

JUNK

Ashraf Jamal

I would like to begin by expressing my keen interest in the concerns of this colloquium; namely what Desiree Lewis termed 'epistemological interventions into food studies'. Prior to responding to Lewis's brief, and listening to yesterday's talks, I have not truly engaged in the question of food: what it meant; why it was central to an understanding of society. Today's talks, under the banner of 'Social rituals, cultural processes and human subjectivities relation to food consumption' perhaps fits more amicably within what remains a speculative engagement on my part.

Nevertheless, Julian May's power-point yesterday comprising images of artworks by Anish Kapoor, Damien Hirst, Penny Siopis, Nandipho Mntambo and Ai Weiwei struck a reassuring cord: food as a visceral fact of life and a concept is vital to the understanding how humans produce need, pleasure, and provocative meaning. 'What is this creature called humanities?' Lewis asked. 'Food security doesn't take the human into account', she added.

'Food justice', 'food sovereignty', 'food security' remains enigmatic terms to me. I did however immediately understand David Sanders reference to 'Big Food', and was caught off guard by a cartoon he showed us with the captions: 'I'm hungry' and 'Stop talking politics'. Charles Dickens's *Oliver Twist* sprang immediately to mind, and with it child bondage and exploitation which bleakly remains with us today.

However it was Vasu Reddy's 'digest' which reassured me that what I have to say may have a purpose. Food as an 'object of culture and performance' struck home, as did the notion of food as both a 'macronutrient and a metaphor' and food as 'a study of relationships'. Largely preoccupied in this paper by consumption, I was moreover struck by Reddy's reminder that we need to also think of food production and procurement. Diet, Reddy further reminded us, is an 'ideational system'. 'Every mouthful can tell us about ourselves and our place in the world'.

But I think it was the seeming indissolubility of food and language – and here Vasu Reddy was referring to the thought of Claude Levi-Strauss and Clifford Geertz – which give me a sense of what I, as a cultural analyst, might offer our conversation.

This paper supposes that we are not only what we literally eat – WE ARE WHAT WE CONSUME. Therefore food, as it is understand here, is both macronutrient and metaphor. Moreover, the very ambit of my meaning, intent, and focus, supposes that, for the purposes of cultural analysis, food

must be thought of as not only a necessary condition for life but a desiring machine. Food defines us, shapes our very being and reveals our varied cultures, and insistently surfaces as a symptom of a profound problem.

What is food symptomatic of? The answers vary widely, which is why I ask that we return to Lewis and Reddy's insistence upon 'epistemology' – some framed project of knowing. Because 'Food Politics' is a massive idea, and a deeply emotional one at that, one needs perhaps to hone the focus for fear of slipping into an unwieldy generalisation.

My paper – titled 'Junk' – is just such a limited focus, or so I thought, because on arriving upon my conclusion I realised that perhaps I may just be very very wrong in supposing that any 'discourse' regarding food can ever be so coolly and so detachedly contained. What follows, therefore, is a meditation upon an *idea* which through the torsions of its very expression has forced me toward a reckoning. 'I'm hungry' Oliver pleads. 'Stop talking politics' the bloated plutocrat replies. But talk we must.



To invent, you need a good imagination and a pile of junk.

Thomas Edison

Sharknado, it's like msg!

Tasneem Wentzel – Burning Museum Collective

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In 1987 the American Pop artist, Barbara Kruger, created a work – ‘I shop therefore I am’ – which not only radically mutated the Cartesian Cogito – I think therefore I am – but, through a devastating irony, the irony of a smiling depressive, drew us pell-mell toward the end-game of late-capitalism. We know this game well; the religion it fostered - conspicuous consumption - the temple it spawned - the shopping mall.

However it was the director of the Office of Metropolitan Architecture (OMA) and the ‘seer’ of Rotterdam, Rem Koolhaas, in a seminal essay published in 2001 in the *Harvard Design School Guide to Shopping - ‘Junkspace’* – who ruthlessly exposed the horror of rampant consumerism.

Here is the response of the American Marxist, Fredric Jameson: ‘The virus ascribed to Junkspace is in fact the vision of shopping itself, which, like Disneyfication, gradually spreads like a toxic moss across the known universe.... In the end there will be little else for us to do but shop’

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Flipping the adage ‘less is more’, Rem Koolhaas proposes that ‘more and more, more is more’. Junkspace is the ‘black hole’ or ‘Bermuda Triangle’ that ‘undermines resolve, confuses intention with realisation’. ‘Overripe and undernourishing at the same time’, it is ‘a colossal security blanket that covers the earth in a stranglehold of seduction’. ‘A fuzzy empire of blur, it fuses high and low, public and private, straight and bent, bloated and starved to offer a seamless patchwork of the permanently disappointed’. A total exhaustion of Descartes’ dictum, cogito ergo sum, Koolhaas’s Junkspace pronounces a ‘postexistential’ world that ‘makes you uncertain where you are, obscures where you go, undoes where you were’.

We revolve about our corpses, Antonin Artaud presciently remarked, and as Friedrich Nietzsche before him foresaw, our lives are governed by the death instinct. It is nihilism which consumes us today – a nihilism wracked by yearnings cracked by uncertainty. And yet like many I seek not only the return of the individual but the indivisible - some collective agency. This possibility however remains contentious, for there is no doubt that junk is the defining virus of the 21st century.

A widget and a catch-all, junk has punctured the cosmos - as 'space junk' - infected urban development – Junkspace – redesigned, refined, and forever altered consumer habits: entertainment, information, lusts, addiction - as 'life-style'.

As a verb 'junk' is a throw away; as a noun it's a ship which has sailed, lost at sea, never to return to port. As a cipher for toxic waste, junk is the sum of what scientists now call the 'Anthropocene Age' - our post-industrial late-Capitalist moment. There is even a name for the geology of this age - 'plastiglomerate' - which refers to an accreted mass discovered on a Pacific beach in 2010, in which plastic – a 1950s polymer - has irreversibly fused with rock, fossil, and wood.

Indeed, the body too is a kind of plastiglomerate; a thing synthetic, inauthentic – barely human - such is the degree to which junk has invaded, retooled, and supplemented our lives. Botox injections, collagen, silicone implants, liposuction, penis enlargements are some of the fragile and insecure indicators. 'Does gene therapy announce a total reengineering according to Junkspace? Koolhaas asks. 'Is each of us a mini-construction site?'

Ours is an insidiously seductive and autocratic age which has made big business out of selling an illusory freedom of choice. The adage – 'we are what we eat' – is a minor key to a greater anthem – WE ARE WHAT WE CONSUME. Food is a substrate of a complex psycho-social, political and economic ecology in which we are conscripted not as individuals but as avatars.

It is telling, however, that Koolhaas begins his jeremiad with food: 'Rabbit is the new beef' he writes. 'Because we abhor the utilitarian, we have condemned ourselves to a life-long immersion in the arbitrary'. Distraction and novelty is our opiate, and 'slow food' – indeed slowness in general - the utopian antidote, because what Junkspace devastatingly revs up is perpetual distraction. Incapable of sustained thought or action our lives have fragmented.

It is not surprising, therefore, that in the midst of fragmentation we yearn the more for the lost world of self-determination; some still point of advocacy in this churning world.

A counter-force is on the rise, marked by the avid return to 'Identity Politics'. Like junk, however, self-reclamation is equally vague and all-inclusive, embracing the needs of the privileged as it does the desperation of the poor. Therefore, whether it is possible to right the damage which afflicts us is uncertain, for as Koolhaas cynically declaims: "'Identity" is the new junk food for the dispossessed, globalisation's fodder for the disenfranchised."

While I balk before this view and, like Othello, choose to hang my heart upon my sleeve for daws to peck at, I cannot blind myself to its cogency. Scrolling through Google Quotes on 'junk' I come across the following sentiments: 'If I could be doing anything I'd be lying on the floor in my birthday suit eating junk food and watching something dumb on TV' – Anita Baker. 'Most people are satisfied with junk food sold as music' – Billy Joel. 'I love sitcoms, and I grew up on sitcoms. That's my tasty junk food' – Felicia Day. 'Junk is the ideal product ... the ultimate merchandise. No sales talk necessary. The client will crawl through a sewer and beg to buy' – William Burroughs. 'The real junk food is what Frank Lloyd Wright called light entertainment – bubblegum for the eyes' – John Geddes. 'Everything one reads is a nourishment of some sort – good food or junk food – and one assumes it goes in and has its way with your brain cells' – Lorrie Moore.

The quotes keep streaming, a manifest of junk's virulent absorption of each and every dimension of modern life: our vision, beliefs, gut, addictions, and taste. One view however remains restorative: 'To invent, you need a good imagination and a pile of junk' – Thomas Edison.

Given that junk is here to stay – 'a toxic moss across the known universe' - what are we to make of the economic, psychological, and political complicities between junk and privation? Is junk just 'globalisation's fodder for the disenfranchised'?

Certainly junk food must be recognised as a variant of a greater virus, for it is impossible to think of junk food without its theatre, be it the student-vendor in my lecture room peddling her shimmering orange train of vacuum-packed nik-naks – an msg staple sold at R1 each - or the more shimmering media-driven advertorial fan-fare of desirable consumables sold in turn at makeshift booths, kiosks, Spaza shops, taxi ranks, train stations, supermarkets, and grandly stuccoed shopping malls.

In a precise splicing of consumption and space, Koolhaas steers our gaze to the refrigerated meat counter: 'Junkspace is additive, layered, and lightweight, not articulated in different parts but subdivided, quartered the way a carcass is torn apart – individual chunks severed from a universal condition'.

Then, palpating a core meme, Mcdonalds, Koolhaas reminds us that 'the arch, once the workhorse of structures, has become the depleted emblem of "community"'. (And here it should not go unremarked that our Vice-President, Cyril Ramaphosa, is also the local puppet-master behind the uber-global-food chain, Mcdonalds. The splice of politics, economics and calculatedly indentured consumption could not be more blisteringly clear).

Of brands more generally, Koolhaas notes that they 'perform the same role as black holes in the universe: they are essences through which meaning disappears'. It is this evisceration of the essential, this fakery of the communal, which is the key to the dominance of brands that seductively enfold us in fantastical virtual worlds we yearn to inhabit; worlds that consume us in the precious instant we mistakenly regard ourselves as consumers.

'There is no progress' in this world says Koolhaas. 'Like a crab on LSD, a culture staggers endlessly sideways ... The average contemporary lunch box is a microcosm of Junkspace: a fervent semantics of health – slabs of eggplant, topped by thick layers of goat cheese – cancelled by a colossal cookie at the bottom'.

This paradox – the belief in healthy living and its cancellation – echoes Jacques Derrida's deconstructive principle: *sous rature*. Whatever our claims, yearnings, actions, whatever we do is 'always-already' under erasure, so that nothing ever remains intact and inviolable. Caught at a crossed road, parasited in the instant we make a fresh advance, we find ourselves in a perpetual default position; scuppered, unstuck, unresolved. (Needless to say, Koolhaas's 'average contemporary lunch box' is not a normative reality in South Africa).

Of buffets (and here I'm reminded of the lavish banquets reserved for senate meetings at my university which, I should add, has failed to effectively cater to the nutritional needs of its students; the excommunication of a Rastafarian fruit vendor from the Bellville campus two years ago being a case in point) Koolhaas discourses lyrically. We read of 'utilitarian tables draped in white or black

sheets, perfunctory assemblies of caffeine and calories – cottage cheese, muffins, unripe grapes – notional representations of plenty, without horn and without plenty’.

‘Each Junkspace is connected sooner or later, to bodily functions: wedged between stainless-steel partitions sit rows of groaning Romans, denim togas bunched around their huge sneakers’. ‘Because it is so intensely consumed, Junkspace is fanatically maintained’, be it the privilege space allotted for a be-suited senate luncheon or the generic denim-clad ‘all you can eat’ emporia Koolhaas describes.

Dedicated to instant gratification, these ‘food courts’ for ‘groaning Romans’ are decadent theatres in which the morbid invitation - ‘all you can eat’ – spurs a feeding frenzy that pushes ‘bodily functions’ to an engorged extreme.

In the shadow of these pleasure domes – which are equally pernicious reminders of all we *can’t* eat - hover the famished and desperate who, with little to sustain themselves, are compelled to revolt, and, as recent history shows, have done so by using raw faecal waste as a weapon.

Between gluttony and excretion, consumption and waste, we find the ruptured fold of society, its skin distended, its surface gloss broken, its moral compass debased.

Caught between the extremes of glut and poverty it is not surprising that Achille Mbembe, the Cameroonian philosopher based at the Wits Institute of Social and Economic Research (WISER), should warn us that our democracy is but a disturbing precursor to a revolution.

Classist, racist, drugged by Capital, South Africa, as a democratic Idea, has failed its purpose and its people. With an onanistic lust for excess, a cruel disregard for human need, bolstered further by a misbegotten Roman cult of entitlement, this is a South African system tottering on the brink of catastrophe. The needs of the multitude are inflammatory and raw, those of the few blindingly gilt-edged.

Because we have not effectively questioned the absurdity of our phantom democracy, nor successfully undertaken the democratic reconstruction we putatively desired, we have created a monster; a citizenry caught between euphoria and despair, which in Koolhaas’s wickedly nuanced prose ‘meekly submits to grotesque journeys past perfume, asylum-seekers, building site, underwear, oysters, pornography, cell phone’; past ‘incredible adventures for the brain, the eye, the nose, the tongue, the womb, the testicles’, all the while smothered in ‘a peristaltic shrink-wrap crucial to all commercial exchange’.

All the above supposes that the ‘citizenry’ of which I speak - the greater sum of which remains condemned to penury - possesses the wherewithal or even the desire to work their way through such phantasmagoria. Because, as Koolhaas forges onward, ‘anything stretched – limousines, body parts, planes – turns into Junkspace, its original concept abused’. And it is this very abusive excess which we confront at every turn; on the streets, on plasma screens, in our betrayed hearts and gnawing gut.

The tragedy of our bloated-yet-starved society lies in its woefully promiscuous and repressive system of governance which, through myriad subtle and cynical betrayals, has further aggravated our beleaguered and exhausted private bodies, dreams, and hopes. The corruption and starvation of our

children, the brutalisation of our mothers and daughters, the rampantly crude and abusive triumphalism of our patriarchal ethos is the root of the problem.

In saying this I in no way seek to wholly diminish my gender but to remind us all just where power remains, the better to question those who wield it and appeal for a more inclusively nurturing world in which hunger in all its complexity will be answered.

Because Junkspace is pernicious, because, for Koolhaas, it is 'the interior of Big Brother's belly', it 'pre-empts people's sensations' and perverts their needs. The very gut of Capital, Junkspace also 'comes with a sound track, smell. Captions'. Designed, it must be redesigned. But is this possible? Can we break the snare of an unthinkingly jingoistic and brutally exclusionary nationalism? Can we truly shift away from what Koolhaas fascistically terms a 'Thousand Year Reign of Razzmatazz, a paroxysm of prosperity'?

After all, as Michel Foucault reminded us, power is always embattled. Illusion is fallible. Our 'canned euphoria' is at an end. Yet still we enshrine and exploit a delusory relation to the Real, with the media at the epicentre of this spin-doctored universe.

In speaking of the media – the TV camera in particular – it is fitting therefore that Koolhaas should return us to the core of our conversation: 'The TV camera suspended from its boom – an eagle without beak or claws, just an optical stomach – swallows images and confessions indiscriminately, like a trash bag, to propel them as cyber-vomit in space'.

In the harsh glare of this obscene insight is it at all surprising that there are those among us who would harness the contents of an all-too-human stomach and hurl its foul contents back at the very beast that would brazenly dare to further enslave us?

'Every document of civilisation is also a document of barbarism'. Walter Benjamin's tragic paradox prevails; defining what we consume, what we throw away – and what we must protest against. The best among us will find a way to break out of their aching bondage, seek sustenance through communion, live ethically because of others.

Ashraf Jamal is a 'cultural analyst' – writer, editor, and journalist. Jamal teaches cinema, photography, media, and visual culture at the Cape Peninsular University of Technology. He is the former editor of *Art South Africa*; co-author of *Art in South Africa: The future present* (David Philip Publishers); co-editor of *Indian Ocean Studies* (Routledge); and author of *Love themes for the wilderness* (Kwela & Random House), *Predicaments of culture in South Africa* (Unisa-Brill), *The Shades* (Brevitas), and *100 Good Ideas Celebrating 20 years of Democracy* (Umuzi).