

Gastropoetics

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Abstract: This paper will explore Memmott and Rettberg's Gastropoetics as a humanistic challenge to the grammar of language, platform, and text generation. The impulse is to situate such works within the tradition of dada and futurist performance, where obvious antecedents can be found. However, in the age of platform dominance, the meaning of experiments in absurdity and embodiment take on new meaning, as platform spaces do the work of aestheticizing the absurd conditions produced by the Taylorization of social life. Where industrial processes once disturbed the lifeworld of human craft and technique in the process of industrialization, the cultural world at the most minute level is subject to the proletarianizing process, and its reassembly into an economic model is now the work of the platform spaces. In other words, Platforms do the ideological work of normalizing social collapse as progress towards the rationalized reorganization of body politic into "taste communities" and other post-digital demographics. While Gastropoetics is a marginal practice, these culinary experiments explore the relational dynamics of cooking, hospitality, and eating as persistent humanistic practices, even as such practices are increasingly mediated by emergent practices like "food selfies" and other performative taste practices. Key to understanding the appeal of gastropoetics is the ad hoc nature of human production and consumption (see de Certeau's "everyday life") performed under the constraints of the generated menu, of the platform, and of the mnemotechnical system itself.

Intro: This paper will be my least-paper-like presentation to an ELO conference. In the past, I felt the responsibility to treat my conference presentations like papers, packing them with critical references and laboring to establish the illusion credibility against the reality of my own idiocy (Latin, *idiotia*, "ordinary person"; Greek, *idios*, "personal, one's own"). But 2021 finds me totally defeated as a scholar. Instead of thinking I should labor in vain against the hegemony of media industries, social networks, and the inertia of clique-bait (not a typo), I have decided, at least for today, to give up on scholarly writing. Instead, I write a love letter stuffed into a bottle and tossed into the sea. (Apologies for the accidental Police reference.)

In an effort to dispense with the formalities that I have grown accustomed to, I will offer some ideas to frame what follows by pulling out key concepts from the abstract that I am obligated to fulfill:

1. Futurist and Dadaist antecedents: F.T. Marinetti's *La Cucina Futurista* (1932), Barbara Turner's *Artists' and Writers' Cookbook* (1961) which feature's Man Ray's "Menu for a Dadaist Day," Salvador Dali's *Les Dinners de Gala* (1973) are notable antecedents that foreground avant-garde recipes (rather than merely recipes by artists). Fluxus artist, Rikrit Tiravanija has developed an entire body of work based around cooking and eating together. Literary references to food are intrinsically weird, in that food itself is a richly affective cultural metaphor. Like music and other sensuous forms, it is non-representational, whereas the Modern literary arts are largely semiotic. Food is corporeal, often "sculptural," and can be formed into symbolic objects, though the physical form must be destroyed to be consumed and the primary sensual experience is non-figural. On the other hand, foods can

remind us of other tastes, smells, and feelings (and their associated contexts). It is the liminality of food—transformed from living matter to a meal, ingested in the passage from plate to body, its symbolic character shifting from form to experience, etc.—that make it an ideal subject for avant-garde consideration (I'd argue that these same qualities make food a rather consistent ritual object in human history, as well). While there is a temptation in scholarly writing to create some lineage of influence, I wish to argue that food has a primal resonance that precedes the pull of culture. Yes, we can cultivate culinary practice and taste, but in the end, what's good is good, and this goodness is singular, changing from person to person, from year to year, from one moment to the next. What one needs or what one has just tasted can determine what one wants next. On the other hand, food might ask us to consider whether or not conceptual work is avant-garde at all—it could be less about what happens next and more about what is not happening now. At least this is the case with Fluxus, moreso than Futurism and Dada. *Eating reminds us (as Latour likes to say) that "we have been modern" (nor have we transcended it).*

2. Taylorization of social life: Frederick Winslow Taylor introduces "scientific management" to the process of human labor. Rather than working at holistically at craft production, Taylor argues, labor should be streamlined to remove all unnecessary movements. An engineer must examine all aspects of the production process, reducing productivity to a series of iterable processes that can be broken apart, rationalized, and then reorganized to remove all unnecessary motions. This innovation, in addition to transforming the way human bodies labor, makes automation simpler, allowing greater coordination of the machine and human in the industrial assemblage. At first blush, the idea of social life might seem antithetical to such a process, as the social carries connotations of informality and excess. But, as with all things, it is possible to frame the sociopolitical as an assemblage of psychological and biological needs (see: biopolitics), which can be streamlined and optimized through therapeutic interventions. In this way, various sensual experiences are essentialized as entertainment experiences that can be recorded, formalized and transmitted via commercial media products (movies, games, theme parks, meals, etc.). Even fairly singular experiences like grief, love, despair, seduction, joy, relaxation seek to be captured and transformed into various kinds of labor (sex work, emotional labor, counseling, self-care, etc.). Under the microscope of social media, even formerly idiosyncratic events like interpersonal conversation, arguments, condolences, flirtations, illness, triumphs are placed under the panoptic gaze of data-mining industries—our every move analyzed and enhanced through predictive optimization, customized reciprocity, and further analysis. The singular stuff of life that was once sheltered under the umbrella of political power has become the umbrella itself, underneath it, is protected (see: neoliberalism and governmentality). *As a result, nothing escapes the ever-seeing eye of the automatic engineer.*

3. The grammar of language and platform: Language, which is a symbolic representation, is subject to grammar. Historically, many types of mimetic representation have escaped from the prescriptive character of grammaticization. While descriptive grammar is considered as a less repressive approach to language than its prescriptive cousin, it is merely a way-station on the road to grammatizing everyday life, which heretofore, had been largely resistant to normalization. While human behavior is loosely organized by norms and expectations, social life tends to reward deviation and surprise in inverse proportion to the degree to which normative expectations dominate. In other words, manners and customs enable tactical

play, and these subversions are the spice of life. However, the advent of digital platforms as spaces for everyday life present a challenge to these kinds of tactical subversions. The common notion that if you can think of it, you can find it on the internet is more of a curse than a blessing. Those who are obsessed with normality have no trouble finding it. Those of us (and we all do so in our own ways) who struggle against conformity must now drive further to find it. This might create some interesting possibilities for subculture, but it has a way of accelerating anti-social tendencies by requiring more from would-be deviants than they would otherwise require in a metastable locality. The coupling of extreme normativity with ever-radicalizing notions of resistance provides excellent fodder for machine learning while wreaking havoc on livable communities. *Platforms have accelerated conflict and while strip-mining the pleasure of the everyday.*

4. Aestheticizing politics. We often think of “the aestheticization of politics” in relation to the way in which fascist regimes wrap themselves in aesthetic packaging to fabricate a picture of social unity. To this, Benjamin introduces an oppositional tendency, the “politicization of art.” Debord does a better job in the *Society of the Spectacle*, by pointing to the collective formation itself as that which has been “aestheticized.” In other words, the masses themselves cease to be “political” in the sense that they are a site of conflict in which the actions of the state are produced. Instead, the masses exist as a proxy for the expression of the will of the state, they are a spectacular form used to legitimate the actions of power, rather than the participants in a more Arendtian vision of the public sphere in which the demos negotiates the production of power. This distinction works very well with the contemporary American conception of politics—two parties representing competing styles of governance, with policy produced by leadership, mediated through the elite pluralist model. Here, politics is something we subscribe to, like Netflix streaming into our lives, without access to the means of its production (though we are told that in subscribing and selecting with streams to view, we provide the necessary input for the creation of the content we wish to access). In this respect, our political system is thoroughly aestheticized following the advent of social media, where a tight feedback loop is created between the public sphere as an object of consumption. Thus, when we think of the aestheticization of politics, we might do well to go deeper than the casual understanding of American electoral politics and, even, Benjamin’s prescient discussion in “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction.” Stiegler’s notion of “adoption,” which is discussed in *Symbolic Misery*, performs the necessary reframing of this question in the contemporary moment. It is the public itself that has become aestheticized, and thus politics along with it, a process which may not be possible without the enormous apparatus of social networks, which make the surveillance, organization, and grammaticization of the everyday possible. Downstream from this, we see the pathological performances of symbolic misery itself as the political gesture par excellence of American consciousness—the collapse of community, the thorough commodification of the self, the fungibility of everything, punctuated by desperate attempts to reclaim the singularity—through ever broadening regimes of sousveillance, through hyperbolic performances of affect, through customized modifications of a self that we no longer believe in, through competitive taste cultures, through works of art entangled in absurd cryptographic schemes, etc. In other words, platforms do the ideological work of normalizing social collapse as progress towards the rationalized reorganization of body politic into “taste communities” and other post-digital demographics. This is the upheaval phase of what the Davos crowd calls the “Fourth

Industrial Revolution,” and the proletarianization process proceeds with culture as its terrain. *Your hopes and dreams are tropes and memes.*

6. Gastropoetics: In spite of the great wave of rationalism that we are living through, there are plenty of moments and places where people still live human lives. Even in Amazon warehouses and the new plantations of global manufacturing, people continue to live, in spite of the totalizing aspirations of their expert managers (and their machine intelligence). People still break laws, violate norms, and flout received opinions, so the situation is not hopeless. For though there are traitors who are seduced into imitating the logic of surveillance and control (typically, who imagine that they will share in the monitoring and administration of order and that compliance will protect them from their own deficiencies), the nature of such a control society is not to eliminate pirates, rather it is to make pirates of us all. If the panoptic gaze teaches us the virtue of self-regulation at the service of the cop in the tower, then the extrapolation of panopticism towards a universal accountability to the massive digital apparatus also places us all in a universal default. The always-on, eternally-archived, pseudo-omniscience of the network makes us all vulnerable to it (not necessarily for what it knows, but for what it claims to know). And every bit of ourselves we obscure or reserve is a crime against the empire. We are all guilty. We are all fugitives from the law. We are all pirates. The choice we face each day is whether to become privateers or be free. The sooner we accept this is the ethical terrain of the 21st Century, the sooner we reclaim our *vita activa* from the prescribed, performative pseudopopulism of platform spaces. The *aporia* in meaning is not an artifact of language belched into existence by grammatical dysfunction. It is not an engineering problem to be solved by a sociopathic wunderkind with a quantum computer. It is *your différance* which makes a difference. And, so, the emerging control society forces us to take sides—do we anoint ourselves with the authority of illegitimate power and use our vulnerability to negotiate a decoding strategy that papers over its brutal errors? Or do we live lives of lawless imagination, in a constant state of dissemblance against our own aestheticization? *The aporia is in your belly.*

Eater-Response Theory: Gastropoetics is not the last pirate ship sailing the seas of consciousness. I only wish to hold it up as one practice that does something difficult but necessary, something between a “moveable feast” and a “last meal,” that defers definition and achieves a kind of poetic resistance to the rapacious instrumental drive of platform spaces. While Gastropoetics is a marginal practice, these culinary experiments explore the relational dynamics of cooking, hospitality, and eating as persistent humanistic practices, even as such practices are increasingly mediated by emergent practices like “food selfies” and other performative taste practices. Instead, this is a call for a hundred thousand billion such marginal practices, with many more being hatched in the imagination. Such a world is closer than we think, as this practice is already in progress, the only thing it lacks is our will to think it. The possible world is not one we are burdened with bringing into being, the possible world is the unrealized world that we desire.

Key to understanding the appeal of gastropoetics is the ad hoc nature of human production and consumption (see de Certeau's “everyday life”) performed under the constraints of the generated menu, of the platform, and of the mnemotechnical system itself. Over the past few years, I have been lucky to be a guest Talan Memmott's test kitchen for *The Limerick Diet* in March 2019 (joined by guest diners Carrie Heckman and Joseph Tabbi) and

Quarantine Quatrains at ELO 2020. And while these events are documented and it is possible to replay these events in various capacities. Memmott and Rettberg's *The Limerick Diet* was performed on July 15, 2019 at the ELO Conference in Cork, Ireland. Randomly selected guests were invited to sit for an evening of dinner and drinks at an off-site house, while the "audience" watched via livestream. The instigating element of the event is the text generated menu (<http://retts.net/limerickdiet/go.html>). For those who wish to look at the constituent parts of the text generator, that can be most easily found here: <http://retts.net/limerickdiet/>. The specific menus from the July 2019 event are published on the Gastropoetics Facebook site (https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=2080708585556671&id=2014265278867669). At this point, we can marvel at the skill with which the javascript generators that combine ingredients, culinary techniques, and thematic elements to create Limericks which function as menu items for the guests. Complicating things a bit are the local, seasonal, thematic, and technical constraints that undoubtedly informed the content of the arrays—as whatever is generated must, in turn, be prepared by Memmott and Rettberg. Furthermore, there is also the hope that the combinations also provide pleasure to the guests. Hence, the writing/programming task of building a text generator like this requires an attention to what will ultimately be possible (and, more importantly, to what will be good).

As is the case for much of electronic literature, the outcome for this project is not a static published text. But further than that, there is no artifact that encapsulates the work, either. In the case of a work like Montfort and Strickland's *Sea and Spar Between* (2010), the work contains a staggering array of possible reading experiences, but all exist as a finite (and quite specifically coordinated) range of combinations that are bound within the artifact that is the code base. Similarly, the initial iteration of Montfort's *Taroko Gorge* (2009), while it builds stanzas randomly in real time as the work runs in your browser, is also a bounded object whose entirety can be understood by examining its code.

Or can it? A work like *Taroko Gorge*, as elegant as it is as a standalone work, has achieved widespread attention thanks to the wave of remixes that it has inspired. The ever-growing list includes works of varied quality, some of which could stand alone as unique achievements, but all of which are enriched through the discursive space opened up by the originating work. This highlights an interesting fact of the literary—while professors and their students are often trained to collect works of art as artifacts to be subjected to a hermeneutic process—the pleasure of the literary contains its own gratifications. And while I am not going to provide a complete taxonomy of these gratifications, I will describe a particular kind of gratification that this work illustrates—that of an instigating moment. For many readers, a work like *Taroko Gorge* initiates a process of decoding, translation, and experimentation. The pleasure such an experience provides can be as simple as a moment of "realization" when one peers at the source code and understands the ingredients to the recipe, when one analyzes competing versions and enjoys the detournements of the text, when one copies the work into a text editor and creates a new page that runs from their desktop, when one creates a semantic system that works with Montfort's engine, when one creates a compelling text generator of their own, and/or when one enters into a community with other hijackers. José Aburto's *Grita* (2005), which requires readers to scream the poem into their browser; Judd Morrissey's *LAMENT* (2017), which is a live performance informed

by a generated substrate; or ALIS's *Typomatic* (2015), which is platform that creates visual poems using words furnished by guests, are just a few works that are best understood as machines created to initiate processes. Viewed in this context, Memmott and Rettberg's experiments in gastropoetics represent an extended instance of literature as an instigating process (rather than a bound text that itself is a performance of distinction as erudition, the extreme example being something like *Norton Anthology*). Instead of adding a dead text to one's cultural repertoire (as we do when preparing for exams or cultivating a social media profile), a gastropoetic menu is a pinpoint on a long arc of practice, preceded by countless hours of noodling in the kitchen, tasting, sipping, giving, receiving, hacking, and repeating. The menu is succeeded by a meandering evening, beginning with a game by which the guests create and name a cocktail from randomly selected cards, continuing with chefs in the kitchen, guests at the table, beverages and plates passing in and out of spaces, dynamic conversations—the meal itself is the scaffolding for an elaborate and unpredictable social interaction.

While I did not dine at the July 2019 *Limerick Diet* (I only tuned in and out of the video stream), the March 31, 2019 test kitchen at Memmott's home offered an opportunity to experience the experience more fully. Joined by Carrie Heckman and Joe Tabbi, Memmott invited us to sit for an evening of machine generated meals. We begin the evening with a card game, and though I do not remember all the particulars, I felt fairly lucky to be dealt a hand of cards which I parlayed into something called "Cayley's Regret," a kind of modified Mesoamerican Manhattan, made from mezcal, sweet vermouth, a splash of bitters and black pepper, with maraschino cherries. Talan, on the other hand, enjoyed the now infamous "Patchwork Mule"—whiskey and sweet vermouth garnished with black pepper and sardine coated in candy sprinkles. Aided by a bit of alcohol, the evening progressed via the following menu:

The Winona Test Kitchen Menu March 30, 2019

https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=2016833898610807&id=2014265278867669

AMUSE BOUCHE

INISHBOFIN COD LIBERTINE

*In Inishbofin they serve up some Cod
Made with Courgettes a very fine scrod
 Broiled with White Wine and garlic
 Sure to get a like click
Oh, that toothsome Inishbofin Cod*

TIPPERARY PRAWN OBSCENE

*In Tipperary they have the best Prawns
Served with Local Greens to turn diners to swans
 Broiled with White Wine, Capers, and garlic
 Will not make you sick
You'll die for those Killarney Prawns*

KILKENNY PRAWN ANTHROPOCENE

*In Kilkenny they serve up some Prawns
Served with Heirloom Tomatoes that soon will be gone
 Sauteed with White Wine, Sesame, and thyme
 Made for primetime
You'll die for those Kilkenny Prawns*

DUNDALK COD SERPENTINE

*In Dundalk they serve up some Cod
Made with Heirloom Tomatoes fit for a God
 Steamed with Butter, Dill, and thyme
 In a brocade of lime
Nothing better than Dundalk Cod*

MAIN COURSE

DINGLE FOWL DU MONDE

*The Broiled Fowl and Edamame of Dingle
With Garlic-Mustard Sauce makes you tingle
 With enough Mushrooms
 For sure to crush gloom
Don't miss the Broiled Fowl in Dingle*

GALWAY FOWL ZAMBONI

*There was a Oulipian from Galway
Whose Cayenne-Red Wine Sauce is made in the French way
 Topped with Pop Rocks
 Like wearing clown socks
Oh! the Broccoli and Cayenne of Galway*

CORK BEEF NAPOLEON

*There was a Beef-Monger from Cork
Whose Garlic-Vodka Sauce was historic
 Add Some Mushrooms
 Whizbang and zoom zoom
Oh! the Beef is fantastic in Cork*

DUBLIN BEEF DE RIGEUR

*There is a Beef dish known in Dublin
Pan-Roasted with Au Jus is quite humblin'
 So many Hot Peppers
 Spliced in like striped zebras
Oh! the Onions and Cinnamon of Dublin*

I remember my meal (Kilkenny Prawn Anthropocene and the Cork Beef Napoleon), but more importantly I remember the evening. As it pertains to the specifics of the meal, I remember being excited and curious to see how the meal would progress from menu to

table. Joe had made a trip to Winona to visit in advance of an international move to Bergen, Norway. Talan had offered up the opportunity of an experimental meal, and invited Carrie to join us. But we all knew that we were being treated to test-run of a project that had been in the works for months. So, we sat down at the table, dealt us the cards with which we played out our cocktails. The winner would select the first machine-generated menu. And so the evening began.

A menu exists as a kind of contractual space, between which a restaurant and a diner agree upon a set of expectations. The kitchen agrees to provide what is described on the menu and the diner agrees to pay for this meal, in between there is the work of preparation and consumption, both of which exist beyond the instrumental contractual obligation between the two parties. Here, the chef has knowledge, skill, and varying degrees of latitude to interpret the meal as it is prepared. The guest has expectations and tastes that ultimately test the activity of the chef. Apart from the “agreement,” the experience is a social interaction mediated by service, ambience, conviviality at table, and the meal itself. In this, the guest and chef play their part, but there are many variables at play. In a perfect world, meals provide the pretext for a kind of radical hospitality and conviviality.

However, we are also accustomed to purely instrumental and industrialized forms of eating. Famine and hunger at one end dictate a purely expedient form of eating, in which getting food into an empty belly takes priority over all other considerations. Similarly, cultures of efficiency provide us with constrained moments of consumption—the grab and go meal, the fastfood kitchen, convenience cooking—all of which provide a kind of relief from stress and mark a kind of material abundance that masks a kind of spiritual poverty at the core of prosperous societies. Finally, there is a kind of pathological eating, which can be excessive or constrained, that provides a kind of hypernourishment or hyponourishment, which is characterized by a kind of carelessness. When I say carelessness, I do not mean to say that the act itself is entirely devoid of care, indeed many kinds of careless activities are driven by an excess of a kind of care at the expense of another. For instance, neoliberal rhetorics of self-care co-opt the necessary affirmations of desire that encourage the impoverished or enfeebled to access sustenance that is routinely denied to the underclass by puritanical cultures. Nevertheless, such discourses have been adopted to rationalize a host of indulgences within privileged social segments as a form of moral preening meant to mask basic hedonic drives. There is nothing wrong with pursuing pleasure in many cases, but there is something uniquely perverse to appropriate the suffering of others to legitimate indulgence as it reaffirms the notion that one must enjoy oneself only with permission to do so. And, in neoliberal society, this kind of self-care exists alongside a corresponding discourse about transactionalizing hedonic interactions, which has the ironic effect of further stigmatizing working class pleasure by claiming “self-care” for those who can afford it and marginalizing free and collaborative conviviality as a source of restoration.

Without getting lost in close reading, there are larger observations about the experience of *The Limerick Diet*. The first is an appreciation for the challenge that exists at the heart of the project—the chefs set out a kind challenge for themselves that they must meet in the context of a live performance for real guests. While the stakes might not be “life or death,” success or failure are real possibilities, as the guests may not enjoy the meal. On the other hand, the guests are caught up in the fun of witnessing the chef’s challenge, making the

gastropoetic experience a game about “making do,” about the triumph of skill over uncertainty, and a significant portion of the time of waiting at the table concerned with seeing what will happen. Too often, we tend to eat without thinking, reserving this kind of anticipation for special occasions (and even then, probably spending less time wondering what our meal will be like). The spectacle of human vs. machine is significant here, and the skill of execution rests heavily on the shoulders of the chefs, as the techniques, ingredients, tastes, and skills all present meaningful constraints on execution. (The *Quarantine Quatrains*, which was based on a remote event in which viewers were invited to participate from home using ingredients on hand, tested this dimension of gastropoetics further.)

Now, it is possible, of course that in the future, machine generated menus will become a commonplace in fastfood kitchens. Similarly, directly machine generated foodstuffs may attempt to obviate chefs altogether. As it is, the Taco Bell menu is a permutational project that creates novel menu items based on a fairly constrained pantry of items and Burger King has already begun exploring the possibility of using AI to generate orders for identifiable customers. As a perennial scholar of digital and mass media, I fully expect that it is inevitable that some will declare the machine generated meal delivered without human contact to be equal to or better than any human culinary accomplishment. We are cursed with a twofold tendency to: 1) embrace a kind of pseudopopulism that declares all mass market commodities to be of superlative aesthetic merit on account of their market share (millions of fans can't be wrong); and 2) to embrace a posthuman attitude towards intelligence which prefers technological achievement over human handiwork (or reserves the enjoyment of the hand-made as a kind of “artisanal” excess for elite consumers). In the end, who am I to say that AI generated music or art or food is better than what I can make with my own hands? Who do you trust? A capricious idiot using cultural concepts inherited from geriatric nobodies? Or a multibillion dollar corporation with supercomputers, a massive surveillance database, and an army of engineers? We know the answer to that question, because we answer it every day when we privilege platform capitalism over people.

So, these kinds of procedural experiments that employ machine processes to initiate human fecundity are critical to life in the 21st Century. Or, the signatories of *Ars Industrialis'* “Manifesto” declare, we must “struggle against carelessness [*incurie*], against the destruction of attention” (the Latin root, *cura*, gives us our words care, concern, healing, curing, and curiosity). And where we cease to attend to the value of human consciousness, we resign ourselves to inhuman existence. In thinking of the literary as something akin to eating a meal, something we do with others, that is nourishing and transient, that cannot be easily written down, that negotiates a variety of constraints, abilities, and desires in a moment of conviviality, we reclaim the popular from the mass. We take back this notion of popular as something we participate in (as something that belongs to the common people and to common experience that can be at once commonplace and singular) rather than something we merely consume (a mass commodity or a platform that is packaged in a prescribed affective relation).

I am not confident that we will win (by we, I am not talking about the leadership class, I am talking about everyone else). It is always possible, and increasingly likely, that we will be overtaken by machine intelligence, not because it will serve us perfectly, but we might

decide that such intelligence adequate for our needs. Nor do I think that a kooky machine generated poetic menu prepared by a friend for the enjoyment of a small group of people will alter the course of human history. Rather, I think billions of such practices must occur (as they surely do), and that we must be here as scholars to receive those paradigmatic occasions with an emphasis and curiosity about their social dimensions against the relentless prioritization of the machine processes that may or may not provoke them.

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