

Reinarz, Jonathan: *Past Scents. Historical Perspectives on Smell*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press 2014. ISBN: 978-0-252-07979-5; XI, 279 S.

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In *Past Scents*, the medical historian Jonathan Reinarz presents a thorough history of olfaction. The title of the book is wittingly chosen, as Reinarz hints that scents are typically studied in the past tense. He argues that a historical study of olfaction is ideal because of the fleeting nature of scents. According to the author, „[t]his volume is an attempt to mine notable seams and outcrops and present them as a comprehensive and coherent introduction to the history of smell“ (p. 1). Following an introduction, Reinarz organizes his work around the social characteristics of religion, race, gender, and class. He also uses two historical-geographical chapters to show the socio-spatial developments of the fragrance industry and the olfactory characteristics within cities as exemplary sites for the study of scents.

In Chapter 1, Reinarz draws connections between religious practice and olfaction. He unravels the fragrant and the foul. The dichotomy – used in societies for ages – helps to define and divide groups. In the case of religion, the faithful believers smelled heavenly, the pagans or infidels smelled foul. Furthermore, Reinarz discusses how olfaction played a role in religious practice and how this relates to identity and morality. He explains how ancient Christianity developed from a scentless practice to a fragrant faith. Smell, as Reinarz demonstrates, became a key component in the formulation of Christian knowledge. Religious meanings are carried and clarified through olfactory experience. One example is incense. It became a symbol of olfactory piety affecting body and mind at the religious ceremony.

In Chapter 2, Reinarz presents a historical-geographical perspective of the perfume trade. He highlights „cartographies of perfume“ (p. 64) whereby the reader is taken on a tour through the historical development of the fragrance industry. Reinarz depicts several epochs: the early Egyptian civilization;

the Hellenistic and Roman period; the Middle Ages; the Italian and French perfume trades of the 16th and 17th centuries; characteristics of a globalizing perfume economy in the 19th to 20th centuries. He structures each epoch by such aspects as important raw materials, methods to extract essences, and new extraction techniques; meaningful perfumes at the time, textures and characteristics of those, and where they were retailed; and the changing geographies and professional conditions over the centuries. These illustrations disclose that the perfume business industrialized and became a highly professionalized sector with an international division of labor.

In Chapter 3, Reinarz shows how smells are utilized „to classify people and objects in ways that define their relations to one another and their relative values within a particular culture“ (p. 19). He introduces the concept of racial odors, linking race with olfaction. The olfactory characteristics of particular races highlight the absoluteness of social boundaries on the one hand and are used as strategies to keep the social status quo between groups on the other. Again, smells are deciphered as characteristics to assess and be ascribed to the social status of societal groups. For example, the instances of Foetor Judaicus (the so-called foul odor of Jews) and scents associated with Chinese migrant workers in California show how smells were used to make a race.

Chapter 4 connects olfaction and gender. It exemplifies how and where smells were gendered and morally assessed: the rank of woman on the social scale depending on her smell characteristics; the smell of witches and prostitutes (i.e. particular stereotypes of disdained women in society) and how character and reputation intermingled with odors; homosexuality and perfume; characteristics of gendered labor in the perfume industry. The gendering of perfume – thus, the assigning of gender attributes to scents through particular ingredients, scent structures, and marketing – is an ongoing theme that helps to define boundaries. However, just like gender theory in general, instances of postmodern framings of perfume challenge and confuse these boundaries; essentialist efforts to gender odors are questioned.

In Chapter 5, the author draws lines between class, smell, and smelling. First, he explains that smell has historically been conceived as the most elitist sense. Similar to race and gender, odor codes drew discriminatory boundaries between classes. Dominant classes considered themselves as odorless or with a pleasant smell. Subordinate classes smelled foul. In fact, this had also to do with hygienic affordability. Bathing as a practice characterized social stratification and related repellent odors with a moral stigma. Second, smelling is discussed as a competence that increased with class status. Social status and success and a refined nose are correlated.

Chapter 6 focuses on sanitation and the health movement in European cities of the 19th century. The author also compares sanitation and deodorization in cities of the Global North and South. This is done to qualify the achievements of public health against the downfalls of losing unique olfactory heritage and specific geographical and historical characteristics. Reinartz summarizes that „civilization evidently despises odor and will oust it with increased ferocity as power strives to close the gap between itself and divine purity“ (p. 208). Reinartz concludes with an overview of „the scent agenda“ (p. 211). He depicts how „the historical study of smell“ (p. 210) over the past three decades has opened up new insights about society.

The books strengths are at least three. First, Reinartz presents a thorough, well-researched historical analysis of olfaction in society. The volume is rich in factual detail and benefits from a multi- and inter-disciplinary perspective, suggesting that future research in historical studies of smell will likewise need to follow suit. Second, Reinartz offers a view on multi-scalar geographies, scales, and effects of olfaction. He meanders between the individual, bodily experience towards that of groups and society as a whole. The book also includes coverage of the Global South, important in its own right but also for comparative purposes to the Global North. Third, the book shows how smells and olfaction are related to power and struggle: on the one hand, the ordering of the human senses since the Enlightenment and, on the other hand, the modernized urban condition of sanitation and public

health.

The book also has some shortcomings. First, Reinartz claims to examine the subject areas of his chapters through „greater attention to previously neglected senses“ (p. 4). He states that „if we are to understand how people in past societies understood and responded to the whole body or just its parts [...] we must begin to explore the so called lesser senses, such as smell, more comprehensively“ (p. 3). However, how to study this adequately (specifically, questions of research methods) and how to communicate the outcomes in a comprehensive way (in spite of an underdeveloped language of smell) needs to be more fully discussed. Second, Reinartz describes a bi-polar picture of an increasingly „fragrant society“ (p. 83) and „stench-free, postindustrial environments“ (p. 82), but fails to adequately describe the rationales and drivers of both. Third, the book has blind spots in its characterization of the perfume industry. For instance, a coherent picture of the development of the perfumer's profession (e.g. from a family-oriented approach to the development of trained professionals; the role of mentorship; the interaction of craft, art, and science) could enhance our understanding of this unique role. These shortcomings aside, Reinartz has provided a significant contribution to the history of olfaction.

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