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Divine Smells: Odorama, Melodrama and the Body in John Waters' *Polyester*

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The comedy *Polyester* (John Waters, 1981) introduced a new cinematic experience. The screenings were accompanied by the Odorama technique in the form of a 'scratch and sniff' card that was handed to viewers in the movie theater. There has yet to be a serious examination of Odorama, which is usually dismissed as nothing more than a gag. This essay shows that Odorama has sophisticated subversive qualities. It confirms scholars' and critics' view that *Polyester* was a turning point in the career of Waters, one of the most important queer filmmakers of all times. The film is frequently seen as his transition from the realm of anarchistic midnight movies to mainstream cinema. This shift was disappointing to many fans, some of whom even considered it betrayal. By contrast, it is argued here that although the film was made by a distinguished auteur, it is also a parody of classic Hollywood melodramas, and playfully adopts the genre's conventions. Unlike Waters' previous films, in *Polyester* the critical ideas are all beneath the surface. It criticizes social norms, middle class values, hypocritical and fraudulent images, 'conventional' families, and gender dichotomies in society and their representations in the cinema. However, this is disguised in a borrowed aesthetic, and expressed through a cunning tactic which some audiences and critics missed entirely.

Polyester, which was released in 1981, is considered by many to be a turning point in the career of its director and writer, the idiosyncratic auteur John Waters. In Waters' previous films such as *Pink Flamingos* (1972), his deliberate violation of good taste is smeared all over the screen, sometimes almost literally, in an explicit attempt to shock his viewers (Hoberman and Rosenbaum 1983: 138). Early films such as *Mondo Trasho* (1969) and *Multiple Maniacs* (1970) consist of a jumble of scenes collated together, with loose plots that unfold randomly. They feature a series of crimes, perversions and anti-social behavior presented in a lighthearted and rebellious manner. Waters has been holding a notorious reputation as 'the pope of trash' (Egan 2011: Xiii, 192, 227): however, during the 1980s it was undermined. The earlier films, from the 1960s–70s, were independent, low budget, and outrageous. *Mondo Trasho* was made for only $2000. *Multiple Maniacs* for $5000. The budget for *Female Trouble* (1974) was $26,000 and for *Desperate Living* (1977) it was $65,000 (Egan 2011: 45, 50). The films from the 1980s onwards were funded by studios and targeted wider audiences. *Polyester* was produced by New Line Cinema and enjoyed a budget of $320,000 plus a couple hundred thousand dollars that financed the manufacturing of the accompanying Odorama cards that were handed to viewers (Egan 2011: 107). *Cry-Baby* (1990) was produced by Imagine Entertainment and distributed by Universal Studios, and its budget was $8 Million. (Egan 2011: 117) The bigger budgets enabled higher production values. The narratives and characters were more developed. Instead of his usual gang of non-professionals who played the leading roles in the early films (marginals and friends from Baltimore, known as 'Dreamlanders'), the later productions featured Hollywood stars. These included Kathleen Turner in *Serial Mom* (1994), Edward Furlong and Christina Ricci in *Pecker* (1998), Melanie Griffith in *Cecil B. Demented* (2000), and Tracey Ullman and Selma Blair in *A Dirty Shame* (2004). The offensiveness of the 'prince of puke' had apparently been tamed. His productions were no longer rated X by the MPAA, and *Hairspray* (1988) was even rated PG. Although the films maintained a level of eccentricity, they are considered mainstream (Kane-Meddock 2012: 205). James Hoberman and Jonathan Rosenbaum, for example, have expressed some disappointment in *Polyester*, claiming it was only slightly edgier than sitcoms on major television networks at the time (1983: 171). Elisa Padilla argues that 'Waters' career has been traditionally understood as a process of domestication or assimilation into the mainstream', and his drive to reach a larger audience was perceived as betraying the exclusivity of cult reception (2000: 1). Walter Metz considers the film to be 'a pivotal moment in the evolution of the underground cinema in the United States' and that it proved that successful transition from midnight movies to a conventional Hollywood product could take place (2003: 157).

Some critics have argued that the historical context of *Polyester*'s release was another possible reason for the shift in Waters' career. According to Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Michael Moon, 1981 was 'the year that many people in and around urban communities in Western Europe and the United States began to register the scope of the threat and reality of AIDS" (1993: 246). Matthew Tinkcom considers *Polyester* to presage the staging of the crisis of family values (2002: 170). Elana Gorfinkel has analyzed the representation of non-mainstream cinema in *Polyester* that includes porn theaters, independent productions, arthouse films, and drive-ins, all of which can be connected in one way or another to Waters' early films. However, 'with the onset of the Reagan era, a different kind of cinema may have been required' (2019).

Polyester indeed taps a different style but never abandons its defiant approach. To a certain extent, Waters willingly gives up his artistic signature to adopt and lampoon the style of another auteur, Douglas Sirk. In a documentary entitled *In Bad Taste* (Yeager 1999), the cinematographer David Insley recalled that when he asked Waters what look he was interested in for *Polyester*, the director told him to watch Sirk's *Written on the Wind* (1956). Waters himself stated in the documentary that Sirk was one of his favorite directors, and that he thought that Sirk's best films dealt with suburban lives, the people locked up in them, and the irony encapsulated in this lifestyle. This observation is shared by Nieves Alberola Crespo and José Javier Juan Checa, who claim that Sirk was at his best when he 'expertly dissects American suburban life from the 1950s with its upper-class conventions, faux formalities and conformity' (2021: 118). The genre that Sirk is most closely identified with is melodrama. The generic conventions of melodrama force Waters to morph from a blunt attack on the 'normative' lifestyle to one that seethes beneath the surface.

Geoffrey Nowell-Smith discusses excess in melodrama and claims that 'the undischarged emotion which cannot be accommodated within the action... is traditionally expressed in the music and... the *mise en scène*' (1987: 73). This time, it is also expressed through smells. In *Polyester* Waters does bring something brand new to the table in a sensory technique known as Odorama. Each admission ticket was attached to a scratch and sniff card whose scents were related to key scenes. At the proper moment, a number flashed in the corner of the screen, signaling to viewers what part of the card to scratch. Odorama was inspired by previous prototypes by other filmmakers, and other methods of adding odors to films such as AromaRama, that was used in the American release of *Behind the Great Wall* (Lizzani 1959) or Smell-O-Vision, that was used in the film *Scent of Mystery* (Cardiff 1960). However, with Odorama, smells, and

the sense of smell, both within the diegesis and in the cinematic viewing experience, are used to expose and convey the films' subversive ideas.

The literature on Odorama shows that it has never been subject to an in-depth analysis. Whether in cinematic studies or more technological works, Odorama is only briefly mentioned as an anecdote. Most scholars seem to dismiss it as just another gag in the film (Banes 2001: 71; Biocca and Delaney 1995: 43,64; DeLahunta 2003: 86; Ghinea and Ademoye 2011: 613; Gorfinkel 2019; Hanich 2009: 299; Khamsi 2009: 513; Krueger 2013: 59; Nakamura 2013: 134; Niedenthal 2012: 108–109; Olofsson et al. 2017: 458; Paterson 2006: 359; Spence 2020: 8–9; Spencer 2006: 169; Spencer 2004: 140; Wells 2000: R172-R173). When Waters himself addressed the issue in interviews, he also tended to underplay Odorama's importance. However, as a popular interviewee, who was frequently invited to talk shows and commentators' panels, Waters usually delivered snappy comebacks and sardonic remarks aiming to amuse, not to educate. His interviewers, and his fan base, would probably not expect him to provide lengthy commentary on cinematic theory. In an anthology of interviews his answers were inconsistent, if not contradictory. He gave different explanations of Odorama to different interviewers on different occasions. At times he described it as a gimmick meant to attract investors. In others he claimed it was a gesture towards B-movies director William Castle, who was famous for his innovative publicity stunts. Sometimes Waters saw Odorama as a practical joke at the viewers' expense. He made fun of people who watch repulsive situations on the screen but still choose to scratch their cards and sniff the smells, even though some were disgusting, for example, skunk spray and flatulent stench (Egan 2011: 74, 87, 107).

One reason why the film has been overlooked is related to the low-brow stigma associated with gimmicks. Sianne Ngai nevertheless argues that this attitude did not prevent condescending critics from being fooled: 'Protected by its own slickness, as a thing whose sheer stupidity cleverly neutralizes the critical feeling it incites, the gimmick defends itself from intellectual curiosity in a way that puts any person seeking to analyze it at a comical disadvantage' (2020: 9). Thus, why would Waters himself, who had no problem dealing with the despised, choose to downplay his own gimmick? One possible explanation is that by preserving its inferiority he was simply confirming his trademark rejection of good taste. 'Gimmicks seem to provoke contempt… mere tools that have a strange way of stealing attention… one that performers "exploit" but in exploiting make their witnesses feel exploited, too' (Ngai 2020: 52). However, the 'irritating' qualities of gimmicks do not appear to be a satisfactory justification for their use in this film. Rather, the olfactory gimmick serves, as Ngai suggests, 'as

affective speech capable of being put to critical or even political uses in a way other negative aesthetic judgments are not' (2020: 17).

As shown below, Waters in fact cleverly used the generic conventions of the melodrama, along with an enhanced phenomenological viewing experience and the representation of the female body in film, to rebel against the dominant social values of that era.

Meet Your Polyester Queen

Polyester starts with an aerial shot of green fields in a suburban neighborhood. The shot is a nod to Sirk's melodramas, for example, *All That Heaven Allows* (1955) in which the view from the height of the church tower presents an ideal image of a peaceful provincial town. The scene is accompanied by a soundtrack in which a cheesy singer touts a kitschy image of the neighborhood. The singer is Tab Hunter, who also stars in the film as Todd Tomorrow, Francine's lover. In the 1950's, Hunter was a successful teen idol and a sex symbol. However, in private life, Hunter was gay, and had to keep his true identity in the closet (Hunter and Muller 2005; see also the documentary *Tab Hunter Confidential* (Schwarz 2015)), just like one of Sirk's most notable leading actors, Rock Hudson. Both Hudson and Hunter had their star image shaped by the same talent agent, Henry Willson (Klinger 1994: 102). Hudson's persona was carefully manufactured. His publicity campaigns included articles and photos which cemented his image as, in Barbara Klinger's words, 'the continued presence of normality in a sea of disintegrating personalities... Through this kind of iconography, wholesome Hudson appeared as a kind of antidote to an overdose of unstable oddballs—drugged, divorced, and uncertain of their identities'. In typical photos he is seen engaged in 'manly' activities, having 'a happy, normal, good time' in settings which represent 'Americana' (1994: 109). *Polyester*'s opening song and images convey the same kind of illusion that negates any hint of the abnormal.

The camera moves into the Fishpaw family's private residence, up the stairs, and into the bedroom. An old TV set in the corner of the room is turned off, and the room is reflected in its screen. This recalls Sirk's use of TV sets to signal the loneliness and misery of the housewives in his films (McNiven 1983: 44–45; Willemen 1991: 277). Bright light shines into the room from the window behind. In the other corner, Francine Fishpaw, the heroine, is standing in front of another window, also bathed in glowing light. Two lamps are also lit on either side of the room. The exaggerated lighting is an articulation of the overstated ironic expressiveness of the film, a typical feature of melodramas.

On the soundtrack, the singer praises Francine, whom he calls 'the polyester queen'. However, the dowdy housewife who appears on screen has nothing royal about her. Francine sits in front of the mirror. Like TV sets, the mirror is also a motif in Sirk's films. It reminds viewers that the characters 'live in a world where privacy is virtually non-existent. The characters are aware of being under scrutiny, so their best protection is to try and take command of the situation by determining their own appearance, if necessary even by deliberately putting on an act' (Willemen 1991: 277). Francine is played by Waters' frequent collaborator, Divine (born Harris Glenn Milstead). Francine's appearance, however, does not match the iconic persona of Divine in earlier films. In *Pink Flamingos* and *Female Trouble*, for example, Divine wears colorful dresses, heavy makeup, has a partly shaved head, and bizarre accessories. Francine, on the other hand, looks like the women in any suburban 1950s neighborhood.

Francine not only looks different, but also acts differently. In this particular scene, she goes through her beauty routine. Unlike *Pink Flamingos*, where Divine wants to be the 'filthiest person in the world', Francine attempts to conform to social dictates and pampers herself. She carefully applies (nonexaggerated) make up and perfume, plucks her eyebrows and nose hair, shaves her armpits, and sprays her body with deodorant. In other words, she gets rid of her bodily emanations. She hides and represses her natural body odors. By doing so she creates a body that is considered by society (and by the 'woman's film' that reflects such values) as more feminine, pretty, and respectable. At the end of the scene, she gets on the scale with a grimace. This reinforces her interest in striving to conform to the ideals of feminine beauty of the time and garnering the approval of others. Derek Kane-Meddock also points out the contrast between *Polyester*'s protagonist Francine Fishpaw and *Pink Flamingos*' protagonist Babs Johnson (a name which the film's narrator describes as an alias that the notorious criminal Divine took on when she is wanted for murder). Francine, he says, 'represses her desires, suffering for the good of her deviant family… [and] seeks to contain the smut that threatens her vision of idyllic home life'. The generic shift requires toning down Divine's excesses, so that she will be able to inhabit the world of family melodrama. Nevertheless, says Kane-Meddock, Waters does not abandon his agenda, and in his version 'the traditional family becomes the very site of perversity… In this case, filth surrounds the maternal figure instead of deriving from it as in *Pink Flamingos*' (2012: 207–208).

The documentary *I am Divine* (Schwartz, 2013) suggests that this was a planned image change, and since Waters had already done Divine as monster, he now wanted to show her as a sympathetic heroine. Other writers have also discussed how Francine diverges from Divine's previous portrait gallery. Sedgwick and Moon claim that

'*Polyester* is the only [Waters] film whose diegesis assumes that Divine's obesity makes her unlovable and powerless rather than magnetically irresistible' (1993: 244). Dan M. Harries, on the other hand, suggests that Francine is only disguised as 'weak' and thus more 'feminine', but clearly as powerful as Divine ever was. He argues that Divine's persona is characterized as a 'strong woman'. One of the main ways to confirm this is to play with the juxtaposition between feminine qualities and her enormous body: 'This, in turn, fosters his subversive parody of what a woman *should* be in terms of size and stature...'. Harries suggests that 'the primary means of achieving this is the "animalization" of Divine's persona, equating Divine with large animals... Divine is reduced to an animalized form, a freak and subversive threat who parodies the social order through a grotesque transformation' (1990: 17). Even though *Polyester* might seem to present a new, gentle Divine, this is merely a façade. Throughout the film, in moments of excessive emotion, she can no longer restrain herself, and is 'jolted back into the "monstrous" Divine', for example, when she aggressively knocks down doors (Harries 1990: 20). Interestingly, Sedgwick and Moon themselves point to Francine's animalization. In fact, they define her as a sort of human-animal hybrid. However, her animalistic features are not the result of her size, but rather her highly developed olfactory abilities, '...a prehensile and almost paranormal receptivity to offensive odor... [she is] darting heavily about her own house... snuffling noisily at bedclothes and the cracks of doors - wriggling uncontrollably... behaving, in short, like any scratch-and-sniffing animal in the world except *Homo sapiens domesticus nuclearus*' (1993: 245).

Clearly, in the world of melodrama, things are never what they seem, since threats to an ideal image are being repressed, hidden and denied. Waters aims to expose this hypocrisy and asks his viewers not to believe their eyes. Instead, the viewers should rely on all their bodily senses. Linda Williams suggests that melodramas, horror and pornography are all 'body genres'. She claims that these genres are considered culturally inferior because in all of them 'the body of the spectator is caught up in an almost involuntary mimicry of the emotion or sensation of the body on the screen along with the fact that the body displayed is female' (Williams 1991: 4). Waters, who enjoys wallowing in the culturally inferior, encourages viewers to use their whole bodies when watching the film to become what Vivian Sobchack (2000) calls 'the cinesthetic subject'. This subverts the normative objective vision which reduces the cinematic sensory experience to a purely visual act of watching. The cinesthetic subject undermines identity and perception theories which prioritize the sense of sight and do not take the whole body into account.

Whoever Smelt It, Dealt It

Throughout *Polyester*, the viewers, along with the heroine Francine, use their sense of smell to discover that something is amiss before observing it with their own eyes. These include the smell of the glue that Francine's daughter inhales to get high, or the gas that her husband passes while they lie in their bed. The flatulent stench perhaps symbolizes their rotten relationship. Melodrama is an excessive cinema that assault the senses. Nowell Smith (1987) and Mulvey (1996) claim that in this genre, aesthetic elements like colors, lighting, composition, or soundtrack inflect meaning and should be read as symbolic. They 'do not just heighten the emotionality of an element of the action: to some extent they substitute for it' (1987: 73). In this special case, the same also applies for smells.

This innovative and amusing form of excess is chosen for its campy qualities. There are many interpretations of 'camp', a term which has been constantly eluding critical definitions (Cleto 1999). One which is particularly useful for the purposes of this discussion, is the definition by Chuck Kleinhans. According to him, camp is 'an ironic and parodic appreciation of an extravagant form that is out of proportion to its content' (1994: 160). The film chooses to exaggerate smell, which films in general do not even bother with, by aggrandizing it. Viewers see a stinky object somewhere in the space that is presented at a distance on the screen but smell it as though it were right under their noses. Kleinhans adds that 'when employed intentionally... [camp] relies for its effect on casual excess, deviant decorum, and libidinal obviousness' (1994: 163), the sort of humor one would expect to find in Waters' filthy works. However, this is not simply a gag for the purpose of evoking crude bodily responses (shock/laugh), but rather has a deeper purpose. Kleinhans notes that 'instead of acquiescing in the ideology of a disposable culture that wants to flush away its social problems, Camp can insist on a determined recycling of political agendas as well as aesthetic diversity' (1994: 171). By refusing to flush away the unpleasant, and instead indulging in its stench, Waters finds another way to expose what melodramas usually avoid facing directly. Thus, the use of Odorama in a parody like *Polyester* is even more effective than in a generic melodrama precisely because of its campy embrace. As Ngai has suggested, comedy 'has a unique way of bringing out the gimmick's aesthetic features in explicit linkage to its status as a practical device' (2020:53).

One key scene captures the height of Francine's suffering. Prior to this, she goes out for a picnic in the woods. While she is away, her daughter's punk boyfriend shows up at the Fishpaw's residence with his friend for Trick-or-treating. Francine's mother does not offer them the desired candies, so they break into the house, trash it, and the situation escalates into a gun fight. Francine's day out ends abruptly after she is being

sprayed by a skunk. At the start of the scene, she returns home to find that her woes have not ceased. As in the Book of Job, 'while he was yet speaking, there came also another'. First, she discovers that her living room is wrecked. Her injured mother scolds her that it is all her fault. She then notices the dead body of her daughter's boyfriend. Before Francine can understand what has happened, a mysterious smell rushes her into the kitchen, where she finds her heartbroken daughter shoving her head into the oven. Viewers had already smelled the cooking gas via Odorama before witnessing it on screen. Francine tries to save her daughter, sobbing and praying God to spare the life of her little girl, when her eyes suddenly light on a suicide letter. Strangely, the signature at the bottom is not her daughter's, but another family member's. The camera quickly tilts up from the letter to reveal that the family's dog has hanged himself. This final blow is an unlikely scenario even in a melodrama and foregrounds the parody in what seems to move into wild absurd humor. Nevertheless, as Nowell-Smith writes, in melodrama '…the 'hysterical' moment of the text can be identified as the point at which the realist representative convention breaks down' (1987: 74).

Francine bursts into tears, gasps agonizing moans which no longer form coherent sentences, and eventually faints. Nowell-Smith draws a parallel between the body of the hysterical patient and the melodramatic body. 'In hysteria, the energy attached to an idea that has been repressed returns converted into a bodily symptom… In the melodrama… a conversion can take place into the body of the text' (1987: 73). Francine faints since she can no longer contain all her emotions. But it is not merely her body that is aching, it is also the cinematic text that reeks.

In a related way, Williams has noted the way excess in culturally inferior genres, including melodrama, is often figured bodily. According to her, these genres share a focus on ecstatic excess, especially through the female body which embodies excessive pleasure, fear, and pain. Waters celebrates this hysterical excess and exaggerates it.

In body genres, the female body becomes a source of sensation mimicked by the spectators' body. The representations are deployed in over-intimate ways to generate close modes of identification between what is on screen and the spectators, who often physically experience the same bodily functions (or production of bodily fluids – tears, sweat, etc.) as the characters in the film. Williams claims that during such experiences the spectator's viewpoint is much more flexible than usual. The viewers' identification is not fixed and moves along the spectrum from feminine to masculine (1991: 4, 8–9). Odorama enhances this experience since it forces the viewers to physically smell what Francine smells. The fact that the female body in the center of this spoof of women's films is Divine's body further undermines gender dichotomies, since Divine is a male actor who portrays a female character.

Similarly, Laura Mulvey argues that sexualized binarism collapses in women's pictures. Referring to classic films such as *Stella Dallas* (Vidor 1937) and *Now, Voyager* (Rapper 1942), she claims that 'these movies were, very often, about performance and therefore necessarily draw attention to the artifice of appearance and the process of its production' (1996: 30–32). In *Polyester*, this is reinforced by the fact that the heroine is played by Divine, a female impersonator. Mulvey mentions that 'female impersonators have, for a long time, made use of the accoutrements of masquerade associated with Hollywood stars'. In an interview which appears as a bonus feature on the British DVD edition of *The Girl Can't Help It* (Tashlin 1956), Waters says that Divine's persona was designed as a twisted takeoff on the persona of the glamor girl and actress Jayne Mansfield. Similarly, Kane-Meddock points out Divine's use of elaborate costuming and makeup in the transformation process for movie roles: 'This, in conjunction with his growing celebrity, made artifice and performance key subtexts for the audience, as sometimes happens with Hollywood stars who have grown too famous to completely inhabit a character' (2012: 207). Waters takes this subversion a step further by completely blurring genders, since the 'female body' that experiences these female phenomena is the body of Divine, who identifies as a male actor in drag, and who was famous for passing as a woman. When Waters mixes traditional roles which are identified with the female stars of the melodramas with attributes that are identified as manly, he complicates and disrupts the feminist theories cited by Williams and Mulvey which criticize the display of the suffering female body as a spectacle for the sadistic male gaze (1991: 6).

However, Judith Butler has identified Waters' sleight of hand and used his films to support her ideas. Butler's pioneering work *Gender Trouble* was named after Waters' film *Female Trouble* (despite the fact that Butler later downplayed the role of drag in the theory of gender performativity). Butler praises Divine's appearance in films such as *Female Trouble* and *Hairspray* that 'implicitly suggests that gender is a kind of persistent impersonation that passes as the real. Her/his performance destabilizes the very distinctions between the natural and the artificial, depth and surface, inner and outer through which discourse about genders almost always operates'. Butler argues that 'laughter in the face of serious categories is indispensable for feminism' and explains that when gender practices are placed in parodic context it brings into relief the performative construction of an original and true sex. Divine's skillful acting raises the question of whether gender is established through the imitation of gender, or a dramatization of the signifying gestures? (2011: xxx-xxxI). Francine Fishpaw is not just another cabaret drag act. This performance is not evaluated as a man who passes as a woman (or a travesty of womanhood, as some critics would say). It is neither just

another film in which a male comedian plays a woman for laughs. Instead, Francine can be defined as a woman played by a drag queen who is played by a man. Unlike in Waters' previous films where Divine remained 'Divine' - the icon, the distinct persona - even when playing characters named Babs Johnson or Dawn Davenport, in this film, for the first time, Divine turns to someone else, hence destabilizing even the discourse about Divine. Furthermore, Kane-Meddock also places such satirical and gender-subversive ideas in a broader context within Waters' filmography. Based on Williams' distinction between extroverted 'posing' which emphasizes artifice and restrained 'passing', he compares Babs Johnson's extravagance in *Pink Flamingos* to *Polyester*'s Francine Fishpaw's subtlety. This leads to a more comprehensive argument about Waters' transitions throughout his career. With time, he claims, 'as gender became a more subtle influence on Waters' work, the exaggeration of generic conventions took on added importance' (2012: 209–211). In the case of *Polyester*, the generic conventions are those of the family melodrama, and one exaggeration does not necessarily come at the expense of the other.

Some may wish to classify the Odorama-technology pioneering film *Polyester* under a different label, such as that coined by Tom Gunning: the 'cinema of attractions'. Sobchack, although critical of Tom Gunning's term, mentions that carnal responses to the cinema tend to be regarded as too crude. Films that collapse the 'proper esthetic distance' between the spectator and the screen are often considered primitive. Their easy thrills, commercial impact, and cultural associations are conflated with other more kinetic forms of amusement such as theme park rides (2000).

The use of smell in theatrical experiences has also often been regarded as simplistic or superfluous, 'merely iconic and illustrative, a weak link in a chain of redundancy across sensory channels that does nothing more than repeat what is already available visually and aurally' (Banes 2001: 68–69). However, as Sally Banes notes, sometimes smell is used for the exact opposite, '*to complement or contrast* with what is happening in the rest of the performance... in this category of our taxonomy, the odor introduces new or even conflicting information' (2001: 70). In melodrama, smell signals the gap between what is presented on the surface and what is indirectly conveyed. Whenever Francine, and *Polyester*'s viewers, sniff a new scent, it is foreshadowing a turn in her life. More often than not, it is a negative twist, that shatters the ideal façade that the all-American housewife works so hard to present to her surroundings and to herself. Francine is in denial about her problems, and therefore she suffers. Throughout the film she becomes disillusioned, mainly due to her sense of smell. The bad smells contradict the pleasant and decent associations that imagery of 1950's suburbia usually provoke and break the delusion.

Smells function in several ways, which might even appear as contradictory. Smell can also be used as a distancing device, which calls attention to itself as an effect, and to the artificiality of the experience. The viewers are aware of the illusion, and the smell undermines, rather than enhances, the realism (Banes 2001: 71). In the case of Odorama there is another layer of complexity since the smells are activated by the user, who is aware and not passive. It is also prompted by Waters' choice to use many unpleasant smells, such as skunk, or dirty shoes. As Julian Hanich has noted 'In order to be experienced as disgusting an object must come overly near and penetrate the intimate area of the senses... the integrity and cleanliness of the body seems threatened by a film' (2009: 295–296). Bad smells are a disturbance, they create discomfort, they alienate the viewers, make them more aware, and enable Waters to convey his critical messages. Hanich notes that 'because sight and sound are the only senses actively called upon... it is much easier to withdraw and hence to avoid serious displeasure'. The instinct is to shake off what is disgusting, 'to get rid of the obtrusively close object that constricts us'. Odorama prevents viewers from following this instinct, immerses them in the disturbing experience, and resists their objection. Hence, Odorama bridges over the opposing effects of alienation and identification. Instead of contradicting they are complementing. The smells are provoking intensified intimacy, and at the same time, especially when the smells are unpleasant, the distancing effect creates a critical viewer who reflects on this intimate experience.

What My Nostrils Knew

When Sobchack (2000) discusses affect and sensory experience while watching a film, she does not refer to cases in which smell is really, physically experienced, as in *Polyester*. But this does not mean that her observations do not apply to Odorama. Sobchack explains that (in almost all films which do not use Odorama or similar technologies) since viewers cannot smell, touch, or taste the figures on the screen that elicit sensual desires, the body 'seeking a sensible object to fulfill this sensual solicitation, will *reverse its direction* to locate its sensual grasp on something more literally accessible. That more literally accessible sensual object is *my own subjective lived body*... I will reflexively and carnally turn toward my own carnal being to touch myself touching, smell myself smelling, taste myself tasting, and, in sum, sense my own sensuality'. It is also worth wondering whether since the body can do this, aren't the scratch-card-produced smells redundant? In a way the cards are, thus turning them into significant excess.

The act of smelling, and not looking, opens Francine's eyes, and enables her to confront her problems, among them: the ungrateful treatment from her family, loveless relationships, dysfunctional kids, low self-image, and constant failure to live the life

she desires. Although she manages to solve many of them, *Polyester*'s finale, as often happens in melodrama, is a pale imitation of a happy ending. Williams claims that each one of the three body genres, and the excessive fantasy or perversion they represent, has its own temporality: the melodrama comes too late, the porn film is right on time, and the horror film is too early (1991: 11). This temporality helps interpret the finale.

Towards the end of the film, Francine's ex-husband and his lover try to murder her. Her children overcome them and kill them. In addition, Francine discovers that her new boyfriend is having an affair with her evil mother, and they plot to take her belongings and admit her to a mental institution. Francine finally realizes the truth, too late. Luckily, however, at the last moment, her best friend Cuddles and her chauffeur drive to the scene, run over her enemies, and save Francine. This ridiculously improbable ending mocks the typical melodramatic endings which sink into artificial and arbitrary solutions (Nowell-Smith 1987: 70, 73). The final sequence exaggerates Williams' concept of the melodramatic temporality of 'too late'. Everything appears to have been resolved. In line with Waters' macabre humor, the 'happy end' is shown on screen as two dead bodies symmetrically and decoratively placed on both sides of the frame. The choice to end the story there, during a temporary moment of relief that only removes the immediate threats, creates the impression of a happy ending. The cheesy theme song returns to dominate the soundtrack, replacing the real sounds of the accident, thus once again sugarcoating the images. One might believe, as Metz put it, 'at the end of *Polyester*, as at the end of Sirk's *All That Heaven Allows*... the middle-class housewife is offered a chance for happiness' (2003: 161). But the characters still face many problems which are simply suspended or repressed. The heroic rescue indeed comes too late. Francine's children have already committed murder. Their father, as nasty as he was, is tragically dead. Their grandmother and Francine's new boyfriend have also lost their lives. Cuddles, Francine's best friend, ran over and killed two people, and will probably face charges. Francine lost everything. Is this truly a happy ending?

Thus, even though Francine deeply inhales the comforting scent of an air freshener that she sprays around her which is supposed to clear the atmosphere and restore peace and happiness, this is only an illusion. Waters emphasizes the unsatisfying phony artificiality of the genre's traditional endings. Francine only deceives herself, while still repressing her troubles and unfulfilled desires. Life, according to Waters, always stinks.

It may be no coincidence that Odorama was used in *Polyester*. Although panned by the critics, Odorama should not be treated as a mere gimmick grafted to the film. If Waters had used Odorama in one of his earlier gross-out films it would have been easier to treat it as no more than an attraction, a cheap shtick. However, *Polyester*, in

its unique and lampooning way, is a melodrama. It adopts the generic formula of films in which many times nothing is as it seems, and excess is repressed by the plot only to burst out through aesthetic choices. Waters uses smells, and the act of smelling, to vitiate social norms, and middle-class values, which he identifies as hypocritical and fraudulent, as mirrored in ‘conventional’ families, and gender dichotomies, in society and in its representation in the cinema.

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Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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