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Philosophical Festival of the Senses

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Festival Filosofia sui Sensi / Philosophical Festival of the Senses

Modena, Carpi and Sassuolo, Emilia-Romagna, Italy, Friday 16 – Sunday 18
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Richard Mohr

Three cities, three days, how many senses? I lost count in the eruption of designer menus, philosophy "master classes," children's activity spaces, all night music parties, herbs and spices, exhibitions including Picasso erotica, and strolls past the flower, fish and formaggio sections of the market in Modena. The latest edition of the city's philosophy festival organized each year since 2001 was dedicated to the senses. From Friday to Sunday, 16-18 September, 2005 Modena and its smaller neighbors Carpi and Sassuolo gave over their piazzas, exhibition spaces, libraries, restaurants and churches to the festival. The trains between the three centers were crowded with "cultural commuters," who were invited to scheduled en route discussions with various philosophers on a number of the trips.

A handwritten sign in the window of a corner foodstore offered a ten percent discount on a brand of pasta and all its wines for the duration of the festival, while in a small, neighboring piazza stalls sold herbs, spices and handmade soap, people sat on brightly-coloured beanbags, and a surgeon and a textile expert occupied neighboring benches, telling stories and answering questions. Small local activities of this sort give an idea of the festival's reach into the community, while the broader ambitions of the festival can be seen in the list of international scholars who spoke to capacity crowds in churches and piazzas: Georges Didi-Huberman, Peter Sloterdijk, Slavoj Žižek. Jean-Luc Nancy was anticipated until the last minute, but instead was represented by an Italian reading of a text previously published in Portugal and Quebec (2004). As well as these names familiar to many overseas readers, there were dozens of Italian scholars, from biology, law, music, theology and psychiatry as well as philosophy. Tullio Gregory, from Rome's La Sapienza University and a member of the organizing committee (Fondazione San Carlo, Modena), discussed art and proposed a set of "designer" menus, based on all the senses and available at forty restaurants in the three cities.

The "polychrome" menu proved to be food for thought. The spectrum moved from the two tones of Modena's dark traditional balsamic vinegar as a dressing for parmigiano from neighboring Reggio Emilia, through the yellow of tortelloni di zucca, to the two reds of a tomato and radicchio salad, finishing with the green of a pistacchio gelato. The chocolate sauce over the gelato brought the palette back full circle: it looked exactly like the balsamic vinegar.

This appeared to contradict Roberta de Monticelli's convincing conclusion to her address on seeing and believing: nature does not deceive us. She had drawn attention to ambiguous images, including ink blots and that silhouette which may be seen as two profiles or as a chalice. These were projected onto a screen in front of the altar of the baroque church of San Carlo above which billowing "curtains" carved out of marble fall away from a massive diadem, which appears to be suspended by a couple of small angels, or supported by the fabric of the curtains themselves. Saints reach out of the walls and cascade into the church. There was no shortage of

ambiguity or deception here. De Monticelli's point was that, despite the ways we may be deceived by artifice or fantasy, although we might "see" fabulous figures in a cloud, it is still a cloud.

But chocolate sauce is not balsamic vinegar. Are we deceived here by nature or by culinary artifice? To deal with this question, I will consider a simpler one, which also occurs at the intersection of our senses. In one of the displays, Michelangelo Pistoletto's *La mensadelle culture*, a table made of a mirror in the shape of the South China Sea had various bowls of spices arranged on it. A young man in dreadlocks, who with his friends had been assiduously exploring the sensory pleasures of these spices, asked me what the dark red spice was. I smelled it, looked at it, tasted it and told him I thought it was paprika. What was ambiguous about this phenomenon? Leaving aside the possibility that the young man's sense perceptions were artificially altered, our discussion can be explained in terms of experience. Having often cooked with paprika, in a kitchen where the labeling of our spices is a casual affair so that their successful use often requires a number of senses, this was easier for me than for this young Italian man. The spice was not ambiguous, nor deceptive, it simply needed a name. However, like chocolate sauce or balsamic vinegar, it could not be named using one sense (vision) alone. Nature will not deceive us, but we may need more than one sense to interrogate it. De Monticelli invited her audience to join in a number of helpful thought experiments about sense perception. How much more satisfying to put them into practice in a festival of sensation.

The festival was successful in focusing attention on the philosophical and the quotidian, the artistic and the culinary, within cities going about their business. The restaurants and markets were natural venues doing their usual business of "restoring" and selling, while the piazzas and churches were subtly transformed. Deception and belief are often discussed in churches, but not usually by philosophers; nor are piles of newspaper supplements on the senses normally stacked in confessional boxes, but they served the purpose well. Politics and ideology are often discussed in Italian piazzas, but here in Carpi's Piazzale Re Astolfo, Slavoj Žižek was probing the problems of fundamentalism, liberalism and commodity fetishism with as much intimacy and enthusiasm as any of the usual participants to be found on a Saturday evening in a piazza in "red" Emilia.

The festival's integration into the life of the host cities apparently brought substantial economic and cultural benefits to the locals as well as to the *pendolari della cultura*: Italians who participate in festivals or cultural events--of which the organizers point out there were 9 million in 2004. The Modenesi are noted as much for their entrepreneurialism as for their food. If this festival goes even part of the way towards making the stunningly beautiful piazzas, buildings and art of Modena, Carpi and Sassuolo as well known as balsamic vinegar, that alone would be a success.

Reference

Nancy, Jean-Luc. 2004. 58 indices sur le corps. Quebec, QC: Editions Nota Bene. (Previously in the *Revista de Comunicagao e lnguagens*, 33 (Autumn), 2004).

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