

Call for Papers

Work and Smell: Comparative Perspectives

25 April 2024

Proposals are invited for this conference, jointly organised by the [Centre for Comparative Literature](#) and the [Decadence Research Centre](#) at Goldsmiths, University of London.

Keynote Speakers:

Prof. Hans J. Rindisbacher (Pomona)

Prof. em. Janice Carlisle (Yale)

The scope for autonomy at the workplace has an important influence on attitudes towards democratic participation; political approaches to social problems are usually well advised to consider the working worlds which frame their search for solutions; and the methodical comparison of the ways in which societies conceive of working worlds is of vital importance for a critical understanding of the international nexus of work. In judgements of the value of work, smell is not always of central importance; however, when work-related smell matters, it tends to carry strong evaluative meaning.

Literature contributes to the cultural repertoire of imagery that underpins conceptions of work. The process of smelling, which involves breathing as a material exchange of the bodily self with its environment, conveys demanding, fulfilling and informative qualities of working situations with particular intensity. Many nineteenth-century workers on French knacker's yards valued the stench of decay as a hardening contribution to good health; others have read pungent smells related to manual labour as signs of an inferior class, though strong odours of agriculture have also been celebrated as a hallmark of vitality which the deodorised bourgeois seemed to lack; doctors, nurses, pharmacists, merchants, housewives, cooks, sommeliers, perfumers, priests or farmers, to name just a few, sniff out the condition of patients, clients, materials or environments; and town planners, architects, engineers and marketing experts design the olfactory qualities of spaces and products. In the literary discourse about work, olfactory perceptions are typically relevant as emotionally strong indicators of the ethical significance carried by specific working practices; literary texts evaluate what it means if a worker smells of sweat, if a craftsman carries the scent of his materials, if non-scented persons can sniff out occupations, if professionals employ certain modes of olfactory diagnosis, or if sites of industrial labour emit smellable gases.

The conference aims to investigate literary depictions of smell pertaining to work-specific contexts from comparatist angles, or in different cultural contexts that invite comparison. It operates with a broad definition of work which includes the production of material goods and the provision of services; work might consist in traditionally ascribed, paid, forced or honorary duties. It is distinguished from private pursuits by its claim to contribute to society as a whole, but the value invested in work – or types thereof – may differ significantly; it may be despised as the bondage of unfree classes, criticised as an exercise of undue privilege, celebrated as a form of social integration or a path to social improvement or religious salvation, explored as an opportunity for personal growth, enjoyed as a socially recognised form of self-realisation, or endured as a mere source of sustenance.

Literary-historical studies on such olfactory motifs have chiefly focussed on specific works which thematise smell in exceptional detail (for example, on Wilhelm Raabe's novella on the stench of

industrial pollution, on George Orwell's references to the stench pertaining to industrial labour, or on Émile Zola's evocation of oppressive atmospheres in the Parisian market halls); on rare smell motifs in national literatures written in an age of olfactory silence (for example, on fresh scents as indicators of a traditional housewife's domestic rule in German Bourgeois Realism, or on smells of characters as traces of their work lives in High-Victorian English Fiction); and on cultural differences in the evaluation of smell across regions (for example, on the fresh smell of Westernised households in nineteenth-century Russian fiction) and times (for example, on the utility-focussed approach to natural scents in the literature of Antiquity). Hans J. Rindisbacher's pioneering cultural-historical study of olfactory perception in literature has compared sensibilities of German, French, English and Russian cultures, but comparative literary studies dedicated to motifs of work-related smell deserve to be developed further, as they throw into relief social and cultural similarities and differences between attitudes towards work and related smells.

For our conference, which invites papers on works from any society, culture and historical period, decadent literature is of particular, but not exclusive interest: some *renifleurs* have cultivated their transgressive abandon to smells in encounters with workers' bodies or garments; decadent ways of life depend on purveyors of scents and scented goods, whose work might thus warrant literary exploration; and the decadents' disdain for the tedium of work may be mirrored in their response to pertinent olfactory atmospheres or traces. Joris-Karl Huysman's praise of the armpit smell of female peasants spreading hay in the midday sun helpfully reminds us of the synaesthetic powers of working bodies: as a 'pure note' and 'sultry cry' of nature, their scent evokes the smell of wild duck cooked in olives and of pungent shallots, which seems to fit harmoniously into the melody of peasant life. The gendered coding of literary smells is also manifest in imaginative invectives about the labour of literary authors; for example, in his diaries, Thomas Mann rejects the Austrian writer Maria Lazar's olfactory-rich first novel with reference to 'penetrating woman's smell'.

Please send your proposal of not more than **300 words** for a **30-minute paper by 8 December 2023** at the latest to: CCL@gold.ac.uk (please include the words "Work and Smell" in the subject line). Please note that we can only accept papers in English.

Topics may include, but are not restricted to

- Olfactory Merchandise Knowledge
- Migrant Workers and Olfactory Cultures
- Stench and Scent in Domestic Households
- Stench and Scent in Institutional Households (for example, convents, hospitals, prisons, military barracks or care homes)
- Smell and Architecture
- Smell in Medical and Hygienic Practices
- Smellscapes of Soldiering
- Atmospheres of Cohabitation with Animals
- Olfactory Design and Marketing
- Stench and Scents of Religious Welfare
- Sex Work between Fragrance and Exhalation
- Therapeutic Reframing of Smells
- Aromatherapies
- Smells at Rural and Industrial Places of Work
- Smells in Contexts of Unfree Labour
- Smell as Occupational Hazard or Stress
- Environmental Fragrancing

- Olfactory Art and Entertainment
- Hierarchies of Smells and Forms of Work
- Gendered Smells of Work
- Olfactory Sensibilities of Working Men and Women
- Smell and Affect in Industrial Relations
- Smell as Occupational Stigma
- Smells of Work and the *Renifleur*
- Smell and Disdain for Work
- The Purveyance of Scents and Scented Goods

For submissions and further inquiries, contact the organiser, Professor Frank Krause, at CCL@gold.ac.uk. Please include the words “Work and Smell” in the subject line.

For more information visit the Conference webpage at <https://sites.gold.ac.uk/comparative-literature/work-and-smell-comparative-perspectives>.