Futurism and Transhumanism on the Art and Science of Food

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Scholars researching the topic of food insist that the notion of food is from the very outset a combination of nature and culture, material and spirit, animality and humanity, self and other (Riva 10). But deep down the understanding of these dualities—or better, multivalences—rests upon each individual’s answer to the question, “How am I to live my life?” In other words, our general existential beliefs are projected onto and colour the answers to the questions of what, how, why, and where we eat. Of course, other variables make the answer dependent on a host of complex conditions.¹ The following analysis offers responses to this question from two ideological perspectives seemingly at opposite ends of a continuum spanning all possible philosophical views on food and life: Futurism and transhumanism. Clearly, this quick overview can only hint at the tendencies, contradictions, and profound possibilities that these movements reveal about our humanity and our stance vis-à-vis the art and science of food. It must be stated from the outset that both movements operate on the underlying and unstated assumptions that there is no scarcity of food and that the economic, social, and political situation is stable.

I. Futurism and Food

Futurism is an artistic movement (whose heyday includes the approximate period between 1909 and 1944) which transcends the idea that art is something outside of lived reality. Above all, Futurism proposes that life and art are one embodied aspect of existence: what we do and how we live must be artistic and the art that exists must be an inextricable part of our lives. This idea also includes by necessity what, where, how, and why we eat, as well as what, where,

¹ See, for example, Belasco or the sociological approach employed by Poulain.
how, and why we prepare food. The ideas of Futurism are deemed instrumental to the formation of a new twentieth-century vision of art (especially in regards to poetry and painting), making of the movement a real model for other avant-garde efforts.

Futurist ideas on cooking have had a long and interesting elaboration. The Futurists not only enjoyed numerous Futurist banquets and suppers during which experiments with breaking culinary traditions were conducted and new recipes were created, but there were also many Futurist blurbs and articles published in French and Italian newspapers on art in the kitchen. Furthermore, there are reports that the founder of the Futurist movement Filippo Tommaso Marinetti owned a restaurant together with the French chef Jules Maincave as early as 1919. Especially in these newspaper articles, there are suggestions as to the type, colour, and shape of the actual plates designed by the Futurists: specifically, the plates were required to be artistic (there exist samples designed by Marinetti himself) and could not be white. These banquets illustrate a break with even the most respected of traditions: that is, the sequence of dishes. At one particular supper, dishes were served backwards starting with coffee and ending with antipasti, turning on its head what Dan Jurafsky calls the “grammar of cuisine” (4).

The aesthetic sensibility and material awareness to the question of food are spelled out in several Futurist manifestos, culminating in Marinetti’s “Il Manifesto della cucina futurista,” which first appeared in Turin’s Gazetta del Popolo in 1930. The “Manifesto” was soon compiled into the cookbook La cucina futurista and later translated into English under the title The

2 The history of “Il Manifesto della cucina futurista” and its relationship to La cucina futurista is complex and not within the scope of this paper. For further reading on this topic, see Pautasso’s volume Cucina futurista: manifesti, menu, documenti and his web page “MANIFESTO DELLA
Futurist Cookbook. In this work, Marinetti declares, “Of all artistic and literary movements Futurism is the only one whose essence is reckless audacity. . . . Against practicality we Futurists therefore disdain the example and admonition of tradition in order to invent at any cost something new which everyone considers crazy” (33). The artistic awareness sustaining Futurism therefore does away with tradition in favour of pointing to new creations, even if they are deemed crazy: not only in the type of food, but also in the way that the food is prepared, served, and consumed. Marinetti does not believe in the myth of the immutable and authentic “lost culinary paradise,” described by Poulain as a point of view of many naïve perspectives of gastronomy (21). In one of his most controversial statements on food, Marinetti openly suggests abolishing pasta: “Above all we believe necessary: a) The abolition of pastasciutta, an absurd Italian gastronomic religion” (37). Claiming that pasta creates sluggishness (which goes against the grain of the main Futurist idea that speed is paramount) and causes lethargic digestion, Marinetti looks for caloric intake of a different kind—although, characteristically and ironically, there exists a photograph of him eating a huge forkful of pasta, apparently taken a day after the “Manifesto” was first published (Spurio).

There is no better way to create controversy in Italy and beyond than by claiming the necessary abolition of pasta. Indeed, controversy and self-promotion have been suggested as the hallmarks of Marinettian advertising of Futurism. As expected, all kinds of controversies ensued

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3 All quotations are drawn from Susanne Brill’s English translation of Marinetti’s La Cucina Futurista entitled The Futurist Cookbook, published in 1989.

4 For further reading on this topic, see Somigli.
and Marinetti was brought into the spotlight. Regrettably, his reckless audacity also distracted from and devalued the other serious and forward-looking ideas about art and food that he and the Futurists proposed—some of which have been likened to *nouvelle cuisine*, a much later French style of food preparation and presentation.

But Marinetti is above all an artist; and as an artist attuned to all of the senses, he urges chefs as well as housewives to support taste, smell, hearing, sight, and touch as much as possible in the consumption of newly-created dishes. The dish “*Sculpted meat*” (Marinetti 39) may be emblematic of the new creations to be enjoyed without the use of cutlery. Its recipe (labeled as a “formula”) reads as follows:

The *Sculpted meat* created by the Futurist painter Fillìa, a symbolic interpretation of all the varied landscapes of Italy, is composed of a large cylindrical rissole of minced veal stuffed with eleven different kinds of cooked green vegetables and roasted. This cylinder, standing upright in the centre of the plate, is crowned by a layer of honey and supported at the base by a ring of sausages resting on three golden spheres of chicken. (39)

Other recipes contain fewer ingredients, but all of the names of dishes and drinks are evocative and reflect Futurist ideals, such as “*Alaskan Salmon in the rays of the sun with Mars sauce*” (38) and “*Woodcock Mount Rosa with Venus sauce*” (39).

The “art” in the Futurist kitchen is easily appreciated, understood, and enjoyed, and the slogan “Mangia con arte per vivere con arte” (also the title of one of Marinetti’s articles) is very attractive. It is the scientific side of Futurist cooking which did not receive much interest at the time and continues to be overlooked by scholars, which is unfortunate as it offers interesting points of view that are really futuristic when looked upon from the perspective of the 1930s.

Marinetti proposes a definite separation between two types of food. On the one hand,
there are refined, iconoclastic, shocking dishes to be enjoyed with the participation of all the senses; and on the other, there are pills or powder:

We believe necessary . . .

(d) the abolition of everyday mediocrity from the pleasures of the palate. We invite chemistry immediately to take on the task of providing the body with its necessary calories through equivalent nutrients provided free by the State, in powder or pills, albuminoid compounds, synthetic fats and vitamins. This way we will achieve a real lowering of the cost of living and of salaries, with a relative reduction in working hours.

. . . Soon machines will constitute an obedient proletariat of iron steel aluminium at the service of men who are almost totally relieved of manual work. With work reduced to two or three hours, the other hours can be perfected and ennobled through study, the arts, and the anticipation of perfect meals.

In all social classes meals will be less frequent but perfect in their daily provision of equivalent nutrients. (37–38)

Clearly, there is a chasm between the (chemical and scientific) necessity for food to be absorbed in the form of pills or powder and the (artistic) sensual enjoyment of food during a “perfect meal,” which according to Marinetti requires:

1. Originality and harmony in the table setting (crystal, china, décor) extending to the flavours and colours of the foods.

2. Absolute originality in the food. (38)

Marinetti calls on chemistry to provide the answers for the mundane caloric intake and gives the State the responsibility to satisfy this necessity free of charge to everyone. The State, therefore, is expected to rely on scientific principles to feed the citizenry while each individual is
made responsible for creating their own artistic “perfect meal.”

The binary opposition between science and art has been overlooked by even the most discerning of culinary observers. Yet Marinetti suggests that science (especially chemistry) and technology can collaborate to help create the “perfect meal,” as the technological improvements in the preparation of food proposed and listed in his work illustrate:

... ozonizers to give liquids and foods the perfume of ozone, ultra-violet ray lamps (since many foods when irradiated with ultra-violet rays acquire active properties, become more assimilable, preventing rickets in young children, etc.), electrolyzers to decompose juices and extracts, etc. in such a way as to obtain from a known product a new product with new properties, colloidal mills to pulverize flours, dried fruits, drugs, etc.; atmospheric and vacuum stills, centrifugal autoclaves, dialyzers. The use of these appliances will have to be scientific, avoiding the typical error of cooking foods under steam pressure, which provokes the destruction of active substances (vitamins, etc.) because of high temperatures. Chemical indicators will take into account the acidity and alkalinity of the sauces and serve to correct possible errors: too little salt, too much vinegar, too much pepper or too much sugar. (40)

It is instructive to note that the technology Marinetti suggests does not aid the cook as much as it aims to enhance the taste or digestive properties of the food. So it is not speed or effortlessness of preparation that the Futurists are after, but the improved chemical composition of food whose technologically-modified properties support ease of digestion or create new products with new properties.

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5 See, for example, M. F. K. Fisher.
It can be concluded that in *The Futurist Cookbook* art and science occupy two distinct, separate, and separated places, and that these two perspectives never meet. Even if, as in the Futurists’ vision, life is art and art is ephemeral, it seems that the Futurists accept the distinct separation between the gratifying, sensual, and artistic aspects of the “pleasure of the palate” experienced during the so-called “perfect meal” and the converse practice of mundane caloric intake. Art and science do not collaborate and do not meet at the table nor in the kitchen, although they may cooperate in the creation of new recipes/formulas. From the Futurist perspective, then, it is clear that efficiency, speed, technology, and science are incompatible with gustatory and artistic pleasures—but these are all fleeting phenomena and thus part of the Futurist Weltanschauung.

II. Transhumanism and Food

Transhumanism is an international “intellectual and cultural movement that affirms the possibility and desirability of fundamentally improving the human condition through applied reason, especially by developing and making widely available technologies to eliminate aging and to greatly enhance human intellectual, physical, and psychological capacities”6 (“Transhumanist FAQ”). The guiding idea promotes the enhancement of all human cognitive, physical, and psychological capacities (senses, skills, and organs) using reason and science. Transhumanism looks forward to conscious self-evolution as illustrated through the need to fight against human biological limits, especially old age. It also claims that there are no ethical or moral reasons not to interfere with nature in order to ameliorate the human condition. The movement’s proponents rely on reason to solve problems caused by human biological and

6 See also Allhof et al. and Benedicter et al.
cognitive limitations. Transhumanism has ideological connections to Ray Kurzweil’s theory of “singularity,” which predicts the exponential growth and acceleration of technological innovation. According to Kurzweil, “The intelligence that will emerge will continue to represent the human civilization, which is already a human-machine civilization. This will be the next step in evolution, the next high level paradigm shift.”

Some enhancements are achieved via conventional means—education, an enriched environment, mental engagement, memory techniques, and the use of drugs—while others take advantage of new technologies such as transcranial magnetic stimulation, genetic modification, prenatal enhancement, brain-computer interfaces, external hardware and software, neural implants, and so on (Sandberg).

It is instructive to note that transhumanism in its main thrust (as delineated in the eight points of “The Transhumanist Declaration”) does not mention food, either from the perspective of nutrition or consumption. “The Transhumanist Declaration” puts the burden on the individual to choose the empowering force of their life:

We favour allowing individuals wide personal choice over how they enable their lives. This includes use of techniques that may be developed to assist memory, concentration, and mental energy; life extension therapies; reproductive choice technologies; cryonics procedures; and many other possible human modification and enhancement technologies.

(pt. 8)

Up until now, scientific experiments with implants and nanotechnology have been frequent, but the modification of taste buds or other sensory receptors (especially those used when consuming food or drink) have not captured the focused attention of scientists. It is also true, however, that nutrition in a transhumanist future will depend on the type of form that humans take on, as the
energy needed by the augmented body will surely have to resonate with that body’s requirements according to its type of enhancement.

It is not surprising that in transhumanism, a strictly scientific and technologically-driven movement, art is often relegated to the function of propaganda, as Natasha Vita-More’s work shows. Her artistic endeavour has become enmeshed with the question of design—especially the challenges with and hopes for her project entitled “Body by Design: An Iteration for Life.” And, as with the majority of transhumanists, her work does not include questions of food or gastronomy. Consonant with Vita-More’s propagandistic view of art is Zoltan Istvan’s statement that “[t]he creation of transhumanist beings—which we are slowly becoming—is perhaps the most artistic endeavor humanity has ever dared to pursue. Transhumanist art will help guide us to becoming masterpieces.”

While there are no programmatic statements about food in transhumanism, it is clear that aspects of transhumanist thought resonate with the following scientific and technological advancements that may aid its cause: (1) the “Quantified Self” movement, especially embedded in food literacy; (2) apps (such as caloric content, carb counters, and so on); (3) concern with the digestive system, such as the interest in the workings of microbes or probiotics; (4) the search for alternative sources of ingredients, especially meat or Soylent, as well as deep discussions about genetically modified organisms; and (5) ad hoc cookbooks, not in the sense of working with ingredients (such as “cooking with rice”) but in the sense of providing recipes that aim to support particular molecular processes. One specific example of the latter is the recently crowdfunded

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7 See, for example, Vita-More’s chapter “Aesthetics” and other works.

8 See, for example, Liberatore.
Longevity Cookbook, whose authors are neither artists nor chefs but scientists: Maria Konovalenko, molecular biophysicist and aging researcher; Anna Kozlova, chemist; Anastasia Shubina, research interests in biomedicine and gene therapy; and Mark McCormick, specialization in biochemistry, molecular biology, and the biology of aging. The purpose of the Longevity Cookbook is stated as follows:

The Longevity Cookbook is a strategy guide to help you get more time to experience the joy from everything that you like in life. Take yourself on a journey starting with nutrients and exercise regimes that goes on to explore the usage of genetically modified symbiotic organisms and using gene therapy to boost your own longevity. (Konovalenko)

It remains to be seen whether art will be incorporated into their view of this special type of biotechno-gene cooking mixtures.

III. Conclusions

There are a number of conclusions that can be drawn about the art and science of food in Futurism and transhumanism. Clearly, the main thrust and general ideas of these two movements form their own bases for constructing a specific view of human beings and their place within the world. Furthermore, recent progress in the field of nutrition indicates that there are two manners in which the experience of and need for food can be defined, and these had already been foreseen by the Futurists: on the one hand, there is the external, sensory, aesthetic, and social experience of eating, while on the other, there are individual, internal, biological, and cellular needs. These two definitions do not seem to look for a point of connection, underlining the exasperated postmodern separation between the individual and the social. However, Futurism and transhumanism do appear to have three central concepts in common: firstly, it would seem that in both cases, food in the form of powder or pills created by scientific procedures excludes art or
any artistic possibilities of preparing, serving, and consuming food. It is as if the scientific view of food as energy source were incompatible with art in any of its definitions. The Futurists stressed the collaboration between chemistry and art to satisfy the energy requirements through originality of taste, while the transhumanists—at least for now—leave the preparation of food to microbiologists whose function is to satisfy cellular energy needs. Secondly, both movements have a specific vision of the perfect body and therefore of the perfect food. Finally, both Futurism and transhumanism offer positive visions of the future and share an optimism of being alive.

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