
Somaesthetics and the problem of social taste

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Abstract

In his *Critique of Judgment*, Immanuel Kant states that taste is a definitely subjective sphere in which experience cannot be generalised. The claim reverberates in a popular saying which proclaims that "in matters of taste there can be no dispute." Bourdieu reminds that the Kantian aesthetics, preoccupied with setting apart that which pleases from that which gratifies, was supposed to result in capturing the distinctiveness of the aesthetic judgment as pure disinterestedness in contrast to "the interest of reason which defines Good." The French sociologist observes that only the members of the privileged classes can possibly afford this "pure" aesthetics while "working-class people expect every image to explicitly perform function, if only that of sign, and their judgments make reference, often explicitly, to the norms of morality or agreeableness. Bourdieu disagrees with Kant on one more point. He argues convincingly that our aesthetic choices are closely intertwined with our culinary preferences. There is a close affinity between artistic preferences and gastronomic taste. In my presentation, I want to insist that our individual tastes do not result from free choices but are instilled in cultural training we are subject to from the moment we are born onwards. Tastes reflect our social position and cultural background. We are what we eat, but what we eat is not exactly a matter of choice. We are ruled by various regimes of taste, and our bodies are formed in compliance with culturally entrenched norms and values. Shusterman repeatedly cites the writings of Bourdieu, whom he counts among important formative sources of his theory. When explaining his concept of somaesthetics, the author of *Body Consciousness* repeatedly refers to the French philosopher; however, despite affinities, their conceptions are not identical. The basic differences seem to lie in the emancipatory potential – the promise of healing inscribed in somaesthetics. Drawing on theories of Bourdieu and Shusterman, I will explore the ways in which taste disciplines our bodies and will examine possibilities of emancipation. If we seek to re-draw the habitus, the article "Somatic Awakening and the Art of Living" is, certainly, a useful source to consult. It describes Shusterman's own experience of a stay at a Zen monastery and relates in detail the rituals of meals with all the involved difficulties, such as mastering the art of eating with chopsticks. What the article offers is an account of successful training which aimed at discarding the somatic style of the Western professor for the sake of conduct and manners proper to the Buddhist monks. Somaesthetics shows the way we could follow to understand how changes can be made to the habitus and, more importantly perhaps, explains how our choices, including the gastronomic ones, affect our total functioning. A feature film *Babette's feast* I will use as an art component which will help me to highlight the discussed problems. The ostensibly simple story-line of *Babette's Feast* telling about two sisters – inhabitants of a remote village – stages in fact a highly complex world of symbolic relationships which lend themselves to diverse interpretations and conveys a richly polyvalent message. The eponymous feast has been analysed in terms of ethics and politics, (Alain Finkielkraut), in religious and aesthetic perspectives

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(Dariusz Czaja and Wiesław Juszczak, respectively) and in the psychoanalytic framework (Sharn Waldron). This catalogue of approaches implies what complexity nutrition accrues when it is incorporated into the order of culture. Drawing on Bourdieu's categories, the story can be construed as an unexpected clash between and an intervention of one habitus into another one. From the Shusterman's point of view it is a story of change and emancipations. We could say that Karen Blixen offers a profoundly pragmatist message, a message which insists that art occupies a very special position and that each action and each experience, a dinner in this case, may deserve the name of art.

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