

Aesthetic Investigations

Published on behalf of the Dutch Association of Aesthetics



Experiencing your art, and eating it too

Author

SUE SPAID

CLINTON PETER

VERDONSCHOT

Affiliation

NORTHERN KENTUCKY

UNIVERSITY

INDEPENDENT

The present special issue of *Aesthetic Investigations* is guest-edited by Mateusz Salwa and Adam Andrzejewski who gathered for us four contributions exploring the aesthetic significance of the everyday. If some everyday experiences are aesthetically significant, this must be because they have a special quality that makes it akin to paradigmatic aesthetic experiences such as those of (fine) art. But if some everyday experiences are aesthetic like that, why not simply say that they fall under the broader category of paradigmatic aesthetic experiences? On the contrary, the theme of this special issue is rather to argue that everyday aesthetic experiences may be akin to paradigmatic ones, but in such a way that it still sets the two apart. Everyday aesthetic experiences have their own norms, and they reveal something about human existence that only they could. To argue this means avoiding having to choose between an apparent dilemma between the uniqueness of everyday experience and its falling under the broader category of aesthetic experiences. It means trying to have your cake and eat it too.

The idiom of having and eating one's cake is apt, because what is a better example of an everyday aesthetic experience than the consumption of food? Food is, after all, often mentioned as one of the core examples of everyday activities that are aesthetically significant.¹ Yet, while the consumption of food, sustenance, is an everyday activity, meals, and especially cakes, often aspire to be much more than that. They aspire to be *feasts*, and the defining mark of a feast is precisely that it is *not* part of the everyday, but rather an

exceptional event. As Salwa points out, food is also a beloved theme for art, and therefore an object for aesthetic experience aside from its being enjoyed as an everyday aesthetic experience. In that respect, cake really does seem to be the kind of thing one could have and eat at the same time.

When it comes to food, one genre that cannot get enough, is cinema. From *Tampopo* (1985) to *Ratatouille* (2007), cinematic portrayals of delicious meals have wowed audiences by reconstructing the Deweyan ‘wow’ of an everyday experience. When this special issue was proposed to us, the editorial team immediately thought of the film *Babette’s Feast* (1987), in which a French housekeeper, a refugee from the 1871 Paris Commune, shows up rather randomly at an ascetic Lutheran community in Denmark, only to spend every last penny of her 10 000 franc lottery prize on importing French delicacies to create a ‘real French dinner’. For most, such a fancy meal hardly counts as ‘everyday aesthetics’, and indeed the film shows us how the meal exercises an exceptional, almost mystical power to quell disagreement among the diners. However, the straightforward charm of the meal, a collection of dishes one could, if one wished, recreate for oneself, was not lost on viewers. This year, Cinema Culinair, a Dutch initiative featuring Dutch chef Anja Sluijs, recently served a variation of Babette’s feast for €90. This culinary initiative offers cinemagoers the chance to viewing several different delectable films while serving the meals consumed in those films on cue, enabling diners to experience the art, while eating it too.

This initiative may strike one as a desperate attempt to breathe life into an industry that has been struggling to get back on its feet ever since the COVID-19 lockdowns. But this was hardly the first time that people have tried to recreate Babette’s feast. Of course, one can find reports online of people who have attempted *Babette’s Feast*.² Indeed, when the film first opened in New York City, the caviar purveyor Petrossian challenged people to prepare Babette’s feast at home, selling those who accepted the challenge the caviar and turtle meat for the blinis and crème fraiche and turtle soup.[Fabricant 1988] Keen to get restaurants across the country to promote the film, Orion Pictures even distributed ‘A ”Babette’s Feast” handbook, complete with recipes and a special telephone number, as a guide to theatre owners and restaurants in about 500 other cities selected by Orion.’³ In addition, the *New York Times* article quoted here, printed several of the recipes, so its readers could try the dishes for themselves. Of course, this could also have been a clever tactic to intimidate diners into making reservations at Petrossian’s rather than prepare the meal at home. In 1988, Petrossian estimated that preparing the meal at home for 8 would cost \$350, as compared to \$1000 at the restaurant, before tax and tip. Those are steep prices. Even the €90 that Cinema Culinair charges, stands in rather stark contrast to the price of one admission, no food, which in the Netherlands today would cost you €12,50. It draws our attention to a paradoxical process by which an art form becomes more exclusive, the more it is experienced as an everyday aesthetic experience. It

is possible to experience your art and eat it too, but only if you are willing and able to pay.

Contrast the riches of Babette's feast and the feasts imitating it with this issue's cover image, a 'poor image' of Polish artist Julita Wójcik's peeling 50 kilos of potatoes in Zachęta National Gallery in 2001. Although it would not be strange to encounter potatoes on a plate in a fancy restaurant, they are in the first instance a staple of the working class. Moreover, many consider the activity of potato peeling a staple of women's work, especially in Wójcik's native Poland.[Culture.pl] Like Babette, Wójcik intervenes in everyday life. Babette intervenes through a feast the likes of which her strict Protestant adherents had never tasted. Wójcik intervenes by introducing an activity that is at once familiar, but is uncannily out of place in the aura of the museum exhibition hall. Wójcik has thereby found an effective means of raising feminist questions about the division of power, the visibility of women's work, and the gendered distribution of household tasks that characterises everyday life. For more on this exceptional performance, as well as the two articles, an Arts & Artists contribution, and a book review that make up the Special Issue, we refer you to Mateusz Salwa's introduction.

Feminist questions persist also beyond our special issue on everyday aesthetics. From discussions between ourselves, and in light of Donald Trump's re-election (a blow to feminists across the political spectrum and global boundaries), we present a duet of Arts & Artists contributions on the 2023 film *Barbie* (dir. Greta Gerwig). In addition, Gabriel Tugendstein contributes a reflection on the ambiguous private/public status of Hayao Miyazaki's aesthetic sensibilities, with particular attention paid to his last, and most likely final, film *The Boy and the Heron*. Finally, we include a review of Vid Simoniti's *Artists Remake the World*.

suespaid@gmail.com
clint@cpverdonschot.xyz

ENDNOTES

1. Saito 2024.

2. Lowder 2013.

3. Fabricant 1988.

REFERENCES

Fabricant, Florence. 1988. In *'Babette,' a Great Feast for the Palate and the Eye*. Accessed: 25 December 2024. <https://www.nytimes.com/1988/03/02/garden/in-babette-a-great-feast-for-the-palate-and-the-eye.html>.

Lowder, J. Bryan. 2013. *Cailles en Sarcophage: Babette's Feast's Richest Most Expensive Dish Made at Home*. Accessed: 25th December 2024. <https://slate.com/human-interest/2013/07/cailles-en-sarcophage-babettes-feasts-richest-most-expensive-dish-made-at-home.html>.

Saito, Yuriko. 2024. "Aesthetics of the Everyday." In *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Winter 2024, edited by Edward N. Zalta and Uri Nodelman. Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University.

COPYRIGHT:

© 2024 Sue Spaid & clinton peter verdonschot

This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC-BY 4.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited.

See <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>

Aesthetic Investigations is a peer-reviewed open access journal published by the Dutch Association of Aesthetics.