

Food Flavors in Italo Calvino: towards an Olfactory Somaesthetics

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Abstract

This chapter offers an inquiry into the experience of flavors and into food-related acts and situations. Drawing from somaesthetic tenets, the argument mainly refers to and is inspired by some of Italo Calvino's novels and short stories where odors and gastronomy play a relevant role. First, the aesthetic and epistemological issues related to the experience of flavors are investigated. Then, the exploration proceeds by considering the relationships between food smells and affections in somatic *qua* sentimental terms. Finally, the idea of food-related olfactory "somatic style" is discussed in broad terms.

Keywords

smell – food – flavors – Italo Calvino – Richard Shusterman

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My problem in writing this book is that my sense of smell isn't very developed, I lack auditory attention, I am not a gourmet, my tactile sensitivity is approximate, and I'm nearsighted. For each one of the five senses, I have to make an effort that allows me to master a range of sensations and nuances. (...) [M]y goal is not so much to make a book as to change myself, which I think should be the goal of every human undertaking.

ITALO CALVINO 1983, 39¹

¹ From the script of *The Written World and the Unwritten World*, a conference held at the Institute for the Humanities of New York University on 30th March, 1983.



1 Introduction

In the epigraph to this chapter, the Italian writer Italo Calvino mockingly pinpoints the difficulties he encountered in writing *Under the Jaguar Sun*, originally designed as a collection devoted to the five senses, but unfinished and published posthumously. Besides lamenting the perceptual dullness, Calvino suggests the existential potentialities of improving the sensory skills and the sentient body, namely *the* kind of cultivation in which somaesthetic melioristic practices are rooted. This chapter offers an exploration of olfactory experiences and specifically of food-related flavors, acts, and situations, whereby it relies on Richard Shusterman's insights. Somaesthetics is applied to selected fictional episodes from Calvino's works in which odors and gastronomy play a relevant role.² Examining a range of Calvino's texts, my argument develops in a series of sections, each devoted to another somaesthetic thematic nexus. In doing so, I neither follow the chronological publication order nor present a rigorous literary-studies account of the books.

2 Thinking through Food Flavors

The epistemological and aesthetic issues of knowledge, body, and thought are interspersed across Calvino's remarkably diversified *corpus*. For this reason, in

2 Besides the texts I discuss in this chapter, other works by Calvino would also deserve further attention in this respect. For example, in "The Argentine Ant" everything is infested by ants and pervaded by their scent or, alternatively, by that of insecticides. A variety of smells lingers in *Invisible Cities*, which opens with a sense of emptiness conveyed by "the odor of the elephants after the rain and the sandalwood ashes growing cold in the braziers" (Calvino 1974, 5); in addition, the smell of fish in the city of Eudoxia is just one of the aesthetic elements drawing attention to the perceiver's partial perspective. In "The Distance of the Moon," the same smell is emitted by the underbelly of the Moon, conveying *her* feminine and maternal olfactory code (see Cavallaro 2010, 54). This is reinforced by the "tart flavor" of her milk (13), another sensuous counterbalance to a highly abstract narration. In *The Nonexistent Knight*, the odor of cabbage given off by the field kitchens fills the air around the opposing regiments. When thinking about his condition as a bodiless entity, Agilulf concludes that there are some advantages to it as he lacks the common defects of carcasses, namely "coarseness, carelessness, incoherence, smell" (Calvino 1962, 56). Finally, in *Italian Folktales*, flavors are recurrent triggers of food cravings bound up with hunger, sin, and monstrous human-based diets.

the first section, I will only focus on “Under the Jaguar Sun” and *Mr. Palomar*, where these themes are explicitly related to food and flavors.

In the act of eating, taste and smell intimately cooperate, mingle, and overlap, giving rise to their complex combinations known as *flavors*.³ Many scholars have pointed this out.⁴ Indeed, it is almost superfluous to speak of the centrality of olfaction in the savoring of food during, as well as before, after, and even regardless of, its ingestion. To revisit a vivid metaphor used by the godfather of gastronomy Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin (1994, 41), the mouth is a laboratory whereas the nose functions as its chimney. Furthermore, both taste and smell are innervated by knowledge, that is, *sapere*. In Latin, *sapio/sapere* means both “to savor/taste, to have flavor” and “to know,” and this semantic correspondence persists in Italian. To evoke Michel Serres’ (2008, 235) lapidary aperçu, if the *sagacious* (I will return to this term later) knows how to smell, the (*homo*) *sapiens* knows how to taste.

Sapore/Sapere is precisely the wordplay originally chosen by Calvino for what is known today as “Under the Jaguar Sun,”⁵ the taste-themed eponymous essay of the collection (see Biasin 1993, 97). Its plot is quite popular: an Italian married couple goes on a trip to Mexico to discover the country through its cuisine and to revive their long-standing relationship, which has gradually cooled down. The aesthetic as the epistemological instance of the trip comes to light in the middle of the story: “the true journey, as the introjection of an ‘outside’ different from our normal one, implies a complete change of nutrition, a digesting of the visited country” (Calvino 1988a, 12). To *know/taste* a place “authentically,”⁶ one has to *perceive* its flavors directly, exercising mindful presence, which cannot be replaced either by media transposition or by any recreation of the original setting, such as at exotic restaurants in big cities. In this sense, the impossibility of flavors to be symbolized, as aptly noted by André Leroi-Gourhan (1993, 292), can be utilized in somaesthetic inquiry.

However, despite asserting the necessity of first-hand engagement, Calvino largely draws on mediated, mainly *optic*, perceptions of food flavors, and

3 Actually, all the senses are always involved. Like Shusterman, I endorse an ecological understanding of perception, where experiences are regarded as cross-sensory and transmodal, and the distinction between the domains is only drawn in retrospect.

4 A comprehensive analysis of the olfactory-gustatory plexus and the ways it has been addressed in scientific and philosophical accounts is beyond the scope of this essay. Suffice it to mention the Gibsonian coupling of smell and taste in eating into a unique “perceptual system” (Gibson 1969, 136–53).

5 Henceforth “UtJS.”

6 The complexity of authenticity cannot be discussed here; on authenticity in relation to exotic food and traveling, see Heldke (2005), Koczanowicz (2017).

actually this is a recurrent aspect of Calvino's poetics. Consequently, I will primarily address the *visual* rendering of flavors here. Indeed, "UtJS" is permeated by a multiplied kaleidoscope effect: the reader savors the flavors experienced by the protagonist as he watches his wife Olivia perceiving them. Her facial expressions and the rhythmical movements of her lips and eyes reveal the unfolding of her food experience. In such observation, the nose plays a pivotal role:

I followed the tension as it moved from her lips to her nostrils, flaring one moment, contracting the next (the plasticity of the nose is quite limited [...] and each barely perceptible attempt to expand the capacity of the nostrils in the longitudinal direction actually makes them thinner, while the corresponding reflex movement, accentuating their breadth, then seems a kind of withdrawal of the whole nose into the surface of the face).

CALVINO 1988a, 9

What Calvino describes in outward terms has important inward consequences too. As Shusterman argues, we "rarely notice our breathing, but its rhythm and depth provide rapid, reliable evidence of our emotional state" (2008, 20). Since the consciousness of breathing implies perceiving the air, the way we breathe considerably affects the flavors we perceive (and hence the feelings) by triggering somatic adaptations aimed to calibrate the olfactory stimuli according to their aesthetic values (see Gibson 1969, 145). The sensory-motor intersection⁷ is so evident in the oral sphere that "nowhere else is and does the relationship between perception and movement remain so primordial" (Tellenbach 1968, 14; translation mine). In other words, flavors change depending on the actions performed by the eater: the same food or beverage tastes different if slowly, rapidly, or barely chewed; if gulped down or lengthily held in the oral cavity; if sucked, munched, sipped, ruminated, or chomped on. This list certainly does not cover all the possible combinations of actions and aesthetic qualities. As stressed by Shusterman, "respiratory movements must be coordinated with (...) eating actions" (2016, 270). This also means that eating involves the balancing not only of the whole chest cavity but also of the body in its entirety, which works as a resonance chamber. Eating is therefore a social act in the most radical sense of the term through the somatic movements, which mirror the eater's

7 The idea that perception is tied to motion is at the basis of the most recent ecological theory of perception; see Noë (2004).

inner sensations; this is thus no coincidence that the relationship between Olivia and the protagonist heavily relies on such somaesthetic sharing:

What I have just said might suggest that, in eating, Olivia became closed into herself, absorbed with the inner course of her sensations; in reality, on the contrary, the desire her whole person expressed was that of communicating to me what she was tasting; communicating with me through flavors, or communicating with flavors through a double set of taste buds, hers and mine.

CALVINO 1988a, 9

Calvino's reflective analysis helps to move the somaesthetics of eating from a mainly self-centered inquiry toward an other-directed investigation and, therefore, to exceed the border of the individual. In fact, "UtJS" vividly shows that in "the universe of taste, everything (...) is caught in the same spiral of fluid transformation, in a relentless whirl of melting and flowing processes, and hence defined by a drastic rupture of conventional barriers between self and other" (Cavallaro 2010, 180). Rather than projecting a sort of taste at a distance, "remote tasting," or visual savoring by proxy, Calvino sheds light on the importance of attuning one's proprioception to the mirrored perception.⁸ As a popular tagline goes, food tastes better when shared; and "UtJS" offers an original outward somaesthetic understanding of such pleasures, where Olivia's and the protagonist's subjective selves "find their amplification and completion only in the unity of the couple" (Calvino 1988a, 10). Calvino goes even further, though; as a first step, he has the couple's sexuality replaced with the aphrodisiac power of Mexican cuisine, whose peculiarity lies in stimulating desires "that sought their satisfaction only within the very sphere of sensation that had aroused them—in eating new dishes" (*ibid.*). This self-referential and solipsistic orientation blurs the boundary between chaste and carnal love as a result of the "experience of flavors gained through secret and subtle complicity" (11).

However, the two characters do not have the same somaesthetic attitude. Olivia is "more sensitive to perceptive nuances and endowed with a more

⁸ According to Helmuth Plessner, states of mind are usually rendered through gustatory metaphors not only because of "the stronger and more differentiated affective resonance of sensations of taste" but also for the greater plasticity, and hence expressivity, of the cheeks and the mouth (1970, 62). This may also explain the projective gratification viewers/listeners obtain from eating shows, such as "food asmr" or "mukbang" videos in which people disparately consume their food.

analytical memory” (ibid.), paying great attention to subtle sensations and becoming almost motionless, concentrated, and concerned, “as if reluctant to allow an inner echo to fade”⁹ (8). As a confirmation of her *thinking through the flavors*, she tensely interrogates the husband, assuming that they are currently having the same experience: “Did you taste that? Are you tasting it? (...) Is it *cilantro*? Can’t you taste *cilantro*?” (9). Olivia acts as a “nose,” a person who, through training, develops an *organ* capable of distinguishing the slightest olfactory nuances. As Bruno Latour insightfully maintains, perceptual skills imply that the body learns to be affected or, as he puts it, “body parts are progressively acquired at the same time as ‘world counter-parts’ are being registered in a new way” (2004, 207). In the process, the person achieves *sapere* in its double meaning: the capacity of tasting and the corresponding ability to detect and to know “*hitherto unregistrable differences*” (209; italics original), “*a minima aesthetica*” (Diaconu 2006, 141; italics original) that, in olfactory training, has to do with infinitesimal variances. Olivia is therefore *sagacious*. As previously alluded, sagacity means “perspicacity.” Derived from the Latin *sagire*, it is closely linked to olfaction, signifying “acute sense of smell, keen-scented”; this ties in with the somaesthetic exploratory modality of knowing, where body and mind cannot be distinguished, and has to do with sniffing as “getting a whiff of something.” Indeed, numerous idiomatic expressions prove the epistemological weight of smell, which is usually underestimated by philosophers.¹⁰

As a counterbalance to Olivia’s sensitivity, the protagonist tends “to define experiences verbally and conceptually” (Calvino 1988a, 11). He is presumably Calvino’s alter ego, and let us not forget Calvino’s admission of being hindered by the obtuseness of smell and taste. However, as a writer, Calvino plumbs the depths of languages “in order to foreground the lunacy inherent in any attempt to grasp conclusively the mysteries of perception and communication alike” (Cavallaro 2010, 14). His lexical choices endeavor to convey the very flavor of the referent, so that the reader can savor it. This attempt to create a synesthetic language¹¹ is characteristic of Calvino’s style, as exemplified by

9 The phrase is an evident homage to the celebrated Proustian episode of the madeleine.

10 Think only of English, where “to smell out” or “to have a nose for something” hints at a vague, though at the same time clear, perceptual intuition, which does not need to resort to any rational, linguistic, or argumentative reasoning (Le Breton 2022, 7).

11 As noted by Franco Ricci: “Though Calvino never developed a systematic theory of aesthetic perception, clearly he considered the medium of literature as both an intellectual and a sense-simulating instrument. In his attempts to extend the boundaries of literature he used the sensuality of objects to create literary effects” (2001, 91).

the second incipit of *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler*,¹² an extremely sensuous and concrete description of the gastronomical olfactory dimension of the setting in which the narrative unfolds. Here, *schoëblintsjia* is an emblematic case. Even if the readers do not know what kind of dish *schoëblintsjia* is, they “can taste its flavor distinctly even though the text doesn’t say what that flavor is, an acidulous flavor” (Calvino 1981, 35; see Salvatori 1986, 207–8). In “UtJS,” the issue surfaces in connection with *gorditas pellizcadas con manteca*, the meatballs through which the protagonist “eats” (the fragrance of) Olivia in an act of metaphorical cannibalism.

To conclude my discussion of “UtJS,” let me consider the charge leveled against the protagonist by his wife, who accuses him of being *insipid* in her specular figurative “savoring” of the partner. According to Shusterman, “somatic self-consciousness always involves an environmental field significantly larger than the self” (2012, 110). Calvino seems to fully agree with this idea since the protagonist protests as a response, claiming that “there are ranges of flavor more discreet and restrained than that of red peppers. There are subtle tastes that one must know how to perceive!” (Calvino 1988a, 25). This signals the problem of overstimulation, which was identified by Georg Simmel and then reformulated by Shusterman in the contemporary and somaesthetic key. The excess and exaggeration of aesthetic stimuli generate not only attention problems but also an elevation of the perceptual threshold, followed by anaesthetization, which smooths out the subtle differences that should characterize the “*minima aesthetica*” of smell. Thus Olivia’s nose may have become provisionally used to stronger scents, the intrusive flavors of Mexican cuisine. Hence, her husband is *insipid* inasmuch as Olivia’s smell cannot taste/know the flavors drowned down by the violent stimuli, which cause a generalized olfactory fatigue. Here, Calvino’s poetics prefigures the main aesthetic predicament of our century and concurrently supports an appeal for a somaesthetic education to fully appreciate experiences that are not necessarily extraordinary.¹³

12 At the beginning of the book, Calvino (1981, 3–4) offers real somaesthetic advice designed to enhance the pleasure of reading, considering background noise, position, lighting, and the like sensory aspects.

13 In this regard, Calvino was not really mistaken when predicting that perfumeries would be “epigraphs in an undecipherable language” for the deaf nostrils of the humans to come (1988a, 67). At the same time, today’s increasingly popular trends include olfactory training (also to heal smell disorders as side-effects of COVID-19 infections), olfactory environmental exploration (e.g., “smellwalks”), and using food flavors to improve health (e.g., effervescent aromatic tablets or flasks with scented pods to increase water intake and restrict caloric intake). On olfactory artistic projects with therapeutic aims, see Georgsdorf (2021, 127–8).

An exploration on food flavors and knowledge inspired by Calvino would be incomplete without mentioning *Mr. Palomar*. Like the senses-themed collection *Under the Jaguar Sun*, the writing process of *Mr. Palomar* can also be considered a “somaesthetic exercise” for Calvino himself, given his professed deficit of observatory and descriptive skills (Calvino 2002, 112). Observation—and, hence, sight—is the perceptual modality that dominates this book, even when food and flavors are involved. Tellingly, though nearsighted and astigmatic, Mr. Palomar takes his name from the Palomar astronomical telescope in California, embodying the aspiration to escape subjectivity and to describe isolated things as they *appear* (see Wood 1994; Heaney 2001; Baldi 2019). However, the more the experiential field is circumscribed, the more it multiplies and becomes permeable and complex, hindering Mr. Palomar in his anxious pursuit of truth as a single, detached, and absolute principle. Seeking the essence of what he observes, his ontological inquiry invariably ends in failure. In this chapter, I analyze “Mr. Palomar Does the Shopping,” focusing on two episodes: “Two pounds of goose fat” and “The cheese museum.”

The former takes place at Christmas and is set in a Parisian charcuterie, where Mr. Palomar is queuing, surrounded by delicacies. His attention being caught by a jar with goose fat inside, he tries to remember the flavor of *casoulet*, a French stew of meat and beans slowly cooked in goose fat. In a visual metaphor, the goose limbs immersed in their fat can be half-seen like a dark shadow in the fog of memories. However, “neither his palate’s memory nor his cultural memory is of any help of him” (Calvino 1985, 67), when contemplating the jar. All the foods displayed in the shop window are described in terms of their visual appearance; tapestry and a coat of arms are just some of the analogies used to optically convey the edible diversity in front of him—a vivid variety in contrast with the customers’ gray opacity. Actually, it seems to be precisely Palomar’s *voyeurism* that prevents him from recalling the flavors he would like to retrieve, and indeed the conflict between sight, the perception of flavors, and recollection is on the whole evident in common bodily behaviors that suppress sight in order to foster aromatic experiences. There seems to be, to use Shusterman’s terminology, an “unconsciously conscious” aesthetic wisdom through which the soma creates the conditions for the enjoyment of flavors, prioritizing one perceptual modality over others. The “memories of odors from the past,” Gaston Bachelard argues, “are recovered by closing our eyes” (1969, 136); and, not incidentally, when Mr. Palomar *looks around*, expecting to feel “the vibration of an orchestra of flavors,” everything is silent:

All those delicacies stir in him imprecise, blurred memories; his imagination does not instinctively associate flavors with images and names. He asks himself if his gluttony is not chiefly mental, aesthetic, symbolic. (...)

[H]is gaze transforms every food into a document of the history of civilization, a museum exhibit.

CALVINO 1985, 69–70

A similar thing occurs in the other episode, which takes place in a Paris cheese store. Here, Mr. Palomar also adopts an ocular (and nomenclative)¹⁴ approach: he *sees* the names, concepts, meanings, histories, contexts, and psychologies of cheeses, fully aware that even the most detailed classification of cheeses according to their forms, textures, and ingredients “would not bring him a step closer to true knowledge, which lies in the experience of the flavors, composed of memory and imagination at once” (73). In this respect, the interconnection of knowing/tasting has been paramount in pragmatist aesthetics for dismissing the *ocularcentric* paradigm of Western thought. According to John Dewey, taste and pleasure are tightly intertwined with knowledge: the *epicure*, while sampling food, *thinks through its flavors*, that is, experiences “qualities that depend upon reference to its source and its manner of production in connection with criteria of excellence” (1980, 49). Though not a gourmet, Calvino (and/as Mr. Palomar) still knows—but just theoretically, without *tasting*—that

[b]ehind every cheese there is a pasture of a different green under a different sky: meadows caked with salt that the tides of Normandy deposit every evening; meadows scented with aromas in the windy sunlight of Provence; there are different flocks, with their stables and their transhumances; there are secret processes handed down over the centuries.

CALVINO 1985, 73

Elsewhere, Calvino states that “the retina is a peripheral portion of the cerebral cortex” (2013b, 118), contending that “the brain begins in the eye” (119). In spite of Calvino’s renowned fascination with the visual, it would be wrong to attribute to him the naïve belief that sight is not affected by “external” or “internal” factors, such as culture, environment, society, moods, and somatic states. It is clear in Mr. Palomar’s inquiries that *seeing* is not a passive, unfiltered, or neutral detection of objective facts, but rather, as Maurice Merleau-Ponty showed, a complex action that depends on the *use* of the gaze and is attuned to an array of circumstances and conditions.¹⁵ In contrast to “UtJS,” where

14 The cheese store also appears to Mr. Palomar as a *dictionary*, with appellatives, lexical variants, and synonyms of all the cheeses.

15 As philosophers have argued, despite the traditional superiority of sight as the sense of “disinterest,” “science,” “knowledge,” and even of “mind,” it is impossible to sever the cognitive from the affective. The mind itself has been recognized as “a bodily-affective

sight is appropriately employed as an affective and transmodal medium, Mr. Palomar's scrutiny mode noticeably inhibits his affective *reciprocal relationship* (Calvino 1985, 72) with food. As he falls back on an analytic and object-oriented look, he seeks the self-sufficient, crystallized, and representative "image" of flavors, which impedes their disclosing and precludes the establishment of "a scale of preferences and tastes and curiosities and exclusions" (73), one that might help him to choose his cheese amid the proliferation of potentially infinite options.

Lost in his ruminations and trying to memorize each dairy product he can see, he starts to sketch in his notebook a categorization system based on names and visual details. At this point, taken by surprise by the salesgirl's call, he becomes confused, and the "elaborate and greedy order that he intended to make momentarily slips his mind" (74–5). He ends up opting for the most trivial and publicized cheese, a result of visual advertising and unmindful, subliminal conditioning by mass media, whose influence is actually an embodied and powerful affective force, as stressed by Shusterman.

Below, I address the affective dimension of food flavors understood as a somaesthetic repository of lived experiences, in which the past and the present, thinking and feeling overlap and interpenetrate. This interplay is paramount in the hedonic responses to food.

3 Feeling through Food Flavors

The inextricable intimacy between the body and the mind is evident in "the ways that moods and thoughts affect eating, drinking, and digestion, and the ways these latter reciprocally affect our mental states" (Shusterman 2008, 184). The affective influence of food is a key subject in the psychology and philosophy of taste, and flavors play a fundamental role in it. The emotional impacts of food can be traced down by considering the aromatic relationships children establish with their mothers and family. Kinship as the "domestic" sphere corresponds to an olfactory dimension that ultimately coincides with the general emotional *atmosphere*, which in the same breath "is condensed into taste" (Tellenbach 1981, 226). Moods, flavors, and nourishment concur and, under normal conditions, are permeated with affection, trust, and protection; as such, they acquire an interchangeable atmospheric value. Although atmospheres have to do with all the senses and manifest themselves cross-sensorially, smell

instrument oriented to the 'knowing-how' (*pathos*), whose realizations are at least partly due to bodily-environmental structures and processes" (Griffero 2017, 71).

seems to be endowed with an “atmospheric primacy,” a point asserted by very different scholars, from Eugène Minkowski (1999) to Gernot Böhme (2019) and others (see Griffero 2022; Mancioppi 2022a, 2023).

Somaesthetically, “[a]tmosphere is experienced by the subject as a perceptual feeling that emerges from and pervades a situation; like other perceptual feelings, atmosphere is experienced in large part as a bodily feeling” (Shusterman 2012, 234). The notion of atmosphere can be understood as the point of convergence between the geopsychic tradition of the *genius loci* and the phenomenological idea of *Leib* (Griffero 2008, 76); in this framework, geographers, architects, and designers tend to agree in assigning the nose a special role, as it can detect the aesthetic-emotional quality of spaces (see Illich 1985, 45–66). A vibrant illustration is provided, again, in *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler*, where Calvino describes the olfactory *aura* of the train station, which is characterized by “a passing whiff of station café odor” (1981, 10). After all, he reflects, stations “are all alike,” with their special odor “after the last train has left,” combined with “the odor of the platform [and] the odor of wet sawdust in the toilets, all mixed in a single odor which is that of waiting” (11).

Atmosphere is a key notion to open up a new path in research on olfactory somaesthetics, since it provides fruitful understandings of the plexus of flavors and the felt dimension of the somatic presence as inextricably entangled with its surroundings (see Schmitz 2019). This is perhaps nowhere more pronounced, I posit, than when dealing with food as a powerful mood-, aesthetic-, and somatic-shaping element. Food flavors emblematically imbue space and time with a peculiar atmospheric quality. Regarding this, one thinks of Calvino’s “Stamps from States of Mind,” which discusses the postage stamps of fictional nations by the American artist Donald Evans. In Calvino’s essay, Evans’ imaginary geography is depicted as a visual diary of feelings and experiences designed to preserve the affective quality of the places he visited. The subjects are manifold but, as Calvino notices, “it was above all through food that Evans established his relationship with countries, catching their most typical flavours and aromas during his travels” (2013a, 141). Indeed, the stamp series of the country called “Mangiare” was created after Evans’ Italian journey, and the stamps picture a wide variety of condiments and seasonings (e.g., *pesto alla genovese*).

According to Simmel, the act of smelling implies a somatic/affective intertwining tangled to the point of triggering the impression of assimilating—even of *eating*—the odorous source. For this reason, not only any odor and food flavor but also a person’s scent “penetrates, so to speak, in the form of air, into our most inner senses” (Simmel 2009, 578). As already mentioned in conjunction with childhood, food flavors often absorb the emotional irradiance emanating

from human relationships. This is evident in Calvino's *Marcovaldo*, whose eponymous protagonist is a tragicomic personification of a human being in the capitalist society and an inveterate dreamer who craves to experience nature in the hostile urban environment (see Cantarin and Marino 2018). In the episode "The Lunch-Box," the protagonist's pleasure of eating is spoiled by his fraught family relationships. Every day, the proletarian Marcovaldo goes to work and, to save time and money, eats his noon meal brought from home outdoors, near the place he works. By describing the flow of Marcovaldo's sometimes contradictory moods and perceptions, bodily movements, and reflections, Calvino portrays a detailed phenomenology of the somaesthetic experience of food consumed from a lunch-box, corroborating Shusterman's idea of "the sentient soma" or, alternately, Dewey's concept of the body-mind as a transactional whole.

"The joys of that round and flat vessel (...)," the opening reads, "consist first of all in its having a screw-on top" (Calvino 1983b, 31); this makes the very action of unscrewing the top a foretasting of the content, all the more so that Marcovaldo does *not* know what food is inside, because it is always made by his wife Domitilla. The sense of mystery is the key factor in this initial phase of pleasure, but in the end Marcovaldo's expectations are almost invariably disappointed. At this stage, having opened the box, he quickly sniffs the aromas and then pokes the food with the fork to make it more visually attractive. While this procedure gives his lunch quite a pretty look, it reveals its small amount in the same gesture. Thus, Marcovaldo resolves to carefully measure the timing of each bite and mindfully chews the food, taking as much time as his hunger allows. Once a forkful enters his mouth, the "immediate sensation is the sadness of eating cold food, but the joys promptly begin again as you find the flavors of the family board transported to an unusual setting" (32). However, while eating, Marcovaldo wonders:

"Why am I so happy to taste the flavor of my wife's cooking here, when at home, among the quarrels and tears, the debts that crop up in every conversation, I can't enjoy it?" And then he thinks: "Now I remember. These are the leftovers from last night's supper." And he is immediately seized again by discontent, perhaps because he has to eat leftovers, cold and a bit soured, perhaps because the aluminum of the lunch-box gives the food a metallic taste, but the notion lodged in his head is: The thought of Domitilla manages to spoil my meals even when I'm far away from her.

ibid.

The concern is then ousted by appetite, which increases as the quantity of food diminishes and eventually runs out; then sorrow takes over again.

The monotony of this humdrum routine is paradoxically broken when Domitilla serves sausage and turnips for three consecutive dinners and as many lunches. Besides gustatory boredom and the sense of being neglected, Marcovaldo ascribes his repulsion to the food itself: the sausages taste like dog meat, especially for their unbearable stench, and turnip is the only vegetable he dislikes anyway. However, naïve and absent-minded as he is, Marcovaldo repeats the ritual outlined above over three days in an unchanged sequence of expectation and frustration; on the fourth day, once he has smelled the same disgusting odor, he begins to wander about inattentively, still holding the lunch-box with his untouched lunch inside. The episode ends with Marcovaldo gladly enjoying a plate of fried brains, the result of food exchange with a child who refused to eat his meal and, confined to his room as a punishment, was looking out of the window of his elegant villa.¹⁶ Marcovaldo and the child greedily eat each other's dishes, "declaring they had never tasted such good food" (34). Here, gustatory pleasure seems boosted not so much by the aesthetic qualities of the food itself as by the fact that the affective traits of the food, which correspond to the respective "domospheres," carry no negative connotations for the eaters. Indeed, by eating sausages and turnips, Marcovaldo *tastes* his "real" existence marred by financial difficulties and inconveniences of the noisy and cramped house in a gray industrial city, where he lives with his six children and Domitilla, whose pragmatism dissuades him from sharing his dreamy world with her.

In general terms, one criticism of somaesthetics has been that it "de-dramatize[s] self-awareness and avoid[s] the most intense affective expositions that could prove it" (Griffero 2021, 19). Accordingly, the somaesthetics of eating might be blamed for denying and rejecting the pivotal notion of disgust,¹⁷ along with negative relationships with food,¹⁸ which are dismissed as the non-artistic, unskilled, uncultivated, and unethical way of ingesting or selecting food. To put it differently, Shusterman's melioristic framework aims

16 At the child's exchange proposal, "Marcovaldo looked at the dish on the sill. There were fried brains, soft and curly as a pile of clouds. *His nostrils twitched*" (Calvino 1983b, 34; italics mine).

17 The notion of disgust covers a vast philosophical field that cannot be explored here. It has been extensively addressed by a range of scholars, such as Carolyn Korsmeyer, Winfried Menninghaus, and Colin McGinn, to mention just a few notable examples. On disgust related to food and smell as a positive perceptual value, also in terms of social and cultural education, see Spaid (2021).

18 Shusterman proposes a distinction between gastronomes who know how to select and enjoy good food and gastronomes who additionally know how to make eating an art—by the appreciation of "the aesthetic elements and qualities of the experience of ingesting food" (2016, 263). Even if Marcovaldo does not meet the criteria for a gastronome, it cannot be denied that he somehow "eats artistically."

to foster *positive values* and *pleasures* of food, championing the food that promotes overall wellbeing, mindful and beautiful eating, and even the subject's capacity to convert some negative values into positive ones, for instance, to enjoy the sensation of hunger. Of course, his project has very good reasons to do so. Yet, there *is* nonetheless *negative* pleasure connected to food in manifold ways; there can be pleasure in eating without seeking composure, balance, health benefits, or harmony. Indeed, one can be invaded by a deep, mindful, and peculiar pleasure while rudely devouring food, instead of elegantly nibbling at it, or while using fingers instead of cutlery in an open violation to table manners.¹⁹ This aspect can prove pivotal in shedding light on the poles of food pleasures and their somaesthetic significance. In this respect, a useful illustration can be found in Calvino's "Theft in a Cakeshop," a short story set in poor postwar Italy and telling of three miserable thieves who sneak inside a pastry store to steal the takings.

The primacy of smells comes to light at the very beginning of the story, when Dritto, the leader of the band, employs his nostrils to show the way to his companions: Baby, the most important character of the story, and Uora-Uora, the lookout. To ease the way for Dritto and break into the store, Baby has to climb up on a window:

It was then that he became aware of the smell; he took a deep breath and up through his nostrils wafted an aroma of freshly baked cakes. It gave him a feeling of shy excitement, of remote tenderness, rather than of actual greed.

"Oh, what a lot of cakes there must be in there," he thought. It was years since he had eaten a proper bit of cake, not since before the war perhaps.

CALVINO 1983c, 98

19 Interesting insights can be gleaned from the banquet scene in Calvino's *The Nonexistent Knight*, where the paladins messily boast and gourmandize their food, except Agilulf. Having no body and hence no possibility to feel appetite, no stomach to fill, and no palate to gratify, Agilulf meticulously simulates the ceremony of the meal without eating or tasting, in an artistic choreography of handling each course with extreme care, cutting, chopping, plating, seasoning, pouring, etc. Engrossed in this simulation, Agilulf is constantly asking for new cutlery and dishware, so much so that "he who ate nothing needed more attendance by servers than the whole of the rest of the table" (Calvino 1962, 74). Today, many food artists and designers, such as Marije Vogelzang and Giulia Soldati, encourage the rediscovery and cultivation of somatic pleasures bred by a less mannered engagement with food.

Using the hands to make his way into the pitch-black backroom to let Dritto in, Baby finds himself surrounded by cakes. As his sensations alternate between tactile disgust, olfactory seduction, gustatory impulse, and even horror and pure happiness, Baby is so absorbed by this intrusive, sweet, and sticky presence that he forgets about his task. The reader immediately *smells* that the situation is gradually heading to a climax. In fact, when Dritto lights up the darkness with his torch, Baby's ambiguous and quite repulsive contact with pastries morphs into a bottomless optic yearning. On seeing the splendid "land of milk and money" (100), Baby is overwhelmed with anxiety, as he at once has an urge to grab everything and feels the pressure of time. So, he

flung himself on the shelves, choking himself with cakes, cramming two or three inside his mouth at a time, *without even tasting them*; he seemed to be battling with the cakes, as if they were threatening enemies, strange monsters besieging him, a crisp and sticky siege which he must break through by the force of his jaw.

ibid.; italics mine

"In gluttony," Walter Benjamin observes, "two things coincide: the boundlessness of desire and the uniformity of the food that sates it" (1999, 358).²⁰ Nicola Perullo (2016, 101–2) labels this perceptual phenomenon as *compulsive indifference* of taste; here, the taste of food becomes marginal, while its tactile dimension salient. When taste and smell fade, the haptic and erotic dimensions prevail to the point that Baby "still felt a kind of frenzy he did not know how to satisfy; (...) he would have liked to lie down in those tarts, cover himself with them" (Calvino 1983c, 101). Eventually the pastries become repulsive again. With this shift, Baby

found that he no longer had any desire for cakes, in fact a feeling of nausea was beginning to creep up from the pit of his stomach, but he refused to believe it, he simply could not give up yet. And the doughnuts began to turn into soggy pieces of sponge, the tarts to flypaper and the cakes to asphalt. Now he saw only the corpses of cakes lying putrifying on their marble slabs, or felt them disintegrating like turgid glue inside his stomach.

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20 Benjamin's episode took place in Naples, where he bought colorful figs in quantity. As the seller had no wrapping paper, Benjamin was compelled to squeeze them all in his pockets, hands, and mouth. The description shares manifold perceptual similarities with Calvino's story, since smell, taste, sight, and touch acquire conflicting somaesthetic values.

A somaesthetic examination of disgust as the extreme stage of food pleasure would probably devote a lot of attention to touch, which represents an ambivalent fluctuation between and, at moments, a near-coexistence of voracity and satiety, delight and nausea; touch is also implicated in the conflicting impulses to incorporate the “enemy” and push it away, which transform into physical tensions.²¹ For its part, smell—*the* sense of disgust par excellence²²—usually acts in order to prevent ingestion. In extreme cases in which dramatic gluttony seizes the eater, flavors give way to the substantiality and frictions of food. For Baby, a positive affect initially coexists with a negative one in the aroma of cakes, as he feels not just “shy excitement” and “remote tenderness” but also greed, poverty, social disparity, and crime through baked flavors. The way he gobbles food and pays conscious attention to his tactile reactions unveils the somaesthetic complexity inherent in the same person. The atmospheric contrast is exacerbated here by the gap between the kind of food (refined and dainty patisseries, each with a name that conveys traditions, crafts, human geography, rituals, etc.) and its dramatic and “feral” consumption, which even the police cannot stop or resist. In the end, after hiding behind the counter and loudly eating candied fruit to calm down, Baby manages to escape. Having inspected the store in vain and stuffed themselves with sweets, the policemen declare “to have seen a monkey with its nose plastered with cream swing across the shop, overturning trays and tarts” (104). This connection between animality, eating, and impulse encourages exploring the relationships between food, the senses (specifically smell), and body posture as one facet of somatic styles as addressed by Shusterman.

4 Smell, Food, and Somatic Styles

Calvino’s “The Name, the Nose”²³ and *T Zero* both highlight two issues. One of them is the relation between human body posture and olfactory functions, and the other is the role of odors and food in somatic styling, personal scent, and identity. This helps us to shed light on *somatic style*, which is an essential and broad concept in somaesthetics, and to put forward some

21 Instead of acting as an adhesive, disgust is “centrifugal” in *The Baron in the Trees*. The aversion and refusal of a dish of snails cooked by his creepy sister prompt the protagonist, Cosimo Piovasco di Rondò, to escape into the trees.

22 Aurel Kolnai’s claim that “the true place of origin of disgust is the sense of smell” (2004, 50) is just one articulation of this widely held hypothesis.

23 Henceforth “TNtN.”

observations on identity, food, and social issues. Although in “TNtN” food is only mentioned incidentally, the essay is useful in supporting and winding up my argument.

Included in *Under the Jaguar Sun*, “TNtN” is unique in being Calvino’s sole essay completely devoted to smell. As a short and accurate overview that transliterates scientific findings on olfaction into a literary form, it covers what scholars have discussed on smell in various disciplines—from biology to history, and from philosophy to chemistry (see Cavallaro 2010, 187–91; Shiner 2020, 35–6). It is composed of three fragmentary and tightly interrelated stories, which are thematically analogical but temporally and spatially transposed to different eras and settings. Indeed, they have the same first-person narrator who is caught in a dizzying journey through time and space. The common thread is provided by the male protagonist’s endeavors to reach the female fragrant source, leading to the epilogue where the craved odor mixes with that of death (see Stamelman 2006, 272–3). The protagonist-narrator appears as three characters, respectively: 1) Monsieur de Saint-Caliste, a wealthy 19th-century Parisian hedonist; 2) an undefined prehistoric ancestor who evolves into a primate and a hominid; and 3) a 20th-century English punk-rock drummer.

Let us start with posture and smell mechanisms. Phylogenetically, hominids seem to have evolved from primates, and the process entailed multiple anatomical modifications, including the transition from quadrupedalism to bipedalism. The development of upright posture caused considerable changes to the nasal organ and the role of smell. It is precisely on this aesthetic switch that Calvino centers the episode in which the animal-like character turns into a human.²⁴ Locomotion and olfactory functions affect and determine each other. In fact, when environments were perceived as “a network of smells” (Calvino 1988a, 71), bodies were oriented downwards: heads and noses were lowered to track trails and clues, and limbs were in contact with the ground to move and run along. In essence, olfaction had primacy in discriminating between food and non-food, sexual partners and rivals, preys and predators and, more generally, in proprioception. As animals, “[w]e understood whatever there was to understand through our noses rather than through our eyes,” so much so that “everything [was] first perceived by the nose, everything [was]

24 Interestingly, in the ninth incipit of *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler*, Calvino uses a complex flavor to picture a reversal of human ontogenesis. While eating spicy meatballs prepared by the woman the protagonist suspects to be his mother, his lips are burning “as if that flavor should contain all flavors carried to their extreme,” eliciting “an opposite but perhaps equivalent sensation which is that of the milk for an infant, since as the first flavor it contains all flavor” (1981, 226).

within the nose, the world [was] the nose" (ibid.). Afterwards, once hands no longer had to climb trees or to support locomotion, the nose rose from the ground to remain suspended in the air. This had manifold consequences, including the loss of the information achieved by sniffing the earth. However, there were still some benefits: "the nose [was] drier, so you [could] pick up distant smells carried by the wind, and you [found] fruit on the trees, birds' eggs in their nests. And your eyes help[ed] your nose, they grasp[ed] things in space" (80).

As Shusterman (2008, 208–9) reminds, erect posture is at the basis of "humanity," enabling humans to create tools and develop intellectual abilities such as abstraction.²⁵ According to this evolutionist view, language also depends on the orthograde posture and the partial dismissal of smell, since facial muscles are employed for articulating speech, instead of for sniffing or for prehensile tasks. Thus, even if the status of smell changes—Shusterman maintains that, "like sight and hearing, it is a distance sense that requires no direct contact with the object whose odor it perceives" (2011a, 153)—it has long suffered from the burden of uncivilized animality.²⁶ In other words, the aesthetic (and also epistemic, ethical, and social) values of the senses are affected by the posture of the body, which determines their position relative to the ground. Broadly speaking, the hierarchy of the senses, with smell traditionally relegated to the bottom of the scale (Korsmeyer 1999, 11–37), seems to be rooted in the long-lasting Western contraposition of the "high"/"superior" and the "low"/"inferior,"²⁷ as well as in the dichotomy of "humanity" and "bestiality." It is on these factors that Sigmund Freud's (1962, 46n, 53n) well-known observations on smell hinge, establishing a direct link between sexual repression (eroticism is largely driven by strong olfactory stimuli from genitals, bodily

25 The opposition between cognitive capacities (i.e., reflection and categorization) and smell as the sense of immediacy and concreteness seems to be confirmed by perceptual disorders such as *hyperosmia* (heightened olfaction); see Sacks (1998, 157).

26 Smell as a distal sense appears in Calvino's *The Baron in the Trees*. An interstitial figure between a civilized human and a wild animal living in the trees, Cosimo uses his nose as a compass to orient himself amid the thick green foliage, where sight is ineffective. Taking advantage of his privileged position, he is the only one to control the forested territory of Ombrosa. For instance, when asked about the wares that the Moors have stolen from the merchants, he answers: "I haven't seen properly (...). From the smell, I'd say that there was a lot of stockfish and goat's cheese" (Calvino 1959, 114).

27 According to Hegel, even if the nose is placed in-between the upper and the lower part of the face, standing for, respectively, the theoretical/spiritual and the practical dimensions, "it still belongs to an animal need, for smelling is essentially connected with taste and this after all is why in the animal the nose is there in the service of the mouth and feeding" (1975, 729).

fluids, etc.)²⁸ and the rising from the ground, which paved the way for civilization. As Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno maintain, societies despise smell precisely because it is the depository of “the old nostalgia for what is lower (...), the longing for immediate union with surrounding nature, with earth and slime”; as such smell becomes “a disgrace, a sign of the lower social orders, lesser races, and baser animals” (2002, 151). Likewise, once Calvino’s first-person narrator symbolizing human phylogenesis smells a female odor which stands out from the collective odor of the herd, he manages to find her, but

if you stop, in the herd’s stampede, they are all on top of you, trampling you, confusing your nose with their smells; and now I’m on top of her, and they are pushing us, overturning us; they all climb on her, on me; all the females sniff me; all the males and females become tangled with us, and all their smells, which have nothing to do with that smell I smelled before and now smell no longer.

CALVINO 1988a, 72

This primordial, but still lingering, memory is embodied in the punk-rock drummer incarnation of the narrator-protagonist. Calvino portrays moral lowness through the story in which the hungover rocker is surrounded by intoxicated people sleeping or fornicating on the floor of a concert room in a stinky London district after a night of revelry. Debauchery has a specific postural and olfactory dimension here: sweaty and stinky, the drummer crawls on a carpet soaked with alcohol and vomit, keenly sniffing dirty groupies lying around. Even though finding himself “in a big tangle of bodies” (75) and befogged by strong odors and a gas leak, he is magnetized by a scent that stands out from the general stench. He is sure it is exuded by a ginger-haired girl’s white and freckled skin and, as he finds her through his nose, they have a sexual intercourse while semiconscious.

Mutatis mutandis, the episode with Monsieur de Saint-Caliste at the center can be interpreted as a specular sublimation of smell. The story begins in a luxurious *parfumerie* on Champs-Élysées, where the protagonist, a loyal customer, desperately asks the owner, Madame Odile, for help in identifying the languid essence oozed by a mysterious woman he smelled at a masked ball. Olfaction is elevated here firstly through the culturalization of its stimuli, which do not

28 By necessity, I do not look into the gender issue. For a discussion on Simone de Beauvoir, the female body, and smell, see Shusterman (2008, 92); on the link between gender, smell, and food, see Mancipio (2022b).

stem from any natural bodily effluvium but from the fine art of perfumery;²⁹ and, secondly, through the social position of the characters and the spatial positioning of the odorous sources. It is not a coincidence that the precious jars containing the rare essences are up on the “highest shelves” of the shop, and the salesgirls have to *climb* to reach them. As Shusterman (2021) points out, perfumery cannot be overlooked when considering erotic arts, in which sexual instincts are dressed in an olfactory refinement, which corresponds to aesthetic cultivation. In this sense, it is interesting to note that Calvino adapts the diction to the evolutionary stage represented by the narrator-protagonist, making verbal expression inversely proportional to the cognitive role of smell and its elevation above the ground. While Monsieur de Saint-Caliste’s story is characterized by sophisticated vocabulary, the drummer’s and the primate’s narratives are phrased in colloquial, even coarse language. Their frenetic prose stylistically evokes the constant succession of smells, as well as the narrator’s becoming and evolution in a linguistic/perceptual flux, and it concurrently forms “a kaleidoscopic montage that threatens the breakdown of system” (Hume 1992, 41).

As already mentioned, the *fil rouge* of “TNtN” is the “hunting” of an odor that embodies the very essence of the desired female: “Odor, that’s what each of us has that’s different from the others” (Calvino 1988a, 72). This ties in with the issue of personal scent as one of the most peculiar components of somatic style. Personal scent can be either “natural” or “artificial.” Of course, this is a controversial distinction since an “added” fragrance does not cover the “self-generated” odor. Rather, as Calvino rightly notices, perfume enhances the smell of the wearer’s skin, and in “TNtN,” the fragrance worn by the unidentified lady “enclosed the perfume of her body as an oyster encloses its pearl” (77). Indeed, cosmetics are part of what Shusterman calls “somatic self-styling” (see Di Stefano 2018). In fact, as he insists, a mere deodorization of the body, or the selection of a random, even if nice, perfume, is not enough for one to be desirable. One needs to carefully choose “a fragrance that goes beyond the scent’s intrinsic allure but also expresses the particular character, personality, or style that the person in question wants to convey” (Shusterman 2011a, 153). Going one step further, Shusterman adds that “the style expressed is more than a mere superficial matter of surface body scent or olfactory connoisseurship but also an expression of one’s deeper character or ethical style” (ibid.). This

29 Perfume expertise is very ancient and quite exclusive, given the “unsubstantial” and expensive nature of fragrances; its most famous practice is *Kōdō*, the Japanese art of appreciating incense; see Jaquet (2018), Shusterman (2011a, 154).

echoes Simmel's reflections on olfactory adornment, which, like clothes and jewels,³⁰ "covers the personal atmosphere [replacing] it with an objective one and yet makes it stand out at the same time" (2009, 579).

The question is what is meant by a "natural," "self-generated" scent, and what its origins are. Since diet is among the most prominent factors shaping individual odors, food can be considered a peculiar styling-driver. As Shusterman argues, "[s]tyles of diet are likewise recognized not only through the smell of the food itself but through the odoriferous traces they leave on our skin and breath" (2011a, 153). In this respect, he remembers arriving at his mother-in-law's village in rural Japan and being told that he smelled like a Korean. Clearly, the garlicky dinner consumed in Seoul the previous day "was still producing its somatic scent" (*ibid.*). It appears that, beyond the sociopolitical issues raised by smells,³¹ an olfactory somaesthetics needs to be articulated as a mediated perceptual practice in which the main focus is less on the soma of the self and more on that of the "other," as proposed in relation to eating in the discussion of "UtJS." In other words, one's olfactory somatic style is always indirectly subsumed by the aesthetic sensitivity of others. Hence, olfactory self-awareness is mostly outward-oriented, in that one's own personal odor is normally the blind spot of proprioception. Shusterman develops this point in broad terms and uses a vivid example of a smoker who "does not smell and taste herself"; he goes on to explain that, in the stylistic field, "self and other are very tightly interwoven" (2015, 186) because the self internalizes the "appreciator's" gaze. In our case, we might say the "appreciator's" nose.

The observations on personal scent apply to collective odors characteristic of ethnic or social groups as well. Eating choices and dietary habits are of great importance in this regard, since food contributes to shaping collective somatic styles too. However, as Shusterman's mother-in-law's grudge indicates, olfactory somatic style fluctuates between stability and impermanence. If, according to the Japanese olfactory sensitivity, eating garlic makes one smell like a Korean, the very olfactory identity must be understood as "transactional," to borrow the Deweyan concept dear to Shusterman, or as inherently "mingled," to use Serres' terminology. In Shusterman's words, "one's body (like one's mind) incorporates its surroundings, going, for example, beyond the conventional

30 With respect to visual accessories, Serres draws an interesting parallel between cartographies of sensations and *cosmetography*, stating that "the reason why we do not have a ring hanging from our nose, as other peoples do, is that we have forgotten the sense of smell" (2008, 34).

31 Social discrimination (racism, classism, sexism, etc.) and bodily normalization are often smell-driven; sensory history and ethnography provide strong evidence for that. On the socio-aesthetic perspective, see Mancioppi (2021).

body boundary of the epidermis to satisfy its most essential needs of breathing and nutrition" (2008, 214). Similar ideas can be found in the third incipit of Calvino's *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler*, where the protagonist listens to a conversation between patrons in a tavern. A prison guard talks about a perfumed lady visiting a convict every week: "When the visiting hour is over, the young lady comes out with the stink of jail in her elegant clothes; and the prisoner goes back to his cell with the lady's perfume in his jailbird's suit," and he adds: "I'm left with the smell of beer. Life is nothing but trading smells" (Calvino 1981, 64). A gravedigger responds: "Life and also death, you might say (...). With the smell of beer I try to get the smell of death off me. And only the smell of death will get the smell of beer off you, like all the drinkers whose graves I have to dig" (ibid.).

As an "external" part of the world, food perfectly symbolizes the idea that the self is shaped by its relationships. Calvino is known to have devoted many of his works to the thorny question of individuality, in addressing which he developed a poetics mirroring the porosity and permeability of being, understood as a fleeting structural stasis in an ever-mingling and mutating flux of materials. Calvino's *T Zero* offers fruitful insights in this respect. Qfwfq, its unpronounceable palindromic protagonist, is an open-ended entity in continuous morphogenesis, evolving across the terrestrial eras (similarly to the narrator-protagonist of "TnN"). Qfwfq is "an ecological and hybrid identity, based on the osmotic-semiotic exchange of forms and signs between self and other, the inside and the outside" (Iovino 2014, 132; translation mine). Calvino's aim in this text is precisely to show the impossibility of drawing the neat boundaries of selfhood. This objective is masterfully achieved in "Priscilla," a long chapter devoted to Qfwfq's beloved. The ontological problem lies, as Qfwfq puts it, in "the fact that from one moment to the next I am no longer the same I nor is Priscilla any longer the same Priscilla, because of the continuous renewal of the protein molecules in our cells through, for example, digestion or also respiration which fixes the oxygen in the bloodstream" (Calvino 1969, 76–7). Indeed, as claimed by Shusterman, the "body is a messy container of all sorts of solids, liquids, and gases; it is always being penetrated by things coming from the outside in the air we breathe and the food we eat, just as we continuously expel materials from within our bodies" (2008, 132). Hence, the self should be rethought as "essentially situated, relational, and symbiotic" (8). How food molds the subject—and in this way undermines the idea of an isolated organism—has been widely addressed in food philosophy (Mol 2008). The most recent research, often in dialogue with biology, suggests that the self should be conceptualized as an outcome of multi-species relationships, rather

than as a self-contained “individual” (Heldke 2018).³² In a way, these findings disempower the subject and subvert their control of their bodily actuality, which encourages what can be called an *outward-* and *multi-somaesthetics* where, as the background of every experience, the selves are fully aware not only of the environment but also of their own inherent heterogeneity.

In this sense, Calvino would probably agree with some of the key points proposed by Shusterman’s project. The epigraph to this chapter evokes the melioristic process he undertook while writing *Under the Jaguar Sun* in order to *master* a palette of subtle and otherwise undetectable sensation. Yet at the same time, I suspect Calvino would not be sympathetic to the self-centeredness that informs a good part of somaesthetics. The reason, I think, can be found in his obstinate ambition to *overcome*, to *go beyond* the self. Regarding *multiplicity*, the last point he managed to elaborate in *Six Memos for the Next Millennium*, he incisively stated:

Think what it would be to have a work conceived from outside the *self*, a work that would let us escape the limited perspective of the individual ego, not only to enter into selves like our own but to give speech to that which has no language, to the bird perching on the edge of the gutter, to the tree in spring and the tree in fall, to stone, to cement, to plastic ...

Was this not perhaps what Ovid was aiming at, when he wrote about the continuity of forms? And what Lucretius was aiming at when he identified himself with that nature common to each and every thing?

CALVINO 1988b, 124

This involves somatic style too. As Calvino notices, Priscilla’s way of being also depends on “unconscious,” embodied alterity: for instance, the events she does *not* remember—“the forgotten things which still remain recorded somewhere in the back of the neurons like all the psychic trauma” (1969, 78)—and the bodily attitudes (e.g., her gait) acquired from the surroundings. Last but not least, the scent of her skin, which is a combination of genetic inheritance, physical and psychical features, and socially- and culturally-driven habits (hygienic practices, soap brands, etc.), primarily results from “everything she

32 For a review of these issues and an aesthetics consistent with them, see Perullo (2022; 2025).

has eaten in her life" (77).³³ As Shusterman (2011b, 316) elucidates, our somas are shaped by food even before we are born, in our mothers' wombs. Prenatal studies and psychology demonstrate the physiological, medical, and *aesthetic* importance of maternal diet. It has been found that in intrauterine life, food flavors contribute to forming the child's future food preferences, which are also impacted by the *atmospheric* quality of protection and love mentioned above.

5 Conclusion

As a conclusion, let me briefly comment on the olfactory aspects of eating itself. Even if it mostly appears as an implicit aspect in Calvino's work, it is explicit and pivotal in Shusterman's idea of what he calls the "fine art of eating." The difference between the *art* and the *act* of eating consists in the former being performed with elegance and deliberate attention (not only to food, but also to bodily reactions, wellbeing, dining companions, movements, timing, etc.), in order to enhance aesthetic enjoyment in the combination of somatic engagement, imagination, social norms, health, and reflection. For its part, the act of eating is a merely instinctual, habitual, and natural action undertaken to satisfy hunger as a need humans share with animals. According to Shusterman, eating is not an art when executed "in an entirely thoughtless, automatic, and crudely insensitive way" (2016, 262), or when its realization causes discomfort. Just considering smelly outcomes, if one eats too fast, one can be disturbed (and disturb others) by flatulence, hiccup, burping, and other physiological reactions; the same disturbing effect occurs when opting for smelly ingredients, such as onions and garlic. Shusterman also has in mind the social dimension of eating, since regrettable odors would annoy tablemates even more. As observed by William James, "[t]hat *we dislike in others things which we tolerate in ourselves* is a law of our aesthetic nature about which there can be no doubt" (1983, 1051; italics original).

That said, one might wonder why smelly foods should be commonly eaten and appreciated, if eating them did not trigger any somaesthetic (even *negative*) pleasure. Moreover, "stinky" foods do not necessarily imply social bother or discord, but may and do carry a sense of community, empathy, and complicity. Piedmontese *bagna caoda*, a dipping sauce made of oil, butter, anchovies, and huge amounts of garlic, is an excellent case in point. Actually, its consumption

33 The idea of "mingled bodies" in conjunction with food recurs in *Mr. Palomar*: "A greed without joy or youth drives [the clients in the deli]; and yet a deep, atavistic bond exists between them and those foods, their consubstance, flesh of their flesh" (Calvino 1985, 69).

is a traditional shared ritual that fosters conviviality and occasions fun to the diners, despite—or, more likely, *thanks to*—the potential olfactory side-effects and traces.

Since somaesthetics is associated with a sociopolitical critique of somatic norms driven by power relations, eating as a somaesthetic *act/art* per se should be further explored to dignify “misfitting” and multiple somas by including marginal experiences which flout major aesthetic canons.³⁴ After all,

[s]omeone might object that the more the work tends toward the multiplication of possibilities, the further it departs from that unicum which is the *self* (...). But I would answer: Who are we, who is each one of us, if not a combinatoria of experiences, information, books we have read, things imagined? Each life is an encyclopedia, a library, an inventory of objects, a series of styles, and everything can be constantly shuffled and reordered in every way conceivable.

CALVINO 1988b, 124; italics original

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34 On smell, art, politics, and resistance, see Lynn and Parr (2021).

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