The Experience of Eating

A phenomenological analysis of transition factors and consumption to understand the experience of eating.

Wigglesworth, S. (1997) *The Disorder of the Dining Table*. Architectural Review. [Online image] [Accessed on 3rd January 2024] https://www.architectural-review.com/essays/folio/folio-sarah-wigglesworths-dining-tables

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

Traditionally, the social act of eating was shaped by localised food systems and socio-cultural identity (Bourdieu, 1984; Bradley, 2016; DeVault, 1991; Guptill et al., 2017). Now, the experience of eating is moulded by every step of its conception; from consumer choices influenced by external factors such as globalisation and sustainability (Banerjee and Quinn, 2022; Guptill et al., 2017; Majumder and Majumder, 2020; Spaargaren et al., 2011), to internal variations influenced by identity and rituals (Bradley, 2016; Castelo et al., 2021; Guptill et al., 2017). By acknowledging the interconnected nature of eating and other social practices (Castelo et al., 2021), a comprehensive understanding of the experience of eating can be achieved.

As such, this essay will phenomenologically consider three main areas to analyse the experience of eating: Action, Consumption and Intentions. 'Action' will inquire into the impact of rituals and identity on the experience of eating and how they can shape – and be shaped by – food practices. 'Consumption' identifies globalisation and individualism as transition factors for the experience of eating, alongside the impact of sustainability concerns. Lastly, 'Intentions' discusses the implications of mindful consumption habits and how this might be combined with design phenomenology to promote sustainable and holistic food practices. The essay will use a combination of sociological and market research in order to analyse transition factors and consumption and their individual meanings.

ACTION

1.1 RITUALS

Rituals are arguably a means of communication; they are manifestations of our interpretation of the world around us. One way to examine rituals is with practise theory. Whilst there is no one definition of practice theory, it's fundamental concern is with the relationship between structure and agency (Schatzki, 2002). That is to say how internal and external factors interact in order to influence our behaviours. When considering eating rituals specifically, it is essential to recognise that eating is interconnected with other daily practices and as such, it can simultaneously compete with and shape how we perform said practices (Castelo et al., 2021). Castelo et al. (2021) propose a framework rooted in practice theory of 'zooming in and out' to examine single practices, believing that the extent in which single practices (such as eating) are embedded in other practices has been underestimated. In this framework, 'zooming in' looks at spatial, temporal and social variations of single practices, and 'zooming out' to co-dependencies between practices. An example of this is the purchasing, transportation and preparation of food required in order to eat, showing that the social practice of eating must be "synchronised and carried out in a certain sequence" (Castelo et al., 2021). Evaluating eating practices in this way ensures a comprehensive understanding of the experience of eating, supporting the validity of this essay.

Another way that eating rituals can be examined is through their relationship with material culture – specifically the role of the television. In western society, the family as a consumption unit uphold and create their own rituals, with mealtimes being a "collective ritual that connotes togetherness, cohesiveness [and] unity" (Chitakunye and Maclaran, 2014:51). Chitakunye and Maclaran (2014) argue that due to the television's less portable nature, it has the power to challenge food practices and embed itself into mealtime rituals. This is illustrated in the blurring of formal and informal eating practices. Whilst formal meals encourage togetherness in the family and provide opportunities for conversation, they can also be restrictive due to the perceived requirement of social order and appropriate table manners (Chitakunye and Maclaran, 2014). Therefore, formal meals can facilitate the performance of routines; intentional actions that reinforce social order, such as correctly setting a table or a parent sitting at the head of the table. These routines become diluted when the television is introduced to meal times; not only can the television become a "conversational resource" (Chitakunye and Maclaran, 2014:63), but it can cause families to renegotiate spatial, temporal and social variations as outlined by Castelo et al. (2021) which begins to blur the line between a formal and informal meal. Whilst it can be argued that what constitutes as formal is subjective, Visser (2003:591) argued that "formality by design increases social distance; informality brings people closer" which suggests that the implementation of television into our eating practices is not inherently threatening to family rituals, instead it can become embedded into family identity. This is, however, a Eurocentric commentary on the relationship between material culture and eating rituals and is therefore not homogenous to other cultures.

1.2 IDENTITY

Not only are food rituals and routines influenced by material stimuli; they can also shape – and be shaped by – identity. Guptill et al. (2017:19) state that since food is consumed through the social act of eating, it can play "a significant role in the construction of identity." Food, much like other consumption choices, can be used as an identifier of social standing therefore shaping how we see ourselves and how others view us. Guptill et al. continue to suggest that individuals from a lower socio-economic background are scrutinised for their consumption choices, such as intent to purchase out-of-season foods for a higher price, thus reinforcing the relationship between construction of identity and food. This is further supported when food is regarded as a form of cultural capital since eating habits can indeed enforce social class differences (Bourdieu, 1984). Contrastingly, it could be argued that social mobility and exposure to food practices in the media has diminished class differences in (UK) eating culture (Bradley, 2016), for example through dining etiquette becoming less exclusive and entering common knowledge.

Similarly, Bradley (2016:12) found that choices we make concerning food allow us to express our identity on a personal level, alongside as part of a community; choices of "produce, preparation, cooking method and presentation" can differentiate us in terms of "nationality, gender, sexuality and class". Food and gender identity is a particularly relevant area for evaluation due to women's dual relationship with food as both consumers and preparers. DeVault (1991) found that whilst the gendered gap in domestic labour has decreased, women are still primarily responsible for the majority of household work, including preparing and serving meals. Interestingly, food and gender identity construction can also be shaped by the foods themselves; Guptill et al. (2017) highlight the associations between meat and masculinity and salads – or 'light' foods – and femininity. They argue that whilst foods can be gendered, the performances of consuming these foods are in fact internalised manifestations of gender conformity. For example, women might choose smaller and healthier meal options (compared to their male counterparts) in order to conform to the notion that femininity is intrinsically linked to perceived attractiveness. It is no surprise then, that DeVault (1991) suggested that women are contributors of their own subordination. Despite this, whilst food preparation can reinforce gender inequality in the home, DeVault (1991) also found that it can provide a sense of identity and empowerment for women. This is further supported by Dickinson and Leader (1998) who observed a sense of belonging as a result of eating as a family and being reliant on a matriarch to prepare meals, therefore providing identity as part of a community.

Cultural identity is a huge factor in the experience of eating. Whilst this essay primarily focuses on western constructions of food practices, the impact of culinary tourism on consumption should not be underestimated. Majumder and Majumder (2020) acknowledge that post-industrialisation, eating at restaurants became much more frequent as opposed to having meals at home, particularly in themed restaurants. Guptill et al. (2017:37) suggest that "consuming ethnic food can illustrate open-mindedness and adventure" but in such a way that maintains an "us and them dichotomy". In essence, we experience 'ethnic foods' through our own lens, suggesting that the authenticity of such a food experience is skewed by our own preconceptions of what that should look like. Following on from this, authenticity can be understood as a social accomplishment (Lu and Fine, 1995); themed restaurants must cater to the consumers' desire for authenticity, but not so much so that it's alienating, therefore pandering to a sense of accomplishment for the consumer. Contrastingly, Bourdain (2001:17) encourages authenticity in his ethnographic accounts in A Cook's Tour by immersing himself into indigenous foods and cultures, stating that in being the guest of a native, he gains a "tremendous advantage" in experiencing said cultures. He acknowledges the role of context and memory on a great meal, experiencing these both firsthand as he recounts shared meals in Portugal, Vietnam and more. This form of culinary tourism is immensely different to profiting off the appropriation of cultures in themed restaurants, rather it appreciates the intrinsic connection between history and food. Whilst much of A Cook's Tour is anecdotal, the whole premise is unprejudiced; Bourdain embarks on finding the perfect meal and is unbiased as to where he might find it. This is further demonstrated in Guptill et al. (2017) comments on an episode of Bourdain's TV show: No Reservations; they recall Bourdain hiding his distaste for indigenous Namibian food and suggest this maintains the aforementioned "us" versus "them" distinction. Whilst it is true that Bourdain did not enjoy the meal, potentially due to viewing it through his own cultural lens, in hiding his distaste (rather than blatantly dismissing the food) there is a respect shown for authenticity and cultural food identity.
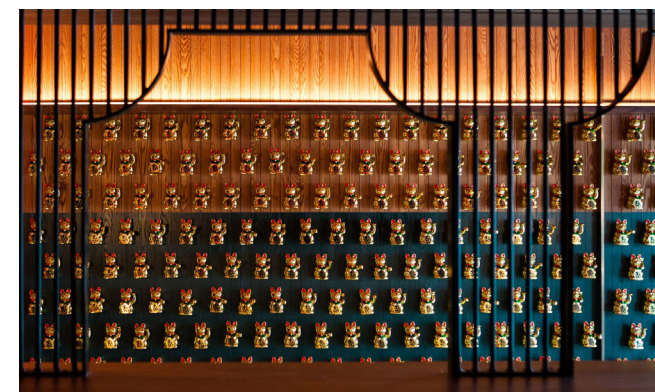
Dworkind, D. (2019) *miss-wong-restaurant-quebec-canada-menard-dworkind_dezeen_2364_col_4-1704x1136*. Dezeen. [Online image] [Accessed on 3rd January 2024] https://www.dezeen.com/2019/04/27/miss-wong-menard-dworkind-chinese-restaurant-montreal/

CONSUMPTION

Scheeren, O. (2016) *kitchen-ole-scheeren-dean-and-deluca-design-miami_dezeen_2364_col_1-1704x1131*. Dezeen. [Online image] [Accessed on 3rd January 2024] https://www.dezeen.com/2016/11/29/dean-deluca-stage-fast-food-restaurant-interior-concept-ole-scheeren-kitchen-design/

Consumption shifts are an important element to consider when evaluating eating practices, with globalisation being one such driving force for these shifts. According to Majumder and Majumder (2020:52), globalisation meant that the demand for imported foods increased, which led to the commodification of food itself; providing large corporations with "a great capitalist opportunity for selling food products and its processes". Furthermore, we have become removed from localised food systems and "now participate in the food system largely as consumers" (Guptill et al., 2017:6). In becoming distanced from traditional and local food practices, more power is therefore placed upon global networks to dictate our consumption habits. This is supported by Poulain (2013), who observed that there has been a homogenisation of consumption due to globalisation and as such, very similar consumption habits can be seen in varied regions of the planet. Whilst it is natural that food practices will evolve with the changing needs of a global society, it is clear that this evolution has been accelerated by consumer capitalism. Irwin (2015:72) highlights that consumer capitalism "manufactures desire", meaning that we are encouraged to make purchases based on want rather than need. Consumerism is therefore born out of capitalism and made even more fervent when it is perceived on a global scale.

A similar byproduct of globalisation is individualism; although seemingly paradoxical, Elliott and Lamert (2009) highlight the correlation between the two principles, suggesting that demand for global products promote individualistic mindsets due to the prioritisation of instant gratification. Following on from this, it can therefore be suggested that domestic technologies which favour convenience (the microwave, pre-packaged meals and fast foods) have contributed to an individualistic approach to eating. Preda (1999) states that material objects can play an active role in the forming of social practices, supporting the argument that individualism in food practices can be driven by domestic technologies. Whilst the technologies themselves allow for quicker and easier food preparation and consumption – thus providing instant gratification – it is their convenience which is most compelling. Dickinson and Leader (1998) state that convenience is favoured over community, which is evident in families being less reliant on a matriarch to provide meals. This is further supported by Warde (1997) who stated that members of a family now tend to eat to suit their own schedules, meaning that mealtimes become fragmented in favour of convenience. In summation, it is clear that individualism has caused a consumption shift not only in the ways that we prepare and eat food, but in how convenience can influence the traditionally communal experience of eating. Alongside the element of convenience, Lee, Hyun and Lee (2022) found that there are other key factors in the pursuing of fast food, such as emotional and location value. This suggests that the consumption of fast food is driven by positive emotional associations. Despite this, Lee, Hyun and Lee's insight into the consumption value

of fast food is market led research, suggesting that the source might be biased; skewed towards prioritising capitalist values, rather than the values of the consumer. Furthermore, since individualism is a byproduct of globalisation (and therefore a symptom of consumer capitalism), it could be argued that the aforementioned positive feelings associated with fast food are artificially manufactured by corporations to encourage the continued consumption of such convenience foods.

Whilst external factors born out of globalisation and capitalism have been transition forces in the consumption of food, consumers also play an active role in the changing of food consumption and eating practices. Spaargaren et al. (2011) state that human intervention in the age of reflexive modernity has led to a co-dependent relationship between consumers and producers; there is not a dichotomy between consumers and producers as once assumed, in fact there is a close connection between technological advancements, regulatory frameworks and cultural perceptions of food. This suggests that consumption shifts do not happen in a vacuum, but they are responses to the changing needs of consumers. Following this, Kjærnes and Torjusen (2011) suggest that trust and distrust in dominant food systems are connected to reflexive modernity, showing that consumers campaign for current food corporations to reform and enact changes that suit their needs. In this sense, consumers are not passive victims of conventional food systems, but instead hold power to be transition forces themselves. Spaargaren et al.'s insights are a development of transition theory, intended to reflect on post-war changes in food consumption, with a particular focus on OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) countries. Due to this, it can be argued that the consumer as a transition force only holds power in countries wherein their government allows them to, which begs the question: do consumers truly hold power to enact change if said power is given to them?

Frama (2023) *frama-il-mercato-3-days-of-design-copenhagen_dezeen_2364_col_4-1704x2570*. Dezeen. [Online image] [Accessed on 3rd January 2024] https://www.dezeen.com/2023/06/12/frama-il-mercato-3-days-of-design-copenhagen/

2.2 SUSTAINABILITY
One such way that we consume food is through the media; such as food sustainability critiques in media and publishing. For example, Lewis and Phillipov (2016:108) found that TV shows, particularly in the UK, promote a "slow food philosophy", one that focuses on local and traditionally sourced foods and cooking methodologies. By consuming food in this form, individuals are exposed to more holistic approaches to food which potentially threaten to subvert current food systems. This is a juxtaposition to today's convenience-oriented food culture as explored in chapter 2.1, suggesting that sustainability concerns are another transition force for consumption. In this context, sustainability in the media plays a significant role for transition by being the first level of exposure to sustainability concerns; alongside the first step in reflexive thinking which can play an active role in the changing of food consumption. Additionally, media depicting sustainable food practices capitalise on the current zeitgeist associated with sustainability, which shows that there is a desired transition back towards smaller, localised food systems (Guptill et al., 2017).

One might assume that locality in food systems simply means local produce, and whilst Banerjee and Quinn

(2022) indeed found that local food is associated with sense of place, they elaborated by explaining that sense of place related to emotional aspects – such as pride in national and self-identity – rather than geography. Their research refers to consumer constructions of local food and the meanings that we give it, which is indicative of the push to understand what locality means to an individual. Alongside sense of place, Banerjee and Quinn (2022) also found that localness is strongly associated with quality perception; this aligned with freshness, nutritional aspects and ethical and food waste concerns – the latter being particularly prevalent amongst young people. Therefore, whilst the purchase of local food is partially driven by gratification from quality produce and altruism from supporting local economies, the moral obligation to be sustainable and ethical is also an observable factor. Banerjee and Quinn (2022:1287) described this as a consequence of a "cultural psyche" of sustainability. If we view the purchasing and consumption of sustainable foods as performances (as outlined in Castelo et al.'s (2021) practice theory framework in chapter 1.1) it can be suggested that the moral obligation to buy local simply conforms to the current sustainability zeitgeist. Whilst the general consensus is that people would prefer for eating practices to remain local and familiar, this raises questions related to the authenticity of sustainability concerns. Despite this, making sustainable and ethical choices should not be discouraged and so questioning moral intention is aimless, especially when considering the power of the consumer to enact changes in dominant food systems (as explored in chapter 2.1).

INTENTIONS

3.1 MINDFUL CONSUMPTION

In the era of reflexive modernity and consumer capitalism, it could be argued that a shift towards more mindful consumption should be paramount; with this already becoming evident in consumer support for sustainable and ethical food systems as outlined in chapter 2.1. It is clear from the previous chapters that food is a mode of communication, therefore in questioning our consumption habits it can be argued that we regain more control over the narrative that food can tell. Preda (1999:364) contends that the relationship between material culture and consumption shouldn't be ignored since objects have the power to change our habits and tell our stories; in "reconceptualising our relationship" to objects, we gain an understanding of "how our relationship to things change us". This is indicative of the need to properly evaluate the effect of material cultures on mental wellbeing. Alongside this, in Chitakunye and Maclaran's (2014) analysis of the renegotiation of mealtimes around the television (chapter 1.1), the extent of this renegotiation on mental wellbeing was not explored; rather the effect on family dynamics were. Whilst Preda and Chitakunye and Maclaran's research are both examples of wellbeing concerns regarding our relationship to material culture, it can be argued that this is still indicative of the need to extend this into other areas of food practices, including the impact of eating environments and wellbeing.

3.2 DESIGN PHENOMENOLOGY

In essence, phenomenology is the "philosophical study of structures of subjective experiences and consciousness" (Hok-Eng Tan, 2013:403). When evaluating the experience of eating, it is therefore useful to draw upon elements of phenomenology to expand upon given meanings and interpretations. Hok-Eng Tan (2013) states that food experiences can be triggered in a variety of ways, for example as abstract thoughts, memories, bodily sensations or emotions. In this case, the act of eating is not an isolated experience of taste, rather it is a comprehensive integration of multiple factors which can amplify perceived taste. This phenomenological outlook is similar to Castelo et al.'s (2021) claim that the act of eating is embedded and interconnected in other daily practices, which reflects the multi-disciplinary possibilities of studying the experience of eating. As a result of this, theories of design phenomenology and sense of place can also be introduced into this evaluation. Relph (1976) sought to define people's relationship to places through sense of place; he coined the term 'insideness' to describe the phenomena in which the more a person feels like themselves in an environment, the more an environment existentially becomes a place. Strong attachments of identity and place are arguably important elements to consider in phenomenological design. Other key considerations in design phenomenology include how the body synchronises with the built environment and the perspective that "people and environment are not separate and two but indivisible and one" (Seamon, 2015). In summation, a phenomenological approach to interior design aims to connect lived experiences with physical and spatial environments in order to boost wellbeing through design. Overall, the implementations of design phenomenology in influencing the experience of eating can be observed through spatial variations, particularly though memory – or 'insideness'.
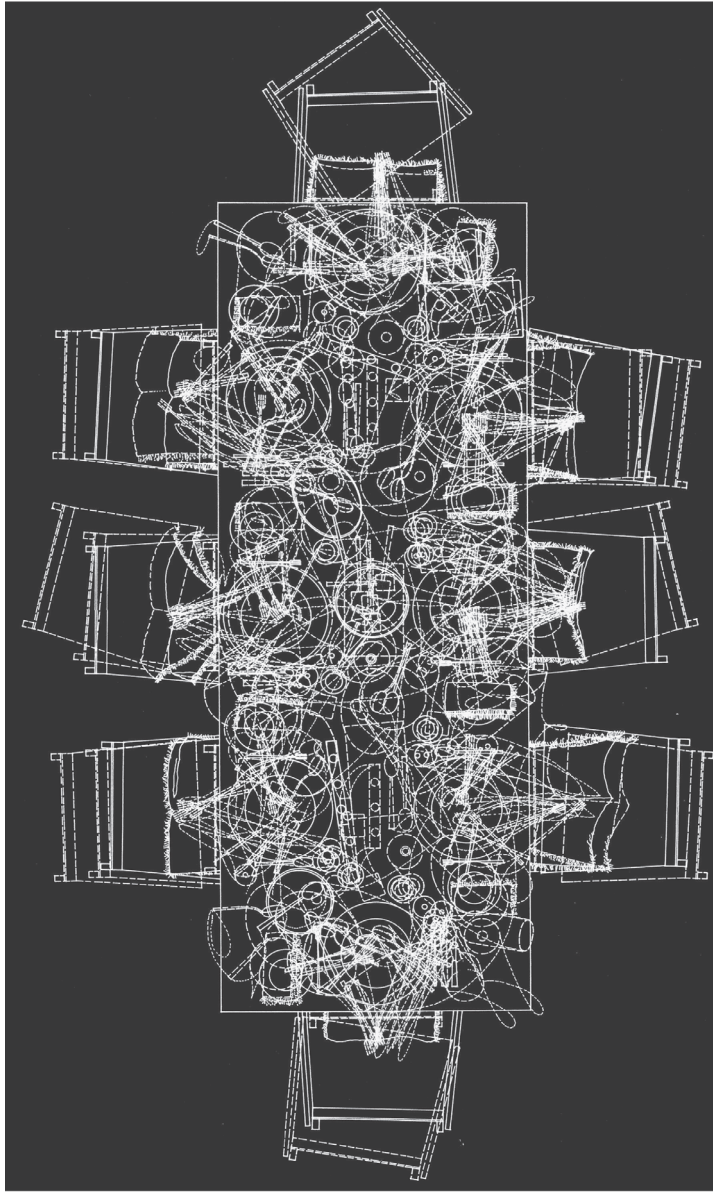
Figure 1: Wigglesworth, S. (1997) 'The Meal'. In: Wigglesworth, S. (2022) 'The Disorder of the Dining Table.' *UOU Scientific Journal*, 4 pp. 122–127.

3.3 DINING DISORDER

Figure 1 depicts an illustration from Wigglesworth's (1997) Increasing Disorder in a Dining Table. The orthographic drawing represents the successive chaos of mealtimes, described by Wigglesworth (2022:124) herself as "not the obvious medium" to capture moments in time due to their static nature. However in doing so, the drawing serves as a useful tool in what orthographic drawings often lack; that is to say human action. Wigglesworth (2022) stated that her interest in the everyday piqued as she felt that architects served the public poorly; often more interested in making monuments of their own creativity. In aligning design with the mundane, therefore lived experiences, a phenomenological insight is gained into human-spatial interactions. Figure 1 is cognizant of the experience of eating in a dynamic sense, further supporting the value of phenomenological design considerations.

Inspired by the concept of the everyday, I completed primary research related to the experience of eating which was informed by the research in this essay. I used an ethnographic approach to immerse myself into various scenarios, most notably culinary tourism in a themed restaurant. My own experience aligned with Lu and Fine's (1995) implication that ethnic restaurants must be authentic, but not alienating (chapter 1.2). This was reflected in the cultural symbols and motifs present in the restaurant, as well as in the cuisine offered. Whilst many Chinese restaurants do indeed serve authentic cuisines, the anglicisation of certain dishes are a prevalent reminder of the catering of ethnic foods to western palettes. One such example of this is the popular salt and pepper chicken; an accessible meal for any Brit wishing to expand their tastes towards Anglo Chinese cuisine. Despite this, my experience was clearly skewed by my own bias towards achieving the social accomplishment of an authentic meal; as I observed the staff and other restaurant-goers, most of whom were Chinese, I felt this validated the authenticity of the restaurant. This prompted me to question my own biases of authentic cuisine, as well as inspiring me to make further considerations as to how spatial and social variations in the built environment can impact upon experiences.

CONCLUSION

The experience of eating is seemingly contradictory in an increasingly modern world; eating is both a social and personal act (Guptill et al., 2017; Warde, 1997); it forms and is formed by identity and rituals (Bradley, 2016; Castelo et al., 2021; Guptill et al., 2017); internal and external factors can simultaneously inform transitions (Spaargaren et al., 2011). Despite this, by recognising eating as part of a network, a full understanding of the experience of eating is able to be achieved.

Castelo et al.'s (2021) observation that eating is embedded in other practices has been indispensable for this essay. For example, Chapter 1.1 highlights the influence of material objects on eating rituals, although this also supports the argument that mealtime convenience is favoured over communality (Dickinson and Leader, 1998) as discussed in Chapter 2.1; the blurring of lines between informal and formal meals mean that the collective ritual of a family meal is lost, similarly to how individualism also diminishes communal eating arrangements. Alongside this, culinary tourism and the dilution of authentic foods as discussed in Chapter 1.2 are both consequences of globalisation. Alongside this, sustainability concerns are also founded on a globalised society, with Majumder and Majumder (2020) attributing the loss of sustainable values to globalisation.

To conclude, in combining the themes discussed in this essay with Seamon's (2015) belief that it is the job of an interior designer to consider the overlooked elements of the everyday, it is possible to create empathetic – and improved – human-spatial environments. In this sense, when designing with the experience of eating in mind, it is possible to make phenomenological design considerations regarding sense of identity, material culture and sustainability concerns that can withstand the everyday intricacies of the human experience.

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