Dining in Prison: Sensory framing and performative perception in Rideout's Past Time

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Introduction: Past Time and the performativity of perception

In this article, I explore a number of ways in which the senses and sensory perception are not free, not just in terms of the orders and structures that maintain and make sense of the conceptual realm of perception (the meaning and significance of what we perceive), but also in terms of sensory perception itself (the actual sensory encounter with 'things' in the world). I argue that, rather than a classic model of perception, which posits a clear process of sensory encounter followed by processing, from an experiential perspective, perception is always already framed in advance and sensory perceptions are not neutral, apolitical or mere information-gathering. To do this, I examine a performance by Rideout called Past Time (2018), where the company worked with a group of prisoners to explore histories of food in prison. The article engages with the way that language operates within perception, as well as the politics that can be at work in and that can circulate around perceptual experience.

Past Time was conducted in HMP Hewell, a men's prison in Tardebigge (Worcestershire, UK) as a collaboration between Rideout and the University of Warwick. It was part of the Wellcome Trust-funded project 'Prisoners, Medical Care and Entitlement to Health in England and Ireland, 1850–2000', with additional funding from Arts Council England, HMP Hewell and the University of Warwick. Rideout (Creative Arts for Rehabilitation) was formed in 1999, initially focusing on creative practice with prisoners and staff in UK prisons, though from 2014 their work was extended to include projects outside of a prison context. Working with a range of historical and archival materials, in Past Time a group of prisoners examined histories of prison food and its effects on physical and mental health, working through historical research and theatre workshops and by experimenting with historical recipes, notably from the 1902 Prison Commission Manual of Cooking. The process culminated in two performances for an invited audience in the chapel of the

prison. The performance I attended, which is the focus of this article, consisted of moments of performance from the prisoners (including songs, staging court proceedings from archival records and autobiographical narratives and reflections from the current prisoners) and samples of food, served to the audience.

While the project was ostensibly examining the effects of prison food on mental and physical wellbeing, I argue that it also explored a sensory and affective politics. In Performance Affects: Applied theatre and the end of effect, James Thompson argues that the applied workshop 'is structured as part of a wider distribution of the sensible', drawing on Jacques Rancière's work and making the case that applied practice can 'start a process of undoing "the sensible fabric" in which it is located' (2009: 174). He argues that the 'affective register of participatory arts' should be central, so that 'what has reached us through the senses becomes foundational to the practice and crucially politics of applied theatre' (116, emphasis in original). While Past Time did include workshops in the process of its production, in this article I explore the politics of the performance itself (rather than necessarily thinking of its stated aims as a piece of applied practice). Thompson's argument is nevertheless useful as a way of framing an exploration of the 'sensible fabric' within which perception takes place. The sensible fabric, which constitutes the cultural and political frames within which perception is realized, was (not necessarily purposefully) made explicit and troubled. Past Time encouraged attendance to the sensory perception of taste within a politicized environment (the prison) and unsettled an easy or transparent experience of perception. It drew attention to the context-dependency of perceptual encounters, specifically through eating, by interrupting the continuity, in experience, of the perceiving body, the site and its political and historical context.

The prison operated as a loaded site for the performance. It is a highly politicized location, given that it is the site of regulation, discipline and rehabilitation. Prisoners are denied particular rights and freedoms of citizens and subject to the regulatory regime of the prison institution. In Past Time, the particular focus of this regulation of daily life was on the food prepared and served in prison. By bringing together the foods historically served in prison with the experience of contemporary prisoners, the project explicitly acknowledged the liberalization of eating and sensory experience

for prisoners, while nevertheless pointing to the continued force of restriction in prison life. The project posed an open question, without a clear answer, about the extent to which eating and the range of sensory experience should be restricted; whether this is a legitimate exercise of power. Past Time did not merely reflect on the sensory, perceptual and gustatory life of a prisoner from an external perspective, but utilized the site of the prison itself to draw attention to the lived and experiential life of bodies subjected to the prison's regulatory practices around food. The ostensibly 'free' bodies of the audience were, to an extent, incorporated into the site during the performance: given a taster of prison life, but in a way that used the tension between inside and outside to encourage attentiveness to, and reflections on, the sensory and perceptual lives of the prisoners.

Through the performance, Past Time began to unsettle and expose the performativity of perception and of eating because the foods offered in the performance troubled an easy and transparent continuous perceptual experience. To say that perception is performative is to acknowledge that it is not something that is free, neutral or simply true about us; that it relies on and manifests a socio-political construction of the body; and that it does this through elements of, or associated with, performance. Various cultural 'scripts' are navigated, negotiated and enacted in individual acts or performances of the sensate body. The sensate and perceiving body is not a tabula rasa that comes into being through each individual act of perception, but rather is always already formed and framed so that sensory perception is mediated by, and furnished with substance through, socio-political and cultural heritages, histories and discourses. Sensations are enacted and experienced according to the iterative logic of socio-political norms. The sensible fabric of cultural discourses marks not only what can be thought as 'making sense' but also as directing sensory perceptions themselves. The double rendering of 'sensible' as both able to make sense and available to the senses is not merely polysemic, an eccentricity of language, but an efficient description of sensing itself. Sensory perceptions are furnished, in advance, with a sense of substance and significance, whereby socio-cultural norms guide the distribution and focus of attention, suggest appropriate modalities of sensing (whether to look at, listen to, touch, smell and/or taste the 'object') and give meaning to the encounter. Sensory

perceptions are never ‘pure’ or abstract, but inflected and regulated by cultures of sense.

There is an increasing body of work that is engaging with the performativity of perception and its palpability in experience. In David Howes’ and Constance Classen’s Ways of Sensing, they write that ‘[c]ultural and personal associations … affect our physical perceptions’, offering the example, ‘When a metaphorical malodour is associated with a particular social group, people may experience members of that group as actually having a bad smell, even though no distinctive odour is present’ (drawing on Largey and Watson’s 2006 sociological study of smell [Howes and Classen 2014: 8]). We could call this the cultural-hallucinogenic property of perception, where expectations and associations, which are culturally formed and maintained, enter into perception with a palpable ‘reality’. Barry Maund writes of ‘intermediaries’ in perception, including ‘images, ideas, sense impressions’ (2003: 6), which have a constitutive force in perception. These intermediaries do not mask ‘pure’ perception, but rather speak of the constitution of perception through the intersection of cultures, language, experience, expectation, materials and bodies. Perception also invariably emerges at the intersection of different senses, which are not discrete streams but always building a cumulative impression of the world through their combinations, interactions and retentions of sensations. The ‘world’ never fully presents itself as pure and immediate sensory presence, but rather through the lingering and intermingling of different sensations.

Stephen Di Benedetto states in The Provocation of the Senses in Contemporary Theatre, ‘Our neural pathways have preferences based on our own personal experiences of the world, and therefore, have already predetermined the eventual interpretation of sensory data’ (2010: 8). If we understand ‘personal experience’ as caught up within various contextual orders and structures, then we are conditioned by ‘norms’ even in the neural pathways of our brains; not only in processes of ‘interpretation of sensory data’, but in what is (seemingly intuitively or spontaneously) deemed appropriate, important or worthy to distinguish as the object of perception, distinct from its background. Works on perception from different disciplinary fields acknowledge that one of its fundamental traits is the ability to distinguish the ‘object’ of one’s attention from a background (for instance, in psychology see Grondin 2016:

1, 83 and in philosophy see Maund 2003: 48). This ability of perceptual distinction is not a priori, but inherited, trained and conditioned: we learn the norms of perceptual distinction, which are experienced as seemingly spontaneous and intuitive, but can nevertheless be interrupted, disrupted and unsettled when the learned correspondences between encounter and context are made discontinuous.

Discourse, bodily practices, histories of culture and language all form the 'norms' that act on and through perception; guiding it, constituting it and forming the 'sensible'. In perception, we can (re)produce, maintain and continue the force of these 'norms' when we take perception for granted, take it as seemingly transparent and a solid ground or substrate for 'higher' reflections on the world and its operations. In experiencing, thinking and writing about performance, we often take perception in this way, as a transparent mediator that is not an issue (which, in and of itself, it is not necessarily an issue). But performance can take perception as an issue for itself; to interrupt the continuity and 'apparent' self-sufficient immediacy of perception by drawing attention to its processes, by making it strange or by exposing discontinuities between the constituent components of perception (objects, sensory streams or modes, discourse(s), cultural framings, expectations and so on). There are two principle ways in which this might happen in performance: through the performance itself directing or drawing attention; and through an act of shifting one's attention, to go 'against the grain' of the work's thrust or focus. In the following reflections on perception in Past Time, I draw on both modes, though I acknowledge that both, in different ways, are grounded in personal experience. However, I also argue that the experience is never going to be entirely unique, given that it carries within it the marks, traces and frames of a shared socio-political world and historical lineage.

The following reflections consider the context-dependency of the perception of tasting and eating in Past Time, exploring how the foods, served in and framed by the performance and its site, drew attention to the performative dimensions of perception, unsettled perception through discontinuities and raised issues of the politics of perception. The article is structured around three of the foods served to the audience in the performance: gruel, soup and bread. For each, I think about how the dual frames of the performance and the site of the prison were integral to both

guiding the perceptual experience and opened up sensual discontinuities—framing, inflecting and guiding what can be sensed and how it should be sensed. Past Time used and explored the sense of taste in such a way that it posed questions of the contextual contingency of sensory experience.

Gruel

Language operates in and through perception, not merely as a name or label, but as a force in perception, permeating, framing and guiding it. In Senses of the Subject, Judith Butler writes:

> Language is said to fabricate or figure the body, to produce or construct it, to constitute or make it. …[T]he doctrine of construction implies that the body is not only made by language, but made of language … as if there is no nonlinguistic stuff at issue. (2015: 19)

While Butler writes this as a way of critiquing an understanding of sensing that is overly determined by language, forgetting the corporeal dimension, there is nevertheless an implication of the role of language operating in and through the embodied encounter of sensory perception. Language operates not only as a means of categorization and articulation following a sensory encounter, but also prefigures sensation, framing and guiding it in advance. The psychologist Charles Spence notes that 'naming, labeling and description, price/valuation, the name of the artist or chef, all these factors can dramatically influence our response to what we see or what we taste' (2018: 58). Flavour perception of course includes the qualities of the material encounter with the food object, but is equally perceptually constituted by the language operating around and through the experience and cultural contexts and framings.

One of the first tasters the audience were offered in Past Time was a serving of 'gruel'. Prepared by the prisoners and served in small pots to the audience, it was made from coarse oatmeal, water and salt. The perceptual experience of eating this dish was wrapped up in the name of the dish: described as 'gruel' by the performers who distributed it. To name the dish 'gruel' carries a series of cultural associations of

institutionalization and of merely attempting to placate hunger—to eat out of absolute necessity. To me, the mixture was dense, slightly gelatinous and very salty. The label of ‘gruel’, with its connotations of deprivation and mere subsistence, anticipated and therefore produced an unpleasant experience in advance of the tasting, heightening and foregrounding, for me, particular qualities of the experience as heavy, claggy and too salty. The object had the potential to be experienced in another way: as filling, velvety or even with a creamy mouthfeel, had it been labelled in a different way (for instance, as ‘porridge’ rather than ‘gruel’). The label, whether ‘gruel’ or ‘porridge’, draws together the different qualities of the experience and gathers them under a name that guides perception. As ‘porridge’, the food had the potential to smell slightly nutty, to taste pleasantly savoury and to feel mostly creamy with some texture. As ‘gruel’, though, there was very little smell, a powerful saltiness and a lumpy texture. The language used to describe the qualities of the experience has a force in producing the (seemingly immediate) perception and operates within a congruous semantic field.

The gruel was positioned in a particular way, in advance, by its name, which led me to perceive it in a particular way. Given that I found it unpleasant, I looked to others in the audience for their reactions, which complexified the experience further. Spence notes that an understanding of dining must take account of its social dimension (2018: 58)—that what we sense in eating relies in part on the socialization of the senses, the impact of how others react, how what they notice can guide what I notice. The sway, force or pressure of the social sphere exerts itself on the moment of perception and not just after the moment of perceptual encounter, but also during and in advance—framing perception in advance to guide attention to what one should notice and experience as sensible. This is one of the ways in which the perception of taste is politicized: when the perception operates within a social world, it becomes something that is not just my own. I am both trained in how to perceive by others and I navigate individual acts of perception through looking to others. In both cases, socio-political relations between bodies presses down on moments of perception that seem to be just my own.

In Past Time, after my initial distasteful experience of the gruel, I looked to others in the audience for any sign of their perceptual experience. Some of the audience were

noticeably enjoying it, perhaps because of other associations with the name of the dish or because they did not experience the word ‘gruel’ as such a powerful force in guiding the experience. The performance of apparent pleasure by others in the audience unsettled my own experience and encouraged me to reflect on whether the question of pleasure itself was appropriate for this food in this context: am I meant to find it pleasurable? is the gruel meant to be highlighting the unpleasant nature of food in the historical prison? As I continued to eat the final few spoons of gruel, my own everyday perceptual attitudes were changed and I ceased focusing on whether the experience was pleasurable (itself a marker of a level of my own privilege, that I can adopt this attitude towards eating, a daily practice not driven by absolute necessity) and instead my perceptive attention tried to shift to the ‘raw’ qualities of sensation, attempting to dissociate them in perception from any accompanying feelings of (dis)pleasure.

The various contexts surrounding the ‘moment’ of experience (the environment of the prison, the frame of performance itself, the particular thrust of Past Time as exploring the relationship between past and present, the reactions of others around me) unsettled the apparent transparency or self-sufficiency of my sensory encounter. Instead, the experience drew attention to its own qualities and began to expose the position, framing and practice of my own sensate body—that it was not the body for whom this object was designed to give pleasure, sustenance or an unobtrusive and unremarkable sensory experience.

‘Vegetable’ soup and processed food

Following the gruel, the audience were served a ‘vegetable’ soup, made with beef shoulder, pearl barley, carrot, celery, swede, onion, flour, beef stock, salt and pepper (hence the quotation marks around ‘vegetable’ because of the inclusion of beef). Like with the gruel, the naming label of the dish had a force in experience. However, for the soup, the naming was not just a frame with various associations, but entered into the perceptual experience, marking a disjunction between the label and the sensory qualities of the dish.

The name ‘vegetable’ soup established certain expectations of what the experience would be, implying that the taste and texture of meat would not be a component part of the food, especially given that the performers did not give verbal articulation to the speech marks around ‘vegetable’ in the title as they offered it to the audience. Spence observes that, in flavour perception, there is a distinction between expectations and experience, though expectations do ‘play an important role in determining the final experience’ (2018: 59). Spence continues:

> If our experience on actually tasting a food is not too different from the expectation… then we will likely end up experiencing what we expected to experience. If, however, the experience is very different from the expectation then a negatively-valenced disconfirmation of expectation response is often seen. (Spence 2018: 59)

The continuity of expectation and actual experience has a force in constituting the experience itself. Perception is not only guided by expectations (for instance, to what one ought to pay attention), but is constituted by the relation between expectation and experience. Here, the name ‘vegetable’ soup set up an expectation of the taste of vegetables; the actual experience included meaty flavours and umami tasting notes; and the whole perceptual experience included this tension. It was not just a disjunction between expectation and sensation, but the perception of the disjunction as a tangible quality in the experience. This potentially has the quality of a perceptual double-take and the discontinuity between expectation and sensation encourages a different mode of perception: an attentiveness to the sensory qualities encountered.

There was an ascetic quality to the food served in Past Time, where the food revealed a history of dining in prison that was grounded in the mere subsistence of the body without regard for sensory pleasure or richness. Simcha Walfish (2018) traces a history of the connection between sensory restriction and solitary confinement in prison. Walfish observes that until the late eighteenth century, the sensory asceticism associated with solitary confinement operated as a religiously inflected form of rehabilitation, to encourage prisoners (within an overtly Christian frame) towards repentance by removing the distractions of worldly sensory experiences. As Past Time was staged in the prison’s chapel rather than the dining

hall, the performance referenced this historical context, suggesting that abstinence and sensory moderation continue to be forms of control, inciting the prisoner to reflect, repent and engage in processes of rehabilitation. Until the late 1700s, this operated within a dominant religious-Christian frame. However, for the contemporary prison, this asceticism has been reconfigured in terms of health discourses rather than in terms of redemption. The body of the prisoner is configured as both subject to regulatory/external forms of control and maintained through personal/internal self-regulation, within precepts of what constitutes a 'healthy' life.

The 'vegetable' soup was bland and insipid, with its rationale for being served in the historical prison seemingly grounded more in terms of health (efficiently administering vegetables, carbohydrate and protein in one dish) than in terms of religious doctrine or any kind of sensory fulfilment. By comparison, the current provision of food in prison seems to allow for a greater variety of sensory experience, with prisoners being offered about five options for lunch or dinner, including pasta, curries, pies, casseroles, fruit and some desserts (Dickens et al. 2016: 6) and a limited number of snacks that prisoners can purchase (9). While this is still a limited and restricted sensory range and framed in terms of health and nutrition, it is nevertheless a wider range of sensory experience than the historical foods explored in the performance. In the performance, the prisoner-performers talked about the processed food they could purchase and about 'kettle cooking', where in their cells they could prepare things like rice with a mushroom sauce or noodles in a kettle, using processed food packets and some fresh ingredients. However, in this autobiographical text from the performers about 'kettle cooking', while they acknowledged that it offered them greater variety, they nevertheless articulated a dissatisfaction that what was available to them was 'processed food'.

While the 'vegetable' soup was rather bland, in comparison to the descriptions of 'kettle cooking' from the performers, it retrospectively seemed a more wholesome, enjoyable and richer sensory experience than the pre-packaged and processed foods we heard described. A tension emerged between the actual experience of eating the soup and hearing the descriptions of processed food. In The Five Senses, Michel Serres writes that to drink something processed and packaged is to 'swallow terminology', to 'drink writing' (2016: 222). Perception of processed and packaged

food, from this perspective, is overly determined by its labelling: ‘everything printed on the external surface can be found within’ (ibid.). By comparison, Serres theorizes a different perceptual experience that is not determined by a label and that ‘cannot say fully what flows over the palate, or lingers in the mouth’ (ibid.). While Serres is writing about the profound experience of drinking an excellent wine, a useful model emerges for thinking about the tension between eating the soup and hearing about packaged food in Past Time. In merely hearing a description of ‘kettle cooking’, the audience were allowed only to perceive words that followed the logic of the food label: nothing but the experience of the words. By comparison, the soup was a multi-sensory experience: we heard its name; we felt the warmth of the container; we smelled the beef stock; we felt the soft texture of the vegetables and the toothsome and slightly chewy quality of the meat; we tasted the savoury, umami notes of the meat and the sweetness of the vegetables. It became a richer and fuller experience. Instead of presenting a history of prison food that moved from bland historical food to a variety of sensations available in the contemporary prison, the performance implicitly suggested there was something more complex about the historical food than the monotony of the processed and pre-packaged.

Bread

Howes and Classen argue that ‘there is a politics of the senses’ and that this ‘is clearly seen when we examine sensory values and practices concerning gender, class, ethnicity …’ (2014: 4–5). In Past Time, the seemingly simple serving of handmade bread to the audience unsettled me and encouraged a reflection on my own sensory life and privilege. The bread recipe was taken from the 1935 prison cooking manual (a revision of the earlier manual) and used fresh yeast to make an overnight starter sponge as the leavening. A sponge produces a more complex flavour profile in bread than a fast prove, because it allows the yeast and bacteria more time to produce complex flavour compounds (McGee 2004: 539). Like with the tension between the ‘vegetable’ soup and the descriptions of ‘kettle cooking’, this bread unsettled the idea of a simple, progressive history of food in prison, given its more interesting flavours and textures compared to the more usual pre-packaged and mass-produced loaf in the contemporary prison.

According to Howes and Classen, ‘Traditionally in the West the upper classes were associated with the “higher” senses of sight and hearing.… The lower classes, by contrast, were linked to touch, taste and smell, which were deemed “lower” senses’ (2014: 67). Artisanal, handmade bread, which is grounded in touch, taste and smell, has been appropriated as a luxury—the so-called lower senses no longer merely associated with labour and the lower classes, but now embedded as a luxury in an experiential economy, primarily reserved for those who can afford to pay. Rich or complex sensory pleasures of touch, taste and smell are transformed into commodities for those with a level of privilege, complicating Howes and Classen’s sensory class hierarchy. In this moment of eating bread in the performance, I was confronted with my own sensory privilege: that I take this kind of sensory complexity (and the labour subsumed within it) for granted, as a staple; that I have the ability and resources to make or purchase and eat bread with a more interesting, varied and complex flavour and texture profile on a daily basis; and my sensory experience is not restricted to bland, mass-produced bread, with no agency to choose otherwise. My daily ‘freedom’ to choose to eat something that was once a necessity and a staple and is now framed as a luxury was exposed. By being served the bread in the prison by prisoners who had made it for the audience and not themselves, I became more attentive to its qualities (the slightly sweet and slightly bitter crust, the soft, spongy and slightly chewy interior), those things to which I would not ordinarily pay attention, but in a way that was uncomfortable rather than pleasurable. The material qualities of the bread remained, but the perceptual experience, which includes my own positioning in relation to the object of perception, was inexorably wrapped up with the politics of the encounter.

Conclusion

Sensory perception is performative. It is an experience constituted at the intersection of embodiment, language and contexts. Perception is always embedded within a socio-political world and, in everyday and seemingly transparent perceptions, there is a continuity between sensation, language and context. Past Time troubled, unsettled and interrupted the continuous experience of tasting, at times exposing the performativity of perception and at times drawing attention to and engaging with the politics that operates around and through perception. In my own experience of eating

the gruel, the soup and the bread, at the intersection of their different sensory qualities and within the frame of the performance, my everyday experience of eating was unsettled. In large part, this was a result of the context of the prison, which framed my perception in particular ways and encouraged modes of perceiving that defamiliarized my experience of sensory perception and encouraged an attentiveness to the politics of my sensate body in that site.

The intense power of politics to frame and produce the senses, manifested in sensory perception itself, has the ability to be taken as 'simply true'—as a 'naturalizing' of politics in the body by assuming that what is constructed and conditioned is a transparent and immediate experience of the world. While Past Time did not explicitly seek to explore the performative construction and deployment of perception, it nevertheless offered a series of unsettling experiences of eating. The prison site was a palpable force in the production of sensory perception within the performance. By operating outside of everyday contexts of tasting and eating, the audience were encouraged to be attentive to the ways in which perception is not merely sensory information gathering, but rather is always entangled with social, historical and political frames. Perception is not neutral, it is not pure, and it is not free.

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