The Restaurant as a Medium (Connect/Disconnect)
On Culinary Temples and Porous Spaces

Torsten Hahn

Abstract *The paper proposes to define restaurants as media. It distinguishes two types of restaurants, namely those whose medial task is closure and those whose task is the opening of space. The latter type is the focus of the text. The essay introduces two restaurants that emphasize the indoor-outdoor boundary and make it a part of the culinary experience: Once by creating an exterior within the interior (UV, Shanghai) and once by bridging the boundary through messengers (Bo Innovation, Hong Kong). Following this, a definition for this type is proposed. In the description of the functioning of the restaurants, the integration of popular elements, usually situated in the beyond of fine dining, is particularly striking. This then leads to an attempt to define culinary pop or culinary pop art.*

Everything began, as always, with a disturbance of order: noise. It is the disturbances that interrupt the usual and force to meditate on things that usually escape our consideration. Thus, I would like to start with an anecdote: Some time ago, when a friend and I were dining at Haerlin in Hamburg, it so happened that a guest had not properly closed the heavy wooden door, which resulted in audible music and chatter from the bar across the hall. A rather corpulent diner then rose laboriously and visibly annoyed from his seat to close the door. Afterwards, he lectured the maître d' that such a thing would not be considered an issue in other establishments, but in a – I quote the unknown diner – "gourmet temple" like Haerlin, it must not happen. The phrase 'gourmet temple,' which was pretty common for this kind of restaurants but now seems anachronistic, made me think – and I would like to briefly present what I have been thinking about in the following paragraphs.

The guest's behavior was somehow still justified considering the weight of the massive, church-like wooden doors, yet it was also outdated. It harkens back to the origins of haute cuisine and its cult. As is known, this origin relates to the institution of the grand hotel and the person of Auguste Escoffier. After working at the Savoy Hotel in London, Escoffier was hired by César Ritz in 1898 as a chef for his grand hotel in Monte Carlo, which ultimately established Escoffier's fame and led to a transformation of the status of chefs in fine dining. The historian Habbo Knoch has defined

the specific space 'grand hotel' as a "luxury space" (2016: 14). This also applies to the embedded restaurants: their space is detached from everything ordinary and interfering, and it is also well known that luxury and obvious consumption do not exclude the sacred, at least since Thorstein Veblen wrote about "conspicuous consumption" (1899: 49). The behavior of the waiters in this type of restaurant is solemn, and their handling of the seemingly mundane things like glasses and dishes comes close to the priestly manipulation of the liturgical chalice. Food thus becomes more than just food. The diner is expected to adopt a receptive attitude akin to that towards works of art. This also means that the chef, who was previously part of the invisible staff, has his moment. He is transformed into a cuisine artist, and the guest becomes the audience.[1] We can think of the restaurant – a concept by which we mean, first of all, a kind of assemblage that includes a multitude of elements: actors, things (plates, glasses etc.) as well as discourse – as endowed with a power analogous to the museum or the art gallery: It lowers the threshold of acceptance to consider something as a (culinary) artwork, or more precisely, as a successful artwork. Restaurants, especially star-category restaurants, are structures characterized by complexity – think of the interplay between chefs, waiters, and things – most of which remains invisible. If this complexity was to become noticeable, it would cause disruption. The plate can be defined as the result of "blackboxing" (Latour 1999: 304) this complexity, which is consumed along with the food. We can now specify the question of successful culinary communication, i.e., increasing the probability of acceptance, by defining the plates as the "symbolically generalized communication media" (Luhmann 1995: 161) of culinary communication, analogous to the œuvre ("Werk") in art.[2] In the sense of Niklas Luhmann's system theory, this type of medium processes a form of improbability in communication, namely the likelihood of it being successful or, in other words, achieving "*success*" (Luhmann 1995: 158).[3] This type of media "secure[s] acceptance of the proposed selection" – here to observe food as culinary art.

The temple-like of restaurant accomplishes the task of transforming food into a culinary œuvre by strictly separating the exterior from the interior. This is ensured by mechanisms such as heavy doors or heavy, luxurious curtains. The present text primarily deals with the alternative to closure, which is the increase of complexity through the inclusion of elements from the restaurant's environment.

---

1   With Ferran Adriá's invitation to the Documenta 2007, this transformation process is, so to speak, symbolically completed. Thanks to Eva Wattolik for the hint.

2   The proposal to understand the œuvre as a symbolically generalized communication medium of art can be traced back to an essay by Gerhard Plumpe and Niels Werber (1993: 25–27).

3   For all three improbabilities see Luhmann 1995: 157–159. For a short explanation of the concept "symbolically generalized communication media" see Baraldi/Corsi/Esposito 2021: 229–234.

This transformation is still present today in ironic quotations, such as when Quique Dacosta serves artificial roses at the end of a meal in his eponymous restaurant (fig. 1). What was once thrown onto the theater stage as a sign of admiration for the performers now, in a reversal of communication, ends up being consumed by the guest.

Fig. 1: Part of the Fronteras' menu.

Source: Photo taken by the author on October 13, 2016.

The space is strictly separated from everything mundane, through such means as music, as Joanne Finkelstein pointed out in *Dining Out* (1989). It is all about a "well-constructed atmosphere" (Finkelstein 1989: 58) that contributes to the enjoyment as much as the food itself. In the classic fine dining restaurant, there is a solid partition between the 'art space' of the restaurant and the rest of the world: Beyond the dining room's limits there may be or surely is disordered noise (in the sense communication theory attributed to the concept), but within, orderly sound, i.e. music, has to prevail. Even the dishes should not draw attention to themselves by producing noise – the waiters and waitresses are required to take care of this. Creating atmospheres is still a central instrument for a successful evening, but these atmospheres have now, as the present discussion claims, become hybrid: nowadays they have become

media that connect elements of different spheres: art and life, interior and exterior, cultivated or exclusive luxury spaces and the street. The gatekeeper function that lets through only what fits the celebratory atmosphere is no longer predominant. More and more, agencies can be observed that connect the inside and the outside. Among the most striking ones are certainly transparent panes. Apparently, this border, that separates luxury from the common, order from noise, cultish dining from the rather simple action of eating had become permeable at Haerlin – a restaurant that, for the unknown diner, apparently was one of the last bastions of 'culinary temples.' The metaphor of the (culinary art) temple, where diners become worshippers, seems to have become increasingly obsolete.

The following will focus on this permeability addressed above as a sort of culinary or gastronomic program. This means that the boundaries of luxury spaces are becoming porous. Closed spaces become 'porous spaces' where the interior and (real/simulated) exterior can merge. When one asks how this works, it quickly becomes apparent that the medial qualities of the restaurant are also crucial in this case. The restaurant functions like a window that separates the interior and exterior and can be permeable, semi-permeable, or completely closed, depending on what is desired. Like the window, the restaurant also controls the exchange with the environment.[4] The text at hand discusses how the space becomes permeable to an environment that breaks in as either real or simulated. Furthermore, the dishes themselves reference the everyday, intertwining with what they were meant to transcend: the profane and ephemeral nature of food.

In the case of restaurants located in areas characterized by seasonal heavy rain, such as Shanghai and Hong Kong in our case, the 'porous space' becomes a metaphor for practices of opening boundaries. One wonders how this happens through media. Here, I would like to explore two possibilities: immersion in artificial worlds and the transformation of the guest into some kind of messenger, connecting the interior and the exterior. The former is part of a paradoxical movement that achieves openness through complete enclosure against the real exterior. But first, I would like to convey these two types through very brief discussions on the question of the transferability of atmosphere, a reconstruction within the guest's home, which was an important factor for fine dining in times of a pandemic.

The creation of transportable frames has proven to be effective. The restaurant boxes not only contained the dishes but also, as e.g. in the case of Le Moissonier in Cologne, tableware: messages from the restaurant that initially enriched the table and then the cabinets with new elements, such as the glass Tajine, whether desired or not (fig. 2). The domestic space is charged and partially taken over by fragments of the restaurants, it is to a certain extent recoded, if you will. Such items tend to

---

4   For the medial qualities of the window with a focus on the interior-exterior difference see Levinson 2004: 9f.

charge with the energy inherent in nostalgia, become memorabilia, and settle into the living space long after the food has been eaten and even the pandemic, that felt like forever, has passed.

Fig. 2 a-b: Le Moisonnier Box, including the tajine.

Source: Photos taken by the author on January 30, 2021.

In addition to this material practice, there were also immaterial practices of re-coding the private space into another space, with transitional zones into a different reality, namely that of the restaurant. The media used were hyperlinks that led to playlists on Spotify, conveying a particular idea that imported the indirect origin of the food along with the dishes into people's homes, creating a distinct ambiance. This was the case, for example, with the collaboration between Nobelhart und Schmutzig from Berlin and Maibeck in Cologne: the "brutally local" cuisine of Nobelhart und Schmutzig was adapted to the Rhineland environment, incorporating dishes like *Sauerbraten*. However, at the same time, the playlist accompanying the meal featured electronic music that harmonized with it, effectively functioning as a reference to both Cologne (nineties) and Berlin (present day). This combination turned the Cologne apartment into a mixed space where times and cities intertwined.

If we were to look for the restaurant's programming codes – let's say culinary/non-culinary – connect/disconnect would certainly be a candidate. The

distinction has been reversed: while 'disconnect' was desired in the past, connecting the interior and the exterior is now the new preference. It is a gross mistake to underestimate the environments of the dishes (starting with the plate, even though in the present text, macroscopic structures are initially of interest) and consider them mere decoration or ornamentation – in the sense of a 'mere' frame. In fact, they act as performers, constantly conveying their scripts (sensu Latour). The second chapter, dedicated to food proper, also focuses on the question of crossing the boundaries of 'interior' and 'exterior' – only the focus shifts: it moves from the environment to the dish, thus from the medium to the message, which, as one can expect, following McLuhan, is itself a medium (McLuhan 2003: 19) – as we have already suggested in relation to the question of the "symbolically generalized communication medium" of culinary art. I want to show how even the forms for what was previously excluded become permeable: the mass-produced, everyday, slightly vulgar. Forms that were previously excluded are now quoted. With this observation, I would like to briefly touch on an aesthetic transformation, for which I would like to propose the term 'pop' for now.

1.   Porous Spaces

Now, let's turn to the environments of food and the opening of the luxury space. The first porous type of space that I would like to introduce interrupts the relationships with the environment to produce controlled, new environments, or simulacra if you like. These are intended to enhance and emphasize taste: the signature of the restaurant is its variability. The restaurant visit is thus expanded with variable visual and acoustic dimensions – although it is not primarily about music. Leading in this regard is Paul Pairet's Ultraviolet in Shanghai: Projectors and sound systems create a unique ambiance for each course. The *Fish and Chips* course, supported by simulated rain and accompanied by music from the Beatles, is certainly well-known, as it has for example been featured by the *New York Times*.[5]

This clearly revolves around complete immersion in something that, analogous to Roland Barthes' concept of "Italianicité" (1964: 41), can be referred to as 'Britishness' or 'Britannité.' The restaurant becomes a space of signs. The clichéd environment of the product is reproduced, where nature and culture constantly merge. The ultraviolet light enhances effects that have always existed, namely, creating a specific ambiance through addressing the sense of hearing. However, it is taken to such an extent that the term "Psycho Taste" (fig. 3) for the environments created is not entirely far-fetched.

---

5   https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q2TPxH42MFw

Fig. 3 (left): Screenshot Homepage UV, seconds 1 to 2 after opening page.
Fig. 4 (right): Screenshot Homepage UV, seconds 3 to 4 after opening page.
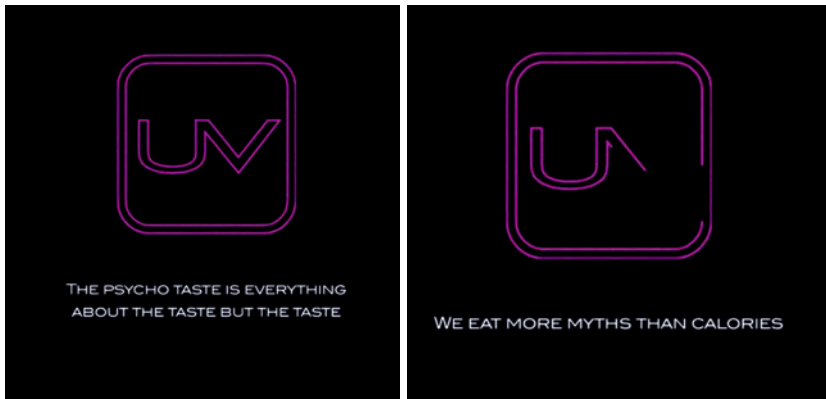
Source: Screenshots of https://uvbypp.cc/.

It is natural to think of Roland Barthes' concept of 'myth' from his earlier work *Mythologies* (1957) in this context. The dishes at Ultraviolet are transformed into a statement or translated into a form that becomes the myth. The food begins to signify something – according to Pairet's idea, almost completely, so that in the end, only a few calories remain (fig. 4).[6]

As Pairet states in the above quoted *NYT*-feature, his restaurant is about the connection between food and multisensory technology with the goal of complete control. This seems to be successfully achieved through the transformation into the myth, presenting a seemingly 'natural' statement. The formula doubles the experience by doubling the perception: into a mental and a sensory experience that together unlock the product as a whole. The respective ambiance completely envelops the diner, making the reality of Shanghai forgotten: whether it's incredibly hot and humid or, as is often the case, rain is pouring. In the restaurant, weather, regions, and acoustic spaces are generated that have nothing to do with the outside world. The diners are actually encased, separated from the current environment of the southern Chinese metropolis with its typical sounds and smells. And indeed, the goal is to consume the entire staging. It is meant to be a myth, a discourse that consists partly of the presented dishes and partly of the respective simulacra.

The next restaurant I want to cite as evidence for my thesis on the porousness of restaurant walls operates in diametric opposition to Pairet's encapsulation approach. Instead, the focus here is on the attempt to achieve an opening towards the

---

6   The sentence is actually a quote, as you can learn from the "UV Brochure" (https://uvbypp.cc /brochure/). Alain Senderens is quoted.

street through the experience of the restaurant visitor prior to entering. The guests become storage media, and their activation create fine networks that dissolve the separation between the interior and exterior. The diner is (without knowing it, at least on his first visit) a messenger who transports messages from the outside world to the restaurant, encoded messages that are decoded only on the plates. Here we find something that is similar to what Walter Benjamin and Asja Lacis described as the "porous architecture" (1978: 175f.) of Naples. Here, the porousness is achieved in a pre-technical and artful manner, although it does not imply that media are not interconnected in a complex manner. The architecture of the restaurant Bo Innovation already hints at this. But it is actually the dishes of X-Treme Chinese Cuisine, created by Alvin Leung, that merge the exterior and interior in a mixed space. However, this would not be possible without the messenger and his message from the street. This is, of course, somewhat risky. One could formulate the thesis, in reference to Pierre Bourdieu's findings on the role of the "art museum" for the conception of art in *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste* that the clearly defined Michelin-starred restaurant is a location where the culinary "disposition becomes an institution" (Bourdieu 1984: 105) – which certainly applies at least partially to the sacred and charged temple-type of restaurant. But here, the difference between interior and exterior is precisely blurred, or rather, this blurring is the program.

X-Treme Chinese Cuisine accomplishes what can be described as "translation" in the sense used by Bruno Latour in *Pandora's Hope*. More specifically, it involves a "chain of translation" (Latour 1999: 27) that bridges the gap between "context" and "content" (Latour 1999: 165). The menu at Bo Innovation is committed to the metabolism between the street and the restaurant: Through the dishes and the memories of the 'guest-messenger,' the plate connects with the outside world, resulting in the perforation of the shell. Through the guest's recollection of recent impressions, the 'porous' space emerges from the dishes.

Therefore, it is not about an external staging of spatial experience, but an internal one. The dishes are presented to the guest with an explanation of the origin of the elements: ingredients are used that bring forward flavors which the guest has inevitably encountered in the narrow streets of Wan Chai, the immediate urban environment of the restaurant that they have just traversed (assuming they were pedestrians). The narrow sidewalks act as a catalyst for perception. The aromas that Leung utilizes are constantly present in the ever-narrowing streets of Wan Chai, with their street food stalls, vendors who are eating, and so on (fig. 5).

This concerns, for example, the bamboo liquor *Chu Yeh Ching Chiew* (竹叶青酒), which by no means belongs to the high-priced spirits – quite the opposite. Its distinctive aroma connects the street and the plate through a subtle thread and thus provides the mentioned "translation." The acoustic-visual simulation of the exterior, which embeds the dishes in their quasi-natural environment, is internal this time. It involves a mixture of the current space (restaurant) with the environment

(the streets of Wan Chai) through memory and the images, smells, and sounds invoked by it. The same applies to the signature dish *Molecular x-treme 'xiaolong bao.'*

Fig. 5: Street in Wan Chai leading to the restaurant.

Source: Photo taken by the author on 20.08.2013.

Furthermore, something peculiar happens: In the translation, in the act of connecting the street with the restaurant, culinary elements become a sort of 'culinary pop art': they are present – think of the liquor – but at the same time, they also become their own quotations and thus part of a network of references of the popular. This can even extend to direct visual quotations of popular product forms, closer to classic definitions of the concept 'pop art.' The classical haute cuisine and its establishments are transformed into 'culinary pop' in somewhat 'mixed spaces.'

2. The Popular Becomes Pop

In the case of a successful translation, the popular elements are sublated: They are integrated and do not create discordance in the dish – which could be possible in the case of bamboo liquor, for example. The popular, profane elements are aestheticized and, although liquor is still liquor, they are transformed: The transformation turns elements of the popular into 'pop material.' In this respect, the process is analogous to the processes in the 'restaurant temple' type: food is elevated to art. This translation process is becoming more frequent now, and it is neither necessarily successful nor does it always lead to positive criticism. However, the process is an expression of taking the environment of fine dining seriously, connecting it to its already accomplished theoretical valorization. This environment is not something external to the 'actual' object and the emphasis on form, which is often criticized as merely distract-

ing and therefore disturbing. On the contrary, translation demonstrates how popular forms give structure to the 'actual' object or the 'substance' of the plate. Translation means enfolding the environment and thus bridging the gap that separates the 'inside' from the 'outside.'

In this sense, 'pop' can also be found in the cuisine of the so-called *Neue Deutsche Klassik*, e.g. at Vendôme in Bergisch Gladbach, one of Germany's three-star classics (although it has currently been reduced to two stars). Chef Joachim Wissler perfectly represents the "New German School" – the title of one of the menus, *Modern Classics*, says it all. The preparation techniques partly represent the advanced modernity of cuisine, which places it in the avant-garde realm (in Jürgen Dollases' sense). However, due to the imposed proximity to the product, this initially does not help much with the visual language – the approach itself prohibits excessive visual effort that distracts from the product. Accordingly, the menu from 2015 includes "Roasted Veal Head and Tongue [Parsley-Caper Vinaigrette: Butter Bean Salad: Gribiche]" and "Rock Red Mullet [Lovage: Bouillabaisse Broth & Curry – Macadamia – Nut cream]" (Vendôme 2015, p. n/a). This is clearly part of the culinary classic and precisely for this reason an iconic counterplay is required. Once again, accessing the popular and its transformation offers itself as a possibility, this time purely on the side of form. The form is taken from what is the opposite of the carefully handcrafted food, namely the mass-produced junk food. The form is separated from the industrially produced matter and the former is lifted. The temple metaphor no longer helps here, unless one wants to be reminded with every communion wafer that it is also an oblate. As an "Auftakt" (overture), for example, the menu presents "fish sticks" (Vendôme 2015, p. n/a), an excellently processed product in a 'downward inclined' (Luhmann 2008: 181) form, as well as the presented "Toffifee," that are only apparently indistinguishable from the original, but have nothing in common with the usual filling. For the "Abschluss" (finale), the diner is then served a "Magnum Royal [Marc de Champagne]" (Vendôme 2015, p. n/a), although the 'M' in Magnum on the handle has been transformed into 'V' for Vendôme (fig. 6).

The surfaces are replicated and transferred into a different cultural system of signs. The effect is that now the form, having been 'liberated' from its original content, stands on its own and has become somewhat autonomous, while emerging as an aesthetically appealing shape. It is evident that the Magnum form is perfectly designed – an effect that was also demonstrated when Jeremy Scott recreated the beauty of McDonald's uniforms, including the logo, for Moschino.[7] Wissler then varies this still further, for example, by taking the Celebrations package, which usually contains chocolate bars from the Mars range, and putting them on the table with the petits fours typical of star kitchens. The irony is obvious: while the bars

---

[7]   One should also think of the Ikea shopping bag by Balenciaga or their Tote Trash Bag made of calfskin in this context.

are supposed to be enhanced by the 'noble' packaging (box of chocolates instead of plastic bag) (inclination upwards), it is the opposite with Wissler Desserts: here the elaborate is presented in a banal setting (inclination downwards) (fig. 7).

Fig. 6 (left): Remains of the Magnum shaped dessert (Vendôme).
Fig. 7 (right): Celebrations (Vendôme).

Source: Photos taken by author on 03.06.2022.

The contents of fine dining are presented in popular forms. This is how the environment is imported here. The forms are borrowed from the stuff you can buy at the kiosks located around the nearby train station or at any supermarket. This inclusion of the external into the interior of the fine dining worlds probably heralds the (temporary?) disappearance of the temple metaphor and the sacred spatial type. But perhaps this can indeed be an occasion to reflect more precisely on the function and prescriptions of the architectures and designs that surround fine dining, as well as the ambiance of light, sound, images, etc. One thing is certain: even the classical setting of the temple type now appears as what it is and always has been: contingent, that is.

Bibliography

Barthes, Roland (1957): Mythologies, Paris: Editions du Seuil.

Barthes, Roland (1964): "Rhétorique de l'image." In: Communications 4, pp. 40–51.

Baraldi, Claudio/Giancarlo Corsi/Elena Esposito (2021): Unlocking Luhmann: A Keyword Introduction to Systems Theory, Bielefeld: Bielefeld University.

Benjamin, Walter und Asja Lacis (1978): "Naples." In: Peter Demetz (ed.), Reflections. Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings, New York: First Mariner Books, pp. 163–173.

Bourdieu, Pierre (1984 [1979]): Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste, Abingdon: Routledge.

Finkelstein, Joanne (1989): Dining Out. A Sociology of Modern Manners, Cambridge: Polity.

Knoch, Habbo (2016): Grandhotels. Luxusräume und Gesellschaftswandel in New York, London und Berlin um 1900, Göttingen: Wallstein.

Latour, Bruno (1999): Pandora's Hope. Essays on the Reality of Science Studies, Cambridge: Harvard University.

Levinson, Paul (2004): Cellphone. The Story of the World's Most Mobile Medium and How It Has Transformed Everything! New York: Palgrave Macmillian.

Luhmann, Niklas (2008): "Das Kunstwerk und die Selbstreproduktion der Kunst." In: Niklas Luhmann, Schriften zu Kunst und Literatur, ed. By Niels Werber, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, pp. 139–188.

Luhmann, Niklas (1995): Social Systems. Stanford: Stanford University.

McLuhan, Marshall (2003): Understanding Media. The Extensions of Man, Corte Madera: Ginko.

Plumpe, Gerhard/Niels Werber: "Literatur ist codierbar. Aspekte einer systemtheoretischen Literaturwissenschaft." In: Siegfried J. Schmidt (ed.): Literaturwissenschaft und Systemtheorie, Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag, pp. 9–43.

Veblen, Thorstein (1899): The Theory of the Leisure Class: An Economic Study in the Evolution of Institutions, New York: Macmillan.