

EATING ABROAD: IN SEARCH FOR CULINARY EXPERIENCE¹

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ABSTRACT: The article addresses the aporia of taste in culture. Drawing on theoretical texts and artworks, it explores the (im)possibility of a tourist's authentic culinary experience. The notion of authentic culinary taste, which is highly appreciated in today's culture, harbors an obvious, irresolvable contradiction. This challenge is related to two factors. Firstly, authenticity is historically contingent and, as such, bound up with change; and, secondly, authenticity has become a marketable commodity in our culture. As the imperative of authenticity becomes more and more pressing, it grows increasingly difficult to meet the requirement of uniqueness while the risk of disappointment soars. The solution is a consciously and actively created experience.

Travelers tend to be torn between a craving for familiar tastes associated with the home and a desire to get steeped in local culinary customs. Admittedly, a clash with an unfamiliar culture can induce admiration, which was the case with, for example, Gertrude Stein, Alice B. Toklas, Julia Child, and Alice Waters. Yet, though the list of aficionados of French cuisine could be extended nearly ad infinitum, French cooking can also cause problems and stir aversion, as evinced by the story of Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel. His biographers like to relate a culinary catastrophe the German philosopher experienced in Paris, the capital of the world's gastronomy. The French delicacies cost him a nasty bout of indigestion.² Even though a Francophile captivated by the beauties, panache and affluence of Paris, Hegel could never fully embrace the French life-style. Having the main meal at 5 p.m. seemed far too late to him. Also, he could never muster competence to navigate restaurant menus. His command of French sufficed to read Montesquieu and Rousseau, but failed him when it came to studying the bafflingly elaborate menus of Parisian restaurants. Ultimately, Hegel acknowledged

himself defeated by French cuisine and found a venue where German dishes were served.³ The club of the defeated was joined also by Mark Twain. His trip to Europe in 1878 turned out to be a huge culinary disappointment. Overcome by homesickness for American food, he compiled a list of splendid dishes he was going to treat himself to on return. Among its many items, the list included broiled Virginia bacon, soft-shell crabs, Philadelphia Terrapin soup, a canvasback duck from Baltimore, Connecticut shad, green corn on the ear, butter beans, asparagus, string beans, American butter (he did not like unsalted European butter), apple pie (predictably), and frogs (rather surprisingly).⁴

Beyond the comfort zone

Reflecting on the risks incurred when one ventures into unknown territories, Lisa Heldke concludes that trying foods of a foreign culture seems far more hazardous than listening to its music, looking at its art or reading its literature; and it is indeed more hazardous.⁵ The food can be awful or, worse even, poisonous. Incorporating a particle of the external world into one's organism entails making it an integral part of one's self. Such a gesture takes daring, but it also takes trust.⁶ In this context, "...the traveler can make contact with the 'not-me,' and can hone the edges of her identity through the contact, either by absorbing the flavors of the Other into own identity or by rejecting them as 'what-I-am-not'."⁷

Stepping out of one's familiar, secure ethnic and cultural zone is compelling and perilous at the same time. During a holiday abroad, one is exposed to problems and pleasures alike as they are likely to surface side by side when eating at an exotic restaurant, being

³ *Ibid.*, 551-3.

⁴ Leslie Brenner, *American Appetite: The Coming of Age of a Cuisine* (New York: Avon Books, 1999), 15-16.

⁵ Heldke, Lisa; 2005, "But is it Authentic? Culinary Travel and the Search for the 'Genuine Article,'" in *The Taste Culture Reader. Experiencing Food and Drink*, ed. Carolyn Korsmeyer (Oxford-New York: Berg), 387.

⁶ Carolyn Korsmeyer, *Making Sense of Taste* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999), 101.

⁷ Heldke, "But is it Authentic?" 387.

¹ Preparing this text was supported by NCN grant: *Aesthetic value of food. Pragmatist Perspective*, No. 2013/11 / B / HS1 / 04176.

² Terry Pinkard, *Hegel: A Biography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 553.

invited to a dinner party by a foreigner, or visiting an acquaintance who wants to treat us to regional specialties. Despite the potential menace, affluent citizens of the Western world are increasingly inclined to take the risk and get to know foreign countries through their food. Consequently, it does not come as a surprise that culinary tourism is boldly asserting its distinct place within cultural tourism.

Culinary tourism

The famous Michelin guide that confers the celebrated stars onto the best restaurants states straightforwardly and confidently that the food served in those boasting three of them is so exceptional that it is worth a deliberately planned trip. In prosperous, highly developed societies, many people are willing to spend considerable amounts of money to dine at a renowned restaurant. Up to two million people used to fight zealously to grab one of the 8,000 seats available at the tables of the cult restaurant *elBulli* over one season. All places used to be booked in advance within a single day.⁸

One or another culinary component is to be found in each type of tourism, except those rare cases when the traveler fares on the foreign soil sustained only by canned food and dried sausages. Research shows that also in Poland the attractions of local cuisines are more and more frequently taken into account as a criterion when planning a holiday trip.⁹ Culinary tourism, focused on learning other cultures through gustatory

experiences, is robustly developing, too.¹⁰ Mentioned above, the wish to visit a superb restaurant and try dishes cooked by a famous chef is but one among the various motivations and activities subsumed under the umbrella term of culinary tourism. Its equally prominent component is participation in culinary fetes and festivals, markets promoting local produce, food fairs, and cooking workshops. Also, tourists follow culinary routes and visit food and cooking museums. The origins of culinary tourism date back to the 17th-19th centuries, when British aristocracy journeyed to the vineyards of France and Italy.¹¹ Currently, it is developing in rural areas renowned for one or another regional product, but it also thrives in big cities that entice with good local cuisine, or, like New York, are appreciated for their cosmopolitan character and inclusive offer of foods from around the world.¹²

A culinary tourist avoids like the plague the most popular tourist venues, which do not enjoy good repute. The food they offer is usually expensive and substandard. Restaurateurs do not have to put in any effort because a well-known piazza, a famous memorial or another exquisite sight will always bring tourists in. Tourist restaurants do not need to cater to regular customers, for their clientele, by definition, is there only in passing. As such, today's customers are not likely to ever come back while the new ones are bound to come along. In such locations, a culinary tourist can find refuge in a personalized offer of home restaurants.

The restaurant came into being by shifting what had been a domestic activity – dining – into the public sphere.¹³ Among its advantages is the possibility to

⁸ Lisa Abend, *The Sorcerer's Apprentices. A Season in the Kitchen at Ferran Adrià's elBulli* (New York-London-Toronto-Sydney: Free Press, 2011), 4.

⁹ Equally strong, however, is Poles' tendency to close themselves off within the national enclave abroad. Travel agencies cater to the wishes of those willing to travel provided they take the home along by offering packages in which Greek beaches and sun are combined with Polish food, films and music. Cf. e.g., Grzegorz Szymanik, "Greckie Wakacje Polaków z Disco Polo, Wódką i Kielbasą," *Gazeta Wyborcza*, July 3, 2017.

¹⁰ Małgorzata Durydiwka, "Turystyka Kulinarna – Nowy (?) Trend w Turystyce Kulturowej," *Prace i studia geograficzne* 52 (2013): 9-30.

¹¹ *ibid.*, 14-15.

¹² Andrzej Kowalczyk, "Od Street Food do Food Districts – Usługi Gastronomiczne i Turystyka Kulinarna w Przestrzeni Miasta," *Turystyka kulturowa* 9 (2014): 10, <http://turystykakulturowa.org/ojs/index.php/tk/article/view/493> (10.08.16)

¹³ For a more detailed discussion, see Dorota Koczanowicz, "Przewodnik smaku," in *Przewodniki w*

choose dishes of one's liking, select convenient dining times and enjoy professional service. Supper clubs and home restaurants – only recently charted on culinary maps – operate in the opposite manner. Strangers are invited into the domestic space to share a meal cooked by an amateur. New dedicated Internet websites pop up, usefully mediating between cooks and guest. The best known of the websites – Gnammo – posts information about the proposed menus, the meal prices, and the number of people the hosts are capable of admitting. Images of dishes, table arrangements, and cooks themselves encourage to come and try the foods. Using a special tab, the guests can assess the meal they have partaken of.

Home restaurants are designed to expand the catering offer both for tourists and for the local residents. They are run chiefly by women, who in this way overcome the traditional division into women's domestic cooking and men's "restaurant" cooking. "Erudite" cuisine meets "popular" cuisine, and a new space opens up to women who cook for their families on a daily basis.¹⁴ While remaining home-based cooks, they turn into chefs and get a chance to earn their own money.

According to Jean-François Revel, restaurateurs tend to cave in to customer pressure and alter classic dishes, which often wrecks the harmony of flavors honed over years upon years of tradition. This happens because "[u]nfortunately, an immense majority of the clientele of restaurants around the world confuse gastronomy with exoticism."¹⁵ In Revel's view, what should really matter are tried-and-tested local ingredients and recipes perfected from generation to generation. Similar problems plague home restaurants, which, counterintuitively perhaps, do not offer genuine home-made food. *The Guardian's* article titled "'Airbnbs for

dining' give Italian female chefs chance to shine" describes menus prepared by two highest-ranked home chefs of the Gnammo website: Claudia Proietti of Rome and Benedetta Oggero of Turin.¹⁶ Inspired by the carnival and the colors of nature, the feast prepared by Claudia started with a velvety orange pumpkin soup with ricotta crostini, and finished with a chocolate semifreddo with ginger and green pistachio sauce. Benedetta went for a themed dinner. The highlights of her chocolate feast were prawns glazed in whisky, sugar and cocoa, and a pork roast with peppers in chocolate sauce. As these menus show, the need of authenticity intersects here with the need of refinement. This allegedly home cooking abandons the safe ground of "popular" cuisine and ventures into the salons of "erudite" cuisine. Embarking on a journey, the tourist seeks to break away from the quotidian and experience something exceptional, new, and, even, bizarre. The same tendency is visible in the cooks' approach as, planning their menus for "strangers," they definitely forsake simple, everyday staple dishes cooked quickly after homecoming from work. This may be the reason why they invite for dinner not to their homes, but to home restaurants.

Hosting foreign guests, we tend to wish to share the quintessence of vernacular cuisine with them even if its canonical dishes are not our everyday treats. The first meal described by Doris Lessing in her novel *The Summer before the Dark* was untypical, consisting of a cold Turkish cucumber soup, shish-kebab "over the fire," and an apricot water-ice. The meal was served in the garden of the London house of the book's protagonist Kate Brown, when an American friend of her husband's joined the family for Sunday lunch. If it had not been for a power outage, Kate "would have provided a traditional Sunday meal, not for their own benefit, since they no longer used the old patterns, but for their guest's: the

kulturze. Prace kulturoznawcze XVII, eds. K. Łukasiewicz and I. Topp (2015): 209-19.

¹⁴ Jean-François Revel, *Culture and Cuisine: A Journey Through the History of Food*, trans. Helen R. Lane (New York: Doubleday, 1982), 13-24, quotation on p. 18.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 18.

¹⁶ Stephanie Kirchgaessner, "'Airbnbs for dining' give Italian female chefs chance to shine." *The Guardian*, January 22, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2016/jan/22/social-eating-networks-italian-female-cooks> (Retrieved 7 August, 2016).

family often joked that when they entertained their many foreign friends, they served traditional dishes like peasants dependent on tourist trade.¹⁷ Tourists easily fall into the traps the locals set either out of pure politeness or for profit. In our culture, authenticity is slowly becoming a commodity like any other one.

Authenticity as a commodity

A shrewd observer of contemporary capitalist societies, Luc Boltanski in his seminal *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, co-authored with Eve Chiapello, rehearses the paradoxes of authenticity in contemporary capitalism. The core of Boltanski's theory of capitalism lies in the argument that contemporary capitalism has been able to co-opt a considerable part of the critique of capitalism advanced in the 1960s and 70s, and, moreover, to use this co-optation to multiply its profits. The French social scientist insightfully analyses various modes of the commodification of experience.¹⁸ The fundamental mechanism behind making us uncertain of the "authenticity" of the goods we are offered is based on the following contradiction: the authentic must elude commodification and mass production. If "authenticity" becomes a commodity on sale (either as goods or as services), its real uniqueness gets undercut. *The New Spirit of Capitalism* demonstrates this interdependence with the following example:

We can see a typical illustration of this phenomenon in the transition from mass tourism to so-called "adventure" holidays, requiring a constant renewal of destinations as and when they become tourist attractions in their turn, losing the authenticity (of which an absence of tourists was precisely the sign) that made them so precious.¹⁹

Boltanski highlights here an irresolvable contradiction: goods sold on the market as authentic and advertised as such in mass marketing must paradoxically pretend not to be subject to the rules of mass commodification. They must make an impression of being embedded in the earlier stages of the market organization, when "the purchaser was face to face with an artisan, at once manufacturer and tradesman, in a marketplace."²⁰ The tourist wants to become, for a while, part of the life lived by the residents of the country he or she has arrived in, or at least to be able to see it for what it really is. Yet, how can "the spontaneity of existence" be distinguished from a designed and crafted product? How can one really know whether a native's gesture of friendship is an expression of unalloyed kindness or, perhaps, a pre-planned item of a marketing strategy aimed to multiply financial gains? How can one be certain that the space of the comer's experience is part of the native experience, rather than an element of a purposefully fabricated decor?²¹

Boltanski observes that "the effect of capitalism's assimilation of the demand for authenticity, by means of a commodification (...) has been to introduce into people's relationship to goods and persons *rapid cycles of infatuation and disappointment*."²² Authenticity requires a disinterested, personal involvement, and, as such, cannot be only an element of trading transactions. Yet, if a thing becomes popular, the overriding tendency is to institutionalize it, whereby its spontaneity, uniqueness, and originality fade away. As a result, authenticity must be sought in ever new places. We live in a constant fear, seeking a continually authentic life. It is not about a well or poorly executed function. The disappointment comes from the discovery "aura" is missing. The tourist is in fact a threat to him/herself. In the quest to experience something authentic, the tourist

¹⁷ Doris Lessing, *The Summer before the Dark* (New York: Knopf, 1973), 12.

¹⁸ Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello, *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Gregory Elliott (London-New York: Verso, 2005), 443-7.

¹⁹ Boltanski and Chiapello, *New Spirit*, 446.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ Cf. Dean MacCannell, *The Tourist: A New Theory of the Leisure Class* (Berkeley-Los Angeles-London: University of California Press, 1999), 91-102.

²² Boltanski and Chiapello, *New Spirit*, 445.

avoids typical tourist venues, looks for restaurants frequented by the locals, not tourists, and forgets that as soon as he or she – a tourist par excellence – appears, the place's pristine nature gets corrupted. It can no longer be described as free of tourists. Tourists do not like tourists. The locals do not like tourists, either. The locals approach tourists with a sense of moral superiority: it must have been a stranger, for none of us would do this or that, wear this or that, eat this or that, etc. They do not want tourists in non-tourist restaurants.

Immersion

We didn't know what to expect the first time we arrived at Yves Camdeborde's Le Comptoir on the Left Bank of Paris. Would it be like La Regalade with dozens of guidebook toting foreigners lined up impatiently at the door and with harried staff trying to cope with the increasing lines and full tables? It was not to be. Most of the tables were occupied by locals seeking the "vrai" cuisine that Yves Camdeborde is famous for.²³

This is how Sue Dyson and Roger McShane, editors of foodtourist.com (a website dedicated to culinary tourism), reviewed Le Comptoir in November 2006. The following year they returned and continued to come back every year up to 2012. They insisted that the food was always great, the wines organic, and the staff professional and tolerant of their poor French.

I do not know when exactly things started to change, but they must have, for when I came to Le Comptoir in 2014, I had to queue in a long line of Asian and American tourists, who had been tipped (perhaps by *The New York Times* like myself) that this was the place to visit. The restaurant was swarming with people, and the staff were visibly annoyed at the surging wave of customers. Weary with handling the throng, the waitresses behaved in the way now popularly referred to as assertive, and

once simply termed rude. There was no condoning poor French, nor explaining the menu. With no advice offered, the tentatively ordered dishes (what on earth might that or another enigmatic name mean?) were served efficiently, if unsmilingly.

Never approvingly assessed, the desperate search for authenticity is always doomed to failure. The news of rewarding places spreads fast. The long lines queuing for *vrai* food, described in guides, kill its home-grown character. Le Comptoir, a local bistro, ceases to be one, for locals have neither time nor determination that tourists have to wait for the table. Yet, is a genuine experience indeed out of the question in a tourist-overrun restaurant?

Let us return to Lisa Heldke's paper "But is it Authentic? Culinary Travel and the Search for the 'Genuine Article.'" Pondering, fundamentally, whether an authentic culinary experience is at all possible, Heldke asks also whether eating a local dish really transfers us amidst the local community's way of life. Is the flavor enough to get steeped in local culture? How can the authenticity of a recipe or a dish be established beyond reasonable doubt? Is such authenticity guaranteed by the use of genuine ingredients and application of techniques "they" would use?²⁴ Problems continue to proliferate. Even if we can ascertain, claims Heldke, that the food has indeed been *cooked* following an authentic recipe, we cannot know for sure whether the eater is ready to experience it as authentic (with authentic denoting the way it would taste to one familiar with a given cuisine).²⁵ In explaining her doubts, Heldke draws on the definition of taste put forward by Korsmeyer, where taste designates a complex "cognitive activity," inclusive of sensory, emotional, cultural, social, and other elements. Crucially, authenticity is bound up with historicity and, consequently, with change. Polish *bigos* (hunter's stew), Greek moussaka, French cassoulet, and countless other culinary classics have transformed over

²³ Sue Dyson and Roger McShane, "Le Comptoir: Review" 2007-2012, <http://www.foodtourist.com/ftguide/Content/12277.htm> (Retrieved 7 September, 2016).

²⁴ Heldke, "But is it Authentic?," 387-9.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 388.

time to acquire what now passes for their “authentic” form. Still, as all dishes are obviously being modified in everyday cooking practice, this “authentic form” is anything if not mutable. Likewise, the entire cultural complex known as cuisine is subject to changes and fads.²⁶

Unwilling to relinquish the idea of an authentic experience and, at the same time, determined to break the deadlock, Heldke comes up with her own strategy, where the process of experiencing replaces the “environment’s” conditions of authenticity as the focal point of inquiry. Singularity, locality, and authenticity are contrasted with a new quality that ensues from a clash of various traditions. Experience is always an individual’s experience, and, as such, is inevitably enmeshed in his or her life history. This is what Anna Wieczorkiewicz highlights when she writes: “One can try many foods and get to know the tastes of local specialties, and yet the chief framework of reference will be provided by the gustatory grid formed by the distinct tastes of the traveler’s culture.”²⁷ To seek authenticity by eliminating the traveler’s uniqueness from experience is to head into failure and disappointment. Inspired by John Dewey’s concept of experience, Heldke does not preclude an authentic experience comprehended as resulting from a clash or negotiation of two actors: the eater and the dish representing the cook.²⁸ Two concepts of authenticity dovetail in this vision: authenticity defined as fidelity to oneself and authenticity understood as a necessary self-effacement for the sake of adjusting to the local requirements.

²⁶ Changes in the sphere of taste and the shift in the idea of what it means to eat well that took place in Poland at the turn of the 17th century are masterfully and compellingly surveyed by Jarosław Dumanowski. Cf. “Kucharz doskonały Wojciecha Wincentego Wielądki,” in *Kucharz doskonały pożyteczny dla zatrudniających się gospodarstwem z francuskiego przetłumaczony i wielką przydatkami pomnożony przez Wojciecha Wielądka*, ed. Jarosław Dumanowski (Warszawa: Muzeum Pałac w Wilanowie, 2012), 15-23.

²⁷ Anna Wieczorkiewicz, *Apetyt turysty. O doświadczeniu świata w podróży* (Kraków: Universitas, 2008), 282.

²⁸ Heldke builds on Dewey’s concept of aesthetic experience developed in his *Art as Experience*. See John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (Penguin: New York, 2005).

A different issue is whether Heldke’s authentic experience is identical with what Dewey calls *an experience*, necessarily predicated on aesthetic completion, which brings about a harmonious integration. Such exceptional experiences are distinct in that they constitute a fulfilled, expressive whole that has its beginning, development, and end.²⁹ I believe that an authentic culinary experience is not always harmonious and smooth, which does not mean that it cannot be etched in memory as exceptional. The traveler is exposed to tastes that can take a longer time to fully accept and give pleasure – a time the traveler does not have as a rule. Choosing dishes from the menu, the tourist tends to sacrifice his or her own food preferences for the sake of local favorites. A journey into the territory of the Other is bound to be ridden with various inconveniences and surprises.

I would describe my visit to Le Comptoir as an authentic tourist experience. It involved in equal measure superb food (a chicken terrine with *foie gras*, lettuce with vinaigrette and shallots, and crunchy toasted bread), fresh chilled white wine, prolonged queuing, and the staff’s masterful strategies of ignoring customers. After all, Parisian bistros are known to be crowded, and Parisian waiters are notorious for their impertinence. The only thing that has lost its undisputed status is the French cuisine’s position as *nonpareil*.³⁰

Homecoming

Small food manufacturers take pride in their produce, and view it as a means of promoting the region that bred it. As early as in the 18th century, when food preservation methods were improved, “the nobility of Perigord sent their relatives and friends truffle-stuffed turkeys and pies, small gifts that strengthened family bonds and, at the same time, helped the local produce garner acclaim. In this way,

²⁹ Dewey, *Art as Experience*, 57.

³⁰ Michael Steinberger, *Au Revoir to All That: Food, Wine, and the End of France* (New-York-Berlin-London: Bloomsbury, 2010).

powerful, albeit unobtrusive, mechanisms of boosting the promotion of local gastronomy came into being.”³¹ This shows that the belief in the uniqueness of one’s local products, which now leads to applying for registered trademarks, boasts a long tradition, indeed. Today, the tourist industry helps one not only enjoy on the spot what a region has to offer, but also take home culinary keepsakes of the visited area. Just before boarding the plane, travelers are encouraged to visit customs-free zones and purchase typical alcohols, spices, and foods vacuum-packed for a long journey. Knowing that the genuineness of the traveler’s experience is dubious even if he or she tastes food in its original interior, we can even more appreciate the complications involved in it after return home.

The tourist’s fridge brims with exotic preserves, her cupboard is packed with strange spice, and her liquor cabinet overflows with alcohols she enjoyed drinking on holiday. All this is designed to sustain contact. Yet, the first glimpse will tell you quite a lot about how problematic this can get. Dishes are closely associated with the *genius loci* of the venue they stem from.³² Taste does not travel easily, tied to the region and the season.³³ Re-creating a recipe in another, remote location will inevitably transform experience. Tasting is not only a pure palatal pleasure, for it is entrenched in the entire, not just culinary, history of a given community. We are warned against the temptation to transfer a bit of a foreign country to our homes by Julian Barnes in *The Pedant in the Kitchen*. Among his “words of advice” for those starting to collect cookbooks, he urges: “Resist, if possible, attractive anthologies of regional recipes, which you are tempted to buy as souvenirs of foreign holidays.”³⁴ The advice is justified by the self-evident “Cantal food tastes best in the Cantal.”³⁵

³¹ Michael Figeac, ed., *Codzienność dawnej Francji. Życie i rzeczy w czasach ancien régime’u*, trans. Dorota Sieńko (Warszawa: Muzeum Pałacu Króla Jana III w Wilanowie, 2015), 207.

³² Revel. *Culture and Cuisine*, 18-19.

³³ *Ibid.*, 5.

³⁴ Julian Barnes, *The Pedant in the Kitchen* (London: Atlantic Books, 2003), 29.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

Appropriation

It seems worthwhile to change our analytical optics at this place. A persistent quest for authenticity is a whim affordable to the wealthiest only. A typical foodie has a white face of a member of the Western middle class, which “systematically scavenges the earth for new experiences to be woven into a collective, touristic version of other peoples and other places.”³⁶ Uch an individual is addressed by the protagonist of *Just Eat It*, a comic by Shing Yin Khor: “‘But is it authentic?’ you ask, wanting my stamp of approval, so my authentically asian self can help gain your authentic asian food expert points. Whose authenticity you’re dipping into? What pre-colonial fantasy have you conjured up in your head – all spices and exotic flavours?”³⁷ The following episodes reveal the artist’s mounting doubts. She does not understand the obsession with and assessment criteria of authenticity. She fears that the concept of authentic food is underpinned by another form of Orientalism. In *The Tourist: A New Theory of the Leisure Class*, Dean MacCannell explains that “[t]ouristic consciousness is motivated by its desire for authentic experiences, and the tourist may believe that he is moving in this direction, but often it is very difficult to know for sure if the experience is in fact authentic.”³⁸ As such, the tourist needs an expert, and this circumstance, paradoxically enough, can be a source of further concerns. Namely, Khor she worries that, as the food of her ancestors is meticulously scrutinized, she will also be assessed and subjected to procedures aimed to establish whether she – a Malaysian American – is authentic enough to judge about Asian foods and products. Anxious and upset, she concludes her comic with an appeal: “Stop thinking. Just slurp the noodle in your mouth. I don’t need you to tell me about your spiritual awakening, or your surprise at

³⁶ MacCannell, *Tourist*, 19.

³⁷ <https://www.bitchmedia.org/post/a-comic-about-food-and-cultural-appropriation> (Retrieved on 16 July, 2017)

³⁸ MacCannell, *Tourist*, 101.

how modernized our cities are, or how charmed you were that English was so widely spoken ... Eat, but don't expect a gold star for your gastronomical bravery. Eat, but don't pretend that the food lends you cultural insight into our 'exotic' ways. Eat, but recognize that we've been eating too, and what is our sustenance isn't your adventure story. Just – eat."³⁹ The focus on the authenticity of food can eventually trivialize culture which has produced it and marginalize its essential component – people with their daily lives, which evade the hierarchizing doctrine of authenticity as changeable and varied experiences.

Avoiding authenticity

Formulated ever since the 1930s, the ideas of liberating authenticity permeating art have failed to resist the assault of capitalism, which has absorbed them as part of its market strategies. Moreover, as Boltanski points out, art as conceived within the authenticity framework has opened up possibilities of generating novel forms of control and new "authentic" consumption models, where uniqueness is actually diluted in abundant returns from the sale of customized products. This dead-end can be avoided by critically minded art. As the French social scholar writes, "the artistic critique should, to a greater extent than is currently the case, take the time to reformulate the issues of liberation and authenticity, starting from the new forms of oppression it unwittingly helped to make possible."⁴⁰

Such an engaged artistic position is exemplified by the work of Rirkrit Tiravanija. The Argentina-born son of a Thai diplomat was raised in his grandmother's kitchen in Bangkok. He studied in Canada and the US, and now lives alternately in Berlin and New York. It is thus hardly surprising that, as he admits, he has been beset with identity problems ever since childhood.

Many of his projects explore intercultural dialogue, the colonial past, and the contemporary hegemonies of global markets.⁴¹

In his artistic practice, Tiravanija often relies on food products and frequently cooks. On the one hand, cooking is highly contextualized as it is intimately associated with local culture, the environment, seasons, etc. On the other hand, there is something universal in food cooking and sharing. This belief informs Tiravanija's attempts to facilitate access to the Other and to create a space of intercultural dialogue through arranging meetings at the table. Tiravanija's best known performance is *Untitled 1992 (Free)*. In New York's 303 Gallery, he served red and green curries, dishes typical of his native Thai cuisine. One pot contained original Thai products – vegetables and spices largely unavailable in an average American store. The other pot was cooked with local ingredients, such as peppers, cauliflowers, and broccoli. The work addressed the idea of food's authenticity and mechanisms of accommodating foreign traditions to local settings. As Thomas Kellein claims, "Tiravanija's artistic power definitely consists of having a 'feel' for the situation and a 'sense of the style of the people or place.' He respects the 'ethos' of a group; he tries to 'understand' their issues or concerns."⁴² Even though, to his taste, the "Thai" pot's texture and flavors were superior, the artist calls the other one interesting as it embodied authenticity forged in an interaction with the local conjuncture.⁴³

Similar issues preoccupied Tiravanija also when working on *Untitled 1993 (Flädlesuppe)*, an installation displayed at the group exhibition *Backstage* held by Hamburg's Kunstverein. The installation involved serving soup made of meat-and-vegetable stock powder and

⁴¹ Hans Ulrich Obrist and Rirkrit Tiravanija, *The Conversation Series: 20* (Köln: Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König, 2010).

⁴² Thomas Kellein, "Essay," in *Cook Book: Just Smile and Don't Talk*, ed. Rirkrit Tiravanija (London: Edition Hanasjörg Mayer/Bangkok: River Books, 2010), 150.

⁴³ Rirkrit Tiravanija, ed., *Cook Book. Just Smile and Don't Talk* (London: Edition Hanasjörg Mayer/Bangkok: River Books, 2010), 16.

³⁹ <https://www.bitchmedia.org/post/a-comic-about-food-and-cultural-appropriation>

⁴⁰ Boltanski and Chiapello, *New Spirit*, 468.

ready-made mix for pancakes in the setting filled with kitchen utensils, spices, hot plates, a typical German biergarten-style beer-drinking bench, and a screen running *Drachenfutter (Dragon Chow)* (1987) directed by Jan Schütte. The film's protagonist are an Afghan dishwasher and an African assistant to a German chef. The team is joined by a Pakistani refugee. The action takes place at a Chinese restaurant in Germany. The illusion of the Chinese character of the place is produced by a waiter and the owner, both Chinese, who are the only staff the guests ever get to see. Out back, nobody has a clue about Chinese cuisine. The emigrants are busy with something else. Talking about the possibilities and ways of assimilation, they conclude that one can tell a real German by the person's ability to cook *Flädlesuppe*. As Tiravanija admits, he feels that the film is essentially about survival – going to a strange place and striving to survive there by adapting, by blending in its culture, and, consequently, by being accepted and allowed to stay.⁴⁴ At the Hamburg show, Tiravanija served *Flädlesuppe*. Yet, he added a pinch of cayenne pepper to the traditional German recipe for a broth with pancake strips, whereby he mixed an exotic element into the German flavor. Combining the ingredients originating in different cultures did not only affect the taste, but also caused symbolic structures rooted in the respective cultures to mingle in one dish.⁴⁵ Still, the gesture was hardly a promise of an easy union of cultures. As Kellein insists, in Tiravanija's works, cultures, instead of being reconciled, clash with each other even though the artist's focus is co-existence rather than conflict.⁴⁶ Tiravanija highlights the polyphonic character of contemporary culture and, consequently, the tensions inherent in it. The promise of co-existence stems from readiness "to recognize and accept otherness as radically

other."⁴⁷ Taking such position entails "the possibility of recognizing and attempting to enter into a dialogue, on an equal footing, with forms of intelligence absolutely different from my own"⁴⁸ and lifts the imperative of looking for authenticity (and thus satisfaction) criteria beyond my own experience.

⁴⁴ Tiravanija, *Cook Book*, 11.

⁴⁵ Combining flavors and symbols in the currently fashionable fusion cuisine is discussed by Richard Shusterman in "Somaesthetics and the Fine Art of Eating," in *Body Aesthetics*, ed. Sherri Irvin (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 274.

⁴⁶ Kellein, "Essay," 152.

⁴⁷ MacCannell, *Tourist*, xxi.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*