Modes of Knowing
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Modes of Knowing: Resources from the Baroque.

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IN THE YEAR 2011, ON A RAINY DAY IN MAY, I HAPPENED TO MAKE A CLAFOUTIS. It turned out very well. As I was happily eating it, it dawned on me how I might tackle the question of baroque coherence that I was hoping to explore for the workshop that would lead to the present book.¹ This specific clafoutis, in all its modest glory, would allow me to address a few urgent so-called theoretical questions (questions that are not directly about the world, but about how to frame, articulate, and imagine the world) while avoiding abstraction. More particularly, by using clafoutis as a case I would be able to ground an exploration of what it is to hang together in empirical materials. Hence, these materials are granted a peculiar role in this text. While social scientists often announce that they will use this or that theory in order to talk about their materials, here I do the converse. I use clafoutis-materials to talk theory.² My hope is that these materials will give a new twist to theoretical questions about what it is to hang together. For issues to do with coherence have mostly been addressed with the icon of logical coherence in the background. In propositional logic coherence is marked by the absence of contradiction: if A happens to be true, then not-A cannot be true at the same time. One of them must be discarded in order to avoid incoherence. If a combination of propositions adds up to A, it cannot at the same time suggest not-A. Logical coherence is friction-free. As it is grounded
in supposedly timeless abstractions, such as A and not-A, it is also enduring. It has a timeless soul. All of which makes it ill-suited for thinking about complex cases where tensions abound and transformations are ongoing, but where there is still a difference between ‘hanging together’ and ‘falling apart’. Clafoutis is a case in point.

But what is clafoutis? The question ‘what makes a clafoutis indeed “a clafoutis”’ is crucially at stake in this text. Hence I will not provide you with a conclusive definition. However, to give you at least an indication, here is a recipe, one of many possible variants. Preheat an oven to 150°C. Mix flour, milk, eggs, and a pinch of salt into a smooth batter. Coat an oven dish with butter. Pour half of the batter into the dish and put it in the oven for five minutes. Take it out again and carefully add fruit with a pronounced taste. Cherries are ideal. Plums are good as well, but as these are slightly sour, you may want to add some sugar. Cover the fruit with the rest of the batter, and then you may sprinkle some sugar on top. Put the dish back in the oven. After around forty-five minutes your clafoutis is ready. It may be eaten hot, lukewarm, or cold.

**A Composite**

How does a clafoutis hang together? If you were to follow the recipe that I just provided, you would end up taking a dish out of the oven with an appearance of congealed solidity. There it is: a single, steaming tart and a single word – clafoutis – is enough to refer to it. But a little analysis quickly reveals that within this singularity a lot of realms, registers, regimes (what should we call them?) are being drawn together. A clafoutis is composed out of (let’s call them) different worlds. Here, I will roughly unpack the composite.

A clafoutis, to start with, is made from ingredients. These have different provenances. Take the flour, a result of grinding wheat. If you were to make your clafoutis in the Netherlands (the geographical focal point of this text) your wheat would most likely come from France or Germany. While this is not so far away, the wheat market reaches out a lot further. The price of wheat in Western Europe moves up and down as harvests in the US or China grow or fall in size.
Relevant as well is the extent to which wheat in Russia is plagued by stem rust in any given year. Recently this problem has grown due to the late sowing in response to the excessively warm weather due to climate change. All of which is just a fraction of what may be said about the wheat. What about the milk? If you bought it in a local shop, it comes from a large number of cows. This may sound surprising, as any single clafoutis contains a lot less milk than the 25-litre daily yield of an average Dutch dairy cow. However, farmers pour the ‘output’ of their animals together, and then factories combine the milk from different farms. The eggs, in turn, bear a little stamp that states their provenance. Since 2012, EU law has stipulated that the chickens that lay these eggs should have a living space of at least 750 square centimetres, including a perch to sit on. Allow me to leave out the salt. More on the fruit below. You get the picture. A clafoutis includes a variety of ingredients that each have their own intricate history and specificity. Putting all these disparate ingredients together is a remarkable compositional achievement in and of itself. At the same time they all stem from what we may call an agricultural world. The first composite on my list.

Now for the second. A clafoutis may be composed out of ingredients, but ingredients alone are not enough to make a clafoutis. Its preparation also depends on techniques. Where do these techniques come from and how do they circulate? Cookbooks and recipe sites on the internet written in Dutch or in English tell us that the original recipes for clafoutis are French. If they give a regional specification, it is the Limousin. However, the recipe that my mother taught me comes from the Alsace. How French is that, or how long has it been French? In German this region is called Elzaß. Boundary contestations hide in many dishes. And so, too, do diverse modes of boundary-making. During the very period that France was becoming a gastronomic nation, a country with a cuisine, Paris installed itself as the measure of everything French. This makes it doubtful whether in France a dish from the Limousin, let alone from the Alsace, might readily qualify as a part of French cuisine. Other histories are at work as well. I was taught how to prepare a clafoutis by my mother, but she, in turn, learnt it from a cookbook. This might be glossed as a personal coincidence, but as with most personal coincidences, it is historically situated. In her generation (my mother was born in 1924) educated Dutch women (my mother studied
geography in university) who were kept out of the labour market (with formal rules as well as the ethos of motherhood) invested their energy in such things as travelling to France (guided by the Guide Michelin) and using interesting cook books (her clafoutis came out of a widely applauded specimen written by the Dutch travel journalist and poet, Werumeus Buning). Cooking techniques also tie up with histories of eating: as recipes lay out clafoutis as a dessert for four people or more, it indexes the family meal. Relevant as well are the availability of an oven and heat-resistant oven dishes. A fascinating curiosity at this point is the metal instrument that makes it possible to take the pits out of cherries (though Limousin recipes recommend that you leave them in for their enticing, bitter taste). Again there is no end to the details, but the point has been made. The techniques of making clafoutis brim with historical, geographical, and culinary specificities. How to put this well? Allow me to stretch the French term: a clafoutis is not just a part of, but also contains, a cuisine.

And then a clafoutis feeds. All along, clafoutis has most likely been prepared and eaten, among other things, for the nourishment it provides. These days such nourishment is more and more widely talked about in the language of nutritional science. As a response to the rising incidence of ‘overweight’ in the population, people in the Netherlands (and elsewhere) are encouraged to make ‘rational and responsible choices’ and to take full calculative control over what they eat. As a part of this, all food packaging in Europe (and in many other places) is legally obliged to specify and quantify its contents in the terms of nutritional science. Thus, if you wished to do so, you could calculate how much energy and nutrients your clafoutis contains. Just add the numbers printed on the packages of flour, milk, sugar, and butter that you use, first the kilocalories (for the energy), and then the protein, carbohydrate, and fat content (for the nutrients). These are all specified per hundred grams, so take account of that. The eggs may pose a problem as their provenance stamp is not a full-blown label and they come in different sizes, but there are tables on the internet that allow you to make an informed guess. You may even put the fruit into the equation. But while public health advisors of various kinds may encourage you to engage in such calculative efforts, they cannot force you to do so. What is more, there are contrasting voices out there that warn you that
maybe you shouldn’t. For investing so much in accounting might well stop you from appreciating clafoutis’ nourishing qualities with your senses. Maybe it is wiser to concentrate on feeling its capacity to feed in your grateful mouth and your satisfied stomach.¹¹

Is your clafoutis finished? Sit down quietly with a bowl or a plate with a serving of this enticing dish in front of you. Do you prefer to eat it with a spoon or a fork? Take a bite. Allow yourself to be surprised by the crunchiness of the top layer, the crust. Beneath it you will find a softer layer of cooked batter, for which the English language has no separate word; it uses ‘crust’ again. Then, beneath that, the juicy layer of warm, enticing fruit. Textures and tastes vary. The crust is modest, the fruit, by contrast, comes out as strong (this is why, according to Werumeus Buning, clafoutis should not be made with, say, apples: their taste is not pronounced enough). Visually, too, the soft brown of the surface and the pale yellow of the layer beneath it nicely contrast with the vaguely red and purple (plums) or the stark, dark red (cherries) of the fruit. The smells waft around seductively. Though some recipes suggest eating it cold and others lukewarm, I recommend it hot. Once chewed and swallowed, clafoutis, neither too sweet nor too fat, tends to please the stomach. It is filling but light. All in all, clafoutis is gratifying – which is not say that it contains its gratifications within it, for these only happen if they are brought out. If indeed you sit down quietly. And attend to your food.¹²

Pleasure is a shared achievement that stretches out in time. Over the years clafoutis has been adapted to the tastes of those who eat it, while clafoutis-lovers (from the Limousin to way further north) have learnt to appreciate its specific textures, flavours, warmth, and stomach sensations. This is co-constitution.¹³ The sensitivities of clafoutis aficionados are already there, absent/present within the dish that seeks to sensually appeal to them. A clafoutis, then, is not just multiple. It does not simply juxtapose elements drawn from the agricultural world (where it is a dish made of locally sourced ingredients); the world of cuisine (where it is a French dessert); the world of nutrition (where it is rich in carbohydrates and proteins); and the world of sensuousness (where it is tasty and gratifying).¹⁴ A clafoutis is also composed. The diverse worlds in which it figures, are, in their turn, absent/present within it.¹⁵ It is the character of this composition that
forms the topic of the present text. How do the worlds of agriculture, cuisine, nutrition, and sensuosity hang together in a clafoutis? Not romantically. For romantic coherence inherits from logical coherence the dream of a friction-free whole. Since the way in which a clafoutis hangs together is full of tensions, it is baroque. This is not to say that if one of its elements were called A, any of the others would be non-A. They would more likely fit other symbols (think of @ or आ). That is to say, the diverse worlds that a clafoutis contains do not jointly fit into a shared Euclidian space. The X- and Y-axes against which they might be projected, do not map onto each other. Accordingly, the qualifications relevant to them are not commensurable either. In an agricultural world clafoutis may be valued in terms of how and where its ingredients grow, how much they cost, and how perishable they are. In a world of cuisine what counts for more are such things as its layered flavours, the social ties it fosters, the memories it evokes, and its ease of preparation. In a world of nutrition, clafoutis may be valued by measuring the kilocalories, proteins, carbohydrates, and fats that it contains; or by appreciating its contribution to a person’s overall sustenance. And in a sensual world, finally, a clafoutis is good if it looks good, smells good, tastes good, and gives the eater a wonderful stomach sensation. All in all, it is quite an achievement that the fascinatingly heterogeneous worlds that meet in a clafoutis hang together in it in such a felicitous way.

Coagulation

Baroque coherence emerges from the encounter of diverse worlds in a composite figure, such as a clafoutis. However, this does not mean that any encounter qualifies. If worlds come together the result may as well be incoherent. Which raises the question of what ‘coherence’ and ‘incoherence’ mean in a composite that brings together such diverse figures as an A, an @, and an आ. Here we may draw inspiration from baroque composites that so far have attracted more attention than clafoutis. Take a baroque church: putting saintly statues together erratically is not enough to evoke the almightiness of God. The gathering of images and imaginations in a church requires a certain strength to be evocative – it needs to
be just so. Likewise with music: combining three or four random voices doesn’t produce a polyphonic devotional song that calls up the Spirit and moves the listeners to tears. Rather this depends on a compelling harmonic interdependence as well as striking counterpoints between the different voices. Even camp only works its wonders if what it draws together titillates and transgresses in a tantalising combination.18 What, in the light of these analogies, makes a clafoutis cohere in a felicitous manner, just so?

Interestingly, a clafoutis is not just a composite object in which worlds come together. It also offers a model for what it may be to coagulate.19 For as you prepare a clafoutis, you mix flour, milk, eggs, and a pinch of salt and, once you have done this, it is impossible to retrieve the separate ingredients. A new entity, a batter, has come into being. Half of this batter goes into a dish made non-sticky with butter. When this dish is put into the oven for five minutes, the batter will solidify just a bit. If you carefully add the fruit, the second half of the batter will stay separate from the first. Thus, after the suggested forty-five minutes in the oven, the clafoutis that emerges has contrasting layers. A crusty upper layer, ‘nicely browned with slightly puffed edges’ as one of the recipes puts it, a soft doughy layer, a juicy fruit layer, and finally another soft doughy layer below.20 At the sides, where the batter has mixed with the butter coating the dish, there is more crust. The fruit has gone mellow and its sweetness has become more pronounced (if you are using prunes, the additional sugar has melted and mixed with the fruit). Thus, the clafoutis that comes out of the oven has irreversibly coagulated while it is also full of contrasts within.

Its composite character seduces me into calling clafoutis’ coherence ‘baroque’, even though whenever it may have been cooked up for the first time, clafoutis only spread through France in the course of the nineteenth century and the term first made its way into a dictionary in 1864.21 But the contrasts within a clafoutis are striking enough: between the hard crust and the mellow fruit; between the modest dough and the stark fruity flavours. And then there are contrasts in time. In its classic versions, logical coherence was timeless: if A contradicts not-A, it does so forever. In a clafoutis, however, there is change. It goes into the oven in a viscous mode and by the time it comes out it has coagulated into a soft solidity. I would like to mobilise that as a model for how, historically, the
worlds of agriculture, cuisine, nutrition, and sensuousness came to cohere in a clafoutis. This opens up various questions about the possible endings as well as the tenacity of this dish.

Without going into too much detail, it is relatively easy to see how (to start with these two) the worlds of agriculture and cuisine came together in clafoutis. For a long time, wheat was deemed to be the most attractive grain in France, but as it was difficult to grow it was expensive. More modest grains such as rye, buckwheat, and oats, were more widely eaten. In the nineteenth century, as growing techniques altered, wheat became affordable for all but the very poor. Hence the flour. Milk was widely available all over France (there were cows), while many people had their own chickens to provide them with eggs.\(^{22}\) North of a line dividing Europe, the ideal fat was butter, derived from churning milk; south of that line, it was olive oil. The Alsace and even the Limousin are above the divide, which fits with butter being used to coat the pot. When fruit was ripe it was abundant, which made it worthwhile concocting a variety of ways of serving it. What is more, as clafoutis goes into the oven you may use preserves. Fresh fruit is not required. Ovens, in turn, were in widespread use in the nineteenth century in rural areas as well as in towns (although, again, not in the houses of the poor). All in all, then, the world of agriculture and that of cuisine were not randomly juxtaposed in a clafoutis, but formed a marvellous fit. In the twentieth century this coagulation endured while spreading out geographically. This is indexed by the situation of my mother, who, in the 1960s, living a few hundred kilometres north of France, had enough money and skills to run a comfortable household. The necessary ingredients were easy to procure. Fresh cherries were rare, but preserved cherries were for sale in the grocery store in town. In August we had plums from a tree in our garden. My mother would preserve these for the winter, first in large glass jars and later in a newly bought freezer. Our kitchen was equipped with an oven and our family would eat family meals every evening, usually with a dessert. In this way, time and again, clafoutis got made and remade.\(^{23}\)

There are also stories to tell about the ways in which the nutrition world and that of a clafoutis’ sensuousness readily join up, even if such stories are more speculative. It is likely that its specific combination of nutrients helps to ensure
that after you have eaten clafoutis you feel satisfied and filled but not heavy. The dish is sweet thanks to the fruit and (if need be) the added sugar, but not oversweet – which is enticing for many French (and Dutch!) adults. As a clafoutis contains more protein and less fat and sugar than most other tasty hot desserts that she served (apple crumble, rhubarb pie, hot semolina pudding, and so on), my mother used to stress that this dessert was healthy. And – let me add some cuisine to nutrition and sensuousness here – a clafoutis holds a certain appeal for those invested in vegetarian (though not vegan) cooking. With its flour, milk, and eggs it nicely complements, say, a lentil soup. Being a grain, the wheat of the tart works together with the pulses of the soup to assure an optimal uptake of their joint proteins, while the eggs add yet more proteins. And it is not just the nutrients that are complementary: so, too, are the tastes. I dished up quite a few lentil soup and clafoutis meals when I was a student and my friends and I would take turns cooking for each other. It fitted with our vegetarian habits and we also liked it. What more to desire than a protein-rich, soul-warming dish that pleases the stomach, is interesting to chew, smells delicious, and tastes good?

Thus, while the different worlds that come together in a clafoutis are made up of disparate entities, fit within different scales, and are open to diverse evaluations, they successfully came together here. Nothing highbrow is going on; we are not talking perfection and evoking the presence of God, or the Spirit may well be asking too much of a clafoutis. Nevertheless, it has a certain blessed propitiousness. As different worlds got together in this dish, they came to cohere there. They held each other in place since the way the elements emerged from one world happened to accord with the way they made up another. The story may be told starting out from the cuisine. Then it becomes a heroic tale about the recipe for clafoutis that helped to transform locally available agricultural products into a nourishing dish capable of satisfying the senses of those who learnt to like it. It is also possible to start with the agricultural world and its cultivars; with the task of cooking for and feeding a family or another gathering; or with the senses that readily learnt to appreciate this particular grain, milk, egg, and fruit combination (don’t forget the pinch of salt). But whichever way the story is told, somehow the worlds of agriculture, cuisine, nourishment, and
sensuousness came to coagulate strikingly well in clafoutis. Hence, clafoutis is not just an arbitrary juxtaposition, but a composite that hangs together in a felicitous way.\footnote{25}

**DISINTEGRATION**

But however impressive the coagulation of different worlds into a clafoutis may be, they do not necessarily continue to hold. After all, shifts and changes of just a single element may lead to the gradual or sudden disintegration of its composite. Since I am shamelessly engaging in self-ethnography all along, let me give you an example that involves my bowels. At some point, and without me immediately realising what was going on, wheat started to disagree with them. At some point, and without me immediately realising what was going on, wheat started to disagree with them. Meals including pasta, bread, or indeed clafoutis, would invariably be followed by bowel pain. But since the average Dutch person would include wheat in her meals almost every single day – I certainly did – it was not a disagreement I found out about right away. It took me a few years of bowel pain (and an undermining list of other symptoms) to realise what was going on. Or rather (after those years of dwindling health) it took me a few experimental days. During those days I avoided eating wheat altogether. All of a sudden my bowel pain stopped and it was a revelation. Since that time I have abstained from wheat.\footnote{26} Exit clafoutis.

Thus, the failure of just a single element may be enough for a composite to disintegrate. This tells us that there are many ways in which ‘clafoutis’ may fall apart.\footnote{27} Who still has a garden with cherry trees? If you don’t, cooking with cherries may feel wasteful. They tend to be so expensive that it is enough of a treat to eat them fresh. You may eat a handful of cherries a few days in a row, or lots of cherries in a big splash, but either way none are left for baking tarts. The instrument to take out cherry pits is still sporadically available, but the patience to use it has suffered somewhere along the way. At the same time, having to deal with pits in your mouth does not quite fit with most present-day (French? Dutch?) standards of what it is to be delicious (in fact a similar sensitivity may have given rise to the invention of the de-pitting tool a long time ago. As Paris became the standard for French cuisine, the clafoutis might have disintegrated.
had it not been for this instrument, for, as a culinary historian put it, ‘locals from the Limousin might accept the cherry pits in a clafoutis, but not Parisian travellers accustomed to a higher degree of culinary refinement’). And then there is the preparation. Who musters the energy necessary for preparing a clafoutis after a full day of paid work? My mother’s investment in cooking was linked to the fact that she, like other women of her generation, in the Netherlands even more than in nearby countries, was forcibly kept out of the labour market. Married women had to care for their families. My mother went into local politics as well, but it was only in the seventies (when there was a severe shortage of geography teachers) that a local secondary school sought her out to do a paid job. From the Guide Michelin and her collection of cookbooks, she turned to geography teaching materials. That may seem an altogether different story – or another that is merely personal – but it was part of a wider trend, one that feeds fairly directly into the conditions of possibility of a clafoutis. That since the early seventies (tediously slowly at first, slightly faster in my generation, and almost completely only recently) women began to participate in the labour market while men, by and large, did not pick up equal amounts of care work at home, makes these conditions of possibility falter.

Then there are other dissonances that may spoil clafoutis’ tune, such as assaults from the nutrition sciences. Traditionally clafoutis was a dessert. But who needs nourishing desserts in an era when overweight has become an enemy of the state? My mother may have praised clafoutis’ healthiness, but if you were to meticulously keep account of your ‘food intake’, you would be likely to find that you no longer need its calories at the end of your mostly sedentary day. Not after your so-called main course. The potential endurance of clafoutis, then, may depend on a shift in what is considered a proper meal, notably the willingness to let go of the main course. Those who are prepared to skip this may combine soup and clafoutis, as I used to do as a lentil-soup-eating student. In my subsequent role as a mother in my turn, I tried something similar, using other soups. Though for a long time resistant to lentil soup, my children used to love clafoutis. This had to do with one of its particularly strong points: its sensuous qualities. Are these impressive enough to consolidate this dish? That remains to be seen. Maybe clafoutis’ sensuous gratifications are not enough
to withstand considerations to do with nutrition, that may, in their turn, shift from limiting calories to limiting carbohydrates (of which, thanks to the flour and the fruit, a clafoutis has ample quantities). Or maybe sensuousness will stay relevant, but food preferences will move in another direction (to spicy stuff? to rougher textures?). There are endless contingencies relevant to what will become of clafoutis in the future.

This is the lesson: baroque coherence may be temporary. It does not necessarily endure. Worlds that get together in felicitous ways in some site, for some while, may stop doing so elsewhere, or a little later. In this way clafoutis might easily disintegrate. How to think about this: what to mobilise as a model for disintegration? It is tempting to call upon the process of eating here. For once it has been chewed, a clafoutis is no longer the same. It has lost its enticing looks. In this state it may be swallowed and provide a satisfying sensation to the stomach. But digestive systems go on to break clafoutis down. Once it is absorbed, your clafoutis’ nutrients still leave a trace: they may give you a sugar rush or a sense of vitality. But after a short while it is all over. Your clafoutis has thoroughly fallen apart. It has helped to build and fuel you. Mixed with other indigestible stuff, some of its remnants are propelled by your bowels to your colon, from where they are excreted as faeces. Its molecules don’t miraculously vanish, but even so your clafoutis is no more. Eating, then, provides a fascinating model of disintegration. But there is a problem with drawing upon this model here, in the context of the question of how worlds may first cohere, and then, after a while, stop cohering in a dish. Which is that eating is an irreversible process. The disintegration of what has been eaten cannot be undone. This is not necessarily the case for the disintegration of the composite figure of clafoutis.

**Transformation**

Eating may not provide a suitable model for clafoutis’ disintegration, but for an exploration of clafoutis’ endurance, it is highly relevant that it is eaten. For the destruction implied in eating tells us that the *figure* of a clafoutis only endures if
new clafoutises are prepared again and again at one site or another. Once they are cast in stone, churches (baroque or otherwise) tend to last for quite a while. They obviously need maintenance, lightning may strike, or a fire may consume them. But just a little travelling through France with a Guide Michelin reveals that many still stand strong long after God left them. Music is more ephemeral. If it is to last, a concerto or a sonata has to be performed over and over again. The event in which listeners attune to sounds is never quite the same. And what music is and does may alter over time. A polyphonic fugue that started out as a vehicle of Bach’s humble devotion to God may change to become an expression of Bach’s genius.32

What might all of this mean for clafoutis? No single clafoutis lasts. Like music, food has to be ‘performed’ afresh over and over again, but unlike music, food cannot be recorded. Listening to it variously in different ways is simply not possible. Instead, for clafoutis to endure its ingredients have to be grown, harvested, and traded from one year to another and someone has to put effort into preparing the dish in some well-equipped kitchen. So clafoutis is ephemeral. It substantiates for just a few hours (or, if there are leftovers, for at most a day or two) along with its material instantiation. And then it vanishes again. This implies that there are endless possibilities for the worlds that coagulate in a clafoutis to fail to come together ever again. But at the same time clafoutis is resilient, quite like churches and music. It just has different tactics.

This is where we hit upon issues to do with transformation. For while the resilience of a church is in the stubborn strength of its stones, that of clafoutis is in its remarkable adaptability. Early in this text I presented you with a clafoutis recipe. It is a simplified version of the recipe from my mother’s cookbook. It lacks precise quantifiers. It doesn’t even include the personally tailored kitchen measurements that tend to serve kitchens better than standard metrics. ‘One manages to make one’s clafoutis, this personal dish that one still calls clafoutis, by using so many spoonfuls of flour (that personal spoon, highly laden) and of sugar (the same spoon, but flattened off). And if the utensils disappear, the conversion of the personal unities to abstract unities is not always easy.’33
Clafoutis, like many other dishes, gets adapted as it gets made. It comes to fit local idiosyncrasies, household tools, and eating habits. Its ingredients are not necessarily quantified in abstract units that easily transport between sites. But all this intractable variability does not prevent anyone from ‘still calling their dish clafoutis’. This surprised me as a child. I remember the day that I stayed over at a friend’s house. In the afternoon, while drinking our lemonade, we were presented with what his mother called clafoutis. But it was far flatter than my mother’s, its texture was smoother, and its taste sweeter. How could such a different dish still bear the same name?

Clafoutis comes in varieties. Cooks freely tinker with it, and written recipes are diverse, too. Leaf through a few cookbooks, or look up ‘clafoutis’ on the internet, and you will be faced with endless variations. Some recipes suggest adding ground almonds, others crushed vanilla, yet others cherry liqueur. Some want you to use sugar in the batter (I found an English website saying that this is what the French do). Some turn up the oven and reduce the cooking time. And there are even recipes for savoury dishes to be served as a main course that are still called ‘clafoutis’ (i.e. ‘Clafoutis with red bell pepper and goat cheese’). What all these recipes have in common is that they mix together flour, eggs, milk, and a pinch of salt. Are these ingredients, then, the defining characteristic of the dish? Do they index what has to be included for a clafoutis to cohere as ‘a clafoutis’ and not some other dish? The answer is: no.

It is at this point that I would like to explain how in May 2011, having abstained from wheat for almost a decade, I still ate a clafoutis. It was the result of an experiment. Home alone and seeking to eat something that would suit me, I improvised. I made a batter that contained milk and eggs, but instead of wheat flour I used fonio flour. Fonio is not a grain that is readily grown in France or Germany. Instead, fonio – ‘the most tasty of all grains’ – originates in West Africa. Mine was imported from Burkina Faso. Since fonio requires a lot of labour it fell out of fashion in the course of the twentieth century. However, early in the twenty-first century, French aid projects began supporting farmers to grow fonio again because it contains more protein and fibre than wheat and withstands drought a lot better. They thought that besides being good local food, it might also be a good cash crop for export, as it is gluten free. Hopes were high that...
the likes of me would be pleased with it. So I used fonio, along with the milk, eggs, and pinch of salt. What prompted my experiment was that I had rhubarb that urgently needed to be eaten before it would rot. I heated the rhubarb, and to spice it up and counter its sour taste I added some ginger and syrup from a jar of ginger in syrup. To make my dish non-sticky I used olive oil. So all in all, it was only the eggs, the milk, and the salt that came down from the clafoutis my mother had taught me to make forty years before. And still somehow my dish cohered in a felicitous way. This was it. As I ate the gratifying dish I joyfully realised that I was eating clafoutis.

While there are many ways for clafoutis to disintegrate, then, there are also many ways for it to endure – and here endurance does not necessarily mean staying the same. A certain coherence may re-emerge in a quite different composite. Along with the Alsace, suddenly Burkina Faso finds itself absent/present in my dish. In this way, while eating, I do not just relate to French nation-building within Europe, but also to French colonial history. At the same time, using fonio engenders the ambivalences that come with eating food that has been grown in an African country for the European market. On the package and their website, the aid organisation suggests that the fonio-growing farmers are pleased that my money allows them to earn a living. But then again, the nutrients from Burkina Faso’s soil that I ingest will not feed someone living there. The rhubarb comes from a Dutch organic farm that, while not able to save the world, still offers some hope. It combines so well with the Chinese ginger in its sugary syrup that they jointly outdid prunes (though not cherries: that is a leap). My experimental clafoutis was small, made just for me. This might well index the crisis of the family meal or even the collective meal. Together all these variations result, or so it might seem, in a quite different composite. Not even its taste safeguarded the category: this particular clafoutis tasted quite unlike any other I had eaten before. But still, somehow, it was a clafoutis. Was this the case just for me, given my particular layered history with this dish? I don’t know. Had I been able to share it, my table companions, or at least some of them, might have agreed. But I could never have convinced them with words. And while writing, I likewise fail to find the words that might express what made clafoutis’ soul so obviously present in my food. Even so, I am sure that
out of the somewhat erratic ingredients that I used, I had made a clafoutis. *This was it.* What endured in my dish – or rather what re-emerged in it – was a striking *just so.* A remarkable composite with an inarticulable but unmistakably baroque coherence.39

**CONCLUSION**

Like other cases, that of clafoutis is a tale in its own right. But at the same time it is possible to draw out some of the lessons about *coherence* that it provides and articulate these in the form of theory. That is to say, it is possible to partially disentangle lessons from the specificities of this case and articulate these in a way that might inspire analysis in other cases – pertinent to other sites and situations. These will come with their own specificities. The lessons they generate are likely to fit partially with what we learnt from clafoutis but will also, in turn, add to, shift, or even radically transform our collective understanding of what it is to cohere. As we work in this way, by unravelling specific cases, disentangling lessons, and moving on to further cases, *theory* provides neither an overview, nor a fixed set of solid handholds. Instead, it is a repository of sensibilities, a lexicon of verbal tools, a repertoire that allows the articulation of varied concerns and gets enriched in unfolding conversations. As it happens (but this is no coincidence), the implication is that the coherence of the *theory* emerging in this way is actually quite like that of *clafoutis.*

What kind of coherence is this? Classic propositional logic worked with entities that had the potential to contradict each other, as they met on a level plane. They were homogeneous: A versus not-A. The entities that hang together in a baroque ensemble are different. They do not necessarily fit in the same lexicon or sign system at all. I suggested as an analogue the way A relates to @ and आ. And then I translated this analogue into clafoutis-terms: this dish contains elements pertaining to worlds as diverse as agriculture, cuisine, nutrition, and sensuousness. In a coherent composite such worlds are not juxtaposed in a random way, but hang together. For instance, as clafoutis got concocted, an emerging cuisine drew on available ingredients to cook up a
dish that established itself as being both nourishing and tasty. An achievement indeed. At the same time, tensions loom. Cherry pits may give clafoutis an enticingly bitter taste, but outside the Limousin people may dislike having to deal with pits in their mouth. Clafoutis may be nutritious, but in contexts where overeating becomes a problem this strength may turn into a weakness. And so on. A composite that hangs together in a baroque way does not have an eternal soul; its soul dies along with the mortal body that it inspires. There are ever so many elements implied in it and a change in just about any of these may be enough for the assemblage to collapse. Calorie-counting, wheat allergies, cherries becoming expensive, women working in paid jobs while men dread the kitchen: all these contingencies and many more may lead on to clafoutis’ demise.

However, while the baroque heterogeneity of a clafoutis makes its coherence precarious, it also makes it robust. For if there is no obligatory passage point, if no single element is essential, there are many possibilities for modulation. Cherries may be pitted, prunes may be appreciated, fonio may replace wheat. Overfeeding may be avoided by leaving out the so-called ‘main dish’ from a meal, or by transforming clafoutis itself from a dessert into a main dish. And so on. But that all but endless adaptations are possible does not mean that anything goes. And here we come to the core of baroque coherence. This core is a speechless moment. A mysterious revelation. This is it. Churches may evoke the presence of God, but may also fail to do so. Music may move listeners to tears, or rather leave them cold. Analogously, clafoutis, too, may either be a gratifying dish or fall apart. Whatever it is that makes the difference between a random juxtaposition and a felicitous composite, I cannot put into words. This may be my failure, but articulating the mystery of baroque coherence may as well be too much to ask of words. For words may do a lot: they may describe a situation, express a concern, call up a memory, convey an order, encourage a sensation, seduce an acquaintance, substitute for a sigh, and so on – but at some point they hit their limits. Here is one such point. My clafoutis was soothingly warm, surprisingly tasty, pleasantly textured, and caringly filling. But that it was a true clafoutis depends on more than these qualities alone. It eludes articulation. It was just so.
NOTES

1. For their role in the substantiation of this text, I would like to thank the organisers and participants of a 2011 CRESC workshop in Manchester on the empirical baroque. More particularly I would like to thank John Law, whose intellectual inspiration is easy to trace in this text, and Mattijs van de Port for his lessons about the baroque. In addition, I thank Marilyn Strathern for her interest and comments and Mieke Aerts for her enduring support. Thanks as well to the European Research Council for its Advanced Grant AdG09 Nr. 249397 that allows me to study ‘The Eating Body in Western Practice and Theory’ with a spirited research team. Thanks to the team (including, if not all at the same time): Emily Yates-Doerr, Sebastian Abrahamsson, Anna Mann, Filippo Bertoni, Rebeca Ibáñez, Michalis Kontopodis, Cristobal Bonelli, Else Vogel, Tjitske Holtrop, Hasan Ashraf, and Carolina Dominguez. Thanks as well to Jan Mol, my father. After I told him that I was writing about clafoutis (a dish he too has fond memories of) he sent me helpful internet links to the provenance of the recipe and the word. My mother I can no longer thank: she died a few years ago. But if this text were an ode, it would be an ode to her.

2. The empirical philosophy that I engage in here finds among its ancestors Foucault (who, for example, theorised power by comparing kings with therapists), Deleuze and Guattari (who drew entangled rhizomes into theory to counter unidirectional roots), and Serres (who, for example, modelled relations on cloth, clouds, rivers, and other ‘things’ that are not solid boxes). See respectively Foucault (1975), Deleuze and Guattari (1980), and Serres (1979).

3. This geographical localisation of the ingredients fits with the investment in what is being eaten. For the argument that this is a Euro-American preoccupation see Strathern (2012), who argues that in Melanesia the question is rather who feeds whom.

4. These details come from a website written for investors concerned with the price of wheat: <http://www.debeurs.nl/debeurs/discussies/onderwerp.aspx?Id=1249924#lastpost> [accessed May 2011].

5. Obviously there is a lot more to say, e.g. about the quest for better living conditions for chickens; about salmonella harboured in eggs; or about infections of chicken with ‘bird flu’; see for instance Hinchliffe et al. (2013). The geographic tropes articulated there resonate with those that I try to work with in the present text.

6. Even though salt is utterly fascinating; see Kurlansky (2002).

7. Annelies Moors brought to my attention the case of falafel, that is famously claimed as a national dish by both Palestinians and Israelis; see Raviv (2003).


9. See Werumeus Buning (1939), which was reprinted for decades. Its title translates into English as 100 Adventures with a Ladle. This beautifully indexes what kinds of adventures its users best aim for in life. The author mobilised his impressive writing skills to make
these adventures sound thrilling and full of wonders.

10 The persistent use of the term ‘choice’ in (Dutch) health advice that at the same time tells you what you should do, is striking. It fits with the general overinvestment in ‘choice’ that I tried to counter in Mol (2008).

11 For an analysis of Dutch dieting advice see Mol (2013); for alternatives that encourage food pleasures, Vogel and Mol 2014; and for the idea that tasting may stretch out from fingers to the sensations in one’s stomach, Mann et al. (2011). Counting nutrients, meanwhile, is not only done in the context of watching one’s weight. All kinds of specific health problems come with their own calculative repertoires (e.g. people with diabetes may learn to monitor their carbohydrate balance; people with kidney problems may variously keep track of their protein and mineral intake). But that is another story.

12 As Teil and Hennion (2004) tell us, taste is neither in the food nor in the person who eats it. Instead, it is a performance: tasting has to be achieved again and again. This achievement depends on the tasters’ investment, but also on the contexts in which they taste. For the latter, see Mann (2015).

13 A lot of writing effort has been spent on moving beyond the liberal fantasy that entities are first given and then relate, so as to bring out instead how entities make each other be. This was one of the points of early actor-network theory that took De Saussure’s model of the ways in which words inform each other and transpose it to things (see Akrich (1993), and Mol (2010)). There are various other models of co-constitution around: for example, Darwinian ones of how species make each other be (see Pollan 2001 for the great example of how apples seduced humans into giving them their current shape). The present article participates in outlining the relational constituting of a heterogeneous ‘composite’ out of varied kinds of elements.

14 Multiplicity is not plurality since it tends to come with intricate interdependencies between the varied versions of entities; see for this Mol (2002), Moreira (2006), and Akrich and Pasveer (2000).

15 Those familiar with Aircraft Stories will have noticed the striking similarity between the way in which I analyse my clafoutis here and the way John Law, in the chapter ‘Hidden Heterogeneities’ of that book, unpacks a formula for the form and the size of the wings of a war plane, the TSR2 (Law 2002). This is how theory, while never abstracted, may yet travel between different cases.

16 Here I draw inspiration from the contrast between romantic and baroque combinatory logics as presented in Kwa (2002).

17 For a more extensive analysis of the way foods may be qualified with the case of ‘good tomatoes’, see Heuts and Mol (2013).

18 For baroque churches, see the introduction to this book; for music, see Hennion (2015); and for an analysis of camp as baroque, see Van de Port (2011). Once the present text was all but finished, I learnt that the notion of ‘baroque food’ has been used in a quite different way by Michel Onfray for chocolate, an alleged stimulant and aphrodisiac. See Onfray (1995).
19 What I need here is a term for getting to hang together irreversibly. There is a Dutch word, *stollen*, that I would prefer to use. It translates as *solidify*, or *coagulate*. In English *coagulation* tends to be used for the way proteins come to hang together as they are cooled (blood) or heated (eggs). Even if a clafoutis contains no blood and is composed out of more than eggs alone, I venture to use this term as it better indexes transformation than the alternative ‘solidify’. Verran (2009) uses the term ‘clotting’ for the way entities assemble together out of heterogeneous elements. But this evokes blood even more directly and hence does not quite fit with the case of clafoutis.


22 The story of milk differs even between adjacent countries. For example, in France in the twentieth century, people got used to sterilised milk, while in the Netherlands and the UK the investment is in fresh milk. It would be worthwhile to try to write milk’s comparative history, but see for France: Vatin (1990), for Britain: Atkins (2012), and for the fascinating travels of milk to India and China (where most adults cannot digest it): Wiley (2011).

23 There is a lot of food literature that relates how local ingredients and local cuisines make (or used to make) each other be. For a good argument against ‘naturalising’ the first while ‘culturalising’ the latter, see Yates-Doerr (2015), which asks whether meat comes from animals, and Yates-Doerr and Mol (2012), which makes a contrast between versions of meat.

24 What is enticing to whom obviously differs. The question of how to specify such differences is one of the contentious issues in the interdisciplinary field of food studies. Is it bodily needs, bodily sensitivities, cultural priming, cultural pride, another ‘variable’, or any combination of these that goes into *taste preferences*? Overall, the ideal is one of addition (see Wilk (2012)). The holism implied in that ideal is, in terms of the present text, romantic in kind. This raises the question of what baroque explorations of eating practices would bring to bear, a question that the present text does not answer but helps to open up.

25 As my investment is in the form of clafoutis’ baroque coherence, I have not even begun to write a proper history of exactly how and why clafoutis coagulated and travelled. This would be a daunting task. It is no accident that many compelling histories have been written of individual foodstuffs (to give just a few good examples: sugar (Minz 1986); the potato (Zuckerman 1998); corn/maize (McCann 2005), but hardly any of composed dishes). As De Certeau, Giard, and Mayol put it, ‘[e]very alimentary custom makes up a minuscule crossroad of histories’ (1998: 171). Hence, to unravel an ’alimentary custom’ requires an exploration of all the histories that meet within it. For a widely cast and still fascinating history, not of a single dish but of ‘food’, see Jones (2007).

26 This happened in the early 2000s. Interestingly, wheat aversions have grown impressively since that time (even if, for instance, in the Netherlands a lot more slowly than in a
It is quite puzzling what is going on with this grain that a few decades ago did not seem to pose any problems, except for people with a deviant gene and the concomitant diagnosis of coeliac disease. Quite a few commentators suspect a fad. See Raffaetà (2011) for an analysis that proposes that people ‘claiming’ to be sensitive to gluten engage in ‘medicalisation from below’. The generalised critical term ‘medicalisation’ was problematic when applied to professionals to begin with, but when shifted to ‘ordinary people’ it becomes strangely moralising. My own and other people’s (literal) gut feelings deserve a more subtle and complex analysis.

This resonates with the stories that Madeleine Akrich (1993) told a long time ago about technologies that stop working because a single element goes missing or falls apart. See also the wonderful exploration of the array of explanations for why the transport system Aramis failed in Latour (1996).

This quote stems from an article that wonders whether Paris is (a part of?) France. Or not. See Parkhurst Ferguson (2000: 1061).

This is obviously a simplified abbreviation of the many complexities involved. For an analysis of one of these, notably the gendering of using ovens, see Silva (2000). And I won’t even start on the way clafoutis is affected by postmodern family life, restaurant eating (clafoutis may be on their menu), and so on.

Mary Douglas’ family, or so she noted, was not prepared to settle for soup and pudding. It became the starting point for her famous deciphering of a meal; see Douglas (1972).

Social science work on defecation and faeces is relatively sparse. But for further examples see van der Geest (2007); Abrahamsson (2014).

These insights I borrow from Antoine Hennion’s long-term investigations into the ways bodies/people learn to be affected. See Hennion (2007), and Hennion (this volume).

This is a quote from one of the rare articles that I found when putting Google Scholar to work on ‘clafoutis’. See Weber (1996: 13), my translation.

This fluid adaptability ties up with that other of other figures, from anaemia (Mol and Law 1994) and the water pump (De Laet and Mol 2000) through to a German ambulance that became a collective taxi in Ghana (Beisel and Scheider 2012). However, the links between clafoutis versions are not all fluid in kind; sometimes they resemble more what Strathern (2004) called partial connections.

Not everyone so forgivingly allows for transformations! On the French Wikipedia page on clafoutis I learn that even substituting cherries with plums is, for those who are serious about this, enough to drop the name. With plums the dish is to be called flaugnarde. See <http://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Clafoutis#mw-head> [accessed November 2013]

This is a translated quote from the site: <http://www.fonio.nl/index.php> [accessed May 2011; no longer accessible in November 2013]. For an English language site see: <http://www.agriculturalproductsindia.com/cereals-pulses/cereals-fonio.html> [accessed November 2013]. Fonio is also sold in the kernel, to use in a way one might use rice or quinoa for a ‘main dish’.
The ingredients inform the cuisine. It is among the assets of gluten that it helps foods to physically hang together: bread, pie, or quiche made without gluten easily fall apart. Clafoutis made with other grains than wheat may still cohere, though, thanks to the eggs. See, for the chemistry involved, McGee (2004).

In this respect, fonio is like other kinds of food transported around the globe. See for questions around their transportation, the contributions by Goodman and Watts (1997), and Inglis and Gimlin (2009). And for the general state of food inequalities and externalities, see Carolan (2011).

Since that May day of 2011, I have continued to experiment. As I am tinkering with the last version of the present text, I lunch on a clafoutis made with equal, small amounts of quinoa flour and rice flour, an egg, milk, a pinch of salt, and de-pitted fresh apricots. There were fresh apricots in my favourite version of the open fruit pies (made with bread dough) that were the specialty of Limburg, the region where I grew up. Fond memories of those pies happily resonate in the gratification provided by this particular version of clafoutis. See for the memories resonating in the dishes of his Greek informants, Sutton (2001).

For further explorations of words affecting bodily engagements with foods, see Mol (2014), Van de Port and Mol (2015). The first traces the Dutch word lekker while the second differentiates between chupar and comer fruits in Bahia, Brazil.

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