Collective Soma: The Aesthetics of Maggi

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Abstract: *Taking Maggi cubes as a case study, the article explores the aesthetics of mass consumption among populations whose choices are limited. Rather than being passive actors of biopolitical imposition or a capitalist ploy, consumers agentively appropriated global commodities into local ethics and aesthetics of mutual bodily care. In fact, collectivities experiencing a shift of habitus due to modernisation and the industrial commodities it brought co-appeared together in a dense weave of material-semiotic relations marked by what could be termed as a "tension of information".*

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Richard Shusterman's intervention in aesthetic philosophy considers the body in a manner that paves the way for a transformation of aesthetics. However, it seems that by "aesthetic" he still refers to *a* use of *a* body[1] that is heir to the burdens of the traditional aesthetic subject. Not only is the *sujet du goût*, especially in its non-metaphorical sense (Shusterman, 2016), still an individual, such subjects are also enabled to *freely* make decisions to enrich their experience. Yet is this necessarily so? As Annemarie Mol (202, p.17) argues, "cultivating 'my body' depends on the efforts involved in cultivating ever so many other f/actors" (people, substances, global commodity chains, etc.). Hence, to isolate the subject of taste is to continue to exercise problematic distinctions and exclusions. The gist of our argument will be the consideration of the aesthetic dimension of a "needful freedom"[2] , that is, the one that takes place in the context of an already-existing material semiotic network (Law, 2019) within which it –and the embodied self that exercises such a freedom– co-appear (*com-parution*) in Jean Luc Nancy's (1996/2000) terms. To advance this argument, we will focus on a commodity that appears emblematic of pretty much everything that Schusterman's individualistic meliorative aesthetic of embodiment and proper eating opposes: the Maggi bouillon cube. After laying out a theoretical framework indebted to Jean-Luc Nancy, Gilbert Simondon, Annemarie Mol and John Law, we review historical and ethnographic evidence of the rise of Maggi consumption in Africa, and conclude

1 Agamben (2014/2016). For an understanding of it from aesthetics, see Bocos Mirabella (2022, p.345-59), particularly in relation to somaesthetics.

2 According to Jonas (1966/1994), the living being *needs* material from the environment to create itself: "in a word, the organic form stands in a dialectical relation of *needful freedom* to matter" (80) that connects the eating subject to a network.

that – far from representing an alien corruption of African culinary traditions and the material semiotic networks in which they take shape – the taste for Maggi bespeaks not the demise, but reproduction of an ethics of collective care under conditions of social transformation[3].

Few seem to have intuited the nutritional aspects of this problematic of "needful freedom" earlier and more clearly than the Italo-Swiss miller Julius Maggi (1846-1912). Shifting his focus from popular nutrition ("Volksernährung") to mass nutrition ("Massenernährung"), he defined the latter as:

> "(…) the nutrition of all those who cannot freely determine it, whether their situation of constraint arises from economic dependence, such as, e.g., among industrial factory populations, or from our political and social order, such as in the case of our troops and navy, among those under the care of hospitals, those attending religious or secular educational institutions, and so forth, or among inmates of prisons." (Maggi, 1887 cited in Vinçon, 1992, p.195. Our translation).

The beachhead for the earliest industrially produced foods (hard-tack, canned foods…) were total institutions such as armies and navies (Goody, 1982). But as Maggi understood, not just hospitals or prisons, but especially factories were fast becoming vast reservoirs of consumers incapable of freely determining their nutrition. If the diet of Swiss peasants and artisans on the eve of industrialization had largely consisted of bread, gruel and porridge made from rye, oats, and spelt, along with potatoes and dairy products, by the second half of the 19th century, the increasing numbers of landless rural proletarians headed towards factory labor neither had the means to grow their own grains, nor the purchasing power to access them, meat or bones in sufficient quantity or on a regular basis, and least of all the time needed to make bread, gruel, porridge or bouillon from scratch.

Cheap, filling, and quickly prepared, Maggi's instant pea soup, bouillon cubes, and seasoning products rushed in to fill that gap between hunger and acceptable forms of satiation with remarkable speed, transforming as they did so the very meaning of the "modern" meal (both accelerating and standardizing domestic food) and molding novel forms of gustatory subjectivity that coalesced around industrially branded taste profiles. Industrial proletarians *learned how to like* Maggi products by being socialized into building them into what Pierre Bourdieu (1990) might have called their culinary "habitus". The result was a race towards a salty, distinctly Maggi-tasting bottom which, for better or worse, engraved itself into the culinary memories of generations of Europeans, generating a sense of belonging. What eventually resulted was a blurring of the boundaries between home cooking and industrial food to a degree that adding Maggi products to soup made from scratch became not just acceptable, but potentially desirable.

Was this, to paraphrase Horkheimer and Adorno (1947/2002, p.120-67), culinary "enlightenment as mass deception"? A biopolitical ploy to satiate the masses with standardized, industrially prescribed tastes, offering cheap, banal satisfaction in lieu of an aesthetic pleasure worthy of the name? By now there exists a massive literature portraying the eaters of industrial food as individuals bereft of the power of decision and discernment, trapped in a labyrinth of stimuli organized by a sophisticated laboratory science that engineers artificial hedonic rewards, so as to prod mindless further consumption. Addicted to products that provide quick but ephemeral gustatory thrills, the much decried fast-food junkies find their remedy in the source

3 In response to one of *Journal of Somaesthetics*' reader's concern about our singling out Africa as a case in point, and thereby inadvertently replicating a "from tradition to modernity" narrative so often foisted on this continent, let us simply quote a passage from Simpson Miller's (2021, p.248) excellent history of foodways in Ghana: "People have been consuming readymade meals in Ghana since the seventeenth century. Prepared food served in markets by enterprising women […] predated colonial rule and arguably preceded the development of fast food in the West."

of their problem (e.g. Cargill, 2016).

While certainly not untrue (especially in the global North), such treatments of the issue not only thrive on an overly individualistic conception of the agent (or patient!) of consumption, and so neglect that eating is a fundamentally social activity involving more than just individual or statistically averaged bodies (Mol, 2021). Moreover, such approaches neglect the role of industrial products as ingredients of homecooked meals (even in contemporary peasant societies, store bought commodities like flour, sugar, salt, or cooking oils are indispensable to traditional cuisines), and so lead us into the paradox that millions of people apparently consume edible commodities of often questionable nutritional benefit and possibly noxious character *precisely because they want to eat well and want to prepare delicious homemade food for those they care for.*

Yet, because of this tension, Maggi cubes can be considered a "good form": "one […] approaching paradox without becoming a paradox, approaching contradiction without becoming a contradiction […]" (Simondon, 1958/2020, p. 688); a form that has the "capacity to traverse, animate and structure a varied domain, increasingly varied and heterogeneous domains" with an infinite series of receptors "not defined in advance" (p. 689). Viewed from a systemic perspective, the supposed "passivity" of the masses is surprisingly akin to the alleged passivity of matter. However, as Gilbert Simondon demonstrated, matter has a form function. Wanting to understand "good form" in systemic context, Simondon uses the term "in-formation":

> "The tension of information would be a schema's property to structure a domain, to propagate through it, to organize it. But the tension of information cannot act alone: it does not also contribute all the energy that can guarantee the transformation; it only contributes this tension of information, i.e. a certain arrangement that can modulate much more considerable energies deposited in the domain that will receive the form, take on a structure. There can be form-taking only if two conditions are joined together: a tension of information contributed by a structural germ, and an energy harbored by the milieu that takes form: the milieu—which corresponds to the old notion of matter—must be in a tensed metastable state, like a supersaturated or supercooled solution, which is waiting for the crystalline germ so it can pass to the stable state by unleashing the energy that it harbors." (Simondon, 1958/2000, p.689)

For Simondon, inorganic "germs" dropped into super-saturated crystalline solutions were informative; for us so it is a cube consisting largely of hydrolyzed plant protein and salt packaged in bright red and yellow dropped into the pots and pans of people in the process of modernistic "massification". The metastable tension of such environments is, in the case at hand, precisely the changes in "form of life" (in Wittgenstein's sense) and habitus that these populations were and are facing –forced to shift from traditional orientations, including their intimate relationship to food, to those of an industrial modernity in which the market becomes "second nature". Such newly "massified" populations learned to like Maggi, to be sure. But the industrial machinery was also learning to channel the novel reduction of aesthetic options and dispositions that industrial modernization was creating. The metastable "mass" is what contains the energy by which a structural germ expands. In the end, Maggi and a collective sensorium attuned to it thus emerged simultaneously, "intra-actively" (Barad, 2007), from a dense weave of relations marking a new era in which pre-existing somaesthetic traditions were paradoxically folded into the context of hypercapitalism and globalization. Both bodily needs and aesthetics values played a crucial role in this shift. In fact, there are at least two different ways of understanding somaesthetic melioration: the one of Julius Maggi himself, concerned to improve popular nutrition; and the

attitude of the "mass", that found (and still finds) in Maggi the affordances needed to effect this transition from one milieu to another.

Hence the success of Maggi is, paradoxically, a success of the plural, of the conjunction and conjugation of different voices, tastes and perspectives. Maggi prompts somaesthetics to think beyond the individuated free *sujet du goût* and shift its attention to subjects whom the classical philosophical traditions (from Aristotle to Hume and Kant, but also Schusterman's somaesthetics) failed to understand as "aesthetic" ones. Furthermore, it reminds of the fact that the body is collective[4] not only because it participates in collective actions (in the sense of Mary Douglas), but because it is the body's appearance in the world – its being thrown into a network – that articulates it as a body. In Jean Luc Nancy's words,

> "Above all else, 'body' really means what is outside, insofar as it is outside, next to, against, nearby, with a(n) (other) body, from body to body, in the dis-position. Not only does a body go from one "self" to an "other," […]; whether made of stone, wood, plastic, or flesh, a body is the sharing of and the departure from self […]." (Nancy, 1996/2000, p.8)

And, while this is true for all bodies, the-eating-body is necessarily defined as an expanded and immersed body (Bocos Mirabella, 2022). As anthropology has shown, the eating body poses new tasks of definitions for an "empirical philosophy" (Mol, 2021):

> "The eating body […] offers a model of being in which the inside depends on the outside, while continuity depends on change. A model of being, too, in which what was far away may be absorbed inside me, while what was inside me gets widely dispersed. […] while, as a walker, I move through the world; when I eat, it is the world that moves through me." (Mol, 2021, p.49)

This co-appearance interpellates the body into a socio-ecological somaesthetic that expands beyond self-enhancement[5] to include the situatedness of any such acts within locally and historically changing networks. Therefore, we think a more nuanced view of Maggi aesthetics is in order: one capable of recognizing forms of care for self and others –a form of *collective* somaesthetic enhancement– in the contexts of daily ingestion, need and hunger. Even in the face of the (often) inevitable consumption of industrial foods, an aesthetic dimension is at work, albeit from different anudations and networks to those of the aesthetic experiences of the "societies without hunger" (Jaques et Vilar, 2024) defined by the tradition of gustatory aesthetics, to which somaesthetics still seems to adhere (Pryba, 2016).

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Let us flesh this out with some ethnographic examples. Europeans have always been mesmerized by the ways in which their non-Western interlocutors made use of, and thereby transformed, what they saw as quotidian technologies, objects, and values of their own cultures (e.g. Howes, 1996). Yet the Swiss missionary ethnographer Al Imfeld is simply astonished at arriving at

4 What the body is constitutes a philosophical question that has been posed in historically varying ways and received diverse and changing answers (see Synnott, 1992). Somaesthetics has also paid attention to it, particularly, Tedesco (2012, p.8) who asserts that "we must first remember the semantic richness of the word soma, whose meaning is not limited to the living body […] but also includes analogical transfers to the 'body of discourse,' from its discursive articulations (soma also means 'element of a structural organization') to its value and function, which are always public and contextual […]".

5 Boisvert, Raymond. *Ecological Somaesthetics. Beyond Self-enhancement* (cited by Perullo, 2022, p.169-170). Perullo criticizes Shusterman's "massive use of the self-prefix", reminds us of Dewey's objection to it and presents Boisvert's ecological, communal and more-than-human model for somaesthetics, one not limited to "the own body". However, 'the own body'is already a body-with, a singular-plural (Nancy, 1996/2000). Boisvert (2010) also takes the preposition "with" into account.

Cameroon's terminal northern train station of Ngaoundere in 1988 to see veritable ziggurats of red and yellow Maggi cubes in the dusty street:

> "In this environment of copper-red earth, reddish dust, brown-red ants, waning dusk, and a red-hot sun just about to set, the Maggi yellow appeared like a magnet. This cube at the top [of these structures] appeared to me as something like temptation incarnate or a hailing to take, take, take and take as long as it's there, one more, take and take ever more. An inner illumination – and it resembled the irresistible yellow of the cube – revealed to me like a flash of lightning that what I was just experiencing was the primordial beginning of consumer desire brought to the point." (Imfeld, 1989, p.1. Our translation)

Still referring to this episode at what must have seemed a god-forsaken part of Cameroon (had it not been for that country's plans to build a high-tech nutritional research facility, there, which Imfeld was to visit), Imfeld goes on to say that

> "This kernel of Maggi contains the explosion of all future worlds. The development towards the modern and monetized world begins with cubes, with the cubism of temptation; without temptation no progress; Maggi, the cubism of culinary culture, the longing for modernity." (Imfeld, 1989, p.1. Our translation)

We will return to Imfeld's sense of wonderment. But let us first retrace how Maggi cubes entered into African cuisines[6]. Chances are that the first bouillon cubes reached colonial West Africa (British Gold Coast, German Kamerun) well before World War I through the Basel Mission whose Basler Missions-Handlungs-Gesellschaft was incorporated in 1859. Due to significant Swiss emigration to German Southwest Africa, both Maggi and Knorr products had reached Namibia by 1910 (Berner, 2010). Manfred Stoppok reports that elderly informants recalled that "cubos de galinha" and "cubos de Maggi" had already become ubiquitous under Portuguese rule in the 1950s (Stoppok, 2011, p.55).

Much of Maggi's global diffusion, however, seems to post-date its merger with Nestlé in 1947. Towards the end of the 1950s, concerted efforts by the latter company to export Maggi cubes to Africa commenced in Liberia, and in 1961 Nestlé expanded its marketing of Maggi products to Nigeria. In the following decade, the company followed its product. By the mid-1980s, Nestlé had set up production sites for Maggi cubes in Cameroon, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Liberia, Nigeria and Senegal. By 2004, it had added further plants in Guinea-Conakry, Kenia, South Africa, and Zimbabwe, and national offices in Equatorial Guinea, Gabon, Madagascar, Mozambique, Niger and São Tomé and Principe (Nestlé, 2005). Yet no one seems to have paid proper heed to the dynamics of this humble "worldly good" (in Robert Foster's [2008] sense of a commodity that defines a central node in a network of global and local perspectives on its economic utility, and extra-economic valorization). How Maggi entered African home cooking, thereby transforming the culinary habitus of millions has largely evaded scholarly attention[7].

But let us return to Imfeld's reflections. After recounting his technoaesthetic awakening[8] in

6 Here we hasten to add that we are decidedly not arguing for a simple extension to the African continent of the meanings and uses ("sense") of Maggi developed in Europe. Following Nancy, "meaning is itself the sharing of Being" (1996/2000, p.2), so that the sense of Maggi is not prior to its co-appearance and, more than that, so that its origin "occurs at each moment of the world. It is *the each* time of Being […]. The origin is for and by way of the singular plural of every possible origin."

7 Even Brandi Simpson Miller's (2021) excellent history of food transformations in Ghana from precolonial times to the present restricts herself to a few sporadic mentions of Maggi products. That she sees the emergence, since the 1930s, of female owned urban Chop Shops serving wage earning men as an entry point for Maggi underscores our argument.

8 In the sense that a familiar object, when seen beyond its function, becomes "surreal", "extraordinary". Simondon believed that "the technical being reproduced and disclosed through industry loses its surreal value to the extent that the anesthesia of everyday use deprives perception of the object's singular characteristics. Seen as a utensil, the technical being no longer has meaning for the individual. The community appropriates

Cameroon, he turns towards Guinea Bissau where Maggi cubes had, by the 1980s, become the only stable currency in the post-revolutionary period: valued at 50 pesos at a time when inflation had put 50 peso coins out of circulation. "This is the only stable thing, here" an agronomist tells him. "Maggi was already here when we came. Comes across the border to Senegal, where Nestlé produces locally. The people think it's indigenous – just like the peso. They just can't read the 'Made in Switzerland' label" (Imfeld, 1989, p.4-5. Our translation).

Speaking to local women involved in a European-sponsored agricultural development project, Imhof gets a sense of why Maggi has made its home in postcolonial Guinea Bissau. As would figure, the women chide him: "why are you so critical when it comes to the cube? Because it gives us more freedom? Or are you jealous and believe that this cube is really a gris-gris? Our men say that when we use Maggi in cooking for guests, they always like it better and that this would be understood as a declaration of love. Our men think that Maggi is to blame when other men desire us." They all agree that Maggi is simply good and delicious: "Of course we can make similar sauces. But that takes time. But when we now have to tend to the onions and manioc [for the development project] we lack the time for that. Development takes up a lot of time. These days we're busy all day long. We lack the two hours we need to prepare the sauce." "A modern African woman," says one of them, "needs three things and these are a bra, as a little secret to be kept from her man, Maggi cubes, and Nido baby formula for the children." Another one pipes in more aggressively: "do you also ask the men in administration jobs why all have a box of Marlboro in their breast pocket, even when it never contains cigarettes of that brand? Why do all of them have to have a Bic ballpoint pen? And why do they carry little briefcases with usually nothing in them? Everyone needs something for prestige. For us women this is clothes, perfume, jewelry, and, of course, Maggi" (Imfeld, 1989, p.5-6. Our translation).

For Imfeld's interlocutors, there was no contradiction in this indigenization of global industrial culinary modernity. On the contrary, these women experienced Maggi not so much as a gustatory revelation, but as the co-appearance of a means to the end, under new conditions, of enhanced care for the self and the collectivities within which gendered flows of food provide a crucial part of social being. Put differently, what Imfeld encountered was the expansion of the primordial plurality in which Maggi appears: its universe expands and, with it, the forms of its being-with multiply.

By the time that Manfred Stoppok was doing research in Guinea Bissau, some 20 years after Imhof, the cubes had become so fully integrated into local foodways that they were commonly referred to as "gusto" – taste, or that which makes food tasty. As he writes: "One buys and adds 'gusto', i.e. taste, to the food. Already this designation demonstrates the enormous importance of this product for [Guinean] food. For who would want to eat a meal without taste?" (Stoppok, 2011, p.64-65. Our translation). Who indeed? And who would want to serve such a meal to others? Deliberately serving bad food, as Stoler and Olkes (1986) demonstrated among the Songhay of Niger, can be as critical a "gastropolitical" (Appadurai, 1981) affront as, say, the accusation of witchcraft, and by that very token as indicative of strained social relations as the latter within close-knit kinship-based communities.

What is at stake in such cases is, at the very least, the dignity of both cook and consumer. As one of us can attest to from doing fieldwork during the worst years of the economic crisis in

it, normalizes it, and gives it a use value that is foreign to its own dynamic essence." (Simondon, 1958/2020, p.416). When Infeld paid attention to Maggi cubes in Africa, he saw them within an unfamiliar network and so he could appreciate not only the technical object as such but also the effects of its dynamic *in a different socio-material network*.

Cuba of the early 1990s, after former Soviet support vanished into thin air, the lack of products available through the government rationing system reduced people to eating what Stephan Palmié's Cuban interlocutors regularly described as a "sancocho" (pig swill) made from "cualquier cosa que aparezca" (whatever may appear on the legal food market for national currency rather than dollars). What was on the minds of many if not most Cubans at the time, was not so much somatic self-care, but their self-image as "gente decente" – decent, or dignified people – who shouldn't be made to eat such crap, but, more importantly even, shouldn't be made to inflict it on their loved ones (Palmié, 2004)[9] .

In precisely this sense – as a bridge between bodies, a "being-with" – in several other African cases, equivalents to Stoppock's Guinean "gusto" had come to replace previous local flavor enhancers[10] . Similar findings have been reported from northern Ghana, where a local, plant-based Hausa flavor enhancer known as *dawadawa* is yielding to Maggi cubes (Ham, 2017). But convenience (here understood as a freeing-up, for other pursuits, the domestic reproductive labor-time of cooking from scratch) is not the only form of utility involved. Sheer purchasing power plays a role as well. As an Institute for Development Studies/Oxfam study reports,

> "In Burkina Faso […] it has become unthinkable to cook a meal without 'Maggi', a famous stock cube/flavouring in West Africa. In Kaya, a district town, a 51 – year old woman taking part in in a focus group with other female civil servants, explained that she first saw a Maggi Cube when aged seven her mother returned from a trip to France. At that time, it was an ingredient mostly used by well-to-do families. Now, participants in the discussion explained, gone are the days when they could buy enough meat for a sauce with 100CFA (approximately £0.11), and Maggi has become the staple flavoring to make a meal 'acceptable'. In both the rural and the urban research sites in Burkina, respondents would often say that if one does not put Maggi in the sauce, no one will eat the meal" (Hossein et al. 2015, p.20)

No one will eat the meal: a failure to accept the gift of food, and so a sign of the breakdown of the unspoken principle of reciprocity that Marcel Mauss (1925/2016), long ago heralded as the key to human sociality! To be sure, what we find in these cases is a form of culinary outsourcing of standards of gustatory acceptability to the food chemists at Nestlé. On the other hand, such commodification of "taste" – as a commercially purchased addition to food – is not at all the sheer result of the top-down industrial stultification of neophyte proletarians. Instead, and at the very least, it appears to thrive on a wide-spread African pattern where complex carbohydrates (rice, yams, plantain, sorghum, millet, manioc, etc.) form the basis of any meal, but are unthinkable *as a meal* unless accompanied by even only small amounts of a relish or sauce composed of animal or vegetable protein that often is described as necessary for the food to go down. Identified for the first time by Audrey Richards in her ethnographic work among the Bemba in Northern Rhodesia (Richards, 1939), and later theorized by Sidney Mintz (Mintz and Nayak, 1985) as the "core-fringe pattern" common to most agrarian populations worldwide, it may well be that it was this conception of what proper food ought to consist in (all else might be a snack, or worse, an indignity) that underlay the phenomenal success of Maggi in sub-Saharan Africa. Temptation incarnated, indeed! Modernity and female empowerment condensed into a red and yellow packaged cube. A co-apparition.

Though Nestlé may not have been aware of this at the time the company began exporting to Africa, its bouillon cubes seem to have functioned like a key to the door provided by the

9 See Hannah Garth (2020) on the continued struggle for a *decent* meal in Cuba twenty years later.

10 Such as *netetu* (*sounbareh* in Sierra Leone, Slow Food Foundation, 2011), a seasoning prepared from the fermented, boiled, re-fermented and dried fruit of the African locust bean tree (Parkia globosa), *camarão seco* (dried crab), or *escalada* (dried salt cod).

core-fringe pattern (not incidentally homologous to the diet of Swiss peasants). By now, of course, Nestlé's taste designers are well aware of this. In its publications, the company is explicit about the fact that not all cubes are created equal anymore. Instead, taste profiles are adapted to regional and local preferences and calibrated against competitor brands such as the Spanish cube Jumbo which enjoys wide popularity in Senegal. Counting only the cubes (i.e. not powders or liquids), Nestlé's website lists nine different versions of its Maggi seasoning products marketed in different regions of Africa: Shrimp/Crevette/Crayfish, Chicken/Poulet, Onion Epice, Cube Regular/Tablette, Mutton, Kari Tablet, Safsafal, Nokoss, and Golden Beef (https://www.nestle-cwa.com/en/brands/culinary/maggidetails).

Their impact on local foodways is undeniable and it projects forward into contemporary African diasporas. Grossrieder (2017) cites the case of Ousmane Sow, a Guinea Konakryan owner of a Zurich-based specialty store named Afro-Shop who conducts brisk business with Maggi cubes produced in Abidjan. These travel 4850 kilometers while the nearest Maggi production plant, in southwestern Germany, is only 50 kilometers away. Likewise, in Chicago's Old World Market that has long catered to that city's African immigrant population, not one of the Maggi cubes on sale there is produced in Europe or the U.S.: Maggi Crevette from Côte d'Ivoire, Halal Chicken and Crayfish from Nigeria, Vegetable Flavor and Caldo de Res from Guatemala; only the range of liquid seasonings featured a product from Germany, alongside a Chinese and Mexican version. Although a wide variety of dried or powdered African condiments, as well as dried shrimp and smoked fish are also available, they appear to supplement, rather than supplant the ubiquitous African-produced Maggi cubes that shore up African flavor profiles abroad (Renne, 2007 and Williams-Forson, 2010 on the formation of African immigrant cuisines in the U.S.). Clearly, not any old cube will do, when it comes to what Richard Wilk (2006) aptly calls "home cooking in the global village".

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Is this a gloomy picture of the erosion of non-Western gustatory somaesthetics under the impact of the onslaught of Nestlé and other food-industrial giants? Perhaps. But we are inclined to grant quite a bit more of agency to the consumers who came to be enrolled in Nestlé global commercial network *and* impacted it in turn. In our view, the very notion of a traditional cuisine that has been left behind as past ('the other'), refers to an outside of the system that does not exist, insofar as it is not allowed to co-appear with everything else, to communicate, or to transform itself. The very definition of the "pure" is precisely the strategy that nullifies its agency. In line with Nancy's ontology[11], we can thus rid ourselves of certain prejudices about Maggi cubes because a critique of the arrival of these products can only be based on an ample understanding of their modes of appearance within multiple networks, taking into account all possible directions, their tensions and even contradictions.

Siding with Marshall Sahlins (2000), we would argue that (as with many other exogenous products), non-Western consumers took to Maggi so as to "become more like themselves" – not any less so (Baviskar, 2018; Simpson Miller, 2021). Far from steamrolling local culinary cultures and their somaesthetics dimensions out of existence, western industrial modernity has been appropriated in an agentive, even discerning manner (Errington, Fujikura and Gewertz, 2012) to maintain critical forms of reciprocity between bodies who, in Marilyn Strathern's (1988) crucial sense, must be conceived as "dividuals": porous containers of variegated and changing

11 We agree with Perullo (2022) that the understanding of being-with, which he also derives from Nancy (and others), negates ontology as defined by "fixed" essences in favor of a processual approach. However, we are more interested in Nancy's notion that the primary question of ontology is not the logic of essences, but their sociality (Nancy, 1996/2000, p.37-38).

configurations of personhood that depend not on care of a "self" (a questionable notion in such contexts), but on the ethical demands of an ontology of "being-with"– in the case at hand, the caring exchange of substances with others : such as preparing meals *with* Maggi cubes for them.

That the emergence of such intercalations between the global food industry and local ways of feeding and caring is not a foregone conclusion is equally clear. Just think of the protests in India in 2015 – including the mass burnings of millions of noodle packets (Fry, 2016 but see also Baviskar's 2018 nuanced analysis). Here, Indian consumers enraged over the alleged heavy MSG and lead contents of Maggi's noodle flavor sachets, collectively disenrolled Maggi noodle soups from a hitherto flourishing network to re-establish what E.P. Thompson (1971) might have called "the moral economy of the Indian crowd". Culminating as it did, in both legal bans and massive bonfires, this case should teach us a lesson.

In sum, what the materials we discussed here seem to amount to is a striking illustration of the way in which heterogeneity – local culinary diversity, if you will – can and does (nowadays perhaps even must!), coexist with structural homogenization and market consolidation on a global scale. Brand diversification does allow the consumer a degree of latitude in "the work of appropriation" of commodities into his or her desired form of life. By the same token, this very "freedom" to choose is ultimately a function of corporate interests geared towards expanding their market share. Nevertheless, and harkening back to our theoretical guides Nancy and Simondon, we might still say with Marx that people cook, share, and eat *their own food* – just not under conditions of their choosing, but ones that happen to co-appear as historical (and therefore changing) solutions to their needs, wants, aesthetic desires and realistic aspirations. Of course, much of the stakes are set by local governments, financial institutions, agricultural policies, global market structures, corporate investment policies, and advertising campaigns. But even if we were to take capitalist industrial expansion and hegemony as an unmitigated evil, we might still agree with John Dewey (1934/1958, p.14), who believed that "in a growing life, the recovery is never mere return to a prior state, for it is enriched by the state of disparity and resistance through which it has successfully passed". There is a political ontology (not just economy!) in all of this (Law, 2019), and Maggi cubes (or similar such products) may help us put this on the table, exposing as they do, the necessary plurality of origins, networks, explanations, and meanings of aesthetic experience. Excepting the direst of "entitlement failures" as Amartya Sen (1981) has called the structural inability to obtain desired (or even only necessary) goods, the ways in which people worldwide toss or crumble Maggi cubes into whatever they regard as proper, dignified food is a decision that is theirs to make. A reason for hope, we think.

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