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## Evoking empathy: smell in the twenty-first-century reception of antiquity

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**IMAGINES**

CLASSICAL RECEPTIONS  
IN THE VISUAL AND  
PERFORMING ARTS

**The Smells and  
Senses of Antiquity  
in the Modern  
Imagination**

EDITED BY

**ADELINE GRAND-CLÉMENT  
& CHARLOTTE RIBEYROL**

BLOOMSBURY

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## CHAPTER 6

# EVOKING EMPATHY: SMELL IN THE TWENTY-FIRST-CENTURY RECEPTION OF ANTIQUITY\*

Kim Beerden

### Introduction

Many people consider history, and especially ancient history, to be something from such a long time ago and ever so distant: the past as a very foreign country.<sup>1</sup> Some academics have contributed to this notion by arguing that the Greeks and Romans cannot truly be understood by us because they are 'other' or 'alien'.<sup>2</sup> When taken to its extreme and without its proper historiographical context, such a stance might turn ancient history into something irrelevant in the public imagination. The story of the ancient past would then become a story about unknowable 'others' that does not have much to do with how we understand our own societies. In my opinion, however, the main aim of the historian should be to find ways to understand the past *in order* to make it relevant to the present.<sup>3</sup> The challenge facing the historian is to communicate this relevancy to a wider audience – without resorting to facile parallelism that denies the fundamental difference of the past or our own subjectivity.

One way to do so is by appealing to 'historical empathy'. In presenting Antiquity and other periods of history to a non-scholarly audience, we can certainly speak of an empathic trend.<sup>4</sup> The idea is that, especially in secondary schools but also in other public contexts, historical individuals are put centre stage and are presented as 'people like you and me'.<sup>5</sup> The public is invited to explore the daily lives of individuals within a particular cultural context.<sup>6</sup> Historical empathy is to 'put yourself in someone else's past', what has also been called 'perspective recognition'.<sup>7</sup> This is supposed to lead to a more intense engagement with the past, a way to enthuse the general public by making it easier for them to identify with historical characters, thus stimulating them to want to learn more about a past society. Historical individuals are thought of as 'same' in terms of essential human cognitive features and 'other' in terms of historical context.

Historical empathy is put into practice in novel ways of presenting history not only in school education, but also in museums and in popular culture, geared toward the presentation of everyday life and toward a depiction of a more sensuous experience (which is sometimes referred to as the 'affective turn').<sup>8</sup> While historians disagree over whether or not historical empathy is a method that can or should be used in academic work – a discussion I will not address here – I certainly believe historical empathy to be a suitable first step in order to engage an audience. Barton and Levstik note that there are four steps involved when an individual learns about history: identification, analysis, moral response and display of knowledge.<sup>9</sup> According to them, and also to many outside

of academia, identification and time on gaining history

Sensory experiences – especially smell – are central in strategies of evoking history. In this chapter I will focus on the related to olfactory experiences. Some extent taste have been visual and auditory media scent and smelling, especially attention.<sup>11</sup> More specifically in modern televised representations (2005–7) as my case study only their evocation. To let exploration than perusing generally is hampered by Analysis of the olfactory exploration of olfaction is before we turn to our case that exist between empathy

### Smell and empathy

Brooks' analysis of the mechanics of historic

The first [element] is values, attitudes, beliefs, otherness combats with view the past through normalcy, is a willingness to make sense and are empathy requires historical actions and events in aspect of empathy perspectives or the values, attitudes, and of empathy, perhaps perspectives depend

The one thing lacking here so than with other sensory

of academia, identification is an important step before people are willing to spend money and time on gaining historical knowledge.

Sensory experiences – sight, touch, hearing, taste and smell – play an important part in strategies of evoking historical empathy. They can suggest the realities of daily life and make (ancient) history come alive, make people feel they are transported into the past. In this chapter I will focus on just one of the senses, smell, and tease out a number of issues related to olfactory experiences in the context of historical empathy. Smell, touch and to some extent taste have been somewhat neglected in our society, which is permeated with visual and auditory media.<sup>10</sup> Although catching up quickly, research into the history of scent and smelling, especially in the Graeco-Roman world, still deserves some extra attention.<sup>11</sup> More specifically, I will analyse the functions that odours and smelling fulfil in modern televised representations of ancient Rome, with the television series *Rome* (2005–7) as my case study. Obviously, in a television series there are no actual smells, only their evocation. To look at the evocation of smells might be a more fruitful line of exploration than perusing the recreation of actual smells, something that as of now generally is hampered by technological problems (to which we will return below). Analysis of the olfactory elements in *Rome* can help to create a framework for the exploration of olfaction in other examples of the moving image, and even beyond. But before we turn to our case study it is important to consider at some length the relationships that exist between empathy, smell and the moving image.

### Smell and empathy

Brooks' analysis of the key elements of perspective recognition helps us to understand the mechanics of historical empathy:

The first [element] is a sense of otherness or the recognition that other people's values, attitudes, beliefs, and intentions may be different from one's own. A sense of otherness combats what Wineburg labels 'presentism' – the natural tendency to view the past through the lens of the present. The second component, shared normalcy, is a willingness to entertain the possibility that others' perspectives make sense and are not the result of ignorance, stupidity, or delusion. Thirdly, empathy requires historical contextualization, which is the ability to explain past actions and events in terms of historical values, attitudes, and beliefs. A fourth aspect of empathy is an acknowledgement of the multiplicity of historical perspectives or the understanding that individuals and groups held a variety of values, attitudes, and beliefs at any given time in history. The final sub competency of empathy, perhaps the most difficult to achieve, is a recognition that one's own perspectives depend on historical context – contextualization of the present.<sup>12</sup>

The one thing lacking here is emotion. One might argue that with smell (probably more so than with other sensory experiences), emotion comes first.<sup>13</sup> There has been much

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research done into the relationship between smell and empathy.<sup>14</sup> One conclusion is that odours evoke the emotional component of empathy, have an impact on behaviour and affect mood and cognitive functions:<sup>15</sup> 'Smell, this most liminal of senses, carries a great subversive potential in its ability to violate boundaries, assault rationality, and evoke powerful emotions of disgust and attraction.'<sup>16</sup> The relation between odours and history especially 'allows us to engage with our history in a more emotional way.'<sup>17</sup> In sum, the direct relationship between smell and empathy, including historical empathy, is quite a strong one.<sup>18</sup>

### The moving image and the use of the smell-empathy connection

The use of olfactory smellscape to engage an audience goes a long way back – even to theatrical performances from the Graeco-Roman world<sup>19</sup> – and it continues in present times.<sup>20</sup> As for modern cinema, there have been several experimental attempts to create a smellscape for the audience with the aim of enlivening the cinematic experience, such as Smell-O-Vision and scratch-and-sniff cards.<sup>21</sup> These generally unsuccessful attempts at engaging the audience show that there is a perennial wish to add smell (and touch) to our sight-and-sound-based media.<sup>22</sup> In museums we see some comparable efforts at introducing scent.<sup>23</sup>

Instead, we are here concerned with the *semblance* of olfaction, by verbal reference to some odour, or by its visual representation, by characters sniffing or by other, more subtle hints of smell.<sup>24</sup> It can be difficult to depict a particular smell in a film or in a television series. All depends on the audience being familiar with an odour. One would expect olfaction, when it is addressed in the moving image, to have an important function. Otherwise, why would a screenwriter, designer or director take the trouble to insert it? In fact, the sense of smell may prove an important tool to enhance audience response: not only does smell trigger memories and emotions, as noted above, but it even invites mimicry – research shows that when viewers see a character sniffing on the screen, they imitate this behaviour and also start sniffing, similar to the mimicry of yawning and laughing.<sup>25</sup> This mimicry is relevant for investigations into historical empathy with onscreen characters because it again facilitates identification.<sup>26</sup>

### Case study: The TV-series *Rome* (2005–7)

*Rome* was an extremely successful television series produced by HBO–BBC, consisting of twenty-four episodes divided across two seasons.<sup>27</sup> It was a large-scale undertaking, an unprecedented \$100 million being invested in the first season alone. Prominent directors such as Michael Apted, Allen Coulter and Mikael Salomon were drafted in. The Forum Romanum and a couple of Roman streets were recreated on the backlot of Cinecittà in Rome – where 'Rome' has been recreated on many occasions. *Rome* relates the (mis)adventures of two soldiers, Lucius Vorenus and Titus Pullo, who live in the time of

the Civil War between Pompey and Julius Caesar. The lives are, on many levels, the series' creators selected consequences, as we will see.

There are several different ways of re-enacting history in drama, re-enactment and historical fiction. As Hunt observes, 'The problem with history is that it can throw some intellectual challenges at you, encouraging viewers to think for themselves. One might doubt whether the series probably did not have the time for further thought. Remarkably, the series claimed that the most important thing is to merit the viewers' attention. Hollywood traditions, but the series – and to engage people with history. It is essentially a 'soap' series with main characters. Nevertheless, the series 'convince' them of the historical reality. To develop some understanding of the past, these are similar to or different from the imposed limits to how we can use a moment.

### *Smelly Rome/Rome*

The semblance of smell in the series viewers in identifying with the characters, humanity and individuality between themselves and the characters in history. *Rome's* Rome is a historical Rome's creators as smelling the ancient world was not a pleasant experience, sky often obscured by the sun, followed suit. Production design was but garish and filthy:

People think of Rome based on the research. The sculptures were all based on the research. Rome was so noisy and the combination of New Rome was pretty extreme.

the Civil War between Pompey and Caesar and under Octavian. Their relatively humble lives are, on many levels, intertwined with the lives of those important politicians. That the series' creators selected this well-documented historical background did have consequences, as we will see.

There are several different genres of 'televised history', such as documentary, docu-drama, re-enactment and many kinds of fiction – and each has a different aim or goal.<sup>28</sup> As Hunt observes, 'The purpose of television history is to entertain, educate and excite. If it can throw some intelligent light on the past through an engaging narrative while encouraging viewers to think more deeply about the subject, then it's doing the job.'<sup>29</sup> One might doubt whether *Rome* 'did the job' as Hunt envisioned it. Its producers most probably did not have the primary motives of educating their viewers and stimulating further thought. Remarkably enough, in the publicity before and after release, it was claimed that the most important reason, or at least a very important one, why *Rome* merited the viewers' attention was its 'historical authenticity'.<sup>30</sup> This is in the best of Hollywood traditions, but it should not fool us: the main goal of *Rome* was to entertain – and to engage people in such a way to make them go on watching the series.<sup>31</sup> It is essentially a 'soap' where we are supposed to identify and empathize with the main characters. Nevertheless, the viewer needs some historical contextualization to 'convince' them of the historicity of the background of the story. By watching, they must develop some understanding of how identities in ancient Rome were shaped and how these are similar to or different from the viewer's identity. Thus, there are some self-imposed limits to how unhistorical the series can be – a point to which we will return in a moment.

### *Smelly Rome/Rome*

The semblance of smell is one of the means employed by the makers of *Rome* to assist viewers in identifying and empathizing with the series' characters. Establishing the humanity and individual identity of the characters allows the audience to bridge the gap between themselves and an imagined ancient Rome. But it is also a statement about history. *Rome's* Rome is a smelly Rome, because the real ancient Rome was thought of by *Rome's* creators as smelly. Historians and archaeologists have explained to us that the ancient world was not one of white marble against blue skies: it was colourful, the blue sky often obscured by smoke, and altogether very dirty. The makers of *Rome* have followed suit. Production designer Joseph Bennett wanted a different set, not grandiose, but garish and filthy:

People think of Rome as white and cold and beautiful, powerful but distant. But based on the research, I don't think it was like that at all. [...] The temples and sculptures were all brightly painted. Rome was like Pompeii, but much bigger. And Rome was so noisy it was impossible to sleep. It was like hell. Think of it as a combination of New York and Calcutta, with insane wealth and insane poverty. It was pretty extreme.<sup>32</sup>

And as Bruno Heller, one of the series' creators, explains:

There was a lot of very recent scholarship at that time [of the production of the series] that transformed people's sense of what Roman [history] was [...] There was much more about the everyday life of Roman people, about how people would have lived in apartment blocks in the insular working class life [sic], and looking at it from that modern perspective [...]. It's lucky that practically every previous representation of Rome on any scale kind of went for the grand imperial late Edward Gibbon velvet drapes and marble columns. Even *Gladiator* went for that. Whereas, in fact, it looked much more like Calcutta or Bombay, and smelled like that.<sup>33</sup>

Obviously, smells were important to the makers of *Rome*, not merely for making the viewer relate to the characters in the series, but also for the historical 'authenticity' they say they were striving for – this is not a fantasy world, it is the real Late Republican Rome of history. We will now have a closer look at how this plays out, singling out a number of themes where scents and smelling are introduced.

### Gender

The relation between smell and gender has been well researched.<sup>34</sup> It seems that the scriptwriters of *Rome* wanted to stress gendered ideas about Roman women living secluded lives. There are two scenes where women are using their sense of smell during which it is clear that women are in an enclosed environment. In one, Octavia and her friend are smoking hemp and Atia remarks, 'You are making the whole house stink.'<sup>35</sup> On a different occasion, Octavia comments on what is probably incense being burned in Atia's room: 'You could choke Vulcan in here.'<sup>36</sup> Here the point seems to be to underline by reference to heavily scented rooms what is already visualized: the supposedly historical fact of men moving about in the outside world, and the women living mostly indoors and making extensive use of scents.

### Death

When Pullo and Vorenus are temporarily working as butchers, their conversation is as follows: 'Smells like old times.' 'It does that.'<sup>37</sup> They mean that the stench of the slaughterhouse reminds them, as ex-soldiers, of the battlefield. It is the mnemonic function of smell that is addressed here, but the scene of course also suggests what the passer-by would smell in a Roman street. The way death and its smell are evoked can be very explicit, as when Marc Anthony and Octavian have a brief conversation on the battlefield after the Battle at Philippi. Marc Anthony says, 'Breathe deep, boy, the smell of victory,' to which Octavian responds, 'Smoke, shit and rotting flesh.'<sup>38</sup> The smell of death can also be depicted in more implicit ways: for example, the sound of flies is heard and smoke is seen when there is a scene on the site of an earlier battle, implying the stench of

slaughter.<sup>39</sup> Indirectly connected with an abortifacient: it is sniffed by Servilia, who is always plotting because she fears she will be killed. Her historical background: dead to the world, quite distinct from the average

### Religious identity

Religious ritual occurs very rarely in a religious context, without being visible at the Egyptian palace during all kinds of religious ceremonies. Incense is depicted as very significant. Again, this provides some old-fashioned 'lived religion' going on, and s

### Socio-economic status

Socio-economic status is another aspect of a personal memory about his life. Worked in the woodyards, part of the scope of *Rome* beyond the actual background information and to introduce the subject of slavery to collect his slaves from the streets, the stench. The slaveholder de you'd know I'd done you noth

Smell functions as an effect of status.<sup>47</sup> Atia says to her young and wash. Let's get the stink of his high status – members of made even more explicit who have to imagine long hair do eat raw meat and never wash more attractive and cross the Atia's dismay: 'Are you wearing So in these instances smell is

### Rural and urban: The quality

There are frequent comments a means to distinguish between

slaughter.<sup>39</sup> Indirectly connected to death and decay is the scene in which a woman buys an abortifacient: it is sniffed – and it clearly smells bad.<sup>40</sup> Somewhat comparable is Servilia, who is always plotting, sniffing her glass of water before drinking, probably because she fears she will be poisoned.<sup>41</sup> Generally, the function here is to fill in the historical background: dead bodies, carcasses, ghastly medicinal concoctions, which are quite distinct from the average viewer's sanitized world.

### *Religious identity*

Religious ritual occurs very regularly throughout the series. We see the burning of incense in a religious context, without the incense being commented on. For example, incense is visible at the Egyptian palace during what seems to be a religious ceremony.<sup>42</sup> We see it during all kinds of religious processions and when Cleopatra appears.<sup>43</sup> Obviously, incense is depicted as very specific to Egyptian religion, hinting at its 'exotic nature'.<sup>44</sup> Again, this provides some olfactory emphasis to the historical backdrop: there is a lot of 'lived religion' going on, and standing out amongst this is 'oriental religion' in particular.<sup>45</sup>

### *Socio-economic status*

Socio-economic status is another aspect of identity that is marked by smell. Pullo tells Eirene a personal memory about his mother: 'She was a slave up north. [It] smelled of pine trees. Worked in the woodyards, probably.' Memories evoked by the sense of smell widen the scope of *Rome* beyond the actual period in which we follow the characters – they provide background information and make the characters more rounded. But it also a subtle way to introduce the subject of slavery. A rather less subtle example of this is when Vorenus comes to collect his slaves from the slaveholder and waves his arms around and coughs to illustrate the stench. The slaveholder defends himself by saying, 'I kept them here despite the stink, so you'd know I'd done you nothing dodgy.'<sup>46</sup> So slavery can smell bad as well.

Smell functions as an effective way to distinguish between high and low socio-economic status.<sup>47</sup> Atia says to her young son Octavian when he arrives back in Rome, 'Come inside and wash. Let's get the stink of horse off you.' The idea behind this is to restore Octavian to his high status – members of the elite are not smelly.<sup>48</sup> The differences in social status are made even more explicit when Brutus describes the Gauls during a party in Rome: 'You have to imagine long hair down to here, huge moustaches, the most horrific stench. They eat raw meat and never wash.'<sup>49</sup> On the other side, when Timon attempts to make himself more attractive and cross the divide between lower and higher class, he uses perfume, to Atia's dismay: 'Are you wearing perfume? [ . . . ] It's horrid, horse shit suits you much better.'<sup>50</sup> So in these instances smell is used to underscore the Roman social hierarchy.

### *Rural and urban: The quality of the air*

There are frequent comments relating to the quality of the air, which seem to function as a means to distinguish between urban Rome and the rural countryside. Timon's brother

says to Timon, 'You breathe this fetid air of Rome, but you are not Roman.'<sup>51</sup> Pullo complains to his wife about the brothel where they are living, that the '[w]hole place stinks like fish, doesn't it?'<sup>52</sup> Vorenius comments on a room where his children will be living that it benefits from 'a good breeze from the river.'<sup>53</sup> Pullo wants to move to the country and says, 'I need clean air, room to move' and on another occasion 'I'm going to the country. Just for the day, to get some fresh air, stretch my legs.'<sup>54</sup> Brutus remarks to Cicero in exile that 'The sea air is bracing, at least.'<sup>55</sup> And Servilia remarks to Octavia, 'Lovely town, I'm told. Healthy air.'<sup>56</sup> The quality of the air is further illustrated by the extensive use of smoke throughout the series. A history lesson again: ancient Rome was dirty, polluted, smoky.

### Food

Eating is a universal function and very suitable for developing empathy with the characters, even when they commit (or are about to commit) a crime. Vorenius, during a family meal, says, 'It smells delicious', just when he is about to lose his temper due to the consequences of his changing position in society.<sup>57</sup> The best example is probably that of Titus Pullo, who smells the ripe peaches (twice) in Cicero's garden before he proceeds to kill Cicero.<sup>58</sup> Here, smell fosters our identification with the characters by stressing their humanity. There is no attempt to inform the viewer about the kinds of food that Romans ate or their sometimes outlandish (to our taste) seasonings.

### Sexuality

Sexuality is an important theme in the smellscape of *Rome*, and is mostly concerned with women. Servilia's slave woman sniffs Servilia's neck and arms and seems pleased, telling her mistress that she smells like flowers in bloom.<sup>59</sup> In another scene, a slave strikes an ironic tone with Cleopatra, who is experiencing withdrawal symptoms from her drugs prior to a meeting with Caesar: 'Nothing like cold, stinking sweat to seduce a man.'<sup>60</sup> Men can also be odorous, and it is Cleopatra who does the smelling in the following example: Cleopatra sniffs Vorenius when she wants to have sex with him and her slave woman comments, 'Flowers. Leather. Olives. Not bad.'<sup>61</sup> Again, these olfactory details seem intended to humanize the characters. The fact that women especially resort to smell for erotic ends seems mostly a narrative ploy: women are systematically sexualized in *Rome* and largely characterized by this feature.

### Analysis and conclusions

The rhetorical use of smell by way of the olfactory themes discussed above can be seen to have two main functions: on the one hand, to help the audience identify with the characters (they use their sense of smell like we do, and equally recognizable is the mnemonic function of smell that rounds out the characters); and on the other hand, to

grasp some basic ideas from our society).

The first function is things more often than seasons 1 and 2, Pullo and any other characters. C some complex characters such as Servilia and Cle do as much smelling as Octavia unpleasant, not dynamics at play here: people in the series more the makers of the series would be the easiest route

When we broaden our find odours and smelling *Fall of a City* (2018) are – or at least we are not in *Rome*. The television series references to smell, with identification and empathy of the *ludus* comes home wash, I smell of death.' He us to feel some sympathy moment of crisis.

The second function 1 century BCE Rome, make poor, urban and rural, civil and gender, class and civil some clouds of incense with a smellscape that tries like and at the same time us of identity.

The smellscape of *Ro* conceptualized and under way on all levels, from details, including smells, wanted their audiences to wrong: the admirable attempt was derailed by the fictional city of Rome, stinks – as quoted above, have gathered They probably could not im

grasp some basic ideas about Roman society (it smelled different and it was different from our society).

The first function is highlighted by the fact that sympathetic characters are smelling things more often than characters the audience is not meant to sympathize with: in both seasons 1 and 2, Pullo and Vorenus, our everyday heroes, are shown smelling more than any other characters. Of course, the main characters have the most screen time. Still, some complex characters with whom we are meant to have an ambiguous relationship, such as Servilia and Cleopatra in the first season as well as Octavia in the second, do not do as much smelling as might be expected. Servilia is cunning, Cleopatra forceful and Octavia unpleasant, not really inviting much empathy. There may very well be gender dynamics at play here: while a reference to smell has the immediate effect of making people in the series more like 'real people', apparently 'people' are mostly men. Perhaps the makers of the series believed that the audience would be mainly male – and that this would be the easiest route to evoke empathy.

When we broaden our scope to the smellscape of other recent television series, we find odours and smelling conspicuously absent. The worlds of *Britannia* (2017) and *Troy: Fall of a City* (2018) are generally very sterile and the likeability of the characters is low – or at least we are not invited to feel empathy for characters who could be 'like us', as in *Rome*. The television series *Spartacus: Blood and Sand* (season 1) is equally devoid of references to smell, with one telling exception which supports the argument concerning identification and empathy suggested above. The scene is in episode 4, where the owner of the *ludus* comes home in a sorry state and is desperate and says to his wife, 'I should wash, I smell of death.' His wife replies, 'No, you smell like a man.' This definitely invites us to feel some sympathy for this otherwise unpleasant character and his wife in a moment of crisis.

The second function related to the use of smell, that of evoking an 'authentic' first-century BCE Rome, makes use of a number of dichotomies: women and men, rich and poor, urban and rural, civilized and barbarian. Indeed, smell has a classificatory function, and gender, class and civilization are easily portrayed with the rhetoric of smell.<sup>62</sup> Add some clouds of incense wafting by, and a pervasive smell of death, and we are presented with a smellscape that tries to say something about what Roman society actually smelled like and at the same time uses those odours to highlight some of its essential characteristics of identity.

The smellscape of *Rome* could lead one to argue that its makers have indeed conceptualized and understood that they could produce their series in a more 'authentic' way on all levels, from details of production design to more abstract matters.<sup>63</sup> 'Authentic' details, including smells, were intended to give us the 'real Rome'. At the same time, they wanted their audiences to connect with their Romans. It is here that something went wrong: the admirable attempt to create a Rome smellier than previous fictional 'Romes' was derailed by the fictional Romans who obviously find that their world, especially the city of Rome, stinks – an opinion they share with the creators of the series, who, as quoted above, have gathered from recent research that Rome did indeed smell bad.<sup>64</sup> They probably could not imagine that Romans reacted to the stench of their environment

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in a different way from modern Western individuals.<sup>65</sup> In fact, it is somewhat pointless to stress the intense olfactory experience of the ancient world (and it is not too difficult to imagine what cesspits, animal dung, smoke, unwashed clothes and rotting teeth contributed to the smellscape – *Rome* could definitely have pushed the boundaries quite a bit further in this respect)<sup>66</sup> without asking how the Romans themselves would have experienced this. There certainly is a strong case to be made that most of the town-dwelling Romans were impervious to the stench of the Roman city – it was their accustomed smellscape – and might have thought the countryside rather pungent.<sup>67</sup>

So, *Rome* was tying into the general trend of writing about the senses in the past in order to get closer to ‘the people we are studying or watching’ and create historical empathy. Olfactory experiences are a forceful way of doing this and have been put to good use in the series. However, the characters in the series are not Romans that we meet at close range, but modern men and women dressed up as Romans. In *Rome*, othering takes place in terms of context only: the characters are like you and me, but the *context* of the lives of these characters is sprinkled with a high dose of ‘authenticity’ to meet its viewers need for ‘reality.’ As such, the audience both has its cake and eats it too – and helped to make *Rome* a very successful series indeed. The viewer is seduced to feel empathy with characters who do not feel, behave or speak like ancient Romans, or even share their experience of smell.

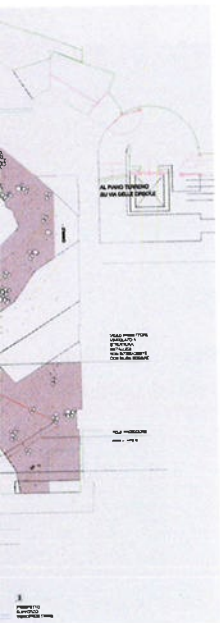
The series was designed to make money, therefore historical empathy was required and making the Romans not too different from modern viewers delivered this historical (or essentially unhistorical) empathy. However, if the characters in the series had reacted to the odours in their environment in a very different, and supposedly historically realistic, manner, this might have made them even more, and certainly not less, interesting to the audience. Exploring the ancient notions of foul and fragrant could have seduced the viewer, in an unobtrusive way, into thinking ‘more deeply about the subject’ of differences, similarities and parallels, continuity and discontinuity. Then, it would have ‘done the job’, to paraphrase Tristram Hunt.

In my opinion, to introduce sensory experience into the presentation of history in order to evoke empathy is an effective strategy, but it will only deliver the results hoped for by historians and educators if the senses and the response to those senses are themselves approached from a historical perspective, and not used to equate, in a beguilingly facile manner, individuals from the past with our modern selves.

### Notes

- \* I would like to thank the anonymous reviewers whose questions made me rethink much of my argument, and Frits Naerebout for his criticism and advice.
1. Misrepresenting D. Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985) – as is commonly done (and which Lowenthal would be the first to appreciate).
  2. See the critical comments by H. S. Versnel, *Coping with the Gods: Wayward Reading in Greek Theology* (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 11–13.

3. The most frequently quoted definition of 'history' in Dutch historiography is by Johan Huizinga: 'de geestelijke vorm, waarin een cultuur zich rekenschap geeft van haar verleden'; J. Huizinga, *Verzamelde werken*, vol. 7 (Haarlem: Tjeenk Willink, 1950), 102: 'the intellectual form in which a civilization renders account of its past to itself'. Cf., 100-1: 'for every cultural subgroup what historical questions are being asked depends on what things that subgroup considers to be relevant'.
4. S. Brooks, 'Historical Empathy as Perspective Recognition and Care in One Secondary Social Studies Classroom', *Theory & Research in Social Education* 39 (2011): 166-7; D. Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country - Revisited* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015): '[Lowenthal] shows how nostalgia and heritage now pervade every facet of public and popular culture. History embraces nature and the cosmos as well as humanity. The past is seen and touched and tasted and *smelt* [my emphasis] as well as heard and read about. Empathy, re-enactment, memory and commemoration overwhelm traditional history. A unified past once certified by experts and reliant on written texts has become a fragmented, contested history forged by us all' (from the publisher's blurb).
5. J. D. Stoddard, 'Film as a "Thoughtful" Medium for Teaching History', *Learning, Media and Technology* 37, no. 3 (2012): 271-88.
6. S. K. Sweeney, P. Newbil, T. Ogle and K. Terry, 'Using Augmented Reality and Virtual Environments in Historic Places to Scaffold Historical Empathy', *TechTrends* 62 (2018): 116.
7. J. Pereira da Silva, 'Uma máquina do tempo movida à imaginação: RPG e empatia histórica no ensino de história' ('The machinery of time moved to imagination: RPG and empathy in historic history of education'), *Anttteses* 7, no. 14 (2014): 541-2, English abstract (RPG = role-playing games). Brooks, 'Historical Empathy as Perspective Recognition', 168.
8. R. Boddice, 'The affective turn: historicizing the emotions', in *Psychology and History: Interdisciplinary Explorations*, ed. C. Tileagă and Jovan Byford (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 147-65; H. Hunter-Crawley, 'Classical archaeology and the senses: a paradigmatic shift?', in *The Routledge Handbook of Sensory Archaeology*, ed. R. Skeates and J. Day (Abingdon: Routledge, 2020), 434-50.
9. K. C. Barton and L. S. Levstik, *Teaching History for the Common Good* (Mahwah, NJ: Routledge, 2004), 7.
10. The Covid-19 pandemic of 2020 brought smell and taste to general attention. One of the symptoms of an infection by this particular corona virus is the loss of smell and taste, temporarily or more permanently. This raised awareness of how essential smell and taste are to human quality of life; see S. M. A. Elkholi, M. K. Abdelwahab and M. Abdelhafeez, 'Impact of the smell loss on the quality of life and adopted coping strategies in COVID-19 patients', *European Archives of Oto-Rhino-Laryngology*, 19 January 2021, <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s00405-020-06575-7>. The recent study by R. Dunn and M. Sanchez, *Delicious: The Evolution of Flavor and How It Made Us Human* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2021), argues that smell and taste are central to our humanity. Cf. P. A. Moore, *The Hidden Power of Smell: How Chemicals Influence Our Lives and Behavior* (Cham: Springer International Publishing Switzerland, 2016).
11. N. Morley, 'Urban smells and Roman noses', in *Smell and the Ancient Senses*, ed. M. Bradley (Abingdon: Routledge, 2015): 110-19, notes the descriptive nature of much writing on smells and smelling in the ancient world (and the distortions that are caused by an insufficiently critical reading of the sources) and states 'that what we really need is an olfactory history of the Roman city that is comparable to the sophisticated studies of Roman visual culture that have appeared in recent years' (112). Six years on, his comments are still as valid as when first published.
12. Brooks, 'Historical Empathy as Perspective Recognition', 168. This is very much what psychologists describe as cognitive empathy, and does not include affective or emotional



Milan Roman Theatre:  
 esy of the author, Ettore



- empathy. See the definition of empathy by F. B. M. de Waal, 'Putting the Altruism Back into Altruism: The Evolution of Empathy', *Annual Review of Psychology* 59 (2008): 279–300: 'the capacity to (a) be affected by and share the emotional state of another, (b) assess the reasons for the other's state, and (c) identify with the other, adopting his or her perspective' (281).
13. R. S. Herz, 'The Role of Odor-Evoked Memory in Psychological and Physiological Health', *Brain Sciences* 6, no. 3 (2016), <https://www.mdpi.com/2076-3425/6/3/22>; R. S. Herz, J. Eliassen, S. Beland and T. Souza, 'Neuroimaging Evidence for the Emotional Potency of Odor-evoked Memory', *Neuropsychologia* 42 (2004): 371–8; G. M. Zucco, R. S. Herz and B. Schaal (eds), *Olfactory Cognition: From Perception and Memory to Environmental Odours and Neuroscience* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2012). See also the introduction to this volume.
  14. C. Bembibre and M. Strlič, 'Smell of Heritage: A Framework for the Identification, Analysis and Archival of Historic Odours', *Heritage Science* 5 (2015). <https://heritagesciencejournal.springeropen.com/articles/10.1186/s40494-016-0114-1>.
  15. Bembibre and Strlič, 'Smell of Heritage'; W. Zhou and D. Chen, 'Sociochemosensory and Emotional Functions: Behavioral Evidence for Shared Mechanisms', *Psychological Science* 20 (2009): 1118–24.
  16. D. Fjellestad, 'Towards an aesthetics of smell, or, the foul and the fragrant in contemporary literature', *CAUCE, Revista de Filología y su Didáctica* 24 (2001): 637–51, quote: 650.
  17. Bembibre and Strlič, 'Smell of Heritage'.
  18. M. Spinella, 'A Relationship between Smell Identification and Empathy', *International Journal of Neuroscience* 112 (2002): 605–12, quote: 610.
  19. M. Bradley, 'Art and the Senses: The Artistry of Bodies, Stages and Cities in the Greco-Roman World', in *A Cultural History of the Senses in Antiquity, 500 BC–500 AD*, ed. J. Toner (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014), 183–208, 202–4; M. Bradley, 'Introduction: Smell and the Ancient Senses', in *Smell and the Ancient Senses*, ed. M. Bradley (New York: Routledge, 2015), 1–16, 1.
  20. See the chapter by Martina Treu in this volume.
  21. An excellent overview with further references: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Smell-O-Vision>. See also Mark Bradley's Envoi at the end of the book.
  22. See, for instance, attempts to 'transmit' odours (not actual transmission, as we are dealing here with molecules instead of waves) on smartphones: <https://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2014/06/now-available-on-the-web-smells/>; Nicola Twilley, 'Will Smell Ever Come to Smartphones?', *New Yorker*, 27 April 2016, <https://www.newyorker.com/tech/annals-of-technology/is-digital-smell-doomed>. In video games, visual approaches have been taken, such as representing smell by providing 'colour filters' on the screen during particular actions, but 'scent domes' and 'nosephones' have also been tried. See, for example, S. Niedenthal, 'Skin Games: Fragrant Play, Scented Media and the Stench of Digital Games', *Eludamos: Journal for Computer Game Culture* 6 (2012): 11–12; J. K. Olofsson et al., 'Beyond Smell-O-Vision: Possibilities for Smell-Based Digital Media', *Simulation & Gaming* 48 (2017): 455–79. P. Pelosi, *On the Scent: A Journey Through the Science of Smell* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 235–48: 'Digital Olfaction: Detecting and Reproducing Smells'.
  23. N. Levent and A. Pacual-Leone (eds), *The Multisensory Museum: Cross-Disciplinary Perspectives on Touch, Sound, Smell, Memory, and Space* (Langam, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014). In fact, open-air museums with re-enactors ploughing their field, thatching their roof or baking cakes at their open fire are most successful in this respect, but usually go unmentioned.
  24. S. Jiaying, 'An Olfactory Cinema: Smelling Perfume', *Acta Univ. Sapientiae, Film and Media Studies* 8 (2014): 113–27, discusses an example of the moving image (Tom Tykwer's movie *Perfume*, 2016) that evokes scent and smelling at every turn, without having recourse to actual odours.
  25. A. Arzi et al., 'Mirror, Mirror on the Wall: The Influence of Visual Feedback on the Perception of Smell', *Journal of Experimental Psychology* 144 (2015): 1905–10.
  26. M. Iacobini, 'Imitation and the Perception of Smell', *Journal of Experimental Psychology* 139 (2009): 653–70.
  27. M. S. Cyrino, 'Introduction', in *Smell and the Ancient Senses* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2015), 1–16, 1.
  28. J. de Groot, 'Empathy and the Perception of Smell', *Journal of Experimental Psychology* 139 (2009): 391–413.
  29. T. Hunt, 'Reality, Illusion and the Perception of Smell', *Journal of Social Psychology* 144 (2004): 1905–10.
  30. J. Paul, 'Working with Smell: A Strategy for Distinguishing Helpfulness from Trouble', in *Smell and the Ancient Senses*, ed. L. H. Bradley (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014), 183–208, 202–4; M. Bradley, 'Introduction: Smell and the Ancient Senses', in *Smell and the Ancient Senses*, ed. M. Bradley (New York: Routledge, 2015), 1–16, 1.
  31. K. Milnor, 'What I See, I Smell: A Strategy for Distinguishing Helpfulness from Trouble', in *Smell and the Ancient Senses*, ed. L. H. Bradley (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014), 183–208, 202–4; M. Bradley, 'Introduction: Smell and the Ancient Senses', in *Smell and the Ancient Senses*, ed. M. Bradley (New York: Routledge, 2015), 1–16, 1.
  32. D. Winner, 'A Blow to the Nose: The Palatial than the Real: Returning the City to the People', *Journal of Experimental Psychology* 139 (2009): 653–70.
  33. <https://www.denofgame.com/2014/06/now-available-on-the-web-smells/>
  34. See, for instance, C. Bembibre and M. Strlič, 'Smell of Heritage', *Heritage Science* 5 (2015). <https://heritagesciencejournal.springeropen.com/articles/10.1186/s40494-016-0114-1>.
  35. Season 2, Episode 3
  36. Season 2, Episode 1
  37. Season 1, Episode 9
  38. Season 2, Episode 6
  39. Season 2, Episode 3
  40. Season 2, Episode 7
  41. Season 1, Episode 4
  42. Season 1, Episode 8

25. A. Arzi et al., 'Mirror Sniffing: Humans Mimic Olfactory Sampling Behavior', *Chemical Senses* 39 (2014): 277–81. More generally on mimicry, see B. J. Calvo-Merino et al., 'Seeing or Doing? Influence of Visual and Motor Familiarity in Action Observation', *Current Biology* 16 (2006): 1905–10.
26. M. Iacobini, 'Imitation, Empathy, and Mirror Neurons', *Annual Review of Psychology* 60 (2009): 653–70.
27. M. S. Cyrino, 'Introduction', in *Rome Season One: History Makes Television*, ed. M. S. Cyrino (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2008), 3.
28. J. de Groot, 'Empathy and enfranchisement: Popular histories', *Rethinking History* 10 (2006): 391–413.
29. T. Hunt, 'Reality, Identity and Empathy: The Changing Face of Social History Television', *Journal of Social History* 39 (2006): 843–58, quote: 843.
30. J. Paul, 'Working with Film: Theories and Methodologies', in *A Companion to Classical Receptions*, ed. L. Hardwick and C. Stray (London: Blackwell Publishing, 2011), 303–14. Paul distinguishes helpfully between a film or series as reception or as an illustrative tool. In the latter case, all kinds of problems appear; for instance, smells are employed as a rhetorical strategy and can be studied as such – to ask whether these smells are also 'real' is asking for trouble. But *Rome*, when imagining an ancient smellscape, does not do so for narrative purposes only, but also to inform about the past. So questions about historicity cannot really be avoided. Regarding the issue of authenticity in general, see F. G. Naerebout "Nice dance! But is it authentic?" What actually is this authenticity that everybody is going on about?, in *Dance as Intangible Heritage: Proceedings of the 16th International Conference on Dance Research, Corfu, 2002*, ed. A. Raftis (Athens: Dora Stratou/IOFA, 2002), 125–38.
31. K. Milnor, 'What I Learned as a Historical Consultant for *Rome*', in *Rome, Season One: History Makes Television*, ed. M. S. Cyrino (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2008), 42–8. Also, without heeding Milnor's warnings, it is quite obvious that in script and direction – as opposed to design – we are returned to the clichés of a typical Hollywood or sword-and-sandal Rome. Cf. F. G. Naerebout, "'This film is not meant to make any sort of political statement". Oudheidfilm, beeldvorming en ideologie', *Leidschrift. Historisch Tijdschrift* 24, no. 3 (2009): 51–65, and F. G. Naerebout, 'Gedroomd Rome', *Lampas. Tijdschrift voor Nederlandse classici* 40 (2007): 361–70.
32. D. Winner, 'A Blow to the Temples: Hollywood's Ancient Rome – Bolder, Nobler and More Palatial than the Real Republic – is Scorned by Historians. But a Television Drama is Returning the City to its Rightful Squalor', *Financial Times*, 29 January 2005 (Weekend Magazine, 34), <https://search.proquest.com/docview/249650985>.
33. <https://www.denofgeek.com/tv/rome-long-road-original-hbo-epic/>.
34. See, for instance, C. Classen, D. Howes and A. Synott, *Aroma: The Cultural History of Smell* (London: Routledge, 1994), 162–9.
35. Season 2, Episode 3, 7 minutes.
36. Season 2, Episode 10, 52 minutes.
37. Season 1, Episode 9, 10 minutes.
38. Season 2, Episode 6, 54 minutes.
39. Season 2, Episode 3, 17 minutes.
40. Season 2, Episode 7, 52 minutes.
41. Season 1, Episode 4, 17 minutes.
42. Season 1, Episode 8, 5 minutes.

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43. Season 2, Episode 2, 6–7 minutes (and many other occasions).
44. Season 1, Episode 12, 4–5 minutes.
45. On 'othering' smell and its links with 'orientalism', see Savani and Guédon in this volume.
46. Season 1, Episode 5, 13–14 minutes.
47. Cyrino, 'Introduction', 6; Classen, Howes and Synnott, *Aroma*, 162–9.
48. Season 1, Episode 9, 13 minutes.
49. Season 1, Episode 1, 31 minutes.
50. Season 1, Episode 3, 7 minutes.
51. Season 2, Episode 3, 13 minutes.
52. Season 2, Episode 6, 40 minutes.
53. Season 2, Episode 4, 10 minutes.
54. Season 1, Episode 10, 34 minutes; Season 1, Episode 12, 31 minutes.
55. Season 1, Episode 5, 33 minutes.
56. Season 1, Episode 7, 32 minutes.
57. Season 2, Episode 5, 56 minutes.
58. Season 2, Episode 6, 19 minutes.
59. Season 1, Episode 4, 18 minutes.
60. Season 1, Episode 8, 28–9 minutes.
61. Season 1, Episode 8, 30 minutes.
62. M. M. Smith, *Sensory History* (Oxford: Berg, 2007), 59, 65–74.
63. Paul, 'Working with Film', 303–14. See comments in note 30, above.
64. On the urban pollution in Rome, see P. Davies 'Pollution, propriety and urbanism in Republican Rome', in *Rome, Pollution, and Propriety: Dirt, Disease, and Hygiene in the Eternal City from Antiquity to Modernity*, British School at Rome Studies, ed. M. Bradley (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 67–80.
65. Milnor, 'What I Learned as a Historical Consultant for Rome', 48, argues that for the makers of Rome, authenticity is in the impressive details, but 'they couldn't conceptualize the extent to which the Romans were really different, not extravagantly but everyday different, different in how they smelled, the way they walked, why they laughed [. . .]'. True enough, but she uses 'how they smelled' probably in the sense of what odours they emitted, but also, and more importantly, we should understand it as 'how their sense of smell operated'.
66. C. Classen, 'The Aromas of Antiquity', in *Aroma: The Cultural History of Smell*, ed. C. Classen, D. Howes and A. Synnott (London: Routledge 1994), 13–50. Very complete, but descriptive and uncritical, cf. note 11 above.
67. Morley, 'Urban smells and Roman noses', 116–19.

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