Somaesthetics and the Art of Eating

Gordon Shepherd explains in his compelling *Neurogastronomy: How the Brain Creates Flavor and Why It Matters* how complicated a construct taste actually is. There are five basic flavors: sweet, sour, salty, bitter, and *umami*, that is, a savory, meaty taste. While children are born with a predilection for sweet flavor and a pronounced aversion to sour and bitter tastes, people’s gustatory preferences are also culturally conditioned. The human biological apparatus and the neurological mechanisms behind the generation of flavor are substantially complemented by social factors. Our tastes are not permanently fixed. We can learn to appreciate new flavors, and come to relish the bitterness of strong coffee, to give one familiar example.

That we associate certain flavors with certain foods results from an interplay of multiple stimuli and complicated processes which all add up to taste sensations. Shepherd cites numerous experiments in order to argue that the perception of flavors hinges not only on the taste buds but also – indeed, to a large extent – on smell, with touch, sight, and even hearing considerably involved in the enterprise. When zigzagging among stands at a produce market, we select fruit by touching it to check whether it is ripe for eating. But touch denotes more activities than simply the movement of the fingers feeling a pear or an apple. When ingesting food, we touch it with our teeth, tongue, inner cheeks, and palate. They shower us with knowledge about the texture of foodstuffs, and channel the pleasure of them crunching or melting in the mouth. Surprisingly few people realize how much of the gustatory sensation depends on the smells foods exude. A simple experiment will make us understand that the sweetness of a candy will be lost on us if we hold our breath. We will be able to feel its size, weight, and crunchiness or, alternatively, glutinousness, but not its flavor. How food looks and what shape it has also affects our sensation of taste, with colors exerting the greatest influence in this respect. Brightly colored substances give an impression of smelling more intensely, and white wine will taste like red wine to us if tinted with a tasteless red dye. Hearing also makes its own considerable contribution to the process. Pondering what food sounds like, Shepherd

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observes that, predictably, various victuals have specific sound fields of their own, and that, for us, crunching is the most appetizing of them all.

Shepherd relies on neurological explanations to account for how gustatory sensations are produced. Relevant and convincing though these findings are, taste should be explored as a manifestation of the body’s integrated activity in its socio-cultural context.\(^2\) The neurogastronomer himself gestures at such a context when discussing the production of olfactory sensations. Feelings and memory hold a profound sway over our perception of smells and, consequently, over our experience of the flavors of foods. Paradoxically, taste does not come from food alone. While it originates in a holistic, sense-channeled experience, the intensity and character of taste results from the joint work of memory, emotions, associations, and social impacts.

Neurogastronomy intriguingly shows how taste came into being as an effect of adaptive evolutionary processes, but the fact that we sometimes resist evolutionary processes in an attempt to meet cultural demands is too patent to be overlooked. Lord Byron insisted that women should not be seen while eating.\(^3\) The only exception he allowed was a meal of lobster salad and champagne.\(^4\) This ludicrous injunction was evidently misogynistic, but Byron’s redeeming grace may be that he visited equally restrictive measures on himself. He did not abide by the lobster-cum-champagne diet, but nutrition was one of his central preoccupations. Byron was prone to weight gain, and his predicament was that Romanticism envisaged poets as slender and pale, with soulful and melancholy-ridden faces. Eating huge quantities of white rice was supposed

\(^2\) That neurological findings should be interpreted in this context is Antonio Damasio’s conclusion in *Descartes’ Error: Emotion, Reason, and the Human Brain* (New York: Putnam, 1994).

\(^3\) This ostensibly absurd principle is in fact still quite vibrant in contemporary culture, as psychological research indicates (cf. Marrie H. Bekker and Kirsten Boselie, “Gender and Stress: Is Gender Role Stress? A Re-examination of the Relationship between Feminine Gender Role Stress and Eating Disorders,” *Stress and Health* 18, no. 3 [2002]: 141–49). Opposite tendencies are in place as well. For example, the American artist Alison Knowles converted public eating into a work of art. She would have a tuna fish sandwich for lunch every day, because, as she claimed, it was the best cheap lunch available in her neighborhood. The invariable order of “a tuna fish sandwich on wheat toast with lettuce and butter, no mayo, and a large glass of buttermilk or a cup of soup” transformed a daily meal into a performance to be called *Identical Lunch*. Associated with the Fluxus, Knowles first spotted a potential for art in her eccentric habit of ordering the same dish every day in 1967. For many years to follow, she would daily repeat it at the same venue (Riss, a now non-existent restaurant on New York’s 8th Avenue) at more or less the same time. With time, she was joined by other artists, whose experiences and impressions were recorded and published in *Journal of the Identical Lunch*. Alice Knowles, *Journal of the Identical Lunch* (San Francisco: Nova Broadcast Press, 1971), 1.

to ensure a fair complexion. At a certain point in his life, Byron nearly halved his weight (from 100 to 54 kilos) by observing a strict diet of mashed potatoes with vinegar, a fashionable method for losing weight at the time. As related by Louise Foxcroft in *Calories and Corsets: A History of Dieting over Two Thousand Years*, this harsh dietary regime was not the most prohibitive one in Byron’s go-to repertoire, as “in his thirties, while travelling in Italy,” he “kept mainly to diet of claret and soda water.” The willowy silhouette was coveted by Byron not only for aesthetic reasons. In fact, the reports of his acquaintances “record his horror of fat, which he believed led to lethargy, dullness and stupidity, and his anxiety that his creativity would be lost.” While Byron’s example brings evident tensions between culture and nature into the spotlight, evolution and culture are also known to interpenetrate and reinforce each other. After all, it was the inclusion of food in culture that bred the revolutionary metamorphoses of the human species. Studies in evolutionary anthropology have amply shown that the cooking and sharing of food laid the foundation for humanity as we know it. Richard Wrangham argues that eating cooked food is what sets humans apart from other creatures. Still, we sometimes use our cultural and evolutionary achievements in quite wrong ways.

1 Ambitions and Temptations

Our societies are harmed by the expansion of the so-called Western dietary style, which involves the excessive consumption of industrially processed foods, where calorie intake overshadows other nutritional values. Such eating habits lie at the root of the increasing incidence of obesity and a range of other civilization diseases from allergies to cancers. However, weight-related problems are by no means our contemporary monopoly. Foxcroft cites stories of several historical personages who struggled with their weight (usually being overweight), and faced the dilemma of gastronomical pleasure vs. abstinent discomfort. This alternative is well exemplified in the culinary preferences of Friedrich Nietzsche, who reportedly loved sausages. Unfortunately, he was also obese as a result of his sedentary work. Nietzsche seriously considered going on diet, and consulted Luigi Cornaro’s *The Art of Living Long*, a very popular

5 Foxcroft, *Calories and Corsets*, 52–53.
6 Foxcroft, *Calories and Corsets*, 52.
handbook first printed in 1558 and published last in 1903. Cornaro, an affluent Venetian, was only thirty-five when his doctors told him in 1502 that he was on the verge of death and could survive only if he drastically cut down on his food intake. It was recommended that he practice a regular, moderate lifestyle and master self-control in order to keep his temptations in check. Cornaro developed very restrictive dietary rules, which essentially came down to eating as little as possible. He ate 400 gram of solid food a day, and drank half a liter of wine. At the end of his life, he reduced his daily sustenance to one egg.

Nietzsche became particularly interested in Cornaro’s exceptionally slow metabolism, which he believed was similar to his own. In Ecce Homo, Nietzsche refers to this, remarking “My blood flows slowly.” On second thoughts, however, he concluded that the gastronomical minimalism advertised by Cornaro would not do because “[s]cholars in this day and age, with their rapid consumption of nervous energy, would be destroyed by a regimen like Cornaro’s.” This belief stemmed from the general notions of Nietzsche’s philosophy of life, in which intellectualism and asceticism stood for a depletion of life. While there is a long philosophical tradition which recommends integrating theory and practice, Nietzsche’s philosophical choices and life practice did not go hand in hand. Today, nutrition is increasingly frequently addressed in public debates and made part of social policy agendas as a result of the problems it may and does cause. Nourishment is explored by neurologists, dieticians, historians, anthropologists, aesthetics researchers, and artists, to name but a few interested groups. Though food is admittedly attracting more and more attention from social scientists and humanities scholars, the interrelated cultural, social, and biological dimensions of the cooking and eating of food call


for a more thorough examination. As a matter of fact, discourse on diet makes its appearance as early as in ancient writings. The recognition that what we eat profoundly affects our conduct, mental capacity, overall social relationships, and even the condition of the state can be traced back to Plato’s times. Despite long-standing disputes on the preparation and consumption of meals, we still feel that something is missing in the rich legacy of nourishment scholarship. The point is that there is no approach which would help us investigate food from the point of view of bodily practices and integrate dispersed discourses of diet and healthy living. Bringing together beliefs about the optimal lifestyle and actual life practice is another, perhaps even more daunting challenge.11

Cooking has become a veritable media craze, and chefs belong among celebrities today. Cooking shows are watched by millions of viewers, and mass social movements preoccupied with nutrition arise, as illustrated by the slow food movement in the previous chapter. In spite of this, we still do not fully realize what a complex activity eating is and how destructive Western nutritional modes may be. While absolutely fundamental to our biological existence, eating is far more than just the ingestion of food. It is a complicated cultural and social process whose multiple dimensions call for interdisciplinary studies. We need a debate on the best diet for us because, as civilization develops, our lifestyle changes. While it is a sheer impossibility to come up with a detailed “recipe” for a diet catering to everybody’s needs, it is possible to formulate general principles of eating aligned with melioristic philosophical investigations.

2 Somaesthetics as an Art of Living

Contemporary culture is obsessed with the body. We spend a lot of time and money on improving and shaping our appearance, for example, by combating the signs of aging. Given this, Richard Shusterman, the author of Pragmatist Aesthetics and Body Consciousness, may sound preposterous when he bemoans the fact that we still do not devote enough attention to our bodies. However, what Shusterman is concerned with is the dearth of in-depth reflection which should lead to a melioristic reinforcement of life practice. This failing is to be redressed by somaesthetics,12 which builds on “the pragmatist insistence on

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11 Knowledge about proper nutrition is key to healthy living. However, putting this knowledge into practice in one’s own life and the consistent observance of dietetic recommendations may be a serious challenge. People with eating dysfunctions may need help from both dieticians and psychologists specialized in psychodietetics.

12 For a detailed depiction of the tenets, goals, and development plans of somaesthetics, see “Somaesthetics: A Disciplinary Proposal,” a chapter added to the second edition of
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the body’s central role in artistic creation and appreciation” to foreground and study “the soma – the living, sentient, purposive body – as the indispensable medium for all perception.”

Shusterman is one of the few thinkers who delve into the philosophical significance of everyday routines. Interested in aesthetics as a discipline which focuses on perception, awareness, and sensing, he primarily attends to the kinetic aspect of human functioning, but the somaesthetics perspective may naturally be fruitful in theoretical investigations of food, as exemplified in Shusterman’s “Somaesthetics and the Fine Art of Eating” (2016). Before going into the details of his meticulous and thorough argument in this paper, let us examine how Shusterman’s pragmatist theory helps incorporate reflections on gastronomical practices into aesthetics and, furthermore, how it recognizes these practices as art.

Shusterman’s books time and again dwell upon the idea of an integral human experience in which the aesthetic, the ethical, the political, the practical, the cognitive, and the somatic interpenetrate and condition each other. His Practicing Philosophy revisits the ancient ideal of philosophy as an art of living in order to produce a holistic account of human existence. Shusterman believes that the best effects are achieved by combining philosophy as theory with philosophy as an artistic life practice. In this way, he surmounts Western philosophy’s entrenched reluctance to ponder the body. When tackling one of the perennial philosophical questions, namely, “How to live better?” he...
Consider the ethical, political, and aesthetic issues, but he finds proper body posture, a healthy diet, and skillful breath control equally important. Hence his philosophy is not only an attempt to reappraise the “body” vis-à-vis the “mind,” but also a descriptive and normative project for the holistic functioning of the “sentient soma.” Importantly, the field of somaesthetics, as Shusterman repeatedly emphasizes, comprises not only theoretical inquiry but also “practical bodily disciplines to enhance our experience and performance while increasing our tools for self-fashioning.”

Shusterman shares John Dewey’s belief that the mental elements cannot be separated from physical action. Shusterman approvingly quotes Dewey’s essay “Body and Mind,” in which the act of eating is taken to exemplify an integral action: “Eating is also a social act and the emotional temper of the festal board enters into the alleged merely physical function of digestion. Eating of bread and drinking of wine have indeed become so integrated with the mental attitudes of multitudes of persons that they have assumed a sacramental spiritual aspect.” Our moods are influenced by what we eat and drink and by how our digestion works; at the same time, our bodily fitness, which depends on what we drink and eat, determines our mental states. Attempts to sever these two orders may lead to problems: “When behavior is reduced to a purely physical level and a person becomes like a part of the machine he operates, there is proof of social maladjustment. This is reflected in the disordered and defective habits of the persons who act on the merely physical plane.”

Dewey’s words could suitably depict the situation of the protagonist of Charlie Chaplin’s Modern Times. Chaplin’s movie features a factory worker who loses his sanity in endeavors to handle the demands of specialized assembly-line labor, which prioritizes economical action and seeks to maximize profit. After a day of work, he is unable to stop performing mechanically repeated operations. Chaplin’s images are indeed hilarious, but they also tell a painfully insightful story of alienation that afflicts eating. Namely, practically-minded scholars use the protagonist in trials of a machine designed to spoon food directly into workers’ mouths. In the experiments (and the future they herald), eating is stripped of its entire social and cultural aura, and reduced to energy-supplying feeding alone. Devised as effective and hygienic, the machinery falls to pieces in its ultimate demise. The only thing that the “streamlined” dining for modern times accomplishes is exacerbating the worker’s torment.

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In his reflection on the essence of philosophical life, which is as a rule identified with mental life, Shusterman ponders in what ways and to what extent it is formed by corporeal practices. In doing this, he considers somatic consciousness, fitness exercises, and proper nutrition. This does not come as a surprise, given that philosophy aspires to improve the lives of individuals by critically reflecting on the human condition, and that it is a discipline which ideally combines theoretical inquiry and life practice. Moreover, in this respect Shusterman shares the notion espoused by Dewey, Wittgenstein, and Foucault that “philosophy was a life-practice where theory derived its real meaning and value only in terms of the life in which it functioned.”

The belief that philosophy is rooted in life, which has its somatic aspect as well, makes it expedient for philosophical inquiries to deal with proper diet as an element of the “care of the self.” In this context, “diet” is not meant in its truncated, albeit currently popular, sense of limiting both the variety and the quantity of food, a regime which often has a crippling effect on the body. Instead, “diet” is understood in conformity with the etymology of the word: “The Greek word *diaita*, from which our word ‘diet’ derives, described a whole way of life rather than referring to a narrow weight-loss regimen. It provided an all-round mental and physical way to health, basic to one’s very existence and success.”

A philosopher should study our situation in the world in its entirety, without privileging one aspect of our existence at the cost, if not the exclusion, of others. Our wellbeing is premised on competently balancing the needs of both the mind and the body. Can the two actually be separated? Such aspirations, which add up to the pursuit of a good life, were on Shusterman’s mind when he set out to illumine the components of the art of eating.

3  The Art of Eating

Animals feed themselves; men eat; but only intelligent men know the art of eating.

*Anthelme Brillat-Savarin*

“In Aristotelian terminology,” Shusterman writes, “cooking is *poiesis*, the making of an object with skill,” and “eating resembles *praxis*, the performing of an

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action.”23 Aristotle equated art with poiesis, and Shusterman’s goal is to demonstrate the potential for art in the somatic skill of food assimilation. Shusterman draws a line between the act of eating and the art of eating, and wonders what conditions must be met for the former to cross this line and become the latter. In doing this, he identifies a series of degrees of engagement and competence in the somatic art of nourishment. As his starting point, he takes the simple need to appease hunger, one that we share with animals. As already stated, even if the human act of eating is reduced to an automatic, incognizant, and primatively insensitive response to hunger, it is always already inscribed in a cultural context. This context encompasses, among other things, both cooking techniques and the skill of naming, that is, of talking about food products and the sensations they provide: “Human culture, through its use of language, enables us to name or identify what we eat and thus better select, communicate, acquire, and critically evaluate our food choices. We can thus organize our ingestion of them in an orderly form or sequence that adds meaning to the act of eating.”24 Shusterman grants the top position in his ranking of gourmands to those who have mastered what he calls the art of dining. These are individuals who not only boast having well-trained taste, the know-how of composing meals, and the skill of savoring them, but also can comprehensively examine the complex process of eating and “know how to eat aesthetically.”25

The art of eating rests on three pillars: the art of cuisine, the art of food appreciation and criticism, and the art of eating proper. In Shusterman’s classification, the art of cuisine covers the processes of the preparation and presentation of dishes.26 The second component of the somaesthetic art of eating, which Shusterman proposes calling the art of food appreciation and criticism, revolves around choosing foods and selecting ingredients. Competent decision-making in this respect is predicated on one’s knowledge of the quality of food, its gustatory properties, its nutritional values, and its health-related effects. Expertise in composing meals also requires knowledge about the socio-cultural position and connotations of foods, and thus depends on cultural competency.27

The careful selection of foodstuffs and the essential relationship between a product and its place of origin were eloquently emphasized by Anthelme Brillat-Savarin:

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Game also draws a great deal of its value from the nature of the country where it has matured: the flavor of a red partridge from Périgord is not that of one from Sologne; and while a hare killed on the plains outside of Paris makes but an insipid dish, a young one born on the sunburned slopes of Valromey or the upper Dauphiné is perhaps the tastiest of all four-legged game.\textsuperscript{28}

Shusterman often refers to Savarin’s ideas when underscoring the importance of gastronomical art and the ways of cultivating it. He agrees with Savarin’s insistence that to account for the pleasures of the table one must not stop at explaining the olfactory and gustatory qualities involved; one must also consider “the visual beauties of food-presentation and the auditory harmonies of music that often accompany our dining to enhance its overall satisfaction.”\textsuperscript{29} In spelling out the conditions for harmonious and intense pleasures of the table, Shusterman both explores the conventionally listed senses (of taste, smell, sight, and hearing) and interprets the impact of touch and proprioceptive sensations on the final form of culinary experiences. In this way, the American pragmatist rounds off the investigations of the famous French gastronome. Shusterman foregrounds the importance of tactile pleasures, which derive from touching various surfaces and textures of both the victuals and the implements we employ in the act of eating. We touch things with our hands, lips, teeth, and tongues. Delight can be occasioned by warmth spreading through our bodies or by refreshing chilliness caused by cold drinks, cooled fruit, ice-cream, and cold dishes and desserts. Tactile stimuli are provided by the chopsticks we lift between our fingers, by the weight, shape, and surface of the cutlery we hold in our hands, by the texture of a napkin with which we wipe our palms and mouths, etc. When we break off a piece of a baguette, we know, even before it lands in our mouths, whether it is crispy, whether its crust is crunchy, and whether it is fluffy or solid inside.

Cooking sections in bookstores teem with publications on cooking techniques, recipes, the history of cuisine (including the history of cookbooks, kitchen utensils, restaurants, chefs, food migrations, etc.), and the description and evaluation of food products. The originality of the methodology underlying Shusterman’s project lies in adopting another, most unconventional lens


\textsuperscript{29} Shusterman, “Somaesthetics and the Fine Art of Eating,” 267.
through which to approach the art of eating. Specifically, in his illuminating paper “Somaesthetics and the Fine Art of Eating,” Shusterman passes over the creative aspects of cooking and chooses a less obvious field of exploration by focusing on the aesthetic dimensions of food ingestion. He goes beyond the bodily surface and probes into the recesses of mouths, throats, stomachs, and bowels. In this way, he investigates what he calls the art of eating proper, a term which he reserves for what are strictly the “modes and manners of ingestion.”

He identifies five major defining elements of the thus-conceived art of eating. These are one's posture at the table, the dynamic of eating, the accessories involved in eating, the kinds and serving sequence of courses, and the modes of appreciating foods, beverages, and the pleasures offered both by festive banqueting and by ordinary everyday meals. Shusterman also stresses how important it is to know when to stop eating and drinking.

To commence his discussion of the somaesthetic art of eating, Shusterman ponders what body posture optimizes the experience of eating and maximizes its aesthetic quality. He scrutinizes the advantages and discomforts of the various positions our bodies take while eating, wherein he goes back to a range of their historical variants and looks over their contemporary forms specific to various cultures. His examination brings into relief the deeply contextual nature of the art of eating, which depends on culturally determined styles and norms, with disparate versions of the same behavior often being accepted within one culture. For example, the European tradition prioritizes eating in the sitting position, but prefers standing in some particular circumstances, such as buffet receptions and cocktail parties. At Italian and French cafes, visitors can choose between two styles of having their coffee and/or breakfast: they may either sit at a table and be served by a waiter or stand at the counter and directly order their drinks and snacks from a bartender. The latter is Shusterman’s favorite. His preference for having his morning coffee in this particular way is not dictated by time pressure or economic reasons; he opts for it, because

this position offers the multisensory pleasure of hearing, seeing, and smelling how your espresso is made and delivered at close range; further there is a sense of dynamic mobility, of stretching one’s legs before one’s long day of work at a desk; there is also an agreeably special sense of momentary, noncommittal solidarity with other diners at the bar, most often strangers, an option of sociality that one can take or leave, depending on one’s mood.

In his depiction of movements involved in the activity of eating, Shusterman pays equal attention to the two kinds he identifies: external and internal motions. We move our arms, hands, and fingers to bring food to the mouth, to manipulate various table utensils, and to offer help to our companions at the table by passing them plates with food and salt-and-pepper pots. Obviously, hand movements are connected to the motions of the entire body when we bend or turn. Shusterman explains that: “In somaesthetically artful eating, movements are done with grace that provides both the proprioceptive pleasure to the diner herself and some degree of pleasure to an attentive observer who can appreciate the fine qualities of movement.”

Volitional movements that take place inside our bodies, such as biting, chewing, swallowing, drinking, sniffing, etc., are no less essential, because those who develop a consciousness of them can regulate the rhythm of their actions and synchronize it with the rhythm of their bodies and the needs of other people at the table. Shusterman’s discussion of internal movements does not leave out breathing, the respiratory motions of which are coupled with food ingestion processes: “One can adjust the speed and rhythm of one’s chewing and swallowing (or even one’s breathing) in order to make these movements more harmonious (not only in terms of the diner’s own eating but in tune with the rhythms of others); one can also intentionally vary these rhythms to add proprioceptive interest of novelty.”

Shusterman marshals a panoply of examples from various cultural contexts to illustrate how the selection of cutlery and various accessories depends on the circumstances in which we eat and on the dishes that are served. The choice of the physical properties – materials, sizes, shapes – of the utensils affects our tactile and proprioceptive pleasure. For instance, as Shusterman rightly notices, quite different experiences are produced by drinking coffee from a Styrofoam mug and from a china cup. He regards the soft wood of Japanese chopsticks as better attuned to bringing rice into the mouth than the cold metal of a fork or metal chopsticks, which he finds more suitable for hot Korean dishes. The sensory is interlaced with the cultural at this level as well: “Besides these sensory aesthetic differences there are aesthetic differences of cultural symbolism in one’s choice of implements: using a fork for some kinds of noodles and chopsticks for others.”

The selection of victuals and the sequence of serving courses add up to another important dimension of the art of eating. In this respect, our decisions are again determined by the culture in which we are brought up, as every
culture cherishes its own forms of table manners. Shusterman discusses differences in serving styles between the East and the West, as well as between Europe and the U.S. Salad and its place on dinner menus offer a simple, but telling, example. In Poland, a salad of raw vegetables is usually a side-dish accompanying a main of meat. In France and the U.S., it is a separate course, with which the Americans begin their dinner but which the French prefer to enjoy towards the end of the meal. Additionally, mealtimes are differently distributed across the day. For instance, Poles have their main meal in the afternoon, but the French and Americans have their most sumptuous meals later in the evening. Consequently, artful eating is premised on one’s capacity to adjust to the context: the time of the day, the season of the year, one’s health condition, the occasion, etc. When choosing what to eat, one also decides to exclude some ingredients and/or foods from one’s menu for “aesthetic reasons other than mere taste.”35 During the heat of summer, a mindful eater will go for light cold soups instead of rich stews suitable for chilly days; similarly, “[o]ne may love chomping on crabs with friends or family, but avoid them in a refined dining situation because they make for messy eating.”36

The fifth defining element of the art of eating, which Shusterman refers to as “perceptions,” is partly implicated in the other four. Perceptions are generated through operations of the “complex sensorimotor systems” in our bodies. These systems perform multiple roles, ranging from the coordination of limb movements to the reception of gustatory, olfactory, tactile, and proprioceptive stimuli so as to enable “appropriate recognition and handling of eating accessories; and they govern our selection and sequencing of foods by identifying them and their qualities through diverse sensory perceptions.”37 To sort this tangled abundance of operations into more ordered categories, Shusterman proposes a simple division into external and internal perceptions. In his framework, the former result from our engagement in relations with the world outside, and the latter encompass sensations coming from inside our bodies. Shusterman recommends “cultivating and sharpening perceptions of inner bodily space, especially those within the mouth, nose, and throat where biting, tasting, chewing, smelling, and swallowing take place,”38 which he believes will promote the optimization of culinary experiences, making them more intense, more complex, and more rewarding. Attention to proprioceptive experiences stemming from body posture and physical contact with food will enhance the

pleasure of eating and help one correctly decipher the bodily signals of satiety and conclude the meal at the right moment.

Art, and therein the somaesthetic art of eating, presupposes the intentionality of action. Nonetheless, Shusterman does not insist that we should invariably mobilize our awareness to focus on each and every crumb we put into our mouths. The point is that art also presupposes improvisation, free play, and intuitive acts. Therefore, “[t]hat many selection and sequencing choices are made spontaneously by habit (rather than through reflective deliberation) does not entail their being unaesthetic choices. Habits can be intelligent and aesthetically creative if they are the sedimented product of intelligent aesthetic training in how to eat.”\(^\text{39}\) The results of this training will persist in our bodies, which know and remember.

4 Body Memory

My body is truly the navel of my world.

JUHANI PALLASMAA

When asked how she had learned to cook, Danièle Mazet-Delpuech answered: “I never took any lessons. I learned the most from my mother. I went to her, watched what she was doing, and then started to do just the same. Finally, it turned out all of a sudden that I could cook this or that myself.”\(^\text{40}\) Łukasz Modelski quizzed her: “But surely it wasn’t that your mother or grandmother took you to the kitchen, saying: Look, this is how you make duck, and this is how you make ratatouille?”\(^\text{41}\) She replied: “No. Not really. Rather, I watched them cook and then tasted the food; after all, I ate at home every day... I don’t know how to put it, but all this sat in me, somewhere deep inside. This sense of taste and cooking savvy.”\(^\text{42}\)

“Know how” very obviously has a dual meaning in the kitchen. Intellectual knowledge is interlaced with manual knowledge in cuisine. Even the most meticulous, step-by-step description of making pierogis will not surpass showing how the fingers actually move when folding them and pinching their edges together, and even this will not give a beginner any guarantee of success.

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41 Modelski, Piąty smak, 252.
42 Modelski, Piąty smak, 252.
Proficiency comes with time and practice, and one day we find ourselves able to perform all the activities involved in making shapely and delicious *pierogis* without monitoring them at all. This bifold quality of cooking, which includes both “movements of the body as well as those of the mind” is highlighted by the French sociologist Luce Giard: “[I]n cooking the activity is just as mental as it is manual; all the resources of the intelligence and memory are thus mobilized. One has to organize, decide, and anticipate. One must memorize, adapt, modify, invent, combine, and take into consideration.”

Many routine daily activities involve habitual actions inscribed in our bodies. In his essay on “Muscle Memory and the Somaesthetic Pathologies of Everyday Life,” Shusterman explains that:

“Muscle memory” is a term commonly used in everyday discourse for the sort of embodied implicit memory that unconsciously helps us perform various motor tasks we have somehow learned through habituation, either through explicit, intentional training or simply as the result of informal, unintentional, or even unconscious learning from repeated prior experience.

Shusterman identifies six species of latent muscle memory, which is sometimes called “procedural memory” or “motor memory” in scientific discourse. Memory linked to the sense of the continuity of one’s self is called “the memory of the self” by Shusterman. Related to it is the second memory type, which is responsible for remembering place. Owing to this, we know how we got to a given venue and how we can leave it. The third variety of body-recorded, implicit memory is described by Shusterman as “interpersonal, or more broadly as intersomatic, so as to include non-human companions like animals.” The remaining memory types listed by Shusterman are memory of social role, performative memory, and the memory of the vestiges of traumatic events. Importantly, memory of the social role and performative memory are activated both while cooking and while eating. Below, I briefly examine these two forms of memory.

Body memory concerning social role is filled and updated from childhood on. Starting in our earliest years, we are trained for a range of culturally

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44 Shusterman, *Thinking through the Body*, 91.

45 Shusterman, *Thinking through the Body*, 95.
endorsed social roles. First they are gender-related, and then we have the standard behavior of a good student, a caring mother, and/or an effective lawyer instilled in us. Culture as a rule offers women and men quite different “packages” of values and appended desired practices. In her “The Nourishing Arts,” Giard recalls her rebellion against her mother’s suggestion that she should learn kitchen chores. She has no doubts that “I refused this women’s work because no one ever offered it to my brother.”46 Giard would not learn to cook, because she associated it with a specific privilege which was in fact an instance of exclusion. The English writer Julian Barnes also blamed his parents for unequal treatment regarding cooking. His collection of essays *The Pedant in the Kitchen* opens with a complaint that he was never given any cooking lesson, which he claims is the reason why, even though he took to cooking with time, he has never acquired enough confidence to feel at ease and be imaginative in the kitchen.47 The kitchen, as he playfully avers, was kept secret from middle-class boys: “Meals and my mother emerged from it – meals often based on my father’s garden produce – but neither he, my brother, nor I enquired, or were encouraged to enquire, about the transformational process.”48 He started cooking himself when he was studying for his degree, and, as he recollects, “[t]he key factors governing my ‘cooking’ at this time were poverty, lack of skill, and gastronomic conservatism.”49 As time went by, Barnes perfected his cooking technique and mastered increasingly complicated dishes. While his mother rejoiced in this development in the hope of having her now-cooking son more appreciative of her own culinary efforts, his father watched it “with the mild, liberal suspicion.”50

A late cooking debut took place in similar circumstances in Giard’s life as well. When she went away to study and was condemned to dining in student eateries and cafeterias, she realized how well she had been fed at home. She decided to cook something all by herself at the ripe age of twenty, when living in an apartment of her own. Her rebellion against the culturally entrenched gender roles did not subside, and prevented her from consulting her mother for advice as that, she thought, would have been tantamount to condoning the “feminine model” she had rejected. If family tradition could not be her recourse, Giard believed that a cookbook was the best solution. She deliberately picked an unillustrated, grey-covered booklet which defied the norms

49 Barnes, *Pedant in the Kitchen*, 3.
50 Barnes, *Pedant in the Kitchen*, 3.
of feminine aesthetics. The key words advertising its recipes were: “simple,” “quick,” “modern,” and “inexpensive.”51 If the book’s grey cover and the lack of plates made for neutral aesthetics, the absence of visual tips was not the most fortunate of choices for a debutante. Be that as it may, Giard was in for a surprising turn of events, as she discovered, to her astonishment, that her body had registered the necessary knowledge:

From the groping experience of my initial gestures, my trials and errors, there remains this one surprise: I thought that I had never learned or observed anything, having obstinately wanted to escape from the contagion of a young girl’s education and because I had always preferred my room, my books, and my silent games to the kitchen where my mother busied herself. Yet, my childhood gaze had seen and memorized certain gestures, and my sense of memory had kept track of certain tastes, smells, and colors. I already knew all the sounds: the gentle hiss of simmering water, the sputtering of melting meat drippings, and the dull thud of the kneading hand. A recipe or an inductive word sufficed to arouse a strange anamnesis whereby ancient knowledge and primitive experiences were reactivated in fragments of which I was the heiress and guardian without wanting to be. I had to admit that I too had been provided with a woman’s knowledge and that it had crept into me, slipping past my mind’s surveillance. It was something that came to me from my body and that integrated me into the great corps of women of my lineage, incorporating me into their anonymous ranks.52

This passage perfectly illustrates both the memory of social role and performative (or procedural) memory, capturing the interdependence of the various kinds of muscle memory, which condition and reinforce each other. Our bodies brim with encoded procedures for doing things, which are spontaneously implemented while performing customary, quotidian activities, such as putting a jumper on or tying our shoes. It is due to the effect of performative memory that we can act without taking time to think on the consecutive component-actions we need to undertake to complete the task.

Such an automatic approach is obviously useful in daily life, because it imbues our movements with smoothness and enables us to invest “always-limited resources of explicit consciousness”53 in more challenging tasks. The

51 De Certeau, Giard, and Mayol, Practice of Everyday Life 2, 152.
52 De Certeau, Giard, and Mayol, Practice of Everyday Life 2, 152–53.
53 Shusterman, Thinking through the Body, 99.
activities which Shusterman enumerates as paradigmatic for this type of body memory include walking, swimming, playing the piano, and driving a car. His list can easily be extended to cover kitchen chores. All homemakers have mastered kitchen economy with the know-how of proper uses, proper applications, and proper dosages. Our body memory streamlines our actions in familiar spaces. Without needless thinking, we open exactly the drawer we need, take just the box we need out of the cupboard, and put objects back precisely where they belong. Our domesticated and memorized space affords us a sense of comfort. Giard aptly observes that the everydayness of the kitchen does not mean pure routine, because it abounds with novel things to do as a result of some temporary wishes of our families or our guests’ preferences. Economic, temporal, and sentimental factors form a complicated nexus, which must be taken into consideration: “With all these details quickly reviewed, the game of exclusion, impossibilities (from lack of time, money, or supplies), and preferences must end in the proposal of a solution to be quickly realized because one has to come up with a menu for tonight, for example, roast beef with oven-baked potatoes.”

The insights compiled in this chapter imply that culinary art is both an expression of submission to the demands of the body, tradition, and routine as well as a creative manner of transforming the world; culinary art is as much a site of coercion as a space of pleasure. Ancient Greeks regarded proper nutrition as inextricable from strivings to attain harmony with the universe. This notion was embodied in a symposion – a banquet where eating was an important part of the conversation in which the interlocutors sought to attain self-knowledge and comprehend the world. Notably, as Shusterman claims, the very act of eating leads to self-examination and to the acquisition of “somatic self-knowledge.” Consequently, it may be highly relevant to philosophical considerations, which have always defined self-knowledge as their goal. Self-knowledge is a prerequisite for self-improvement, in which more conscious and thoughtful responses to the needs of the body are developed along with the competent use of one’s sensory apparatus.

Dietary practices impart meaning and profundity to existence, enhancing its authenticity. Yet the aesthetics of eating should not be reductively confined to special occasions and sumptuous feasts. Every common meal may have an aesthetic dimension. Ultimately, any culinary experience may contribute to creative self-fashioning: “Through such artful dining, even a simple meal becomes an artwork of improvised group choreography whose silent yet

54 De Certeau, Giard, and Mayol, Practice of Everyday Life 2, 200–201.
55 Shusterman, Thinking through the Body, 113.
communicative harmonies not only serve as a means for efficiently coordinating food ingestion, but can provide powerful pleasure in their own right.”

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