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The Taste Culture Reader – Experiencing Food and Drink

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Carolyn Korsmeyer, ed., *The Taste Culture Reader – Experiencing Food and Drink*. Oxford and New York: Berg, 2005, 421 pp., ISBN 1845200608 (hbk), £55.00, 1845200616 (pbk), £19.99.

keywords: body ♦ culture ♦ identity ♦ multidisciplinary ♦ sociology of food

This volume presents an extensive and comprehensive collection of essays on ‘ambivalence’ and ‘paradox’ in meanings given to the tasting of food and drink. It constitutes an enjoyable and accomplished multidisciplinary journey from beginning (Part I) to end (Part VIII) where the reader is familiarized with perspectives on taste derived from history, sociology, anthropology, philosophy, geography and psychology. Alongside scientific knowledge, the book displays alternative knowledge frames and discourses on taste offering contributions from writers, gastronomers, poets and other artists. Another original feature is the surreptitious combination of cognitive discourse with praxis by displaying recipes from different periods in time, which articulate both familiar and exotic ingredients. This seems to have the purpose of challenging the reader to test their taste buds (along with their cooking skills and competence in the kitchen!), almost looking for reiteration and confirmation through practice and experimentation with some of the theoretical issues brought to the fore by the authors whose writings were selected for the volume.

The opening question, ‘what is taste?’, is answered by linking nature (body) and culture (society) in many different ways. In some accounts, nature overrides society when taste is explained as mainly determined by the physical and biochemical characteristics (e.g. body composition and nutritional values); but in other accounts, society seems to take the lead when evidence of social and cultural constructions of taste are presented in refined ways. In this vein, inspired by Deborah Lupton’s essay (‘Food and Emotion’), tastes are ‘embodied’ (this idea is also present in Pierre Bourdieu’s work) and ‘biological processes are socially framed’ (pp. 291–2). Yet, the cultural and social meanings of taste are clearly predominant. The tension between nature and society is never resolved (maybe the exception is conceded when Amy Trubek tastes a vintage port, see ‘Place Matters’), it being an invitation to understand taste as a complex issue: multifaceted, paradoxical, contradictory and ambivalent.

The process of selecting the texts to be included in this volume was probably a thorny task. It is indeed a noteworthy effort to include multidisciplinary perspectives on taste consulting both classical and contemporary texts. Included, for example, are discussions around ‘gustatory taste’ and ‘aesthetic taste’ in the 17th and 18th centuries in the work of David Hume and Immanuel Kant compared to notions of ‘distinction’ in the contemporary work of Pierre Bourdieu (see ‘Taste of Luxury, Taste of Necessity’). Other examples are the empirical observations about taste by Brillat-Savarin in the early 19th century when there was apparently a hierarchy of the senses with taste downgraded by comparison with more ‘sophisticated’ senses such as hearing. These contrast with more recent scientific accounts of the biochemical components of taste, the anatomy of the tongue, and

its neural articulation with other senses such as smell to identify chemical stimuli (see Bartoshuk and Duffy, 'Chemical Senses – Taste and Smell').

The book has eight parts and 37 essays relating to functional, cognitive, communicative, aesthetic/cultural and identity values of taste. Each part opens with a preface that provides an overview of the topics dealt with and links to earlier or later discussions in the book. This gives an internal coherence and consistency throughout.

The selection of texts begins by an account of the physical determinants of taste and the omnivorous ability of humans to search for diversity and variety of foods. Part II goes on to explore this aspect of cultural diversity further, linking it to the social basis for taste differentiation (gender, social class, ethnicity, caste and social status). A common aspect that links the first three essays of this part is the acknowledgement that there are differences between 'high' and 'popular' taste cultures. For Revel, the differences are between an erudite/elite cuisine, 'the cuisine deliberately created' and a silent or popular cuisine that is 'unconsciously transmitted' (p. 53), one where the ordinary and inconspicuous aspects of taste in food and drink prevail. In Bourdieu, the distinction made is between 'luxury' and 'necessity' with taste a mode of social differentiation. Jack Goody's historical account of global cuisines acknowledges not only social class differences but also differences in gender relations. The last essays of this part call attention to 'creolization' processes of different culinary cultures and how these processes incorporate elements of change as well as the reproduction of tradition.

Social differentiation of taste is explored in the following part by bringing its communicative feature into play. There are numerous meanings ascribed to the flavours of foods and the uses made on particular occasions can be instrumental for group acceptance or rejection, dictating inclusion (identity) or exclusion (differentiation). These processes are variable and susceptible to change as shown in a historical account of the meanings ascribed to salt, spices and sugar, and the mutations they undergo. As we are told, particular foods and flavours also transmit messages of pleasure, displeasure, power, coercion or submission. Thus, taste can reflect both personal and collective identities, and be an instrument of power or compliance.

The spiritual and religious accounts on disciplining the body and nourishing the soul are explored next with attention given to norms and values assigned to foods employed in rituals, festivals, celebratory occasions, as well as to foods that should be prohibited or eliminated from diets (e.g. abstinence in periods such as Ramadan and Passover).

The debate as to whether taste is just gustatory, a sensory component of the body or whether it is associated with aesthetic sensibility is opened by two classic philosophers, Immanuel Kant and David Hume, who present contradictory views about this issue. It is then nicely closed by an essay on Chinese aesthetics that emphasizes the importance of gustatory taste (usually underestimated by western literature on taste). The development and cultivation of taste is the theme of Part VI, where essays by Stephen Mennell, Jukka Gronow and Amy Trubek address ways of educating and learning taste, either through gastronomic guides (*Good Food Guide*), through policy, institutional and commercial arrangements (e.g. the Soviet Union's proliferation of a new material culture in the 1930s) or even through social movements around local food.

The 'Soviet champagne' (coined a 'kitsch' product) is an interesting example of the appropriation of a designated region by a different country (the Soviet Union) with disparate cultural traditions and soil/climate conditions for the production of an alleged 'authentic' champagne (actually produced in France). This controversial issue leads to Trubek's essay on *terroir* products (or 'the local taste of the earth', p. 237) and the social and natural implications of cultivating tastes where place matters. In a similar vein, the slow food movement can be seen as a way of educating people to appreciate 'quality' food, where taste is at its core. This brings to the fore the implications of reinventing new tastes with a nostalgic appeal, where memory and the senses are implicated in the aesthetic appreciation of food. The power of memory to recall flavours of the past and trigger an emotional experience around food is the topic of Part VII, which starts with the famous scene describing Proust's personal experience of eating a Madeleine.

The appeal for 'quality' and for traditional foods connected to place and memory contrasts with the industrialization, standardization and homogenization processes that drive the global economy of food production and distribution. Here, taste is being adulterated by artificial flavours in foods and drinks served in standardized eating outlets (e.g. McDonald's, Pizza Hut and Burger King), and consumed by people who are pressed for time (on the topics of time, sustainable consumption, social practices and convenience, which were not the main theme of this volume; see also the work developed by Elizabeth Shove (2003), Dale Southerton (2006) and Alan Warde (1997, 2005)). This raises a question that nicely closes the book: what is authentic food? Is it possible to recover 'authentic' taste? The food philosopher Lisa Heldke gives readers some food for thought about the complexity of meanings that the 'authentic' bears.

The book ends as it starts, by challenging the reader to think about taste in multifaceted ways. I can think of at least two aspects of taste that have not received too much attention. First, it would have been interesting to examine more closely the mundane, ordinary and inconspicuous aspects of taste present in everyday life food practices. There seems to be a certain emphasis on the celebratory, visible, conspicuous, extraordinary features of taste and a certain underestimation of what is going on in the 'silent cuisine' (see 'Retrieving Tastes – Two Sources of Cuisine', p. 51). Second, and, as the editor points out, it would have been good to explore further the aesthetic appreciation of taste in artistic contexts: painting, cinema, theatre, publicity, literature and so on, thus having a deeper account of the construction of taste in such cultural and social contexts. The work presented in this volume certainly awakens a 'succulent' desire to learn more about taste in contexts less explored in this book. Still, the 'succulent' selection of 50 further readings proposed at the end is probably one of many ways to do it.

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D. Petersson and E. Steinskog, eds, *Actualities of Aura: Twelve Studies of Walter Benjamin*. Svanesund, Sweden: Nordic Summer University Press, 2005, 293 pp., ISBN 9188484254, €26.95.

keywords: aura ♦ images ♦ reproduction

What could be more topical than a book on the auratic character of contemporary existence? We live in a media-mediated world, where the role of the spectator is ever a problem and a subject of concern for sociologists, both with respect to the generation of passivity and how to theorize its mutating technological forms. Walter Benjamin was an early theorist of precisely these things, in essays such as a 'Little History of Photography', 'The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility', 'The Storyteller' and the unfinished 'Arcades Project'. Since his untimely death in 1940, his work has been of recurring interest to western intellectuals, and it is perhaps fair to ask if a new book is necessary. It is hard to envisage a secondary text capable of replacing Susan Buck-Morss's (1989) *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project*. This collection has no such ambitions, and it lacks the visual images that make the Buck-Morss book a pleasure to both the reader and the viewer.

This collection of essays by European and American academics under the title, *Actualities of Aura: Twelve Studies of Walter Benjamin*, justifies its publication and topic in the following manner:

Digital technology had indeed facilitated and shaped other modes of writing as well as different conditions for editing; for us it has furthermore inspired new questions to pose about Benjamin's concept of aura. (p. ix)

The goal is therefore clear, to address changes in experience and (media) production/consumption brought about in the move from traditional library space ('the space of reading rooms, collections and catalogues') to digital space ('the space of computed code, digital documents and interface mediation'). Will the move into this

The Taste Culture Reader: has been added to your Cart. Add to Cart. Buy Now. "because Korsmeyer recruited authors to write new original material, this second edition is more than simply an updated survey of relevant literature about taste, food, drink, and culture. On the whole, her strategy proves to be a very successful one." - FoodAnthropology. Book Description. New edition of this field-defining textbook on the sensory experiences of food, including classical and contemporary sources in anthropology, history, philosophy, science and beyond. About the Author. DAVID HOWES is Professor of Anthropology at Concordia University and the general editor of the Sensory For Details about The Taste Culture Reader: Taste is recognized as one of the most evocative senses. The flavors of food play an important role in identity, memory, emotion, desire, and aversion, as well as social, religious and other occasions. Yet despite its fundamental role, taste is often mysteriously absent from discussions about food. Now in its second edition, The Taste Culture Reader examines the sensuous dimensions of eating and drinking and highlights the centrality of taste in human experience. " R.S. Khare, "Food with Saints," in The Taste Culture Reader: Experiencing Food and Drink, ed. Carolyn Korsmeyer (Oxford: Berg, 2005), 156-165. " Carolyn Korsmeyer, ed., "Bitter Herbs and Unleavened Brea (from the Passover Haggadah)," in The Taste Culture Reader: Experiencing Food and Drink (Oxford: Berg, 2005), 181-183. " D.T. Suzuki, "Zen and the Art of Tea," in The Taste Culture Reader: Experiencing Food and Drink, ed. Carolyn Korsmeyer (Oxford: Berg, 2005), 166-174. February 2, 2015 " Guest Lecture 1. " Siegel " HI233: Taste, Culture, and Power. " Sidney Wilfred Mintz, Sweetness and Power: The Place of Sugar in Modern History (New York: Penguin Books, 1986); selections TBA. February 9, 2015 " Uppers and Downers: Coffee, Alcohol, and Other Drugs. Educated Tastes is a collection of new essays that examine how taste is learned, developed, and represented. " A set of key themes connect these topics: the relationships between taste and place; how our knowledge of food shapes taste experiences; how gustatory discrimination functions as a marker of social difference; and the place of ethical, environmental, and political concerns in debates around the importance and meaning of taste. " Chapter Four National Tastes: Italy and Food Culture. (pp. 81-104). MATTHEW HIBBERD. " Hosted by the editor of the hunters' journal La Chasse Illustrée , it featured two dishes that today may well strike the reader as bizarre if not horrifying: an