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# "One man's toxic sludge is another man's potpourri": Notes on Overconsumption, Marginalization and Smell in How the Grinch Stole Christmas (2000)

As the success of stink bombs and woopy cushions would suggest, the sense of smell is an essential element to low comedy and general buffoonery. As it has historically considered inferior, repulsive and taboo, at least in Western traditional thought<sup>[1]</sup>, the presence of smell in cultural practice necessarily leads to the dissociation of sensory perceptions and bodily experiences from canonical aesthetics and hegemonic politics. Since smell is often culturally associated with lower body functions<sup>[2]</sup>, it seems almost too 'on the nose' that olfaction would be the sensory modality of low-brow humor and general stinky buffoonery, as the texts of the oldest mystery plays and farces suggest<sup>[3]</sup>. While the *Smell Studies Blog* has made itself home for introspective, opinionated and forward-thinking pieces, I propose in this short semi-academic article to literally 'lower' the bar in order to delve into the inner workings of the oft-ignored interactions of 'low-brow' (or popular) culture, low comedy, and the lowest of the senses: smell. My somewhat informal enquiry will be constituted of a non-exhaustive study of the uses of olfaction in the dialogs and the direction of *How the Grinch Stole Christmas* (2000). The film is directed by Ron Howard, written by Peter S. Seaman and Jeffrey Price, and based on an eponymous children's book by Theodor Dr. Seuss (1957). It notably stars Jim Carrey and the Grinch and Taylor Momsen as Cindy Lou Who. While previous research works have pointed out the overall political nature of the original book and of Seuss's productions and adaptations in general<sup>[4]</sup>, my intent here rather focuses on how smells are used in the film to infer a complex subtextual critique of overconsumption. Indeed, while smell pleasantness perception is mostly universal<sup>[5]</sup>,

the Grinch's preference for malodor not only allows him to distinguish himself from and to repel other Whos, but also to embody his own social position as a smelly, undesirable outcast, ideally situated to better critique the unchecked consumerist *habitus* of Whoville's inhabitants.

## A Bloated Christmas

As Isaac Weiner notes, aurality is essential for understanding the tensions between religion and secularism in the United States in the original *How the Grinch stole Christmas* 1957 comic book: the Grinch initially abhors the Whos's loud public displays of Christmas cheer as they drown out his own need for singularity and individuality in a homogeneous, harmonious society<sup>[6]</sup>. But, in the film adaptation of the year 2000, the religious critique seems to be overtaken by a subtextual satire of America's chronic overconsumption habits, which are represented metaphorically through digestion in the cinematography. Overconsumption of goods is akin to pathological overconsumption of food, leading to gastric distress and manifesting through various loud and malodorous gaseous emissions. During the opening credits, Whoville's marching band "in their Christmas-y best" superposes merry caroling with flatulent-sounding air instruments while the narrator explains how every single Who "loved Christmas the most, without a single Who doubt" (0;02;33). The farty caroling serves to introduce the Whos frenetic Christmas-related shopping habits by focusing on the constant shrill movement of the cash register at a shop named Farfingle's (0;02;40-0;02;45). This transitions into the first inkling the 2000 adaptation anti-consumerist stance through the young girl character Cindy Lou Who: she expresses doubts about the excessive consumption associated with the festivities and asks her father: "Doesn't this seem like a bit much? / This is what Christmas is all about! Can't you feel it?" (0;03;14). Indeed, Whoville's Christmas is all about things, and especially numerous, overwhelmingly abundant things, as shown through close-up shots of Farfingle's cash register, which shows piles of bills, coins and constantly moving numbered buttons, as well as the town's square clock countdown till Christmas (0;03;19-0;03;26). The parallel on-screen omnipresence of both objects and numerals represents the excess of a community whose sole interest resides in freefall consumption. The film exaggerates the Whos's compulsion to consume up to the point of absurdity by mocking contemporary aggressive and misleading marketing tactics as shown by the boisterous announcement of a 5-minute 99% percent off Christmas sale (0;03;30), which in turns leads to a comical, and vaguely threatening,

stampede of frenetic Whos rushing towards the brazen salesman. The Whos's Christmas is, as Cindy Lou naively points out, all about collectively sanctioned excessive consumption, which is always represented, in the film, as both comically repulsive and vaguely threatening. Toward that effect, the cinematography uses visual elements and sound effects to effectively link commercialism, digestion and toxicity: when the Grinch uses Whoville's garbage disposal tube to access his own lair, his arrival on Mount Crumpit open-air dump is accompanied by flatulence sound effects (0;17;35) to represent both Whoville's trash and the Grinch himself as the excremental refuse of the Christmas-obsessed community.

## Garbage Economy

After presenting Whoville, the Whos, and their enthusiastic attitude towards Christmas, the film's next sequence introduces the Grinch himself as a character through his lifestyle and personal possessions, focusing on the way he's negatively perceived by his peers and therefore marginalized. The Grinch is a particularly excluded Who, both socially and geographically, as he lives in isolation in an underground lair, located at the top of "Mount Crumpit", and ominously towering over Whoville. While Dr. Seuss named said mountain "Mount Crumpet" in his original story, the 2000 film significantly renames it "Mount Crumpit" to suggest, thanks to onomastics, the noun "crumb", its derived adjective "crummy", as well as the odorous *arm-pit*. Indeed, historically, given toponyms are often linked to objective sensory characteristics of the spaces they name<sup>[7]</sup>: the toponym "Crumpit" thus indicated that the Grinch's living space is, in fact, Whoville's open-air garbage dump, used to discard both material and social refuse. Access to the Grinch's lair is through a trash chute marked with the label "Dumpit to Crumpit" (00;16;38). The fact that the trash chute is vertical, that refuse paradoxically ascends, demonstrates how nonsensical Whoville's consumer habits, environmental management, and exclusionary behaviors are. In the likeness of trash ascending towards Mount Crumpit through an unexplained anti-gravity disposal system, the Grinch's social and geographical exclusion is represented as equally silly and problematic for the Grinch himself complains that "there's got to be a better way" for him to interact in some way with Whoville's community (0;17;04). Indeed, the Grinch's survival relies solely on the reusing and recycling of Whoville's trash. Along his canine companion Max, he picks through the Whos's waste and brings home whatever they reject for his own creative, if not slightly dangerous, use, claiming that "it's amazing what these Whos just throw

away" (0;17;39). For instance, he characterizes a "stench[y]" red trash bag labeled "hazardous waste" as "some kind of soap" (0;17;43) and ends up using its contents as a form of alternative fuel (0;19;42). The Whos's overconsuming *ethos* leads to a quest for sensory uniformity which necessarily causes the rejection of individuals and objects deemed unacceptable. The Grinch, on the other hand, while his trash dumping habit may seem initially repulsive, ignores the value system of those who rejected him to see the use and the beauty beyond what may appear undesirable.

## Smell and Alienation

The young Cindy Lou Who is perplexed by the Grinch's exclusion from Whoville's Christmas pageantry and enquires to understand his character by interviewing Whos who knew the Grinch as a child. While the narrator hypothesizes that the Grinch hatred for Christmas is caused by his "heart two sizes too small" (0;06;35), narrative flashbacks into the Grinch's childhood show he has been initially rejected by other Who children for his unusual appearance and behavior. As the young Grinch crafts a thoughtful Christmas present for Martha May Whovier, said present is characterized through the neologism "hideoderous" by the future mayor of Whoville, Augustus May Who, who combines the adjectives "hideous" and "odorous" to disqualify the Grinch and his gift on both visual and olfactory terms. Augustus's unconventional use of language does not reflect on his talent for verbal creativity: it serves the purpose of othering the object and its maker through neology, as the Grinch and everything related to him become ontological hybrids, monsters only fit for humiliation and exclusion. Rightfully hurt and angered by the humiliating behavior of the Whos, the Grinch physically excludes himself on Mount Crumpit as he forsakes Whoville and Christmas altogether. The alienation of the Grinch from his community is not only represented, in the film, through the geographical and social marginalization of the character, but also through him adopting opposite hedonic preferences from those of the inhabitants of Whoville, leading to further social alienation, especially through smell. The first shot of the Grinch himself as a character shows his hands rummaging through a slimy pile of discarded fruits and vegetables while he describes how much he despises Whoville's inhabitants, after having scared a group of teenagers on their way to invade his space for some cheap thrills: "Serves them right, those Yuletide-loving, sickly-sweet, nog-sucking cheer mongers! I really don't like 'em" (0;05;29). Amongst the second-hand groceries he's perusing, the Grinch chooses a plump yellow onion for a snack, biting into it directly, loudly chewing skin and flesh (0;05;41).

The camera focuses on the Grinch's mouth as it spills bits of juicy onion all the while he expresses his distaste for the Whos and Christmas in general. The close-up shot on the Grinch's toothy open mouth loudly masticating the raw onion both indicates his disregard for social convention while associating his behavior with that of animals. He then thoroughly rubs said onion into his own armpits (0;06;00), which concludes his sulfur-scented personal hygiene routine[8]. The use of raw onion as a snack, a buccal hygiene product and a personal deodorant, is meant to enhance bodily smells usually considered undesirable and often cause for actual marginalization outside of fiction[9]. This suggests that the Grinch and the Whos's animosity is rooted in opposite codes of sensory pleasure: the "sickly-sweet" atmosphere of Whoville's frenetic overconsumption is opposed to the sulfurous breath of the Grinch's onion-based hygiene. Similarly, he vocalizes his sincere enjoyment of the malodor of an oozing, squelching trash bag in no uncertain terms: "Ugh, what's that stench? It's fantastic!" (0;17;25). The Grinch's puzzling olfactory preferences, besides feeding into the comedic effects of the cinematography and dialog, advocate for radical hedonic individuality rather pleasant conventional uniformity, as specified by his customizing of a popular saying to illustrate his own stance on hedonic individuality: "One man's toxic sludge is another man's potpourri" (0;17;41). This acute polarization of the Grinch and Whoville's inhabitants' hedonic preferences shows exactly how much the sense of smell is an important vector for ideological conflict and political action[10].

## Malodor as Resistance

As he has exiled himself on Mount Crumpit in reaction to the Whos's unfair treatment, the Grinch is acutely aware of how negatively he is perceived by the inhabitants of Whoville. In the later parts of the film, he breaks into song to express his own feelings of self-hatred through olfactory metaphors, as he describes himself as having "garlic in [his] soul" (1;03;23). In that regard, the Grinch's attitude toward in own olfactory self-image is particularly ambiguous as he seems to equally deplore and embrace his persona as a malodorous Christmas antagonist and, implicitly, an intellectually sharp critic of his own community. Indeed, the Grinch's unsatisfactory socialization marks him as the "mean and hairy and smelly" (1;13;33) malicious objector to the Whos's unquestioned values as both consumers and as social beings. As such, the Grinch uses his own personal malodor in conjunction with various disruptive strategies to reject the Whos themselves as well as disturb their Christmas

celebrations. Smell becomes a potent offense mechanism to further his own (now willing) alienation and to resist the Whos's mindlessly joyous overconsumption. While strolling through Whoville looking for opportunities for mischief, the Grinch comes across an invasive salesman who insists on selling him a hat: "Hey stranger, won't let you go till you buy a chapeau!". The Grinch responds with violent malodorous retching, visually depicted as a thick, radioactive-green gas, directly into the salesman's face, stunning the Who while the Grinch cackles (0;07;01-0;07;11). Likewise, a few minutes later, the Grinch's anti-Christmas agenda veers into comical feats of harmless anarchism: after his onion-scented counterattack on the aggressive salesman, he disturbs Whoville's mail distribution system by flooding it with (among other "trash" mail) jury duty notices (00;10;02-00;10;29). At Christmas, the time of the year when pressure on postal workers is at its highest, this sequence represents acts of citizenship as meaningless chores, thus weakening the Whos's whole value system. The fact that the Grinch's main antagonist and childhood bully is in fact Whoville's mayor Augustus May Who (played by Jeffrey Tambor) confirms this interpretation of the Grinch's disruptive tactics as a form of pseudo-anarchist direct action against Whoville's values and administration<sup>[11]</sup>. In that regard, Cindy Lou Who's progressively more critical stance on Christmas overconsumption and the Whos's hostility towards the Grinch verbalizes the Grinch's anti-Christmas and anti-establishment beliefs in ways that far more policed, far less abrasive, and just as ineffectual. The incredibly verbose child consistently attempts to convince her "kerbubbled" family to question their "superfluous" Christmas shopping using an extensive vocabulary which derails, rather than asserts, her own critical stance (0;07;25-0;07;30). In the end, the Grinch's final action of stealing Whoville's Christmas gifts can be understood as attack meant to resist consumerist practices and ideology through the destruction of property, not unlike the Grinch's use of unpleasant smell to question the Whos's sensory and social value system.

## Conclusion

Beneath the guise of fart jokes and light-hearted satire, the Grinch's failed attempt at domestic terrorism only highlights a general crisis in American (and globally western European) political thought and action from the early 2000s onward. While this enquiry goes far beyond my own knowledge and skill set, I would like to highlight how much cultural representations of smell are often used as media for political thought in all forms of fictional productions. While Ron Howard's politics are virtually

unknown<sup>[12]</sup>, *How the Grinch stole Christmas's* use of olfactory motifs can be interpreted as a lesson from the unpleasant. The sense olfaction being fleeting, unpleasant smells, contrary to pleasant, "sickly-sweet" ones, appear as an antidote to unchecked greed as nothing can be gained from them, except for those willing to challenge social conventions and hedonic hierarchies. In the likeness of Max the dog refusing to don a red nose representing (for an approving Grinch) "the glitter of commercialism" (1;01;00), the film invites its spectator to question the social impact of collective overconsumption in such a uniform community as Whoville.

[1] Chantal Jaquet, *Philosophie de l'odorat*, Hors collection (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2010), <https://www.cairn.info/philosophie-de-l-odorat-9782130579144.htm>.

[2] Constance Classen, David Howes, and Anthony Synnott, *Aroma. The Cultural History of Smell* (Londres: Routledge, 2002).

[3] Rory G. Critten and Annette Kern-Stähler, "Smell in the York Corpus Christi Plays," in *The Five Senses in Medieval and Early Modern England*, ed. Wietse De Boer, Beatrix Busse, and Annette Kern-Stähler (Brill, 2016), 237–68, [https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004315495\\_013](https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004315495_013).

[4] On Seuss's work specifically, see Isaac Weiner, "'And Then! Oh, the Noise! Oh, the Noise! Noise! Noise! Noise!' Or How the Grinch Heard Christmas," in *The Public Work of Christmas*, ed. Pamela E. Klassen and Monique Scheer (McGill-Queen's University Press, 2019), 36–59, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9780773557956-005>; Philip Nel, *Dr. Seuss: American Icon* (New York: Continuum, 2005); Michael R. Kearney, "Stealing Christmas: The Epideictic Rhetoric of the Grinch," in *Rzeczywistość zanimowana: kreskówki w kulturze, nauce i społeczeństwie*, ed. Weronika Andrzejewska, Krzysztof Czyżak, and Marek Kaźmierczak, Wydanie I, Seria Filmoznawcza / Uniwersytet im. Adama Mickiewicza w Poznaniu 33 (Poznań: Wydawnictwo Naukowe UAM, 2021); Julia Pond, "A Transformative Biblical Encounter: The Garden of Eden in How the Grinch Stole Christmas," ed. Michelle Abate, *The Looking Glass: New Perspectives on Children's Literature* 14, no. 1 (2010). On Christmas mediatization and politics, see Sheila Whiteley, *Christmas, Ideology and Popular Culture* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2022), <https://doi.org/10.1515/9780748631872>; Shelby Burroughs, "Consumer Capitalist Christmas: How Participation in Christmas Frames Us as Religious Subjects" (Religion:



Student Scholarship & Creative Works, Rock Island Illinois, Augustana College, 2019), <https://digitalcommons.augustana.edu/relgstudent/8/>.

[5] Weiner, "And *Then!* Oh, the Noise! Oh, the Noise! Noise! Noise! Noise! Or How the Grinch Heard Christmas."

[6] Weiner.

[7] On trash and toponyms (French context), see Olivier Bauchet, "Les Déchets Dans La Toponymie: État de La Question," *Les Nouvelles de l'archéologie*, no. 151 (June 12, 2018): 6–9, <https://doi.org/10.4000/nda.3928>.

[8] On the smell of sweat and exclusion, see William Tullett, "Grease and Sweat: Race and Smell in Eighteenth-Century English Culture," *Cultural and Social History* 13, no. 3 (July 2, 2016): 307–22, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14780038.2016.1202008>.

[9] Nat Lazakis, *Body Odor and Biopolitics. Characterizing Smell in Neoliberal America* (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2021).

[10] On that topic, see among others Gwenn-Aël Lynn and Debra Riley Parr, *Olfactory Art and the Political in an Age of Resistance* (Milton: Taylor & Francis Group, 2021).

[11] On anarchism, individual action and terrorism, see Yonah Alexander and Kenneth A. Myers, eds., *Terrorism in Europe* (London: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2015).

[12] Richard Brody, "The Silent Political Messaging in Ron Howard's "Hillbilly Elegy" Adaptation", *The New Yorker*, November 23, 2020, <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/the-front-row/the-silent-political-messaging-in-ron-howards-hillbilly-elegy-adaptation> <https://perma.cc/KP7P-KXPZ>

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