

Olfactory Order and the Non-Discursive Power of Modernity: Reading Patrick Süskind's *Perfume*

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Abstract

This paper offers a sociological interpretation of olfaction as an under-integrated dimension of modern power. While the sociology of the senses has explored the cultural and symbolic meanings of scent, its role in shaping social ordering remains less explicitly theorized. Reading *Perfume: The Story of a Murderer* as a form of speculative sociology, the paper examines how smell operates as a medium of classification, exclusion, and affective orientation. Through the figure of Jean-Baptiste Grenouille, the analysis highlights how sensory absence and olfactory mastery reveal the importance of perceptual participation in processes of social recognition. Rather than proposing olfaction as an alternative framework, the paper shows how it clarifies the sensory and affective conditions through which power is exercised. In doing so, it contributes to a more integrated understanding of how social order is sustained not only through discourse and representation, but also through the embodied organization of perception.

Keywords: olfaction, social theory, sensory power, sociology of the senses, social recognition

Olfaction and the Blind Spot of Social Theory

Modern social theory has been built upon a marked sensory asymmetry. Vision and language have functioned as the privileged media through which social order is rendered intelligible, governable, and legitimate, while olfaction has been comparatively marginalized within dominant theoretical frameworks. Smell has often been treated as residual, instinctual, or pre-social, a physiological remainder to be disciplined rather than a meaningful dimension of social life. This hierarchy of the senses is neither neutral nor accidental. It reflects the broader civilizational project of modernity, which has systematically privileged distance over proximity, abstraction over immersion, and reflexive control over affective exposure. In this context, olfaction emerges as a problematic sense: intrusive, involuntary, and resistant to rationalization. Precisely because smell implicates the body so directly, it unsettles

the epistemological and moral architecture upon which modern social theory has been constructed (Synnott, 1991).

At this regard, recent interdisciplinary reviews in sensory studies highlight that sensory perception is not merely a biological given but a culturally and socially constructed system of meaning and practice, with scholars underscoring how sensoria are shaped by power, identity, and social norms (Bull and Howes, 2025).

The relative marginalization of olfaction is therefore best understood not simply as an oversight but as a constitutive blind spot within dominant paradigms. Smell complicates the modern aspiration to govern social life through visibility, discursivity, and representation. Unlike vision, which allows for detachment and surveillance, or language, which enables classification and normativity, olfaction operates through immediacy and affect. It cannot be easily bracketed or deferred: one smells before one judges, reacts before one interprets. This temporal and affective priority helps explain why olfaction has remained analytically elusive within traditions invested in the fiction of rational autonomy. The relative neglect of smell thus mirrors a broader tendency to background those sensory dimensions of social power that operate beneath conscious articulation (Low, 2005).

Classical sociology already contains important, if partial, insights into this dynamic. Georg Simmel's reflections on sensory interaction, for instance, gesture toward the disruptive potential of olfaction. In his analysis, smell occupies a peculiar position: it is the sense that most radically collapses social distance. Whereas sight allows individuals to observe one another without contact, smell imposes proximity, generating attraction or repulsion without mediation. For Simmel, this intrusive quality helps explain both the association between smell and disgust and the intensity with which modern societies seek to regulate it. Smell does not merely communicate information; it produces an immediate relational effect, binding bodies together or separating them through affective response (Simmel, 1909).

Norbert Elias situates this sensory anxiety within the *longue durée* of the civilizing process. The progressive refinement of manners in Western societies involved not only the regulation of violence and sexuality but also the increasing control of bodily emissions. Odour became a moral and social problem. Practices of washing, deodorization, spatial segregation, and the privatization of bodily functions were central to the formation of modern habitus. To smell "right" became a marker of self-restraint, respectability, and social competence; to smell "wrong" signaled moral failure, lack of discipline, or social inferiority. In this sense, olfaction was incorporated into a broader regime of bodily governance, transforming sensory experience into a site of moral evaluation and social distinction (Elias, 1982).

State-of-the-art sensory sociology emphasizes that sensory regimes including smell are historically and culturally mediated, not universal or static, and that cultural norms actively shape which sensory experiences are legitimized and which are marginalized (Bull and Howes, 2025).

Yet even within these classical accounts, olfaction appears primarily as an object of regulation rather than as a medium of power in its own right. Smell is something to be controlled, suppressed, or neutralized, not a force that actively structures social relations. While such analyses illuminate the historical disciplining of the senses, they leave comparatively underdeveloped the question of how olfaction itself may function as a generative dimension of social ordering, producing effects of inclusion and exclusion, authority and submission, independently of explicit discourse or institutional mediation (Hoffmann, 2023).

It is at this analytical juncture that *Perfume: The Story of a Murderer* (2010) becomes particularly productive. By constructing a fictional world in which smell operates as the primary axis of social perception, Süskind foregrounds dynamics that often remain implicit in everyday life. The novel does not so much introduce a wholly unfamiliar logic as it amplifies existing olfactory regimes, rendering visible how identity, morality, and social evaluation can be organized at the level of sensory perception (Lusiana, 2013).

Read in this way, *Perfume* (2010) does not function as proof of a theoretical claim but as a heuristic device that allows the sensory infrastructure of social order to be more clearly articulated. It suggests that beneath rational norms and institutional arrangements lies a layer of affective regulation that shapes perception and response prior to conscious deliberation. Smell, in this sense, operates as a pre-discursive force, not by persuading subjects, but by orienting their embodied dispositions in advance of interpretation (Metaphors et al., 2025).

This perspective resonates with broader critiques of modernity that have questioned the overemphasis on rationality and representation within social theory. Karl Marx's analysis of fetishism, for example, already hinted at affective and sensorial dimensions of social relations that escape conscious control (Lewin and Morris, 1977), while Michel Foucault's work on biopolitics displaced the primacy of discourse by demonstrating how power increasingly targets bodies, capacities, and sensations (Anderson, 2012). Yet even within these critical traditions, the role of the senses, and olfaction in particular, remains only partially specified. *Perfume* (2010) extends these insights by dramatizing a form of power that operates not only through discipline or ideology, but through the modulation of affective perception.

What makes olfaction especially significant in this regard is its resistance to abstraction and stabilization. Smell is context-dependent, relational, and deeply entangled with memory and affect. This instability does not diminish its social efficacy; rather, it helps explain how it can operate below the threshold of explicit normativity. One does not argue with a smell; one responds to it. In this way, olfaction draws attention to forms of power that precede justification and exceed conscious consent (Synnott, 1991).

To foreground smell, then, is not to claim that it has been entirely absent from sociological inquiry, but to suggest that its implications for theories of power remain

insufficiently integrated into dominant frameworks. *Perfume* (2010) invites a reconsideration of these limits by rendering perceptible the sensory conditions under which social order is reproduced. It highlights how processes of recognition, evaluation, and belonging are shaped not only through discourse and representation, but through embodied, pre-reflexive forms of perception (Low, 2006).

In this sense, olfaction constitutes not only a blind spot but also a productive entry point for rethinking modern social theory. Attending to the ways in which smell structures social perception makes it possible to grasp forms of power that are at once intimate and collective, diffuse yet effective. Rather than overturning existing theoretical frameworks, such an approach seeks to extend them by accounting for the sensory conditions through which social life is lived and organized. *Perfume* (2010), read as a speculative sociology of the senses, serves precisely this purpose: it does not impose a new theory, but enables a clearer articulation of dimensions of social order.

Odourlessness and Social Non-Existence

Jean-Baptiste Grenouille's defining characteristic, his complete lack of personal odour, functions as one of the most striking sociological provocations in *Perfume: The Story of a Murderer* (2010). In a world saturated with smells, odourlessness does not signify neutrality or purity but a breakdown in sensory recognizability. Grenouille is not simply unnoticed; he is socially illegible. His condition foregrounds a fundamental insight that remains only partially articulated within social theory: social existence is not secured by biological presence alone, but by participation in shared regimes of perception. To exist socially is to be sensed, evaluated, and situated within a collectively intelligible field. Grenouille's odourlessness places him at the threshold of this field, rendering him a kind of living absence (Dortyol, 2020).

Smell, in this sense, operates as a form of implicit inscription. Bodies become socially meaningful not only through language or appearance but through sensory emanations that are interpreted according to culturally sedimented schemas. Odour can signal belonging, normality, danger, intimacy, or exclusion prior to explicit judgment. Grenouille's lack of smell deprives him of this minimal sensory legibility. He cannot be easily classified, trusted, or affectively located within the moral economy of his environment. His exclusion is not articulated through discourse or codified norms; it emerges pre-reflexively, through unease, neglect, and avoidance. Others recoil without fully knowing why. The absence of smell thus corresponds to an absence of social intelligibility (Howes, 1987).

This condition draws attention to a rarely foregrounded dimension of social life: that recognizability is sensory before it becomes cognitive. Social actors do not first interpret and then react; rather, sensory cues orient interpretation in advance. Grenouille's odourlessness can therefore be read as a disruption of the ordinary

mechanisms of social recognition. He is not perceived as morally transgressive but as perceptually indeterminate. His presence fails to stabilize within the sensory coordinates through which social reality is ordinarily organized. In this respect, odourlessness approximates a form of social non-existence, echoing broader sociological concerns with marginality, abjection, and non-personhood (Classen, 1992).

The significance of this condition becomes clearer when considered through the lens of symbolic capital. In Bourdieusian terms, bodies carry value insofar as they conform to the implicit norms of a given social field. Although rarely theorized explicitly, smell can be understood as one such dimension of embodied competence. To smell appropriately is to demonstrate self-regulation, social attunement, and adherence to collectively recognized standards. Grenouille's body fails to emit these signs. As a result, he is unable to accumulate even minimal symbolic capital, remaining excluded from processes of recognition that would render him socially legible (Bourdieu, 2004).

At the same time, Süskind's narrative complicates this exclusion. Grenouille's odourlessness is inseparable from his extraordinary olfactory perception. While lacking a smell of his own, he perceives the smells of others with unparalleled acuity. This asymmetry situates him in a paradoxical position: excluded from the sensory economy of recognition, yet granted heightened access to its underlying structure. He detects distinctions, of class, intimacy, and affect, that remain only dimly perceptible to others. His marginality thus becomes the condition for a particular form of sensory knowledge, one that is embodied rather than discursive (Gumilang and Saksono, 2021).

This knowledge does not take the form of explicit understanding. Grenouille does not interpret social life through norms or categories; he navigates it as a sensory landscape. In this respect, he approximates a kind of involuntary analyst of the senses, perceiving the tacit distinctions that structure social interaction. His position outside ordinary sensory participation allows him to apprehend, in exaggerated form, the otherwise taken-for-granted role of olfaction in organizing social relations (Panea, 2015).

Such a perspective complicates conventional accounts of marginality (Varghese and Kumar, 2022). Grenouille is not excluded because he violates norms, but because he fails to register within them at all. His marginality is not primarily punitive but structural. He is not sanctioned; he is bypassed. This mode of exclusion is analytically significant precisely because it operates without explicit justification. It exemplifies a form of power that functions through sensory omission rather than overt repression, producing forms of non-existence that remain largely unarticulated (Gumilang and Saksono, 2021).

At the same time, his developing mastery of scent introduces the possibility of reversal. By learning to produce and manipulate odours, Grenouille acquires the

capacity to inscribe meaning onto bodies and environments. He moves from perceiving the sensory order to intervening within it. In doing so, he reveals the contingency of the very structures that excluded him. If social existence depends upon sensory recognizability, then control over the sensory field becomes a powerful means of shaping recognition itself (Shaw, 2022).

The implications of this reversal are significant. Grenouille's odourlessness initially marks him as socially absent, yet it also frees him from the internalized constraints associated with olfactory normativity. Unlike others, he is not governed by anxieties about smelling "right" or being judged through sensory cues. His body is not subject to the same forms of self-monitoring that characterize modern subjects. This absence of sensory selfhood renders him both vulnerable and, paradoxically, less constrained by the affective mechanisms that sustain social conformity (Low, 2006). From a broader theoretical perspective, Grenouille's condition challenges assumptions that locate social power primarily in visibility or discourse. His case suggests that sensory absence can be as consequential as sensory excess. Just as certain smells can stigmatize, their absence can erase. Both dynamics indicate that social inclusion depends upon relatively narrow thresholds of sensory normativity. Those who fall outside these thresholds, through excess, deficiency, or difference, risk becoming socially unintelligible (Dortyol, 2020).

Read in this way, *Perfume: The Story of a Murderer* (2010) does not simply dramatize an exceptional condition but foregrounds the sensory foundations of recognition and belonging. Grenouille's odourlessness makes perceptible a dimension of exclusion that typically operates without visibility. By failing to participate in the olfactory order, he exposes the extent to which social existence is contingent upon sensory participation (Lusiana, 2013).

More broadly, this condition can be interpreted as an exaggeration of modernity's ambivalent relationship to the body. Modern social orders demand increasing control over bodily emissions while simultaneously minimizing their acknowledged significance. Smell is regulated intensively yet often treated as analytically negligible. Grenouille embodies a limiting case of this tension: a body stripped of sensory trace, and therefore of social presence. His odourlessness is less a natural anomaly than a conceptual device that renders visible the sensory conditions of social existence (Metaphors et al., 2025).

In this sense, the figure of Grenouille does not simply illustrate exclusion but helps clarify the mechanisms through which recognition itself is constituted. Before one can be judged, categorized, or addressed, one must first be perceptible within a shared sensory field. Where this perceptibility fails, social existence becomes precarious. By foregrounding this dynamic, *Perfume* (2010) invites a reconsideration of the sensory thresholds through which the boundaries of the social are continuously drawn and maintained (Coronil, 2001).

Smell, Distinction, and the Sensory Economy of Class

The social world depicted in *Perfume: The Story of a Murderer* (2010) is structured through a pervasive olfactory hierarchy. Urban spaces, occupations, and bodies are saturated with classed odours that function as immediate markers of social position. Markets, tanneries, fish stalls, slaughterhouses, and overcrowded dwellings emit smells that adhere to the bodies of those who inhabit them, marking the lower classes as morally suspect and aesthetically offensive. Conversely, perfumed interiors, private chambers, and carefully regulated bodily scents signal refinement, civility, and legitimacy. Smell operates here not simply as an additional social cue, but as a classificatory principle that organizes perception at the level of affective immediacy rather than reflective judgment (Waskul and Vannini, 2008).

Alain Corbin's historical analysis of olfactory regimes finds a particularly suggestive resonance in Süskind's narrative. Corbin demonstrates how, in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Europe, odours became progressively moralized and medicalized, functioning as indicators of danger, degeneration, or virtue. Smell thus operated as a diagnostic medium through which broader anxieties about poverty, disease, and disorder were articulated. *Perfume* (2010) can be read as an amplification of this historical logic, rendering explicit how olfactory perception may organize social evaluation prior to discursive interpretation.

From a Bourdieusian perspective, olfactory competence can be understood as a form of embodied cultural capital. Knowing how to smell, or more precisely, how not to smell, is not an innate capacity but a socially acquired disposition, unevenly distributed across class positions. The regulation of bodily odour presupposes access to material resources, spatial arrangements, and forms of practical knowledge: clean water, private space, perfumed products, and the time required for bodily maintenance. These conditions are differentially available, such that the capacity to conform to dominant olfactory norms becomes a marker of distinction, translating structural inequality into embodied difference (Garratt, 2015).

In this context, perfume is not merely an aesthetic accessory but a technology of distinction operating directly at the level of the body. To smell "appropriate" is to embody social legitimacy; to smell "wrong" is to carry stigma. Because olfactory perception presents itself as immediate and self-evident, these distinctions tend to appear natural rather than socially produced. Smell does not require explicit interpretation to be effective; it is experienced as an intuitive response. For this reason, olfactory hierarchies can function as a particularly subtle form of symbolic violence, naturalizing social difference through sensory experience (Waskul and Vannini, 2008).

Recent scholarship in cultural sociology also highlights how senses become resources of distinction, arguing that taste, sound, and smell are shaped by inequalities of class, power, and cultural capital rather than being transparent windows onto social reality (Howes, 2021).

What Perfume: The Story of a Murderer (2010) makes visible, however, is the contingency of this sensory economy. Through Grenouille's apprenticeship in perfumery, the novel foregrounds the technical and cultural processes through which smells are produced, stabilized, and circulated. Odours are not simply given; they are composed, manipulated, and reproduced. This insight destabilizes the apparent naturalness of olfactory hierarchies. If scents can be fabricated and transformed, then the social distinctions they sustain cannot be understood as fixed or inherent (Moffatt, 2001).

Grenouille's intervention operates by short-circuiting the established relationship between smell and status. His perfumes do not merely refine existing distinctions; they suspend them. By producing scents that elicit admiration, desire, and reverence independently of social position, he disrupts the tacit correspondence between olfactory perception and class hierarchy. The crowd that later responds to him does not recognize conventional markers of status, wealth, lineage, respectability, but reacts to an affective stimulus that reorganizes perception itself. In this moment, smell becomes the primary medium through which value is attributed, displacing more familiar criteria of social differentiation (Classen et al., 2002).

This disruption has broader theoretical implications. It suggests that class distinction, often treated as a relatively stable structure grounded in economic relations, is also sustained through fragile sensory conventions. These conventions operate continuously at the level of everyday perception, stabilizing social hierarchies by rendering them immediately intelligible. When such sensory expectations are manipulated, the apparent solidity of class distinctions becomes less secure. The authority of social hierarchy depends not only on institutions and norms, but on the ongoing reproduction of shared perceptual frameworks (Low, 2013).

At the same time, the novel resists any straightforward reading of this disruption as emancipatory. Grenouille's mastery of olfactory production does not dissolve hierarchy; it reconfigures it. By gaining control over the sensory conditions of perception, he acquires a form of power that exceeds conventional class authority. This power operates not through recognition of status but through the modulation of affect, compelling responses that bypass reflection. In this sense, *Perfume* (2010) points toward a form of domination grounded in the capacity to shape perception itself.

The sensory economy of class depicted in the novel also extends beyond individual bodies to the organization of urban space. Paris appears as an olfactory landscape in which different zones are marked by distinct smells. Spatial divisions are reinforced through sensory differentiation: certain areas are avoided not because of

formal prohibitions, but because their odours signal danger, contamination, or moral degradation. Smell thus participates in regulating movement, proximity, and interaction, shaping the lived experience of class through everyday practice (Mattern, 2008).

Grenouille's ability to navigate and manipulate this landscape further underscores its constructed character. His perfumes allow him to move across spaces and social contexts from which he would otherwise be excluded. In doing so, he reveals how access and exclusion may be mediated less by explicit rules than by sensory perception. Class, in this sense, is not only an economic or symbolic position but also a perceptual condition, continuously reproduced through embodied experience (Öneç, 2025).

From a broader perspective, this analysis suggests the need to extend class theory beyond its traditional focus on economic relations, institutional structures, and symbolic representation. While these dimensions remain central, they are sustained by a sensory infrastructure that stabilizes social difference at the level of perception. Smell functions as one such medium, translating abstract inequalities into immediate experience. By foregrounding this process, *Perfume* (2010) highlights a dimension of class power that is at once intimate, diffuse, and difficult to contest (Shaw, 2022).

This dynamic also resonates with contemporary developments in which sensory environments are increasingly designed and managed. Practices such as ambient scenting and olfactory branding illustrate how smell can be strategically deployed to produce atmosphere, influence behavior, and differentiate spaces. While distinct from the fictional scenario depicted in the novel, such examples point to the broader relevance of understanding olfaction as part of the material and affective organization of social life (Lawler, 2005).

Ultimately, the novel suggests that the economy of class cannot be fully understood without attending to the economy of the senses. Smell operates as a form of embodied capital that both reflects and reproduces social hierarchy. Grenouille's intervention reveals the contingency of this order while also demonstrating its susceptibility to manipulation. In doing so, *Perfume* (2010) does not replace existing theories of class, but extends them by drawing attention to the sensory conditions through which inequality is lived, perceived, and sustained (Craig, 1976).

Olfaction as Non-Discursive Power

The climactic execution scene in *Perfume: The Story of a Murderer* (2010) provides a particularly concentrated illustration of the dynamics at stake in olfactory power. Confronted with Grenouille's perfume, the assembled crowd suspends moral judgment, legal rationality, and individual restraint. What unfolds is not persuasion, argumentation, or ideological conversion, but a rapid and collective transformation at

the level of affect. The spectacle of punishment, intended to reaffirm the authority of law and moral order, instead gives way to an altered perceptual and emotional state. In this moment, smell appears not simply as a sensory input but as a force capable of reorienting social response.

This scene can be productively read through a biopolitical lens. Michel Foucault's insight that modern power increasingly targets bodies, capacities, and dispositions is particularly relevant here. The perfume does not instruct the crowd to act differently; it alters the conditions under which action becomes intelligible and desirable. Smell, in this sense, operates as a modality through which affective orientations are reorganized. Rather than functioning through prohibition or command, it acts by modulating the field of perception within which subjects respond (Foucault, 1977).

Recent research in sociology and social psychology suggests that olfactory cues can interact with social biases and prejudices, influencing proxemic behavior and implicit associations in ways that extend beyond conscious evaluation (Invitto et al., 2025).

Crucially, this mode of power can be described as non-discursive in a specific and limited sense. It does not rely primarily on language, representation, or explicit meaning-making. The crowd does not deliberate, interpret, or justify its response; it is drawn into a shared affective state that precedes such processes. This does not imply that discourse is irrelevant, but rather that it is temporarily displaced. The scene thus foregrounds a dimension of social control that operates prior to, and conditions, discursive articulation (Miller, 1990).

In this respect, the novel does not so much displace existing theories of power as extend them. If disciplinary and biopolitical frameworks have emphasized the regulation of bodies and conduct, the scene suggests that such regulation also depends upon more immediate, sensory forms of orientation. Olfactory power does not replace discursive or institutional forms of power; it helps specify one of the ways in which subjects become affectively available to them. It operates at the level at which perception is organized and response is primed.

The execution scene also complicates the distinction between coercion and consent that underpins many normative accounts of power. The crowd appears to desire what is imposed upon it. Submission takes the form of pleasure, devotion, even reverence. This ambiguity does not eliminate domination, but it suggests that power may be most effective when it operates through alignment with affect rather than through overt force. In this case, olfactory modulation produces a condition in which submission is experienced as attraction rather than constraint (Howes, 2003).

This dynamic resonates with Elias Canetti's analysis of crowds, particularly his emphasis on the dissolution of individuality and the intensification of shared affect. Yet where Canetti foregrounds proximity and collective movement, *Perfume* (2010) introduces smell as a key medium through which such affective convergence

can occur. Olfaction contributes to the formation of a temporary collective subject not by coordinating action directly, but by synchronizing perception and emotional response (Brighenti, 2010).

From a sociological perspective, this moment underscores the dependence of normative order on affective conditions. Law, morality, and punishment presuppose subjects who remain perceptually and emotionally oriented toward their authority. When these orientations shift, the effectiveness of such institutions may be undermined. Grenouille's perfume does not directly contest the law; it renders it temporarily inoperative by reorganizing the affective field within which it is encountered (Garland, 1991).

The non-discursive dimension of olfactory power is therefore best understood not as a separate domain, but as a layer of social ordering that operates alongside and beneath more visible forms of regulation. Smell does not persuade or command; it shapes the conditions under which persuasion and command can take effect. In this sense, it functions as a condition of possibility for certain forms of social action rather than as their explicit cause (Cerulo, 2018).

This perspective also invites a reconsideration of how power inhabits the body. Rather than acting solely upon subjects from the outside, power may operate through the modulation of sensory experience, influencing how individuals feel, orient themselves, and respond. Olfaction, given its close connection to memory, emotion, and bodily orientation, represents one such channel through which affective life can be shaped (Damon et al., 2021).

Grenouille's mastery of scent exemplifies an extreme, fictionalized version of this capacity. His power does not depend on institutional authority, surveillance, or explicit norms. Instead, it derives from the ability to influence perception directly. Subjects are not compelled through threat or obligation; they are drawn into a perceptual environment that elicits particular responses. This mode of influence remains compatible with, rather than external to, broader frameworks of governance, insofar as it operates on the same terrain of embodied disposition emphasized by biopolitical analysis (Foucault, 1991).

At the same time, the novel resists any straightforward valorization of this form of power. The crowd's transformation is not emancipatory but destabilizing. The suspension of judgment also entails a suspension of responsibility. By dissolving the distance necessary for evaluation and critique, olfactory modulation produces a form of affective capture that is difficult to contest. Precisely because it operates below the level of conscious awareness, it does not present itself as power in any recognizable sense (Foucault, 1982).

This ambiguity resonates with contemporary concerns regarding the increasing use of sensory techniques to shape behavior and experience. Practices such as ambient scenting, atmospheric design, and the strategic modulation of environments suggest that sensory influence plays a growing role in the organization

of social life. While less extreme than the scenario depicted in *Perfume* (2010), these developments point to the broader relevance of understanding how perception itself can become a site of intervention (Bochicchio and Winsler, 2020).

The execution scene also raises questions about agency and responsibility. If action is shaped in part by sensory conditions that precede reflection, then agency cannot be understood solely in terms of conscious intention. This does not negate responsibility, but it complicates accounts that assume fully autonomous subjects. Social actors are embedded within affective environments that orient their responses in advance, even if these orientations remain only partially accessible to awareness (Fuchs, 2001).

In this sense, *Perfume* (2010) highlights a tension within modern social theory. On the one hand, the modern subject is conceived as rational and self-determining; on the other, social life increasingly involves forms of influence that operate at the level of affect and perception. Olfactory power makes this tension visible by illustrating how easily rational autonomy can be displaced when sensory conditions are altered.

Ultimately, to conceptualize olfaction as non-discursive power is not to propose a wholly new form of domination, but to draw attention to a dimension of social ordering that has remained comparatively under-specified. Smell does not replace discourse, ideology, or institutional regulation; it contributes to the sensory conditions through which these become effective. By foregrounding this dimension, *Perfume* (2010) enables a more nuanced understanding of how power operates not only through what is said or seen, but through what is felt, often immediately, involuntarily, and prior to reflection (Tullett et al., 2022).

Gender, Objectification, and the Extraction of Essence

The gendered dimension of the sensory regime depicted in *Perfume: The Story of a Murderer* (2010) is difficult to overlook. Female bodies occupy a structurally asymmetrical position within the novel's olfactory economy: they appear less as agents of sensory power than as its primary material substrate. Their narrative and social significance is not organized around voice or action, but around the extractable qualities attributed to their scent. In this context, smell becomes a medium through which processes of objectification can be both enacted and obscured, aligning with broader patterns in which bodies, particularly gendered bodies, are rendered available for forms of abstraction and appropriation (Simmonds, 2019).

From the outset, Süskind's narrative associate femininity with a form of sensory plenitude that is simultaneously aestheticized and instrumentalized. The young women whose scents Grenouille seeks are described less in terms of subjectivity than through their olfactory presence. Their individuality is attenuated as

their significance becomes tied to what they emanate. This narrative logic does not simply depict objectification; it foregrounds a mechanism through which value is detached from persons and reconstituted as a sensory attribute. Smell, in this sense, provides a medium through which value can be extracted without requiring recognition of subjectivity (Keller, 2021).

Feminist sociology has long emphasized that objectification operates through the reduction of persons to instruments of use or desire. In *Perfume* (2010), this reduction takes a particularly literalized form. Grenouille's actions are not driven by interpersonal desire in a conventional sense, but by a technical orientation toward extraction. The female body is approached as a site from which an essence can be isolated, preserved, and recomposed. Violence is reframed as procedure. This framing does not diminish its severity; rather, it reveals how processes of objectification can be embedded within seemingly neutral or technical practices (Kao, 2020).

The process of distillation offers a useful analytical metaphor for this dynamic. Distillation abstracts, concentrates, and stabilizes; it removes context and contingency in order to isolate a purified residue. When applied to the human body, this logic entails a radical form of reduction, in which lived experience is displaced by extractable value. Feminist analyses of commodification have often highlighted how bodies are fragmented and reconfigured into consumable elements. *Perfume* (2010) extends this insight into the sensory domain, illustrating how even ephemeral aspects of embodiment can be incorporated into processes of appropriation (Gray, 1993).

This dynamic also reflects a gendered distribution of sensory authority. Within the novel, olfactory knowledge and technical expertise are largely associated with male figures, perfumers, craftsmen, producers, while female bodies are positioned as the source of raw material. Women are primarily those who are smelled, rather than those who control or interpret smell. This asymmetry mirrors broader sociological patterns in which access to cultural and symbolic capital is unevenly distributed, shaping who is able to transform embodied qualities into recognized forms of value (Shaw, 2022). Contemporary, recent qualitative research indicates that bodily smell conveys cultural meanings related to gender and identity, with individuals reporting that changes in their own body odor are interpreted through cultural scripts of gender and selfhood (Easterbrook-Smith, 2025).

From a Bourdieusian perspective, this asymmetry can be understood in terms of differential access to the conversion of embodied properties into symbolic capital (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 2013). While male actors within the narrative are able to translate olfactory knowledge into prestige and authority, female bodies remain the substrate upon which such value is produced. Their contribution is essential yet unrecognized, reflecting a form of symbolic asymmetry in which the conditions of value production are obscured by the forms it takes.

At the same time, the novel resists a purely individualized reading of this dynamic. Grenouille's actions are extreme, but they are not entirely disconnected from broader processes through which bodies, affects, and sensations are transformed into commodities. His project can be read as a condensed and exaggerated instance of more diffuse social logics: the extraction of value from embodied difference, the aestheticization of experience, and the translation of lived qualities into consumable forms (Rindisbacher, 2015).

This becomes particularly evident in the displacement of desire. Grenouille's relation to the women he targets is not structured by reciprocity, recognition, or interaction, but by a form of technical interest in their sensory properties. The women themselves are interchangeable to the extent that they contribute to an ideal olfactory composition. Desire is thus reconfigured from a relational phenomenon into a process of selection and control. Such a shift resonates with broader critiques of how modern forms of desire can become aligned with consumption and mastery rather than mutuality (Gray, 1993).

Moreover, the novel highlights how objectification may operate through processes of disappearance as much as through visibility. The violence inflicted upon female bodies leaves little trace within the sensory logic of the narrative. What persists is not the person but the product, an abstracted essence that circulates independently of its origin. This dynamic reflects a broader pattern in which the conditions of production are rendered invisible, allowing consumption to proceed without sustained engagement with its underlying processes.

The relationship between smell and memory further complicates this dynamic. Although olfaction is often associated with the preservation of memory, Grenouille's perfumes do not retain the individuality of those from whom they are derived. Instead, they contribute to a composite ideal that effaces particularity. In this sense, the process of extraction is also a process of erasure, aligning with analyses that emphasize how embodied contributions, particularly those associated with gendered labor, can be absorbed into forms that obscure their origins (Fleming, 1991).

From a broader theoretical perspective, *Perfume* (2010) situates gendered objectification within the sensory organization of modern social life. The regulation and commodification of the senses are not neutral processes; they are embedded within relations of power that shape whose bodies are rendered available for extraction and whose are positioned as sites of control. By foregrounding olfaction, the novel draws attention to a dimension of objectification that operates not only through representation, but through affective and sensory transformation (Shaw, 2022).

This perspective also resonates with contemporary developments in which sensory value is increasingly mobilized within economic and cultural practices. From fragrance industries to forms of affective labor, the association between femininity, sensory appeal, and value production remains salient. While distinct from the

fictional scenario depicted in the novel, such dynamics underscore the broader relevance of understanding how sensory attributes become incorporated into regimes of production and consumption (Adams, 2000).

Importantly, the novel does not offer a resolution that would reconcile aesthetic value with ethical consideration. The apparent perfection of Grenouille's final perfume does not negate the conditions of its production; rather, it depends upon them. This tension prevents a separation between sensory pleasure and the processes through which it is generated, foregrounding the ambivalence at the heart of aestheticized forms of domination (Butterfield, 1998).

In this sense, *Perfume* (2010) does not simply depict gendered violence, but provides a lens through which to examine how objectification can be embedded within sensory practices themselves. By framing domination through the extraction of essence, the novel highlights how processes of abstraction, appropriation, and erasure may operate at the level of perception and affect. Attending to these dynamics expands the analysis of gender and power beyond discourse alone, drawing attention to the sensory conditions through which bodies are transformed into sources of value (Synnott, 1991).

Conclusion: Toward a Critical Sociology of Smell

This paper has argued that olfaction constitutes a significant yet comparatively under-integrated dimension of modern social order. Through a sociological reading of *Perfume: The Story of a Murderer* (2010), smell has been examined not as a marginal sensory residue but as a modality through which processes of recognition, exclusion, desire, and domination may be organized at the level of embodied affect. Read in this way, the novel does not present an entirely separate social world governed by scent, but rather foregrounds dynamics that remain less visible within dominant theoretical frameworks. By bringing olfaction into focus, the analysis has sought to extend existing approaches to social power. While classical and contemporary social theory have extensively examined the roles of discourse, representation, and institutional regulation, the sensory conditions through which these processes become effective have received comparatively less systematic attention. Smell, precisely because it operates through immediacy and affect, helps to illuminate how social orientations are shaped prior to explicit interpretation. In this sense, the argument is not that the sensory replaces established accounts of power, but that it specifies one of the conditions through which they are enacted. Grenouille's trajectory can be read as a particularly concentrated exploration of these dynamics. His odourlessness foregrounds the sensory foundations of social recognition, suggesting that social existence depends not only on categorization or normativity, but also on perceptual intelligibility. Conversely, his capacity to manipulate scent

highlights how social responses may be reorganized through the modulation of affective perception. The execution scene, in particular, illustrates how established forms of authority may be destabilized when the sensory conditions that sustain them are altered, without implying that such authority is simply displaced or overcome. The analysis has also considered how olfaction intersects with class and gender. Smell operates as a dimension of embodied differentiation, translating social inequalities into immediate experience while contributing to their apparent naturalization. At the same time, the extraction of scent from female bodies in the novel provides a stylized representation of processes through which embodied qualities may be abstracted, commodified, and detached from their social and material conditions. These dynamics do not stand outside existing theories of distinction and objectification, but rather extend them by drawing attention to their sensory dimensions. More broadly, the paper has suggested that attention to olfaction can contribute to ongoing developments in the sociology of the senses, by more explicitly linking sensory experience to questions of power, affect, and social ordering. In doing so, it positions olfaction not as an entirely neglected domain, but as one whose implications for theories of power remain to be more fully articulated. Ultimately, *Perfume: The Story of a Murderer* (2010) can be understood as a form of speculative sociology that renders perceptible the sensory infrastructures through which social life is organized. Its value lies not in providing a definitive account of social reality, but in enabling a clearer articulation of dynamics that are often experienced but less frequently theorized. Attending to smell, in this sense, is not simply an additive gesture, but a way of refining sociological analysis by incorporating the affective and perceptual conditions through which social power becomes lived and effective. This paper has therefore argued that olfaction helps specify how power operates through the affective organization of perception.

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