

Unplugged - The Interpreters

Data we collect and use in organization and management studies look like “cold cases”. We want to offer more conversations, interpretations, arguments, even disputes. The Interpreters is a nexus where academics invite colleagues and friends to analyze and discuss freely an argument, raw data, cases, qualitative materials.

Interpreting aesthetic video data

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HOW CAN I KNOW WHAT I SEE UNTIL I HEAR WHAT YOU THINK?

AN INVITATION TO COMMENT ON VIDEO RECORDINGS OF AESTHETIC WORK IN PERFUMERY

Imagine 300 hours of video recordings on an external hard disk. The recordings follow two perfumers as they engage in practices and processes of new scent creation in their studios in Berlin and New York. The data were collected in the context of a larger initiative that set out to explore the nature of aesthetic work and its links to materiality, coordination and innovation¹. Methodologically, the focus on aesthetic work comes with some challenges. How to explore and ‘capture’ the embodied and tacit knowledge, the aesthetic judgement and decision-making, the non-verbal elements and the sensing that it involves: the hidden, unspoken, felt sense, that constitutes (not only) aesthetic work.

At the same time, the organizational setting of perfume making is highly aestheticized; the collection of data in this context an aesthetic practice in itself, including the visual cues of the mood boards, the olfactory impressions of the perfumes, the haptic challenge of the scent’s immateriality, the scientific calculations and ‘cold’ lab setting, the spoken words, the touch and tension of a ‘friendship culture’, the atmosphere and moods of the perfumers as the scent develops or deteriorates, the temporal parallelism and concurrency: all of this needs to be taken into consideration and made sense of. At times, a sensual overload, to say the least.

With the turn to aesthetics in management and organization studies, the interest in sensory ways of knowing has proliferated and with it the use of visual methods (e.g. Bell & Davison, 2013; Warren, 2008 for overview), and video-based methods in particular. We, too, decided to make use of video recordings in addition to our ethnographic observations, field notes, and interviews. In the beginning, we thought of the videos mostly as a ‘back-up’. As others in the field of visual ethnography have argued, videos provide the opportunity to “revisit the field”, to return to the situation under study and rewind the process indefinitely to observe, once again (and this

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1. The two research projects were funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation ‘Wissensduft’ (grant 13DPD6_132215) and ‘New Scents in Action’ (grant 100016_147133). In both projects, Claus Noppeney has been the project leader and generated most of the data. Prior publications include Endrissat and Noppeney (2013); Endrissat, Islam and Noppeney (2016); Islam, Endrissat & Noppeney (2016).

time with greater attention or a different focus!) the unfolding of interactions and dynamics.

Further to compensating our limited cognitive / sensual capacity to pay attention to everything that might be relevant at the same time, we came to understand that video recordings provide another opportunity. The data is extremely rich: multivocal, multilayered, multi-modal. Video-based methods are able to capture image, sound, temporality and movement concurrently, and thus augment textual (interview, field notes) or non-moving visual (observational) data. They provide a 'way into' studying the moving, thinking, and feeling body by making available socio-material interactions, gestural elements, facial expressions, temporal sequences and other elements that are difficult to record in field notes. "As a visual depiction, video encodes the complex aesthetic and embodied relations within practices and interactions, revealing more than words alone. Yet, by recording participant interaction over time, video captures temporally extended, unfolding actions that allow translation into a written narrative" (Toraldò et al. 2017, p. 8). In short: video provides an avenue into the socio-material, embodied and aesthetic aspects of organizing (Gylfe et al. 2017; Toraldò et al. 2018).

The collection of video data per se is not difficult. If the research participants feel comfortable being filmed, the data is only a click away and can quickly add up to large amounts. The researcher's anxiety to miss a crucial moment and her diligence in documenting the process create the challenge of having so much data that one sometimes can't see 'the forest for the trees'. Reflections about the collection of visual data (e.g. Warren, 2009) including, for example, the (performative) effect of different camera angles and camera movements on the findings (Mengis, Nicolini & Gorli, 2018) and wider methodological and philosophical implications of video ethnography have been put forward (e.g. Hassard et al. 2017). However, little is said about *how to analyze and interpret* video or aesthetic data – perhaps because the interpretation involves tacit or embodied knowledge that is difficult to put in words, remaining – at least in part – elusive. Like theory development, the analysis of visual and aesthetic data is likely to involve "an uncodifiable step that relies on the insight and imagination of the researcher (Weick, 1989)" (Langley, 1999, p. 707).

However, existing studies tend to apply standard procedures for analyzing qualitative data, such as conversation analysis. In their study of embodied cognition in strategy research, Gylfe and colleagues (2017) develop a toolkit for analyzing video data that involves three steps: detailing, sequencing, and patterning. The effect of this systematic approach, as in other analytical approaches, is to suggest that there is agreement on what we see in the data. It aims at providing a convincing story, to make a point. It closes the meaning making and leads to one collective reading of it.

This is not what we are aiming at here.

Instead, the Interpreters in this issue is an invitation to comment on four video clips taken from our second project on perfume making. The idea is to fathom the multivocality of the data, to explore its richness by looking at it from different perspectives. It is an exercise in opening up the meaning making process, rather than closing it down. Similar to joint data-analysis workshops in PhD classes or conference sessions, the idea is that hearing what other people see in the data will help to scrutinize and sharpen our own way of seeing it. Weick's classical sensemaking recipe 'How can I know what I think until I hear what you say' is the inspiration. The commentary is also an invitation to explore how we approach video

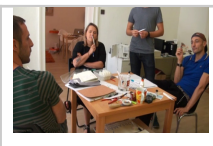
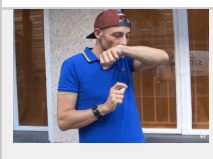
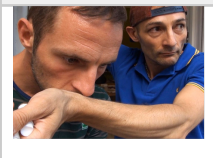

data, to capture the elusive element described above by reflecting on our interpretation process, our own aesthetic work.

THE INTERPRETERS

We have asked three colleagues with expertise in different areas to look at four video clips and provide a short commentary on how they approach the data and make sense of them. The experts are: Davide Ravasi, an organization and management professor who has examined design and designers' work from a cognitive, symbolic and aesthetic perspective; Jeanne Mengis, professor of organizational communication who explores processes of organizing from a communication and practice theoretical perspective; and Viviane Sergi, a management and organization studies professor with a keen interest in process ontology and performativity. These three are no strangers. Because of their expertise, we had asked them to act as experts on our advisory board for the project from which the data is taken. They had kindly agreed to do so and this publication reflects a moment of our ongoing exchange.

THE VIDEO CLIPS

The four short video recordings provide a glimpse of what perfumers do when they create a new scent. We see two perfumers (Christophe Laudamiel and Christoph Hornetz) in their studio in Berlin. It is the 24th July 2015 and throughout the day, they are working on different projects. However, all four clips refer to the same project: a haute perfume with the working title 'melt my heart'. In addition to the two perfumers, we see in clip 1 a flavorist from France who is in Berlin on that day to work on an ongoing project. Because of her expertise, she is invited to join the evaluation of the scent that Christophe Laudamiel is currently leading ('melt my heart'). All four moments represent an evaluative moment: a moment of smelling the scent that is in the making, talking about and exchanging about it. We see the process and its dynamic.

	<p>Clip 1: CL, CH, and the flavorist are sitting around a table inside the studio, evaluating the current version of 'melt my heart' on a blotter (paper strip). The lab assistant is in the background.</p> <p>www.youtube.com/watch?v=qdGZQ2ZbOWQ</p>
	<p>Clip 2: CL outside the studio, smelling a later version of 'melt my heart' on his arm. First alone, then CH joins him.</p> <p>youtu.be/SF1Luth4re0</p>
	<p>Clip 3: Still outside (continued from clip 2). Discussing the scent.</p> <p>youtu.be/jYB_1EuXHQ</p>
	<p>Clip 4: CL in the studio alone, talking about the latest version of 'melt my heart'.</p> <p>youtu.be/1RDqAgo9JN8</p>

What follows are the commentaries that Davide, Jeanne, and Viviane provided.

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INTERPRETIVE QUALITATIVE DATA AS AN ACT OF SENSEMAKING

Interpreting qualitative data is never easy, even when you have collected them yourself. Interpreting fragments of data, collected by someone else, as part of someone else's study – even if supported by video clips – is particularly difficult.

Interpretative qualitative data is really a search for patterns – patterns that help us bring order into the chaotic flow of observations and experiences that were part of our study; patterns that help us “make sense” of them. According to Weick (1995), we do so by connecting cues (our observations, often in the form of textual data) and frames (the mental categories that are part of our research question and/or the theories we use to guide interpretation). Or by connecting multiple cues to build new frames. This is, in essence, how we “make sense”; this is how we construct meaning.

In qualitative research, meaning is constructed – some may say “imposed” upon the data (Astley, 1985) – as an interpreter envisions connection between them (similarities, differences, sequences, implied causal connections, etc.) or between them and a research question. Working with a handful of brief excerpts, however, makes it less likely for the interpreter to be exposed to “connectable” cues that may support grounded theorizing of a phenomenon. How one brackets the flow of data, what one pays attention to, and how it is framed, therefore, likely reflect one's own interests or past research.

As I read the transcripts I received – I always prefer to start with the text – then, my attention was caught by the difficulties of expressing and articulating aesthetic knowledge (see Ewenstein & Whyte, 2007), which was the subject of a study that Ileana Stigliani, as the principal investigator, and I conducted a few years ago, but managed to publish only recently (Stigliani & Ravasi, forthcoming). Our ethnographic study helped us identify practices, such as cross-mode shifting or the development of an “aesthetic discourse”, that industrial designers use to overcome this difficulty when working in team. In my view, the excerpt I received offered direct insight into micro-level interactions between a team of perfume makers sharing their aesthetic experiences as they “designed” a scent aimed at evoking a particular set of meanings and emotional responses (see Islam, Endrissat & Noppeney, 2016).

These excerpts first reminded me of the subjectivity of aesthetic experience, whereby the same stimulus (in this case, a particular fragrance) may evoke different associations in different people. The two perfume makers, for instance, seemed to disagree on what caramel smelled like – and turn to real world examples to illustrate (“...those caramel bonbons, they are like square, they are like brown, and they are very chewy”). While they seemed to agree on what coconut smelled like, they disagreed about whether they could smell it at all in the fragrance. Some associations were quite personal and/or difficult to grasp for others – possibly recalling multiple sensorial perceptions, as reflected also in the use of synesthetic expressions, such as “I smell hot metal”. Past research suggests that metaphorical language can be used to compensate for the “muteness” (Taylor, 2002) of aesthetic experiences (Strati, 2008). These excerpts point to how the subjectivity of aesthetic experiences makes it difficult to communicate them, even using metaphorical language.

At the same time, it seemed that the process unfolded within a web of conventional (cultural?) associations between fragrances, the objects they alluded to, and the uses and occasions of use (perhaps even users)

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of these objects. For instance, one perfume maker rules out a fragrance (rosemary) on the account that 'that is not a fragrance to wear'. While the explanation remains implicit, one may speculate that the association between rosemary and cooking may make this fragrance inappropriate to other spheres of life (a night out? A date? A Valentine gift?) by evoking associations unwanted in those circumstances. At the same time, makers seemed to rely on conventional associations between objects and emotions to stimulate emotional responses (e.g. calm) through mental associations triggered by aesthetic stimulation (the smell of chamomile). I am not a chemist, but I am not sure it is possible for the mere smell of chamomile to have the neurological effect of the infusion...

My attention was also caught by how the conversation constantly shifted back and forth from evocative and metaphorical language of aesthetics to the language of chemistry, precision, and objectivity – whereby fragrances were described in terms of precise proportions, percentages of chemical ingredients (e.g. "methylate"), etc. The second excerpts revealed the inability to perfectly align the two dimensions – the chemical-analytical and the aesthetic-associative one – as it was not always clear to the makers what part of the formula caused what aesthetic sensation. The ambiguous connections between these two dimensions were also manifested, in the third excerpt, in the surprise of the makers at the unexpected results of changes in the formula. This observation highlights the limited predictability of changes in chemical compositions on the aesthetic outcome of the process.

I found this duality fascinating. It triggered reflections about whether the shifts I observed were unique to this setting, or whether one could theorize the particular characteristics of the technological processes through which scents are developed that induce these exchanges. Could it be, for instance, that they reflect a process where the output (the fragrance) is experienced aesthetically, but the input (the ingredients and their proportions) are determined and 'designed' analytically? Can we find other processes that are similar in this respect? Electronic music? Molecular cuisine? Fashion apparel? I know too little about these settings to speculate, but this seems an interesting avenue for future studies.

More generally, as I progressed through the interactions, I began wondering: Are they really listening to one another? Many expressions of aesthetic experiences and mental associations, are only partially responded to by the other perfume maker – and perhaps they are not even intended to be responded to. As if they were rather a verbalization of an internal mental process, of a train of thought stimulated by the scents. As if hearing their own voices helped makers reflect on their experiences. Which made me wonder about how valuable was the interaction at all. Ileana and I showed how material practices help designers "think together" as they develop new ideas (Stigliani & Ravasi, 2012). As I read through the excerpts, I asked myself how collective the process really was. To what extent were the makers involved really collaborating, as opposed to being engaged in two, only occasionally intersecting, monologues?

This "messiness" was also reflected in the apparent absence of a linear path and overall vision, the makers' focus on individual aromas, and the apparent absence of tracking of who liked what ("I said there is a coconut chocolate thing in there that I don't like. That's already what I said last time"), which was particularly manifest in the second excerpt. Whether the process followed a clear plan was difficult to discern. Immediate visceral, aesthetic responses seemed to matter more than the focal task. It is possible, however, that this impression reflects the fragmentary nature of the available data, rather than of the process itself. Having the opportunity

to follow interactions as they unfolded throughout the process may reveal patterns that otherwise remain undetectable.

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AESTHETIC WORK: WHEN SENSING IS NOT THE CONVERSE OF, BUT CONVERSES WITH LANGUAGE

“The smell of a sweating horse meant just as much to him as the tender green bouquet of a bursting rosebud, the acrid stench of a bug was no less worthy than the aroma rising from a larded veal roast in an aristocrat’s kitchen. He devoured everything, everything, sucking it up into him. But there were no aesthetic principles governing the olfactory kitchen of his imagination, where he was forever synthesizing and concocting new aromatic combinations. He fashioned grotesqueries, only to destroy them again immediately, like a child playing with blocks-inventive and destructive, with no apparent norms for his creativity.” (Süskind, 1986)

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The one cultural reference that has shaped most our imaginary of (the work of) a perfumer is Patrick Süskind’s novel “Perfume. The story of a murderer”. The young perfumer Grenouille is depicted as a Wunderkind, born with an extraordinary ability of smell, defiant of usual categorizations of good and bad odor, inquisitive and creative, a passionate, obsessive worker, a maniac, an introvert, a dangerous genius.

I am given four video recordings that show moments when two to three perfumers smell different versions of the perfume in development, melt my heart, first on scent strips, then on their forearms. In between the repeated, prolonged sniffs, the perfumers engage in conversation, share how they like the perfume, try to define the smell, and debate in which direction to develop further the perfume and what essences to change. I view the recordings again and again.

What surprises me most about the recordings is the continuous verbal interaction, the entrustment in the word. In the case of the rather autistic Grenouille, his extraordinary capability of smell was clearly not coupled with the ability to verbalize his smelling experiences (Ádám, 2008). Here instead, the work of the perfumers is not the one of introverts, loner geniuses, but rather does the smelling, the continuous concocting of new versions of the perfume, and the ongoing conversations about the perfume tightly work together. The strong presence of verbal interaction surprises me also as it seems to contrast the general conception that language is ill-suited to match the richness and variety of smell. While our nose can recognize approximately 400,000 smells, there is an “inexpressibility, unutterability of the experience of smelling” (Vroon, 2005: 139, in: Ádám, 2008: 95). More generally, a holistic sensory, aesthetic experience – such as an intense smell – is faced with the problem of “aesthetic muteness” as it is challenging to translate the experience into the mainly “discursive signal system of language” and requires to engage into a “movement from experience into representation (...), from aesthetic to intellectual” (Taylor, 2002: 823-824).

Current organizational research aiming to foreground the sensory (Pink, 2015), the aesthetic (Strati, 1999; Taylor, 2002, Warren, 2012), the non- or more-than-representational (Beyes & Steyaert, 2012; Lorimer, 2010; Thrift, 2008) aspects of organizing, suggests that verbal language is badly equipped to translate an aesthetic, sensory and embodied experience. Instead, we should build on “a language operating in visual, aural, verbal, temporal, and even (through synesthetic association) tactile domains” (Mac Dougall, 2005: 116). Sensory experiences such as smell are soaked with emotional and historical elements. For example, the smell of a homemade bread can bring the past of a happy childhood to the present (cp. Proust, 1988/1913-1927) as well as the associated sense of

protection, and this is not a mere repetition of the experience, but a transformation. It is suggested that this multi-dimensionality and openness of the sensory experience is not reducible to language (Pink, 2015:43, referring to Seremetakis, 1994: 6). In an organizational context, the “aesthetic knowledge” that a consultant enacts, for example, when performing a strategy presentation, staging a certain style of consultant talk and a sense of confidence, can hardly be articulated verbally and necessarily goes “beyond words” (Ewenstein & Whyte, 2007: 689).

In view of this background and the discussed limits of verbal language for expressing the sensory, embodied, aesthetic and affective, I ask myself why do the perfumers rely so extensively on verbal interaction for the development of a perfume? How do they interact and what is achieved in conversation?

CONSTITUTING THE PERFUME IN ITS OPENNESS AND MULTIPLICITY

Consider the initial scene of the first video recording I was given as I have synthetically transcribed it in line with the tradition of sensory ethnography (O’Dell & Willim, 2015), which aims to be attentive not only to verbal talk, but also to bodies, objects and non-verbal forms of action and interaction².

All three perfumers sit around a wooden table. Laudamiel – the creator of the perfume - is given a perfumed scent strip by his assistant and hands it over to Marlene and then to Christoph. They start venting their strips in front of their nose and casually engage in small talk. After a short while, with all smelling while talking, Christoph takes the scent strip closer to his nose and directly addresses Laudamiel in a loud voice: “You know what, this is much better!”

2. We reproduce here a shortened version of Jeanne’s transcript.



Figure 1. Perfumers (with creator of the perfume on the right) smelling a version of the perfume in conversation (Author’s sketch)

In the course of this interaction (video clip 1), the perfumers are far from agreeing what is dominant in an odor; for one it is coconut, for another it is caramel, and for a third it is hot iron. At the same time, however, they all will concur in their general judgment about the perfume and that Laudamiel is “very close” to a great perfume, which Marlene says to “adore”.

We can thus observe that in conversation, the perfumers establish what the perfume “is” and socialize the emotional reaction to and affective judgment of the perfume. Part of this work is to identify the dominant note of the perfume. This practice is peculiar as perfumers, contrary to wine tasters for example, exactly know the chemical composition of the perfume. In the scene above, Christoph had asked for the formula so that he can compare his smelling experience with the list of notes that compose the perfume. However, what the perfume is, is not its chemical composition. We can see (in video clip 2) that Laudamiel puts faith not in the formula, which is focused on the compositional parts of the perfume, but in the socialized, intersubjective perception of the perfume established in conversation. As “no-one said coconut”, the perfume cannot be about coconut.

This suggests that perfumers, in their very sensorial work, rely on the conversational practice not to analytically dissect the aesthetic experience of the odor into its parts, but to socialize and construct what the holistic, aesthetic experience is about. In this practice, it does not seem to be a problem that the conversation will not allow the perfumers to reach a shared understanding or consensus of what the dominant note of the perfume is. Rather, it seems important to voice differences of perception. Similarly, it does not seem to be a problem that the verbal language will not allow them to represent, faithfully and precisely, the complex odor. Indeed, in the aesthetic, sensorial work of perfumery, there is an advantage not to “smell too fixed” (Laudamiel, 2017) as a single note (e.g. damascenone) can be found in a variety of natural products (e.g. roses, tobacco, white wine) and thus allow for a variety of perceptions and associations. The conversational practice helps to give a voice to these multiple perceptions (Taylor & Robichaud, 2004) and to paint the complex world of associations that makes a perfume (Islam, Endrissat, & Noppeney, 2016).

In this way, I find that the materially anchored conversations have a constitutive role in what the perfume is, not by fixing a single and precise meaning, but by taking into account the openness and complexity of the perfume and the multitude of its perceptions. In search of an odor that will melt our heart, the conversations orient and refine the olfactory experience, and help to reorient new iterations of concocting aromatic notes and smelling them in conversation.

INTENSIFYING THE AESTHETIC EXPERIENCE

Perfumers paint the world of the olfactory experience, in conversation, by bringing together the sense of smell with other senses and making many synesthetic (or cross-modal) associations (Ádám, 2008; Islam, Endrissat, & Noppeney, 2016; Stigliani & Ravasi, 2018). Christoph, for example, when arguing for the “caramel effect” (video 1), does not refer to caramel in general, but to a very precise visual and gustatory experience. In his precise description of eating a caramel bonbon, Christoph relates the scent of caramel to the sense of taste – the bonbon’s chewiness - and to the sense of sight, i.e. its color, its form. By verbally making these “intermodal interactions” of the various senses, and thereby

mutually enforcing the effect of the senses (Ádám, 2008, Islam et al., 2016; Vroon, 2005: 139-142), I find that the perfumer intensifies the olfactory experience of how he feels the caramel note.

This suggests that the conversational practice not only intersubjectively establishes what the perfume is about, it simultaneously extends and intensifies the sensory experience. Another beautiful example of this is the interaction between the perfumer Laudamiel and the researcher making the video recording (video 2). The perfumer not only states that there is a dominant note of chamomile, but describes with some detail what chamomile does to your senses (it is “calming”, but “does not put you to sleep”) and how it is perceived (referring to it as the fleeting top note). He thereby repeatedly draws on the sense of sight, such as in “I see the chamomile” or “you see it”. The interaction further shows a close co-habitation of rationalistic, matter-of-fact, and technical talk (e.g. planning in which version of the perfume to put a specific scent, identifying “right amounts”, comparing the scent with the brief for “meltmyheart”) and emotionally charged, affective expressions (e.g. “oahh”, ah, exclamation). For the latter, the perfumer heavily draws also on bodily gestures (e.g. putting hands over heart, making a smile) and on his continuous practice of scenting. In other words, the rationalistic and the affective do not seem to be opposite poles in tension, but rather are interactively worked together in conversation.

Taken together, the work of perfumers allows me to challenge the notion that the sensorial, aesthetic work goes somewhat contrary to language and can hardly be grasped in linguistic “representations”. If we move our focus from the abstract “signal system of language” (Taylor, 2002: 823) to the everyday practice of conversing, and if we see the conversation as an embodied and materially anchored practice, drawing both on multiple modes (e.g. practice of scenting, bodily expressions) and cross-modal processes (e.g. expressing a scent as a taste or a sight) (cp. Stigliani & Ravasi, 2018), we can start to appreciate that language is an integral part of the sensorial, aesthetic work. My brief reading of the video recordings has shown that the conversational practice is important not primarily for representational purposes and to fix meanings and establish common understandings (cp. Taylor & Robichaud, 2004). The conversations did not primarily serve analytic purposes to dissect the aesthetic whole or to create symbolic and knowable representations of the perfume, but rather to engage reflexively in the aesthetic, sensorial experience (cp. Ewenstein & Whyte, 2007; Stigliani & Ravasi, 2018). Indeed, conversations served to socialize and lay out the intersubjective complexity, plurality and openness of the sensorial experience. Conversations also served to intensify and expand this aesthetic, sensorial experience. Through intermodal interactions and non-verbal expressions of the affective reactions to scent, the conversational practice charged the olfactory experience with intensity and direction. This brief analysis helps us to depict the idea that the conversational practice is an integral - and not separate part - of aesthetic work. As much as for our master perfumer Laudamiel it is hard to describe the perfume until he smells it (Laudamiel, 2017), he could not engage in the sensorial, aesthetic work of perfume making without conversation.

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IN JUST A DROP, ABUNDANCE

FROM MELTMYHEART'S PRESS RELEASE:

“Laudamiel said “I’m really proud of this fragrance. When one hears that notes such as oudh, real dark chocolate and orris butter are all ingredients in this precious oil, you know that you’re in for an amazing sensorial experience. Add ginger and bergamot on top, nutmeg in the middle and sage absolute as an undertone, and you have a very mysterious potion.””

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FROM A REVIEW OF THE PERFUME:

“M. Laudamiel uses a zingy opening of ginger and bergamot. If meltmyheart is all about falling in love this is the frisson of meeting someone special for the first time. Nutmeg provides the transition into the heart. The chocolate comes out first as it picks up the sweetness of the nutmeg. The oud comes next and I am struck once again by what a perfect partner chocolate is for oud. [...] For a short while I begin to wonder where the orris is. As the chocolate and oud have my attention. The orris is there but it takes a little time to find its position as it catches some of the bitter components of the chocolate and powders over some of the more intense facets of oud. What the orris does is provide the harmonic to allow the best qualities of the chocolate and oud to predominate. The skill of M. Laudamiel to pull this off and to keep it almost transparent in its effect is fabulous. When I wore meltmyheart I expected this phase to just expand and evolve into something overpowering. It never does. Instead it is a relationship of equals which has an unusual fragility I never expected. Many hours later a bit of smoky sage absolute winds its way through the orris/oud/chocolate making it seem like it is all melting away in a cloud of smoke.”

If both the descriptions, that of the master perfumer who created the fragrance and that of the expert who reviewed it, allude a specific sensorial experience I know I will never be able to live, a few elements resonated vividly with me: just how complex the structure of a perfume is; how challenging testifying of this complexity can be, because of its dynamic, unfolding character; and, most notably, how much is contained in just a drop of perfume. By this last element, I do not simply refer to the materials that have been concretely combined; I imply all the work needed to create this perfume, the richness of the experience one can have of smelling it *and* the variety of meanings this experience can carry, varying from one person to the other. That something so small as a single drop of perfume can be so multilayered, multifaceted and constantly changing is a true marvel – and, as I will explore here, this points to an unsuspected source of methodological inspiration.

By the time I had watched the clips five times, I had a few pages covered in notes. These preliminary observations ranged from the relaxed, almost carefree atmosphere seen in clip 1, to the transition we see in the mood between different moments (especially from clip 2 to clip 3), to how Christophe & Christoph spoke (notably, using the verb “to see” to refer to different odors). More analytically, my ideas included the role of sensory elements in ongoing action³, the complexity of expert judgment in action

3. With Nada Endrissat and Claus Noppeney, we have already written a conference paper on this topic, and we are currently expanding this line of inquiry (Endrissat, N., Sergi, V. & Noppeney, C. (2018) Evaluative moments in scent making: Exploring ‘sensing and experiencing’ as constitutive of organizing. Presented at the 34th EGOS Colloquium, Tallinn, Estonia).

and the central place of materiality. Although these notes touched upon key elements visible in the clips, I was slightly uncomfortable with having to pick one for this piece. Not that choosing was a difficult task; it rather felt like something else, something I had yet to uncover, floated in-between the clips and my mind, waiting to be grasped. But just like the fragrance in the making featured in the clips, this idea was evanescent. One second I thought I had put my finger on it, and the next, it had dissolved into air. This was becoming frustrating. I moved from notebook to computer and forced myself to figure it out through writing. The process was, as usual, uneasy. Words were not flowing – a sign that my thoughts were still a bit clouded. I was still missing that angle that would be ‘it’. I needed to watch the clips a sixth, a seventh, a tenth time. But hadn’t I already seen everything contained in these few minutes of video?

Just like many powerful forces, repetition works its magic in a subtle, almost indiscernible way. On the surface, the repeated action seems to remain the same. But when repeating is done with a touch of mindfulness, one can notice the microscopic alterations and their ripples on what happens next. Pure repetition does not exist, and this realization reveals a world that tends to be left aside. After five viewings of the clips, the obvious had been seen and seen again. I could pass it up and become attentive to something else. With this renewed perspective on the act of repeating, I tried to look at the clips in another way. After all, these clips were exactly the kind of material I love to work with: moments of collective action, each a tapestry so rich in details woven together, exposing the sociomaterial complexity of what is happening, in a place in time and in movement. Even more: this material came from a rather unusual site, for me: that of the elaboration of *haut de gamme* fragrances. This was more than mere ‘creative’ work; this was an ideal site to watch artistry and craftsmanship à l’oeuvre, to consider highly talented individuals while they are in the act of creating, to see the mysterious work of assembling a perfume. This should have been exciting, but it wasn’t. Thinking about repetition in a different fashion had not instantly provided me with what I was looking for.

In fact, I had to be honest: not much was happening in these clips, and the little that was happening was taking place in a banal setting. Moreover, the clips were marked by a slow tempo. What do these clips show? Three people talking around a messy table, covered with small bottles, pieces of smelling paper and other random objects, in a nondescript location. Conversations, full of half-questions and suspension points. The impression of having captured something (the “melting my heart” moment Christophe Laudamiel experiences in clip no 2) ... only to have this feeling shattered with one less enthusiastic reaction. The repetitive smelling on various parts of the arm, while standing silently on the sidewalk. The unsettled state of affairs, at the end of the fourth clip. This was all very ordinary. Then, only then, did it hit me. There was a point to be made with the mundane quality of what we see in the clips.

This lack of excitement⁴, in the clips, was nothing new. The first time I had seen clips from this ethnography – prior to the selection of the four clips for this experiment in interpretation – I had been struck by the ordinariness of the setting, which had made me realize that I was unconsciously expecting something more from this site. And this had happened again, with these four clips. What could this *more* be, specifically? I probably expected something more striking. More spectacular and more remote from my own experience of working daily on making something (anything). But yet again, what I was seeing was

4. Interestingly enough, from an etymological point of view, *mundane* only acquired the meaning of “dull, uninteresting” in the middle of the 19th century. Older, previous meanings, as derived from Latin and Old French, referred to a worldly quality (of this world, in a material sense, opposed to a spiritual life).

remarkably ordinary. It wasn't, fundamentally, different from any banal moment of people trying to do something together – be it writing an academic text, developing a recipe, coming to a decision in a meeting, rehearsing a play or building a high-tech prototype. From that point, the most salient thing I could see, over and over, was how mundane this setting and these interactions were, making them much closer to ordinary life and work.

The contrast could not be starker, then, between these clips seen in this light and the quotes included at the beginning of this text. Surely, one can ask, there must be something *between* the clips and the quotes, something we are not seeing here. A bridge must exist between this banal setting and mundane interactions, and such a complex finished product! There must be a secret and fascinating path, a kind of almost-magical process or some extraordinary talents at play for us to dissect and expose! I think that such a way of framing the situation speaks more about us, observing from the outside this creation process and being enthralled by what stems out of it. This framing dramatizes the creative process, making it more out of the ordinary. Yet, what good do binary oppositions, such as creative and non-creative, or extraordinary and ordinary, produce? Not as much, I contend, as trying to keep together what seems on the surface as opposite. The clips are limpid on this: in these extracts, what we see in plain light is the utter ordinariness of producing something that in the end, will become something extraordinary – a creation so intricate that it will warrant descriptions like the two quotes above. Even more: in the clips, we see at the same time the banal (people around a table, taking their time to ponder on what they are smelling; two people standing on a side walk, barely talking, but thinking and feeling aloud) *and* the non-banal (the complexity of expressing in words and in linear fashion what is perceived as an aggregate of sensorial and affective experience, the challenge of trying to evaluate something that is as multilayered and elusive as a perfume in the making, the mix of exceptional olfactory sense, knowledge and experience). If it is nuances we want to add to our understanding of people working, creating and organizing, look no further: many of them are directly woven in the mundane texture of daily life.

As a researcher influenced by process thinking, I could have easily jumped right at the processuality of what we see, highlighting how much is happening in a few minutes of interactions. I could have written about the richness I find in grounding myself in such an ontology, as it allows me to attend to the constant movement that characterizes life. The clips do attest of this (and so much more, of course). But the point I want to make here is located a bit before starting such analysis, as engaging in it requires to pay attention to the mundane *but more importantly* to value it. Let me quote Tsoukas and Chia's article on organizational becoming to make this simple idea stronger:

“In the [processual] view proposed here, organization scientists need to give theoretical priority to *microscopic change*. [...] such change occurs naturally, incrementally, and inexorably through “creep,” “slippage,” and “drift” as well as natural “spread.” It is subtle, agglomerative, often subterranean, heterogeneous, and often surprising. It spreads like a patch of oil. Microscopic change takes place by adaptation, variations, restless expansion, and opportunistic conquests. Microscopic change reflects the actual becoming of things (Chia 1999).” (2002, p. 580; italics in the original)

I think that what they write about in this quote is often overlooked or taken for granted, in process studies. Yet, process thinking needs the mundane, to care for and build theoretical insights from what is microscopic, heterogenous and surprising, to borrow Tsoukas and Chia's words. Then, just what may be the mundane? The mundane may not be a focal point but rather an *entry* point. How we

get to,
get into,
get at

whatever interest us – may it be materiality, identity, innovation, power or change. Celebrating the mundane may rather be a desire to go beyond the guise of the banal, and to dig deeper. It may be an unflinching drive to attend to the minute, the small, the everyday – and to make it sing. It may be a sensitivity to activate, an inclination to follow, a disposition to cultivate. The mundane may be a way to question to world.

At the same time as I started to write this piece, I came across a photo essay on the Japanese painter Kazuaki Tanahashi⁵. One photo comes with this quote from the painter: "A painting works only on the edge of not working. Then what is ungraspable comes near." The ungraspable is what eludes us, running between our fingers like grains of sand, a mist that evaporates the minute we touch it. The ungraspable is present in all of our studies, and yet, I do not think that we work enough with it. Why not strive to get closer to it? Reading this quote while seeing the perfumers at work, I felt that it captured with subtlety something we sense acutely, in these clips and even in the overall work of elaborating a perfume: how thin, fragile and fluctuating is the margin between where it "works" and where it "doesn't work". Where is this edge, and of what is it made? I suspect that trying to document this edge – in the context of the clips or in any other – can be a very stimulating entry point into human inventiveness. Inventiveness is a fundamental quality that is not reserved to out-of-the ordinary circumstances, but that imbues everyday practices and so-called ordinary actors. Exploring this edge requires that we delve in what I have designated here as "the mundane".

In fact, in our field, we are already delving into the mundane in many ways (conversation analysis; visual studies; ethnographic inquiries, just to name a few). Why not, then, celebrate more *clearly* the key role and the richness of the mundane? In this sense, this text should be read as a rejoinder to various studies that have all tried to show that considering what seems like banal dimensions of work and life is a relevant way to deepen our understanding of the lived experience of individuals⁶. I am aware that I have not analyzed the clips, but rather used them as a pretext to talk about the mundane. I have consciously only stated that the mundane is generative, especially from a process ontology, and not shown in detail this generativity. I believe that it is up to each researcher intrigued by what might remain nestled in the mundane to take on the challenge of exploring it. Hence, this text is offered as a question, not as an answer. Just as there is so much happening in the expansion of a single drop of perfume once it touches the skin, the mundane is abounding with possibilities – if only we allow ourselves to stay with it long enough, and give it our careful attention. Look at the mundane in your empirical setting of choice; in the banal aspects of your site, ask yourself: what might be hidden in plain sight ?

5. This photo essay can be viewed here:

www.globalonenessproject.org/library/photo-essays/kazuaki-tanahashi#photo=14.

In fact, the other quotes from the painter presented in the photo essay are as rich as the one I chose, and I invite you to have a look.

6. In spite of what we might assume, the mundane is very much at the forefront of several studies – if not of whole approaches (for example, in ethnomethodology). For a while, a sociology journal was even devoted to the mundane (that was the *Journal of Mundane Behavior*, published online between 2000 and 2004). A recent (and very much incomplete) search for the mundane led me to find clearly recognized in Shortt's study on liminal spaces at work (2015); Gregg's exploration of how political discourses shape mundane life (2004); in Pink, Sumartojo, Lupton and Heyes La Bond (2017) consideration of mundane data as revealing the digitalization of life; among many other examples, the mundane is present in studies of small wins (Weick, 1984; Reay, Golden-Biddle and Germann, 2006), and can be read in some critical management studies (such as those discussing micro-resistance, for example). In a more global sense, for our field, the mundane is also prominently featured in the practice perspective, in workplace studies and in the communicative constitution of organization (CCO) perspective, among others.

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CUBISM AND A REFLECTIVE SPACE FOR INTERPRETIVE INQUIRY

Realities do not co-exist simultaneously.

But actually, they do.

At the beginning of the 20th century, cubism became an influential art style that disrupted conventional practice on how to present reality. It opened up new possibilities to see by breaking objects or figures down into pieces, each representing a different angle from which to view the object. This new practice allowed the co-existence of “different viewpoints at the same time and within the same space and so suggest their three dimensional form” (Tate, 2018).

Reading through the three commentaries, I am struck by how different the approaches to data analysis and meaning making are. They range from systematic to intuitive, each offering a perspective and a reading of the data that seems to capture *exactly* what one can see in the videos. All three interpretations are credible, sound, and useful. And yet, they all see something different, mirroring the polylocality of video data.

Davide Ravasi’s approach to the data might be best described as a classical interpretive analysis: a search for patterns in the data that will help to order, structure, and ultimately make sense of the data. He starts by reading the transcripts, then turns to the videos. His attention is guided by the frames and concepts he has developed in the context of his prior research on design work but he also identifies new patterns that recur across the videos clips: the dual existence of a chemical-analytical orientation (language, reference system) and an aesthetic-associative one. His reflections take him far beyond the specific context of the videos and lead him to wonder about the applicability of his observation to other contexts and processes, thereby speculating about the pattern’s relevance and generalizability.

Jeanne Mengis engages with the data by translating it. She starts by immersing herself in the videos, watching them over and over again. Then, she produces visual renderings of the scenes in drawings and describes them in her own words. By doing so, she focuses her attention on specific attributes of the situation and the conversation. Her translation (from video data to sketched images to verbal text) is a good illustration of what multimodal translation of video data can mean and how it can support the process of data analysis that wants to be attentive to the sociomaterial aspects of social life. Her detailed description on how she works with the data is reflective not only of her own role as an interpreter, but of the performative quality of data translation for analysis. While her approach could be described as one of conversation analysis, it differs from it by paying attention to the material setting and non-verbal forms of action and interaction. Theoretically, Jeanne explores what is achieved in conversational practice and shows how language is an integral part of aesthetic work.

The last commentary by Viviane Sergi exemplifies an essayistic approach to the data: open, holistic, reflective. She provides an honest account of her struggle to make sense of the data. Despite having watched the clips several times, she does not seem to find what she is looking for. What follows is a reflection about her own expectations as researcher to be able to see something ‘extraordinary’. In the courses of her arguments, she then brings our attention to the mundane and banal and asks us to value it for it is the mundane through which we gain access to understanding work, organizing, and life itself. Her theoretical position is that of process theory and by emphasizing the mundane and the level of microscopic changes,

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her commentary can be read as an invitation to reconsider the attention we give to the everyday, banal processes in our research.

RE: HOW CAN I KNOW WHAT I SEE UNTIL I HEAR WHAT YOU THINK?

The commentaries offer insights into *practices of data interpretation*, outlining the process of meaning making. As is the case in most sciences, video data research is an inferential exercise. Clicking the 'recording button' does not solve the challenge of interpreting what has been recorded. What we see will depend on how we approach, how we read and interpret the data. While it is true that video data is particularly rich in its quality and able to provide the opportunity to 'return', 'rewind' and 'give access' to practices and processes as they unfold, it does not come with ready-made meaning. The three interpretations thus also exemplify the 'messiness' of video data and the fact that it can trigger different stories depending on which theoretical angle or perspective is explored. Like in a cubist work of art that combines different viewpoints, the commentaries complement and accentuate. They challenge and help sharpen our own understanding of the data, leading to a more nuanced understanding of what is taking place.

Recent contributions to visual ethnography have proposed new methodological avenues that take advantage of the polyvocality of video data to enhance dialogue for more participatory and emancipatory purposes by providing voice to actors that often remain silent. This line of research calls for "communicative spaces that facilitate progressively 'polyvocal' forms of organizational analysis" (Hassard et al. 2017, p. 13, see also Warren, 2008). The Interpreters can be seen as such a methodological attempt: to engage in dialogue and create a reflective space for interpretive inquiry, a space for diverse conceptualizations, representations, and discourses without having to give preference to one over the other.

At first, Cubist art was deemed abstract and fragmented. People were used to two-dimensional flat paintings and univocal representations and found it hard to make sense of this new artistic style. However, with time, cubism became one of the most influential art movements. The co-existence of different viewpoints, the Cubist artist George Braque claimed, would allow the viewer to "get closer to the object". Take another look and see for yourself.

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