



THE SOUND OF SCENT

The language of perfume is being rewritten – with colour, shape and sound. Will this change our attitude to scent? Christa D'Souza investigates. Photographs by Mario Godlewski

Sod. Just the thought of having to plough through a whole piece about perfume. For doesn't reading about top notes and bottom notes and accords and dry downs enervate you in a way that no other subject ever, ever can? Perfume – or scent, as nicely brought up girls called it in my day... Sorry, but I've got a bit of a block about it. I want to get it, I really do, because I'm into smell big time. Of all our senses, smell is the one, I'm pretty sure (judging by the panic and claustrophobia and depression I always get with a blocked nose) I'd want to lose the least, but... Oh, it's a struggle.

This is partly because of a core childhood belief that all ladies' perfumes smell basically

the same, and partly – no, mostly, actually – because of the people obsessed with it. You know the type: they follow scent like the stock market; they insist on bringing out their precious collection of vintage perfume bottles with the pudding and coffee; they're the hardcore perfumistas, in short, whom you see knocking around the perfume department at Liberty at lunchtime, clutching 25 scent strips in their tremulous paws. Call me mean spirited, but whenever I come across any of the above, the words "life", "get" and "a" cannot help but present themselves. And while we are on the subject, the word "fragrance", could it not, along with the word "timepiece", be legally banned?

Well, the times they may be a-changing – because luckily for us, even the perfume industry might have had enough. Instead of cloaking the art of perfumed water in overblown adjectives and ludicrous press releases, the industry is letting a new breed

of perfumer have their say, bringing with them some beguilingly different ways of thinking about scent. Which may just mean – callooh, callay – that the rest of us will finally be able to approach, enjoy and describe scent without seeming like we've been smacked with the pretentious stick.

"Every scent in here has its own colour," pronounces James Craven, fondly surveying the rows and rows of bottles lining the boudoir-like space, as though they were errant children. He is not a "nose" himself but the head perfume adviser at Les Senteurs in Belgravia. I'm particularly interested in meeting Craven – a former cook, librarian and *Mastermind* finalist (specialist subject, Marie Antoinette) – because as well as being a well-known beacon of reassurance and sanity in a world shrouded in such mystery and melodrama, he has synaesthesia: a recognised clinical condition whose sufferers have included Kandinsky, Nabokov and >

David Hockney, where one type of sensory stimulation evokes the sensation of another. In Craven's case, this means he cannot help but smell in colour. To him, in other words, Chanel No 19 is "a beautiful, lizard-like greeny gold", Chanel No 5 is "crimson, striped like a zebra with velvety black", and Fracas is "pink, but not a shocking pink like the colourway of the bottle; more an apple-blossom pink".

One of the benefits of Craven's synaesthesia (despite the fact there is no actual objective pattern to the condition) is that it gives him an almost spooky ability to match scent to customer. For example, though he thinks my favourite perfume, *Tiempe Passate* (which smells to him unequivocally of cherry red), is perfectly fine, for me might he recommend "something more amber, like autumn leaves glowing, or golden coral? Something defined but delicate," he says, steeping his fingertips. "Not *Opium*, as such, but with a suggestion of spice and incense like the gauzy surface of a lake. Or the honey-coloured shimmer of *Versailles* against a slightly misty blue October sky, and the hundreds of golden trees below the terrace in the park... A faintly smoky warm woodiness, the colour of Marie Antoinette's hair, *blond cendré*..."

Next up is Stéphane Humbert-Lucas and his wife Christa Patout, who are behind the new perfume brand *Nez à Nez*. A Jean-Paul Belmondo lookalike with ridiculously blue eyes, Humbert-Lucas welcomes me into the couple's cluttered, rather theatrical apartment in Paris's Marais district. It is crammed with crackling candles, perfume flacons and a lot of abstract, brightly coloured paintings. These are by Humbert-Lucas himself, who as well as being a perfumer is also a painter. Oh, and, guess what? He's a synaesthete, too.

Sucking on a cigarette and downing a shot of vodka ("because it helps wiz my Engleesh"), he tells me a lot of synaesthetes are mediums and also see auras – but he is not one of them. He merely sees people in colour. "You? Amber?" he says. "*Non, non, non*. You are blue with a little bit of green..." Over the course of the conversation, he draws me little sketches of decapitated triangles and squares with Swiss-cheese-like holes – it's the way he "sees" smell. "You

cannot imagine the frustration," he shrugs wistfully, "of having this smell already in my head and then trying to create it exactly. That frustration is why all us perfumers are a little crazy, I think."

Being able to see people in colour, being able to paint smells in colour, being able to nail a particular scent in a way no one else can – these are the things that characterise the most interesting new perfumers. Olivier Polge – the hot new nose, who can, as it were, "smell" sound – was inspired by a favourite playlist on Christopher Bailey's iPod (*Arctic Monkeys*, *Razorlight*, *The Fratellis*, etc) to create the scent *Burberry the Beat*. But some synaesthetes' references are more out there



than others. Take Mark Buxton, the nose behind the cult scent *Comme des Garçons 2*. Buxton's esoteric range of own-name fragrances includes one called *An English Breakfast*, which the package describes thus: "It's seven in the morning. An English man in Japan sitting in the Shinkansen is going to Kyoto. What does he do at this time? He opens his sushi/sashimi box for breakfast." "The fish market in Kyoto at 4.30am – it's so inspirational for me," explains Buxton, "which sounds weird, but it's so fresh, it doesn't smell fishy. It's misleading that I called it *An English Breakfast*, though. I called it that for no

other reason than that I was eating one in my house in Normandy when I came up with the formula."

If nothing else, a weird name or a crazy description of a scent will pique your interest. But the point is that this, yes, synaesthetic approach to making scent more specific to each of our lives is more than just a curiosity. It may be the thing that's going to cure the perfume fatigue we all suffer in the 21st century. "Very definitely," says Lana Glazman, head of consumer insight at IFF, the perfume giant that works with major fragrance houses, and which is behind something called *Mood Mapping*, a scientific method

developed to "visualise or map the mood associations that are spontaneously evoked by fragrance". "What we are now doing is capitalising on the fact that smell can be associated with other senses," Glazman explains. "So you'll have a respondent smelling one of the 2,000 smells we've got in our 'library', and then reaching into our magician's box of textures, and feeling, say, velvet, then saying how that makes him or her feel. The point is being able to target the customer more specifically. Right now, there's this minestrone soup of smell out there in the department stores – the result of the industry trying to appeal to the masses. Well, the future is going to be much more precise, much more tailored. Scent has to have emotional resonance. The bottom line is if there's no emotional resonance, the customer won't buy again. They're not going to 'wear' the package."

As a result, these people who live life through their noses – who talk the talk, walk the walk and live in a slight parallel universe – are no longer being confined to small, niche scent brands, but are also, like Polge (who happens to be the son of Jacques Polge, Chanel's in-house nose), being employed by the big fragrance houses, and by other industries, too. The weird science of it all is marvellous. Did you know, for example, that odour chemists can clinically capture the smell of "technology" and "modern electronics" and "cricket"? Did you know that if you wear the smell of grapefruit, people perceive you as being a few years younger, that if you wear the smell of floral and spice, people perceive you

as being up to 12lb lighter, and that the combination of lavender and pumpkin-pie odours has been shown to increase penile blood flow?

Hmm. Imagine a scent you could put on after lunch that stopped you falling asleep at your computer; imagine wearing a perfume that stopped you eating chocolate; imagine being able to capture the smell of your kids' dirty hair – how comforting that would be for business trips and so on. “Dirty hair! That’s a good one!” says Will Andrews, a scent expert for P&G Beauty. He explains that yes, if I were willing to have my kids wear special “headspace capture” helmets and if I had the money, yes, it could be done. And by the way, asks Andrews, have I checked out Eric Berghammer, the “aroma DJ”, who sets scent to music? Apparently, he can have the crowd in a frenzy playing heavy metal to the olfactory accompaniment of baby powder. All of which sounds a touch creepy and specialist, but maybe smell is the one sense – in this predominately audiovisual world we inhabit, with its “minestrone” of meaningless department-store smells – we’ve been ignoring.

Enter Christophe Laudamiel, who, according to scent critic Luca Turin, is “one of the most creative, inventive perfumers on the face of the earth, and an example of the new breed of perfumer who can translate abstract concepts into smell”. An elfin-looking man with a partially crimson quiff, Laudamiel has created perfumes for Clinique, Estée Lauder, Tom Ford and Ralph Lauren. His real passion, though, is the concept of incorporating more scent into our lives – of pushing the boundaries in a marketplace otherwise dominated by the audio and visual. Through his new Manhattan-based “fragrance media” company, Aeosphere, he plans to develop scents for hotels, movie theatres, videogame makers (Wii with smell? Talk about 4-D, or what), and, of course, the good old workplace. “Consumers only see 20 to 30 per cent of what we can do with perfume, and already they are saying, ‘No more! No more! We have so many already!’” says Laudamiel. “But why? I never heard anyone say, ‘Oh my God, we have too much music. Please don’t make any more.’” (To make his point, earlier this year, he put on a scent opera at the Guggenheim Museum, where the audience was bombarded with specific smells through a scented “microphone” attached to each seat.)

Francis Kurkdjian is the perfumer who famously recreated Marie Antoinette’s favourite fragrance (note to perfume junkies:

there might still be a bottle left at Luckyscent on Beverly Boulevard in Los Angeles), and who now has his own state-of-the-art *maison* in the Place Vendôme, where you can pick up his trademark scented blowing bubbles (try the Poire one – like very delicate tea on a hot summer’s day). Like Laudamiel, he also thinks we should think more musically about scent. More specifically, too. “The future is in finding variations on ‘the scent of me’,” Kurkdjian says. “Think of it as a releasing a song with different remixes, with a remix for every mood – a variation of the same smell evolving throughout the day...”

Ah, the smell of me. The person I have to thank for this is Geza Schoen, the Berlin-based nose behind Molecule 01. That’s the pheromonic concoction Kate Moss and Madonna supposedly bought by the case when it first came out three years ago, and what all my friends’ groovy teens are wearing and swearing has an almost magical effect on their pulling power. Its USP is that it is made up of one single ingredient called ISO E Super, and it’s the first time I get a whiff – quite literally – of a scent of “me”. The first spray has me underwhelmed. What is it? Musk? But as the day wears on and I forget about it, I keep finding myself wondering what that fabulous, fabulous smell is that’s coming from... me. Every five minutes, I have to keep putting my nose down my pully to get a whiff of it. But how to describe it? Kind of like MSG, perhaps, but in a good way...

Who cares? Maybe that’s the point. Maybe any attempt to describe perfume without being completely abstract, tangential and – yes – synaesthetic in your approach is, by definition, going to fall short of the magical, consuming, all-encompassing power of perfume. “Most people who use that traditional perfume language of top notes and dry downs have no idea what they are talking about, so they end up sounding like the dialogue of a Ionescu play.” So pronounces the immaculate, oyster-eyed Frédéric Malle, of Les Editions de Parfums. He’s the perfumer’s perfumer, the scent master’s scent master, and, being the grandson of Serge Heftler Louiche, who founded Parfums Christian Dior, he’s a kind of demigod in the industry. Malle, like many perfumers I’ve spoken to, has always thought synaesthetically. “It’s something I found out when working on an account in an ad agency, and I realised the direct connection between the colour of a pack and the strength of a cigarette. If you’re not talking raw materials, how else to describe

a scent other than that it’s pointy, squeaky and red?”

Perhaps that’s the secret. To love scent, to embrace it, one has to think of it as “pointy, squeaky and red” – maybe, even, become a bit of a scent junkie oneself. Yes, it’s possible you’ll find yourself unable to keep away from Chanel’s new olfactory bar in Selfridges, having a recurring dream about Frangipani by Ormonde Jayne, or serving old bottles of Empreinte and Ecusson instead of pudding at dinner parties. But, in doing so, maybe, just maybe, you’ll live a better, fuller life.

For here’s the thing I’ve discovered: people who live through their noses, people who smell for a living, who devote their lives to finding and trying to describe new scents, are, almost by definition, more interesting to talk to. Having to tap into their other senses to describe something as ephemeral, as quixotic, as emotional as smell, constantly thinking up new analogies and metaphors, I’m sure of it, creates neural pathways, and forces us to describe the world we live in more accurately. “Well, a sense of smell is like a muscle,” says Christopher Sheldrake, director of research and development for fragrances at Chanel, “and it can be trained.” Certainly, this tallies with what the synaesthesia expert VS Ramachandran believes, saying that we need synaesthetes to generate not just new associations between things, but to open up the very possibilities of language. And it also tallies with the idea posited by the naturalist and *New Yorker* writer Diane Ackerman in her wonderful book *A Natural History of the Senses*, that we *think* because we *smelt*. Smell, you see, was our first sense, and according to Ackerman, it was so successful that in time, the small lump of olfactory tissue atop the nerve cord grew into a brain.

And so, against all the odds, I find myself hooked. There are these little incidents. Like the time I found myself diving into an unsuspecting Lady Helen Taylor’s neck over dinner at a friend’s house. Like the time I had near fisticuffs with the security man at the O2 when I thought he was going to take my bottle of Querelle away. Like the time I found myself emailing my friend Amelia to find out what scent she’s wearing so we won’t clash. Eau d’Hadrien with maybe a dot of Bel Respiro, she obligingly emails back (which worked perfectly well with the Chanel Beige and a dot of Molecule 01 that I was wearing, you’ll be glad to know). Oh dear. I never thought this would happen. But give me a perfumista to sit next to at dinner over a journalist or a theatre producer any day. ■