineation is expressed not only through material differences but also through the kinds of anxieties and discourses different classes vocalize and are allowed to vocalize. I argue that in *Parasite*, the motifs of smell and the urgency of having a plan not only highlight the precariousness of the lower class but also serve as vehicles for the film's broader commentary on social mobility and class boundaries.



“Sediments of Floral Scents: From Preventive Medicine to Hierarchy in Nursing or: Orders Based in Flowers (1800-2015)”

In 2015 a series on myth busting in a popular newspaper focused an article on the German practice of nurses taking flower bouquets out of patients rooms at night. It was said that the nurses did this just because of consideration and kindness and that there was nothing more behind it. But it was far more than that. In my postdoc project I am researching the history of clinical odors from 1800-2025. According to Edmund Husserl's theory of sedimentation, science can become tradition, if we no longer understand the subjects. What was once science can “sedimentate itself so to speak” and then become an unquestioned tradition. According to Michel Foucault, the current paradigm is that doctors have organised the hospital around the visual. But this theory was doctor-centred, and the hospital comprises far more groups than just the physicians. Using the example of the scent of flowers, I would like to show that, from the 18th century onwards, it was to be avoided (especially at night) so that the flowers would not kill patients and eventually, long after this theory had ceased to apply, it became established practice, instilling and reinforcing obedience among nurses within their own hospital hierarchy.

**MONJA
SCHUENEMANN**

Otto-von-
Guericke-
Universität
Magdeburg

PANEL 5: META REFLECTIONS ON SMELL

“The Role of Storytelling in Smell Scholarship”

STEPHANIE OLIVER Colleagues laughing about researching smell in Victorian literature. Childhood frustration at a parent’s inability to describe the aroma of an orange grove. Harmful headaches after sleeping in a freshly-painted apartment. This paper attends to a conspicuous pattern in smell scholarship: the use of storytelling, particularly anecdotes, to convey personal and academic relationships to scent.

University
of Alberta

This paper is part of a larger project that develops and refines methodologies for studying literary scents. Specifically, it shifts the focus from representations of scent in literature to stories of scent in smell scholarship, particularly literary studies and related fields. Smell is deeply tied to memory, emotion, and associative learning; it is thus not surprising that scholars weave stories of scent into academic writing. But are these stories more than mere “hooks” that provide background and explain inspiration? What storytelling forms and techniques emerge in smell research, and what do they reveal about the relationship between smell, storytelling, and scholarship? How do anecdotes and other storytelling methods complicate or reinforce conventional scholarly methods (e.g. close reading), style (e.g. analytical writing), and modes of knowledge production (e.g. taxonomizing literary scents)?

To address these questions, this paper draws on foundational theories of positionality in feminist theory and Indigenous studies (e.g. Donna Haraway, Vanessa Watts) to consider how scholars use story to theorize olfactory positionality in explicit and implicit ways (e.g. Will Tullet, Warren Cariou, Kristen Simmons, and Robin Wall Kimmerer). By close reading notable examples from prominent smell scholars (e.g. Diane Akerman, Janice Carlisle, Hsuan Hsu), I will investigate how scholars’ scent stories convey what I call a “sensory positionality” that reveals (often unstated) relationships to the politics of knowledge production. I contend that studying scent invites scholars – including myself – to reflect on their positionality, and I aim to offer a model for participants to position themselves in their own work.

“Smelling Indian Epistemology: Olfactory Construction of Identities in Select Indian Classical Texts” (online)

Smell operates as a sociopolitical phenomenon beyond mere biology, shaping micro and macro social dynamics. We smell class, caste, gender, ethnicity, and religion—even unconscious sniffs creating proximity and distance in everyday life. Olfaction generates impressions that construct identities for individuals, groups, and spaces.

Yet the analytical possibility of taking smell seriously depends on which epistemological tradition one inhabits. Western epistemology, rooted in Aristotelian hierarchy, privileges sight and sound as rational while degrading smell, taste, and touch as emotional and animalistic, establishing monosensual dominance in knowledge production. Indian epistemology, by contrast, is fundamentally multisensory, recognizing *indriyas* as essential windows to knowledge, rooted in Indian classical texts. This multisensory worldview saturates ancient Indian literature. In the *Rāmāyana*, Rāma's crowning ceremony features elaborate aromatic descriptions, while his denial of the throne is marked by fragrance's conspicuous absence. The *Mahābhārata*'s '*Anushāsana Parva*' explicitly links smell hierarchy with social hierarchy—fragrant flowers for gods, foul-smelling ones for enemies. Other classical texts like Kālidāsa's *Meghdūtam* employ olfactory markers as spatial guides, while *Ritusamhāra*'s seasonal depictions exemplify multisensory aesthetics.

Such literary patterns reflect lived social arrangements. The training of noses mirrors caste locations: upper-caste individuals handling fragrant materials like sandalwood and incense occupy the hierarchy's apex, while those dealing with foul substances—corpses, excrement, animal skins—are relegated to the bottom or outside the caste hierarchy entirely. This creates a "smellable-unsmellable" dichotomy that enacts the "us versus them" binary from the vantage point of privileged groups, revealing how marginalization registers in the nostrils. In Indian tradition, smell remains integral to *dharma*, *artha*, and *kāma*, which are indispensable for achieving *mokṣa*.

This paper examines how smell constructs individual, group, and spatial identities, arguing that the nasal question is fundamentally a social question—one revealing the sensory dimensions of hierarchy, belonging, and exclusion in Indian society.

**SAYANTAN
GHOSH**

Hiralal
Mazumder
Memorial
College for
Women

“Olfactory Museology in Theory and Practice” (online)

**MOJCA
RAMŠAK** Olfactory museology focuses on the systematic research, documentation, and presentation of the olfactory dimension of heritage, where smell is not merely a complementary element of exhibitions but an independent interpretative medium with significant potential to establish a direct emotional and physical connection with the past. The presentation defines key concepts such as olfactory meaning, olfactory evaluation, olfactory object, olfactory exhibition, olfactory narrative, and olfactory gesture, which together form a methodological framework for a professional approach to olfactory heritage. Special attention is given to practical challenges, including olfactory nostalgia as a psychological bridge between present and past, olfactory fatigue as a physiological phenomenon of adaptation, and olfactory museum marketing, which creates new opportunities for selling olfactory souvenirs and strategically using scents in promotional campaigns. These concepts enable museum professionals to understand the physiological and psychological aspects of the olfactory experience. The presentation also addresses the complex ethical dilemmas that arise when engaging with smell. Historical authenticity raises questions about the legitimacy of reconstructed smells. Consent and exposure management address the issue of the inescapability of smell, necessitating clear marking of spaces. Cultural sensitivity and representation highlight the need to engage with communities of origin. Documentation challenges include the use of artificial intelligence, where there is a risk of algorithmically generated descriptions replacing authentic memories. Accessibility and inclusion require the development of strategies for different visitor groups. The presentation thus establishes the foundation for understanding olfactory museology as a critical practice that demands a constant balance between historical authenticity, visitor autonomy, cultural sensitivity, and ethical responsibility. The presentation will be illustrated with examples from contemporary museological practice.

University of
Ljubljana

“Smellscapes of Belonging: Olfactory Narrative, Mobility, and Identity in Malayalam Cinema”

This study investigates the role of olfactory experiences in Malayalam cinema as multisensory mediators of spatiality, memory, and cultural identity. It contends that olfactory cues function as markers of spatial boundaries and evoke affective nostalgia linked to ancestral homeland imaginaries. The frequent return-to-homeland narrative in Malayalam cinema hinges upon protagonists’ sensory re-encounters with the village air, thereby inscribing scent as a site of lineage and belonging.

**MUHAMMED
MUSTHAFA KP**

University of
Calicut

Malayalam movies privilege and valorise the rural scents through narratives that celebrate village aromas as emblematic of nostalgia and pastoral authenticity, often juxtaposed against urban modernity. Movies portray urban spaces as sensuous cities and the source of fetid odours, suggesting that the city is impregnated with foul odours and lacks the olfactory authenticity of a village. In addition, it also indicates the threshold of demarcating urban boundaries as exemplified in films such as *Pulival kalyanam* (Shafi 2003). This olfactory representation not only maps the cityscape but also articulates socio-spatial divisions, including the demarcation of urban ghettos, as portrayed in *Kumbalangi Nights*.

Furthermore, Gulf migration, a widespread phenomenon in Kerala, brings a distinct and desiring smell associated with aspirational modernity and transnational migration. The body of *gulfukaran* (Gulf returnee) is signaled through olfactory motifs such as *Atharinte manam* (the scent of perfumes) and other Gulf-related fragrances. These scents function as cultural signifiers of transformed cosmopolitan identities and reconfigured social imaginaries of success, thereby mapping transnational mobility onto localized sensory and class consciousness in the village smellscape. While earlier Malayalam films extensively incorporate references to fragrance in songs, they seldom visualize olfactory phenomena, thereby reinforcing the notion of smell as a non-diegetic and invisible sensory experience. This absence reflects the limitations of haptic visuality in these films. The 1997 film *Guru* (Anjal 1997) marks a significant intervention in visualizing smell, pioneering a cinematic engagement with the haptic dimension of olfaction. This analysis contributes to broader discussions on Malayalam cinema’s negotiation with modernity, employing olfactory modalities to interrogate sensory experiences entangled with spatial, social, and cultural transformations.



EXTRAS

CONTACT INFORMATION

Organisation

Nisan Karaca Odabasi
nisan.karaca_odabasi@tu-dresden.de

Judith Neder
judith.neder@tu-dresden.de

Prof. Dr. Cornelia Wächter (for zoom-related queries)
cornelia.waechter@tu-dresden.de

Address

Technische Universität Dresden
Wiener Straße 48
Fakultät Sprach-, Literatur- und Kulturwissenschaften
Institut für Anglistik und Amerikanistik
01062 Dresden

DIRECTIONS

Conference Warming (Friday, 19:00)

Ristorante Da Franco (Weberplatz 3, 01217 Dresden)
(accepts only cash payment)

Lunch break options

Saturday: Wachstube (Lennéstraße 9, 01069 Dresden)
Sunday: CompAsia (Sushi & Asian)
Nearby Supermarkets: Netto & Lidl (only on Saturday)
Nearby Bakeries: at Netto & Morenz (only on Saturday)

Conference Dinner (Saturday, 18:30)

Planwirtschaft (Louisenstraße 20, 01099 Dresden)
Take Tram 13 from Lennéplatz to Görlitzer Straße (see Map)

Useful apps for public transport:

VVO Mobil or DVB App





