



THE ETERNAL INSTANT IN “SCENT OF A WOMAN”

O Instante Eterno em “Perfume de Mulher”

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El Eterno Instante em “Esencia de Mujer”

Resumo: Baseando-se no clássico *Perfume de Mulher* dirigido, pela primeira vez, em 1974, pela produção italiana de Dino Risi e repaginado, em 1992, pelo diretor Martin Brest, procuraremos, trazer à baila, o movimento da vida em sua fragrância feminina. Trata-se de compreender em que medida a metáfora do perfume inebria o campo perceptivo como pano de fundo desde onde a figura da mulher emerge com um protagonismo ímpar acerca da vida, ou melhor, da dança da vida. O texto termina por descrever como um instante se eterniza admiravelmente num só ritmo sendo, pois, capaz de transcender o tempo cronológico e devolver nova vida para além de nossas convenções.

Palavras-chave: Fenomenologia; Percepção; Cinema; Perfume de Mulher.

Abstract: Based on the classic *Scent of a Woman*, directed for the first time in 1974 by the Italian producer Dino Risi and redesigned in 1992 by director Martin Brest, we will seek to bring up the movement of life in its feminine fragrance. This article aims to understand to what extent the perfume metaphor inebriates the perceptual field as a backdrop from which the figure of the woman emerges with a unique protagonism about life, or rather, the dance of life. The text ends by describing how an instant is admirably eternalized in a single rhythm, capable, therefore, of transcending chronological time and giving new life beyond our conventions.

Keywords: Phenomenology; Perception; Cinema; Scent of a Woman.

Resumen: A partir del clásico *Scent of a Woman* dirigido, por primera vez, en 1974, por la producción italiana de Dino Risi y renovado, en 1992, por el director Martin Brest, intentaremos sacar a la luz el movimiento de la vida en su fragancia femenina. Se trata de comprender hasta qué punto la metáfora del perfume embriaga el campo perceptivo como fondo del que emerge la figura de la mujer con un protagonismo único en la vida, o, mejor dicho, en la danza de la vida. El texto termina describiendo cómo un instante se eterniza admirablemente en un solo ritmo, pudiendo así trascender el tiempo cronológico y dar nueva vida más allá de nuestras convenciones.

Palabras llave: Fenomenología; Percepción; Cine; Perfumes de Mujer.

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Introduction

The classic *Scent of a Woman* has two major eponymous productions which marked the screens by pinning their honorary place in the seventh art, an Italian production, originally called *Profumo di Donna* and directed by Dino Risi in 1974 and another, Martin Brest's 1992 version. Note that both are based on the Italian novel *Il Buio and Il Miele* by Giovanni Arpino (1969).

Thus, taking as reference Brest's remake of Risi's film, we aim to step beyond purely technical criticism and situate, in the light of a "phenomenology of cinema" and via the theme of perception, to what extent this cinematographic work invites us to a reflection permeating a more immediate philosophical interest.

To do so, viewers are invited to hone their sense of smell and, as much as possible, allow to feel or better perceive the essential fragrance coming out of the screens in *Scent of a Woman*.

"Scent of a Woman"

Let us look at what makes Brest's *Scent of a Woman* a classic!

In short, the plot orbits around two central characters. The first is that of Frank Slade, played by Al Pacino. He is a terribly bitter, cranky, and irreverent retired lieutenant colonel who suffers from a late blindness contracted during his military service. Chris O'Donnell plays the second character, Charlie Simms, a prep school student who works as an assistant to Slade. By looking for a weekend job to fund his studies, Simms decides to face the task of taking care of Frank for his family who is bound for a trip on Thanksgiving.

Little does he know that Frank has plans which include traveling to New York and enjoying the best pleasures he can find as if bidding goodbye to a life to which he no longer wants to cling. Frank tells young Charlie his plans: visit his family, eat in good restaurants, sleep with a beautiful woman, and then commit suicide. Forced to accompany the rude and irascible colonel, Charlie still has to worry about the troubles he had in school with his friend and "trust fund baby" George Willis, played by Philip Seymour Hoffman. He goes to Baird school, in which the film, at first, records no-one but a sequence of harmonic and static compositions of the institution. Its atmosphere is that of a certain timeless experience, detached from finitude. Its environment is caricaturedly masculine, formal, and stern. It also has a conventionally prosaic feature (in the most positivist expression of the term). Its formalism sometimes contrasts with the sound of its alarm, in which we see random movement and students' shrill voices, who rush to leave.

In any case, despite the extremely heavy air of the school, Charlie is eager to try and breathe purer air. Thus, in addition to earning money, he accompanies old Frank so he can do this. The vivid unfolding of plot chapters attest to this. The narrative is disconcerting, unpredictable, and full of unexpected shocks. The point is that if, on the one hand, they hate each other at the beginning, a deep feeling of admiration and mutual respect is born as days pass. Soon, at first, Frank puts Emmylou Harris' "Evangeline" on his cassette player for Charlie to enjoy. The song portrays a woman who always nourishes a strong hope for the return of her beloved (which never actually happens). The film suggests the hypothesis that Frank seems to embody "Evangeline" and that his "beloved," the perfect source of aroma, will give him the joy of living he has long lost. The Army reserve officer seems to behave, in a sense, like a Proustian: in search of lost time...

This searching spirit would be, however, unattainable on his own. As much as Frank is a man who had extensive experience in living absorbed by his own convictions (to the point of enduring so many setbacks), he finds new strength. The window scene portrays this well at the moment when, in the midst of the penumbra of his room, in his secluded unconscious, a light protrudes – probably as a good pinch of enlightenment, common sense, and hope – a light which Charlie personifies very well. The young high school student's innocence seems to really give wings to Frank's imagination who shamelessly refuses to give up his peculiar blasé cynicism to truly disdain the world which turned his back on him. He considers his relatives backward, is hated by his brother. The past tormenting him are the pieces of a plot, of a boundary situation taken to an extent in which Frank seriously considers suicide.

By any means, this plan shows Charlie unusual facets of Frank's personality, which may or may not alter the course of their lives during the brief but memorable period in which they will coexist. The fact is that, despite Charlie's inexperience and his lost and aimless predicament, a whole maturing process is gradually visible as the ill-mannered colonel's ego descends from its height, turning him into a more sufferable figure. An expert connoisseur of women and the fragrances they use, Frank begins to reveal countless other keen insights under his arrogant appearance. He goes from genuine paternal tenderness toward the boy to terrible attacks of self-preservation and aggression.

Apparently, the secondary plot involving the boy's school conflict may sound a little disposable, but it is justified by the need to show the inevitable exchange of favors between generations. Although it is the main



reason behind the somewhat excessive length of the film, it is only so that the distinguished film audience will know whether or not the unstable colonel learned something from his young companion in a journey marked by embarrassing sincerity and passages of undeniable charm.

One such undoubtedly memorable moment is the unforgettable restaurant scene, in which Frank asks the beautiful Ms. Donna (Gabrielle Anwar), who seemingly waits for her boyfriend Michael (David Lansbury), if he can keep her company. She then confesses to him:

Well, I'm expecting somebody. Frank asks: Instantly? She replies: No, but any minute now. – Any minute? – he asks – Some people live a lifetime in a minute (Brest, 1992).

It is at this moment that old Frank generously persuades her as if by an admirably charming gesture. When trying to dance Carlos Gardel's *Por una Cabeza*, Frank brings her to the middle of the dancing hall in a light, sweet way or, perhaps more than that, as an absolutely free, simple, and deeply sensitive man. He shows a sensitivity on edge! Upon reaching the peak of his maturity, without any modesty or resentment toward what old age or the limitations of his physical disability, Frank simply throws himself or, if it may please the reader, dance! And his dance is only, by the way, engaging because he refuses to repress himself. He makes that minute an eternity. A fragile eternity, surely, but long enough to leave absolutely nothing out. He throws himself into immanence and in life like a dance. He fears no contradiction, the movement of ambiguity as inherent to the body, sight, touch, and smell. He is surrounded whole in that fragrance in the air, that scent, the scent of a woman.

What actually makes this scene iconic is how much dance is the purest expression of freedom, the true fragrance of life. A really expensive freedom, which the young lady seems to have given up as she leaves Frank and Charlie behind in the restaurant, departing with her boyfriend. Its scenic symbolism stemming seems to suggest that the young lady was renouncing her own dreams so wrapped in that essential perfume which, at first, she exuded and infected. Donna regrettably seems no longer to own herself; she allows the fragrance of life (that necessary and unique breath of life) to evaporate so she can conform to a social or conventionally expected role.

The outcome of the film is marked by the confrontation in the school assembly. Then, principal Traski forces Charlie to face his colleagues to elucidate who is in fact responsible for premeditating a joke in poor taste which burst a cunningly designed balloon and soaked Traski. As an alibi, one of the involved in the infamous and hilarious episode, hiding behind "big daddy's pocket," takes as a pretext the fact that he lost his contact lenses at the very moment of the incident, his near-sightedness made him unable to reveal the author of the event. Charlie still vehemently refuses to hand over his colleagues, resisting the pressure on him to confess and the threat of having his academic and professional future compromised.

Thus – as the principal is about to openly absolve the real culprits in a checkmate to Charlie – Frank surprises him by speaking out against the hypocrisy and elitism of the institution. More than that: in addition to Baird's luxurious school, the connection created between Frank and the young student transcends the usual formalism of academic life; after all, having a degree is not everything. Here is the reason behind the old colonel's rudeness: beyond standards and a certain academic puritanism, one must live true life in its essence. It is necessary to bring back that air, that atmosphere or fragrance inebriating the characters in a dance to the sound of a tango. In this climate, the perfume metaphor may again exude a fragrance neutralized by moral hypocrisy.

Perceptual fragrances

After all, what "perfume" invades the restaurant and also deliciously takes foot on the dancing hall?

The film makes this scene really emblematic because maybe it is its scenic epicenter, i.e., the perfume metaphor appears as an expression synthesizing multiple sensations and fragrances. As we have seen or perceived, it is not for nothing that the analogy between "dance" and "life" (Silva, 2014) becomes a fundamental piece in the redemption of both characters. We undoubtedly have a great material to explore one of the classic questions in *Gestalttheorie* (or psychology of form) in conjunction with phenomenology: perception. Merleau-Ponty asserts two perception models: the first is classic and the second, phenomenological. In the classical model, two schools converge, despite their differences, into a concentric conception. Empiricism deems perception as the "sum or a mosaic of sensations, each of which is strictly dependent on the local retinal stimulus which corresponds to it" (Merleau-Ponty, 1996, p. 103). On the other hand, intellectualism, as the "perception becomes an 'interpretation' of the signs that our senses provide in accordance with the bodily *stimuli*²⁰, a 'hypothesis' that the mind evolves to 'explain its impressions to itself'²¹" (Merleau-Ponty, 1945, p. 42). Thus, for a conception, the ability to perceive is an absolutely physical (empirical) power; for another, a purely spiritual (intellectual) one emanating, ultimately, from the *cogito*.

Thus, in his *Essay On a New Theory of Vision* (2008), commented in *A Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge*, Berkeley (1980, §44, p. 21) claims that:

The ideas of sight and touch make two species entirely distinct and heterogeneous. THE FORMER ARE MARKS AND PROGNOSTICS OF THE LATTER. (...) the proper objects of sight neither exist without mind, nor are the images of external things (...)



In *La Dioptrique*, although Descartes (1996, p. 81; 84) recognizes that sight is considered the most universal and noble among the senses, this recognition fails to translate, at all, a metaphysical primacy. Sight is imperfect when one seeks to print the images of things. Thus, the need for its improvement by optical instruments or, if you will, the support of touch since, “of all our senses, touch is one considered the least deceptive and the most secure” (Descartes, 2009, p. 5).

The phenomenological conception starts from another principle: perception is neither a “mosaic of sensations” nor a spiritualist “analysis” or “interpretation” but “an “initiation into the world” (1945, p. 297), a “communication or a communion” (1945, p. 370). What does that mean exactly? Psychology of Form or *Gestalttheorie*¹ teaches us a fundamental lesson, as Merleau-Ponty notes (1996, p. 61): “Groups rather than juxtaposed elements are principal and primary in our perception.” This school shows us that, in the perceptual field, ‘sensation’ and ‘perception’ are no longer distinguished because we never have partial sensations but what we ‘feel’ and ‘perceive’ is an organization phenomenon, i.e., a configuration system, a totality, a form or structure” (Silva, 2009b, p. 128). The classical model of knowledge theory and its division of the senses misunderstands this phenomenon, as Merleau-Ponty illustrates:

It is a commonplace to say that we have five senses, and it would seem, at first glance, that each of them is like a world out of touch with the others. The light or colors which act upon the eye do not affect the ears or the sense of touch. Nevertheless, it has been known for a long time that certain blind people manage to represent the colors they cannot see by means of the sounds which they hear: for example, a blind man said that red ought to be something like a trumpet peal. For a long time it was thought that such phenomena were exceptional, whereas they are, in fact, general. For people under mescaline, sounds are regularly accompanied by spots of color whose hue, form, and vividness vary with the tonal quality, intensity, and pitch of the sounds. Even normal subjects speak of cold, shrill, or hard colors, of sounds that are clear, sharp, brilliant, rough, or mellow, of soft noises and of penetrating fragrances. Cézanne said that one could see the velvetiness, the hardness, the softness, and even the odor of objects. My perception is therefore not a sum of visual, tactile, and audible givens: I perceive in a total way with my whole being; I grasp a unique structure of the thing, a unique way of being, which speaks to all my senses at once (1996, p. 63).

Via his *Gestalttheorie*, Merleau-Ponty shows that “we are paradoxically surprised by the experience that sight touches, touch sees, the palate smells, the smell tastes. Our sensations are neither punctual nor intersubjectively incommunicable but interchangeable phenomena, promiscuously entangled in each other” (Silva, 2009a, p. 167). “These distinctions between touch and sight are unknown in primordial perception” (Merleau-Ponty, 1996, p. 20). Perhaps what Descartes missed, notes the French phenomenologist, is that one is unable to take away all the consequences of an aspect about which Descartes was, in part, right: the blind see with their hands; although, we know, not only with their hands.

Art such as cinema admirably revives this broader, whole-like perception. As Merleau-Ponty (1996, p. 74, our emphasis) again notes, “(...) perception permits us to understand the meaning of the cinema. *A movie is not thought; it is perceived.*” From the *Gestalt* point of view, cinematic experiments such as Brest’s shows us more than a simple “figure” but a “background” which crosses the ultimate meaning of life, time, body, and others. *Scent of a Woman* is a film to be “perceived,” rather than “thought,” as it is tinted and seen from different angles, savored or smelled in different fragrances.

Time is one of these perceptive fragrances. Some people run after time, but they only seem to catch up with it when they die wealthy. For others, time passes slowly; they become anxious, such as the inexperienced Charlie, and Donna and her supposed crush, anxious about the future, thus forgetting to live the present, the only existing time. Everyone has time. No one has more or less than 24 hours a day. The difference lies in what each does with their time, even with a fraction of a minute.

Thus, the lady on stage re-expresses life. As a feminine face and contour, life gives us to see, in its wholeness, a perspective of which we almost always lose sight. When we lose it, we lose its essence, its characteristic odor. We simply stop breathing, feeling the essential fragrance, the most primordial sensation of what connects us to life itself. The essence of life escapes us when we harden it; we become indifferent to nature; we replace our rhythm with another, that of the watch. This almost always occurs when we are in a hurry, failing to savor what is most intimate, perceptible, and connecting us to earth. This is the fundamental phenomenological perception that *Scent of a Woman* extracts from the beginning to the end.

¹ Merleau-Ponty, in delivering the conference *The Film and the New Psychology* (which became a chapter in *Sense and Non-Sense*) shows how this “new psychology” – i.e., his *Gestalttheorie* – precisely leads us to the best cinema aesthetes’ observations. Why? Because, unlike classical psychology, which treats our visual field as a sum or mosaic of sensations, Psychology of Form shows no parallelism between our simplest and most immediate sensations. Our field becomes a system of settings. At the same time, this new school makes another important contribution by offering another conception about others’ perception: “Anger, shame, hate, and love are not psychic facts hidden at the bottom of another’s consciousness: they are types of behavior or styles of conduct which are visible from the outside. They exist on this face or in those gestures, not hidden behind them.” (1996, p. 67). This “new psychology” inscribes a meaning to conduct; a perceptible intersubjectively sense since love, hatred, and anger are not inaccessible inner realities, never shareable. It is only this broader scope which Merleau-Ponty projects “the film as a perceptual object, we can apply what we have just said about perception in general to the perception of a film” (Merleau-Ponty, 1996, p. 68). “This is why” – still, he notes – “the movies can be so gripping in their presentation of man: they (...) give us his conduct or behavior. They directly present to us that special way of being in the world, of dealing with things and other people, which we can see in the sign language of gesture and gaze and which clearly defines each person we know.” (Merleau-Ponty, 1996, p. 74).



Everything happens as if viewers and film buffs were transported to the narrative, as if they intensely lived its characters' troubles and contradictions or rather, the film goes from fiction to life; "life as it is," in Nelson Rodrigues' words. The film produces content to be not only intellectually thought but also deeply experienced or, in the suggested scenic language, perceived by a *sui generis* smell. Thus, the cinematographic experience belongs to the order of the lived, the very order of what disconcerts us to the point of encountering a viscerally ambiguous, contradictory I who now finds itself without two nickels to rub together.

Thus, the logic of the lived deconstructs another: a moral, culturally crystallized in the West one, as portrayed by Dostoyevsky's (2000) *Notes from Underground* or Nietzsche's (1998) *The Genealogy of Morality*. Frank seems to embody well this somewhat Dostoyevskyan, tragic character, dying as a man who lives underground and, in the shadows, and who refuses to follow a certain "moral of the herd," a moral whose prototype is resentment. Absolutely contradictory, the character assumes, once and for all, his peculiar ambiguity, to young Charlie's perplexity, who is led by the hands of a "blind man" to see other facets of life or, if he so wants, to prove how much a woman can soften hardships with her perfume in an instant that promises to be eternal.

This game between "figure" and "background" always structures the plot. Frank invites Charlie to experience the verse and obverse of life in the good it can bring, i.e., its ambiguous, sometimes naively lost essence. Frank fails to resolve any ambiguity at all. He lives, inside and out, his own incoherence, erraticness, and ambiguity. The old colonel breaks the old binary logic between subject and object, theory and practice. He shows Charlie, from a younger generation, that old habits still persist and that, therefore, one cannot remain indifferent, stuck to details to the detriment of the whole. It takes sufficient perception to understand the essence of things, the exuding perfume which inebriates, transports, and overflows us. Without it, life not only becomes colorless but also lacks taste, freshness, odor.

It is the denunciation of the *status quo*, a vegetative way of life which moral resentment or social sectarianism must conserve which Frank lays bare in his defense of Charlie. School hypocrisy, in turn, points to the perfidy of the US and the world at large, making the eminent master declare: "There is nothing like the sight of an amputated spirit; there is no prosthetic for that..." (Brest, 1992). In lending that tone to his speech, Frank leaves no stone unturned; he demolishes the foundations of the cultural building forming our civilization by deflating the shame of a system insisting on mutilating, in excising those who often lack the same opportunities as the ones born in land of the free and the home of the brave. The school environment Charlie experienced has no panache: it disables everyone. What a veteran such as Frank seems to show is the existence of other types of far more limiting disabilities. A legion of blind, deaf, dumb far worse than him: they neither see, hear, talk, touch or smell any odor. They prefer austere lives than to experience what is fresh in life even for a single instant.

Thus, despite his visual impairment, Frank refuses to shy away from his own complicity with the world and its things; he refuses to flee, in the end, from his own mirror. Although his physical disability stems from an accident, his resembles Hellen Keller's famous experience (1939) who, although born blind, deaf, and mute, learned to use language and, as Merleau-Ponty had rightly recalled, to live. But, of course, as we have seen, this learning neither stems from a pure fact of understanding or symbolic intellectual activity nor from a mere translation of corresponding sensory ideas. Rather, it effects a body disposition, a question of understanding the body not as an object or matter in space but as an exemplary and originating means of expression open to the world; the body as if inseparable from a more global view of reality. Thus, it speaks, gestures, touches, feels itself whole, appreciates, smells; it is all smell. To this extent, Frank embodies an olfactory sense departing from the classic Cartesian model. A *sui generis* nose intertwined with all other sensory organs.

Therefore, the experience of the dancing body announces "the structures of behavior," to remind the reader of Merleau-Ponty's (1942) seminal and homonymous work. Everything in the cinematic narrative is choreographic in the strongest and metaphysical sense of the word, i.e., an invitation to dance. *Scent of a Woman* is an essay whose structure is that of meaning (Silva, 2012); a sense not ascetic to experience, but of the flesh since it makes itself promiscuous, gets drunk to naked and raw experience, to what is lived. Thus, in *Eye and Mind*, Merleau-Ponty writes (1985, p. 86): "Vision is the meeting, as at a crossroads, of all the aspects of Being." This is only possible thanks to the work of art, be it, painting or cinema. The work neither overlaps an external meaning on the margins of experience nor flies over it but participates and celebrates this encounter of sight, of perception launching us at an ontological crossroads in which we experience multiple fragrances of being, such as that exuding the essential aroma of life, time, and intercorporeity in one movement, in one rhythm.

Frank does not miss that scent. He intensely senses and feels it, as a balm. In *Scent of a Woman*, the viewer can feel this same odor of the landscape felt by Cézanne in his paintings, as Gasquet assures us (1988, p. 81). Donna's delightful perfume is the odor of life! It is the intoxicating, stunning scent a scene can also revive. Thus, whether stunning by the performances of the characters and the recreated scenario or by the glimpse of the open perspectives for philosophical or psychological criticism, Brest's work creates an ode to life for the film audience, both as a film adaptation and a *romanesque*. By giving life to his character in a spectacularly impeccable performance, Al Pacino unveils the scent of life: a feminine essence perhaps to show the ultimate meaning that life is a dance and that, therefore, whoever misses this dance is the true "blind," the miserable "mute," the incorrigible "deaf," who no longer touches, missing the most essentially seductive fragrance in the world.



Conclusion

Imbued with an exalting message, *Scent of a Woman* reminds us that we always find something to learn even from those who we deem most unlikely to have anything to teach us or those we find inaccessible. The film also reconstructs, in a certain sense, both the Hegelian lord-bondsman dialectic and the Sartrean one of the gaze and the set of mirrors of which Lacan speaks. We find a Heraclitian background, the idea of the conflict of opposites through which the narrative incessantly runs, whether addressing the clash of generations or permeating the very question of gender, the relationship between men and women.

The latter deserves at least a paragraph note. The film, we should reiterate, adapts a novel for cinema. Its environment, from start to finish, is predominantly masculine and its constructed narrative, markedly “manly.” Its foreground lacks a female lead, however much the title seems to suggest it. Its beginning only briefly features the abandoned veteran’s niece. Even the prostitute who he meets in a luxurious hotel falls into anonymity. The feminine presence only gains, in fact, greater evidence at that essential instant in the restaurant scene (before and during the dance), although still as a supporting role. It is quite true that one can live a lot in a minute – as the character portrays – if we interpret, from the gestational point of view, that that presence is featured more as “background” than a foreground “figure.” The 1974 film has a sharper presence of the donna. The Italian drama certainly imprints an extra “feminine touch,” whether for Faust’s unforgettable beloved or the prostitute, the hotel house cleaner or the other characters but always under a male narrative universe.

In any case, we may perhaps interpret the perfume metaphor as an aroma inebriating all our sensations in a harmonious set, awakening a broader, original, and savage perception as “archetype of the original encounter” (Merleau-Ponty, 1964, p. 210). Frank’s keen nose is transfigured, in the scenic atmosphere, as the sign of this encounter whose time, even in for a fraction of a minute, creates the “meaning of life,” as Claudel (1929) would say; a sense that, at the end, reverses roles, leading Charlie to advise his old master against his premeditated suicide. We must live...

This precious, priceless value is put to all proof since we note even more the fragrance of time. Frank and Charlie star a compliment to temporal ephemerality, projecting the maxim that “time is worth gold” beyond its, at first sight, ideological and mercantilist character. This is a gift of time, that instant which can be made eternal a la impressionist painters. The aesthetic fruition which flows from it gives the essential tonic of this ecstasy, this eternal instant; a fleeting instant, to be sure, but unique and unrepeatable. Thus, the character’s “blind dance” amid the charm of a tango envisions, even if for a fraction of a minute, the enchantment of the world. The unrestrained fascination with the sweeping fragrance of the perfume seals, at the same time, this nuptial pact with the life of which Gabriel Marcel spoke.

We receive another pedagogical lesson. Experience puts a single understanding of life in reciprocity. The protagonists learn from each other. It is not only the young who learn from the old: the veteran colonel is also an apprentice; perhaps an eternal one. This translates the idea that it is never too late to learn and, if necessary, to accompany someone to retake their steps. Complicity and sharing is an ineffable gift, even before tragedy. What remains in this mutual learning is the recognition of the other as the other, even in their most visceral contradictions or ambiguities. There could not be more perfect company. What we learn from this lesson is that the human condition is ambiguous, paradoxical. It is impossible to seize it logically and coherently. Or perhaps, as Malraux (1947, p. 152) would say, there lives a kind of inescapable “coherent deformation.” Perhaps we would be unable to expect much from an ex-military man who acquired a disability during his service and, above all, became even ruder and more arrogant, wandering through life. For some critics, he may not be the best reference, the example we expect for good boy Charlie but this other paradoxical face of the old colonel makes us recognize an obscure background constituting us. This face show how insatiable, fragile, and tragic we are.

As with every artwork, a film lends itself to various impressions or interpretations. We suggested one especially tinted with a more phenomenological bias. Surely, the film has many other facets to be explored: we can focus on it in the light of philosophy or psychology of education, the philosophy of law, ethics, aesthetics, theory of knowledge, and even public health. On the latter, the film could give vent, for example, to the pandemic crisis which began in late 2019. It is not only common sense that feeds on snobbery and obscurantism, especially because science is liable to lies, fake news, and all sorts of manipulation or corporatism in the name of some elitist paternalism. Thus, the film offers an ode to life in the most sanitary sense of the term. After all, COVID-19² is one of many agents which can cause loss of smell, taste, vision, and touch (also due to a preventive policy against contagion). We find a deeper crisis which we have witnessed in our sometimes invisible and callous time, which translates into every form of denialism and irrationalism. Fatally denying and defiling the meaning of our lives. Many prefer to practice the dance of death than that of life. They ignore and turn a blind eye to others’ pain. The essential aroma that only a full life can retrieve has been lost for a long time. Old patterns are preserved. We find a certain apology to a conservatism which creates, advances or emancipates nothing. We are also unable to dance when we give in to academic proselytism, to a collegial ostentation due to a sometimes patriarchal and increasingly hysterical and hypocritical austerity. This is a kind of subterfuge which makes the air heavy and unbreathable. Life in the academy often opts for seclusion among four walls than the peripatetic walk across the garden of existence.

2 Coronavirus (COVID-19) is a disease caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus which, once it spreads to the mouth or nose of an infected person, causes, among many reactions, the loss of smell.



Life exudes aromatically. Fragrances resemble the essences we experience not only in bodies but that we weave with things and with relationships with others. Each of these places are not equidistant forums as if they formed the sum of the parts of a whole, but manifest the whole itself in its parts. Here is the idea of perspectivism inherent to perception as an archetype and an ambiguity movement which continuously crosses those multiple faces incarnated in each character intersecting a single eternal instant.

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