

‘What Do You Taste Like?’: Experiencing the Other through the Mouth

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Introduction: What Is It Like to Taste Your Own Tongue?

In Jean-Paul Sartre’s Being and Nothingness (2003: 10), he posits that all consciousness is intentional. For Sartre, consciousness is never a thing unto itself, but is always consciousness of something. He proposes ‘consciousness (of)’ as a means of articulating the experience of consciousness: the bracketing of the ‘of’ fulfilling a grammatical function only, with consciousness only ever being that which it is directed towards. To taste strawberries is not to have a consciousness that encounters the perception of the strawberry, but a ‘consciousness=strawberry’, with a playful deferral back and forth between the two, which mutually constitute one another.

In the same way, we might consider the embodied consciousness of the tongue. To attempt to taste your own tongue is a self-reflexive act, where the apparatus of tasting turns back upon itself, unable to recognize itself in its act of self-perception. In this small act of rolling the tongue back upon itself, the nothingness or abyss at the centre of Being is exposed, brought into the open, its absence given a presence in experience. To taste is always intentional; it is always directed towards something. And it is from this premise of the inability to taste one’s own tongue that this article proceeds.

Using numerous performances that have made food a central component of the work, this article will explore how food, eating and taste can be used in performance to explore the relationship to, and constitution of, the Other. For Sartre, the relationship between Self and Other is a relationship of mutual constitution, developing from Heidegger’s understanding of the continuum of Being-in-the-world (1962: 78). What Sartre adds to this discourse is to move beyond the relationship between the subject (Being, Dasein) and the objectal world to the relationship between subjects. And it is this Other that constitutes the consciousness of the Self; ‘consciousness (of)’ is always directed towards an Other. This article explores how food, as an intermediary, allows for the mutual exploration and constitution of the Self and the Other. The article is split into three sections: experiencing the Other through the food object, experiencing the Other in the food object and experiencing the Other as the food object.

Tasting and consumption have an established history in performance, from the practices of the historical avant-garde through to contemporary immersive and participatory practices. This article focuses on a number of contemporary performances where the tasting of food is a key component of the work itself. The article begins with Pop-up Love Party (2015), an adaptation of Plato's Symposium by the Canadian company, Zuppa Theatre. In collaboration with New York-based chef, Daniel Burns, the company presents a contemporary retelling of the speeches on love from Plato's text, each coupled with a dish served as part of a seven-course taster menu. I will then move to aspects of food performances from the Birmingham-based companies KILN and Companis, as well as an alternative Valentine's Day meal performance, Diabolical Roses (2016), devised and designed by Kaye Winwood and Sarah Hamilton Baker, in collaboration with chef Chris Hughes. While each of these works opens up a number of interesting areas in relation to performance practice, the focus will be on the act of tasting the food presented and the ways in which that food engages with notions of Otherness and knowing the Other.

I argue here that the tongue and tasting, in each of these performances, are utilized to explore the constitution of the Self and Otherness. Each of the performance works explicitly deals with ideas of love, sex and desire, which operate as key sites in relation to an understanding of Otherness. Through exploring different encounters with, and experiences of, the Other, I argue that the interrelations of tasting, sex and performance allow for a consideration of the constitution of the Self. Taste exposes the nothingness at the centre of the Self and the performative ways in which the Self is constructed as an intentional position towards the Other.

i. Experiencing the Other through the Food Object:

Zuppa Theatre's Pop-up Love Party

In Pop-up Love Party, in the same way that Plato uses dialogues in the Symposium to come to an understanding of love, the performance makes use of the fictional Other of the characters from Plato to allow the audience-diners to develop their understanding of the text and of love. Through both the performances and the food, Zuppa Theatre expose how the Other is used to define the Self, enacting the process of self-identification in relation to ideas, to characters and to taste. The ideas themselves operate at the surface level of experience, through the tasting of the food. In his discussion of Plato, Slavoj Žižek writes that, 'What Plato was not ready (or, rather, able) to accept was the thoroughly virtual, immaterial (or, rather, insubstantial) evental status of Ideas: Ideas are something that momentarily appear on the surface of things' (2014: 87, original emphasis).

Countering the classical Platonic dualism of form and idea(I), Žižek marks out how ideas circulate at the level of superficial experience and it is in this way that we can understand the food of the performance. Each of the tasting dishes was designed to articulate the ideas of the Symposium and, in so doing, bring philosophy to the surface. The Self encounters the philosophical ideas at the level of taste; the embodied consciousness (of) the idea in the perception of the food. In other words, the characters (and characteristics) of the Symposium are translated into a food object; the (fictional) subject is encountered through taste rather than reading or hearing. It is through the experience of the food object that the Other is brought into direct relation with the Self and ideas are made manifest.

To take a concrete example: in Pop-up Love Party, Pausanias (one of the speakers in Plato's Symposium) is presented as a dish entitled 'The Lawyer'. The dish consists of a parsnip and yogurt mousse, sitting on a malt cookie (fig. 1). The dish is more in keeping with the presentational style of a dessert than a savoury course, which, along with the two distinct parts of the food, establishes a duality to the dish that mirrors the content of Pausanias' speech. In the Symposium, Pausanias discusses the duality of love as either Common or Celestial (Plato 1994: 13). Pausanias argues that celestial love is 'attracted to the bodies rather than the minds' (14) and marks out 'right' and 'wrong' love not as a priori, but found in the conduct of love (17). These ideas are mirrored in the taste of the food itself. The parsnip and yogurt mousse has a creamy, smooth and bouncy texture, like a panna cotta but slightly thicker and more substantial, with the earthy and nutty flavour of parsnip underscoring its sweetness. The malt cookie is a darker and bitterer taste, with a background of treacly sweetness that sits next to the malty richness of porter ale. Given the expectations of a dessert through the way the dish is framed (its description as mousse and cookie on the menu and the presentation style), the dish enters this duality typically associated with food: that the savoury is more 'serious' and dessert more playful (the celestial and the common respectively). The sensation of tasting suggests a more complex and developed palate, not speaking to the 'childish' associations of dessert and sweetness but the acquired taste for bitterness (found in dark chocolate and coffee). There is an impression of maturity in the dish, highlighted through the expectation of sweetness and the sensation of bitterness. To persevere with the dish and to appreciate it after this initial shock also speaks to an assertion of Pausanias' that the common or immature love 'flies away and is gone ... as soon as the physical bloom that attracted him fades' (17). To be constituted as the 'better', celestial love involved moving beyond the visual attraction of the dish and appreciating its more complex qualities; to do so puts the Self in the realm of the celestial; to be repulsed is to be in the realm of the common. In this dish, as

with each of the courses of the meal, the Other is experienced as the experience of the Self. The idea of the Self is performatively constituted as the experience of tasting, producing the Self as the incorporation of the Other; the Other is reduced to only what is experienced by the Self.

[[figure 1]]

Figure 1. 'The Lawyer' (parsnip and yogurt mousse, malt cookie) from Zuppa Theatre's Pop-up Love Party (2015).

ii. Experiencing the Other in the Food Object:

Raspberry Breasts, Semen and Pasta Vaginas

The connection between food and sex, as the relationship to the Other, follows a similar structure: the initial attraction becomes a developing connection and understanding, leading to a moment of satiation, where the Other is incorporated as part of the Self. Of course, this narrative is not always so direct and linear, but nevertheless seems to follow this kind of structure. This narrative of the embodiment of the Other can be found in the two food objects explored in this section: 'Diabolical Roses' from Winwood's, Hamilton Baker's and Hughes' work of the same name and a pasta vagina from KILN's Hotel du Van (2012). However, these two objects trouble an easy understanding of the Other as only an experience of the Self. They present the Other as that which is in tension with the Self.

KILN's Hotel du Van was a performance event in the back of a van, where the audience were invited to eat a freshly cooked vagina, made from beetroot pasta with a goat's cheese centre and served with a lemon sauce from a lube bottle (fig. 2). Diabolical Roses was an alternative Valentine's Day meal performance, compered by a couple of cupids and moving through a seven-course tasting menu that mirrored the structure of sex, moving from an initial titillating titbit, through a more substantial consumption, to a moment of orgasmic release (an overtly male construction of sexual intercourse, but one which is troubled -- discussed shortly). The dish, 'Diabolical Roses' (fig. 3), was inspired by two dishes from Marinetti's Futurist Cookbook: 'Strawberry Breasts' ('A pink plate with two erect feminine breasts made of ricotta dyed pink with Campari with nipples of candied strawberry' (Marinetti 2014: 210)) and 'Diabolical Roses' (battered and fried red roses (222)). The dish served in the performance was a pair of raspberry breasts with a salted yogurt sauce, which was squirted over the breasts by the audience from a syringe before eating.

The act of tasting is not only the sensations of taste on the tongue (sweet, salty, bitter, sour and umami), but the act of putting something in the mouth. To taste is more complex than just the perception of those five qualities; it is the perception and understanding of the experience in the mouth. In these two dishes, the act of tasting is made explicit as a sexual act. It is an act of penetration. For Foucault, in the second volume of the History of Sexuality, he marks out the political history of penetration as an act of domination, of power, which rests on the binary of the active penetrator and the passive penetrated (1985: 215). This binary is the established heteronormative, patriarchal power discourse, which privileges the phallus as that which penetrates, extrapolating from that the position of power and authority. KILN's pasta vagina engages with this history and enacts a challenge to the historical primacy of the 'powerful, penetrating phallus'. The vagina is presented as the active, penetrating object, which enters the mouth. This subversion is a political act of resistance to the primacy of the penetrating phallus and this subversion does not only take place at the level of language, but is enacted. The literal tasting and eating transforms the (seemingly) 'logically impossible' (the vagina that penetrates) into the realm of the 'actually possible'. Metaphor and actuality are conflated in the act of tasting. Through the collapsing of binaries (male and female, penetrator and penetrated), the heteronormative construction of Self (in opposition to the distinctly other Other) is destabilized, but without coming to a conclusion. The pasta vagina operates within a troubling space of tension between various Selves and Others.

Similarly, the taste of the food plays with cultural constructions of cunnilingus, specifically, and oral sex more generally. Firstly, the vagina is translated into an edible object with its own flavour: the delicate and chewy pasta, with a light note of beetroot, envelops a tangy, sharp and slightly creamy goat's cheese. The chewy pasta gives way to a substantial centre; female genitalia are not constructed as merely a 'sheath', a gap to be filled, but have substance, thereby subverting the patriarchal construction of female as a dominated, penetrated receptacle. The taste reiterates this: pasta alone can be bland and merely bulk. Instead, this has its own complex and sophisticated flavour (more could be drawn out on the markedly 'middle-class' ingredients that I do not have time for here). To explore this vagina with the tongue is not to encounter a neutral and submissive object, devoid of its own content.

[{figure 2}]

Figure 2. Pasta Vagina (beetroot pasta and goat's cheese) from KILN's Hotel du Van (2012).

In the same way, as an act of resistance against patriarchal constructions of power and sexuality, Diabolical Roses presents and subverts the pornographic image of ejaculation on breasts. The 'cum shot' is brought within the control of the viewer, as, irrelevant of their gender, they ejaculate a semen-like salty yogurt over a pair of raspberry mousse breasts. The ejaculation is controlled, in terms of amount squirted and the rate and direction of the spraying. What is conventionally constructed as an automatic act of the body over which there is no control is playfully brought into the open, and the seemingly 'natural' function of the body (and the associations of the naturalization of the power of the phallus) is undermined, with the entirety of the act then consumed. While the structure of the meal is built around a 'masculine' understanding of the narrative of sex (where ejaculation means orgasm and conclusion), there is no privileging, in the tasting, of one aspect over the other (the 'masculine' or the 'feminine'). Indeed, the two complement one another in the tasting: the sweet and fruity raspberry flavour in the soft mousse of the breasts is mixed together, in tasting, with the sharper and salty yogurt, producing a more complex experience where each element has its own identity and yet they grow together (is the sharpness from the fruit, or the yogurt, or both?). The structure of Otherness, which maintains the gender binary and associated power structures, is problematized; not only is the agency of the act problematized, but also the conventionally feminine and masculine (breasts and semen respectively) are consumed together and the construction of Otherness that separates them is broken. However, a gender distinction is still produced, even if the binary is problematized. The pleasure of the dish is in the combination of its parts, suggesting a lesser (simpler?) pleasure if one only partakes of just the breasts or just the semen. So, while the privileging of one gender over another is undermined, the act still privileges the heteronormative. [figure 3]

Figure 3. 'Diabolical Roses' (raspberries, roses and salted yogurt) from Winwood's, Hamilton Baker's and Hughes' Diabolical Roses (2016).

In presenting food styled as parts of the body, each of these dishes plays around with ideas of cannibalism and the eating of the Other. For Sartre, the abstracted body part always refers back to the whole body or person. As such, the relationship between the Self and the Other is different than the relationship between the Self and the thing (Sartre 2003: 368). Both of these dishes play with these different relationships; at the level of the food object, the thing, they exist only in and as themselves; however, in their presentation as body parts, they also play with the relationship between Self and Other, with the resultant act of readership moving from the part to a sense of

the subject behind it (the imagined subject). In Paul Bloom's How Pleasure Works, implicitly building on Sartre, he writes that cannibalism operates through a perceived, constructed or imagined essentialism; that the human-food does not have an essence, but that the cannibal imagines an essence to it, which is imbibed and embodied (2010: 27). Using this, we could say that to eat each of these dishes is, in some sense, to come into contact with the Other by proxy. Whether that Other is the artist who created the food, the person who served it or some fictional Other that lingers in the image of the food, in each case they are not only mediated through the food, but present in it. For the two dishes above, there is a noticeable absence of meat, given that they both mimic human flesh. In relation to Bloom's imagined essentialism, the dishes move beyond the literal flesh and attempt to construct a subjectivity in the experience, with the respective tasting qualities of a sour and chewy vagina and soft, sweet and creamy breasts and semen. A third subject is constructed in the in-between space, in the perception of the food object, where the Self and Other (as a binary) are collapsed; they approach one another. However, they remain separate and in tension. Following Bloom's logic of imagined essences, to consume the Other, while superficially rendering the Other as Self, still maintains a critical distance between the two, imagining the Other as something separate within.

iii. Experiencing the Other as the Food Object:

A Used Napkin and a Creamy Kiss

The food object as a proxy for the Other exposes what Žižek, through Lacan, describes as 'Che vuoi?': 'the unbearable enigma of the desire of the Other' (2008: 132). The object, as a partial body referring back to a whole body, has no ability to desire; it is presented for the sole enjoyment of the Self. In this respect, the Other is exposed as subject-as-object. The abyss that is encountered at the centre of the Self, in the attempt to taste one's own tongue for instance, is seen in the Other, in the inability to access their desire (a reciprocal relationship of desire that constitutes myself and the Other as subjects). It is in this mutual existence as a nothingness that the Self and the Other are brought together.

The Birmingham-based company, Companis (meaning to break bread with someone), produced a number of performance events using food. In Lip Service (2013), a series of performance moments around food and the body, the company presented the diner-guest with a napkin that bore the trace of a lipstick kiss (fig. 4). For the company, the lipstick mark on the napkin was suggestive of blow-up dolls, blow jobs and a scream of horror. In a conversation with

Siân Tonkin, one of the members of Companis, she said that, 'We loved the idea of giving people used napkins -- something that had been touched to someone's lips -- and would be touched to someone else's lips: a really intimate gesture.' This mouth-to-mouth contact that operates through the napkin provokes an intimate connection between the Self and the Other.

In his article on erotic performances in topless bars, Philip O. Sijuwade discusses 'counterfeit intimacy': the playing of intimacy in strip clubs as a 'cynical performance' where each participant plays an intimate role as part of an economic transaction (1996: 30). The problem in Sijuwade's argument is that he establishes a binary between 'real' and 'fictional' intimacies; this is problematized in light of Derrida's critique of 'serious' and 'non-serious' performatives (1986: 326). The fictional operates at the same level as the real and so while the intimacy may be considered 'counterfeit', it is still articulated through a 'real' (material) performance. In the same way, the used napkin sits within the fictional frame of the performance work, but enacts a material connection between mouths; what is the everyday reserve of the private space (intimate mouth-to-mouth contact) is explored more openly in the public space of performance.

[[figure 4]]

Figure 4. Napkin from Companis' Lip Service (2013).

But what is the significance of the mouth-to-mouth contact for the relationship to the Other? Considering the tongue as an intimate site of the Self, there is a stripping away of intermediaries and a direct encounter with the Other. The kiss that brings tongues together is an intimate act, where the 'core' of the Self (as consciousness) -- the absence, abyss or nothingness at the epicentre of the Self -- comes into direct contact with that of the Other. Not only does it bring to the fore of experience the troubling unknown of the desire of the Other, it also reveals the unknown at the centre of the Self, with a deferral back and forth of the constitution of Self and Other through the lack that exists when one comes into contact with the Other. Consciousness itself can only ever be experienced in itself and, through its intentional structure of 'consciousness (of)', it only ever 'is' what it is directed towards. In the tongue-on-tongue kiss, when one tastes the tongue of the Other, consciousness becomes 'consciousness=(of)=consciousness', in an embodied way. The doubling engenders a deferral back and forth across the two embodied consciousnesses of the tongue, each tasting the lack of taste of the Other.

As part of their series of performance meals, KILN presented the Courtship and Sex May Day Meal (2010). The meal consisted of provocative dishes, designed to titillate and arouse. The final course was a 'creamy kiss', where two participants would bring their mouths together to

taste a lemon posset (made of cream, lemon zest and lemon juice). The experience of tasting for this dish was the conflation of the food and the tongue of the Other. The above theorization of the mouth-to-mouth encounter with the Other is rather idealized; what is missing is the inevitable in-between space, which is always present. The tongues cannot ever be purely tasted; there will always be an intermediary (saliva, previous food eaten, etc.). In the creamy kiss, the doubling of the embodied consciousness is mediated by the sharp, creamy lemon posset. The structure of the experience, in Sartrean terms, is consciousness=lemon-cream=consciousness. Along this spectrum, one encounters the Other through the sharing of an experience of both the intermediary and each other and, indeed, the intermediary object and the other are flattened out into one, homogeneous, surface-level experience. The performance (performance as both frame and act) facilitates this mutual experience of Otherness: the binary itself of Self and Other itself is performatively troubled and each becomes the other, forming a Möbius strip of experience and Self.

Concluding Remarks

In dealing with issues around the Self and the Other, this article has worked through the structure of thesis, antithesis, synthesis: the Other as an experience of the Self, the tension in the binary of Self and Other, the resolution of mutual construction through the encounter of Self with Self, Other with Other. Through each of the food performances, the tongue and tasting are used as a key site of the Self and its encounter with, and experience of, the Other. As an embodied articulation of the intentional structure of consciousness or Self, the tongue brings to the surface of experience the nothingness at the centre of Being. In bringing together the performance of food and sex within the frame of performance itself, each of the works engages with the intimate relations of Self to Other. This intimacy implicitly acknowledges the personalization of experience and the problematic boundaries of the Self and the body. The problems of attempting to know the Other are mirrored in the epistemological doubts around knowing oneself. The nothingness or the abyss at the centre of the Self and of the Other are experienced directly, through the inability to taste your own tongue.

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