



Faculty of Liberal Arts & Sciences

2010

## Rev of Milk and Melancholy by Kenneth Hayes

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### Suggested citation:

Reeve, Charles (2010) Rev of Milk and Melancholy by Kenneth Hayes. *Gastronomica*, 10 (3). pp. 113-114. ISSN 1529-3262 Available at <http://openresearch.ocadu.ca/id/eprint/894/>

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2010

# Andy Warhol's Deaths and the Assembly-Line Autobiography

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Published as:

Reeve, Charles. Rev of Milk and Melancholy by Kenneth Hayes. *Gastronomica* Aug. 2010: 113–114. Web.

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Unfortunately, by that time, what remained in the stalls was the smelly, old mackerel that didn't look too bad in the dark. But just in case, some sellers daubed gills with a little "fishy makeup"—red paint—to feign the bloom of the recently netted. Certainly the smell proclaimed the fish's rottenness, but as Wilson notes, the duped knew the midnight price would be cheapest. Besides, what choice did they have? All sorts of food buyers and sellers of the period had similar "curious" relationships based on implicit mistrust, Wilson tells us, and both groups seemed victimized by market forces beyond their control.

Wilson, a weekly food columnist for London's *Sunday Telegraph*, admits that she writes disproportionately in *Swindled* about fakers of Britain and America. It is partly because of where she lives but also, troublingly, because foodstuff fraud has historically flourished in places like the UK and U.S., where industrialization coalesced with "a relatively non-interventionist state" (p.xiv). Being comprehensive isn't, in any event, her aim. Rather, she presents a series of case studies that illustrate the basic trends in food crime and punishment, from which we may extrapolate to guard against contemporary deceptions. Yes, given human nature, it is most assuredly an ongoing problem, and not just in China, whose infant-formula scandal recalls that of the swill milk sold during Tammany Hall days in New York.

The first half of Wilson's account features several flawed heroes, including Friedrich Accum, author of the first fraudulent-food exposé, *A Treatise on Adulterations of Food, and Culinary Poisons*, published by the German chemist in 1820; Arthur Hill Hassall, a Notting Hill doctor who used his microscope to expose food adulterators in the 1850s; Thomas Wakley, founder of the *Lancet*, who published Hassall's research and boldly named offenders' names; Harvey Washington Wiley, who laid groundwork for the U.S. Pure Food and Drugs Act of 1906; and, of course, our own investigator of the putrid Chicago stockyards, Upton Sinclair.

These tales—of sweets dyed red with lead; pepper and other spices bulked up by floor sweepings; oatmeal padded by barleymeal, which produced vomiting and diarrhea in children; and bread baked with alum, to make wholemeal bread look to the class-conscious like white-flour bread—are not the most original part of the book. Rather, it is Wilson's general discussions of how early-twentieth-century campaigns for food purity begat such "solutions" as overly processed foods, additives, pesticides, and packaging, while at the same time warping the very word *pure*, as commercial interests, like Heinz, used the purity pitch questionably to build empires.

Wilson is also good at describing odd paradoxes, like the sentiments in Hitler's Germany, where ingesting ersatz foods and drinks—e.g., "coffee" made from ground walnut shells and rhubarb as a substitute for lemon—came to be considered acts of patriotism that were one indication of a culture gone mad.

Wilson shows in the second half of *Swindled* that by the postwar period, the problem of adulterated food and drink grew more complicated as marketing forces gained more power to persuade and occasionally deceive the public. The new artificial colorings, flavorings, and preservatives were advertised as marvels of progress, and government attempts to protect consumers by passing laws like the U.S. Food Additives Amendment of 1958 worked perversely to offer greater protection to manufacturers of "foods" like Pringles and "drinks" like Coca-Cola's cyclamate-sweetened Tab.

The situation only gets worse with the "great panacea of food safety" (p.276)—labeling—that allows industry to make misleading statements of "fact." For every step forward, it seems, we take two proverbial steps back. Most disheartening of all, Wilson introduces us to a new medical condition, orthorexia nervosa, a term coined by Steven Bratman, M.D. and defined by him as an obsession with healthful eating and by Wilson as "righteous eating" (p.309). While buying organic is among the solutions that Wilson advocates, she describes the plight of one extreme case of an orthorexic who insisted not only on organic vegetables but those that had been out of the ground for no more than fifteen minutes. As Wilson herself depressingly acknowledges: "History suggests that all victories in this struggle are the presage of further battles to come" (p.321).

—Jeanne Schinto, Andover, MA

### *Milk and Melancholy*

Kenneth Hayes

Toronto: Prefix Institute of Contemporary Art, 2008

206 pp. Illustrations. \$24.95 (cloth)

Crying over spilt milk makes sense when milk is all you've got. Such is the crisis that Jeff Wall captures in a white sweep through the foreground of his 1984 photograph *Milk*, an artwork at the heart of Kenneth Hayes's hunt through images—some obscure, some renowned—for milk's secret meanings.

To the young man in Wall's image, the white fluid splashing from the package he holds could mean several things. His rough appearance—greasy hair and bare ankles—and his seated posture on a sidewalk before a

standoffishly prim building, suggest that he might see in milk nutrition and hope: fresh milk for a fresh start.

This backstory sets up the disaster: an involuntary jerk sends the precious fluid arcing through the air to splatter, wasted, on the concrete. For Hayes, the man's pose against the wall heightens the crisis by recalling the setting for a firing squad. The picture "induces a momentary state of suspension and expectation," he writes, "a shock rendered all the more disturbing by the way it mirrors that produced by the milk suspended in space" (p.180).

Years ago, Roland Barthes wrote that milk had displaced water as the anti-wine. Wall broadens this opposition to incorporate alcohol generally, but Barthes's point stands. Wine mutilates, transmutes, and delivers (in the sense of transports). Milk "joins, covers, restores....[I]ts purity, associated with the innocence of the child, is a token of strength."<sup>1</sup> The shock in Wall's image springs less from the milk than from the splash disrupting its restorative potential.

And that disruptive, traumatic splash drives Hayes's discussion. Starting from Harold Edgerton's images of a milk drop's coronet of spray, Hayes recovers antecedents both visual (A.M. Worthington, Joseph Plateau) and intellectual (Johann Wolfgang von Goethe) to explain milk's use in the study of splashes: it offered a "visible middle term between mercury's glare and water's transparency" (p.34).

But if our interest lies in the splash, not the milk, why are the milk splashes of Worthington and, especially, Edgerton more popular than the former's ballistics splashes or the latter's dramatic picture of a bullet exiting an apple? Perhaps milk's several contradictory meanings affect us unconsciously. Perhaps Sigmund Freud would call milk "overdetermined."

That possibility accounts for the allusion in Hayes's title to Freud's essay "Mourning and Melancholia." And while, as Hayes forewarns, he doesn't psychoanalyze milk's significance for contemporary art, Freud's legacy lightly flavors the idea that our interest in this first food involves more than meets the eye.

For instance, if water registers poorly on film, why didn't Worthington and Edgerton add dye? Does their turn to milk enact a defense mechanism at the level of the social? "Milk was the material repudiation of the transparency in which Idealism saw its most persuasive model of intellectual clarity," Hayes proposes. "With its indelible taint of the body, milk contested the desire to find equivalence between things in the world and the image of things held in the mind" (p.34). Nineteenth-century discoveries showing that sight isn't transparent were troubling in the wake of the Enlightenment's equation of knowledge with

clear vision. In this context, seizing on milk (and opacity) as superior to water (and transparency) could redeem vision—not despite our body's interference between what we see and how we see it, but because of it.

Occasionally, Hayes overreaches. His assertion that the appearance of milk-related work by William Wegman, Jack Goldstein, and David Lamelas in 1972 "marked a peak in the milk-splash discourse" (p.107) makes one wonder what constitutes a peak. And, even with Hayes's caveats, the title's nods to Freud or (via *Saturn and Melancholy*) art historians Erwin Panofsky, Fritz Saxl, and Raymond Kiblaneky aren't quite justified.

However, Hayes is intriguing on Worthington and Edgerton in the early twentieth century and "smart-art" Conceptualists like Gilbert and George, Richard Prince, and General Idea in the 1970s and 1980s. And, delightfully, the discussion of Wall's picture from which this book grew reveals (fleetingly) its unconscious, its own—as Slavoj Žižek called it—unknown known. "Despite the assurance of the title, the fluid's identity is uncertain," Hayes writes of the spray in *Milk*. "Its luminosity suggests something more refined, more ethereal" (p.180). He is either hedging or doesn't know how right he is. But Wall's milk has its own secret: it fell apart too quickly for the slow shutter of his large-format camera. So milk, having grown used to standing in for water, here needs its own stand-in—its sweeter, milkier-than-milk, and, indeed, "more refined" version: condensed milk.

—Charles Reeve, Ontario College of Art and Design

NOTE

1. Roland Barthes, "Wine and Milk," in *Mythologies* (1957), Annette Lavers, trans. (New York: Hill and Wang, 1972), 60.

*Sins of the Flesh: A History of Ethical Vegetarian Thought*  
 Rod Preece

Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2008

xiv + 393 pp. \$85.00 (cloth)

At first glance Rod Preece's new book—with its title, cover design (of a pig looking to satisfy its animal urges), and series of six epigraphs (from Tertullian and St. Basil of Caesarea, among others) warning about the sinful lusts of the flesh—would appear designed to address ascetic vegetarianism rather than to trace the history of ethical vegetarian thought. But the book's subtitle, the author's dedication ("For my fellows on the path" [p.v]), and his subsequent acknowledgment that his "greatest debt is owed to those who were

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