

PSYCHOLOGY

AND THE APPRECIATION OF

PERFUME

by Avery Gilbert

I've devoted my career as a sensory Psychologist to discovering how and why people respond to smells the way they do. We know that odor perception varies with age and sex, pregnancy and hormonal state. I've shown that scents are associated with color, sounds and textures. I've even measured how well people can imagine odor in their minds. The study of psychology and behavior can illuminate our appreciation of perfume.

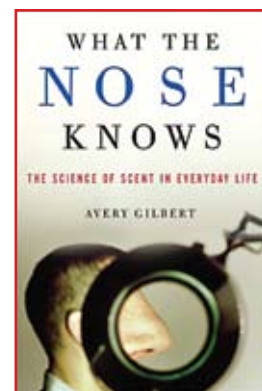
Take the act of smelling for example. It's a complex, finely tuned interplay of physical behavior and mental processing. We capture most of the information in a scent with a single sniff; in fact, we do it in the first 450 milliseconds of the first sniff. And yet, we sniff repeatedly when exploring a new scent, and we do so with a characteristic timing pattern that is as individually unique as a fingerprint. Our brain responds before we are even aware of a smell—a structure called the amygdala codes odors as good or bad, just as it does other kinds of external stimuli. Once we consciously detect an odor, we begin to evaluate it. How strong is it? Is it appropriate? Have I smelled it before? Does it differ from the last one I sampled?

These are familiar questions for perfume lovers and those who work with fragrance for a living. They are the means by which we delve into a perfume, explore its aesthetics and come to a judgment about it. Smelling is about comparison, discrimination and memory, what Psychologists call higher-order, cognitive processes. We may be passionate about perfumes, but our appreciation of them is not simply emotional—it is deeply thoughtful.

Fragrance marketing could be more effective if it took account of the basic psychology of odor perception. For example, brands often describe new perfumes using what I call the Ingredient Voice—an impossibly long list of exotic notes that few people have ever encountered in pure form. Ingredient Voice mistakenly assumes that we perceive perfume as a collection of individual notes, as does the monstrous Grenouille in **Patrick Süskind's** novel *Perfume: The Story of a Murderer*. In reality, we perceive a complex bouquet as a whole object; we smell the forest not the trees. Unlike Grenouille, Perfumers and fragrance fans smell from the top down; they recognize a general type—a chypre for example—look for a distinguishing twist and only then search for specific notes that make it unique.

In pure science and applied research, I focus on actual smells: the point where the perfume meets the nose. Marketing abstractions—cocooning, indulgence and multitasking—and consumer demographics—Gen X, Metrosexuals and New Millennials—take us away from the juice. So do gimmicks like coffee beans on the fragrance counter. I have yet to find a jot of scientific evidence that sniffing beans “clears the nose.” How could it? There are over 800 kinds of volatile molecules in a medium roast Arabica coffee.

Still, we should be wary of making a fetish out of the juice. Perfume is made to be worn—its ultimate aesthetic value is determined by how it projects from a woman's skin. Perfume critics who treat fragrance as art with a capital 'A' are intellectualizing a sensory experience that in truth is available to everybody. It took artistic vision to create Gucci Envy but that doesn't mean it ought to be hanging on a wall at the Met and expounded upon only by experts. Instead, we should exploit the psychology of scent to make the magical experience of perfume available to all. *BF*



Dr. Avery Gilbert is president of the consulting firm Synesthetics, Inc. and Author of *What the Nose Knows: The Science of Scent in Everyday Life* (Crown, 2008; \$23.95). It is available in bookstores, online at Amazon.com and at Barnes & Noble.