

Epistemology of the Feelies. Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* and the Dream of Smell Media

Giancarlo Grossi, University of Milan

The essay analyses from an epistemological point of view the functions of an imaginary medium, the *feelies*, namely some stereoscopic, tactile, and especially olfactory movies imagined by Aldous Huxley in the futuristic dystopia *Brave New World* (1932). Its main goal is to comprehend the identity, functions, and objectives of yesterday's and today's multisensory media. In this perspective, the essay reconstructs the cultural-historical horizon which produced Huxley's imaginary entertainment, considering the three polarities which constitute a media dispositive in the perspective of media epistemology, i.e. *machinery*, *representation*, and *spectator*. With regard to the mechanical function of the fictional dispositive, its ability to catch sensory spheres such as smell and touch reflects the contemporary debate on media specificity, a discussion in which Huxley himself participated with a famous 1929 article. In the same way, the fictional feely *Three Weeks in a Helicopter* appears as a parodic pastiche which bears the marks of various cinematic paradigms of the time: especially early "cinema of attractions", as well as film genres which communicate directly to the spectator's unconscious. Finally, focusing on the imaginary spectator's experience, the essay reconnects feelies to the cultural history of olfaction, a repressed sense whose media conquest coincides with a precise form of colonization of human subjectivity.

Keywords
Imaginary Media
Multisensoriality
Cultural History of Smell
Cinema of Attractions

DOI

[https://doi.org/
10.54103/2036-
461X/19442](https://doi.org/10.54103/2036-461X/19442)

THE IMAGINARY MEDIA EPISTEME¹

A fertile ground for interrogating the identity of a media device is that constituted by that media which have never been realized or simply imagined. By the identity of a medium, I do not mean any pre-existing or pre-fixed construct, but rather the effect of an intersection of practices, technologies, institutions, ideologies and experiential spaces that intertwine and take shape reciprocally in a given historical framework. Eric Kluitenberg, in the preface to his *Book of Imaginary Media* (Kluitenberg 2006, 7–25), emphasized not only that the identity of each medium possesses components that are as real as imagined, but that without one of these characteristics it could not function. More precisely, in the appearance of a new medium, something analogous to what happens in the formation of communities takes place: an imaginary subject needs to take shape for individuals to identify with it and act accordingly. Mythologies thus assume a decisive and productive role in assembling imaginary and real



components, whether simply dreamt or historically realized. Analysing the mythology that accompanies the emergence of a media identity thus means understanding what processes led to its technical and social configuration. In these mythical narratives, the imprint of the different knowledge and powers which characterized the historical-cultural horizon producing them remains alive. This is what, starting from a distinctly Foucauldian approach to media archaeology, is called episteme, or in a more general sense dispositive². In this vein, François Albera and Maria Tortajada, focusing on audiovisual media, have also considered the importance of the contribution that science fiction and fantasy narratives, from the 19th century to the present day, have had on the conceptualization of the cinematic dispositive, drawing inspiration from technologies that existed at the time as much as they were still being projected (Albera 2010; Albera and Tortajada 2015). Considering the para-cinematic devices imagined by Villiers de l'Isle Adam and Verne up to Barjavel, Albera and Tortajada emphasize two aspects in particular: firstly, how these devices were refractory to any media specificity, as they hybridized different technological and experiential possibilities--a bit like, one might add, mythological creatures created by the association of different animal species. This assemblage is a meaningful aspect of the emergence of a new media experience. One need only think of the advent of a multiform device such as cinema (in which the expressive possibilities of painting, photography, theatre, and music converge). Secondly, in complete continuity with Kluitenberg, Albera and Tortajada indicate how the imaginary devices which inhabit fictional literature do not merely predict and prefigure future ones, but actively contribute to their birth. It could be argued that media, when they first appear, are already welcomed within a shared social recognition, precisely because of the pre-existing framework of these fictional narratives.

The investigation of imaginary media is not, however, a mere novelty of the more recent emergence of media-archaeological approaches in film theory. It was already circulating in theories of the 1950s. Edgar Morin, in his famous 1956 essay *The Cinema or Imaginary Man*, dedicates a huge discussion to the "cinema of the future imagined by science fiction", which coincides with the Bazinian myth of "total cinema, which catapults into the unfathomable future that which is in embryo in the very nucleus of the image" (Morin 2005, 41). According to French philosopher and sociologist, these possibilities express the anthropological goal of the cinematograph itself, which corresponds with the production of a double that is more real than the real itself, capable of surviving the transient character of time.

In the present investigation, I will be interested in considering a specific function of certain imaginary media, which reveals as much the intrinsic vocation of cinema as they trace a borderline territory between the cinematic dispositive itself and the immersive media that preceded it (such as phantasmagoria)³, or with which it briefly coexisted (Morton Heilig's Sensorama patent)⁴ and still coexists today (virtual and extended reality environments)⁵. I speak of the fantasy of a cinema capable of colonizing not only the sensory domains of sight

and hearing, but also less mediated--and hard to mediate--sensory spheres such as touch and, above all, smell. It is in fact Morin himself who specifies how "the first wave of science fiction begins by conferring all the sensory characteristics on projected images". In the 1930s, there is especially one fantasy that, according to Morin, most significantly represents the multisensory character of "total cinema": Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932), in which "the singing, speaking, synthetic film, in colour, stereoscopic, scented" (Morin 2005, 42) constitutes one of the main attractions of the dystopian and futuristic society described within the book (Huxley 2006). Huxley gives this dispositive the name "feelies" in analogy to "talkies", the term with which sound films were referred to at their advent. *Feelies* also play a central role in the unfolding of the plot, which is why it is possible to find in the novel a detailed description of their functions, from the more technical to the more experiential aspects. Consequently, by combining the traces of the various pieces of information left by Huxley in the text, it becomes possible to reconstruct and interrogate the medium in an accurate manner, almost as if it were a pre-cinematic device that is now in disuse. Moreover, in Huxley's narrative, the feelies appear fully integrated with other processes of domination and programming of subjectivity that distinguish the dystopian universe of *Brave New World*: such as *hypnopædia*, the conditioning and automated teaching imparted during sleep, or *soma*, the hallucinatory drug that allows future citizens to calm down by evading reality. It then becomes necessary to ask why the idea of a cinema involving the entire sensorium becomes as significant to identify a precise configuration of society (massified) and the psyche (programmed) such as the one prefigured by Huxley.

Starting from these considerations, I will attempt to apply an epistemological investigation to the feelies, with the aim of understanding from the analysis of an imaginary medium what components and functions characterize the multisensory vocation of media, and, above all, the technological conquest of spheres such as touch and smell. Consequently, I will search the feelies for traces of both the technological and cultural trends that permeate the historical horizon in which Huxley imagined them. In doing so, this investigation will consider Huxley's novel as an opaque object, an utterance whose meaning is not so much to be searched in the author's creative intention as in the historical interweaving of institutions, discourses and technologies in which even a merely imagined medium inevitably participates.

THE MULTISENSORY MACHINERY

Starting from the complexity of information that can be identified in *Brave New World* about the feelies, it becomes possible to isolate three areas for the analysis of the imaginary medium. In an epistemological perspective such as that outlined by Albera and Tortajada, every dispositive implies a reciprocal relationship that is imposed between three constitutive elements: machinery, representation, spectator (Albera and Tortajada 2010). Focusing on the first

aspect, we can analyse the material arrangement and technical functioning of feelies; on the second, their fictional and narrative content; on the third, the subjectivity they address together with the sensory, cognitive, and emotional experience they arouse.

The technical functioning of the feelies emerge most clearly in one of the novel's climactic scenes, in Chapter XI, when the beautiful fetus technician Lenina Crowne and John the Savage meet at the "screening" of "*THREE WEEKS IN A HELICOPTER. AN ALL-SINGING, SYNTHETICAL TALKING, COLOURED, STEREOSCOPIC FEELY. WITH SINCHRONYZED SCENT-ORGAN ACCOMPAINMENT*" (Huxley 2006, 167). Already in the title, openly parodic with respect to any multisensory assemblage, it is possible to guess Huxley's position within the debate of those years on the topic of media specificity. In an article that appeared in *Vanity Fair* in July 1929, "Silence is Golden", Huxley had already described in caustic terms his first encounter with sound cinema, at the Boulevard des Italiens in Paris⁶, "where the latest and most frightful creation-saving device for the production of standardized amusement had been installed" (Huxley 1929, 72). The film that was the subject of Huxley's first disastrous contact with the talkies, whose account resembles more a tale of a misfortune than a film review, is precisely the first sound film in the history of cinema, *The Jazz Singer* (Alan Crosland 1927), released only two years earlier. Huxley himself proudly claims the delay of his experience: "This is one of those cases where it is most decidedly better never than late, better never than early, better never than on the stroke of time" (Huxley 1929, 72). If, however, one compares Huxley's reasons with the positions expressed a few years later by media specificity theorists such as Rudolf Arnheim, one can see some essential differences. For the Gestalt psychologist and art theorist, the problematic nature of talkies concerns rigidly formal aspects, rooted in a precise aesthetic conception that distinguishes the expressive power of an art or medium on the basis of the sensory sphere it implies. As Arnheim states in an essay entitled, with clear reference to the distinction among the arts in Lessing's 18th-century aesthetics, *A New Laocoon* (1938), "in their attempts to attract the audience, two media are fighting each other instead of capturing it by united effort" (Arnheim 1957, 199). Instead, the expressive power of an art would consist precisely in its ability to communicate the perceptive complexity of the world through a single sensory channel. For Huxley, on the other hand, the problem of the multiplication of sensory impulses in the media corresponds rather with a process of cultural decadence, in which the blurring of any tension towards the ideal corresponds with the propagation of immediate and obtuse sensory pleasures. The problematic nature of talkies thus concerns not so much an aesthetic or expressive rule as the socio-economic configuration of the mass-entertainment, with the transformation of media narratives into "Taylorized work and mechanized amusement" (Huxley 1929, 94). This standardization brought about by the inclusion of sound in cinema is reflected mainly in the content than in the form of the movie. Especially, Huxley adopts an elitist point of view with respect to musical phenomena belonging to popular culture such as

jazz: "The jazz players were forced upon me; I regarded them with a fascinated horror. It was the first time, I suddenly realized, that I had ever clearly seen a jazz band. The spectacle was positively terrifying"; not to mention the disgust provoked by Al Jolson's performance of *My Mammy*, defined by Huxley as "the most nauseatingly luscious, the most penetratingly vulgar mammy song that it has ever been my lot to hear" (Huxley 1929, 94). The advent of talkies would therefore represent nothing more than a further transformation of art into pure sensation, increasingly far from any cognition and within the reach of the standard spectator's entertainment.

With regard to the imaginary medium of feelies, the role of undermining media specificity is instead parodically assumed by two culturally neglected senses such as smell and touch, both of which are difficult to colonize by the *media* regime precisely because they are characterized by *immediate* contact with the object. From a technical point of view, the sense of smell is conveyed by a scent organ that works like a musical instrument, emanating odors instead of sounds, while the tactile sensations appear by pressing a metal button on the armrest of the armchair. But while touch takes on a mimetic function, anchoring itself to the objects represented and making them hyperreal, olfactory notes remain as abstract and arbitrary as musical notes, which, according to a long-standing aesthetic tradition, do not replicate the universe of objects but rather constitute the expression of feelings and emotions⁷. The analogy between music and perfume is in fact explicitly emphasized by Huxley: the "projection" of *Three Weeks in a Helicopter* is preceded by an olfactory concert, in which top notes, heart notes and base notes tune in and follow each other as in a symphony:

The scent organ was playing a delightfully refreshing Herbal Capriccio--rippling arpeggios of thyme and lavender, of rosemary, basil, myrtle, tarragon; a series of daring modulations through the spice keys into ambergris; and a slow return through sandalwood, camphor, cedar and newmown hay (with occasional subtle touches of discord--a whiff of kidney pudding, the faintest suspicion of pig's dung) back to the simple aromatics with which the piece began. The final blast of thyme died away; there was a round of applause; the lights went up. (Huxley 2006, 166-67)

The music/smell analogy is not an invention of Huxley but appears already well established in 19th century British culture. In particular, the chemist and perfumer Septimus Piesse, active in London in the second half of the 19th century and co-owner of the popular perfume house Piesse & Lubin, had already argued in his *The Art of Perfumery* (1855) for the existence of an olfactory octave, and even of semi-odors comparable to semitones⁸.

Scent thus appears capable both of producing an autonomous spectacle, like a sound medium, and of integrating itself in relation to images. Even in this second case, this does not occur in order to make the olfactory qualities of the intradiegetic objects perceptible, but in the form of an extradiegetic "smelltrack", a background commentary that would make full sense in itself even without

linking up with the visual content. In the scene of a kiss, for instance, while on a tactile level a fully realistic titillation on the lips corresponds, the scent organ only emanates pure musk (Huxley 2006, 168).

The non-illusory character of scent within feelies, even in a science-fiction fantasy such as the one proposed by Huxley, says much about the resistance of smell to any process of mediatization. In the years prior to the release of *Brave New World*, the use of scent in the cinema took place in a few instances and without a specific purpose of synchronization with the images. An example of this use occurred in 1929 during the screening of *Lilac Time* (George Fitzmaurice, 1928) when the manager of Boston's Fenway Theatre added lilac perfume to the movie theatre's ventilation system in accordance with the appearance of the film's title on the screen (Spence 2020, 4). As Vinzenz Hediger and Alexandra Schneider note, "the function of these smells was to contribute to the general atmosphere of the presentation. The narrative articulation of smells, the representation and reproduction of diegetic smells, is a rather different affair" (Hediger and Schneider 2005, 246). An affair that began to concretize, albeit with little success, only years after the publication of Huxley's novel with the application of various patents. Some instances are the "smellies", introduced in 1941 by a Detroit cinema; Hans Laube's Smell-O-Vision, which accompanied the projection of *Scent of Mystery* (Jack Cardiff, 1960); and the famous Odorama, made by scratch and sniff cards, of *Polyester* (John Waters, 1981).

Huxley's scent organ remains closer to perfume itself, if considered as a medium capable of autonomously organizing a spectacularized experience. As a matter of fact, fragrances are everyday, atmospheric, and wearable objects which represent the most concrete attempt to join sensations and evoke images, producing a para-cinematic experience which is both sensory and mental⁹.

BODIES AND SKINS OF IMAGINARY NARRATIVES

The second aspect which is fundamental to understanding the identity of the imaginary medium from an epistemological point of view concerns its imaginary content: as far as feelies are concerned, I refer to the aesthetic and narrative characteristics of *Three Weeks in a Helicopter* and of the other works which are only briefly but significantly mentioned within the novel.

The first reference to *Three Weeks in a Helicopter* appears already in the second chapter, in a dialogue between the Hatchery and Conditioning Administrator Henry Foster and his Assistant Predestinator:

"Going to the Feelies this evening, Henry?" enquired the Assistant Predestinator. "I hear the new one at the Alhambra is first-rate. There's a love scene on a bearskin rug; they say it's marvellous. Every hair of the bear reproduced. The most amazing tactual effects." (Huxley 2006, 35)

Already in this first exchange, it is evident how the attention aroused by the feely does not so much concern the story being told, as it does the enchantment aroused by the very operation of the dispositive. This one could be defined in McLuhan's terms as a superhot medium, characterized by an extreme definition and complexity of the information transmitted to the sensorium. As Laura Frost notes, "Huxley's feelies reach backward to cinema's music hall origins and forward to the imagination of technologies such as virtual reality" (Frost 2006, 450). Their aim is not so much to tell a story, which, as we shall see, is partially insubstantial, but to enchant and attract the spectator through the deployment of the medium's spectacular power. It is in this sense that, even though Huxley was writing in the 1930s and in the book there is no lack of parodic references to the narrative cinema that developed after *The Birth of a Nation* (David Wark Griffith, 1915), the feelies mainly adhere to the "cinema of attractions" paradigm coined by Tom Gunning to describe early movies (Gunning 1989)¹⁰. It is no coincidence that throughout Huxley's novel a markedly traditionalist contrast is continually played out between high art, naively identified with the Shakespeare masterpieces loved and quoted by John the Savage, and the primitive emotions aroused by the feelies, which strike an immediate and unreflective chord with the human sensorium. As the Resident Controller of Western Europe Mustapha Mond states in Chapter XVI in dialogue with John himself (this latter being horrified by the media system of the new world): "You're making flivvers out of the absolute minimum of steel--works of art out of practically nothing but pure sensation." (Huxley 2006, 221). This pure sensation produced by the medium, which excludes thought but is rooted directly in sensory and bodily experience, is considered by Huxley to be on a par with the Marxian opium of the people that allows for easier control of the masses:

In Brave New World non-stop distractions of the most fascinating nature (the feelies, orgy-porgy, centrifugal bumblepuppy) are deliberately used as instruments of policy, for the purpose of preventing people from paying too much attention to the realities of the social and political situation. The other world of religion is different from the other world of entertainment; but they resemble one another in being most decidedly "not of this world." Both are distractions and, if lived in too continuously, both can become, in Marx's phrase, "the opium of the people" and so a threat to freedom. (Huxley 2001, 31)

What this cinema of sensation/attraction aimed at propaganda consists of becomes clearer when analysing the thin plot of *Three Weeks in a Helicopter*. As Huxley himself notes, it "was extremely simple". The feely protagonists are "a gigantic negro and a golden-haired Beta-Plus female", two individuals categorized within lower castes within the social system of 632 AF (After Ford) London in which the novel is set. The core of the plot consists of a helicopter accident that causes the man to lose his conditioning and develop a psychopathological monogamous passion for the blonde girl, to the point of kidnapping and segregating her "for three weeks in a wildly antisocial tête-à-

tête". Monogamy, in the diegetic universe of *Brave New World*, in which the cohesion of society is guaranteed by the elimination of all biological and cultural restraints on erotic and sexual impulses (including paternity and maternity), is regarded as a dangerous antisocial perversion. The feely continues according to the classic Hollywood pattern of "here comes the cavalry!": after a series of adventures and aerial acrobatics, the girl is rescued by "three handsome young Alphas", while the black man is sent in an Adult-Re-Conditioning Centre to regain his wits and lose his deviant monogamous tendencies. In the happy ending, the blonde girl becomes the mistress of all the three rescuers (Huxley 2006, 168–69).

The plot's inherent racism is based on the equation of blackness with a savagery parodically identified with traditional bourgeois morality. At the same time, it can only be partially justified by a satirical intent towards a future society organized by biologically conditioned castes. Indeed, traces of the exotic and colonial gaze current in Hollywood productions of the time seem to converge in this parody. As Laura Frost notes: "Huxley was not alone in associating cinema with racial otherness and blackness in particular" (Frost 2006, 458). Also, according to Frost, the same title of the feely is to be understood as a parody of the erotic novel *Three Weeks* by genre writer Elinor Glyn, adapted in 1914 into a motion picture directed by Perry N. Verkoff. The novel is centered on an exotic love affair involving a British businessman and a mysterious Eastern European noblewoman. However, one should not forget the most obvious reference described in depth by Huxley in *Silence is Golden*, namely *The Jazz Singer*, and especially the controversial sequence in which Al Jolson sings *My Mammy* in blackface that so disgusted the British writer. It is no coincidence that the narrative genre of *Three Weeks in a Helicopter* assimilates, at the same time, the pornographic film--the bearskin love sequence with its tactile effects propagated on the viewer's body--and the musical--where the songs are reduced to primitive, onomatopoeic verses: "'Aaaah." "Ooh-ah! Ooh-ah!". An equally pertinent reference concerns the film whose innovations are at the origin of the classic Hollywood editing model, *The Birth of a Nation* (1915). The crosscutting introduced by Griffith's movie, in fact, corresponds inextricably with the topic of the rescue: more precisely with the sequence in which Elsie, besieged by blacks, is released by the Ku Klux Klan. This sequence represents the apotheosis as much of the technical revolution of cinema as of the most obtuse and violent reactionary ideology of the US South.

A further trace of cinematic colonial exoticism resurfaces in the final chapter, with the figure of Darwin Bonaparte, "the Feely Corporation's most expert big game photographer" (Huxley 2006, 252–53). Already author of "Sperm Whale's Love Life", the documentary filmmaker and explorer will find in the escape from civilization of the Savage John, caught while he is whipping himself to resist the thought of Lenina, the occasion to film his new masterpiece, "Savage of Surrey". The documentary also assumes a tragic importance in the epilogue of the novel since, marking the impossibility of escaping from the colonizing capture of the new world's media system, it inevitably leads to John's final suicide. In

Bonaparte's film, it is not difficult to glimpse a reference to the exploratory cinema of Robert Flaherty, and especially *Nanook of the North* (1922), which pandered to the general public's interest in the customs of exotic peoples shown in exhibitions, wax museums, zoos.

If it is clear that in Huxley one can hardly find a critical awareness of the prevailing racism in the culture of his time--his disdain for jazz is exemplary--, it is equally true that the sarcasm he directs at the cinema contemporary to him inevitably ends up also affecting the racism that innervates its narratives. The feelies described by Huxley are parodic pastiches of cinema as such; in them, it is possible to find all those sensory and narrative elements (exemplary of both cinema of attractions and first Hollywood genre movies) which play directly on the spectator's unconscious and shape his or her ideology. The media domain of touch and smell thus appears to us to be closely linked to the process of modelling the unconscious sensorium.

THE UNCONSCIOUS ENTERTAINMENT

The spectatorial experience envisaged by the feelies is linked to the other technologies of subjugation imagined by Huxley, such as soma and hypnopædic education, specifically aimed at conditioning the unconscious. It is significant that one of the novel's main characters, Helmholtz Watson--whose first name pays homage to the German psychophysicist Hermann von Helmholtz--in addition to being a lecturer at the College of Emotional Engineering and himself an Emotional Engineer, "composed feely scenarios, and had the happiest knack for slogans and hypnopædic rhymes" (Huxley 2006, 67). The engineering of the unconscious, as we have seen, corresponds to the aims of a medium that propagates pure sensations and emotions to the exclusion of the activation of conscious thought. This coupling of technical and mental elements is also reflected in the current mythology in the diegetic world of *Brave New World*, in which Ford not only stands in for Christ (the years are counted from his birth), but is fully identified with Freud as they were the same individual ("Our Ford--or Our Freud, as, for some inscrutable reason, he chose to call himself whenever he spools of psychological matters [...]"; Huxley 2006, 29).

In addition to the feelies as a public spectacle, Huxley's novel also features a domestic version of the device, less analysed in the critical literature. It is described in Chapter XIV, when John rushes to the hospital to assist his dying mother Linda. Each hospital room appears as a media environment, in which the functions of technology intersect with the hallucinatory and dreamlike power of the soma:

Linda was lying in the last of the long row of beds, next to the wall. Propped up on pillows, she was watching the Semifinals of the South American Riemann-Surface Tennis Championship, which were being played in silent and diminished reproduction on the screen of the television box at the foot of the bed. [...] Linda looked

on, vaguely and uncomprehendingly smiling. Her pale, bloated face wore an expression of imbecile happiness. Every now and then her eyelids closed, and for a few seconds she seemed to be dozing. Then with a little start she would wake up again--wake up to the aquarium antics of the Tennis Champions, to the Super-Vox-Wurlitzeriana rendering of "Hug me till you drug me, honey," to the warm draught of verbena that came blowing through the ventilator above her head--would wake up to these things, or rather to a dream of which these things, transformed and embellished by the soma in her blood, were the marvellous constituents, and smile once more her broken and discoloured smile of infantile contentment. (Huxley 2006, 200)

Even the few moments of wakefulness are reabsorbed within the oneiric universe produced by the combination of different media (among which we may consider, in line with Walter Benjamin who studied hashish as a medium¹¹, also the soma), as in the scene in which Linda finally realizes John's presence at her bedside:

Linda's eyes fluttered open; she saw him, knew him--"John!"--but situated the real face, the real and violent hands, in an imaginary world--among the inward and private equivalents of patchouli and the Super-Wurlitzer, among the transfigured memories and the strangely transposed sensations that constituted the universe of her dream (Huxley, 2006, 205).

The intersection between various media and sensory stimuli, besides acting directly on the unconscious and engineering its emotional content, also produces dreamscapes in which subjects are enraptured and alienated--averted, above all, from the most disturbing and tragic elements of reality such as dying.

The fact that the media system imagined by Huxley again includes and captures the olfactory dimension is no coincidence. Indeed, smell can be considered an unconscious sense for several reasons. Firstly, because of its character as a culturally neglected sense: already at the beginning of the 20th century, Georg Simmel, in his *Sociology of the Senses* (1907), had emphasized how there are no independent and objective expressions to signify olfactory stimuli, since smell alone is not sufficient to constitute an object, but remains locked up in the subjective level, consisting of comparisons and analogies (*smells like...*) (Simmel 1997). Furthermore, again according to Simmel, smell produces a paradoxical social relationship: precisely because of its character of proximity, it can give rise to effects of repulsion and distancing.

Secondly, smell is relegated to the unconscious background of human perception by virtue of its resistance to mediation and registration processes. As Constance Classen, David Howes, and Anthony Synnot note in an extensive survey of the cultural history of smell, "nor can odours be recorded: there is no effective way of either capturing scents or storing them over time. In the realm of olfaction, we must make do with descriptions and recollections" (Classen, Howes, and Synnot 2002, 3).

This link to memory is connected to the revolution introduced by psychoanalysis, and especially to the conception of smell as a repressed sense, dumped into unconsciousness by the development of human culture. Especially, in *Civilization and its Discontents* (1930), Freud considers the sense of smell as repressed and weakened by the process of civilization beginning with the acquisition of upright stature. In Freud's perspective, smell becomes an unconscious sense to rediscover and mediatize through the analytical process: as a matter of fact, the resurfacing of smell's centrality in neuroses and fetishisms makes even more urgent its integration with the conscious universe¹².

These three meanings of the unconscious character of smell (culturally neglected; neither recordable nor mediatable and therefore inextricably linked to the dimension of recollection; repressed and psychopathological) all return in *Brave New World* precisely in relation to the effects that feelies provoke in the spectator's sensorial and mental abysses. In Chapter XIII, following the experience of *Three Weeks in a Helicopter*, Lenina finally manages to realize a sexual approach with John, embracing and enveloping him with her tactile and olfactory presence. This sensation, however, awakens in John the--for him traumatic--reminiscence of the hyper-realistic feely:

And suddenly her arms were round his neck; he felt her lips soft against his own. So deliciously soft, so warm and electric that inevitably he found himself thinking of the embraces in Three Weeks in a Helicopter. Ooh! ooh! the stereoscopic blonde and anh! the more-than-real black-amoor [sic., ed.] Horror, horror, horror ... he fired to disengage himself; but Lenina tightened her embrace (Huxley 2006, 192).

The attempt to escape the sensory impact with the traumatic real (but culturally and technologically hyper-mediated) is translated into the intellectualistic and idealizing quotation from Shakespeare, which, however, continues to betray a constant reference to smell: "Give me an ounce of civet, good apothecary, to sweeten my imagination' [...] "O thou weed, who are so lovely fair and smell'st so sweet that the sense aches at thee" (Huxley 2006, 195). Although the smell, a sense of memory, persists and haunts him even when contact fades: "But her perfume still hung about him, his jacket was white with the powder that had scented the velvety body" (Huxley 2006, 195-96). In his critical analysis of Huxley's novel, Theodor W. Adorno underlines how the figure of John, far from embodying the romantic idea of the good savage, corresponds to "the type of shy, aesthetic youth, tied to his mother and inhibited, who prefers to enjoy his feeling through contemplation rather than expression and who finds satisfaction in the lyrical transfiguration of the beloved" (Adorno 1967, 105). A configuration of the human that for Adorno is, after all, just as standardized as the dystopian future citizens imagined by Huxley: "This type, incidentally, is bred at Oxford and Cambridge no less than are Epsilons in test tubes, and it belongs to the sentimental standbys of the modern English novel" (Adorno 1967, 105). What is most important, however, is that John's unconscious, far from being natural, is

also colonized by the sensations experienced in the feelies. Smell, persistent in the feelies as in memory, is an integral part of this process of conquest.

In conclusion, what do feelies tell us about the identity of yesterdays and today's media technologies? From the epistemological analysis of the imaginary dispositive, considered in its mechanical, representational, and experiential components, we can find various analogies with the contemporary processes which characterize the new media cultural horizon. Firstly, the feelies deal with a machine which absorbs its user by embracing all his or her senses; secondly, the feelies exhibit a narrative content whose main goal is more related to the production of "pure sensation" than to intellectual comprehension, reproducing a representational model which can be found in the "cinema of attraction" paradigm of early movies and vaudeville spectacles as well as in the ideological goals of classical Hollywood cinema entertainment; finally, exactly for the reasons reported before, the feelies communicate directly to the spectator's unconscious and express its content in the form of a technological dream. All these processes pass through the conquest of the sensory fields which are more elusive to the process of recording and mediatization, and especially the sense of smell, historically and culturally considered as the unconscious sense par excellence. The analysis of an imaginary medium of the past then can function as a model to comprehend real media of today, especially immersive experiences such as virtual reality, whose vocation to absorb the user involving her or his whole sensorium can be thought of as the last technological attempt to colonize and exteriorize the deepest areas of human subjectivity.

Notes

¹ This article was written in the framework of the research project “AN-ICON. An-Iconology: History, Theory, and Practices of Environmental Images”. The project has received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union’s Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme (grant agreement No. 834033 AN-ICON), and is hosted by the Department of Philosophy “Piero Martinetti” at the University of Milan (Project “Department of Excellence 2023–2027” awarded by the Italian Ministry of University and Research).

² The difference between episteme and dispositive is clarified by Foucault himself: “Maintenant, ce que je voudrais faire, c’est essayer de montrer que ce que j’appelle dispositif est un cas beaucoup plus général de l’épistémè. Ou plutôt que l’épistémè, c’est un dispositif spécifiquement discursif, à la différence du dispositif qui est, lui, discursif et non discursif, ses éléments étant beaucoup plus hétérogènes” (Foucault, 1977, 88).

³ For an epistemological survey of this dispositive, see Grespi and Violi 2019.

⁴ Presented, not without reason, as ‘the cinema of the future’: see Heilig 1955, 1992.

⁵ On the relationships between virtual reality and post-cinematic episteme, see Casetti and Pinotti 2020.

⁶ Not far from the Boulevard des Capucines where *L’arrivée d’un train à la gare de La Ciotat* by Auguste and Louis Lumière was screened on 28 December 1895.

⁷ For a survey of the aesthetic debate concerning the meaning of music and its connection to expressiveness, see Kivy 2002.

⁸ “Scents, like sounds, appear to influence the olfactory nerve in certain definite degrees. There is, as it were, an octave of odours like an octave in music; certain odours coincide, like the keys of an instrument. Such as almond, heliotrope, vanilla, and orange-blossoms blend together, each producing different degrees of a nearly similar impression. Again, we have citron, lemon, orange-peel, and verbena, forming a higher octave of smells, which blend in a similar manner. The metaphor is completed by what we are pleased to call semi-odors, such as rose and rose geranium for the half note; petty grain, neroli, a black key, followed by *fleur d’orange*. Then we have patchouli, sandal-wood, and *vitivert* [sic., ed.], and many others running into each other”. See Piesse, 1867, 38–39.

⁹ On the mediality of the scent, see Perras and Wicky 2022.

¹⁰ For a complete survey on the relationship between early cinema and attraction see also Strauven 2006 and Gaudreault 2011.

¹¹ See Benjamin 2006.

¹² For more on the role of olfaction in Freud’s work and the subsequent history of psychoanalysis, see LeGuerèr 2001. Hediger and Schneider also note how “as we all know, psychoanalysis and cinema were invented at about the same time, a historical coincidence that has given rise to much theorising in the field of film studies. The fact that the invention of cinema runs roughly parallel with the de-odorization of public space and with the introduction of artificially produced fragrances has so far been given rather less thought”, Hediger and Schneider, 2005, 245.

REFERENCE LIST

- Adorno, Theodor W. (1942) 1967. "Aldous Huxley and Utopia." *Prisms*, 95–117.
- Albera, François, and Maria Tortajada. 2010. "The 1900 Episteme." In *Cinema Beyond Films: Media Epistemology in the Modern Era*, edited by François Albera and Maria Tortajada, 25–44. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press.
- Albera, François, and Maria Tortajada. 2015. "The Dispositive Does Not Exist!" In *Cine-Dispositives. Essays in Epistemology Across Media*, edited by François Albera and Maria Tortajada, 21–44. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press.
- Albera, François. 2010. "Projected Cinema (A Hypothesis on Cinema's Imagination)." In *Cinema Beyond Films: Media Epistemology in the Modern Era*, edited by François Albera and Maria Tortajada, 45–58. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press.
- Arnheim, Rudolf. 1957. "New Laocoon: Artistic Composites and the Talking Film." In *Film as Art*, 199–230. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Benjamin, Walter. (1928–34) 2006. *On Hashish*. Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press.
- Casetti, Francesco, and Andrea Pinotti. 2020. "Post-cinema Ecology." In *Post-cinema. Cinema in the Post-art Era*, edited by Dominique Chateau and José Moure, 193–218. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press.
- Classen, Constance, David Howes, and Anthony Synnott. 2002. *Aroma: The Cultural History of Smell*. London/New York: Routledge.
- Foucault, Michel. 1977. "Le jeu de Michel Foucault" (entretien avec D. Colas, A. Grosrichard, G. Le Gaufey, J. Livi, G. Miller, J. Miller, J.-A. Miller, C. Millot, G. Fajeman). *Ornicar? Bulletin Périodique du champ freudien* 10: 62–93.
- Freud, Sigmund. 1930. "Civilization and its Discontents." In *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume XXI (1927–1931): The Future of an Illusion, Civilization and its Discontents, and Other Works*, 57–146. London: Hogarth Press.
- Frost, Laura. 2006. "Huxley's Feelies: The Cinema of Sensation in *Brave New World*." *Twentieth Century Literature* 52 (4): 443–473.
- Gaudreault, André. (2008) 2011. *Film and Attraction. From Kinematography to Cinema*. Champaign: University of Illinois Press.
- Grespi, Barbara, and Alessandra Violi, eds. 2019. *Apparizioni. Scritti sulla fantasmagoria*. Canterano, RM: Aracne.
- Gunning, Tom. 1989. "An Aesthetics of Astonishment: Early Film and the (In)credulous Spectator." *Art and text* 34 (1): 31–45.
- Hediger, Vinzenz, and Alexandra Schneider. 2005. "The Deferral of Smell: Cinema, Modernity and the Reconfiguration of the Olfactory Experience." In *I cinque sensi del cinema/The Five Senses of Cinema*, edited by Alice Aurelitano, Veronica Innocenti, and Valentina Re, 241–264. Udine: Forum.
- Heilig, Morton. 1992. "El cine del futuro: The cinema of the future." *Presence Teleoperators Virtual Environment* 1 (3): 279–294.

- Huxley, Aldous. (1932) 2006. *Brave New World*. New York/London: HarperCollins.
- Huxley, Aldous. (1958) 2000. *Brave New World Revisited*. New York: RosettaBooks.
- Huxley, Aldous. 1929. "Silence is Golden. Being the Misanthropic Reflections of the English Novelist on First Hearing a Picture Talk." *Vanity Fair* 32: 72 and 94.
- Kivy, Peter. 2002. *Introduction to a Philosophy of Music*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Kluitenberg, Eric, ed. 2006. *Book of Imaginary Media: Excavating the Dream of the Ultimate Communication Medium*. Amsterdam/Rotterdam: De Balie-NAiPublishers.
- Le Guérer, Annick. 2001. "The psychoanalysts' nose." *The Psychoanalytic Review* 88 (3): 401–53.
- Morin, Edgar. (1956) 2005. *The Cinema or the Imaginary Man*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Perras, Jean-Alexandre, and Érika Wicky, eds. 2022. *Mediality of Smells/Médialité des odeurs*. Bern: Peter Lang.
- Piesse, Septimus. (1855) 1867. *The Art of Perfumery and the Methods of Obtaining the Odours of Plants*. London: Longman, Green, Longman, and Roberts.
- Simmel, Georg. (1907) 1997. "Sociology of the Senses." In *Simmel on Culture*, edited by David Frisby and Mark Featherstone, 109–19. London: Sage.
- Spence, Charles. "Scent and the Cinema." *i-Perception* 11 (6): 1–22.
- Strauven, Wanda, ed. 2006. *The Cinema of Attractions Reloaded*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press.