Gender and the Everyday Aesthetics of Food

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Philosophical analyses of the aesthetics of food are typically framed in terms of whether food can count as art. However, one might ask whether art is always an appropriate domain for analysis of the aesthetics of food. As one philosopher suggests, some interesting aesthetic functions of food exceed the aesthetic functions of art.[1] While art is often expected to provide universal, timeless insights, a significant aesthetic function of food is its reflection and enforcement of historically and culturally located practices and belief systems.

Our paper distinguishes feminist aesthetic/ethical analysis of food from analyses of food in philosophy of art. Philosophers of art commonly distinguish between "proximal" sense faculties (taste and smell) and "distal" sense faculties (sight and hearing). The former are central to perception of aesthetic characteristics of food, while the latter are central to perception of aesthetic characteristics of paradigmatic art-forms (visual art and music). Philosophical arguments for food-as-art suggest that proximal sense perception, when suitably educated, can at least approximate feats of distal sense perception. For example, it is argued that gourmet palates, like artistically trained eyes and musically trained ears, can make more-or-less objective judgements about artistically prepared food and drink (i.e., gourmet food, wine, etc.).[2]

Such arguments, while interesting, divert attention from how gender is implicated in the perceived primal nature (i.e., subjective-ness and ineluctable embodied-ness) of everyday (i.e., not gourmet) eating and cooking. By refocusing aesthetic analyses of food on the significance of primal aspects of proximal sense perception, we aim to make possible exploration of gendered aspects of the

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[1] Korsmeyer, Carolyn. *Making Sense of Taste*. Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1999.
[2] Tefler, Elizabeth. *Food for Thought: Philosophy and Food*. New York: Routeledge, 1996; Harris, John. "Oral and Olfactory Art," *Journal of Aesthetic Education*, Vol. 13, No. 4 (Oct., 1979), pp. 5-15

aesthetics of everyday food, as well as everyday eating and cooking practices, in different historical and cultural contexts. We analyse how certain aesthetic functions of food and eating reflect and enforce three domains of *gendered* practices and beliefs: diet, domestic food-related activities and attitudes, and class-based aesthetic assumptions. Analysis of these domains reveals locally perceived aesthetic characteristics of food, which are significantly shaped by local gender norms. We conclude by suggesting that our analysis provides promising possibilities for cross-generational and cross-historical feminist community building.

THE AESTHETIC EXPERIENCE OF FOOD

To determine whether food could be considered as an art form, we must first consider whether we can have an aesthetic appreciation of food. Elizabeth Telfer characterizes aesthetic reactions as those that are based solely on how the object appears to the senses. Aesthetic reactions are non-neutral, intense, non-instrumental and are often accompanied by judgements for which the judgers claim a kind of objectivity (Telfer 1996: 43). Not every reaction to food will have these qualities, but we will argue that some reactions may.

First, sometimes our reactions to food are non-neutral, though at other times they may be neutral. For example, on the plane here my reaction to the food I was served was decidedly neutral, it did not stir me one way or the other. On the other hand, the experience described by Proust upon eating a tea-soaked Madeleine that made him shutter and experience an overwhelming joy (cited in Harris 1979: 6) would certainly count as an intense and non-neutral reaction in the required sense. Second, sometimes when we appreciate food we appreciate if for qualities that are non-instrumental. Although I may appreciate my food instrumentally because it provides nourishment, it is healthy or it was produced in an ethical manner, I may also have a non-instrumental appreciation of the food itself as when I appreciate the particular combination of flavours and textures or the way that a particular dish pairs with another.

The final part of Telfler's characterization, whether we can make objective judgements about food, may be the most difficult to ascertain. Kant held that we could divide the organic senses into two kinds those that are more objective and those that are more subjective. The relatively objective senses brought more information about the external object than they do about the sense organ. In other words, these senses are "transparent" and do not call attention to the sense organ but to the thing in itself. In contrast, the relatively subjective senses call more attention to the enjoyment and stimulation of the sense organ than attention to the external object. In other words, the subjective senses lead to pleasure rather than a perception of the object and cannot produce knowledge of the object without the aid of the other senses (2005: 210). Kant thought that touch, sight and hearing belonged to the first kind and smell and taste to the second, relatively subjective kind. Further, Kant writes that we can come to an agreement about the relatively objective senses, but because the subjective senses depend on their mingling with the body and how the subject responds, we cannot easily agree on the judgements related to smell or taste. Kant's view, however, seems to over-state the case. When I rely on a friend to recommend a restaurant it is because I believe that what my friend finds delicious I will likely also find delicious. Food critics that write for newspapers make their living by refining their palates and if there were not some agreement about what foods are objectively worth appreciating this endeavour would not make sense. We think that it makes sense to argue about whether our food-related judgements are accurate. Further, we can sometimes see that a food is of the kind that merits appreciation, even if we do not appreciate it ourselves. For example, my partner does not like cilantro and finds it quite unpalatable with an after-taste resembling soap. He does, however, see why other people might enjoy this taste even if he does not. Finally, the sense of taste and oral touch is the first means by which infants explore their world, even before the sense of sight has been developed. The sense of taste and smell may play a larger role in structuring the information from our other senses than has been recognized by analytic

philosophers. In this paper, we side with the likes of Hume, to say that although judgements about taste cannot be made a priori, there is some meaning to just criticism in judgements about taste, even if these must be gained by experience rather than introspection. Therefore, we conclude that the aesthetic experience associated with taste can be on par with the aesthetic experience associated with the other senses.

IS FOOD ART?

After establishing that there are important aesthetic reactions associated with the sense of taste, many philosophers who have considered the subject have gone on to question whether food could then be considered an art form. In her analysis, Elizabeth Telfer distinguishes between a classifying and evaluative sense of “art.” In the classifying sense, the object is intended to be regarded as an object of aesthetic apprehension, or it is regarded by a society as an object of aesthetic apprehension. In the evaluative sense of "work of art," the object merits the label, and in some senses "repays" the effort put into the aesthetic consideration. Many philosophers agree that at least some kinds of food are intended and regarded as works of art and therefore pass the classifying sense of the term. Although food and eating is also useful and required to continue living, the kinds of eating practices enjoyed in many parts of the world are not *merely* useful and certain meals may be intended primarily to delight the palate.

In the evaluative sense, however, it is unclear whether food lives up to the label “work of art.” Some commentators, such as John Harris, have argued that food does merit this label since it can “evoke scenes, events, memories, and ideas in addition to being occasions of transcendent joy” (1979: 9). Other philosophers, such as Elizabeth Telfer, have argued that although food may be classified as an art, it should be considered a minor art because food is transient and cannot communicate across generations, food cannot have meaning because it is non-representational, food cannot move us in fundamental ways and we are reluctant to call food beautiful (1996: 58-60). Finally, other commentators have argued that

food should not be evaluated as art because of the limited range of emotive capacity associated with food. In arguing that food should not be considered an art, Carolyn Korsmeyer notes that although we may enjoy works of art that disgust us or that we find unpleasant, we may not similarly enjoy unpleasant or disgusting dishes of food. Food cannot be considered a work of art because its aesthetic appreciation must aim at pleasure. The requirement that food must aim at pleasure to induce aesthetic reflection restricts the range of emotions that are capable of being elicited by food, and hence, food should not be considered an art form on this view. There are many interesting issues that are raised by these arguments, however, we would not like to engage with them at this moment. Instead, we would like to suggest that framing the question of the aesthetic appreciation of food in terms of whether it constitutes an art form may miss some important aspects of the everyday aesthetic appreciation of food; and these aesthetic aspects have moral significance.

TOWARDS A FEMINIST AESTHETICS OF FOOD

Although the aim of many of the authors who consider the aesthetic importance of food is to break down the problematic hierarchical dualism between the mind and the body, these arguments tend to re-inscribe problematic hierarchies of their own that may interfere with aesthetic appreciation and lead to injustices. In particular, discussions of the aesthetic qualities of food that compare the culinary arts to other art forms tend to re-inscribe gender and class hierarchies. Not all kinds of culinary endeavours are granted the status of art-like by even the most generous commentators. Those that fail the test of the criteria of art tend to be those that are practiced by women in their everyday duties and those that are enjoyed by the lower classes. For example, although Jean-Francois Revel is attempting to show the interdependence of the popular and erudite cuisines, in the article “Retrieving Tastes,” he associates the female homemaker’s culinary tradition with nature and the foods that are in season. He says this cuisine is “based on age-old skills, transmitted unconsciously by way of imitation and habit”

(2005: 53). In comparison, he thinks that the more refined cuisine is based “on invention, renewal and experimentation” (2005: 53). This assumes that the things that “women do” are unthinking, instinctual, un-reflexive and uncreative. But this characterization ignores the tremendous amount of energy and creativity that goes into the daily preparations of the family meal. For example, a friend of mine grew up in Canada’s North where food must be flown in and people stock up on goods to last throughout the winter. Her father often remarked at her mother’s ability to “create something out of nothing” as the winter months grew long. This kind of mundane cooking certainly takes creativity and imagination, and, if my friend is a credible source, also involved painstaking aesthetic consideration. Revel further assumes that food stuffs are “found in nature” according to the seasons. Yet Garrison and Watson note that there is little to no “food” in nature until it is combined with human ingenuity, tools and reason. For example, many of the things we think of as everyday foods, such as cashews, pork or olives, would be indigestible or even poisonous in their natural state. Finally Revel’s characterization of the “unthinking and uncreative” nature of the family cook may lead to a problematic association between gender and food.

In North America, where we come from, women are often associated with an obsessive attitude to food. Women’s attitudes to food are widely considered unhealthy because they are said to be preoccupied with caloric and nutritional content of various foodstuffs as well as the current dietary advice about food. We worry that this dismissive attitude about women’s obsessions may be the result of a neglect of the importance, knowledge and creativity associated with the daily aesthetic preparation of the family meal. To prepare an aesthetically pleasing daily meal requires extensive knowledge about science. For example, the cook must know what of the things found in nature can be eaten as they are, and which require special preparation; she must know which foods have what kinds of nutritional value and how to adjust these to the needs of the family members at any given time. It requires knowledge of

economics to determine what foods are affordable and which of these offers the best value for money—a consideration whose importance varies with the socioeconomic class of the cook and her family. Preparing a daily meal to satisfy the aesthetic demands of the family also requires emotional intelligence to determine whether the family members are in need of comfort or are at a time where they may be more willing to experiment with new things. It requires an understanding of cultural norms concerning what foods are classed as palatable or disgusting by members of this community—which may be more challenging in interracial or interethnic relationships. Finally all of these considerations must occur in a context of aesthetic creativity to keep the family members from rejecting food out of repetitive boredom. None of these feats could be achieved through unthinking habit. We would not like to claim that all family cooks undertake these aesthetic tasks, or that those that do undertake them on occasion always do so. However, we worry that the easy dismissal of (mainly) women's everyday aesthetic endeavours reflects a bias that views women's work as unimportant rather than an accurate assessment of the importance of the everyday aesthetics of food preparation. A feminist aesthetics of food would value this knowledgeable and creative aesthetic contribution.

Second, many of the commentators that agree that *some* foods can count as art consider these to be the foods of the upper classes and the lower classes are assumed to lack aesthetic appreciation. This distinction is far from clear. In many cases the foods that are considered delicacies in one part of the world are considered peasant foods in another. For example, many of the Asian cuisines served in North America as examples of fine dining are not considered to be fine dining in the region where they originated. Further, the assumption that the aesthetic sense of the lower classes is less refined has lead to real economic injustices in some cases. Roderick Macdonald provides and illustrative example: He notes that the fresh produce available in Montreal's wealthy Westmount area is only on the shelf for two days. This few-day-old produce is then shipped to Montreal's poor neighbourhood, St. Henri, where it is

sold for the same price. Due to the assumption that aesthetic qualities of foodstuffs are less important to the lower classes, Montreal's poor were paying the same money for foods of lower quality. The solution for Macdonald involved bringing the poor into the Westmount supermarkets which made the patrons uncomfortable and convinced the supermarket manager to reconsider the unethical allocation of the aesthetic qualities of the produce available to the different classes. A feminist analysis of aesthetic appreciation would not assume that the ability to appreciate the aesthetic qualities associated with foodstuffs belonged primarily or exclusively to one class or group of people, but would instead explore the possible differences in what is considered aesthetically pleasing when the possibility of aesthetic experience is equally distributes.

CONCLUSION

In this short time we have not been able to fully explore what a feminist, everyday aesthetic of food would look like, but could only hint at some of the considerations it would undertake. In conclusion we would like to briefly discuss some aspects of the claim that food cannot speak across regions or generations. Food and communal eating can reinforce community ties, but it may also serve to separate and segregate communities. For example, the North American distain for Chinese cuisine that considered "anything" to be a foodstuff is clearly tainted by racist assumptions. However, because food involves taking a substance into one's body for aesthetic consideration and this in turn involves vulnerability and trust, food and eating can also forge understandings across differences. If we could appreciate food and cooking for itself, without trying to make it "live up" to some pre-established norm, we could perhaps open space for cross-community learning. For example, when my parents first moved to Toronto, eating on patios exposed to the street was considered by many Torontonians to be barbaric (though that may seem strange in this context). The opening of an annual festival to celebrate so-called-ethnic cuisine, and the subsequent demand for more varied restaurants helped to establish the ethic of

multiculturalism that now defines the city of Toronto. People fear the unknown. This is especially true of food, because it can be dangerous in a way that other forms of aesthetic experience are not. But having these cultural artefacts available can also promote understanding and trust across cultures. Through sharing foods the differences of the many communities that make up Toronto began to seem less foreign and less frightening. Although food is often said to be temporally bounded due to the changes in equipment and ingredients, my own interest in food grew out of a desire to understand the daily lives of my grandmothers. Women's history is often left out of the official accounts and by preparing (admittedly changed) ingredients, such as butter, cheese and bacon, according to the directions found in heirloom cookbooks and using only period-appropriate equipment, I felt that I was able to gain some understanding of the daily tasks performed by my ancestors. By appreciating the everyday aesthetics of food we may be able to find ways of making cross-generational connections.