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Thresholds of Experience

Food, Embodiment, and Artificial Simulation in Popular Culture

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Articles

Introduction: Experience, Popular Culture, and Food

Experiencing popular culture involves more than detached spectatorship. In contemporary media environments, culture is encountered through bodies, senses, and technologies, leaving impressions that are at once physical, emotional, and collective. To watch a television drama over dinner, to attend a themed screening in costume, or to follow a TikTok recipe inspired by a favourite film is not just to consume culture but to engage in practices that inscribe themselves into appetite, routine, and identity. Experience is not incidental to popular culture; it is its medium expressed through gestures, textures, tastes, and affects that go beyond narrative.

Recent scholarship has framed experience as a critical category for understanding media. Studies in design and technology emphasise the structuring of interaction through frameworks such as User Experience (UX) and Experience Design (XD), which highlight how systems are crafted for immersion and engagement (Norman; Hassenzahl). Yet these models remain limited, as they centre on designed interfaces rather than on lived experience. In popular culture, experience extends far beyond engineered usability: it emerges through embodiment and through the ways people inhabit, repeat, and rework cultural texts in everyday life. Food provides a particularly sharp way to think this through. As Barthes notes, food is “a system of communication” through which social meaning is organised and shared (24), while Counihan argues that eating is a prism refracting gender, power, and identity (8). Food is at once symbolic and material, code and calories: something represented and something tasted. Popular culture continually mobilises this duality. Meals, snacks, hunger, and feasts as experiences mark class, intimacy, crisis, and aspiration. Even when audiences cannot literally taste what they see, culinary media activates gustatory imagination: the capacity to recall flavours, anticipate textures, or feel bodily responses such as hunger, desire, or disgust.

This article argues that food is an experiential interface through which popular culture is lived. Drawing on phenomenological accounts of embodiment (Merleau-Ponty; Csordas), it reads food scenes and food-inspired fan practices via three diverse cinematic representations: *Breaking Bad*, *Severance*, and *Barbie*. These are sites where cultural experience is scripted and contested. It then turns to generative AI, particularly AI-generated food images and recipes, as a field in which taste is increasingly simulated. AI proliferates food simulations inspired by Walter White’s blue meth sweets, *Severance*’s engineered reward foods, and Barbiecore brunch spectacles, generating edible imaginaries that resemble meals yet remain wholly disembodied, untasted, unlaboured, and unlinked to the sensory and social practices that constitute real eating. By examining how food is experienced and simulated across these examples, the article reframes popular culture as a threshold space where human and artificial modes of mediation converge. At this threshold, the meaning of experience, be it authentic or apparent, lived or generated, becomes central to the negotiation of cultural participation.

Embodied Engagement: Food as an Experiential Medium

Popular culture is not only consumed cognitively but experienced as sensory experience. To encounter a text is to feel it through bodies, gestures, senses, and rituals that exceed narrative comprehension. As Merleau-Ponty observes, perception is not detached cognition but an embodied orientation to the world: “I am not in front of my body, I am in it, or rather I am it” (150). Csordas similarly describes embodiment as the “existential ground of culture and self” (9). In this sense, experience is not a secondary effect of popular culture but its means of inscription in the body.

Food sharpens this insight. Eating is one of the most intimate and rhythmic ways bodies inhabit the world: it structures daily life, marks celebrations and crises, and mediates relations of care and hierarchy. Counihan emphasises that food is a lived site of identity and power (8). When food appears in media as a shared family dinner, a fast-food chain, a corporate reward, or a pastel

dessert, it mobilises both symbolic and sensory registers. Close-ups of frying, pouring, chewing, and swallowing invite viewers to experience taste and texture, to feel hunger or repulsion, even though nothing passes their lips. Culinary popular culture activates a specifically gustatory experience. Food in literature and screen culture is rarely neutral; it is woven into questions of class, race, gender, and nation (Piatti-Farnell and Brien). Beyond this, it also engages bodily memory. Watching someone crack an egg, butter toast, or bite into a burger draws on sedimented, everyday knowledge of flavour and texture. Experience then is neither purely cognitive nor purely physiological; it is historically formed, mediated by culture and habit.

Fan food practices make this dynamic especially evident. In *Eating Fandom*, Reinhard, Largent, and Chin document how fans cook, bake, and consume foods modelled on beloved texts. These practices function as embodied modes of textual engagement. Fans photograph their efforts, and share them on social media where food becomes part of the narrative experience. Preparing and eating renders popular culture tangible and digestible. Seen from this perspective, food is an experiential and embodied medium. It links screen and body, representation and ingestion, imagination and digestion. The following discussion show how this plays out in *Breaking Bad*, *Barbie*, and *Severance* before turning to the forms of edible simulation generated by AI.

***Breaking Bad*: Domestic Meals and the Cultural Experience of Eating**

In *Breaking Bad*, food functions as a cultural and sensory vocabulary through which the series articulates shifting relationships, emotional atmospheres, and the gradual distortion of Walter White's identity (Nolan and Coghlan). Meals are central expressive devices: they organise scenes of intimacy, distance, hope, and rupture. The repetitive cadence of the White family's breakfasts and dinners establishes food as a cultural script, one that promises stability, routine, and belonging. Yet as Walter's double life intensifies, this script begins to falter. The food rituals designed to reassure and bind the family instead highlight fissures that can no longer be concealed. Food in *Breaking Bad* is a medium of emotional signalling.

The iconic arrangement of bacon into the numerals of Walter's age encapsulates this dynamic: it is a gesture steeped in domestic familiarity yet reveals an underlying desperation to hold onto an identity that is slipping away. Eating in *Breaking Bad* becomes an index of moral drift: what, when, and how characters eat, and refuse to eat, communicates transformations they cannot articulate. Within this framework, the domestic table functions as an affective stage where narrative pressure is materialised through gestures of serving, sharing, or withholding food. A bowl of cereal or a plate of eggs becomes a cultural site where comfort, anxiety, and denial converge. Food is entrusted with the work of maintaining the appearance of unity; yet it simultaneously exposes the fragility of that unity. *Breaking Bad* thus uses the experience of eating to dramatise what is otherwise difficult to express: that the family no longer shares the same rhythms, appetites, or emotional or moral world.

If the home represents food as cultural intimacy, the show's fast-food settings, Los Pollos Hermanos, present an alternate cultural representation of eating: one defined by predictability, pleasure, and surface-level warmth. The sensory environment of the restaurant – bright colours, friendly greetings, and comforting fried chicken – evokes a highly familiar cultural experience of fast food as a place of ease and uncomplicated pleasure. *Breaking Bad* uses this setting not only as neoliberal critique but to explore how culturally coded sensory environments shape emotional expectation. The consistency of taste, the repetition of menu items, and the predictability of the dining experience all signal a form of cultural reassurance: a stable, shared experience of eating that feels safe and communal. This sensory stability becomes meaningful precisely because it stands in tension with the instability of the characters' private lives. In *Breaking Bad*, fast food is culturally legible as a space of lightness and familiarity; a place where taste is immediate, uncomplicated, and collectively understood. Yet when the show juxtaposes this sensory comfort with the escalating rupture in Walter's domestic world, it prompts viewers to consider how food mediates experience in different cultural contexts. Home meals become strained and emotionally charged, while public eating spaces present an ease that the characters can no longer authentically inhabit. *Breaking Bad* uses food and eating to stage cultural experiences that are as much emotional as they are sensory. Eating becomes a way of measuring belonging, signalling change, and making visible the tension between who characters were, and who they are becoming. Food is the emotional atmosphere of the series: a medium through which the audience feels the shifting ground beneath the White family long before characters acknowledge it themselves (Nolan and Coghlan).

Barbie: Plastic Food and Edible Pink

At first glance, *Barbie* appears distant from questions of food. Barbie Land is populated by plastic kitchens, miniature fridges, and toy cupcakes that are endlessly handled but never eaten (Tamas). The dolls mime drinking and dining, enacting the gestures of meals without ingestion. This absence is telling. Historically, Barbie's thin, rigid body is bound up with ideals of control and self-regulation. Appetite sits uneasily within this world of perfect surfaces. Greta Gerwig's 2023 film knowingly plays with this logic. In Barbie Land, food is pure form and colour; a prop for play. Yet in the "real world" Barbie encounters a messier materiality: coffee that spills, food that stains, bodies that age and ache. The contrast exposes how the doll's universe evacuates risk, digestion, and hunger in favour of eternal readiness for display.

Around the film's release, food featured in marketing and fan practices (Moir). Barbie-themed brunches, high teas, and cocktails proliferated, with menus dominated by pink foods and drinks: beetroot burgers, strawberry cakes, glittered martinis, fuchsia macarons. These events translated the film's visual liminal pink spaces and codes (Brammer) into edible form, encouraging participants to "eat Barbie" by ingesting colour and branding (Coghlan, Hackett, and Nolan, "Barbie: Imagining"). Social media amplified this phenomenon: carefully staged photographs of Barbiecore food circulated on Instagram and TikTok, turning meals into content. Food mediates between fantasy and embodiment. Barbie's plastic world disavows appetite; Barbie-themed food in

the real world reinstates it, but tightly channels it through aesthetics of cuteness, sweetness, and femininity. As Coghlan, Hackett, and Nolan's broader work on *The Barbie Phenomenon* suggests, this edible pinkness is not innocent: it reproduces and packages gendered expectations around pleasure, control, and appearance. Experience is simultaneously gustatory and visual, folded back into inedible images.

***Severance*: Engineered Taste and the Fragmentation of Experience**

Severance offers food as deliberately engineered experience. Within Lumon's corporate workspace, food functions as an affective device, precisely portioned and strategically timed to control. This dynamic reflects Ahmed's claim that emotions attach to objects and are used to orient and govern bodies. Food in *Severance* is precisely such an orienting object: a carefully crafted stimulus that shapes how alienated workers feel and act within an artificially restricted world. The "melon party" and "waffle party" exemplify taste as a designed encounter. These are not meals but are mediated experiences (Gorton 4). Because workers have no sensory life outside work, these tiny gustatory moments become hyper-saturated, disproportionate experiences. The rationed slice of melon, for example, becomes a moment of manufactured intensity. The pleasure of sweetness is amplified because it is scarce; its emergence is timed to maximise emotional responsiveness.

As Merleau-Ponty reminds us, perception arises through the body's orientation in the world (150). Lumon exploits this foundational phenomenological principle by engineering the sensory environment so tightly that taste becomes a primary instrument for shaping subjectivity. In this way, *Severance* resonates with Boellstorff's account of technologically mediated worlds as "designed lifeworlds", spaces in which sensory and social experience are synthetically constructed (Boellstorff 122). Lumon's edible rewards are precisely such synthetic lifeworld interventions. The "waffle party" sharpens this dynamic further. Its blend of ritualised indulgence, controlled eroticism, and choreographed spectacle exemplifies the intimate economy of spaces where affect, pleasure, and power converge to produce compliant subjects (Berlant 1–3). Taste becomes a portal through which Lumon deepens its psychological reach over labour. Food does more than soothe or reward; it orchestrates the sensory experience of workers. For viewers, *Severance* activates what Sobchack terms "the address of the body", a mode of spectatorship grounded in felt, sensory response (Sobchack 63). Food in *Severance* is visceral evidence of how the series understands experience itself: as something that can be partitioned, engineered, and commodified, but also something irreducibly embodied.

Artificial Experience: Simulated Food

The rise of generative AI troubles the category of experience by producing cultural artefacts of images, texts, and recipes that convincingly simulate creativity and affect without embodiment, sensation, or memory. This is particularly evident in the domain

of food, where AI systems generate endless images and recipes inspired by popular culture without any necessary relation to cooking or eating. From a design perspective, UX and XD frameworks assume that experience is human-centred, embodied, and affective (Norman; Hassenzahl). They are concerned with how users feel as they move through systems. AI-generated content unsettles this foundation. As Manovich argues, digital culture is defined by “database logic”, in which cultural materials are modular, recombinable, and infinitely reproducible (48). Generative models trained on vast datasets of food photography and fan art now produce meals that look like they belong in *Breaking Bad*, *Barbie*, or *Severance* with a single prompt. Hyper-saturated images intensify each text’s existing aesthetic. AI-generated *Breaking Bad* food often features crystalline blue desserts, stylised fried chicken platters, or domestic breakfasts with an uncanny sheen. *Barbie*-themed outputs push pinkness to the edge of toxicity: burgers, cakes, and cocktails in neon hues that blur the line between edible and plastic. AI-generated *Severance* food turns melon cubes and waffle-party treats into hyper-polished, clinical objects, intensifying the show’s portrayal of food as engineered experience rather than nourishment.

These images solicit gustatory imagination and experience. They can make viewers hungry, curious, or queasy, but they are detached from labour and taste. There is no recipe behind many of them, no embodied act of chopping, stirring, or burning. They are, to borrow from Benjamin, endlessly reproducible, lacking the “aura” of a singular, time-bound experience (Benjamin). What they offer is only an experience of food: a visual and affective stimulus without ingestion. AI recipe generators go further, promising menus tailored to one’s favourite shows or characters. A user might request a *Breaking Bad*-inspired chicken burger, a *Severance* waffle or cookie recipe, or a *Barbie*-themed brunch. The system responds with plausible lists of ingredients and steps. Yet, as Hayles reminds us, embodiment cannot be reduced to information (291). AI does not know what it means to have food used as a reward for labour or loyalty, to cook under financial pressure, or to navigate the gendered politics of eating. Users scroll through images, bookmark recipes, share favourite dishes, and sometimes attempt to reproduce them offline. In doing so, they bridge the gap between simulation and embodiment, but the scale and speed of AI production also risk flattening culinary experience into an endless stream of novel, rarely cooked images. The slow, messy labour of fan cooking that Reinhard, Largent, and Chin identify as central to eating fandom is replaced, or at least overshadowed, by prompt and scroll.

In this context, food becomes a testing ground for experience in AI-saturated popular culture. AI-generated meals derived from *Breaking Bad* produce risk without danger; *Severance* treats become aestheticised via scarcity; *Barbie* brunches become infinitely reproducible pink fantasies without bodily consequence. Yet these simulations still depend on humans. Viewers bring their own histories of eating to bear on AI simulations. Without our embodied archives, the images would be inert. AI thus transforms experience into a contested terrain: no longer solely grounded in embodied acts like cooking and eating, but increasingly mediated through simulations that reproduce the appearance of culinary practice without its lived substance. The question becomes not whether AI can “experience”, but how human experience is altered when taste is increasingly imagined through images that have never fed anyone.

Conclusion

Across these cultural spaces, experience emerges as a threshold concept: at once embodied and abstract, cooked and coded, eaten and imagined. By centring food, this article has argued that popular culture is best understood through its gustatory dimensions: through the ways it scripts what is eaten, how, and with what affective charge. Generative AI complicates this terrain by proliferating simulations of food inspired by these texts; meals that look plausible, even enticing, without ever being cooked or consumed. It amplifies visual spectacle while detaching it from labour and sustenance, yet it cannot entirely escape embodiment, because it still relies on human sensoria to register meaning. AI food images and recipes reshape expectations of taste and presentation, even as they risk reducing culinary experience to an endlessly scrollable surface.

Attending to food as experience therefore clarifies what is at stake in the convergence of popular culture and artificial simulation. Taste becomes a threshold where human bodies encounter machine-generated images; where fans continue to cook, eat, and share, even as they navigate streams of synthetic meals. Popular culture, at this juncture, is not simply something watched or clicked, but something taken in, sometimes literally, sometimes only in imagination, through the mouth, the stomach, and the senses. It is on this terrain that the politics and possibilities of experience will increasingly be negotiated.

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