

Dutch scientists use smell to recreate JFK, Diana and other famous deaths

December 26 2014, by Nicolas Delaunay

Dutch scientists are recreating the deaths of some of the world's most famous personalities by reconstructing their last moments using scents and sounds.

From the sweet smell of Jacqueline Kennedy's perfume mingled with the scent of John F. Kennedy's blood to Whitney Houston's last drug-fuelled moments in a Beverly Hills bathtub, scientists at Breda university say they offer visitors a unique, if somewhat macabre, historical snapshot.

"We all have seen the images of JFK's assassination, but what did it smell like?" asks Frederik Duerinck, from the communication and multimedia design faculty of Breda's Avans university of applied sciences.

To find out, visitors with a sense of the morbid are invited to lie in a series of four silver metal boxes similar to those found in a morgue.

The boxes, which are pitch-dark inside, are rigged with pipes leading to bottles containing pressurised smells.

A soundtrack is played and on queue different scents are released into the box to recreate a specific "final moment."

For around five minutes, visitors can relive the smells and sounds believed to have surrounded four people whose deaths are etched into the world's collective memory: Kennedy (1963); Princess Diana (1997);

Moamer Kadhafi (2011) and Whitney Houston (2012).

Strong chemical odour

For instance, those wanting to experience Houston's final moments are transported to a bathtub at the upmarket Beverly Hills hotel where the diva died in February 2012 at age 48.

A coroner ruled that the singing legend died of accidental drowning, with cocaine and heart disease listed as contributing factors.

To the sounds of splashing water and Houston's voice, a visitor first gets a whiff of generic cleaner, used in hotels around the world, followed by the olive oil the singer used in her tub.

Then a strong chemical odour, similar to that of cocaine fills the box, grabbing its occupant by the throat, followed by the sound of rushing water and then silence.

"Smell is rarely used in communication and we wanted to explore its uses," said Duerinck. "It's a very powerful means of communication."

Scientists have proved that smells are linked to the part of the brain that regulates emotion and memory.

Odours are often used in the retail industry to trigger a buying mood in customers.

"Who doesn't want to buy a loaf after catching a whiff of fresh bread?" said Duerinck, who together with other lecturers and students has put together an inventory of odours and is devising new ways of using smell: for instance in story-telling.

"It's quite surprising and spectacular," said Riks Soepenbergh, 31, who experienced a recreation of Kadhafi's last moments as the former Libyan strongman was hunted and killed by rebels in October 2011.

"You can watch the pictures as many times as you want, it's just not the same thing," he said of the attack on Kadhafi's convoy, forcing the long-serving leader to hide in a drainage pipe before being murdered.

'I felt myself being hunted'

"I almost felt myself being hunted," said Soepenbergh.

In the coming months the installation will be taken across Europe.

"We've conducted extensive research," said Wander Eikenboom, another lecturer at Avans about the authenticity of the experience.

"There's already a lot of information available on the Internet, such as what perfume Jackie Kennedy or JFK were wearing," said Eikenboom.

"Whitney Houston's autopsy report for instance, is also available," he added.

But the scientists admit battling to recreate the right scent for Jackie Kennedy's perfume, which is no longer made.

"We had to rebuild something that resembled it as closely as possible," said scientist Mark Meeuwenoord.

The inventors of the "final moments" smells said in any case, exact historical accuracy was not their aim.

Rather, they wanted to explore new ways of "smelling" old stories.

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Citation: Dutch scientists use smell to recreate JFK, Diana and other famous deaths (2014, December 26) retrieved 4 May 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2014-12-dutch-scientists-recreate-jfk-diana.html>

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