The Evanescence of Smell and Sympathy
A Study of Transience in the Filmic and Written Forms of Patrick Süskind’s Perfume

I rejoiced when I was able to finally watch Perfume: The Story of a Murderer. I hungrily unwrapped my Subway sandwich, preparing to watch an enjoyable film. Well, I was half right; within the first few minutes, I gagged and rushed to the restroom. The opening scenes of Perfume showed various things found in the Paris downtown marketplace: secreting pus, dead bodies, fish guts, rats, and worst of all, maggots. The visuals of the film were too engrossing (pardon my pun) for me to keep my appetite. But the novel is unique because it deals with a sense that not many other authors had experimented with before—the sense of smell. It is not Patrick Süskind’s use of nasal analogies that helps to create a new world; it is his capitalization on the ephemeral nature of the olfactory that does. He carries out this theme of transience through not only smell, but also by the lives of the characters and the events of the story. However, the film version directed by Tom Tykwer, for obvious medium differences as well as marketability, changes the story by extending scenes and transforming the egocentric and flawed characters into sympathetic ones. A story about a cast of unredeemable villains in which even the heroes maintain terrible flaws is not an appealing narrative for mass consumption. The protagonist (or perhaps more the anti-hero) Jean-Baptiste Grenouille is an unlikable amalgamation of the worst human traits imaginable. His thirst for the solution to his unfathomable loneliness should be a tear-jerking quest; however, his emotionless hatred is a sensation that mankind just cannot understand. But it is the state of such terrible evil and lack of any possible pity that drives the narrative; this uniqueness is what makes the story of Grenouille so spectacular. This paper will delve into the world of the ephemeral, the evanescent, the transient, the fleeting—a world that obviously cannot be portrayed through visual means. The sense of smell can never be fully described, even in the words of the book; the readers must enter a trance, just as Grenouille does, to imagine the intermingling of various scents and smells and sort this collection in the libraries of the mind. This paper will highlight the successes and flaws of Perfume presented in both mediums.

* © Creative Commons Attribution 3.0 License
E-Mail: justin.yi@duke.edu
and show why the written version is highly superior to that of the film because of its adherence to the motif of transience.

The long-lasting motif of *Perfume* is the ephemeral nature of substance. Throughout this essay, I will define substance as the material world and the lives of people. All of these things are merely moments in transition, steps of an indefinable process. Just as Grenouille’s mysterious murder of the twenty-six girls was for the sole purpose of a perfume that would be incomprehensible to the average human mind, the fleeting form of life is a segment of a greater, unknown purpose that can never be discerned. This motif allows even this 250-page novel to pass quickly as an episodic narrative, skipping from one event to the next; it is not a conventional narrative structure, but rather a thematic structure that guides the novel. The main thematic element, the sense of smell, works perfectly with this idea of transience because scents themselves are ephemeral; the wisps disappear almost as soon as they appeared. It is impossible for them to be recorded in history because they cannot be contained and preserved for long periods of time. Smells are born and killed immediately afterwards. The volatile and easily swayed minds of the masses throughout the novel, whether they be people who are deceived by Grenouille’s fake scents during his market runs or those who partake in the massive, delirious orgy, demonstrate the speed at which smells overtake the mind. Their minds are manipulated so quickly and effectively in the novel, but in the film, the scenes of transformation and subjugation are elongated and dramatized. For the purposes of the film, this technique is useful, and even helpful, because it provides a visual representation of the processes of the subconscious, but the ephemeral quality found in the original is not retained.

The transient nature of all things is shown through the lives of people as well. Almost every character in the world of *Perfume* who comes into contact with Jean-Baptiste Grenouille meets a ghastly, short demise. His own mother, who tried to abandon him in a pile of rotting fish guts, is hanged for her attempted infanticide after his squeals alert passersby. The first major character other than his own mother is Madame Gaillard, who, because of her lack of nasal abilities, treats Grenouille with the same care as she does the other children in her orphanage. However, after discovering his peculiar ability to sense lost objects, she sells him off to avoid having her treasures stolen. The book immediately describes the conclusion of her life once Grenouille departs; she succumbs to various diseases and dies a slow death, but the manner in which this information is presented, “a few sentences to describe the end of her days,”

---

accentuates the transient nature of life even when the process of dying is prolonged and extended. The movie presents the evanescence of life in a different manner by having Madame Gaillard be murdered immediately after her transaction with Grimal. The next caretaker, Grimal the tanner, meets a quick end after he negotiates a trade with Baldini for Grenouille. Overjoyed by his good deal, Grimal becomes drunk, is knocked over by a carriage, and drowns in the river. The tanner’s demise is represented in a similar fashion in both the novel and the film. After Grimal’s death, Baldini the perfumer enters the scene and trains Grenouille in the art of mixing and preserving scents. But as soon as his relationship with Grenouille is finished, his house collapses on top of him and his hundreds of formulas for potent perfumes. Marquis de La Taillade-Espinasse, under whom Grenouille next serves, is a noble obsessed with his scientific endeavors, such as locking his subject in a ventilation box or leaving Grenouille stripped on a pedestal for his lectures. When Grenouille runs away, the Marquis climbs a mountain to reach the “zenith” of intellectualism, only to never return. This character is absent from the film perhaps because of the Marquis’ active dominance throughout the narrative; Grenouille becomes secondary to Taillade-Espinasse during their encounter. Once Jean-Baptiste settles in Grasse, he works with a scent maker named Druot. Even though it is Druot who discovers the clothes and hair of the missing victims, the crowd turns against him once Grenouille escapes his execution and blame him for the murders. Each character that dares to interact with Jean-Baptiste Grenouille is silenced the moment that their relationship ends, demonstrating the transient nature of life that surrounds the scent collector.

The book’s pattern of describing Grenouille’s relationship with each character and then shifting the focus to the aftermath of Grenouille’s departure reflects the tumultuous nature of life. The film represents this well by similarly following the pattern of showing the death of each character following Grenouille’s absention. The visual destruction of these characters’ lives reveals the ephemeral qualities of life on the silver screen because the destruction happens so quickly in comparison with the rest of the other scenes. This contrast works in this motif’s favor, reminding the audience that everything in life is quick and short. But the transience of life goes beyond merely the lives and deaths of the characters. The language and other metaphors scattered throughout the novel follow a similar motif. The constant reference to virginity and its pure essence indicates the treasured quality of this brief moment of a woman’s life. This brief period is a time to be cherished and honored, because it can easily be destroyed by a single act of intercourse. Jean-Baptiste hunts down the lives of young, innocent maidens because his act is an act of creation rather than destruction as the town of Grasse...
believes, and he needs to obtain samples from when life is at its peak rather than when it is at a stage of decline. Virginity is the peak stage of life, when it could be considered “living” as opposed to “dying,” at least to Jean-Baptiste. When he extracts the scent from Laure, he claims, “Only now was she really dead for him, withered away, pale and limp as a fallen petal.” This metaphor of virginity as a flower accentuates not only the beauty of life, but also the fragility of it. And the scent that he extracted from the girl would not last forever; there was no way to keep this “flower” alive for eternity, and this causes him fear: “Grenouille was terrified. What happens, he thought, if the scent, once I possess it . . . what happens if it runs out? The real thing gets used up in this world. It’s transient . . . . It would be a slow death, a kind of suffocation in reverse, an agonizing gradual self-evaporation into the wretched world.”

A smell is more than merely the ingredients of a perfume or a means of manipulating people—the scent of a person is that person’s soul. Jean-Baptiste’s lack of a scent is not just the lack of a body odor, but also the lack of a heart. Ever since he was a child, it was not that people hated him, but that people could not sense his humanness. The lack of the soul confused people and made them uncomfortable, for they were dealing with someone who had the physical characteristics of a man, but without the substance that fully established him as a human being. The sense of smell itself is always a way in which a person’s soul is identified; without the ability to smell, one cannot detect the soul in a person. Scent becomes crucial in defining the human soul. Madame Gaillard’s disability is a testament to that: “she had lost for good all sense of smell and every sense of human warmth and human coldness—indeed, every human passion. With that one blow, tenderness had become as foreign to her as enmity, joy as strange as despair.” Grenouille’s quest for the scents of various people can be seen as an act of harvesting souls to create one for himself. Thus the human bodies that house the scents that he seeks are nothing more than empty bottles once he has extracted their essence. After extracting Laure’s scent, “[s]he no longer existed for him as a body, but only a disembodied scent. And he was carrying that under his arm, taking it with him.”

The scent of the flower is described like the nature of the soul, just as virginity was earlier: “The perfume of these two flowers [jasmine and tuberoses] was both so exquisite and so fragile that not only did the blossoms have to be picked before sunrise, but they also demanded the most gentle and special handling . . . the souls of these noblest of

---

2 Ibid., 220.
3 Ibid., 191.
4 Ibid., 19.
5 Ibid., 220.
blossoms could not be simply ripped from them, they had to be methodically coaxed away."  The human soul as a scent is extremely delicate and requires careful procedures to extract. The soul, which is so intricately tied to the physical body, would be destroyed if forced apart from its original host. But despite how delicate a procedure removing a soul from a living being might be, the host of any living thing will fight back: "For in contrast to the patient things, doorknobs and stones, animals yielded up their odor only under protest... unlike flowers, the animals he tried to macerate would not yield up their scent without complaints or with only a mute sigh—they fought desperately against death, absolutely did not want to be stirred under, but kicked and struggled... he would have to kill them."  Grenouille soon discovers that no matter how hard he tries, a living being will not give up its scent or soul. So when he is able to lure a puppy, kill it, and separate its essence, he rejoices: "Grenouille closed [the tube] up tight and put it in his pocket and bore it with him for a long time as a souvenir of his day of triumph, when for the first time he had succeeded in robbing a living creature of its aromatic soul."

Unfortunately, the movie finds difficulty in expressing the notion of scent as the soul. When Jean-Baptiste Grenouille kills the young maidens and takes their scents, the fact that he is actually stripping them of their souls is underplayed or not even shown at all. The film cannot show the scent itself as it is being stripped away, for the scent is not a visible gas that could be represented on the screen. While the novel describes in detail the analogy of the soul and the scent of a person, the movie makes no such reference, and this lack is aggravated by the "sympathization" of its characters. In the novel, none of the characters are pitiable or truly understandable. "In Tykwer's version," however, Grenouille "is a more commonly coded and understandable criminal—some of these women provoke him." In the film, Grenouille also imagines himself making love to one of his murder victims, "something the truly monstrous character of the book would never think of doing." Even the characters that the audience is supposed to relate to are never fully developed, and thus leave no time or room for the readers to embrace the character. For example, Laure Richis, a character the readers are expected to root for while

6 Ibid., 179.
7 Ibid., 185-86.
8 Ibid., 186.
10 Ibid.
Grenouille stalks her, is presented as nothing more than the final victim—she has none of the kind, gentle characteristics that are seen in her movie counterpart. She stands instead as the final ingredient to the anti-hero’s plot, a pesky mouse that has eluded his grip for the time being. Her safety is not something that anyone can place his hopes in, since her demise has already been sealed.

As stated earlier, the novel presents very flawed characters, whereas the film attempts to balance out the supposed heroes, especially Antoine Richis, the father of Laure. In the novel, he is a cold, calculating nobleman who constantly suffers from the desires of incest he has for his own daughter. His thinking always revolves around deceiving and outsmarting his opponent, using his cunning to defeat his enemies. In the film, none of that is present and he is shown as a loving father, a logical thinker, and a protective caretaker as he takes his daughter to the shore in order to keep her safe. Even Baldini, who is played by A-list actor Dustin Hoffman, is less pompous and more silly. In the novel, Baldini was depicted as a selfish man who helped Grenouille for the sole purpose of extracting his secret formulas. The film still portrays him as an arrogant perfumer, but also adds a quirky and likable side. But the protagonist Jean-Baptiste Grenouille changes the ambience of the film even more so than these two altered characters. A heartless being, Patrick Süskind crafts his anti-hero as an unlovable, demonic tour de force rather than the pathetic-looking human being that Tom Tykwer builds him to be. The actor playing Grenouille is too small and bony; in the novel, he is a bulky hunchback with scars spreading across the entirety of his malformed body. Ben Whiskaw, the actor who portrays Grenouille, is much too handsome for the role and his expressions are that of curiosity and confusion more so than villainy and anger. “The film tries to soften the viewer’s distaste for its protagonist by making his first crime an accident. Grenouille is a murderer, but a handsome and even understandable one.”11 The author makes it clear that there is no reason to feel any sympathy towards the protagonist for he himself could not love: “True, he did not love another human being, certainly not the girl who lived in the house beyond the wall. He loved her scent—that alone, nothing else, and only inasmuch as it would one day be his alone,”12 and for the crowd at large he claims: “What he had always longed for—that other people should love him—became at the moment of its achievement unbearable, because he did not love them himself, he hated them. And suddenly he knew that he had never found gratification in love, but always only in

11 Ibid., 184.
12 Süskind, Perfume, 190.
hatred—in hating and in being hated.” Jean-Baptiste Grenouille basks in his own soullessness, “born with no odor of his own on the most stinking spot in this world, amid garbage, dung, and putrefaction, raised without love, with no warmth of a human soul, surviving solely on impudence and the power of loathing, small, hunchbacked, lame, ugly, shunned, an abomination within and without—he had managed to make the world admire him. To hell with admire! Love him! Desire him! Idolize him!” He takes pride in the fact that he raised himself from the depths of hell to completely control the human race. So for the film to pity him and expect the audience to sympathize with him is to destroy him even more so than the crowd of vagabonds who eat him alive in the end.

The film dwells on each scent and occurrence longer than in the novel, thus changing the fragility and swiftness of life emphasized by Süskind. The novel emphasizes the quickness of each relationship that Grenouille forms and accentuates the rapidness in which they ended. This carries on to even the dramatic scenes, such as the final orgy on the execution plaza. The town’s descent into madness is described in a couple lines and emphasizes the chaotic nature of the entire fiasco. The film, however, takes a different approach and dramatizes the moments even more, slowly focusing on the handkerchief that Grenouille waves about. When he lets it fly into the wind, the camera follows it bird’s eye view and shows the undivided attention of the masses, staring intensely at the floating piece of cloth. Then the members of the crowd slowly begin to recognize their carnal desires and start to fall into their lustful wants. While this presentation was powerful in its own way, the fury and destructive nature of their sexual acts is lessened. The murders are also portrayed in a somewhat different light. The first difference is in the number; the novel had Grenouille kill twenty-six girls while in the movie he captures thirteen. The twenty-six murders are rushed by quickly, with none of the individual murders being disclosed or explained; only Laure’s receives special attention, and very little even at that. The succinct nature of the maidens’ deaths in the book attests to the insignificance of the temporality of the individual lives for the eternity of the larger picture. By being nondescript about each death, Süskind develops a mysterious air about the entire ordeal; what is this madman planning? Why is he committing these acts if they are not even for sexual gratification?

But this mystique is destroyed by the introduction of the Egyptian tomb legend introduced by the Baldini of the film version, in which Grenouille must gather twelve scents to make up the head, the heart, and the base (each of which require four pieces) and a secret final scent that

---

13 Ibid., 240.
14 Ibid., 239.
was rumored to enrapture the entire world for a few seconds of happiness. By describing Grenouille’s rationale in this manner, his mind seems more understandable, his actions more traceable. But that is not what the author intended; there is very limited knowledge or information as to why Grenouille is doing what he is. The readers themselves must either solve the puzzle using hints laid before, or wait for Jean-Baptiste to reveal it like he does to the crowd of angry vigilantes in the finale. The only fleshed-out explanation is given from the thoughts of Antoine Richis, who still does not have the completely correct assumption. “For if one imagined—and so Richis imagined—all the victims not as single individuals, but as parts of some higher principle and thought of each one’s characteristics as merged in some idealistic fashion into a unifying whole, then the picture assembled out of such mosaic pieces would be the picture of absolute beauty, and the magic that radiated from it would no longer be of human, but of divine origin.”¹⁵ This idea that Antoine stumbles upon shows the running motif of the novel in which each murder is insignificant on its own and can only be meaningful if these pieces are all combined—the lives of humans are temporary, but when collected under the jurisdiction of a “god,” then the ephemeral quality of life can be set aside to produce a divine, eternal existence, which the ultimate perfume was supposed to do. With the perfume’s ability to control and manipulate the minds of humans, Grenouille now held the power to lengthen and shorten life as he willed.

Since the novel relies so heavily on the sense of smell, both the author and the protagonist look down upon the other senses. Grenouille despises the use of his other senses: “The sound of the blow was a dull, grinding thud. He hated it. He hated it solely because it was a sound . . . .”¹⁶ For the other characters, it is the use of their vision or hearing that causes them to make incorrect decisions or assumptions. When Richis awakens feeling victorious over the murderer, he walks into his daughter’s chamber with confidence and is greeted by the glistening rays of the sun: “The door sprang open, he entered, and the sunlight fell full into his eyes. Everything in the room sparkled, as if it were filled with glittering silver, and for a moment he had to shut his eyes against the pain of it.”¹⁷ The masses awaiting Jean-Baptiste’s trial hearing are simply confounded by his appearance or the way that they perceive him for “he simply did not look like a murderer. No one could have said just how he had imagined the murderer, the devil himself, ought to look, but they were all agreed: not like this!”¹⁸ Yet it is not only the mere foolishness of

¹⁵ Ibid., 203.
¹⁶ Ibid., 216.
¹⁷ Ibid., 221.
¹⁸ Ibid., 227.
sight and hearing that cause the manipulation; it is Grenouille’s professional control of a single, specific sense that hooks his enemies. “[Grenouille] could not possibly be a murderer. Not that they doubted his identity! The man standing there was the same one whom they had seen a few days before . . . . And yet—it was not he either, it could not be he, he could not be a murderer. The man who stood at the scaffold was innocence personified.”19 They are still able to see and hear and feel, but they are so enraptured by the control of their smell that Grenouille has that they transform all of their other senses to match what their noses tell them to believe. The executioner, the bishop, the commoners, the nobles, and even Antoine Richis abandon their other senses to indulge in only the sense of smell.

The ephemeral nature of smell throughout Patrick Süskind’s novel *Perfume: The Story of a Murderer* develops the continuing motif of transience of scents using flower imagery, the idea of virginity, and constant reminders of shortness and fragility of the human life. Using vivid imagery dealing with the olfactory and the abruptness of each event, the novel presents a tale of the manipulation of life and the soul. The film, however, is unable to capture this fleeting sensation of the realm of scent. Instead, it builds its story around the pitiable existence of Jean-Baptiste Grenouille, who is more a lost soul than the incarnation of the devil as the novel seems to imply. Grenouille the “tick” found in the pages of Süskind’s work is absent in the film; he is instead replaced by a curious and intellectually stimulated misanthrope whose disappointment with humanity is its trivialness. The Grenouille in the novel is a vengeful lord of human souls who becomes desperate and despondent because of their simplicity and corruptibility. Because the medium of film is so heavily forced to rely on the visual and the audio, it cannot be helped that the nasal qualities stressed in the book are not present. The film takes a different approach, creating characters that are relatable and realistic, and thereby eliminating the powerful motif of the transient nature of life and scent. The horrifying and atrocious deeds of Jean-Baptiste Grenouille are, however, easy to forget “because his gifts and his sole ambition were restricted to a domain that leaves no traces in history: to the fleeting realm of scent.”20

---

19 Ibid., 236.
20 Ibid., 1.