

Perfume: In Search of the Fifth Sense

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‘There, right there, is where they smell best of all. It smells like caramel, it smells so sweet, so wonderful, Father, you have no idea! Once you’ve smelled from there, you love them whether they’re your own or somebody else’s...

...if they don’t have any smell at all up there, even less than cold air does, like that little bastard there, then...(Suskind, p. 14)

Cut to the scene an hour into the screen time of Tom Twyker’s cinematic adaptation of Patrick Suskind’s novel *Perfume- The Story of a Murderer* when Jean-Baptiste Grenouille (Ben Whishaw) realizes for the first time, the one missing smell in his life- “his own” (Twyker, 2006). It is the same absent smell, which perturbs Jeanne Bussie, Grenouille’s wet nurse who is vocal about her utter dismay and disgust in the above excerpt. What Suskind has construed and what Twyker has captured underscores an interesting definition of human existence, of human value and of human identity.

The protagonist of the novel, Grenouille is born with a lack or absence-body smell. This absence hampered his identity formation and valuation as a human being- his mother abandoned him in the rancid filth of Paris immediately after cutting the umbilical cord with a gutting knife; his wet nurse Jeanne Bussie labelled him a “bastard”, fellow children in the orphanage tried to smother him to death several times, Madame Gaillard sold him off like a heartless merchant to an equally cold-blooded tanner named Grimal and Giuseppe Baldini poached his skill like a parasite.

Thus rejected, unloved and pushed into oblivion, the psyche and identity of the protagonist is corroded throughout the narrative and his identity crisis reaches a climax with the epiphany he experiences, holed up in the tunnel at Plomp du Cantal- i.e. the aforementioned scene in Twyker’s rendition. Since the focus of this paper is to search and locate the similarities

and differences in the language of the novel and the semiotics of the film as potent but distinct media of expression, it would be worthwhile to consider the transposition of this epoch moment in the narrative.

Throughout the film, Twyker has been haunted by the voice of Suskind's omniscient narrator and has transposed him into the conventional tool of most adaptors- the voiceover. The written word assumes the position of the spoken word and informs, directs and trudges the narrative forward. In this significant moment of profound silence and equally profound realization, it is the voiceover that lends expression to the conflict of the protagonist- "the fear of his own oblivion", the knowledge that he has been "a nobody to everyone" and the final confrontation with himself- "it was as though he did not exist".

Fleshing out a character for whom smells are more corporeal and real than words, it did only make sense to attribute more silence to his script than dialogues. The surplus of diegetic dialogues are handed over to the script for the voiceover artiste (John Hurt). Yet, one would think it ironical that this conventional tool was adopted for the adaptation of an unconventional narrative that explores and exploits the ephemeral and evasive fifth sense- smell. But, trust the director of the cult movie *Run Lola Run* to create his own cinematic language, which emerges and operates on its own to create and incite meanings. Let us consider the flashback scene that Twyker uses at this instance- his first rendezvous with the plum girl on the streets of Paris. Twyker replays that scene at this junction but lends a significant alteration to it- this time while Grenouille (Whishaw) is chasing the plum girl (Karoline Herfurth), she turns around but unlike in the first version, she is not startled at his presence but rather looks past him and finds nothing, only an absence.

Note that Twyker uses the age old over-the-shoulder shot when these two characters are facing each other; the eye match provokes the well-conditioned audience to anticipate acknowledgement of the second character and a conversation between them. But this expectation of the

audience trained in filmic language is betrayed to bring home two points- one, this is Grenouille's (Whishaw) revisiting of the pertinent moment but in his imagination and secondly, this is his discovery of his non-entity like status in the wider world too besotted by their sense of sight, sound and touch that the subliminal sense of smell evades them. Though the world and its inhabitants may not share the keen sense of smell as the protagonist, ironically, sight, sound and touch alone fail to make them lend identity and love to Grenouille- a fact well captured through this altered flashback scene.

Continuing on our identification of Twyker's cinematic language, he exaggerates visuals and sounds in order to underscore the intangible fifth sense- smell. So, the visual of the flashback scene cuts into the cave of present day Plomp du Cantal where more visuals unfold- Grenouille smelling his body parts, frantically unclothing himself, washing the dirt off his body in the rain and continuing to search for some trail of his own body smell. The quick succession of these visuals without any voiceover alone suffices to communicate the emotions of the characters on-screen desperation, insecurity and fear.

Sounds act as apt accompaniments to heighten the sense of panic and anxiety. Note the loud thunder sound building like a crescendo while he is bathing himself naked, the drop in the pace and loudness of background score immediately after, as if the silence was to intensify and aid his sense and act of smelling his body. What follows is a slow zoom out shot- as if placing this anticlimactic incident in the protagonist's life into perspective; long shots- to create the depth of perspective; wide shots- to isolate the protagonist in a world, which seems empty and silent around him because he shares no connection with it, and the juxtaposition of those wide shots with close up shots- as if articulating his personal search for and solitary conflict with identity.

When cinematic fiction is able to communicate meaning without the aid of a trans-media tool like the voice over, one seeks the maturity of both the film maker as well as the audience. It would be significant to consider the process of film viewing from an audience's point of view through

Karen Bardsley's essay, *Is it All in Our Imagination? Questioning the Use of the Concept of the Imagination in Cognitive Film Theory* where she put forth the argument from Graham Currie's *Image and Mind: Film, Philosophy and Cognitive Science*- "that cinematic fictions are devices which use images and recorded sounds in order to guide the imaginations of viewers." Beyond the obvious simulation aroused by the cinematic form, Bardsley focuses on Currie's division of the imaginings of the audiences into two categories: primary and secondary imaginings.

Primary imaginings consist in the imagining of the propositions that make up the story we are being told i.e. running the propositions that make up the story through our (for the moment off-line) mental simulator as if they were beliefs. *Secondary imaginings*, on the other hand, occur when we imagine various things so as to imagine what is true in the story. Often these imaginings involve simulations of the beliefs and desires of the characters.

Perfume: The Story of a Murderer is a cinematic text that invites the secondary imaginings of the audience more than ever. For example, in the scene immediately succeeding the one mentioned earlier, Grenouille (Whishaw) is walking down the road and the camera zooms in from behind and stops close near his neck and shoulders. This precedes the entry of Laura (Rachel Hurd-Wood) into the frame and into the film narrative. Traditionally, the camera would have approached the on looking character (in this case Grenouille) from the front and would have closed in on his eyes creating the anticipation amongst the audience for the entry of a new character.

The juxtaposition of close up shots of Grenouille's eyes and Laura's skin and eyes creates the momentary illusion that he is seeing Laura. It is only when Laura enters the frame after he has had the first glimpses of her skin, hair and eye do we realize that the visuals were the images of his smell- of his imagination. Immediately, the audience's secondary imagining is at work and one realizes that here is a character for whom the tangible sight ceases to matter for, his nose is his true navigator.

Suskind has informed his readers well in advance that for Grenouille, "...everyday language would soon prove inadequate for designating all the olfactory notions that he had accumulated within himself." (Suskind, p. 29) When words find themselves failing in the concrete capture of an odourless protagonist whose sense of smell defines his identity, the language of cinema is poised with a greater challenge to translate the fifth sense onto screen.

Twyker meets this challenge with many cinematic replacements for the literary expressions- the omniscient narrator with clairvoyant voiceovers, extensive olfactory descriptions with hurried juxtapositions of provocative frames and the nose, fantastical occurrences with softened colours, orgasmic moments of love with a heightened background score and an intriguing sense of comprehension with inverted camera angles and shots. In the discussion so far, we have seen that while the camera shots and angles have communicated successfully by arousing the secondary imaginings of the audience, the voiceover narration lets the filmic language slip into unnecessary conventionality and at some level, betrayal of the protagonist's battle with the inadequacy of language.

Also, it is betrayal of the basic dictum in expression and communication of any form through any media, which is well stated by Dudley Andrew in *Concepts in Film Theory*, "...verbal and cinematic signs share a common fate: that of being condemned to connotation." (1984, p. 103) The constant and insistent voiceover takes away from Twyker's frames, this vital element of connotation. Consider the scene that takes us to the streets of 18th century Paris and the voiceover narration is superimposed on an authentically rendered production set design, which *could* have visually captured :

In the period of which we speak, there reigned in the cities a stench barely conceivable to us modern men and women. The streets stank of manure, the courtyards of urine, the stairwells stank of mouldering wood and rat droppings, the kitchens of spoiled cabbage and mutton fat; the unaired parlours stank of stale dust, the bedrooms of greasy

sheets, damp featherbeds, and the pungently sweet aroma of chamberpots. (Suskind, p. 3)

However, what Twyker unfortunately does is let his voiceover artiste (Hurt) spell out the following: “stench”, “profoundly repugnant”, “foulest” and “most putrid spot”. What his cinematographer and his medium could have done with connotation, Twyker lends to his script.

Robert Stam states in the *Introduction: The Theory and Practice of Adaptation*, “As cognitive theorists point out, films have impact on our stomach, heart, and skin, working through neural structures and visuo-motor schemata.” (ed. Stam and Raengo, p. 6) It is these exact senses that are at work when we see baby Grenouille letting out a deafening scream while he lay in the “most putrid spot” (this time minus the voiceover) accompanied by rapidly juxtaposed frames of Grenouille’s nose and visuals of fish, rats, meat and diverse filth of the fish market. It is here that we as an audience “see it feelingly.” (ed. Stam and Raengo, p. 6). And it is here that we as audiences have felt the movie in our stomachs, hearts and skins and have completed the communication through the nuance of connotation.

Before we move ahead into our exploration of the film as an adaptation text, let us lay bare the grand, binding theme of Suskind’s project- to create a story about one man’s search for *identity, love and morality*. The search and quest for all these three entities is equally important because so intricately co-woven are they in Suskind’s mind that in the absence of one, the other two would lose their meaning. Having considered an instance where the crisis of and with identity is portrayed, we venture into the transposition of the remaining two searches- of love and of morality.

A novel or film that creates a distinct “fleeting realm of scent” (Suskind, p. 3) appears to operate within its own fantastical framework. Yet, this effacing yet discernible scent operates within a larger social, religious and political framework. In fact, Suskind’s narrative is constantly working against the very grain of the established institutions- of society and social

order, of religion, of family, of history and of language. The opening paragraph of the novel reads as an open and satirical attack on the writing and authenticity of history and its heroic and victorious figures:

His name was Jean-Baptiste Grenouille, and if his name- in contrast to the names of other gifted abominations, de Sade's, for instance, or Saint-Just's, Fouche's, Bonaparte's, etc. has been forgotten today, it is certainly not because Grenouille fell short of those more famous blackguards when it came to arrogance, misanthropy, immorality, or, more succinctly, wickedness, but because his gifts and his sole ambition were restricted to a domain that leaves no traces in history: to the fleeting realm of scent.

(Suskind, p.3)

In its cinematic counterpart, the voiceover narration remains. However, significant satire is omitted during the opening scene of the film with a close-up shot of Grenouille's nose against a dark and unlit frame. While the announcement of his execution is demanded and spelled out, he is visually pitted against the collective despise of an entire community and yet, not as someone who has destabilized its structure and challenged its most sacred norms.

Fleeting but significant are certain moments in the novel that overtly defy and transgress morality. Equally significant are similar moments in the film that overtly do not defy and transgress morality.

Instance One: The murder of the plum girl. In its written format, Grenouille murders the girl whose scent has overpowered him as the most natural thing to do. There is no thought, no justification, no struggle required. For, outside of the world of language, Grenouille is also outside the world of morality, which the world inscribes through its language/s. Split screen to the murder scene in the film and it occurs through mere accident while he struggles to avoid revelation. Therefore, the fifth sense that assumed the shade of a new personal order in Suskind's mind has been erased of that function in its adaptive mode.

Instance Two: The night Grenouille prepares “Amor and Psyche”, Baldini for the first time ever, forgot to say his evening prayers and also, called off the idea of going to Notre-Dame to thank God for the strength of his character. The intoxicating scent that Grenouille sniffed and preserved was acting as a drug more powerful, more honest, more purposeful, truer and closer to existence than even God and religious diktats. The sensuousness and sensuality of the human body is privileged over the Christian signs and theology of being born with an original sin and surrendering to a larger fate and destiny.

It is the same Baldini who was perturbed by the contemporary questions raised by the Enlightenment, by the corrosion of the aristocracy and the nobility and the same Baldini who scorned at electricity, the same man now finds his truest and highest happiness in being inebriated with perfume. This underlying Suskindian theme that aims to reconsider and redefine the rigidity of morality and religious scriptures through the sensuous and also amoral world of *Perfume*, seems to evade the screen within which Twyker inscribes his execution. Therefore, the fifth sense that assumed the shade of a new moral order in Suskind’s vision evades recognition in Twyker’s cinematic scheme of interpretation.

As the focus and purpose of this paper was also to expose the similarities and differences in two perspectives of the essentially same narrative, one might want to look at the differences being outlined here less as a handicap and simply as a matter of narrative choice. As most postmodernists would believe, the narrative once written; begins to wane in its belongingness to the author and its elements are dispersed, diffused and derived by anyone and everyone who enters the narrative from his or her vantage point of interest and politics. Andrew’s paraphrasing of a metaphor from Andre Bazin’s *What is Cinema?* may capture this point more succinctly:

To extend one of his most elaborate metaphors, the original artwork can be likened to a crystal chandelier whose formal beauty is a product of its intricate but fully artificial arrangement of parts while the cinema would be a crude flashlight interesting not for its own

shape or the quality of its light but for what it makes appear in this or that dark corner.(Andrew, p. 99)

This lighting up of one dark corner and not the other is the matter of choice we were weighing earlier. This is a creative choice, an interpretive choice, a cinematic choice and more importantly, a personal choice, which essentially does not owe allegiance to any previous articulation nor to any future fabrication. One more instance where a dark corner has been pushed to the oblivion and deliberately so.

Instance Three: As established earlier, the sequences in Plomb du Cantal act as one of the most significant transition phases in both, in the narrative as well as in the life of the protagonist. It has already been considered how Twyker has communicated, through the cinematic language, the personal journey and quest for identity, the on screen presentation leaves out a daringly pertinent streak in Grenouille:

Yes! This was his empire! The incomparable Empire of Grenouille! Created and ruled over by him, the incomparable Grenouille, laid waste by him if he so chose and then raised up again, made boundless by him and defended with a flaming sword against every intruder. Here there was naught but his will, the will of the great, splendid, incomparable Grenouille. (Suskind, p. 145)

Here is a man who being spited by human existence throughout his life has turned God, has assumed for himself the status of a Creator, claimed for himself a power that touches that of God and yet, remains of human origin. This is not God's man born with an original sin but rather of a man who will evade all dichotomies of good and evil, right and wrong, sin and virtue- pretty much like the smells he accumulates (without differentiating good from the bad). The rise of this man to this elevated platform through sheer self-determination is the second thematic journey of morality- the journey that the film ceased to capture at poignant junctions.

Having scanned through the three instances chosen and explicated above, one does not need to adopt a critical, skeptical lens view towards the

cinematic text and a more privileged lens view towards the literary text. For, as Hutcheon says:

Because adaptation is a form of repetition without replication, change is inevitable, even without any conscious updating or alteration of setting. And with change some corresponding modifications in the political valence and even the meaning of stories. (Hutcheon, p. 173)

The difference we see in the connotation and meaning attributed to the fifth sense in the novel and the film should be looked at as this shift in the political valence, the shift from the writer to the filmmaker, the shift from the deviant to the conforming. It is this difference in the political valence between the cinematic and literary text that is at its most pronounced in the ending sequence of the film. Since the journey of morality has been excluded from Twyker's narrative hitherto, the cumulative and climactic scene of ultimate defiance and the assertion of Grenouille's moral world of love and sensuality as embedded in Suskind's literary fabric, plays out in a highly reductive and simplistic fashion.

Consider the trajectory of the final sequence as portrayed in the film: Grenouille looks at his executioner intently and affects a change of heart and kneeling down, he declares him innocent; Grenouille releases his most prized perfume that intoxicates every man and woman present; however, only when it reaches the Bishop and he spells out, "He is an angel" (Twyker) do the men and women begin to bow before Grenouille and look up to him as a God figure to be revered and praised. The same scene plays out very differently in the novel. Taking the liberty to visualize the words from the page, it is almost as if the world and its people are divided between the Bishop and his seat of honour, and Grenouille and his mound of execution.

While the purely ecclesiastical justification from the Bishop exists in the novel, it is purely for the Bishop's personal transition and his individual mechanism to combat this confrontation of the Creator and the Creation. The 18th century men and women of France who are de-robing themselves and partaking of Grenouille's sensuous religion of

perfume, who are giving in to the acquisition of the fifth sense are in this scene, completely detached and uprooted from not only religious roots but also from other moral, social and personal norms and do not wait for the larger sanction from the Bishop. They all are coming into the being of their own personal moral order.

While the line “For the first time they had done something out of Love” is employed in both the narratives; in the novel, it acts as a conduit to seal the search, purpose and vindication of Grenouille the Man Creator while in the film, it simply acts as a transitory cross over to the “fleeting realm of scent” (Suskind, p. 3) and no more. The collective love making sequence lasts as if under a magician’s spell and once broken, they return to the realm they have been confined to- the transgression that is supposed to carry the current of a revolution is retracted and not allowed its due stride of glory and triumph.

To conclude, I would want to borrow novelist Graham Swift’s words on adapting his novel, *Last Orders* as mentioned by Hutcheon:

As it proved, among my best memories of filmmaking are the conversations (drunken or otherwise) I had with (director) Fred (Schepisi), in which we both acknowledged, I think, that, different as film directors and novelists are, our abiding obsession was the same: the mysteries of storytelling- of timing, pacing, and the exactly judged release of Information and emotion. (Hutcheon, p. 33)

It is indeed the mystery and intrigue of storytelling that brings us- novelist, director, audience, reader, student- all to the brewing point of understanding and analysis. With its own fragrances, with its own combinations, permutations and combinations; each one of us chooses to undergo this journey in search of Perfume- the fifth sense. To locate the similarities and differences between the two narratives or pieces of expression is not to hierarchize one over the other but rather to see through an informed lens view two co-existing pillars of artistic works.

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