

Think 53: Food Talks

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Comfort Food and the “Exotic”

Tuesday, May 30, 2017

1. *Story of a Madeleine*

- Food and memory of life experience

2. *Stories of Chopsticks and Sukiyaki*

- Orientalism
- Semiotics (briefly)
- A history of sukiyaki

3. Summary

- Contrastive experiences with food

Story of a Madeleine



Marcel Proust



Marcel Proust

- 1871 – 1922
- French novelist, essayist, and critic
- *À la recherche du temps perdu* [*Remembrance of things past*][*In search of lost time*] (writing began in 1909, published between 1913 and 1927).

Marcel Proust

- Suffered from asthma since the age of nine. The disease is one reason why later in his life he spent most of the time at home, where his only activity was writing.
- Never had a job, and lived with his parents until their deaths.
- Educated at one of the oldest and most elite high schools in Paris where Jean-Paul Sartre taught at one stage.
- Studied philosophy at the Sorbonne.

Marcel Proust

- Proust attended philosopher Henri Bergson's lectures at the Sorbonne from 1891 to 1893.
- The preoccupation with memory resonates with Henri Bergson's *Matter and Memory* (1909).
 - **Bergson** (1859-1941), Nobel Laureate in Literature (1927), argued that *the processes of immediate experience and intuition* are more significant than abstract rationalism and science for *understanding reality*

In the “madeleines” section

- Proust was interested in:
 - himself
 - memories of the pastbut not particularly in madeleines
(unfortunately)

“And soon, mechanically, [...], I raised to my lips a spoonful of the tea in which I had soaked a morsel of the cake. No sooner had the warm liquid mixed with the crumbs touched my palate than a shudder ran through me and I stopped, intent upon the extraordinary thing that was happening to me. An exquisite pleasure had invaded my senses, something isolated, detached, with no suggestion of its origin.”

“And at once the vicissitudes of life had become indifferent to me, its disasters innocuous, its brevity illusory - this new sensation having had on me the effect which love has of filling me with a precious essence; or rather this essence was not in me it *was* me. I had ceased now to feel mediocre, contingent, mortal. Whence could it have come to me, this all-powerful joy? I sensed that it was connected with the taste of the tea and the cake, but that it infinitely transcended those savours, could not, indeed, be of the same nature. Whence did it come? What did it mean? **How could I seize and apprehend it?**”

“I drink a second mouthful, in which I find nothing more than in the first, then a third, which gives me rather less than the second. It is time to stop; the potion is losing its magic. It is plain that the truth I am seeking lies not in the cup but in myself.”

“And **suddenly the memory revealed itself**. The taste was that of the little piece of madeleine which on Sunday mornings at Combray (because on those mornings I did not go out before mass), when I went to say good morning to her in her bedroom , my aunt Léonie used to give me, dipping it first in her own cup of tea or tisane. **The sight of the little madeleine had recalled nothing to my mind before I tasted it**; perhaps because I had so often seen such things in the meantime, without tasting them, on the trays in pastry-cooks' windows,...”

“But when from a long-distant past nothing subsists, after the people are dead, after the things are broken and scattered, **taste and smell alone**, more fragile but more enduring, more unsubstantial, more persistent, more faithful, remain poised a long time, like souls, remembering, waiting, hoping, amid the ruins of all the rest; and **bear unflinchingly**, in the tiny and almost impalpable drop of their essence, **the vast structure of recollection.**”

“And as soon as I had recognized the taste of the piece of madeleine soaked in her decoction of lime-blossom which my aunt used to give me (although I did not yet know and must long postpone the discovery of why this memory made me so happy) immediately the old grey house upon the street, where her room was, rose up like a stage set to attach itself to the little pavilion opening on to the garden which had been built out behind it for my parents (the isolated segment which until that moment had been all that I could see); and with the house the town, from morning to night and in all weathers, the Square where I used to be sent before lunch, the streets along which I used to run errands, the country roads we took when it was fine.”

Scents and Memory – Proustian experience –

Why odors are so widely regarded as the best memory cues?

Herz, R. S. (2000). Scents of Time. *Sciences*, 40(4), 34-39.

Herz, R. S., & Schooler, J. W. (2002). A naturalistic study of autobiographical memories evoked by olfactory and visual cues: testing the Proustian hypothesis. *American Journal of Psychology*, 115(1), 21-32

“It is **emotional intensity**, not accuracy, that accounts for the impression that odors are the best memory cues.” (Herz 2000:37)

- A study of autobiographical memories elicited by verbal, olfactory and visual versions of five items shows that memories evoked by odors are emotionally powerful, but impart no additional accuracy.
- When odor was the cue, the subjects recalled their personal episodes with a greater feeling of being brought back to the original event than they did when the cue was an image or the spoken name of the same item.

(Herz & Schooler 2002)

Scents and Memory – Proustian experience –

“It is that connection to long-forgotten events that makes the Proust phenomenon so exhilarating. The rush of vivid, emotionally charged memory linked to a lost love or a childhood event can make the past appear more powerful than the present. That such vividness could be merely an illusion – a product of the intimate tangle of smell, memory and emotion – seems no reason not to revel when coming across the right scent.” (Herz 2000:39)

Herz, Rachel S. "Odor-evoked memory." *The Oxford Handbook of Social Neuroscience* (2011): 265.

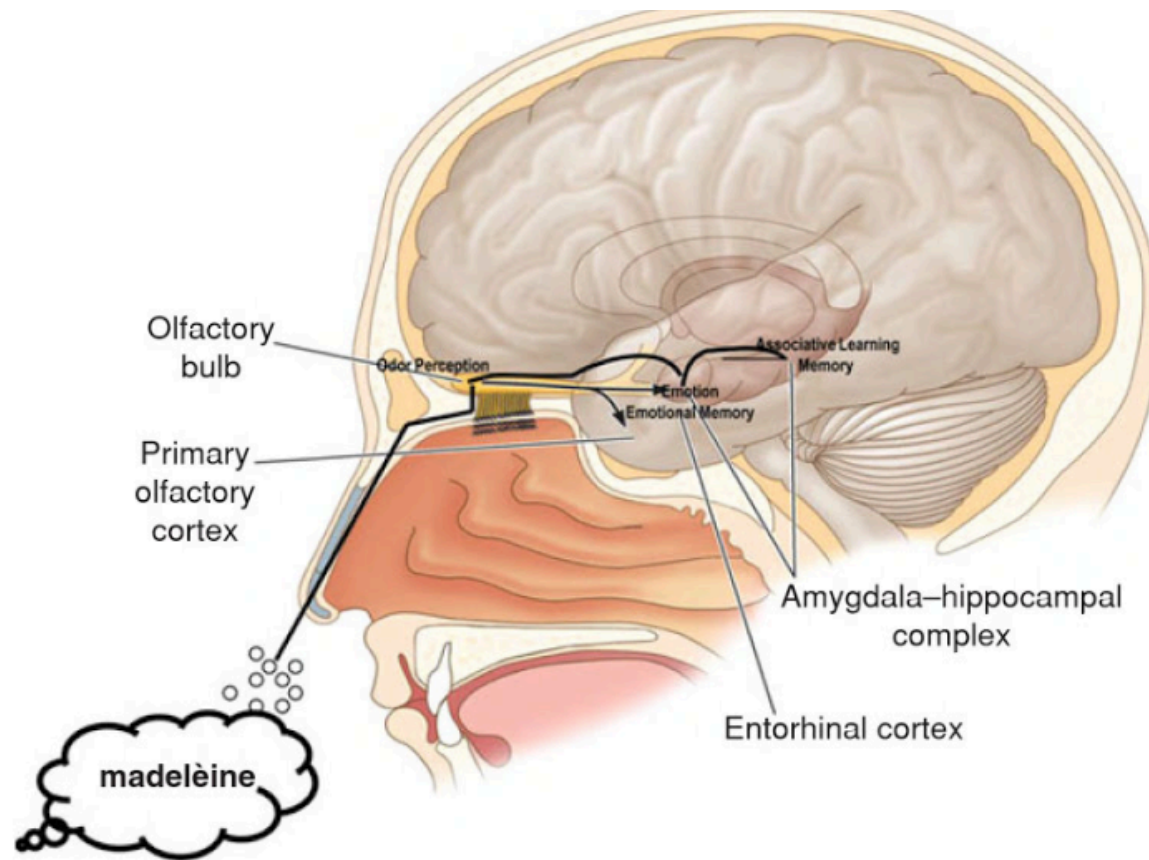


Fig. 17.3 Schematic showing the neural route from odor sensation through to odor perception, emotion and emotional memory processing (amygdala), associative learning, and memory elicitation (hippocampus).

Proustian Memory and Taste



Ratatouille (2007)



Proustian Memory and Taste



Anton Ego, the restaurant critic

[ratatouille short.webloc](#)



What is --

- your madeleine?
 - the food you remember/miss from your childhood?
 - the food you like to eat when you are sick?
-
- What comes to your mind when you think of it (or eat it)?
 - What do you associate with it?

The Dinner of Your Life

Special dinner at a hospice (Osaka, Japan)



***Stories of Chopsticks and Sukiyaki
told by a French cultural critic***



Roland Barthes



Roland Barthes

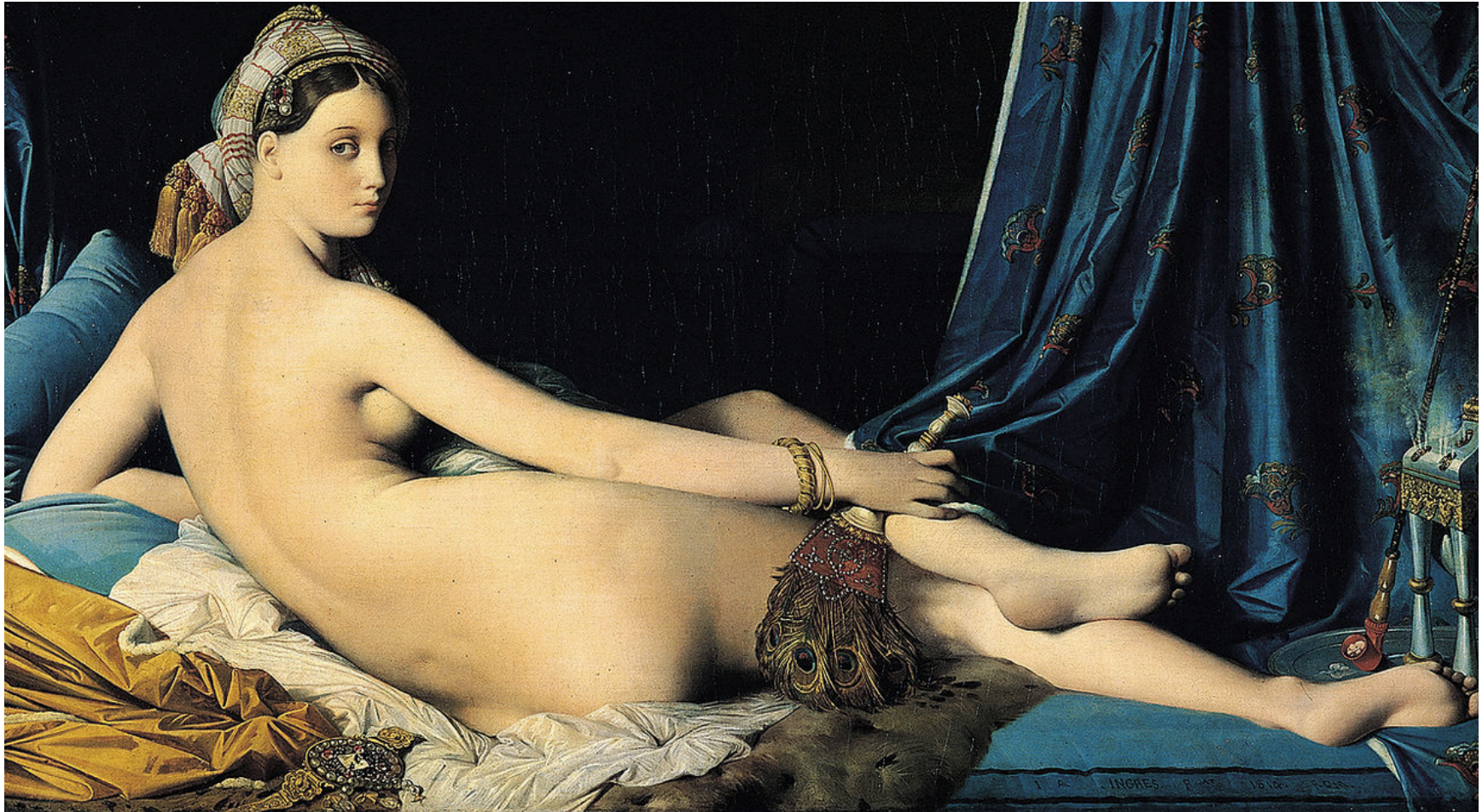
- 1915-1980
- Literary theorist, cultural critic, semiologist and philosopher
- Author of *Writing Degree Zero* (1953), *Elements of Semiology* (1964), *Mythologies* (1957), *S/Z: An Essay* (1970) etc.
- Travelled to Japan in 1966.
- *Empire of Signs* (1970).

Barthes and Orientalism

Orientalism

- Edward Said in his 1978 book *Orientalism* uses the term to describe a discourse that has exoticized and misrepresented many non-European cultures (e.g. Middle Eastern, South Asian, and East Asian cultures).

Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres,
Grande Odalisque, 1814



Orientalism – the discourse

- The discourse began against the background of European (British, Dutch etc.) imperial expansion in Asia.
- In this context the Europeans perceived themselves as manly, strong, rational.
- The Orient (Asia, North Africa) functioned as the Other against which Europeans could define themselves. “The Orient” was seen as *feminine, weak, irrational, and implicitly decadent, and mysterious*.

Contemporary Orientalism



Scene from *Memoirs of a Geisha* (film 2005) based on Arthur Golden's novel (1997)

Are Barthes' essays Orientalist?

Story of Chopsticks

What kind of stance does Barthes have toward chopsticks?

- A familiar user of chopsticks?
- An (alienated) observer?

Chopsticks

Functions:

1) deictic function

“a **chopstick points** to the food, **designates** the fragment, **brings** into existence by the very gesture of choice”

“instead of ingestion following a kind of mechanical sequence, in which one would be limited to swallowing little by little the parts of one and the same dish,

“**the chopstick**, designating what it **selects, introduces** into the use of food not an order but a caprice, a certain indolence...an intelligent and no longer mechanical operation”

Chopsticks

Functions:

2) pinching function (not piercing as “our forks do”)

“to pinch, moreover, is *too strong a word, too aggressive*”

“for the foodstuff never undergoes a pressure greater than is precisely necessary to raise and carry it”

“in the gesture of chopsticks...there is something *maternal*”

“cook’s long chopsticks...: the instrument **never pierces, cuts, or slits, never wounds but only selects, turns, shifts.**”

Chopsticks

Functions:

3) dividing function

“**the chopsticks** must separate, part, peck, instead of cutting and piercing, in the manner of our implements; *they never violate the foodstuff*: ...thereby rediscovering the natural fissures of the substance (in this, much closer to the primitive finger than to the knife).”

Chopsticks

Functions:

4) transferring the food (“their loveliest function”)

“**the chopsticks**...slide under the clump of rice and raise it to the diner’s mouth, or (by an age-old gesture of the whole *Orient*) they **push the alimentary snow from bowl to lips** in the manner of a scoop.”

Chopsticks vs. Knife/Fork

- Chopsticks seen as “**maternal**” and “the converse of our knife (and of its predatory substitute, the fork)” (p. 18)
- “By chopsticks, food becomes no longer a prey to which one does **violence** (meat, flesh over which one does battle), but a substance **harmoniously** transferred.” (p. 18)
- Barthes establishes a dichotomy between “they (the Japanese chopsticks)” and “us.” “**The Orient**” is seen as **feminine, gentle and maternal, harmonious** while “**the Occident**” is seen as a site of **violence**.

What kind of stance does Barthes have toward chopsticks?

- A familiar user of chopsticks?
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Story of Sukiyaki (Food Decentered)

How does Barthes experience sukiyaki?

- Through which one of the senses does he describe sukiyaki?
- How does Barthes' description of sukiyaki compare to Proust's madeleines?

Sukiyaki



Sukiyaki

- “Sukiyaki...is **the very essence of the market that comes to you**, its freshness, its naturalness, its diversity, and even its classification, which turns the simple substance into the promise of an event.”
- “It is an entire minor odyssey of food you are experiencing **through your eyes**: you are attending the Twilight of the Raw.”

Sukiyaki

- “**Entirely visual** (conceived, concerted, manipulated for sight, and even for a painter’s eye), food thereby says that **it is not *deep***: the edible substance is without a precious heart, without a buried power, without a vital secret: **no Japanese dish is endowed with a *center*** (the alimentary center implied in the West by the rite which consists of arranging the meal, of surrounding or covering the article of food); here **everything is the ornament of another ornament...**”

Sukiyaki

- “sukiyaki, an interminable dish to make, to consume, and one might say, to “converse,…”
- “sukiyaki has nothing *marked* about it except its beginning (that tray painted with foodstuffs brought to the battle); once ‘started,’ it no longer has moments or distinctive sites: *it becomes decentered, like an uninterrupted text.*”

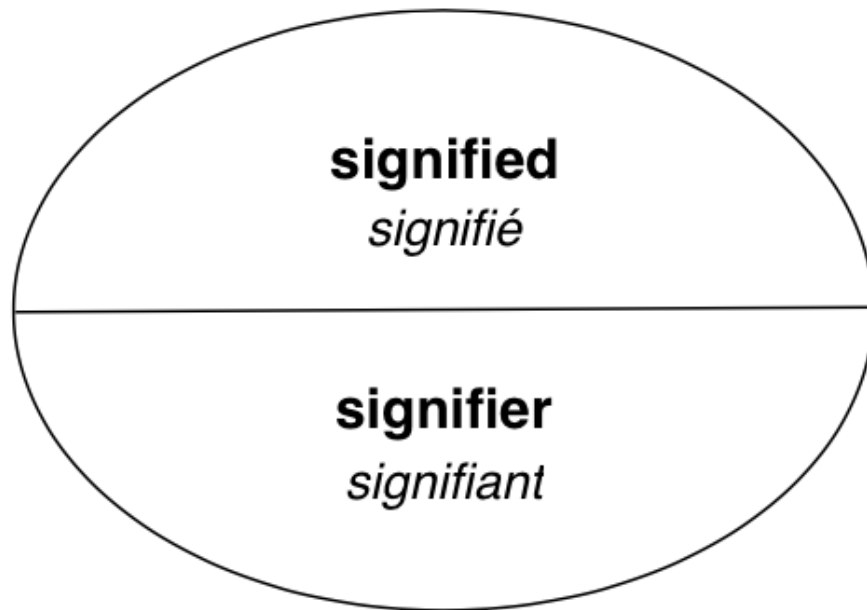
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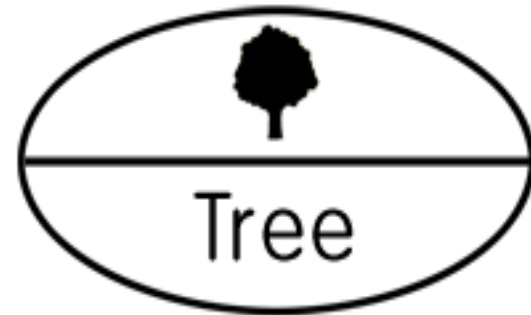
Signs and Structural Linguistics

Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913)

Language as signs



Arbitrariness of signs



Meanings of Signs -- Semiotics

- Denotation vs. Connotation
- Denotation:
 - The relationship between the signifier and its signified.
 - Usually treated as the definitional and literal meaning
 - The first order of signification
- Connotation:
 - The sociocultural and personal association produced as a reader decodes a text.
 - The second order of signification

Chandler, D. 2016. *Semiotics: The basics*.

- Denotations and connotations of chopsticks and sukiyaki for Barthes?

By the way,

is sukiyaki a traditional Japanese food?

Japanese and Meat

- Japanese adopted Buddhism from the 6th C.E.
- Under Buddhist precepts, killing and eating animals was discouraged.
- Yet, the Japanese have occasionally eaten fowl, rabbit and wild boar.
- Beef was not a common food since cattle were used mainly as work animals.
- Beef became part of the Japanese diet only starting in the mid-19 century.

How did beef come into the Japanese diet?

- Japan opened its ports to American and European ships beginning in 1853.
- Fearing the possibility of becoming colonized, **the Japanese began a rapid process of modernization.**
- The Meiji era (1868-1912) was a period when numerous Western technologies as well as ideas, values and laws were imported to Japan.
- **One imported idea was that eating beef and drinking milk are good for your health.**

History of *Sukiyaki*

- *Sukiyaki* – A Western fusion dish?
- Hot-pot dishes had existed in Japan before the Meiji era, but the preferred ingredients were either fish or duck.
- In the Meiji era, Japanese introduced beef in their diet, but they did not incorporate Western methods of preparing beef.
- Rather, they used beef in already existing dishes, slicing it in thin and tender pieces to resemble fish or the softer duck meat.

安愚楽鍋 *Sitting Cross-Legged at the Beef Pot*
Kanagaki Robun (light fiction writer) (1871)



安愚樂鍋 *Sitting Cross-Legged at the Beef Pot*
Kanagaki Robun (light fiction writer) (1871)

Samurai, farmer, artisan or trader,
oldster; youngster; boy or girl;
clever or stupid, poor or elite,
you won't get civilized if you don't eat meat!
-- Thus the little city-birds sing,
while with a bat-like European umbrella,
the kite spreads his feathered wing.
If you are not too far away, you can ride in a jinrikisha;
if you live nearby, you can stop over
on your way home from the bath.
Fat for the winter months – milk, cheese, and butter, too;
scrotum of bull will make a man out of you!

安愚楽鍋 *Sitting Cross-Legged at the Beef Pot*
Kanagaki Robun (light fiction writer) (1871)

Take some home for a gift, there's no limit,
but when the shop gets crowded,
watch out that your pockets don't get picked!
Seconds on that sake bottle! The check, please! Come back
again!
-- The fashion for beef knows neither day nor night.

[From the introduction to *Aguranabe*]

John P. Mertz. 2003. Novel Japan: Spaces of Nationhood in Early Meiji Narrative, 1870-88. The University of Michigan.

Sukiyaki then and now

- In the Meiji era, *sukiyaki* was an expensive dish, since beef and sugar were still relatively hard to procure.
- Gradually, *sukiyaki* became a dish to be enjoyed at home, when all the family is gathered together.
- Hot pot dishes, including *sukiyaki*, have also become popular in the U.S.

Familiar and Exotic - Summary

- Use of language reveals meanings that the writer attached to the target of description
- Proust's madeleine: his emotion and his personal (specific) memory take over the description
- Barthes' chopsticks and sukiyaki provide detailed descriptions, devoid of personal and social meanings associated with them

When you read Ochs et al. (1996)

- Recall phrases that your family (especially parents) used to talk to you about food at mealtime in your childhood.