

The Tenth Muse: Food and Aesthetics

‘Love is an emotion of the heart, but not one of the palate.
Anon. 19th century

Whilst it is true that all philosophers have had to eat, very few have felt the need to ‘philosophize’ food, its preparation and its consumption. The study of food, as it is constituted in the modern academy, has been undertaken overwhelmingly by anthropologists, social historians and practitioners of Cultural Studies. (1) However, on the side of the preparers of food, namely cooks and those eaters for whom the consumption of food is more than a purely nutritional activity there is a surprisingly strong desire to assign to food an ‘aesthetic’ dimension in both a technical and vernacular sense. At this stage of the argument I’m going to refrain from presenting the reader with a rigorous definition of the word ‘aesthetic’, that will emerge during the course of the essay. For the moment, let’s just say that it suggests those aspects of the human affairs that are concerned with ‘the beautiful and the artistic’. (2) Again, in vernacular usage this sense of an aesthetic dimension is thought to accompany every step of what we might call the food chain. For example, there are those cooks for whom the preparation of food is equivalent to making a work of art. Cooking, that is the act of transforming a set of raw materials into a dish becomes an activity of the highest order because it results in something that is both beautiful *and* good. Of course, culinary philosophies of this intensity are rare. Nonetheless, there is a widely held feeling that because food is the outcome of a number of individual choices about ingredients, their combination and the ways in which these are then presented, something very close to a moral order is being articulated by the sensory organization of eating. Adjectives like

simple, honest, crude, natural, artificial, foreign, unsophisticated... all are capable of complex moral elaboration and they have found, and still do find, immediate and concrete exemplification in what we eat and how we eat it. Time and again in the history of Western food social, political and religious differences (not to mention aesthetic ones) have been enacted at table. When the physical forms taken by food are considered, once again aesthetics in the broadest sense is in play. The look of food, what we might call its composition, or its formal properties, is not arbitrary. Like any of the products of human activity it is possible to locate food in time space through its style and this can be determined as readily as one can date a work of art or any other complex human artefact. Regarding the position of the eater one encounters an activity whose pleasures straddle a number of senses – sight, smell, taste. The western tradition of aesthetics has long argued over the question of to what extent the human senses are equivalent or whether only certain of them (usually hearing and sight) are capable of apprehending the higher forms of beauty. Put bluntly, we need to ask whether the sense of taste (as well as smell and touch) is an ‘inferior’ sense? If it is, then what are the implications of this lower sensory status for the way in which the ‘art’ of cooking and the pleasures of eating have been construed by philosophy? As I hope to demonstrate, it is here that some of the traditional concerns of aesthetics bear directly upon a system of the arts in which culinary activities have never quite gained full membership but nor have they been completely excluded.

Cores and Coatings

Those authors who do register the presence of an aesthetic dimension to food, not surprisingly, describe and explain this dimension in accordance with the Western notion of objects in general and human artefacts in particular. Food is

seen in consisting of an essential, primary functional dimension, namely nutritional matter and an inessential, secondary aesthetic (decorative) coating. It is as if the latter were an optional extra, something that a ‘no-nonsense’ approach to cooking could easily forgo. Roland Barthes, in an early blast against the creeping influence of ‘image-food’, remarks that ‘a cookery which is based on coatings and alibis... is for ever trying to extenuate and even disguise the primary nature of foodstuffs, the brutality of meat or the abruptness of sea-food’. (3) Mary Douglas also positions the ‘aesthetic’ dimension of food within a functionalist/aesthetic dichotomy. (4) Food, like the applied arts of ‘clothing, architecture and utensil design’, is instantly distinguishable from the pure, or fine arts. The latter have no instrumental, or utilitarian cores (such as nutrition or mechanical efficiency) and are wholly made up of what Douglas calls ‘pattern-making’. What we eat consists of nourishment plus this other dimension, which is the result of a vague, but insistent, pattern-making urge. No suggestions are offered (here) by Douglas as to why food seems to open out so inexorably onto an aesthetic realm. ‘Pattern-making’ is *sui generis*, the result of a quite separate disposition of the human soul and one totally unrelated to nutrition.

Like other abstract terms that have both a technical and vernacular meanings, it is the assertion of what they are not as much as their positive contents that comprises their full complexity. ‘Aesthetics’ carries a distinct sense that the sorts of activities, objects and feelings it is associated with are of a very different order to other sorts of human affairs. If, for instance, the aesthetic is compared to the realm of the economic, then it is not just a matter of designating two separate, but equal, sorts of human practice. The comparison relates them as opposites that are as activities whose very ontologies are ordered by wholly opposite imperatives. Economics serves the demands of physical

survival whilst aesthetics serves ends whose aims can often only be engaged with by suspending the 'laws' of the economic. If one stresses the art, artistic dimension with art and its synonyms marking out that territory beyond necessity, instrumentality, reason and survival.

Food offers a particularly vivid example of this duality. Pose the question 'What is the function of food?' and the most immediate answer (pathological behaviour aside.) is that we require the nutrition that food provides in order to stay alive. But, if we then ask 'Is what we see and taste on our plates simply nutrition made manifest?' then the answer would have to be no, since there is no innate link between nutritional essence and its sensory appearance either as sight or as taste. Food is immediately drawn into, ad across, those previous distinctions between the useful and the necessary as opposed to the non-utilitarian and inessential. The aesthetic gets assigned to a kind of realm of non-essential surplus. This division of objects, processes and activities into essential cores and secondary decorative aspects will be familiar to devotees of Western art and aesthetics. It is on just such a separation as this that European notions of ornament, decoration and 'design' have traditionally rested and it is at its most fundamental level it provided this civilisation with a veritable ontology for, and of, the object. Evolutionary temporal schema was elaborated to show how the essence of object and activities appeared before the non-essential. In the case of food nutrition came first and the 'looks'. The latter aspect is not denied, it just comes along later. Somewhere in all of this lies the assumption that nutrition, deep down, is able to dispense with having to be mediated through the forms of food. (5) A whiff of this *arriviste* notion of the aesthetic still hangs about even in such a serious critic as Susan Sontag. At the conclusion of her great essay 'On Style' she makes the following observation.

‘Whenever speech or movement or behaviour or objects exhibit a certain deviation from the most direct, useful, insensible mode of expression or being in the world, we may look at them as having a “style” and being both autonomous and exemplary’.

Here style is a synonym for the aesthetic and is regarded as that which appears at the moment when there is a deviation from the ‘non-aesthetic’, here construed as ‘the most direct, useful, etc...’ But, as we have already seen, in the case of food there is a problem with this seemingly reasonable separation into the essential and the non-essential because food does not have a ‘direct, useful, insensible mode of expression or being in the world’. Ultimately, it will have to be nutritious and life sustaining but in itself this nutritional element does not, and cannot, have an autonomous being. Hegel’s answer to this problem was to recognise that ‘style’, or the ‘aesthetic’, as the gateway through which all that is brought into being by human labour is required to pass. He is worth quoting at length on the matter.

But since it comes into appearance through art, it labours, so to speak, to exist for contemplation by others . . . This progressive development into existence for others is to be explained on the part of the topic as if it were a complaisance, because it does not seem to need this more concrete existence for itself and yet pours itself completely into it for our sake (7)

Since the material form taken by food is not given by nature, its aesthetic dimension is that which appears out of the activity of human beings. By driving the aesthetic right into the heart of human activities and their products, Hegel

makes of it, not something secondary (at this stage anyway) something strictly tied to a ‘fine art’, but that which is an inevitable consequence of human manufacture. It is a gift that constantly delights by its apparent autonomy.

Lets begin again... but this time pose the question ‘What is food?’ in the light of Hegel’s notion of the aesthetic as the fundamental mode of appearance of human artefacts. One result of following through on Hegel’s radical reformulation is that he broadens considerably what can be included beneath the remit of the aesthetic. Philosophical aesthetics intersects with this question in three general areas. First, the status assigned to cooking (and eating) within the western system of the arts. Second, the nature of form in food. Lastly, the distinction made in western philosophy between the higher and lower senses and the implications this has for the activity of eating.

Coarse or Refined?

There seems to be a deal of consensus amongst philosophers that what we might call ‘aesthetic modernism’ emerges in Europe in the eighteenth century. (8) It is characterised by a desire to define and legitimate a particular category of human activity – the Fine Arts – which have as their sole aim and purpose Beauty. It is out of this massive discursive reorganisation that what that what today is known as Art appears. Sculpture, Painting, Music, Architecture and Poetry made up the core of these fine arts and, although certain technically innovative media have gained entry into this club, the original list has remained remarkably resilient over the past two hundred years. Not surprisingly, this radical re-ordering of human activities had a number of serious implications for those practices, which lost, or had diluted, their claims on art and beauty. The nineteenth century saw

the emergence of a number of intermediate categories to provide homes for these 'non-fine' arts. Craft, Applied Arts, Decorative Arts, Industrial Arts, Euphemisms like the 'useful arts' and the 'minor arts' all rushed to the rescue of this aesthetic cleansing. What each of these bridging categories attempted to do was to indicate the existence of a set of human activities that were neither wholly devoted to the creation of beauty but were neither wholly mechanical nor utilitarian. The problem was that so distinctive had the claims made for the Fine Arts become and so precise were the conditions under which beauty could be present in the work of art as well as being apprehended by the sensate human subject, that all those 'intermediate activities' lost any sense that they had positive characteristics. The practitioners, the objects and the pleasures received from these 'minor arts' ended up as diluted versions of the higher arts, distinguishable from the former by what they lacked. A simple example will illustrate the problems caused by the use of this invidious comparison. In one of his letters written in the 1960s, the English drama critic Kenneth Tynan remarked that it was impossible for a frock to be tragic. It could be disastrous but never tragic. The reason for this, he argued, was a consequence of there being differences amongst the arts; differences between those capable of articulating the more complex emotional and existential dimensions of human life and those which were incapable of such profundities. The Applied Arts of, for instance, dressmaking and cooking are incapable of reaching the heights attained by the Fine Arts because, unlike the latter, they are not free (Liberal). That is, part and parcel of their being is to be indentured to function, necessity and utility. It is precisely the absence of such constraints that enable the Fine Arts to soar. If we allow for the moment that *Hamlet* is tragic whilst a Dior dress and the activities that produced it and the pleasures it gives are not, and never can be, of the same order as *Hamlet*, we are still left guessing as to what the

positive contents of cooking and dress making consist of. We don't really know what it is that makes them arts, irrespective of whether they are major or minor. But what if we reverse the statement? What qualities are possessed by the dress, which are closed off to *Hamlet*? It becomes clear that one immediate consequence of using the invidious comparison is that it hides a considerable amount of preliminary conceptual labour, which is necessary before the act of comparing can get under way. As has been pointed out repeatedly, to compare things with the aim of differentiating them requires that they be 'mounted' upon the same comparative table in the first place. Comparison is always a *de facto* recognition of similarity as well as difference. Returning now to Tynan's observation concerning frocks and tragedy, we might want to ask what was it that enabled them to be brought together in the first place in order that such a comparison could be undertaken? What was it that they were assumed to have in common before the attempt to differentiate them was begun? The answer would no doubt be that they are both arts of a sort. If that is the case, then what precisely is the nature of the common ground that embraces these 'arts-in-general'? To answer this it is necessary to revisit how Western thought has construed the very notion of what an art is.

The Forming Arts

Great difficulties have obtained in attempting any sort of précis as to what the arts in general might be. However, some level of consensus does exist. The most fundamental element is that the arts are those activities that distinguish human beings from all other animals. No matter how they are subsequently differentiated the arts are concerned with bringing into being that which does not appear in nature. The art, that is those skills specifically developed by human beings, are ways of producing what does not produce itself. (9) Many

and various are the reasons given as to why human beings have such skills and how they are to be differentiated one from another. As far as origins are concerned, the explanations have been summarised by David Summers in the following way.

In either version of the origin of art there is a deep sense of the opposition of art and nature; in one case the natural state is ruptured by civilization (or civilization is a response to the rupture from nature); in the other, nature is not so much lost as hostile, having set mankind into the world without the same means that fitted animals to their activities and unable therefore to live according to nature”’. (10)

As far as the question of how the various arts are to be distinguished from one another the only thing that may be stated with certainty is that there seems to have been a recurrent feeling that the arts lie between two poles, one ‘technical’ and the other ‘sublime’. The former denotes those mechanical skills through which we as a species adapt the environment to our needs. (In the words of Ortega y Gasset they accommodate nature to human nature’.) (11) The latter are those, which concern themselves primarily with giving, pleasure to the senses; that is they are aesthetic in a strict technical sense. The beauty of Hegel’s notion lies in the way in which it considers all human making as inevitably caught up in a proto-aesthetic dimension. The physical form of that which is a product of a human art is by definition one that is not given by nature. But this notion of a ‘proto-aesthetic’ dimension to human forms can be taken even further. Consider this extract taken from a definition of form.

Form It is possible to regard the production of art as involving the arrangement of some stuff – stone or paint or words or sounds or bodily motions or images,

as may be – by a maker into a form, so that a certain end or effect may be achieved. (12)

Apart from a sense that the final phrase may be superfluous this seems to contain all the ingredients packed into a notion of a ‘proto-aesthetic’. There is arrangement. That is human activity replaces that which is disposed by nature in favour of an alternative order which derives from human affairs. This ‘arrangement-into-a-form’ implies the presence of physical stuff that receives and embodies the results of this human activity. There is also the suggestion that these human arrangements may go beyond merely moving natural elements around like counters and start to produce meta-materials capable of more sensitive responses to these arranging desires. Finally, there is, via the emergence of a quasi-stable pattern or entity (form) out of the activity of arrangement an opening out onto a collective dimension. In fact we have all the elements of the arts in general, that is bringing into being that which is not given by nature. Hegel offers a rather different gloss than is usual on this transformatory art process. He argues that ‘arrangement’ is not undertaken beneath an imperative of communication. That form is not just the making of signs by another name. It is the shifting of natural materials from nature into human made forms that is the key. Why? Because the aim is to produce a second nature in which human beings can recognise themselves, or at least produce a world that is more accommodating to them and of them. As Hegel comments it is the creation of a ‘Reality derivative from his own reality’ that is the spur. (13)

Food and Form

Of the various themes that suggest when thinking about the forms of food perhaps the most obvious one is the appearance or the look of food; the face it

presents to the world and to those about to consume it. But 'look' in relation to food is ambiguous to say the least. A look is never absent from food – the humble baked potato always has an appearance of sorts. Its look is not something that is restored to it by the 'food aesthetician' after it had momentarily disappeared after cooking. Likewise, a bean on being cooked does not lose its look. Put it on a plate and it appears in an immediate manner as one that has been dressed. So, in relation to food, *aesthetics* suggests a set of activities that are undertaken to organise the look of food in a particular manner. It is the result of an activity of 'appearance-forming' rather than something that is the result of given appearances. But even here there are difficulties. Hannah Arendt has argued that in the West the split between being and appearance inevitably makes the latter a thing of surfaces, capable of a radical disjuncture in relation to being. (14) When aesthetics is used in relation to food we have already seen that it suggests that a visible coating, or surface which is stretched over a nutritional core. But the division between appearance and being, as we have already seen, does not hold in quite this way for food. Food is there 'all the way down' and we cut into food, not to locate its essence but to obtain a helping. The problem with the statement by Mary Douglas that 'there is no difficulty in thinking of examples of food that are produced entirely for display' is that if it were in this condition then it would immediately cease being food. (15) Some of these problems can be resolved if those two key terms, food and cooking, are re-examined.

Food is a complex notion. It may refer to a quality latent in the objects of nature i.e. matter that humans ingest without anything additional being done to render them edible. Very little of what gets eaten in either traditional or modern societies falls into this category. Most of what is called food has undergone some sort of preparation. This rendering of stuff into an edible form is normally

termed cooking, but even a cursory glance at the activities grouped under this heading shows that it involves a great deal more than just the application of heat, the addition of water, etc. The most simple of cooking processes – say, the dropping of a hen’s egg into boiling water – applies to only a small amount of what we eat. Complex stages of pre-preparation have to be completed before any additional stages may be commenced e.g. marinades. Other prepared stuffs may have to be assembled before cooking proper can commence e.g. oil, milk, and cream. During the act of cooking herbs, spices or condiments may have to be added to ensure the desired flavours. After cooking, equally complex and varied ‘pot cooking’ stages may have to be gone through before the food is ready. The whole of this complex set of materials and processes can hardly be encompassed accurately by the conventional reach of such terms as ‘food’ and ‘cooking’, let alone enable us to discriminate confidently between what is added for the sake of nourishment and what is undertaken for the form and appearance of a dish. For instance, is the pastry made for a pie divisible along such lines? It seems that the very notion of a pie carries with it the idea of a particular form and that if it does not embody the principles of this *pie-form* then it can’t be a pie. We encounter similar difficulties when cooking and the appearance of food are thought of together. Cooking, even in the strictest sense of rendering something edible, cannot realistically be distinguished from those activities concerned with the appearance of food. Where does the look of food start and finish? A Battenburg cake is appearance all the way through whilst the heart of a salami only appears when one slices into it.

These difficulties may be alleviated if instead of food we refer to *ingredients* and dish. The former points to every material that is put into ‘the pot’ irrespective of the reasons. The latter refers to what emerges from the set of transformatory processes that are applied to the ingredients. If we now insert

‘cooking’, or better still, ‘preparation’, between ingredients and dish, it starts to embrace considerably more than the elemental transformation of the potentially edible into the actually eatable. This broadening of the idea of cooking is not all that original. Ever since Levi-Strauss drew attention to the aptness of the distinction between the Raw and the Cooked in human experience, anthropology has become alerted to the symbolic significance of cooking. My own small contribution to this would be to see ‘cooking’ as the intersection of three processes. Rendering physical matter edible. Investing it with cultural and symbolic meaning. Finally, imparting form to these materials. Indeed, many of the processes of cooking are explicitly undertaken to render the ingredients into a more malleable condition and so more able to be formed in the required manner. Consider the trifle. It is without doubt food yet the human species would be able to survive (just) if it were deprived of such a treat. Almost all the processes involved in making this dessert are concerned with imparting form to the ingredients. The early stages are primarily about rendering each element into a workable consistency. Colours are then blended and the surface is finally ‘dressed’. To watch the spoon travel through the many layers of a well-made trifle and to observe the colours and varying substantialities of the ‘inside’ as they are suddenly revealed is an integral part of the pleasure of the dish. At the end of the meal one can contemplate the pleasing ruination of this order as the trifle disappears and realise that form here is of the essence.

A process of forming is, then, an integral part of cooking (which is saying nothing more than that nourishment and imagination are inseparable.) But it must also be recognised that, over time and place, variations, differences and dialects can be detected in forms assumed by food. There must be a double recognition that ‘Food comes shaped’ but also that ‘These shapes vary’. From

widely dispersed cuisines through to personal styles of food preparation it seems that one of the 'core elements' is the regular and persistent appearance of certain formal characteristics. My grandmother's cooking, for instance, had the pie as its central organizing form. There were several perfectly sound economic, historical and class reasons for why this was so. But beyond all of these considerations one would have to concede that there was a mysterious affinity between the cook and this favoured form. It was as if she spent here life pursuing the ideal pie. So pervasive was this form that some meals would consist of nothing but a succession of different pies. Hot ones, cold ones. Sweet and savoury. Large and small. Round and square. In each of them, the focal point was the relative complexity of their 'Chimneys'. This feature underwent an increasing elaboration in the number assigned to each pie and in the complexity of their decorative pastry surrounds.

A number of authors have noted the role that the presence of persistent formal properties plays in constituting the distinctiveness of national and regional cooking styles. Douglas and Nicod note that, in what they call 'British standard cuisine', colours are distributed differently across the courses of a meal with white and pastel shades clustering in the sweet courses. The intensity of visual patterning can also vary across the courses of the meal. Douglas and Nicod once again note that in 'British standard cuisine' formal patterning is much more pronounced in the sweet courses. (16) Mennell and C. Anne Wilson have discussed the unnatural food colours that predominated in mediaeval cooking. (17) Attar has discussed the gulf between the appearance of Victorian dishes and the 'natural' appearance of their ingredients. (18) One constant in all of this seems to be the close integration between what is placed on the table and the habits and expectations of those sitting around it. Groups form up around food

just as food is formed up for its eaters. When the two are no longer synchronised the result can be anxiety, repulsion and nausea, as well as delight in the occurrence of the unexpected. Simmel has argued that the universal presence of food forms can be read as index of the degree of elevation achieved by the species as a whole. (19) (See Elias) What he seems to mean by this is that the desire to obtain a certain degree of aesthetic satisfaction – satisfactions provided by the material forms of the food and the shared formalities enjoined by table manners – enables eating to rise above the crude satisfaction of an ‘egotistical’ appetite. The alternative would be a collection of unmediated and individual responses to hunger and thirst shorn of any collective formalities.

If we now return to Hegel, we can see that he regarded this forming activity and its results as lying at the heart of human historicity. Form(s) are what emerge out of the human transformation of the world about them. He sums this up so:

The purpose he achieves by the modification of external things upon which he impresses the seal of his inner being, and then finds repeated in them his own characteristics. Man does this in order as a free subject to strip the outer world of its stubborn foreignness, and to enjoy in the shape and fashion of things a mere external reality of himself. (20)

Hegel cautioned against limiting this ‘transformatory urge’ to purely utilitarian purposes. This is not just the adaptation of the environment by human beings to increase their chances of survival, rather it is a re-creation of the world (and human beings themselves) into a quasi-stable second nature. The crucial difference being that the reformed version is one wherein humanity ‘finds repeated in them his (sic) own characteristics’. Food is that form in which human necessity, namely nutrition, is transformed into a civil requirement.

Higher and Lower Senses

In his 1849 publication, *An Historical Enquiry into the True Principles of Beauty in Art*, the author, James Fergusson posed the following question.

In like manner, after the useful arts of cooking, baking, or brewing, I have placed gastronomy, confectionary, and wine making ... all of which are aesthetic refinements of useful and necessary arts, and, if my definition be at all correct, are fully entitled to the distinction of the fine arts. But shall I dare to call them so?

His hesitancy at the end of this quotation was a direct consequence of the triumph of aesthetic modernism in the years just previous to this publication. A very sharp line had been drawn between those senses characteristic of the fine arts and those attached to those of a minor order. Consider the following couple of culinary snapshots. I am cooking Every so often I look at what is being prepared and taste the food and adjust the ingredients if required. Next, I am in restaurant trying to decide what to order. I look across to the next table. 'That looks good ... I'll try that'. Where food is concerned, taste and sight are always in some sort of alliance and whilst it is possible to imagine eating something that either looks awful, smells awful or tastes revolting (a personal list here would include beetroot, mashed potato and fennel) we have seen that cooking is as much about forming the food into an appetising sight as it is producing something that delights the palate. We even indulge in a little synaesthesia when we use the phrase 'That looks mouth-watering'. This combination of mouth and eye and nose only becomes a problem when it collides with European philosophy's habit of ranking the human senses and the sorts of apprehensions that each of them opens out for the human subject. In, and of, themselves, multiple sensory art forms are not the problem. What does cause difficulties, particularly after the aesthetic revolution of the late 18th century, is what to do with those arts and activities that rely on, or are mediated by, the 'lower' senses

of smell, taste and touch. Those that derive from a strict combination of the 'higher' senses (sight and hearing) such as opera, drama and film are permitted the status of a fine art but those which draw upon the remaining three are almost never accorded this status. Cooking, despite being so heavily dependent on sight and material for its full appreciation never really gains entry into the Fine Arts.

Discriminating between the senses within the tradition of western philosophy is a topic of great complexity, impossible to fully explore in the present context.(22) To cut a very long story brutally short one might say that the explanations advanced to account for these differences can be divided into those which regard them as being a reflex of cultural difference and those (the overwhelming majority) that regard these differences as deriving from a set of inherent universal characteristics. [Difference in this context means not individual variety, nor cross-cultural variation but rather the differential *natures* of each of the senses. What it is that they enable humans to apprehend.]

The architectural theorist and historian, James Fergusson, provides a good example of the culturalist camp. His point of commencement is that of human sensory equability:

No animal, however, has the whole five senses in so well-balanced and equal a degree as we have them; and man alone has the power of extending their use, or improving in any way the natural powers given to him at birth. (23)

The fact that, as he surveys the complete range of human activities, he comes across absences which strike him as a sign of differential sensory 'amplification' rather than the presence of any inherent barrier. A propos the low standing of the power of scent he remarks:

We have scarcely done any thing to extend our power of scent in a useful point of view, and though in the table I have named perfumery among the cal-aesthetic arts (the arts of beauty), I feel half ashamed of doing so at all, so little is it understood or practised in this sense in this country, or indeed in modern Europe. (24)

This leads him to construct his above-mentioned table in which he ‘completes’ the family of the aesthetic arts.

Taste	Gastronomy
Smell.....	Perfumery
Touch.....	Eumorphics
Sight.....	Euchromatics
Hearing.....	Music and Dance (25)

Ultimately, for Fergusson, all that stands in the way of the totally sensory ‘amplified’ human being are the pre-dispositions of a culture.

The overwhelming majority of the philosophical explanations of the differences between the senses of human beings have pointed to differences in their inherent qualities, that are to their sensory natures. It must be emphasised that these sort of explanations are pre-scientific and rest upon a series of tangential observations of the ‘importance’ in human affairs of sight and hearing as opposed to the places occupied by touch, smell and taste. The code for this is to declare that the ‘lower’ senses are incapable of being ‘elaborated’ or ‘refined’ in a manner similar to the higher ones. What is absent from the lower senses, what does not accompany them is any generally distributed standards of variations and intensities. In other words, there are no consensual units. True, with certain specialised activities, such as wine or tea tasting, the reading of Braille, or ‘composing’ perfumes the lower senses are capable of exquisitely fine distinctions. But it is that second term, ‘refined’, that seems to get to the heart of the problem. ‘Refined’ suggests that, as well as being able to achieve a certain

level of sensory sensitivity, it is also the way in which each of the senses articulates with the intellect and the imagination. In other words the sensibility into which these discriminations are capable of being inserted. Certain of the senses do not seem amenable to this type of articulation. George Santayana tackled this problem in *The Sense of Beauty*. (26) For Santayana, the higher senses are 'higher' because they are aligned with the intellect and the imagination and it is this that enables these sensations to be drawn up into more complex sets of meanings. He advances as justification of this a complex, dialectical explanation of the interaction between sensory material and an organ of sense.

They (the lower senses) have not reached ... the same organization as sounds, and therefore cannot furnish any play of subjective sensation comparable to music in interest. (27)

Even here, it is still not clear as to precisely what it is that is blocking a mutual interplay between sense and sensed that is characteristic of sight and hearing. Nor do these lower senses seem especially available or malleable when it comes to recalling them and playing with them at the level of the imagination. No matter how elaborate the cuisine there seems to be something that blocks it from aspiring to the true in the trio of 'the beautiful, the good and the true'. As I hinted at the start of this essay, even being capable of articulating a sophisticated moral order is attained only rarely. Santayana uses this argument to put food firmly in its place,

But tastes have never been so accurately or universally classified and distinguished (as music): the instrument of sensation does not allow such nice and stable discriminations as the ear. The art of combining dishes and wines, although one, which everybody practices, ... deals with a material far too unrepresentable to be called beautiful. The art remains in the sphere of the pleasant, and it is consequently regarded as servile, rather than fine. (28)

Santayana's point here is a valid one in that there is something truncated about the lower senses and the arts they support in comparison to sight and hearing.

As he notes ‘ the art remains in the sphere of the pleasant’ - which I read as meaning that the emotions and ideas that it inspires - never really free themselves from themselves. The tasting, eating, smelling and seeing of food is difficult to transform into anything other than judgements of approval or disapproval upon these immediate sensory experiences. The quality of the experience of eating remains just that and it is this isolated simplicity that constitutes its ‘pleasantness’. This may be why the arts mediated by the lower senses seem incapable of generating the sorts of meta-substances such as oil paint, or the units of sound which make up the basis of music. Food and drink do not provide the materials for representing anything outside of their particular sensorium. In the light of the differences it would seem that we either concur with Tynan’s conclusion about *Hamlet* and frocks or recast his assertion in a very different way.

The Uncritical Arts

We have seen that one of the consequences of the modernist aesthetic was that it marooned a vast range of human activities (arts) somewhere between utilitarian functionality and the disinterestedness of the high arts. The modes of being of these intermediate practices became less and less distinctive, less able to be described positively and increasingly could only be signified by what they lacked. For a while, the 19th century held onto ‘decoration and ornament as they tried to retain a memory of artistic functions and practices other than those of the newly triumphant high arts. With emergence of artistic modernism these final traces vanished leaving only the general category of design and its antithesis, kitsch. One only has to pursue the comparison of food and (high) art further to see how quickly it becomes inappropriate within a modern context.

A crucial component of European art since Kant has been its critical awareness of its own nature. A central element of its modernity has been the search for a practice that was in alignment with the results of this immanent critique. Nothing, it would appear, was capable of ameliorating this 'testing to destruction' of western art. One only has to imagine the transfer of some of the more notorious modernist strategies of the visual arts into the domain of cooking to see how futile such a comparison is. Anti-food in the spirit of Dada. Action cooking where the diners scrape the meal off the walls! Surrealist dishes in which the normally distant is combined. Food can neither articulate, or pursue, unpalatable truths without it being spat out or thrown up. At its other edge, food seems to be an inappropriate medium with which to approach those states that cluster around such ideas as the sublime, the infinite and the transcendental. It could not investigate the realms of ugliness, despair and death without there being some prior agreement between makers and eaters. Perhaps the only way to proceed with this investigation is to forgo the art/food comparison for good since all it ever yields is an invidious comparison in which food always comes off second best.

I want to return to Hegel's notion of the human appropriation of the natural (external) world to suggest a possible way out of this impasse. Michael Inwood makes a number of interesting points in his gloss on this theme.

Hegel seems, in this section, to associate art with practice rather than theory; the practical effects one produces-e.g. rings in water or specifically human regularities, decorations, etc.-are recognized as such, but they need have no content, meaning or theme Hegel's account of practice here seems to be biased towards artistic production by its concentration on self-expressive actions, such as stone throwing, at the expense of actions for specific purposes, such as catching fish to eat. In reply he would draw attention to the elements of self-assertion and self-expression involved in such activities as dressing, fishing, or eating,

and also arguer that e.g. fishing for food presupposes actions which acquaint me with my needs, my powers and with e.g. the river, and the world in general, as an appropriate field for my activity. (29)

To my mind this starts to sound like a much more adequate description of food, cooking and eating. And not only food, but also a whole swathe of human activities that not primarily mimetic in character; that are, more often than not, dealing with the arrangement of materials in three dimensions; activities which tend not to be related to the arts of engraving; arts that are low on signification, relying more on intense and immediate physical presence; arts that do not generate complex hermeneutic discourses; finally, activities that tend towards a model of making and doing (enactment?) rather than one of contemplation, close scrutiny and relentless interpretation. (30) The distance between this reformulated notion of aesthetic activity and specific manifestations upon one's plate is a very long way, so demonstration rather than assertion would perhaps be the most appropriate way in which to bring this essay to a conclusion.

A persistent (but hardly surprising) element in the aesthetics of food presentation is the indication and dramatization of abundance. A common figure for staging this quality in the European tradition is the cornucopia, or the horn of plenty. This was a Roman elaboration of a Greek myth, eventually attaining the status of a common sign placed on coins and everyday objects, as well as appearing in paintings and sculpture. It reappeared in Europe after the Renaissance and subsequently permeated into shop window design, advertising, flower arranging, as well as becoming an organizing principle underpinning the formal arrangement of meals and particular dishes. The narrative aspect of the myth had dimmed but the object itself has proved itself to be a durable embodiment of abundance. The products of the horn, that is the fruit and vegetables spilling out from its interior, present themselves as ready to eat or, at

least, requiring only a minimum of preparatory labour. From somewhere within the horn's darkness (a form that spirals down to an emerging point) these foods incessantly materialise with no effort required on our part. It is at the mouth of the horn that this generative profligacy is most apparent. The rim marks an edge over which the fruit and vegetables continually tumble, pushed over as ever more supplies arrive. Cornucopic abundance is moved by the force of a creative power located somewhere deep within the horn. This element of spilling also surfaces in the dictionary definitions of abundance. It is defined as 'an overflowing state or condition; superfluity or plentifulness' whilst abundant is 'overflowing; more than sufficient'. (31) This play in which the contained constantly threatens to break the bounds of the container is one of the most ubiquitous elements in dramatising abundance; steaks hang over the edge of their plate; lobsters whose pincers threaten the peace of mind of diners; prawns apparently legging it out of their cocktails; piles of bread, mounds of fruit, in fact anything that looks as if it is the process spilling out of its bowl, overflowing its plate, running over rim of the glass (as in champagne) seems to imply a condition of dynamic inexhaustibility. 'All you can eat for \$20'. 'The bottomless cup of coffee'. The expansive forces animating abundance can even lodge themselves inside particular foods. Poultry so plump that they seem ready to burst like balloons. Loaves whose crusts have cracked open so possessed are they by cornucopic energy. Abundance is not just 'a lot', it is 'a lot' in a particular condition. Not just a heap, but a heap that is multiplying before one's eyes. It is worth recalling that one place where the cornucopia was commonly found was as an accompaniment to the personifications of the river gods. There is no doubt that as a force what cornucopic most resembles is the flow of a river, and like a river it can sometimes flood. Abundance 'streams forth', wine 'flows like water', food can be 'drowned' by sauces and salads 'drenched' in

oil. Many dishes, particularly those of the Victorian period resembled fountains of food with the ingredients cascading down the sides of mounds. Once they have poured over the rim of the horn the contents of the cornucopia stream away, spreading outwards like the waters of a delta. When it was the fashion to pour sauces (sweet or savoury) over the food the flow pattern thought most appealing was that which most nearly resembled the radiating waters of a spring. Gravies, sauces, custards and creams flowed out and over the food as if they were bubbling up from somewhere within the landscape of the dish. The mouth of the horn recurs on the plate, in the bowl, the basket and on the table.

The English psychologist J.C. Flugel was fond of pointing out how diverse were the satisfactions to be had from ‘keeping warm’. When he had finished with the topic, believing that it had anything to do with maintaining one’s body temperature seemed literal in the extreme. To experience ‘warmth’, to keep oneself warm, or be kept warm was, according to Flugel, to simultaneously experience corporeal; integrity, ontological security, inner repletion and social fulfilment. So powerful were the images of warmth and warming that they were capable of inferring the existence of a totally benign order of things that stretched from inner peace through to radiant social relations. (32) Food – that is the food on the plate on the table – can be a similarly dense meeting ground for the inner and the outer. The ‘aesthetics’ of a meal, its forms and its appearances not only embody for the diner ideal somatic dispositions but also allow for the correspondences to be suggested between these benign inner states and the external social and natural order. The look of the food provides a material embodiment of its inner bodily effects and its outer social milieu.

Notes and References

- (1) What this has meant is that the sociological dimensions of food, its cultural meaning and historical diversity have generated a considerable literature. Texts dealing with the organization and appearance of its physical form are rare. This has meant that a number of fundamental, and crucially pertinent categories found in Art History and Philosophical aesthetics, terms such as style, form, design, pattern and appearance remain absent. Notable exceptions are C. Anne Wilson, *The Appetite and the Eye*, (Edinburgh University Press, 1991) and Roland Barthes' essay 'Toward a Psychosociology of Contemporary Food Consumption' in *Food and Drink in History*, Eds. R. Forster and O. Ranum, Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 1979.
- (2) T.J. Diffey, 'A note on some meanings of the term 'aesthetic'', in *The British Journal of Aesthetics*, vol. 35, no.1, January 1995.
- (3) Roland Barthes, 'Toward a Psychosociology of Contemporary Food Consumption', *op cit.* M. Douglas, 'Food as and Art Form', in Food as a System of Communication, *In the Active Voice*, London, Routledge, 1982, pp. 105-113.
- (4) Richard Johnstone discusses how, in projections into the future, food sheds many of its more cumbersome physical dimensions. Meals start to assume the form of pills in which there has been a hyper-concentration of nutrition or they resemble a sort of 'ur-puree', a formless nutritional slurry. See Richard Johnstone, Round Table, *The Australian* newspaper. Date unknown.
- (5) Susan Sontag, 'On Style', in *Against Interpretation*, New York, 1969, p. 45.

- (6) G.W.F. Hegel, *Hegel's Aesthetics; Lectures on Fine Arts*, trans. T. M. Knox, vol II, Oxford, 1998, p. 617.
- (7) See Paul Kristeller, 'The Modern System of the Arts', in *Essays on the History of Aesthetics*, ed. P. Kilvy, University of Rochester Press. P. Kilvy, *Philosophies of Arts*, Cambridge, 1997. T. Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic*, Blackwell, Oxford, 1990. See esp. 'Introduction' and chapt. 1, 'Free Particulars'.
- (8) J-L Nancy, 'Why are there several Arts', in *The Muses*, Stanford University Press, 1996, p.25.
- (9) David Summers, *The Judgement of Sense: Renaissance Naturalism and the Rise of Aesthetics*, Cambridge University Press, 1987, p.236.
- (10) Ortega y Gasset, 'Thoughts on Technology', in *Philosophy and Technology*, ed. Mitcham and Mackey, New York, 1972, p.292.
- (11) David Cooper (ed.), *A Companion to Aesthetics*, Blackwell, Oxford, 1997, p. 158.
- (12) G.W.F. Hegel. *Introductory Lectures on Aesthetics*, Penguin, 1993. Edited by Michael Inwood. See pp 35-36 and also Inwood's gloss on these pages note 8, p. 121. The proto-aesthetic can be aligned to Hegel's figure of the 'Artificer' that he elaborates on pp 421-424 in *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, Oxford University Press, 1977. See also p. 183, *Companion to Aesthetics*, for a discussion of the artificer.
- (13) Hannah Arendt, 'Appearance' in *The Life of the Mind, vol. 1, Thinking*, London 1978.
- (14) Mary Douglas, 'Food as an Art Form', in *In the Active Voice*, London, 19
- (15) Mary Douglas and N. Nicod, 'Taking the Biscuit', in *New Society*, Dec. 19th, 1974.

- (16) Stephen Mennell, *All Manners of Food: Eating and Taste in England and France from the Middle Ages to the Present*, Blackwell, Oxford, 1985, p. 33. C. Anne Wilson, op. cit.
- (17) Dean Attar, 'Keeping up Appearances: the Genteel Art of Dining in Middle-class Victorian Britain'. In C. Anne Wilson, op. cit.
- (18) G. Simmel, 'Sociology of the Meal', in *Simmel on Culture*, eds. Frisby and Featherstone, London, 1997.
- (19) G.W.F. Hegel, *Introductory Lectures on Aesthetics*, op. cit. p. 36.
- (20) James Fergusson, *An Historical Enquiry into the True Principles in Art*, London, 1849, p. 98.
- (21) Useful discussions of these questions can be found in Jean-Luc Nancy op. cit. and David Summers op. cit.
- (22) Fergusson, op. cit., p. 107.
- (23) Fergusson, *ibid*, 108.
- (24) Fergusson, *ibid*, p.107.
- (25) George Santayana, *The Sense of Beauty: Being the Outlines of Aesthetic Theory*, MIT Press Cambridge and London, 1988.
- (26) Santayana, *ibid* p. 44
- (27) Santayana, *ibid* p. 45.
- (28) Hegel, op cit, p. 122.
- (29) Both definitions taken from *The New Shorter Oxford Dictionary*, 1993, p.10.
- (30) J.C. Flugel, *The Psychology of Clothes*, Hogarth Press, London, 1930. See pp. 81-84.