

Contemporary perspectives in aesthetic theory: Steven Connor, Sianne Ngai and the edible world

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Abstract

This article interprets the work of cultural theorists Steven Connor and Sianne Ngai in terms of their efforts to reevaluate certain key presumptions of aesthetic theory that inherits the surprisingly resilient biases of the 18th century, in particular the work of Immanuel Kant and Edmund Burke. Focusing on the work of Ngai and Connor, I think through the implications this recent theory has for the previously peripheral position occupied by gustatory taste and the cultural objects and experiences it implicates. I discuss the possibility that ideas and examples drawn from the work of Connor and Ngai might form the basis for an alternative area of analysis that is better adapted to the peculiarities of gustatory taste and the culinary. In particular, I argue that the visceral element, which tends to accompany gustatory taste, ought to be interpreted in terms of its generative contribution to the creation of concepts through metaphor, rather than as a muddying influence that prevents clarity of discrimination. Similarly, the close relationship between the edible and the domestic is deserving of a more generous reading than is commonly found in aesthetic theory underwritten by the categories of the sublime and the beautiful.



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This paper is an introduction to the work of Steven Connor and Sianne Ngai, two theorists who make contrasting and complementary efforts to think critically about a number of resilient biases in contemporary aesthetic discourse. I argue that the work of these two thinkers is united by a more or less explicit effort to generate argumentative friction from questioning two key strands of thought within aesthetic theory of the past 200 years: the

centrality of the sublime and the beautiful, and the idea that the discriminatory power of the distance senses, particularly vision, justifies their centrality in aesthetic theory.

Although there have been many efforts to critique and refine the work of key thinkers of the sublime and the beautiful, most prominently Immanuel Kant and Edmund Burke, and to challenge the dominance of the distance senses in

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theories of the aesthetic, there is arguably little in the way of a settled configuration of ideas to create the foundations for an alternative area of analysis. Even reappraisals of the proximal senses tend to frame their worth in terms inherited from discourse that privileges the distance senses and the sets of positive values they entail: simplistically equating the discriminatory powers of vision with positive values, and interpreting the vague, visceral, characteristically equivocal nature of the proximal senses as lacking the exactitude of vision, rather than autonomous ways of being affected.

Connor and Ngai offer a provocation to rethink the kinds of sensory experiences foreclosed by these strains in aesthetic theory. Beyond making an abstract argument for an alternative aesthetic theory, their work is an example of rich investigation into contemporary aesthetics that persuasively demonstrates the interrelationship between specific objects, feelings, and sensations, elaborating a distinctively suggestive framework to better understand folk descriptions of an ever more pervasive commodity culture. Following their work, I suggest the materially abundant, pleasure- and entertainment-focused cultures of Western, late-capitalist modernity are more richly described when the terms for analysis are drawn from a sustained sensitivity to particulars, rather than previous hierarchies.¹ While I focus on gustatory taste, smell and touch are equally deserving of extended analysis; this is particularly the case for touch in light of its centrality in Connor's work.²

BACKGROUND: CONNOR AND NGAI

Part of the skill in undertaking a project like that of Connor and Ngai is in not getting overly wound up in iconoclasm, which often informs critiques of the sublime or the beautiful, while at the same time managing to neatly acknowledge their limitations as aesthetic categories.³ This can provoke a kind of cheap-shot mentality—Ngai resists, Connor, at times, can't help himself. Furthermore, as Ngai notes of the "ugly feelings" she analyses in an earlier book, and which significantly inform her work on aesthetics, it is also important not to romanticise the previously deviant thing for which one is acting as an advocate.⁴ The under theorisation of "minor aesthetic categories," to use Ngai's terminology, doesn't equate with the idea that it is good to have

more things that conform to their characteristics, or that the categories themselves are morally superior to others.⁵ On the contrary, it is the lack of moral leverage in minor categories that in part constitutes their peculiarity. The value in renewing the set of tools that is used to analyse aesthetics is in making sense of hitherto poorly understood phenomena, not in making value-based claims for the things in themselves.

Connor's view is at times more radical than Ngai's. He more or less seems to think that talk of "the aesthetic" as such is moribund and that the largely academic discourse that circles around the art object would be improved if it avoided invoking the pretensions to specialness associated with the aesthetic or with the powers of art and its attendant claims of "emancipation, transfiguration, or resistance."⁶ Connor argues that attempts to define the aesthetic end up inadequate, trivial, or circular in their logic.⁷ His work falls in line with polemicist works like that of John Carey's, *What Good are the Arts?*⁸ Ngai is more of a reformer. She suggests a shift in focus from the major categories that have been the mainstay of aesthetic discourse since the 18th century to minor categories, including the cute, the interesting, and the zany.⁹ These new, minor categories entail different ideas about the kinds of pleasures and displeasures that arguably define aesthetic experiences in late-capitalist societies. Despite differences in emphasis and tone, this is where the work of Ngai and Connor comes together: as two thinkers looking at the way the economies of affect or of emotional energy have changed in hyper-aestheticised, media dominated, and mathematically administered cultures of abundance.

In their renovation of the assumptions and terminology proper to discussions of the aesthetic, Ngai and Connor offer a welcome opportunity to rethink the role food and eating have played and might come to play in theories of the aesthetic. As sensuous experiences associated with the mundane, the motivated, the muddled, and the intimate, gustatory taste sits at the periphery of an aesthetic discourse that values disinterested appreciation (for which vision is far better equipped), rarity, and magnitude of affect.

As many critics have pointed out, sight and hearing are rightly or wrongly the senses most commonly associated with modernistic aesthetic

discourse.¹⁰ Sometimes known as the distance senses, these senses are regarded as the best for perceiving things without the muddying needs of the body. They are also the senses to which artworks and performances in concert halls, opera houses, museums, and galleries are most closely adapted. To some extent, these remain special places people go to have the kind of rarefied pleasures that are often, rightly or wrongly, seen as central to the aesthetic. Such places cultivate a way of perceiving that is peculiar to their events, objects, and displays, a way of perceiving where the body will ideally tend to vanish. This is mirrored in aesthetic discourse which tends to either casually neglect the proximal senses, as in the case of Glenn Parsons, for example: “aesthetic qualities seem to be primarily a matter of how things look or sound to us.”¹¹ Or more emphatically struck off, as in Edmund Burke’s infamous 18th century treatise on the sublime and the beautiful: “Smells, and Tastes, have some share too, in ideas of greatness; but it is a small one, weak in its nature, and confined in its operations. I shall only observe, that no smells or tastes can produce a grand sensation, except excessive bitters, and intolerable stench.”¹²

According to this view, the proximal senses are hampered by what the philosopher Alfred North Whitehead called “perception in the mode of causal efficacy” which is his phrase for perceiving things *with* the body.¹³ Vision and, to a lesser extent, hearing involve the contrasting mode of perception that Whitehead names “presentational immediacy,” which allows us to distinguish things apart from the body, things that aren’t imperative to our physiological functioning. This is apparent if, as Whitehead suggests, we examine the fact that when we see something with our eyes, the *witness* of our eyes in seeing that thing is largely imperceptible. By contrast, when we taste or smell something, the witness of our sensory organs in the process is comparably explicit.¹⁴

Aesthetic discourse has tended to neglect the role of bodily witness in favour of disinterested appreciation; meditation on the utterly distinct as opposed to the sensorially comingled. In defence of the aesthetic relevance of the proximal senses, Yi-Fu Tuan nicely describes this process as “a momentary removal of self from object or event.”¹⁵ Eating, by contrast, makes the mixing of self and

world a central feature. As Connor notes in the section on “Pop” in his book on air:

Eating is the most conspicuous form of our bodily transactions with the world, which systematically contradict our view of the body as a self-enclosed, and enclosing, entity, and our projection of the body as a succession of uniform images or states—black white, young, aged, fit, sick dead, etc. Eating and drinking are the primary forms of the body’s traffic, not just with other bodies, but the with the great, shifting, mixed, body of the world, a world that, in the forms of foam, ferment and effervesce, is ever at work upon us, as well as we upon it.¹⁶

This aptitude for mixing and the attendant dissolution of self in the world ought to be central to an analysis of the pleasures and displeasures of food, and to the analysis of culture and anthropological work more broadly. This is perhaps particularly so in light of microbiological discoveries that increasingly posit the healthy human organism as community of others held in precarious equilibrium.¹⁷ If vision was the sense of the emancipated subject, perhaps taste and the other proximal senses describe a subject who returns inescapably to the folds of its ecology.

CUTENESS: EATING ON ITS OWN TERMS?

A number of extant works argue for the importance of gustatory taste in human experience.¹⁸ However, this doesn’t equate with a reevaluation of the particular form of thinking that is deployed in aesthetic judgements and the role aesthetic categories play in this process. This is apparent in a work like Carolyn Korsmeyer’s otherwise very compelling *Making Sense of Taste: Food and Philosophy*. Korsmeyer is well aware of historical antipathy shown by aesthetic theorists and philosophers of the sublime to taste and the bodily sensations it implicates. As she writes,

Explicit discussion of the hierarchy of the senses arise infrequently with the sublime. Perhaps the bodily senses appear too obviously feeble to invite us to consider seriously the routes they may prove to sublimity. Only the imaginative faculty and the senses that are capable of comprehending a worlds utterly distinct from and alien to the puny human perceiver can aid in the experience of the sublime. What is more, it is probably that the

strength and extremes of experience required by the sublime would not yield a desirable experience even if they could be translated into taste or smell.¹⁹

While the distance senses allow us to experience events of great emotional and imaginative intensity in a manner that doesn't tax the body, the proximal senses are thought to be confined to experiences involving some significant degree of physiological motivation and occupy the more modest range of judgements spanning from the agreeable to the unpleasant, lest they become perilously overwhelming.²⁰

Yet, astuteness in identifying this prejudice doesn't prevent Korsmeyer from redeploying an aesthetic theory that seeks out the sublime in food-related experiences in order to rescue them from irrelevance. Rather than outline the terms of an alternate aesthetic theory free from the biases of the sublime—as suggested in the above quotation, biases for the powerful and the alien—Korsmeyer looks to the representation of food in painting and transgressive eating such as cannibalism as two examples of food-related things that induce experiences of comparable profundity and extremity to the sublime. As Korsmeyer writes, “Recognizing that tasting and eating can summon up a dreadful range of aesthetic experience—at least in responses to art—suggests that the positive aesthetic values of these activities also sustain profounder possibilities than is usually acknowledged.”²¹ Korsmeyer attempts to prove that gustatory taste can also offer grandness and force on a comparable scale to the sublime, rather than treating experiences of eating and sensing food through taste and smell on their own terms and outlining the implications for aesthetic theory from this position.

Instead of interpreting sensory experiences according to aesthetic categories that favour the capacity of vision to discriminate particulars without unwanted feedback from the body, I'd like to propose an aesthetic theory for gustatory taste modelled on the role bodily withinness plays in this sensory mode—as it clearly does in the booming Korean food fad known as *Mukbang*, where people live stream themselves binge eating to thousands of viewers every night.²² Likewise, there is surely scope for a theory of the culinary that regards the range of feelings implicated in the routines of domestication as complex and important, rather than somehow lesser versions of the rare and

supposedly profound transformative experiences that underwrite an aesthetics of the sublime and the beautiful.

In light of these inadequacies, the value of Ngai's minor categories is readily apparent. Ngai begins her article on cuteness with JL Austin's imperative to “forget for a while about the beautiful and get down instead to the dainty and the dumpy.”²³ She looks to the domestic and commercial sphere for objects that induce feelings which are characteristically “more ambivalent and diffuse, or weaker in intensity than the strongly positive or negative feelings of pleasure/displeasure that ground the concepts of the beautiful and sublime.”²⁴ Ngai offers an explicit if fleeting invitation to reevaluate the aesthetic possibilities of food when, referring to the work of American Modernist poet Gertrude Stein, she suggests that cheese might be “handsome”²⁵—although she doesn't go into detail as to what qualities a piece of cheese might possess for it to warrant this judgement, it seems a readily imaginable possibility.

However, it is Ngai's analysis of the cute, which she describes as an “aesthetic of powerlessness,” that forms the more enduringly relevant aspect of her work to an aesthetic theory of gustatory taste and its attendant sensations.²⁶ In her analysis of both Stein's *Tender Buttons: Objects, Rooms, Food*, and the work of Japanese artist Yoshitomo Nara, Ngai elaborates the not always palatable feelings that characterise our relationship with cuteness. Cute things are to some extent necessarily disempowered in their relative formlessness or plasticity of form (Ngai uses an anthropomorphised bath sponge as an example), their diminutive size, and a general sense that they seem to signal a need for care. In this sense, cute things are defined by their capacity to be available for us to bring into ourselves, whether in a literal sense through eating, or through a more abstract but no less real means of possession, such as buying or looking. Nara appeals to this aspect of cuteness and its connection to the culinary through his use of items such as dinner plates and tea cups that act as framing devices for his characters in works such as *Slight Fever* and *Fountain of Life*, which are analysed by Ngai.²⁷ In the context of Nara's artworks, these implements serve to highlight the relation between cuteness and the edible, which, as Ngai notes, is evident in the common expression “you're so cute I could just eat you up.”²⁸

Ngai compares these two works of Nara's to Kogepan, a character invented by the company San-X, that takes the form of a "slightly burnt and dejected-looking bread bun" and is "occasionally depicted with a bite taken out of the top of its head" and "even baking miniature versions of itself."²⁹ In response to these works and others by Nara, Ngai speculates whether the "ultimate index of an object's cuteness may be its edibility."³⁰

Similar ideas feature in Ngai's analysis of Stein's *Tender Buttons*, where certain foodstuffs, such as custard and roast beef, and the transformative processes used in cooking, such as heating, melting, and churning, function as analogies for the act of writing poetry that are expressed in the compositional principles at work in Stein's poems.³¹ The beautiful and the sublime exhibit a positive relationship with autonomy, whether through cohesiveness of form (in the case of the beautiful) or power (in the case of the sublime). By contrast, the cute is to some extent about the precariousness of form and an incomplete kind of agency. Hence, the rightness of the analogy between objects that suffer formal dissolution through cooking and experiments in the breaking down and rebuilding of grammar evident in Stein's poetry. Ngai points out that, while on the one hand, cute things might be regarded as lacking in agency and therefore vulnerable, on the other hand, this vulnerability has a positive relationship with an openness to transformation.³²

Examples from the prose poems of Francis Ponge give further specificity to Ngai's investigation into the relationship between the formal and emotional properties of the cute and the edible.³³ Ponge's two poems, "The Potato" and "The Orange" both deal with round, small objects that undergo transformations as humans prepare them to eat. Ponge's poems are little, closely observed archives, detailing the sensuous and sometimes mildly sadistic range of feelings that are implicated when these two foodstuffs are subjected to the routines of deformation common to the process of rendering them edible. As he writes in "The Potato": "In the end, they are left for dead... If their form survives (which is not always the case), they have become soft and tender."³⁴ Or similarly, in "The Orange": "Like the sponge, the orange aspires to regain face after enduring the ordeal of expression. But where the sponge always succeeds, the orange never does; for its cells have burst, its tissues are torn."³⁵

In both examples, Ponge explores the sensory dimension of the culinary by describing domestic objects as though they had a particular kind of agency. Crucially, however, this agency is compromised to the extent that it emerges in relation to an agent that delimits the conditions on which its survival or destruction depends.

The centrality of the domestic in Ngai's analysis of the cute seems appropriate in a world where more and more wild, alien, non-human things are brought into the realm of human control and readied for our consumption. Rather than make the reflex presumption that this reduction in autonomy and quality is concomitant with a reduction complexity and importance, Ngai invites us to appreciate how an obscure and yet pervasive power exists in the subject-object complexes that subtend attributions of cuteness.

SWEET SWEET CONNOR

It seems naïve to think that aesthetic categories are somehow frozen in time while the subject of their study, that is, the art object or the object as art, has changed irrevocably. Both Ngai and Connor perform their analysis in a fashion that is mindful of the fact that much of contemporary, mass culture involves "celebrating our capacity to render the whole world fit for our consumption."³⁶ Connor deliberately chooses mundane objects that might be considered inappropriate for the kind of scruple and seriousness demanded by aesthetic discourse. His decision reflects the changing status of the art object in a society where the binary of high and low art and the distinction between art and commodities is increasingly blurred. His analysis of sweets in a chapter of *Paraphernalia* exemplifies his commitments in this regard.³⁷ Of course, this approach is hardly unique, as cultural studies has long made us immune to the analysis of pop culture. The difference in Connor's analysis is that it eschews the Marxist social theory central to the Frankfurt School and the romantic rejection of industrial modernity. Instead, he employs a poetic sensitivity that is perhaps more proper to phenomenology, although without the lopsided emphasis on the subject seen in that philosophical school.

Connor is clearly influenced by Roland Barthes in this regard, and one can certainly see echoes of Barthes' work on "the crisp" (about which I will

have more to say at the end of this article) when he meditates on the quality of sweetness:

Sweetness is not just one taste among others, not just a good taste. It is the taste of goodness as such, the measure of edibility. Sweetness is the good of eating. This is why sweetness is always more than taste. Being the essence of taste makes sweetness also gratuitous, luxurious.³⁸

As Connor notes, this quintessence of sweetness is in part due to its separateness from “the vulgarity of hunger and the utilitarian purposes of nutrition.”³⁹ In this sense, sweetness meets the demands of disinterestedness commonly associated with aesthetic experience. It is an experience of pleasure free from bodily needs and unrefined urges. And yet despite this indifference to the nutritional demands of the body, there is arguably no kind of eating that is more *of the body* than the eating of sweets. Sweets are isolating mechanisms for creaturely appetite, making the apparatuses of eating manifest. Connor gives a number of compelling examples that attest to this, including lollypops, gum, and gobstoppers. We can see here how the imperative of disinterestness works differently in different sensory realms and produces contradictory ripples through an aesthetic theory that attempts to include the proximal senses while retaining the theory inherited from analysis with a visual bias.

Like art, lollies retain a sense of specialness, of things set aside from the usual or the mundane, and yet in the cultures of abundance there is arguably no experience of eating that is more mundane and more pervasive than scoffing a few lollies. While sweets might have been a rare treat for the likes of *Oliver Twist*, today they are among the most common kinds of eating experience, perhaps even to the extent that previously hearty delights have become a kind of confectionary—the roast chook has become popcorn chicken. Indeed, as food historian Felipe Fernandez-Armesto persuasively argues, post-industrial cultures that feature extreme wealth and inequality are sometimes confronted with a perverse situation where it is harder for poor people to avoid the health problems that come with too much rather than too little food.⁴⁰

The steady normalisation, pervasive availability, and constant advertising noise about sweetness means that many of its affects are experienced in a manner that is gradual or delayed, both in the sense that they tantalise us with the possibility of

extending the moment of pleasure (think of the everlasting gobstopper, the magic pudding, or the never ending pack of *Tim Tams*) and in the sense that the most profound and pernicious physiological effects of sweetness are usually well after the moment of eating, from commonly reported but yet to be clinically defined symptoms of foggy headedness, to the more conspicuous issues of obesity and diabetes.

Connor also touches on another way in which sweets provoke us to think differently about how people might attempt to experience the sublime through eating. If as Korsemyer compellingly suggests, cannibalism is the best candidate for an experience of the edible sublime,⁴¹ then lollies are an instructive case of what happens when the ultimate aesthetic experience is subject to the forces of mediation that as Ngai reminds us are among the defining features of contemporary culture. Lollies allow the sublime to be converted into something that is more readily available and less immediately potent. As Connor notes, we eat the representations of things that we wouldn’t usually dare to eat, things we feel strongly about, things we like or hate. He lists the boys’ toys that end up in treats: “teddies, bunnies and gingerbread men. Themed birthday cakes give us the opportunity of eating ourselves: the Arsenal supporter, or the *Thomas the Tank Engine* fan, eats their loved object . . . We also eat in the form of sweat things that we fear or loathe but seem to wish to neutralise by consuming: spiders, snakes, insects, dinosaurs.”⁴² In this sense, sweets are what enable us to experience daily transgressions of a banal but nonetheless culturally important variety. Sweets isolate an extreme gustatory experience and expose us to emphatic and sudden transformations. As Connor notes, “Sweets are magical objects because their shape is to be transformed, to transform themselves under our touch. They are subtle, paradoxical, alchemical, polymorphous substances.”⁴³ If, as Michel Serres suggests, “We should define sublimation as the passage from solid to gaseous, a softening,”⁴⁴ then sweets represent a sight for extended experimentation in the culinary sublime. Fairy floss, soufflé, sponge cake, marshmallows, Aeros . . . Sweets are the least hearty, most ephemeral kind of food, while at the same time offering tastes of great intensity.

So while sweets might be regarded as thoroughly threatening, it is not a threat that takes the

same form of transgressive eating witnessed in cannibalism or eating of the forbidden fruit. Sweets are the domesticated sublime. They are like domesticated animals, whose resource intensiveness poses a far greater threat to humanity than stampeding elephants or razor-toothed sharks.⁴⁵ At this juncture, the question for the aesthetic theorist becomes in part one of semantics: do we continue to use the old discourse and terminology to make sense of these new kinds of affects, and adopt phrases like “the domesticated sublime,” or do we, like Ngai, need to shift the sets of categories we use to analyse aesthetic experience? Perhaps, the terminology is in the end less important than the way the terms are put to use.

ROUTINE, NOT RARE

Connor identifies a characteristic antipathy towards the motivations of routinised behaviours in much of the late 20th century theory about pleasure and the senses, particularly the kind with an inheritance in critical theory. In fact, he suggests theorists including Barthes, Lyotard, Bataille, Kant, and Badiou suffer from a peculiar dietary disorder called “anorbesity” when it comes to accounting for matters of pleasure. That is, they swing between “austere, pinched abstractness” and “libidinous engorgements” in a way that matches “that contemporary oscillation between obese exorbitance and anorexic emaciation.”⁴⁶ Hence, “anorbestiy”—a portmanteau of anorexic and obese. Connor argues that the “familiar principle” of this relation to pleasure is “honouring principles of excess, or infinity” and criticism or neglect of “moderated and compulsory pleasures”: “What governs this is the suspicion of the allegedly normalising and disciplinary form of moderation, and the consequent inability to conceive value other than in terms of excess or immeasurability.”⁴⁷

Connor takes an example from Charles Dickens’ *Life and Adventures of Martin Chuzzlewit* to contrast the routine-free, sudden, emphatic, disinterested-yet-profound cathartic experience of the sublime:

All the farmers being by this time jogging homewards, there was nobody in the sanded parlour of the tavern where he had left the horse; so he had his little table drawn out close before the fire, and fell to work upon a well-cooked steak and smoking hot potatoes, with a strong appreciation of their excellence, and a very keen sense of enjoyment. Beside

him, too, there stood a jug of most stupendous Wiltshire beer; and the effect of the whole was so transcendent, that he was obliged every now and then to lay down his knife and fork, rub his hands, and think about it.⁴⁸

Here, we see an example of the routinisation of pleasure. In contrast to the stereotypically non-domestic examples that characterise conventional accounts of transcendental aesthetic experiences patterned on the sublime, the farmer’s experience of enjoyment is both thoroughly domesticated and, more importantly in this context, subject to measure, as evidenced by his pacing out of the satisfaction that ensues from his meal and beverage. As Connor remarks, “pleasure is intimately intermingled with temporal experience.”⁴⁹ It is not difficult to think of a substantial set of like instances where part of the pleasure comes down to reflecting on how much of something remains to be had, how far one has got and got to go, how *this* measures up to *that*, and how it might measure differently in some time to come.

According to this view, pleasure is available as something to which one might regularly return, rather than a sudden, effervescent epiphany. This is strikingly different to the experiences of the sublime that are defined by their suddenness. By stopping to pause and reflect, the farmer effectively prolongs the pleasure, reassured that its vivacity will not dissipate—at least while his meal still remains. The *economic* nature of pleasure—Connor credits Freud and Peter Sloterdijk among the thinkers of this school—is apparent in this example in the sense that time is a willingly interwoven obstacle in the farmer’s experience.⁵⁰

SPECIFICITY, NOT SINGULARITY

One of the striking things about postmodern theories of art and aesthetics modelled on the sublime is their lack of involvement with particular qualities of objects and the polyvalent sensations they might induce. This is in part because the ancestry of the Kantian sublime, while trimmed and morphed to suit various new sentiments, dictates that the thing that induces an experience of the sublime is not a property of object as such. The proper object of the sublime in the Kantian sense is a totality or vastness that cannot be singled out as a quality: “The beautiful in nature has to do

with the form of the object, which consists in the boundary [*Begrenzung*]. The sublime, on the other hand, is to be found in a formless [*formlosen*] object, insofar as it or by occasion of it *boundlessness* [*Unbegrenztheit*] is represented, and yet its totality is also present to thought.”⁵¹ For example, the ocean might induce a sublime response due to its vastness, but that vastness is not a property of the ocean in the sense that wetness, coldness, or saltiness might be. It is, rather, that thing which cannot be experienced as a property due to its magnitude and the relative smallness of the human observer. Thus, in Kant, the sublime moves squarely into the realm of the subject, who experiences the rift between what they can and can’t sense through a “supersensible quality” that transcends empirical experience.⁵²

In Kant’s philosophy, extreme events or things in nature are the key source of the sublime. In postmodern art theory, this physical extremity is replaced by conceptual originality or alienness. Thus, Jean-Francois Lyotard describes the sublime as “the event of a passion, of a possibility for which the mind will not have been prepared, which will have unsettled it, and of which it conserves only the feeling—anguish and jubilation—of an obscure debt.”⁵³ In this sense, the project of modern art is to present the unrepresentable, the unforeseen, that which escapes determination or measure.

In placing so much emphasis on what cannot be sensed, such theories of the sublime and the aesthetic discourse they entail can seem strikingly impoverished when it comes to involving themselves with the details of objects and their specific comingling with the senses. This insight brings us back to Connor, whose approach of cultural phenomenology sets out to get back to the things that postmodern literary theory had neglected. As an alternative to the deliciously muddled, non-specific, supersensible of the sublime, he offers the term “senstance” which describes a hybrid pairing of a sensation and substance: “a sensation made substantial, a substance so closely twinned with a sensation as to have become cosubstantial with it.”⁵⁴ Senstances are highly particular in the sense that they pick out distinct hybrid units of matter and affect. This is a feature that they share with sweets and sexual perversions, which Connor describes as “intensely specific.”⁵⁵

Although this is more a theory for perception in general than a term that picks out a definite

limited number of senstance kinds, there are a number of exemplary candidates which Connor lists, and many of these are closely related to the preparation, consumption, and disposal of foods. He mentions senstances such as the bath of ambergris in *Moby Dick* identified and analysed by Gaston Bachelard; Jean Paul Sartre’s *visqueux*, or sliminess; his mother’s phobic reaction to sugar; and soap, which is a topic in the work of writers including Roland Barthes, Pablo Neruda, and François Ponge.⁵⁶

Connor’s work here seems to carry on the tradition of Barthes, who in addition to his work on soap, picks out a great example of a senstance in “Towards a Psychosociology of Contemporary Food Consumption,” Barthes discusses the notion of “crispness,” which he names as an instance of “a certain ‘spirit’ of food.”⁵⁷ Like the Greek word *yávos*, which denotes both “succulence, brightness, and moistness,” crispness is “a complex but homogeneous dominant feature useful for defining a general system of tastes or habits.”⁵⁸ It can be used to describe affects associated with a range of contrasting things, such as money, air, potato chips, lettuce, cereal, biscuits, and beer. In this sense, crispness “goes beyond the purely physical nature of the product” and shows how certain “units of food” or, what I’m suggesting with Connor we call senstances, can “overthrow logical categories.”⁵⁹ As Barthes notes, in language, Connor echoes throughout *Paraphernalia*: “crispness in food designates an almost magical quality, a certain briskness or sharpness, as opposed to the soft, soothing character of sweet foods.”⁶⁰ In light of this, one can appreciate the audacity of a name like Krispy Cream, which doubles its semantic power by combining two contrasting, magical qualities, crispness and creaminess—Coco Pops are no doubt up to something similar with their motto, “just like a chocolate milkshake only crunchy.” It seems that it’s a recipe for success if a brand manages to convince consumers that they are crisp as well as creamy: fresh and light, as well as soft and rich.

While crispness and other senstances like it might exceed the physical, and in this sense take on a degree of mystery, its excess is less an encounter with something beyond sensation, as in the roughly Kantian postmodern theory of Lyotard or Slavoj Žižek, and has more to do with the isolation and augmentation of a particular, exemplary sensation

around which the subject and its communities then might revolve.⁶¹ We can see this at work in Connor's cultural and material history of air, where he looks at the phenomenon of "pop" as an exemplary sensation and substance hybrid that to some extent can be used to interpret the ongoing project of modernity.⁶² Connor looks at the way confectionary, detergent, and champagne, all to some degree make this sensation routinely manifest. He suggests that what was spiritualised matter in the pre-modern alchemical tradition is now used to mask material potency, with the foaminess of detergent disguising its abrasive quality, and the "softness" of soft drinks misleading us as to their inescapably heavy consequences. Connor describes the new energy associated with pop and its allotropes, foam, fizziness, and ferment, as "a kind of busy, purposeless inertia."⁶³ A characterisation that in an impressionistic though instructive sense echoes Ngai's identification of the "zany," whose phonetic links with the fizzy ought not to be too swiftly dismissed as coincidence.⁶⁴

CONCLUSION

Ngai and Connor offer a provocation not only to think differently about aesthetic discourse, they outline a compelling, new set of emphases that unearth examples through which we can read the contemporary. Ngai draws our attention to the status of weakness and equivocation as characteristics that are both central to the kinds of aesthetic judgements people routinely make and are perversely powerful in the sense that weakness in intensity can actually aid in dissemination. Her insights provide a framework for thinking differently about the proximal senses that are less well adapted to make immediate, detailed, and assured distinctions but which are no less important in perceptual experience. Rather than interpret these so-called weaker, proximal senses on the terms set by the distance senses, we should follow Ngai and Connor and look at the way their weak distinguishing capacity might be read as a powerful mixing capacity. In this sense, Connor's notion of "senstance" invites us to read the bodily witness of the proximal senses not as regrettably obscuring our capacity to appreciate things as disinterested spectators but as an alliance between object and subject which sheds light on the way we inhabit the world.

Notes

1. Steven Connor, *Blissed Out: On Hedonophobia*, <http://stevenconnor.com/blissedout.html> (accessed April 14, 2016); Steven Connor, *Paraphernalia: The Curious Lives of Magical Things* (London: Profile, 2011); Steven Connor, "Doing Without Art," *New Literary History* 42, no. 1 (2011): 53–69; Sianne Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012); and Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005).
2. Steven Connor, *The Book of Skin* (London: Reaktion, 2004); Steven Connor, "Intact," a lecture given at the *Fruitmarket Gallery, Edinburgh, as part of Embodied Values: Bringing the Senses Back to the Environment*, <http://stevenconnor.com/intact.html> (accessed July 17, 2016).
3. This is pointed out by Timothy Costello in the introduction to *The Sublime: From Antiquity to Present*: "It is almost as fashionable in the history of philosophy to declare certain concepts dead and buried as it is, periodically at least, to announce the discipline itself to be at an 'end'." Costello cites the work of James Elkins in particular who in a manner not dissimilar to Connor's suggestions regarding "the aesthetic" suggests a "moratorium on the word." See Timothy Costello, *The Sublime: From Antiquity to Present* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 1.
4. Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, 4.
5. Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories*, 22–3.
6. Connor, "Doing Without Art," 68
7. *Ibid*
8. Jonathan Carey, *What Good are The Arts* (London: Faber and Faber, 2005).
9. Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories*.
10. Martin Jay, *Downcast Eyes: The Demigration of Vision in Twentieth Century Thought* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994).
11. Glenn Parsons, *Aesthetics and Nature* (London: Continuum Publishing, 2008), 15.
12. Carolyn Korsmeyer, *Making Sense of Taste: Food and Philosophy* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1999), 59.
13. Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality: An Essay in Cosmology* (New York: The Free Press, 1985), 168–83.
14. According to Whitehead, humans always experience the two modes in some kind of elaborate mix. Although he does not use the terms "presentational immediacy" and "causal efficacy" in *Modes of Thought*, Whitehead identifies this duality as the essential "peculiarity of sense perception": "We look at the scenery, at a picture, or at an approaching car on the road, as an external presentation given for our mental entertainment or mental anxiety. There it is, exposed to view. But on reflection, we elicit the underlying experience that we were seeing with our eyes. Usually this fact is not in explicit

- consciousness at the moment of perception. The bodily reference is recessive, the visible presentation is dominant. In the other modes of sensation, the body is more prominent." Whitehead is keen to stress that "the other modes of sensation," such as touch, give us if not a clearer, then a more intense, or ecstatic sense, of perception in the mode of causal efficacy. The point, of course, isn't to deride vision as inherently misleading with regard to our perceptual experience but to point out what visual perception tends to obscure—to point out the potentially constitutive role obscurity might play in experiencing causal efficacy as part of our visions. See, Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality: An Essay in Cosmology* (New York: The Free Press, 1985): 168; *Modes of Thought* (New York: The Free Press, 1966), 153.
15. Yi-Fu Tuan, "Pleasures of the Proximate Senses: Eating, Taste, and Culture," in *The Taste Culture Reader*, ed. Carolyn Korsmeyer (Oxford: Berg, 2005), 226.
 16. Steven Connor, *The Matter of Air* (London: Reaktion, 2010), 332
 17. Gisli Palsson, "Ensembles of Biosocial Relations," in *Biosocial Becomings: Integrating Social and Biological Anthropology*, ed. Tim Ingold and Gisli Palsson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 22–41.
 18. Korsmeyer, *Making Sense of Taste*; and Carolyn Korsmeyer, *The Taste Culture Reader*.
 19. Korsmeyer, *Making Sense of Taste*, 59.
 20. *Ibid.*, 54.
 21. *Ibid.*, 191.
 22. Stephen Evans, "The Koreans Who Televisе themselves Eating Dinner," *BBC News*, February 5, 2015, <http://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-31130947> (accessed June 20, 2016).
 23. Sianne Ngai, "The Cuteness of the Avant-Garde," *Critical Inquiry* 31 (2005): 811.
 24. *Ibid.*, 811.
 25. *Ibid.*, 812–13.
 26. *Ibid.*, 842.
 27. Yoshimoto Nara, *Fountain of Life*, acrylic on white plastic plate (2001); and Yoshimoto Nara, *Slight Fever*, fiberglass sculpture (2001).
 28. Ngai, "The Cuteness of the Avant-Garde," 820.
 29. *Ibid.*, 820.
 30. *Ibid.*, 820.
 31. *Ibid.*, 831.
 32. *Ibid.*, 831.
 33. *Ibid.*, 830–2.
 34. Francis Ponge, cited in Ngai, 830.
 35. Ponge, cited in Ngai, 832.
 36. Connor, *Paraphernalia*, 202.
 37. *Ibid.*, 198–205.
 38. *Ibid.*, 199.
 39. *Ibid.*, 199.
 40. Felipe Fernández-Armesto, "How gluttony went out of fashion," *New Statesman*, December 16–30, 2002, 77.
 41. Korsmeyer, *Making Sense of Taste*, 192.
 42. Connor, *Paraphernalia*, 202.
 43. *Ibid.*, 203.
 44. Michel Serres, *The Five Senses: A Philosophy of Mingled Bodies*, trans. M. Sankey and P. Cowley (London: Continuum Books, 2008), 115.
 45. George Gessert, *Green Light: Toward an Art of Evolution* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2010), 45.
 46. Connor, *Blissed Out*.
 47. *Ibid.*
 48. *Ibid.*
 49. *Ibid.*
 50. *Ibid.*
 51. Ian Boyd Whyte, "The Sublime: An Introduction," in *Beyond the Finite: The Sublime in Art and Science*, ed. Roald Hoffman and Ian Boyd Whyte (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 5.
 52. *Ibid.*, 5.
 53. Gene Ray, *Reading the Lisbon Earthquake: Adorno, Lyotard, and the Contemporary Sublime*, *The Yale Journal of Criticism*, 17(1) (2004):3.
 54. Steven Connor, *Soap, Senstance and Semblance*, A talk at the Blake Society, Downing College, Cambridge, May 1, 2013, <http://stevenconnor.com/senstance.html> (accessed April 14, 2016).
 55. Connor, *Paraphernalia*, 204.
 56. Connor, *Soap, Senstance and Semblance*.
 57. Roland Barthes, "Toward a Psychosociology of Contemporary Food Consumption," in *Food and Culture: A Reader*, ed. Carole Counihan and Penny Van Esterik (New York: Routledge, 1997), 31.
 58. *Ibid.*, 31.
 59. *Ibid.*, 31.
 60. *Ibid.*, 31.
 61. For a discussion of the relevance of postmodern continental philosophy and the sublime, see Whyte, *The Sublime: An Introduction*, 5.
 62. Connor, *The Matter of Air*, 327–33.
 63. *Ibid.*, 330.
 64. Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories*, 174–232.

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