

Hungry for Art

A semiotic reading of food signifying art in the episode *Grant Achatz* (2016) in the documentary *Chef's Table* (2015-present)



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Abstract: Hungry for Art

When looking at *Chef's Table*, a documentary on Netflix, there are a few things standing out. One of those things is the fact that the chefs presented in the series talk about their food as if it was art. Hereby it contributes to the debate about food that signifies art. Despite the many debates and studies that have been done, there is a loophole in the field of research that regards food as art. This occurred with the rise of the obsession with food in recent years and the manifestation of this obsession. Where food was eaten formerly the company of friends and family, the food is now photographed and shared with the world. The rise of so-called foodies raises the question of the value of food as art and the extent to which the valuation of food in our times is warranted. In this thesis the techniques used to understand food as a form of art are discussed through a Peircean semiotic reading. The first chapter focuses on the intertextuality between a dish presented in *Chef's Table* and the paintings of Jackson Pollock. The second chapter argues that Modernism, the art movement, is a great part off the signification of food as art. The last chapter concentrates on the presented dishes as fetishized commodity. this paper will provide a complete analysis on how visual and auditory techniques contribute to the signification of food as (a modernist) art(form) in the episode *Grant Achatz* (2016) of the Netflix documentary *Chef's Table* (2015-present).

Introduction

Auguste Escoffier (1846-1935), French chef of the Ritz hotel, once said: “Cooking is a science and an art, and the man who puts all his heart into satisfying his fellow men deserves consideration.”¹ This statement illustrates a broader discourse that presents food as a form of art. The series *Chef’s Table* (2015-present) also (unknowingly) takes part in the debate by presenting itself with the statement: ‘where the art of film meets the art of cooking.’² The series shows the stories of chefs of the best restaurants in the world. Every episode a story of a particular chef gets told. The spectator sees how the dishes in the different restaurants are made, what they look like when they are served and how the chef came up with the idea of the dish. In this thesis, I focus on the signification of food as modernist art in the episode *Grant Achatz* (2016) of the documentary-series *Chef’s Table* (2015-present). This episode takes place at the *Alinea* restaurant in Chicago Illinois. The three Michelin star restaurant is led by chef Grant Achatz who is famous for his use of the so called molecular gastronomy.³ This gastronomy exists out of four primary components. Firstly, the chefs of molecular gastronomy try to model “culinary definitions” which are the objectives of recipes and thus tell the chef which ingredients to use and the basic outline of what to do with them.⁴ Secondly, they try to collect and test “culinary precisions”. This is the useful technical information that is not necessarily needed to create a dish, such as; old wives’ tales, proverbs, tips and methods.⁵ The chefs also explore the social link of cooking. This focuses on the way food can connect people through conversation and experience. Lastly, they explore the art component of cooking in which the chefs use techniques or ideas out of the art discipline to create their dishes. In this thesis I will analyse specifically the art component of cooking within the episode *Grant Achatz* of *Chef’s Table*. The episode *Grant Achatz* signifies food as art in primarily three different ways; some of the dishes refer to existing works of art; the chef refers to a kind of thinking that is implemented in the arts from the beginning of the twentieth century till the mid-twentieth century named Modernism; and there are suggestions of the dishes being fetishized commodity.

With the release of documentaries about the aesthetics of food, the senses of smelling and tasting become less important. The spectator of the series only sees the dishes and does not smell or taste them. With the disappearance of these two senses another one is introduced. Music is of key importance within documentaries and thus hearing along with seeing are the two senses of importance within documentaries. More recent publications suggest that the idea that hearing and seeing are superior to the other senses. One of them introduced the ‘Consumption Exclusion Thesis’ (CET).⁶ This follows the Hegelian assumption that food cannot be art because it is not permanent as a result of consumption.

¹ Escoffier, A. (1979): 7.

² Gelb, D. (2016).

³ Myhrvold, N. (2011): 45.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibidem: 135.

There are scholars who are trying to refute this proposition. They argue that the perishable nature of food and the subordination of smell and taste to seeing and hearing do not exclude food as a form of art. One of them is Aaron Meskin. In his article *The Art and Aesthetics of Food* he argues that all the argumentations in this discussion fail. As he puts it:

Mimetic theories of art fail because not all art engages in imitation. Expression theories fail because not all art works are expressive. Aesthetic theories fail because not all art traffics in the provision of aesthetic experiences. Finally, representational theories fail because not all arts, not even all major arts, function to provide us with a perspective on what they represent. (I'm thinking of absolute music, architecture, some abstract painting, and so on.) Food, then, can be a major art form without representing in the substantial sense [...].⁷

Studies that have been done so far that (only) take the visual into account are focused on the influence of the layout of a plate on the experience of taste and the spending pattern of costumers. Thus, The question I will answer in my thesis is: In which way do visual and auditory techniques contribute to the signification of food as (a modernist) art(form) in the episode *Grant Achatz* (2016) of the Netflix documentary *Chef's Table* (2015-present)?

In order to give an answer to this question I will do a close reading of the episode *Grant Achatz* in the form of an analysis of montage, camera movements, light, props and music. Furthermore I will also analyse the way in which the chef discusses his own work in the episode to support the visual analysis. The analysis will be linked to the theory of semiotics of Charles Sander Peirce and especially to his three-way division of signs on the level of interpretation (iconic, indexical and symbolic). This theory offers a way of connecting the analysis to 'meaning' or 'effect' of different signs. The majority of these meanings and effects arise from 'agreements' or 'ideas' that already exist on the meaning of cinematic techniques, modernist art and food as art.⁸ Other meanings are constructed by for example repetition of images or techniques. A sign in the theory of Charles Sanders Peirce can be understood as a connection of three separate phases.

'A sign has, as such, three references; first, it is a sign *in* some respect or quality, which brings it into connection with its object; second, it is a sign *for* some object to which in a thought it is equivalent; third, it is a sign *to* some thought that interprets it.'⁹

The first phase is the nomination of a possible sign, most of the time by seeing an object in connection to the other two phases.¹⁰ The second phase is the reference to reality. The first phase is now really connected to an object. The third phase is the emergence of meaning. The object refers to a certain idea.¹¹

⁷ Meskin, A. (2013): 5.

⁸ Van Driel (1987): 120.

⁹ Ibidem: 116.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibidem: 117.

The first phase, the nomination of a possible sign, can be subdivided in three categories; qualisign, sinsign and legisign. The qualisign relies on meaning within a certain object such as its colour or shape. The sinsign relies on something outside the object like smoke belongs to a fire. A legisign relies on convention, habit or laws.¹² Thus, the nomination of a sign can lie within an object itself but also outside the object. The second phase, the reference to reality, can also be divided in three subcategories: icon, index and symbol. The iconic reference to reality relies on similarities in appearance. The indexical derives from experiences and the symbol relies on agreements.¹³ The last phase, emergence of meaning, is also subdivided in three: rheme, dicent and argument. Within a rheme the relation between the sign and its meaning is not actualised yet. An example is the beginning of old Hollywood movies wherein certain aspects of a character are introduced and in the course of the movie actions of those character are linked to the aspects. The moment these relations are actualised, Peirce talks about dicents.¹⁴ When two dicents are connected to each other and a conclusion is drawn from them it is an argument.¹⁵ In order to understand signs, one must have knowledge about certain objects. Thus, to implement the theory of Peirce, I will use theories about the Abstract Expressionist Jackson Pollock, Modernism and food porn to interpret the different signs.

Using the different theories stated above in combination with the analysis of the different scenes will help me to qualify the different signs in the system of Charles Sanders Pierce. This will help me to signify the understanding of food as art in the episode of *Chefs Table*.

The first chapter of my thesis will draw on the first and second scene of the episode. The intertextual relationship between the dish named *Tropical Fruit with Rum, Vanilla, Kaffir Lime* (IMG. 1) and abstract expressionist paintings will be discussed based on an analysis of rhythmic and graphical relations between shots through montage, props, camera movement and music. The notion of intertextuality as used by Paul Claes, as well as the working approach of Abstract Expressionist is explained. The focus lies on the work of Jackson Pollock in connection to the dish *Tropical Fruit with Rum, Vanilla, Kaffir Lime*. The second chapter concentrates on resemblances and differences in modernist thinking based on scenes in which the dishes are prepared and the scenes wherein the chef explains his way of thinking. Based on an analysis of primarily textual statements made in the episode of *Chef's Table: Grant Achatz*, the resemblance between the key terms of Modernism as stated by Jeff Wallace in his book *Beginning Modernism* and the sequences of ideas with which Grant Achatz gives meaning to his dishes will be made clear. The third and last chapter focuses on the notion of food porn and the way in which people tend to eat and taste with their eyes and focuses on the scenes where the final product or dish is presented to the viewer. Through the definition of the concepts of spectacle, voyeurism and the gaze, the notion of food porn and how it is presented in the episode of *Chef's Table*

¹² Ibidem: 118.

¹³ Ibidem: 125.

¹⁴ Ibidem: 126.

¹⁵ Ibidem: 127.

are explained. I will argue that food can signify art by the use of different techniques to create different signs and thus meanings through explaining and matching the concepts of food porn, Modernism and Abstract Expressionism to the way food is presented in the episode of *Chef's Table*.

Chapter 1. Plating like Pollock (and other Abstract Expressionists)

‘People like to think the creative process is romantic. The artist drifts to sleep at night, to be awakened by the subliminal echoes of his or her next brilliant idea. The truth, for me at least, is that creativity is primarily the result of hard work and study.’¹⁶

- Grant Achatz

As cited in the introduction, the episode *Grant Achatz* of the Netflix-series *Chef's Table* signifies food as works of art in three different ways: some of the dishes refer to existing works of art; the chef refers to a kind of thinking that is implemented in the arts from the beginning of the twentieth century till the mid-twentieth century named Modernism; and it suggests that the dishes can be seen as fetishized commodity. The first way of signifying will be discussed in this first chapter. Based on an analysis of the rhythmic and graphical relations between shot through montage, usage of props, camera movement and usage of music in the first two scenes of the episode, the intertextual relation between the dish *Tropical Fruit with Rum, Vanilla, Kaffir Lime* (IMG. 1) and Abstract Expressionist paintings will be discussed. Firstly, the concept of intertextuality will be briefly explained after which the concept will be linked to the sign system of Charles Sanders Peirce. Hereafter the method of working of Abstract Expressionists, and especially that of Jackson Pollock, will be linked to the way the dish is plated and to the notion of intertextuality. In this respect, I will pay attention to the diegetic world, which also includes the use of colour and props. Subsequently, the way in which the elements of the extra-diegetic world, such as camera movement, montage and music contribute to the intertextuality between the dish and the Abstract Expressionist works of art will be clarified. These elements can be classified as separate signs within the system of Peirce and do contribute to the intertextuality.

Peirce and Intertextuality

There are many different ways in which the concept of intertextuality is defined. None of the definitions fully explain what intertextuality is and how it can be used within the analysis of objects. Paul Claes, essayist and writer, attempts to give a definition that functions as an umbrella which includes all other definitions. He states that intertextuality is ‘the totality of relations between texts by which a subject that recognizes the relation can assign a function.’¹⁷ These texts are not mere written words on pages but can also be interpreted as other phenomena such as fashion or film.¹⁸ An intertextual relation between different ‘texts’ occurs when the ‘texts’ have at least one element in common. That element functions as the distinguishing mark.¹⁹ Most of the time the ‘texts’ have more than one element in common.²⁰ The

¹⁶ Myhrvold, N. (2011): 83.

¹⁷ Claes, P. (2011): 49.

¹⁸ Ibidem: 50.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibidem: 51.

whole of ‘texts’ which are bound through intertextual relations, is a so called intertext.²¹ All the ‘texts’ that are part of an intertext are variations of one another. With that knowledge, Claes argues, we can research the differences and similarities between ‘texts’ in a fully authentic way.²²

Within the sign system of Charles Sanders Peirce, one of the signs, the indexical sign, is subdivided into three sub-signs.²³ The indexical sign indicates a relation between the object and something known to people outside or inside the object.²⁴ This can be an intertextual relation as well as a relation with something that refers to a reality outside of ‘texts’ and a relation within the ‘text’ itself such as a leitmotiv.²⁵ Peirce, as well as Claes, argues that an intertextual sign or reference only can be found if the subject has knowledge about the ‘text’ (architext) where the first ‘text’ (fenotext) refers to.²⁶ While Peirce did not explain in which way the fenotext can refer to the architext, Claes did. He states that there are twelve ways in which this can happen at three different stages.²⁷ This leads to the following table²⁸:

<u>Transformation</u>	<i>Addition</i>	<i>Deletion</i>	<i>Substitution</i>	<i>Repetition</i>
<u>Level</u>				
<i>Form</i>	Elaboration	Summary	Definition	Citation of letters, sounds and graphics.
<i>Content</i>	Deepening	Smoothing	Distortion	Allusion
<i>Both</i>	Expansion	Redemption	Exchange	Citation

The intertextual relationship between the dish *Tropical Fruit with Rum, Vanilla, Kaffir Lime* (IMG. 1) and abstract expressionist paintings will be demonstrated through a comparison in the way the dish is plated and the technique used to make Abstract Expressionistic paintings as well as the final result of the dish and the paintings. There are two types of intertextuality at play in this section. The first one is the signification between the two scenes at the beginning of the episode and the second one is the signification to paintings and used techniques of Jackson Pollock.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibidem: 52.

²³ Van Bork, G.J. (2016).

²⁴ Deeley, J. (1994): 1059.

²⁵ Van Bork, G.J. (2016).

²⁶ Deeley, J. (1994): 1061. & Claes 52.

²⁷ Claes, P. (2011): 53.

²⁸ Ibidem: 54.

Abstract Expressionists (Jackson Pollock)

The modern artist is working with space and time, and expressing his feelings rather than illustrating.

- Jackson Pollock

The quote of Jackson Pollock explains for a great part what Abstract Expressionism is. Firstly, it is abstract; the art does not depict the reality in a way that it is directly recognizable. Secondly, the modernist artists express themselves and show emotions and expressions through their work. As a side note: we have to take into account that this is a very simplistic version of what Abstract Expressionism actually is and that for every artist associated with Abstract Expressionism the concept of the movement differs.²⁹ However, this perception gives enough insight to Abstract Expressionism to understand the signification between the dish shown in the episode and the works of Jackson Pollock.

The term Abstract Expressionism was chosen by a *New Yorker* critic in 1946. None of the painters associated with the movement saw themselves as a group, as many other movements like the Futurists or the Bauhaus Group did.³⁰ They did not have a Manifesto containing perspectives on how they would like to express themselves and thus had no rules on how to express themselves.³¹ This results in the existence of a 'group' put together, not by the artist themselves but by art critics, in which Willem de Kooning as well as Newman, whose style and meaning differs a lot from De Kooning, are included.³² Though the Abstract Expressionist always resisted a single collective identity based on style, theory and social ties they all declared their independence from political ideology. They refused to be manipulated by politics as happened to many people in fascist regimes like Nazi Germany.³³ In the view of the Abstract Expressionists, 'abstract art was the most plausible way to engender this position.'³⁴

The first dish presented in the episode *Grant Achatz of Chef's Table* second season resembles some of the characteristics of Abstract Expressionism and especially the working process of Jackson Pollock. Just like other modernistic art movements, Abstract Expressionism tried to break with everything that has been done before.³⁵ Because the Abstract Expressionists were not a group, all artists associated with Abstract Expressionism tried to break with the past in their own way. Pollock's decisive break with the artistic past was the use of a technique that was never shown before, namely 'Action Painting' or 'Process art.'³⁶ The artist canvas is laid on the floor upon which Pollock drips, squeezes,

²⁹ Wallace, J. (2011): 55.

³⁰ Anfam, D. (1990): 14.

³¹ Ibidem: 15.

³² Ibidem: 14.

³³ Cernuschi, C. (1992): 39.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Wallace, J. (2011): 52.

³⁶ Ibid.

splashes or pours paint. In most of the works, the canvas is covered in paint completely which creates a dense texture because of the layering of the paint.³⁷

Two Types of Intertextual Relations

The first thing the spectator sees when he or she is watching the episode of *Chef's Table* is the chef Grant Achatz watching abstract paintings in a gallery (IMG. 2). Most of the shots in the first scene are played in slow motion while classical music softly begins to play and the shots are about five seconds in length. The second scene has a very different feel to it. The slow motion of the first scene has disappeared. Ten seconds into the scene the music accelerates and becomes louder while the shots of the scene last less than one second in duration. The second scene depicts the plating of the *Tropical Fruit with Rum, Vanilla, Kaffir Lime* (IMG. 1) dish. The first scene informs the spectator on what to expect in the second scene. There are two ways in which intertextuality is present between and in the two scenes.

The first kind of intertextuality is the reference of the end product of the dish, when it is fully plated and shown from a helicopter view at the end of the second scene (IMG. 1), to the paintings shown in the first scene (IMG. 2 and 3). In this first scene the chef states: 'Early on in *Alinea* [the restaurant of the chef followed in the episode], we had this realisation that there is other disciplines that we can draw on for inspiration' while standing in front of the paintings in the gallery.³⁸ The kind of intertextual reference taking place in this situation according to Claes is that of a citation of letters, sounds and/or graphics. This means that there is a graphical repetition of the architext without the repetition of meaning from the architext.³⁹ Form is the most obvious graphical intertextual reference. The paintings shown in the first scene have impasto brush strokes (very thick layered brush strokes of paint). These brush strokes are placed almost randomly on the paintings but do have a flow to them. The dish made by Grant Achatz has the same kind of (brush)strokes and lining as the painting in the gallery. Both works do not depict a realistic object or subject if they depict anything at all. The way in which the final dish is presented to the spectator also shows similarities with the way the paintings are presented. The plated dish is wholly shown as a finished work of art on a canvas (tablecloth), the same is done with the paintings in the gallery. However, both works have a different sort of meaning. The plated dish is not only to look at and to enjoy, but eventually also to be eaten and to feed the people who eat it.⁴⁰ The difference in meaning as well as how this effects the dishes being art will be discussed in chapter two and three.

The second intertextuality can be derived from the first kind. We now know that the dish *Tropical Fruit with Rum, Vanilla, Kaffir Lime* (IMG. 1) can refer to an abstract work of art. However, the chef Grant Achatz never clarifies that the artworks exhibited in the art gallery in the first scene are

³⁷ Ibidem: 54.

³⁸ Gelb, D. (2016).

³⁹ Claes, P. (2011): 55.

⁴⁰ Myhrvold, N. (2011): 16.

the actual works of art the dish refers to. Thus, the dish can refer to other paintings or to Abstract Expressionism as a whole. As explained in the previous paragraph, Abstract Expressionism is not an art movement with one particular style or theory. Thus, for this second interpretation, I will look at the expressionism of Jackson Pollock because of the way in which the dish is plated and the colour palette used in both the dish and the works of Jackson Pollock. The graphical relation between the dish and the works of art of Pollock can be understood in the same way as in the first intertextuality. However, the usage of the colours yellow, black, white and red in the dish as well as in the paintings of Pollock (IMG. 4), who limits his colour scheme to these four colours in much of his paintings, also play a role in the graphical relation.⁴¹ According to the theory of Peirce this intertextual relation can be understood as an indexical sign, as explained in the section 'Intertextuality'. Another important indexical relation between the two objects is made clear through montage. When the chef starts plating the dish, the shots get shorter in duration the moment the chef starts plating. The shift in the duration of shots highlight the dynamic of the artistic process followed by the chef. This contributes to the idea of action and thereby can refer to the technique used by Pollock that is, action painting. This sign is not an intertextual one but can be understood as a symbolic sign.⁴² This symbolic sign can be understood as smoke with fire. When a person sees smoke, there is a high chance at a fire being nearby. A symbol then is an 'association of general ideas in such a way that its Replica calls up an image in the mind which image, owing to certain habits or dispositions of that mind, tends to produce a general concept.'⁴³ The shots therefore can stand for action which is an symbol for action painting. Another factor contributing to the idea of action is the music which plays faster and louder during this scene. The way in which music and camerawork contribute to the depiction of dishes as works of art will be discussed in chapter three.

Action painting is, according to Pollock, all about rhythm.⁴⁴ He does not depict an experience because it would never satisfy him; art, he would say, 'was not a question of illustration, only rhythm and compositional arrangements matter.'⁴⁵ They also do not contain discernible traces of political statements.⁴⁶ The first real similarity between the paintings of Pollock and the dish of Grant Achatz is the way in which they both start painting/plating. Pollock states:

'My painting does not come from the easel, I hardly ever stretch my canvas before painting. I prefer to tack the unstretched canvas to the hard wall or floor. I need the resistance of a hard surface. On the floor I am more at ease. I feel nearer, more part of the painting, since this way I can walk around it, work from the four sides and literally be in the painting.'⁴⁷

⁴¹ Cernuschi, C. (1992): 27.

⁴² Deeley, J. (1994): 1058.

⁴³ Ibidem: 2100.

⁴⁴ Cernuschi, C. (1992): 17.

⁴⁵ Ibidem: 20.

⁴⁶ Ibidem: 27.

⁴⁷ Ibidem: 105.

Thus, Pollock tacks the canvas on the floor while Grant Achatz tacks the canvas (tablecloth) on the table. Both work with a hard surface underneath and can walk around the canvas. The only difference is that Pollock can freely walk around his canvas while Grant Achatz has to deal with two to four people sitting on either side of the table. The second similarity is the way in which they plate and paint their canvas. They both use variations of the dripping technique made famous by Pollock. Through this technique the artist pours or drips, almost impulsively, paint on the canvas.⁴⁸ The paint is spread over the whole of the canvas and so makes the painting into what Clement Greenberg calls the 'allover'. Grant Achatz does the same with the tablecloth of the dish, the food is spread all over and little space is left between the different kinds of food (IMG. 1). In the process, the artist makes adjustments to the painting, as Pollock says:

I have no fear of making changes, destroying the image, etc., because the painting has a life of its own. I try to let it come through. It is only when I lose contact with the painting that the result is a mess. Otherwise there is pure harmony, an easy give and take, and the painting comes out well.⁴⁹

The same thing is shown at the end of the second scene in the episode of *Chef's Table*. Neatly arranged white scoops of food are scattered to pieces with the strike of a spoon (IMG. 5). The last obvious similarity is the scale of the dish and painting. Pollock used enormous canvasses for his painting and now Grant Achatz does the same with his dish.⁵⁰ Normally, a chef would make and arrange his dish on a plate which is 21 centimetres wide but now Grant Achatz uses the whole table to plate his dish. He thus implements innovative techniques in the style of the Abstract Expressionism of Jackson Pollock.

This intertextuality between the dish and the work of Jackson Pollock is mostly an intertext on the surface or visually of the dish and the paintings besides the resemblance in performance. While the paintings of the Abstract Expressionists are truly modernist the dish of Grant Achatz can also be seen as postmodern. Frederic Jameson introduces the term depthlessness by which he points out that there is a huge difference between modern and postmodern art.⁵¹ The modernist art tells something about what is depicted in the painting. They take the viewer back to that 'whole larger lived context' of the painting. In Postmodernism the art does not evoke the 'life world' from which they come. Jameson argues that in Postmodernism there is no difference between commercial images and 'art'. They are one and the same thing. Postmodernist art further lacks the political statement that is made within modernist art.⁵² Although Jackson Pollock refused to make a political statement that in itself can be seen as political according to Jameson. He tried to break away from his predecessors and their ideology but thereby established a new ideology which is political in itself. Grant Achatz however tries not to break away

⁴⁸ Ibidem: 34.

⁴⁹ Ibidem: 105.

⁵⁰ Ibidem: 34.

⁵¹ Walton, D. (2012): 231.

⁵² Ibid.

from the current ideology but seeks ways to renew old techniques and find new techniques to astonish his public with a spectacle. Feeling, emotion and subjectivity almost disappear in postmodern art, it is a mere simulacrum (Baudrillard) of another work of art. The dish discussed in this chapter then only focuses on the appearance. It is a commercial product which is made to be consumed and does not bear a specific political statement. There is no essence – only appearance through intertextuality, discourses and textual play.⁵³

The dish *Tropical Fruit with Rum, Vanilla, Kaffir Lime* (IMG. 1) then signifies Abstract Expressionism in different ways. The order in which the scenes are played in combination with the voice-over explaining the way in which the chef gets inspired by works of art denudes the relation between the dish and art. However, this relation seems only to be concentrating on the surface and less on the political statement or stories behind actual Abstract Expressionist paintings.

⁵³ Ibidem: 234.

Chapter 2. Moving like the Modernists

‘I was fixated on finding a symbol that we could make a logo out of. There was this late-night googling session, and [I] found the alinea symbol and then looked at the definition. It was this perfect meaning: “The beginning of a new train of thought.”’⁵⁴

- Grant Achatz

In the first chapter, the indexical relation between the dish *Tropical Fruit with Rum, Vanilla, Kaffir Lime* (IMG. 1) and the works of Jackson Pollock is compared. Jackson Pollock was one of the Abstract Expressionists who, in turn, were part of a broader movement called Modernism. In the quote above Grant Achatz refers to the medieval meaning of the alinea symbol (IMG. 6a-6b).⁵⁵ The ‘new train of thought’ indicates the beginning of a new paragraph or alinea in written works, and thus takes its origin from the literary arts.⁵⁶ At the same time it resembles the idea of many movements within Modernism namely, to break with the past and the search for new forms of expression.⁵⁷ In this chapter, a resemblance between the dishes of Grant Achatz and works of art will be discussed in terms of Modernism as a view on the role of the creative mind and aesthetics in society. Based on an analysis of primarily textual statements made in the episode of *Chef’s Table: Grant Achatz*, the resemblance between the key terms of Modernism and the sequences of ideas with which Grant Achatz creates his dishes will be made clear. This analysis will be linked to the theory of Charles Sanders Peirce, wherein different interpretations of the signs, derived from the analysis, will be discussed. Thereafter, I will give a short introduction of the movement called Modernism. In this section I will expound the key terms within the movement based on the book *Beginning Modernism* from Jeff Wallace. Then, these key terms will be examined in greater depth and in conjunction to the textual and partly visual analysis. Through a Peircean analysis the chapter argues that the dishes shown in the episode of *Chef’s Table* do not only refer to an intertextual relation between works of art and the dishes, but also can be seen as a more general expression of ideas that have been drawn from the modernist movement.

Peirce and Modernism

As explained in this chapter the Modernist Cuisine, as Nathan Myhrvold calls it, can be considered a derivative from Modernism in art. Thus, it can be treated the same way as in the first chapter: like an intertextual relation between the two umbrella terms. But, in general, with the exception of some of the dishes, the modernist chefs who started in the 1980s do not explicitly take the modernist art of the early twentieth century as their inspiration. The mission of the modernist chefs, as Myhrvold argues, is ‘not to be like the modernist artist but to give diners a new experience with food, using whatever tools are

⁵⁴ Gelb, D. (2016).

⁵⁵ Stamp, J. (July, 2013).

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ The Editors of Encyclopædia Britannica. (February, 2016).

available.⁵⁸ They created their own (non) rules which look like the (non) rules associated with the modernist art.⁵⁹ Then the dominant sign, according to the sign system of Charles Sanders Peirce, is the symbolic sign. More precisely it is a Symbolic Rheme.⁶⁰ This sign is explained by Peirce as:

‘[...] a sign [that is] connected with its Object by an association of general ideas in such a way that its Replica calls up an image in the mind which image, owing to certain habits or dispositions of that mind, tends to produce a general concept, and the Replica is interpreted as a Sign of an Object that is an instance of that concept.’⁶¹

The chefs of the so called Modernist Cuisine do not have a straightforward connection with the modernist art of the early twentieth century, but are connected through an association of general ideas. These ideas are the (non) rules or general perceptions of what Modernism is, as noted by Jeff Wallace. When looking at the dishes of Grant Achatz, one, with enough knowledge of the modernist movement, can relate the perceptions of Modernism to the dishes. The dishes are not merely connected through intertextual signifiers to modernist art but can also be signified as symbols and other signs. In the next few sections Modernism as well as Modernist Cuisine will be explained in more depth to make the connection to the theory of Peirce more clear.

Modernism Applied

Change is not something that is evident within a small amount of time. For the most part social change is clearly noticeable several decades later, when people reflect on the changes made throughout the past few decades. Culture is altered more radically than intimate changes by revolution rather than evolution.⁶² The idea of an artistic avant-garde suggests that most of the time this change starts with a group of artists who want to break away from their predecessors. They try to create a new aesthetic within art, like the movements within Modernism do.⁶³ Thus, Modernism does not consist of one movement but is used as an umbrella term for a mixture of artistic schools and styles which arose in late-nineteenth century Western Europe.⁶⁴ The term Modernism however, was introduced in American academia around 1950.⁶⁵ According to Jeff Wallace, professor at the Cardiff School of Education, ‘Modernism is the moment at which art stops making sense.’⁶⁶ The spectators do not experience immediate gratification when looking at modernist artworks, but need to search for meaning. The goal of (high) Modernism then, is to make the ‘familiar unfamiliar’ and at the same time ‘disrupt and shatter

⁵⁸ Myhrvold, N. (2011): 36.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Deeley, J. (1994): 2100.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Myhrvold, N. (2011): 16.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Felski, R. (1995): 1.

⁶⁵ Wallace, J. (2011): 14.

⁶⁶ Ibidem: 3.

our accepted forms of representation and understanding, to introduce difficulty.⁶⁷ This difficulty is characterised by ‘surprise, bafflement, bewilderment, and perhaps exasperation.’⁶⁸ Often, the ‘Emperor’s New Clothes’ narrative is compared to the way in which Modernism effects people. The difficulty within Modernism is then seen as a ‘kind of trick, played on an unsuspecting public.’ Only an innocent child has the ability to understand the trick being played.⁶⁹ The innocence of the child makes that they can cut through the atmosphere of sycophancy that surrounds the works of modernist art.

Modernism is a very broad term. There are many definitions of the word Modernism and its meaning. For this reason, Jeff Wallace introduces a few key terms which are associated with Modernism. I will use these key terms as a guidance in the comparison of Modernism with the analysis of the episode of *Chef’s Table*. The first term is aesthetic self-consciousness or reflexivity. This includes the way in which art refers to itself by drawing attention to its own constituent materials and the way it is constructed.⁷⁰ The second term refers to the use of spatial rather than temporal forms. It includes the idea that time is not ‘a linear succession of moments or movements.’ At the same time, according to most modernists, different moments ‘can be experienced simultaneously within the space of the artwork.’⁷¹ The third assumption is that Modernism consists of paradoxes, ambiguities and uncertainties. It is about open rather than closed endings, multiple narrations and shifting perspectives.⁷² The last key term, according to Wallace, is the notion of dehumanization. Which means that the self is not characterized by wholeness but rather a subject in conflict with discontinuous drives.⁷³ The best way to act on these terms is through the abstraction of things (artworks).⁷⁴

Although disruptive changes appear within the arts quite often as mentioned in the section above, those changes are relatively rare in the world of food.⁷⁵ Whilst the revolution in the world of art reached its climax, nothing changed in the world of fine cuisine. As Nathan Myhrvold, scientist and chef, states: ‘The very people who sought to remake the style of the modern world somehow sat down to eat totally conventional food and thought nothing of doing so.’⁷⁶ Since the 1980s, roughly one hundred years after the start of the revolution within the arts, a similar break as happened in the modernist art movement took place in the world of cuisine. Similar ways of breaking with previous movements in the food world were present, such as the breaking with the Nouvelle cuisine and the way of serving named *service à la russe* that came with it (light dishes out of the French cuisine, plated and served in courses rather than served all at once as with Cuisine Classique and *service à la française*).⁷⁷ The Modernist

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Ibidem: 12.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Ibidem: 15.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Ibidem: 17.

⁷⁵ Myhrvold, N. (2011): 16.

⁷⁶ Ibidem : 52.

⁷⁷ Allhoff, F. et al. (2007): 128.

Cuisine, aspires the development of new techniques and a new aesthetic in preparing the food as well as serving and plating it.⁷⁸ However, Myhrvold argues that this break is made by modernist chefs but the intentions of this break could be easily understood as postmodern.

The Nouvelle cuisine, which was the most dominant form of haute cuisine right after the time of the modernist arts, imposed strict rules, written and unwritten, for the chefs to adhere to. A lot of modernist movements existed out of strict ruler, for example De Stijl. Yet, those rules are what the so called modernist chefs attacked.⁷⁹ One of the first quotes of Grant Achatz in the episode of *Chef's Table* 'Rules? [scoffs] There are no rules. Do whatever you want' fits perfectly in this train of thought and gives an impression of what to expect in the rest of the episode.⁸⁰

Key Terms (Autonomy, Paradoxes, Self-Consciousness, Time and Space)

The drive for most of the key terms introduced by Wallace is the search for autonomy. In this section three of the four key terms as named by Wallace will be discussed in conjunction with the episode *Grant Achatz* of the series *Chef's Table*. The idea of autonomy will be briefly explained and applied to different dishes presented in the episode of *Chef's Table*. Thereafter the three key terms paradoxes, reflexivity, and spatial time will be discussed and also applied to several dishes.

Modernist artists did not want to picture the world from a position of external authority. They rather work from the inside out.⁸¹ They would give an impression or an expression of the objects they saw, not by presenting paintings of discreet objects but by presenting situations through characteristics which are 'mutually dependent and mutually determined.'⁸² Thus, through the principal of autonomy, artists claim the right to redefine the rules written by their predecessors.⁸³ That makes for a break with the past. Grant Achatz puts it in the episode as: 'I had to leave those confines of the rules.'⁸⁴ However, Grant Achatz was not the first chef to break with the rules of the Nouvelle cuisine. Adria, the owner of the restaurant El Bulli, is seen as the founder of the Modernist cuisine.⁸⁵ In the early 1990s he formed a development group with his team to generate new ideas and techniques that had never been shown before.⁸⁶ Grant Achatz is a successor of Adria, he worked for a couple of weeks in his restaurant, but has his own ideas and elaboration of those ideas.⁸⁷ He also asks himself questions like 'why do you have to eat with a fork or a spoon? And why does it have to be served on a plate or in a bowl? Why can't we

⁷⁸ Myhrvold, N. (2011): 33.

⁷⁹ Ibidem: 53.

⁸⁰ Gelb, D. (2016).

⁸¹ Altieri, C. (2009): 1.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Gelb, D. (2016).

⁸⁵ Myhrvold, N. (2011): 34.

⁸⁶ Ibidem: 35.

⁸⁷ Ibidem: 73 & Gelb, D. (2016).

come up with something new?’⁸⁸ The styles of Adria and Grant Achatz differ, just as other chefs associated with molecular cuisine differ in style.⁸⁹ Thus, Modernist Cuisine consists, just like the Modernism that arose in the late nineteenth century, of several movements with different styles.

The style of Grant Achatz is characterised by the use of uncommon tools in the kitchen. A co-worker of Grant Achatz states that ‘This food is not only to satisfy you here [points at belly] but to stimulate you here [points at head].’⁹⁰ Modernist art, according to Clement Greenberg, has to make you think and the questions asked should not be or are not answerable.⁹¹ The usage of paradoxes, ambiguity and uncertainties, as shown in the two dishes, the sugar balloon and the strawberry-tomato dish, is one of the techniques by which Grant Achatz stands to create intellectual dishes.

‘The leading chefs in the world know that they can make delicious food. So we have to take it a step further. At Alinea we are actually trying to curate an experience. I want the guests to have a sense of wonderment. “What is going to happen next?” They should not go: “I know what this is going to be like.” They should expect the unexpected.’⁹²

With this statement, and especially the last part of the statement, Grant Achatz pursues the approach adopted in the Modernism of the arts where bewilderment surprise, bafflement, and exasperation make the ‘familiar unfamiliar’, as Jeff Wallace states. It introduces difficulty, because the costumer does not get what he or she expects out of a dish. ‘Modernism is the moment at which art stops making sense’, and within the sugar balloon dish and the strawberry-tomato dish, paradoxes, ambiguities and uncertainties caused by the way in which the dish is prepared or plated, make that the dishes also stop making sense.

The re-examination of the way food should be prepared or plated led to conceptual advances.⁹³ One of them, noted by Myhrvold, is the notion of ‘deconstruction.’ The dessert of Grant Achatz with the tomato and the strawberry which are moulded into each other’s shapes is a perfect example of this notion. The flavours in the dish are conventional but they are presented in an unconventional way. The texture, shape and/or temperature are modified and thereby transform the already known gastronomic association into something unknown.⁹⁴

Chefs like Adria and Grant Achatz are labelled as practitioners of molecular gastronomy.⁹⁵ This usage of physics within the creation of dishes reflects the development of modernist art and the use of physics within the creation of those artworks. Not merely by means of really using physics to create an

⁸⁸ Gelb, D. (2016).

⁸⁹ Myhrvold, N. (2011): 37.

⁹⁰ Gelb, D. (2016).

⁹¹ Wallace, J. (2011): 47.

⁹² Gelb, D. (2016).

⁹³ Myhrvold, N. (2011): 37.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Ibidem: 47.

artwork but also in thinking about physics and the consequences of using it.⁹⁶ The poem written by Wallace Stevens in 1942 shows the process of thinking:

‘That the glass would melt in heat / That the water would freeze in cold / Show that
this object is merely a state / One of many, between two poles.’⁹⁷

The questions raised by this poem according to Wallace are: ‘should we think of phenomena as objects, or as events?’ or ‘Is a glass of water a thing, complete in itself, or is it a temporary stage in a process?’ are also the questions raised by modernist chefs seventy years later.⁹⁸ One of the co-workers of Grant Achatz states: ‘He [Grant] is asking himself questions like “Can I make that float?” Or, “Can I make that invisible?” Or, “Can I hide this food in front of the guests?”’⁹⁹ While this voice-over reaches the spectator of the episode, he or she actually sees the way in which Grant Achatz manipulates food through science to make the food float or invisible.

The way in which the dishes of Grant Achatz are manipulated and make the ‘familiar unfamiliar’ also refer to another key term of Modernism, namely the reflexivity and aesthetic self-consciousness of the artwork or dish. Within Modernism artworks are seen as something constructed and consumed and refer to themselves by accentuating its construction or materiality.¹⁰⁰ The dessert with the manipulated tomato and strawberry (IMG.8) is an example of a dish that draws attention to its construction and materiality. The fact that the tomato looks like a strawberry but still tastes like a tomato makes that the consumer has to think about the way the dish is constructed. Although the consumer may not see that the strawberry is actually a tomato and vice versa, he or she later ‘establishes a connection between the flavour of what he is eating and the classic recipe; in other words, he or she recognizes it’ according to Myhrvold.¹⁰¹ This causes the consumer not only to reflect upon the dish but also upon itself, the consumer is in a way self-conscious.¹⁰²

The notion of reflexivity and self-consciousness is also reflected in the same way in the idea of Grant Achatz to cover a wall with a canvas and throw sauces on it:

‘Imagine if we have a wall covered with canvas and we threw sauces on it. And then they came up and scrape the sauce off with their spoon, right?’ We would not do that, but is there a way to think about it like that?’¹⁰³

There are other dishes in which the idea of self-consciousness and reflexivity are present in the way mentioned before. There is a dish in which the centrepiece, a chili pepper, hanging above the tables is

⁹⁶ Wallace, J. (2011): 124-125.

⁹⁷ Wallace, J. (2011): 125.

⁹⁸ Ibidem: 125 & Myhrvold, N. (2011): 47.

⁹⁹ Gelb, D. (2016).

¹⁰⁰ Ibidem: 15.

¹⁰¹ Myhrvold, N. (2011): 37.

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ Gelb, D. (2016).

used in one of the last plated dishes. The waiter or chef serves the dish and then grabs the centrepiece from above the table, cuts it in pieces on the table and finishes the plating of the dish. Another trick is played at a dish called *Chicken Leg, Kombu, Shishito, Lily* (IMG. 9). Grant Achatz states:

‘You have what appears to be just a pile of wood on fire, there is a sense of intrigue and mystery there because you don’t really know why the fire is there. Then we trick you into thinking the fire is there so you can take the pine branches off with the unagi and the plum and warm it up. And then at one point as you’re eating your way through all of these other components, the captain will come over to the table, remove the fire, pull apart the fire. In the middle you have a piece of chicken thigh that’s been wrapped in kombu roasting in the fire, hidden.’¹⁰⁴

In all three of these dishes the consumer is forced to think about the materiality and the construction of the dish as well as the fact he or she should react on the dish, what makes the consumer self-conscious.

The last two dishes, especially the dish that uses fire, explained in the previous section, also show great resemblances with the notions of time and space within Modernism. In his process of thinking Grant Achatz asks himself the question ‘Is there a way to expand, instead of scale, time?’¹⁰⁵ In modernist thinking time, as a linear and diachronic entity of measurable and homogeneous quality, comes under pressure.¹⁰⁶ It should be considered of a quantity that mixes temporalities or speeds, and past, present and future.¹⁰⁷ By surprising the guests of the restaurant with the chicken thigh that has been cooked under their eyes without them noticing it, Grant makes the guests reflect on the passing of time. Not only do the guests not know how long the chicken thigh has been there but also the present, past and future get mixed. The chef knows that in the future the guest will be eating the chicken, while the guests only know that in the past the chicken was already hidden in the fire. So, the present of the guests and the chef is that of a different kind because of the knowledge they have about the dish.

The passing of time in different speeds is also connected to the logo, as introduced at the beginning of the chapter. Grant Achatz links the alinea-logo to the philosophy of the restaurant: ‘The whole philosophy of the restaurant is going to be, “This is new and then it is new again, and it is new again, and it is new again.”’¹⁰⁸ So, while the logo stays the same, it presents the passing of time without actually making it visible by using a clock.

However, this deconstruction of time and space is carefully constructed by Grant Achatz. It therefore is not completely disruptive in a modernist sense of way. The surprising effect of the dish not being what it seems like is a wondering one more than a disturbing surprise. The modernist tried to disrupt this wondering whilst the postmodernist added a polished layer of carefully constructed entertainment.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ Wallace, J. (2011): 136.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ Gelb, D. (2016).

Chapter 3. Food Porn

‘The leading chefs in the world know that they can make delicious food. So, we have to take it a step further. At *Alinea* we are actually trying to curate an experience.’

- Grant Achatz

In the previous chapters the focus lay on food as signifying expressions in the arts. This chapter will focus on the food shown in the episode *Grant Achatz* as fetishized commodity through voyeurism and the use of senses. The focal point in this chapter are the scenes leading up to the presentation of the dishes and the scenes of the presentation itself. As noted in the introduction of this thesis, there has been an ongoing discussion about food as art. Most of the arguments regarding this discussion focus on the various senses. Ever since Greek antiquity taste and smell are seen as secondary senses.¹⁰⁹ They are considered to be inferior to seeing and hearing. The senses seeing and hearing presuppose objectivity because they perceive from a distal distance. This differentiation between the senses endures within the Christian and Jewish tradition up to today’s society with social media as a new factor.¹¹⁰ However, food, in a way, has a quality of tapping into our emotional reservoir. It triggers nostalgic memories to elicit desire, greed, familiarity, comfort and pleasure (affect).¹¹¹ This is consistent with a development within the arts. As Anneke Smelik states in *Gender in media, kunst en cultuur* (Gender in media, art and culture) there must be a re-evaluation about what defines the arts being arts. The aesthetic experience (affect) is often forgotten within the analysis of artforms.¹¹² When focusing on the sensory and emotional experiences of the medium or art form the visual is just a small part of the analysis. It then not only focuses on the visual but also on what lies behind it.¹¹³ The focus of the analysis of food porn then does not lie with the visual representation but with the emotional connotation or affect that triggers the desire.

The discussion about art which started with Plato was all about the senses. The visual as the most important sense and taste as a more insignificant sense. Food then, has never been considered a real art because it was part of a consumerism spectacle. Modernist artists tried to restore our critical abilities by creating good art. But, with the notion of food porn leading towards the senses as all being part of the experience as a whole and not specifically being part of a ranking of senses, a new layer is added to the discussion.

With the advent of the internet 2.0 people began to share images with one another, including images of meals. The use of hashtags is introduced with this phenomenon of sharing images (‘A word or phrase preceded by a hash sign (#), used on social media websites and applications, especially Twitter,

¹⁰⁹ Sweeney, K.W. (2007): 117.

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹¹ Ibidem: 3.

¹¹² Smelik, A. M. (2007): 200.

¹¹³ Ibid.

to identify messages on a specific topic').¹¹⁴ One of those hashtags is that of 'food porn.' Through explaining and matching the concept of 'food porn' to the way food is presented in the episode of *Chef's Table*, I will argue that despite the process, the vision and the intertextual references to Modernism the end product is presented as fetishized commodity.

In this chapter I will first link the idea of understanding food as art and a consumer product to the sign system of Charles Sanders Peirce. Secondly, I will give a definition of the concept of 'food porn' through the notions of performance, voyeurism and the gaze. Within those sections I will match the way the food is presented in the episode of *Chef's Table* to those notions. In this respect, camera movement, sound and props are important aspects of the presentation of the food. Thereafter the way in which the different senses are triggered is discussed. This chapter argues through a Peircean analysis, that filmic techniques contribute to the dishes as a spectacle to be consumed with voyeuristic jouissance.

Peirce and Food Porn

Food visualisation, media and pornography have technological similarities. A few of those similarities are the use of extreme close-ups, manipulation and extending the 'climactic' moment.¹¹⁵ Each of those techniques have their own way of expressing meaning as intended by the sign system of Charles Sanders Peirce. In this section music, camera movement, framing, light and props will be discussed.

The use of music is very important in the episode of *Chef's Table*. Most of the time, the music is used at the moments the chefs start preparing a dish and leading to the moment of presenting the dish. Those two moments are divided in two scenes with the music overlapping the scenes. The music is always classical styled music and builds up to a climax, which is the showing of the dish in its whole. The 'rhythm' of the music is also connected with the montage. Which is most clear in the parts where there are details shown of the dish before the whole dish is presented (IMG. 12a). This music has a rhythmic relation with the visuals. It therefore is symbolic for what is shown in the episode, a symbolic rheme in the system of Peirce (as explained in chapter two).¹¹⁶ Through the episode the spectator can notice the connection between the montage of the shots and the playing of the music. It then becomes a 'general idea' which calls up an image in the mind of the spectator. As soon as the music starts playing the spectator can hear when there is a cut in the montage without having to look at the episode.

The camera movement has a constant style. In the scenes where the dishes are prepared a hand held camera is used. This gives the spectator the feeling as if he or she were really there in the kitchen with the chefs preparing the dishes, looking over their shoulders. The scene that presents the dish as a whole can be divided in two parts of which the first one shows only little parts of the dish. The camera then lingers over the dishes in slow motion (like the gaze of a lecher over a naked body). In this moment,

¹¹⁴ Definition from the Oxford Dictionary.

¹¹⁵ Ibrahim, Y. (2015): 2.

¹¹⁶ Deeley, J. (1994): 2100.

the camera movement is also a symbolic rhyme.¹¹⁷ The second part of this type of scene can be recognized as the moment that the dish is shown in its entirety. The slow motion in the second part of the scene continues but the camera is steady and only zooms in on the dish.

In the two scenes the dish is presented as a whole only ones, and that moment is the last few seconds of the second scene. Beforehand only little parts of the dishes are shown. This is also true for the lightning. Only in the last few seconds this changes. At the same time as the camera zooms in on the presented dish, the background lights are dimmed and a vignette technique ('A small illustration or portrait photograph which fades into its background without a definite border') is used whilst the dish itself is highlighted more.¹¹⁸ This framing can be considered an iconic sinsign with the information given in the next sections. It resembles the way in which female bodies were presented in classical Hollywood cinema and therefore fits in the definition of Peirce: 'An Iconic Sinsign is any object [or movement] of experience in so far as some quality of it makes it determine the idea of an [similar] Object [or movement]'.¹¹⁹ The movements of the camera, as well as the slow motion used show similarities with the movements made in the classical Hollywood film. The dish is framed, just like the women in classical Hollywood film before it gets revealed as a whole.¹²⁰

The dishes are shown in two different surroundings. The first one is at a kitchen counter within the kitchen of the *Alinea* restaurant. Whilst the dish is presented, the chefs go on preparing different meals. So the props in the background is the usual equipment used in a kitchen. The second surrounding is a black room as seen by the *Bean, Many Garnishes, Pillow of Nutmeg Air (2006)* dish (IMG. 10). The prop used in this kind of scenes is smoke. This usage of technique can be linked to Peirce's rhematic indexical sinsign which is 'any object of direct experience so far as it directs attention to an Object by which its presence is caused'.¹²¹ The most common example of a rhematic indexical sinsign is the smoke which belongs to fire. When a spectator sees smoke in open air, most of the time they think or suspect there is a fire nearby. The smoke used as a prop in the episode can have two meanings. The first one is that of the heat coming of a hot dish when it comes fresh out of the kitchen. The other meaning is that of presenting a spectacle or a mystery as is done in theatre shows where smoke appears when there is something about to happen (like the introduction of a character).

All three sorts of the signs, indexical, symbolic and iconic are presented within the use of visual techniques. They support the performance or spectacle, as explained in the next sections.

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

¹¹⁸ Definition from the Oxford Dictionary.

¹¹⁹ Deeley, J. (1994): 2100.

¹²⁰ Smelik, A. M. (2007): 188.

¹²¹ Deeley, J. (1994): 2100.

Food Porn: A Definition

The term ‘food porn’ appeared for the first time in 1977 in the *New York Review of Books* as ‘gastro porn’. A cookbook review reflected that ‘True gastro-porn heightens the excitement and also the sense of the unattainable by proffering colored photographs of various completed recipes.’¹²² The words ‘excitement’ and ‘unattainable’ give a sense of fantasy or unreachability. Roland Barthes did not use the term but discussed the meaning in his collections of *Mythologies*. He comments on the way *Elle*, the fashion magazine, offers the woman reading the food-content, but cannot cook or afford very difficult meals themselves, fantasy.¹²³ Barthes states: ‘[C]ooking according to *Elle* is meant for the eye alone, since sight is a genteel sense.’¹²⁴ The term ‘food porn’ further refers to still or moving images of food across different sorts of media (cookbooks, websites, television and social media).¹²⁵ Most of the time the term is used in a positive way. The use of aesthetics of composition (lightning, close-ups and colour saturation) suggests desirably depicted food.¹²⁶ The word ‘porn’ does not refer to something erotic within the depiction of the food or in the food itself, although the depiction can be made erotic.¹²⁷ The ‘porn’ refers to something unreal or unreachable. As Signe Rousseau states in his text *Food ‘Porn’ in Media*: ‘you will never meet a Playmate of the month; you will never eat the red, juicy tomato that you see on ‘Barefoot Contessa’[an English cooking show].’¹²⁸ So, most of the time the term is used to describe any food that looks good to eat, even if it is unreachable or even uneatable. Another aspect of food porn is the notion of desire or jouissance.¹²⁹ This notion is tied to luxury goods and is often mentioned in combination with molecular gastronomy, of which Grant Achatz is part, because of its value of experience.¹³⁰ The dishes within molecular gastronomy are not merely food, but are an experience on their own because of the unexpected within the different dishes. Thus, the unreachability makes the spectator desire to taste the dishes shown. The frustration of not knowing how the dishes are made exactly through the use of jump cuts makes the spectator desire the dish even more because it is even more unreachable.¹³¹

¹²² Rousseau, S. (2014): 748.

¹²³ McBride, A. E. (2010): 38.

¹²⁴ Ibid.

¹²⁵ Rousseau, S. (2014): 748.

¹²⁶ Ibid.

¹²⁷ Ibid.

¹²⁸ Ibid.

¹²⁹ Bradley, P. (2016): 235.

¹³⁰ Ibidem: 232

¹³¹ Ibidem: 233.

Performance, Voyeurism and the Senses

Portrayals of food have been modified for advertising and cookbooks to make it look better, accentuating the unreachability of presenting your own food in that way.¹³² Food then, is so transformed by lighting, styling, and the way it is set out on the television show that it implies a spectacle. An example of this notion of this spectacle in the episode of *Chef's Table* is the way the finished dishes are presented (IMG. 11a-11c). The camera focusses on the finished dish, named *Peach with Cava, Basil, Murray River Salt*, which is placed in the kitchen or on a table in the restaurant. The camera slowly moves forward towards the dish or the centre of the dish. At the same time the background lights is dimmed and the vignette technique is used whilst the dish itself gets lit up more. In this way the colours of the dish draw more attention and look more saturated.

Critic Richard Magee links the presentation of food in visual culture to the postmodern:

Food [within visual culture] becomes divorced from its nutritive or taste qualities and enters a realm where surface appearance is all important. The interest here is in creating a graphic simulation of real food that is beyond anything that the home cook could produce.¹³³

This focussing on the surface (depthlessness and simulation) is the same as mentioned in chapter one (see page 12). So, food porn focusses mostly on the surface by using visual techniques such as lightning and styling to create a sense of unreachability. The visual then is all performance.¹³⁴ This focusing on the sense of seeing does not mean that the other senses are not triggered. Magee also points out that 'both food pornography and sexual pornography are primarily focused on food or sex as performance, and, like all performance, are designed as a voyeuristic exercise.'¹³⁵ The performance here can be understood as comparable to Guy Debord's spectacle. This spectacle, in a nutshell, can be understood as an understanding of society that supplants relations between people with relations between commodities. The social relationship between people, according to Debord, is mediated by images.¹³⁶ It is not about mere 'having' in consumerism anymore but the focus shifts to a state of 'appearing' through images.¹³⁷ At a performance in a film the spectator is looking and the performer is not able to look back so the spectator can look unashamedly without being seen. The same goes for looking at someone preparing the food. The spectator can look without being looked back at and so can look unashamedly at all the desirable food without getting caught. The spectator then consumes the food through looking at an image.

¹³² McBride, A. E. (2010): 38.

¹³³ Ibid.

¹³⁴ Ibid.

¹³⁵ Ibid.

¹³⁶ Debord, G. (1994): 13.

¹³⁷ Ibid.

Voyeurism is the (sexual) pleasure gained from looking or seeing.¹³⁸ It was first conceptualized in visual culture in the seventies in the context of the feminist movement. Laura Mulvey, British film feminist and theorist, expressed in the eighties that the active and passive side of looking are divided between the sexes.¹³⁹ The male looks and the woman is being looked at. In classical Hollywood cinema, the camera follows the gaze of the male. It shows what the male character sees. Thus, the spectator is forced to look from the male perspective. The female body in the film is shown fragmented through the use of framing and montage. Filmic tools such as camera movement, framing, montage and music are used to objectify the body of the woman and make it a passive spectacle to look at: 'to-be-looked-at-ness.'¹⁴⁰ In today's visual culture the look is not necessarily a male one. The camera takes a more neutral position.¹⁴¹

Signe Rousseau argues that the food portrayed in visual culture also invites to look at it as a voyeur. Yasmin Ibrahim, professor at the Queen Mary University of London, further clarifies the invitation to gaze at food in his article *Food Porn and the Invitation to Gaze*. The gazing is, according to Ibrahim, vicarious for actually consuming the food.¹⁴² The food, he states, becomes fetishised like the female body in Hollywood films.¹⁴³ According to Mulvey fetishizing is making the woman into a perfect beauty or spectacle. At the moment of 'spectualisation' the story that is being told stops for a little while. At that moment, it is all about the woman and not about the actual story being told.¹⁴⁴ So, if food is fetishised, it is made into a perfect beautiful dish. In the episode of *Chef's Table* this fetishizing is very evident.

The dish named *Graffiti, Carrot Spray Paint, Wild Mushrooms* (IMG. 12a-12b) is a perfect example of the fetishising of dishes in the episode and thereby invites to gaze and to behave as a voyeur by looking at the scene. At the moment the dishes are shown, music begins to play and there is no other sound in the background. This is the moment the story 'stops' as Mulvey implies. The focus now lies on the dish itself and not on the way it is made or the way the chef created it. First, the spectator sees little bits of the dish before it is shown as a whole. Then, the camera moves forward towards the dish and the vignette technique is made visible (as explained at the dish *Peach with Cava, Basil, Murray River Salt* (IMG. 11a-11c). At this time the music builds up to a climax and it perfectly matches with the montage of the whole scene. The way the music, camera movement, montage and colour give meaning to this scene have been analysed in the section 'Pierce and Food Porn.'

The hungry people, as Ibrahim calls them, consume the food 'by sight and other senses (well removed from just ingesting it).'¹⁴⁵ Barbara Kirschenblatt-Gimblett argues that food that is dissociated

¹³⁸ Smelik, A. M. (2007): 188.

¹³⁹ Ibidem: 189.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid.

¹⁴¹ Ibidem: 191.

¹⁴² Ibrahim, Y. (2015): 2.

¹⁴³ Ibid.

¹⁴⁴ Smelik, A. M. (2007): 190.

¹⁴⁵ Ibrahim, Y. (2015): 2.

from eating, bypasses the nose and mouth because it is only visibly accessible. Memories of taste and smell let us 'taste' the food that we only can see.¹⁴⁶ This tasting with the eyes is only possible if the spectator has a memory or an idea of how the food shown in the visual representation tastes like. It then depends on memory. This memory can be the taste of the dish as well as events that triggered a certain emotion while eating the food for example the vanilla ice cream the spectator ate at a special moment. The desire then is not for the taste of food but for returning to that moment.¹⁴⁷ As stated at the beginning of the chapter, Smelik argues to shift the focus from form and colour to effect and experience. This notion hints at the way the dishes in *Chefs Table* cannot only be understood as modernistic because they are participating in a society that is involved in Postmodernism as well. The experience or spectacle the chef Grant Achatz seeks to give his costumers can be understood as a postmodern phenomenon.

¹⁴⁶ Ibidem: 4.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid.

Conclusion

This thesis explores the representation of food as art in the episode *Grant Achatz* (2016) of the documentary-series *Chef's Table* (2015-present). The episode which is filmed in and around Chicago follows the chef Grant Achatz while he talks about his restaurant *Alinea* and his passion for the molecular gastronomy. The show draws on the discussion about food as a form of art which originated with Plato. His distinction between intellectual and non-intellectual needs affects the way in which we distinguish between what is art and what is not up to today. Taste and smell are seen as inferior to seeing and hearing and therefore food cannot be art. However, with the release of documentaries about the aesthetics of food, spectators can not actually smell or taste the dishes and the visual becomes even more important. Despite this development, studies about the visuality of food only focus on the influence of the layout on a plate on the experience of taste and the spending pattern of costumers. The question answered in this thesis is therefore: In which way do visual and auditory techniques contribute to the presentation of food as (a modernist) art(form) in the episode *Grant Achatz* (2016) of the Netflix documentary *Chef's Table* (2015-present)? The Peircean semiotics theory gives a detailed overview of the different signs that give meaning and are present in the episode. The theory of Peirce, through its detailed explanation also has its limitations. Not all the signs fit perfectly in the definitions that Peirce gives. Thus, further research on this subject with another theory of semiotics and another scope like Postmodernism or even metamodernism on this show and other shows about food will further specify the research on visuality in food as art.

In this thesis there are three forms in which the episode refers to food as art; some of the dishes refer to existing works of art which are explored in the first chapter; the chef refers to a kind of thinking that is implemented in the arts from the beginning of the twentieth century till the mid-twentieth century named Modernism which is explored in the second chapter; and significations to the dishes being fetishized which is explored in the third chapter.

In the first chapter the intertextual relation between the dish *Tropical Fruit with Rum, Vanilla, Kaffir Lime* (IMG. 1) and Abstract Expressionist paintings are analysed. There are two types of intertextuality between the dish and the works of art. The first is the intertextual relation between the paintings that are shown in the first scene of the episode and the dish that is shown in the second scene. This is a citation of letters, sounds and/or graphics. There is a graphical repetition of the architext without the repetition of meaning from the architext. Only the visual appearances overlap. The second intertextual relation is that between the dish and the works of Jackson Pollock. According to the theory of Peirce this intertextual relation can be understood as an indexical sign which emphasises on the process of Action Painting (the dripping and pouring of paint/food on a large canvas/tablecloth). The use of montage and the shift in duration of shots support the portrayal of Action Painting. However, it is also only the surface appearance that shows similarities. It can be argued that the dish of Grant Achatz

embodies a postmodern depthlessness in which the dish is a mere simulacrum of Abstract Expressionistic techniques.

The second chapter argues that the dishes shown in the episode of *Chef's Table* do not only refer to an intertextual relation between works of art and the dishes, but also can be seen as a more general expression of ideas that have been drawn from modernist art. Not all the dishes shown can be explicitly linked to existing works of art but more to the underlying concepts of Modernism. The dominant sign, according to the sign system of Charles Sanders Peirce, is the symbolic sign in this chapter. Which means that different objects are connected through an association of general ideas. These general ideas are the autonomy of the works of art, the paradoxes within those art works, the self-consciousness of the works of art as well as the spectators and the use of time and space.

The third chapter explains how the food shown in the episode can trigger effect and experience through the appliance of the notion of food porn. The focal point of the chapter is the presentation and preparing of the dishes. All three sorts of the signs, indexical, symbolic and iconic are presented within the use of visual techniques in these scenes. The signs support the spectacle aspect of the presentation of the dishes. This spectacle, which is linked to the notion of food porn, focusses particularly on the surface (depthlessness) of the dishes and can thus again be seen as postmodern. Visual techniques such as lighting and styling create a sense of unreachability and desire which triggers voyeurism which triggers in its turn the tasting with the eyes. This leads to the senses as all being part of the experience as a whole and not specifically being part of a ranking of senses. The fetishizing of the food then contributes to correspondence between modernist references and postmodern consumer society in the dishes shown in the episode of *Chef's Table*.

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Filmography

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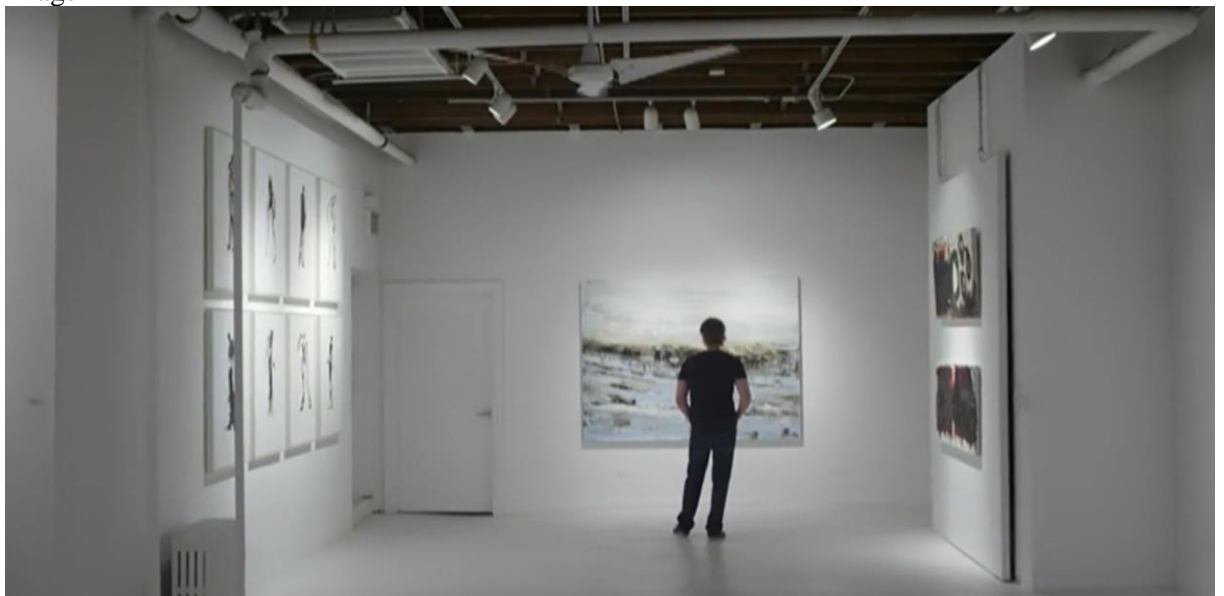
Appendix

- Image 1



Gelb, D. *Chef's Table: Grant Achatz*. 2016. Boardwalk Pictures, City Room Creative.

- Image 2



Gelb, D. *Chef's Table: Grant Achatz*. 2016. Boardwalk Pictures, City Room Creative.

- Image 3



Gelb, D. *Chef's Table: Grant Achatz*. 2016. Boardwalk Pictures, City Room Creative.

- Image 4



Jackson Pollock. *Number 18*. (1950). Oil and enamel on Masonite. 56.0 x 56.7 cm. Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum. <https://www.guggenheim.org/artwork/3484>.

- Image 5



Gelb, D. *Chef's Table: Grant Achatz*. 2016. Boardwalk Pictures, City Room Creative.

- Image 6a

iunctæ litteræ vocem quasi corp⁹ aliquod componūt
¶ Inter litteras & elemēta hoc inter est ¶ ¶ elemēta
pprie dicuntur ipæ pronuntiationes. ¶ Litteræ vero
sunt notæ: & signa elementornm. i. pronuntiationum
¶ Abusiue tamen & elementa plitteris: & litteræ pro
elementis vocātur ¶ Litteræ accidunt tria nomen,
figura & potestas. ¶ Nomen litteræ est quo littera
nominatur vt a-b. ¶ Figura litteræ est qua littera
depingitur. ¶ potestas litteræ est ipa pnuntiatio qua
valet. ¶ Litterarum aliæ sunt vocales aliæ sunt cōso
nantes. ¶ Vocalis est littera que p se vocem pficit &

Excerpt of a page from Villanova, *Rudimenta Grammaticæ* showing several pilcrow/alinea signs in the form common at that time, circa 1500

(image: <http://www.smithsonianmag.com/arts-culture/the-origin-of-the-pilcrow-aka-the-strange-paragraph-symbol-8610683/>.)

- Image 6b



Gelb, D. *Chef's Table: Grant Achatz*. 2016. Boardwalk Pictures, City Room Creative.

- Image 7



Gelb, D. *Chef's Table: Grant Achatz*. 2016. Boardwalk Pictures, City Room Creative.

- Image 8



Gelb, D. *Chef's Table: Grant Achatz*. 2016. Boardwalk Pictures, City Room Creative.

- Image 9



Gelb, D. *Chef's Table: Grant Achatz*. 2016. Boardwalk Pictures, City Room Creative.

- Image 10



Gelb, D. *Chef's Table: Grant Achatz*. 2016. Boardwalk Pictures, City Room Creative.

- Image 11a



Gelb, D. *Chef's Table: Grant Achatz*. 2016. Boardwalk Pictures, City Room Creative.

- Image 11b



Gelb, D. *Chef's Table: Grant Achatz*. 2016. Boardwalk Pictures, City Room Creative.

- Image 11c



Gelb, D. *Chef's Table: Grant Achatz*. 2016. Boardwalk Pictures, City Room Creative.

- Image 12a



Gelb, D. *Chef's Table: Grant Achatz*. 2016. Boardwalk Pictures, City Room Creative.

- Image 12b



Gelb, D. *Chef's Table: Grant Achatz*. 2016. Boardwalk Pictures, City Room Creative.