



Towards Psychonutrition

John Hartley

Hand picked observations, lovingly folded into intriguing comparison and just a touch of the lightest fancy.

Towards Psychonutrition

We are in the midst of a crisis of future. You may have noticed! We're overdue for some deep play with what we regard as the future, or how we emerge and grow, and in particular the sorts of ingredients that aid or restrict that.

And why don't we try and take a networked, ecological point of view as we do this? It's the only current thing to do.

Energy and Spirit

We operate within an economy powered by solar energy. Fossil fuels are stored solar energy built up by micro-organisms over millions of years. Although we've plenty of coal left (not the most energy rich of fossil fuels, but the dirtiest) we've used up a generous half of the oil and natural gas reserves. Much of the energy has gone on rooves, food and medicine. But plenty has gone on fueling our sprites and demons.

Look at Jeremy Clarkson's celebrated poetics. He isn't re-commissioned for consumer research reports to help rational actors make informed decisions - as neo-classical economics would term it. Few of us are in a quandry about whether to race a Lambo or a helicopter across a continent. His power is a demonstration of the power of petroleum sprites. The studio audience laughs raucously, buoyed and intoxicated by his

Some psycho food groups

The Extreme

The philosopher Schopenhauer claimed that all of life is either boredom or pain. And we seem to need at least a bit of that pain. If something is easy, everyone may already be doing it. And although falling in line is good news for many activities and approaches, 'becoming' needs disruption (unconvinced? read about the Game of Life and the necessary conditions for self-sustaining dynamism. The Game of Life is a computer programme making patterns that grow and thrive within certain narrow constraints. The game doesn't reward high levels of change or volatility, which leads to runaway chaos, not little amounts of change, which is nullifying. As a model for complex systems it teaches us that we need to find the balance point between order and chaos; a vanishingly thin line that moves and dances with the march of circumstances. If human acts outside of computer programmes also work in any way like the Game of Life or other complex systems, then finding that point of balance between order and chaos would be a subtle and *timely* act of critical poise. One found through *taste* perhaps - that most subtle and finely tuned of metrics. Too much homogeneity and things die the grey death. Too much radical exceptionalism and chaos burns us to bits. There's a fine line between order and chaos and that's the line of becoming (further reading: *Complexity, the emerging science at the edge of order and chaos*, M. Mitchell Waldrop))



There is benefit in the privilege of adversity and we can look at this through the lens of psychonutrition, across both material, foody stuff and a more metaphoric framing of personal and cultural development and becoming.

We pay some of the highest prices for extreme foods. Ones that taste of rot and death. Crunch, resistance, spice and *piquancy* (french for 'bite') are highly prized. Why should we value food that bites *us*? If we fling ourselves into flavours that evoke damage while at the table, we do the same in other parts of our lives; defying death, celebrating bravery, learning to resist through bloody minded opposition and vigour.

Extremis tests our vigour and grounds us in mortality. We are

Chili (member of the Nightshade family)

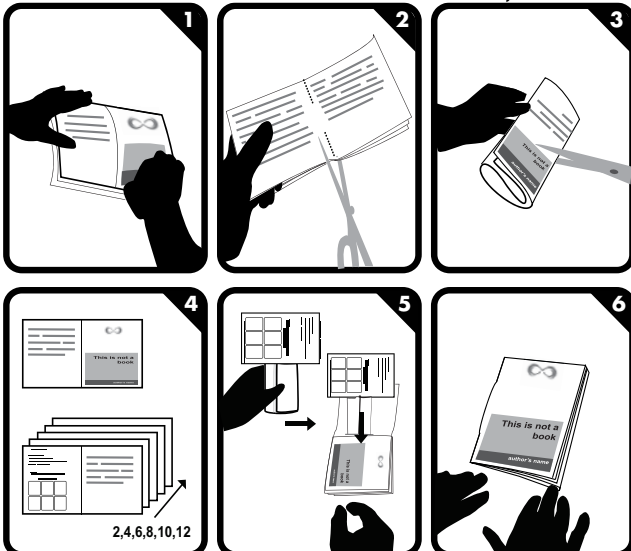


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Let's cast about for material to work on with these questions. Perhaps some daftness can unhinge our way of looking at things. If we can rearrange our thinking about what nourishes and makes us grow personally and collectively, then that could actually be quite useful!

For the last few decades a range of disciplines have been lining up to rework our world view through the lens of systems thinking (across computer science, anthropology, psychology, ecology, in social science, political theory and economics ...). So what's the significance of systems thinkers when it comes to how we imagine future? Does connectivity look different across time? If we privilege the connections between elements in a system (whether that system be a set of beliefs, a web of species, or a community), then what of time? Are there different ways to connect past histories and unrealised potential? We can stop thinking about leaving the past, progressing towards a new state, a fractured narrative; and instead look at *becoming*, a connected narrative. Now we're in the territory of continual emergence.

along in future's wake.

imagined is now split for each separate eye, we're still dragged are condemned and demolished, and the future we had modernism. But even though our utopian architectural projects will remind us that we now occupy a space on the 'post' side of mythological spaces of the last few centuries. Cultural theorists collective narratives. The future is one of the defining resonate, perhaps, along the length of our personal and personal; the cultural; the biological... And patterns that atomising. Patterns that can resonate across different scales: the it's timely to search for patterns that are 'synthetic' rather than could probably do with some new aesthetic innovations.

exercised dominion over a world that came to meet the ego. We looking at order. The individual observer was central and perspective *internalised* and fortified one particular way of ascribe them no value). In the sixteenth century, the invention of

demonstration of the power of a cohort of polluting ariels, enlivened by hell-for-leather evocation of grit and determination, despite - or even against the system.

But straw men aside, how many ariels do even the most righteous and dowdiest of us employ? And what do we bid them do? Yes, we ask for jumpers, meat, education, aspirin...but we also call for them to spin comforts, reinforce our mirage of dominion, extend our impression of hygiene, describe an implacable order... These are energy rich requests.

Width

If we accept the implications of a systems approach to looking at these issues, the flicking of a switch, animating our cultural desires, impacts in some way on the skies on the other side of the planet. Quickly 'green' choices embrace a widening net of relevant considerations. How is evening entertainment on dark nights depend upon a system-nexus for which time is limited? What about our expectations for personal task/debt trajectory (aka 'career')? Interesting to ponder, but such expansive dwelling can quickly spiral beyond personal agency into self-defeating confusion.

Freshness

If you hang out in the right circles you'll hear that the ecological crisis is a crisis of aesthetics. How could it be any other way? We are exhausting the relevance, and feeling the limitations of 'the atomist project', seeking to build understanding and ultimately exercise control by learning more and more about less and less. As the particles of study grow smaller, the cost of observations grow exorbitantly. As the factors under consideration become more clearly separated from other processes, the more we have to excuse externalities (such as the degradation of 'ecological support services' by markets that

While the geographical is a key aspect of materiality, one richly woven through with concepts of ownership, origin, aspiration, progress, socioeconomic categorisations and boundaries, it is not the only physical reality that might yield to psychic mining. Other realms are open to investigation and we might ask how they are activated. Cast a look at writing on human needs and a search for becoming suggests areas ripe for play.

We might view land as our origin, source or homeland, often describing ourselves in regional terms. We say we own land and can exchange deeds for it, or for the permission to use it for a limited period of time. People walk about on top of land together and perhaps our most immediate idea of public is, for whatever reason, visualised as a throng on a street – chance encounters, a mix of socioeconomic groupings, multiple activities seen side by side. And subtler terrains are proposed: motorways, waterways, the countryside, non-spaces and virtual geographies.

Many artists, working with mobile technology, social realities and emerging collaborative practices have referred to and developed the concept of psychogeography. Psycho-geography could be characterised as a way of using physical surroundings to show the internal life of where we're at, here and now. It throws light on the individual and (perhaps more often) a public internal life – what Jung called the collective conscious.

Psychogeography

adjacent possible.

'Character' is perhaps less about volume, than distribution. a person of effective character is not 'more person', it's just that their range of spirit is more relevantly distributed. Just consider how you apportion your patience or humour in the different spheres of your life. These things are not set in concrete. Likewise, several determined centuries of enlightenment have not managed to kill 'God' (by which we might mean a cultural expression of ultimate authority and power) we just redistributed him/h er/them. The Gods are still there, but we've made them invisible and hid them in our white goods, power steering and shopping centres.

Myths and dreams, spirits and taboos are present in all societies, and just as they are distributed, so might they be redistributed. And might we also redistribute our dreams concerning resources, big systems and technology? If we want that to be a cultural project, we should be careful. The methodology of the arts, isn't (or shouldn't be) intentional redesign. More a case of stumbling from hope into grace. So plenty of lucky tinkering with a hefty preparation of ambition is what we should try and let's be ready and waiting, just in case anything useful falls on us.

Ease

If we're to influence becoming, let's not start from scratch; can't be done! Judicious nudging (surely at the heart of all pragmatism) is the small person's approach (Eileen Conn, ex civil and Peckham activist recently referred me to theoretical biologist Stuart Kaufmann's theory of 'the Adjacent Possible'. Conn advocates social change through the adjacent possible taking, as one example, the remarkable inter-war 'Peckham Experiment' a world-recognised attempt to facilitate self organising community empowerment that provided value-free information about health, rather than directed interventions about disease. Look it up, it's great).

Or as they say in Tai Chi, deflect force and stick to speed... We need to look to our energies and we need to look for the

The Feral Trade Courier is a live shipping database for a freight network running outside commercial systems. The database offers dedicated tracking of feral trade products in circulation, archives every shipment and generates freight documents on the fly. A social network operating since 2003



Feral Trade: Kate Rich

Familial Course

Playful Course

Concrete Soup Kitchen: Bob and Roberta Smith

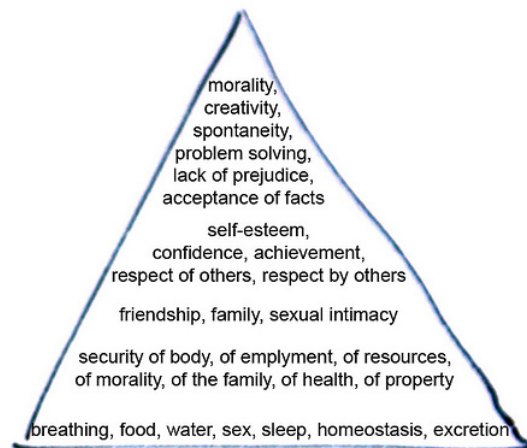
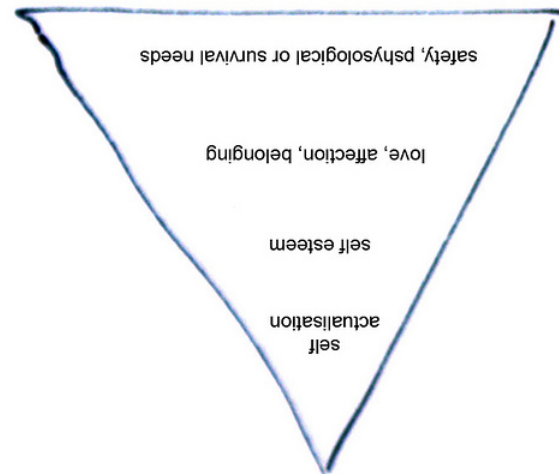


cement and aggregate dining, offered to the public during performance at Beaconsfield Gallery 2005

The psychological significance of sex and family are unavoidable, although looking at these categories more metaphorically, we might want to ask if the concept of psycho-heredity would be a useful tool for looking at traditions in behaviour. Many groups claim psycho-parentage from antecedents, notably in politics and the arts, which have often

Psychoinheritance

But whoever's model and whichever ontological aesthetic you use to arrange phenomena, it's still worth throwing a few rocks at these multi-scale models, picking over the shards and celloping a 'psycho' prefix to a range of 'needs' and see if we can't spot a few other fun ideas. So let's throw that stone...



Maslow ranks his hierarchy of human need, and psychogeography could be thought of as a tool that allows us to consider the subtleties of the higher steps of his ziggurat by looking at the lower ones. If however you don't agree with his particular hierarchy, then Manfred Max-Neef might be the fella for the job. His fundamental human needs are a little less deferential, a little more referential. A range of motivations, not a transcendental aspiration of progress.

A menu of becoming

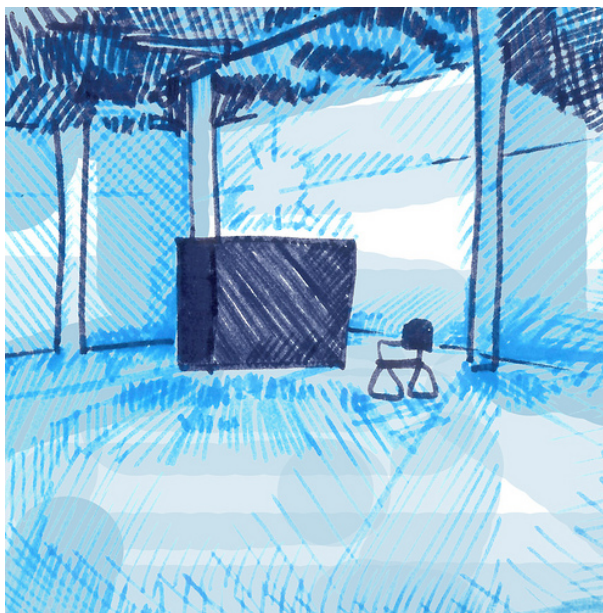
Extreme Course



the surprises of the season, provided by urban climbers and guerrilla gardeners, as practiced in many modern cities

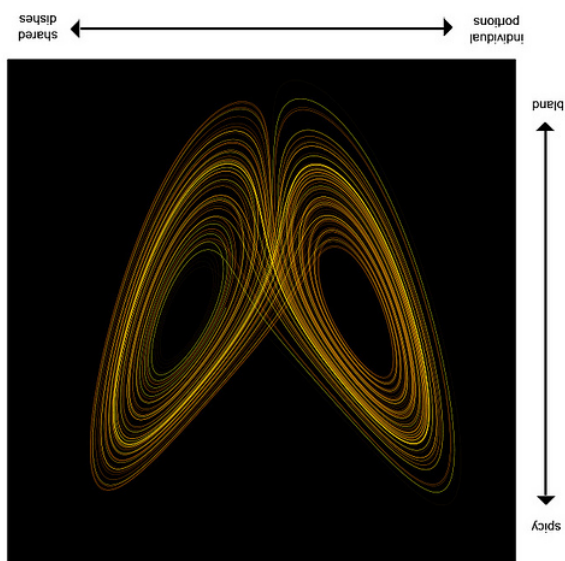
Sublime Course

Cat: Ansuman Biswas



Ansuman Biswas performs an experiment / demonstration drawing on the image of Schrödinger's Cat, the famous paradox in quantum physics. The work arises from a comparative study of modern scientific methodology and the 2,500 year old Indian science of vipassana. It will last for ten days during which time the artist will remain sealed within a light and soundproof chamber. He will attempt to maintain continuous, detailed observation of all sensory phenomena. Performed at South London Gallery, 1998

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As with Schopenhauer's boredom/pain dialogue the point of appropriate play and ideal seasoning can be a fine boundary, and it is a boundary that shifts over time, perhaps swinging back and forth across our potential preferences etching a line in search of the strange attractor of taste.

into the food, *Chopin empties a handful of cayenne pepper* (from Iris, A weekly periodical for 'sophisticated readers,' Berlin August 2nd 1833).

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Fresh becoming

How can we reallocate our needs in a way that meets them equally or better even, given the scale of transformation asked of us? Lets not get caught up in the idea of sustainability. Although this is the off the shelf policy framework that supports low carbon, low ecological footprint change, it can't be the best paradigm to lunge towards. It's problem as a concept is that it presumes permanence, rather than being transitional. Read Hildegard Kurt on this word. She suggests we should learn to die. I take that to mean our habits and expectations rather than giving up and rotting, but the temporary is a powerful idea that can be done with continual grace.

Our habits around property, neighbourhood, work, seclusion are currently joined to historically particular forms of nourishment. What do we need to help us become differently and where might we get that from? What other sources of psychonutrition are untapped? To end this forage, I've suggested a taster menu of arts practice and cultural activity, although ingredients could quite easily vary according to tastes and available disciplines.

Enjoy

Psycho-poo is another productive concept. If we were to embark upon a taxonomy of soul turds we would have to first remind ourselves why excretion is so necessary as well as reasons that we have such strong socially reinforced hygienic to separate it from living spaces and thoroughfares. It's not enough to say that there should never be turds from the heart. Shit won't stop! Excessive billowness (too much black bile) was seen as an ailment by the medievals and others since; and furthermore, one organism's catharsis is another's boutique hotel. So recognising where the right place is for offloading internally carried poisons and the dregs accumulated in the course of psycho-metabolism. Think of some of the people you know or have read about. Maybe some throw their own waste in the faces of others while others festoon themselves. The low metabolisers of a deep sleep existence might well produce less psycho-poo, but they probably lie around in it for much longer. (sometimes it's tough for dreamers to change the sheets). Surely the most hygienic place to offload is away from our normal routine. Somewhere

Psychoexcretion

metaphorise and collectivise.

as there are other interesting shards of the individual that we can different modes of somnolence? But lets not spend too long here waking dreams? And are we ever unable to move between sleep is REM sleep, where the arms and legs don't work but the unproductive state, just a distant one. Between light and deep of deep psychosomnolence! That's not to say it's an deep delta wave zones, either by design or oversight. Acolytes reflectively inclined individuals who've lived many years in such disorientated for a while afterwards. I'm sure I can think of some Meanwhile, it can be hard to wake from deep sleep and you'll be ungrounded in the face of a challenge of dizzying scale. 'sleep starts'. I can certainly think of occasions of psycho-vertigo, Light sleep often involves the feeling of sudden falling during

looked back to other times for useful models (for instance, painters linking their ideas to those 'before Raphael', or look at how 'gothic' begat Victorian architecture, a century of uncanny literature and sepulchral guitar music).

Psychosexuality

What might Psycho-intimacy mean (and is it even possible to use such a term metaphorically since intimacy between individuals doesn't need a psycho prefix)? Alternatively we could approach from a different disciplinary direction. A key claim by biologists regarding sexual reproduction is that it is a way of accessing new data, genetically speaking. So we might see a concept such as psycho-sexuality as offering a metaphorical connection between the acts of individuals and those of whole cultures. In which case, the idea becomes a metaphor about exchange and creative disruption leading to a vibrant pool of increased possibilities. Can we see parallels between cross-cultural exchange and the fraught tension of teenage snoggers? Each as likely to end in mutual incomprehension and rejection as surprising new vigour. And do the xenophobe and the nationalist fit into this metaphor (perhaps their outrage translated into prudish denial...). This mash up offers insights, of sorts!

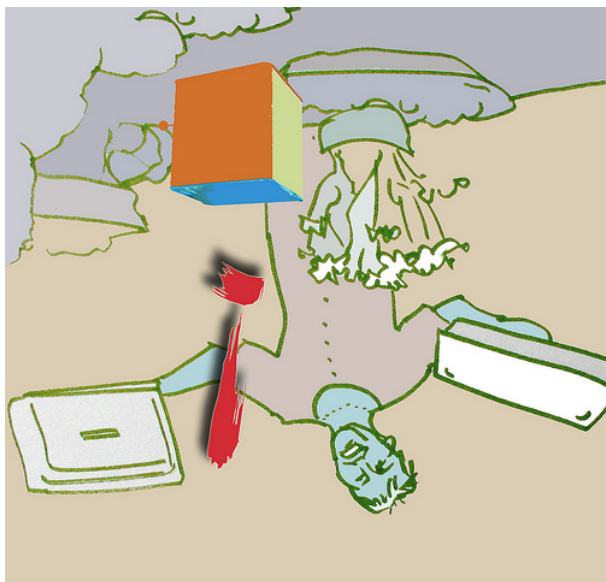
Psychosomnolence

Some of the most interesting franken-thoughts from this experiment come from the bottom of Maslow's pyramid. What happens when we flip the idea of sleep into the notion of psycho-sleep. Are there whole categories of contemporary life dedicated to psycho-somnolence? Which of our habits belong to our drowsy lands and drowsy lives? And what is the difference between drowsiness and other types of sleep, such as light sleep, deep sleep and REM sleep?

Play gave us much of what we call technology. The Wright brothers were lucky not to have something better to do. Their

sparked to many creative acts. Absurdity and playfulness are necessary chaotic distractions that add spice to other forms of nutrition. As with all matters of taste, it is easy to go too far with seasoning though. A life that is too fractured and unpredictable is unlivable. Constant japes grate, and can numb in a way that negates the trisson. If seen as a form of cultural nutrition, this 'food group' is often contrary, challenging familial traditions and approaches and providing the

The Playful or Unlikely



modern followers celebrate their surprising innovation by falling from the end of seaside piers, snapping their fingers in derision at nonsense like gravity and species limitations. Playful absurdism can be a great ally in self-determination. Transhumanists are another group of fierce innovators, unwilling to accept the destiny prepared for them ('I'll leave 'by whom' a hanging question).

Suggesting similarities between the Wright brothers and Walt Disney's frozen head is only useful in pointing out that there might actually be boundaries and constraints that do limit the relevance of play. Our planes damage our skies, our limbs will wither eventually, it's possible no-one will be able to afford thaw-and-sew technology to reanimate a frozen head. Where those boundaries are is a key question for our point in history. For instance, boundaries of play are currently being renegotiated between the police and civil society with the unofficial attempt to criminalise photography of urban infrastructure or corporate architecture.

Perhaps other internationally relevant boundaries, such as those concerning climate talks, are for some participants about defining play space. When people talk of 'Business as usual', what part of that is about some form of play? Our definitions of appropriate playspace is continually changing.

Chopin's nocturnes are among the central pillars of the romantic piano repertoire. To modern ears they sum up the highly-ornamented classical confection of bittersweet mournfulness beloved of Belle Epoch European connoisseurs. Love them or loathe them we find it difficult to consider them too strongly flavoured. But that was not how they were received on publication. In 1833 Ludwig Rellstab compared Chopin unfavourably to the, now-forgotten (as insipid?), John Field,

Where Field smiles, Chopin makes a grinning grimace; where Field sighs, Chopin groans... where Field puts some seasoning

snacking. Since we've lost the certainty of progress, the glee with which we approach test tube additives has waned. Nowadays, we are anxious and worried about E numbers, or any food denoted by numbers and letters. Tricky really, because even thoroughly 'natural' ingredients such as crushed beetles or Oxygen have been given E numbers (Cochineal E120 (!) and E 948). Once you start eating science, it's hard to stop. Still popular though are foil wrapped crisps and intensely coloured party food. We do still eat robot. But where once such vivid future-fare was widespread and aspirational, now it is relegated to playful parties and kiddo

Technonutrition

and sunshine stuff, but also include a tiny smattering of salts and minerals (famously junk from exploding stars). Nutrition is all about reusing and building upon basic materials and energies and that is an approach we can keep in mind when imagining psychonutrition. What are the materials and energies which the psyche (personal or collective) is constructed from or motivated by? Are there some easily spotted cultural nutrients that connect with particular forms of becoming? Reinforcing this link between the external and internal, we can look at what is currently on the shelves to suggest some cultural nutrients. For instance, it's quite easy to spot technical nourishment and historic-idealistic nourishment. Both give us some interesting hints of where else to look to understand psychonutrients.

where it supports other useful existence. The holiday economy is just such a place; based upon recycling detritus formed by routines and rigmarole. Renewing and refreshing urban bile through the anaerobic digestion of the festival, the B+B and the package tour.

Follow this the concept of psychometabolism one step back and we come to the metabolic starting point: psychonutrition.

Psychonutrition

The energy system which we most immediately control is our own metabolism. Looking at the multiple layers of nutrition built up around food stuff and feeding can also help us look at broader metabolisms, referencing the prejudices and sleights of hand that inflate the industry of food marketing and presentation, as well as cultural assumptions and aspiration. It's not a new approach. Roland Barthes first set out such idea by considering the mythology of steak, and perhaps to consider psychonutrition is just to rework the transvisible world of semiotics. However, exploring and repopulating the concept from our own contemporary perspective might well look different to the observations that Barthes made in newly modern France, not least if we unseat the 'future' in favour of 'becoming'. But let's start by actually considering some bits of real, proddable stuff first.

Take a look at your arm. Where does it come from? it is made out of your dinners. And where do your dinners come from? Tracing them back through the food chain, the ultimate dinner origin is photosynthesising plants, which generate carbohydrates out of just air and water, joined by sunshine.



Along the way, through the jaws and stomachs of mini beast and maxi beast, the carbohydrate is joined by other nutrients (proteins, fats etc...). They too are made of the same air, water

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OK, so we can see that we invest our food with rich ideas. But these are really second order beliefs played out through food. If a level. If we abstract downwards, we can come up again in surprising places. So I'll try to set out four of the major food groups of the shared psyche: the extreme, the sublime, the familial and the absurd. Any meal has to be approached with the ingredients at hand and these are suggestions that do come to

The interest in Mediterranean diet is also about a return – again to the preindustrial, although here the preindustrial is assumed to still exist in other countries, even though we have left it behind in our own neck of the woods. The old people featured in adverts for olive products is a case in point. Although health benefits and longevity are claimed as benefits of such products, that doesn't explain why these senior citizens are dressed in 1950s clothes, pushing hand carts. Why aren't they taking the taxi to bingo behind the industrial quarter like modern Mediterraneans?



Historicist retreat

A more self-assured theme sold to us through food is the return to a previous age - a common response in times of anxiety. A premium is demanded for cheese and bacon presented in plastic that resembles greaseproof paper, evoking a community butcher's lo-fi wrapping of a ration to be plopped into a wicker basket by the valued customer. Interestingly, the wrapping is actually high-tech polymer, with the final technical flourish going on a retro-disguise.

The Sublime

eating the void, perhaps (for a time) beating the void. And if not, then at least knowing it and developing our taste for entropy. Destruction is a profoundly creative force, when done well. But even if we understand *the extreme* adequately, we are in a world of risk aversion, multi-layered safety measures and great in-built societal inertia. Can we say we're happy with our collective, habitual choice of crunch and do we seek it too much through carbon-intensive ways?

Likewise, bliss is an out of body experience. If we watch adverts and tv chefs, we do see the out of body face quite often. Eyes closed, a dreamy 'mmm' shutting out the present, while slow-moving utensils mesmerise and the other worldly time frame of dreamily glugging creams and gravies stretches into the distance.

The sublime is losing yourself in vastness, perhaps ceding individuality (but this time without the threat of it destroying us). No doubt a relevant, modern, low carbon sublime could be found in different places. Previously we sought jet set paradise and palms to 'remove' us into the distance. Or else we joined the vast through pioneering conquest of continually expanding frontiers. This urge or need might be met differently, touching externalities through social union or group concerns.

is being a football fan sublime? Can we expand new approaches to travel and discovery (like house swaps perhaps)? What about losing yourself in playing group music? Many people make their own paradise in gardens or allotments, finding big things in small holdings. What's the collective noun for root vegetables (a paradise of swede)?

The Familial

The smell of home cooked bread and coffee sells houses (or homes, more to the point). Chicken soup is food for the soul; rich and easy to digest, taking you back to childhood security. But the familial, is also about routine and even collapse of responsibility. Pot noodles, kebabs, fish finger sandwiches can all hold a special place in our routines out of proportion to taste value. Rearranging our boltholes, without losing the support they give us would be a powerful way of opening up new avenues for being. But we have to be careful when tinkering with things that work largely because they've been done for ever. Creative, transformative becoming could seem a bit exhausting and worthy if it doesn't permit the post-boozer kebab (or equivalent). Luckily we've got a lot of history to plunder. Both personal and cultural. It turns out many of the best timeless traditions were invented by the Victorians; from Christmas trees to kilts. And although we're not obliged to reanimate *their* ghosts, if we can work new vigour into our archives, then our emotional duvets could come from all sorts of new places.