

Blind tasting wine – the phenomenology (and hermeneutic) of things

“Near to us are what we usually call things. But what is a thing?” (Martin Heidegger, *the thing*)

Introduction:

Consider you're tactile meeting with things and the making situation and how you as an artisan are influenced by your awareness, your sensation, senses, empathy and perception. How dependent are you on your tactile knowledge? In this, the phenomenology of craft research is about how we experience the material - and vice versa; how the material, surroundings or the social context affect us. In a hermeneutic perspective, it is central to highlight how we are influenced by our prior knowledge: what we already know and are familiar with, but also what we are foreign to. How do this affect us? For example, how are we able to reveal the secrets from tool marks in timbers from medieval time? Is it possible to deconstruct, reconstruct and distinguish the past knowledge with our modern understanding? How are skill, knowledge and understanding involved when we examine craft?

I will now present a phenomenological (and hermeneutic) perspective regarding “how we live ourselves into, senses, and experience objects” and in the same time have “prior knowledge of objects”. I will do so through the example of wine. Through “blind tasting”, I will discuss the wines “inside” and “outside” perspective. By what means can we throughout skill and perception IN wine live ourselves into, analyse and describe it? I will also reflect ON how knowledge and understanding about wine, allows us to evaluate and examine the product.

PPT 2

Most of us are familiar with blind tasting as a “party game” where wine lovers test each other's skills to identify the wine's taste, colour, smell, character and origin. In such wine-interested situations, it is almost a ritual that one serves wines blindly. In other words, by hiding the label with all its information, shape of the bottle and all other info, the differences is balanced between those who have prior knowledge of the wine and those who have the ability to live themselves in and reconstruct the wine by sensing it. Often this can be a “hubling” exercise in which ideas of own knowledge and excellence collapses in the face of challenges.

PPT 3

The purpose of the blind-tasting is primarily, through an inner perspective, make a sensory perception in which taste and bouquet are considered and linked to contextual and outer descriptions of the wine's origin, personality and background. This way of examining wine is often linked to the person's ability to evaluate the character of the wine. However, blind tasting is first and foremost about the fact that the taster analyses and assess the wines properties in a apparently objective or "neutral way". Wines are considered without the person who investigates knowing the wine's identity. The tasters prejudice, in other words, the knowledge and perceptions about vineyard / producer, vintages and other conditions, should not dominate the valuation of what is in the glass. The method has a phenomenological starting point but the interpretation process also invites you to move from something familiar to something unfamiliar (which is hermeneutics).

PPT 4

Many people have an idea that the characteristics of wines are considered best if one knows as little as possible about it. However, is this necessarily true? Does our preconception and knowledge slow down or restrict us when we analyse the wine? Alternatively, is it opposite? That our knowledge about the wine, our position, attitude and perspective to it, have great influence and dominate the impression we get by drinking it. Isn't it a strength for the evaluation if we has knowledge about historical- and contextual facts and conditions as well? Both perspectives have impact on how we consider and evaluate material things or the making process behind it. However, the result of the two positions may differ.

In the following, I will do a thought experiment were I argue that the experience of a wine is an interaction between perception and sensation IN wine – in connection with prior knowledge, facts and expertise OF wine. Both abilities are tools helping us to make the perception and sensation more conscious when we analyse wine or craft objects and the exercise of knowledge behind the making.

PPT 5

Of course, wine can be both art, craft, and science, but it is often evaluated through sensation and perceptions. An act where knowledge & practice and

evaluation & reflection takes place for example through empathy, sensitivity and attention.

According to wine experts, the most important ability evaluating the wine is the sense of smell. Although smell is a basic “subconscious” sense, it is weakly physiologically developed in us and varies in strength from human to human. Although the smell has an important function in daily life, the skill has been taken for granted. It has become a part of our tacit knowledge.

Few people has developed an advanced vocabulary for aromas. Those who have may work specifically in professions where one is dependent on this and perhaps they first started when they were in their 20`s. We know that this is an age when the ability to develop such skills, just as natural language learning, is far more difficult than in childhood. Moreover, not only are we set back in the development of the sense of smell, we do not trust it either!!

In several scientific examinations, test persons are methodically misled into thinking that the experiment is about something else than it really is. In the journal “Brain and Language”, researchers demonstrates how 54 test persons, without knowing it, were given a white wine that was coloured red with a tasteless and odourless colorant. The test persons styled the wine as a red one. The wine`s bouquet were described in light of characteristics and fruits with same colour as the wine, and both “strawberries” and “raspberries” were used to define the white wine that actually was coloured red. Several other attempts has shown same tendency. The test demonstrates how we are misled into thinking that, “what I see is what I get” and that what we actually do not trust our sensitivity; what we taste and smell cannot be right! All test persons sensed the same wine, but perceived a completely different wine.

In research, there are many examples like this.

However, how would the outcome of this experiment be if we have knowledge about the wine's identity as well; in the art of craft, the history and the context? Prior knowledge gives us a radically different basis to consider the wine than when we taste it blindly. A glimpse of the label, shape of the bottle etc. give contextual information and compensate for years of training of the senses through tasting. From this example, we can argue that what we sense and what we perceive are two different phenomena.

.. Reflect upon the relationship between a pure phenomenological survey and a hermeneutic study related to craft. How does this affect you? ..

In another scientific experiment, a video of a group of youngsters playing basketball is presented to a group of persons. After a while, a person in a “gorilla-suit” appear between the players, turns to the camera, jumps and waves, and then goes out of the picture. You do not need any distinctive skills to notice the “gorilla”, but when the test persons are told to count how many times the ball is played from one person to the next, half of the test persons refuse to have seen any gorilla and the same happened each time the movie was displayed. The researchers concluded after the survey that the brain is so busy counting all the times the ball is thrown from one person to the next so that the impression of the gorilla does not become conscious for the test persons. The gorilla is noteworthy, but half of the test persons didn't register it. The “gorilla” was sensed, but not perceived. The example point out that expectation is of great importance.

Another example. A group of people stands close together and talks in a gathering. You are in this group talking to someone, and focus on your dialog. Suddenly you no longer hear your own conversation, but some nearby talk about something you perceive as relevant. Your name is perhaps mentioned and this take your attention. Suddenly you only hear the conversation where your name appeared. This can only be explained by the fact that this particular conversation was sensed, but not consciously perceived until the brain recorded that your name was mentioned. A conversation who was one of several in a noisy room and not considered important until your name was mentioned.

Attention, awareness and sensitivities affect the ability to recognize and percept something which in turn affects our observations and thereby our practice.

PPT 6

Once I participated in a "blind-testing", the host poured a magnum bottle into two carafes, and then served the wine “blindly”..

The expectations were that we were served two different wines, and people around the table referred to them as two wines. None of the participants who tasted commented on the wines, as possibly, from the same bottle. All expected that the wine was different wines. The two decanters had the same wine with

exactly the same colour and smell. It was not the eyesight nor the smell that took priority over the sensitivities: rather, it was the hermeneutic expectations that overwhelmed each and ones sensory properties.

Perhaps a wine expert wouldn't go into this trap, but the present participants were all experienced and sensory "finely-tuned" tasters. So, how can this be explained?

PPT 7

Truly, the expectation was different wines, and in the evaluation of each of the two glasses, we became aware of "different aspects of the wines". We constructed different characteristics for the same wine. Could this be explained as the mind's active interpretation, a construction based on a premise that the content in the two glasses was from different wines?

These examples, and research experiments, challenge the picture of what happens when you taste, interpret and evaluate wine. Wine tasting is not just, about what we sense in wine, but is also, about what we expect and are aware of. In my opinion, this is relevant and transferable for how research methods in craft are, or can be used.

Hermeneutic oriented research are concerned with interpretations; in other words with our experiences, what we are familiar with, and often-in connection with what we are foreign or unfamiliar to. Phenomenology, on the other hand, is more concerned with our inside perspective, what we are intimate with. Our subjective interpretations or intentional actions from the performer's perspective.

PPT 8

Empathy and sensitivity, related to "know-how" or embodiment, in tasting wine, and perception about wine, related to "prior knowledge", is linked, but does not necessarily have to correspond. The situation and degree of relevance or contrast also controls our attention.

However, expectations play an active role in the experience and assessment of the product. In our example wine. We do not only lose our "fore-knowledge" or "preconception" when we taste blind; we lose part of the experience; both skill and understanding.

Knowledge direct our expectations (Heidegger: “directedness”), and the expectations and knowledge about these wines are not just something that prevent you from a true and objective evaluation of the wine. The knowledge facilitates what the wine is considered in relation to: what is expected of the wine? What kind of quality or bouquet? Wine is an object that is difficult to measure and describe and our sense of smell is not particularly developed nor trained. This means that what you bring to the wine is just as important as your sensory skills and the wine in the glass.

Therefore, blind tasting really is like any other tasting – or sensory experiences. When we taste and experience wine, the smell (of the odour and aroma) plays a dominant role in our evaluation. It is a product of both the sensory information the wine give us and our comprehensive overview, personal knowledge and experience. All these are needed to discover the character, personality and properties of the wine, and to make us able to judge it from other wines and what it is.

Personal knowledge can be simplified into two categories, where the “written knowledge” is what you can read, learn and reflect around. And “know-how” is the practical knowledge you build up through experience for example the ability to taste. The know-how has to be trained for a long time, but we don’t get anywhere without knowledge and the ability to empathize and reflect. It is when you learn the connections between what you taste and what it is, that you build expertise in wine.

In blind tasting, this connection is broken; we miss a starting point, we fumble for something to compare the experience with. When we know what’s in the glass, it is not only the preconceptions that are activated. Our previous experience with similar wines and the knowledge of what we expect out of them will be activated. Knowledge and experiences help us to draw attention upon everything we sense, and what ever is significant and interesting with the wines. This is what we evaluate the wines out from; the alternation of details and context. It gives us contrast and it make it easier to find something relevant in the wine when we know what is in the glass. For the human mind is not, at least not in the case of wine, any “tabula rasa”.

It is the knowledge and know-how we have about the wine which open ups the experience and involvements of the wine. What separates experts from

amateurs, is precisely knowledge and experience. Brain research has shown that trained tasters treat the perception and impression of a wine in a completely different way, and elsewhere in the brain, than amateurs. We also bring knowledge and know-how to the wine, and this knowledge helps to evoke (fremkalle) the experiences.

One of the misleading things about blind tasting is the widespread notion that everyone can “see” the relevant characteristics of a wine without knowledge and experience.

If you work with an experienced blacksmith, gardener, carpenter or knitter you know that this is not truth.

Finally. The objective for this talk has been to give some thoughts about how empathy and experience of an object, for example wine, is related to action, but also how we deconstruct and reconstruct knowledge. Empathy, both involve what we immediately sense, what we know and what we recognize. Knowing wine, or craft, is a laborious work IN an ABOUT wine or craft. It takes time and effort. It is in the dialog between nearness in the details and its context craft reveal its inner qualities to our minds.