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Olfactory Entanglements: Syntactic Fragmentation & Scentimentality

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the entangled relationship of smell, affect, and environmental contamination. I show how olfactory memory mediates the relationship between breathing and the uneven distribution of respiratory risks from polluted air. To do so, I examine Cesar Majorana's work "The Syntax of Smell," which is performed in the context of an open laboratory. During the performance, Majorana engages with the audience, creating a scent based on their stories, bringing attention to the connections between their memories, their perception of artificiality, and pollution. This paper is divided into two sections focusing on syntactic fragmentation and scentimentality respectively. In the first section, I illustrate how "The Syntax of Smell" manifests both as the concepts of breathing and olfactory aesthetics. I demonstrate how the performance paradoxically criticises and utilizes bio- and necropolitical forces of smell production. In the second section, I explore the affective qualities of olfactory entanglements by zooming in on the relationship between affective responses and toxicity in relation to Michael Eigen's concept of toxic nourishment as well as cognitive dissonance. Lastly, building on social psychological research, I show that the performance's olfactory memory-triggering qualities might contribute to its effectiveness in increasing awareness of air pollution.

Keywords: *Olfactory entanglements; olfactory and breathing aesthetics; bio- and necropolitics; affect; toxic nourishment*

Introduction

Large conglomerates increasingly scent our daily lives, and many of our olfactory memories mask histories of pollution, waste, and ecological extraction (Sonic Acts, 2022). In this regard, current publications within the field of environmental humanities and beyond have suggested the inevitable morbidity of breathing (Albano, 2022; Tremblay, 2022). This, seemingly paradoxical, proposition suggests that while breathing is vital for living systems, it also puts them in a vulnerable position. With the increasing toxification of the air, it becomes impossible to protect ourselves from airborne toxins and toxicants (Tremblay, 2022). However, this vulnerability, is an existential condition which is not experienced equally.

Respiratory hazards are unevenly distributed, resulting in what some call differentiated atmospheres (Hsu, 2021) or simply environmental injustice. While this inequality is widely studied, the role of human affect within the inevitable morbidity of breathing remains comparatively unexplored. Adding an affective dimension to debates on the uneven distribution of respiratory hazards is important as emotional responses have been widely suggested to be an important factor in cognitive and behavioural changes (Pfaff et al., 2008;

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Rimkute et al., 2016). Therefore, it is an essential feature in increasing awareness of environmental injustice and pro-environmental behaviour.

In this paper, I investigate the entangled relationship of smell, affect and environmental contamination. I use Lisa Feldman Barrett's and James A. Russell's (1998) definition of affect as an umbrella term, encompassing both mood and emotions on two dimensions: valence (pleasure) and arousal. Scent can evoke both negative and positive affect. Similarly, the potency of a fragrance can be likened to the arousal level within affect. Building on literature within the field of environmental humanities focusing on the uneven distribution of respiratory risks of polluted air (Albano, 2021; Hsu, 2020; Tremblay, 2022), I further explore how affective experiences, especially olfactory memory, stand in relation to differentiated respiratory pollution. To do so, I examine Cesar Majorana's work "The Syntax of Smell".

"The Syntax of Smell" is an open laboratory performance, performed by Cesar Majorana as part of the Sonic Acts Biennial 2023 in Amsterdam. In the context of The Syntax of Smell, Majorana has curated scent listening sessions, which are based on a smell laboratory that they have been constructing over the past two years. Within this laboratory, Majorana treats scent as a storytelling medium. Visitors to Majorana's laboratory are invited to participate in personalized scent sessions, referred to as "monko" sessions, where they will collectively explore and unravel the intricate details of scent composition (Sandberg Instituut, n.d.). Monko means "listening to" scents and suggests experiencing the scent mentally, as if tasting it within the realm of your mind (Iwasaki, 2004). During the performance, the artist engages with the audience creating a scent based on their olfactory memories, bringing attention to the connections between our memories, our perception of artificiality and pollution (Sonic Acts, 2022).

This paper is divided into two sections: 01. syntactic fragmentation and 02. sentimentality. In the first section, I shed light on the olfactory entanglement proposed within Majorana's work. I show how The Syntax of Smell manifests both the concepts of breathing and olfactory aesthetics. Furthermore, I argue that Majorana paradoxically both criticises and utilizes bio- and necropolitical forces within their performance. In the second section, I examine the affective qualities within their work. Drawing on social psychological research, I show how affect, especially emotions associated with memories, relate to smell within the performance. Moreover, I use Michael Eigen's concept of toxic nourishment to show the intertwined nature of olfactory emotional nourishment and poison. Lastly, I demonstrate how the unfolding of the above-mentioned concepts contributes to the effectiveness of The Syntax of Smell in regard to increasing awareness of air pollution.

Syntactic Fragmentation

This section aims to syntactically fragment the olfactory entanglements within The Syntax of Smell. A syntax can be defined as "a connected or orderly system: harmonious arrangement of parts or elements" (Merriam-Webster Dictionary). A syntax of smell can be understood as the harmonious arrangement of scents. However, if we consider Majorana's Syntax of Smell to be symbolic of the environmental and socio-political dimensions of smell, it seems that a syntax of smell could be seen as the antipode to an olfactory entanglement. The question that is being asked here is whether an olfactory disentanglement is possible and, if yes, whether a syntactic arrangement of its components would be beneficial. In the following section, I shed light on this olfactory entanglement. By bringing Majorana's work in conversation with the

concepts of breathing and olfactory aesthetics and the theories of bio- and necropolitics, I argue that *The Syntax of Smell* can be fragmented into an entanglement of three main forces: breathing, pollution, and affect. The question posed by that is whether these forces can be disentangled and syntactically arranged.

The Syntax of Smell embodies the concept of breathing aesthetics. Breathing aesthetics explores the diverse facets of respiration, investigating its impact on our sensory perceptions, emotional states, and physical sensations. In their book “Breathing Aesthetics” Jean-Thomas Tremblay (2022) asserts that the contradictory aspects of respiratory vitality and morbidity indicate the unequal distribution of air toxicity. Tremblay demonstrates how biopolitical and necropolitical forces manifest in the embodied experiences of respiration. They argue that this can be exemplified by their connection to the persistence of extractive capitalism, imperialism, and systemic racism. Furthermore, the author argues that the articulation of survival now hinges on the management and mitigation of respiratory hazards. Through this lens, Tremblay indicates how a focus on the aesthetics of breathing gives rise to historically, culturally, and environmentally grounded tactics and strategies for navigating precarious respiratory conditions. According to Tremblay, artworks categorized within the realm of breathing aesthetics need to fulfill two key requirements. Firstly, they need to demonstrate a harmonious alignment between their content and form with the concept of respiration. This does not necessarily involve the artist’s or spectator’s own breathing. Secondly, they engage with conceptual aspects that address the socio-political and environmental complexities influenced by the act of breathing (Tremblay, 2022). In line with these requirements, both the form and the content of *The Syntax of Smell* are attuned to respiration. The form of the performance as an open laboratory engages with commercial artificial scent production on a micro-scale. The production of these scents, however, inevitably contributes to air pollution, which is directly linked to the paradoxical nature of vitality and morbidity (Hsu 2019; Tremblay, 2022). Like the practice of breathing itself, the form of the open laboratory in which Majorana is in constant dialogue with their audience is a very intimate one. The performance creates a form of co-presence characterized by the scents handed around and floating in the air as well as the constant exchange of air. Additional to smelling the scents from their toolbox, Majorana invites their audience to smell each other. They explained that smells develop differently on everybody’s skin due to our human pheromones. The performance, thus, not only spins a web of inter- and intrarelations between the participants and Majorana themselves but also highlights the importance of subjectivity. This form, emphasizing co-dependence as well as individuality, could itself be seen as a form of differentiated atmospheres. In other words, while we are all intimately sharing the air we are breathing, and the scents we are smelling, we are nevertheless experiencing these sensations differently.

The Syntax of Smell is attuned to respiration not only in its form but also in its content. The whole performance is focused on scent production and smell. This alone would not suffice for the performance to be categorized as a manifestation of breathing aesthetics. As mentioned above, an object falling under the header of this concept also needs to conceptually engage with the socio-political and environmental dynamics mediated by breathing (Tremblay, 2022). During the performance, Majorana shared the detrimental consequences of scent production for the environment. They gave numerous examples of olfactory toxicity, including that ethyl butyrate is used to produce freshly bottled orange juice in the supermarket, and that the smell of rain is mostly a mix of asphalt, toxins in the air, and dead skin. They

further shared how all the smell toxicity in the air, resulting from the production and use of synthetic smell, travels through the air and confuses animals who become unable to orient themselves in an environment that is suddenly smelling differently.

While the environmental dynamics mediated by breathing were rather explicitly stated by Majorana, they also referred to some socio-political dynamics. However, it is to note that the socio-political dynamics were less prevalent during their performance and mostly implicit. Majorana talked extensively about the environmental damages resulting from the production of scents during their performance but made considerably few remarks regarding who the people who suffer from these damages are. Nevertheless, they explicitly referred to socio-political issues connected to scent manufacturing when they talked about how the production of sandalwood is intertwined with an ongoing history of slavery and exploitation. In other words, the delight of enjoying a pleasurable scent disguises the capitalization on natural resources and certain demographics. Additionally, towards the end of their performance, Majorana mentioned how smell has been weaponized by ingroups referring to their outgroups as malodorous. Smell, as a sensory experience, has been manipulated and utilized as a means of social exclusion, discrimination, and dehumanization. The act of referring to outgroups as having a foul odor serves as a form of stigmatization, portraying them as inferior or undesirable. By bringing attention to this socio-political issue, the exploration of breathing aesthetics within *The Syntax of Smell* sheds light on the ways in which power dynamics, social hierarchies, and prejudices can intersect with our sensory experiences.

The Syntax of Smell not only embodies the concept of breathing aesthetics but also the concept of olfactory aesthetics. While breathing aesthetics focuses on the respiratory interconnectedness of morbidity and vitality on a socio-political and environmental level (Tremblay, 2022), the concept of olfactory aesthetics portrays the political and ethical ramifications of atmospheric differentiation (Hsu, 2020). Hsu argues that olfactory aesthetics offer a unique lens through which to examine environmental inequalities and the differential exposure to odors and pollutants. It delves into how individuals from different social and cultural backgrounds perceive and interpret smells, as well as the social and political implications of olfactory experiences. During the performance, Majorana did not extensively touch on these political and ethical ramifications of the uneven distribution of respiratory hazards. Nevertheless, *The Syntax of Smell* embodies the concept of olfactory aesthetics.

According to Hsu (2020), olfactory aesthetics is critically situated where the concepts of air conditioning and biopolitics intersect. Air conditioning is a principle coined by Peter Sloterdijk (2009) that includes methods of atmospheric manipulation and how they condition our lives. The concept positions the human as they are contingent on the air they are breathing and reframes air as a medium of separating human groups into segregated and stratified breathing spaces through the fragmentation of the atmosphere into microclimates. Michael Foucault's term biopolitics, simply put, refers to the use of power, socially and politically, to control people's lives. Foucault initially presented this as a protection mechanism while acknowledging that this protection is also a medium of subjugation of populations considered less valuable (Foucault et al., 2008). Following these definitions, *The Syntax of Smell* can be read as a point where air conditioning and biopolitics intersect, as it shows how we are dependent on the air we are breathing and smelling, how this experience differs among people and how this is controlled by biopolitical dynamics.

Focusing on smell, the performance raises consciousness of how we depend on the air we are breathing. Breathing and, with that, air can be very easily taken for granted, due to its invisibility (Tremblay, 2022). The Syntax of Smell demonstrates how smell can be a tool to make the air surrounding us, with all its toxins and toxicants, more discernible. Furthermore, during the performance, Majorana repeatedly emphasized how the production of scents is hazardous and how this contributes to respiratory risks. They further stressed how this uneven distribution of polluted air is not only limited to humans but extends further to other ecosystems. Simultaneously, they, however, emphasized how scent production is used for human pleasure, at the cost of other humans' and other species' suffering. Therefore, the point within *The Syntax of Smell* where air conditioning and biopolitics meet highlights the entanglement between smell, air pollution, and affect.

While *The Syntax of Smell* reveals how the production of fragrances is used for human pleasure, the important question that seems to be almost left out, or rather scented over, is whose pleasure are we talking about? If *The Syntax of Smell* embodies biopolitical forces, it also inevitably embodies necropolitical forces. As Jasbir Puar (2018) puts it: discussions of bio- and necropolitics must be intertwined as “the latter makes its presence known at the limits and through the excess of the former; [while] the former masks the multiplicity of its relationships to death and killing in order to enable the proliferation of the latter” (p. 35). Achille Mbembe's (2008) theory of necropolitics is often seen as an extension of Foucault's biopolitics and can be defined as the employment of social and political power to determine who may live and who must die. This results in some people being trapped in what can be called death worlds, a type of social existence where large populations are subjected to living conditions that render them akin to the of being both alive and dead (Mbembe & Libby, 2003). The concept of death worlds can be extended to the argument of an uneven distribution of respiratory hazards: some people are suffering from bigger exposure to air toxins than others and these dire situations can lead to more than discomfort but death. Majorana seemingly contests these forces within scent production, which can be exemplified by their references to olfactory pollution. However, during their performance, Majorana themselves engages with artificial scent production on a micro scale by mixing various chemicals together to create a fragrance composed of their audiences' olfactory memories. By doing so, they contribute to the production of these chemicals and, thus, employ bio- and necropolitical forces - optimizing certain lives while trivializing or attacking others. This paradoxical dynamic can be likened to the inevitable morbidity of breathing. Consequently, *The Syntax of Smell* embodies the concept of death worlds as it indicates simultaneous vitality and morbidity of respiration. This contributes to the performances' effectiveness in highlighting the socio-political as well as environmental ramifications associated with scent production. A deodorized performance, that does not engage with bio- and necropolitical forces, would arguably be not as effective in showing the olfactory entanglements which scent our daily lives.

In this section, I aimed to disentangle the olfactory entanglement presented within Majorana's work. What I argue is not that the olfactory entanglement can be understood as affect, toxicity, and smell but that the interrelation between them is a vital starting point when thinking about increasing awareness of air pollution. Similarly, relating to the question posed at the beginning of this section, I demonstrated that while the fragmentation of this olfactory entanglement is crucial to better understand its dynamics, the entanglement itself is too complex for it to be successfully arranged syntactically. To put it differently, a syntactic arrangement of the actors

within the olfactory entanglement would inevitably happen at the cost of the dynamics between the actors. While this section has mostly focused on the entanglement between breathing and toxicity, in the next section I will shed light on how affect relates to this.

Sentimentality

Having situated the Syntax of Smell within current debates on the entanglement of breathing and toxicity, in this section, I show how the performance uniquely adds an affective dimension to the dialogue and why that makes it successful in communicating awareness of air pollution. As mentioned above, affect encompasses both emotions and moods on two dimensions: pleasantness/valence and arousal (Feldman Barrett & Russell, 1998). In this section, I use the feeling of sentimentality, or rather “sentimentality,” to exemplify the connections between scent and affect. Sentimentality can be defined as the “expression of gentle emotions such as love, sympathy, or caring” (Cambridge Dictionary). When I am referring to “sentimentality” within this section, I am, thus, referring to such emotions evoked through scent, especially olfactory memory. The memory-evoking qualities of scents are nothing new. Scientists have shown that smell and memory are so closely linked because the anatomy of the brain allows olfactory signals to get to the limbic system, the part of the brain involved in our behavioural and emotional responses, very quickly (Khamisi, 2022; Zhou et al., 2021). Additionally, it has been found that the reconstruction of memory while being exposed to low levels of perfumes increased the amount of positive emotion words participants used to describe these memories (Castellanos et al., 2010). Applying this finding to Majorana’s performance, this would mean that participants used more positive words to describe their olfactory memories. Nevertheless, Majorana repeatedly warned about the socio-political and environmental ramifications of scent production. This is likely to have mediated the relationship between memory and affect among Majorana’s audience.

Previous research revealed how olfactory cues impact people’s affective and cognitive responses, attitudes, and perception, as well as memory and behaviours (Rimkute et al., 2016). By asking their audience to tell them about an olfactory memory and making it their mission to create a scent which re-evokes this memory, Majorana effectively triggers affective responses, especially nostalgia, in their audience. However, these responses put the audience in a vulnerable emotional state. Being in an emotional state can make people highly receptive to information (Rimkute et al., 2016). This receptivity also depends on the valence (negative versus positive) and the level of arousal (low versus high). Especially high arousal affective responses have been associated with behavioural and cognitive changes (Pfaff et al., 2008). Nostalgia, for example, can be seen to score high on arousal (Orth & Bourrain, 2008) and previous research within the social and behavioural sciences showed how feeling nostalgic can be used to influence pro-environmental behaviour (Wu et al., 2019). Similarly, olfactory cues have been found to influence cognitive processes. Exposure to scent increases attention and can lead to a greater elaboration of information (Rimkute et al., 2016). By evoking high arousal affective responses to memory, and exposing their audience to scent Majorana, thus, makes their audience highly susceptible to the information presented during their performance. The Syntax of Smell’s focus on the socio-political and environmental dimensions of scent production, thus, mediates the relation between the audiences’ memories and emotions. This contributes to the performances’ effectiveness in increasing awareness of the environmental and socio-political consequences of scent production and aligns with previous research

demonstrating the potential for odours to change attitudes and perceptions (Rimkute et al., 2016).

By showing the interrelation of memory, scent and toxicity and tailoring this to their audience, Majorana successfully evokes emotional responses in their audience. In line with the enmeshment of vitality and morbidity represented in the concept of olfactory aesthetics, *The Syntax of Smell* embodies what Michael Eigen called toxic nourishment. Even if they can be distinguished, emotional nourishment and poison can often be so intertwined that it is difficult, if not impossible, to have one without the other. In order to obtain emotional nourishment, one may need to take emotional toxins (Eigen, 2018). In other words, Majorana invites their audience to consider the complex and multifaceted nature of our sensory experiences and their impact on our and others' well-being, challenging our understanding of toxicity and vitality as separate entities. This, furthermore, relates to the psychological concept of cognitive dissonance, which is the mental discomfort resulting from inconsistent thoughts, beliefs, or attitudes. People naturally strive for cognitive consistency and seek to reduce this dissonance by aligning their thoughts, beliefs, and actions (Stone & Fernandez, 2008). In the context of the paradoxical relationship between respiratory toxicity and vitality, cognitive dissonance may arise when individuals are faced with the contradictory nature of respiratory vitality and toxicity. They may be aware of the detrimental environmental and socio-political consequences of scent production, which creates cognitive dissonance as it conflicts with their desire for the enjoyment of pleasant scents. Previous research has found that cognitive dissonance reduction can be achieved through behaviour and attitude change (Stone & Fernandez, 2008). By highlighting the negative consequences of scent production, *The Syntax of Smell* contributes to their audiences' perceptions of air toxicity. This increased awareness might lead to attitudinal and behavioural changes reducing cognitive dissonance.

Pertaining to this thought, toxic nourishment and cognitive dissonance relate to the above-mentioned paradoxical dynamic within *The Syntax of Smell* in which Majorana talks about the uneven distribution of respiratory hazards while simultaneously contributing to these hazards through his performance in an open laboratory. *The Syntax of Smell* balances the interrelation between nourishment and poison by, on the one hand, showing the pleasure we can experience through scent while, on the other hand, highlighting the environmental hazards as a result of the production of these smells. However, the relationship between nourishment and toxicity is not that simple, and it is crucial to differentiate whose pleasure we are talking about. One's emotional nourishment from a fragrance might not be that poisonous for themselves but rather for somebody else (who is often not in immediate proximity to the other person). This dimension of distance makes it hard for people to grasp the risks of air pollution. The performance focus on sentimentality, however, bridges this distance by effectively targeting the audiences' cognition, affect, attitudes and memories.

Conclusion

Ultimately, Majorana's open laboratory performance *The Syntax of Smell* embodies the entangled relationship between smell, affect and environmental contamination. In the first section, focused on syntactic fragmentation, I demonstrate that *The Syntax of Smell* can be fragmented into an entanglement of three main forces: breathing, pollution, and affect. By examining the concepts of breathing aesthetics and olfactory aesthetics, I shed light on how Majorana's performance embodies these concepts, highlighting the contradictory aspects of

respiratory vitality and morbidity. Moreover, I show how *The Syntax of Smell* engages with the environmental and socio-political dimensions of smell, emphasizing the unequal distribution of respiratory hazards and the interconnectedness of power dynamics, social hierarchies, and prejudices with sensory experiences. However, I also demonstrate that Majorana's engagement with scent production utilizes both bio- and necropolitical forces and contributes to the environmental contamination associated with it. This paradoxical dynamic aligns with the concept of death worlds, where certain lives are optimized while others are trivialized or attacked.

In the second section of the paper on sentimentality, I show how *The Syntax of Smell's* memory-evoking qualities and olfactory cues contribute to the effectiveness of the performance in increasing awareness of the negative consequences of scent production. By exploring the simultaneous vitality and morbidity of respiration, *The Syntax of Smell* effectively conveys the socio-political and environmental ramifications associated with scent production and the uneven distribution of respiratory hazards. Overall, through showing how the concepts of breathing and olfactory aesthetics, bio- and necropolitics, toxic nourishment and cognitive dissonance unfold within *The Syntax of Smell* we can gain a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the entangled relationship between smell, affect and environmental contamination. This underscores the importance of considering affective dimensions in discussions of environmental injustice and pro-environmental behaviour, ultimately deepening our awareness of the interconnectedness of human experiences and ecological well-being.

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