

Geoforum Debate submission

Debate title: Better than text? Critical reflections on the practices of visceral methodologies in human geography

Submission 4

Manuscript title: On sensing and making sense

My interest in attending to the 'visceral', the 'embodied' experience of eating practices stemmed from two areas of my research. The first one relates to consumer concerns for the quality of life of farm animals. This research started over a decade ago prompted by the consumer crises and loss of confidence in the European animal farming sector after a series of major food scares in the UK, such as BSE (1996) and the FMD outbreak (2001). In the focus group discussions and interviews that I carried out with consumers, the taste of food (i.e. the organoleptic properties of meat) was a key element affecting their consumption practices. However, ethical and aesthetical reasoning were very much bundled together: for example, organic or free-range chicken meats were considered to taste better because the birds lived a better life (Miele and Parisi 2001; Miele 2011; Evans and Miele 2012). The materiality of the animal body was perceived to embody the animals' quality of life, as revealed by the 'tastier', 'more colourful', 'tougher' and 'juicer' meat. With Adrian Evans (2012) we proposed the concept of 'foodsensing' as the hybrid process through which consumers simultaneously sense and make sense of food. As we argued:

'This definition emphasises both the material and symbolic dimensions of food consumption practices and hints at their deep interconnections. We believe that food consumption is a deeply sensorial and sensuous affair, and as such, the starting point for our approach is to conceptualise food consumption practices in a way that draws attention to their underlying material and visceral natures' (Evans and Miele 2012:10).

Essential to our concept of foodsensing was the belief that acts of consuming (or more broadly, acts of 'sensing') foods should be viewed as lively processes, where most of the action occurs in between the consumer and the consumed or the sensor and the sensed.¹ Here we have drawn upon general insights from actor network theory (ANT) (Latour 2005), which lead us to look at the 'liveliness' of food, its capacity to move the consumer, and, more specifically, from the conceptualisation of taste proposed by Antoine Hennion (2007): 'Taste is not an attribute, it is not a property (of a thing or of a

¹ See also Probyn, 2000 and Roe, 2006.

person), it is an activity. You have to do something in order to listen to music, drink a wine, appreciate an object' (2007:101).

Therefore, instead of looking at tasting food in a narrow realist fashion (as the passive reading of the intrinsic physical properties of a food), we proposed the concept of foodsensing for looking at taste in a performative fashion, where the properties of the food and the 'ordering' of human-nonhuman relations are simultaneously produced.

The second area of research, in many ways connected to the first one, is about children's taste for food. With Monica Truninger, I have looked at some successful initiatives of introduction of healthy school meals in the UK, Italy and Portugal where children have learnt to appreciate healthy school meals (Miele and Truninger *forthcoming*). To explore children's food practices I carried out ethnographic work in school canteens in Italy and the UK² and examined the following questions: How do children learn to like or dislike particular foods? How do they learn to consider certain plants or the flesh of specific animals as edible or delicious, and conversely feel disgust and repulsion at the thought of eating others? How do they get enrolled and enact the food practices they find themselves embedded in? I have attempted to trace their feelings about food and examined how children describe their taste for and their knowledge of the foods they eat by joining them in group discussions (prompted by games with toy animals and real vegetables). I also conducted focus groups with their parents and interviews with dinner ladies, head-teachers and school teachers.

However, the descriptions of these sensations gave no clear clues of the processes that led them to emerge. Again my starting assumption was that children's ability to sense food and to develop a 'taste' for healthy school meals (what Mol has called 'good taste') was neither in children's bodies nor in the foods themselves, but is an effect of the practices they are enrolled into. Inspired by several ANT studies of shopping and consumption practices (Cochoy 2008, 2010; Kontopodis 2012, 2013). I have focused my attention on the often underexplored role of the nonhuman participants of these 'healthy eating' practices. I have looked at how children's enrolment in these food practices and appreciation of healthy school meals is affected by the spaces (school canteens, school kitchens), tools (school menus, school foods) and devices (rules for getting meals, seating arrangements, forms of payment); the very materials that contributed to their meals. In order to engage with these neglected 'actants', as Latour (2005) notes, of children's food practices and for bringing to the forefront of my study the effects of the nonhuman participants (e.g. menus, canteen seating arrangements), I have attended to the choreography of school meals (Cussins 1996, 1998), both by joining the children in the school canteen and sharing meals with them, as well as by observing the work of the dinner ladies in the school kitchen and the organisation and constant tinkering of the menus to increase the

² From 2007 until 2010.

children's appreciation of healthy meals (Miele and Truninger *forthcoming*).³ By using this bricolage of different methods I have attempted to grasp children's sensorial engagement with food in school – what children feel and know about food, what they like and why – and the processes of learning to 'taste'. These methods work to uncover the ways in which (child) bodies are trained or cultivated to appreciate certain foods via the procedures (Mol 2009), tools and devices that constitute the choreographies of school meals.

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³ As Cussins has argued, 'the choreography is the coordinated action of many ontologically heterogeneous actors in the service of a long range self' (1996:600).

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