

CHAPTER 11

Food: An Ordinary Practice or an Extraordinary Experience?

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Abstract: Food and the practice of cooking hold a privileged place in contemporary aesthetics, as attested by the extensive literature that has been devoted to this topic. Food has been addressed in both Anglo-American and European studies from multiple points of view, including a cognitivist, pragmatist, phenomenological, everyday and somaesthetic perspective. In this essay I will try to identify a path that allows us to hold together these readings through the ordinary-extraordinary dichotomy. First, I shall analyze food through the lens of the extraordinary, taking into consideration some examples in which food is presented as a true work of art in museums or as an exceptional experience in increasingly aestheticized daily life. Then, using the key of the ordinary, I will consider food preparation and consumption as routine practices. Finally, I will make an attempt to reconcile the two categories by identifying the moments in which the extraordinary manifests itself in everyday

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1 Introduction

Food has a high-ranking place in contemporary research in aesthetics, as it has been investigated in both Anglo-American and European studies from a variety of points of view.¹ Based on a cognitivist framework, notably in the footsteps of Nelson Goodman (1977), numerous inquiries have focused on ‘when’ food turns into a work of art, and have looked into artists’ installations and performances revolving around food.² Differently, by embracing John Dewey’s (1958) pragmatism, other

¹ For an overview, see Perullo (2018).

² For an overview on this debate, see Korsmayer (2002, Chapter 4).

inquiries have dealt with the practice of cooking and eating food as a participatory and community-based activity; phenomenology, and above all the aesthetics of atmospheres, has discussed taste, the sense of smell, and the design of environments, including those where food is consumed (Tellenbach 1981; Böhme and Engels-Schwarzpaul 2017); Everyday Aesthetics has included cooking, eating and food packaging among the typical aesthetic practices of everyday life; and Somaesthetics has brought into focus the relation between food and psycho-physical wellbeing (Pryba 2016), thus filling a gap in the somatic accounts aiming to define the ‘art of living.’

While relying on the interpretative dichotomy ordinary-extraordinary, this essay develops along a path that cuts across all the above theoretical approaches and holds them together. First, food will be scrutinized through the categories that pertain to the sphere of the extraordinary. In this respect some instances will be discussed, in which food is presented either as a work of art in its own right, for example in exhibitions and in museums, or as a unique and special experience in our increasingly aestheticized everyday life (Welsch 1997). After that, with reference to the ordinary key, the preparation and consumption of food will be investigated as part of daily and routine activities. Finally, a conciliation between the two aspects will be attempted by identifying those moments in which what is extraordinary appears in everyday life.

2 Food as an Extraordinary Event

Ancient philosophical theories differentiate between higher senses (i.e. sight and hearing), which are apt to lead theoretical processing, and those pertaining to the lower, material, bodily realm (i.e. taste, touch, and smell). This hierarchy within senses had repercussions also on culinary art (Brady 2012), which since antiquity ranked among the *artes mechanicae*, that is to say the servile practices (Tatarkiewicz 1980). Over time, however, the preparation and the consumption of food have received artistic recognition, making an entry in the ‘art world’: in galleries, museums, exhibitions, etc. (Danto 1964). Among the many possible examples, one might want to mention the innovative experimentations of futurist cuisine, Joseph Beuys and Daniel Spoerri’s Eat Art, and Rirkrit Tiravanija’s performances.

This transition from ‘not-art’ to ‘art’ can be read through a key of the notion of *artification* as investigated by Natalie Heinich and Roberta Shapiro (2012). In the wake of Nelson Goodman’s contribution (1977),

the two sociologists have identified the conditions and social processes leading to the acknowledgment of the artistic value of folk cultural forms, including food.

By shifting the focus from the production to the enjoyment of food, the collaboration occasionally developing among artists, designers, and chefs can be interpreted on the level of an aesthetic experience. These unusual collaborations are indeed aimed at setting the stage for the consumption of food – going as far as to design furnishings and the shape of plates – as to allow the clients to experience unique and exceptional emotions.

In reality the contamination between art and food striving to produce an aesthetic experience boasts a long and ancient tradition. One could mention here the banquets of the Middle Ages, when musicians, actors, and acrobats would entertain guests, and the great edible constructions of the nineteenth-century cuisine, such as Marie-Antoine Carême's marzipan architectures and Auguste Escoffier's ice sculptures (Rambourg 2010). Even today, culinary art is often inspired by the form and language of painting and sculpture, not only making a display of creativity but also eliciting a multi-sensory experience. The aestheticization defining contemporary society seems indeed to linger also over food, which is often presented according to the form and format aiming to trigger aesthetic emotions, in the same way as works of art do.

This trend introduces the aesthetic experience of food as an extraordinary event, the main features of which are its rarity and its high costs, these place it in the realm of luxury. Within this range we can find star chef creations, such as those signed by Ferran Adrià, Pierre Gagnaire, and Heston Blumenthal, which rely on technical innovations in the food industry supported by advances in physics and chemistry (Solier 2010). The techno-emotional cuisine of the renown Spanish chef Ferran Adrià provides indeed an interesting case study. While working as a chef at the ElBulli restaurant, he used to set the stage for a theatricalization of the gastronomic experience. Inspired by futurist suggestions, his avant-garde cuisine took advantage of technical innovations in the processing of ingredients in order to create intense multi-sensory experiences. Offered in small bites, food was supposed to be surprising and exciting (Perullo 2017, p. 27). A conceptual approach to cooking was there at stake, inasmuch as the preparation of dishes supported by technology was not primarily functional to taste and the corresponding pleasure or sense-based enjoyment, but rather geared to the new and original, made

to arouse a cognitive and cultural appreciation. What happens then is a 'transfiguration of the commonplace' (Danto 1981) and food acquires some sort of 'aura' similar to that of works of art.

The notion of aura, developed by the German philosopher Walter Benjamin (2002), makes frequent appearance in the European debate on contemporary art as to indicate the bestowing of artistic status to practices and objects traditionally excluded from the realm of art. However, the aura oozing from food in luxury restaurants is a 'worldly' aura, resulting from the aestheticization of everyday life. Food acquires the 'exhibition value' of museum-compatible works of art, but not the 'cult value' connected to the original ritual function of art (Benjamin 2002, p. 107).

Whereas food would previously only give off the scent of something delicious, nowadays – quoting Yves Michaud's (2011) famous metaphor – we can say that it gives off 'aesthetic ether.' However, while belonging to the realm of the extraordinary, the relation between aesthetics and food is limited to the *mise en place* of dishes, to the creativity of the chef, to the visual quality of food, in reference to aesthetic categories – that is to say, cognitive, expressive or representational categories – that are extraneous to gastronomy. This implies that food itself is not seen in this realm as a potential vector of ordinary experiences that can be both satisfying and aesthetic.

3 Food as an Ordinary Practice

Within contemporary philosophy the preparation and consumption of food as ordinary practices have been investigated by those who take an interest in everyday experiences inspired by John Dewey (Somaesthetics; Everyday Aesthetics). Somaesthetics is a philosophical approach first promoted by Richard Shusterman (2008). It focuses on the living body and its relation to the environment aimed at achieving psycho-physical wellbeing. According to this perspective, the aesthetic experience of food can be directed toward a form of consumption which is respectful of natural resources and of the people involved in the process of production. This includes paying more attention to the quality of food and to the consequences it has on its consumers in terms of health and wellbeing. According to Somaesthetics – where dietetics and pleasure merge together and are indistinguishable – the tasting experience of food is only an intermediary stage in a process, which starts with the careful selection and processing of ingredients and ends with a good digestion by the consumer.

In this regard, the issue of authenticity becomes relevant also for the taste enjoyment. Following Danto (1981, p. 14) who emphasises the pre-eminence of the work of art's cognitive aspects over the perceptual ones, Carolyn Korsmayer points out (1991, p. 91) that "the interpretation – the recognition of the substance to be ingested – precedes or coincides with the taste enjoyment." Hence the importance of products with 'protected designation origin', because correctly identifying the history, origin and characteristics of the food increases the pleasure of the experience, reassuring the consumer of the authenticity and goodness of the product.

A corporeality-centred reading paves the way to unprecedented horizons of experience not only from the point of view of the consumer, but also from the point of view of those who, in their job, as a hobby or out of necessity, are busy with the preparation of food on a daily basis. As every craft, also cooking is an 'embodied knowledge', which through practice reaches self-perfecting (Sennet 2009). Like gymnastics, cooking belongs to the realm of activities for which repetition is something positive and necessary to improve the results.

The notion of repetitiveness characterized early debates in Everyday Aesthetics (Naukkarinen 2013; Melchionne 2013, 2014), as they focused on the identification of the aesthetic practices that are typical of everyday life (e. g. eating, cooking, getting dressed, etc.). And precisely the notion of positive repetitiveness has been seen by Melchionne (2014) not only as indispensable, but also as a key category within this philosophical approach. While still evolving and exploring new possibilities, the repetition of gestures generates a bodily rhythm releasing energy and becoming an experience. This is why many people find cooking relaxing and take pleasure in it.

According to Yuriko Saito (2007, p. 116), in order to aesthetically appreciate food like any other daily practice, it is not necessary to consider it as a work of art, but to let it emerge from the routine, paying attention to sensitiveness. Saito claims that the aesthetic attitude engrained in Japanese culture engages all senses in the appreciation of food, which is the result of a meticulous preparation aimed at best expressing the peculiarities and freshness of the ingredients. Even food packaging favours organic materials, which are supposed not only to please the eye, but also to entice the senses of touch, smell and taste.

Furthermore, Saito (2007, pp. 121-123) emphasizes to what extent the balance of several factors (e. g. time of day or year, season, environment, occasion, table setting, conversation, music, etc.) is a key to

the transformation of an ordinary experience into ‘an experience,’ that is to say a truly full, satisfying experience, worth aesthetic appreciation in compliance with Dewey’s theory:

The multi-sensory dimension of our eating is not limited to ingesting food itself; it extends to the entire experience induced by our handling of the container, utensil, and the like [...]. Furthermore, in addition to the multi-sensory experience surrounding the act of eating and drinking, our appreciation of food is inseparable from the whole ambience orchestrated by a number of other ingredients: table setting, the environment in which we are eating, its occasion, time of the day and year, the atmosphere created by the conversation between and among our eating companions, and so on (Saito 2007, p. 120).

Although Saito lays emphasis on the peculiar atmosphere of some events, she seems unaware of coming very close to the issues investigated by the aesthetics of atmospheres, born within the context of German phenomenology.³ In this respect, the notion of ‘atmospheric space’ has been put forward by Gernot Böhme, one of the major advocates of the ‘new phenomenological aesthetics.’ Spaces (indoors or outdoors, public or private) can be uplifting or oppressing; they can be bright, cold, welcoming, festive, sober; they can convey an atmosphere that is repelling or attractive, austere or intimate. According to Böhme, the atmosphere is the result of emanations – more precisely ‘ecstasies’ – which are not intrinsic properties of things or people, as they are perceived in the relation between subject and object: “The new resulting aesthetics is concerned with the relation between environmental qualities and human states. This ‘and’, this in-between, by means of which environmental qualities and states are related, is atmosphere” (Böhme 2017, p. 30).

While the environment in which a meal is eaten plays an important role, those who design spaces and furnishing should therefore take into account the emotional involvement that these things are supposed to awake in the observer, client or consumer. The atmosphere is in fact the

³ The concept of ‘atmosphere’ lies at the core of a new philosophical orientation, whose roots extend in the traditions of twentieth-century phenomenology and draw both from the line connecting Husserl to Merleau-Ponty and from the phenomenological anthropology of Rothacker, Klages and Hermann Schmitz. However, Böhme’s new aesthetics of atmospheres is firmly connected to the theory of perception and the theory of the sentient body as well as with a retrieval of Alexander G. Baumgarten’s aesthetics. A full overview of Böhme’s theoretical assumptions is provided by Griffero (2016) together with a critical assessment.

result of an ‘aesthetic work,’ which through natural elements (e.g. flowers, plants, water, air, light) or artificial ones (e.g. architecture, furnishing, music, lighting) is able to create different types of environments, from ordinary to ultimate luxury ones. The designer should be able to interpret the requests of the commissioner and to understand the needs of the client, designing spaces accordingly so as to generate the appropriate atmosphere. The same restaurant can, for instance, produce an elegant atmosphere – with classic furniture, refined tableware and *mise en place* (linen, crystal, silver, etc.), and an obsequious service – or a romantic one – with dim lighting, candles on the tables, background music – or even an informal atmosphere – with simple furnishing and easy-going service.

Nevertheless, food can be interpreted in the light of the aesthetics of atmospheres also independently of the contribution of architects. For instance, the atmosphere connected to street food is defined by the smell and sound of the open space, which merge together with the often-short tasting experience of food eaten while standing. Furthermore, one should not forget that atmospheres result from intersubjective relations. In each experience of food consumption, specific relational and emotional situations are developed, based on the occurring affective and interpersonal relations (e.g. current mood, a feeling with the staff, memories connected to the place, etc.). The whole set of interacting atmospheric qualities determines the emotional space in which the aesthetic appreciation of food is consumed.

4 The Extraordinary in the Ordinary

Whereas art categories (creativity, originality, cognitive, expressive or representational values) support a reading of food in the light of the extraordinary, positive repetitiveness and familiar atmospheres can help grasp the meaning of the aesthetic experience of food within the daily routine.⁴ Is there any common ground between these two seemingly distant or even opposite realms? Although the most radical supporters of Everyday Aesthetics exclude special events from the daily aesthetic practices (Melchionne 2013; Naukkarinen 2013), an interpretation bridging the two dimensions has been put forward by Thomas Leddy (2012, 2015).

⁴ First introduced by Arto Haapala (2005), the notion of the familiar was later developed by Saito (2017).

The American philosopher is well aware that what is out of the ordinary cannot be separated from the ordinary without losing most of its meaning. Similarly, it would be misleading to tie Everyday Aesthetics to routine practices and exclude exceptional or rare events, since these are what enrich the value of life allowing us to go back to daily business feeling restored. The dialectics of ordinary and extraordinary is, in Leddy's view, the core of daily life and the main object of Everyday Aesthetics. Although he refers to special moments of a mundane kind – i.e. weddings, birthday celebrations, anniversaries, trips, special events, etc. – his account never excludes more general keys apt to encompass the dimension of the sacred (Leddy 2012, pp. 73-77).

As he maintains that ordinary life acquires aesthetic value when extraordinarily experienced, Leddy (2015) retrieves the notion of aura, but develops it differently from Benjamin, and claims namely that: “Something has aura or heightened significance if it seems more alive, more real, more present, or more connected to other things.” Furthermore, Leddy connects aura to the notion of awe, which, despite originally stemming from the sacred sphere, stands for the feeling of wonder that also small things can trigger in everyday activities. According to anthropological studies, “awe motivates people to take part in community-building, such as ‘collective rituals, celebration, music and dance, religious gatherings and worship’” (Leddy 2015), where food often has an essential symbolic function.

Going back to Benjamin's thinking, this symbolic function connected to the sacred allows us to apply the notion of aura to food, not in relation to ‘exhibition values’, but rather in relation to ‘cult values’ connected to rites and historical traditions. Two examples introduced by Carolyn Korsmeyer (2002, pp. 37-38) illustrate the aura springing out of ritual meals commemorating historical or religious events. In the United States, Thanksgiving celebrates the solidarity between the settlers in Massachusetts and the local native population, who, in the harsh winter of 1621, helped the settlers survive. The reference to this historical moment of peace and harmony among generally hostile groups is celebrated through the collective consumption of food, and entails a certain menu, mainly made of stuffed turkey and root vegetables, which aims to recreate the meal shared during the very first feast. Since it is based on tradition, innovation here is frowned upon. Especially the turkey bestows a symbolic value on this moment, and in turn in that very moment also acquires a special taste. According to Korsmeyer (2002, p. 138), “one reason why sometimes foods taste good only during their

relevant festivals is that their meaning is restricted to that time.” The rich taste and abundant portions of the Thanksgiving meal induce torpor and slow digestion. It is suitable for the winter season, which is felt as part of the eating experience. Thanks to its seasonal position, the fellow diners are indeed aware of experiencing a particular moment in the year and of “participating yet again in a cyclical celebration, one that is never quite the same as festivals of time past yet retains an enduring identity over time” (Korsmeyer 2002, p. 137). This typical feature of rituals – together with the collective consumption of food, which transforms eating companions into a community – lends a specific aura to the Thanksgiving holiday. Similar remarks can be made concerning Passover, which commemorates the exodus of Jewish people from the captivity in Egypt and, by extension, the freedom of all peoples from slavery. Also this ritual meal is rich in symbolic value, which comes through not only in the visual presentation of food, but also in its taste, as, for instance, bitter herbs stand for the bondage and sorrow endured in Egypt. Furthermore, eggs are a symbol of the renewal of life and the roasted shank bone of a lamb stands for the Paschal lamb prepared in commemoration of the event of Passover, that is, God passing over the houses of Jewish people and striking to death each firstborn of the Egyptian captors. The symbolic value of this ritual banquet is confirmed by the fact that some of the food (e.g. the lamb shank bone and the salty water) are only tasted and not actually consumed. The purpose of this food is accordingly not nutrition or sensory enjoyment. “Nevertheless they not only are part of the meal, they also have a significance that is manifest in the act of tasting” (Korsmeyer 2002, p. 138). Like Thanksgiving, also Passover entails types of food that are eaten principally on that occasion. Rigidly prescribed preparations methods even alter their taste, compared to when the same food is prepared for other convivial situations – for instance using unleavened Matzoh flour instead of normal wheat flour. The aura of this meal turns the people around the table into a community of faith, and refreshes the memory of a sacred event which repeats itself in the ritual, always the same despite all space-time contingencies.

These examples of cyclically repeated feasts are also useful to illustrate Ellen Dissanayake’s (1992) theory, which, like Leddy’s, supports the presence of the extraordinary in everyday life. According to the anthropologist Dissanayake (1992, p. 225), art is not the object of contemplation, but rather a behavioural inclination which amounts to ‘making special’ something, someone, or even actions themselves.

Focusing on the everyday rituals and on the value of taking care of what is special within a community, Dissanayake points out that the power of making the ordinary extraordinary is associated to ceremonies in which gestures, objects, and behaviours stand for some biologically or socially relevant states to the community: “Ritual ceremonies are meant to affect biologically-important states of affairs that humans necessarily care about – assuring food, safety, health, fertility, prosperity, and so forth” (Dissanayake 2009, p. 156). Collective ceremonies help people find relief from anxiety in the uncertainties and dangers of life, inasmuch as rituals shape the emotions of the participants, strengthening their social bonds.

Some convivial situations with family or friends turn into ‘special moments’ if intensively experienced together with our companions, by taking care of details or the *mise-en-scène* – for instance the *mise en place* and the presentation of food – or by paying attention to perceptive features, i.e. sound, smell, touch-related features, etc. Unlike the consumption of food in public places, domestic meals entail an affective relation between those who prepare the food and those who eat it, be them relatives, members of one’s family or friends. In the absence of an economic transaction, the preparation of food at home looks like a gift establishing a connection between the cook and the other fellow diners. According to Mauss’ (1990) theory,⁵ in fact, those who are invited to share a meal feel obliged to return the invitation. In reference to the ethics of hospitality which regulated the relations with foreigners (*hospes*, in Latin) in the Ancient Greek and Roman world, the offer of food stands for social cohesion, thus establishing an emotional space where affective and relational bonds are established.

Within the framework of this anthropological understanding and specially in the line of Dissanayake’s perspective, the choice, processing and *mise en place* of food consumed at home is a sort of ‘artification’, that means ‘making things special’ and taking care of those one loves.

5 Conclusion

In conclusion, in line with the aestheticization of daily life, food today increasingly holds the representational and symbolic values pertaining to the realm of works of art. In truth also the ordinary experience of food

⁵ “In Scandinavian civilization, and in a good number of others, exchanges and contracts take place in the form of presents; in theory these are voluntary, in reality they are given and reciprocated obligatorily” (Mauss 1990, p. 3).

can be satisfying and endowed with aesthetic value if seen against the background of an 'art of living'. This means not only paying attention to mere appearance, but taking into account the corporeality-centred values, the repetitive actions, the quality of food, the conviviality and everything else can produce health and well-being.

Developing this line of thought, we can find a conciliatory synthesis, especially if we learn how to experience our 'ordinary' life in a 'special' way, following an anthropological perspective. The preparation and consumption of food are part of the daily rituals and can be 'artified' according to Dissanayake's theory. It does not mean transforming food in a 'work of art', but 'making it special', that is to take good care of our eating companions and pay attention to the details, as to transform them into an extraordinary event in everyday life.

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