

Podcast transcript

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Sweetness as an aesthetic relationship

Madalena Borsato is a graduate of the University of Gastronomic Science in Pollenzo, Italy, a student of philosophy and of food, of sweetness, pastry, and someone who's going to apply the philosophy of aesthetics to sweetness today. Her dissertation, her thesis, was about sweetness, and I think you're going to be speaking to the book you have written. You're now at Ritsumeikan University in Kyoto. So thank you for joining us.

So I'm just arrived from Osaka Airport after travelling from Italy. So my mind is probably still in Italy. My body is in Kyoto and the presentation is in Oxford, so this is the world we live in...

Clarifying the title, I would like to start by presenting myself, or at least my academic path, that is something that is related also to the topic. I studied philosophy, as Stanley said, I studied very strict philosophy Western philosophy, German idealism.

And after many years of these kind of things, I felt the need, the necessity, to stop making so abstract things so not life-related things, so to say, and I start baking and I started learning craft, learning a job and I became a pastry assistant in different labs in Italy.

And then the PhD came and PhD was somehow the connection between my two passions that is, philosophy and particularly aesthetics, and pastry and sweetness. And in this sense I can explain very briefly already this idea of aesthetics.

Because aesthetics in the philosophical field is mainly related, and I'm always speaking about Western philosophy, there are connections also with the Orient, some Oriental philosophy. But I want to speak about aesthetics in Western philosophy, which is always related with this idea of the beauty of art, of the philosophy of art, while the original sense of aesthetics also deals with the food, also the perception, and with the senses.

And not only the senses of art, which are normally sight and hearing, but also taste, smell, touch, which are the senses also of our relationships with food and aesthetics. It has to do also with the with pleasure, with our desires, with our emotions, and these are all elements which are essential for an aesthetic study that is not only related to art, even if there are a lot of relationships also with the artistic world. And I will tell you later about this.

And now I'm doing a postdoc in Japan, dealing with gastronomy and with philosophy of food from another perspective, and writing about Japanese aesthetics. But today I want to present you this nice book, very pink book. I'm really proud of the pink of this book, unfortunately, is for now only in Italian language, but I'm thinking about translating it in English. It will be nice.

So about the topic of today, I would like to start my presentation by explaining the title and then the main topic of the book. I would like to start with 30 seconds of this video if it works.

Video - But if you've never tasted a doughnut, you wouldn't really know how sweet and how good a donut is. If you've never had that experience, transcendental meditation is like that. Transcendental meditation gives an experience much sweeter than the sweetness of this doughnut. It gives the experience of the sweetest nectar of life, pure bliss consciousness. As Maharishi says, those who don't know, they don't know those who know they enjoy it. I hope this following documentary gives you some good news about the sweetness of life.

I love David Lynch and I love this idea of sweetness dealing with the lot of this, painting, not only with food or with the doughnut and the weird video. So first of all, I would like to explain the title of my book. To say some words about the three main areas of my book and of my four year research project, which are about taste, sweet taste, sweet forms. For you the most interesting part and I will deepen it a little bit more. So the contemporary dynamic dealing with sugar and its ethical and political aspects.

The story begins, so to say, to explain the title, with sweetness and with an apple. Like most of the most important stories of many cultures, they begin with an apple, and not speaking only about the Bible. But this is to say that sweetness is first of all, the property of being sweet. This has to do simply with taste. It starts with the apple so to say, because sweet is considered the most one of the most, or simply the most, basic human taste which is biologically necessary and in this sense is an index of edibility and of energy supply. And from these qualities, by extension, sweet food became an expression of care, of love, of intimacy. On the other hand, sweet and sweetness has also very different meanings.

Is considered, especially in its sugary. All these things that I put in this chaotic slide are things that contain sugar, considered to be harmful for health. Almost somehow a poison that brings us unhappiness. Not only harmful for the body, but also psychologically. And some kind of sedative nowadays. So in order to go from the apple to this chaotic situation, I had to explore many different fields and while my research was primarily aesthetic, I had to venture into geology, into philology, into art history, these courses related to very heterogeneous and different and unrelated contexts, eras and meanings. In this slide, I put all the possible ambiguities and all the possible contradictions that are to do with this, with sweet taste and with sweetness as the first taste, but at the same at the same more. If we think about pastry, if we think about sweet food in general, as being positive, but also carrying negative meanings, as being edible but having a lot to do also with the non edible, because in the history of pastry, we see a lot of foods that were made not to in order to be eaten and these are some among many of the ambiguities and of the contradictions that are inside this, this idea of sweetness, and this idea of sweet food. These were the some of the research questions I try to cover with my research in my book.

So starting with the individual level to the social, to the ethical and political role of sweet, of sweetness, of sugar. And at the very end with the possibility of a switch to the second part of the title because the title is sweetness as an aesthetic relationship, and I already explained the aesthetics part so to say. But I think the relationship is very, very important and fundamental to understand, not only because sweet food can be understood as a primary relationship. If we think about phylogenetically about fruits, but also ontogenetically. So in the evolution of the human and the mother's milk. I mean they say that we like mother's milk because of the lactose it contains because of the sugar it contains.

Relationship has also a deeper and more interesting meaning for me, which is the one connected to the world of food. So this idea that food continuously breaks down the boundaries between inside and outside, between body and environment. And in the sense when I speak about sweetness as a relationship, as relational, I speak also about an ecological idea. So this idea that we are always in an environment and there is a deep interaction, not only interaction, but a connection between bodies, foods and environment, so this idea of relationship comes from the essence of food. So the fact that every gustatory identity we could say, every identity that has to do with taste, consists of a continuous exchange between inside and outside between eater and food. The identity is originally relational. I didn't want to think about sweet food as an object and me as a subject dealing with it. The relationship somehow comes before it, comes first.

The other step I want to do, to explain the title, is about marginality that has a deep connection. Also in the history of Western philosophy it was always a marginal topic, not even marginal, it was always a, no, it was never a topic so to say, because food as taste, food as pleasure, has been subordinated in the philosophical discussion, from from ancient time, but until 30 or 40 years ago. And in this sense, speaking about aesthetics means speaking about a part of philosophy which is already marginal, because it has to do with pleasure, has to do with bodies, has to do with senses which for the Western philosophy there have always been problems, so to say, because everything that has to do with the body was a problem for Western philosophy.

And in this sense, to make a step further, food is a marginal topic in aesthetics, and the third, the third step, is that sweet food has a double marginality, so to say, because it's not only a food which is marginal, but it's also something that we consider now days, to be marginal. Of course, with all the contradictions that these things contain, because sweetness is also the first taste and our evolution has adapted to have a very high threshold for the perception of sweet taste. But at the same time it is considered something that is harmful and is unnecessary for our normal diet, so to say, so this idea of marginality has a deep connection with how I wanted to deal with this topic, and this was to somehow to dissect the title because because I think it's important. Now we can go to the first part of the book.

The research was about how I tried to pose the basis of sweetness, starting from the many possible perspectives that are all interconnected in dealing with this giant topic. So starting with the scientific level, so to say. So the phylogenetic, the ontogenetic, the psychological evolution of sweet taste, to turn and to deal with the also the words. So I started asking myself, what does it mean? What does it imply to recognise the sweet as being the most natural of all tastes? And then from this idea, trying to understand also the world making because sweet and sweetness became metaphors and became words for many different fields. Not only thinking about food, but also about emotions, about feeling. I deepen the history mostly of religion and of theology and of philology. And I put you here a very confused schema about the etymologies of sweet taste. I don't want to go deep and because it's a little bit complicated, but it was only to understand this idea that also the words as a root that has a deep connection with the not only with taste, but also with gluttony, with the truth, but also with pleasure. With the persuasion with the idea of convincing the other in this sense I found a deep connection also with this idea of the most basic tale, but also the most ambiguous and ambivalent for the many, many meanings it contains in itself. The last part of this work.

First, the topic of sweet taste, I wanted to deepen the metaphors and where we can find sweet taste and sweetness. And to do this, I tried to find all the images that are connected to sweet taste and to also to try to understand it in order to have some kind of order to do this because it is really a word and a concept that is everywhere. I tried to research sweetness in all the other senses, not only in taste.

So starting from the whiteness of the candy, of sight - candour came from candy. So this idea of naivity and candour, also in our in our sense of sight, going through music, the sweetness of the voice of poetry, of music itself. It's a powerful metaphor. The one of sweetness in hearing, through touch, through this idea of softness, of needing. And also all the ambiguities that have the connection with smell and asking myself what is a sweet odour, even if it's something that does not exist? Actually because sweet is always sweetness, is always connected to a taste, but in the history of literature, for example, there is a lot about sweetness. I wanted to close this first basic part by asking myself which is the contrary of sweetness, because I think it's something really interesting if you ask someone which sweet taste is shared with all the other flavours, and not only flavours, not only taste, but also many other different ideas.

But the idea is that an analysis and a negative analysis of sweetness made me understand that it seems that sweet and other flavours or tastes already contain in themselves all the possibilities and all oppositions. So it turns out, once more to be complementary and contradictory and not fixed substance, not something we cannot find only something sweet, and try to understand sweet without dealing with all the other possible possibilities when dealing with it.

And so I tried to understand sweetness and sweet taste as a process more than a fixed substance. I think maybe it can sound a little bit confused - that it was an idea of dealing with something of recollection. Also this idea of food, that between the eater and the food, the inside and the outside. And so it is sweet, and sweetness is a process more than a substance.

The second part I will go a little bit quicker. The second part of the book is about symbols because I wanted to deal also with pastry in a more concrete way and dealing with pastry means dealing with levels too. And as I said before, it has to do with religion, with the divine, and above all with all the ceremonies, all the rites of passage that for you anthropologists are something really, really interesting and fundamental, with the idea of the gift, with the idea of hospitality, sweet food characterises all our moments of transformation into the society and of the individual.

Just think about marriages, about funerals, about baptism. There is always something sweet to help us go through this moment of transformation in society.

And that's why the symbolism of sweet food is very important, because it's not only a visual symbolism, it is something that we eat. And in this sense it transforms ourselves first of all and transforms all, all together, society in which there is this rite of passage and evolution somehow, and sweet food contains many meanings. One of care, one of sacrifice. I have some visual examples of a very traditional pastry that has to do with this idea of symbolism of the sweet.

In this second part I tried also to understand the sweet from the standpoint of the artistic world, because sweet food, more than any other type of food, has had a connection with the arts, and I put here this very famous quote from the founder of the new national French cuisine. But also European cuisine in the 18th and 19th centuries. And the famous quote says that the Fine Arts are five in number, namely painting, sculpture, poetry, music, architecture, the principal branch of the latter being pastry. So pastry for most of the European history was considered as a sculpture or as an architecture with a very strict connection with the world.

And this brings us also to the connection with the world of art, with the introduction of industrial food, with the use of sugar and the role of sugar in the in the 20th century. And also the idea of reproducibility. I don't want to deepen it, but it's the final step also in dealing with sweetness and sweet food as an artistic medium, and then I finish this second part with a connection with the third and final part of this presentation of my book, which is a specific case study on conventional pastry.

Conventional pastry was the pastry made by nuns in in in the monastery, which for me was very important to try to understand sweetness also as a tool of community Location, because nuns communicated, they couldn't speak, they were not allowed to speak or to or to be seen, but they could communicate through this embodied knowledge of making pastry, and through their kneading of pastry. And this was for me very important again, to understand sweetness not only as an object of art, as an artefact, but also as a process, as a medium, as something that makes a connection, makes a relationship between me and another. This gives me this book.

Also the idea of the risks of sickness as stickiness, as nausea, as disgust, because sweetness has a deep connection also with taste and disgust. I put here a very famous quote from Sartre. Sartre wrote very interesting pages about stickiness and the viscosity of sweetness, that is something that creates somehow a kind of relationship because it glues together things, from this idea.

I can understand better the role of sugar nowadays, the idea of pharmacon. And I wanted to speak about pharmacon, because pharmacon is a Greek word that means both medicine and poison at the same time. And that really makes sugar the perfect example of the contemporary dynamics of sweetness. Nowadays we witness the massive use of sugar by the food industry that contributes to some kind of a flattening of flavours, a flattening of tastes. There is this flat sweetness throughout all the things that we eat, all the things that we experience and all the things that we perceive, that accentuates this idea, this invasiveness of sweet. And I think that sugar, for the role it had in history and for the role it has today is the perfect example of a pharmacon, because it seems that it acts on us like the most insidious poisons, it draws us to itself. Until we cannot bear it anymore. Until we can only perceive nausea and disgust.

But at the same time, as you can see from this, I mean from 1960s and 1970s advertisement, sugar was always, for most of the history of our culture, was considered a medicine first, a drug, then a medicine, and then it becomes something else, the evolution of sugar is really in the treasury of luxury, making it a power device, a source of violence. Also a source of harmful things, and to do this I of course use the most important book that you probably know. That is the book of Sidney Mintz 'Sweetness and Power' in order to understand this idea of the globalisation of sweet taste that we are dealing with, that we are living with nowadays, and if in our time sweetness is mostly demonised and considered harmful, is characterised by a history that understood sugar as something else. But sugar is a part of what sweet and sweetness means as I try to explain. This idea of pharmacon, so also a poison. So these big contradictions that sugar but also sweetness contain.

Me, me, I ask myself if it is possible nowadays to go beyond this prepackaged, so to say, period. Is it possible to educate on sweetness? I have tried to say that to go beyond this idea of sweetness we have to try to understand it as a process and as a way to know things.