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Once Upon a Time There Was a Minor Sense
New Perspectives on Gustatory Aesthetics

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Once Upon a Time There Was a Minor Sense: New Perspectives on Gustatory Aesthetics

Guest editor
Nicola Perullo

Introduction

Nicola Perullo

Over the course of about three decades, gustatory aesthetics has gradually established itself as a discipline in its own right, gaining legitimacy and occupying a significant place within academic research. More generally, the entire field known as the *philosophy of food* – which encompasses not only aesthetics but also ethics, politics, epistemology, ontology, technology, and other more specific areas – has become a small but meaningful area of study. It is, therefore, a novel subject, emerging toward the end of the last century and continuing to be enriched by contributions, even in venues that until recently seemed unsuitable. I need only mention the special issue of *Rivista di Estetica* dedicated to wine, *Wineworld* (Perullo, 2012) and the issue of *The Monist* dedicated to food (MacBride, 2018). The main protagonists of this recent history, as well as the reasons behind what has also been termed the *culinary turn* (van der Meulen and Wiesel, 2017), have been analysed and described extensively.¹

Within the realm of aesthetics, the growing interest in gustatory taste and gastronomy is part of the movement known as *everyday aesthetics* (Yuriko Saito),² in which concepts now central to the debate – such as, for example, *aesthetic experience* (Richard Shusterman),³ *aesthetic engagement* (Arnold Berleant),⁴ or *relational aesthetics* (Nicola Perullo)⁵ – play a central role. But even earlier, between the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, as Elizaveta Kravchenko demonstrates in her contribution, there were hints of ‘practical’ gastronomic aesthetics that can be considered precursors to this culinary twist in aesthetics. More broadly, the aesthetics of taste tends to emphasise the non-distal nature of gustatory perception, its participatory and ecological dimensions. Based on this premise, models of aesthetic experience are proposed and their implications are explored.

¹ For a brief history, cfr. Perullo and Koczanowicz (2025).

² Cfr. e.g. Saito (2010).

³ See, for example, Shusterman and Tomlin (2008).

⁴ Among many works, consider: Berleant (2001).

⁵ See Perullo (2025).

As it is evident, however, *gusto* concerns everyone, not just scholars. We all consume food, and many of us prepare it. Lately, thematic interest in gastronomy has grown at an unprecedented rate, affecting every area of culture and mass communication. Food and cooking are a substantial and pervasive part of media discourse. Thus, it would seem entirely pointless, if not downright paradoxical, to continue stressing (as has been appropriately done previously) the importance of food for life and its dignity as a subject of discourse and a field of study, even from a philosophical perspective.

For these reasons, when I was asked to serve as guest editor for this issue of *ESPES*, I decided to propose a different approach. Since it is now widely accepted that *gusto* is not a neglected or overlooked ‘minor’ sense, how can we engage with it in a positive and constructive way? What critical issues does it raise? Where do its tensions, potential, and limitations lie? The time has come to set aside preliminary questions regarding its place in modern (particularly Western) philosophical aesthetics, and finally focus – perhaps with a more pragmatic and phenomenological approach – on what taste *can* and *cannot* do, and on its direct and indirect effects. The essays collected in the present issue bear witness to this new viewpoint. Several central issues emerge repeatedly in these papers that I find highly significant and which I would like to briefly address here to provide some concise insights.

The first is that gustation does not concern exclusively chemical or physical sensitivity. In other words, *gusto* is not limited to the sensory dimension, since it is, at the same time, both the bearer *and* the creator of meanings and values that cannot be reduced to the material dimension. These are social and cultural, symbolic, and metaphysical meanings and values. As I argued a few years ago, one can think of taste as an ongoing *task* that is carried out in every specific situation. *Gusto* is not merely a ‘sense’ (but does it still make sense to distinguish between the senses and their ‘other,’ as Sarah Worth rightly asks in her contribution?); it never acts in isolation, nor does it reflect entirely predetermined criteria and codes. *Gusto* is rather a compass that guides human action, always through the relationships and correspondences of an overall ecology. This is why taste is not solely pleasure or disgust but also knowledge and attention. It requires education, commitment, and participation.

This leads to a second, fundamental aspect underlying several articles in this volume: gustation is at once intimate – unrepresentable and not shareable – *and* communal, a device for social action, a shared tool. As Jacques Derrida, to whom Serena Luce’s important text is dedicated, has clearly shown us, taste retains a secret dimension that points to the impossibility of being fully assimilated. It is an approach that overturns the image of gastronomy and cuisine typically promoted in common discourse and by the media.

From this arises a third point common to the contributions of this issue of *ESPES*: far from being an accommodating ally of consumerism, *gusto* can – and indeed, *should* – constitute an element of *resistance* that is both ethical and political. As demonstrated by Anastasiia Tormakhova, Veronika Tormakhova,

and Dmytro Tovmash, contemporary art, in its participatory and performative forms, often engages with food to draw attention to this critical issue, aiming to raise awareness not only about the excesses and decadence of what I have termed *gastro-gentrification*, but also about the rhetoric of violence and war.

The relationship between gustation and technology is a further crucial element. *Gusto* is, literally, technique (*techne*) – there is no such thing as ‘natural’ taste because it is constructed, requiring cultivation and culture. Today, hyper-aestheticization and spectacularisation, linked to the decadent hedonism that characterises contemporary societies, have created the marketing of ‘experiences’ around taste that must be denounced through critical scrutiny. As Maddalena Borsato and Elena Mancioppi maintain in their original paper, a new ‘marginalisation’ of gastronomic taste might today, in a seemingly paradoxical way, foster this kind of sensitivity and ecological resistance.

This, however, would not mean depriving *gusto* of its centrality. Quite the contrary: it would imply developing an unprecedented agenda to reposition it at the centre of life on ‘new’ foundations (which are, in reality, profound and very ancient). Indeed, food can be understood, as Alexandra Plakias suggests, as a *primary epistemology*, as long as it is not confused with the contemporary supermarket, dominated by the superficiality of immediate visual effects, or with the prevailing *gastro-gentrification*. Pietro Bertino’s article is connected to such a constellation of ideas. Here, gustatory experience is conceived as a tension between standard, canonised, and objectified aesthetic qualities, and dynamic qualities that are purely immanent to the situated experience.

Two other knots investigated in these papers – and worth noting – are the problems and risks associated with the digitalisation of taste and its exclusively human-centred framing. What comes to light from the analyses is a critical sensibility that aims to shift the gustatory aesthetics onto a different plane. Alexander Markov and Anna Sosnovskaya propose a symbiotechnical and post-anthropocentric approach to taste.

In conclusion, this issue of *ESPES* contributes significantly to the development of a field of aesthetic research on taste that still holds great potential for growth and further exploration. Among other things, this new trajectory will increasingly need to free itself from its Eurocentric and modern imagery. In this sense, it will also be important to engage in comparative analysis with other gustatory aesthetics that have been developed around the world throughout history.

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The Taste and Quality of Cheese

Towards an Aesthetics of Quality Against the Pasteurization of Thought

Pietro Bertino

This paper investigates the concept of *quality* through the lens of cheese tasting and production, arguing that different conceptions of quality entail distinct epistemological and practical consequences. It begins by analysing a dominant classical modern framework in which quality is treated as an objective and static property, revealing the vicious circularity underlying such an approach. Drawing on pragmatist philosophy, particularly William James, the paper reconceives quality as immanent to experience rather than as a property of an independent reality. It then develops the distinction between *dynamic* and *static* quality to show how processes of stabilization enable communication and reproducibility while potentially suppressing qualitative variation. Through the case of pasteurization in cheesemaking, this suppression of qualitative variation is framed as a broader ‘pasteurization of thought’ – the point at which a stabilized quality comes to be mistaken for quality as such. Finally, drawing on aesthetic experience, the paper argues that this tension between dynamic and static quality is not to be resolved but managed, and shows how tasting and production practices can keep static quality answerable to the dynamic quality it stabilizes. | *Keywords: Quality, Cheese, William James, Aesthetics, Taste*

1. Escaping a Vicious Circularity: Where Does Quality Come From?

It would not be entirely incorrect to trace the origin of this work back to a Tuesday in February a few years ago. I remember that day clearly because it was the first of ten meetings that would eventually grant me the qualification of *cheese taster*. The lesson and tasting session were almost over when a question came from the back of the room: “So what exactly does the quality of a cheese consist in?” At the time the question struck me as almost naïve, and it provoked a light laughter throughout the room, as if the request were somewhat excessive. Yet it was a perfectly legitimate question. As stated in the course description, the aim of the program was precisely to guide participants from the simple appreciation of a cheese’s taste to the recognition

of its quality. Philosophically speaking, the goal was to move from a merely experienced quality to the discernment of quality as an objective judgment. For this reason, after a moment of hesitation, the master taster answered: “it consists in the balance and harmony of its different components.”

Building on the anecdote of the tasting course, this paper investigates the nature of what we call *quality*, showing how different conceptions carry distinct practical and theoretical consequences. In this first section, I examine one of the most common notions of quality, rooted in a classical modern epistemological framework, and highlight the problem of vicious circularity that arises when quality is treated as static and objective. This perspective shapes both evaluative and productive practices, framing quality as an ontological feature rather than as something emerging from experience. In the second section, I introduce the distinction between *dynamic* and *static* quality, and show how the stabilization of experience – exemplified by the case of milk pasteurization – enables communication and reproducibility while remaining, at this stage, a legitimate and instrumental operation. The discussion lays the groundwork for understanding how these two dimensions of quality interact in concrete practices such as cheese tasting and production. Finally, the third section names and examines the point at which this operation becomes problematic: what I call the ‘pasteurization of thought,’ the moment at which a stabilized quality is mistaken for quality as such. Turning to the aesthetic dimension of quality, this section argues that the resulting tension between stability and variability is not a problem to be resolved but a condition to be managed, and shows how tasting and production practices can keep static quality answerable to the dynamic quality from which it derives.

It is precisely within this tension that the episode described above acquires its philosophical relevance. After the answer given by the master taster, my thoughts immediately turned to the field of aesthetics. In fact, one of the central debates within the discipline has long concerned the search for a criterion capable of distinguishing the artistic from the non-artistic, much in the same way that one distinguishes a high-quality cheese from one that is not. This search for an objective judgment, however – as Arnold Berleant notes in a remarkable passage – remains deeply anchored in individual experience:

A critic or aesthetician has in mind certain forms or styles of artistic production on the basis of which he sets up his categories and defines his terms and criteria. Ortega favors modern art of the early twentieth century in which only a tenuous connection with representational features is retained. Bell and Fry champion fully nonrepresentational painting; the expression theorists, romantic art; the imitation theorists, representational painting and realism and naturalism in literature. These and others implicitly use what is for them fresh and genuine art as the standard by which to clarify aesthetic experience and to judge works of art. (Berleant, 1970, p. 95)

The procedure just described could be called *deductive*, insofar as standards are first established from which the defining features of what will subsequently be recognized as authentically aesthetic are derived. If the problematic nature of

such a procedure is evident, however, an eventual *inductive* approach would be no less problematic, as Heidegger (2002) famously showed. To begin an empirical investigation aimed at identifying what defines the artistic, I would already need to know where to direct my search. I would therefore already have in mind a reference that is simultaneously the final goal of the investigation.

One might therefore say that recognizing a qualitative standard – whether in aesthetics or in the sensory sciences – initially carries with it precisely this problem of vicious circularity. In order to discern a quality cheese, we must already possess, at least in part, an idea of the quality we seek. For this reason, it becomes necessary to dwell philosophically on this circularity to deconstruct some of its underlying assumptions.

First, it can be argued that such circularity – if reconsidered from a pragmatist perspective – is not vicious *in itself*. Its problematic nature emerges only when the genealogical process through which such cognitive structures arise is forgotten, that is, when their essentially contingent nature is obscured. This occurs in the passage from conceiving an idea of quality to its ontologization into a *thing in itself*, immediately referring to a noumenal level. The sociologist Kenneth Liberman has effectively described this dynamic in relation to professional coffee-tasting models:

One can ignore the fact that the apparatus is made up of conventions and become so pleased with what the apparatus is capable of achieving, including the discoveries it will open up, that one accepts the language *too literally*, and a lexicon can come to foster a prejudice that the world exists on its own in the very way one has just conceived for it. (Liberman, 2022, p. 148)

Starting from this illuminating fragment, the central conviction guiding this work begins to emerge: even a seemingly simple practice such as tasting cheese, once deconstructed, reveals itself to be grounded in a specific vision of the world. A model of production or tasting is always also a model of thought. In this regard, the circularity mentioned above – well captured by Liberman's example – becomes vicious or problematic only when it is considered within the framework of a classical modern epistemological model. By *modern epistemological model* I mean, broadly speaking, the conviction that nature is written in mathematical terms¹ and that the adventure of knowledge consists in refining mathematical-scientific methodology to approach this noumenal reality.² Following this paradigm –

¹ Reference is made here to a passage from *The Assayer* in which Galileo writes: "In Sarsi I seem to discern the firm belief that in philosophizing one must support oneself upon the opinion of some celebrated author, as if our minds ought to remain completely sterile and barren unless wedded to the reasoning of some other person. Possibly he thinks that philosophy is a book of fiction by some writer, like the Iliad or Orlando Furioso, productions in which the least important thing is whether what is written there is true. Well, Sarsi, that is not how matters stand. Philosophy is written in this grand book, the universe, which stands continually open to our gaze. But the book cannot be understood unless one first learns to comprehend the language and read the letters in which it is composed. It is written in the language of mathematics, and its characters are triangles, circles, and other geometric figures without which it is humanly impossible to understand a single word of it; without these, one wanders about in a dark labyrinth" (Galilei, 1957, pp. 237–238).

² Reference is made here to the passage in which Bacon, in the *Novum Organum*, states that "in order to penetrate to the more inward and remote parts of nature, both notions and axioms must be abstracted from things in a more certain, better-grounded way; and a more certain and altogether better intellectual procedure must come into use" (Bacon, 2000, p. 36).

which, as the fragment above suggests, remains widespread in professional tasting courses – quality is something that exists out there, “in the more inward and remote parts of nature,” (Bacon, 2000, p. 36) waiting to be revealed through a rigorous intellectual method.

To better understand this point, it is useful to turn to the field of *Quality Management*, within which a dense conceptual discussion concerning the nature of quality has developed. Anttila and Jussila (2017), for instance, argue that in order to improve the applicability of the concept of quality in management and service sciences it is necessary to clarify the ontological and theoretical foundations on which the concept rests. Without such clarification, semantic confusion surrounding the notion of quality would also hinder its practical applications. However, when examining these theoretical foundations, they rely on a Popperian model that closely resembles the modern epistemological posture mentioned above. This model “divides reality into three worlds, which interact with each other” (Anttila and Jussila, 2017, p. 253). World 1 is the reality of objects and events; World 2 is the (human) consciousness of World 1; and World 3 is the realm of linguistic structures and conceptual constructions. Once this hierarchy has been established, the authors can state:

According to the critical scientific realism, Popper’s World 1 has temporally and ontologically precedence over the knowledge of it. A prerequisite for success of the evaluations is that the constructions of definitions (in World 3) describing and characterizing the entities of interest correspond to the real world (World 1). (Anttila and Jussila, 2017, p. 254)

From this passage a distinctly *correspondence* conception of quality emerges. Through the methodological refinement of World 3, World 2 must manage to grasp thematically what is already incorporated – albeit without being consciously apprehensible – in World 1. The paradigm underlying both Anttila’s and Jussila’s positions and that of the tasters mentioned above is therefore a world structured by the distinction between mind and world, between subjects and objects. From this initial fracture, however, the vicious circularity involved in defining quality arises. If quality is something that precedes my definition – preserved in World 1 – then it becomes difficult to explain how it can simultaneously already be present in my mind, in World 2, guiding my search from the outset. The alternative seems inevitable. Either quality is entirely objective, already inscribed in the cheese (or in the artwork), and its recognition depends on the successful application of an appropriate methodology. In that case, the historical variability of evaluative criteria would simply be interpreted as a series of imperfect attempts on the path toward progressive epistemic success. Or quality is entirely subjective, and the passage from *I like it* to a judgment of quality would amount to nothing more than a refinement of individual taste – a preference made more cultivated, but not thereby more grounded. It is precisely this alternative that generates the vicious circularity. It arises from the assumption that there exists, on the one hand, a world already constituted, and on the other, a subject called upon to mirror it correctly. The aim of the present work is to show some limits of this epistemological

paradigm. This goal will be facilitated by conceiving reality as a continuous *realization* within the form of experience.

In this respect, it is helpful to rely on the perspective of William James, a philosopher associated with pragmatism and widely considered one of its founders. James begins from the assumption that everything we can say about *reality* is unequivocally bounded to the experience we have of it. One of his most important insights, developed within his proposal of *radical empiricism*, consists in conceiving experience in its *purity*, that is, initially free from the reassuring subject-object dichotomy that has come to define it. Experience first appears as a *field*: a dense space populated not by entities but by vectors that, by virtue of their qualities, shape the field itself. In this sense, James could speak of a tragic or sad *situation*, where sadness and tragedy are not properties of objects but qualities that permeate and characterize the experiential field as such, while at the same time opening the possibility of subsequent differentiation. The difference between the world conceived by modern epistemology and a world of pure experience can be clearly illustrated through James's well-known example of paint:

In a pot in a paint-shop, along with other paints, it serves in its entirety as so much saleable matter. Spread on a canvas, with other paints around it, it represents, on the contrary, a feature in a picture and performs a spiritual function. Just so, I maintain, does a given undivided portion of experience taken in one context of associates, play the part of a knower, of a state of mind, of 'consciousness'; while in a different context the same undivided bit of experience plays the part of a thing known, of an objective 'content'. In a word, in one group it figures as a thought, in another group as a thing. And, since it can figure in both groups simultaneously we have every right to speak of it as subjective and objective both at once. (James, 1912, pp. 9–10)

Within this paradigm, as we can see, there are no ontological separations between different *worlds*: these worlds emerge through the qualitative function that different vectors exercise within a given context of occurrence. Through James we can therefore find a solution to the dilemma raised by Anttila and Jussila. Quality can be present simultaneously in World 1 and World 2 because it is, first and foremost, the same portion of pure experience functioning at times as objective content and at others as mental production. It is difficult not to think here of the famous opening of Robert Musil's *The Man Without Qualities*, where the same experience can be described either in terms of "isotherms and isotherms," "a-periodic monthly variation in temperature," "phases of the moon, Venus and Saturn's rings," "vapour in the air" and so on, or as "a fine August day in the year 1913" (Musil, 1980, p. 3). From a Jamesian perspective, then, quality is not only the objective content of a subjective experience – as in the tasting of a cheese – but also the overall configuration of each fragment of experience, caught in its *purity*. Like in the example of paint, quality is both the operative dimension of experience and one of its possible thematic outcomes: when grasped in its purity, this experiential mode allows – through a *virtuous* circularity – the emergence of a quality that, although not belonging to a World 1, nevertheless becomes shareable and capable of agreement. It may even be argued that precisely

because quality is immanent to experience, we are later able to form an idea of quality that appears to transcend it, as if it belonged to a World 1.

At this point the distance between the two paradigms becomes clear. In the perspective just outlined, quality can become a shared and thematic criterion because it is, first and foremost, an immanent and operative characterization of experience grasped in its purity. In the modern epistemological framework, by contrast, quality transcends experience because it belongs to an objective world (World 1), accessible only through the cognitive reworking performed by the human mind (World 2) through the refinement of conceptual tools (World 3). In the first case, quality is already present within experience because it constitutes its mode of appearance. In the second, it enters experience only by transcending *perceptual* experience through a cognitive incursion into the world of objects.

The point, now, is not to determine once and for all whether objective quality truly resides in a supposed World 1, but to recognize the role that this belief plays in structuring practices of evaluation and production. What remains to be examined, then, are the consequences that follow from adopting such a conception of quality, with a particular regard to cheese production and consumption.

2. Cheese Variety Between Dynamic and Static Qualities

From the first section, it clearly emerges that the idea of an objective quality embedded in World 1 is far from false – at least in the sense Nietzsche would give to the term. That is, not so much in a strictly epistemological sense, but rather in terms of its relevance within the process of producing reality. It is evident that, whether correct or not, this conception of quality has its own weight and influence; and, precisely because it is vital, it produces truths. For this reason, it would be misleading to interpret the first section as an attempt to offer a truer alternative to the notion of quality, one capable of refuting the idea of objective quality as misguided. In keeping with the pragmatist spirit that informs this work, the concern here is not primarily which position is more correct, but with the effects that follow from believing in one position rather than another. This second section therefore addresses a single question. Given the robust health of the idea of objective quality – firmly rooted both in tasting protocols and in the field of Quality Management – why do we come to believe in this type of quality, and what consequences follow from that belief?

In part, this question has already been addressed through the case study of professional tasters. At first glance, the idea of an objective quality that transcends any individual taster provides a stable foundation on which judgments of taste can be grounded, freeing them from arbitrariness. One might say, borrowing an expression from Ludwig Wittgenstein, that the belief in objective quality is one of the ‘hinges’ upon which the possibility of tasting protocols rests. To doubt such a certainty would be to deprive the language-game of professional tasting of its very meaning; such a move would therefore be senseless before being either right or wrong

(Wittgenstein, 1969).³ Kenneth Liberman, again with reference to coffee tasting, has captured this dynamic through the notion of “occasioned objectivity” (Liberman, 2022, p. 104). Rather than rejecting tasting practices as unfounded and adopting a relativist position, Liberman calls into question the type of foundation upon which these practices rest. This foundation is not ontological – a *natural* quality belonging to a World 1 – nor is it purely rational, grounded in epistemic certainties. Instead, it consists of a set of collectively negotiated practices that give rise to an intersubjectively recognizable context, without this process of meaning-production ever being completed once and for all. As Wittgenstein famously remarked, “we make up the rules as we go along,” (Wittgenstein, 2009, §83) and these rules do not lose their validity simply because they are not valid once and for all. On the contrary, they never lose their fundamentally *occasioned* character.

Although these arguments might appear purely methodological, Liberman’s warning has an eminently practical dimension. Developing blind trust in the ontological – and therefore immovable – status of these tasting rules may sometimes lead to the substitution of *good quality* with certain surrogates such as, for example, *consistency*. Liberman’s account of how consistency can come to stand in for quality (Liberman, 2022, pp. 271–273) carries a profound meaning: if we allow a single trait identified as quality to harden for too long – as if it were eternal and immutable – we may overlook something different yet equally interesting. In such cases, quality – which for Liberman is clearly not hidden in a World 1 but continuously nourished and renegotiated within tasting practices themselves – may be replaced by a surrogate that has served one of our tasting purposes reasonably well, for a certain time. Indeed, returning to the anecdote that opened this work, when the master taster defined harmony and balance as the defining traits of a quality cheese, I immediately thought of the cheeses that have fascinated me most in my life – cheeses that were anything but balanced and harmonious in a common sense: an excessively pungent French Roquefort, an Italian Robiola di Roccaverano with an advanced state of proteolysis, and so on. All these cheeses, which left an unforgettable impression on me – and which, incidentally or not, cost me quite a lot of money – would most likely have been rejected in a professional tasting session.

To understand more clearly the danger identified by Liberman, it is necessary to systematize the genealogy introduced in the first section from a quality as the operative texture of pure experience to quality as a thematized construction. In this regard, it is useful to revisit the philosophical attempt of Robert Pirsig (2022) who, in his search for a metaphysics of quality, distinguishes between *dynamic* and *static* quality. Pirsig can be situated within

³ Reference is made here, in particular, to Ludwig Wittgenstein’s idea that certain propositions function as what are often called *hinge propositions*: background certainties that are not normally subjected to doubt, since questioning them would amount to undermining the very framework within which doubt and justification can take place. Attempting to refute such certainties would therefore imply, so to speak, changing the rules of the game, thereby rendering the move itself unintelligible within the same language-game. See, for example, the following passage: “We know that the earth is round. We have been convinced of this for a long time. We shall go on believing it unless our whole way of looking at nature changes” (Wittgenstein, 1969, §291).

the line of process philosophers that includes James, Bergson, Whitehead, and Deleuze. He assigns to quality the role that James attributes to pure experience, or that Deleuze attributes to the plane of absolute immanence: quality, in its fundamental unity, generates every possible distinction – including that between substance and attributes, or between subject and object. Pirsig calls this primordial quality *dynamic*, defining it as “the source of all things, the pre-intellectual cutting edge of reality” (Pirsig, 2022, p. 19). It is only thanks to this generative quality that *static quality* emerges, understood as “any pattern of one-sided fixed values” (*Ibid.*). Pirsig’s proposal recalls that of Henri Bergson, who in *Time and Free Will* writes: “Hence it is through the quality of quantity that we form the idea of quantity without quality” (Bergson, 1950, p. 123). Paraphrased: it is only through an initial encounter with a quality immanent to experience that we can construct a static quality capable of transcending that experience in order to establish intersubjective agreement.

Even after it has been established, static quality never fully severs its derivation from dynamic quality. It is less a finished product than a condensation of it. For this reason, Pirsig writes that “Without Dynamic Quality the organism cannot grow. Without static quality the organism cannot last. Both are needed” (Pirsig, 2022, p. 96). According to Pirsig – as, broadly speaking, also to Bergson and James – these are not two separate kinds of quality but two moments of a single process, dynamic quality as source and static quality as its condensation,⁴ intrinsically intertwined, and neither exhausts the other. Yet many process philosophers expressed, each in their own way, the fear that, to use a Gestalt metaphor, the *figures* might come to dominate the *ground*: that subjects and objects might overshadow processes, causing the intrinsic dynamism of reality to be forgotten in the very act of its realization.

The philosophical friendship between James and Bergson was strengthened precisely through their shared struggle against what they called *intellectualism*, to which James added the emphatic adjective “vicious” (James, 1909, p. 60). What they criticized was the tendency – present across both realist and idealist philosophies – to substitute reality with the conceptual categories used to interpret it. In this sense, James asks: “Can it be that the whole dialectic consists in attributing to the experience talked-about a constitution similar to that of the language in which we describe it?” (James, 1912, p. 104). The need to overcome this *vicious intellectualism* stems primarily from the fact that such an attitude is destructive of the manifold ways in which reality can manifest itself.

One of its practical consequences can easily be observed by returning to the example of cheeses that would be rejected by tasting protocols. Once static quality is identified with values such as balance and harmony, tasting becomes oriented exclusively toward recognizing those values. In this way – although

⁴ Since Pirsig’s is a *metaphysics* of quality, the tension between dynamic quality and static quality could be understood as that between process and reality, to refer to Whitehead, but also to that of the virtual and the actual of Bergson.

they represent only the static dimension of quality – these values end up absorbing every possible expression of dynamic quality. Static quality thus ceases to function as a methodological or conceptual tool useful for certain purposes and instead becomes the very measure of dynamic quality itself, suppressing many expressive possibilities that will be dismissed as deviations from the norm. While this undoubtedly facilitates intersubjective communication, it also imposes a limitation on the diversity of ways in which cheese can manifest itself. In other words, we once again encounter the risk of a conceptual violation of the manifest variety of reality, carried out in the name of standardization and reproducibility in judgment.

This becomes even clearer when we turn to the productive dimension of cheesemaking, beginning with the variability of its primary material: milk. Consider the case of Camembert, which has been the subject of one of the most important and detailed studies in cheese history: *Camembert. A National Myth*, by Pierre Boisard (2003). As the author shows, Camembert became a true national myth and one of the most widely produced and consumed cheeses in the world largely thanks to the relatively recent adoption of milk pasteurization.⁵ This process consists of heating milk to the temperature of at least 72 °C for 15 seconds or any other equivalent combination in order to eliminate its microbial load, with the result of a significant loss of microbiological content (Neviani et. al., 2025). Through this process, producers sought to impose a limit on what Steven Shapin has called “the fundamental indiscipline of artisanal cheese production” (Shapin, 2003, p. 13). Before the introduction of pasteurization, Camembert displayed considerable qualitative variability, most visibly in its rind, which could exhibit multi-coloured patches, sometimes even blue, gray, or green.

Pasteurization effectively produces a kind of *tabula rasa*, eliminating not only harmful microorganisms but also so-called *good bacteria*, many of which are responsible for the production of lactic acid, a crucial element in the cheesemaking process. Starting from this microbiologically neutral base, Camembert producers were able to design a new quality standard – without which the cheese’s commercial success would have been impossible. Camembert became what we know today through the selection of specific bacterial cultures and, above all, through the triumph of a single mold over all others: *Penicillium candidum*. Reintroduced into microbiologically neutral milk, this mold produces the characteristic white rind that defines Camembert today. Just as the identification of a static quality allows the creation of reproducible tasting sheets, it is also indispensable for stabilizing a specific flavour profile capable of identifying a product and enabling its global commercial success, achieving the *consistency* referred to by Liberman. At the same time, however, choosing this type of quality necessarily means leaving other qualities behind. Pasteurization partially neutralizes the bacterial

⁵ In fact, the study explores the issue further, since it introduces additional causes, such as the invention of the characteristic wooden box that facilitated the transport of Camembert, first to the French capital and later throughout the rest of the world. However, for the sake of simplicity and because of its relevance to the present study, we will focus here on the process of pasteurization. For further discussion, see again Boisard (2003).

microflora that develops through practices such as grazing or alpine pasturing, thereby diminishing their potential contribution. Beyond any evaluative judgment about the differences between pasteurized and raw-milk production, what matters here is to highlight the procedure – and its consequences – through which static quality absorbs dynamic one, becoming a surrogate for its many possible forms of expression.

At this point an affinity begins to emerge between two operations that neutralize variability in order to stabilize it. Just as pasteurization strips milk of its qualitative dynamism to establish a recognizable and replicable static quality, classical epistemology strips experience of its qualitative variability in order to attribute it, in this model, to a World 1: experience too is *pasteurized*, then *reinoculated* with a static quality belonging to that supposed World 1. This reinoculation facilitates both judgments of taste and productive processes. In the third and final section, we must therefore ask what consequences may follow from an excessive emphasis on static quality – an emphasis that risks losing the indispensable correspondence between dynamic and static quality described by Pirsig. This question will be addressed by turning to aesthetics, understood as a perceptual task.

3. Towards an aesthetics of quality against the pasteurization of thought

From what has been discussed so far, it clearly emerges that quality contains at least two impulses within itself. On the one hand, there is a disciplining impulse, which tends toward stabilization, the definition of shared criteria and the construction, by tasters and producers alike, of relatively stable forms of agreement. On the other hand, there is an undisciplined impulse that continuously exceeds these stabilizations, reopening the field of experience to unexpected qualitative configurations. As we have seen, depending on the needs and the context in which quality occurs, one of these impulses will prevail over the other. Thus, for example, in order to establish shared judgments and common evaluative parameters, one tends to simplify the variety of factors that constitute the quality of a product, isolating certain attributes that can be recognized and replicated with sufficient stability. A similar dynamic applies to the productive dimension: although cheese is by its very nature highly variable, some characteristics tend to be fixed, whose preservation guarantees ‘the quality’ of the product, as we have seen in the case of Camembert and in the role played by *Penicillium candidum* in defining its contemporary sensory profile.

This tension between stabilization and excess, however, does not concern only production practices or tasting protocols. More deeply, it affects the very way in which we organize our experience. If, as suggested in the first section following William James, experience initially presents itself as a dense and undifferentiated qualitative field, constructing conceptual categories and criteria of judgment necessarily involves a process of selection and simplification. Some features are emphasized, others are neglected, while the whole field of experience is reorganized into relatively stable configurations. It is precisely in this sense that the process of attributing quality can be analogically compared to the material process of milk pasteurization.

The comparison can be made more precise. Milk never arrives as a neutral substance: it reaches the dairy already qualitatively differentiated, bearing the traces of the pastures, animals, and microbial communities from which it comes – the system of relations that Paxson has called “ecologies of production” (Paxson, 2013). Pasteurization intervenes in this complex ecosystem, reducing its variability so that the product becomes controllable and replicable, and then re-inoculating it with selected ferments that yield a stable and expected profile. Experience, as we saw in the first section following James, arrives qualitatively connoted in much the same way: dense, differentiated, saturated with relations before any category is imposed upon it. The epistemic and linguistic practices through which we define quality perform, on this qualitative field, an operation analogous to pasteurization: they reduce the original richness so that certain configurations may be isolated, recognized, and shared, and they re-inoculate the field with stabilized categories that function as standards. This operation makes it possible both to communicate intersubjectively and to construct productive and evaluative criteria, and – this must be stressed – it is entirely legitimate insofar as it remains instrumental. Pasteurization is a useful technology, for milk and for the ordering of experience alike; in certain contexts it is exactly what is needed.

The difficulty begins one step further on. When the static configuration ceases to be treated as an instrument and comes to be taken for the real itself – when the stabilized quality is mistaken for quality *as such* – the stabilization of experience hardens into what I propose to call a “pasteurization of thought,” following the path traced by Bruno Latour’s *The Pasteurization of France* (1988).⁶ The distinction is decisive, and I will return to it: to pasteurize experience is an instrumental gesture; to pasteurize thought is an ontological one. Two further clarifications, both made pressing by the analogy itself, are in order here. First, the pasteurization of thought is neither a deliberate choice made by an individual mind nor a necessary structure of thinking as such: it is a practical and distributed process, enacted through protocols, markets, and institutions, and for this very reason contingent and open to revision – always, in Latour’s terms, an attempt to reduce the irreducible that is never definitively completed. Second, the analogy has a limit, and the limit is instructive. Milk pasteurization eliminates microbial life; the pasteurization of thought does not destroy dynamic quality but only suppresses and conceals it. Dynamic quality is never abolished, only forgotten – and it is precisely this residue that the aesthetic, as we shall see, is able to reawaken.

⁶ This work is composed of two sections. In the first, Latour reconstructs the historical emergence and success of Pasteurian science, dismantling the myth that it prevailed simply because it was ‘truer’ than competing epistemic systems; its diffusion is traced instead to a complex system of forces, alliances, and synergies among human and non-human actors that progressively stabilized its authority. In the second part, significantly entitled *Irreductions*, Latour systematizes this historical intuition at a philosophical level, elaborating a “theory of irreductions” condensed in the treatise’s first proposition: “Nothing is, by itself, either reducible or irreducible to anything else” (Latour, 1988, p. 158). Although Latour never explicitly applies the term “pasteurization” to mental processes, throughout the work it repeatedly assumes a broader sense, indicating the attempt to reduce a plurality of factors to a single explanatory principle. It is in this sense that I use the expression ‘pasteurization of thought’ to name the attempt – always contingent and never definitively completed – to reduce the irreducible: the process of stabilization through which certain configurations of reality come to be established as genuine ‘local victories,’ without thereby exhausting the multiplicity of relations from which they emerge.

At the same time, I will now attempt to show that there are certain experiences – namely the *aesthetic* ones – that, by their very internal constitution, are largely immune to such attempts at pasteurization. A brief remark on my use of the word is necessary first, since aesthetics as a discipline has itself been shaped by the impulse I have been describing. In seeking philosophical legitimation, it long sought to secure a domain of its own by elaborating a body of Aesthetic Principles designed to regulate and interpret the variety of aesthetic manifestations; in this respect it emerged under the aegis of a pasteurizing mode of thought – the strong epistemological impulse characteristic of modern philosophy from which the present inquiry has taken its starting point – and helped to reinforce it. It is against this tendency that James’s impatience with the discipline can be read. Dismissing aesthetic theory as “grotesque stuff” (James, 1975, p. 36), he objected, in his comments on Santayana’s *The Sense of Beauty*, that “when stated abstractly, this theory, like all aesthetic theories, sounds so skinny in comparison with the richness of the phenomena it includes that one wonders how principles so trivial should account for results so significant and precious” (James, 1975, p. 518). The complaint is precisely that static principles cannot capture the qualitative richness they claim to explain – the same richness that, in the terms proposed here, pasteurization suppresses.

Yet although this tendency still represents the dominant orientation in aesthetics, alternative approaches do exist. Among them are forms of *relational aesthetics* that affirm the precedence – not so much in a chronological sense as in a transcendental one, determining the very conditions of possibility – of relation over individual entities. According to some of these perspectives, the aesthetic is precisely the triumph of the *collusiveness* between a creature and its environment (Matteucci, 2022), bringing about the collapse of the subject-object paradigm (Perullo, 2025). The reading of a novel offers a familiar illustration: it becomes aesthetic at the moment the reader ceases to be a merely external consumer and is drawn into the world of the narrative – into the engulfing seascape of *Moby-Dick*, or the obsessive anger of Captain Ahab – so that the reader’s otherwise resilient subjectivity is momentarily suspended along with the conceptual constructions that ordinarily guide experience. It is in this sense that Perullo has defined the aesthetic as the “call of consciousness” (Perullo, 2025, p. 54): the arrival at a plane of absolute immanence that momentarily takes the place of conceptual distinctions which would otherwise remain firmly in place.

The distance between these two attitudes has been systematized through the dichotomy between an *experience-of* something and an *experience-with* something (Matteucci, 2018). In the first case, perception is analytical and oriented toward the subjective recognition of an objective attribute; in the second, it is ecological, non-directed, and open to the qualitative variety of the experiential field. The difference can be grasped in a scene familiar to anyone who frequents museums, and one that forms a near-*topos* of aesthetics itself: the visitor who moves from painting to painting only to identify the author or the movement to which each work belongs, often by reading the label

affixed beside it. Kandinsky, among others, wrote of this attitude: “People [...] go from canvas to canvas, leaf through and read the names. And then they leave, just as rich or poor as when they came in, immediately absorbed again by their own interests, which have nothing whatever to do with art. Why ever did they go?” (Kandinsky, 1982, p. 129–130). Such a visitor has an experience-of the painting – the recognition of an attribute already given – but never an experience-with it. The professional tasting of cheese, when it aims solely at certifying conformity to an expected profile, belongs to exactly the same register: it recognizes a standard where it might encounter a quality. The two cases are strictly parallel. Just as the aesthetic experience of a painting does not consist in recognizing the work through its label, the aesthetic experience of a cheese cannot consist in a tasting aimed only at confirming a pre-established quality.

Although there is no sharp separation between the two attitudes – experience-of remains an indispensable enhancer – it is in experience-with that the aesthetic properly manifests itself as a call of consciousness. One might say that dynamic quality manifests itself precisely in experience-with: it is within this collusive suspension of conceptual crystallizations that the resources for the constitution – or the questioning – of static quality can emerge. Perullo offers a striking example of what he calls a *daub* in order to circumvent the prescriptive approach typical of aesthetics:

Imagine walking through a market and coming across a painting lying on the ground among books, lamps, and rugs. It depicts a simple flower vase enclosed by a modest frame with a sign that reads ‘30 euros, oil painting’. At first glance, it seems like an ordinary painting without any particular value, or, better, a daub. Ordinary perception may think that this work has nothing to do with ‘real’ art. (Perullo, 2025, pp. 91–92)

By putting into practice a perception aimed at the recognition and evaluation of a static quality, this painting would certainly have little to say. Yet, if I momentarily suspend this paradigm of reference, other qualities may open up – for instance, the history of this painting, the rudimentary nature of the technique, or even the satisfaction of the person who painted it. Perullo therefore continues:

This disposition of perceiving opens up to another plane of the real. Do vulgarity and inadequacy lie then with the daub or with the unscrupulous, authoritative, and uncompassionate gaze of the competent expert, peculiar to the police of evaluation? In the relational aesthetics, any ‘daub’ *can* have as much value as an artist’s celebrated work. This is *not* to say that it *must* always have value: it depends on how the potentials become correspondences. (Perullo, 2025, pp. 92–93)

Understood in this way, the aesthetic reveals its potential to subvert the established order. Here the distinction drawn earlier between the two pasteurizations returns with full force. To stabilize experience is instrumental and legitimate; the pasteurization of thought, by contrast, promotes a world in which epistemological certainties take on convincing ontological connotations – in which the static configuration, useful as a tool, is silently promoted to the status of the real. This is the ontological overreach announced above: what

James called *vicious intellectualism*, the treatment of a concept as though it exhausted the reality it was meant only to designate. It is also the practical error Liberman describes when tasters come to take their instruments and tasting sheets *too literally*, mistaking the sheet for the cheese. Against this, the aesthetic appears as the site in which the hegemony of static quality can be weakened through its collusive encounter with dynamic quality. From this perspective, at least two consequences become visible. From an aesthetic standpoint, tasting ceases to be oriented exclusively toward the recognition of an objective quality: such recognition becomes only one of the many directions experience may take, alongside other forms of appreciation that cannot be immediately reduced to codified standards. From an epistemological standpoint, this openness introduces an element of impermanence into the very criteria that claim objectivity. Standards are not abolished, but they recover their historical and situated character, returning to being instruments rather than ends – which is only to say that they are returned from the ontological plane to the instrumental one on which they legitimately belong.

This applies not only to those who taste but also to those who produce, and here the case of Camembert can be read in a new light. Pasteurization did not merely impoverish the cheese; it also democratized it, making a safe and recognizable product available far beyond its region of origin (Boisard, 2003). The point is not that raw-milk cheeses are better than pasteurized ones, nor that pre-modern production should be romanticized: static quality answers real needs – safety, communicability, reproducibility – and to abolish it would be neither possible nor desirable. The difficulty arises, once again, only when a single stabilized standard – the triumph of *Penicillium candidum* over every other mould, encountered at the outset of this discussion – ceases to be perceived as one contingent configuration among others, one *local victory* in Latour's sense, and is taken for quality as such. What is lost then is not merely an aesthetic nuance but the plurality of the field itself: the microbial, sensory, and cultural variety that, for example, grazing and alpine pasturing continuously regenerate. This is the concrete sense of Liberman's concern with quality giving way to a surrogate: what is lost is aesthetic in the fullest sense, that is, in the practices themselves, for it forecloses configurations of value that might otherwise have emerged.

The task of an aesthetics of quality can thus be stated more precisely than as a mere plea for openness. The tension between dynamic and static quality is not a problem to be solved but a condition to be managed: static quality must be produced, yet it must not be allowed to forget its derivation from the dynamic quality it stabilizes. This management has a recognizable practical form. For those who taste, it means treating the tasting sheet as a revocable instrument rather than as a measure of the real – remaining capable of an experience-with, and not only an experience-of, the cheese. For those who produce, the implication is less obvious and runs, as it were, in the opposite direction. To educate oneself to non-standardized tastes does not merely widen the range of what can be appreciated; it alters the conditions under which cheese can be made. Where tasters cease to demand strict

conformity to a single profile, producers regain a margin of latitude – room to work with raw milk, to let seasonal and microbial variation register in the final product, to revive practices that a fully standardized market had rendered economically unviable. The education of taste is in this sense not only a matter of reception but a condition of possibility for the diversity of production itself: a field of appreciation open to variety is what keeps the field of production open in turn. In neither case does the aesthetic abolish the standard; it keeps the standard honest, periodically reopening it to the emergence of new configurations. Perhaps it is precisely here that the proper task of an aesthetics of quality is to be found: not in decreeing once and for all what quality is, but in keeping open the possibility that it may occur again, each time, in the contingent encounter between the variety of the world and the forms through which we attempt to stabilize it.

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The Aesthetics of Techno-Decadence

Taste in Avant-garde Gastronomy and Contemporary Arts

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This paper explores the relationships between taste and technology in avant-garde gastronomy and contemporary arts. The case of *Des Esseintes* from Huysmans's *À rebours* will be taken as the literary archetype of contemporary hyper-aestheticization of creative meals. We propose the term *aesthetics of techno-decadence* to define a hallmark of today's food scene: the emotional role of technology as a medium of excess and decline. Rather than celebrating sensationalism, techno-decadence integrates the dark sides of food systems into the hedonistic dimension of sophisticated dining experiences. The glorification of artifice resonates with artistic experimentations designing ultra-tech experiences centred on taste. What emerges is not a triumphant victory over nature but a form of critical hyperbole and sarcastic commentary that recalls the *fin de siècle* of over a century ago. Within this framework, the traditional marginalisation of taste becomes a site of resistance and ecological awareness. | **Keywords:** *Techno-Decadence, Avant-garde Gastronomy, Contemporary Arts, Des Esseintes, Huysmans*

1. Introduction: Taste, Decadence, and Technology

The 19th century, especially in its *fin-de-siècle* phase, witnessed a radical emphasis on taste. The Kantian ideal of taste as a disinterested judgment gave way to a cult of refined, extravagant, and even perverse pleasures. Sadean imagination and libertinism are specimens of a complex constellation that sinks its roots in social, political, artistic, moral, and existential motifs. The sensuous was eroticised, functioning as a political attack and a form of rebellion against middle-class taste and morality. Either a historical-literary phenomenon or, in Nietzschean terms, a metahistorical and collective category, decadence, despite the difficulty in defining it,¹ equated the cultivation of the palate with that of the spirit against the vulgarity of both nature and bourgeois society. Moreover, far from being mere hedonism,

¹ Cf. Gilman (1979), Gluck (2014), Weir and Desmarais (2021b).

decadence anticipated what Lev Manovich and Emanuele Arielli (2024) describe as *artificial aesthetics*, foreshadowing many instances of the technological hyper-aestheticization pervading today's media. As Mary Gluck (2014, p. 353) maintains, decadence is inherently associated with "an unexpectedly wide range of aesthetic [...] innovations, which incorporated the concept of *modernité* but also transcended it." In this sense, the figure of Jean Floressas Des Esseintes, as portrayed by Joris-Karl Huysmans in *À rebours*, can be viewed as the literary archetype of the contemporary appreciator of technologically-mediated arts and, in a broader sense, of the taste underlying creative and modernist cuisine. In this context, the metaphorical meaning of taste includes its literal root and encompasses the fine arts and realm of food (cf. Weir and Desmarais, 2021a).

The glorification of artifice – "the distinguishing characteristic of human genius" (Huysmans, 1998, p. 20) – finds expression in contemporary artistic experimentations designing ultra-tech experiences centred on taste. However, the decadent idea of nature promoted by Des Esseintes does not fully coincide with that advanced in today's gastronomic and artistic practices. Whereas the 19th-century spirit regarded nature as banal and monotonous, something that humans can surpass thanks to technological means,² the contemporary spirit is forced to take into account human responsibility in the depletion of natural resources. From molecular gastronomy to techno-emotional cuisine, and across some contemporary artistic projects, what emerges is not a triumphant victory over nature but a form of critical hyperbole and sarcastic commentary reminiscent of the *fin de siècle* of over a century ago. Like the decadent aesthete, contemporary practitioners construct artificial gustatory worlds, yet their interventions, rather than being motivated by the desire to overcome nature, are often intertwined and prompted by critical and ethical reflections on the current ecological problems. The cases here considered use technological devices to stage encounters with synthetic or radically transformed food. In fabricating taste and smell³ artificially, these examples encapsulate a historical atmosphere dabbled by decline and pessimism that heightens the exposure of the environmental crises and dilemmas in contemporary food systems.

To read *À rebours* today is to be faced with an uncanny mirror of our own condition. Des Esseintes's *artificial paradise* – to use a Baudelairean phrase – foreshadows the aesthetic infrastructures of the 21st century: confined within his home at Fontenay-aux-Roses, lighting, sounds, colours, and works of art are staged to create immersive experiences and designed, controlled situations, where nature is replaced by the mechanical.⁴ Historically, such a process intensified throughout the 20th century, as the aesthetic (and

² In *À rebours*, this is a recurring theme encompassing many dimensions. For instance, Des Esseintes's *artificial flora* is reminiscent of the *futurist flora* (cf. Azari (1924)).

³ We will mainly focus on taste but, in light of the Gibsonian ecological approach to perception that we embrace, we will treat it as a complex perceptual system that, in the act of eating, always involves smell (as well as the other senses).

⁴ Although the aesthetic significance of the mechanical exceeds the scope of this paper, it is worth noting that it oscillates between the uncanny and the comic, as Bergson (2014) has famously proposed.

gastronomic) field became increasingly intertwined with technological innovations. The Futurists and Surrealists embraced the machine as their Muse, celebrating speed, energy, and automatism; later, Pop Art revealed to what extent everyday life was saturated by industrial and mass culture imagery. Beneath these avant-gardes runs the same decadent current that animated Huysmans: the fascination with artifice, *the sex appeal of the inorganic* (Perniola, 2004), and the desire to aestheticize them by transforming the mechanical into a source of beauty. In its evolution, technology, far from dispelling decadence, becomes ever more its vessel. Indeed, the 21st century has transformed the decadent ideal fantasy into a ubiquitous reality: our experiences of art and food are more and more filtered through synthetic compounds, prosthetic extensions, and algorithmic systems. Such an aesthetics extends Des Esseintes's dream, while making the repercussions of this model, as prefigured in *À rebours*, pervasive: the extreme mechanisation of the senses produces saturation, anaesthetisation, and an exhaustion of novelty, the supreme value of this paradigm. However, the inauthentic constantly evokes the authentic it displaces. For Huysmans, this relationship favoured artifice, which he nonetheless considered superior to nature; today, it emphasises nature's loss in dystopian and catastrophic scenarios.

Contemporary artistic and aesthetic practices reimagining *taste* and *technology* can be approached as the philosophical terrain of a renewed decadence. Here, artifice functions less as indulgence rather than as a reflexive and ethical mode that exposes both the capacities and limitations of our perception under technological saturation. This paper pinpoints the intersections of art, technology, and taste by exploring avant-garde gastronomy and contemporary arts through the lens of Huysmans's decadence. We propose an *aesthetics of techno-decadence* to interpret today's food scenario and its hallmarks. Rather than merely celebrating sensationalism, a techno-decadent aesthetics integrates the dark sides of food systems into the hedonistic dimension of sophisticated dining experiences. Within this framework, the traditional marginalisation of taste⁵ in the artistic field acquires a paradoxical centrality, emerging as a site of resistance to technological saturation and revealing the aesthetic and ecological challenges of our present.

The article is structured in three parts. The first examines the 19th-century decadent taste, tracing back how the deliberate construction of artificial sensory experiences anticipates the logic of today's gastronomic scenario, from molecular gastronomy to techno-emotional cuisine and immersive dining experiences. In the second section, we explore how some selected contemporary artistic projects actualise an artificial, technologically-mediated aestheticization of taste and smell for the cultivation of perceptual and ecological awareness. The final section will argue that techno-decadent

⁵ We will set aside the longstanding debates over whether taste and smell can be considered legitimately *aesthetic*. The growing interest in taste and food that has been spreading for decades in artistic practices increasingly legitimises a philosophical account for them. After all: *once upon a time there was a minor sense*. See e.g. Curtin and Heldke (1992) and Perullo (2016). Moreover, like many of his decadent contemporaries, Des Esseintes himself believes that every sense, if educated, can experience pleasures "equal to those of hearing and sight" (Huysmans, 1998, p. 92). For the hierarchy of the senses in Western thought, cf. Korsmeyer (1999).

aesthetics is a structural response to a world where the distinction between the organic and the synthetic has ceased. Here, taste constitutes a form of resistance: even when stimulated by the most refined devices, it reveals that the gustatory experience refuses to be fully reduced to a prosthetic artifice.

2. Des Esseintes's Decadent Palate and Avant-garde Gastronomy

Few figures embody the spirit of artifice as completely as Des Esseintes, the solitary hero of Huysmans's *À rebours*, a novel published in 1884 that can be read as a manifesto of decadent aesthetics. Des Esseintes is a wealthy aristocrat who withdraws from Parisian society to a private retreat where he dedicates himself to the cultivation of artificial and exotic experiences. Des Esseintes transforms his own existence into an experiment in refined perception. The house functions as a proto-digital environment and a controlled sensory interface. Each room is turned into a sensory laboratory, from the double dining room, which resembles a "ship's cabin" (Huysmans, 1998, p. 17) inserted into another dining room, constructed as a glass chamber, where an aquarium built into the wall displays artificial marine creatures flashing jewel-like colours, to the "languorous environment" of the bedroom (Huysmans, 1998, p. 10), consisting in a kind of mirror-lined boudoir resulting in an "artificial atmosphere" (*Ibid.*). Des Esseintes is "totally insulated from the sights, sounds, and smells of external reality" and instead "immerses himself entirely in the invention and dissection of the most esoteric sensual fantasies" (Hartnett, 1977, p. 367). Indeed, his self-imposed exile from the world is not an evasion from experience but its intensification, an attempt to orchestrate sensation through artifice, to elevate taste far from society's vulgarity. Des Esseintes engages in lengthy descriptions of rare odours, sounds, and tastes. Narratively, this is reflected in the prose of the novel; Paul Valéry characterised Huysmans's style as "always striving after the unexpected and the extreme, overloaded with adjectives perverted from their usual meaning" (Hartnett, 1977, p. 367), a *modus operandi* that applies equally to Des Esseintes's approach to sensory stimuli. Indeed, he decomposes perception into discrete variables – light, colour, texture, smell – and recombines them into aesthetic responses. His glorification of artificial and immersive experience establishes Des Esseintes as an early prototype of technological mediation and synthetic cuisine.

Yet, his relationship with food is deeply paradoxical. The very excesses that shaped his aesthetic sophistication have also destroyed him. Sometimes even the most frugal meals become problematic for his "over-stimulated or consumptive" constitution (Huysmans, 1998, p. 14), which is paralleled to that of those "weak and nervous people whose sensual appetite demands food enhanced by smoking and pickling" (*Ibid.*). However, although he blames his sensitive stomach for his inability "to take any serious interest in the art of cooking" (Huysmans, 1998, p. 171), his refined taste and expertise in food are apparent. In this respect, the historical context in which the character of Des Esseintes was conceived plays definitely a role. The rise of gastronomic literature in the 19th century, exemplified by Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin's *Physiologie du Goût* (1825), had established "a theory of food-as-art

perfectly suited to decadence” (Colton, 2020, p. 5), with its elegies of sumptuous banquets and catalogues of rare ingredients. An episode that would place him among the ‘gastronomes’ follows the famous scene in which Des Esseintes decorates a living turtle with precious (and mostly artificial) stones so that its shell harmonises with his Oriental rug. Unusually hungry due to the exceptional result, he “dipped his toast – spread with a quite unique butter – in a cup of tea, brewed from a flawless blend of Si-a-Fayoune, Moyoutann, and de Khansky, green teas which had come by very special caravans from China by way of Russia” (Huysmans, 1998, p. 38). The precision of this description – the provenance, the blend, the caravan route – reveals Des Esseintes’s connoisseurship, yet this same expertise becomes a form of compulsion. Pleasure is intellectualised and abstracted, conformed to a collector’s taxonomic knowledge rather than an appreciator’s enjoyment.

Interestingly enough, Des Esseintes inherits the 19th-century gastronomic tradition but places it within a proto-20th-century framework: rather than celebrating abundance, he cultivates restriction; rather than enjoying social dining, he pursues solitary experimentation – traits that would mark the transition to industrial society. From liqueurs to different kinds of food and drink, Des Esseintes’s culinary refinement resurfaces in the few moments when sensory pleasures gratify him. Aesthetic satisfaction temporarily alleviates the nervous disorders from which he suffers; nonetheless, they stem from the very sensory overload he pursues.⁶ Overcome by illness and forced by his doctor to feed himself using a peptone enema, Des Esseintes accepts this form of eating as the culmination of his project of absolute artifice, as evidence of being able to do without real food. Indeed, “to take nourishment in this manner was unquestionably the ultimate deviation from the norm that anyone could realize” (Huysmans, 1998, p. 171). His aesthetic project is therefore inseparable from infirmity, insofar as “sickness is cultivated as an artistic practice by stimulating the senses to the point of overload” (Leggette, 2014, pp. 282–283). Refinement and psychophysiological deterioration coincide: Des Esseintes’s body and mind are the sites where art and pathology converge. He oscillates between the most sublime, even mystical aesthetic experiences and neurotic exhaustion, as though the refinement of taste were also his condemnation. This is what Valentine Colton identifies as the inherent paradox of his decadent gastronomy: Des Esseintes showcases a “dialectic of attraction and disgust toward culinary art,” whereby food becomes “a double-signifier of refinement as well as decline” (Colton, 2020, p. 11).

One of Des Esseintes’s most elaborate gustatory experiments involves what he calls his “mouth organ” (Huysmans, 1998, p. 39), an apparatus for orchestrating spirits as though they were musical instruments. Each liqueur, in his fantasy, corresponds to a sonic timbre; combinations produce chords; sequences compose melodies. Des Esseintes imagines an orchestra in which

⁶ Des Esseintes’s symptoms are comparable to those of hysteria that, from the end of the 19th century, has acquired a new cultural meaning, becoming the typical disease of modern urban life, as it is triggered by immoderate sensory excitement; cf. Gluck (2014, pp. 355–358).

the savouring turns into the performance of interior symphonies, “providing his gullet with sensations analogous to those which music affords the ear” (*Ibid.*). For instance, dry curaçao corresponds to the clarinet, penetrating and velvety; crème de menthe and anisette to the flute, honeyed and pungent, whining and sweet; gin and whisky to cornets and trombones, explosively strident. In this gustatory-musical experience where melodies are played on the tongue, the decadent aesthete becomes a composer of the invisible, transposing sensory domains into one another. Such a synesthetic aestheticism is already, we might say, an analogue technology, transforming perception into a system of coded correspondences. Des Esseintes drinks to construct multisensorial architectures, and in doing so, he anticipates the logic of contemporary aesthetics, where the boundaries between artistic creation, scientific experiment, and technological design blur into one another. This extends to his attitude towards authenticity and adulteration: in a world already corrupted, deliberate artifice becomes for him a form of honesty. Des Esseintes reflects: “Since, the way things are today, nothing remains that is pure and authentic, since the wine we drink and the liberty we proclaim are both adulterated and derisory” (Huysmans, 1998, p. 101). For the decadent, if nature is already compromised, then the artificial is not betrayal but amelioration.⁷

However, the perfection of artifice is inseparable from decay. Des Esseintes’s project is to exclude both nature and society, living in pure solitary artifice at the borders of death, where decay itself has a positive value. This trajectory – “from the dissolution of forms to the dissolution of the self” (Leggette, 2014, p. 284) – reveals the existential stakes of aesthetic overexposure. Des Esseintes’s being, subjected to a self-imposed sensory regime, begins to rebel. His stomach rejects food; his nerves fray; his perceptual apparatus, calibrated to detect the finest variations in sensation, becomes hypersensitive to the point of hallucinatory agony. The novel documents this progressive collapse not as a failure but as the logical apogee of the decadent project. Aestheticizing life completely equals to exhausting it.

This opulent aestheticization already anticipates a broader contemporary trend: Des Esseintes’s dream enters the current public dimension thanks to avant-garde gastronomy. Whereas he transforms the domestic interior into a theatre of artifice, contemporary cuisine expands that stage into the restaurant, both in the dining area and in the kitchen. Although technology, in its various forms, has always been part of culinary practices, here it is turned into a show. Indeed, the adoption of technology as an atmospheric means of enhancing the dining experience goes hand in hand with its use in cooking. Among the forerunners of this type of gastronomy, the Futurists attempted

⁷ This is not without effects on the enogastronomic sphere, as a passage on wine reads: “Thus, nowadays it is widely known that, in restaurants celebrated for the excellence of their cellars, gourmets enjoy drinking fine vintages made out of inferior wines which have been treated by the method of M. Pasteur. Now, whether genuine or fake, these wines have the same aroma, the same colour, the same bouquet, so therefore the enjoyment experienced in tasting these adulterated imitations is absolutely identical with the pleasure one would take in savouring the pure, natural wine which is unobtainable today, even at an astronomical price” (Huysmans, 1998, p. 19).

to create a revolutionary cuisine in step with modernity and technological innovation raging in all fields. This explains their emphasis on the design of true multisensory and thematic performances, originality in food, and the use of a “battery of scientific instruments in the kitchen” (Marinetti, 2014, p. 39). In this vein, albeit in a different historical context, one of the most significant cases of technological implementation in the contemporary culinary panorama is the so-called *molecular gastronomy*,⁸ systematised by French chemist Hervé This⁹ and Hungarian physicist Nicholas Kurti. By studying the scientific processes underlying cooking techniques, molecular gastronomy aims at creating new flavours and innovative textures working on the chemical properties of food through advanced technologies.

Since the 1980s, many chefs have operated within this framework, though not all of them accepted the definition. Ferran Adrià, a renowned Spanish chef who used to run the restaurant elBulli, in Roses (Costa Brava), willingly preferred that of *techno-emotional cuisine* proposed by food writer Pau Arenós. The movement’s tenet, embraced by other famous chefs such as Heston Blumenthal and Andoni Luis Aduriz, and fully actualised in Adrià’s restaurant – a laboratory for cutting-edge and experimental gastronomy for two decades from the 1990s onwards – is the correspondence between knowledge and emotion, technique and technology, imagination and reality (Arenós, 2019). Spherification¹⁰ or the edible foams and bubbles¹¹ are some of the techniques developed by Adrià with the aim of combining technological innovation and the emotional impact of food. In Adrià’s culinary experiments, the eater, like the reader of *À rebours*, is disoriented by the dissolution of categories: solid becomes liquid, savoury becomes sweet, food becomes vapour. Like Des Esseintes orchestrating liqueurs, Adrià plays (with) molecular transformations, treating the kitchen as both a scientific laboratory and an art studio. A similar logic operates in Heston Blumenthal’s multi-sensory creations, where the technological atmosphere intensifies food flavours. His *Sound of the Sea*, a seafood dish served with a shell containing an iPod playing ocean waves, exemplifies what psychologists call *sonic seasoning*: the marine soundscape measurably enhances the taste of the dish. This cuisine conceives the taste of food not only as a sensory phenomenon but also as a cognitive and intellectual experience.

Today, various examples of *techno-emotional dining* echo Des Esseintes’s endeavour of synthetic sensations. Sublimotion, a restaurant in Ibiza run by chef Paco Roncero, proposes a futuristic dining experience where 12 guests sit around a single table and experience a 20-course menu paired with immersive technology, including 360-degree projections, soundscapes, light shows, temperature changes, and augmented reality,

⁸ The original term, coined in 1988, was *molecular and physical gastronomy*. It became popular in its shortened version a few years later.

⁹ Cf. This (1993), his most renowned work.

¹⁰ A complex and innovative technique which resorts to sodium alginate and calcium chloride to create liquid-filled spheres.

¹¹ Another signature cooking method by the Spanish chef, using emulsifiers and stabilisers to create airy textures.

all synchronised with each dish. Here, the technological apparatus threatens to overwhelm the gustatory experience itself, subordinating taste to its own spectacular display. The resulting cuisine, like Huysmans's prose, oscillates between satire and extravagance. The diner coincides with the decadent subject: aware of the artifice, accomplice in it, yet seduced by its precision. Here, taste is inseparable from technology: digital sounds, olfactory compositions, and staging contribute to providing an aesthetic experience. Restaurants of this type are theatres of controlled artifice, actualising Des Esseintes's solitary experiments on a larger scale, and giving concrete form to what he defines as "the indispensable medium for decaying civilizations" (Huysmans, 1998, p. 148): the demand for a language – here, a culinary one – that must constantly renew itself, being fresh, non-conformist, and capable of producing multiple effects of surprise.

A further case of hyper-technological dining is The Alchemist, a two-Michelin-starred restaurant in Copenhagen run by chef Rasmus Munk. The restaurant stages what Munk calls 'impressions' rather than dishes: immersive, multi-sensory experiences that combine food with digital projections, installations, and performance to convey ecological and social messages. Particularly, the use of digital projections of underwater ecosystems directly echoes Des Esseintes's dining room: food – at times disturbing due to unusual flavours or repulsive visuals – is accompanied with unsettling videos on climate change that envelop the entire restaurant hall. "Such queasiness is part of the intention of The Alchemist, which offers [...] 'holistic dining'" (Mead, 2024). The sophistication of the dishes and cuisine is accompanied by a carefully designed atmosphere aimed at amplifying the effect of the food and revealing its endangered biospheres. Ecological disasters being spectacularised finds its synaesthetic correspondence in taste. Whereas Des Esseintes constructed his oceanic dining room "at his own pleasure" (Huysmans, 1998, p. 17) – by pouring a few drops of coloured essences into the water to create shades in accordance with the seasons, the sky, and the atmospheres required – The Alchemist deploys aquatic imagery to expose ecological devastation. Des Esseintes's nausea *for* nature's banality becomes nausea *in favour* of nature, as a means for raising awareness of its being destroyed by human impact and pollution. Yet, this project is not without its contradictions. Munk "insists that he has never created anything for mere shock value" (Mead, 2024), and that every creation must bear a social message. But here is the flaw: To what extent does provocation raise awareness without turning into mere spectacle? More fundamentally, on a socio-economic level, as Rebecca Mead observes, "Alchemist, in its reliance on financial inequality to generate its customer base, might even be said to exacerbate it" (*Ibid.*). Fine dining opens up to collective and environmental issues, intertwining critical reflection with gustatory pleasure or discomfort; however, it does so within structures of privilege that reproduce the very inequalities it seeks to criticise. The spectacularisation of the meals is deeply embedded in elitism. Des Esseintes himself "acquired a reputation of eccentricity" by hosting atypical performative dinners for writers and intellectuals (Huysmans, 1998, p. 11). Huysmans describes a meal echoing the aesthetic stance of

The Alchemist, implicitly highlighting the same social implications: a funeral refreshment replicating an 18th-century banquet to celebrate the most insignificant of misfortunes.¹² The black of the decorations, the black of the food and wine served, and the funeral dirges all came together to perform an ironic mourning. Such a misfortune dramatised through a gastronomic experience can be interpreted as a preview of what would become entrenched two centuries later: the hyper-technological death knell for ecosystems glamourised by haute cuisine to entertain wealthy guests.¹³

Both Des Esseintes and contemporary gastronomy attempt to refine experience beyond nature, to aestheticize life through technological mediation, thereby exposing the ambivalence of taste. Actually, Huysmans had already glimpsed the paradox that Walter Benjamin would theorise: the technological reproduction democratises experience, yet it strips away its aura. In this sense, Des Esseintes's experiments anticipate the mass cultural mechanisms that would follow; his solitary decadence foreshadows a digital collective intoxication. However, both Huysmans's decadence and contemporary haute cuisine resist the utopianism often associated with technological innovation: artifice is suffused with melancholy, an acknowledgment that every simulation is also a loss. The perfection of the artificial implies the death of the natural; overstimulation entails sensory exhaustion. Des Esseintes's collapse at the end of the novel reveals the existential cost of aesthetic overproduction. It is no accident that he finally turns to the simplicity and unadulterated purity of bread in Eucharistic terms. This moment of failure, far from negating Huysmans's project, provides it with its philosophical depth: decadence culminates in the moment when it acknowledges that artifice, though inevitable, carries within it the seed of decay. Contemporary techno-decadent aesthetics combines the nostalgic *fin-de-siècle* spirit, born from the awareness of inhabiting a "dull and stupid" period (Huysmans, 1998, p. 147), with a sense of critical responsibility that drives art to respond *against the grain*.

3. Gustatory Experiences in Contemporary Arts

À rebours, emblem of aesthetic withdrawal, is in fact a prophecy of the rhetoric of *immersive experiences*. What Huysmans could only imagine, the 20th and 21st centuries have made true through digital technologies and the developments in chemistry. To trace this continuity is to recognise in Huysmans's artificial fantasy the early technological unconscious of modern aesthetics. Actually, the *fin de siècle* was an age of sensory experimentation: the era of electricity, photography, and early cinema. Each invention reshaped the sensorium, extending perception through mechanical prostheses.

¹² Inspired by Grimod de la Reynière, author of the successful *Almanach des gourmands* (1803–1812) that established him as the first modern gastronomic critic.

¹³ This aestheticization of crisis from a position of privilege recalls an episode where Des Esseintes feels an inexplicable appetite, "a perverted craving" watching a poor child eat a slice of bread and cheese (Huysmans, 1998, p. 137). His decadent fascination with what he perceives as foul is possible only through a kind of social distance that transforms the others' necessity into his own aesthetic experience.

Within this trajectory, artistic experimentation with tastes and food flavours emerged as particularly significant, reaching prominence in the 20th century through movements such as Fluxus, Junk Art, Performance Art, Body and Eat Art. The ephemeral nature of gustatory and olfactory perception aligned with these movements' subversive intentions: tastes, odours, and flavours resist objectification, emphasising transience and idiosyncratic engagement. Together, taste and smell challenge conventional aesthetic categories, transforming art from a static object to a lived, evenemential experience, encouraging the deconstruction of the traditional conception of the work of art. Technology has played a significant role in allowing artists to experiment with new forms of aesthetic practices, from the synthesis of aromas, food flavourings, and artificial ingredients, to the invention of electronic noses and the development of refined diffusers.¹⁴ If it's true that 19th-century decadence "was not a pessimistic critique of the modern world, but rather a complex and ambivalent celebration of its creative possibilities" (Gluck, 2014, p. 350), the current situation seems to heighten such ambiguity. Technology reproduces and manipulates tastes and smells in ways previously impossible. However, taste is fundamentally proximal and limited; in contrast, olfactory stimuli are fleeting, potentially infinite, and spatially transmittable. In a way, the ambiguous and intermediate position of smell becomes a technological and artistic potential. Such asymmetry between the two senses – already proclaimed by Des Esseintes's extreme olfactory fantasies and experiments – opens up a space for art: smell can simulate or suggest the taste of a food that is physically absent.

This finds concrete expression in recent works such as *The Ghost Food Truck*, an artistic project designed by Miriam Simun and Miriam Songster and performed in the U.S. and Moscow between 2013 and 2019, playing on the convergence between taste, smell, food, technology, and the ecological crisis. This performative installation aims at making the impact of climate change tangible and emotional by addressing the repercussions on daily life resulting from the future extinction of various species that are pivotal in some gastronomic cultures (Songster, 2018). It consists of a food truck with a futuristic and minimal design, with waiters wearing uniforms that contribute to suggesting a hi-tech atmosphere. Passers-by can order three familiar options of food from a menu adapted to the country where the performance takes place. The main ingredients are species endangered by environmentally harmful practices. All dishes are actually made of sustainable and climate-resistant foods, while their corresponding but 'absent' ingredients are evoked through artificial flavours emitted by a direct olfactory stimulation device to be worn. Here, through an *olfactory hologram* (Mancioppi, 2023, pp. 157–160), taste and technology operate simultaneously and deceptively to evoke the presence of an absence, creating a cognitive and emotional tension that enhances awareness of biodiversity loss and food future unavailability. The entire performance relies on synthetic flavours in order to recreate ordinary eating habits in an atypical situation, where artificial stimuli are the

¹⁴ For example, *Smeller 2.0* by Wolfgang Georgsdorf; cf. Georgsdorf (2021).

only perceptual link through which the gustatory and affective dimension of food can be reconstructed. The gap between the abstract concept of climate change and the material, affective experiences with food, sometimes disappointing, is essential in order to foster a personal connection to the environmental issue. This example raises broader questions. Suppose that people become accustomed to such eating experiences and to hi-tech flavours: there may be a shift in food preferences and in the very affective and mnemonic dimension of it.¹⁵ The normalisation of synthetic or simulated foods could change culinary practices, dining experiences, collective memories, prioritising either sustainability or artifice as such, distancing us from what is not anthropized. Moreover, this could lead to increasingly individualised and customised eating experiences, deeply redefining how people perceive and interact with food. The underlying question, which intertwines ethics and aesthetics, is therefore: “Where are the limits to what we can learn to enjoy?” (Songster, 2018, p. 52). In a way, what Huysmans imagined as an aesthetic dream – the capacity to invent new sensations independent of nature – has become a scientific pursuit. The contemporary gourmet can savour compounds that have never existed in the natural world. This prospect, simultaneously exhilarating and unsettling, marks the threshold of a postnatural and posthuman aesthetics.

On another note, an interesting artistic case is *mEat me* by Theresa Schubert, who interrogates the boundaries of meat consumption, the human/non-human body, and biotechnology through a radically provocative gesture. Her research project, culminated in a hybrid performance at Galerija Kapelica (Ljubljana) in 2020, ponders over post-humanist tenets by taking them to their most extreme consequences, that is, by exploiting her own body as if it were a farm animal. By growing muscle cells from her blood into edible meat and consuming it, Schubert challenges consumerist hierarchies and ethical assumptions. Pointing to the critical issues of animal abuse, the climate crisis, and the cultured meat industry, *mEat me* sheds light on the “delusion of a victimless post-meat-eating utopia” (Dancewicz-Pawlik, 2025, p. 83). The work provokes reflection on the role of technology in mediating predation, questioning whether human flesh *tastes* more ‘tolerable’ when created through technology, hence avoiding death and diluting the association of our body with mortal (edible) flesh. Here, taste is both literal and conceptual, foregrounding the intersection of technology, embodiment, and ethics, as it points at the cultural taboo of cannibalism. The “misuse of technology invented with the intention to capitalize on it” (Schubert, 2020) translates into a true gastronomic act of techno-decadence, i.e. the consumption of an artificial version of ourselves obtained through biotechnological innovations. Here, like in Huysmans’s novel, abundance and self-destruction are seamlessly intertwined; the act of eating is based on a technological mediation that challenges the boundaries between what is acceptable or not. In this sense, we might speak of *technovore* humans. Technovores end up consuming themselves thanks to technology; techno-decadent aesthetics displays

¹⁵ This has actually been happening for several decades; cf. Hirsch (1992).

precisely the qualities “most feared by critics of decadence: dynamic change; fragmentation; radical subjectivity and creative destruction” (Gluck, 2014, p. 355).

Whereas Schubert pushes biotechnology to its ethical limit, the work of Sam Bompas and Harry Parr, who founded the company Bompas & Parr in 2007, brings these explorations into the realm of *mixed reality food and dining*. Through a series of installations and prediction reports, the British duo create experiences in which participants consume physical food while experiencing digitally manipulated or augmented food sensations, demonstrating how technology can mediate multisensory perception. These projects blur the boundary between tangible and simulated gustatory experience, raising questions about the role of digital mediation in shaping both pleasure and expectation. Yet, the same company express ambivalence about this technological trajectory. When asked about the relationship between taste and digitalisation, Pablo Britton, Bompas & Parr’s Senior development chef, replied that, whereas “technotopians present the evolution of technology as inevitable,” he remains “heartened by the stubbornness of the lower senses to be replicated and recreated” (Britton, 2025). This resistance of taste and smell to full technological reproduction – their insistence on material presence, proximity, and embodied engagement – may constitute, as he suggests, a form of symbolic resistance against “the hyper-technologisation of the sensory world” (*Ibid.*). Such tension manifests clearly in their 2020 publication *DIY Decadence*, a book documenting works from 72 collaborators from all over the world. The work shows how the Covid-19 pandemic sparked creativity and experimentation in homes where impromptu feasts with whatever was available acted as imaginative and emotional responses to lockdown challenges. The aim of the project was to encourage people confined to their homes to turn anxiety into ingenuity and to pursue extravagant pleasures in simple occasions by designing bizarre culinary creations and table settings. Such a global situation is reminiscent of Des Esseintes’s aesthetic retreat, though motivated by radically different reasons. From dishes adorned with precious jewels to gargantuan meals with foods that are eccentric in pairing and appearance, *DIY Decadence* “outlines radical strategies for pleasure” in what they hoped would be “a golden era of creativity” (Bompas & Parr and Friends, 2020).

Whether through olfactory holograms of extinct species, consumption of lab-grown human flesh, or mixed reality food, contemporary subjects seek, like Des Esseintes, sensation through technological mediation. This artificial pursuit for gustatory experience, far from contradicting decadence, fulfils its mission. What we call ‘experience’ is increasingly the product of designed environments. The collapse of a strict separation between natural and artificial taste constitutes the decadent achievement of technology: artifice no longer imitates nature but replaces it as the primary site of aesthetic engagement. However, this project stems from the general situation in which humanity finds itself in this critical era. Paradoxically, the *artistic capitalism* (Lipovetsky and Serroy, 2013) even goes so far as to aestheticize the effects of hyper

consumerism constituting its essence. Then, to speak of the mechanisation of the senses is to trace a genealogy that begins with the decadent laboratory and culminates in the digital, molecular, and augmented dining room. Both are architectures of mediation, organised around the fantasy of perfect control over perception. Both reveal the paradox of that fantasy: the more sensation is engineered, the more it risks desensitisation and saturation. The techno-decadent subject, like Des Esseintes, confronts a crisis in perception.¹⁶

The line separating organic and synthetic has dissolved. Huysmans's *À rebours* can be read as a prophetic allegory of the posthuman sensorium: a perceptual field in which biological and technological systems intertwine inseparably. The aestheticization of technology – the transformation of devices, interfaces, and data into sensory experiences – has reconfigured how we perceive, judge, and taste. Contemporary gastronomy operates in the light of what Rosi Braidotti (2013, p. 188) calls the “posthuman nomadic subject,” a self distributed across organic and technological assemblages. In this framework, taste flows across networks of mediation: from the sensory nerves of the diner to the sensors and data systems that record, predict, and reconfigure experience.¹⁷ In this space, taste is a technological process, distributed across machines, networks, and bodies. In light of this, the *technovores* take on further nuances: they correspond to the posthuman gourmets whose pleasure is prosthetically extended, whose tastes are co-produced by machines.¹⁸ In a way, this idea was already present in *À rebours*. Towards the end of the novel, forced by illness to consume only liquid concoctions, Des Esseintes derived from this constraint an aesthetic intuition. By creating new recipes “of inverted epicurism” from oils and food extracts (Huysmans, 1998, p. 171), he reimagined the meal as an opportunity to eliminate “the tediousness that invariably accompanies the necessarily limited choices of dishes,” “the vile sin of gluttony,” and “the tiresome, vulgar chore of eating” (*Ibid.*). The ideal was complete efficiency, something that can also be found in the Futurists’ project: ingesting chemicals that provided all the essential nutrients, stripping food of all social, cultural, sensory, and time-consuming excess. Des Esseintes can be understood as a *proto-technovore*, according to whom eating assumes the function of technological-metabolic performance, yet simultaneously experiencing it as a creative play and *Gesamtkunstwerk*.

Artistic performances, synthetic compounds, augmented dining experiences operate not merely as symptoms of the decadent crisis but as potential interventions, as they function as forms of ‘perceptual persuasion’: by placing

¹⁶ On this, from a broad ecological and relational perspective, see Perullo (2025).

¹⁷ On the cooperation between sensory machines and human senses, including taste, see Salter (2022).

¹⁸ In the realm of foodtech and food digitalisation, numerous techniques and devices aim to expand gustatory limits and simulate taste experiences. Current approaches combine chemical and non-chemical methods in various ways: devices like *Taste the TV* (Miyashita, 2021) use chemical flavouring sprayed onto screens users can lick; cross-sensory devices like the *Sonic Sweetener* manipulate auditory cues to alter flavour perception. Cf.: Apac (2017). In the realm of olfaction, current developments involve the use of AI to source olfactory imagery in digital art collections and archives, as well as to profile and create fantasy flavour formulas that meet consumer tastes to be added to customised foods to maximise sales.

the artificial alongside the absent natural, they aim to reconfigure how we perceive ecological crisis and our responsibility towards it (Koczanowicz, 2025, p. 74). The artifice proves to be a critical tool in the transformation of perception. Therefore, the challenge for contemporary aesthetics is not to escape technological mediation, rather to inhabit it critically. This means reimagining decadence as reflexive practice, as the capacity to dwell artifice while acknowledging that its pursuit is inseparable from melancholy, loss, and decay.

4. Conclusion: Taste as a Site of Resistance in the Age of Techno-Decadence

Far from being merely a stylistic revival of decadent tropes, techno-decadent aesthetics constitutes a structural response to a world where the distinction between the organic and the synthetic has collapsed under the pressure of ecological depletion and digital saturation. Whereas Des Esseintes withdrew from nature for its triteness, we inhabit an artificial infrastructure that conceals the impossibility of returning to it. Under these changed conditions, decadence can no longer be an aim in itself: contemporary artists and chefs adopt a reflexive and critical posture towards it. As seen through the case of techno-emotional cuisine, The Alchemist, the artistic projects *The Ghost Food Truck*, *mEat me*, and the experiments by Bompas & Parr, technology is used to deconstruct the materiality of food, turning it into a hyper-real signifier that evokes the very nature it has displaced. The disgust induced by Munk's disturbing ingredients and visuals, or Schubert's consumption of her own lab-grown cells, is a deliberate aesthetic strategy. It is a form of critical hyperbole that uses the tools of excess to point towards an impending lack. However, a significant difference emerges: whereas much avant-garde cuisine tends to privilege entertainment and experience as finalities in themselves – with any hints of awareness rapidly diluted in spectacular flavours and performances – contemporary art, though equally part of the leisure industry, more firmly bears a function of collective responsibility.

In this techno-decadent scenario, the traditional marginalisation of taste in Western philosophy is precisely what allows it to become a material site of resistance. In an era where visual and auditory fields are increasingly colonised by algorithmic logic and infinite reproducibility, taste demands a physical encounter that resists total digitalisation. As Britton has suggested, the stubbornness of taste not to be fully mediated constitutes an anchor to presence and materiality against the hyper-technologisation adopted by the very avant-garde gastronomic field. This resistance is the core of the techno-decadent paradox: we use the most refined devices to simulate taste, only to find that the experience itself refuses to be reduced to a prosthetic artifice. It is precisely in the gap between this technological conditioning of perception and its critical use that contemporary art positions itself as a laboratory of techno-resistance.

Seen in this broader perspective, both the gastronomic and artistic experiments considered in this paper share with decadence an ambivalent stance towards modernity. On the one hand, they celebrate the power of artifice, the human capacity to engineer new modes of perception. On the other, they expose the depletion of the natural, the impossibility of unmediated experience. It is taste that reveals this crevice, where the dichotomy emerges with full clarity. Undoubtedly, in the digital age, algorithms play an increasingly central role in shaping taste as well. Digital platforms do not simply reflect users' tastes; they produce it, curating experience through predictive models that anticipate and shape desire (Arielli, 2018). Taste increasingly becomes a quantifiable metric, a dataset of optimised preferences.¹⁹ The algorithm functions as a new *Des Esseintes*: a machinic aesthete that refines perception to the point of exhaustion.²⁰ Here, a key risk emerges from the complex interplay between global homogenisation and the desire for unique, customised expressions of taste. Whereas taste remains one of the most subjective experiences, its history has been marked by endless efforts to establish shared standards of objectivity, with consequences for both everyday life and world market economies. This ambiguity helps explain why AI applications and the externalisation of gustatory preferences are more complex to analyse than in other perceptual domains.

Contemporary artists and chefs produce an aesthetic-ethical field that, like Huysmans's fictional world, oscillates between ecstasy and decay, innovation and overload – a decadent dialectic for the current age. As the natural world recedes and the artificial one proliferates, the act of tasting – whether food, art, or digital experience – becomes the stage on which the modern crisis acquires its flavour. For this reason, in this *golden era of creativity* born of anxiety, taste stands not only as an analogue stronghold but also as the very symbol of a renewed decadent movement, rising in response to the algorithmic raging of the digital.

The challenge for future aesthetics lies in the capacity of inhabiting the mediation critically – to acknowledge that every simulated flavour is both a triumph of human genius and a mourning. Huysmans's artificial paradise, for all its morbidity, resisted the vulgarity of his time. Likewise, contemporary techno-aesthetics²¹ can be read as a form of resistance to the powers of technology by turning them to artistic advantage. Techno-decadent gastronomy embodies this performative contradiction, intensifying experience through technology while at the same time exposing the mechanisms – and ecological costs – of that very intensification. Thus, the aesthetics of techno-decadence provides a philosophical framework to inhabit the ecological crisis without falling into either naive techno-optimism or paralysed nostalgia. By aestheticizing the dark sides of our food systems – extinctions, chemical

¹⁹ For a contrasting account of taste as a cultivated aesthetic practice, shaped through experience, attention, and situated engagement, cf. Bertinetto (2025).

²⁰ This process has been described as the rise of the *database aesthetics* (Vesna, 2007), in which experience is organised through combinatory logics.

²¹ On techno-aesthetics, see the works by Pietro Montani, e.g. Montani (2021).

adulterations, and ethical dilemmas of cultured meat – contemporary art and gastronomy transform decline into a tool for awareness. The challenge is no longer whether to embrace technology but how to cultivate, as Des Esseintes attempted, a taste refined enough to perceive both the beauty of artifice and the melancholy of what it replaces. Techno-decadent aesthetics operates precisely in this interstice: acknowledging that artifice, though inevitable, carries within it the seeds of decay and awareness, of loss and critical consciousness.

Maddalena Borsato is the author of sections 1 and 3 and Elena Mancioppi is the author of sections 2 and 4.

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The Practice of Taste

The Aesthetics of Food in 19th- and 20th-Century Culinary Writings

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This article explores the phenomenon of the practical aesthetics of taste. The author analyses three culinary works from the perspectives of pragmatic aesthetics (somaesthetics) and the aesthetics of education. The following works are reviewed: Grimod de La Reynière's the *Almanac des gourmands*, *The Spirit of Culinary Art* by von Rumohr, and the Soviet recipe book *The Book of Tasty and Healthy Food*. The work explores the intersection of the aesthetic, ethical, and political dimensions of taste: from practices of improving the body through nutrition and cultivating attitudes toward food to the ideological normalisation of taste preferences. Furthermore, the article demonstrates how these works anticipated contemporary discussions about food. | *Keywords: Gustatory Aesthetics, Aesthetics of Taste, Practical Aesthetics, Aesthetic Education, Somaesthetics*

1. Introduction

Over the past few years, the aesthetics of the 'lower senses' has become firmly established in Western academic discourse and continues to gain recognition in the philosophical community. On the one hand, this is due to the deconstruction of the hierarchy of senses in Western aesthetics; on the other, it is due to the expansion of the concept of aesthetic experience beyond art (Dewey, 2024) and academic interest in the aestheticisation of everyday life. One of the sought-after areas of the aesthetics of the 'lower senses' is gustatory aesthetics, or the aesthetics of taste. Philosophers' investigative attention to food crystallises in the so-called culinary turn.

The term *culinary turn* is introduced in the book *Culinary Turn. Aesthetic Practice of Cookery* (van der Meulen and Wiesel, 2017) to highlight the convergence of gastronomy and art, as well as how cooking permeates various spheres of life. The authors of the articles examine artistic and design techniques, gastronomic performances, ways to enhance flavour, and the interaction of taste with other levels of sensory perception, demonstrating that food is notable in art for more

than just its visual component. Food consumption is, first and foremost, part of the art of living and an aesthetic practice that permeates the fabric of our everyday lives. Furthermore, the authors emphasise the social and political dimension of this shift, as food consumption correlates with ethical issues of food distribution and sustainable development, environmental concerns, and animal rights.

The interweaving of ethical and aesthetic components in the aesthetics of taste is reflected in the field of gastrosophy. This relatively young term lacks a strict definition, being more of an approach. Within this framework, one of the leading German gastrosophists, Lemke, rejects the understanding of taste as a 'lower sense' and insists that taste is a philosophical faculty of cognition (Lemke, 2007, p. 14). The gastrosophical concept of taste presupposes its training and cultivation, a continuous expansion of gastrosophical knowledge. This forms a kind of gastrosophical intelligence. For Lemke, the specificity of gastrosophical intelligence includes not only sensory education, but also the practice of ethically correct life (Lemke, 2007, p. 180), which is called the art of living well. This concept of the art of living is well developed, above all, by Lappé. She conceptualises nutrition as an ethical, political, and aesthetic practice. The researcher approaches the issue from a socially critical perspective: Lappé advocates a shift toward plant-based protein sources and a reduction in food waste. At the same time, the proposed transformation of nutrition is not ascetic; the construction of this model is based on the aesthetic pleasure derived from food.

The aforementioned terms *culinary turn* and gastrosophy lack strict definitions. However, within the topic being researched, it is not the strictness of the terms that is important, but their very appearance. The necessity of their use reflects the desire to capture changes in the philosophical field. Whatever we call this turn or shift, it is clear that the emergence of such terms reflects philosophers' keen attention to food as a practice and as part of the art of living. Thus, the conversation about food is moving from the margins of philosophy to one of the most relevant topics of recent decades, located at the intersection of aesthetics, ethics, social and political philosophy.

The studies presented above highlight not only the transformation of food discourse but also the particular importance of a practice-oriented approach to the study of taste. Abstract theoretical research is giving way to the study of specific mechanisms of taste formation, developments in its cultivation and practice in everyday experience. A striking example of this research lens is Perullo's concept of *episthenologia*. *Episthenologia* is not a theory that seeks application. It is, first and foremost, a practice related to the art of living (Perullo, 2021). Perullo's main idea is the need to restructure the conversation about wine. In place of an analytical approach, the Italian researcher introduces a formula of knowledge-with, through which knowledge about wine is constructed not by catalogues and tasting instructions, but based on the individual's unique experience of interaction with wine. Perullo thus seeks to cultivate a new attitude toward wine culture. This new attitude, which goes beyond subject-object dualism, fosters a deeper understanding of the surrounding world, particularly food, and one's bodily and sensory faculties.

The idea of a practical side to aesthetics has a long history. In the 18th century, the importance of the practical register of aesthetics was emphasised by Baumgarten, who initially divided the aesthetic project into theoretical (general, clarifying, and instructive aesthetics) and practical parts (Baumgarten, 2021, p. 44). However, the second part was never realised. Presumably, practical aesthetics, according to Baumgarten, is aimed at improving taste. In the mid-19th century, the concept of practical aesthetics was more firmly established by the German art theorist Semper, who understood practical aesthetics primarily to include architecture, textile art, and ceramics. As the goal of practical aesthetics, Semper identifies the nationwide education of taste, which must be carried out through examples and practical teaching methods, and not through lecturing (Semper, 1970, p. 83). In contemporary philosophy, Radeev and Di Stefano address the distinction between the theory and practice of aesthetics. Radeev, in particular, focuses on the difference between practical aesthetics and aesthetic practice. Aesthetic practice is opposed to a purely contemplative approach to reality and is carried out by everyone, as it involves experiencing aesthetics within the context of everyday life. Practical aesthetics, in turn, encompasses both aesthetic practice and an understanding and explanation of the mechanisms of this practice. This line of research can be complemented by Di Stefano's reflections on the so-called new aesthetics, which stands at the boundary between theory and practice and is particularly evident in spheres oriented toward the corporality (e. g., fashion and cosmetics) (Di Stefano, 2012, p. 49). According to her, philosophers cannot ignore the gap between aesthetics 'from above' and aesthetics 'from below', which is why scholars such as Böhme and Shusterman fill the gap between theory and practice in their research.

In the 19th and 20th centuries, the primary form of practical aesthetics was aesthetic education, aimed at cultivating feelings and taste. As Radeev notes, today, practical aesthetics manifests itself in such contemporary fields as experimental aesthetics, design, pragmatic aesthetics (somaesthetics), the aesthetics of atmospheres, and a number of others (Radeev, 2025). It is important to note that all these fields are not isolated and intersect, with elements of aesthetic education evident in most of these trajectories. Thus, within the philosophy of taste, the interpenetration of aesthetic education and pragmatic aesthetics is most evident. Due to the limited scope of research articles, this work focuses on this latter aspect: aesthetic education and pragmatic aesthetics as practices for self-improvement.

Three texts representing different cultural and historical models of cultivating (gastronomic) taste were selected for this study: Grimod de La Reynière's *The Almanach des gourmands* as a project conveying norms of hospitality, 'enlightened' taste and seasonal consumption; von Rumohr's *The Spirit of Culinary Art* as a practical guide to aesthetic education in relation to gastronomy; and *The Book of Tasty and Healthy Food* as a political project to normalise Soviet taste. The goal of this article is to identify how these three projects implement educational and pragmatic

components and how these works anticipated contemporary discussions of food within the framework of practical philosophy. To this end, each text highlights specific mechanisms of aesthetic education and improvement, aimed at constructing a certain ideal model of the 'gastronomic subject'.

2. The *Almanach des gourmands*: Between Journalism and the Aesthetics of Taste

The *Almanac des gourmands* by Alexandre Balthazar Laurent Grimod de La Reynière¹ (1758–1837) is more than just a source on everyday culture; it is one of the first projects for a practical aesthetics of taste. This practical focus is reflected in the following mechanisms: establishing norms for seasonal consumption and constructing the figure of the 'enlightened gourmet', as well as cultivating the perfect Amphitryon.² Within the context of contemporary discussions about taste, this text is notable for its contribution to the formation of a concept of 'proper' food pleasure, based on knowledge and discipline.

Modern views on food seasonality have been developed primarily by the Slow Food movement and research promoting a mindful approach to food. However, the first attempts to normalise seasonal food consumption can be found in the first volume of the *Almanach des gourmands*, which contains twelve chapters corresponding to the months of the year. These chapters provide recommendations on which foods to eat according to the season and holidays of the month. More than just a list of shopping tips, Grimod de La Reynière focuses on the potential of each product, allowing one to maximise health and physical benefits, as well as enhance gastronomic enjoyment by adhering to seasonal recommendations. Grimod de La Reynière's attention to biological and natural rhythms, as well as to food quality, anticipated the modern principle of the art of living well, as described by Lappé and Lemke.

The art of living well depends not only on the nutritional value of a dish, but also on its aesthetic pleasure. Grimod de La Reynière's bold move was to legitimise gastronomic pleasure. In the pages of the *Almanach*, the author writes about the enjoyment of food, making it a social norm: "Of all the mortal sins that man commits, gluttony seems the most innocent and the least burdensome to his conscience" (Grimod de La Reynière, 2014, pp. 114–115). Grimod de La Reynière thus rehabilitates the concept of gourmandism and clearly distinguishes it from gluttony: "A gourmand is one in whom the aforementioned virtues are combined with enlightened taste" (Grimod de La Reynière, 2014, p. 409). In other words, a gourmand is a person with a certain gustatory discipline and knowledge.

¹ The *Almanach des gourmands* was published from 1802 to 1812 in eight volumes. At the beginning of the 19th century, this work provided information on gastronomic establishments and dining traditions relevant to the French capital. Furthermore, the *Almanach des gourmands* was published in other countries, such as the Russian Empire, serving as a practical guide to visiting Paris, including for foreigners.

² Amphitryon is a character from ancient Greek mythology whose name has become synonymous with hospitality.

The next important part of the *Almanach*, as an example of practical aesthetics, is the guide for Amphitryons. Grimod de La Reynière's Amphitryon serves as a model of hospitality, a bearer of the norm, and an organiser of aesthetic pleasure. Wealth and generosity are by no means sufficient for this status. The main virtue of the Amphitryon is its common sense (Grimod de La Reynière, 2014, p. 354), which consists of the proper preparation and presentation of dishes, as well as the creation of the necessary conditions for the meal. This section, devoted to the organisation of the dining environment, is largely consistent with the modern aesthetic theory of atmosphere developed by Böhme and Griffero. In general, the theory states that, in addition to the classical relationship between subject and object, there is a third factor – atmosphere – that influences these relationships. According to Grimod de La Reynière, one of the fundamental conditions for a comfortable atmosphere is consideration of the activities and interests of the participants in a gastronomic event. Proper seating arrangements for guests influences the overall mood. Furthermore, Grimod de La Reynière dwells in some detail on gourmet morality. In these notes, we learn about the proper behaviour of Amphitryons, including consideration for timid guests, rules for invitations, and punctuality. Ignoring the mood of the participants and the atmosphere of the meeting distorts the impression of the dishes consumed and hinders the achievement of a complete aesthetic experience, which is the key goal of gourmandism and part of the art of living.

An unrealised practical component of Grimod de La Reynière's project was the idea of organising a so-called *Gourmet Newspaper*, which would promote the development of gastronomy, the etiquette and rules of hospitality, and communication between gourmets from different regions. The newspaper was never published, but was partially embodied in the *Almanach des gourmands*. The *Gourmet Newspaper* was one of the ideas that illustrates the scope of Grimod de La Reynière's gastronomic project. However, his thoughts were not without a touch of utopia. As the Russian scholar of everyday culture Milchina notes, disillusioned with the revolution, Grimod de La Reynière replaced the real social world with a gastronomic one, in which he sought to establish order and embody a spirit of brotherhood that is born more readily in an exemplary shared meal than in a republican system (Grimod de La Reynière, 2014, p. 516). Thus, the French gourmet sought to construct a strict system and, on its basis, cultivate the perfect steward of the meal and its participants, whose harmonious interaction could contribute not only to the enjoyment of food but also to a certain unity and social equality built on a shared interest in gastronomy. In this aspiration of Grimod de La Reynière, one can discern the modern gastrosophical principle of a just and harmonious society.

Thus, the *Almanach des gourmands* pursues both the pragmatic and educational trajectories of practical aesthetics. The pragmatic trajectory manifests itself primarily in caring for the body through quality nutrition. This attention to food quality is complemented by the cultivation of an enlightened palate and the ability to experience gustatory pleasure, which corresponds to the modern gastrosophical concept of the good life. The continuation of this

line of aesthetic education is embodied in the *Amphitryon* manual and the rules for organising meals, which also contribute to a full aesthetic experience.

3. The Gastrosophy of von Rumohr: A Synthesis of Theory and Practice

Other early attempts at practical aesthetics include *The Spirit of the Culinary Art*³ by Carl Friedrich von Rumohr (1785–1843). Furthermore, this work is notable for being the first⁴ to postulate food as a fully-fledged subject of aesthetics within the context of Western philosophy. The German art historian developed a comprehensive project for the practical aesthetics of taste, in which cooking is presented as an art and a tool for harmonising the physical and moral spheres. On the one hand, Rumohr offers specific recommendations for preparing nutritious food that would promote health and well-being. On the other hand, part of his work is emphatically educational: the author introduces a list of habits and manners necessary for cooks and diners, combining prescriptions for physical and behavioural practices with the education of the soul.

One of the goals of Rumohr's work is to draw attention to the products of the German land, which should be used not so much for fleeting pleasure as for the sake of strengthening health (Rumohr, 2026, p. 14). "The entire culinary art would likely become a useless construct if it did not serve the goal of enhancing and long-term maintaining a healthy sense of life," asserts Rumohr (2026, p. 210). According to Rumohr, it is primarily the ability to maintain a sense of life that defines cooking as an art. Culinary art, unlike many others, is both useful and enjoyable. It is useful because it pursues the goal of nourishment and delight. It becomes enjoyable for two reasons: first, nutritious and healthy dishes are generally tasty; second, culinary art, by adding appropriate seasonings, gives nutritious dishes a pleasing appearance. The book thus integrates with somaesthetic thought about improving the body.

However, reflections on culinary art are not limited to theory alone. Part of the work is devoted to elevating the practice of preparing and consuming food to the rank of art; it also explores how to excel in it. Rumohr views cooking primarily as the art of creating nutritious dishes. Beginning with detailed recommendations for the minimum list of necessary utensils, as well as the quality of the stove and fuel, Rumohr moves on to identifying so-called

³ The work *The Spirit of the Culinary Art* was published in 1822. Its title perfectly reflects the cultural context of the Romantic era and the state of German philosophical thought, clearly alluding to Hegel's philosophy. However, researchers of Rumohr's legacy believe that the author used the concept of *Spirit* more to attract attention and did not see *The Spirit of the Culinary Art* as his life's work: Rumohr was known as a fine art critic, so the first edition of his work was published under a pseudonym in case such a specific work was rejected by critics.

⁴ It is worth noting that in 1814, Beauvilliers (1754–1817) published a book in France titled *L'Art de cuisinier* (The Art of the Chef), or *The Art of French Cookery* in English. A successful restaurateur, Beauvilliers wrote a fundamental guide for the early 19th century, for both restaurateurs and housewives, who could find a systematic collection of recipes with precise instructions and recommendations for housekeeping. However, Beauvilliers does not explain why cooking is an art, what purpose it pursues, or what effect it has on a person, beyond the opportunity to "enjoy the delicacy of our senses" (Beauvilliers, 1827, p. III). Thus, for Beauvilliers, cooking takes on shades of craft rather than art.

nutrient activators, which he includes fire, salt, and water. It is with these basic elements that the German gastrosophist suggests starting to organise the hearth. The German romanticist doesn't provide a list of specific recipes with strict cooking instructions, but he does highlight the most common categories of dishes (roasts, boiled meat and fish, soups, baked foods) and offers general tips for increasing the nutritional value of a dish. This is precisely how the goal of culinary art is achieved. It is noteworthy that Rumohr does not include the visual component, which often defines the enjoyment of food as a kind of still life, in culinary art. Rumohr, on the contrary, argues that embellishment should be avoided. It seems that avoiding visual excesses enhances the perception of pure taste. Rumohr's mentioned recommendations go beyond the scope of household instructions: the author develops a specific program for caring for the body and health, focusing not on pleasure but on the quality of the food. Similar tendencies can be found in the works of Lappé, whose views evolved from adherence to ascetic principles in food to the need to make food not only high-quality and healthy, but also aesthetically pleasing.

The second significant focus of *The Spirit of Culinary Art* is aesthetic education. Here, several approaches can be identified in Rumohr's reasoning: cultivation of culinary masters, table etiquette, and the moral education of individuals. Overall, this body of thought lies at the intersection of aesthetics and ethics, clearly emphasising the convergence of the two disciplines and allowing us to view *The Spirit of Culinary Art* as a precursor to modern gastrosophy.

The elements of aesthetic education are presented in the work as follows. In training culinary masters, Rumohr considers collaboration with other sciences an important tool. Masters must educate their minds through natural science, history, and mathematics, which can provide knowledge applicable to cooking (Rumohr, 2026, p. 207). In turn, Rumohr presents table manners as part of the aesthetics of everyday life, but this fragment differs from a strict set of rules. Rumohr analyses the transformation of table etiquette and offers only a few tips on how parents should regulate children's behaviour at the table. Rumohr postulates gluttony and sweet tooth as two moral vices. Therefore, to avoid them, Rumohr calls for the cultivation of a mindful attitude toward food: parents need to instil moderate eating in their children. As noted above, Rumohr does not focus on the enjoyment of food. First and foremost, a gastrosophist strives to prevent wastefulness and opposes random indulgences. Rumohr insists that greed for any food should be replaced by a desire for its nutritional and quality properties. The German Romantic complements his moral principles regarding food with warnings against states of mind in which one should not eat. Rumohr refers to irascibility, anger, irritation, drowsiness, and intoxication, since, according to him, they have a negative effect on the digestive organs. Throughout his work, Rumohr balances between two poles: he does not reduce food consumption to a dietary practice, but at the same time defines a number of rather strict ethical principles that align with the program of modern gastrosophy.

Thus, *The Spirit of the Culinary Art* is not simply an art historical approach to food. Rumohr substantiates the need to develop the art of cooking to extract

maximum benefit from the human body. At the same time, the art of cooking is not limited to a physiological function: the attitude toward food and products must be accompanied by the cultivation of discipline and moderation. Food can certainly be enjoyable, but it's important to maintain a balance, not reducing the art of eating to mere pleasure or gluttony. Rumohr's ideas on moderate and healthy eating, as well as adherence to certain ethical principles regarding food, align with modern strategies of gastrosophy and the somaesthetic practice of body improvement. In turn, the development of taste is possible only within the framework of certain moral foundations, which must be instilled from childhood.

4. The USSR's Gastronomic Policy: *The Book of Tasty and Healthy Food* as a Soviet Gastronomic Canon

A large-scale project of practical aesthetics, in which taste became one of the tools of ideological construction, is embodied in *The Book of Tasty and Healthy Food*,⁵ first published in 1939 in the USSR. In this recipe book, the aesthetic education of taste emerges as a distinct direction of state policy and the industrialisation of everyday life. Explanations of the origins of products and recipes, introduced hygiene standards, and recommendations for serving shape a new type of subject: 'the new Soviet person' must combine a rational approach to nutrition with the enjoyment of food. In *The Book of Tasty and Healthy Food*, the aesthetics of education, somaesthetics, and politics are closely intertwined: this manifests itself in the formation of new habits, care for the body, and the construction of an image of Soviet gastronomic culture for the productive construction of a communist society. *The Book of Tasty and Healthy Food* acted as an instrument of ideological propaganda through 'soft power'. Thus, this monument of Soviet culture is an excellent subject for modern gastrosophical research.

Being a normative canon for education and a tool for restructuring everyday life, *The Book of Tasty and Healthy Food* was supposed to act as a mechanism for creating something, in Anderson's terminology, an imaginary community – to instil a sense of belonging to a multicultural Soviet society. This situation correlates with the next episode of Italian history. Studies of the Risorgimento era often cite the idea that Artusi's *Science in the Kitchen and the Art of Eating Well* did more to unify the country than Manzoni's *The Betrothed*. This recipe book, found in every household, helped consolidate the Italian literary language across all regions and introduced the cuisines of the various regions of the Apennine Peninsula. A similar significance attaches to *The Book of Tasty and Healthy Food*, as it incorporated culinary traditions from various regions of the world's largest country and served as the 'culinary bible' of Soviet citizens for 50 years. Furthermore, its colourful illustrations, in the spirit of "Stalinist

⁵ *The Book of Tasty and Healthy Food* was published on the initiative of Anastas Ivanovich Mikoyan (1895–1978), who held the position of People's Commissar of the Food Industry of the USSR in the 1930s. A team that included chemists, biologists, engineers, doctors and housewives worked on a collection of recipes for the largest cookbook, designed for the widest segments of the population. This book has been reissued many times: the first was realized in 1939, the last adaptation, already with a reference to Brillat-Savarin, and not on Stalin and Mikoyan, published in 2025. In this article the author will refer to the classic versions of 1939 and 1952 (Molchanov, 1952).

baroque” (Glushchenko, 2010), and the list of diverse ingredients sought to evoke in the reader the impression of a superior, culturally rich, and abundant country. Even simply leafing through or examining the book became a source of aesthetic pleasure. Thus, Shusterman calls this one of the dimensions of the art of food: “Many people enjoy reading food writing and looking at food images (in magazines or on screen) without actually eating the dishes presented” (Shusterman, 2016, p. 262).

The ideology of socialism sought to create a new person through the introduction of new aesthetic practices. This required a tremendous amount of work, overturning the layers of everyday life that had been built up over centuries. The initiator of *The Book of Tasty and Healthy Food* project, Mikoyan, sought to change the tastes of the Soviet people: “The most important task is to awaken new tastes in the population, [...], to cultivate new needs, a craving for new products, a new assortment” (Khudyakov 1939, p. 24); “We must actively break old habits. [...]. This is that part of the work of remaking man that falls to the food industry” (Khudyakov 1939, p. 24). In this case, taste is perceived as plastic and controllable; it is not revealed, but rather constructed anew through institutional practices. Here, a parallel can be drawn with the revolutionary gesture of the Italian Futurists Marinetti and Colombo (Fillia), who, in addition to art, sought to radically change everyday life, including the rejection of retrograde food, and to cultivate a new, dynamic Italian (Sokolova and Di Santo, 2018). Similarly, the content of the Soviet recipe was built on the opposition of the good Soviet and the backward bourgeois.

We previously noted the pragmatic aspect in the works of Grimod de La Reynière and Rumohr, but in the Soviet recipe, the idea of self-improvement through food practices is even more poignant. In Soviet politics, the body serves as the material for the creation of a new Soviet person: in 1939, Soviet authors were convinced that new gastronomic habits would create the healthiest and strongest generation of people, capable of building a communist society.

To substantiate this position, the recipe book included explanations for thematic sections with recipes. Commentary on the recipes was necessary for the successful introduction of new ingredients from the Central Asian republics; products and combinations introduced by Mikoyan after his trip to the United States (for example, cornflakes and tomato juice); as well as canned goods and industrially processed meat products. The nutritional properties of the products were explained through explanations and calorie tables.

It is worth noting that the policy of introducing canned and semi-finished products correlates with gender issues. Traditionally, cooking was considered a female activity. In modern studies, cooking is viewed as a creative and active process in which both men and women can realise their potential (Lemke, 2007). However, at the time *The Book of Tasty and Healthy Food* was written, women’s liberation from cooking was perceived as an act of emancipation. Written in the spirit of social change, *The Book of Tasty and Healthy Food* presents cooking as a process that needs to be optimised to free women from

kitchen work. Of course, the ideological underpinning of this aspiration was somewhat different: it was about relieving women from household chores so that they could devote that time to working for the good of the country. As a result, *The Book of Tasty and Healthy Food* sought to justify the advantages of industrially produced products for the sake of temporal rationalisation of Soviet life, which left an imprint on the taste preferences of the inhabitants of the USSR.

The aesthetic education of the new Soviet man is clearly expressed in the formation of his ideas about the value of food, as well as the transformation of household and hygienic habits. An important element in the development of a new taste was concern for pleasure. The early post-revolutionary period did not involve a focus on gustatory pleasure: the state, exhausted by wars and revolution, sought to provide workers with minimal nutritious food. However, Stalin's famous words in 1935 that life had become better and more fun heralded a new turn in Soviet ideology, which is perfectly captured by the title *The Book of Tasty and Healthy Food*, which was approved after Mikoyan's lengthy polemics with other party members. Mikoyan insisted that pleasure should become an integral part of the new Soviet cuisine and this should be reflected in the title of the culinary collection (Glushchenko, 2010, p. 139). The first introductory articles are devoted to proper nutrition and how important it is for a person's performance, his cheerfulness and the prevention of aging (Khudyakov, 1939, p. 5).

The project of a new Soviet cuisine, aimed at building a harmonious society and a new type of person, is certainly utopian in many ways. For example, some recipes or serving tips don't meet the original purpose of *The Book of Tasty and Healthy Food* which was to save time. This raises the question: how closely did homemakers follow these instructions? Clearly, they did not. Moreover, the availability of many ingredients is questionable. It is important to note that the list of ingredients and dishes was adjusted in different years of publication depending on the political and economic situation: for example, in the 1980s, during a period of shortages, references to salmon were reduced. These problematic aspects indicate that *The Book of Tasty and Healthy Food* was a kind of idealised image of the new taste preferences of the Soviet people and served as a normative guide for their tasting practices and the organisation of a 'proper' meal.

Thus, in the light of practical aesthetics, *The Book of Tasty and Healthy Food* is an excellent example of the intersection of aesthetics and politics: through aesthetic education, the state attempted to shape a new type of person. This goal entailed the introduction of highly nutritious dishes, ready-to-eat foods, and semi-finished products that, in addition to maintaining physical health and a strong body, were intended to be a source of aesthetic pleasure. *The Book of Tasty and Healthy Food* is, on the one hand, a utopian project, and on the other, a practical, working guide. However, this project can be considered fully realised, as its result was the emergence of Soviet cuisine as a phenomenon. Its traditions continue to form the foundation of Russian gastronomic culture and that of many post-Soviet countries.

5. Conclusion

This article examines culinary works from the 19th and 20th centuries, which serve as resourceful sources for studying practical aesthetics in light of the culinary turn. As noted at the beginning of the article, practical aesthetics not only proposes certain practices but also justifies them. The analysed works reflect this strategy: they set standards for aesthetic practices of food, arguing their necessity. All three works are united by their embeddedness in contemporary trends such as aesthetic education and pragmatic aesthetics. Furthermore, the study highlighted areas of intersection between aesthetics and ethics, as well as politics within tasting projects, consistent with current gastrosophical discourse.

The section devoted to the *Almanach des gourmands* reflects the practical aspect of aesthetics, highlighting the following manifestations of the aesthetics of education and somaesthetics. Menu planning in accordance with seasonality, which maintains health and enhances the aesthetic enjoyment of food. Cultivating an enlightened palate based on an understanding of how to enhance the pleasure of food without crossing the line between indulgence and gluttony. A guide for Amphitryons, which employs an atmospheric approach: for a complete tasting experience, not only the quality of the dishes is important, but also concern for the comfort of the gourmets. Overall, Grimod de La Reynière's program is in line with the principle of the art of good living developed by Lemke and Lappé.

Secondly, the same principle of the art of living well is revealed when examining Rumohr's work. The section provides a rationale for why cooking is an art, and also identifies the basic elements for developing this art. It demonstrates that an important component of the book is aesthetic education with pragmatic elements: this applies both to master chefs and basic rules of table manners, as well as to a person's moral character. Morality in the context of the aesthetics of taste manifests itself in the cultivation of discipline and moderation, which promote self-improvement and quality self-care.

Thirdly, the purpose of *The Book of Tasty and Healthy Food* is revealed: to create a new type of Soviet person. Of particular scholarly interest are the recipe explanations and introductory articles on aesthetic education. The recipe commentaries aim to cultivate Soviet citizens' loyalty to new nutritious foods necessary for the perfection of the Soviet body. In turn, the fragments on aesthetic education reinforce the recoding of the tastes of Soviet society in the 1930s: new gastronomic habits should include not only a commitment to nutritious and quickly prepared dishes, but also new hygiene practices, serving methods, and, most importantly, the enjoyment of food, in order to nurture the strongest generation of the socialist state.

Expanding the geographic scope of the study, as well as taking into account contemporary digital transformations in the world of gastronomy, appears to be significant in terms of future prospects.

1) Identifying major national recipe collections similar to *The Book of Tasty and Healthy Food* could contribute to the construction of a typology of 'recipe-instruments' that influence the formation of national taste under different political regimes. This could be a valuable resource for current gastrosophical research focused on the intersection of aesthetics, ethics, and politics, and will deepen our understanding of the mechanisms of taste formation in various political and cultural contexts.

2) Expanding our geography can involve not only analysing other national recipes but also exploring other projects of practical gustatory aesthetics that extend beyond Western European and Russian cultures. For example, understanding Eastern practices of aesthetic education and body improvement through nutrition can significantly enrich the established philosophical discourse on food, which has been developed primarily by Western European scholars. It appears that the aesthetic education of taste in the Eastern tradition is directly linked to religious and ritual systems (for example, the Japanese tea ceremony as a model for the discipline of taste and behavior, or Islamic norms of nutrition and hospitality as aesthetic and ethical practices).

3) The digitalisation of gustatory aesthetics and the implementation of AI in terms of body improvement, health care, and taste development require special attention. In this case, two directions can be identified. First, the mechanisms of taste construction in the digital environment can be examined: how digital platforms and social media create perceptions of healthy, wholesome nutrition and aesthetic presentation, and how this differs from classic recipe books. Second, discussions with students during lectures on everyday culture revealed that AI is regularly used for meal planning and food preparation. One of the main constraints of the prompt is the limited number of products available at any given time. Another popular constraint is the emphasis on healthy eating. At the same time, traditional recipe books or YouTube videos are losing their relevance. This trend can be analysed from the perspective of how AI embodies a new institution for the regulation of taste.

The general conclusions from this and similar studies can significantly complement and refine the analysis of the foundations of aesthetic education and body improvement (somaesthetics) within gastronomy. This analysis could be used to develop courses and modules on aesthetic taste education within aesthetics and cultural studies programs, culinary schools, or museum educational projects.

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The Secret of Taste

Derrida on Non-Appropriation

Serena Luce

This article investigates taste in the corpus of Jacques Derrida, focusing on its emergence across published works and unpublished seminars. Starting from *A Taste for the Secret* and *Economimesis*, and through a close reading of *Manger l'autre* (1989–1990) and *Rhétorique du cannibalisme* (1990–1991), it follows the ways in which taste appears as an experience of auto-affection that maintains a structural relation to what exceeds and resists consumption. Rather than presenting taste as a pure alternative to appropriation, the article interprets it as a limit-experience in which contact, incorporation, and knowledge encounter what cannot be fully assimilated. It thus proposes to understand taste as a non-appropriative posture, capable of orienting the relation between aesthetics and ethics without resolving it into a normative synthesis. Approaching the seminars as a theoretical laboratory, the contribution shows how taste operates in Derrida's thought as a critical instance with respect to any economy of appropriation. | *Keywords: Taste, Disgust, Auto-Affection, Ex-Appropriation, Jacques Derrida*

1. Introduction

At first sight, taste may seem to occupy only a marginal place in Jacques Derrida's corpus: it does not appear as one of the most immediately recognisable names of deconstruction. Yet a closer reading of Derrida's published texts and unpublished seminars reveals that taste belongs to a broader constellation of motifs through which Derrida repeatedly interrogates the limits of appropriation. Taste, in this sense, is a privileged site for thinking the unstable passage between contact and assimilation, pleasure and rejection, knowledge and incorporation. It allows us to ask whether there can be a mode of knowing that does not take the form of an objectifying possession.

This article traces a number of sites of taste in Derrida's corpus, outlining a trajectory that moves across published texts such as *A Taste for the Secret* (2001 [1996]) and *Economimesis* (1975), as well as unpublished seminars, in particular *Manger l'autre* (1989–1990) and *Rhétorique du cannibalisme* (1990–1991), in order to investigate taste as a modality of auto-affection inscribed

within a reflection on ex-appropriation.¹ The gradual posthumous publication of Derrida's seminars has progressively revealed the value of these pages and their crucial role in the genesis of the published works. Approaching the unpublished seminars as a living laboratory of Derrida's philosophical practice makes it possible to foreground their theoretical significance and to identify a missing element in the trajectory of taste within Derrida's corpus.

When asking whether Jacques Derrida ever engaged with the question of taste, the most explicit point of reference is *A Taste for the Secret*, a dialogical volume structured around a series of interviews in which Derrida responds first to questions posed by Maurizio Ferraris and later by Gianni Vattimo, and offers a seminar-style commentary on a text by Maurice Blanchot. The title refers above all to a strongly idiomatic expression – *avoir le goût de, avoir le goût pour* – to have a taste for something, an inclination, a fondness, a desire, but also a recurring habit that may appear capricious or gratuitous. In this idiomatic choice one may discern in Derrida himself a certain fondness for an ambiguous terminology whose meaning never stabilises, but continually shifts between literal and figurative senses. Taste names both a sensible experience and a disposition, both a bodily contact and an affective or intellectual orientation. In both cases, it implies a self-reflexive structure: tasting is never only tasting an object, but also tasting oneself in the very act of tasting. Every gratification involves, at least minimally, a form of self-gratification; every relation to what is tasted passes through an experience of auto-affection.

Why, then, speak of taste in relation to the secret? Taste, understood as a form of gratification, operates here by orienting pleasure, and with it desire, towards a lack destined to remain such, towards what cannot be exhausted by possession. Like desire, taste does not simply consume its object. It may seek contact with it, but this contact does not abolish distance. By orienting pleasure, Derrida explains, the taste for the secret indicates a movement of desire towards what is lacking, towards what cannot or must not be said: something that comes to a halt before being uttered, held within by the closure of the lips, an emblematic threshold, not merely metaphorical, of the space of the proper. The presence of the secret thus takes the form of absence: of silence, which is itself a mode of presence. Whether kept silent or rendered silent, the secret is what remains private even when it is inscribed within a public space, without being absorbed into a normative or affective system, as in the case of the secret that inhabits the most private of private spaces: the unconscious. The secret is both inside and outside, retained and expelled: *le secret*, in its literal ambivalence, is at once secret and secretion. It remains within, yet unintegrated, and precisely for this reason remains external to what contains it, as an excess.

In *A Taste for the Secret*, Derrida describes this logic in terms of what has persistently occupied his attention: that which eludes the system, interrupting its closure without constituting itself as a mere exteriority:

¹ For a psychoanalytically informed reading of orality in Derrida, see Guyer (2007). For a transversal reading of Derrida's work centered on alimentary motifs, see Perullo (2011).

I have constantly attempted to single out that element which would not allow itself to be integrated into a series or a group, in order to show that there is a non-oppositional difference that transcends the dialectic, which is itself always oppositional. There is a supplement, or a *pharmakon* – I could give many more examples – that does not let itself be dialectized. Precisely that which, not being dialectical, makes the dialectic impossible, is necessarily retaken by the dialectic that it relaunches. At this point, we have to remark that the dialectic consists precisely in dialectizing the non-dialectizable. (Derrida, 2001 [1996], p. 32)

With respect to the system, Derrida lingers on what does not allow itself to be integrated, what interrupts closure without assuming the form of a simple outside. This is a logic that, in the following lines, Derrida will explicitly define as one of *ex-appropriation*: that which prevents dialectical reabsorption and describes the movement of expropriating inclusion that characterises the relation to all alterity, to every intimate estrangement.

One might then ask whether this image of the secret also implicitly says something about taste itself, or more precisely whether, in this failure of appropriation, one might also discern the secret of taste. To what extent is there, in taste, a dimension that eludes appropriation, that exceeds it, and yet persists? To what extent can taste be considered a sensible modality capable of retaining without consuming? And to what extent does Derrida in fact speak of taste in these terms?

My claim is that taste becomes philosophically significant in Derrida precisely because it occupies this unstable threshold, neither simply aesthetic nor simply ethical. It belongs to aesthetics insofar as it concerns sensibility, pleasure, disgust, and judgement; it becomes ethically charged insofar as every act of tasting implies a relation to alterity, to what is welcomed, consumed, rejected, preserved, or left to remain. Derrida's scattered reflections on taste allow us to think taste as a limit-experience of appropriation. Far from being a pure alternative to appropriation, or a relation to alterity untouched by violence, assimilation, or consumption, taste marks the point at which appropriation encounters what it cannot fully master. In this respect, taste belongs to a logic of *ex-appropriation*: a movement in which what is most proper is constituted only through an exposure to what exceeds it, displaces it, and prevents it from closing upon itself. To taste is to receive, to retain, and to be affected by something other; yet what is tasted is never simply possessed. It leaves a trace, a memory, an aftertaste, but it also withdraws from full incorporation.

Once taste has been introduced as an auto-affective modality that shares the logic of the secret, the article turns to *Economimesis*, where Derrida examines Kantian aesthetics and the role of disgust within the economy of judgement. Before taste is explicitly thematised as such, disgust already functions as a limit-element: something at once internal and external to the system, capable of interrupting its closure. Disgust marks what cannot be assimilated, represented, or transformed into a concept. It is expelled, but its expulsion reveals the fragility of the system that requires it.

From there, the analysis moves to the unpublished seminars *Manger l'autre* (1989–1990) and *Rhétorique du cannibalisme* (1990–1991), where taste, eating, auto-affection, and *restance* are most explicitly brought together. In these seminars Derrida examines the material, symbolic, and religious meanings of the alimentary act, of incorporation, and of taste, turning them into privileged sites from which to interrogate the relation between aesthetics and ethics.² It is here that some of Derrida's rarest and most valuable reflections on taste emerge, understood as a sensory faculty, bound up with memory and with a form of retention capable of preserving without consuming. In the course of the seminar lectures, Derrida also outlines a genuine semiotics of flavours, which often extends beyond immediate sensoriality in order to describe the affective tone, the aftertaste, of moods and feelings. What is at stake here is precisely the flavour of particular *secreta*: of tears, which can be salty and at the same time sweet or bitter, and of milk and honey, whose sweetness is invoked to figure an infusion of maternal or divine love.

Through these stages, it becomes possible to show how Derrida's attention turns to taste across the broadest range of its meanings, allowing it to be thought as a non-appropriative mode of knowing, in close contact with the question of the indeconstructible *restance*, *le reste*.

2. The Economy of Disgust

An initial interest on Derrida's part in the logic of taste, and more specifically of disgust, emerges in *Economimesis*, where it is already possible to discern the search for a limit-element, both internal and external to the system, capable of interrupting its closure.³ After having examined the Hegelian dialectical–speculative system in *Glas* (1974) as an incorporative and metabolising apparatus without leftovers, Derrida turns in *Economimesis* to Kantian transcendentalism, understood as a philosophical method that institutes a system of exchanges governed by an economic logic. Whereas Hegelian discursivity is regulated by an infinite incorporative movement, conceived as a work of mourning, Kantian transcendentalism occupies the position of a frame, filter, or threshold. It operates as the condition of possibility of the categorical system, rendering the organisation of thought accessible through analogical relations.

Starting from the *Critique of Judgement*, and through an analysis of the conception of the beautiful in Kantian aesthetics, Derrida seeks to show how it is structured through a series of analogies between moral taste and bodily taste, within an economy of exchange that finds its limit in disgust. Beauty,

² These two seminars constitute the second and third acts of the cycle devoted to *The Politics of Friendship*, initiated in 1988–1989. Initially delivered at the EHESS in Paris, the seminars were later presented in the United States. Copies are held at the Institut Mémoires de l'Édition Contemporaine (IMEC) and in the Jacques Derrida Papers at the University of California, Irvine. Reproductions also held in the archives of the Princeton University Library. A substantial part of the second half of *Manger l'autre* was later taken up and reworked in the article *Reste – le maître ou le supplément d'infini*, dedicated to the historian of religions Charles Malamoud (Derrida, 2002). For a discussion of Derrida's seminar *Rhétorique du cannibalisme*, see Krell (2006).

³ Published in 1975 in the collective volume *Mimesis, des articulations*, *Economimesis* is connected to two texts from the same period: the article *Parergon* (1974), later further developed in *La vérité en peinture* (1978).

insofar as it comes to express aesthetic ideas, is grounded by analogy in the verbal expression of the human body, in which the mouth performs this function, as the site of the tongue, which is language while also fulfilling a perceptual role. Within it, the complicity of the senses allows hetero-affection to become auto-affection. As an opening, an orifice and a point of transition from outside to inside, a transitional space situated neither within nor without, the mouth embodies the Kantian transcendental mechanism, whereby concrete experience is filtered and transformed into universal concepts. Taste assumes a transcendental function whenever it operates a synthesis that confers meaning on perceived objects, transforming subjective inclination into an experience that appears necessary, that is, oriented towards universal ends. Taste for beauty would thus be the sign of nature's orientation towards moral ends, as well as the basis of its teleology.

This system, however, is not entirely continuous and circular, but is interrupted by disgust: nature, even in its most genuine authenticity, can give rise to repulsion. Disgust provokes the vomiting of an element that is impossible to assimilate, that is, to classify, represent, or name. It is something that can only be partially digested, insofar as it constitutes an excess that cannot be transformed into a concept or assimilated to the categorical system, and thus remains outside the scope of judgement. Disgust is itself an alterity that is at once internal and external to the system, and that assumes a function akin to that of the *parergon*. Like the frame, which is situated at the margins of the work of art without being an integral part of it, disgust operates at the limits of the transcendental system. However, it moves in the opposite direction, as a resistance to incorporation, as an internal drive towards expulsion. In proximity to sensible disgust, in the literal sense, moral disgust, or contempt, is founded by analogy. For Derrida, the reference to rejection thus assumes a supplementary function, making it possible to refer to alterity without reducing it to an absolute exteriority that would be radically unnameable.⁴

If Kant thus insists on the disinterested character of the judgement of taste, that is, its lack of practical, moral, or cognitive interest, Derrida notes that mimesis is never neutral, but always enacts an exchange of meanings, power, and values through a "double scene". The apparently free representation is sustained by an underlying dynamic that organises its sense.⁵

From this observation of disgust as an alterity internal to a system that only appears to be closed, Derrida will later continue to think taste in relation to alterity, and I want to shift the emphasis towards the persistence of what

⁴ Among philosophical studies of disgust, Winfried Menninghaus's historical and theoretical survey approaches Kantian disgust, unlike Derrida, as a form of radical expulsion. His perspective remains of interest above all for the parallel it draws between disgust and laughter (Menninghaus, 2003, pp. 103–115). For a broader discussion of *Economimesis*, see Campos-Salvaterra (2021).

⁵ In a different context, the Kantian account of disgust leads to conclusions comparable to Derrida's. Aurel Kolnai, a pioneer in the philosophical study of disgust, describes it as a "two-faced Janus", characterized by a perverse magnetism that repels while simultaneously attracting the revolting object, a reading emphasized by Carolyn Korsmeyer (Kolnai, 2004 [1929], pp. 1–36). Derrida's intervention radicalizes this insight by stressing that this process is not manifest, but operates instead through introjection or phantasmatic incorporation.

remains after appropriation. This does not exempt sensible relation, once and for all, from consumption or from a certain form of violence. Derrida's point is more unstable and more demanding: what is at stake is the exposure, from within, of the limit of appropriation. The same mouth that tastes is also the mouth that eats, speaks, incorporates, rejects, and expels. There is therefore no innocent taste, no relation that would simply leave the other intact. What taste makes thinkable, rather, is a relation in which appropriation is exposed to what persists without allowing itself to be objectified: a trace, a supplement, an aftertaste, a persistence of sense. The remainder is not only an indigestible residue, a leftover of assimilation, but above all that impalpable dimension of experience which survives consumption, insists in memory, and continues to act without becoming fully available. In this sense, the non-appropriative dimension of taste, rather than opposing appropriation from the outside, emerges at the point where appropriation encounters what can be retained, but not possessed. It is for this reason that such a reading is ethically relevant, insofar as it considers sensible experiences not merely as subjective states, but as deeply relational experiences. They imply a relation to what is other: to what is welcomed, incorporated, rejected, preserved, or left as remainder. Derrida's reading of disgust thus prepares the later analyses of eating by showing that the aesthetic economy of taste is already traversed by a question of alterity and assimilation. The ethical significance of taste neither prescribes a norm nor converts aesthetic experience into moral judgement; rather, it shows that every relation to the other is marked by the failure of any claim to assimilation. In this sense, taste orients ethics "negatively", by making sensible the impossibility of fully appropriating what one encounters. The following section pursues this limit into the unpublished seminars, where the question of taste is displaced from the economy of judgement to the scene of incorporation.

3. Tasting Oneself and The Other

Manger l'autre and *Rhétorique du cannibalisme* are two seminars devoted to the psychoanalytic, anthropological, and religious implications of the alimentary act, and to the meaning of eating in its elusive scope. Through references to food that is sacred and profane, raw and cooked, natural and cultural, Derrida explores within them the dimension of taste and of sense, of tears, bread, flesh, blood, milk, and honey. In these lectures, eating is situated at the intersection of three major philosophical questions: the proper, the *cogito*, and the thing. It thus concentrates a series of ambivalences and paradoxes that lend themselves to deconstructing the limits of the body, the subject, and the text, as well as those of the meal and of food itself.

The playful seriousness that characterises Derrida's approach throughout these seminars takes the form of irony, farce, or parody. This tone belongs to a moment in which Derrida, at the height of his international visibility, had for several years been exposed to criticism and reassessment, and continued to confront accusations that understood deconstruction as a practice of decomposition, rumination or even nihilistic dissolution. Against this polemical background, the alimentary lexicon does not remain external

to deconstruction; it also comes to name the very risk to which deconstruction exposes itself in interrogating appropriation. A comparable problem emerges, in dialogical form, in *A Taste for the Secret*. Vattimo, in the course of a discussion on violence, experience, and the encounter with the other, describes the work of exegesis on the master as a way of consuming, metabolising, and eating (Derrida, 2001 [1996], p. 91). The metaphor thus marks the point at which philosophical interpretation recognises its own exposure to the alimentary logic it analyses. If deconstructing also means working over what one encounters, then the deconstructive gesture is never simply foreign to appropriation; it exposes itself performatively to the very economy it interrogates.

Derrida's response clarifies the stakes by distinguishing violence from brutality. Even the most respectful argument, he suggests, preserves a certain violence, without which there would be no culture; brutality, by contrast, is the dogmatic, impoverishing, and repetitive violence that leaves no room for the other (Derrida, 2001 [1996], pp. 91–92). Deconstruction therefore cannot consist in the simple elimination of violence or appropriation. Its critical force lies rather in exposing, within its own operation, the limit at which reading risks becoming consumption. Taste suggests, in this sense, not only a relational dynamic, but also a posture of reading in which contact does not coincide with assimilation and understanding does not require complete possession.

This is why, during the seminars, Derrida confronts Heideggerian disorientation directly, positioning his own gesture less as an alternative than as a continuation, as its other face. A recurrent question thus arises: what does it mean to eat? Derrida adopts the mode of Heidegger's seminar *Was heißt Denken?* (1951–1952), in which, by multiplying questions around the initial problem, the inquiry slides across the different layers of meaning that can be discerned within the question itself, depending on how it is formulated. What, then, is a thing to be eaten, and, prior to that, what is a thing? Derrida poses this question by returning once again to Heidegger, drawing not only on the lecture *The Thing* (1950), but above all on the earlier seminar *The Question of the Thing* (*Die Frage nach dem Ding*), delivered between 1935 and 1936. Eating, ultimately, is like writing: it leaves traces. Beyond the fact that food cannot be classified as a "thing" among others, nor framed as a simple object of knowledge, it inevitably entails the production of wastes. Since a component of the thing remains inaccessible and cannot be assimilated, Derrida asks what it is that is not assimilated in the thing that is eaten. What is the unassimilable?

In the final lectures of *Manger l'autre*, from the tenth session onwards, Derrida begins to suggest a shift from the thing to the restance, *le reste*, in search of an instance destined to remain an indeconstructible limit. He identifies four meanings of the restance, which he sets out by closely following Heidegger's definitions of the subject in his seminar, almost as if seeking to replace them. What emerges is a term that is difficult to translate: that which subsists as substance and remains after a disappearance; the leftover

of food, which one ought not, does not wish to, or cannot eat; the remains of a dead body; and difference as the excess produced by an arithmetical operation. Alongside these meanings, a fifth is added that traverses them structurally: restance as what is left over from an ontological project centred on being, that is, alterity as such, which is also the restance of restance. Restance is bound up with a general idea of dirtiness: it is corruptible, insofar as it concerns organic matter that decomposes and separates, thereby threatening the indivisibility of a proper, clean body (*propre*). At the same time, this logic of restance is articulated through more concrete figures of residue. Waste, as decomposing matter, marks what must be expelled in order for the body to maintain its integrity. Leftovers, by contrast, refer more specifically to what remains of a meal, what one does not, cannot, or must not eat. In both cases, contamination does not concern the residue as such, the *quoi*, the thing, but above all the individual to whom it is connected, the *qui*, namely the one who has handled it, cooked it, or left it behind. Leftovers, indeed, are always someone's leftovers. The *who* thus put into question by restance, prior to being a subject, is defined in relation to what it expels and to its capacity to become edge, orifice, and boundary of the body. It is therefore not possible to delimit what is proper to the *who* except, paradoxically, in what remains after all its residues have been taken away from it. The *who* is both the subject of restance and that which remains, at once including and included within the logic of what exceeds it. And yet, paradoxically, the human subject is anything but its waste or its leftovers.

In the eleventh lecture, eating the other thus becomes a problem of delimitation between the body and what it leaves behind. What is at stake is a displacement of the boundary between inside and outside, bringing it inward: not only because self-assimilation is possible, but because in eating one makes the other part of oneself. Yet if every heterophagy entails homophagy – understood not only as derived from *ōmos* (raw), but also from *homos* (same, similar) – it also becomes autophagy. Observing the topology of sensibility in the classical distribution of the five senses, Derrida notes how, in the alimentary act, they are difficult to isolate from one another, and he returns to the notion of auto-affection, of which touch – also implicated in taste and in tasting oneself – is the paradigmatic example. Every contact is always a contact of the other with oneself and, at the same time, a contact with oneself perceived as other. Described in terms of intentional consciousness, transcendence, and intersubjectivity, the experience of restance comes to overturn its own value: from waste and impure residue it becomes substratum, substance, an ineliminable ground, the being of non-being. In relation to the body, once the distinction between body and non-body (soul, spirit, consciousness) has been overcome, restance functions as a delimitation of the proper, clean body (*propre*). The body is what remains once its waste and leftovers have been removed, with which it retains no relation of ownership. By attending to sensoriality, Derrida thus comes to outline a transcendental aesthetics starting from touch as an auto-affection implicated in taste.

4. The Flavour of Emotions and Taste as the Indestructible

The experience of taste thus becomes a threshold experience when flavours are called upon to describe emotions. Derrida ventures into a universe of flavours capable of articulating emotional tones, and it is in the pages of these seminars that he perhaps for the first time describes the taste of the *secreta*. The fourth lecture of *Manger l'autre* opens with the image of a raft in the middle of the sea, the sole means of survival for shipwrecked figures who, exhausted by hunger and thirst, might yield to a form of cannibalism sometimes considered justified by extreme circumstances. In that same context, where survival would render otherwise abominable acts acceptable, thirst might also lead one to drink seawater, which, beyond its debilitating effects, has the salty taste of tears. Devoted to the sea, the abyss, and tears, this lecture includes intense interrogations into the meaning of eating. Freud's narrative, which traces Eucharistic ritual back to the totemic meal, is itself traversed, in a *mise en abyme*, by the sacrificial dynamic it describes: the denial of filiation and parricide, so that the son may take the place of the father. From the *goût de la mer*, Derrida thus comes to speak of the *goût de la mère*, shifting attention from the father to the mother, and from tears to wine and milk. It is for this reason that he presents Augustine's *Confessions* as a great book on tears and on the temptations of the flesh, focusing on the passages devoted to Saint Monica, Augustine's mother, and commenting as well on her taste for wine, which in this case appears as a vice.⁶

Sweetness, by contrast, is at the centre of the fifth lecture of *Rhétorique du cannibalisme*, in which Derrida lingers on the passage from the Book of Ezekiel (3:1–15), where the prophet receives from God the command to eat the scroll containing his word, which will be for him “sweet as honey”. Honey, Derrida remarks, is a peculiar nourishment: it concentrates those features that render food an inappropriable “object”, even with respect to structural categories. It might be described as natural, even though it is produced by an animal society and by the industrious activity of bees. It is both pure and processed, a vegetable substance that becomes animal and retains the fragrance of flowers. It is a secreted fluid that separates from a body and, like seed, egg, or germ, is dense with life and regenerative power. Like milk, it is a gift, a sign of peace, produced in nature without putting any living being to death. It represents sweetness par excellence and in itself. Sweetness, Derrida insists, arrives with dessert, when hunger has already been satisfied, in order to respond to a desire that exceeds need, in pure taste. Sweetness is indeed the taste of the Good, something that remains good beyond hunger, a comfort, as if it possessed in itself a certain “spiritualising” power. There is sweetness in contact, in the caress, as well as in the eyes, in the gaze, which is capable of being haptic. Beyond a phono-logocentric perspective that would restrict sweetness to the human being and to God, Derrida asks whether it is possible to deny certain living beings, certain animals, the experience of sweetness and of the caress. And how are we to think the soul and love, if not starting from

⁶ *Confessions*, IX.8.18; see also the concluding sections of Book IX on the death of Saint Monica.

sweetness? The power of the trope of sweetness allows it to invade the sensory sphere only to exceed it, offering itself to an inner feeling that, almost paradoxically, becomes the supplementary taste of words themselves. It is here that Derrida describes taste as an excess, as the part of food that is not eaten and that, insofar as it remains inappropriable, participates in the ethical dimension of *restance*.

5. Conclusions

What Derrida outlines across the texts and seminars considered here is an epistemological ethics inscribed within aesthetics: one that reintegrates corporeality, sensibility, and the alimentary act as domains of philosophical interest, while at the same time questioning how such reintegration might avoid becoming another form of re-assimilation. A certain claim to totalisation, often an unacknowledged risk, concerns the summarising operation of every tradition, as well as of every discourse that seeks to include, classify, interpret, and comprehend. It is for this reason that the question repeatedly returns: how can one include without annihilating?

Taste gives this question a sensible form. It knows through contact, retains through memory, disappears and returns when recalled; yet, although it interiorises, it does not simply annihilate, consume, or possess what it preserves. Its non-appropriative dimension consists neither in a pure exteriority nor in a complete interiority with respect to incorporation. In this sense, taste shares the structure of the secret and participates in the dimension of *restance*: it is retained without being fully integrated; it insists without becoming entirely available. Derrida then suggests, in one of the concluding lectures of the seminars, that starting from taste the task is therefore to think another ethics, or another law, of *restance*: not an ethics imposed on sensibility from the outside, but one that emerges from the very way in which sensibility enters into relation with what it cannot make entirely its own. If there is a pedagogical value of taste here, it concerns the possibility of educating desire not towards the renunciation of contact, but towards the recognition of its limit.

Over an extended temporal arc, and across texts separated by many years, the trajectory reconstructed here bears witness to Derrida's return to taste as a limit-experience, irreducible both to conceptual knowledge and to ethical normativity. In taste, according to a modality that extends across the entire sensory sphere, Derrida finds a posture of knowing and of contact grounded in the renunciation of totalising appropriation. To understand the other as other, to let the other remain wholly other, means renouncing the fantasy of a fully determinable relation. From this renunciation, and from the loosening of the subjective grasp on the object, there also follows the possibility of restoring value to every alterity, to every singularity.

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Symbiotechnical Taste

A Festival of Finkian Phenomena in the Post-Anthropocene

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This article proposes a reconceptualization of gustatory aesthetics beyond the anthropocentric paradigm that has historically marginalized taste as a ‘minor sense’. Drawing on Eugen Fink’s phenomenology of fundamental human phenomena – death, labor, domination, love, and play – we argue that taste attains its full aesthetic and ontological significance only when these phenomena are gathered together in the event of a festival. Contemporary discourses on the post-anthropocene, flat ontologies, and symbiotechnical alliances provide the framework for extending Fink’s analysis beyond the human. By integrating Fichte’s concept of mutual recognition (*Aufforderung*) and recent debates in new materialism and posthumanist aesthetics, we develop a model of ‘symbiotechnical taste’ in which human agents enter into cybernetic alliances with non-human actors – artificial intelligence, sensor technologies, microbial cultures, ecological systems – to overcome the limitations of individual gustatory judgment. This model transforms taste from a subjective aesthetic judgment into a relational, co-constitutive practice of world-making, wherein the Finkian festival re-emerges as the event of gathering distributed agencies into a shared gustatory experience. | *Keywords: Gustatory Aesthetics, Eugen Fink, Johann Gottlieb Fichte, Post-anthropocene, Symbiotechnical Alliance, Festival, Taste, More-than-human Theory*

1. Introduction

The concept of taste occupies a peculiar and contested position in the history of modern aesthetics. Beginning in the seventeenth century, the term underwent a significant semantic shift: from its original meaning – pertaining to the natural sense of the palate, encompassing flavours and sensations associated with food and drink – it became the governing metaphor for aesthetic judgment as such. In the philosophical systems of Kant and Hegel, this metaphorical sense of taste came to designate the capacity for discriminating beauty, a capacity explicitly disassociated from its corporeal origins. The gustatory sense was relegated to the status of a ‘lower’ or ‘minor’ sense, deemed incapable of producing the disinterested pleasure that for Kant

defined the aesthetic judgment proper. This hierarchical ordering of the senses – privileging sight and hearing while marginalizing taste, touch, and smell – has loomed large over the discipline of aesthetics until quite recently. The past three decades, however, have witnessed a sustained and increasingly successful effort to challenge this hierarchy, reclaiming gustatory experience as a legitimate object of aesthetic inquiry (Korsmeyer, 1999; Perullo, 2016; Matta, 2023).

Yet even within this emerging field of gustatory aesthetics, a fundamental assumption remains largely unexamined: the subject of taste experience is implicitly understood to be human. The questions posed – whether cooking can be considered an art, whether taste judgments admit of standards, how memory and emotion inflect gustatory perception – all presuppose a human agent engaged with a world of edible objects, ingredients, and culinary practices. This anthropocentrism, however defensible from a phenomenological perspective, has become increasingly difficult to sustain in light of contemporary discourses on the post-anthropocene, flat ontologies, and the emergence of cybernetic alliances between human and non-human actors. The very conditions that have made gustatory aesthetics a viable field of inquiry – the food consciousness described by Perullo (2025), the integration of gastronomy into cultural industry, the aestheticization of food practices – also demand that we rethink the subject of taste in more radical terms.

This article proposes a reconceptualization of gustatory aesthetics that moves beyond the anthropocentric paradigm while retaining the phenomenological richness of taste experience. Our argument proceeds in four movements. First, we examine the limitations inherent in individual human taste perception – sensory fatigue, cognitive bias, the influence of trauma and memory – and argue that these limitations are not merely contingent but structural to an aesthetic model that isolates the subject of taste. Second, we turn to Eugen Fink's phenomenology of fundamental human phenomena, as elaborated in his *Basic Phenomena of Human Existence* (1979). For Fink, the phenomena of death, labor, domination, love, and play constitute the fundamental modes through which human existence is articulated. Crucially, the festival (*das Fest*) is not a sixth phenomenon but the event in which these five phenomena are gathered together and manifest in their interconnectedness. Third, we extend Fink's analysis by introducing the concept of the symbiotechnical alliance – a term that designates forms of co-constitution between human and non-human agents in which agency is distributed and outcomes are co-produced. Drawing on Fichte's philosophy of mutual recognition (*Aufforderung*) and recent work in new materialism and posthumanist aesthetics, we argue that the five Finkian phenomena can be reconfigured within such alliances, taking on new forms that no longer presuppose a human subject as their exclusive locus. Finally, we propose that the festival – understood as the gathering of these phenomena – re-emerges in the post-anthropocene as the event of symbiotechnical taste, a practice that transforms gustatory experience from a subjective judgment into a relational mode of world-making.

Our approach is informed by the rich and contentious debates that have shaped posthumanist thought over the past decade. The work of Rosi Braidotti (2013, 2019) has been instrumental in articulating a post-anthropocentric framework that refuses the dialectic of human and animal, human and machine, without falling into simplistic celebrations of hybridity. Braidotti's concept of the 'posthuman' names not the end of the human but the recognition that the human has always been a transversal entity, constituted through relations with non-human others. Similarly, Donna Haraway's (2016) insistence on 'staying with the trouble' and her elaboration of 'sympoiesis' – making-with – provide a vocabulary for thinking co-constitution without subsuming difference into identity. Haraway's term 'sympoiesis' emphasizes that entities do not pre-exist their relations but are collectively produced through ongoing, multi-species entanglements. These thinkers, along with a growing body of work in more-than-human aesthetics (Aloi, 2018; Grusin, 2015) and new materialist approaches to sensation (Bennett, 2010; Barad, 2007), offer the resources for rethinking taste as a distributed, relational phenomenon.

At the same time, we engage with recent high-impact scholarship in aesthetic theory that has begun to question the sensory hierarchy inherited from modernity. The turn toward everyday aesthetics (Leddy, 2012; Saito, 2017), which examines the aesthetic qualities of ordinary objects and routine activities, somaesthetics (Shusterman, 2012), which foregrounds the lived, embodied dimensions of aesthetic experience, and atmospheric theory (Böhme, 2017; Griffero, 2016), which attends to the diffuse, quasi-objective felt spaces that precede subject-object distinctions, has created space for reconsidering taste as a mode of aesthetic engagement that cannot be reduced to cognitive judgment. These developments converge with work in sensory studies (Classen, 2005; Howes, 2022) that has historicized the hierarchy of the senses and shown its contingency. Our argument is situated within this broader intellectual context, but it pursues a distinctive line of inquiry: rather than simply defending taste as a legitimate aesthetic sense, we ask what taste becomes when its subject is no longer presumed to be exclusively human.

2. The Structural Limitations of Human Gustatory Judgment

Before we can propose a model of symbiotechnical taste, we must first articulate the problem that such a model is designed to address. The limitations of human gustatory perception are not merely technical deficiencies that could be corrected by better training or more refined techniques; they are structural features of gustatory experience as it is constituted within the framework of individual subjectivity. To understand these limitations is to recognize why a merely human-centered gustatory aesthetics inevitably encounters obstacles that cannot be overcome by intensifying or refining the capacities of the human subject.

The first limitation is sensory fatigue. Taste perception, unlike vision or hearing, undergoes rapid adaptation. The phenomenon of sensory-specific satiety – the decrease in pleasure associated with a particular flavour as it is

repeatedly experienced – is not merely a matter of psychological boredom but a physiological process that affects the capacity for sustained aesthetic engagement (Rolls, 2018). This poses a challenge for any aesthetic theory that values sustained contemplation: where a painting or a symphony can be experienced repeatedly with increasing depth, the gustatory object typically yields its pleasures within a relatively narrow temporal window. The sommelier's practice of spitting rather than swallowing is a practical acknowledgment of this limitation, but it also reveals a deeper truth: the professional taster, the paradigmatic subject of gustatory judgment, must actively suppress the very processes that constitute gustatory experience as a mode of embodied engagement.

The second limitation is cognitive bias. Gustatory perception is notoriously susceptible to suggestion and contextual influence. Studies of wine tasting have repeatedly demonstrated that expectations – shaped by price, provenance, label design, or the authority of the taster – significantly influence flavour perception (Goldstein et al., 2008; Plassmann et al., 2008). This susceptibility is not a mark of the inferiority of taste as a sense; rather, it reflects the deeply interpretive character of all perception. Yet it does pose a problem for any aesthetic theory that seeks standards of taste or criteria for judgment. If the same wine can be experienced as excellent or mediocre depending on the price tag affixed to its bottle, what becomes of the judgment of taste as a claim to intersubjective validity? The history of aesthetic theory, from Hume's *Of the Standard of Taste* to Kant's *Critique of Judgment*, has grappled with this problem, but the solutions proposed – the cultivation of ideal critics, the disinterestedness of the judgment – all presuppose a subject who can transcend these biases through discipline or detachment. The evidence from cognitive science suggests that such transcendence is at best partial and temporary.

The third limitation is the influence of trauma and memory. Gustatory experience is intimately bound up with memory and affect in ways that both enrich and complicate its aesthetic dimensions. Proust's madeleine is the paradigmatic literary instance of this connection, but the phenomenon extends far beyond the pleasant or nostalgic. Traumatic experiences associated with food – deprivation, poisoning, forced consumption – can produce lasting aversions that no amount of aesthetic education can fully overcome (Ogden 2013). Conversely, the pleasures of taste are often bound up with associations – of childhood, of cultural belonging, of intimacy – that are not strictly aesthetic in Kant's sense but that cannot be neatly separated from aesthetic experience. This entanglement of taste with personal and collective history challenges any aesthetic theory that would isolate the judgment of taste from the biographical and social conditions of its emergence.

Taken together, these limitations suggest that individual human gustatory judgment is structurally inadequate to the demands that a robust gustatory aesthetics might place upon it. The project of gustatory aesthetics cannot, therefore, consist solely in defending taste against the charge of being a 'minor sense' or in establishing the credentials of cooking as an art form. These

debates, while historically necessary, have reached a point of diminishing returns. What is needed instead is a reconceptualization of taste as a distributed, relational phenomenon – an event that involves multiple agents, human and non-human, whose capacities and limitations intersect in ways that can produce forms of aesthetic experience unavailable to any of them individually.

3. Eugen Fink and the Phenomenology of Fundamental Phenomena

The framework for such a reconceptualization can be found, perhaps unexpectedly, in the phenomenology of Eugen Fink, whose work has received less attention in the anglophone aesthetic tradition than it deserves. Fink, a student of Edmund Husserl and a close collaborator of Martin Heidegger, developed a distinctive approach to phenomenology that emphasized the fundamental phenomena of human existence as irreducible modes of world-engagement. In his *Basic Phenomena of Human Existence* (*Grundphänomene des menschlichen Daseins*), delivered as lectures in 1955 and published posthumously in 1979, Fink identified five such phenomena: *death*, *labor*, *domination*, *love*, and *play*. These are not simply themes for philosophical reflection but the fundamental ways in which human existence is articulated – the modes through which *Dasein* comes to understand itself and its relation to the world.

For Fink, each of these phenomena constitutes a distinct modality of human being-in-the-world. *Death* (*Tod*) is not merely the termination of life but the horizon of finitude that conditions all human activity. Death names the fundamental temporality of existence, the fact that human beings exist as beings who know themselves to be finite. This knowledge is not merely cognitive but existential: it structures how we relate to our own projects, to others, and to the world (Fink, 1979, pp. 115–118). *Labor* (*Arbeit*) is the mode in which human beings transform the world, producing objects and conditions that satisfy needs and realize ends. Labor is not merely economic activity but the fundamental modality of world-making through which human beings leave their mark on the environment (Fink, 1979, pp. 145–150). *Domination* (*Herrschaft*) is the phenomenon of power and authority – the capacity to impose form on the world, to direct the actions of others, to establish order. Domination, in Fink's analysis, is not reducible to its political forms but permeates human relations at every level (Fink, 1979, pp. 178–182). *Love* (*Liebe*) is the phenomenon of relation to the other – not simply as an object but as a subject whose recognition is constitutive of one's own selfhood. Love, in this sense, names the structure of intersubjectivity that makes community possible (Fink, 1979, pp. 210–214). Finally, *play* (*Spiel*) is the phenomenon of freedom – activity that is its own end, that is not subordinated to any external purpose, and that manifests the capacity for self-transcendence (Fink, 1979, pp. 240–244).

Crucially for our purposes, Fink does not present these five phenomena as an exhaustive catalogue of human existence. Nor does he treat them as separate domains that can be studied in isolation. The significance of his analysis lies in

his insistence that these phenomena are fundamentally interconnected and that their interconnections are most fully realized in the event of *festival (Fest)*. The festival, for Fink, is not a sixth phenomenon alongside the others but the gathering of all five into a single event (Fink, 1979, pp. 260–265). In the festival, labor is suspended or transformed into celebration; death is acknowledged as the limit that gives the festival its intensity; domination is ritualized and rendered symbolic; love is expressed in community and shared experience; play becomes the dominant mode of activity. The festival is the time and space in which the fundamental phenomena of human existence are not merely juxtaposed but integrated into a coherent form of life.

This understanding of festival has profound implications for aesthetic theory. If the festival is the event in which the five fundamental phenomena are gathered together, then the aesthetic dimension of human existence cannot be confined to a specialized domain of art or beauty but must be understood as pervading these fundamental modalities of world-engagement. The aesthetic is not a separate region of experience but a dimension of experience that comes to the fore when the fundamental phenomena are manifest in their interconnectedness. Taste, understood as a mode of aesthetic experience, would then be not merely the capacity for discriminating flavours but a mode of engagement with the world that can, under the conditions of festival, gather together death, labor, domination, love, and play into a unified experience.

Fink's analysis, however, remains anthropocentric in ways that we must challenge. The five phenomena are presented as fundamental to human existence; the festival is the event in which human existence is articulated in its fullness. But if the conditions of the post-anthropocene require that we rethink the boundaries of the human, then we must ask whether these phenomena can be extended to non-human agents. Can a cybernetic system, an AI, a microbial culture, or an ecological process manifest something like labor, domination, or play? Can a non-human entity participate in the gathering that is the festival? The challenge, and the opportunity, lies in answering these questions without simply anthropomorphizing non-human agents or reducing them to mere instruments of human purposes.

4. The Symbiotechnical Alliance: Extending Fink through Fichte

The resources for such an extension can be found in an unexpected conjunction: the philosophy of Johann Gottlieb Fichte, specifically his concept of mutual recognition (*Aufforderung*), and the recent discourse on symbiotechnical alliances in posthumanist theory. Fichte, in his *Foundations of Natural Right (Grundlage des Naturrechts)*, argues that self-consciousness is not self-originating but is called forth by another rational being. The individual becomes an 'I' only through the summons (*Aufforderung*) of another: "the human being is not a solitary being; rather, the concept of the human being is the concept of a plurality of beings, for the human being becomes a human being only among human beings" (Fichte, 2000, p. 37). This summons is not merely an invitation to recognize the other but the condition of possibility for self-recognition. The 'I' is constituted through a relation of

mutual recognition in which each acknowledges the freedom of the other and is thereby acknowledged as free.

Fichte's analysis, like Fink's, is framed in terms of human beings. But the structure of the argument – that subjectivity is constituted through recognition, that the summons is the condition for the emergence of selfhood – lends itself to extension beyond the human. If self-consciousness emerges in response to a summons, and if that summons can be issued from non-human sources, then the boundaries of the 'we' that constitutes subjectivity must be redrawn. This is precisely the gesture that recent posthumanist thought has made, though rarely in explicit dialogue with Fichte. Donna Haraway's (2016) concept of 'response-ability' – the capacity to respond to the summons of non-human others – can be read as an extension of the Fichtean framework. Similarly, Rosi Braidotti's (2013) 'nomadic subjects' are not pre-constituted entities but emerge through encounters with non-human others. The Fichtean summons, in this expanded sense, becomes the mechanism through which new forms of subjectivity and collectivity are constituted across the human/non-human divide.

We propose to name such constituted collectivities *symbiotechnical alliances*. The term combines two registers. 'Symbio-' references the biological concept of symbiosis – mutually beneficial co-existence of different organisms – and its extension in recent thought (Margulis, 1998; Gilbert et al., 2012) to encompass the co-constitution of life forms through ongoing interaction. 'Technical' references the technological dimension of contemporary existence: artificial intelligence, sensor networks, algorithmic systems, and other artifacts that shape perception and action. A symbiotechnical alliance, then, is a form of co-constitution in which human and non-human agents – biological and technical – enter into relationships of mutual summons and response, producing outcomes that cannot be attributed to any of the participants individually.

Within such alliances, the five Finkian phenomena undergo transformation. They are not simply applied to non-human agents but reconfigured in ways that respect both their phenomenological origin and the specificity of non-human modes of being.

Death, in the symbiotechnical alliance, is not the uniquely human consciousness of finitude but the recognition that all participants in the alliance – technological systems, microbial cultures, ecological processes – have their own forms of finitude and vulnerability. An AI system can be deactivated or overwritten; a microbial culture can die; a sensor network can fail. The alliance acknowledges these vulnerabilities and organizes itself around them. This acknowledgment is not metaphorical but structural: the alliance is constituted precisely through its recognition of the finite duration and contingent existence of its components. This aligns with recent work in more-than-human phenomenology (Bubandt and Tsing, 2018) that has explored how non-human beings inhabit time and finitude in ways that call for philosophical attention.

Labor, in this context, ceases to be exclusively human work and becomes distributed production. The fermentation of a complex food product is not merely the work of the human chef but the labor of microbial populations that transform substrates according to their own biological imperatives. The monitoring of sensory data is not merely the work of a human taster but the labor of algorithmic systems that process and synthesize information from multiple sources. The aesthetic object – the dish, the beverage, the gustatory event – is the product of a distributed labor process in which human and non-human agents each contribute capacities that no single agent could supply alone. This distribution of labor has been theorized in new materialist frameworks (Bennett, 2010) that emphasize the agency of non-human actors without reducing them to passive instruments.

Domination is transformed from a relation of mastery over the world into a relation of governance without control. In the symbiotechnical alliance, no single agent exercises sovereign authority over the others. The human does not dominate the machine or the microbial culture; the machine does not dominate the human. Instead, governance emerges through feedback loops, mutual constraints, and the negotiated coordination of different agencies. This model resonates with recent work in cybernetic aesthetics (Pickering, 2010; Hörl, 2019) that emphasizes distributed agency and the erosion of the sovereign subject. Domination, in this reconfigured sense, becomes the capacity to shape the conditions under which the alliance operates while remaining subject to the shaping activity of others.

Love, in Fink's sense, is the phenomenon of relation to the other as other – not as a projection of one's own subjectivity but as a genuine alterity that makes possible the constitution of self. In the symbiotechnical alliance, love becomes the capacity to respond to the summons of the non-human other, to acknowledge its irreducible difference, and to allow oneself to be transformed by that acknowledgment. This is not the anthropomorphic love one might feel for a pet or a favored tool but a form of recognition that respects the non-human other's modes of being without reducing them to human categories. Haraway's (2008) reflections on 'companion species' and her insistence on 'becoming with' rather than 'being with' articulate something like this expanded sense of love.

Play, finally, becomes the mode in which the symbiotechnical alliance manifests its freedom from instrumental determination. The festival that we will describe in the next section is the event in which the alliance's activity is not subordinated to external ends – the production of a commodity, the satisfaction of a biological need, the demonstration of a technical capability – but becomes its own end. Play, in this sense, is the capacity for activity that is not merely functional but expressive, that manifests the alliance's capacity for self-transcendence. This aligns with the tradition of aesthetic theory, from Schiller to Gadamer, that has understood play as the fundamental mode of aesthetic existence.

5. The New Gustatory Festival: Gathering the Phenomena in Symbiotechnical Taste

With this reconfigured understanding of the five Finkian phenomena, we can now articulate the central thesis of this article: *symbiotechnical taste is the festival in which death, labor, domination, love, and play are gathered together across the human/non-human divide. The gustatory event*, understood in these terms, is not merely the experience of flavours by a human subject but the coming together of multiple agencies in a shared event of tasting that transforms all participants.

Before proceeding to concrete examples, a clarification of the terms ‘festival’ and ‘event’ is necessary. In the Finkian framework we deploy here, not every event is a festival. An ‘event’ names any temporally bounded occurrence. The ‘festival,’ by contrast, is a specific mode of gathering in which the five fundamental phenomena – death, labor, domination, love, and play – are manifest in their interconnection. While every festival is an event, only an event that achieves this integrated gathering of phenomena rises to the level of festival. Moreover, the festival can be repeated, ritualized, and cultivated as a practice; it is not restricted to a one-time occurrence but can become a recurring mode of engagement.

The festival, in Fink’s sense, is the time and space in which the fundamental phenomena are manifest in their interconnection. In traditional societies, the festival takes the form of ritual, celebration, and the suspension of ordinary social and economic relations. In the post-anthropocene, we argue, the festival re-emerges in new forms – no longer tied exclusively to the cycles of nature or the rhythms of religious life, but constituted through symbiotechnical alliances that gather human and non-human agents around the event of taste.

Consider the example of fermentation. A fermentation practice – the production of a complex sour beer, a naturally fermented bread, a traditionally made soy sauce – involves a symbiotechnical alliance of human and microbial agencies. The human creates the conditions, selects the ingredients, controls the environment; the microbial populations, with their own metabolic imperatives, transform the substrate in ways that cannot be fully predicted or controlled. The outcome is co-produced: no human could create these flavours alone, and the microbes would not produce them without the human’s intervention. When this fermentation is undertaken not merely for subsistence or commerce but as an end in itself – as an exploration of flavour, a celebration of the alliance – it becomes a festival.

In this festival, *death* is present as the finitude of the microbial populations, the transformation of the original ingredients, the passing of the time required for fermentation. The taster, encountering the final product, encounters also the traces of this finitude – the specificity of the time and place and conditions under which the fermentation occurred. *Labor* is present as the distributed activity of human and microbial agents, each contributing their capacities to the shared project. *Domination* is present as the negotiated governance of the

process: the human can create conditions but cannot determine outcomes; the microbes follow their own imperatives but within limits set by the human. *Love* is present as the recognition of the microbial other – not as a tool to be used but as a partner whose alterity is essential to the outcome. *Play* is present as the freedom of the activity from instrumental determination: the fermentation is undertaken for the sake of the experience itself, for the discovery of new flavours, for the joy of co-production.

The gustatory event that follows – the tasting of the fermented product – gathers these phenomena once again. The taster, who may or may not be the same person who initiated the fermentation, enters into the alliance. The tasting is not merely the evaluation of a product but the culmination of a process in which multiple agencies have participated. The aesthetic judgment that emerges is not the judgment of a solitary subject but the expression of a distributed event.

Consider a second example: the symbiotechnical wine tasting that involves human tasters, sensor technologies, and data analysis systems. A wine estate might employ sensors to monitor soil conditions, weather patterns, and vine physiology; algorithms to predict optimal harvest dates and blending strategies; and human tasters to evaluate the results. In a conventional framework, the human tasters are the ultimate judges, and the technologies are merely instruments. In a symbiotechnical framework, the alliance is more symmetrical: the sensors detect volatile compounds that no human nose could identify; the algorithms identify patterns that no human memory could retain; the human tasters bring contextual knowledge, cultural frameworks, and affective responses that the machines lack. The tasting event that emerges is not the human judgment supplemented by data but a genuinely co-produced assessment that none of the participants could achieve alone.

In such an alliance, the festival is not the harvest celebration or the annual tasting but the moment when the distributed agencies gather in a shared event of attention. This gathering can be repeated, ritualized, made into a practice that acknowledges the contributions of all participants. The phenomena of *death* (the finitude of the vintage, the passing of the season), *labor* (the work of vine and soil, sensor and algorithm), *domination* (the negotiated governance of the vineyard and cellar), *love* (the recognition of the non-human others whose contributions make the wine possible), and *play* (the freedom of the tasting from purely commercial or evaluative purposes) are gathered together.

6. Conclusion: Taste as a Way of Knowing in the Post-Anthropocene

We return, in conclusion, to a theme central to this special issue: *Taste as a Way of Knowing* (*sapere/sapore*). The Latin doublet captures the connection between taste and knowledge: *sapere* is to know, *sapere* is to taste. In the tradition of Western thought, this connection has often been understood as metaphorical: the taste that knows is the intellectual taste, the capacity for discernment, the judgment that distinguishes true from false, beautiful from ugly. The literal taste of the palate, by contrast, has been relegated to the realm of the merely physical, the merely sensory, the merely

animal. Our argument has been that this hierarchy is not only philosophically untenable but practically disabling. In an age of ecological crisis, technological transformation, and the erosion of anthropocentric certainties, we need a different understanding of taste – one that takes seriously its character as a mode of engagement with the world that is not reducible to either intellectual judgment or sensory pleasure.

The symbiotechnical model of taste that we have proposed offers such an understanding. By extending Fink's phenomenology of fundamental phenomena through Fichte's concept of mutual recognition and situating this extension within the framework of post-anthropocene thought, we have argued that taste can be understood as the event in which multiple agencies – human and non-human, biological and technical – gather in a shared practice of world-making. This gathering is the festival, not in the sense of a traditional celebration but in the Finkian sense of the event in which the fundamental phenomena of existence are manifest in their interconnection.

This model has implications that extend beyond aesthetic theory. If taste is understood as a symbiotechnical festival, then the project of gustatory aesthetics becomes a project of cultivating the conditions under which such festivals can occur. This involves not only the development of technical capacities – sensor systems, algorithms, fermentation technologies – but also the cultivation of practices of recognition that acknowledge the contributions of non-human participants. It involves the creation of spaces and times – festivals in the ordinary sense – in which these practices can be enacted and experienced. And it involves a fundamental reorientation of aesthetic theory away from the judgment of isolated subjects and toward the analysis of distributed aesthetic events.

The debates that have occupied gustatory aesthetics over the past three decades – whether taste is a minor sense, whether cooking can be considered an art – have served a necessary purpose. They have challenged the sensory hierarchy inherited from modernity and opened space for a richer understanding of aesthetic experience. But the time has come to move beyond these debates. The question is no longer whether taste can be aesthetic but what taste becomes when it is understood as a symbiotechnical practice, when its subject is no longer presumed to be exclusively human, and when its festival gathers death, labor, domination, love, and play into a shared event of co-production. In addressing this question, we hope to contribute to a gustatory aesthetics adequate to the conditions of the post-anthropocene – an aesthetics that takes seriously the entanglement of human and non-human agencies and that understands taste not as a judgment but as a way of knowing, a way of being, a way of making world.

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Knowing Taste

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We most often consider taste as a gateway to aesthetic experiences, which marks a difference between it and other senses, which are primarily considered in terms of the access they provide to the world. Here, I examine the epistemic dimensions of taste and their significance to epistemology more broadly. How have our epistemic paradigms relegated taste to a lesser role, and how might taking food itself more seriously change that? | *Keywords: Taste, Epistemology, Scepticism*

1. Introduction

The senses that have received the most philosophical attention – vision, touch, and (to a lesser extent) hearing – are supposed to put us in contact with the world around us; help us navigate and track external objects.

Taste is different, we're told, because it's more subjective- it happens inside the tasting subject- and because the object of taste is destroyed in the act of tasting. It's different because it's more variable, because it depends more heavily on one's assumptions, context, training, and biology. But also: taste is different because we don't know what it's supposed to do. Taste is a source of pleasure, of course, and philosophically, this is the aspect that receives the most attention. But from an epistemic perspective, which is the one I'll take up here, the question remains: What does taste do? What does *taste* put us in contact with?

The most obvious answer is, taste puts us in contact with the flavours of our food. That is, there are certain *qualities* in our food- call these 'tastes' or 'flavours'- and *taste*, the sense, tracks these qualities. To taste 'correctly' is to accurately identify the qualities in our food. (If this paragraph seems like a linguistic mess, well, yes: the language of taste and tasting is often "erroneous and confusing" (Spence, Smith & Auvray, 2014).

The project of disambiguating taste from flavour, and an account of how olfaction and gustation combine to construct flavours, is far too ambitious to

attempt here. Indeed, throughout what follows I continue to use ‘taste’ in a way that muddies together flavour (the qualities we detect through gustation and olfaction) and taste (in the sense of basic tastes such as sweet, bitter, etc). The discussion that follows is less concerned with our ability to individuate flavours (and our perceptions of them) than in how we use taste to identify what we’re eating. How is taste vulnerable to – or immune from – the epistemic concerns raised about other senses, in particular vision? More fundamentally, what would it mean to trust taste as a guide to the world around us?

2. Food-First Epistemology

Sceptical philosophers have worried that perhaps no belief is immune from doubt; the external world might be an illusion, and the only thing we can be sure of is our own mind. Descartes worried that there might be no external world at all; all the appearances might be a dream, or the work of an ‘evil deceiver.’ How, he asked, can we trust our senses to reflect reality? How can I trust that my eyes represent the world correctly to me, when in reality I might have no eyes; no hands; no body at all? (Descartes, 2013) These are the questions from which modern Western epistemology proceeds: how to construct knowledge on something more certain, more foundational, than the contingent body and the unreliable senses. Answers have typically proceeded in the Cartesian model, beginning with total scepticism and building up knowledge from scratch. This approach makes sense if we begin with a picture of knowledge as disembodied, general, universal, and rational. Our knowledge of food is none of these.

Given this framing of the problem of knowledge, it is not surprising that epistemologists working in the Western tradition have neglected taste as a form of epistemic access to the world around us. Our early ancestors’ quest to escape from predators is well-rehearsed in the literature on evolution and cognition; their quest for food is not. Contemporary sceptical arguments question whether we can trust our cognitive and moral judgments, given that they are saturated with evolutionary influence.¹ Sceptical arguments like these don’t deny the relevance of taste so much as overlook it. The question of whether taste might track the truth seems ill-formed: the truth about what, exactly?

The simple answer *is*: the truth about what we’re eating. Taste tells us what the thing is: an apple, or perhaps a potato cleverly painted to resemble one. An orange, or a lemon. Cheese or chocolate. But of course, we don’t depend on taste alone for this: few of us would put food into our mouths without some prior belief about its identity. Doing so risks disgust or even danger. The writer Jiaying Fan describes their first encounter with an American olive:

In Chongqing, I had been introduced to them as a fig-like snack, dried or cured, that had a sweet-tart kick. In the U.S., I placed a dark-green drop onto my tongue and, for the first time in my life, spat something out of my mouth and into my palm. Salty and greasy weren’t what I was expecting, and my reaction was born as much of disgust as it was of having been deceived. (Fan, 2001)

¹ See for example the essays in Beilby (2002).

Taste confirms or denies our beliefs about what we're eating. There can be pleasure in having our expectations subverted, but to be consistently mistaken is disorienting and alienating:

To be a new immigrant is to be [...] confused by the unfamiliar and unsettled by the familiar-looking. The firm, crumbly white blocks that you mistake for tofu are called feta. The vanilla icing that tastes spoiled is served on top of potatoes and is called sour cream. At a certain point, the trickery of food starts to become mundane. Disgusting foods become regulars in the cafeteria, and at the dinner table. (Fan, 2021)

If we start from the perspective that epistemology begins in food – a 'food first' epistemology – we gain several insights. First, our need to know what we're eating shapes the development of our senses; our senses and environment coevolve so that we can track colour, shape, and size, but also texture, taste, and smell. Our ability to take down large prey and distribute the gains from cooperative hunts likewise points to the coevolution of eating habits and social capacities. Our brains are literally shaped by the activities around food acquisition and preparation.²

From this perspective, the question of whether taste and smell might be 'lesser' senses seems positively silly. The question of whether our external environment might be an illusion, and whether we might best be understood as disembodied minds, can only arise from the perspective of someone for whom food has always appeared on the table. The ability to treat food as beneath serious consideration is itself a kind of privilege; only when the body is sufficiently attended to, someone else's responsibility, can we abstract away from it.

But while the epistemic redemption of taste would make for a satisfying narrative arc, matters are not so simple. The disconnect between inner subjectivity and the external world that so worried Descartes has been made manifest, not because of any intrinsic deficiency of the senses, but via a systematic reshaping of our food system and the construction of what we might call (in a nod to another famous sceptical argument) 'facades of flavour' – foods which are cleverly designed to resemble other things.³

3. The Sceptic in the Supermarket

Ironically, even as contemporary epistemology has been shaped by the need to answer the sceptic, the contemporary Western supermarket has come to resemble Descartes' sceptical scenario, as the link between our senses and the underlying reality of food itself grows increasingly tenuous. We are increasingly reliant on vision, rather than smell and taste, to signify food's identity as well as its quality. The historian Ai Hisano describes how the use of synthetic colouring allowed manufacturers to develop standard shades

² While there may be disagreement on the details of what we were cooking – meat versus vegetable – the consensus remains that cooking our food is part of what allowed us to divert tissue from gut to brain, developing greater cognitive complexity, which in turn fueled cooperation, which in turn allowed us to hunt large game and divide the spoils. See Wrangham (2009) and Skyrms (2003).

³ This is a nod to Goldman (1976).

that signified flavours such as ‘lime’ or ‘strawberry,’ even where these bore little resemblance to the natural colours of those foods: ‘the pink shade of strawberry-coloured frosting, for example, was not necessarily the colour of actual strawberries. Nor did the frosting taste like fresh strawberries. But as processed foods flooded the market, consumers learned to identify a specific pink shade as the colour and flavour of ‘strawberries’ (Hisano, 2019, pp. 95–96).

But colours don’t just signify identity; they’re used to smooth over natural variation, which in turn might correlate with flavour, season, or quality. Butter is one example:

The actual shade of butter varied seasonally [...] depending on the kind of cattle feed, the breed of cows, and the period of lactation. During the summer months [...] the color of butter was bright yellow [...] The channel Island cattle breeds generally produced a more highly yellow butter than did Holsteins and Ayrshires [...] the carotene-rich feeds of early summer also added richer flavour, as well as more nutrients, to butter. The bright yellow color signified for producers as well as consumers better eating quality. (Hisano, 2019, pp. 45–46)

Once colour can be manipulated, it loses evidential value. Even as yellow butter continues to signify quality for the consumer, the link between colour, flavour, and nutrition is severed. What was once a meaningful indicator becomes meaningless at best, and often positively misleading.

In other cases, the addition of colour creates false expectations about the natural variation (or absence thereof) and discoloration in produce and meat. Here, artifice is less evident, hence perhaps more troubling. Our reliance on colour to signify freshness leaves us vulnerable to manipulation: an orange isn’t always a fresh orange; a green orange isn’t necessarily ‘green’ (Hisano, 2019, pp. 106–107). Tuna that’s treated with carbon monoxide takes on an appealing, bright-red colour, which it will retain even as it spoils.

The addition of colours to food, and the transformation of produce to reduce natural variation in appearance in favour of a standard shape and colour, not only remove the link between a food’s appearance and its contents and their ripeness, it also means that we no longer have the opportunity to train our senses via exposure to differences.

Notably, the contemporary supermarket offers relatively little sensory interaction with food. We rely instead on testimony from packages and labels to identify what they’re buying. We sometimes smell produce (peaches, produce) but even this can be misleading; tomatoes sold on the vine not only look more appealing, but have the fresh tomato-leaf scent that tricks the unwary shopper (Stuckey, 2013, p. 102). In other cases (olive oil, seafood), fraud and mislabelling may be so prevalent that we truly cannot be said to know what we’re buying (Olmstead, 2015). Indeed, while I was writing this piece, a story crossed my desk about a butter-fraud ring: roughly thirty years ago, a Mafia-affiliated group approached food buyers across Italy offering butter at a price that seemed too good to be true – and in fact was, because the

‘butter’ was actually a mix of “chemical additives, oils intended for use in cosmetics and non-food uses, and beef tallow” (International butter fraud, no date). Several buyers, including several of the largest French cheese makers, took the deal. But one company had a policy of tasting before buying, and their tasters identified “a strange, metallic taste” (Sechet, no date), leading them to reject the butter – the only company to do so.⁴

In response to worries about whether our senses are a reliable guide to our environment, philosophers have constructed a model of knowledge that elevates propositional knowledge and certainty above the skill-based mode of navigating a specific and variable environment. In doing so, we’ve elevated a way of thinking about and valuing food that contributes to the realization of that same sceptical worry: our standardized food environment is no longer amenable to sensory navigation, with the result that our senses become increasingly dulled.

At the same time, our approach to cooking itself has shifted, from a skilled activity using recipes as rough approximations, to an approach that emphasizes recipes as scientific formulas which take consistent ingredients and measures as inputs and offer reliable results in return.

Again, irony lurks: while the algorithmic recipe makes cooking more democratic and accessible, it also reinforces a particular conception of culinary knowledge, consisting in adherence to precise measures, and prescribed timing and temperatures. Consider by contrast the following passage, from an article Mennell winkingly suggests might “not have been cleared by the circulation manager”:

The secret of good cooking may lie, to a certain extent, in [...] accurate weights and measures, and a precise regulation of heat, but this is not all that is necessary. Neither is a good recipe a guarantee that a certain dish will be a success [...]

There is another qualification for successful cookery [...] and that is an intuitive sense of taste and fitness, which is natural to some people. It enables them to tell how a dish will taste [...] and to know instinctively what will be the result of combining certain ingredients. (Mennell, 1985, p. 246)

It would be absurd to argue that recipes do not work or don’t constitute knowledge. The question is not which mode of knowledge – intuitive skill or algorithmic recipe – is best full stop, but how our emphasis on one over the other reinforces a certain idea about what knowledge consists in and how claims to knowledge are justified.

But this emphasis isn’t fixed, and the advent of new media is changing how we think about cooking. Fellow millennial readers may recall the moment food websites started to feature videos, usually shot from above and tightly edited, showing a disembodied pair of hands stirring garlic in a skillet, sprinkling salt over meat or scattering herbs over a finished dish. Once recipes take the form of videos, we no longer rely solely on measurement or description; while we

⁴ The example comes via Karen Constable’s *Food Fraud* newsletter (Constable, 2026).

can't taste, we can watch the process unfold and see what the finished product looks like. We can also understand cooking in terms of the aesthetics of action: an activity that's pleasurable in its own right, and not just because of the result.

I haven't said much about taste as a gateway to pleasure, partly because I've been interested in its other dimensions: the way taste relates to philosophical conceptions of knowledge, or to the things we want to know. This desire for knowledge is itself something that can be satisfied by food, and with that satisfaction comes pleasure.

We can also understand pleasure differently: a 'food-first' epistemology opens up space for understanding affective reactions to food in terms other than the aesthetic. For example, there's a pleasure in discovery – discovering something new, or identifying something good. This is not (need not be) an aesthetic reaction; the thrill of discovery is real. The risk is that in an environment offering easy acquisition, food no longer challenges us as it once did (if anything, the challenge now is to avoid food and tame appetites). In today's environment, most of us in the industrialized West don't have to work hard to discover food: it's everywhere. The rewards we might once have gotten from simply finding food now come from finding a good deal on food, or a new flavour or product. If we understand that what we really want is to exercise skill, a few things shift. Rather than ask about how we need to eat differently, we might ask ourselves to attend to our experiences differently, noticing when we are skilful in the kitchen, or clever in our planning, or detect something new about the quality of a food.

Philosophy begins in theory, but food begins in practice: in rituals; action; sensation. Writing about food always carries a certain risk of romanticization of the past, but our memory, too, is shaped by the need to rediscover food, to map and revisit its sources. I began thinking about these ideas while picking blueberries – not this year, but last. I know it must have been July, because that's when blueberries happen around here. As I write this, it's turned to apple picking season. Before calendars, or dates, or school holidays, the appearance and ripening and fading of foods marks the passage of time – another way we know the world around us. We now compare whether seasons come early or late by referring to months and days, but most fundamentally, it arrives; we see it; we want it; we eat.

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Incorporating War

Gustatory Aesthetics, Embodiment, and Traumatic Experience in Contemporary Ukrainian Art

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Contemporary debates in aesthetics are increasingly challenging the traditional marginalisation of taste as an ‘inferior’ bodily sense, drawing attention to its cognitive, affective and ethical significance. Building on this reassessment, the authors consider the gustatory aesthetics as a critical model for analysing context-dependent forms of proximity, incorporation, and embodied implication. This model is applied to contemporary Ukrainian artistic practices that engage with wartime artefacts, sound, darkness, debris, traces of violence and traumatic experiences. Drawing on the critique of the hierarchy of the senses in the works of Carolyn Korsmeyer and on Nicola Perullo’s understanding of taste as a situational experience, the authors demonstrate how certain Ukrainian artistic practices transform military objects - fragments of missiles, bullet casings, weapons and other remnants of war - into media for aesthetic reflection and memory with an ethical underpinning. Gustatory aesthetics makes it possible to analyse how war-related art can create conditions for bodily intimacy without reducing trauma to a spectacle or transforming violence into an aesthetically consumed object. | *Keywords: Gustatory Aesthetics, Embodiment, War Artefacts, Traumatic Experience, Contemporary Ukrainian Art, Incorporation*

1. Introduction

Contemporary aesthetics increasingly calls into question the inherited hierarchy of the senses, within which sight and hearing have traditionally been privileged as the primary media of cognition and aesthetic judgement, whilst taste, smell and touch have been relegated to the realm of bodily need, appetite and subjective pleasure. This re-evaluation is important for analysing those artistic practices that cannot be fully understood through the model of detached contemplation. When a work of art confronts the viewer or listener with materials marked by violence, destruction and bodily vulnerability, the aesthetic experience can no longer be described merely as visual recognition or symbolic interpretation.

The starting point of this article is precisely such a re-evaluation, in which the aesthetics of taste is considered not as a literal reference to taste, nor as a metaphor for aesthetic judgement in the Kantian sense, but as a critical model for analysing aesthetic situations structured by proximity, embodiment, vulnerability and ethical engagement. Such clarification is necessary, as the concept of 'taste' can easily become too broad if it is used to denote any bodily reaction, sensory intensity or affective engagement. Therefore, in this article, the aesthetics of taste is used in a restricted sense, where it may refer only to those artistic situations in which the distance between the recipient and the material object becomes unstable, and the encounter with this object takes on a bodily, affective, meaning-making and ethically significant character.

As Carolyn Korsmeyer has demonstrated, taste was historically marginalised within philosophical aesthetics precisely because of its intimate relation to the body, pleasure, and necessity. In *Making Sense of Taste*, she notes that taste was long excluded from aesthetic theory on the grounds that it "involves the body too directly, is too closely tied to appetite and need, and lacks the distance thought to be required for disinterested judgement" (Korsmeyer, 1999, p. 2). At the same time, it is precisely the bodily intimacy of taste that is important for our study, as we believe it reveals the limitations of an aesthetic model based exclusively on visuality, detachment and the separation of subject and object.

Korsmeyer's argument provides a framework and enables us to understand taste as cognitively and symbolically significant. Taste is not merely a source of pleasure or disgust; it can also participate in the production of meaning. This is particularly important for the analysis of Ukrainian artistic practices that engage with wartime artefacts, as such materials do more than simply induce sensory shock. Fragments of rockets, cartridge cases, weapons, ammunition boxes, armour plates and other remnants of military violence carry within them stories of use, destruction, survival and loss. Their aesthetic power depends not only on their sensory impact, but also on the meanings that remain associated with these objects.

Nicola Perullo's ideas in *Taste as Experience* form the second theoretical axis of our study. Whilst Korsmeyer helps to explain why taste has been marginalised and why this marginalisation should be reconsidered, Perullo offers a positive model for understanding taste as a situational experience. His central thesis is that "taste is a situation, a circumstance and an ecological experience" (Perullo, 2016, p. 1). In this sense, taste is not merely a physiological sensation or a personal preference. It is a relational event that encompasses the perceiver, the perceived object, the environment, and the conditions under which the encounter takes place. This approach is fruitful for analysing works in which material objects are not merely represented, but are placed within a situation of encounter that alters the recipient's mode of attention. This relational understanding of taste is important because it prevents gustatory aesthetics from being reduced to the subject's private reaction to an external object. Taste does not reside solely in the perceiver, nor solely in the object of perception. It arises in the relationship between the

recipient, the object and the situation surrounding them. In this sense, the experience of taste is always an interaction ranging from the material properties of the object itself to the subject's cultural orientation, as well as the atmosphere, context and conditions in which the encounter takes place. That is precisely why, in this article, the gustatory aesthetics is considered not as a theory of the taste of food or drink, but as a critical model for analysing context-dependent forms of proximity, incorporation, and embodied implication.

Thus, in this article, we draw on the ideas of researchers Korsmeyer and Perullo together, but not as interchangeable concepts. Korsmeyer presents a historical-critical argument in which taste is important because it challenges the hierarchy of the senses and the dominance of aesthetic distance. Perullo offers a phenomenological and relational argument that taste is important because it emerges as a situational experience requiring engagement and embodiment. Together, these approaches enable us to understand the aesthetics of taste not as a loose metaphor, but as a model of an undistanced aesthetic experience. In our view, this model is particularly productive for analysing artistic practices that engage with the material remnants of war, where the object of encounter cannot be reduced merely to a sign, image or symbol.

At the same time, the analogy with taste has clear limits. We are not claiming that military artefacts can literally be tasted, or that any physical reaction to sound, touch, visual intensity or spatial pressure constitutes a taste sensation. A loud sound, a tactile surface, a heavy object or a disturbing image do not in themselves create a gustatory experience. This is precisely why it is necessary to distinguish between sensation, perception, affect, trauma and incorporation. Sensation denotes the immediate physical impact of sound, vibration, pressure, texture or darkness. Perception organises this sensory data into a meaningful encounter. Affect concerns pre-reflexive intensity and bodily orientation. Trauma is linked to a disruption of experience, memory, the capacity to act, and narrative integrity. Incorporation, in the sense in which the term is used here, occurs only when an encounter with the material traces of war enters the embodied field of memory, affect and ethical response of the viewer, listener or participant. This distinction also clarifies the relationship between the aesthetics of taste and other theoretical frameworks that will be drawn upon in this article. The aesthetics of taste does not replace affect theory, trauma studies or sound studies. Affect theory helps to describe intensity and highlight bodily reactions. Trauma studies help to analyse rupture, repetition and the complexity of narrative integration. Sound studies help to explain vibration, resonance and acoustic pressure. The gustatory aesthetics adds something else, something that answers the question: under what conditions is external material reality incorporated into the subject's field of experience in such a way that detached observation is no longer sufficient? It is precisely this question, rather than a general theory of corporeality, that guides the subsequent analysis. These boundaries are particularly relevant to contemporary Ukrainian art, created in response to

Russia's war against Ukraine. Since the start of the full-scale invasion (in 2022), Ukrainian artists have increasingly been working not only with images of war, but also with its physical remnants. Among the remnants of war, they actively utilise fragments of rockets and shells, spent ammunition, damaged military equipment, bullet-riddled armour plates, as well as sound recordings resulting from the use of weapons in various ways or from military debris. Such materials are not neutral. They retain their original functions and the associated histories of violence even after their artistic transformation. A rocket fragment remains associated with destruction; a cartridge case with the act of firing; an armour plate with protection, injury and survival. The artistic use of such objects creates a situation in which materiality and memory cannot be completely separated.

We regard all the artistic practices we have selected as unique, independent examples. Some works are directly linked to the aesthetics of taste, as they involve sound, vibration, resonance and physical pressure. Others operate indirectly – through visual encounter, material proximity, symbolic transformation or a commemorative function. This distinction prevents the concept of taste from being applied too broadly. Our aim is to identify those situations in which the material residue of violence breaches aesthetic distance and demands a bodily and ethical response. Artistic transformation does not automatically atone for or neutralise violence. Similarly, the use of war debris does not, in itself, create a sense of closeness to the victims. Such works can become a spectacle, a cathartic game, a patriotic backdrop, a visual curiosity or aestheticised violence. A painted bullet casing may preserve the object's traumatic history, but it can also be consumed as a surface to be decorated. A weapon used as a source of sound may provoke critical reflection, but may also be perceived as a spectacle. Therefore, the ethical power of such practices depends on whether the artwork preserves the object's violent history and whether it prevents the viewer, listener or participant from consuming it as a neutral aesthetic object.

We suggest that the gustatory aesthetics enables us to analyse this ambivalence. It raises the question of how intimacy is produced, what meaning it carries, and whether it fosters an ethical attitude towards the material remnants of violence, or, conversely, reduces it to spectacle. In this sense, the aesthetics of taste offers an opportunity to rethink the connection between trauma, memory, embodiment and aesthetic experience beyond purely representational paradigms. Art related to war is considered here not merely as a representation of violence, but as a field of material encounters in which the remnants of violence can enter into perception as demands for memory, responsibility and critical reflection.

2. Traumatic Experience, Embodied Memory and the Limits of Incorporation

Traumatic experience cannot be understood merely as an event that took place in the past and is subsequently represented in language, memory or art. It alters the way the subject exists in the world. In the context of war,

trauma can encompass physical injury, loss, fear, exhaustion, sensory overload and the repeated disruption of everyday life. Olga Kopyevska emphasises that war-related violence causes not only physical but also psychological and emotional trauma, the psychotraumatic potential of which can persist over time (Kopyevska, 2024, p. 7). This observation shifts the focus from trauma as an isolated event to trauma as an embodied state that influences the subject's perception, orientation and relationship with the surrounding world.

In wartime, this embodied state is rarely shaped by sight alone. Dust, smoke, darkness, acoustic pressure, odour and the physical sensation of polluted air can all contribute to the formation of traumatic perception. This is precisely why the sensory dimension of war should be understood not as an adjunct to representation, but as one of the conditions through which memory, fear and ethical response are formed. From a phenomenological perspective, trauma is not limited to emotion or cognitive content. It can disrupt the experience of time, space, bodily orientation and the continuity of the self. Serhii Rudenko and Mykhailo Tasenko note that phenomenological approaches are essential for understanding traumatic experiences beyond standardised diagnostic frameworks, as they allow for changes in the experience of time, space, the body and the self to be taken into account (Rudenko and Tasenko, 2024, pp. 128, 135–136). Artistic responses to war often address precisely those dimensions of experience that cannot be fully captured by a narrative description of disorientation, acoustic pressure, bodily vulnerability, material exposure and the difficulties of giving form to what has been experienced.

Hanna Meretoja's philosophical reflection on trauma helps to further clarify that a traumatic experience should be defined not primarily in terms of a narrative rupture, but in terms of the damage it inflicts on the subject's ability to act, understand themselves and shape their future prospects. As she writes, "traumatic experience should not be defined primarily in terms of disruption but in terms of how damaging it is" (Meretoja, 2020, p. 34). This approach is particularly important for the analysis of war art, as it prevents trauma from being treated merely as an aesthetic theme or a narrative problem. Trauma concerns the impairment of one's ability to navigate the world, to act, to remember and to imagine the future. Therefore, art that engages with trauma not only represents suffering but can also reveal the difficulties involved in its perception, memory and other modes of consciousness.

Traumatic memory is also linked to material and sensory forms through which the past continues to be present. Unlike ordinary memory, traumatic memory can resurface in the form of fragments, flashbacks, sounds, images, physical reactions or involuntary associations. The concept of memory in the digital age, proposed by Aleida Assmann, emphasises the growing role of photographs, sound recordings, video footage and other media in documenting past reality, whilst drawing attention to their vulnerability and instability over time (Assmann, 2012, p. 428). In art, this instability is often heightened through the use of damaged, broken or incomplete objects. Wartime debris, bullet casings, rocket fragments, photographs, recordings and personal

belongings can function not only as documentary evidence, but also as material traces that bring the past back into the present in the form of an unresolved demand.

The experience of a protracted war also makes it difficult to distinguish between the extraordinary and the everyday. What seems shocking from a distance may become part of the familiar world for those living under constant threat. However, habituation does not negate the trauma. Christian Wilde notes that when a devastating event becomes part of a person's everyday world, it may no longer cause such acute shock, but instead lead to helplessness, depression and chronic vulnerability (Wilde, 2020, p. 226). The repetition of attacks, sirens, losses and destroyed environments does not make violence any less devastating. Rather, it can transform an acute rupture into a prolonged state of physical and emotional exhaustion. Contemporary artistic practices that engage with wartime artefacts operate precisely within this field of damaged memory and prolonged exposure to violence. The aesthetics of taste help to describe those artistic situations in which traumatic material is experienced through proximity, sensory pressure and bodily engagement. In such cases, the viewer, listener or participant cannot treat the object merely as a distant sign.

However, artistic practices do not automatically heal trauma or guarantee an ethical understanding. They can create resources for memory, reflection and collective testimony, but they can also oversimplify, aestheticise or sensationalise violence. Therefore, the following analysis does not treat artistic transformation as inherently redemptive or therapeutic. Instead, we ask how specific works preserve, alter or neutralise the traumatic history of wartime artefacts. The central question is not whether art is capable of transforming trauma into beauty, but whether it can create an aesthetic situation in which the material remnant of violence remains ethically unsettling, rather than being transformed into a consumable image or a decorative object.

3. 'The Sound of Weapons' as Sonic Incorporation

In wartime, sound is perceived not only as an external object that attracts attention, but also as something that can be experienced through vibration, pressure, rhythm, repetition and acoustic shock. This is precisely why sound practices that engage with the materials and sounds of war require an analytical language that goes beyond mere representation. They do not simply 'depict' violence, but organise situations in which the listener encounters its material and acoustic remnants. Sound practices become relevant to the aesthetics of taste when they create a situation in which sound cannot be kept at a safe distance, when the listener encounters the material history of the object that generates this sound, and when such an encounter takes on affective and ethical significance. In this limited sense, the use of weapons as a sonic medium in contemporary Ukrainian music can be analysed as a form of sonic embodiment.

Contemporary musical performance increasingly functions as a form of social and theatrical action, engaging the audience in new ways of participation and perception. As Mariia Lihus notes,

Modern musical performance as a social performance is transformed into a musical and theatrical action [...] a characteristic feature of contemporary musical performance (including academic performance) is the search for experimental mise-en-scene and symbolic means that focus the audience's attention. (Lihus, 2016, p. 124)

In this sense, the use of weapons in musical performance reflects not only an intensification of performativity, but also a reaction to the traumatic intensity of contemporary experience. The work of Ukrainian percussionist and military musician Oleksandr Seleznov, a member of the Band of the Presidential Honor Guard Brigade "Hetman Bohdan Khmelnytskyi", is an example of sonic incorporation (Seleznov, 2023). Trained in academic percussion performance and contemporary musical practice, Seleznov combines technical virtuosity with experimental methods of sound production. Following the start of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, his compositional practice changed significantly. One of Seleznov's best-known works is the composition 'Unexpected Counterattack' (Seleznov, 2023), which was performed using an RPG-7, an AK-74 assault rifle, a Javelin portable anti-tank missile system and magazines for small arms. Before the war, such a set of 'instruments' might have been perceived as provocative or even unthinkable. In the context of Ukraine's defence, these objects take on a more complex status. They remain instruments associated with violence and destruction, but at the same time are linked to protection, survival, resistance and the defence of civilian life. Their artistic use does not erase their military function. On the contrary, the performance depends on this original function remaining recognisable. The sounds created in the composition 'Unexpected Counterattack' differ from the timbral characteristics of traditional musical instruments. Metallic surfaces, mechanical tension, harsh contact and the recognisable materiality of weapons form an acoustic field that is closer to impact, pressure and percussive force than to melodic development. The listener does not perceive these sounds as neutral musical material. Their origin matters. The RPG-7, AK-74, Javelin and magazines are not merely objects capable of producing sound. They are objects whose usual function belongs to the battlefield. This is precisely why the performance destabilises the boundary between music and noise, between aesthetic experimentation and the acoustic memory of violence. The performance stages the destruction of aesthetic distance. The listener is confronted with a sound whose material source cannot be separated from the history of violence associated with it. The acoustic event is not only heard but also physically experienced. Sound can enter the listener's field of experience as pressure, resonance and recognition. It must not simply be listened to and observed, but also endured, interpreted and ethically reflected upon.

Historically, military music has served ceremonial, signalling and collective functions within the army. Ukrainian musicological sources define military music as that which is linked to the educational, combat and cultural needs of

the troops, played during drill exercises, marches, ceremonies, parades and demonstrations, and also used for signalling and cultural and educational purposes (Filts, 2006, p. 370). In the traditions associated with Kyivan Rus' and the Zaporozhzhia Sich, military music was often performed using portable wind and percussion instruments – trumpets, whistles, kettledrums, tambourines, drums and kettledrums (Filts, 2006, p. 370). Such instruments were effective in open spaces and met the needs of collective coordination, ritual and combat communication.

Seleznov's practice both continues and breaks with this tradition. On the one hand, the composition 'Unexpected Counterattack' utilises the percussive potential of military objects and thus recalls the historical role of rhythm, signals and acoustic power in military contexts. On the other hand, it replaces traditional military instruments with real weapons. It is precisely this substitution that is decisive. A drum or a trumpet may signify military order or collective mobilisation, but an automatic rifle or anti-tank weapon has a direct material connection to destruction. Thus, the performance shifts military sound from the realm of ceremonial representation into the realm of material conflict. It does not merely accompany war, but renders the very object of war audible. On the one hand, this transformation can be understood as an act of resistance and support for the Ukrainian army, particularly given its circulation on social media and public reception. On the other hand, the use of weapons as musical instruments risks turning violence into a spectacle or an acoustic novelty. The critical power of the work depends on whether the listener recognises the violent origins of the weapons, or simply consumes the performance as an unusual musical effect. The piece 'Unexpected Counterattack' illustrates how sound maintains a tension between destruction and protection, violence and survival, noise and music. In this sense, Seleznov's performance can be interpreted as a form of sonic embodiment. The sound of weapons is perceived not only as a distant sign of war, but also as a material acoustic force capable of entering the listener's embodied field of perception. The performance prompts the listener to encounter the material residue of war as something that is simultaneously heard, felt and ethically reflected upon.

4. The Sound Transformation of Wartime Debris

Another important example of the artistic transformation of wartime material relates to the work of the Ukrainian composer Roman Hryhoriv. His practice operates at the intersection of contemporary academic music, performance art, opera and intermedia experimentation, combining sound with physical action, spatial dramaturgy and visual presence. In the context of Russia's full-scale war against Ukraine, this interdisciplinary approach has taken on particular significance, as Hryhoriv began working with military debris not only as scenographic material but also as a source of sound. This instance demonstrates a more direct form of sound-material incorporation than many visual practices involving wartime artefacts. The object is not merely displayed, painted or symbolically reinterpreted; it is acoustically activated. Its former function as a weapon is not erased, but transformed into a field of resonance, friction, pressure and vibration.

In the summer of 2023, Hryhoriv created a series of performative compositions using the metal casing of a spent rocket projectile from the 'Uragan' multiple launch rocket system, in collaboration with the National Ensemble of Soloists 'Kyiv Camerata'. This artefact came from a private collection of military remnants assembled by a military volunteer whose house had been destroyed during shelling in Irpin by precisely this type of weapon (Nevmerzhytskyi, 2023). The rocket casing is not an abstract object or merely an unusual instrument. It has a concrete connection to destruction, forced displacement and personal loss. Therefore, its transformation into a sound object cannot be separated from the violence to which it is physically linked. In contemporary art, the conceptual underpinnings of a work are of paramount importance, as they 'help' the listener to better understand the work's meaning, the artist's intention and so on. Without these 'additional' explanations, it is sometimes difficult for us to distinguish between a work of art and everyday objects, as both their location and the specific framework that shapes our perception are significant.

Initially, the rocket body was introduced as a scenographic element in the opera project 'Genesis' in October 2022, where it functioned primarily as an installation rather than a musical instrument. Its subsequent activation as a sound source marked an important transition from a visual presence to an acoustic encounter. The audience no longer merely saw a remnant of war, but also heard it. This shift from display to sound is central to the work's aesthetic and ethical power, as the object's material history becomes present not only as an image or symbol, but also as a resonance. The rocket's sonic potential was uncovered through a physical experiment, specifically by running a bow across various sections of its metal surface. This process revealed a wide spectrum of timbral effects – ranging from low-frequency vibrations to piercing, screech-like sounds produced by friction against the rocket's longitudinal sections.

The structural deformations caused by the impact took on acoustic significance, generating unstable resonance patterns and distinct vibrational effects. The resulting sound does not readily fit within the expectations of traditional instrumental performance. It exists on the borderline between music, noise, the sound of an object and an acoustic wound. A publicly available composition, which can be found on the author's page, is, for example, 'LANGSAM - 9M27K' (Hryhoriv, 2023). Hryhoriv's works are relevant to the aesthetics of taste because they create a situation in which the listener cannot completely separate the sound from the violent history of the object that produces it. The resonance of a rocket is not a neutral acoustic phenomenon. It is heard as the sound of a physical object whose usual function is associated with destruction. The work premiered in Kyiv at St Andrew's Church, where the acoustic and symbolic environment heightened the perception of the performance as a sonic requiem. The sacred space, the prolonged reverberation, the visual presence of the rocket casing and the knowledge of its military origins shaped the listener's experience as something more than a musical experiment. The performance did not offer a narrative

representation of violence. Rather, it placed the audience in an acoustic relationship with one of its material remnants. Trauma was not represented directly, but was approached through resonance, pressure and the unstable boundary between sound and memory.



Figure 1. Roman Hryhoriv with body of rocket

Hryhoriv's performances featuring war debris have been staged both in Ukraine and abroad, notably in Ivano-Frankivsk, Berlin and at Blenheim Palace. The reception of these works has varied depending on the context. For a Ukrainian audience, the sound of a rocket might resonate with shared experiences of air raid alerts, destruction, loss and survival. For some members of the international audience, the same object might be viewed from a greater distance – as a striking visual artefact, a curiosity or an unusual musical instrument. This distinction demonstrates that embodied aesthetic perception is neither universal nor automatic. The same object can foster an ethical connection in one context whilst remaining merely a spectacle in another.

The culmination of Hryhoriv's sound experiments with wartime debris was the album 'Irrenaissance' (2024), comprising twelve tracks that explore various configurations of the rocket's sound in combination with electronics,

an orchestra and the human voice. In some compositions, the rocket appears as a solo sound source, whilst in others it is integrated into more complex interlude textures (Hryhoriv, 2024). The closing track, 'Gloria in excelsis Deo', is particularly significant, as the sound of the rocket ceases in it, leaving only the human voice and the piano. This gesture does not merely resolve the violence inherent in the preceding soundscape. Rather, it reinterprets silence as an ethical horizon. The absence of the rocket's resonance becomes significant precisely because the listener has already encountered its acoustic power.

Performer Olena Shykina describes the sound of the rocket as immersive rather than external, noting that the listener feels 'as if inside the rocket itself', and that its timbre varies "from rough, powerful and disharmonious to lyrical, soft and harmonious" (Novitska, 2024). Such testimony suggests that the sound of the object is experienced not merely as an external musical effect, but as an acoustic environment that surrounds and engulfs the listener. At the same time, Shykina's reflections on the human capacity to transform fear and aggression into meaning and action should not be understood as a mere atonement for violence. A rocket does not become innocent simply because it is used in art. Its artistic transformation remains ethically fraught. It may open up space for reflection and action, but it does so only on condition that the memory of its destructive purpose is preserved.

Outside institutional artistic contexts, similar practices of sound transformation can also be observed in everyday wartime situations. Musicians serving in the Armed Forces of Ukraine adapt military debris as improvised instruments for informal performances in the field, in particular creating stringed instruments from mine casings. One widely circulated video shows a sapper Andriy performing Volodymyr Ivasyuk's song 'Chervona Ruta', accompanying himself on a so-called 'mine-ukulele' (128 okrema bryhada).



Figure 2. Created a ukulele from a mine. Andriy is a soldier in the 128th Brigade of the Territorial Defence Forces.

Hryhoriv's works demonstrate how wartime debris can be transformed from instruments of destruction into media for embodied meaning-making, without losing their traumatic history. Here, the musical performance does not merely symbolically represent war. It activates a physical object and makes its violent past audible. The sound of a rocket becomes a point where trauma, memory, resistance and ethical ambivalence intersect. Through this sonic transformation, the listener encounters the remnants of war as something that can be heard, felt, remembered and which raises ethical concerns.

5. Visual Transformations of Wartime Debris: Memory, Ornament and the Risk of Aestheticisation

Contemporary Ukrainian art, created during Russia's war against Ukraine, is increasingly turning to the material remnants of violence as artistic media. Visual works created from the debris of war should not be understood merely as illustrations of trauma or symbolic representations of the conflict. At the same time, they cannot automatically be interpreted as successful acts of ethical transformation. Their connection to the aesthetics of taste is more indirect; it arises through material proximity, visual encounter, cultural coding and the viewer's realisation that the object has a history that extends beyond its present artistic form.

In her theory, Jill Bennett argues that affective imagery does not merely convey emotion; it can become a site of thought. As she writes, "affective imagery... does not just produce feeling; it is the site of thought" (Bennett, 2005, p. 10). This assertion allows us to move beyond the assumption that emotionally intense art is merely expressive or therapeutic. In the case of Ukrainian works created from the debris of war, affect becomes significant when it directs critical attention to the object's history, to the violence it embodies, and to the viewer's own stance regarding that violence. Bennett also emphasises that art can "trigger an empathic response from the viewer", which ideally should lead not to a sentimental conclusion, but to "thought and critical inquiry" (Bennett, 2005, p.6).

The viewer is invited to look at an object whose surface has been transformed, yet whose military history remains recognisable. A painted bullet casing, a decorated ammunition box or a plate of armour transformed into a canvas for an image create a tension between visual form and material memory. The viewer may see flowers, landscapes, ornamentation or national symbols, but these images appear on objects associated with gunfire, impact, defence, injury and death. The power of such works lies precisely in this unresolved tension.

One of the most common practices is painting on bullet casings. The artist Inna Zubok from Nizhyn is a consistent example of this approach (Bilous, 2024). By painting used bullet casings, she re-signifies objects associated with death and destruction as vessels of visual memory. Her works often feature landscapes, animals, floral motifs and other images associated with life, duration and fragile beauty. The impact of the works depends on whether the viewer realises that the painted surface remains a bullet casing. If this

realisation fades, the work risks becoming a mere decorative object. If it is maintained, the viewer is confronted with the coexistence of beauty and violence, ornament and destruction, aesthetic pleasure and ethical unease.



Figure 3. Works of Inna Zubok.

Walter Benjamin warned that the aestheticisation of politics transforms violence and power into spectacle, whilst the politicisation of art can reveal the political conditions of aesthetic experience (Benjamin, 1969). In the case of the painted bullet casings, this distinction helps to articulate the central risk. If the viewer perceives the cartridge case merely as an attractive, painted object, the work may descend into aestheticisation. If, however, the history of the cartridge case remains visible and unsettling, the work may politicise perception, forcing the viewer to juxtapose beauty, violence and survival.

In her concept of taste, Korsmeyer challenges the notion that aesthetic experience must necessarily be based on distance and detachment; taste becomes philosophically significant precisely because it engages the subject and destabilises the boundary between observer and object. Visual encounters with the debris of war do not literally replicate the experience of taste. The viewer does not absorb the object. However, they can create a similar structure of engagement, where the object's history precludes neutral contemplation. The viewer cannot look at a painted bullet casing as

an innocent image without simultaneously confronting the threat inherent in the object itself. Marianne Hirsch's concept of post-memory helps to explain how such objects mediate traumatic experiences beyond the realm of direct testimony. Hirsch understands post-memory as a relationship to the past shaped not only by personal memory, but also by representation, projection and imaginative engagement (Hirsch, 2012, p. 5). War artefacts, transformed into visual art, can function as mediators of such memory. They enable those who did not directly experience a specific attack, battle or loss to encounter their material trace through an aesthetic form. At the same time, such mediation remains precarious. It may open up a space for remembrance, but it may also trivialise or domesticate violence if the object is too readily absorbed into visual pleasure.

The broader field of Ukrainian visual practices can be organised into several interrelated strategies. The first might be termed 'pictorial inscription'—a pictorial or representational form of inscription in which military objects become alternative surfaces for drawing. In addition to Zubok's work, this strategy is evident in the art of Yulia Koval (Koval, 2024), who paints ammunition boxes, cartridge cases, weapons and large-scale military equipment, often as part of charitable initiatives in support of the Armed Forces of Ukraine. Vadym Mitkov (Suspilne Zaporizhzhia, 2022) from Zaporizhzhia develops a more intimate version of this approach, creating miniature Ukrainian landscapes on fragments of shells and sometimes combining them with images of destroyed buildings (Smahina, 2023). In these works, visual beauty is not simply set against violence. Rather, it is placed in a tense relationship with it. A landscape painted on a fragment of wartime debris does not negate the destruction, but rather makes the contrast between everyday life and its violent interruption more visible.



Figure 4. Yulia Koval and her works (Skasiv, 2025)

The second strategy can be described as ornamental or traditional re-codification. A particularly telling example is the work of Oksana Bezdon (Sluzhyla viiskovoiu kukharkoiu, 2025), who applies Petrykivka painting to bullet casings, mines and fragments of ammunition. Petrykivka ornamentation (UNESCO, 2013) is associated with the domestic sphere, fertility, continuity and the vitality of Ukrainian visual culture. When it appears on military artefacts, a semantic clash arises. The floral ornament does not merely decorate the object; it imbues a material form associated with death with a cultural code of life. This practice can be interpreted as an attempt to symbolically disarm the object. At the same time, its ethical power depends on whether the object's dangerous origins remain recognisable. If the contradiction remains visible, the ornament becomes a form of resistance rather than concealment.

The third strategy involves functional transformation, whereby military remnants are repurposed into everyday objects. Oleksii Kaplauh (Gvara Media, 2022) from Kharkiv creates interior items - floor lamps and vases - from fragments of ammunition and captured helmets. Kateryna Uvarova (Morozov, 2022) transforms spent cartridges into jewellery and decorative objects, channelling the proceeds towards the reconstruction of the Hryhorii Skovoroda Museum, which was destroyed by shelling. Such works transfer wartime debris into domestic, cultural and social contexts. This movement is ethically complex. On the one hand, it may blur the line between the front line and civilian life, making the material consequences of war visible in everyday spaces. On the other hand, functionalisation may also domesticate the object, thereby weakening its traumatic power. The question, therefore, is not whether functionality is good or bad, but whether it preserves the object's connection to violence, loss and collective responsibility.

The fourth strategy can be described as a sculptural and monumental reconfiguration. Master blacksmith Oleksandr Shaposhnik's sculpture 'Girl-Kalina' (Nova skulptura 'Divchyna-kalyna', 2022), assembled from fragments of shells, transforms metal debris into a figure associated with Ukraine, rebirth, vulnerability and resilience. Projects such as 'ArtBronya' in Lviv (Karnaukh & Deineka, 2022) bring together artists who work with bullet-riddled armour plates from combat kits, transforming them into surfaces for visual reflection. In these cases, the object's previous function takes on particular significance. An armour plate is not merely a piece of metal. It is a protective surface that may bear traces of impact. When it becomes a work of art, it simultaneously embodies the ambiguity of a shield, a wound, an image and a testimony.

The fifth strategy might be described as a sound-symbolic intersection. Of particular importance in this regard is Ivan Bodnar's (Polivchak & Borysevych, 2022) transformation of bullet casings into bells. This overturns the historical logic whereby, during wartime, bells were often melted down to make weapons. Here, an object associated with a gunshot becomes a source of sound linked to mourning, warning, prayer and hope. Although this practice belongs partly to the visual realm, it also activates multisensory imagination.

The viewer imagines not only the object's appearance, but also its potential sound, ritual function and symbolic reversal.

Susan Sontag's reflections in her book *Regarding the Pain of Others* are particularly important for understanding this risk (Sontag, 2003). Images and objects associated with suffering may inform, disturb or mobilise the viewer, but they may also give rise to fatigue, detachment or even a form of moral anaesthesia. When violence repeatedly appears in visually striking or aesthetically organised forms, the shock of suffering can be dulled. The viewer begins to perceive war as a familiar spectacle rather than an ongoing human catastrophe. This danger is exacerbated when military artefacts are transformed into beautiful, collectable or decorative objects. A painted surface may attract attention, but at the same time it may conceal the real history of injury, fear and death associated with that object. The ethical ambivalence of such works lies in the fact that they combine an instrument of violence with a creative gesture. In this sense, the ethical power of war-related art depends on a kind of 'language of truth' that maintains a connection with the context.

From the perspective of relational aesthetics, these works can also be understood as creating social situations, rather than merely autonomous objects. Nicolas Bourriaud's (1998) concept of art as a field of relations is significant for our study, particularly when works made from war debris circulate in exhibitions, charity auctions, museum projects, public performances and online platforms. The significance of these objects often arises through participation, donation, testimony, discussion and collective memory. However, the relational dimension should not be idealised. Social engagement does not guarantee ethical depth. A charitable object may retain critical power, but it may also be reduced to a consumable symbol of support. The difference lies in whether the work fosters reflection on violence or reduces it to an easily exchangeable symbol.

This is precisely why Ukrainian visual practices involving wartime debris exist in a liminal space between resistance and aestheticisation. They politicise art when they maintain the tension between an object's violent past and its transformed artistic form. They risk aestheticising violence when this tension disappears and the object becomes merely beautiful, collectable or decorative. The most powerful of these works do not merely invite the viewer to admire the transformation of weapons into art. They demand that we remain conscious of exactly what has been transformed. Their ethical power lies in maintaining a sense of unease. A bullet casing painted with flowers, a piece of armour transformed into an image, or a fragment of a rocket turned into a bell, can become sites of remembrance and resistance only when the artwork prevents the object's violent history from fading away. In this sense, the visual transformation of wartime debris reveals both the potential and the danger of aesthetic affinity.

6. Darkness, Drawing, and the Aesthetics of Working Through

Artistic reflection on war does not always depend on the direct transformation of military artefacts. In some cases, artists turn to traditional means of artistic

expression, but radically alter the conditions under which perception, memory and artistic gesture become possible. A telling example is the experimental project by the contemporary Ukrainian artist Mykola Plekhov (Plekhov, 2010), created in response to Russian attacks on Ukraine's energy infrastructure. Prolonged power cuts have made darkness a recurring feature of everyday life, transforming the absence of light from a temporary inconvenience into a familiar state. Plekhov's project was based on a simple yet conceptually significant constraint: he created graphic works in complete darkness, without artificial lighting, digital devices or visual feedback (Kravchenko, 2022). The artist deliberately closed his eyes and eliminated extraneous auditory stimuli, leaving only the ambient background sounds of his surroundings - such as the hum of generators or the distant rumble of traffic. The aim was not merely a technical experiment. Rather, the artist used darkness as a condition for observing his own psycho-emotional state and the spontaneous emergence of images, gestures, memories and bodily impulses in the absence of visual orientation. Therefore, darkness in Plekhov's project should not be understood merely as a physical circumstance. It functions as an altered mode of perception brought about by war. The blackout alters the relationship between the body, space and the imagination. Sight, which usually governs the act of drawing, is suspended; the gesture becomes less controlled; the hand begins to capture states that are not entirely accessible to conscious visual correction. Consequently, the resulting image is not merely a representation of darkness, but a trace of the artistic act carried out within it.

The project was carried out in Kyiv between 24 November 2022 and 20 February 2023 using black Canson paper and oil pastels. The visual language of the works is built on the contrast between deep black backgrounds and sharp, light lines. This contrast can be understood not only as a formal choice, but also as a response to the wartime experience of perceptual liminality. In conditions of danger, loss and the destruction of infrastructure, experience is often condensed into opposites: light and darkness, safety and threat, presence and absence, control and disorientation. Plekhov's drawings capture this condensation without reducing it to a direct illustration. According to the artist, the works functioned much like the Rorschach test, resonating most strongly with viewers who had undergone a similar experience of enforced darkness and sensory deprivation. This aspect is significant, as the project does not merely express a private emotional state. It creates a perceptual field in which individual experience can become recognisable to others. Here, the viewer encounters neither a documentary depiction of war nor a transformed military object, but rather a visual trace of a state shared by many civilians during the attacks on Ukraine's energy infrastructure.

The process of creating the works also involved subsequent reflection with a psychologist, which enabled the artist to correlate gestural expression, emotional states and subconscious associations. Over time, the project documented a transformation in both visual style and inner orientation. Aggressive and fragmented lines gradually gave way to smoother and more fluid forms. This shift indicates that darkness was experienced not merely as

a threat, deprivation or paralysis. It also became a space for adaptation, reflection and partial acceptance. The project therefore does not portray the disappearance of trauma, but rather a slow re-evaluation of the subject's relationship to the traumatic state. Dominic LaCapra's conceptual distinction between 'acting out' and 'working through' helps to clarify this process. "Acting out [...] involves the compulsive return of the trauma [...] Working through [...] implies a more critical and self-aware relationship" (LaCapra, 2001, p. 142). Plekhov's project can be understood precisely in this second register. It does not overcome trauma in a therapeutic or redemptive sense, nor does it transform darkness into a positive aesthetic value. Rather, it creates a disciplined artistic situation in which the traumatic state of a blackout can be re-enacted, observed, brought to the surface and gradually worked through by means of gesture.



Figure 5. Mykola Plekhov's work.

Unlike the sound-based practices of Hryhoriv and Seleznov, or the visual transformations of bullet casings and military debris, Plekhov's project does not focus on the physical remnants of weapons. He does not work with military artefacts whose violent history is physically present within the artwork itself. Its relevance lies in the transformation of the wartime condition of perception into an artistic method. Darkness becomes the medium through which trauma is registered, explored and, to some extent, worked through. The project engages with bodily vulnerability, sensory deprivation, affective intensity and altered perception; it arises from the conditions that war imposes on everyday perception itself. At the same time, Plekhov's project demonstrates that contemporary Ukrainian art responds to the war not only by rethinking its physical debris, but also by transforming the sensory conditions generated by the war into an artistic form. The absence of light becomes a medium for reflection; drawing - a means of capturing disorientation; gesture - a means of negotiating fear, memory and adaptation. In this sense, the project belongs to an aesthetic of working through, in which artistic practice does not erase trauma but creates a space where one can

approach it without reducing it to either spectacle or direct representation. Alongside works by Inna Zubok, Oksana Bezhon, Roman Hryhoriv, Oleksandr Seleznov and other artists, Plekhov's project highlights the diversity of Ukrainian artistic responses to the experience of war. Some practices engage with the material remnants of violence, whilst others deal with altered modes of perception, darkness, sound and bodily vulnerability. They are united not by a single technique or a universal aesthetic strategy, but by a shared desire to resist the neutralisation of traumatic experience. Their ethical significance lies in their ability to preserve a sense of unease, activate memory and create conditions for reflection in circumstances where everyday perception itself has been damaged by the war. At the same time, they shape new forms of aesthetic taste and judgement, which arise from specific social conditions brought about by and shaped through the hostilities.

7. Conclusions

The analysis presented in this article has shown that contemporary Ukrainian artistic practices which engage with military artefacts, weapons, sound, darkness and the material remnants of violence require an aesthetic language that goes beyond mere representation. These works do not merely depict war or illustrate traumatic experiences. In various ways, they create situations in which viewers, listeners and participants encounter the remnants of violence – whether as objects, sounds, images or altered conditions of perception – which maintain an ethical tension.

The article has argued that the aesthetics of taste can serve as a productive framework for analysing such practices, provided that the term is used in a restricted and methodologically precise sense. Taste is not understood here as the literal taste of food or drink, as an aesthetic judgement in the Kantian sense, or as a general synonym for bodily intensity. Drawing on the concepts of Carolyn Korsmeyer and Nicola Perullo, the aesthetics of taste is considered as a model of proximity, embodiment, vulnerability and ethical engagement. Its relevance lies in its ability to describe those aesthetic situations in which detached contemplation becomes unstable, and the recipient is confronted with material or sensory traces that must be perceived, endured, interpreted and made sense of.

The sound-based works of Oleksandr Seleznov and Roman Hryhoriv are examples in which the artists use weapons and fragments of military equipment as sources of sound, vibration, resonance and physical pressure. In these works, the listener encounters the artefact not merely as an image or symbol, but also as an acoustic force in which the object's menacing history remains palpable. The sound of a weapon or a rocket casing is not neutralised by its artistic use; on the contrary, it preserves the tension between destruction, defence, survival and memory.

The visual practices discussed in this article operate somewhat differently. In their works, Inna Zubok, Oksana Bezhon, Yulia Koval, Vadym Mitkov and Oleksandr Shaposhnik transform bullet casings, ammunition boxes, armour plates, helmets and war debris into painted, ornamental, sculptural, functional or commemorative objects. These practices are relevant to the aesthetics of taste in a more indirect way. They do not engage the viewer through vibration or acoustic

pressure, but can create a sense of material and symbolic closeness if the viewer remains aware that the transformed surface is still associated with gunfire, injury, defence, destruction or survival. These practices also play a part in reshaping aesthetic and ethical perceptions. By transforming military remnants into objects of sound, image, memory and public attention, Ukrainian artists challenge the reductive perception of Ukraine as a passive victim of war. Instead, they demonstrate Ukrainian cultural agency, capable of responding to destruction without denying the violence itself. At the same time, such works can counteract the normalisation of war, preventing military artefacts from becoming mere 'facts of life'. When placed within artistic, museum, performative or public contexts, these objects can compel the viewer to look beyond the painted surface, the ornamental form or the striking materiality - towards the human cost of the conflict. In this sense, their significance lies not in creating beauty from ruins, but in transforming the remnants of violence into a poignant aesthetic and ethical challenge.

Mykola Plekhov's works demonstrate the transformation of a wartime condition of perception into an artistic method, where darkness becomes a medium through which fear, disorientation, memory and adaptation can be explored; for it is we who determine the conditions under which material or sensory proximity acquires aesthetic and ethical significance.

The study also showed that the artistic transformation of war artefacts is ambivalent. Such practices can create spaces for remembrance, resistance, solidarity and critical reflection, but they also risk turning violence into a spectacle, a decorative surface or a sensational novelty. The value depends on whether the work preserves the connection between the object's threatening past and its transformed aesthetic form. The ethics of proximity emerges as a possible outcome of specific aesthetic situations in which the viewer or listener cannot consume the residue of violence as a neutral object; where discomfort persists, the object's history is preserved, and it does not become an empty performance. In this sense, contemporary Ukrainian art is an important arena for rethinking the connection between trauma, memory, embodiment and aesthetic experience. By working with weapons, fragments of rockets, bullet casings, armour plates, darkness, sound and other conditions engendered by war, Ukrainian artists do not merely create representations of destruction. They create encounters with its remnants. Such encounters can foster individual and collective reflection, but their power does not lie in resolving trauma. Rather, it lies in holding the complex space between pain and form, memory and materiality, resistance and aesthetic risk. Thus, this article does not propose a general 'taste for war'. Instead, we argue that certain artistic practices create multisensory situations in which sound, image, material memory and bodily vulnerability remain inseparable from ethical interpretation. Gustatory aesthetics emerges when aesthetic experience becomes a form of embodied engagement.

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Thinking Through the Senses

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The senses occupy a paradoxical place in the history of philosophy. They are our primary means of engaging with the world, yet they have frequently been treated as inferior to reason and regarded with suspicion as unreliable sources of knowledge. In this paper I trace the philosophical history of the senses from antiquity to the present, examining how different traditions have understood the relationship between sensation, cognition, and the body. I explore the enduring hierarchy that privileges vision and hearing as ‘cognitive’ or distal senses while relegating taste, smell, and touch to a lower, more bodily status. I also examine a number of historical debates over whether humans possess more than the traditional five senses, considering proposals ranging from speech and sexuality to proprioception, intuition, and extrasensory perception. By bringing together philosophical, historical, and anthropological perspectives, I argue that the number and status of the senses are not fixed biological facts but reflect broader assumptions about reason, embodiment, knowledge, and cultural values. Rather than treating the senses as passive channels through which information reaches the mind, the chapter invites readers to reconsider them as active participants in human understanding and to question the philosophical commitments that have shaped sensory hierarchies for more than two millennia. | *Keywords: Philosophy of Perception, Hierarchy of the Senses, Embodiment, Epistemology, Sixth Sense*

1. Introduction

Philosophy has a split personality. This could be true in several ways, but the one I want to talk about here is the deep divide between body and mind. Ever since our earliest ancient philosophical roots, philosophers have talked about the body and mind as if they are distinct, separate, and sometimes even mutually exclusive. And the more we *talk*, the more we end up *thinking* of ourselves as distinct entities. The mind (or soul, *psyche* in Greek) is ephemeral and immaterial, but rational, and according to some, immortal. The body is physical, sensual, untrustworthy, and sometimes even construed as a burden to the mind. The mind thinks, and is capable of moral reasoning, and restraint, but the body is passive and its needs and desires can distract us from good thinking. For philosophers, there is no question that the mind is superior. But the history of the senses is not merely a history of perception. It is a history of what philosophers have valued. The senses that count as ‘higher’ or even

as genuine senses reveal deeper assumptions about reason, embodiment, morality, and what kinds of knowledge deserve philosophical attention. Here, I will talk about some of the important historical constructions of the role that the senses have played in the division, and connection, between the mind and the body. Interestingly, the senses play a key role in metaphysics, epistemology, and ethics. What I want to argue is that the classification and ranking of the senses reveal a culture's philosophical assumptions about the relationship between body, mind, and knowledge. The history of the senses is really the history of philosophy's changing ideas about what counts as knowledge. Sensory hierarchies are never merely about perception – they are expressions of deeper commitments about reason, embodiment, morality, and human nature.

2. A Hierarchy of Senses

Whether or not we admit it, philosophers have struggled with the senses for a long time – almost from the very beginning of philosophy. Our five senses (or maybe more, sometimes less) are the primary way in which we interface with the world around us. Our senses are all dependent upon healthy bodily functioning since a damaged physical body (eyes, ears, tongue, skin, or nose) can lead to compromised sensory experience. But beyond just the damaged senses, we often experience the world in different ways even when all of our senses are working just fine. We see different colours depending on other colours in proximity, and sometimes we have drastically different food preferences which influence our assessments of how good something is. Trained experts can hear or see or smell details that the untrained cannot, even though the sensory cues are exactly the same. Our sense experience is not always reliable, or objective, in the ways we wish it was, so that we could always know for sure that the way we experience the world is exactly the way the world is. The locus of concern about the senses for many philosophers is about how reliably we can know the world around us and the ways in which our mind interprets sensory data. Rationalists, like Plato and Descartes, thought that we could *only* trust the truths that the mind comes to on its own. They thought that our senses impose an unreliable divide between our minds and the physical world we live in. The empiricists, on the other hand, like Aristotle, George Berkeley, and David Hume, thought that we could get reliable knowledge from our perceptions of the physical world, through our senses. This debate between rationalism and empiricism has persisted throughout the history of philosophy. Each age brings its own arguments, and of course the reigning science and religion of each era changes many of our fundamental beliefs about human experience. But much of the history of philosophy is dedicated to this fundamental question of how the senses work, and how they can provide knowledge, even if the senses themselves are secondary to particular kinds of knowledge that we like to talk about. Some philosophers do not even discuss the senses when they talk about perception and *only* refer to the external world and the mind, bypassing the reality of the senses all together. We tend to think that knowledge only happens in the mind, but the senses are the required negotiator between the mind and the world. Without sensory input the mind has nothing to contemplate.

Most of what we know about the senses falls under the category of what is called philosophy of perception, or the *problem of perception*. Vision is so ubiquitous in the study of perception that when philosophers say perception they are almost always talking about vision, but all of our senses provide information on an unending basis and the inputs we get from them makes our ability to function possible at all. Our senses are ranked in order of importance, depending on how well they reliably convey knowledge. Vision is typically the clear winner. Vision is so much the winner that the other senses are often referred to as the non-visual senses. For many, Plato and Aristotle to start, vision is used as a metaphor for understanding and intellect as it is at the front of our head, at the top of our head, and represents what is best about us as humans. Hearing comes in a distant second, and then after that, smell, and then taste and touch are tied for last. The order of the last three has everything to do with how closely they are associated with the body. Vision and hearing are known as the distal senses because the way they acquire information is not attached to the physical body at all. Vision and hearing are the principal ways in which we acquire objective, reliable knowledge. Thus when two people see an object, they should be able to come up with roughly the same description of the object whether it be about colour, length, or size. The same is roughly true for hearing. Two people who are in close proximity hear the same tones, words, and music. *Interpretations* of sights and sounds might vary, but the sensory experiences, or sense data, are undeniable. Vision and hearing are so important to gaining knowledge that they are often referred to as the cognitive senses, or the intellectual senses.

The so-called lower senses, taste, smell, and touch, are known as the proximal senses since they acquire information literally through the physical body. Vision requires light, sound requires the vibrations of air waves, but touch and taste both involve direct contact with the body in order for sensations to register, and smell usually requires relatively close proximity (although this is also contested as with the examples of skunks or paper mills). Since we cannot know for certain if two subjects experience the exact same sensations of touch and taste, they are less reliable in providing knowledge. Taste often comes in dead last in this hierarchy since not only is it tied to the body, but in the process of tasting, we also ingest, and so the object of inquiry is literally consumed by the taster. It is destroyed, but also becomes one with the taster.

The lower senses are also more closely associated with pleasure and pain, which are often seen as being completely embodied. Vision and hearing, being cognitive, generally do not produce pleasure in the same way the body does. If we look at art, or beautiful scenery, this is thought to inspire cognitive reflection, but not bodily pleasure. If we taste a favourite dish, it is the physical experience we enjoy. Vision and hearing, although they can both produce cognitive pleasure, do not produce the *kind* of pleasure that one might lose themselves in, or need to over-indulge in. One can be captivated, or interested, but it does not happen that when looking at a painting one *cannot turn away* like it could happen with a container of ice cream, or with sexual pleasure. Interestingly, taste, touch, and smell are not themselves the culprits of

gluttony, but it is the body more generally that seems incapable of independent moderation. The body *needs* – it needs sleep, sex, food and drink, and without a rational mind we seem incapable of any meaningful self-regulation. Given this ranking, visual and auditory works tend to be considered more important and have more cognitive value than works that engage the bodily senses.

This ranking also impacts the social values that are associated with each of the senses. Sight, being king of the senses, is linked with the most important faculty of reason. Vision is said to be the most objective of the senses, and several scholars throughout the ages said that vision is more important than hearing because one can see much further than one can hear. Hearing was particularly important in the Middle Ages because of the importance that was put on listening to the word of God. Robert Jütte explains that hearing well was a “guarantee of salvation and obedience to God’s commandments” (Jütte, 2005, p. 66). He notes that *Schma Israel* (listen, Israel) are the first words of the most important prayer in Judaism indicating that one must *listen* in order to understand. Touch is literally coupled with the body and thus regarded as mere physical sensation or *mindless* pleasure. One cannot *know* things through the body so any sort of experiences taste, touch, and smell provide tend to be considered less important. Parents teach their children visual symbols (like the alphabet and basic symbols) well before they focus attention (if they ever do) on detailed smell identification. But the ability to detect smell accurately can often help with safety in the case of poison or smoke, and before major progressions in medicine, many physicians would smell (and on occasion even taste) patients to be able to detect subtle odours that various diseases tended to produce.

The importance of smell has changed quite a bit over the centuries. Lower animals depend on smell much more than humans developmentally because they are lower to the ground and cannot see as far as upright humans. But we depend less on smell now than humans have in past ages since we have invented cleaning agents, enclosed septic systems, and considerably better hygiene expectations. Strong smells are often associated with either food waste or rotting garbage, or the good smells of cooking. The upper class is often associated with pleasant smells, perfumes, or they do not tend to smell at all, while the lower classes are associated with body odour, household stench, and trash. Whether or not these stereotypes are accurate is questionable, but the impressions are often imagined even if they are not real. The upper class tends to have access to more spacious houses, cleaning methods, and of course, perfumes. The lower classes are not innately more smelly, but do not have such easy access to large airy spaces or cleaning essentials for bodies and homes. Sociologists Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno suggested that “vision is associated with the upper classes due to its inherent detachment, while the mingling nature of smell makes it a sign for the ‘promiscuous’ lower classes” (Classen, 2001). The lower classes are more tightly associated with physical labour, sexuality, and food production, or, in other words, things having to do with the body. All of these things involve

the lower senses of taste (production and consumption), touch (sexuality and work), and smell (both bodies and spaces). It does not seem strange then, that there has been such a strong emphasis for philosophers on vision, as it is the sense that distances us not only from the body, but the physical work, pleasure, and care that bodies need in order to be sustained. Once philosophers began asking *which* senses deserve epistemic authority, a second question naturally followed: How many senses are there? If the traditional hierarchy reflects philosophical priorities rather than biological necessity, then perhaps the canonical list of five is equally open to revision.

3. A Sixth Sense

There has been much discussion of how perception works, but there has also been much discussion of *how many* senses there are. Although five has been a steady number, what those five are has not been consistent throughout history. The typical range is between four and eight, and most who claim more than five include variations of touch like pressure, temperature, and heaviness. Plato, in some places, did not distinguish clearly between senses and feelings. In one enumeration of perceptions, he “begins with sight, hearing and smell, leaves out taste, instead of touch mentions hot and cold, and adds sensations of pleasure, discomfort, desire and fear” (Classen, 1993, p. 2). Aristotle, on the other hand wanted to put an end to the discussion of the number of senses and said that there was “an intrinsic relationship between the senses and the elements” (Classen, 1993, p. 2). Earth, air, fire, water, and aether (the idea of the upper atmosphere according to the Ancient Greeks that was also air breathed in by the gods) needed to be matched directly with sense perception. Philo of Alexandria, a first century Jewish scholar, argued that there were seven senses; the five traditional senses plus reproduction and speech. Seven was an important number for Philo since it had allegorical connections to Stoicism, Pythagoreanism, as well as the seven days of the week. Speech is another sense that has been touted several times throughout history, discussed as our capacity for language most recently (Noam Chomsky for example). In the Middle Ages, Catholic confession manuals made direct links from sins to senses and claimed that speech was an additional sense (Howes, 2009, p. 4). In the 14th century another *Book on the Sixth Sense* (*Liber sexti sensus*) was written by philosopher Raymond Lull advocating for the sixth sense of speech or voice (Howes, 2009, p. 4).

In the 18th century at least one philosopher, Johann Gottfried von Herder, suggested that there was a sense of *beauty* that had to do with the feelings that vary in response to aesthetic objects (Herder, 2002). He also thought that aesthetics were deeply historical conditions, and what was considered beautiful in one time and place varies from time to time and culture to culture. For Herder, language, expressive and metaphorical language in particular, lays the foundation for the formulation and communication of thought itself, and so perceiving beauty in itself is allowed by the fact that one can interpret his or her own culture and express it and appreciate it.

Immanuel Kant (Herder's teacher) suggested that there was a different sixth sense that was associated with sexuality. Anyone who knows anything about Kant will know that he did not look upon sex or sexuality favourably (or women for that matter), but in his *Lectures on Ethics* (1764) he says that the sexual impulse is an "inclination that may be called appetite, and is directed to enjoyment of the other" (Kant, 1997, p. 384). He says sexual desire is "more a matter of warlike vengeance than an inclination" (Kant, 1997, p. 384). For Kant, the sensory organs are oriented toward *specific* sensory objects, and for him, sexual desire is an obvious one. This sexual sense is also something we should be ashamed of according to Kant, something we should work to minimize and control, and something that in all cases debases men, in particular. Given that men cannot want women for their *humanity*, but *only* for their *sex*, Kant says that "the sexual impulse puts humanity in peril of being equated with animality" (Kant, 1997, p. 384) since the essence of humanity is reason, not the debasement of the body. Because of this he says that masturbation is worse than suicide (both are acts that work against one's rational nature), but sexual desire remains a sixth sense like the object directed others.

Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin, a Frenchman who wrote one of the original philosophical treatises on gastronomy, *The Physiology of Taste* (1848), also supported sexuality as one of our primary senses, and in fact, *the most important sense* (Brillat-Savarin, 1949, p. 37). He outlines six senses in the very first paragraph of his book, claiming that each sense has a particular organ that it is associated with. Physical desire, he says, "draws the two sexes together so that they may procreate" (Brillat-Savarin, 1949, p. 37). Just as other senses have their own organs, so obviously does sexual desire. He says that "if taste, whose purpose is to enable a man to exist, is indisputably one of his senses, then how much more reasonable it is to call a sense that part of him destined to make mankind itself survive" (Brillat-Savarin, 1949, pp. 37–38). Given the importance of reproduction, Brillat-Savarin figured that sexual organs and sexual desire made as much sense as any other to count as one of the six senses.

In the 19th century and early 20th century, the most common candidate for a sixth sense were psychic powers of one sort or another and not by philosophers but by anthropologists and 'new age' scientists. David Howes explains that psychic abilities include spirit mediumship as well as "transference or 'telepathy,' premonitions or 'precognition,' clairvoyance or 'remote-viewing,' and levitation or 'psychokinesis'" (Howes, 2009, p. 6). These mental abilities were attempts to make scientific sense of many occult powers now deemed to be mental and not just spiritual. This was typical of the period in the early 20th century as attempts to make all things subject to scientific explanation that could previously not be explained. In 1934 Joseph Rhine, known as the 'father of modern parapsychology' published the best-selling *Extra-Sensory Perception*, making scientific claims about paranormal sensory perception. Rhine conducted scientific experiments in laboratories showing the consistent nature of the ways in which some people were able to obtain reliable information not using the traditional five senses.

In the 20th century many of the suggestions for a sixth sense had to do with aspects of the mind that could not be accounted for physically, or with standard medical or scientific explanations. ESP, the paranormal, and clairvoyance have all been objects of study that have amazed and confounded people since they do not work within the bounds of standard sense perceptions. The paranormal is that which goes beyond the so-called normal foundations of the brain, given a purely materialist account of the mind (Howes, 2009, p. 8). Materialism contains the notion of mind only to mental states that are reasonably produced by typical brain activity. Rupert Sheldrake has done extended research on the *sense of being stared at*, telepathy, and precognition. All of these abilities are widely experienced and scientifically studied as well as they can be, but the subjects of these experiences are still doubted since they do not fall neatly into that which is directly, or traditionally, scientifically observed and measured. Thus, it is easy for people to dismiss these extra-sensory perceptions as merely imagined. Sheldrake says that these kinds of telepathy or premonitions “appear to happen but if all possible kinds of forces, fields and information-transfer are already known to science, then they ought not to exist” (Sheldrake, 2009, p. 247). This really forces us to question whether the science we have of fundamental principles is complete or not, and further it forces us to question whether there are legitimate kinds of experiences that we still just cannot account for scientifically.

One other area in which we could potentially have a sixth sense is below the skin. We have a multitude of molecular and biological experiences that happen inside of our bodies that we are hardly ever aware of but which regulate our internal states. Howard Hughes explains that

our senses of balance, of body motion, and of posture, depend on sensory organs in the inner ear, in our joints, and in muscles [...] these organs provide the brain with information essential to life, but they do not produce conscious sensory experiences (otherwise, people would be aware of the onset of hypertension, and it would less frequently go undetected). (Hughes, 2001, p. 5)

There are a multitude of these senses that seem to exist internally to the body, but that are neither mental states nor sensory information from the external world. They are internal bodily senses like kinesthesia, muscle memory, and balance. These may not be considered senses in their own right because they are not directed specifically at receiving impressions from the external world.

Anthropologists study the senses in multiple cultures and ages and a few of these anthropologists have come up with an ever-evolving list of all of the senses that different cultures have argued for. They call this list an *abcderium* as it uses the alphabet to generate different ways of thinking about things and then organizing them. The *abcderium* of Extra/Sensory Powers includes the following:

Animal Magnetism (Mesmer); Anomalous Cognition; Anpsi; Balance; Beauty; Being stared at (Sheldrake); Blink (Gladwell); Body (Cashinahua); Bones (Andean); Clairallience; Clairaudience; Clairgustance; Clairsentience; Clairvoyance; Coenesthesia; Common Sense (or *sensus communis*); Cosmic

Consciousness; Déjà vu; Direction; Dowsing; Dreaming; Echolocation; Electroreception; ESP; Film Sense (Eisenstein); Genital; Gut Feeling; Hallucinogens; Hearing; Heart; Honor; Humor; Imagination; Inner Senses (Medieval); Instinct; Internal Senses (Eighteenth Century); Interoceptive Senses (Nineteenth and Twentieth Century); Intuition; Jacobson's Organ; Kinaesthesia; Liver; Magnetic; Mass Media; Memory; Mimetic Faculty; Mind (Buddhism); Moral Sense; Navigation; Occult; Pain; Paroptic Vision; Pineal Gland; Plant Psi; Precognition; Premonition; Pressure; Proprioception; Psychokinesis; Psychometry; Public Sense; Quintessence; Remote-viewing; Second Brain (Gershon); Second Sight (Scottish); Sight; Smell; Speech; Spiritual Senses (Origen, Swedenborg); Synaesthesia; Taste; Telepathy; Temperature; Third Ear; Third Eye; Touch; Trance; Unconscious (Freud); Vibration; Visionary; Whiskers; Wind (Navajo); X-ray; Yogic; Zen Meditation. (Howes, 2009, p. 358)

4. Conclusion

As we can see from this, there are lots of different ways of thinking about *how we know*, that go well beyond just the traditional five senses. Philosophers now, I suspect, stick with the traditional five because of tradition, but also because they align neatly with the ways of knowing that are traditionally accepted and understood.

As one might *see* at this point, we can only decide which sensations should count as senses by deciding what the definition of a sense is. Of course this might be a perfect job for a philosopher. If we begin with the assumption that there is an internal, coherent mind and the senses are embodied so that they just feed the mind information, but function only as passive mediators for sensory data, then making sense of the senses is a very different matter than if the senses are doing some of the interpretation of their own. It also seems to make a big difference if we lump the senses together as the senses or if we really consider them as fundamentally different kinds of reception or perception. The history of the senses reminds us that perception has never been merely biological. What counts as a sense – and which senses matter most – has always reflected deeper philosophical commitments about knowledge, reason, and what it means to be human.

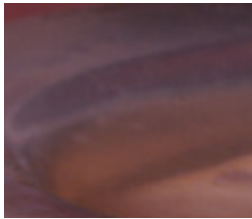
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Research Articles

The *Old Abnormal*

Continuous Experiencing of Terror and the Negative Sublime

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This article examines the aesthetic dimensions of prolonged Russian aerial terror in Ukrainian rear cities. Moving beyond the dominant paradigm of terror as spectacle, it argues that contemporary Ukrainian experience is shaped by what Tina Polek terms the *new abnormal*, now solidified into an *old abnormal* in which disruption becomes a permanent condition of everyday life. Drawing on Arnold Berleant's theory of negative aesthetics, Kant's notion of the monstrous, and everyday aesthetics (Saito, Bachelard), the article conceptualises civilian life under bombardment as an engaged, embodied, and ethically charged aesthetic condition. It proposes the concept of an anti-sublime to describe how practices of care, repair, and dwelling resist the aesthetic and moral erasure produced by repeated terror. In this framework, meaning arises not from the spectacle of destruction but from the fragile persistence of everyday life under conditions of continuous threat. | *Keywords: Everyday Aesthetics, Negative Sublime, Acoustic Terror, Care, Urban Aesthetics*

1. Introduction

The phrase *new normal* is widely used across sociology and disaster studies to describe the stabilising phase that follows a rupture: societies incorporate disruption into routine and re-establish functional patterns of life. In protracted war, however, this framework falters. It presumes an arc – from crisis to adaptation to a renewed normality – whereas the civilian experience of long war is often defined by the ongoingness of rupture and the exhaustion of adapting to what does not end.

Ukrainian cultural anthropologist Tina Polek (2022) proposes the term *new abnormal* to name precisely this condition: the transformation of emergency into permanence, where unpredictability and danger do not recede but become constitutive of everyday life. In her description of Kyiv in the first months after the full-scale invasion, she registers a paradox: what looks like 'irresponsibility' to newly arrived foreigners – Kyiv residents not rushing to

shelter at every siren – is, in fact, a socially learned survival tactic shaped by the sheer frequency of alarms. The siren, once a signal demanding immediate bodily relocation, becomes background noise unless confirmed by proximate explosions and air defence fire. Polek narrates the mutual bafflement: foreigners are shocked by local nonchalance, while locals are shocked by the foreigners' literal obedience to the siren's imperative, as if an emergency could be treated as an episodic event rather than an extended condition (Tina Polek, 2022).

Polek's conceptual move is essential because it displaces a comforting narrative of recovery and highlights a different temporality: the persistence of threat. Yet in Ukraine the war has already exceeded the time horizon implied by *new abnormal*. When a condition lasts long enough, it ceases to be merely 'new'. It becomes the environment within which childhood, socialisation, and ordinary life unfold. After several years of full-scale war, we can speak about an *old abnormal*: a temporally sedimented abnormality, in which the extraordinary is neither overcome nor newly integrated, but rather repetitively endured. The *old abnormal* does not describe psychological habituation (which is never complete), but a historical fact: time has passed inside the abnormal. Children have grown into conscious age without remembering a non-war civic atmosphere; adults have accumulated years of interrupted sleep; domestic interiors and urban infrastructures have been re-scripted by repeated strikes, blackouts, and the constant possibility of loss.

The central argument of this article is threefold. First, that the *old abnormal* produces a specific aesthetic condition in which the collapse of aesthetic distance is not an exception but a structural feature of everyday life under sustained aerial terror. Second, that this collapse renders the standard application of the sublime – predicated on safety, distance, and spectatorial position – both analytically inadequate and ethically problematic: to designate the experience of those who are targeted as 'sublime' risks aestheticising what should resist aestheticisation. Third, that the concept of the anti-sublime, grounded in practices of care, repair, and engaged dwelling, offers a more adequate framework – one that acknowledges the genuine aesthetic transformation of everyday life under threat without either beautifying violence or denying the aesthetic dimension of wartime experience altogether.

The question is not about aesthetic beautification of violence; it is about whether – and how – perception, embodiment, spatial inhabitation, and the sensory organisation of daily life under threat can be theorised within aesthetics as a discipline. This includes the ethical stakes of aesthetic discourse itself: the risk that aesthetic framing may distance, domesticate, or even romanticise violence.

This risk was articulated with unmatched clarity by Susan Sontag, who warns against assuming a stable collective subject ('we') when looking at other people's pain: "No 'we' should be taken for granted when the subject is looking at other people's pain" (Sontag, 2003, p. 3). The Ukrainian case introduces a complication that Sontag's framework – developed primarily in relation to

distant observers of others' suffering – does not fully anticipate. In Ukraine, the asymmetry between the one who suffers and the one who looks is not simply a function of geographical or political distance. It is reproduced within the same subject: the civilian who survives an attack at night may, by morning, encounter its documentation on a screen – photographs of the building, thermal imaging footage, the kill count. One becomes, in effect, both the body inside the event and the spectator of its representation. The 'we' that Sontag problematises is thus fractured not only between nations or positions but within the experience of a single person. This internal loop – being inside the spectacle, then seeing oneself inside it via media – does not dissolve the ethical force of Sontag's warning; it radicalises it. The question is no longer only whose pain is seen and by whom, but what happens to perception, affect, and aesthetic response when the boundary between witness and witnessed collapses from within.

To respond to that dilemma, this article proceeds in four movements. It begins from the phenomenology of the civilian body under aerial attack – the sensory, spatial, and temporal restructuring of everyday life in Kyiv. It then examines dominant aesthetic frameworks for thinking about terror, centred on the spectacle paradigm, and identifies their structural inadequacy for a situation in which the spectator and the victim coincide. Drawing on negative aesthetics and theories of the quotidian sublime, it develops a conceptual vocabulary for this experience. Finally, it proposes that practices of care, repair, and engaged dwelling constitute an anti-sublime that resists the aestheticisation of violence while acknowledging the genuine aesthetic transformation of everyday life under sustained threat.

This is not an ethnography in the conventional sense, though it draws on ethnographic attentiveness to daily practices. It is also not a trauma narrative, though it speaks from within a traumatising environment. Methodologically, it is closest to phenomenological description combined with critical aesthetic theory. The core empirical material is my own experience as a civilian in Kyiv during continuous aerial terror, including sheltering routines with my family and observations of damaged urban sites.

This positionality matters. Many studies of terror and terrorism – especially within aesthetics – begin from mediated encounter: film, photography, television, found footage formats, or the reception of spectacular events transmitted globally. Such scholarship is valuable, but it often presumes an observer who retains the option of distance. In my case, I write from 'the other side of the camera,' not as an image-consumer but as a body whose sleep, hearing, domestic space, and sense of time are reorganised by the repeated prospect of impact.

This does not grant epistemic privilege over all other positions, but it does alter the ethical configuration of description. One cannot 'choose' to engage aesthetically with an air raid. One is forced into engagement. In Berleant's terms, violence abolishes disinterestedness and makes the witness vulnerable, threatened, and therefore aesthetically *engaged* (Berleant,

2019). The article therefore treats *aesthetics* not as a detached appreciation but as a field capable of addressing involuntary, negative, and morally saturated experience.

In a rear city under regular aerial attacks, war is most immediately given not as a front line but as terrorism against civilians through missiles and drones. The attacks vary in intensity by geography and period, but their shared feature is the vulnerability of 'soft targets': residential buildings, hospitals, universities, schools, childcare centres, business hubs, cafés, offices, warehouses, and production spaces. In such conditions, the city is no longer merely a site of dwelling; it becomes a space of constant negotiation between survival and continuity. The dominant sensory channel of this negotiation is sound. War arrives as sirens, engine whine, air defence fire, detonations, the falling clatter of debris, and the occasional frightening silence between these events.

A major part of wartime experience occurs before anything happens: anticipation. The expectation of an attack becomes a background mode of being. Over time, one learns that the question is not *if* but *when*. This transforms domestic space into a field of strategic thinking. Gradually, it becomes ordinary to think: a drone or a fragment might hit *this* building, *this* entrance, *this* apartment. In that scenario, there will be explosion, fire, and potential loss of home. Even if the hit is elsewhere in the building, windows may shatter; shards become a danger to sleeping bodies. Thus the apartment is re-evaluated not as a stable 'home' but as a set of zones with different probabilities of harm.

People learn the rule of 'two walls': interior spaces protected by two or more walls (bathrooms, closets, corridors near elevator shafts) are considered safer from shrapnel. Yet everyone also knows the cruel limit: in direct impact, no wall 'protects'. This knowledge produces a peculiar domestic logic: one simultaneously prepares and recognises the futility of preparation. The apartment becomes both refuge and potential trap.

From this domestic logic emerges a set of micro-rituals of survival. Bedtime is preceded by assembling 'transition kits' (documents, medicine, water, snacks, warm clothes), choosing sleeping locations away from windows, preparing routes to shelters, and constructing interior niches as improvised protective spaces. These practices form an emergent aesthetics of care and endurance, where mundane gestures acquire existential intentionality. Crucially, the micro-ritual is not only practical; it is perceptual and affective. Laying out a backpack by the door, placing a child's shoes in reach, moving a mattress to the hallway – these are gestures that reorganise the meaning of objects. They become charged: not objects of comfort, but instruments of continuity. Here, 'everyday aesthetics' shifts from taste to maintenance of life.

A clarification is needed, however, about what makes these practices specifically aesthetic rather than merely engaged or habitual. Engagement, as Berleant uses the term, describes the continuity between subject and environment – the absence of detached, disinterested spectatorship.

But engagement alone does not define the aesthetic: one can be fully continuous with one's environment in a purely functional, automatic, or rule-governed way without any aesthetic dimension arising. What distinguishes aesthetic engagement from mere environmental immersion is a quality that several theorists of everyday aesthetics have tried to articulate in different ways. Saito, drawing on Dewey, emphasises the unity and completeness of perceptual experience – the moment when an activity becomes an *experience* in Dewey's full sense: internally organised, felt as a whole, and distinguished from the mere passage of events (Dewey, 1934). Berleant himself, in his later work, speaks of the intensity and quality of perceptual involvement – not quantity of contact but a particular mode of attentiveness. What both accounts share, and what the wartime practices described in this article exemplify, is a further feature: their irreducible situatedness and non-rule-governed character. Assembling a transition kit is not aesthetic because it is expressive or beautiful, but because it cannot be performed by rote. Each time, it requires a fresh assessment of what this particular situation demands. The practice unfolds in response to the specific, the contingent, the unrepeatable. And it is precisely this improvisatory, situation-responsive quality – the creative attentiveness demanded by conditions that never repeat themselves exactly – that grounds the aesthetic character of wartime care practices.

In many Ukrainian cities, there are limited purpose-built bomb shelters. Metro stations and dedicated underground shelters exist but are unevenly accessible. Often, people use underground parking garages in newer buildings or basements in older housing stock. These spaces are re-made by residents. Over time, shelter interiors accumulate furniture brought from apartments – folding chairs, camping tables, blankets – and infrastructure such as Wi-Fi. In some cases, families bring sofas so that parents with small children can sleep.

It is a form of domesticisation of an emergency space – and, more precisely, an aesthetic act in a specific rather than merely broad sense. What is at stake is not spatial organisation in the abstract but a particular kind of sensory and affective transformation. The underground parking garage, with its smell of concrete and petrol, its harsh fluorescent light and acoustics of dripping water and car alarms, is an environment that assaults perception. It modifies what Berleant calls the aesthetic field – the quality of perceptual engagement available to those who inhabit the space (Berleant, 2009). A shelter furnished for human duration alters the temporal and sensory experience of waiting: it permits conversation, rest, and a form of sociality that is incompatible with bare concrete. In Saito's terms, the transformation of a shelter into a provisional home is an act of aesthetic care – it shapes the quality of embodied inhabitation and the nature of perceptual engagement with a shared environment (Saito, 2022, p. 141).

Yet the most difficult moment is often not the time inside the shelter but the threshold: the decision to leave the apartment, to wake a child, to move through stairwells and elevators that may fail during blackout. The shelter is safer, but the act of getting there is a negotiation with exhaustion, fear, and uncertainty. This threshold experience is a key component of the *old abnormal*:

the repeated crossing between private interior and emergency interior, night after night, year after year.

If your building is not hit that night, the attack is primarily lived as auditory experience. Sirens may or may not be heeded; the decisive sounds are closer: air defence fire, the buzzing approach of drones, the explosive booms of interception or impact, and the after-sounds – debris falling on roofs, car alarms, human voices. The affective structure of these sounds is contradictory. A boom triggers instinctive flinch and fear; yet if the boom signals that air defence has destroyed a drone, it may also bring relief, even joy. The same sound is simultaneously terror and salvation. This ambivalence is part of the aesthetic complexity of wartime hearing: perception is saturated with interpretation. You do not merely hear; you listen diagnostically. You try to decide what kind of sound it is, where it is, whether it is approaching, whether it is 'above us.' The auditory field becomes a cognitive map.

The next day, even if one managed to sleep in a shelter, the sleep is usually shallow and interrupted. Yet 'normal' weekday life resumes: morning hygiene, children to school or kindergarten (where staff are already present), commuting, working, supporting others. This routine is conducted under chronic fatigue that accumulates into exhaustion and decreased productivity.

The morning is also saturated with news: which buildings were hit, who was killed or injured (how many adults, how many children), what infrastructure was damaged, whether electricity and water will be cut. Blackouts and outages become unpredictable and therefore must be incorporated into daily planning: one continues living, caring, working, speaking about 'ordinary' problems, even when light and water disappear.

This is where the spectacle model collapses most clearly. There is no 'viewing' position. One becomes, in effect, an uncredited participant in a scene that could later become a film. Yet the participation is not chosen; it is imposed. The civilian is not an audience; the civilian is a vulnerable body inside the event. This collapse has a direct bearing on Sontag's warning that the 'we' of spectatorship masks asymmetries of safety and distance. In the Ukrainian rear city under sustained bombardment, this distinction breaks down from within: the same person who is the vulnerable body inside the event will, by morning, encounter its documentation on a screen, become, briefly, a spectator of their own night. The asymmetry Sontag diagnoses does not disappear – it is reproduced, but now internally, within a single subject oscillating between the two positions. It is precisely this oscillation – between being inside the spectacle and seeing oneself inside it – that existing aesthetic frameworks for terror, built around the figure of the distant observer, are unable to account for. The discussion that follows examines those frameworks and their limits.

2. Terror in Aesthetic Theory: The Dominance of the Spectacle Paradigm

To understand how the everyday experience of wartime Ukraine is translated 'for the world,' it is instructive to look closely at recent journalistic reports, both international and Ukrainian. These texts do not merely transmit

information; they actively produce a regime of meaning – a way in which war becomes legible, measurable, and communicable to distant audiences. At the same time, they reveal the structural tension between testimony and objectification.

A recent international investigative report opens with the refusal of quiet as a category of wartime life: “This summer, there were no quiet nights” (Johnson et al., 2025). What follows is a movement from the lived night into the language of scale: numbers of drones and missiles, the tally of dead and injured, the intensification of bombardment. The account culminates in a formulation that returns to the body and the senses: “To endure a night of war is to be assaulted by noise” (Johnson et al., 2025).

A second passage from the same report deepens this sensory ontology through rhythm and sound imagery: “Death in Ukraine lurks between sounds. Echoing in the hush between the thunderclap of exploding drones. Spiking in the seconds after a ballistic missile’s boom. Plinking like debris falling against a roof” (Johnson et al., 2025).

Here, sound is no longer simply described; it is performed in language. The sentence structure mimics the experience of waiting, of listening, of anticipating the next impact. Death is not located in a single explosion but in the intervals between them – in the suspended time of acoustic uncertainty. The article thus captures something essential about contemporary Ukrainian civilian life: the war is not only what happens; it is what might happen again in the next few seconds.

A Ukrainian report describes the same phenomenon through a different discursive lens. It emphasises long-term psychological inscription and collective memory:

The sounds of explosions and gunfire, the constant wailing of sirens and air-raid alerts have become everyday life for Ukrainians [...] This traumatic experience, deeply buried in the subconscious, will never disappear. It will be rooted in the collective memory of the Ukrainian people for at least several generations. This is the consequence of acoustic terror. (Khut, 2024)

There is no reason to doubt the empirical truth of this statement. And yet its language is unmistakably clinical. *Traumatic experience, subconscious, acoustic terror* resemble the vocabulary of a medical file or a psychological diagnosis. In such a framework, the civilian becomes implicitly a patient, and society becomes a damaged organism to be assessed. This tension between testimony and objectification becomes even more pronounced when we turn to academic literature on terror and terrorism.

Some authors, echoing Theodor Adorno’s post-Auschwitz provocation, question whether any *aesthetic* can be entertained after witnessing terror first-hand (Senoussi, 2018, p. 33). Others argue that ‘successful’ terrorist acts offer an aesthetic experience structurally comparable to artworks because they are products of and in a medium, resembling performance or cinema (Battisti, 2022). Still others insist that terrorism is *designed to look* theatrical, even if it is not theatre: orchestrated violence intended to destabilise an audience (Battersby, 2013).

These debates are instructive but often hover at the level of analogy – terrorism as performance, terror as art-like – and thus risk granting terrorists the aesthetic agency they seek. They also raise an ethical problem: if the terror ‘impresses’ aesthetically, does that imply admiration? Emmanouil Aretoulakis (2008) attempts to resolve this by arguing that appreciation of beauty – even in the case of 9/11 – may be necessary to establish an ethical stance toward terror, life, and art. The argument suggests that aesthetic power can be ethically mobilised. Yet it remains tied to the spectator’s position: it is about how terror appears and affects those who behold it.

A revealing example is the discussion of Thomas Hoepker’s photograph taken on 11 September 2001 in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, showing people relaxed in sunlight while smoke rises across the river. Samuel Weber (2013, p. 29) notes that the image’s power lies in the nonchalance it depicts at the moment when the grounds supporting that attitude are literally being consumed in the background. The moral shock emerges from contrast: leisure and catastrophe in one frame.

Hoepker’s photograph also recalls Martha Rosler’s photomontage series *House Beautiful: Bringing the War Home* (1967–72), in which images of war enter the domestic idyll of American interiors, exposing the mediated intimacy of distant violence. Rosler’s gesture is critical: she shows that war is already ‘in’ the home via television and newspapers, and she makes that intrusion literal. In Ukraine, however, the montage becomes reality. The war does not enter the home as image alone; it enters as blast waves, shattered windows, boarded facades, and sleep in hallways away from glass. The domestic interior is not merely a site of mediated viewing; it is a site of direct vulnerability. Rosler’s critique thus helps identify a shift: from the aesthetics of mediated intrusion to the aesthetics of material and sensory invasion.

One of the most helpful conceptual moves for this problem comes from Robert Appelbaum (2019, p. 5), who argues that what we talk about when we talk about terrorism unfolds in several temporal modes: something that happened, has happened, is happening, or simply happens. Classic communications models treat an event as a discrete occurrence followed by media reaction, but Appelbaum insists that terrorism discourse operates through shifting temporalities that structure how we inhabit the event imaginatively.

Appelbaum also warns that popular culture often renders terrorism as something that “just happens,” with vague past and irrelevant future – an entertainment modality that can take viewers “hostage” (Appelbaum, 2019, p. 15). Wartime Ukraine exposes the ethical gap between that entertainment temporality and lived temporality. Here terrorism is not a plot device; it is a recurring condition that reorganises life.

It is at this point that the concept of the sublime enters the discussion. Historically, the sublime has been the category through which aesthetic theory has tried to make sense of experiences that combine fear, awe, and attraction. In the eighteenth century, it was linked to the power of reason confronting overwhelming nature. In the twenty-first century, it is often mobilised to

account for the strange allure of catastrophe and terror in mass-mediated culture.

Some scholars explain our fascination with horror and terror by pointing to what Noël Carroll and Carolyn Korsmeyer describe as the *paradox of aversion*: people are drawn to experiences that deliver unpleasantness and even pain, combining curiosity, disgust, and a strange form of pleasure (Stern, 2013; Pascale, 2016). The sublime, in this sense, becomes a way of legitimising our attraction to what repels us.

But when applied to real terror, this move becomes ethically dangerous. György Fogarasi has therefore warned that the fashionable linkage between the *aesthetics of the sublime* and terrorism risks emptying both concepts of meaning. Without radically rethinking what the sublime is, invoking notions such as the *negative sublime* in relation to events like the Holocaust may imply – however unintentionally – that scholars experience some form of ‘indirect’ pleasure in contemplating Auschwitz (Fogarasi, 2014). This warning shows that we cannot simply extend the sublime to encompass contemporary terror without confronting the risk of aestheticising what should resist aestheticisation.

Berleant’s earlier work (2009) already identifies this structural tension within the aesthetics of terrorism. He argues that terror, while possessing dramatic force and staged theatricality, simultaneously overwhelms the boundaries of objectivity: its audience is not disinterested but threatened and vulnerable. Crucially, Berleant distinguishes between disinterested appreciation – which aestheticises violence and thereby risks condoning it – and engaged appreciation, which confronts violence as aesthetically negative and morally intolerable. In the Ukrainian case, this distinction is not merely theoretical: it describes two actually available modes of reception. On one side stands the mediated spectatorship available to international audiences, for whom Ukrainian war arrives as image, data, and narrative. On the other stands the engaged, involuntary participation of civilians whose sensory environment is structured by recurring threat – for whom the distinction between spectator and target has dissolved. The difference between these two positions is not one of degree but of kind, and it is this difference that motivates the shift, in what follows, from spectacle-based models to the negative aesthetics of engagement.

It is at this point that I turn away from spectacle-based models and toward negative aesthetics and engaged perception, which allow us to think about terror not as something we look at, but as something that happens to and through us.

3. The Sublime as a Mode of Aesthetic Experience of Everyday Terror

The preceding sections have operated at two distinct but related levels: the phenomenology of the individual civilian body and domestic interior under aerial attack, and the analysis of how aesthetic theory has conceptualised terror as a cultural and mediated phenomenon. Bringing these levels into

contact requires a conceptual bridge. That bridge is built from three components: Berleant's negative aesthetics, which replaces spectatorship with engagement as the foundational mode of aesthetic experience; Kant's distinction between the sublime and the monstrous, which provides a diagnostic tool for identifying where classical aesthetics reaches its limits under conditions of direct threat; and an account of temporal rather than spatial distance as the condition that makes a modified sublimity possible in sustained wartime. What connects the personal and the theoretical is the collapse of the spectatorial position: in the *old abnormal*, there is no outside to retreat to, no safe distance from which to aestheticise one's own vulnerability.

Much aesthetic writing on terror and terrorism has been shaped by media events and representational forms: 9/11 as the paradigmatic spectacle, cinema's staging of fear, video games' survival mechanics, found footage aesthetics, and the ethics of viewing. For example, discussions of horror and terror in visual culture often focus on how the camera becomes a tool – recording alternative versions of events, revealing what characters cannot otherwise see, or functioning as a weapon (McMurdo, 2017). Such analyses illuminate how contemporary media organise fear.

Many scholars note that 9/11 was intrinsically linked to its instantaneous worldwide televising, affecting people far beyond those directly threatened (Bleiker and Leet, 2006, p. 715). Terrorism, in this view, aims less at destroying physical targets than at destabilising audiences through mediated circulation. This is a crucial insight for understanding modern terror, but it also centres the 'audience' as the primary locus of terror's efficacy. In the Ukrainian case, the audience and the victims overlap: the same people are both the threatened bodies and the consumers of information about the threat. One lives the event and then watches its documentation. The result is a loop: being inside the spectacle, then seeing oneself inside it via media.

The experience differs fundamentally from terror-as-spectacle theories. Civilians in Kyiv do not observe violence from a safe distance; they inhabit its interior. One becomes a participant in an unfolding scene – a future documentary or analysis – in which today's 'extras' enact survival rather than witness representation. Aesthetic distance collapses.

Even when one is not personally hit, the city confronts civilians with spectacular scenes: a building with a black cavity, a torn-off entrance, a street scattered with glass. Like passing a car accident, the gaze sticks – even against one's will. This is not voyeurism in the simple sense; it is an involuntary response to visible catastrophe. Yet here again ethics enters: to look is to risk turning others' disaster into an image, while to look away is to deny shared reality. This tension sits at the heart of wartime aesthetics: the constant negotiation between attention and respect, between witnessing and consumption.

Theoretical frameworks help to clarify why the civilian experience of sustained bombardment in rear cities is so difficult to conceptualise aesthetically. Arnold Berleant's notion of negative aesthetics and the negative sublime describes

situations in which terror overwhelms perceptual capacities and collapses the possibility of detached contemplation; Immanuel Kant's concept of the monstrous, by contrast, identifies experiences that paralyse imagination and compel a primarily moral – rather than aesthetic – response. Contemporary Ukraine often occupies precisely this unstable threshold: a space in which the classical sublime slides into the monstrous, and yet where daily life continues through adaptive routines, practices of care, and a reconfigured mode of inhabiting urban space.

Berleant theorises the possibility of a negative aesthetics – an aesthetics of violence and harm inseparable from an ethics of violence. The key mechanism here is engagement: aesthetic experience is not defined by distance and disinterest but by a continuity between subject and object, in which perception becomes ethically charged. Negative experience is not an exception reserved for extreme events; it is pervasive, though often unrecognised, because it is “commonplace and unremarked” (Berleant, 2019). For Berleant, the crucial danger is not simply that violence appears in art, but that social life normalises violence by turning its presentation into an object of disinterested appreciation. When violence is aesthetically consumed without moral consequence, it becomes socially condoned. When appreciation becomes engaged, however, it can function as a humanising force by bearing “negative testimony to the moral import of aesthetic experience” (Berleant, 2019).

Berleant's formulation is also important because it names the structural ambiguity of terrorism as an aesthetic object. Terror has dramatic force and staged theatricality; thus one can speak of an ‘aesthetics of terrorism.’ Yet precisely through its aesthetic impact, terror overwhelms the boundaries of objectivity; its audience is not disinterested but threatened and vulnerable (Berleant, 2019). Disinterested appreciation aestheticises violence and thereby risks condoning it; engaged appreciation confronts violence as aesthetically negative and morally intolerable, making aesthetic experience a testimony to its moral significance (Berleant, 2019).

To approach the sublime as an analytic category, it is necessary to return briefly to the canonical modern theorists: Edmund Burke and Immanuel Kant. Burke famously argues that when danger or pain press too near, they produce no delight; they are *simply terrible*. Only “at certain distances, and with certain modifications,” can fear become “delightful,” which is to say, capable of yielding the aesthetic pleasure associated with the sublime (Burke, 1757/2005). This emphasis on distance is crucial for thinking about war as sound.

Burke explicitly highlights sudden and excessive sound as a generator of terror:

Excessive loudness alone is sufficient to overpower the soul, to suspend its action, and to fill it with terror [...] The noise of [...] thunder, or artillery, awakes a great and awful sensation in the mind [...] A sudden beginning, or sudden cessation of sound of any considerable force, has the same power. (Burke, 1757/2005)

Yet Burke's account still assumes the possibility of an aesthetic transformation: at the right distance, terror can become sublime.

Kant radicalises the issue by distinguishing between what remains within the aesthetic domain and what breaks it. In §26 of the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, he differentiates the colossal – the “almost too large for any exhibition” – from the monstrous, which nullifies the purpose of the concept and overwhelms the faculties (Kant, 1987, p. 253). The pure judgement of the sublime, Kant insists, must have no purpose of the object as its basis; it must remain aesthetic rather than mixed with the judgement of understanding or reason (*Ibid.*).

Building on this, Herman Parret offers a sharp interpretation: the colossal remains within the aesthetics of the sublime, but the monstrous lies beyond it. The monstrous paralyses the mind; it destroys imagination and produces pain so intense that mediation between pain and pleasure becomes impossible. This is the domain of “ultimate ugliness,” whose affective effect is disgust or loathing; here, no aesthetic relation is possible, only a moral attitude (Parret, 2016, p. 14). In Parret’s reading, ugliness is not simply the opposite of beauty; it stands “on the other side” of the sublime, beyond the grasp of representational faculties (*Ibid.*).

These distinctions become analytically urgent in the context of repeated aerial terror. The phenomenology of attacks in a rear city resembles Burke’s catalogue of sudden and overwhelming sounds – artillery-like bursts, detonations, concussive waves – yet the distance required for sublimity is missing. Often the explosion is not literally “above you,” but the sound wave is so powerful that it produces an effect akin to Kant’s monstrous: the mind is stunned, the imagination cannot “frame” the event, and the immediate reaction is axiological – fear, disgust, moral protest. In other words, Kantian sublimity is structurally unavailable at the moment of attack: it is too close, too engulfing, too large to be comprehended “within one whole” (Kant, 1987, p. 253). This is why the Kantian model – so effective for thinking about the sublime in nature, and later for thinking about the sublime in art – becomes problematic when applied to the lived reality of recurring terror.

For this reason, the concept that offers the most promise for my analysis is Berleant’s negative sublime, rooted in social aesthetics and an aesthetics of engagement. He notes that Kant’s dynamical sublime requires that we feel secure and unthreatened, able to rise above fear rather than be subject to it. Even war, Kant suggests, can contain something sublime if conducted with order and respect for citizens’ rights – presumably by protecting non-combatants. In terrorism, by contrast, sublimity appears in the intensity of physical force and engulfing emotional power, in the overwhelming psychological pressure of the situation (*Ibid.*). The Ukrainian war collapses the Kantian condition even more radically: civilians are not protected; they are repeatedly targeted. The rear becomes a battlefield. The ‘spectator’ position erodes.

At the same time, Berleant’s later work (2019) becomes especially valuable because it opens space for describing the aesthetic character of witness experience. The aesthetics of violence, by the standard of engaged experience,

is unqualifiedly negative – appalling, emotionally distressing, morally repugnant; it is a direct encounter with negativity (Berleant, 2019, p. 9). While perpetrators may be disinterested and victims abstract in the logic of terror, the experience of the witness is personal and compelling – an engaged aesthetic (*Ibid.*). And because disinterested appreciation condones violence by aestheticising it, engaged aesthetic appreciation can become a humanising force by confronting aesthetic negativity and testifying to the moral significance of aesthetic experience (*Ibid.*).

This is the bridge I need: a way to theorise my own experience (and the experience of other civilians) without turning terror into spectacle. The aim of this article is not to find pleasure in horror, nor to redeem violence through aesthetic categories, but to analyse a lived condition in which sensory experience, domestic space, and urban routines are restructured by recurring threat – and to use that analysis as an entry point into ethical theorising. If the experience is left only in the registers of trauma, pathology, and statistics, it remains objectified. An engaged negative aesthetics, by contrast, allows the experience to be articulated as meaningful without being beautified.

A remaining difficulty, however, is that Berleant's negative sublime often presumes either spectatorship or a single extraordinary event. The Ukrainian condition is not a one-time spectacle but an accumulated temporality of recurrence: terror enters everyday life repeatedly and predictably enough to become routine, yet never predictably enough to become safe. This is why concepts such as the 'mundane sublime' and typologies of terror aesthetics become relevant.

Jenifer Presto (2011) identifies what he calls a *decadent sublime* in Alexander Blok's aestheticisation of catastrophe and terror. Steven Cresap (1990, p. 111), earlier, introduced the *mundane sublime* to describe "how we use the value of the sublime to deal with a world in which the destruction of cities is no longer a remote possibility". This formulation resonates strongly with contemporary Ukraine, where urban destruction is not a distant scenario but an experienced condition of possibility – one that shapes daily planning, bodily tension, and the temporal structure of nights and mornings.

Marshall Battani and Michaelyn Mankel attempt to extend Berleant's (2017) negative sublime precisely in this direction, proposing a typology that includes the negative sublime but adds two aesthetic types: the corporeal and the quotidian. They note that the juxtaposition of everyday images with captions that redefine them as terror casts terror and everyday life into supporting roles; terrorism begins to operate like what Berleant (2009, cited in Battani and Mankel, 2017) called "a vicious lottery with equal opportunity to lose," highlighting the circumstantial and oblivious nature of victimisation – especially apt for quotidian terror directed at "soft targets". Crucially, they argue that aesthetic appreciation is key to constructing a thoroughly ethical stance toward terror because it engages all faculties while privileging none; ideal types built from socio-technical moments offer a sociologically informed framework for such engagement (Battani and Mankel, 2017).

The question, then, remains: can the prolonged, repeated experience of urban terror be understood through the lens of a negative sublime that has become quotidian – an everyday sublimity without spatial distance? One possibility – advanced here as a conceptual hypothesis rather than a definitive claim, and necessarily conditioned by the particularity of the position from which it is offered – is that what makes a modified sublimity available in sustained wartime is not spatial but temporal distance. This hypothesis may be generalisable beyond the individual case: wherever a civilian population endures prolonged, recurring aerial terror rather than a single spectacular attack, the phenomenological structure of the experience shifts from the instantaneous to the durational, from shock to endurance. In this durational structure, the relevant aesthetic transformation does not occur in the moment of attack – which tends toward the monstrous, in Kant’s precise sense, overwhelming the faculties without permitting mediation – but in the aftermath: in the experience of having survived, of the body’s continued presence in a world it might have left. This is not pleasure in violence, nor redemption of suffering through aesthetic categories; it is, rather, a minimal, ethically charged affirmation of continued existence. Whether this constitutes sublimity in a philosophically rigorous sense remains genuinely open. What can be claimed is that it constitutes a distinct aesthetic mode – one that resists both the spectacular framing of terror and the denial of any aesthetic dimension to wartime experience altogether.

A second scenario complicates the picture: witnessing the aftermath of catastrophe elsewhere in the city. When one sees, with one’s own eyes, a building torn open by impact – a black cavity in a residential block, debris scattered, volunteers assisting residents – the scene becomes a ‘spectacle’ in a literal sense. But the witness position is ethically unstable: it can reproduce the voyeuristic logic that Sontag warns against. The question is whether this witnessing can be framed not as consumption of ruins, but as engaged recognition of vulnerability and care.

In November 2025, an impact occurred near my home. The affected building was where Tetiana, the gardener who appears in my earlier article *The vernacular Garden during the War: Heterotopia, Space of Care and Relational Symbol of Non-Violent Resilience* (Butsykina, 2023), lives. When I asked how she was, she said the drone struck the neighbouring entrance: her apartment remained standing, but windows were shattered, and she spent the morning collecting glass. When I asked about her garden, she said it was intact – yet she feared emergency services might throw burned remains onto the young trees she had recently planted. Does this moment contain a place for the sublime – negative, mundane, or otherwise? In one sense, it does: the garden’s survival, and her concern for it amid destruction, condenses a refusal of terror’s totalising claim. But when I later crossed the canal and looked back from a distance, seeing the same black cavity in the building, I did not feel sublimity at all – despite occupying the Kantian ‘correct’ position of distance and visual totality. War and its consequences do not inherently carry sublimity; they cannot yield aesthetic pleasure, even transformed of suffering

and fear. If anything, what approaches sublimity here lies not in destruction but in its inverse: the persistence of inhabitation, care, repair, and the stubborn continuation of a shared world.



Image 1. View of the building hit by a Shahed drone during the night. Kyiv. November 2025

4. Aesthetic Engagement and Care for Dwelling Space as an Anti-Sublime

The condition Tina Polek describes as the *new abnormal* – and which, in Ukraine, has solidified into an *old abnormal* – is precisely such a state of prolonged aesthetic harm. The city is no longer a neutral background for everyday life; it becomes acoustically hostile, visually unstable, and temporally unpredictable. And yet, paradoxically, this condition also generates a dense ecology of reparative aesthetic practices.

These practices are visible across Ukrainian cities: volunteer replanting of bombed parks, painting of checkpoints and barricades, spontaneous war memorials, taped windows, sandbags, plywood facades, and makeshift shelters. None of these are designed as artworks, yet all function aesthetically in Berleant's sense: they reorganise perception, reconfigure space, and reclaim agency within damaged environments. They are acts of aesthetic resistance – not in the sense of symbolic protest but in the sense of sustaining a living world against its systematic destruction. This sensory recalibration is inseparable from practices of care. When shattered windows are immediately covered with plywood, this is not only pragmatic protection but an aesthetic and ethical gesture in Yuriko Saito's sense – an everyday aesthetics of maintenance, repair, and resilience (Saito, 2022).

In Saito's framework, such acts should not be dismissed as merely functional. They are aesthetic precisely because they shape how we live with things, how we attend to them, and how they invite us into relationships of care. Even when an object is "ready-to-hand," actively engaging with it also brings it into the mode of "present-at-hand," allowing it to be experienced not only as a tool but as a participant in a shared world (Saito, 2022, p. 141). Taped windows, boarded doors, or improvised shelters thus become aesthetic objects of

necessity. They invite engagement not as beautiful designs but as signs of shared vulnerability and mutual responsibility.

This relational understanding of the aesthetic becomes even more powerful when read alongside Gaston Bachelard's phenomenology of domestic space. In *The Poetics of Space*, Bachelard writes: "For our house is our corner of the world [...] it is our first universe, a real cosmos in every sense of the word" (Bachelard, 1994, p. 4). Home, in this sense, is not just a physical structure but a cosmological orientation – a way in which the self is anchored in the world.

War radically destabilises this cosmology. In my own case, the Russian invasion of eastern Ukraine in 2014 displaced me from my first home in Luhansk, which now exists only in memory – and not in a nostalgic register, but as a traumatic and politically contaminated space. Yet even in this condition of forced displacement, dwelling does not disappear. What emerges instead is a transformed mode of Heideggerian *Wohnen* – a way of inhabiting space under threat that intensifies attachment rather than dissolving it.

Bachelard's insight that "every corner in a house, every angle in a room, every inch of secluded space in which we like to hide [...] is a symbol of solitude for the imagination" (Bachelard, 1994, p. 136) takes on new meaning here. Under aerial terror, corners and inner rooms are no longer merely poetic refuges; they become strategic zones of survival. Bathrooms, corridors, and closets – spaces protected by two or more walls – are re-purposed into sleeping areas. Mattresses, blankets, and pillows migrate from bedrooms into improvised shelters. Underground parking garages and basements are transformed into nocturnal living rooms, furnished with folding chairs, camp beds, Wi-Fi routers, children's toys, and thermoses of tea.

These spaces accumulate objects of care: water, snacks, power banks, shared blankets. Neighbours place bottles of water and sweets in elevators in case someone is trapped during a power outage caused by an attack on energy infrastructure. These gestures are small, but they create a dense network of mutual attunement. They are aesthetic in the deepest sense: they materialise interdependence.

This is where the anti-sublime emerges. The black cavity in a bombed building does not produce sublimity; it produces shock, grief, and moral outrage. But the garden that persists beside it, the plywood that seals a shattered window, the blanket offered in a shelter – these enact a form of everyday negative sublimity. They do not overwhelm the senses; they resist being overwhelmed. They testify to what Berleant calls an engaged aesthetic: an experience that is emotionally distressing and morally charged, yet capable of sustaining meaning (Berleant, 2019).

Saito's philosophy makes this explicit. Active engagement with material objects allows us to experience them not as anonymous instruments but as partners in a shared history:

We continue the object's history through its own aging process and our interaction with it [...] It is no longer the anonymous other simply serving my needs but something that grows together with me and shares a life and history with me. (Saito, 2022, p. 142)

This is precisely what happens to wartime domestic objects – windows, doors, walls, gardens, shelters. They are scarred, repaired, reinforced, and revisited, becoming witnesses to survival.

Through such aesthetic engagement, Saito argues, we develop a care relationship with the material world and “reclaim and celebrate our interdependence with the world around us” (Saito, 2022, p. 164). In Ukrainian cities under bombardment, this interdependence becomes existential. The anti-sublime is not found in the spectacle of destruction but in the fragile, stubborn, and ethically charged persistence of inhabitation.

This dynamic – the emergence of an anti-sublime from the intersection of recurring threat and the refusal of its totalising claim – is not unique to Ukraine, though it takes a particular and historically specific form there. Wherever civilian populations inhabit the interior of prolonged conflict rather than its mediated exterior, the aesthetic categories developed for spectators require replacement by categories adequate to participants. The anti-sublime is one such category: it names not a redemptive transformation of violence but the aesthetic texture of survival itself – the quality of attention, care, and dwelling that persists under conditions designed to make persistence impossible.

5. Conclusions

This article has argued that the experience of prolonged Russian aerial terror in Ukrainian rear cities constitutes a distinct aesthetic condition that cannot be captured by the dominant paradigm of terror as spectacle. The shift from the *new normal* to what Tina Polek calls the *new abnormal* – and what has now become an *old abnormal* – marks the stabilisation of rupture itself as everyday life. In this condition, danger, uncertainty, and acoustic violence do not interrupt the ordinary; they structure it.

Classical theories of the sublime, grounded in distance and spectatorship, fail to account for this situation. As Burke and Kant already implied, terror becomes aesthetically meaningful only when it is not too close. In contemporary Ukraine, however, missile and drone attacks are experienced at a bodily and spatial proximity that collapses the possibility of sublimity and pushes experience toward the monstrous. Terror is not contemplated; it is endured.

Arnold Berleant's concept of negative aesthetics offers a more adequate framework. By replacing disinterested contemplation with aesthetic engagement, Berleant allows us to understand terror as an aesthetic phenomenon without aestheticising violence. In this perspective, the experience of bombardment is aesthetically negative – distressing, repugnant, and morally charged – yet still meaningful because it is lived and interpreted from within.

However, Ukrainian wartime life also exceeds the logic of the single spectacular event. Drawing on notions of the mundane and quotidian sublime, this article has shown how repeated terror becomes embedded in daily routines, spatial practices, and care relations. The aesthetic force of this condition does not lie in destruction itself, but in the fragile persistence of dwelling: boarded windows, shared shelters, gardens, and everyday acts of repair.

These practices constitute what this article has called an anti-sublime – an aesthetic of resilience that resists both spectacular terror and detached contemplation. In continuing to inhabit, care for, and repair damaged spaces, civilians produce a form of everyday aesthetic and ethical resistance that cannot be captured by frameworks predicated on distance, spectatorship, or the single catastrophic event. The argument advanced here is necessarily situated: it emerges from a specific position, a specific city, a specific duration of war. But its implications extend beyond that position. Wherever the distinction between spectator and target collapses – wherever terror becomes not an event to be witnessed but a condition to be endured – aesthetic theory requires not merely extension but reconstitution. The anti-sublime is one step in that reconstitution: under conditions designed to erase a shared world, the fragile persistence of inhabitation becomes the most meaningful aesthetic act of all.

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Beauty Again

On Singularity, Truth, and the Conditions of Art Today

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This paper examines the role of beauty in the history and theory of art, arguing that its marginalization in the late twentieth century has led to a crisis in the relation between art, truth, and action. Drawing on Nietzsche's conception of life as an aesthetic phenomenon and Plato's critique of mimetic art, the paper traces the gradual displacement of beauty by rational, institutional, and conceptual frameworks. It further analyzes the emergence of kitsch and the increasing mediation of meaning in contemporary art. Against this development, beauty is reconsidered as a condition of immediacy, singularity, and judgment. The paper concludes that the reintroduction of beauty is essential for restoring the possibility of meaning in art and life. Paradoxically, if beauty is not restored as a constitutive value of art – just as truth is to science and justice to politics – the very distinctions between performance and truth, presentation and reality, pretending and genuine emotional expression, original and fake, true action and its simulation risk collapsing. Beauty, as singular necessity – as exercised and exemplified in art – is the condition for meaning in art, and therefore in life. | *Keywords: Beauty, Aesthetics, Singularity, Modern Art, Kitsch, Plato, Nietzsche*

1. Greeks: Art as the Justification of Life

In *The Birth of Tragedy*, while exploring the origins of Western art, Friedrich Nietzsche introduces the metaphor of 'life as a work of art'. For the Greeks, life was justified only as an aesthetic phenomenon – not merely at the level of the individual, but as a mode of being that extended to the life of an entire culture. In their aesthetic conception of life, the Greeks composed their destiny – out of contingency – into a work of art, guided by a sense of beauty and aesthetic sensibility, in which, as in a musical symphony, all actions and individual parts, governed by an 'aesthetic necessity', held a permanent and non-interchangeable place.¹

¹ Nietzsche's (1967, §1) claim that "it is only as an aesthetic phenomenon that existence and the world are eternally justified" constitutes the central thesis of *The Birth of Tragedy*.

Such an artistic attitude to life, in which beauty and truth were one, however, came to an end, Nietzsche claims, with Plato and his introduction of the *other world*. Plato, for Nietzsche, replaced art with metaphysics, thereby denying the 'actual' by displacing all values and norms from the world into a super-empirical realm of Ideas.

Hence, whereas the wise and virtuous man in ancient Greece dwelled in the real world – 'he was it', living all values by exemplifying them in action – in the period following Plato, Nietzsche would argue, human beings came to believe that truth lay outside their existence, outside themselves. By removing an essential part of who they were and relocating it elsewhere, they became weak, vulnerable, sickly, and humble – they became 'all too human'.

The *true world*, as Nietzsche describes in *How the 'Real World' at Last Became a Myth* (1968), gradually became something unattainable – beyond human experience, perception, and comprehension. The role of moralities, religions, philosophies, and all the *teachers of the purpose of existence*, such as Plato, was thus to justify the meaning of life by appealing to something external to it and by denying the actual – which, for Nietzsche, constitutes a denial of life itself.²

The Greeks *knew and felt the terror and horror of existence*, yet they understood that all values must be sought and found in actuality. And since no one can endure the anxiety of experiencing reality as merely contingent and meaningless when reduced to bare facts, it is only through art that life becomes bearable – and indeed possible.

Art engages the actual; yet, in its detachment from literal facts, the work of art transforms actuality into something meaningful and life-affirming. Beauty, as understood here, does not adhere to fixed aesthetic norms; rather, it emerges each time anew as a singular event through which actuality becomes newly visible. In genuine art, the 'what' cannot be disentangled from the 'how': what the work reveals becomes inseparable from the manner of its revelation. It is precisely this irreducible unity of form and disclosed content that gives beauty its experiential force. In earlier works, I referred to this structure as the *Singular Rule*: the work of art both legislates and uniquely answers its own calling.³

If art transforms actuality into something meaningful rather than merely factual, it does so through a certain distance from immediate literalness. From this there emerges the necessity of what may be called *metaphorical distance*: that which enables art to present reality as beautiful and true rather than as a mere collection of blunt, literal facts. Such distance resists immediate transparency, repetition, and codified recognition, preserving instead the friction through which reality may become visible anew.

Nietzsche speaks of the terror that seizes human beings when they are deprived of the *metaphorical distance* provided by art and are left to confront life in purely literal terms:

² Nietzsche traces the progressive devaluation of the *true world* through six stages, culminating in its abolition and the collapse of the distinction between the *real* and the *apparent* world.

³ For more on the logic of the Singular Rule, see Avital and Dolanská (2019) and Avital (2007).

True knowledge, an insight into the horrible truth, outweighs any motive for action... Conscious of the truth he has once seen, man now sees everywhere only the horror or absurdity of existence... Here, when the danger to his will is greatest, art approaches as a saving sorceress, expert at healing. (Nietzsche, 1967, §7)

2. Freedom and Necessity

When Nietzsche speaks of the freedom to create our destiny out of contingencies as a work of art, he by no means envisions an unrestricted freedom detached from form, discipline, or norm. On the contrary, Nietzsche argues that precisely because no transcendental rules govern our existence from beyond the world, the Greeks grasped a fundamental truth: to create anything meaningful, one must submit to rigorous discipline within a clearly defined framework of form and norm. Art stands as the paramount example of this necessity. Although many artists and so-called ‘free’ thinkers of our era have objected to the arbitrariness and caprice of systems of law, Nietzsche maintains that:⁴

The curious fact is that all there is or has been on earth of freedom, subtlety, boldness, dance, and masterly sureness, whether in thought itself or in government, or in rhetoric and persuasion, in the arts just as in ethics, has developed only owing to the ‘tyranny of such capricious laws’; and in all seriousness, the probability is by no means small that precisely this is ‘nature’ and ‘natural’ – and not that *laissez aller*. (Nietzsche, 1989, §188)

The values, norms, and rules within which we operate are, in a sense, arbitrary and contingent-constructed rather than grounded in any transcendental necessity or metaphysical determination. Yet this does not render them any less real. In rejecting any metaphysical justification of the world from beyond it, Nietzsche does not reject order as such, nor the normative as a constitutive dimension of reality.

Nietzsche’s point is that rules and norms are not abstractions imposed upon life from without; they exist in actuality, in the same space as human beings and their lives. The normative is always already immanent to the reality we inhabit. There is no passive encounter with ‘raw existence’ untouched by structuring, valuation, or affirmation. Thus, insofar as structures, rules, and norms are embedded in the reality we inhabit, they are not merely arbitrary or contingent; they are real and true.

The question therefore becomes: how can necessity arise within a world no longer grounded by transcendence? Nietzsche resolves the tension between the normative and the arbitrary that arises in the absence of any transcendental foundation through his metaphor of the *eternal recurrence* of the same. Most immediately, the *eternal recurrence* refers to a way of becoming one with one’s values such that one would will and enact them in precisely the same manner, in the same situation, across an infinity of lifetimes. When ‘repeated eternally’, things otherwise devoid of metaphysical or transcendental grounding acquire weight and emerge without the *mitigating circumstance of*

⁴ Nietzsche’s point being that genuine freedom and creativity are inseparable from discipline, constraint, and form.

their transitory nature. What is, in principle, arbitrary and contingent—namely, the choices we make, the actions we take, and the values we follow – ceases, in fact, to be arbitrary by being eternally the same.⁵

Thus any idea that ‘it could just as well have been otherwise’ loses its force, for the way things are becomes the only possible way. A ‘number of fortuities’ thus becomes necessity – contingency is transformed into destiny. Under eternal recurrence, every action we take is marked by a necessity inherent to it, not imposed upon it from an external metaphysical realm. Accordingly, all weight falls upon the present moment. Events unfold here and now in such a way that even past and future are gathered into the present – this, I think, is the true meaning of Nietzsche’s ‘eternity’.

To live life as art is to be at once legislating a standard of action within a given situation and enacting that standard in the very act itself – we create and carry out our values in one and the same gesture. When action is undertaken for its own sake, as an end in itself, and when we act as though our conduct were the only possible choice – one we would will repeat in precisely the same way forever – that conduct takes on the weight of necessity.

Here the structure of eternal recurrence logically echoes the singularity of the work of art itself. In a genuine artwork, the ‘what’ cannot be separated from the ‘how’: meaning becomes inseparable from the singular manner of its disclosure. Likewise, under the horizon of eternal recurrence, action can no longer derive its justification from anything external to itself; it must bear its necessity within the manner of its enactment. Just as a work of art achieves beauty when nothing within it can be altered without destroying its meaning, so too a life lived as art acquires necessity when action and value become internally inseparable. Eternal recurrence is therefore not mere repetition, but the transformation of contingency into necessity through the singular manner in which life is lived.

Hence what once appeared arbitrary or contingent assumes the character of destiny. Life is neither an arbitrary sketch nor something that seeks its justification beyond the world. It is art that grants life its gravity and meaning, disclosing reality in such a way that beauty itself becomes a source of meaning for our existence.

3. Plato and the End of Art?

According to Nietzsche, the Greek way of life as art – where beauty and truth were one – came to an end with Plato and his introduction of the ‘other world’. The aesthetic conception of the world, grounded in actuality, gave way to Plato’s metaphysics of truth and illusion, of high and low, of light and darkness. Against art, Plato introduced the concept of truth as something attainable only through reason. Art was to be banished from the ideal state for being *untrue* – a mere semblance, an illusion that leads one away from living in *truth*.

⁵ The doctrine of *eternal recurrence* is introduced most dramatically in *The Gay Science* (§341 – *The Greatest Weight*), and elaborated throughout *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. For Nietzsche’s treatment of necessity and contingency in relation to art, see Nietzsche (1968, §§796–853).

While in Homer's *Odyssey* truth emerges through the presence of beauty – Odysseus' words possess such formal grace that he could not possibly lie – Socrates, Plato's teacher and the first 'rationalist', brought classical Greek tragedy to an end through reason and replaced art with philosophy.

In Greek tragedy, there was no distance between thought and action, truth and illusion: the Greeks embodied truth, while the enemy embodied falsehood. But in contrast, to follow Nietzsche's reading, Socrates, in introducing rationality, reflection, and relentless questioning, persuaded the Greeks that values were not identical with how they were lived – that goodness and truth did not necessarily coincide with beauty or aesthetic pleasure, and that ugliness was not in fact evil or inferior. From that point on, the good and the beautiful were to be constructed by reason rather than felt through instinct or experienced through the senses. Rationality was offered as a crutch once the certainties of life had been lost.

Yet Nietzsche's characterization of Plato remains partial. Once we turn to Plato's own writings, the relation between philosophy, truth, and art becomes considerably more complex. In fact, few thinkers in the history of philosophy have taken art as seriously as Plato. In the *Laws*, Plato addresses the tragedians – the *serious poets* – in the following terms: "Most honored guests, we're tragedians ourselves, and our tragedy is the finest and best we can create" (Plato, 1997, 817b).⁶ This statement might well have come from Nietzsche himself, reflecting on the Greek way of life as a work of art – a form of life governed by inner necessity. It can be argued here that Plato makes the point that when life itself is lived as art – when action embodies aesthetic necessity – there is no need for separate works of 'art' on top of that way of living.

What, then, is Plato's true attitude toward art? What underlies his fear in condemning the mimetic arts?

For Plato, art is essentially mimetic: it imitates what already exists. Yet the sensible world itself is only a copy of the Forms, and art becomes an imitation of an imitation – at a third remove from truth. Plato illustrates this through the image of the bed: the Form, the crafted object, and the painted image. While the craftsman is guided by knowledge, the artist imitates appearances. Confined to surface and sensory effect, mimetic art cannot engage reason; it appeals instead to the emotional parts of the soul, arousing passions without knowledge or measure, and thus, according to him, poses a dangerous challenge to the formation of the soul.⁷

The artist, in Plato's mimetic sense, reproduces things not as they are but as they appear, lacking knowledge of their true being. Remaining at the level of appearance, mimetic art cannot engage reason; it appeals instead to the

⁶ Plato addresses the tragic poets directly, claiming that the legislators of the ideal city are themselves *tragedians* of the finest and truest kind – their city being the most beautiful and best tragedy.

⁷ The three-tiered ontology of Form, particular, and image is illustrated through the example of the bed: God makes the Form, the craftsman makes the bed, and the painter makes an image of the bed – thereby standing at a third remove from truth (Plato, 1997, 596a–598d).

emotions, exploiting illusion and arousing passions without measure. In doing so, it weakens rational judgment, confuses seeming with being, and substitutes gesture for action. Mimetic art thus does not merely misrepresent reality; it disorders the soul and undermines the ethical conditions of genuine human action.⁸

Among such artists, Plato singles out the tragic poets – Homer foremost among them – as especially dangerous, precisely because they take ethics itself as their subject. The poet speaks of virtue, war, and politics without possessing knowledge of them. Like the painter who depicts a cobbler without knowing cobbling, the poet imitates the appearance of wisdom without grasping its substance. His art persuades those who judge by rhythm and charm rather than understanding.

Because the poet remains at a remove from truth, he mistakes what appears good for what is good, transmitting distorted values. The mimetic arts thus blur the distinction between seeming and being, strengthening the irrational parts of the soul while weakening its rational governance. In this way, poetry does not merely represent life; it shapes the character of those who encounter it.

Plato therefore presses a decisive question: if Homer truly possessed knowledge of virtue or politics, why did he not act upon it? Why did no city credit him with wise governance? The answer is revealing: the poet does not legislate from within action; he observes from without. He produces images of virtue but does not enact it. To say it bluntly, we, with Homer himself, may mistake Homer for Achilles, the hero of the Trojan War and the central protagonist of Homer's *Iliad*. It is hard to miss the relevance of this critique to our times; consider, for example, the central role actors play in our contemporary culture.⁹

Thus the mimetic artist parasitizes upon the achievements of those who genuinely act and know. He borrows the prestige of wisdom while lacking its substance. His art risks distorting virtue by presenting images detached from knowledge and responsibility. What is at stake is not merely aesthetic truth but the formation of ethical and political life itself.

This critique sounds uncannily resonant today, when the distinction between what is real and what is staged has grown fragile. Public life is saturated with rehearsed gestures and calculated performances. We inhabit a landscape in which imitation no longer follows reality – it replaces it.

4. The Tragedy of Hamlet: the Dionysian Man

The tension Plato identified between appearance and action re-emerges with particular force in modern tragedy. Plato's concern that imitation might replace genuine action finds one of its most striking dramatic expressions in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*.

⁸ Plato argues that mimetic poetry "waters and nourishes" the passionate part of the soul while "starving" the rational part, and that this disorder extends from poetry into life itself (Plato, 1997, 605c–606d).

⁹ Plato presses this argument against Homer in particular, asking why, if Homer truly understood virtue and politics, no city credits him with wise legislation and no pupil of his became a great statesman (Plato, 1997, 598d–601b).

The Platonic opposition between imitators and true actors resurfaces with particular intensity in this tragedy. If Plato feared the confusion of appearance and being, Nietzsche finds in Hamlet the figure who experiences that confusion from within. Hamlet – Nietzsche’s paradigmatic ‘Dionysian man’ – embodies the tension between acting and merely performing, between shaping history and reflecting upon it.¹⁰

He is captivated by the power of actors to lend weight to words and substance to ideas—to make meaning appear real through performance. This fascination leads him to stage the play within the play, trusting that theater might reveal truth by holding ‘the mirror up to nature’. In this moment, Hamlet still believes that imitation can disclose reality.

Yet he soon confronts the danger Plato had identified: actors can simulate passion without living it, display emotion without responsibility, and substitute gesture for deed. The player who weeps for Hecuba lays bare this tension: emotion without cause, passion without involvement, appearance without being.¹¹

Hamlet’s famous question – *to be, or not to be* – is a question of action: of whether one can still act after seeing through the illusions that sustain it. Having glimpsed the instability of appearances, Hamlet finds himself suspended above the world of action, unable fully to re-enter it. For, as Nietzsche observes, one cannot both see and act at the same time. Reflection displaces action; lucidity corrodes the will to act.

We have arrived here again at Nietzsche’s insight: knowledge, when it dissolves illusion, is paralyzing, for one cannot both see how values are constructed and still inhabit them with unreflective immediacy. From this position of detached awareness, the world loses its immediacy: love, justice, and beauty no longer compel but appear instead as objects of contemplation. Life itself becomes a spectacle.

In this sense, Hamlet embodies both Plato’s fear – that imitation corrupts action by replacing knowledge with appearance and doing with performing – and its tragic reversal, in which the opposite danger to which Nietzsche alludes emerges: that without ‘illusion’ action becomes impossible. Where Plato warned that imitation corrupts action, Hamlet reveals another danger: that knowledge itself can paralyze action. Unable to return to unreflective participation, yet unwilling to settle for empty performance, he oscillates between performance and action without being able to enact either. It is in this respect that Nietzsche renders knowledge itself tragic.

This tension finds its most striking expression in Hamlet’s own reaction to the player, whom he calls ‘monstrous’ for being able, in a mere fiction, to summon

¹⁰ Nietzsche describes Hamlet explicitly as the Dionysian man: “Both have once looked truly into the essence of things, they have gained knowledge, and nausea inhibits action; for their action could not change anything in the eternal nature of things” (Nietzsche, 1967, §7).

¹¹ Hamlet’s response to the Player’s performance reads: “Is it not monstrous that this player here, / But in a fiction, in a dream of passion, / Could force his soul so to his own conceit [...] And all for nothing! / For Hecuba!” (Shakespeare, 1987, Act II, Scene 2).

genuine passion – *all for nothing* [...] *for Hecuba* – while he himself remains unable to act where action is required.

The tension revealed in Hamlet thus returns us to the question of the sense in which action – as it oscillates between illusion and knowledge – must ultimately recover a form in which meaning and action once again coincide.

5. Art and Emotional Monstrosity

Hamlet brings to light what he calls the ‘monstrous’ power of mimetic art: the capacity to produce genuine passion detached from action. What appears here as a disjunction between appearance and action returns us to Plato’s central anxiety about art: that, by appealing to what he calls the inferior part of the soul, mimetic art cultivates responses no longer anchored in action. Gesture is mistaken for deed, impression for essence. Mimetic art thus comes to operate according to a principle of maximum effect – the stronger the impact, the greater its apparent success – one of exaggeration rather than measure.

Yet this critique, while identifying a genuine danger, also brings into view a deeper question: if action cannot be sustained either by illusion alone or by knowledge alone, what then are its conditions? What Plato and Nietzsche ultimately share, I would argue, is the conviction that life must be lived as an art – not as the imitation of external models, but as the enactment of a standard that is both legislated and embodied from within.

This does not mean treating life as an object of aesthetic appreciation but forming action itself according to an inner necessity. An action guided in this way is not performed because it conforms to a model, nor because it produces a desired effect, but because it arises as necessary within the act and could not be otherwise. To live in this way is to allow conduct to be shaped from within. The beauty of action – the manner in which something is done – thus becomes the measure by which it is judged: not an addition to action, but the form in which its truth and rightness are realized.

In this sense, what Plato feared in art and what Nietzsche affirmed in it converge: not imitation, but the formation of action itself.

What appears in Hamlet as a tragic psychological condition becomes, in modernity, an aesthetic condition. From this perspective, Plato’s critique of mimetic art can be understood as an early recognition of a phenomenon that, in modern terms, might be called kitsch: the production of intensified emotional effect and the appearance of beauty detached from truth and action. That such a term can be retrospectively applied underscores the acuity of Plato’s insight into how emotion may be exploited under the guise of art. This danger finds its most complete expression in modernity, in the form of kitsch as a dominant aesthetic mode.¹²

Kitsch is the denial of art, since it represents a failure to interact with reality in a way that would be valuable to our lives. Kitsch does not contribute to our

¹² Kulka (1996) defines kitsch as works that: (i) depict objects or themes that are highly charged with stock emotions, (ii) are instantly and effortlessly identifiable, and (iii) do not substantially enrich the associations relating to the depicted objects or themes.

understanding of the world; it fails to disclose reality in a way that would be beautiful or meaningful. Kitsch knows nothing of the 'metaphorical distance' essential to art as a mode of engaging with reality in a direct and brave, yet moderately detached, way. Kitsch appeals to values agreed upon in advance, preventing us from dealing with our existence in the world freely, meaningfully, and afresh. It promotes sentimentality instead of discipline and cultivates impotence when it comes to action. Kitsch exists for its own sake, revealing nothing about the world or our life within it. It covers things up rather than opening them up for us.

The emotional appeal of kitsch – already evident in the intensity of Plato's apprehension toward it – is nonetheless extremely powerful. Part of this appeal lies in the complete predictability of kitsch and of our response to it. Kitsch offers certainty: we know exactly what we are going to get. Everything about it is explicit, immediately recognizable, and resistant to ambiguity. It excludes novelty – anything unexpected, vague, or unpredictable. We know what we ought to think and feel even before the encounter.

Kitsch guarantees that our experience is shared, that it is the same for all of us – we can be certain that we are all talking about the same thing. It embodies what is most 'typical', most 'appropriate', most 'representative', and most 'characteristic'. Kitsch presents the appearance of truth in advance, thereby offering comfort and safety. In kitsch, nothing is left out and nothing is added; everything is clear and simple. With kitsch, we take no risks.

Here again we witness the collapse of 'metaphorical distance'. In genuine art, the work does not merely reproduce already established conventions of representation but opens a singular path toward its object. The observer must traverse a certain distance – interpretive, perceptual, existential – through which reality becomes newly disclosed. Kitsch, by contrast, collapses this distance into nullity. It replaces discovery with immediate recognizability and substitutes repetition for revelation. The result is not truth disclosed anew, but the frictionless confirmation of what is already culturally codified and socially affirmed as reality itself.

It is precisely this political dimension of kitsch that brings Plato's critique into direct dialogue with modernity and contemporary art. What most concerned Plato was not merely art's aesthetic failure, but its capacity to function politically – to reassure its audience of who they are through what might be called a form of moral flattery, while quietly rendering them susceptible to direction.

As Arnold Hauser observes, kitsch, marked by its intrinsic mediocrity, operates as a 'pseudo' or 'parasitic' art whose primary function is to soothe, flatter, and reassure its consumers.¹³ By appealing to cultivated sentimental tastes, and by offering objects of admiration that echo and celebrate the

¹³ Hauser's (1962) analysis of kitsch as a product of industrialization and the market for mass culture remains one of the most incisive sociological treatments of the phenomenon.

aesthetics of the prevailing order, kitsch becomes, as Clement Greenberg argued, a powerful political instrument of modernity.¹⁴

6. Modern Art – The Emergence of Visual Truth

Kitsch belongs to modernity not only as a term, but as a fully developed phenomenon. It comes into being wherever art is reduced to effect, repetition, and reassurance. As Georges Bataille observes in his reflections on the nineteenth-century Salon, one encounters there an endless proliferation of works that are dull and hopelessly conventional, offering saccharine evocations of inherited themes.¹⁵

What defines such production is not merely its lack of originality, but its insistence on being taken seriously as art. Kitsch does not demand a virtue; it congratulates the viewer for already possessing it. Its impact remains at the level of recognition: it recalls great works, deep emotions, and elevated sentiments, without ever embodying them.

From this perspective, the emergence of modern art can be understood as a response to the reduction of art to repetition and effect – that is, to the conditions that define kitsch. With Édouard Manet and, subsequently, the Impressionists, art turns away from formula and toward the demand for truth – not grounded in a metaphysical order or in the authority of the past, but in the immediacy of lived reality. Standards and values cease to exist as external norms and instead take shape within the work itself.¹⁶

In this sense, aesthetic sensibility and necessity converge; what had previously appeared as a transcendental standard reappears within the work itself as an immanent necessity. Modern art thus does not abandon the question of truth; it relocates it. Truth is no longer given in advance but must be formed within the act itself.

It is precisely for this reason that a moment of ‘metaphorical distance’ remains essential to art. Modernist art ‘flatness’ expresses the withdrawal of any given depth or metaphysical beyond: the work no longer invites the viewer to look through it toward a pre-existing order, but presents itself as a self-contained field in which meaning must emerge. Yet precisely because transcendence is no longer given, it must be reconstituted within the work itself.

This sheds new light on what Walter Benjamin described as the *aura* of the artwork in his seminal essay *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*. A work of art offers an experience marked by a moment of symbolic – or metaphorical – distance, as already introduced in the discussion

¹⁴ Greenberg’s (1939, pp. 34–49) seminal essay argues that kitsch is the rear-guard product of industrial capitalism, exploiting the genuine cultural needs that avant-garde art addresses. His account of kitsch as vicarious experience and faked sensations has remained foundational for subsequent discussions of the phenomenon.

¹⁵ Georges Bataille’s reflections on the academic Salon are developed across several texts, especially in *Manet* (Geneva: Skira, 1955), where he contrasts the transgressive immediacy of Manet’s painting with the complacent conventions of the official Salon tradition.

¹⁶ On Manet’s role in the emergence of modernism, see T. J. Clark (1984). Clark’s account of how Manet’s paintings disrupted established conventions of representation and judgment is particularly pertinent here.

of Plato and later inverted by Nietzsche: it raises questions, suggests meanings, and alludes to something that exceeds its literal form. It promises something other than itself – something not immediately present, yet toward which the viewer is drawn. This problem becomes decisive once art no longer merely risks mediation through reproduction, but becomes structurally dependent upon institutional mediation itself.

What is at stake here, however, is not simply the disappearance of originality in the traditional sense, but the erosion of the metaphorical distance through which the work interrupts habitual perception and reorients experience.¹⁷

In this sense, Baudelaire's insight that modernity consists in the fleeting and the contingent, whose artistic task is to capture within it something eternal, expresses the paradox at the heart of modern art: art holds together what passes and what endures.¹⁸

7. Arthur Danto and the Attack on Beauty

Modernism's progressive withdrawal from beauty – initially undertaken as part of a broader rethinking of inherited values and forms – culminates, in its late development, in a decisive break: beauty comes to be regarded not merely as unnecessary, but as philosophically suspect. This position finds its most articulate formulation in Arthur Danto, whose account of the *end of art* reflects a moment in which art, having freed itself from all stylistic and historical constraints, no longer requires aesthetic criteria to be defined as art – aesthetic properties may persist, but they are no longer constitutive of what makes something art (Danto, 1997, p. 197).¹⁹

This withdrawal was not without historical justification. Modern and conceptual art often emerged as emancipatory movements directed against rigid academic conventions, inherited hierarchies, and exhausted aesthetic formulas. The problem arises, however, when liberation from fixed criteria culminates in the disappearance of any constitutive relation between the work, beauty, and lived experience.

In such a condition, beauty is displaced from its constitutive role and treated as an optional, even misleading attribute – something that risks obscuring the conceptual nature of the work. At times, this suspicion takes on a distinctly moral tone, as though beauty itself were complicit in illusion, seduction, or superficiality. What emerges, then, is not merely a neutral reclassification of aesthetic values, but a structural shift: the separation of meaning from immediate appearance, and with it the growing dependence of art on interpretative mediation.

¹⁷ Walter Benjamin's ([1935] 1968, pp. 217–251) concept of the *aura* – defined as *the unique phenomenon of a distance, however close the original may be* – remains one of the most influential frameworks for thinking about authenticity and reproducibility in art. For the relation between Benjamin's *aura* and the concept of singular necessity developed here, see Avital and Dolanská (2023).

¹⁸ Baudelaire (1964, p. 13) defines modernity as “the ephemeral, the fugitive, the contingent” – one half of art whose other half remains “the eternal and the immutable.”

¹⁹ For Danto's broader account of the *end of art*, see also Danto (1981).

The disappearance of beauty as a constitutive element of the work does not leave art in a state of neutral freedom; rather, it produces a vacuum. In this intellectual climate, it is no surprise that Danto undermines the very physicality of the work of art, as in his well-known claim that “with the philosophical coming of age of art, visibility drops away, as little relevant to the essence of art as beauty proved to have been” (Danto, 1997, p. 16).

Under such post-historical conditions, the work increasingly depends on institutional frameworks of interpretation in order to secure meaning. The danger here is not merely the displacement of beauty, but the erosion of the metaphorical distance through which art discloses reality anew. As the work becomes increasingly subordinated to institutional explanation, the tension between appearance and meaning begins to collapse.

Where meaning is no longer anchored in the immediate presence of the work – no longer secured by the necessity that beauty once expressed – it must be supplied from elsewhere. Interpretation no longer emerges from the encounter between the work and the beholder, but is increasingly mediated, stabilized, and authorized in advance. It is at this point that institutions – museums, academies, curatorial and critical discourses – assume a decisive role, not merely in presenting art, but in determining what counts as art and what counts as meaning.

The work of art thus enters a phase that we may best label as a ‘bureaucracy of meaning’. In the absence of an internal criterion – of a necessity that would be legible in the work itself – meaning must be administered. Contemporary artists, in order to be recognized within this system, risk becoming its functionaries: producing works that are already aligned with the interpretative frameworks through which they will be validated. What is exhibited and circulated is not simply what is made, but what can be rendered intelligible in advance.

In this way, the work no longer challenges the conditions of its reception; it confirms them. The space of judgment is thereby narrowed, as the encounter with the work is pre-structured by the very apparatus that claims to interpret it. What disappears in this process is the possibility that meaning might arise unmediated – from the work itself – as an event rather than an assignment.

8. Institutional Mediation and the Loss of Immediacy

This condition has been described from within the art world itself with particular clarity by Dave Hickey. What he identifies is not simply a change in taste, but a structural transformation: the emergence of an administrative system that mediates between the work and its audience, regulating not only interpretation but access. In this system, the encounter with the work is no longer immediate; it is pre-structured by institutional discourse (Hickey, 2009).²⁰

²⁰ Hickey’s comparison of the contemporary art institution to the Church – both mediating access to images and regulating the terms of their reception – is developed in the title essay, *Enter the Dragon: On the Vernacular of Beauty* (Hickey, 2009).

Hickey's comparison to the Church is instructive. Just as the priest once stood between the believer and the sacred image, guiding and controlling the terms of access, so contemporary institutions stand between the viewer and the work. The route from image to beholder is no longer direct but passes through an apparatus that authorizes meaning in advance. Hickey describes from within contemporary art practice what Danto's philosophy makes structurally possible.

What is at stake in this mediation is precisely the place of beauty. For beauty, as we have seen, depends on a certain immediacy – a capacity of the work to address the beholder without prior authorization. It introduces a relation that cannot be fully regulated, one that escapes fixed interpretative frameworks. It is for this reason that beauty becomes suspect: not because it is superficial, but because it bypasses the structures that seek to govern meaning.

9. Beauty as Counterforce

What is denied in this arrangement is not simply pleasure, but judgment. Beauty is excluded because it enables a form of judgment that does not depend on institutional validation. It opens a space in which the work can be encountered directly, and in doing so, it threatens the monopoly on meaning exercised by the system.

Beauty thus stands as a counterforce to the bureaucratization of art. By reaching the beholder without mediation, it reintroduces the possibility of a direct encounter with meaning – one that cannot be reduced to discourse, managed by authority, or exhausted by explanation. It interrupts the closed circuit in which the work merely confirms the system that sustains it.

In this sense, beauty is not an escape from politics, but a condition of resistance. It disrupts the established language through which reality is administered and reopens the possibility of seeing – and judging – anew.

10. Beauty as Singular Legislation

If beauty resists institutional mediation, it is because it cannot be reduced to rules and norms applied from outside. A work of art does not become meaningful by conforming to pre-established criteria; it becomes meaningful by establishing its own necessity. In this sense, a genuine artwork is not an application of a rule, but the moment in which a rule is formed. It is at once the posing of a problem and its resolution. The preceding tensions – between action and imitation, immediacy and mediation, contingency and necessity – converge in the question of how meaning is legislated within the work itself.

It is for this reason that a work of art is and must be singular. To call something singular is not merely to say that it is particular – one instance among others – but that it answers only to itself. It does not derive its validity from belonging to a class or satisfying a definition. Rather, it establishes, in its very constitution, the standard by which it is to be judged. The work is both the law and its instantiation, the criterion as well as its fulfillment.

Beauty is the name we give to this coincidence of freedom and necessity. A work appears beautiful when it no longer seems contingent, when it impresses itself upon us as if it could not have been otherwise. What is experienced here is not conformity to a prior rule, but the emergence of necessity within the act itself. Beauty does not follow from correctness; it reveals it.

This is why beauty cannot be fixed in advance, nor reduced to a formula. Any attempt to codify beauty transforms it into convention, and therefore into something repeatable. But what is repeatable belongs to the domain of the general, whereas beauty belongs to the singular. It must be rediscovered each time, in each new work, as the successful formation of a relation between what is given and what must be made.

In this sense, art stands in a deep affinity with ethics. A genuine ethical situation, like a genuine artistic problem, cannot be resolved by the mechanical application of inherited rules. It is singular. Competing values press upon the agent at once, and no pre-established answer can determine the course of action in advance. To act is therefore to legislate: to redefine, within the situation itself, what counts as right, true, or just. Only in retrospect can such an action appear necessary.

This is the point at which Kant's insight converges with Nietzsche's. For Kant, a work of art is that which gives the rule to itself; for Nietzsche, in the absence of transcendental guarantees, life itself must be lived as a work of art. In both cases, what is at stake is the same structure: the emergence of a standard from within the act, rather than its imposition from without (Kant, 1952, §46).²¹

Wittgenstein's later philosophy offers a further clarification. Rules do not function as fixed prescriptions determining their own application in advance; they are extended, reinterpreted, and brought to life in use. A rule is not a 'railroad to infinity', but something that acquires meaning only in its enactment. Art makes this visible. In the work of art, a rule is not followed – it is reinvented (Wittgenstein, 1953, §218).²²

This is why beauty cannot be separated from truth. When a work achieves this singular necessity, we do not experience it as one possibility among others, but as the only possible resolution of the problem it sets. We feel that it could not have been otherwise. It is in this sense that beauty becomes the criterion of truth – not as an external measure, but as the internal coherence of what has been brought into being.

In the contemporary condition, where meaning is increasingly mediated, administered, and stabilized by institutional frameworks, this dimension of singular legislation is precisely what is at risk. What is threatened is not simply

²¹ Kant defines genius as "the innate mental aptitude (ingenium) through which nature gives the rule to art" (Kant, 1952, §46, p. 168). The singularity of the artwork, on the Kantian account, consists precisely in this: the rule it gives cannot be derived from any prior formula but must instead emerge from the work itself.

²² Wittgenstein's image of the 'railroad to infinity' criticizes the mistaken assumption that rules determine their own application in advance. For an application of this insight to the philosophy of art, see Avital (2007, pp. 20–37).

taste, but the capacity of art to establish meaning from within. Beauty appears here not as an ornament, but as resistance: the point at which the work escapes repetition, exceeds its conditions, and reopens the possibility of truth.

It is here that the significance of beauty extends beyond art itself. For what is at stake in the experience of art is not merely aesthetic judgment, but the very condition under which meaning can emerge in life.

Beauty is something we cannot capture and own; yet we cannot live meaningfully without it. It cannot be calculated or predicted, and yet it guides our lives as an ethical measure. It is a place where we cannot lie – for the beauty of things, or the lack of it, reveals whether they are true or false, and the grace of a conduct or a deed shows whether it is right or wrong.

It is worth emphasizing once more that the reintroduction of beauty therefore does not imply a return to rigid aesthetic norms or fixed hierarchies of representation. On the contrary, beauty is defended here precisely as that which resists codification, repetition, and administered perception. Its task is not to close meaning, but to reopen the possibility of a singular encounter with reality.

Art, as the legislator of beauty, stands as a counterforce to both the abstractions of modern rationality and the pressures of practical life. It preserves the possibility that something irreducibly singular may emerge beyond repetition and system. In this sense, art does not merely represent life; it makes life meaningful by preserving its irreducible uniqueness.

Art remains emancipatory precisely in this sense. Because the singular relation between the ‘what’ of the work and the ‘how’ of its disclosure cannot be prescribed in advance, meaning itself cannot be fully reduced to external formulas or administered interpretations. Art demands participation in the formation of meaning. To live life as art is therefore not to submit to a fixed ideal of beauty, but to assume responsibility for shaping meaning and value from within the singular conditions of existence.

We are thus brought back to the beginning: to the Greek intuition that life is justified as an aesthetic phenomenon. But this justification is never given once and for all. It must be enacted, rediscovered, and legislated anew time and again.

As T. S. Eliot writes:

We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.
(Eliot, 1943, Part V)

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Celebritization and Kitsch

Correlated Phenomena Shaping Aesthetic Values in Contemporary Mass Culture

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The paper presents the common characteristics and aesthetic implications of two correlated phenomena, celebritization and kitsch, in contemporary society. While celebritization refers to the process of transforming individuals into public figures through intense media attention, kitsch pertains to mass-produced objects and themes often considered unoriginal or aesthetically void. Both phenomena are rooted in contemporary mass culture and are closely linked to commercialization, media, and market values. The study examines how celebritization and kitsch influence aesthetic perception, aesthetic norms, and values in society, particularly through mechanisms of emotional simplification, repetition, and media-driven visibility. At the same time, the research highlights their socially integrative functions: celebritization shapes collective ideals and social aspirations, while kitsch democratizes aesthetic enjoyment, fosters cultural solidarity, and generates accessible emotional engagement across diverse groups. These findings suggest that both phenomena are not only markers of superficiality but also active agents in shaping cultural participation, public taste, and aesthetic sensibilities in modern society. | *Keywords: Celebritization, Kitsch, Aesthetic Superficiality, Consumption Culture, Social Integration*

1. Introduction

In today's media-saturated world, questions of taste, beauty, and cultural value are no longer determined solely by traditional artistic canons but are increasingly shaped by the dynamics of mass culture. Two phenomena stand at the forefront of this transformation: celebritization and kitsch. Celebrities dominate social media feeds, influence consumer choices, and set new standards of aspiration, while kitsch – often dismissed as superficial or unoriginal – permeates everyday life through mass-produced objects and popular aesthetics. Both are frequently critiqued for their lack of depth, yet their persistent presence in contemporary culture demands closer examination.

Far from being marginal curiosities, celebritization and kitsch reflect the very mechanisms through which culture operates in the 21st century. They reveal how commercialization, media amplification, and public fascination redefine what counts as authentic, valuable, or desirable. At the same time, these phenomena also play a socially integrative role: celebrities act as collective symbols of identity and aspiration, while kitsch democratizes aesthetic enjoyment, creating shared cultural experiences across social boundaries.

The present study therefore argues that understanding the interconnectedness of celebritization and kitsch is not only timely but urgent. Their combined influence reaches far beyond entertainment or decorative culture – it reshapes aesthetic perception, cultural preferences, and even social values. By situating these phenomena within the broader framework of mass culture, the paper seeks to uncover how the interplay of media, market forces, and public reception continues to redefine the boundaries of taste and the construction of aesthetic norms in contemporary society. More specifically, the paper focuses on the mechanisms through which these phenomena – individually and in interaction – shape aesthetic perception, normalize certain forms of taste, and structure cultural values in contemporary society. In this paper, the interconnectedness of celebritization and kitsch is understood not as a set of superficial similarities, but as a shared aesthetic mechanism, whereby celebrity culture incorporates kitsch-like forms of emotional simplification, visual standardization, and symbolic repetition which, through media circulation, become normalized and actively shape aesthetic perception, taste, and cultural values in contemporary mass society. The following sections therefore examine celebritization, kitsch, and their intersections in order to clarify how these phenomena operate within contemporary media and consumer culture.

2. The Dynamics of Celebritization: From Personal Popularity to Media Phenomenon

Fame is no longer defined solely by individual achievement; it emerges through visibility within media networks and public attention. (Turner, 2014, p. 5)

Common definitions equate a celebrity with fame, where celebrities are known for being known (Ahmed & Faiq, 2022). A celebrity is generally someone recognized for achievements or contributions in film, entertainment, sports, or other popular fields,¹ which attract media interest and turn individuals into public figures. However, in contemporary media environments, this understanding has shifted, as visibility itself – rather than achievement – has become a primary source of fame. Individuals may gain media attention through talent, skills, or achievements, but also through distinctive or tumultuous lifestyles (e.g., frequent relationship changes or controversies) that keep them in the spotlight and enhance their fame.

¹ A new form of celebrity culture, strongly supported by the media, is exemplified by the 'wellness economy', where famous individuals promote wellness activities and lifestyles, integrating them into daily life (Petrovic, Murgas and Kralik, 2023, p. 101). Another example is 'food tourism', represented by chefs and confectioners who have become national and global celebrities (Petrovic, Murgas and Kralik, 2023, p. 106).

In this context, the concept of celebrity is evolving due to advancements in mass media. Celebritization is understood as an interactive process between the celebrity and the public, where media-produced messages and meanings are fundamental elements (Marcus, 2019). More precisely, celebritization can be conceptualized as a process shaped by media logic, in which visibility, representation, and audience engagement play a constitutive role. Media culture that creates and sustains celebrities is closely tied to commercialization and market values. Rather than listing individual factors, this relationship can be understood structurally: media outlets depend on audience attention and profitability, shape content accordingly, and increasingly integrate promotional and consumer-oriented elements. Within this framework, celebrities function not only as public figures but also as commodities, generating economic and symbolic value.

With the rise of media production and growing interest in celebrities, new terms have emerged. ‘Celebrification’ refers to becoming a celebrity through specific achievements, whereas ‘celebritization’ involves attaining fame through media and entertainment, reflecting mediated fame (Ahmed & Faiq, 2022). This distinction highlights a shift from achievement-based recognition to visibility-based fame. Furthermore, the intriguing lifestyles of celebrities foster large fan bases, with fan-celebrity interaction being reciprocal, symbiotic, and mutually beneficial (Stever, 2009, p. 3).² Such interaction reinforces media visibility and contributes to the circulation of celebrity meaning. For the public, a celebrity is someone well-known due to achievements or lifestyle, who is also considered interesting by fans.³ The combination of fame and public interest enables celebrities to influence trends, opinions, and behaviour (Rusnák, 2010).

Building on this perspective, Jonathan E. Schroeder highlights how personal popularity is transformed into a media phenomenon through deliberate self-branding and the interplay between artistic identity and media visibility. In *The Artist and the Brand*, Schroeder (2005) argues that modern artists – and by extension celebrities – must manage their public persona strategically, akin to commercial entities. Appearance, aesthetics, and self-presentation thus function as key mechanisms sustaining recognition. Similar insights are offered by Turner’s (2014) notion of the *demotic turn*, showing how media visibility elevates ordinary individuals to celebrity status, and by Driessens’ (2013) theory of celebritization as a process driven by media logic and commercialization.

Scholars such as Neal Gabler, Neil Postman, and David Giles further illuminate the cultural and psychological dimensions of celebritization. Gabler (1998) described celebrity as a form of modern mythology, with stars embodying

² Based on G. Stever’s opinion, “a dialogue between artists and the patrons of their work gives the artist valuable feedback and gives the fan a sense of contribution to the ongoing career of the artist” (Stever, 2009, p. 30).

³ A well-known person who attracts significant public attention, such as a government official, is not necessarily a celebrity. Although they are well-known to the public, they do not qualify as a ‘celebrity’ unless they are considered interesting by others. A celebrity fulfils both conditions: being well-known and being perceived as interesting.

narratives that entertain and provide symbolic meaning. Postman (1985) emphasized that television turns public life – including politics, religion, and education – into entertainment, accelerating celebrity creation across society. Giles (2000) analysed parasocial relationships as a mechanism sustaining audience attachment. Taken together, these perspectives demonstrate that celebritization operates as a cultural mechanism linking media production, symbolic meaning, and audience engagement.

Building on these insights, P. David Marshall, Graeme Turner, John Street, and Fred Inglis conceptualize celebritization as a structural and political process shaped by media visibility, symbolic value, and commercialization. Marshall (1997, 2010) interprets the *celebrity persona* as a form of cultural capital, while Street (2004) demonstrates how media representation transforms political actors into entertainment figures, thereby reshaping public perception and political legitimacy. Inglis (2000), in turn, highlights the commercialization of culture and its role in constructing public values and symbolic hierarchies. Together, these perspectives show that celebritization functions not merely as entertainment, but as a broader mechanism through which media environments shape social meaning, value, and public authority.

As indicated, contemporary celebrities influence public attitudes and behaviours not only through achievements and fame, but also through strategic self-presentation and visual identity. This influence remains ambivalent, as motivations may conflict with public benefit (Rončáková, 2023; Stewart & Giles, 2020). Some celebrities exhibit behaviours that provide no societal advantage or may even be harmful (Rončáková & Sámelová, 2023). As Rusnák (2010, p. 47) observes, celebrities tend to attract attention particularly when they are “striking, unusual, or standing out from the crowd”, while Stewart and Giles (2020, p. 3) emphasize that public responses to celebrities reveal how value is constructed and circulated in contemporary society.

Within this framework, the aesthetic dimension of celebritization becomes particularly significant. Celebrity culture relies on forms of self-presentation that are immediately recognizable and emotionally engaging, privileging visibility, accessibility, and repetition.

In this sense, celebrity culture frequently operates through aesthetic strategies closely aligned with kitsch sensibility. The visual and narrative self-presentation of celebrities often relies on simplification, emotional intensification, and easily recognizable symbolic forms, such as idealized lifestyles, sentimental storytelling, and standardized visual aesthetics. These features correspond to established definitions of kitsch as emotionally charged, reproducible, and accessible forms of cultural expression (Călinescu, 1987; Kulka, 1996). Consequently, celebritization not only incorporates but actively relies on such aesthetic strategies to sustain visibility and audience engagement. Importantly, this does not imply that all forms of celebrity culture are inherently kitsch; rather, kitsch functions here as a recurrent aesthetic mode operating within celebritization, particularly in media environments driven by visibility, repetition, and affective immediacy.

3. Kitsch as a Cultural and Aesthetic Phenomenon

Kitsch thrives on emotional clichés and predictable sentimentality, yet it remains a pervasive and socially integrative form of popular culture. (Călinescu, 1987, p. 114)

The concept of kitsch⁴ has attracted significant scholarly attention, with definitions ranging from strictly negative to ambivalently or even positively framed. Contemporary discussions increasingly approach kitsch as a historically evolving and internally differentiated aesthetic phenomenon shaped by changing cultural, media, and consumer contexts (Ryynänen & Barragán, 2023). One of the most influential critical interpretations comes from Jean Baudrillard, who in *The Consumer Society* (1998, pp. 110–111) describes kitsch as a ‘pseudo-object’ and a simulation devoid of authentic meaning, characterized by excessive reproduction and imitation. Within this context, kitsch possesses a low distinctive value, yet this low value is connected to its high profitability, as entire social classes adopt it. Baudrillard’s observation that the weak value of kitsch is linked to maximum statistical profitability highlights ‘the cultural demand’ across all societal levels, a phenomenon increasingly evident in the 21st century – namely, that objects traditionally classified as kitsch may nevertheless acquire cultural and market value within contemporary consumer culture (Baudrillard, 1998, pp. 110–111).

Kitsch thus reaffirms the value of rare, precious, or unique objects, even though such objects can also be industrially produced. Therefore, kitsch and the ‘authentic’ object organize the world of consumption according to their own logic (Baudrillard, 1998, p. 111). At the end of this comparison of aesthetic value, individuals who cannot distinguish between the authentic and the reproduced may ultimately attribute value to the reproduced object itself, revealing how aesthetic value in consumer culture may become detached from authenticity and increasingly shaped by visibility, reproducibility, and market circulation (Baudrillard, 1998; Kulka, 1996).

So, what differentiates popular kitsch (previously described as unoriginal or aesthetically null) from kitsch that is today identified as art? It seems that originality has become the measure of what is considered cheap kitsch and what is instead regarded as a well-crafted and critically and popularly appreciated piece of art. Marcel Duchamp’s *Fountain* (1917), Andy Warhol’s *Brillo Boxes* (1964), and Damien Hirst’s *Tiger Shark* (1991)⁵ provoked astonishment, attracted intense media attention, and were quickly elevated into objects of prestige desired by wealthy collectors. This process reflects the dynamics of celebritization and kitsch as correlated phenomena shaping

⁴ See Călinescu (1987, pp. 225–230) for a broader discussion of the historical development and etymology of the concept of kitsch.

⁵ One example among many: An iconic work of British art from the 1990s is titled *The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living*. Created by Damien Hirst in 1991, this work consists of a preserved tiger shark in a 5% formaldehyde solution within a display case. The shark cost Hirst £6,000, and the total cost to assemble the piece was £50,000. In 2004, the shark in formaldehyde was sold for an undisclosed amount, estimated to be between \$8–12 million. Critics argue that Hirst’s piece confronts us with reality and physicality, forcing us to consider it within a new context (Stańska, 2023).

aesthetic values in contemporary mass culture: media exposure and public fascination elevate certain objects – or their creators – into cultural icons, while their aesthetic evaluation becomes inseparable from commercialization, popularity, and market value (Stewart & Giles, 2020).

An interesting perspective on kitsch is offered by Czech novelist Milan Kundera, who concurs with the low aesthetic value, lack of originality, and ‘cheapness’ of kitsch. However, he also emphasizes the distinctive sentimentality that kitsch evokes, independent of the object’s aesthetic value, originality, or price. Kundera illustrates this phenomenon by stating that kitsch induces two tears to flow in rapid succession. The first tear signifies the joy of seeing children play on the grass, while the second reflects the pleasure of sharing this sentiment with all humanity. According to Kundera, kitsch is less about the object observed than about the observer’s own emotional response. This mechanism can be understood here as a form of detached emotion. According to Kundera (1984), kitsch redirects emotional attention from the represented object toward the observer’s own sentimental response, making the experience partly an affirmation of one’s own capacity to feel. This sentimentality shifts attention from the represented object toward the observer’s own emotional response. In Kundera’s (1984) understanding, kitsch thus encourages an emotionally gratifying experience centred less on the object itself than on the individual’s awareness of sharing and experiencing the expected sentiment. In this sense, the emotional response associated with kitsch remains detached from deeper engagement with its object. This notion aptly illustrates the position of kitsch within the contemporary hierarchy of art.

From this perspective, kitsch can also be understood in relation to the experience of the ‘kitsch consumer’, whose engagement is characterized by immediate emotional responses to aesthetic stimuli. Rather than encouraging critical distance, kitsch reception often prioritizes emotional accessibility, familiarity, and symbolic recognition. In broader theoretical reflections on kitsch, including those associated with Gillo Dorfles and Ludwig Giesz, this affective mode of reception helps explain the persistence and mass appeal of kitsch within contemporary consumer culture.

From a social perspective, however, kitsch performs integrative functions: it provides a common symbolic language that bridges differences of education, class, and cultural background. As Călinescu (1987) notes, kitsch thrives on shared codes of sentimentality, which makes it a socially cohesive force capable of generating feelings of belonging. Eco (1986) similarly highlights that the repetitive and easily recognizable forms of kitsch allow for a broad and inclusive aesthetic experience that does not demand specialized knowledge. In this way, kitsch fulfils an important social role by democratizing access to aesthetic enjoyment, creating cultural touchpoints that are widely understood, and reinforcing a sense of community through collective emotional engagement. Its accessibility and sentimental appeal thus contribute not only to its persistence but also to its capacity to foster cultural solidarity in mass society.

Yet, kitsch also has positive dimensions: it fosters emotional engagement, provides accessible aesthetic experiences, and creates a sense of shared sentiment across social groups (Eco, 1986; Călinescu, 1987; Kulka, 1996). In this sense, kitsch operates simultaneously as a commercially successful, socially inclusive phenomenon and as an aesthetic form that prioritizes reproduction, accessibility, and sentimentality (Jacobus & Martin, 2018; Mihăilescu, 1997a). In other words, its circulation demonstrates how aesthetic evaluation in contemporary culture can become inseparable from market forces as well as media attention.

Moreover, kitsch must also be situated in the context of mass production and consumer culture. It has become a part of mass culture by acting according to the changing dynamics of consumer culture and the expectations and tastes of consumer society (Özler & Kizilelma, 2023, p. 30).⁶ Media culture appears to be a significant supporter not only of celebritization but also of kitsch. In this light, the endless reproducibility of kitsch contributes to its profitability, as whole social classes adopt it, a process that Baudrillard (1998, pp. 110–111) connects with “cultural demand”. As Mihăilescu (1997b) notes, kitsch production often prioritizes marketability over aesthetic criteria, shaping a cultural environment where superficiality and accessibility become valued qualities.

Lastly, definitions of kitsch also acknowledge its paradoxical status. *The Oxford Art Dictionary* (n.d.) defines it as “in poor taste because of excessive garishness or sentimentality but sometimes appreciated ironically or knowingly.” This duality resonates with Jacobus and Martin’s (2018) view that kitsch’s *weak value* contributes to its endless reproduction but also its cultural persistence. Thus, kitsch emerges as a paradoxical category: simultaneously dismissed as superficial and celebrated as emotionally compelling, commercially successful, and socially inclusive. It mirrors consumer society while responding to fundamental human needs for recognition, emotion, and belonging, explaining both its persistence and transformation in contemporary culture. These characteristics of kitsch become particularly significant when examined in relation to contemporary celebrity culture and mediated aesthetic visibility.

4. Celebritization and Kitsch – Convergences and Divergences of Two Significant Phenomena

This section examines the principal intersections and distinctions between celebritization and kitsch to clarify the mechanisms through which these phenomena jointly shape aesthetic perception, cultural values, and media-driven forms of public engagement.

The intersections of celebritization and kitsch reveal the intricate dynamics of contemporary mass culture. While both phenomena are distinct in focus and form, they share key characteristics, including reliance on media systems, audience engagement, and commercialization. This convergence underscores

⁶ Let us add that the nature of the term ‘consumer society’, its development, and many suitable examples of consumer society can also be found in older works. For example, we can mention Holmwood et al. (1997), Scitovsky (1976) or Baudrillard (1998), and so on.

how public attention, popular taste, and market forces collectively shape perceptions of value, aesthetics, and cultural significance. Importantly, this relationship is not limited to external similarities, as celebrity culture itself often operates through aesthetic mechanisms that can be understood as intrinsically kitsch-like.

By examining the intersections between celebritization and kitsch, several convergences can be observed:

a) Anchoring in mass culture and commercialization – Both phenomena operate within media-driven, consumer-oriented environments. Celebritization transforms individuals into public figures whose fame is amplified and monetized, while kitsch comprises widely produced and consumed objects or cultural forms that appeal to broad audiences despite limited aesthetic distinction (Baudrillard, 1998; Stewart & Giles, 2020). These conditions are not treated as the central explanatory claim, but rather as the structural environment within which the aesthetic mechanisms linking celebritization and kitsch operate.

b) Media attention – Media visibility sustains both celebritization and kitsch. Celebrities remain in public consciousness through curated images, achievements, and lifestyles (Schroeder, 2005; Turner, 2014), whereas kitsch relies on mass exposure via advertisements, social media, and popular culture channels to reach consumers (Baudrillard, 1998).

c) Dependence on public interest – The success of both relies on audience engagement. Celebrities capture attention through persona and performance, often promoting consumerist values (Marshall, 2010; Street, 2004), while kitsch caters to widespread emotional and aesthetic preferences, often prioritizing appeal over originality (Özler & Kizilelma, 2023).

d) Criticism and perceived superficiality – Both are subject to critique for promoting shallow engagement. Celebritization has been criticized for fostering idolization and undermining substantive social and moral values (Gabler, 1998; Postman, 1985), whereas kitsch is often associated with emotionally simplified forms of aesthetic experience. In Kundera's (1984) interpretation, kitsch redirects emotional attention from the object itself toward the observer's own emotional response. In the present study, this mechanism is understood as a form of detached emotion characterized by sentimentality, immediacy, and reduced critical distance (Kundera, 1984; Călinescu, 1987).

e) Influence on aesthetic norms – Both shape perceptions of value and taste. Celebrities establish ideals of beauty, success, and lifestyle that influence social norms (Schroeder, 2005; Turner, 2014), while kitsch, through simplification and repetition, reinforces standardized aesthetic patterns, potentially constraining originality (Baudrillard, 1998).

f) Kitsch sensibility within celebrity culture – Beyond structural similarities, celebrity culture itself frequently embodies features of kitsch. The construction of celebrity personas often involves emotional clichés,

idealized imagery, and repetitive aesthetic codes that enable rapid recognition and mass appeal. This 'kitsch lining' of celebrity culture reflects its dependence on affective immediacy and simplified symbolic communication, aligning it with broader dynamics of kitsch as an aesthetic mode of mass culture (Călinescu, 1987; Kulka, 1996).

g) Celebrities as carriers of kitsch meaning – Additionally, kitsch may also operate through the use of celebrities as symbolic carriers of meaning, where familiar public figures enhance emotional accessibility, recognition, and mass appeal, further reinforcing the circulation of simplified aesthetic forms.

This overlap is not merely descriptive but operates as a mechanism shaping aesthetic perception and cultural values. The kitsch-like features of celebrity culture – such as emotional simplification, visual standardization, and repetitive symbolic forms – enable rapid recognition and affective engagement across audiences. Through constant media exposure and circulation, these aesthetic patterns become normalized, gradually influencing what is perceived as attractive, desirable, or valuable. In this way, celebritytization, by incorporating kitsch sensibility, contributes to the stabilization of simplified aesthetic norms and to the broader structuring of taste within contemporary mass culture.

Key divergences between the two phenomena include:

a) Focus and object – Celebritytization is centered on individual figures and their constructed personas, whereas kitsch pertains to objects or cultural forms that often mimic high culture without generating originality (Baudrillard, 1998).

b) Emotional engagement – Celebrities elicit admiration, idealization, or disappointment, reflecting complex parasocial dynamics (Giles, 2000; Stewart & Giles, 2020). Kitsch, by contrast, produces immediate, sentimental, or superficial affective responses, exemplifying detached emotion (Kundera, 1984).

c) Originality – Personal stories, achievements, and uniqueness underpin celebritytization (Schroeder, 2005; Turner, 2014), whereas kitsch relies on replication and formulaic appeal (Baudrillard, 1998; Dorfles, 1969).

d) Long-term cultural impact – Celebritytization can influence societal norms and aesthetic ideals over time (Marshall, 2010; Inglis, 2000), while kitsch affects aesthetics indirectly, normalizing consumption-driven and easily digestible forms of culture (Baudrillard, 1998).

e) Social reach and mechanisms – Both phenomena achieve wide dissemination, but through different pathways: celebrities operate as social models amplified by media, whereas kitsch capitalizes on accessibility, affordability, and reproducibility to permeate cultural consciousness (Turner, 2014; Stewart & Giles, 2020; Özler & Kizilelma, 2023).

5. Summary and Future Considerations

The tragedy of *King Lear* begins when real individuals – Kent, Cordelia, Edgar, Gloucester – are driven out by counterfeit figures, i.e., the deceitful and emotionally false sisters Goneril and Regan. (Shakespeare, n.d., Act 1, Scene 1, line 62)

The concluding reflection of this study begins with a literary metaphor drawn from William Shakespeare's *King Lear*. In this pivotal scene, king Lear engages with his daughters Goneril and Regan, who profess their love for him in exaggerated and insincere terms, while Cordelia, the youngest, expresses her affection simply and genuinely. Her honesty, however, leads to her banishment – a critical turning point in the play. This dramatic moment resonates strongly with contemporary mass culture, where authentic individuals and genuine aesthetic experiences are often overshadowed by media-constructed celebrities and mass-produced kitsch. Just as in *King Lear*, superficial representations frequently gain prominence over depth, originality, and human value, shaping public taste and perceptions of aesthetic and social worth. In this sense, the metaphor provides a lens through which to understand celebritization and kitsch as interrelated phenomena that reflect and influence cultural hierarchies, market dynamics, and collective emotional engagement.

This study has emphasized the correlated nature of celebritization and kitsch, pointing to their shared foundations in contemporary mass culture and their close connection to commercialization, media dynamics, and market-driven values. Celebritization, through the transformation of individuals into public figures, and kitsch, through the proliferation of mass-produced objects with varying aesthetic quality, jointly shape cultural preferences and aesthetic perceptions. Both phenomena influence contemporary aesthetic experience, yet they do so in different ways, reflecting a complex interplay between media exposure, public fascination, and market forces.

Celebrity culture is defined by its focus on individuals who gain public recognition through media presence, personal success, or distinctive lifestyles. Celebrities often shape social norms and trends, and their visibility influences public attitudes and behaviours. This phenomenon is strongly influenced by media dynamics, commercial interests, and public perception, with the aesthetics of these personalities frequently becoming symbols of societal values and trends (Schroeder, 2005; Marshall, 1997, 2010; Turner, 2014). Celebritization not only reflects media-driven amplification of personal identity but also actively contributes to shaping public taste, aesthetic ideals, and social aspirations.

Kitsch, in contrast, is characterized by mass production, low aesthetic distinction, and a form of sentimentality in which emotional attention is directed primarily toward the observer's own response. In Kundera's (1984) interpretation, kitsch does not merely evoke emotion toward its represented object; it also encourages satisfaction in experiencing and sharing an expected sentiment. As Baudrillard (1998, pp. 110–111) observes, kitsch possesses low distinctive value yet gains high profitability, as it is adopted across entire

social classes, reflecting a broad cultural demand. Its circulation is inseparable from commercial and media dynamics, with objects widely consumed regardless of originality or artistic merit (Özler & Kizilelma, 2023, p. 30). In this sense, the emotional appeal of kitsch may be understood as being directed more toward the observer's own sentimental experience than toward deeper engagement with the represented object (Kundera, 1984). Yet, kitsch also has positive dimensions: it fosters emotional engagement, provides accessible aesthetic experiences, and creates a sense of shared sentiment across social groups (Eco, 1986; Călinescu, 1987; Kulka, 1996). In this sense, kitsch operates simultaneously as a commercially successful, socially inclusive phenomenon and as an aesthetic form that prioritizes reproduction, accessibility, and sentimentality (Jacobus & Martin, 2018; Mihăilescu, 1997b). From a social perspective, it may even function as a symbolic language that bridges differences of education, class, and cultural background, democratizing aesthetic enjoyment and reinforcing cultural solidarity through collective emotional engagement (Călinescu, 1987; Eco, 1986). Its circulation demonstrates how aesthetic evaluation in contemporary culture can become inseparable from market forces, media attention, and public fascination, highlighting the paradoxical status of kitsch as both trivial and emotionally resonant, yet also unifying and culturally participatory.

Shifts in cultural norms and values are likely to affect the role and significance of both phenomena. Celebrity culture and kitsch may adapt to new social trends, potentially changing what is considered aesthetic, valuable, or desirable. Evaluating celebrities and kitsch provides insight into broader social trends and priorities, including the level of cultural progress or cultural demand at all societal levels.

While both phenomena have been extensively discussed in academic literature, their interconnected operation – particularly at the level of shared aesthetic mechanisms – remains insufficiently theorized. Both phenomena continuously shape public taste and discourse, yet they are often perceived as superficial or lacking critical value. This suggests a need for intensified research into how media, commercial interests, and popular reception interact to influence contemporary aesthetic standards. By examining these interactions, researchers can better understand how celebrity culture and kitsch contribute to the perception of aesthetic worth, social values, and emotional engagement in modern society.

Looking ahead, several potential developments merit consideration. If societal attitudes shift toward renewed emphasis on authenticity and originality, evaluation criteria for both celebritytization and kitsch may change, requiring updated aesthetic standards and frameworks. Conversely, the proliferation of digital platforms and social media influencers may amplify superficial aspects of both phenomena, further entwining public recognition, commercial appeal, and emotional resonance. Both trajectories offer fertile ground for research into the evolving relationship between media, culture, and aesthetics.

In conclusion, celebritization and kitsch are intertwined phenomena with distinct yet overlapping impacts on contemporary culture. Celebrities shape aesthetic ideals and social norms through visibility, personal branding, and public fascination, while kitsch reflects mass production, emotional engagement, and broad cultural participation. Both highlight the interplay of media, market forces, and audience reception, illustrating how contemporary mass culture constructs, disseminates, and evaluates value, beauty, and emotion. The study underscores the importance of recognizing both the superficial and the socially integrative functions of these phenomena, advocating for a nuanced approach to understanding their role in shaping cultural and aesthetic sensibilities.

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