

# The New Atmosphere of Death

Liminality, Olfactory and Pathicity in Virtual Reality

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*“You can block out all the senses except smell”*

Barbara Hyett

# Statement of Authorship

With my signature, I confirm to be the sole author of the thesis presented. Where the work of others has been consulted, this is duly acknowledged in the thesis' bibliography. All verbatim or referential use of the sources named in the bibliography has been specifically indicated in the text.

The thesis at hand has not been presented to another examination board. It has not been part of an assignment over my course of studies and has not been published. The paper version of this thesis is identical to the digital version handed in.

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# Part I: Prelude

## Abstract

This paper tackles the two great societal changes that are currently unfolding simultaneously. The first one, our relationship with death. From previous denial, sign of weakness, angst, dying is evolving into a matter of personal choice and self-curation. The laws permitting voluntary euthanasia and physician-assisted suicide reflect this shift.

The second one, the gradual transferal of a majority of experiences into the virtual realm known as Metaverse. Due to the transcending character of this specific moment in time, the liminality is palpable. Using the concept of atmosphere and affective experiences to demonstrate the importance of smells as atmosphere generators, this paper makes a point of the use of olfactory experiences as an emotional framework for navigating novice rites of passage.

What is the association between olfaction and the aesthetic perception of atmospheres? Do the concepts of liminality and ambiance connect? In a fully mediated and digitalised environment can one still speak of a pathic experience? This paper will prove that odours and atmospheric feelings are the same.

With hope to serve as an invitation to creators and inventors, to embrace the pathic ambiguity and intersubjective unexpectedness that odours encompass and use them as groundwork for bringing new types of digital experiences to life.



## Introduction

Throughout Western societies, there has been no other element of human life so certain, so given, as the cessation of it. Death. The end of life is a confirmation of the existence of a living entity, at the same time it is an irreversible rapture, a permanent shift in the essence of being.

Dying, however, or more accurately, our connection to it, as many concepts in human life, is also a part of a process of adaptation and perceptual change. One does not prepare, experience or talk about death today, as they did 50 years, or even 500 years ago. For a biological fact, (still) mostly beyond our control, this is surprising. Even though the actuality of dying remains unaltered, societies throughout time choose to see mortality through a different lens and with different emotions, always connected to other contemporary historical and societal events.

During a worldwide pandemic, one not only brushes constantly with the presence of death, but witnesses a denial of life itself. Existence has been reduced to a struggle for survival and a constant attempt of avoiding exposure of scent and touch for the fear of germs and viruses. This non-stop conscious alertness for deodorising, sterilising, and -most-importantly, *not breathing*<sup>1</sup> - has had an impact on finding enjoyment through unexpected olfactory experiences, essentially demonising any smell that reaches one's nose. It has altered also our phenomenological approach to everyday experiences. We are more aware of our noses that ever but for the "wrong" reasons. We need to be able to smell nice things again.

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<sup>1</sup> To be able to smell anything nowadays, means that one's mask is not adjusting properly and one is exposed to viruses and Covid.

Regarding death, the change is so prevailing, that Western legislations are becoming more open to the freedom for persons to choose the time of their own departing at an almost exponential rate. This newly evolving option of self curation of one's own death, the circumstances, the time, the location, the *atmosphere*, will bring a massive change in the way we talk about death, and our sentiment around it. Widespread attention and shifts in legislation towards assisted euthanasia and accompanied suicide are happening month by month, in the global north. This paper aims to shed light on this tipping point of change, by focusing on the atmosphere surrounding human mortality throughout time. Exploring this vacating atmosphere, the necessity for an update of perception towards death emerges. The atmosphere surrounding dying is changing.

The concept of atmospheres, surprisingly has not been around in the academic discourse for as long as one might think, even though one is in perpetual concern of *experiencing* or *creating* the right atmosphere. It is not just spaces that contain an atmosphere, but also people, traditions, rites of passage, social situations and periods in time, whether insignificant or important. Everything can be tuned, tinted in a specific way. An atmosphere can be either experienced and/or staged. When staging an atmosphere, for personal or commercial reasons, the creators imply a careful selection of various elements which through completion and contradiction, will emit the right ecstasies, thus creating the wanted atmosphere. For this purpose, one of the most common elements used is light and sound. This paper will argue that the most powerful parameter in atmospheres is

smell. Pushed in the quest towards a visuocentric society of detachment, the significance of olfaction in corporeal experiences is gaining attention thanks to artists and brand strategists who are using the potency of aroma-rich experiences to bring narratives to life.

Humans do have a very strong sense of smell. Our noses can effectively distinguish more than 1trillion of smells.<sup>2</sup> The sense of smell does not currently receive the same prestige and attention as seeing and hearing. During the 18th century, Western societies chose to collectively brand ‘smelling’ as an animalistic sense, and to establish vision and audition as the main senses which distinguished man from animal. Using odours for collective rites of passage, was a common practice in Ancient Greece and Rome. Long before the current scented candle boom, the ancients used odours to convey spatial messages, create emotional auras, and lay a common groundwork for rituals.

This thesis bifurcates into a portrayal of the significance of odours in embodiment and spatial situations, while concurrently analysing an emergent alteration in society’s acceptance of loss of life, as witnessed in the acceptance of (voluntary) euthanasia and physician assisted suicide.

By following a twofold investigation, the intention is to collide in the mind of the reader the power of smells as vessels of emotional familiarity when disembarking into unforeseen novice rites of passage while transitioning to an entirely digital representation of societal ecosystems.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.nih.gov/news-events/nih-research-matters/humans-can-identify-more-1-trillion-smells>

Wishing to set a specific atmosphere even in this very project, excerpts from *Soylent Green*, a movie depicting a reality not so distant from our own, are used. I see the societal mood depicted in the movie as a cardinal theme for this Thesis paper, interconnected in a multiplicity of ways to each chapter.

In Chapter 2.1 the concept of atmosphere, the way the academic discourse has evolved from its initial conceiving as a purely spatial idea, to come to represent tuned moods in society, a phenomena many thinkers label as ‘the affective turn’, ‘the ethereal turn’ etc. In 2.2 using examples from Ancient Greece and Rome, I analyse the significance of smells, essentially creating an unbreakable correlation between them. *Smells are atmospheres*. The next chapter, 2.3, some contemporary examples from the realm of advertising and art are presented to further establish the actuality which smells currently reap in the aesthetic economy.

The second main part of this paper, tackles with Death. 3.1 aims to explore the connection between the concepts of liminality and atmosphere in relation to spatial Stimmung. Focusing on the influential writings on human mortality by historian Philip Aries, Chapter 3.2 offers a brief but hopefully sufficient groundwork for understanding the various ways in which the atmosphere around death has been shaping throughout time. In Chapter 3.3, the neophytic practice of accompanied dying is discussed. To demonstrate the transcending Stimmung around this procedure I analyse some notable proponents, cases, devices, based on their semantic affordances and using always the concept of atmosphere as an analytical reference.

Finally, I end my quest in Part 4, by focusing on Virtual Reality. In the first chapter I am pondering the idea of pathicity in Cyberspace. I analyse the concept of an atmosphere when mediated in the virtual realm. In Chapter 4.2 I analyse what is still missing from Virtual Reality to make the feeling of presence and immersion more believable, by using as examples some recent cinematic or documentary VR media. The next Chapter, 4.3, I present selected examples for olfactory inclusivity in cinematic experiences and mediated environments, unfortunately none of them have succeeded till now.

2022

*The 1973 movie Soylent Green depicts New York in the year 2022, horridly polluted and overpopulated, with 40million citizens.*

*The sheer amount of people has its effects on the natural environment, which is entirely destroyed with almost all animal species wiped out. There are extreme food shortages. Overpopulation also has its effect on the governance which is proving insufficient in managing the populace and due to soaring corruption, is unable (and perhaps unwilling) to sort the food problem out. People have nothing to eat and nowhere to sleep, entrances and hallways of buildings are full of semi-homeless people, and those who cannot feed themselves die on the streets. Crime is rampant, and the weekly public restocking of Soylent and the newer more nutritious Soylent Green, usually end up in violent riots, since supplies do not last for everybody and the pricing is not controlled, leaving the most vulnerable out. Detective Thorn and his flatmate, former detective Sol, share the difficulties in this life and Sol often helps Thorn into various cases that he needs to solve.*

Part II:  
Atmospheres are Everything,  
Everything is Atmospheres

*'If you do not feel well in an environment, the reason might not be a toxic agent in the air but aesthetic impressions'*

Gernot Böhme

## Atmosphere, Affectivity, Affordance:

The word atmosphere: atmo (from greek ατμος: air, vapour) and sphere, comes from the scientific field and means a gas layer around a celestial body.

In the aesthetic discourse, atmosphere implies a certain spatial mood that fills a space, covers everything in that zone with a particular veil of modality. A great interest is currently directed towards atmospheres, ambiances, they are the object of active control, manipulation and analysis. This sudden interest in ambiances is not unrelated with the increasing time spend on social media and the necessity for self-representation in the virtual realm.

Some of the initial traces of interest in spatial moods can be found in the work of neo-phenomenologist Herman Schmitz, who defined the concept as 'affective powers of feeling, spatial bearers of moods' (Böhme, 1993). For Schmitz, atmospheres are entirely independent from the things in their borders, and the form as a primary quality of a thing is the parameter that emanates the 'ecstasies' of the thing, which in turn "unctures" the remaining atmospherical bubble.<sup>3</sup>

After Schmitz, various thinkers have approached the idea from different sides. Gernot Böhme sees atmospheres as a

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<sup>3</sup> Böhme, Gernot. (1993). Atmosphere as the Fundamental Concept of a New Aesthetics. Thesis Eleven. 36. 113-126.



clearly defined spatial phenomena<sup>4</sup> as he analyses them in his seminal ‘The Aesthetics of Atmospheres’, he defines atmosphere as something that lies inbetween, what mediates two sides. It is “the transparent layer of emotions that fills a space, and affects people and objects who find themselves in this certain location”. Atmospheres are invisible but their affective core is not. They are quasi-objective phenomena, their existence is felt, but they do not display physical properties.<sup>5</sup> The character of an atmosphere is defined by the affective quality that it portrays on the perceiver. The atmosphere of a space is what defines the spatial mood of that space, the way one is expected to feel upon entering the boundaries there, where the atmosphere is present. The most intrinsic traits of atmospheres are their spatiality and their emotional character, which makes them susceptible to a certain degree of subjectivity. Atmospheres can be experienced and be produced.

To be in the world is to feel the atmosphere of a space, to be affected by it. They are totalities,<sup>6</sup> they taint and imbue everything in a certain light. The atmosphere is the primal object of perception, one enters a space and its atmosphere is the first *thing* that is being felt.

The connection of atmosphere with the term affordance lies in that they are both objects of primal perception, one enters an atmosphere and receives its affect, before being in a condition to analyse it using logic (Griffero). The term affordance was coined by James J. Gibson in *The Senses Considered as Perceptual Systems* and means ‘what the environment offers the animal, what it provides or furnishes,

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<sup>4</sup> Riedel, Friedlind. (2019) Atmosphere, in Slaby, J., & von Scheve, C. (2019). *Affective Societies: Key Concepts* (1st ed.). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781351039260>

<sup>5</sup> Böhme, Gernot. *Ambiances, Atmospheres and Sensory Experiences of Space* (2017) Routledge, London and New York

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.* p.55

either for good or ill' (Gibson, 1979) They are a relationship, do not have to be visible, known or desirable. Some affordances are yet to be discovered<sup>7</sup>. Since then the concept has been endorsed by the design community thanks to the book *The Design of Everyday Things* by Don Norman, and its meaning has evolved to mean 'those action possibilities that are readily perceivable by an actor' and more specifically for product design (and user-experience design and HCI), meaning the way the user perceives an object and what their impression on the objects actions are, and how they might interact with it. So affordance for objects is the way they present themselves in a functional way, whereas atmospheres are the way spaces and actors present themselves in an emotional way. An objects' affordance tells us what we can do with it, shows us its possibilities, its disposition. A (spatial or otherwise) atmosphere tells us what we should feel upon entering it, shows us its affective qualities, it's attunement. An atmosphere is an entity, infused with a concrete mood, which presses this mood on the persons that enter its physical qualia, and tints the objects in its atmospheric emotionality.

To understand atmospheres, the German word Stimmung (attunement) is essential, as according to Thonhauser, 'both drive towards subverting binary distinctions between mental and bodily, subjective and objective, inner and outer'. According to him, for Heidegger, it is the attunements which 'signify the ontic instantiations of this ontological structure' of the Dasein. Stimmung is to beings not an outside component, but a sum of their parts. One is always in

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<sup>7</sup> [https://jnd.org/affordances\\_and\\_design/](https://jnd.org/affordances_and_design/) The website of Don Norman, where he talks about his work and affordances in design

Stimmung (tuned), even when in the wrong one, or a not so prevailing one, the Stimmung (attunement) comes in modalities (Heidegger).<sup>8</sup>

Böhme makes a connection between a tuned space and the aesthetics of commodities, as established initially through packaging design, now to convey an atmosphere of an entire lifestyle (usually of affluence) through advertising, social media, and generally in cyberspace. Nowadays, one buys a commodity, not because of its function, but because of the way it is presented, the atmosphere of the lifestyle in which it is perceived. So an atmosphere is not only the mood in a space but is also an invisible set of coded messages and desires, portraying a socio-economic background displayed through a specific selection of visual symbols.

The preoccupation with lifestyle has resulted in what Böhme calls the ‘complete aesthetisation of our lifeworld’ in which everything needs to be staged in the appropriate way, not only products for sale, but also people and situations. Objects (and people) are evaluated upon their *Iszenierungswert* (staging value). The very idea of creating an atmosphere comes from stage design, where the positioning of objects with referential meanings and the accentuation (or not) with lighting happened first. Since then, nearly every aspect of daily life is a curated experience of one’s own digital representation, though the staging of the lifestyle atmosphere one yearns to portray. This is the fundamental principle of the aesthetic economy, where everything (and everyone) is valued upon their use-stage value, the type of

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<sup>8</sup> Thonhauser, Gerhard. Tuning the world: A conceptual history of the term Stimmung part two (2021) in Dylan Trigg (ed.) *Atmospheres and Shared Emotions Ambiances, Atmospheres and Sensory Experiences of Spaces*. (pp40-56) Routledge, London and New York

atmosphere that they emanate, to what extent they can ‘intensify life’.

Unfortunately, Böhme falls in modernity’s trap, by attributing absolute importance to the sense of vision and disregarding completely the other senses (even sound), as witnessed by his thoughts on what is considered beautiful: the examples he uses are paintings by Mark Rothko<sup>9</sup>, also admitting that ‘we *look* for beauty everywhere’<sup>10</sup>, he does not write ‘we sniff for beauty everywhere’ or even ‘we seek for beauty everywhere’. Böhme finds beauty in ‘the light glinting on a pewter vessel, or in the play of shadow on a white wall’.<sup>11</sup> For Böhme, atmospheres, their aesthetics and their beauty is something to be perceived only through the eyes.

For the architect Peter Zumthor<sup>12</sup> the potentiality of atmospheric generation is narrowed even further down, he reduces atmospheric perception and generation on the (mainly) visual qualities of materials.<sup>13</sup>

For Griffero, pathicity, the ability to receive effects rather than produce them, is key when entering upon an atmosphere. To experience an atmosphere, is to be surrendered to its affectivity. The influence of a spatial mood

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<sup>9</sup> Böhme, Gernot. *Ambiances, Atmospheres and Sensory Experiences of Space* (2017) Routledge, London and New York. p.101

<sup>10</sup> Ibid. p.124, italics mine

<sup>11</sup> Ibid. p.104

<sup>12</sup> Zumthor, P. 2006. *Atmospheres: Architectural Environments. Surrounding Objects*. Birkhäuser, Basel

<sup>13</sup> Zumthor’s thoughts on ambiance creation do not need further analysis here, industrial designers in their own creative process since early on have made use of the affective properties of materials to create affordances and to ‘tune’ an object in a specific way, in a point of the product development known as CMF (color-material-finishing), to recreate a feeling of affluence (when necessary) or to imbue it in a more visibly environmentally-friendly ambience (nowadays more valued than affluence), always in connection to the aesthetic economy.

comes before the ability to register its effects on oneself though logic.

Atmosphere and ambiance or mood is also used to signify a generalised broader Stimmung, which is hinged on specific events of societal importance, and is thus connected to a specific historical period in time. For example, one speaks of ‘a fascist atmosphere during the military Junta’, or the ‘atmosphere of the 90s’, then elements which connect to this period are immediate carriers of that specific ambience. One cannot simply decorate their home with Nazi memorabilia, due to the extremely strong negative emotional baggage (or affordance) and the deeply unsettling ecstasies which those objects emanate. On a more positive note, one often speaks of ‘the atmosphere of the 90s’, (a very common theme in the aesthetic economy) and means the general semantics of that decade, the music, the fashion, the general aesthetics, as well a reference to the way of life back then, more hopeful, optimistic, care-free etc.

Atmosphere also can be connected with a social movement, or a general political climate, one speaks for example of the ‘tense atmosphere on the Ukrainian border’, or ‘the atmosphere of oppression in Afghanistan’ etc. In such cases atmospheres are not generated by sensorial triggers such as light or sound, but are generalised social phenomena<sup>14</sup>. Based on these examples, the observation is made that when talking about social/historical ambiances, we can follow a separation between good or bad, for a historical context is never represented or remembered in an impartial way, its affect on future developments is mostly analysed through a negative or a positive scope and in regards to the extend that it further permeates and taints future events.

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<sup>14</sup> For more on social atmospheres see Derek P. McCormack and Ben Anderson

## Odors are atmospheres

*Thorn is back at the flat after a long day on the job.  
He puts some unspecified snack in his mouth, but twists his  
face in disgust: 'tasteless, odourless crud', he says.*

Smells, like atmospheres fill the boundaries of a physical space, they are quasi-things<sup>15</sup>, invisible but their affective qualities are not. Once one is in the territory of an odour, it is impossible to escape the thoughts in the form of synapses that the neurones in the brain send to each other. Automatically, the mind is transferred to another place, another mood, one is tuned in whichever way the smell dictates, affected entirely by the molecules of the smell.

*"Many years had elapsed during which nothing of Combray, save what was comprised in the theatre and the drama of my going to bed there, had any existence for me, when one day in winter, on my return home, my mother, seeing that I was cold, offered me some tea, a thing I did not ordinarily take. I declined at first, and then, for no particular reason, changed my mind.*

*She sent for one of those squat, plump little cakes called "petites madeleines," which look as though they had been moulded in the fluted valve of a scallop shell. And soon, mechanically, dispirited after a dreary day with the prospect of a depressing morrow, I raised to my lips a spoonful of the tea in which I had soaked a morsel of the cake.*

*No sooner had the warm liquid mixed with the crumbs touched my palate than a shiver ran through me and I stopped, intent upon the extraordinary thing that was happening to me. An exquisite pleasure had invaded my senses, something isolated, detached, with no suggestion of its origin. And at once the vicissitudes of life had become indifferent to me, its disasters innocuous, its brevity illusory — this new sensation having had the effect, which love has, of filling me with a precious essence; or rather this essence was not in me, it was me. I had ceased now to feel mediocre, contingent, mortal.*

*Whence could it have come to me, this all-powerful joy? I sensed that it was connected with the taste of the tea and the cake, but that it infinitely transcended those savours, could, no, indeed, be of the same nature. Whence did it come? What did it mean? How could I seize and apprehend it?*

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<sup>15</sup> Griffero

*I put down the cup and examine my own mind. It alone can discover the truth. But how: What an abyss of uncertainty; whenever the mind feels overtaken by itself; when it, the seeker, is at the same time the dark region through which it must go seeking and where all its equipment will avail it nothing. Seek? More than that: create. It is face to face with something which does not yet exist, to which it alone can give reality and substance, which it alone can bring into the light of day:*

*Undoubtedly what is thus palpitating in the depths of my being must be the image, the visual memory which, being linked to that taste, is trying to follow it into my conscious mind. But its struggles are too far off, too confused and chaotic; scarcely can I perceive the neutral glow into which the elusive whirling medley of stirred-up colours is fused, and I cannot distinguish its form, cannot invite it, as the one possible interpreter, to translate for me the evidence of its contemporary; its inseparable paramour, the taste, cannot ask it to inform me what special circumstance is in question, from what period in my past life.*

*And suddenly the memory revealed itself. The taste was that of the little piece of madeleine which on Sunday mornings at Combray (because on those mornings I did not go out before mass), when I went to say good morning to her in her bedroom, my aunt Léonie used to give me, dipping it first in her own cup of tea or tisane. The sight of the little madeleine had recalled nothing to my mind before I tasted it; (...) Taste and smell alone, more fragile but more enduring, more unsubstantial, more persistent, more faithful, remain poised a long time, like souls, remembering, waiting, hoping, amid the ruins of all the rest; and bear unflinchingly, in the tiny and almost impalpable drop of their essence, the vast structure of recollection.”*

À la recherche du temps perdu, Marcel Proust<sup>16</sup>

Observed initially by Marcel Proust, what is now widely known as the Proustian Moment, or Proust Phenomenon, is a demonstration of how a specific smell taps deeply into the subconscious and retrieves long forgotten memories from one's past. Olfaction is the only human sense which can do that. What is more, as Proust observes, the scent of the

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<sup>16</sup> Proust, M. (1913-27). Remembrance of Things Past. Volume 1: Swann's Way: Within a Budding Grove. The definitive French Pleiade edition translated by C.K. Scott Moncrieff and Terence Kilmartin. New York: Vintage. pp. 48-51.

madeleine *'had invaded my senses, something isolated, detached, with no suggestion of its origin'* it had come first in his perception, and affected him, before his cognition could begin to analyse in which setting he was exposed to the smell of the madeleine. He is first tuned, tintured and permeated via the atmospheric power of the smell, he becomes one with the invisible atmospheric feeling (*this new sensation having had the effect, which love has, of filling me with a precious essence; or rather this essence was not in me, it was me*) immersed in the positive valance and emotionally altered by its affect (*I had ceased now to feel mediocre, contingent, mortal*), stemming from the memory which is slowly taking shape in his cognition (*the visual memory which, being linked to that taste, is trying to follow it into my conscious mind*) but does not take shape until moments later (*suddenly the memory revealed itself*). Proust himself comes to the realisation that it is the taste and the smell that has led him on this extraordinary recollection of his past and has uplifted his spirits.

Odors are affordances, they inform one of the qualities of a space, who is in it, what has taken place or is about to happen. Odors are synesthetic pathic experiences on their own, they taint and affect, like Schmitz's ecstasies, not just the things in a locality, but our whole perception and cognition is filtered through the message that the odour dictates. Is it an unpleasant smell? Immediately leave, staying in that place cannot be safe. Is it a smell we like? Pleasantly affected, we have to smell more of it, our mood changes, we become one with the pleasantness of the aroma.

A nice smell immediately changes the Stimmung in a space, or the disposition of a person. Imagine coming back home from a horrible day at work, or simply going into the kitchen- to discovered that a fragrant and spicy ramen soup



is cooking on the stove? A bad odour -which also means a bad taste- <sup>17</sup> cannot cover for a pleasant visual experience. Imagine eating in a high-end design restaurant but the staff smell horribly. Compare this experience to a shabby, back street joint which has not renovated the interiors since 1999, but the smell of home cooked food covers everything. Which experience is more pleasant? What is the point in admiring ‘the beauty of the play of shadow on a white wall’<sup>18</sup> if everywhere smells of rotten eggs?

*Thorn exits the small dark apartment he is sharing with Sol to go to work. He has a full night shift at the police station. As he is walking down the stairs of the apartment building, homeless people are laying on each step, on top of each other, dressed in rags, malnourished, dirty.*

*The next scene shows the general atmosphere of the city: Everything feels dirty, stinky, grimy. Everybody is sweaty, poor, angry. The color palette is between a toxic green, mold-green, and grey, symbolic of the destruction of the natural environment and the unhealthy air people breathe. Due to the greenhouse effect, and the constant heatwaves, everybody is constantly sweaty. Washing clothes or even having a warm shower are habits which belong to the past, because of the climate catastrophe.*

On the atmosphere of a city (page 201) Böhme writes “Odors are an essential element of the atmosphere of the city, perhaps even the most essential” to continue “for odors are, like almost no other sensible phenomenon, atmospheric: Expelled indeterminately into the distance, they envelop, cannot be avoided; they are that quality of surroundings which most intensely allows us to sense through our disposition (Befinden) where we are”. Unfortunately, after this moment of authorising great agency to the power of

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<sup>17</sup> There is no flavour without olfaction

<sup>18</sup> Böhme, Gernot. *Ambiances, Atmospheres and Sensory Experiences of Space* (2017) Routledge, London and New York. p.104

smells, he contradicts himself by not mentioning scents in the last part of the book, when presenting the tools used to create an atmosphere. Light and sound are presented extensively, making no further mention of smells (pages 269-340).

*In the extreme dystopia of Soylent Green, only the elite white men have showers and hot running water at home. The large majority of people, do not even have a place to stay, and even the ones that do, do not have enough running water for personal hygiene. The temperature outside is steadily about 35°C, but people cannot cleanse themselves...*

One's own smell is an attentive declaration of personhood and embodiment. What concerns self-presentation in the aesthetic economy, smell is more essential than vision when it comes to creating a personal effluvia of oneself for peer-acceptance. One's hygiene is one of the most important, if not the most important unwritten rule of coexisting in society. Those who do not oblige to this rule are automatically shoved to the fringes and respectively those who belong to the fringes of society, are bearers of smells deemed negatively by the other members. Apart from cleanliness, perfume is another essential part when one creates their atmosphere, their invisible personal bubble. The boundaries of one's body are not where one's skin ends or how long one can stretch their arms. It is the perceptible personal sphere of smell, attached to every person, and based on their personal odour. The stronger it is, the more 'space' a person takes. A person who smells unpleasantly to the others surrounding him, makes everybody instinctively to avoid them, they have managed to get more personal space for themselves. Similarly, someone

who wears a strong perfume, makes their presence *sensed* from afar; their perfume is the declaration of their arrival and their presence generally.

As with the home, there is a multiplicity of smells which correspond to various moods-atmospheres, always in correspondence to desired result. One chooses a smell in order to create an atmosphere, and to tune themselves to one. For example, one does not wear the same perfume for the office, as they would at a bar. And one does not wear November's perfume in May. The same principle to clothing applies here: a perfume is an additional layer of 'clothing', it creates an invisible barrier to the outside while revealing a personal taste and social disposition. It functions the same way as fashion does, for every occasion and place, there is always the appropriate outfit and smell.

In Ancient Greece and Rome, scents were used in a variety of ways and people had a highly developed sense of olfactory aesthetics.<sup>19</sup> For personal self care and adornment the Ancients had a rich 'olfactory wardrobe' of various ointments, oils and smokes. The royals even had personal perfumers, to be able to create personal olfactory experiences on call, but also encompassing atmospheres for social gatherings. Even dogs in antiquity were aromatised. Although initially accessible mostly for the upper classes, with the rise of palestrae and baths during the Hellenistic and Roman periods led to a 'democratisation' of perfume use (Brun, 2004). Regarding the human usage of scents,

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<sup>19</sup> Aroma, the Cultural History of Smell. Constance Classen, David Howes, Anthony Synnott, Routledge, 1994. p17

there were often even specific ones for different parts of the body. (Classen, Howes, Synnott)

The ancient homes were also fragrant. Scent-savvy, Greeks and Romans used herbs and aromatic woods in clever ways to enrich the atmosphere of the home and also enhance the sense of cleanliness: they daubed the walls of the home with perfumed unguent and sprinkled the mosaic floors with fragrant water and flowers.<sup>20</sup> During cold season, burning scented wood gave the home a warm and pleasantly fragrant atmosphere.<sup>21</sup> They filled cushions with dried herbs, and used pulverised scents on the bed linens<sup>22</sup>. The creation of an atmosphere of the home was directly linked with the use of scents and aromas. Additional to the aesthetic purpose of home aromas, they also served a hygienic purposes: incense, the most popular scent in antiquity, kept rodents out but was also considered an air-purifier, getting rid of airborne viruses and misfortunes. Incense was also burned after every meal, to 'render the atmosphere agreeably spicy'.(Classen, Howes, Synnott)

One can only imagine how cities and towns smelled before the agricultural and the industrial revolution. The exhaustion pipes of means of transport and the polluted air have created an ever-present layer of smog, impossible to escape, unless one travels to the great outdoors. In ancient Greece and Rome, it was common practice to mix perfume right into the mortar, creating a type of multi-sensorial

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid. p.18

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid. p.65

architecture, this also added an important layer of information for the citizen.<sup>23</sup> Theatres also made use of the atmospheric propensities imbued by scents, in Ancient Rome ‘their stages were sprinkled with saffron or other scents’. This helped to create not only a pleasant experience aesthetically but also to unite the viewers in a way that vision alone could not, the meandering invisible presence of the sweet smells united them and engulfed them into a common spell, making them ‘feel identified with the play and with each other’. Here one witnesses the use of scents as an invisible, but strongly sensible factor for atmospheric generation, accompanying a visual spectacle. We can speculate as to what had a more vivid impression on the visitors of this theatre, the play unfolding onto the stage, which they have to follow closely with their eyes, or the lingering cloud of godly saffron penetrating carelessly their noses and gaining direct access to the limbic system of their brain?

Further strong evidence of the powers of smell for unification was the ‘collective perfuming’ a ‘means for entertaining and impressing the masses and establishing group solidarity’.(Classen, Howes, Synnott)

*Of course the rich in Soylent Green do not live like the poor. They get to enjoy spacious apartments, furnished with sleek retro-futuristic fixtures. Women are also included with each luxurious condo, as they are considered ‘furniture’. The homes of the rich are clean, bright, airy. And have showers! The ultimate luxury...  
The rich -men- also have access to real food, vegetables and beef, and do not have to compromise even with a high-end version of Soylent.*

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid. p.27

At festive occasions of the ancient upper class and gatherings hosts and guests would be heavily adorned with fragrant flowers, around the chest, so that the smells could ‘enliven the heart’ and around the head. Petals were also scattered around the floors, creating a fragrant rug. The usage of smells for generating a spatial mood and a personal atmosphere as well, a shared attunement throughout the common sweet scent of flowers. In rituals, smells played a particularly important role, as messengers carriers towards the deity or person to whomever the message was intended. Scents were considered to have metaphysical properties, in ancient Egypt it was believed that the strong scent of incense would provide the pathway towards heaven, the deceased could just follow the trajectory of the smell, which due to the heavenly beauty of the smell of incense would travel upwards till the gods.

*While investigating the murder of the affluent Simonson, Thorn manages to sneak some of the real produce (salad, tomatoes, a piece of beef) that Stevenson’s porcupine Shirl bought from the secret mini market for the elites. He is more interested in the bottle of cognac that he confiscated from Simonson’s condo.*

During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, thinkers such as Kant, Hegel, Marx, Darwin, and Freud collectively ‘decided’ that humanity should focus on vision and audition as its primary senses. Smell, according to them is an animalistic and brute sense.<sup>24</sup> In the years that followed olfaction was pushed aside, something made visible in the arts but in everyday life as well. People who sought after the

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<sup>24</sup> Kelvin E. Y. Low (2007) *Scents and Scent-sibilities: Smell and Everyday Life Experiences*. Newcastle upon Tyne, U.K.: Cambridge Scholars Publishing

enjoyment of smells were branded ‘savages, degenerate proletariat, or else aberrations: perverts, lunatics or idiots’. Smell was marginalised and demonised not only because of its alleged inferiority, but additionally because its radical interiority, its boundary-transgressing propensities and its emotional potency. (Classen, Howes, Synnott)  
Olfaction suffered greatly because of Modernity.

*After spending some time in the condo with Shirl, Thorn prepares to leave. Shirl, as a non-independent decorative woman, tries to persuade him to stay overnight by being cute. She offers to cook him some real food for breakfast. Thorn, though, is a tough man and will hear nothing of it, he has a lot of work to do, down at the station. Until Shirl pulls out the ultimate temptation: he can have a warm shower. Thorn ecstatically accepts the offer immediately.*

A general turn towards acceptance of more senses other than the primal of vision and audition was initiated through philosophers of Phenomenology such as Husserl, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, Bachellard, around the first half of the 20th century. Phenomenologists focused on the various structures that define experiences and consciousness, from a first person point of view. They rejected the use of quantitative data and aimed for subjectivity and the explanation of the phenomena unfiltered by preconceptions and logic. This set them on the opposite side of Kant and his followers, when it came to the importance of vision and audition, since phenomenologists analysed the way phenomena affected them in a variety of senses, not only through vision.

*“I alone, in my memories of another century, can open the deep cupboard that still retains for me alone that unique odor, the odor of raisins drying on a wicker tray. The odor of raisins! It is an odor that is beyond description, one that it takes a lot of imagination to smell.”*

The Poetics of Space, Gaston Bachellard<sup>25</sup>

For Bachellard, a smell travels from the nose into the limbic system of the brain in the same way as one goes deeper into an old house and opens cupboards, whose contents are long forgotten. This phenomenon then results in unexpected atmospheres in the shape of memory recollections, which appear suddenly and completely in front of ones perception, their totality so immersive that the perceiver is completely taken into, mesmerised by the moment or person that the smell connects to. These memories are a rapture for the perception of reality, since the experiencer is *teleported* into the locality of the memory, they become a traveller in time. Olfaction is the only one of the five human senses which can trigger such distinct recollections and activate long forgotten memories.

*Thorn drops on the kitchen table of the grimy flat he shares with Sol the confiscated treasures. Sol looks at the tomatoes and starts crying.*

There is a scientific explanation for all of this, of course. The power of smell as the strongest smell is based on two separate factors: the first one has to do with the nature of the smell molecules, which have a longevity beyond the

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<sup>25</sup> Bachellard, Gaston (1958) The Poetics of Space. Presses Universitaires de France. English edition 1964



mere presence of the person or item that produced the smell.<sup>26</sup> They linger in the air, after the generating factor has shifted position. (When I give some cheese to my dog, after he has eaten it, he pokes with his nose through the air on the exact same invisible trajectory that the piece of cheddar moved through)

*In spite of the hardship and misery in 2022 New York, Sol and Thorn are making ends meet and enjoying each other's companionship. Thorn, as the younger and stronger one, offers his physical strength whenever there is a power outage and they need to generate electricity by pedalling, and Sol as the elderly one, offers words of wisdom. The groceries Thorn snuggles from the house of the elite, Sol cooks. Reminiscent of a time long gone, when real food was available for everybody, and the natural environment wasn't destroyed.*

Moreover, olfaction is the sense with the biggest proximity to the brain.(figure 1) The smell molecules interact with the system of the brain in 3 different ways:

- 1)The olfactory system is closely connected to the limbic system in the brain, such as the amygdala, which is involved in emotional memory (Herz, Eliassen, Souza, 2004)<sup>27</sup>
- 2) Olfactory processing happens in the orbitofrontal cortex of the brain, where also a significant part of the regulation of emotion and motivation takes place (Hawkes and Doty, 2009)<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Stevenson, Richard (2014). The Forgotten Sense: Using Olfaction in a Museum Context: A Neuroscience Perspective in Nina Levent and Alvaro Pascual-Leone (ed) The Multisensory Museum: Cross-Disciplinary Perspectives on Touch, Sound, Smell, Memory and Space. (pp 151-167) Rowman and Littlefield, Maryland and Plymouth

<sup>27</sup> *ibid.* p.154

<sup>28</sup> *ibid.* p.155

3)Olfaction reaches much higher in the brain -cortical structures- without having to pass through the “gatekeeper”, the thalamus (Tham, Stevenson, Miller, 2009) This explains the ability of odours to affect conscious experience subliminally.<sup>29</sup>

These parameters not only tell of the powers of olfaction, but also differentiate its advantage against vision and audition. A seen image or a heard does not linger in one’s conscience, after the source which is visible or making the noise, disappears. The smell however, can stay for hours even days. Think about the smell of fried fish, or the clothes of a smoker. Another aspect which sets smells apart from visuals and sounds, as mentioned in the Proust Phenomenon, is the ability for instant memory recall, from the depths of the brain, which effect images and sounds cannot produce. Moore describes it like this: “the odor molecules have effectively reached inside of my memory bank and activated those long bygone days. Just as if viewing a virtual reality movie of my life, I am surrounded by my past”<sup>30</sup>. Smells are an encoding-decoding mechanism for past experiences, like no other sense, but not only that. A felt smell is a powerful medium for immersion, the same way as a virtual reality film or a book immerses one. One’s memories of the past immerse them, and separate them from the current reality. Seeing and hearing lack this ability.

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<sup>29</sup> *ibid.* p.155

<sup>30</sup> *ibid.* p.35

*As promised, Sol cooks for Thorn the goodies  
Thorn sneaked out from the murdered Simonson.  
We see them chewing on large pieces of lettuce, and  
cheering with the cognac, poured in the only two available  
cups they have, - hint: none of them crystal -. Sol brings out  
a tiny pot with the cooked beef. Can you imagine how this  
would smell to someone who for years has been eating  
solidified pale green mix of soy and lentils? Thorn is very  
curious about the food. Together with Sol they are having a  
great time, chewing, drinking and twisting their faces from  
enjoyment. Sol is making the typical gesture with the hand  
to show how delicious the food is.  
-Sol: I haven't eaten like this in years!  
-Thorn: I have never eaten like this !*

## The Ethereal Turn?

After the Pictorial Turn<sup>31</sup>, a shift in cognitive priorities, connected with the need for a society free of racism and outdated stereotypes, more sensitivity and empathy, the so-called Affective Turn is emerging, with its initial time frame set somewhere around 1995<sup>32</sup> and calls for the refocusing on the way one feels in a society. Atmosphere is an essential parameter of the Affective - Pathic Turn.

As seen, in antiquity smells were used as framework for team-building and amplifying the sense of solidarity. Today, scents do currently play an important part in our lives but mainly as commodities, as the increased interest in the use of smells collides with what the ‘complete aesthetisation of the lifeworld’ and the potency of smells is harnessed for commercial purposes. In a dense urban environment, one is highly unlikely to have access to unmediated and naturally occurring fragrant scentscapes, unless they are part of the aesthetic economy.

In 2011, Sephora teams up with Firmenich, leading fragrance manufacturer, and production company The Department of the 4th Dimension, to create the world’s first pop-up scent museum ‘The Sensorium: Lucid Dreams from the Sensory World’ in New York’s Meatpacking District. According to the teams ‘we imagined a blend of cinema, design and technology where the sense of smell brings life to image and sound’ and invite to visitor to ‘step into a perfumer’s earliest memory of scent’.<sup>33</sup> Visitors wander

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<sup>31</sup> W.J.T. Mitchell, *Picture Theory*, The University of Chicago Press, 1994

<sup>32</sup> Massumi, Brian (1995). "The Autonomy of Affect". *Cultural Critique*. Autumn (31): 83–109

<sup>33</sup> <https://www.dexigner.com/news/24072>

through a 6 of medium sized dimly lit spaces, in each a pedestal with the scent of each room is positioned and corresponding projected imagery. The displayed smells focus either on prepackaged atmospheres such as ‘Spring is Back’(with green colors, and blurry zooms between grasses shown on the walls), ‘Warm Embrace’, (close-ups of a wool pullover), ‘Weekend Splendor’ (the visuals show grass-mowing) ‘Bacon & Bisquits’ etc.

*Thorn didn't sneak only produce and alcohol from Simonson's flat. He also took a small bar of soap. Intrigued by it, he uses it. He is surprised how nice his hands smell afterwards.. he keeps sniffing himself. We see him also in a couple of more scenes to bring the translucent orange oval-shaped piece of soap to his nose and to exhale deeply; he cannot get enough of it...*

Apart from branding, smells can also have political potential, in shaping namely a social atmosphere, since they ‘foster participation and direct engagement’<sup>34</sup>. In the ‘Olfactory Art and the Political and an Age of Resistance’, Lynn and Riley Parr mention the work of post-black olfactory artist Rashid Johnson, who makes use of shea butter and black soap in his works. Shea butter has been used extensively in Africa and in the Black Diaspora in the States, before -white- cosmetic companies started exploiting the great potential of this emollient. Johnson, through his olfactory art, reclaims the roots of shea butter, and sheds light on another aspect of cultural appropriation from white elites, on key elements of daily African-American life.

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<sup>34</sup> L.Hsu, Hsuan (2021) Olfactory Politics in Black Diasporic Art in Gwenn—Aël Lynn, Debra Riley Parr (ed) Olfactory Art and the Political and an Age of Resistance. Routledge, New York and London. pp10-22

Olfactory branding, is a fast growing sector of the aesthetic economy that most people are not aware of. Dawn Goldworm, the director of olfactive branding agency 12.29<sup>35</sup> is one of the most well-known specialists of this important yet evasive design discipline. For Goldworm, a brand cannot achieve emotional communication with their clients, if they do not include smells in their brand experience. One of her most outstanding projects was the design of the signature smell for the Nike brand, which was inspired by the smell of ‘a rubber basketball sneaker as it scrapes across the court and a soccer cleat in grass and dirt’.<sup>36</sup> This serves as an excellent example of how smells can trigger unmistakable emotional responses, and recreate entire atmospheres through a simple hint of a second in time -*a sneaker as it scrapes across the court*- which in the minds of the experiencers recreates this specific emotional memory, or a similar one. By recreating this recognisable smell, as a branding element, Nike will essentially ‘own’ every moment that a person who has been exposed to their scent, and the times that they will experience it even out of the context of Nike itself. This ‘feedback’ or ‘ping-pong’ effect further establishes and strengthens their brand presence in the subliminal consciousness of their clients, without the need to be present in visuals marketing platforms (online, print, tv etc)

Finally, a very important observation regarding the commodification of smells, is that the memories that odors

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<sup>35</sup> <https://1229scent.com/>

<sup>36</sup> <https://bettermarketing.pub/how-olfaction-influences-buying-6f6367908ab6>

trigger are mostly from the first decade of a person's life.<sup>37</sup> (*figure 2*) This is priceless data in the hands of atmosphere stagers in the aesthetic economy, which depending on the target group aimed, can accurately choose smell triggers based on the prevailing smells during the childhoods of said target group.

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<sup>37</sup> Stevenson, Richard (2014). The Forgotten Sense: Using Olfaction in a Museum Context: A Neuroscience Perspective in Nina Levent and Alvaro Pascual-Leone (ed) *The Multisensory Museum: Cross-Disciplinary Perspectives on Touch, Sound, Smell, Memory and Space.* (pp 151-167) Rowman and Littlefield, Maryland and Plymouth

# Part III: Liminality



# Liminal Atmospheres / Atmospheres of Liminality

In anthropology, liminal is the phase during rites of passage in which the participant is stripped of their pre-ritual status, but have not yet transitioned into the new one.<sup>38</sup> From the work *Limen*, which in Latin means “threshold” this period is always connected with a feeling of ambiguity and disorientation. *(figure 3)*

Dying is a form of liminality, due to the passing through the threshold between life and death, existence and non-existence, the earthly realm and the metaphysical (for those who believe).

Since then the term has been appropriated into various fields, connected to non-places (*Auge*) such as airports, hallways, places of transition. In internet culture, liminality is a growing trend<sup>39</sup> amongst hobby photographers and on Instagram. Countless accounts exist, with posts of eerie, unsettling spaces, with outdated carpet flooring, suspended ceiling tiles, disproportionate positioning of door- and window-frames, empty playgrounds, abandoned shopping malls from the 80s etc. *(figure 4)* The indie game *the Backrooms*, is an acute depiction of a liminal experience, as one is aimlessly wandering through eerie, disorientating locations. Although an online video game, *the Backrooms* in its description does include the parameter of smell (*The walls were covered in gross tan patterned wallpaper. There was also an overwhelming stench of moist carpet*), as it is essential for the perception of the atmosphere of the game. *(figure 5)*

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<sup>38</sup> Van Gennep, Arnold. *Rites of Passage* (1909)

<sup>39</sup> <https://musemagazine.com/features/2020/11/1/the-cult-following-of-liminal-space>

The concept of liminality and atmosphere share some common phenomenological traits, since their similarities are experienced through the felt body:

- 1) Same as with a liminal phase, a spatial mood, an atmosphere is a situation one enters, it is dependent and only valid if an experiencer is present, to feel the liminality of a space or the atmosphere being poured in it.
- 2) Another characteristic is that the liminality of a space, in the same way as the ambience of a space, is defined by the objects in it, or the people. It is their sum, or more correctly put, the sum of their emanated ecstasies that generate a given atmosphere, or render a space liminal. It is due to the role of a space that we name it 'liminal', that is a transitional, ambiguous place, without a sense of belonging. But the role of a space, its function is signalled through the selection of functional or decorative objects placed in its borders. So a waiting room is a waiting room because someone has to wait in it, - and as usually the case is, for not so pleasant news- and because it is a waiting room, there has to be chairs, many of them, so more people can wait, and they have to be durable, and cost efficient, which usually means ugly, and since all the people waiting do not know each other, the chairs are arranged in an obvious way that gives out indifference - almost hostility- if there were to be more people at the same time in the area. So this space is liminal, but not only that, its atmosphere is an atmosphere which emanates out of the anti-socially positioned budget-friendly objects and the waiting people inside, and it is an atmosphere which one would

not describe necessarily as ‘festive’ or ‘friendly’ or even ‘desired’ (more on if a liminal space has an atmosphere)

3) Both liminality and the concept of spatial atmosphere occupy defined spatial areas. The liminal areas may have more defined limits, as liminality considers specific spaces, and the specificity is usually defined through borders, doors, walls. One enters a waiting room, or an elevator. At the same time in a large room there could be more than one atmospheres, depending always on the objects, people or situations happening. So in a dinner party for example towards the kitchen the atmosphere can be more tense, around the Christmas tree more festive and jolly, and on the balcony where everybody is smoking, more festive and social and so on. But a spatial situation that is regarded as liminal, does not have alterations in its liminality depending on topology. Entering an underground car garage, does not feel more liminal on the middle of the way towards one’s car, than it did in the beginning of the route.

So liminality and atmosphere are both spatial emotions and share some common idiosyncrasies. Can it be said that liminality is an atmospherical state? Or is spatial and emotional liminality prevailing when there is an absence of otherwise agreed upon, atmosphere? Then liminality would be on the opposite side of a spatial mood, a spatiality void of an atmosphere.

All the examples of common traits above, tell of the first case. That this spatial ambiguity is a type of atmosphere, since it radiates from the objects in a specific location, additionally it can be felt intersubjectively<sup>40</sup>, and even more so, the sense of ambiguity and vagueness connected with

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<sup>40</sup> Griffero, Tonino. (2019). Pathicity: Experiencing the World in an Atmospheric Way. *Open Philosophy*. 2. 414-427. 10.1515/opphil-2019-0031

liminality is so strong and commonly agreed upon, it is a common emotion experienced by many people.

A quick example that offers an argument towards the second case, that liminality is the absence of atmosphere or ambiance is this: Often one witnesses specifically in the case of hotel lobbies, or doctor's waiting rooms, non-places etc, the usage of scents in order to create a more 'homely' effect, to add an invisible layer of emotional feelings, and to cover the unpleasantness of a non-existent spatial odour. In this case, released atmosphere through scents, to create a more 'pleasant atmosphere', in an otherwise unpleasant space. Specifically for waiting rooms, the use of indoor plants, and some art on walls are very common and recognisable efforts towards reducing the vagueness of a space. By decorating, adding objects which through their ecstasies would radiate more 'homey' and 'friendly' moods, a dentists waiting room, or a hallway in a government building. Liminal spaces are disorientating, the use of olfactory hints provides a sense of place.

# Evolution of the Atmosphere of Death

Same like death itself, the atmosphere surrounding cessation of life is considered tragic, because the opportunity of living is deemed so great. According to Thomas Sheehan, Heidegger's Being is not the center of his existentialist philosophy, but mortality is. The radical finitude which Heidegger calls 'temporality', is what drives humans to find meaning in life.<sup>41</sup>

Even the word "Death" can never be pronounced impartially. The sentiment around human mortality, the atmosphere of death, till this point has been tuned (*bestimmt*). Everything surrounding the concept of dying is *tuned* in this special way because it is connected to the end of one's life, it is tainted by this effect, it is under the common umbrella-like atmosphere of sorrow, pain and discomfort that death brings. It is an agreed social contract, an event for mourning, an occasion generally seen as negative, never a prospect for joy, rarely a signifier for .

The historian Philippe Ariès, in 'Western Attitudes towards DEATH'<sup>42</sup> offers many insights which shed light on this progressing Stimmung. Before the Middle Ages, people lived in acceptance with death, they were not impressed by it, nor scared. During the Early Middle Ages, man slowly becomes aware of his own mortality, death 'became the occasion when man was most able to reach an awareness of

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<sup>41</sup> Thomas Sheehan

<sup>42</sup> Ariès, Philippe, (1975) *Western Attitudes Toward Death from the Middle Ages to the Present*. Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore

himself”.<sup>43</sup> The gradual loss of anonymity in funeral inscriptions, (a sign of human vanity) was followed by effigies, which became more realistic during Louis IX of France.

The reappearance of tombs made humans of the Middle Ages face the reality of death, it personified the act of dying. After the fifteenth century, there are a lot of erotico-macabre themes surrounding dying. Death becomes important, but still not frightening. Fast-forward to the nineteenth century, death is treated with intolerance, it is an occasion for exaggerated, active mourning. During the Romantic Era, (1800-1850) there is even embracement of death, which seen as ‘a reward’: “Dying is a reward, since it is Heaven..” as written by a ‘teenager’ of that time.<sup>44</sup> For Ariès, the fascination for death during that time is a religious sublimation. Another very important milestone which shaped human’s relationship towards death during that era was the simplification of the dead man’s will, to resemble the form it has today, a legal act distributing fortunes,<sup>45</sup> a sign for the secularisation of society. A gradual element of procedural efficacy and standardisation is beginning to form. The appearance of cemeteries in the eighteenth century, which functioned also as parks, keep the idea that the ‘city of the dead’ are an ‘intemporal image’<sup>46</sup> of the city of the living. Cemeteries were usually in the center of cities/towns and people often visited them, they considered the dead as coexisting with them.

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid. p.46

<sup>44</sup> Ibid. p.60

<sup>45</sup> Ibid. p.64

<sup>46</sup> Ibid. p.74

Apart from olfaction, modernity has its profound effect on the attitude towards death as well. The new sentiment was that exaggerated grief and the ugliness of death need to be avoided, and society, and the deceased person's family need not be reminded of it<sup>47</sup>. Ariès names it 'the hushing-up'. The 'displacement of the site of death' during the 1930-50 is the greatest schism with all previous associations regarding human death. 'One no longer died at home, in the bosom of one's family, but in the hospital, alone'. (Ariès, 1974) This new phenomenon strips death of its rituality, and enhances even more the pragmatic nature of the procedure following dying, it is now a problem to be dealt with, it has been *institutionalised*.<sup>48</sup>

Around the time of Ariès work (1974) death is strongly perceived as a sign of weakness, only matching in a series of disappointments that life in industrialised societies serves the modern human.

Another sign that the general sentiment, the Stimmung around dying is gradually changing is the emergence of a narrative around death, the presentness of it is taking a leading role as a coping mechanism in the difficult time of a global pandemic. In Great Britain in various libraries a new section for death-related books has appeared. Initially only 3 libraries participating, with many more expressing interest in taking part in the program. A library with a 'death-positive' section would have a small section or grouping of books with a distinct death-positive sign above them.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid. p.87

<sup>48</sup> Based on Foucault's theory on disciplinary institutions, such as hospitals, prisons, asylums etc.

<sup>49</sup> UK libraries become 'death positive' with books and art on dying / [theguardian.com](https://www.theguardian.com)

Still, the death positivity movement has been around for long before the pandemic. In the USA, the Order of the Good Death<sup>50</sup> is a death positivity movement focusing on building “a meaningful, eco-friendly, and equitable end of life”. The group recognises as problematic the ways society handles human mortality, highlighting environmental, financial, ritual and accessibility factors of concern.

Their sister organisation, The Death Saloon, has been running annual meet ups since 2013, to encourage conversations on mortality and mourning and their resonating effects on culture and history.<sup>51</sup>

Reimagine is “a nonprofit organisation that draws on the arts, design, medicine, and spirituality to transform taboo cultural attitudes around death and grief, and to address the inequities surrounding how we live and die.”<sup>52</sup> Their first festival took place in 2016 as part of OpenIdeo’s End-of-Life challenge as part of an effort to investigate the intersection of art, community, and end of life. (OpenIdeo is an open platform for collaborative projects by IDEO, one of the biggest international design companies worldwide). Since then the festival has been happening every year either in San Francisco or New York (and online) tackling themes such as grief, acceptance of death, life under the constant presence of death, regrowth etc.

*What is the secret of Soy lent Green?*

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<sup>50</sup> <https://www.orderofthegooddeath.com/>

<sup>51</sup> <http://deathsalon.org>

<sup>52</sup> <https://letsreimagine.org/>



As all human activities, dispositions of their remains are also changing in order to reduce the carbon footprint of the procedure. Various companies are aiming to change the way people approach the procedure of the funeral, such as Recompose, whose describes the company as “a public benefit corporation powered by people who believe in changing the current death care paradigm. We approach this work with energy, tenacity, and joy.”<sup>53</sup> Recompose “utilises the principles of nature to return bodies to the land, sequestering carbon and improving the health of our natural surroundings.”

Visual representation of death related matters is visible through the clean-looking, eco-conscious design aesthetic their branding and user experience shows. The connection with mortality is not done through the usual visual cues which remind one of death : skulls, the color black, victorian gothic aesthetics, etc. This offers a new design direction when working on matters of death as a designer / atmosphere creator. There is a chance for a fresh perspective on death related matters. One does not need to go to either gothic related visual experiences or generally towards a ‘macabre’, ‘dark’ aesthetic. A new perspective on dying calls for a new temperament on the side of design professionals when designing for death related procedures, and vice versa, the growing need for death to be framed in new light, reflects on professionals’ altered aesthetic approach towards it.

An unexpected source of new acceptance towards death might come from Ye, formerly known as Kanye West. For the

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<sup>53</sup> <http://recompose.life>

winter 2021-22 issue of lifestyle magazine 032c in an interview with Berlin artist Tino Sehgal, he makes extensive references for the need to be reborn again, implies working on a new performance project called 'The Funeral Rehearsal of Kanye West' which according to him "is the death of Kanye West (...) the death of the ego that separates us - it's the birth of humanity... Let me start by killing myself. The less you, the more room for God."<sup>54</sup>

## Accompanied Dying: An emerging Rite of Passage

*"Thorn, I'm going Home"*

*Sol*

*In this extreme dystopia, the only glimpse of freedom over one's own destiny seems to be the option given to the elderly to end their own life in working-around-the-clock government euthanasia institutions, in a process known as "going home". Sol, -spoiler alert- tired of the difficulties of life and shocked by the cynicism and corruption of the government chooses this way out. The procedure is relatively simple. The building of the institution is large, and there are wide doors, to let the hoards of people who want to die, enter freely: An employee of the Thanatorium hands Sol a questionnaire with his preferences, orange is his favourite color. A man and a woman in priest-like long white aprons welcome Sol in another room, and help him lay on the bed, whose legs we do not see, making it resemble either a pedestal or an altar. Thorn manages to witness the final moments of the procedure, where the departing Sol is watching the beauty of a bygone nature unfold as projection mapping or giant screen visuals panoramically on the walls around him. Beethoven's Pastoral Symphony No.6 and Tchaikovsky's Pathetique Symphony No.6 play in tune with flowing*

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<sup>54</sup> <https://www.dazeddigital.com/music/article/55094/1/kanye-west-talks-capitalism-communes-staging-his-own-funeral-rehearsal-032c>

*rivers and running deer. Everything is beautiful and a warm orange color slowly engulfs the whole room, symbolising the sunset on Sol's life.*

If someone of the caliber of acceptance and influence such as Ye starts talking freely and candidly about the need to 'sacrifice' themselves for the sake of an 'egalitarian society' and for 'God', what could the reverberations of such statements on his million followers and fans regarding voluntary euthanasia be?

Humanity's eternal struggle has always been to eliminate death, nonetheless we are coming at a time that death might be an entirely personal choice, a matter of taste. While its proponents view medical aid in dying as a matter of ethical responsibility and control over one's own body, the general sentiment which surrounds this divisive procedure is still undefined and ambiguous. Like with death, voluntary death is absent from main societal discussion in the same way that matters like 'health', 'lifestyle', 'celebrity gossip', 'tech trends', 'food' are always being reminded of their importance and their *societo-belongingness* factor as tabs on every website or app. Death, and by extension the wish to die, are hushed down and hidden from the daily narrative. One needs to look for specific mortality focused websites or advocacy groups in order to stay informed. Yet even doctors are trying to shed the mainstream light on the amounts of people that do not want to live anymore.<sup>55</sup>

The vague and uncomfortable social attunement around this choice can be pinpointed to the lack of a specified atmosphere, seeded through an amalgam of set traditions

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<sup>55</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2021/oct/25/assisted-dying-dutch-psychologist-wim-van-dijk-suicide-powder-to-over-100-people>

and rituals, conjoined by an unspoken design language of aesthetics and interpretations. Imagine how much accepting society would be if Gwyneth Paltrow started a column on accompanied dying or started selling an object specifically for this ritual?

Currently, the conscious choice of ending one's own life faces entirely different legal framework around the world. In general, Euthanasia (E) is classified into 4 categories:

- Voluntary Euthanasia (VE), in which case the physician administers the lethal dosage to the patient, usually through a syringe.

- Non-voluntary Euthanasia, punishable as murder,

- Involuntary Euthanasia, also illegal,

- Physician assisted suicide (PAS), where the patient is provided the relevant medication to end their own life, they administer the required dosage themselves, usually orally.

It goes without saying that deciding on the termination of another human being's life, even after legal consent, is a highly sensitive and complicated matter, and the procedure needs to be framed in a foolproof ethically correct framework. Opponents of the right-to-die movement cite among other the 'slippery slope argument', arguing that the loosening of the legal aspect of voluntary euthanasia and the mainstream societal acceptance of such a choice will eventually lead to other previously unaccepted practices such as non-voluntary or involuntary E.<sup>56</sup> Another reason why the social atmosphere around E is very tainted are the involuntary practices in Nazi Germany, known as Aktion T4, which took place from 1939 until the end of the war in 1945. Approximately 300.000 "incurably ill, physically or mentally

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<sup>56</sup> Lewis, P (2007). "The empirical slippery slope from voluntary to non-voluntary euthanasia". *J Law Med Ethics*. **35** (1): 197-210. doi:10.1111/j.1748-720X.2007.00124.x

disabled, emotionally distraught, and elderly people” were killed.<sup>57</sup>

In most countries around the world, E is illegal. The case is different for PAS which in certain countries and under very precise conditions is permitted, following a strict set of legal procedures and rules. The opponents of PAS/(V)E oppose the right-to-die option is the contradiction of the proponents’ argument that “cessation of life is to be chosen if it is to relieve a patient of severe and insufferable pain”. The contra-argument from the opponents is that nor the medical staff nor patient, have knowledge of what death feels like and if there is life after death, and what the essence of the afterlife (if existent) is, in order for the argument that terminal cessation of vital functions were to be a preferred choice, to be of validity.

At the time of writing this paper, various European countries (for example Spain<sup>58</sup>, Germany<sup>59</sup>, Austria) are loosening legislation around VE and PAS. The most liberal laws in the world are in the Netherlands, Belgium, and Switzerland, which attracts even the so-called ‘euthanasia-tourism’ sector, people who wish to end their life legally and in their own terms, visit the Swiss clinic Dignitas, where PAS is legal.

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<sup>57</sup> Proctor, Robert N. (1988). *Racial Hygiene: Medicine under the Nazis*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard College. ISBN 978-0-674-74578-0.

<sup>58</sup> País, El (2021-03-25). "La ley de eutanasia entrará en vigor el 25 de junio". *EL PAÍS*

<sup>59</sup> <https://www.dw.com/en/germanys-top-court-paves-the-way-for-assisted-suicide/a-52531371>

The previous comment on Gwyneth Paltrow was not just humorous. Part of the weirdly tainted atmosphere surrounding voluntary euthanasia could be the lack of diversity and the explicitly white male dominated presence of notable proponents and inventors. In advertising men usually (used to) convey power, strength, competitiveness<sup>60</sup>, hardly necessary traits when one is wanting to face death. Both of the most talked after inventors on voluntary euthanasia also have the nickname 'Dr. Death'.<sup>61</sup> <sup>62</sup> Because death is still a taboo, and considered an undesired state for most in society, such a nickname brings fear and connects in the collective memory the idea of a practitioner who will lack in compassion and—might even rush procedures. The other physician who also was nicknamed Dr Death, Jack Kevorkian was convicted of second-degree murder and served 8 years in prison. Kevorkian was the inventor of some devices which aimed at helping his clients administer the lethal dose themselves.

A well-know proponent of voluntary euthanasia is Philip Nitschke, known as 'Dr Death' or 'Elon Musk of assisted suicide' since he has been the first doctor in the world to provide a patient with a syringe which afterwards the patient themselves activated through a computer, blurring the conceptual boundaries between medically-aided suicide and euthanasia. Nitschke is also the the developer of the

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<sup>60</sup> O'Barr, William M. "Representations of Masculinity and Femininity in Advertising." *Advertising & Society Review*, vol. 7 no. 2, 2006. *Project MUSE*, doi:10.1353/asr.2006.0028.

<sup>61</sup> Apart from the generic negative connotation that surrounds a nickname like 'Dr. Death' and the barbarism that it implies, it is a nickname connected to Christopher Duntsch, medical practitioner who paralysed 33 out of his 38 patients. His story has been made into a tv series under the name Dr. Death.

<sup>62</sup> Goodman, Matt (November 2016). "Dr. Death". *D Magazine*.

‘Sarco’, a 3D printable pod, where a person interested in ending their life, enter, and in a semi-inclined position can on their own pace press a button which releases nitrogen gas <sup>63</sup>. According to Nitschke “the machine can be towed anywhere for the death. It can be in an idyllic outdoor setting or in the premises of an assisted suicide organisation”. Analysing the atmosphere of the Sarco based on Norman’s concept of affordance, the device looks futuristic, a one-man escape pod.*(figure 6)* It is modern, has an aerodynamic shape, metallic finish and is spray coated in a metallic purple and pastel gold. The aesthetic of the Sarco is a bold design aiming to destigmatize assisted euthanasia, however seen from an -industrial design and- affordance point of view, is it in the right mood? Or is the social mood yet ripe for the Sarco? The MAYA principle comes from the ‘father of industrial design, Raymond Loewy and stands for “Most Advanced Yet Acceptable”, and in his words translates to: “The adult public’s taste is not necessarily ready to accept the logical solutions to their requirements if the solution implies too vast a departure from what they have been conditioned into accepting as the norm.” Is the public conditioned to accept a futuristic purple and gold euthanasia pod as the norm?

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<sup>63</sup> <https://www.swissinfo.ch/eng/sarco-suicide-capsule--passes-legal-review--in-switzerland/46966510>

Part IV:  
The Aura of Cyberspace /  
Digital Atmospheres



# The Felt Body in Cyberspace

In the Metaverse we speak of entirely synthetic atmospheres. Is it then an atmosphere that we can speak of at all ? Is it a simulation of an atmosphere or is it a new type of aesthetic perception ?

Presence, in Virtual Reality, comes initially from the term telepresence, which Steuer defines as the experience of being in an environment by means of a communication medium.<sup>64</sup>

The term is used inter-connectedly with immersion, however immersion means that ‘the player is caught up in the world of the game’s story (diegetic level) but it also refers to the player’s love of the game and the strategy that goes into it (nondiegetic level).<sup>65</sup> Immersion can be observed also in the cinema, or while reading a book.

We are in that environment, we feel present we are immersed we feel our digital body. However due to the rendering qualities of the digital commodities we cannot speak of ecstasies of things, or feeling emanating from the objects. The environment is staged, it is predefined as a whole atmosphere. The participating objects and things do not interact with each other to emanate a blended mood towards us, the mood is already predefined and then the objects are chosen. It is this specific aim and teleology in the staging which dismisses the potential of an emanated virtual

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<sup>64</sup> Steuer, J. (1992), Defining Virtual Reality: Dimensions Determining Telepresence. *Journal of Communication*, 42: 73-93. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1460-2466.1992.tb00812.x>

<sup>65</sup> McMahan, Alison. (2003) *The Video Game Theory Reader*. Routledge, New York and London

spatial mood to be synesthetically pressed upon one and perceived by one.

On the other hand, beyond the staging totality of the virtual atmosphere, the concept of Benjamin's Aura<sup>66</sup> needs to be re-addressed. Since one is actually in the experience, in the (moving) photograph, the depicted environment, there is not medium to directly separate us from the environment that needs to be depicted, can we speak of a loss of aura, a 'tissue of space and time' which is not recreated here? Being virtually, but nonetheless equally being in this new environment, there is the notion of distance, depth, present volume. We can sense the objects in their embodiment, the arrangement. There will not be a hint of a cut out detail, which might have altered the spatial mood, thus the aura could not be recreated. As we are in the virtual realm we are in the aura of the predisposed arrangement. We are part of it. It is a new type of aura, a synthetic one, in the sense that the virtual world cannot escape this feeling of a virtual 'Truman-show' like dome, which at some point will end, predefined by the designer of this cyberspace. It might end in 5metres, or in 50 depending on the budget of the simulated experience, but it will end. The edge of the dome is near. We are aware of that. Like in the Matrix karate simulation, 'this is not real air' we are breathing. This alters the perception of the aura. The synthetic 'air' we breathe is finite, and creates a finiteness and closer ring around us and the virtual artwork in question. One is aware of the borders or the Magic Circle.<sup>67</sup> There is no cut portion of the presence fabric between us and the object, but we are aware

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<sup>66</sup> Benjamin, Walter (1936) *Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, Suhrkamp Verlag; 6th edition (20 Sept. 2010)

<sup>67</sup> Linser, Lindstad, Vold, Roni, Nina, Tone (July 4, 2008). "The Magic Circle – Game Design Principles and Online Role-play Simulations"

that we are given a much smaller portion of ‘aura’ to handle in the first place.

A variety of gadgets aims to change the way the human body interacts in and with VREs: mind controllers, haptic gloves, catwalk runners, body pressure suits etc.(figure 7) The new polemic towards experience could be how still the medium of the HDM is excluding the connectedness of the brain to be experienced. The new “aura” in question could be this missing link of transmission.

When it comes to Virtual Reality experiences (and desktop gaming), there is always a “hint” of atmosphere present, not as a fog volume, but as translucent particles, small in number which float slowly in the virtual near-space (in the VRE) of the headset-wearer. They resemble dust, or some particle of undisclosed *virtual* substance, but what is its purpose? Does it serve as a link to a haptic physicality in a world where nothing is touchable?

Is it used to add depth to a space, between the immersed visitor and between the element of action, whose space, life and story the headset wearer is “intruding”? It could be simply a nod to the literal meaning of atmosphere, the sphere of air, *-look there is air also in the virtual environment you are in right now-..*

# The Problem with Virtual Reality

Odours are the most important parameter missing in order to make VR fully immersive, they are the 4th dimension lacking when simulating environments realistic or fantastic in the virtual realm.

As seen, atmospheres are generated by objects curated carefully in the context of a spatial situation, to produce a certain mood and affect the experimenter in a requested way. Once again here, as in atmospheres for physical spaces, smell, tactility and taste are mostly second class mood generators. Digital environments are recreated by 3D objects positioned in a 3D environment, resembling to a certain degree the properties of their corresponding counterparts in the physical world.

The addition of olfaction as an additional parameter when experiencing VREs offers an unprecedented level for immersion. Most narrational VR experiences base already a very important part of the storytelling on showing and attempting to demonstrate experiences in which odours play a highly critical role. One can only imagine the level of realism that a VR documentary could offer, if the viewer could experience also the smells of the DRC<sup>68</sup>, or at least a modified, recreated experience of the olfactory scene.

In the VR experience ‘Texas Jail’<sup>69</sup> by Netzerland Studios, the viewer is transported to the Texas County jail, where the

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<sup>68</sup> As an example, *Kinshasa Now* (2020) by Marc-Henri Wajnberg, about the homeless children of Kinshasa, in the Democratic Republic of Congo.

<sup>69</sup> *Texas Jail* (2020) by Ethan Prochnik

360° camera is put in real cells and real prisoners are shown. The experience is not scripted, the prisoners are aware of the camera and they are encouraged to act naturally and to speak however they please. In spite of the immersion offered by VR, and the breaking of the 4th wall, the experiencer never fully feels present in the actual prison cell. One imagines that the smell of a prison cell, no matter how clean, will differentiate from the smell of a common bedroom, or office or living room space. So while the visual and auditory experience represents the atmosphere of incarnation, the olfactory is linked to one's entirely personal sphere.

In the PBS 360° video 'My Brother's Keeper'<sup>70</sup> a narrative based on the deadliest fight of the American civil war, which finds two brothers on opposite sides of the firing line. Naturally if one is watching a movie where a lot of shooting takes place, but in the physical world they are burning some vanilla, or the pizza is just out of the oven, the immersion will never be full. The distinct smell of gun powder combined with the metallic odour of blood is what would make the movie truly believable and immersive.

'Travelling while Black' by Felix&Paul Studios and Oculus<sup>71</sup>, tells the story of the racism and harassment black people had to endure while travelling across states during Jim Crow-era America. The 360° movie's main narrational setting is taking place at Ben's Chili Bowl, in Washington D.C., which was a safe space for the African American travellers. As the main characters narrate their stories of endured racism and violence, the viewer is present with them in the booth of the cosy diner. Yet the experience is far from complete. How much more immersive this cinematic

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<sup>70</sup> My Brother's Keeper (2021) by Kevan Otto

<sup>71</sup> Traveling While Black (2019) directed by Roger Ross Williams

VR would be if the viewer could also smell the delicious comfort food that is being cooked behind the counter?

‘We Live Here’<sup>72</sup> takes the viewer at Rockey’s tent who by being handed a bad card in life, ends up being homeless in LA. The police raid her tent, and she has to flee. The viewer is present in the tent and can explore the few items that Rockey has managed to salvage from the happier times in her life, a coffee tin, an old radio, some old photographs etc. (*figure 8*) While the level of presence is quite strong, an added element of olfaction to accompany the smellscape of living in a tent, the aromatic coffee, the smell of old books and photographs, perhaps even a simulation of the smell of fear, when one’s only belongings can fit in a bag, and even these they can lose any day in a raid.

Last but not least, the cinematic VR experience ‘Notes on Blindness: into Darkness’<sup>73</sup>, which presents the experience of a blind person, based on the notes of scholar John M. Hull, who became completely blind in 1983. The experience makes an attempt to highlight the perception a blind person would have of their surroundings, by rendering the audible environment around them through particle effects. (*figure 9*) Various common auditory situations, such as Hull’s children approaching him, a kettle on the stove boiling, the sense of rain, the whistling of the wind, are all recreated through realistic movement rendered in point clouds/particles. The experience feels nothing less of an oxymoron, since vision not only is highlighted but is also used in order to demonstrate how a person who entirely lacks it perceives the world.

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<sup>72</sup> We live here (2020), by Rose Troche

<sup>73</sup> Notes on Blindness (2016) by James Spinney, Peter Middleton

# The Problem with Odors in Cyberspace

Everything is connected, everything can be transmitted and communicated, everything can be digitalised and virtualised, except smells. Two main reasons contribute to this hurdle.

People are lacking the vocabulary to describe smells, the same way one synesthetically describes colors: ‘a warm grey hue’, ‘cold blue’ and everybody immediately knows what is meant. Once again, additional properties to the singular sense of vision are prescribed, probably due to the constant need to hide the onedimensionality. For sounds, there is an even richer vocabulary: buzzing, crackling, banging, beeping, chiming, clicking, droning, pinging, rumbling, whistling<sup>74</sup> etc, only to name a few. Sounds are also categorised based on duration, their affectivity (pleasant or unpleasant) etc.

There is no commonly accepted vocabulary when it comes to the description of smells.

In the initial conception of virtual reality through HMD, olfaction was never excluded. In the 1935 book, *Pygmalion’s Spectacles*<sup>75</sup>, writer Stanley G. Weinbaum’s main character comes across a pair of goggles where one can watch "a movie that gives one sight and sound [...] taste, smell, and touch. [...] You are in the story, you speak to the shadows (characters) and they reply, and instead of being on a screen, the story is all about you, and you are in it." Weinbaum predicts in an extraordinary way not only VR headsets but also a holistic pathic experience which involves the entire body as an apparatus for receipt of mediated atmospheres.

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<sup>74</sup> <https://www.writerswrite.co.za/106-ways-to-describe-sounds/>

<sup>75</sup> <https://www.historyofinformation.com/detail.php?entryid=4543>

Regarding the use of odours in cinematic experiences, there has been various attempts, without any long term lasting products on the market. Interestingly, the use of smells in cinemas came before the use of sound. The very first such experience dates back to 1868, when a Rimmel scent was sprayed during a play at the Alhambra Theatre of Variety, in London.<sup>76</sup> In 1929, in Boston, Massachusetts, during the screening of the film *Lilac Time* the manager of the Fenway Theatre poured a pint of lilac perfume into the theatre's ventilation system, to correspond the smell of the flower with the dropping titles of the movie.<sup>77</sup>

40 years later, in 1960, the *Smell-o-Vision* (*figure 10*) was a similar system that released odours during the projection of a film, so that the viewer could smell what was happening in the movie. It was used only on one film. *Sensorama* (1962) was the first multi-modal machine which incorporated all five senses in a cinematic experience<sup>78</sup>. It was designed as a mechanical device, in front of which the viewer sits. Inside the device were a stereoscopic color display, fans, odor emitters, stereo-sound system. The chair the viewer was sitting on was also motional. (*figure 11*)

*Odorama*, was a system that director John Waters released as a homage to the *Smell-O-vision*, in 1982. The experience featured a card with specific numbered scratch points, to be scratched and sniffed at specified moments during the film. (*figure 12*)

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<sup>76</sup> "Another Early 'Smellie'. *Variety*. January 6, 1960. p. 35.

<sup>77</sup> Fowler, Albert E. (January 13, 1960). "Fragrance of Long Ago". *Variety*. p. 6. / Gilbert, Avery N. (2008). "Hollywood Psychophysics". *What the Nose Knows*. Crown Publishers. ISBN 978-1-4000-8234-6

<sup>78</sup> Regrebsubla, Namron (2015). *Determinants of Diffusion of Virtual Reality*. GRIN Publishing. p. 5



FeelReel, the first multi-sensory VR mask<sup>79</sup> connects directly to the HMD, and ‘releases vaporised smells for user inhalation’, in extremely close proximity to the user’s face. The scents are to be connected to specific VR experiences, available already on the online store, such as Skyrim, Beat Saber etc. FeelReel (*figure 13*) is the closest gadget to Sensorama to be conceived yet, as it also features a water mist in its mask as well as micro-coolers. in order to simulate a realistic feeling of rain and wind respectively. If FeelReel is keeping up with the MAYA principle of design, remains to be seen. At present FeelReel is still pending approval from the FDA, since the liquids they use to recreate the scents are the same chemical consistency as vaping products, without the nicotine.<sup>80</sup> (*figure 14*)

All gadgets which tried to integrate olfaction in a technological device have failed greatly. This is a further proof of the high fidelity and inherited sensitivity humans have towards smells, in spite of the insignificance odours have been granted the last 200 years.

The only glimpse of a successful integration of an olfactory experience combined with a VR app is ‘Smell Revived’ the first virtual reality smell training system targeting Post-Covid anosmia<sup>81</sup>. It consists of a VR app and scent capsules which the user attaches on their clothing, should be close proximity to head. The app shows the patient items, and the capsule emits the corresponding scent, aiming to help people who suffer from anosmia due to long Covid to retrieve their sense of smell.

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<sup>79</sup> <https://feelreal.com/>

<sup>80</sup> <https://www.roadtovr.com/feelreal-vr-scent-mask-vaping-fda-ban/>

<sup>81</sup><https://www.smellrevived.com/>

# Conclusion

After the over-aesthetisation of the lifeworld, we are witnessing the complete virtualisation of the lifeworld, which as in the case of the Kant and his followers, endangers the involvement of olfaction as an apparatus for navigating experiences.

We have seen that olfaction can be used to trigger strong emotional responses, long forgotten, from a persons childhood. Brand specialists are making use of the power of the smell already. Smells are unmistakable anchors to reality and generate a sense of place, combined with VR they can bring experiences to life and affect deeply and emotionally the viewer.

Curated and staged atmospheres are have become superfluous and by following a given recipe, of specific elements which emanate specific ecstasies with known results to one, the true aspect of a pathic experience is lost. An atmosphere is a phenomenon one feels in its entirety, one grasps its essence subconsciously, before being able to analyse its typology. Olfaction is the most underrepresented parameter for creating atmosphere and presence. By allowing odours to be carriers of unexpected messages, a return to the true meaning of atmospheric experience is taking place. It is time to return to the practices of antiquity, to use smells as agents for creation of solidarity, unification and common spatial moods.

In the complete virtualisation of the lifeworld, where all atmospheres are mediated through a HMD and each parameter is carefully calculated, pathicity is not complete,

and one cannot understand the world in an atmospheric way<sup>82</sup>. Smells are unbreakable anchors which link the virtual environment to the physical and vice-versa. There is an intense need for realistic odours, which as atmosphere generators will enhance a cinematic (or diegetic) VR experience. This will pave the way for complete immersion and presence in VR, and bring to life narratives on racism, homelessness, and social injustice. Additionally, a pleasant scent, such as a home cooked meal, can unify the viewer with the experienced narrative and enhance the emotional investment towards VR experiences.

Creators however, should not aim to just use pleasant smells to accompany VR experiences. After all the lifeworld is full of unpleasant smells, which are essential for successfully navigating one's existence. A bad odour would add to the believability of a simulated virtual world. Through a contrast of pleasant and unpleasant smells, the aesthetic appreciation of nice odours is enhanced, and the positive affective effect is stronger. Experiencing an olfactory cinematic VR experience, and at the same time going through a Proustian moment, should be the next halo of immersive experiences, and all creatives should aim for this level of deep emotional engagement and sentimentality.

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<sup>82</sup> Griffero

*Sol is laying in the Going Home main room while experiencing his final moments:*

*-Sol: Thorn?*

*-Thorn : Yes...*

*-Sol : Isn't it beautiful?*

*-Thorn : Oh, yes...*

*-Sol : I told you.*

*-Thorn : How could I know? How could I...  
how could I ever imagine?*

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## VR Media:

Kinshasa Now (2020) by Marc-Henri Wajnberg

My Brother's Keeper (2021) by Kevan Otto

Notes on Blindness (2016) by James Spinney, Peter Middleton

Texas Jail (2020) by Ethan Prochnik

Traveling While Black (2019) by Roger Ross Williams

We live here (2020), by Rose Troche

# Illustrations

LIMBIC SYSTEM STRUCTURES

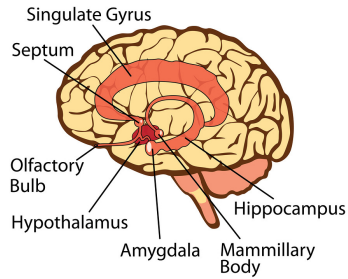


Figure 1: the proximity of the brain to the limbic system. Source: [wisegeek.com](http://wisegeek.com)

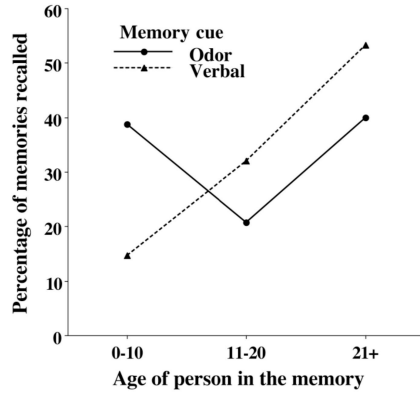


Figure 2: Memory recollection and age. Source: *The Multisensory Museum: Cross-Disciplinary Perspectives on Touch, Sound, Smell, Memory and Space.* (pp 151-167) Rowman and Littlefield, Maryland and Plymouth

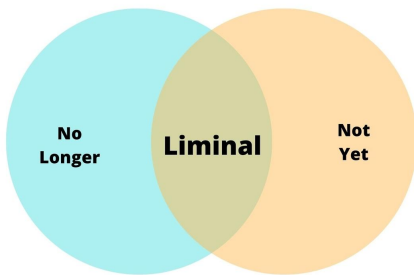


Figure 3: Liminality. Via [barrierisman.com](http://barrierisman.com)



Figure 4: A liminal space. Author unknown. Via <https://visualsignals.xyz/>



Figure 5: The Backrooms game. Author Pie on a Plate productions.



Figure 6: The Sarco. Author: Exit International



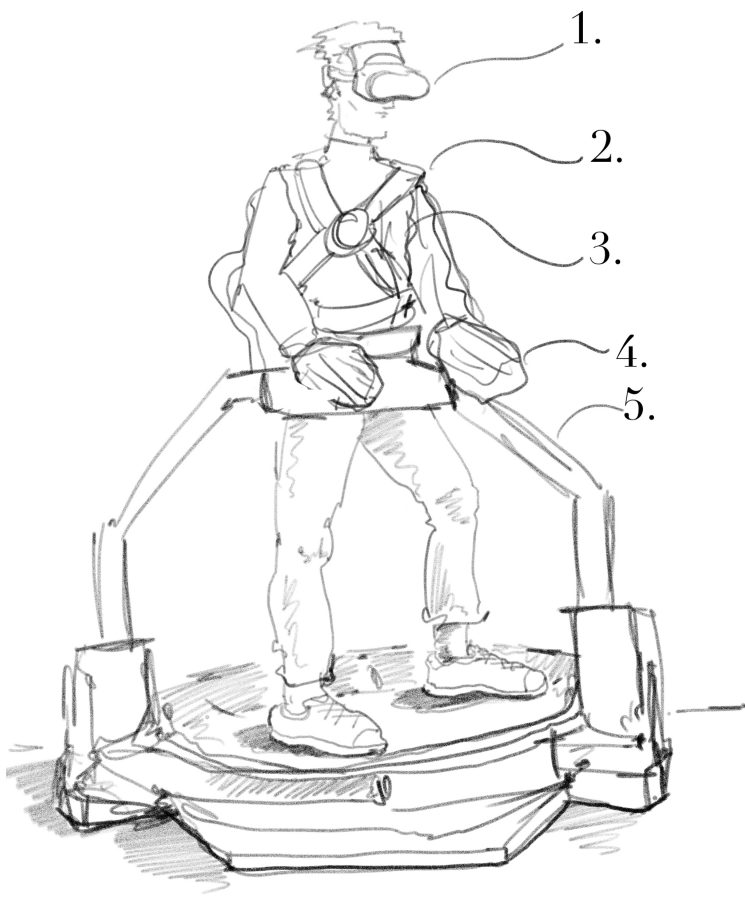


Figure 7 : Depiction of a pathic experience in a VRE. 1)HMD 2)VR haptic belt 3) VR haptic vest 4) Haptic gloves 5) VR treadmill. Martina Krastev



Figure 8: We Live Here, by Oculus VR for Good. Screen capture via Oculus Quest 2.

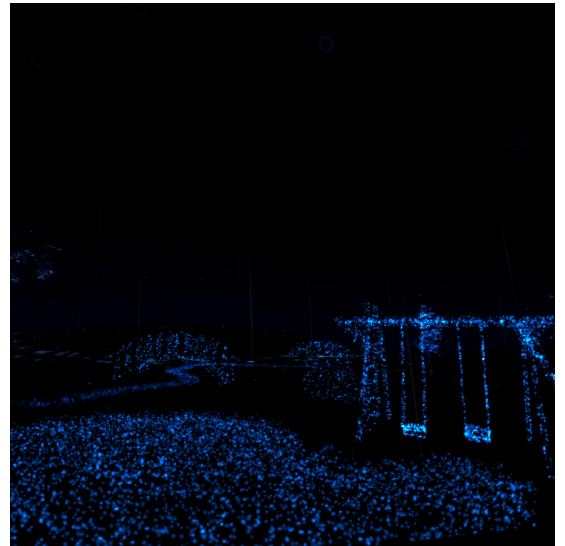


Figure 9 : Still from 'Notes on Blindness', produced by Ex Nihilo, ARTE France, Archer's Mark. Screen capture via Oculus Quest 2.



THE BRAINS OF SMELL-O-VISION—Michael Todd, Jr. (left) sits beside master control and scent energizer of the Smell-O-Vision system with its inventor Hans Lube. Latter points to the multitude of vials each containing a different scent which is selectively projected through tubes to every seat in theatre on signal triggered from picture's sound track.

Figure 10: The Smell-O-vision. Author: Unknown. Via [wired.com](http://wired.com)

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Figure 11 : A 1962 advertisement for the Sensorama device (Courtesy of Scott Fisher's Telepresence) Taken via [www.computer.org/publications/tech-news/research/experiencing-the-sights-smells-sounds-and-climate-of-southern-italy-in-vr](http://www.computer.org/publications/tech-news/research/experiencing-the-sights-smells-sounds-and-climate-of-southern-italy-in-vr)



Figure 12 : Odorama Smellcard. Image author: Gmhofmann. Taken via [Wikimedia Commons](https://commons.wikimedia.org/)



Figure 13 : the FeelReel mask.  
Author: FeelReel



Figure 14 : the FeelReel cartridges.  
Author: FeelReel

