

TASTY

An Intelligent Conversation over Dinner

Alexander García Düttmann

“There was no friend of Kant’s but considered the day on which he was to dine with him as a day of festal pleasure.”

Thomas de Quincey, *The Last Days of Immanuel Kant*

- Why are people these days so interested in comparing food with works of art, and in turning cooks into artists? I remember a ghastly and very successful television series with someone called Oliver Peyton who travels around the world and tries to make a case for cooking as fine art, though the premise of the series is that it is all a foregone conclusion and that a cook who makes a dish look like a painting by Matisse must be an artist indeed. Sometimes there is a reactionary cultural critic in me who wonders whether the inclusion of cooking in the domain of fine arts is not a symptom of the end of art or of a pseudo-democratic politics that refuses to make distinctions because making a distinction would amount to an authoritarian imposition. Even if a number of analogies between cooking and creating art can be drawn, what difference do they make? The moves in this game are so predictable, that it is not to my taste. In my eyes, even the frisson to be gained from the “bodily awareness” of the moment “when a life and a death are commemorated in a taste”,¹ as Carolyn Korsmeyer puts it, seems to call for a surrealist bashing. Is it a coincidence that the ritual of eating fine food has provoked the subversive imagination of the likes of Luis Buñuel and Marco Ferreri, and that in *La grande bouffe* the saturation of bourgeois society and its self-consumption are depicted as the suicidal orgy of four indulging gourmets?

- Please switch off the television. Before you ramble on, allow me to remind you of a rather trivial observation. Some of the finest food critics are also excellent and sharp-eyed writers, writers who display wit, irony, and invention and have a real moral sensitivity rather than a fondness for tasteful things. In Spain, two names come to

¹ Carolyn Korsmeyer, “Delightful, Delicious, Disgusting”, in: *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 60:3, Summer 2002, p. 224.

mind immediately, Álvaro Cunqueiro and Nèstor Luján. In a portrait of his friend the Catalan composer Xavier Montsalvatge, Luján once wrote the fine sentence: “We were young at the same time and decided to be young forever.”² And in his ingenious novel *Un hombre que se parecía a Orestes*, a literary feast in which the author demonstrates that nothing can take place if it must take place, or that the inevitable must fall prey to an endless deferral, to vicariousness, Galician gourmet Cunqueiro imagines a barefoot and barelegged maid who serves dinner to a travelling king and smiles at him gracefully. The king interprets her gesture as an invitation to join her later on “but prefers to preserve the affair in the guise of a dream”³ so as to feel accompanied during the long wintry nights he will spend alone in his kingdom.

- The philosopher Kant distinguishes, as is well known, between two forms of taste, a taste for the agreeable and a taste for the beautiful. What is agreeable to me may not be so straight away, and sometimes great cooking consists in preparing a dish that does not allow me to decide whether what I am meant to eat is agreeable to me or not, is delicious or disgusting. Delight in tasting and eating such a dish then depends on an experience of undecidability, and the more I feel surprised by what I put in my mouth, the more difficult it is to anticipate whether I will swallow it or spit it out. I suppose that this is one meaning of what Korsmeyer calls “terrible eating”. If the agreeable, no matter how complicated it may prove to determine its actual condition or to trace its experience, is to be distinguished from the beautiful, from a feeling of pleasure that Kant describes as a feeling of life, or as the experience of a heightened intensity, then a criterion is required that will also allow us to distinguish between the craft or the technique of cooking and the creation of a work of art; for a work of art provokes the same kind of intensity a beholder experiences when contemplating beauty in nature. This criterion is disinterestedness. Inasmuch as tasting a dish prepared by an exceptionally innovative and skilled cook, by a cook who literally surpasses himself, involves not only touching it with the tongue but also swallowing it, digesting it, and ultimately evacuating its residues, there can be no gastronomy that would not be guided by an interest. Conversely, inasmuch as appreciating a work of art created by an exceptionally innovative and skilled artist, by a genius, as Kant says, involves contemplation, an impossibility of touching the

² Nèstor Luján, *El túnel dels anys 40. Memòria personal*, Barcelona 1994, p. 56.

³ Álvaro Cunqueiro, *Un hombre que se parecía a Orestes*, Barcelona 2004, p. 267.

object, not because of its physical properties or a conventional prohibition but because of its condition as a work of art, the interest or intention that must guide the artist and that communicates itself to the beholder remains subordinated to a more fundamental disinterestedness, or at least it remains embedded within an irreducible tension that separates it from art's rejection of any instrumental use that could be made of it.

- When you speak of a tension here, I assume that you are alluding to Kant's definition of participation in art. For according to the *Critique of Judgement*, participation in art demands both an awareness of art as art, or an interest, and some sort of suspension of disbelief: one must consider the work of art "as if" it were a product of nature, not simply as an artifact produced by an artist. In a sense, the work of art is always more than simply an artifact precisely because in order to be innovative the artist must allow for his skills and his knowledge to be invalidated. It is nature that provides him with the rules he must apply, Kant stipulates. This double demand without which there is no participation in art brings forth a tension between interest and disinterestedness.

- But then, following your argument, I could still claim that there can be an important affinity, a family resemblance, between, on the one hand, the gourmet and the beholder of a work of art, and, on the other hand, the cook and the artist. All that would be needed would be to imagine a gourmet who behaves like a wine-taster, though for reasons that would not be pragmatic. The gourmet who wants cooking to be an art, in Kant's terminology a fine or a free art, must always spit out whatever morsel he has placed in his mouth. He must discard the food before it starts to disintegrate, to melt in the warm cavity, to nourish; if he wishes to belong to the family of artists and of beholders of art, he must let go. Excrement is the gourmet's betrayal of art. Accordingly, the cook's artistic talent must consist in the ability to cook a dish that the diner is not able to swallow even though no physical property of this dish prevents him from doing so. The artist's menu can only be one of degustation. As an artist, the master of the kitchen must put the diner in a position where he can feel something like an enabling or inviting disgust that has ceased to be a mere "sensation". This is difficult because taste, touching something with one's tongue, excludes distance: "Objects of taste are always literally close to one."⁴

⁴ Korsmeyer, "Delightful, Delicious, Disgusting", p. 221.

- In a sense, then, spitting out the morsel is analogous to actively preserving the letter in one's relationship to art. For the actively preserved letter is protected against dissolving in the meaning of an interpretation. What keeps gastronomy, at least in so many of its traditional forms, at bay from art is that it has not understood the importance and the value of *not* doing something, regardless of the fact that its exploits depend on hunger having been satisfied. If the population is starving, gastronomy has not much of a place.

- I ask myself whether your argument does not rely on a concept of art that is incompatible with the achievements of modern and contemporary art since it seems to be entirely determined by the idea of contemplation and therefore, as you mentioned in the beginning, by an experience of beauty, or of the aesthetic. Perhaps, if we were to choose a different approach, one that would not exclude participation as *constitutive* of a specific art practice, we could reach a different conclusion as to the relationship between art and cooking.

- Please keep such stereotypical objections to yourself. Let me continue with my argument on a more general level. Taste, as conceived in the wake of Kant, would be a concept incompatible not only with barbarism but also with culture. The barbarian is the one who has only one goal in mind, appropriation by swallowing. He follows the logic of desire. Ultimately, he does not care what he eats as long as he keeps eating, and this is why he can never put an end to his activity, reproducing his desire as he satisfies it. His is a form of addiction, or perhaps addiction is the form barbarism adopts in culture. Interestingly, when Deleuze discusses the habit of drinking in the conversations with Claire Parnet he recorded for television, he claims that the alcoholic does not aim for one last drink; rather he aims for the penultimate drink, given that the last drink would lead to his collapse and hence interrupt his addiction. I would be tempted to say that to the extent that the addict must learn the virtue of asceticism for him to be an addict, there is already some culture in addiction, something which exceeds barbarism, an element of refinement or indeed of taste. Unbeknown to himself, the addict is already on the way. Yet taste is incompatible with culture, too, with any established set of rules and conventions to be applied in a variety of social situations. Taste is not an item of knowledge, to be catalogued in the archives, and it is here that lies its proximity – art's proximity – to thought. Taste is distant twice over, once with regard to appropriation, and then again in view of what has been received and accepted – or, to put it differently, once

with regard to first nature, then in view of second nature. Perhaps, then, taste is neither something natural nor something cultural. Such an understanding of taste means that the aesthetic has a paradigmatic dimension, or that all taste is intrinsically aesthetic.

- Even in modern and contemporary art, participation is kept apart from the event itself, from the art practice that includes it at the same time as a defining element. Art is untouchable by definition, and when the art work calls for touching, touch is transformed. In art, whether contemporary or not, there can only be touching without touching. It is not by chance, not out of an arbitrary whim, that we hesitate to touch a sculpture. All participation presupposes a caesura, otherwise there is nothing in which one can participate. When it comes to art, though, the interruption is prescribed by the object itself, an essential moment of any possible relationship to it. Iconoclasm is always incapable of bridging the gap, of annulling the distancing effect that puts art out of reach for the destructive gesture that tries to grasp and seize the work. What does this mean? It means that art is a matter of freedom and truth, of what comes to us and imposes itself upon us to the extent that we let it come to us. I am paraphrasing Heidegger's phenomenological interpretation of Kant here. Art has to do with the fact that something comes to us in the first place.

- Imposition is the clue that prompts me to explore taste from the angle of disgust. Surely, if we stay with Kant, what causes disgust is also meant to be what resists artistic representation and thus aesthetic taste. In his essay *Economimesis*, Derrida shows how disgust functions as the negative other that renders Kant's thoughts on aesthetic taste coherent. It is only when this other, or whatever it is that triggers disgust, no longer lets itself be identified and disrupts the coherence of thought, that aesthetic taste is truly challenged, as if disgust were the subjective response to a breakdown of identification and to a boundless generalisation of vicariousness: "The system has an interest in determining the other as *its* other, that is as literally disgusting."⁵ Yet how, exactly, does Kant introduce the notion of disgust? Disgust is, he writes, a "sensation" based on "nothing but imagination". We experience an object as disgusting when it imposes itself upon us, insisting violently on our enjoyment of it because we reject it with equal violence, so that, in the experience of disgust, we no longer distinguish between what is imaginary, a mere representation of the object,

⁵ Jacques Derrida, "Economimesis", in: *Mimesis – des articulations*, Paris 1975, p. 93.

and what corresponds to the object's very nature. Our sensation is a source and a product of confusion. When it comes to the pleasure we take in the work of art, the "as if" is designed to ward off such confusion. Kant adds that sculpture is a fine art that lends itself particularly to a mix up of the artifactual and the natural in sensation. Perhaps this explains our hesitation to touch a sculpture as much as our desire to feel it with our hands. So Kant's comments on disgust suggest that when we are disgusted and, as a consequence, reject something, it is not clear that what we actually reject is the object that elicits our disgust; or, to put it differently, it is not clear that it is an object which elicits disgust. As much as the pleasure of beauty, or that feeling of life which amounts to a kind of self-affection of the subject, disgust, the sign of an ugliness that resists all attempts at representing it, is a subjective matter, a matter of the subject being at odds with himself. In disgust, it becomes apparent that the subject can put himself at risk, or that the feeling of life harbours a deadly madness, if madness is tantamount to the impossibility of making a distinction between nature and art, between what comes first and what comes second.

- There would be then two forms of imposition. On the one hand, there would be the imposition of art on the beholder. The condition for art to impose itself upon us in aesthetic pleasure, or for aesthetic pleasure to be a free exposure to something that comes to us freely and bestows a sense of necessity on us, so that we cannot reject it and do not experience its coming as a violent intrusion, would be a distinction between art and nature that averts vicariousness and allows taste to remain irreducible to both nature and art. However, it must be noted that this distinction becomes all the more tenuous the more difficult it proves to understand the usage we must make of the "as if" when determining participation in art and considering art "as if" it were nature. On the other hand, though, there would also be the imposition of the subject of aesthetics onto itself, the suicide of the aesthetic. This imposition would destroy the pleasure of beauty, and hence beauty itself. It would stem from confusion and result in confusion, triggered by an imagination that would have refused to enter into harmonious and free play with the understanding, the other power of representation, to employ Kantian vocabulary. Everything would hinge on the imagination's freedom, play itself out between a form that would remain at a distance and a form that would come too close to be enjoyable, as it were. What touches me can only do so if I do not feel that it seeks to touch me. Thus, pleasure in aesthetics depends on the imagination not subordinating itself to the understanding

but also on it keeping the right distance, on it not trying to subordinate the understanding to its own blind purposes. In other words, the imagination's freedom is always a double achievement, both in the sense of being already at work in this achievement and in the sense of being the achievement itself. It is this precedence or this subsequence of freedom, without which freedom cannot be conceived of, that threatens aesthetic taste and pleasure.

- Contemplating beauty may not be as mechanical an activity as chewing and shitting, yet contemplation would be just as stupid if art did not demand to be seen as art, too.

- Apparently aesthetic taste is not to be had easily! But does this warrant letting the cook in?

- "Canary wine is agreeable."

- "It is agreeable to me."