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AN ANTHROPOLOGICAL CASE STUDY OF SCANDINAVIAN FOOD-DESIGN: THE SIGNIFICANCE OF RITUAL IN CONSUMPTION

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ABSTRACT:

” We wanted a re-enactment and staging of the meal,” says the production designer of the first molecular-performative restaurant in Denmark. The restaurant names itself a “food theatre,” as it combines molecular redesign of food and high cuisine with visual design and production effects for all senses. This culinary theatre has been a location for anthropological fieldwork with the purpose of understanding

contemporary design of food products. The food industry is a significant part of Danish economy, but usually associated with process industry and semi-manufactured goods. However, the design of food products is part of a growing experience economy. Not only processing of raw materials and packaging, but also specialised food services such as ecological or regional brands, special food fairs, luxury retailing and delicatessen home deliveries are part of this trend. Inspired by the narrative turn in marketing and the cultural turn of the experience economy, a number of *avant-garde* food-designers have emerged, catering to new segments of consumers. This case study illustrates how the design of rituals enters into meals as performative products and loci of identification. The paper discusses the design of meals, food produce and narratives of nutrition from an anthropological angle, using examples from the author's own first hand ethnographic studies in the symbolism of meals and their design.

O. SHORT PREFACE

This short paper is the outline of research in progress. The research project is a study of the significance and role of authenticity to contemporary design, perceived as an instantiation of cultural production. The empirical studies for this project, which are still in progress, consist in ethnographic field studies in the design of food, cooking and meals. The first two case studies are also still in progress, and one of them is the subject matter of this paper. The paper therefore should not be read as a final thesis or argument, but rather as a first sketch or outline of empirical research and theoretical work in progress. The methodology is mainly drawn from the author's primary academic discipline, ethnography, and the theory is principally drawn from cultural and social anthropology. The paper thus hopefully represents emerging trends in design research in at least two ways: By representing emerging ethnographic design research, and by addressing the production of food, meals and their surroundings as relevant matters for design and of design research.

I. CONTEMPORARY DESIGN OF FOOD?

Is cooking a matter of design? The answer will obviously depend on your definition of design – and of cooking. I would argue that food, meals and cooking have become design phenomena in recent years, and that the methodological aesthetic, functional and performative refinement and development of food production and of its consumption and surroundings could be regarded as an emerging trend in design. Recently, a number of chefs and food-producers have chosen to define their products as for example hi-tech, molecular or performative creation. Fine cuisine, “half-baked” delicatessen and semi-manufactured quality meals today can be lucrative commodities, especially if sold on mass basis as new luxury goods (Silverstein & Fiske 2003). Furthermore conscious design and marketing of food produce have proven to be significant elements in the branding of regions and nations, and assets to regional economies in global competition: Champagne from Champagne, ham from Parma and Cypriot haloumi cheese are examples of the regional kind (eg. Andilios & Welz 2004), as Mexican tequila, Japanese nori seaweed and British fudge are national examples. The reinvention and refinement of local foodstuff as luxury items marketed in global packaging could be regarded as strongly related to design activities, if not actually food-design in its own right.

Other producers have turned to foodstuff as a significant symbol and content of lifestyle and social distinction, and have developed on basic foodstuff so as to make it politically correct, aesthetic, prestigious, ideologically and spiritually appealing and more refined in terms of taste and senses – for example through a focus on the development of organic foods (cf. Jönsson 2005).

A number of scientists and food producers advocate that cooking is a matter of rational methodology. These cooks and scientists regard the preparation of food as a scientific pursuit, which can be methodologically researched, defined and refined. With increasing attention they discuss the chemical and physical processes at work in cooking (e.g. Barham 2001), the chemistry of taste (This 2005), and the cognitive and neurological aspects of physical and sensory characteristics of food (e.g. Møller & Hausner 2006). Studies have also been done in the history and lore of cooking (e.g. McGee 2004), as well as the cultural, social and symbolic dimensions of food (cf. Mintz & Du Bois 2002). The culturally applied significance of cooking and meals has in my own field of anthropology often been treated as key to a deeper understanding of the overall cultural characteristics of a particular society (e.g. Douglas 1966). The civilizing of basic nutrition into cooking and meals has obviously also fascinated several other disciplinary fields, such as those traditionally culinary and bromatologic, but also those relating to human psychology, art, philosophy and aesthetics. The combination of these methodological and scientific approaches with the aforementioned trends in branding, marketing, research and development have created convenient conditions for the development of new designs related to the production and consumption of foodstuffs.

In 2004 the British chef Heston Blumenthal told that five years prior “one of the most widely reported of our discoveries was the combination of caviar and white chocolate [...] I demonstrated this combination to one of the world's leading flavorists, who was amazed at the marriage.... He went off and came back with a printout [of the chemical makeup] of cocoa and caviar, and surely enough, they both contained high levels of amines” (King 2004). Blumenthal today is well known for his contributions to experimental, hi-tech cooking or molecular gastronomy as is the Spanish chef Ferran Adria, who is attributed with having designed “‘culinary foam’, which is now used by chefs around the world. Culinary foam consists of natural flavors (sweet or savory) mixed with a natural gelling agent. The mixture is placed in a whipped cream canister where the foam is then forced out with the help of nitrous oxide” (Moore 2006). Besides an internationally top-rated restaurant, Adria also has a culinary lab. Adria, Blumenthal and other hi-tech chefs are not only working on the taste and chemical constellations, but also experimenting with conceptual effects and symbolic elements: What do diners perceive, how do they interact with the food, and how do they experience *trompe l’oeil* food that looks like other food or non-food? Much prior to these commercial and culinary food experiments scientists have done cognitive and perceptive experiments with food. Housewives and cooks have done similar, often quite systematic work for millennia (Symons 1998), just as young women of industrialised societies for generations have been instructed with various trends in home economics (cf. Shapiro 2004) and scientifically managed kitchen work (Frederick 1919). However, this predominantly female and mundane work was regarded neither as *design* nor as *hi-tech*, but generally associated with low-prestige menial tasks and women’s unsalaried duties – except of course for the culinary achievements by professional, male chefs that were regarded as of a different league. But today the prestige of cooking has spread, and the methodological development of cooking is no longer regarded as “just” part of women’s everyday, mundane family business, as eccentric, private experiments by enthusiasts or as a highly traditional profession. Today experimental cooking has become a potential, economically very important contribution to the big business of industrial food production and to the design of food in a growing experience economy – at least in Europe, which is my field of study. Consistently methodological cooking experiments have fused, not only with chemistry, physics and neuroscience, but also with performance studies, design and anthropology. Furthermore, European men have gradually taken an interest in private and experimental cooking, along with the plenitude, improvement and prestige of technical facilities and refined raw materials in the kitchen - and with their changing gender roles. Cooking has turned performative – not only amongst chefs, but also more generally in society (cf. Dybdahl & Engholm 2007).

2. PERFORMATIVE FOOD

In July 2006 the British newspaper *The Guardian* told about a visit to an experimental restaurant in an elegant, but nondescript apartment block in my native country Denmark. The chef, “Mette Martinussen set up *1.th* [Danish for *1st to the right*] restaurant (it's named after the number of the apartment) because she was interested in staging a dinner party in a more intimate environment. ‘We send out formal invitations, we ask all our guests to arrive at the same time and then we lead them through a 10-course meal. The idea is to make the guests feel like they are at a very exclusive dinner party’” (Carr 2006). Since then Ms. Martinussen has opened a second performative restaurant - *Madeleines Madteater og Laboratorium* (“*Madeleine’s Culinary Theatre and Lab*”) - a concept restaurant where gourmet food is served in face to face interaction with the cooks, against a backdrop of moving artistic installations, relational aesthetics and staged performances to entertain and affect the guests. In an old storeroom in central Copenhagen’s harbour area, Mette Sia Martinussen has teamed up with production designer, Nikolaj Danielsen and a team of chefs, waiters and performers to create multi-sensory food experiences and achieve the stimulation of every sense during the experimental meal. In order to amplify the experience of eating during the three-hour meal, the team experiments with sound, light, music, choreography, stage props, olfactory stimulation, stage set design and other contemporary production design effects to supplement the traditional and hi-tech food, which partly is developed in the restaurant’s laboratory. A performance called *The 7th Sense* was structured so as to include something crisp, something bitter, something salty, something soft, something sour, something strong and something sweet in various combinations along the meal. Another performance took inspiration from the Madeleine cake (which has lent its name to the restaurant) of Marcel Proust’s novel *The Way by Swann’s*, and de- and reconstructed popular Danish dishes traditionally associated with childhood memories in a semiotically inspired manner. Consisting of approximately 10 courses, each show contains a fixed menu including wines and experimental beverages such as birch sap or beer with lilac foam. Each thematic menu-show runs for a few months, so that each theatre season includes a number of thematically very different food-shows. Diners are introduced to such courses as pigeon in liquorice sauce with black pepper paste and duck liver in crispy coating with pumpkin, at the same time as individual needs of e.g. vegetarians or allergy sufferers are also catered to. A thematically designed light- & sound-show accompanies the choreographed gestures of waiters and cooks, who work in an open kitchen next to the stage on which the diners are seated. Each table size is made to fit the group of diners, as in conventional restaurants, but the table itself is also made into a small stage – or altar – with individual light design and props changing with each course. As the three+ hours meal draws to a close, diners are invited to a tea salon hidden behind a curtain in the same theatrical space. Here lime tea and Madeleine cakes are served as a ritual of closure, whilst liqueur may be ordered and

tobacco smoked. There is no check at the end of the meal. As in other theatres, the ticket is paid in advance; and at the same occasion special needs can also be announced prior to the meal. In this way, the theatre can plan economically and the customers and guests need not worry about mundane issues of money or allergies during the event. The cost of the evening corresponds to a meal in other Danish gourmet restaurants, or to the cost of a more average restaurant meal plus a ticket to the Royal Ballet. Theatre and meal have converged, as other fields of cultural production tend to do these years (cf. Salamon 2007).

3. NARRATIVE

A significant part of *Madeleine's Culinary Theatre's* performance is related to a narrative approach to food and meals. In one of the performances, the meal was constructed with reference to a particular Danish, modernist poem. A banner with the poem was suspended from the wall of the entrance room, where the welcome cocktail was served, but it was up to each guest to take notice. For the rest of the meal and evening this poem remained but an implication, of which only fractions appeared in the visual show accompanying dishes. In another performance, letters and words appeared in the food, as ingredients spelled out words or exclamations. Other performances remain non-literal - "staging sensory experiences", as the production team has explained (Lorenzen 2005) - in the sense that they play on tacit emotions and associative affectivity rather than words or explicated meaning, and have rather involved instrumental music, sound design with unintelligible mutter, rain, wind, light and other visual material that could not be expressed meaningfully in words in a one to one relationship. 2006/2007 was the first full season of the culinary theatre, which accordingly went through a range of experiments to find its identity and format. A few years prior to the opening, the chef and the production designer had allied themselves with a creative board: a sociologist, a "sensorian", a brain scientist, a psychotherapist, an installation artist, a sculptor, a performance artist, a stage set designer and a musician/sound designer – besides this author; an anthropologist (all of us unsalaried – we are in it for the fun and the research). *Madeleine's* had been on the drawing board since 2002, and about a year later the founding team contacted the members of the creative board to try out various effects and approaches, and evaluate the development of each new design in either food, visual and auditive effects or narrative and dramaturgical structures. The company opened with the first commercial laboratory projects in April 2004, and the full-fledged restaurant opened two years later. *Madeleine's* first experimental dinner was set on the stage of the old Copenhagen Court Theatre (which dates back to 1767), where chef Mette Sia Martinussen and production designer Nikolaj Danielsen hosted a first complete six-course multi-sensory dining experience to the creative board. They wanted to create a dramaturgical restaurant space around the diners, tell stories and offer multi-sensorial

impressions. They also hoped to influence the development and design of food products, not least through the culinary lab, for which they could receive financial support from a government backed venture fund. The next experimental event was an interactive culinary exercise involving the united creative board in storytelling: Each board member wrote down a very short essay (half a page or less), and sent it to the production designer at Madeleine's. A few weeks later the board was invited to an eight-course dinner (one course for each member), based on our collected narratives. All participants succeeded in recognising each our own essay *qua* meal – purely through the sensory associations created by the food and the choreographed serving. We even could often guess themes in the others' stories without having read them or heard of the contents: A story of gardening and burning old leaves in autumn was turned into a dish of smoked tastes and smells, autumn colours and crispness. A narrative of kissing secretly in a train tunnel turned into hot chilli surprises hidden in unknown versions of marshmallows, whilst my own story of skiing on the Volga and coming home to warmth and red carpets in a Russian inn, turned into a new version of very hot beet-root soup served in bowls made out of pure ice, coated with snow of frozen Russian sour cream. Was this design? Was it a new version of arts and crafts? It definitely was narrative food. It also definitely was hi-tech cuisine, theatrical performance and experience economy.

4. SOCIALITY

Modern restaurants like Madeleine's obviously did not invent narrativity in meals. We know it from communal ritual meals of many traditions throughout centuries. Most clearly this is the case in sacrificial meals that usually have a very set narrative structure and often is accompanied by an oral narrative - for example in the form of incantations or prayers throughout the meal (eg. Salamon 1996, Sjørsløv 1995). Most of us know this from religious food sacrifices in temples and shrines, but also from holidays such as Christmas, Thanksgiving and Pesach, where traditional menus usually have a formal connection to the key narrative of the ritual event. These ritual structures also have been carried over into modern celebrations and forms of consumption – such as birthday celebrations and New Year's Eve meals, often to the extent where we can speak of a (re-) invention of tradition(s) (cf. Hobsbawm & Ranger 1983, Miller 1998, Salamon 1999). All of these rituals belong in a communal context, where the diners share and synchronise their consumption and thus confirm their mutual social bonds, alliances and obligations. The ritual meal is intensely social, and its narrative usually is one of social implications. Meals of ritual celebration can be described as narrative through nutrition, where the narrative comes to structure the design of the event and the contents and ingredients of the meal. Madeleine's Culinary Theatre clearly is not ritual in this traditional sense, nor is it necessarily producing narrative celebration of social alliances. Rather it produces

modern narratives that may have a rather individualised character, and it does so through the staging and experience of consumption. Each meal has its own dramaturgical structure, each dish and food ingredient its own semiotic significance, and the ensemble of elements make up an event that may be individually interpreted and sold as pure entertainment in a modern experience economy (cf. Pine & Gilmore 1998 & 1999). As exemplified in the first narrative experiments of Madeleine's Culinary Theatre, the narratively designed meal does not directly relate to any collective or social story or mythology, as would a traditional narrative encapsulated in a ritual meal. Rather the meal must be freely and individually interpreted as an impressionistic story, created out of a number of singular and ambiguous stories springing from individual experiences. But similarly to the traditional ritual meals, the synchronized consumption of a meal still creates a communal event - in spite of the anonymity, which may be present amongst co-diners who may not even want to get to know each other. The co-diners in the restaurant are united in ways similar to those of audiences in theatres or museums: they all consume together and in synchronicity. The diners interact with a design that can be consumed as an artistic or cultural event – or just as nutrition. However, as each guest in synchronization with other guests consumes the meal, the event turns into a modern ritual in itself. Each participant in the performance must read her or his own significance into the narrative and performance, but still the performance clearly makes sense as a collective act – irrespective of anonymity, individual readings and analyses of meaningfulness and content. In this sense, it lives up to being a modern ritual: individualised in terms of significance and application, but also synchronized as a commercial event of just-in-time, collective consumption of ambiguous or empty signification.

5. IDENTIFICATION

However empty or ambiguous and open the signification of the meal may be, it clearly involves issues of identification. As in theatre and traditional rituals, narratives are being consumed – and here in the most literal sense of the word. This implies that the narratives are internalised in the body. It is difficult to consume something that one rejects, unless one manages to reinterpret or change its significance. Thus the issue of pleasure has been important in the discussions of the creative board: must all ingredients of the meal – including sounds and music – be comfortable and agreeable to everybody in the audience all the time? This is what we usually expect when going to a restaurant: Good food, pleasant chairs, friendly waiters and so forth. But in a theatre play we might perceive constant convenience and comfort as boring or even senseless. This potential paradox of a culinary theatre that wants to make a difference, may be solved by keeping the food that literally is consumed pleasant, but allowing some of the other impressions – such as sound – to be provocative at times. However this is solved, the narrative and the meal must

create some sense of identification, just as is the case in ritual. During previous fieldwork I was told an anecdote about a modern divination ritual used in corporate business: A Japanese corporate executive officer of a very large company would swallow new contract drafts to see if his bowels consumed the offer in an agreeable manner. If he felt well after having ingested a contract, his company would sign the contract. If his body rejected the draft, so would his company (Salamon 2004). Similar concretisations of what we see as social or cultural metaphors are known elsewhere in the world, and are interesting for several reasons. In this context it is particularly interesting to notice how consumption or ingestion is associated with a ritual event which points to the identification between an individual body (e.g. of the leader) and a social “body” (e.g. of the corporation – corpus literally means body). If the individual body senses pleasure from ingesting a contract, so will the collective body of the company. Eating is a bodily practice, but also a practice of identity – both collective and individual. Producing food design or design in food thus involves conscious engagement with identification mechanisms of consumers: how do we identify with the context and setting of the meal? Is it pleasant to us, and if not – why? If the food tells a story – for example of regional roots (Champagne, Parma) or of personal memories (the taste of 1960s strawberry soda for a birthday party or grandma’s Christmas pudding or apple pie) – it engages with identity issues. This is sensitive, but also highly interesting and potentially exciting ground to work on. As in other fields of design, taste is a matter of distinction, and distinction is closely associated with identity (Bourdieu 1979).

2. DESIGNING CONSUMPTION?

I started out this presentation by asking whether cooking is a matter of design. I do not want to claim an answer to this question, as it will depend on definitions of both design, cooking – and as I have tried to introduce here – also of narrative, identity and sociality amongst many other elements present in staged meals, such as food rituals. However, I hope to have made it evident that food, meals and cooking have become phenomena worth considering in terms of design issues. In my own current research, I have taken the stance that the aesthetic, functional and performative development of food production and consumption could be regarded as emerging trends in design. Design research has for many years taken an interest in the material culture surrounding cooking, such as kitchens and tableware. Now we can also address the formative processes at work in the actual act of cooking, as well as the staging, packaging and – uhm – *design* of the meal as a social process and cultural event in the growing experience economy.

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