

## Teaching olfaction at the time of the 'sensual turn'. The case of Pierre Bénard

**Sandra Cadiou**

Sciences of education and formation, UCO Niort, France. Université catholique de l'Ouest de Niort France.

---

### **Abstract**

*Teaching olfaction is changing these days as the olfaction professional world. The 'sensual turn' studied by Howes (2003) reveals the regain of interest in this badly loved sense. We focus on teaching olfaction in higher education with the case of Pierre Bénard: a perfumer, an expert in raw materials, an olfactory manager, and a teacher. This case gives an overview of an unknown field: teaching in olfaction and opens a new research field: education sciences in olfaction. We used a semi-directive interview in a clinical orientation and different exchanges in a cooperative methodology to collect new knowledge transmitted in higher education. By his way of considering olfaction, teaching, and art as a unique way to live, the singular course of Pierre Bénard seems symptomatic of this 'sensual turn'.*

**Keywords:** *already there sensory olfactory; teaching in olfaction; sensual turn.*

---

## **1. Introduction**

Higher education establishes privileged links with the professional world by preparing students for the world of work. This is the case for olfaction. This teaching was done on the job and in the family for a long time and now has its schools. The Institut Supérieur International du Parfum, de la Cosmétique et de l'Aromatique alimentaire (ISIPCA) was created in 1970 by Jean-Jacques Guerlain, and other prestigious schools have followed: the Ecole Supérieure du Parfum (ESP), Cinquième Sens, Grasse Institute of Perfumery, Montpellier University, etc., not to mention the professional schools that are integrated into the companies in the sector. They train famous noses, and also professionals in detergent and industrial perfumery.

At the same time, interest in this sense is growing. The creation of the Osmothèque<sup>1</sup>, a memory of odors, and the magazine "Nez<sup>2</sup>" bear witness to this, as does the field of contemporary creation in olfaction (Castel, 2018).

We explore the higher education devoted to olfaction by considering this current interest in odors. While some knowledge persists, other knowledge is emerging. What new knowledge related to olfaction is created? What conceptual tools are used? For this, we look at Pierre Bénard: a perfumer-creator, a specialist in natural raw materials, an olfactory scenographer, and a teacher.

## **2. Theoretical framework**

### **2.1. Olfaction**

Olfaction remains a mysterious field. Interest in this field has increased, particularly following the 2004 Nobel Prize of Linda Buck and Richard Axel (Buck & Axel, 1991), which brought to light further research on this sense, often denigrated because of its animal and sexual connotations.

This work is therefore often physicochemical, but the point of view of the human and social sciences is gaining ground, particularly since the 'sensual turn' (Howes, 2003, p.29) of the 1990s, which marks the interest of anthropology in odors: 'sensory perception is a cultural, as well as a physical, act' (Classen, 2010, p.401).

This research focuses on the cultural variability of olfactory perception, the knowledge and skills of cultures, the place and meaning of odors in everyday life, and their significance

---

<sup>1</sup> The Osmothèque is a perfume conservatory based in Versailles.

<sup>2</sup> The website [auparfum.com](http://auparfum.com), the magazine *Nez* and the publication of books have largely contributed to the popularisation of olfaction. <https://shop.bynez.com/marques/nez/>

(Candau, 2016). Cognitive sciences underline the importance of memory in sensory perception, the first encodings in childhood in cognitive psychology (Schaal *et al.*, 1980; Schaal & Kontar, 1998, Urdapilleta & Dubois, 2003), or sensory categorization processes (Urdapilleta & Dubois, 2003). And we underline an important characteristic of olfaction: its resistance to classifications (Dubois, 2006) and to words, which impacts the teaching of a highly verbal profession.

### **2.2. Olfaction teaching and clinical orientation**

The teaching of olfaction is in this sense an even less well-researched field. Schools are recent, students are few, and companies also train internally. Also, given the financial stakes, discretion is preferred and doors are not easily opened. The sciences of olfaction education are almost nonexistent, some few researches exist in clinical orientation under the hypothesis of the Freudian unconscious.

The case of Marcel (Cadiou, 2021) is the first research in this sense: how does this olfaction trainer in a luxury brand train the saleswomen? In his thesis on the olfactory part of the sensory analysis of wine (2019), Alvarez identifies an already there sensory, a component of the already there, i.e. the latent history of the subject (Combis-Carnus, 2001) which filters the didactic action. And this already there sensory would be common to the teaching of perfumery sales training and the teaching of sommelier training in hotels and restaurants (Cadiou & Alvarez, 2021).

### **2.3. Teaching: between constructed knowledge and knowledge to be constructed**

Teachers of olfaction do not come from the national education system, they generally do not have didactic or pedagogical training and come from the professional world of which they possess the knowledge and know-how. The anatomical-physiological apparatus, the olfactory neuroreceptor system, extraction methods, the composition and facets of odors, etc., are all taught in a more or less stable manner.

Teaching is also a discursive practice of professional know-how. In this sense, with teaching experience, these professionals re-elaborate or construct new knowledge (Vanhule, 2009), that is transmitted.

This meta-professional activity is coupled with a reflexive activity of research-action-creation (Caumon, *et al.* 2016). Here, the knowledge linked to olfaction is also linked to artistic practice: how to construct a perfume, how to smell, and how to take advantage of odorous materials are questions that the aesthetic practice of the professionals has confronted.

### 3. Research questions and issues

How is olfaction taught in higher education? We aim to give an insight into a poorly documented field. The teaching of olfaction is relatively young and uncommon. This varied knowledge: conceptual, technical, know-how... is established for some, sometimes discussed, and for others still to be constructed. What new knowledge is being constructed and transmitted? On the other hand, we are interested in the subjects as actors of knowledge from the educational sciences in a clinical orientation. We dedicate this text to Pierre Bénard, a teacher (among others) in the world of perfumery.

### 4. Methodology

Our clinical approach presents a case. This singularity sheds light on the object taught, particularly on the creation of knowledge in this teacher, in an informative and comprehensive approach, and on the intimate and personal way of considering teaching.

Pierre Bénard did not grow up in Grasse, the land of perfume, but in the South-West. He wanted to go to the Beaux-Arts but decided to study biochemistry and during an internship at the Association Asquali, he discovered the world of olfaction.

This association envisages olfaction in a new way: *"they were the pioneers in seeing odors; it is more the world of odors in a way [...] not perfumistic at all"*. It is part of an approach to cultural development, through the vector of smell, and olfactory mediatization.

The internship turns into six years of training with Asquali and he becomes a professional in the sector. Later on, he teaches at the ISIPCA, the ESP, the University of Montpellier, and the Grasse Institute of Perfumery. He teaches in the schools of the profession but also in art, design, fashion, gastronomy, communication, marketing, and engineering schools. Its teaching is organized both face-to-face and remotely. Pierre Bénard is also interested in olfactory awakening and education. He works in nurseries, kindergartens, and colleges, and addresses more vulnerable groups: ULIS and UAM.<sup>3</sup>

We had several exchanges with Pierre Bénard in various ways. I conducted a semi-structured interview on 14 October 2022, which allowed me to collect the first set of information while letting the speaker follow his train of thought. The extracts are therefore verbatims, proposing a speech, an oral discourse with its syntax twisted by the thread of the subject, bringing out chains of signifiers. In this sense, I am relying on groping speech rather than composed speech.

---

<sup>3</sup> ULIS : Localized school inclusion unit. UAM: UnAccompanied Minors.

On the other hand, we exchanged following this verbatim to collect precise information and, in an afterthought, on martyr texts where Pierre Bénard validates or not the analysis of the comments on the teaching set up by him.

This cooperative methodology seeks to keep transparency in the work of the perfumer and teacher and to give easier access to the world of perfumery and its teaching. This article, therefore, draws on Pierre Bénard's professional, personal, and creative contributions as well as my own, which attempt to think about these from a theoretical perspective in educational sciences and this sensual turn'.

## **5. The case of Pierre Bénard: olfaction teacher**

Pierre Bénard's teaching practice is based on commonly shared knowledge. For example, he starts any training course, whatever the audience, by reflecting on his olfactory system: its anatomical functioning in particular. But we are only interested here in certain innovations in terms of knowledge linked to this teacher.

### **5.1. Olfactory cone**

The representation of odors and perfumes often involves geometry (Cadiou, 2021). In marketing, the perfume is represented by a triangle which is called an olfactory pyramid. It is divided into three parts: top notes, middle notes, and base notes.

Pierre Bénard uses a slightly different schematization: the cone. The three-plane dimension is accentuated, but also a certain movement: seen from above it evokes the drop of water that falls and spreads. The choice of the cone brings the notion of volume, waves, time, and volatility into the perfume, and within its three theoretical times: head, heart, and wake. This conceptual tool further emphasizes the continuity within the diffusing olfactory form and thinks of perfume as an art of space and time.

### **5.2. Systematic of scents© or "chromatic code"©**

There are various types of classifications of scents and perfumes. For example, the first "Classification des Parfums" was produced in 1984 by the French Perfumers' Society and has been reissued several times. Other classifications were created, such as Jean-Noël Jaubert's "Champs des odeurs® ", a method used in olfaction teaching, but also tasting (Dratz, 2001).

Pierre Bénard proposes one: the "Systematic of scents"©, also called "chromatic code"©. It is organized around the origin of the raw materials mentioned and comprises 7 areas: spicy, fruity, floral, herbal, suave, silvan, and animalic. The classification allows us to think in terms of creation by proposing connections between raw materials. Their similarities propose possible replacements while keeping the assemblies specific to a certain classification of perfume: cologne, chypre, fougère, oriental, woody, leathery.

It uses the term area which encompasses both smell and fragrance by uncovering smell/fragrance structure combinations and thus drawing or re-drawing olfactory shapes. The concept of area is of direct professional interest because these combinations offer frameworks and proto-categories for olfactory projects. As an intellectual step, it facilitates the olfactory thinking of (future) professionals.

The work on colors in this classification should also be highlighted. The expression "chromatic code" is also a way of "speaking" about odors by relying on the synesthesia strongly present with the world of odors, the linguistic incapacity to explain odors is replaced by a color/odor equivalence that says something. This equivalence would be based on conventions, also on a choice specific to its author, and it is evocative.

### **5.3. Sandalwood**

Pierre Bénard is also an expert in rare materials, particularly sandalwood. His research work produces knowledge that links material, smell, and perfume. This work is therefore a further step in his work on the systematic of scents. Upstream, Bénard links with sandalwood production.

This work is the result of a collaboration with a company producing high-quality and sustainable Indian and Australian sandalwood.

Pierre Bénard has created a knowledge of the different olfactory interests of the various sandalwoods, according to the species and the part of the trunk: from the heart to the bark. This knowledge is pushed to its creative limits: the formulation of perfumes according to the variety and parts of the various sandalwoods. For example, the sweet and milky side of certain parts and essences forms an interesting combination with gardenia and tuberose.

### **5.4. Olfactory manager**

Pierre Bénard is a perfumer: he creates perfumes, but he is also a manager and olfactory scenographer. He perfumes concerts and streets. This work is technical: creation and development of odorization systems, and artistic: place, volume, intensity, and moment of the smell in a creation.

He developed a work on fluid mechanics which he teaches today. This knowledge concerns the diffusion systems, the technical installations thought in the problematic of air design, that is to say, what is an olfactory space.

It also integrates the basics of olfaction about its communicative and scenographic capacities. It is therefore a field at its dawn, like the olfactory art detached from perfumery (alcoholic intended for the body) which is at its beginning (Froger, 2016; Castel, 2018).

## 6. Discussion

With the case of Pierre Bénard, we can discuss the types of knowledge transmitted: if some are of course always transmitted, others are transformed and some are completely created. This may be due to the evolution of research and knowledge in olfaction, but also of the professional world.

It is true that the case is a singularity and can not be generalized. Pierre Bénard's work touches on various fields: perfumery, expertise in raw materials, mediation, olfactory management, and, of course, teaching. These various facets are at the origin of new knowledge linked to olfaction. His artistic and professional approach nourishes a singular look at this knowledge and transforms it into a desire to live/teach odors that are part of this 'sensual turn' and participate in the contemporary olfactory art scene.

Moreover, this teaching is also a matter for the actors. Sharing-affect-odor would be intimately linked in him, and this psychic braiding would be inclined to set up a transference dynamic privileging the teacher/learner relationship. To the question: does teaching make him happy? he answers "yes, very happy", "because I am made happy [...] by the presence of [...] the feedback".

The methodology used is a mixture of journalism and clinical approach which sought to report, in a spirit of transparency, on the often obscure work of olfaction professionals. This point was close to Pierre Bénard's heart. Here again, this hybrid methodological approach would also be symptomatic of the current position of olfaction. We regret not being able to compare with other practices as they are little or not documented, and we are working on it.

## 7. Conclusion

Research in the teaching of olfaction is a little investigated field. The case of Pierre Bénard gives access to current teaching in higher education: between usual, renewed, and new knowledge. It seems to us symptomatic of the 'sensual turn'. Olfaction is regaining interest and its teaching is opening up new paths crossing the contemporary art scene. His artistic and professional approach nourishes a singular look at this knowledge and transforms it into a desire to live/teach odors that are part of this 'sensual turn' and participate in the contemporary olfactory art scene: *"olfaction is intimately linked to breathing, to the body, to its vital function, to smell is to survive, to live on. In this sense, to smell is to go beyond living"*.

## References

Alvarez, D. (2019). *Enseigner l'analyse sensorielle du vin, ressorts didactiques et déjà-là sensoriel de l'enseignant, études de cas en didactique clinique*. Thèse, UT2J.

- Buck L, Axel R. (1991) « A Novel Multigene Family may Encode Odorant Receptors: a Molecular Basis for Odor Recognition» *Cell*;65:175-87. Consulté à <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/1840504/>
- Cadiou, S. & Alvarez, D. (avril 2021). Sciences de l'éducation et enseignement de l'olfaction: le déjà-là sensoriel, un concept didactique heuristique. Savoir/pouvoir et singularité du sujet. <https://spsujet.hypotheses.org/167>.
- Cadiou, S. (2021, février 19). *Au coeur des aspects économique, esthétique et intime du parfum : Le cas d'un professionnel en vente de parfumerie de luxe*. Le parfum, un matériau pour la création en design. Journée d'étude LARA-SEPPIA, UT2J Toulouse.
- Candau, J. (2016). L'anthropologie des odeurs : Un état des lieux. *Bulletin d'études orientales*, 64, 43-61. DOI : 10.4000/beo.4642
- Castel, M. (2018). *Les Dispositifs olfactifs au musée*. Le Contrepoint.
- Classen, C. (2010). Foundations for an anthropology of the senses. *International Social Science Journal*, 49(153), 401-412. DOI : 10.1111/j.1468-2451.1997.tb00032.x
- Combis-Carnus, M.-F. (2001). *Analyse Didactique du Processus Décisionnel de l'Enseignant d'EPS en Gymnastique*. Toulouse III Paul Sabatier.
- Dratz, M.-T. (2001). The field of odors. Educational interest and application in descriptive sensory analyse. *Annales des Falsifications, de l'Expertise Chimique et Toxicologique* (France).
- Dubois, D ( 2006). « Des catégories d'odorants à la sémantique des odeurs », Terrain [En ligne], 47 | septembre 2006, mis en ligne le 15 septembre 2010, consulté le 19 décembre 2022. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/terrain/4263>; DOI: 10.4000/terrain.4263
- Froger, G. (2016). « L'Art olfactif contemporain ». *Critique d'art*. Actualité internationale de la littérature critique sur l'art contemporain.
- Houssaye, J. (1988). *Le triangle pédagogique* (2ème). Peter Lang. Caumon, C., Houssard, F., & Lecerf, G. (2016). *Recherche action par la création artistique et design*. Editions Publibook.
- Howes, D. (2003). *Sensual relations: Engaging the senses in culture and social theory*. University of Michigan Press/2010.
- Schaal, B. & Kontar, F. (1998) « Médiations olfactives de la socialisation précoce » in Rey-Hulman, D., & Boccara, M. (Éds.). (1998). *Odeurs du monde : Écriture de la nuit*. INALCO : Harmattan ( p. 293-319).
- Schaal, B., Montagner, H., Hertling, E., Bolzoni, D., Moyse, A., & Quichon, R. (1980). Les stimulations olfactives dans les relations entre l'enfant et la mère. *Reproduction Nutrition Développement*, 20(3B), 843-858.
- Urdapilleta, I. & Dubois, D. (2003). Evaluation sensorielle et psychologie cognitive. *Psychologie Française*, 48(4), *Psychologie française*, 2003, Vol.48 (4).
- Vanhule, S. (2009). Savoirs professionnels et construction sociodiscursive de l'agir. *Bulletin VALS-ASLA (Association suisse de linguistique appliquée)*, 90, 167-188.