

Dispositifs immersifs
monumentaux et collectifs

Monumental and Collective
Immersive Viewing Systems

Le cinéma odorant

Olfactory Cinema

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Public regardant un film stéréoscopique à Londres lors du Festival of Britain, 1951. Photographie tirée des collections de The National Archives (Royaume-Uni). [Voir la fiche](#).

Audience watching a stereoscopic film in London during the Festival of Britain, 1951. Photograph taken from the collections of The National Archives (United Kingdom). [See database entry](#).

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A documentary database listing all the contents of the *Encyclopedia* is in [open access](#). References to the database are also provided for each image included in this book.

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Le cinéma odorant

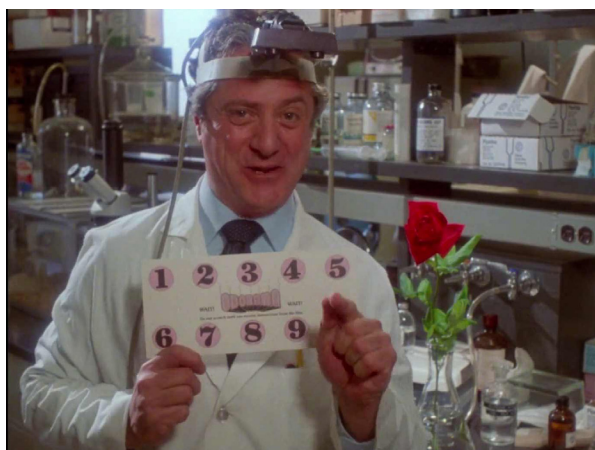
par Aude Weber-Houde

À travers son histoire, le cinéma odorant s'est essentiellement décliné selon deux technologies distinctes : soit les odeurs sont diffusées dans l'air de la salle de cinéma, en utilisant les systèmes de climatisation ou en installant des tuyaux près de chaque siège – ce qui ne nécessite pas d'action particulière de la part des usagers, hormis celle d'hummer les parfums; soit les odeurs peuvent être reniflées à partir d'une carte individuelle qui doit être grattée par l'utilisateur, ce qui libère un effluve discret.

L'«Odorama», proposé en 1981 par John Waters, est spécialement conçu pour accompagner son film *Polyester*. Il se présente sous la forme d'une carte individuelle, imprimée en couleurs, et comprenant dix pastilles à gratter par l'utilisateur, lesquelles émettent des effluves distincts, agréables ou non, variant entre la rose et le cuir, en passant par des parfums de pizza ou de colle. Le grattage doit être effectué au moment opportun pendant le visionnement du film, indiqué au spectateur par un chiffre apparaissant à l'écran et associé à la pastille à gratter. L'odeur ainsi reniflée correspond à l'action présentée à l'écran.



Carte Odorama recto verso créée pour le film *Polyester* (John Waters, 1981). [Voir la fiche.](#)



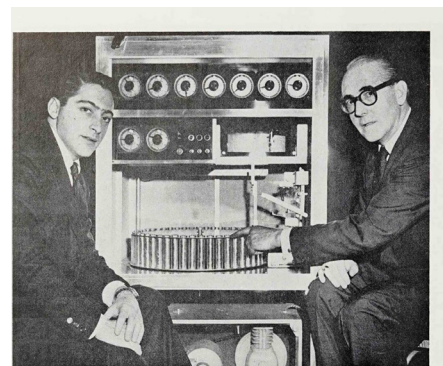
Capture d'écran de *Polyester* (John Waters, 1981).

[Voir la fiche.](#)

Un extrait vidéo est accessible en ligne.

Selon le journal *Motion Picture Daily* du 10 septembre 1958^[1], une des premières manifestations odorantes en salle de cinéma serait associée au célèbre exploitant américain Samuel Roxy Rothafel, et aurait eu lieu en 1906, à l'occasion de la présentation d'actualités filmées par Vitascope Company au sujet du Pasadena Tournament of Roses Parade, un défilé annuel de chars fleuris ayant lieu en Californie. À cette occasion, il aurait placé de l'essence de rose devant un ventilateur dans sa salle Family Theatre dans la ville de Forest City, en Pennsylvanie. Or, la

tuyaux installés sur chaque siège et diffusant un total de 30 effluves au moment opportun, pour accompagner le film *Scent of Mystery*, produit par Mike Todd Jr. Ce dernier était précédé, lors de ses premières projections, par un court métrage d'animation, *A Tale of Old Whiff*, réalisé par John Hubley (1960), qu'on croyait perdu jusqu'en 2016. Les odeurs proviennent d'un système central contrôlé de façon électronique, appelé « Smell Brain », dans lequel se trouvent, sur un convoyeur, des contenants d'odeurs placés dans l'ordre de leur apparition, percés puis dirigés dans les canalisations au moment opportun, à partir d'indications inscrites sur une piste « olfactive ». Cette compétition aux procédés concurrents, l'un assez simple, l'autre, complexe, s'est soldée par la victoire d'AromaRama, le film *Behind the Great Wall* ayant été présenté au public pour la première fois le 2 décembre 1959, supplantant Smell-O-Vision et le film *Scent of Mystery*, diffusé le 12 janvier 1960. Ces deux systèmes furent toutefois voués à l'échec, notamment en raison des difficultés à chasser les odeurs des salles et du comportement jugé dérangeant du public, dont les reniflements s'avéraient bruyants^[4].



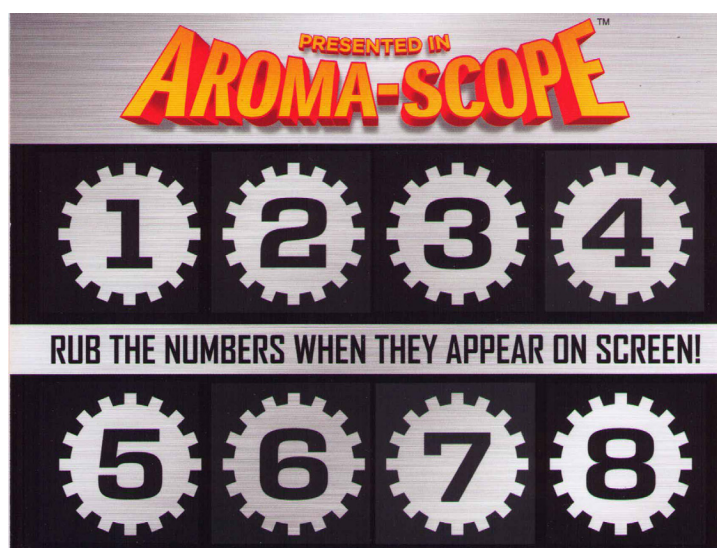
THE BRAINS OF SMELL-O-VISION—Michael Todd, Jr. (left) sits beside master control and scent energizer of the Smell-O-Vision system with its inventor Hans Laube. Latter points to the multitude of vials each containing a different scent which is selectively projected through tubes to every seat in theatre on signal triggered from picture's sound track.

This Movie Has Scents!

It smells, but pleasantly! You'll be intrigued by this innovation in motion picture presentation—scented scenes that can be smelled as well as seen.

Le système Smell-O-Vision présenté dans un article du *American Cinematographer*. Sur la photo: Michael Todd Jr. (gauche) et Hans Laube (droite). [Voir la fiche](#).

Le système des cartes individuelles proposé par John Waters a été reproduit à quelques reprises, notamment dans les années 1980 afin d'accompagner des émissions et des films diffusés à la télévision (dont *Scent of Mystery*), puis en 2003 avec le film *Rugrats Go Wild*, et enfin en 2011 avec le film *Spy Kids 4: All the Time in the World*, de Roberto Rodriguez, lequel s'accompagnait de la carte « Aroma-Scope ».



Carte Aroma-Scope, 2011. [Voir la fiche](#).

Actuellement, les systèmes 4DX et MX4D proposent des odeurs en salle. Le système MX4D diffuse des odeurs à partir de cartouches intégrées dans les accoudoirs des sièges, choisies en fonction du film présenté, alors que les odeurs générées avec 4XD proviennent du dossier de chaque siège et sont diffusées vers l'arrière. Les parcs thématiques Walt Disney World et Disneyland font aussi usage de ces techniques de cinéma odorant dans leurs salles spécialisées.

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- [1] James M. Jerauld, «New “Smell” Movie Backers Plan Feature Picture for Road Showing», *Motion Picture Daily*, 10 septembre 1958, 3.
 - [2] Pour une analyse détaillée en français du système de Leavell, consulter Catherine Clepper, «Symphonies olfactives. Les expériences de cinéma odorant aux États-Unis à l'ère du parlant», dans *Techniques et technologies du cinéma. Modalités, usages et pratiques des dispositifs cinématographiques à travers l'histoire*, dir. André Gaudreault et Martin Lefebvre (Rennes : Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2015), 125-142.
 - [3] «War of Rival Film “Smellies”», *Variety*, 14 octobre 1959, 1, 13.
 - [4] Pour une analyse détaillée de l'histoire de la «bataille des *smellies*», consulter Catherine Clepper, «The Riggged House: Gimmickry, Exhibition, and Embodied Spectatorship in Mid-Century American Movie-Going» (thèse de doctorat, Northwestern University, 2016), 88-112.

Olfactory Cinema

by Aude Weber-Houde

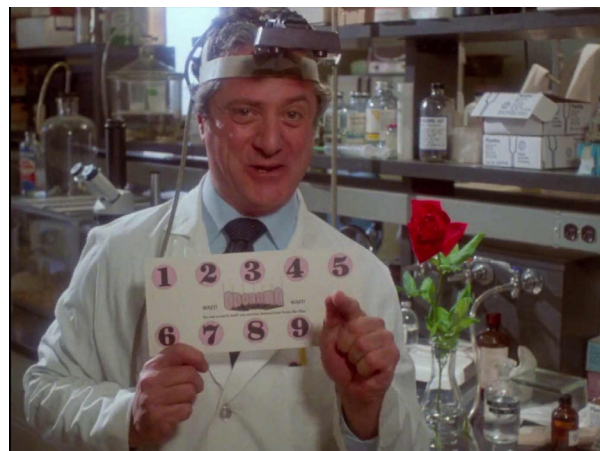
Translation: Timothy Barnard

Throughout its history, olfactory cinema has basically been made with one of two distinct technologies: either a scent is diffused in the air in a movie theatre using the air conditioning system or by installing a pipe near every seat – this method does not require any particular action on the part of the film viewer, other than breathing in the scent; or an odour can be sniffed using a personal card which has to be scratched by the user, releasing a discreet aroma.

“Odorama,” introduced in 1981 by John Waters, was specially designed to accompany his film *Polyester*. It took the form of a personal card, printed in colour, with ten spots the user would scratch to give off distinct odours, both pleasant and unpleasant, from roses to leather, pizza and glue. The card had to be scratched at the right moment during the film, which was indicated to the viewer by a number on the screen matching the spot to be scratched. The odour sniffed in this manner matched the action on screen.



Double-sided Odorama card created for the film *Polyester* (John Waters, 1981). [See database entry.](#)



Clip from *Polyester* (John Waters, 1981). [See database entry.](#)

A video clip is available [online](#).

According to *Motion Picture Daily* on 10 September 1958,^[1] one of the first times smell was used in a movie theatre came in 1906 when the American exhibitor Samuel Roxy Rothafel is said to have presented a Vitascope actuality film on the Pasadena Tournament of Roses Parade, an annual event held in California featuring flower-bedecked floats. On this occasion, Rothafel placed rose essence in front of a fan in the Family Theatre in the town of Forest City, Pennsylvania. But the Family Theatre was only built in 1908, and it is not possible using primary sources from the period to confirm this anecdote. It is possible, therefore, that the event took place on another date. Nevertheless, this practice, by which exhibitors diffused in their theatres scents generally

connected to the film being shown and most often by means of ventilation or air conditioning systems, recurred on several occasions.

In 1927, the inventor John Leavell filed a patent application for an “apparatus for presenting theatrical impressions.” This patent, granted in 1930 and inspiring numerous inventors thereafter, including Hans Laube and Morton Heilig, was for an apparatus for diffusing scents in a movie theatre in a way that was completely synchronized with the images, thereby creating “olfactory images.” This system would work by means of pipes installed under the theatre floor diffusing at the right moment scents coming from a central tank. The theatre had to be equipped with fans installed under each seat to help propel the scents upwards. This system was never installed in a movie theatre, however, with the exception of one inconclusive test, because of the difficulty in getting rid of the odours after they were released; the accumulation of scents made viewers unwell.^[2]

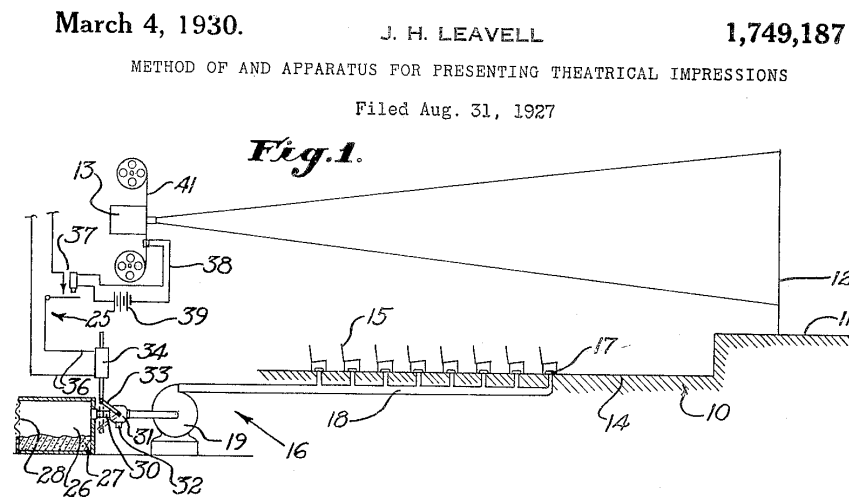


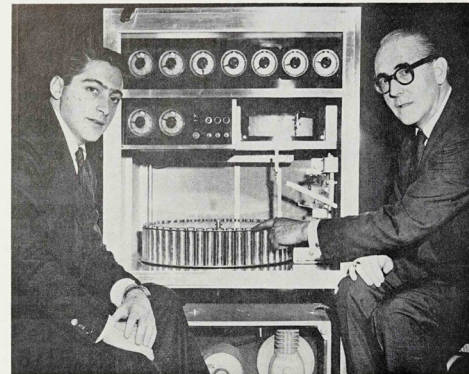
Illustration taken from the patent application of the Method of and Apparatus for Presenting Theatrical Impressions (John H. Leavell, 1927). [See database entry.](#)

In 1959 there began one of the great periods in the history of olfactory cinema, a race to the winning method described by *Variety* at the time as a “war of rival film smellies.”^[3] Two methods faced off: AromaRama, created by Charles Weiss, diffused scents by means of the movie theatre’s air conditioning system to accompany the travelogue *Behind the Great Wall* by Carlo Lizzani. This was a nod to the widescreen system Cinerama, which was often used for travelogues. AromaRama’s competitor, Smell-O-Vision, first created by Hans Laube in 1939 under the name “Scentovision” and then patented in the United States in 1957, diffused odours through personal diffusion systems made up of small pipes installed in each seat and releasing a total of 30 scents at the right moment to accompany the film *Scents of Mystery*, produced by Mike Todd Jr. This film was preceded at the initial screenings by a short animated film by John Hubley, *A Tale of Old Whiff* (1960), which until 2016 was believed to have been lost. Here the scents came from a central system, controlled electronically, called “Smell Brain” and in which, on a conveyor belt, were found containers of scents in the order of their appearance. These were pierced and

the scents were then directed towards the pipes at the right moment on the basis of indications written on an “olfactory” track. This competition between rival techniques, one quite simple and the other complex, culminated with the victory of AromaRama; *Behind the Great Wall* was exhibited publicly for the first time on 2 December 1959, and would supplant Smell-O-Rama and *Scent of Mystery*, released on 12 January 1960. Nevertheless, each of these systems was doomed to failure, in particular because of the difficulty in getting rid of the scents in the theatre and the way the systems functioned, which audiences deemed annoying because they were noisy.^[4]

The system of personal cards introduced by John Waters has been reproduced several times, in particular in the 1980s to accompany television broadcasts and films shown on television (including *Scent of Mystery*) and in 2003 with the film *Rugrats Go Wild*, and finally in 2011 with the film *Spy Kids 4: All the Time in the World*, directed by Roberto Rodriguez, which was accompanied by the “Aroma-Scope” card.

Today the systems 4DX and MX4D are used to provide scents in movie theatres. The MX4D system diffuses scents chosen according to the film being shown from cartridges incorporated in the armrests of the seats, while the scents generated with 4XD come from the backrest of each seat and are diffused backwards. The Disneyland and Walt Disney World theme parks also use these olfactory cinema techniques in their specialized cinemas.



THE BRAINS OF SMELL-O-VISION—Michael Todd, Jr. (left) sits beside master control and scent energizer of the Smell-O-Vision system with its inventor Hans Laube. Latter points to the multitude of vials each containing a different scent which is selectively projected through tubes to every seat in theatre on signal triggered from picture's sound track.

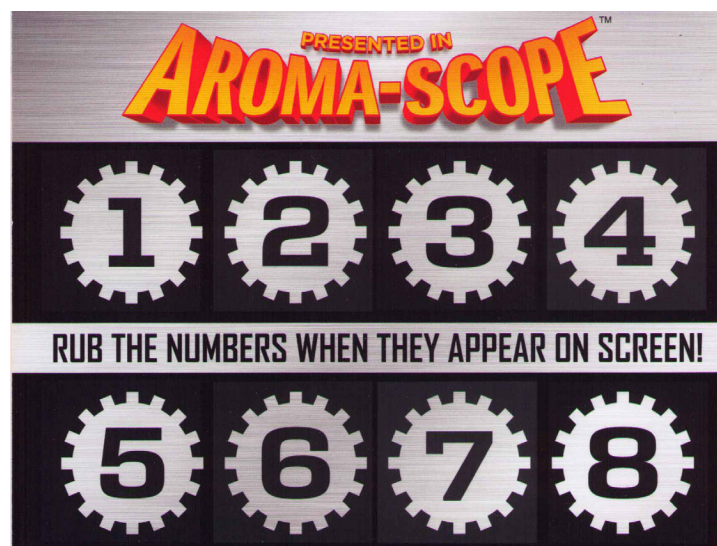
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It smells, but pleasantly! You'll be intrigued by this innovation in motion picture presentation—scented scenes that can be smelled as well as seen.

By HERB A. LIGHTMAN

The Smell-O-Vision system introduced in an article in *American Cinematographer*. In the photo: Michael Todd Jr. (left) and Hans Laube (right).

[See database entry.](#)



Aroma-Scope card, 2011. [See database entry.](#)

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- [1] James M. Jerauld, "New 'Smell' Movie Backers Plan Feature Picture for Road Showing," *Motion Picture Daily*, 10 September 1958, 3.
 - [2] For detailed analysis in French of Leavell's system, see Catherine Clepper, "Symphonies olfactives: Les expériences de cinéma odorant aux États-Unis à l'ère du parlant," in *Techniques et technologies du cinéma: Modalités, usages et pratiques des dispositifs cinématographiques à travers l'histoire*, eds. André Gaudreault and Martin Lefebvre (Rennes: Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2015), 125-42.
 - [3] "War of Rival Film 'Smellies,'" *Variety*, 14 October 1959, 1, 13.
 - [4] For a detailed analysis of the history of the "battle of the smellies," see Catherine Clepper, "The Rigged House: Gimmickry, Exhibition, and Embodied Spectatorship in Mid-Century American Movie-Going," (PhD diss., Northwestern University, 2016), 88-112.