

# What shall we have to eat?

*tradition, technology and the normative avant-garde*

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— very early draft, comments very welcome —

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It's beyond strange that so many humans are clueless about how they should feed themselves. Every wild species on the planet knows how to do it; presumably ours did, too, before our oversized brains found new ways to complicate things. Now, we're the only species that can be baffled about the "right" way to eat...

Mark Bittman and David L. Katz 2018

Food is a very fertile field from which to approach normativity for it is one of the few spaces of action where most of our decisions are overt and conscious: what to serve, what to prepare, what to have, what to sell, what to buy, what to cook. Furthermore, food is a rich space where different normative regimes converge. When asked why they ate out at KFC, the most popular fast food chain in the USA, most answers converged into four key factors: KFC food is cheap, tasty, familiar and there always seems to be one open and near. (Inglis et. al. 2005, Foley 2007) And while there does not seem to be anything wrong with preferring food that is cheap, tasty, familiar and convenient, many people cringe at the very idea of a KFC meal. This is because other criteria operate on our food choices. Loosely borrowing from a recent list made by Sebastián Lomelí, we

can identify at least the following sort of criteria involved in our food decisions, beyond price, convenience, taste and familiarity:

- Aesthetic criteria: Is it worthy of contemplation? does it have irreducible aesthetic value?, etc.
- Romantic criteria: Does it express masterful technique? Is it exemplar or original? Does it denote a work of genius, etc.
- Kantian criteria: does it stand at the beginning of a chain of inspiration, or even imitation? Does it stand as the peak achievement of a culinary tradition? Does it challenge a canonical way of cooking, eating, serving, etc.?, etc.
- Hermeneutic Virtues: how informative is taste to what it contains? how well defined are the flavours that make it?, etc.
- Political Virtues: as you stand on a socio-economic chain from produce to mouth, are you contributing to this chain being fair to those involved, like growers, marketers, cooks, etc.? or to others affected by your decision to partake in it?, etc.
- Moral Considerations: mostly, bioethical considerations
- Meaning: what is the symbolic significance of your choice? is it authentic?, etc.
- Religious and similar taboos

Now, mind you that Lomelí was not talking about food when I heard him come up with this list, he was giving an introductory course in the philosophy of art. However, as I heard him I noticed all he was saying about art applied to food as well. It is well known that much of the vocabulary we use to justify our food preferences echoes the vocabulary we use to justify our aesthetic choices in art (but probably not only aesthetic choices in art). This might lead us to believe that food preparation just is an art form as much as painting, theatre or dance. After all, the simplest way to explain why these criteria seem to be as useful in other arts as they are in food is just to recognize that food is art. In other words, I will not argue that “granting art status to food [might

be helpful] to recognize and value it aesthetically” (Boisvert and Heldke 2016), but that doing so might have explanatory value, i.e., that it might help us explain *how* we prepare, consume, etc. food. Here, I am in deep agreement with Edouard Machery (*forthcoming*) that if a concept is helpful in making sense of some phenomenon, even if the phenomenon was not part of the intended domain of the concept, we’d better take it literally and just expand its application to cover the new phenomenon. As Martínez (2003) has insisted, expanding the reach of concepts is useful primary for bridging cognitive resources, between the original field and the new one. Thus, regardless of whether food is art in the current sense, I want to argue that a conception of art that includes food would help us build a theoretical bridge that would allow us to exploit the cognitive resources we have developed for the understanding of current art practices to understand culinary practices as well. Instead of offering some armchair conceptual argument for this claim, I will try to show how we can apply a theoretical development in the contemporary study of an aspect of fine art to show light on an analogous aspect of contemporary culinary culture. In particular, I will argue that Georgina Born’s theoretical apparatus for the understanding of the musical avant-garde (Born 1995) applies *mutatis mutandi* to analogous tendencies in what I would call the culinary avant-garde.

## I. Georgina Born and the Avant Garde

According to Born, one of the driving questions in twentieth century art was the question as to how much knowledge is required to properly appreciate a work of art. So-called populists considered that art, in general, should not require any special epistemic disposition from the public except for a natural curiosity and opens to the piece. Many others, in contrast believe that

at least some forms of art required special skills and knowledge. Mohan Matthen, for example, writes:

The primary attractors are what make art appeal to the senses, and thus they are essential for the appreciation of art... Many think that at least some of them have universal appeal and propose that they are genetic and connected to evolution... But art is not simply the production of an artefact that can be appreciated in this way... Art has another universal characteristic—it has *secondary attractors* that [require] skill levels that demand practice and learning... however loaded it might be in primary attractors, art is made in part to appeal to *connoisseurs*. In so-called high art, the secondary attractors predominate. (Mathen 2015)

An analogue phenomenon occurs in the world of food: “Populists” consider that good food must appeal to the good taste of everyday people and not require any special knowledge. To paraphrase John Armstrong (2004):

[The populist] is worried that this retort – ‘you are no connoisseur’ – will prevail over the initial, skeptical reaction. The [diner] will doubt his own response and think something like: ‘I can’t [taste] it, but connoisseurs can, so I must be wrong.’ [The populist] is terrified that the common-sense [diner] will be duped by the [avant garde chef]...” (Armstrong 2004, 8)

In contrast to populism, the twentieth century saw the rise of two different avant garde trends: experimental postmodernism and serialist (and post-serialist) hyper-modernism. While experimental composers like Wolff, Cardew and Cage conceived of music foremost as a cultural phenomenon and thus their experimental proposals aimed at enriching and expanding the cultural and communal aspects of music: a priority of performance over composition, incorporation of non-western musical elements into the western tradition, etc. (Born 1995: 56-61) Serialist and postserialists, in contrast, adopted a theory first approach where experimentation aimed at

developing a completely new way of thinking (and only derivatively, composing, playing and hearing) music. I will argue here that the debate between these two tendencies within the musical avant garde is completely parallel to a similar debate in contemporary cuisine, between connoisseurs and hypermodernists.

## II. Connoisseurs

For Born, the European musical avant-garde of the twentieth Century can be characterized by parallel but inverse tendencies regarding the relation between knowledge and appreciation: those who hold the view that **special knowledge** is required in order to appreciate a work of art and those who, on the contrary, believe that certain **active ignorance** is required. In the culinary realm, the former tendency corresponds to self-regarded **connoisseurs**, who hold that special knowledge needs to be acquired in order to properly enjoy their avant garde dishes:

...people have to be trained to recognize and like them. [It is necessary to] set up programs to teach children taste, [and to] organize... workshops for adults to study the tastes of different foods, [etc.] offering people the opportunity to expand their horizons... [This] education in taste ... can mean education in the objective detection of flavors using the techniques refined by food scientists in the last couple of decades and the opportunity to explore novel tastes and textures. Or it can be education in "good" taste, a much more subjective matter and traditionally a way of showing membership in an elite... (Laudan 2004: 140-1)

Connoisseurs are what Rachel Laudan (2001) has called “culinary luddites” regarding food technology, which they associate not, as we will see soon, with innovative techniques such as molecular cooking, but with technological developments aimed at making food more convenient, like canning, dehydrating, etc. So they do not consume canned foods (or, in general, what they deem ‘processed’ food), take away or frozen meals, etc.

The ‘food connoisseurs’ ... are distinguished by the low importance placed on almost all of the convenience factors. This segment is the least likely to snack between meals or to snack instead of eating meals. This segment is less likely to select convenience food to make life easier. Saving time and energy in meal preparation and during shopping is [not] important to these consumers ... They feel less time pressured and less stressed than [others.] The food connoisseurs are less likely than the other segments to be concerned with checking the price of their food items and are the least inclined to view cooking and meal preparation as the sole responsibility of the woman in the household. (Buckley, Cowan & McCarthy 2007)

This does not mean that they are conservative in their food choices or avoid experimenting new foods, but – and this is just what one would expect from Born’s analysis – they prefer their experimentation be of a particular sort: they like trying new things when eating out, appreciate foreign cuisine, and experiment in their own home-cooking (Sparke & Menrad 2011). But their conception of ‘experimentation’ is quite empirical. ‘Empirical’ here, following Born (1995), must be contrasted with theory-first experimentation. It is a sensory and bodily sort of experimentation. It tries to conserve the aesthetic pleasure of cooking that Nigella Lawson describes thus:

...the feel of the dough in my fingers, the scent of a lemon as I zest the skin and the aromatic oils spritz in the air, the sizzle of onions in a pan, the darkly gleaming beauty of an eggplant. Cooking provides deep aesthetic pleasure... (Nigella Lawson 2018)

This sentiment of trying to keep aesthetics as sensual and, therefore, embodied is also central to a lot of improvisational musical experimentation. Practice-led experimental music is usually

conceived as an embodied activity that must be experimented *and* thought through the body “in order to avoid persistent Cartesian tendencies” (Laws 2014: 131) Even when technology is central to this sort of musical experimentation, there is always an emphasis in trying to keep the body *in control* of the music, there is always a driving “...desire to have physical control and use the body in a musical performance.” (Magnusson & Hurtado Mendieta 2007: 1) In a 2007 survey (mostly) among users of musical software that uses the screen as the main control interface, like iXi, SuperCollider, ChuckK, Pure Data, Max/MSP, CSound, AudioMulch, eu-gene, livecode, etc. Magnusson & Hurtado Mendieta found that:

Playing digital instruments seems to be less of an embodied practise (where motor-memory has been established) as the mapping between gesture and sound can be changed so easily by changing a variable, a setting, a patch or a program... There were some comments that are worth printing here due to their direct and clear presentation:

- “I don't feel like I'm playing a digital instrument so much as operating it.”
- “...full control is not interesting for experimentation. but lack of control is not useful for composition.”
- ...
- “I think acoustic instruments tend to be more right brain or spatial, and digital instruments tend to be more left brain and linguistic.”

(Magnusson & Hurtado Mendieta 2007: 5)

In other words, the problem is not with technology itself but with heavily mediated interfaces, that is, interfaces where the act of controlling the tool does not function as an expressive gesture. When I was a teenager, for example, my high school classmates were getting their first cars and they made a big difference between traditional car stereos that used knobs for controlling volume, tuning, etc. and the newer models (at that time) that used only buttons; the distinction

lives on electronic musician, where we usually distinguish between button pushers and knob-twisters. In twisting a knob, bodily action clearly maps to the resulting change in sound – as you twist the pitch knob continuously clockwise, the pitch continuously rises in proportional ratio, for example –, but no similar robust mapping occurs when you push a button, drag a mouse or type code on a keyboard.

### III. Hypermodernism

In contrast and reaction to the connoisseur, the *hyper-modernist* seeks to innovate food preparation by using technology in the pursuit of a completely new way of conceiving of food preparation (Hollows & Jones 2010). They conceive of experimentation not just as trying some new exotic ingredient or adding a new ingredient to a traditional dish. Just like serialist and post-serialist composers, hyper modernist chefs do not embrace technology for technology sake, for they embrace technology mostly as a means, a tool in the pursuit of “total, rational and predictable control of” flavor (Born 1995: 183). Thus, not any technological development in food processing or preparation suits the *hyper-modernist* ethos. Cheese ripening technology, for example (Law 2001) does not fit the *hyper-modernist* requirements for its goal is not creative, but pragmatic: to prepare food in a more efficient way (i.e., to make conventional food in a non-conventional way).

This distinction between *bad* technology (canned or frozen food, synthetic flavoring, etc.) and *good* technology (immersion blending, sous vide, etc.) is also present in the hypermodernist musical avant garde of serialism and postserialism. According to Born (1995), serialism and postserialism, rejected the ‘artisanal’ and ‘pragmatic’ use of technology developed by



experimental composers and embraced technologies that allowed them to completely control the resulting sounds.

For the hyper-modernist, the epistemic effort to properly appreciate a dish is not one of knowledge, but of forgetting or ignoring. It is as if the instruction were to *forget all you think you knew about food* and embrace the new paths laid by the hyper-modernist chef. When talking about seminal hyper-modernist chef Heston Blumenthal, for example, Hollows & Jones (2010) write:

His cuisine challenges diners to reflect on the seemingly obvious categories—for example, the distinction between sweet and savory, hot and cold, raw and cooked—that organize our normal culinary and cultural experience. [Blumenthal’s restaurant] The Fat Duck’s menu began to confuse different meal events by including breakfast goods such as (parsnip) cereal and (snail) porridge in a lunch or dinner menu. It also disrupted the expected sequence of a meal, from savory to sweet, in a dessert of bacon and egg ice cream. (Hollows & Jones 2010: 526)<sup>1</sup>

Modernism, Born reminds us, is married to a theory-first hyper-rational approach to experimentation (see also Huxtable 1983). Since the beginning, modernist artists, Born claims, showed “a concern and fascination with new media, technology, and science.” (Born 1995: 41) As evidence, Born mentions not only the words of Peter Wollen (1987), according to whom “... modernism developed an aesthetic of the engineer...” (Wollen 1987: 5) but also, as examples of modern art being driven by technological and scientific developments, Seurat and Cezanne’s

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<sup>1</sup>. Instead to talk about ‘forgetting’, Hollow and Jones (2010) suggest that what the hyper-modernist asks of us in order to appreciate his cuisine is to be consciously aware of what we think we know an ice-cream or a bisque is.

inspiration and interest in the vision science of their time, the Futurist's "turn to machines [in] their search for new sound materials", etc. (Born 1995: 41). Thus, it is not surprising that hyper-modernist chefs like Blumenthal, have "sought out scientific experts to help him master cooking processes" (Hollows & Jones 2010: 526).

Avant-garde cuisine... has emerged as a new scientific area... Investigating the physicochemical transformation of base ingredients that occur in cooking, chefs can make practical use of scientifically rational techniques to assemble edible materials into a variety of culinary creations... Benefiting from innovations made possible by progress in physical chemistry, many physicochemical transformations of ingredients in cooking processes were investigated in recent years and these transformations were used intentionally to fabricate novel aliments, or forms and shapes thereof. (Fu et al. 2014: 11747)

According to Born, a common trope of modernism and hyper-modernism is to contrast their own scientific, rational experimentation with the empirical experimentation of amateurs. Culinary hyper-modernism is not an exception in this regard. Barham and his collaborators, for example, start their 2010 paper with the following condescending statement:

The science of domestic and restaurant cooking has recently moved from the playground of a few interested amateurs into the realm of serious scientific endeavor. (Barham et al. 2010: 2313)

It has become common for chefs to co-author scientific papers, and it is not rare to read people talk about molecular gastronomy as much as a scientific field as a culinary technology; yet critics have also argued that might be just a fad within the already well-established field of food studies (van der Linden et al. 2008, Caporaso & Formisano 2016). Thus, the role knowledge plays in

hyper-modernist cuisine remains antithetical to its role in connoisseurs' cuisine: knowledge is applied in the elaboration of the dish, not in its appreciation.

According to Born, another “feature of modernism” associated with its scientism, “is theoreticism. Modernist art invests an unprecedented power in exegetical texts... manifestos and [other] writings...” (Born 1989: 42). Once again, this is a well-known feature of hyper-modernist avant garde cuisine where some of the most famous Chefs are almost as well known for their dishes as for their texts. There is a manifesto of Italian molecular cuisine (Cassi & Bocchia, 2005) and even a Plating Manifesto (Deroy et al. 2014) that aims to

...to promote a different approach to plating, which breaks with the more functional and decorative purposes of plate ware, and puts experiments in visual presentation at the heart of modernist culinary expression. (Deroy et al. 2014: 3)

There is evidence (Vanhonacker, Lengard, Hersleth, and Verbeke 2010, Buckley, Cowan & McCarthy 2007, etc.) that connoisseurs appreciate ‘traditional’, as opposed to both ‘modern’ and ‘popular’ food choices. However, there is an alternative way of conceiving the relation between “modern” and “traditional”, where modern cuisine is just the latest development of a gastronomical tradition. This is how modernist position themselves in relation to their traditions. In a 2006 statement, Ferran Adria of *El Bulli*, Heston Blumenthal of *the Fat Duck*, Thomas Keller of *the French Laundry* and *Per Se*, and writer Harold McGee, claimed that...

Our cooking values tradition, builds on it, and along with tradition is part of the ongoing evolution of our craft.

The world's culinary traditions are collective, cumulative inventions, a heritage created by hundreds of generations of cooks. Tradition is the base which all cooks

who aspire to excellence must know and master. Our open approach builds on the best that tradition has to offer.

As with everything in life, our craft evolves, and has done so from the moment when man first realized the powers of fire. We embrace this natural process of evolution and aspire to influence it. We respect our rich history and at the same time attempt to play a small part in the history of tomorrow. (McGee et al. 2006)

In other words, hypermodernist experimentation is still linked to the development of a tradition: “using old cooking techniques with new ingredients, or using old cooking techniques with old ingredients in new ways” (Rao et al. 2003: 806 apud. Hollows & Jones 2010: 525), so that tradition is both “conserved” and “transformed” (Hollows & Jones 2010: 525). In the words of Cassi & Bocchia, “innovation must expand, not destroy, the Italian gastronomic tradition” (Cassi & Bocchia, 2005).

However, it is clear that Rao’s use of the term ‘old’ should not be taken too literally. As is well known, *tradition* tends to be more myth than historical fact and culinary traditions are not the exception. As Laudan has warned us,

I am an historian. As an historian I cannot accept the account of the past implied by Culinary Luddism, a past sharply divided between good and bad, between the sunny rural days of yore and the grey industrial present... The Luddites’ fable of disaster, of a fall from grace, smacks more of wishful thinking than of digging through archives. It gains credence not from scholarship but from evocative dichotomies: fresh and natural versus processed and preserved; local versus global; slow versus fast; artisanal and traditional versus urban and industrial; healthful versus contaminated and fatty. (Laudan 2001: 36)

Another common trope in hyper modernism is the technological purification of aesthetic appreciation. Once sound manipulation becomes the prime matter of hyper-modernist musical avant-garde, this allowed composers to embrace the discourse of cultural purification, i.e., the

idea that the music they were producing was purer and unpolluted by any social or culturally construed meanings (except, paradoxically, by those of hyper modernism itself). Something similar is found in much writing on molecular gastronomy. It is not uncommon to read that the flavours such synthetically manipulated are ‘pure’ in a way that flavours still attached to their ‘natural’ or ‘traditional’ sources are not, so that social and culturally construed meanings can be freely manipulated to enhance their appreciation (Caporaso & Formisano 2016). Technological manipulability and naturalization are commonly linked in the hyper-modernist imagination (Hacking 1983). Thus the fact that we can technologically manipulate flavours or sounds is easily interpreted as revealing more natural or pure sounds or flavours (This 2006).

#### IV. Conclusions

The aim of this brief essay has been to illustrate one of the many parallelisms between cuisine and the fine arts. In particular, I have tried to show that the main trends that Georigina Born identified in the anti-populist musical avant-garde in her influential (1994) work, are also present in much the same guises in contemporary culinary culture. Just as the history of late twentieth century avant garde music can be reconstructed as the dynamic dialectic between a traditionalist post-modernism and a rational hyper-modernism, so we can characterize much of the recent history of western innovative culinary trends as a similar dialectic between a traditionalist post-modernism and a rational hyper-modernism.

This does not mean that there are not important differences between the musical and culinary avant grades, just that the similarities are indeed striking. Let me just mention two of the most obvious ones: on the one hand – and this is something Born constantly insists on –, the

musical avant garde has developed mostly on public institutions like the IRCAM in Paris, and its discourse has, consequently, developed mostly for the justification of its public budget. The culinary avant garde, in sharp contrast has developed mostly in the private sector, in extravagantly expensive restaurants such as *Parlour* in West London, *Alinea* in Chicago or *Nocti Vagus* in Berlin. A second (and perhaps related) major difference between musical and culinary avant garde is the centrality of **noise** in the former. While it is true that avant garde musicians' and sound artists' embrace of noise gave rise to many innovative ideas at the beginning of the previous century, it has now become a tired cliché; nevertheless, nothing similar seems to have developed within the culinary avant garde. Can you imagine a cuisine so experimental that it embraced disgusting flavours the way composers like Russell or Cage embraced noise a century ago? For all its so-called experimental nature, both the connoisseur and the hyper-modern versions of avant garde cuisine are very *complaisant*; no movement transgressive enough to subvert the current orthodox relation between cuisine and taste has yet emerged. This is something I wish I could explain.

Now, what to make about these similarities and dissimilarities? We can take them as defeasible evidence that cooking is a bona fide art, just as much as music is; or we can hypothesise the a common, more general, phenomenon manifests itself in both the musical and the culinary avant garde, one that is neither artistic, nor not artistic, so to speak. I would like to hear your thoughts, and Profr. Engisch's, during the comments section of the talk.

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