The Sounds of Food: Defamiliarization and the Blinding of Taste

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The first course was a soup in which pieces of undisguised and unabashed gristle floated in a mud-colored sauce whose texture and temperature were powerfully reminiscent of mucus. Then a steaming vat was placed in the middle of the table, where the jowly, watch-chained headmaster presided. He plunged his serving arm into the vessel and emerged with a ladleful of hot food, steaming like fresh horse dung on a cold morning. For a heady moment I thought I was going to be sick. A plate of […] cottage pie – the mince grey, the potato beige – was set in front of me. (John Lanchester 1996: 11)

John Lanchester's description is shocking, brutal, and corporeal. Most senses are activated through the associations triggered by gristle, mucus, jowls, and horse dung. However, the sensory experience absent in this evocative presentation of food is the auditory. Lanchester is not alone in muting the volume in food writing. The sonic artefact and exegesis that are presented in this article prioritize the sounds of food, temporarily closing the metaphorical eyes of eating. Intentionally, the non-eating sounds of the digital and analogue interplay around obtaining and preparing food are summoned. This is an artificial process, well suited to creative-led research (Laing and Brabazon 2007). Food consumption is a multisensory experience. Eyes tumble over plates, locating shapes and colors (Plates 2017). Tongues gather information about bitterness, saltiness or sweetness. The feel of cutlery or glass between our fingers signifies class. The smell of bread, coffee – or decaying fish – signifies freshness, danger or unpleasantness (Shepherd 2013). However, the visual dominates. There is an empire of the senses (Howes 2005). Betty Fussell even argued that "food is always image and icon as well as substance" (Marranca 2003: 244). She did not state that food is always sound. Sound is attendant to vision and suppliant to it.

To research the sound of food requires some unusual methods, approaches, and theories. Recognizing this, a significant research note should be made at this point. There are two parts to this creative-led research: the sonic artefact and this exegesis. These two parts are tethered to and dependent on each other. One component does not make sense without the other. The incompleteness of each, individually, is part of the argument. I align food studies and sound studies through theorizations of multimodality. Yet, as Gunther Kress has confirmed, "multimodality can tell us what modes are used: it cannot tell us about this different style; it has no means to tell us what the difference might mean" (Kress 2010: 1). The flattening of power relationships generated through the production of digital artefacts and the communities that may form around their dissemination, which I contend produce "The Google Effect" (Brabazon 2008),

influence the relationships between analogue sensory signifiers and digital signifieds. Often creating texts that float in digi-space and time, resulting in disintermediation and deterritorialization, I remain interested in working with what Kress describes as, "the social embeddedness of signs and sign-making practices" (Kress 2010: 69).

When employing visual sources, these elements of embeddedness operate more self-sufficiently, thanks to the shared visuality of images and words, which enables a tighter alignment between signifiers and signifieds. The cliché is inaccurate but pervasive: seeing is believing. Also, meaning is more easily constituted when moving from one visual source (photographs or film) to another (letters and words on a page or screen) due to the common instructional tactics of institutionalized education in schools and universities, with knowledge delivered through print and images. The goal of my project is to problematize – through defamiliarization – any easy, assumed, and experiential response to sonic sources framing food. Therefore, my artefact is not an autonomous sonic documentary and is indeed incomplete without this exegesis. It is not auto-ethnographic, even though Manovski's research (2014) demonstrates the profound value of this method. More an oral history of the "dead," ignored, and unrecorded geographies around food, I draw upon the field of accidental sounds – sounds without narrative, consequence, power or longevity – and make a first attempt at interpreting the diffidently, ambivalently accidental. Further, the mode of writing in this exegesis is dependent on the spaces created in the sonic artefact. The writing is configured by the imperatives of creative-led research: to generate new knowledge through the production of meaning through media. This mode of interpretation and scholarship was not presented in a key book of writing about food, Dianne Jacob's *Will Write for Food: The Complete Guide to Writing Cookbooks, Blogs, Reviews, Memoir and More* (2005). An exegesis is much more reliant on research protocols and is a distinct form of food writing (Brabazon 2011). Even though food writing is burgeoning, it has not substantially intersected with the field of sonic scholarship and is thus undertheorized and under-discussed. This artefact and exegesis offers a pathway into this paradigm.

A key question is how scholars research the sound of food. There are many such pathways to scholarship via popular culture, many captured on Sound Cloud, including podcasts such as Thought for Food (2017), found sounds and food storytelling (Vaz Moço 2013). Entering sonic semiotics, interpreting the spaces between signifier and signifieds, is more dispersed and ambiguous than in visual semiotics. Additionally, so much of formal and compulsory education is founded on visual learning from paper and screens. Letters become words. Shapes become meaningful. Sound is flighty. Sound is darkly ambiguous. When presented on a platform of meaning saturated with other senses – such as taste and vision – food sounds were and are a source of humor. The sounds of food were the basis of an April Fool's Day prank by the microphone company, RØDE. Promoting via YouTube their Cuisine Condenser Microphone, the sound geek featured in the video proceeded to place microphones around plates, earnestly recording the results (RØDE 2017). The resulting comments – with many recognizing the joke and others enthusiastically asking for the release date of the microphone – reveals some of the challenges in researching and disseminating this awkward, ambiguous, unpopular, quirky field of food sounds.

Sound studies is within and attendant to media studies and cultural studies. Too often merged with or dominated by popular music studies, the fields of sonic architecture and sound art offer a key corrective. Yet, with food tourism and gastronomic tourism emerging as interdisciplinary areas of expertise, understanding the semiotic suite of food is important. Charles Spence and Betina Piqueras-Fiszman recognized "the profound effect that each one of our senses has on our perception and enjoyment of food" (Spence and Piqueras-Fiszman 2014: xvii). Here, I test their statement by probing the least theorized sensory engagement with food, cooking, and cuisine: sound and hearing. As flavor is determined through all the senses and a diversity of media platforms, I explore the value of cutting away four of the five senses and probing the relationship between food media and sonic media (Spiegel 2014). Spence and Piqueras-Fiszman advanced through 190 pages of their (outstanding) book exploring the "multisensory science of food and dining" before mentioning "the sound of food." Describing "this 'forgotten' flavor sense'" (2014: 194), they questioned the role of the crunch of chips – or an apple – and "how their dishes sound" (2014: 196). Particularly of interest is what they described as "sensory incongruity" (2014: 218), which described unexpected conflict or misalignment between the senses, the mismatch between expectation and reality.

This article takes "sensory incongruity" as its goal. Working with Viktor Shklovsky's theorization of defamiliarization or ostranenie (остранение), presented in his 1917 essay "Art as Device," I am interested in reducing "automatization" and value "disruptions" (Shklovsky 1990: 14). Applied to food sounds, I record the unrecorded sonic events of daily life. Through the recording, the re-playing, and the analysis in this exegesis, I gently tether signifieds to signifiers. With the visual senses and meaning systems blindfolded, I destabilize the visual, tactile, and taste domination of food. I have produced a sonic artifact that textualized three slices of food sound: shopping for groceries, the delivery of food to a domicile, and cooking. These sonic artefacts were not slotted into a convenient narrative of a sonic documentary. They were not staged; they were not sound effects. They were extracted from daily life and experiences. This is a way to demonstrate the value of sound in enabling différance, revealing Jacques Derrida's two stage system of meaning. Meaning is determined via difference: signs gain their meaning by being different from other signs. But also, and particularly of relevance to sonic media, meaning is also deferred. There is a gap – of experience, expertise, perception, and meaning – between signifier and signified. The deferral creates hesitation, confusion, instability, and unsettles meaning systems (Derrida 1982). This research is positioned in this gap.

The artefact features a voice-over, introducing the sonic texts, but offers few anchoring frames to assist meaning-generation. Framing is a key concept here. An intriguing aspect of sound is that frames and framing do not function as effectively with auditory as with visual communication. Sound bleeds beyond the frame. Each semiotic mode – which is much more intricately constituted than a sensory mode – has a distinct grammar. For sound and sonic media, the frame is a complex concept to apply (Kress and Van Leeuwen 2001). There was a reason to utilize this framing introduction. These sounds were not pleasant or polished for performance. As with the extracts from an anthropologist's fieldwork journal, they defamiliarize a researcher's sensory experiences of food. I offer little anchorage and choose not to compile an accompanying digital photo story, which – as always – would have enabled the visual to dominate. Researching food and food media, while subtracting four of our five senses in order to focus on auditory culture, sonic media,

hearing, and listening, necessitates a multi-disciplinary study, involving auditory art, aural architecture, sonic media studies, cultural studies, media studies, food studies, sensory anthropology, sociology, history, and education (Jensen 2006: 8). Productive ambiguity emerges. I do not specify to you, the reader, when to listen to the artefact. I do present the sonic link at this point. The reader can pause and transform into a listener. The reader can ignore the link and progress with the exegesis, allowing this visual palette to frame the sounds. The reader can play the artefact while reading, noting that the sounds will soak into or soak up the visual comments being made.

The Sounds of Food

The first sonic sequence reveals the online shopping experience, capturing this process of defamiliarization. The analogue delivery of digitally ordered and purchased groceries is an increasingly popular activity. This first artefact revealed some unexpected spurts of sound. Silence is never silent. Sounds always bleed into space and activities. My expectations of this sonic documentation were that gentle clicks on the keyboard would be recorded. Online shopping is dominated by screens, the experience of looking at goods (Dujardin 2011). I realized only upon re-listening to the online shopping soundscape that not only do the clicks have a rhythm to them but that the solitary online shopper is interrupted by an array of people and sounds. The silence and the clicks of a keyboard draw a range of sonic, contextual interventions.

Because we do not have earlids, sounds pervade our daily life. The unwanted sounds that enter our bodies are often described as noise (Attali 2004: 7-9). Actually, noise is instructive, stretching, arousing, and probing the limits of our literacies (Cage 2011: 4). To avoid this discomfort, artificial earlids are created, including car bodies and windows, mobile phones, and earphones. Such strategies fail. Our bodies are relentlessly invaded by unexpected sounds. The sonic artefact of shopping captures those conversations, sounds, and noises. It also demonstrates the potential of digitization and digital shopping. I was at my parent's house for the last few days of a holiday, buying groceries for my home – in another state of Australia – that would be delivered upon my arrival.

There are moments of silence in this recording, but they are textured and layered. Sound is not convenient. It cannot be flicked through or scanned (or deleted) like text on a screen. It occupies time. When silence is acknowledged for its specialness, because of its rarity, sound can be deployed to change the mood, build new literacies, and understand other people and communities. John Cage realized the complexity of sonic modernity. As a composer and philosopher, he studied the density and texture of silence and the productive chaos of thinking through noise. His composition 4'33" revealed that silence is never silent. It loops, ticks, swoops, breathes, hums, and flows in waves, cycles, and interventions. He recognized that silence must be constructed to be experienced.

Cage's attention to silence, percussion, disorganization, randomness, and play, embraces chance. Agitating the relationship between philosophy and composition, he opened the spaces between hearing and listening. No longer would a sound – to use the cliché – go in one ear and out the other. Instead, if we "sound out" a word, then greater interpretation and understanding emerge.

The goal is to create a movement from perception to consciousness. Barry Blesser and Linda-Ruth Salter describe this as "a functional model of auditory awareness" (Blesser and Salter 2009: 12). A location is squeezed into sound, and a sound bounces through a location. Cage reminds scholars of sound about indeterminacy and the multiple layers of ambiguity between composition and performance. While our senses are drawn to the familiar, creative-led research (such as this artefact and exegesis) stretches our perspective and perception (Kim-Cohen 2013). The key distinction in my artefact is that it is not a performance. In methodological terms, I have created and disseminated a form of sonic ethnography, capturing daily life through a digital recorder rather than fieldwork notebooks.

These sonic notes are important, confirming that listening is different from hearing. It is intentional, conscious, and active. Listening is literacy for the ear. It is a social act and involves making choices in filtering and selecting sounds from our sonic environment. Listening is underestimated in our daily lives and under-theorized in academic literature. Jean-Luc Nancy confirmed that hearing is "to understand the sense," while listening "is to be straining towards a possible meaning" (Nancy 2007: 6). The sonic artefact operates in this space where hearing demands meaning. Nancy argues that listening requires work, decoding the unknown and inaccessible into the realm of interpretation and comprehension. The overwhelming majority of information received and the processes required to understand the world emerges through our eyes. Most of what constitutes knowledge and methods of study – such as ethnography and participant observation – attach meanings to behavior, derived primarily from the information we gather through vision.

With this saturation of visuality, Michael Bull and Les Back probed "the opportunities provided by thinking with our ears" (Bull and Back 2004: 3). We read sound through the ears as much as print on paper or text on a screen. Every act of listening is based on recalling a prior hearing experience. When we listen, we learn. Because we lack earlids, we often accidentally and randomly build literacies, learning about ourselves through what we hear and how we evaluate it.

The second sonic part – capturing the arrival of groceries from the online shopping – also revealed surprising information. The resulting rupture of a household routine in order to accept the delivery of the food was clear. My husband and I were watching a *Dr. Who* documentary while waiting for the delivery, which was scheduled to take place in a three hour window. When the van arrived, our behavior immediately changed. Significantly, we did not hear the truck and neither did the recorder. The flurry of activity at the front door created the discontinuity in behavior. The television was turned off, and we quietly waited for the consignment to be removed from the van, packed on a trolley, and rolled up the driveway. Upon his arrival at our front door, there was a flurry of activity, with the recorded sounds of food jutting from the speakers upon playback. The predominant sounds are the rustling of plastic bags, the carriers of food. This was a clear example of defamiliarization – the distinctive pattern in a household when juxtaposed with a response to an outside intervention. The scale of change in our behavior between waiting for the delivery, retrieving the groceries from the delivery man and then moving them to the kitchen for storage was unexpected. The performativity of this process was surprising, only revealed through recording the process.

Listening is intensely personal and intimate, and such everyday sounds rarely receive a public performance. As Peter Szendy asks, "what summons us to listen?" (Szendy 2008: 142). For sonic media researchers, the job is to connect the motivation for listening with a motivation for knowledge creation. Technology matters to this discussion. An array of platforms can control sensory information and construct an environment for listening, learning, and thinking. An argument I have proposed is that specific reductions in sensory information creates different types of learning (Brabazon 2013). When researchers intentionally – with careful planning and consciousness – strip away digital information, fresh data sources emerge. For example, the information that emerged through the recording of the cooking processes revealed not only the leakage of media – such as television – into the experience of food, but also the conversations emerging through cooking. The unexpected sounds – that I had no awareness of before this research project – reveal the scale of the packaging encasing food. Plastic wrapping, including bags of fruit and vegetables, not only occupy space and time in the cooking process, but reveal under-discussed sounds.

Sounds move. Sounds bleed. But sound is intrinsically progressive (Carpenter and McLuhan 1970: 67). When aligning theory and history, integrated and resilient vocabularies can be developed to understand digitized sonic media. Digital sonic history is important, and distinctive, and can generate innovative alignments with food studies. David Grubbs realized that, "persuasive arguments can be made that the current availability of an unprecedented amount of recorded music has contributed to a levelling of musical hierarchies" (Grubbs 2014: xv). The proliferation of sounds (and noise) ensures that new relationships and opportunities emerge to connect text and context, experience and expertise. This is not high or popular culture, art or trash, sound or noise. All sonic files are equal before the download. This plurality and diversity is multimodal. Digitization can – at its best – integrate an array of textual experiences (Kist 2005). As shown by this series of sonic foodscapes, sound enables a more intricate understanding of how digitization – including online shopping, delivery, and the sonic recording of cooking – can shift, question, and agitate food studies.

This is the moment for digital food studies. Sonic media reveals surprises and spurts of creativity. Andrew Middleton realized that, "audio is suited to conveying change and differences in thinking, and so invites the listener to be curious, critical and academic" (Middleton 2013: 11). As the relationship between food media and media studies, food communication and communication studies, becomes more intricate and complex, the potential of sound will be revealed. The vocabulary for food studies will be widened to explore visuality, texture, taste, and smell in a distinctive – defamiliarized – way.

To create meaning, all food requires translation from the experience of taste. Gordon Shepherd stated that, "connecting smells and flavor with language may be difficult, but it is a uniquely human endeavor" (Shepherd 2013: 211). The sounds of food – because of the wider gap between signifier and signified and the lack of institutionalized education in the decoding of sonic signifiers (Bignell 2003) – offers a challenge to scholars: to what extent can food meanings be understood and controlled? Not only is meaning construction (or more precisely determination) difficult in sonic systems, it is also unpredictable, ambivalent, and inconclusive. It offers meta-realizations about the abstractions of food. This realization is not pessimistic or negative. It is a recognition

that food remains both tantalizing and textual. It is part of everyday life. It is part of popular culture. But the scholars and scholarship of food studies gain through defamiliarizing the sounds of food.

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