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Review: Siôn Parkinson, *Stinkhorn: How Nature's Most Foul-Smelling Mushroom Can Change the Way We Listen* (Sternberg Press, 2024)
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Fascination with mushrooms has experienced a curious renaissance in the humanities within recent decades, as indicated by the scholarly interventions of Anna Tsing (*The Mushroom at the End of the World*, 2015), John Cage (*A Mycological Foray*, 2020), and Merlin Sheldrake (*Entangled Life*, 2020); to name but a few. To this ever-growing field of research, a new and highly evocative title is added. Siôn Parkinson's *Stinkhorn: How Nature's Most Foul-Smelling Mushroom Can Change the Way We Listen* is a volume perfumed with thought-provoking entries on the shared resonances between putrid smells, aural landscapes, and phallic fungi. Beyond the arresting image of a ripe dune stinkhorn proudly adorning the front cover, the reader encounters a heady concoction of etymological musings, philosophical provocations and punny wordplays, all of which waft together with each turn of a page. In stylish Plantin typeface, Parkinson crafts an elegant reflection on what is largely considered to be one of the strangest – if not the smelliest – mushrooms to have protruded from the ground below: *Phallus impudicus*, also known as the 'common stinkhorn'. While the book reflects a thorough engagement with natural history and mycology, it is wonderfully generous in how it conveys the story of this shameless, earthy growth, and its power to captivate the minds (or indeed noses) of thinkers such as Pliny the Elder, Hadrianus Junius, and John Gerard.

Leafing through *Stinkhorn*, one discovers that every paragraph is numbered according to an ambiguous sequence, one that stylistically imitates the accumulative list of figures found in an old naturalist's notebook or a collection of footnotes to some greater, enigmatic study on the oddities of this elusive fungus (as Parkinson himself notes, the odour exuded from the stinkhorn has historically denied an investigator's ability to carry out a sustained observation. Any attempt to draw or analyse its physical appearance indoors usually ends with its swift departure out of a nearby

window). What sets this publication apart from previous contributions, however, is Parkinson's commitment to the possibility of Stink with a capital 'S', a type of *smelling sound* that induces feelings of uncertainty or dread in a nearby listener, as if their ears were inhaling the pungent aroma of a flagrant stinkhorn mushroom.¹ Stink, according to Parkinson, is more than just a bad smell. It is an insistent, pervasive impression left behind by an odour so inebriating, one can think of or imagine little else.² It circulates throughout the mind as an ambivalent reeking miasma, teasing the brain-centre and sensorium as a whole with the full breadth of its foul tones and textures. At its most speculative, Stink meets the ear and the nose at the back of the throat, manifesting as a percussive contraction similar to a gag reflex that bubbles up when faced with something truly revolting.³ Stink, Parkinson tells us in *Stinkhorn*, is a durational intensity that has the potential to *inform* how we make sense of sound, going beyond what is normally considered to be our acoustic understanding of the world, to include 'tones' or 'notes' that are uniquely olfactory as well as auditory.⁴

Mycologists, neuropsychologists, chemists, and perfumers might scoff at this proposition for being unscientific or wishful thinking. How can sounds *smell*, or even *stink* for that matter? In what world is it possible to suggest that noise gives off any kind of odour? Parkinson is not oblivious to the likelihood of such strong opposition from critics, or even to the possibility that some might characterize his argument as the inconclusive ramblings of a 'shit-talker' (the provocative title he chose for his recent public lecture at Goldsmiths).⁵ However, the bold statement that drifts from the pages of *Stinkhorn*, like a cartoonish scent trail (think Pepe le Pew), is meant to be intellectually 'funky', even a little muddy. If images are 'listenable', Parkinson argues in the introduction, in the sense that noise can be implied by the content within their visual frame, then perhaps there are other sensory modalities that are shared between sound and smell which are independent of sight (can a 'ting' imply a 'tang?'). Perhaps, he suggests, there are instances in which one can think about sound *through* smell, where one can mull over a melodic musk as it diffuses into discrete tonal elements in space over time.

This is not a straightforward task, and one which Parkinson openly admits to still be mulling over even after publishing *Stinkborn*.⁶ Granted, it is a line of thought that is unprecedented, but only because it thwarts, in the words of philosopher Jean-François Lyotard, the principles of a language in which the prospect of a ‘sonorous scent’ cannot be heard as such.⁷ Stink, this ambivalent type of smelling sound that Parkinson chases throughout *Stinkborn* (again like Pepe?), is *inarticulate* because it cannot be addressed *by* language in the traditional sense. Rather, Stink ‘mushrooms’ as a language *beneath* language, a ‘sonorous depth’ or ‘scent’ of the senses which, as Lyotard muses in ‘Music, Mute’, only the ‘hallucinating ear’ can hear as such.⁸

In fact, the more we sniff around *Stinkborn*, the sooner we come to the realization that Parkinson’s Stink is largely *hallucinatory* in nature. Despite what appears to be an inevitable contradiction, Stink, according to Parkinson’s logic, is a philosophy of the senses which fosters a ‘nose-led approach’ to reality, a way of listening to sounds which are *felt* to be real, with the same sort of insistence that an offensive smell makes on the nose, despite the fact that the source object is largely absent from our immediate surroundings.⁹ These illusory smelling sounds, tones and textures that draw us in to the world, contribute to a ‘nasal imaginary’ which informs the elusive impressions of a reality that normally defies articulation as such. For Parkinson, this hallucinatory aspect of Stink is most prominent in the ‘funny turns’ that indiscriminately disrupt our uniform sensory perception of the world itself, a phenomenon which he himself started to experience a few months into the UK’s coronavirus pandemic in the form of random seizures that began one day without warning and which were accompanied by a strange, yet deeply obnoxious odour. ‘Cool, chemical-like, pure and poisonous’ are the words that Parkinson lands on when describing this phantom stench which would last no more than ten seconds before he lost consciousness.¹⁰ His subsequent diagnosis of temporal lobe epilepsy became the basis for a nasal imaginary in which smelling sounds are arguably *felt* to be real despite their ghostly manifestation. Pre-epileptic auras, Parkinson notes in *Stinkborn*, can be filled with sounds of buzzing, ringing, drumming, or humming, and smells of burning, rot, dirt, and mould, without appearing as an object in the world

as such. And while one might argue that the connection is tenuous, it is curious to think, as Parkinson asks us to do, about whether the ‘hum’ of a phantom Stink *informs* the ‘hum’ of a phantom sound in these moments of temporal disconnect, where the perceived differences between aural and olfactory registers become whisper-thin rather than worlds apart.

Many questions persist after reading *Stinkhorn*, like a bad smell that I can’t quite shake off. What does Stink confirm or deny about the longstanding issue of transcendence and immanence in philosophy, or the possibility that queer ecologies convey a ‘sonorous scent’, given that the foul-smelling phallic shaft of the stinkhorn mushroom naturally grows from a flagrant volva or ‘witch’s egg’? Does morning breath Stink? Is the human voice a smelling sound that rises from the back of the throat and the nasopharynx that connects the nose to the ears? It is difficult to say for certain, yet the potential for future Stink is substantial. When comparing Parkinson’s *Stinkhorn* to John Mowitt’s well-respected 2002 publication *Percussion*, if the intention behind the latter is to make sense of senseless beating, then it’s safe to say that the former is a volume obsessed with making sense of the sensible conditions which resist categorization: the foul smells and sounds of a world that draw us in while simultaneously repelling our desire to even sense reality as such. In short, this book Stinks, but for all the right reasons.

¹ Siôn Parkinson, *Stinkhorn: How Nature’s Most Foul-Smelling Mushroom Can Change the Way We Listen* (Sternberg Press, 2024), p. 23.

² Ibid., p. 31.

³ Ibid., p. 42.

⁴ Ibid., p. 12.

⁵ Siôn Parkinson, ‘Shit-Talker’, Goldsmiths, University of London, 21 November 2024.

<https://www.gold.ac.uk/calendar/?id=15219> [accessed 29 December 2024].

⁶ Such an ‘admission’ was clear from the lecture given at Goldsmiths in November 2024, yet Parkinson’s playful suggestion that he might be ‘shit-talking’ should not belie the intellectual endeavour behind his argument, or the very real fact that he might be about to ‘strike the right note’ in successfully articulating sounds that smell.

⁷ Jean-François Lyotard, ‘Music, Mute’, in *Postmodern Fables*, trans. by Georges van den Abeele (University of Minnesota Press, 2003), p. 220.

⁸ Ibid., pp. 224, 227.

⁹ Parkinson, *Stinkhorn*, p. 22.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 129.