

Coffee (slot) machines

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One of the coffee tales about the drink and its spaces concerns the *Automats*.

If only one of New York's 1950s *Automats* remained, we would be greeted by a space completely lined by backlit grids, large menus in a synoptic form consisting of little glass windows stacked in columns, topped by signs, and peppered with taps and buttons. A chrome-edged control panel containing plates brimming with cakes, sandwiches, bagels, and pies, where coffee and milk ran hot from spouts in the shape of a dolphin.

The history of this singular place is relatively unknown because it finished in a dead-end somewhere during the transformations of the city and changes in consumption habits. This is the story of how cafés play a role in the utopia of mechanized modernity and, above all, it is exemplary of how the café as an urban appurtenance constitutes "a perfect collective scene"¹.

Automats spread through the European capitals at the end of the nineteenth century to achieve the acme of their success in American cities between the 1910s and the 1950s and then completely vanish, replaced by the gigantic fast food chains.

Their story was born from a futuristic idea which, seen from our own times, from the hyper-technological globalized future we live in (compared to that experience), we might dismiss it as a naive form of urban entertainment that was in certain cases extremely lavish. In reality, the *Automats* were precursors of the current process of globally standardizing food, its production, consumption practices and spaces, and, in their upward trend at least, they

reveal the success and decline unwinding between the old and new continent, a profound change in the spatialization of consumption experiences.

Their history can be the starting point for a reflection on places to collectively enjoy food and drink, along with the potential ability of architecture to describe a product and its complexity (its chemistry, history, flavour and processing). Interior architecture in particular, by providing the space for tasting, can narrate the role of taste in the material culture of an era and the immaterial things this taste evokes, also thanks to the forms that host it.

There is a bond, perhaps overlooked but inseparable, between taste understood as the sense that perceives and recognizes flavours and the meaning that ensues, namely, taste as the capacity to understand and recognize the beautiful² and, by extension, taste as a "set of preferences, trends, guidelines and myths, belonging to the culture of an age or period"³. We shall attempt to show how this division of senses reverberates in places of taste and in their architecture: interiors which are a concentrate of the aesthetic culture of a society and an era.

Coffee Machines

Coffee is a drink whose processing requires several stages, from the harvesting of the "cherry" (the coffee fruit) in the plantations, the roasting of the "bean", the grinding, infusion and filtering.

This makes it a modern drink: its transformation envisages the use of machines whose improvement is the task of inventors, engineers and designers in a succession of technological innovations and patents

that has no equal in the processing of other drinks such as its “cousin” tea (the basic molecule of theine and caffeine is the same) which it is obviously close to, or even very complex examples such as wine.

At the same time, the long process of transformation gives coffee its mysterious aura of ancient knowledge/flavours and their secrets: the different changes in state (from a green seed to a burnished bean, a powder, and a liquid) almost alchemical transformations (at least two require the administration of heat, therefore fire) which demand skilled gestures that only experience can make effective to achieve an optimum result.

Finally, the fascination and at times the wonder linked to the preparation of a beverage of an exotic origin and by now rooted in local traditions, also evokes a sense of recreation, good-natured enjoyment, as we shall see. Because coffee becomes a habit, caffeine an indispensable stimulant, even though not strictly necessary. Not a food that nourishes but fundamentally, as a famous advert has been repeating for years, coffee is a *pleasure*.

All this makes it the perfect energizer for the modern city, its timeframes and aspirations. The history of the *Automats* is proof enough of this.

Contrary to common belief, misled by the stereotype of “fast food” as an American institution, *Automats* were not born in the United States but in Germany, back in 1896. Here the Berlin engineer Max Sielaff patented different types of beverage vending machines, and then also for foods, that worked with the insertion of coins, – “slot machines”. In associa-

tion with Gebrüder Stollwerk, at the time the largest producer of chocolate in Europe, Sielaff founded the company *Automat* - which in German means “machine” and which today has become synonymous with the vending machine⁴ – and the homonymous café-restaurants where food and drink were distributed by machines and not by waiters.

If Max Sielaff is attributed with the creation of *Automats* as a place where coffee is distributed by machines, the study of contraptions to distribute various products is much older. It can even be traced back to the origin of the vending machines for liquids after the insertion of coins (those which Anglophones call “slot machines”) to the invention of the mathematician and inventor Hero of Alexandria who, more than 2,000 years ago, designed for an Egyptian temple a distributor of sacred water operated by means of coins which, by falling on a lever, opened the valve from which the liquid emerged.

The use of mechanical devices to pour coffee also has examples prior to Sielaff’s inventions.

As already mentioned, the transformations to obtain coffee as a beverage require the use of various devices that form part of the imagery linked to the product ever since its arrival in the West. This imagery is enriched by the wonder of seeing the first machines operate as if by magic, apparently without the intervention of man, alone, in the literal sense of the term *automaton*: “a mechanical device operating under its own hidden power; a robot.”⁵

By the end of the 1700s, among the various cafés that opened in Paris under the porticoes of the Palais-

Royal, one appeared that aroused great curiosity because of the way the coffee was served: the *Café Mécanique*. Here, as told by the history books and travellers' guides, a mechanical device "[made] what the consumer ordered appear on every table without the assistance of any visible operator."⁶

There are no illustrations of this attraction, nor of the mechanism or the interior of the café, with the exception of an image decorating a fan of the time⁷. In it appears, at the centre of a perfectly symmetrical environment, the cashier behind his desk and at the sides two tables with the patrons, elaborately dressed ladies and gentlemen. On the right can be seen two transparent cylinders protruding from the floor to reach a table. Clearly the order reached the customer from a basement using a system of pulleys. On the fan, at all three places represented: the Beaujolais Theatre, the gardens of the Palais-Royal, and the *Café Mécanique* itself, the central role of coffee in the life of the city is demonstrated. The place itself was also more than a little theatrical: the spectacle consisted of the service but also the customers (the history books tell of curious people who could not afford a drink but would crowd behind its windows), but it was also an occasion for meetings, to have a stroll through the public parks, for example. At any rate, it became one of the Parisians' pastimes, hence a place where they could linger for a spell devoted to pleasure.

Opened in 1785, the *Café Mécanique* was closed by the first rumblings of the Revolution.

The fascination with mechanical phenomena continued to be linked to coffee but its character as an eli-

tist whim faded and on the contrary what emerged was that principle of efficiency and egalitarianism that would characterize the *Automat*.

At the first *Exposition Universelle* in Paris in 1855, in the *Galerie des Machines* set up close to the Champs-Élysées, the engineer Édouard Loysel, already the holder of many patents for coffee-making machines but not only (among his inventions were parlour games and the first billboards) presented his giant *Percolateur Hydrostatique*. This machine allowed the preparation of large quantities of coffee in a much shorter time compared to the coffee makers in circulation at the time, allowing a lower cost per single cup of coffee. This was a revolution that made coffee consumption more popular and located the machine at the centre of the place for consumption as an attraction, in full view and no longer concealed as at the *Café Mécanique*.

When the Exposition ended, the appliance was transferred to a fixed location, the *Café Percolateur*, which continued to be a major attraction, as told by the weekly *L'illustration*: "It can prepare ten thousand cups of coffee served every day around a counter 40 metres long, which can accommodate more than 100 people at a time. Each of these consumers stays no longer than two and a half minutes; it is therefore not intended to meet the need of the lazy sitting there 'to kill time', as the saying goes, and playing dominoes. The *percolateur* responds to other tastes."⁸

The article effectively renders the emergence of a new trend with respect to consumption times, which did not exclude coffee sipped at a table, a characteristic

element of the nineteenth-century cafés⁹, with their flâneurs reading the newspaper, but was a complement, resulting in a change in the internal structure of the premises: the counter to lean on when drinking standing up, located near the coffee machine, became an increasingly important element, also in a dimensional sense.

It was in this period that vending machines were to evolve, in parallel to the development of coffee-making devices. For a long time, it was the producers of perfume who studied the operation of this type of machine.

In fact, in France it was Philippe Leoni, a Parisian manufacturer of perfume who experimented with distributors for perfumes and then drinks. After founding the *Société Française des Fontaines Populaires*, in 1891 Leoni opened a first *Bar Automatique* in Montmartre, where machines distributed ranges of French beers, punches, and Málaga. The bar's advertising brochure insisted on the autonomy and freedom of patrons who could choose and serve themselves without "anybody observing them or addressing them"¹⁰. In the image printed on the brochure, the place appears completely open towards the pavement, more of an urban cul-de-sac than an interior. The premises are sketchily illustrated but above the distributors, arranged in series on the walls, appear different signs and slogans, precisely like a shopping street or a market. Next to the patrons, all men, are represented some workers intent on carrying wooden barrels inside from the street. It is a dynamic scene which shows this first automatic bar as an informal place to take a break, characteri-

zed by the chance encounters typical of cafés. The customers' autonomy in serving themselves is presented as an element that increases the informality and ensures a certain egalitarianism which encourages anyone to stop: nobody would observe their choices, the amounts, nor their clothing, their habits or the generosity of their tip. This "democratic" aspect would be a very marked characteristic of the American *Automats*.

The Automat GmbH Company

Max Sielaff met Philippe Lions and got to know his *Bar Automatique*, but it was the German engineer who first had the idea of a place to mechanically distribute hot drinks such as coffee but also foods, and to develop the necessary technological solutions. Sielaff presented his "automatic buffet" at the 1896 Berlin exposition, naming this formula *Electriche Automat Restaurant*.

A contemporary postcard shows one of the first places that the Automat GmbH company opened in Berlin. The picture shows only the inside, not its relation to the street. The distributors are arranged on the two side walls, in series as in Leoni's bar, but integrated with the walls, as we would say today, and given rhythm by two symmetrical series of arches. On one side are the food distributors, on the other, taps to pour out drinks. Only two signs face one another above the arches indicating the two sectors. Everything is framed by rich decorations, including the ceiling, from which large circular chandeliers hang. Another significant difference compared to the illustration of the *Bar Automatique* is the pre-

sence in the centre of tables, these too arranged in succession along the axis of the bar. The tables are high without chairs, leaning on which are a couple in elegant clothes intent on conversing while drinking. This high table combines the characteristics of the counter, to serve oneself standing up, and those of the classic tables that allow isolation from other customers. Another couple appear in the foreground. Further back can be seen the patrons who are serving themselves alone from the distributors, a lady on one side and a gentleman on the other.

Like Leoni's brochure, the postcard also bears slogans that announce the newness of the "self-service", but the type of scene shown features a different formula. Here the autonomy of the customer does not serve so much to ensure anonymity and freedom of access regardless of the social standing. The emphasis on the autonomy in service here seems to be aimed above all at making the customer feel modern and up to date, capable of mastering the use of machines. The presence of the tables, although there are no chairs (some can be seen at the end of the room, however), suggests a longer stay, also associated with the consumption of food. This, and the type of clientele, also female, gives the impression that these first *Automats* intended to provide pleasing snacks while out shopping rather than quick meals during work for Berlin's office workers¹¹.

The company did not limit itself to selling Stollwerk products through its café-restaurants but entered society with more international partners that supplied coin-operated slot machines, launching the spread of this system of vending and consumption

throughout Europe and subsequently in the United States. It was here that the *Automats* would arrive at the peak of their success and reputation, becoming, as we shall see, one of the places which were peculiar to American urban culture from 1910 to 1950, as witnessed by the figurative arts, literature and cinema.

Instead, the *Automats* that spread across Europe were much less known than they should be. The architectural quality of the premises (most of which have unfortunately not been conserved) was considerable, the investment in terms of materials and finishes was considerable, far different from the standard now widespread in the chains of cafés and fast-food eateries. What is most interesting about these original cafés is that they represented an attempt to experiment with new types of architectural interiors to accommodate a brand-new form of consumption. It is indicative that, although constituting an anticipation of the contemporary phenomenon of large worldwide chains of branded eateries, the *Automats* featured local adaptations and forms, both as regards the consumption practices and types of user¹² and the architectural aspects and spatial conceptions.

The Automat GmbH company distributed this model to all the major European cities. A catalogue published by the company¹³ contains photographs of the interiors and exteriors of the premises opened in Germany, Belgium, Denmark, the UK, France, Sweden, Norway, Switzerland and ultimately in the USA, in Philadelphia and New York.

In the absence of indisputable documentation from

the archives of the company, which is no longer active, historians question whether it already operated with the logic of a modern brand, namely, running the cafés directly, or limited itself to providing the equipment.

From the point of view of the architecture, it is possible to detect in the photographs of the premises certain aspects of continuity that made these cafés the forerunners of the contemporary bar and restaurant chains of international brands, however, some decisive differences also emerge. There are common elements in the Art Nouveau design of the distributors, set into the walls inside a partition with panels, mirrors and decorative frames above a marble skirting. Three recurring decorative motifs can be recognized, based on variations of the trilobate arch, each in two versions, one for distributors of food and one for those of drinks. On the walls of the café in Berlin can be recognized the same pattern as in Frankfurt, New York, and Philadelphia, while another decorative motif unites the premises of Nuremberg, Copenhagen, Brussels and Stockholm, and a third those of Aachen, Dortmund, Essen and Hanover.

The organization of the space looks similar, but it is possible to notice some variations. In Germany, almost everywhere there is the room with high tables but without chairs, usually developed lengthwise with distributors at the sides, as shown on the picture postcard of the Berlin branch, in addition to other rooms with tables and chairs. At all the other European sites and in two American ones, only traditional tables prevail or are present. And then the chairs

and tables differ in each city. The chairs are mostly models in curved wood, of the Thonet type, very common in nineteenth-century cafés. Instead, at the Stockholm café appear some rather massive chairs in a medieval style, with seat and back in studded leather, while in Philadelphia, the wooden chairs and tables are accompanied by others in curved iron of the type normally used in gardens.

Predictably, the exteriors of the premises show a still greater differentiation. Even if certain elements are identifiable as constants, the architectural character of the different streets they overlook and the inclusion in existing structures dictated different measurements and rhythms, as is almost always the case for commercial premises.

The catalogue does not give the name of any architect, nor the author of the designs of the distributor panels, evidently developed by an office inside the company. We do not know, therefore, whether the interior designs with the constants related to the Automat GmbH supply, and the façade designs were by the same professional, or if the design of the exterior was entrusted to an architect and that of the interior to the company's technical office, nor what the relationships of the latter were with local workers and craftsmen. The various roles would be considerably clearer in the designs for American *Automats*. Here it is interesting to note how a different way of serving the product required the invention of a space, and it was both aspects, the distribution technique and the spatial organization, that determined users' behaviour, rather than the reverse. It was the design that invented a new gesture, the function did not

determine the form but was created by the design¹⁴. That this became apparent on the steady appearance of coffee machines does say something. Customers seemed to have earned various degrees of freedom, the independence to pour a coffee when they wanted, to take as many slices of cake as they wished, without asking, and literally be accountable to no one, simply by inserting coins. In reality, it was the automatic distribution system and its logic that was deciding the environment in which they found themselves as well as their behaviour. This differed from what occurred in traditional cafés where the patrons' habits seem to have had more influence in defining the interiors and furniture: it was conversation and the need for isolation that determined the birth of the small coffee table, as was the custom of watching people strolling along the street that took these tables outside.

The American *Automats*

While the target of European *Automats* were the ladies and gentlemen strolling in search of a place to take a break in which the “automatism” conferred a note of novelty that would quickly become stale, the American *Automats* prepared to respond to one of the most urgent market demands at that time: providing meals for a burgeoning class of workers, that of the clerks. In the USA, the tertiary sector was growing faster than in Europe producing a demand for meals which, for logistical and time reasons, would no longer be eaten at home but near the workplace. Unlike factory workers, clerks had no canteens. Thousands of men and women during

what began to be defined as the “lunch-break”, looking for a place to eat in a short time and at low cost downtown.

The first *Automat* to debark in the United States was that of Philadelphia, whose photographs are featured in the German catalogue. Opening it were two business partners, Joe Horn and Frank Hardart, who, during a trip to Germany admiringly visited Sielaff's automatic buffet in Berlin and ordered a first delivery from him which was lost thanks to a storm during the crossing¹⁵. In 1902, having finally arrived and been installed under the personal supervision of Sielaff, the vending machines proved hugely successful, and in 1912 the two partners opened a second venue in New York, with the same distributors, as shown in the *Automat* catalogue. But from then onwards, the Horn & Hardart Company would stamp its own character on its *Automats*, altering them in terms of technology, communication, and architecture. The premises became increasingly large, offering a wider choice of food, but the coffee consumption became more central than in the German bars. With its own engineer, Horn & Hardart developed new vending machines that guaranteed the freshness of the prime-quality French filtered coffee which they managed to sell at a price of only one nickel per cup¹⁶.

The interiors featured a more linear decoration than the prototypes imported from Germany, partially because the style that had become established meanwhile was the Art Déco of the contemporary skyscrapers, and partially because the values that the communication focused on were hygiene and effi-

55 In un *Automat*, 1948



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ciency, which corresponded to cleaner lines, chrome bezels, fewer mirrors, and more space given to the showcases where it was possible to see the entire range of food available.

The decorative apparatus of the façades and entrances were no less precious than their European counterparts: the façade of the Horn & Hardart Automat on Broadway was realized by the then famous Italian Deco stained-glass artist, Nicola D'Ascenzo, who designed a large double-height doorway in brass, marble and glass dominated by the word "*Automat*". D'Ascenzo also realized internal decorations for other company premises, and it was probably he who devised the famous dolphin-shaped spouts from which the coffee emerged in all Horn & Hardart branches, inspired by an Italian fountain.

The *Automats* were characterized everywhere by rich decorations on the façade and large signs, becoming city landmarks¹⁷, and such a constitutive part of the urban image that the advertising slogan of the Horn & Hardart flagship in Times Square read as follows: "The Automat = as famous as the New York Skyline itself."¹⁸

Horn & Hardart was thus the first café chain definitely recognizable as a "brand". Even without the international spread of Automat GmbH (only operating on the east coast of the United States) its success was enormous and enduring: in 1920 it possessed, in New York alone, 14 cafés which become 43 in '33, while by the Fifties it was the largest chain in the world, serving 800,000 persons per day and 90 million cups of coffee every year¹⁹.

Beyond the turnover, undoubtedly equalled and

then surpassed by other brands, it was the role the *Automat* occupied in American social and cultural history that was unique. What the *Automats* represented for the society of the time was condensed in a definition by playwright Neil Simon according to whom the *Automat* was "the Maxim's of the disenfranchised"²⁰, an emblem of American democracy where it could happen that the most powerful manager might sit next to his company's latest bell-boy. Where no one was served with greater obsequiousness, because nobody was *served*, no tips were left, and the food, of a good quality standard, was affordable. Above all the coffee, whose characteristic taste everyone learned to recognize, had a cost that anyone could afford. Where the many clerks could also dine alone, something that was, and would still be for years, unusual in a traditional restaurant. This latter aspect found its manifesto in the picture by Edward Hopper of 1927, entitled precisely *Automat*²¹, in which a woman sits alone in a café in an atmosphere of melancholy, a key that accepted another effigy of this exciting modernity, an image that marked a different idea of time, a different psychology.

The extent to which the *Automats* were rooted in the culture and urban landscape of New York is also told by the shots of the photographer Berenice Abbott in her *Changing New York*²², frames of life and gestures, contacts of modernity, where the works of architecture contain traces of life stories.

On the Screen and Behind the Scenes

The art that has spoken most of the *Automat* is cine-

ma, which acknowledged them as a peculiar scene of daily life in New York for almost half a century, whether choosing them as a setting or playing with their spatial and functional devices. Thus the several films shot over the years in *Automats*²³ allow access to these places which have now disappeared, narrating their evolution. Beyond the documentary value, the cinema arguably provides the most useful elements to question the relationships between design and gestures, between spaces and rituals of use and the imagery that produced them.

The *Automat* already appeared in some silent films. In *The Early Bird*, from 1925, the main character, a milkman, takes a girl he wants to impress to a Horn & Hardart. Showing himself to be a habitu  of the place, the boy explains the operation of the distributors (whose levers, buttons, doors and taps the camera frames in detail) and entrusts the girl with a trick to have two cups of coffee at the price of one, a nickel. Pretending that the distributor has not poured the milk requested into his coffee (which in reality he secretly pours into the girl's empty cup) he calls a waiter to protest. The latter, in order to resolve the problem and pour another coffee without introducing coins, knocks on the distributor, seems to say something to someone behind the panel and immediately coffee and milk pour from the tap. The young couple then go to sit at a table to drink their two coffees and the food they have selected and taken from the glass-fronted recesses. At their table, which unlike European caf s is shared, a distinguished gentleman takes a place and then an elderly man. The latter pours his coffee from the

cup into the saucer, from which he starts to drink. Accompanied by the disgusted expressions of the gentleman, the two young people, out of solidarity and sympathy with the elderly man, repeat his gesture. The reaction of disgust of the distinguished gentleman is interrupted by the arrival of a driver in livery who, addressing the elderly man, informs him that his car is waiting outside. The distinguished gentleman remains open-mouthed as he scrutinizes the elderly man about whom he had clearly formed a wrong impression, while the milkman and the girl leave but not before the former has filled his pocket with a handful of sugar sachets.

The scene at the table confirms the egalitarian dimension as one of the most celebrated, attributed, or desired achievements of modernity represented by the *Automat*, which put everyone at the same table. But also the scene at the coffee distributor provides some interesting aspects. Through its work on what we see and what we believe we see, cinema bares some crucial aspects to understand these places and the distance from similar forms in contemporary life, quite literally unveiling the secret of the *Automat*: the machine is actually an artifice. The automatism certainly works but it is also imaginary, it is part of an illusion. This is hinted at by the waiter who knocks on the distributor asking for another coffee. Behind the machine there is clearly someone capable of operating the automatism.

Later films would bring the *Automat* mechanism to the centre of the narrative device. In the screwball comedy *Easy Living*, from 1937, the penniless female protagonist enters an *Automat* where one of the

employees, in reality the incognito son of a millionaire, offers him some free food. Thus we see him appear from behind the displays containing the food and speaking to her through the little windows. But something goes wrong, some levers are operated by mistake and all the doors suddenly open while coffee and milk begin to stream from the famous dolphin-shaped taps. The customers become crazy, flocking to take the free food and coffee, a brawl erupts, and the two protagonists flee.

The film that completely reveals automatism as the interface of a system that is still very human is the comedy *That Touch of Mink* from 1962. In it Doris Day goes for lunch to an *Automat* in Midtown Manhattan with a shot of the street entrance surmounted by the large words “Horn & Hardart”, which from the 1960s was in red neon, and the revolving doors. On arriving in front of the wall of food displays, the woman begins to call her friend, who works in the kitchens to arrange the dishes behind the little doors. A conversation begins from one to the other side of the wall of displays through the window from which, in the meantime, the friend passes to the other girl additional dishes evidently not paid for (something for which she will be reproached). The shots show us both sides of the array of displays from the dining room and for the first time also from the kitchen.

Thus we understand how the *Automat* achieves the original meaning of the term *autòma*, since it “apparently” moves on its own, while in reality it is people who are preparing the food and overseeing its distribution. Just as, despite the slogan “without waiters”, some waiters continue to assist customers.

The automatic interface, which designs the interior by imposing the rhythm of the backlit windows, transposes the organizational logic for offices into the café, those large open spaces divided by a grid of desks – as in Jacques Tati’s film *Playtime* – but also the filing cabinets: the matrix as an index of rationality and thus efficiency. Sometimes a human can burst onto the scene, throwing everything into turmoil, as happens in films, but the game is to be modern in any case, full of confidence that modernity will be as democratic, clean, and efficient as the *Automats* and that it will suffice to insert some coins to choose anything you want.

The optimistic and playful appearance of the *Automat* peaked in the “Merry-Go-Round Cafés”, a sort of carousel bar where it is the tables and the customers that spin around²⁴. A more functional variant, with the same name, sees both the food and drinks run around a belt offering customers the ability to serve themselves from a wide choice while remaining seated at a long bar²⁵.

The *Automat* and Art Déco.

In Europe, the story of the first *Automat*, interrupted by the events of WWI, continued afterwards but with dimensions that were not comparable with those achieved in the United States. As a result, there is a tendency to omit the European origins, so much so that several journalists have accredited the invention as characteristically American. Thus the *Automats* Made in Europe, mostly in Paris, tend to be perceived as an importation of American modernity and in reality, had few elements in common with Sielaff’s *Automat*.

Between the two world wars, Parisian cafés enjoyed a period of splendour. The particularity of the spaces that were developed between 1920 and 1940 was that they included more functions: they served all types of beverages, not just coffee, people could eat there and sometimes dance. These were the *café-restaurant*, the *bar-brasserie*, the *café-dancing*, housed in audacious constructions, often spread over several floors. The interest in café architecture grew, as demonstrated by the presence of prototypes at the Expos and Fairs²⁶. These prototypes show how from the most orthodox and strict rationalism in the late '20s, café architecture turned to a less severe simplicity, to borrow, from the '30s, the sweetness of Art Déco curves and ornament²⁷.

Two genuine *Automats*, with wall distributors of food and coffee, were the *bar automatiques* chain significantly called *Presto*, created in Paris in 1930 by the Viennese architect Otto Bauer. In general, however, the Parisian cafés adhered only partially to the *Automat* model, accepting not so much its functional aspects and those social ones seen in the United States, as the aesthetic values linked to the imagery of mechanistic modernity. The references of the cafés' decoration were the car, the plane, the transatlantic liner, and the train, incarnations of vitality, models for the creation of environments in which people wanted to breathe sparkle and optimism. Among the materials, gleaming metals abounded, and architects were experimenting with the use of novelties offered by industrialization: aluminium, duralumin, plywood of precious woods, corrugated steel. The tables in wood and marble of the nineteenth-

century cafés were replaced by models in steel and Bakelite. Hygienic concerns favoured finishes that gave an impression of cleanliness, such as chrome plating, and easily washable materials such as ceramic and glass. The latter appears in every possible guise: opaque, transparent, translucent, reflective, in tiles like mosaics, processed using different methods, printed, frosted, and sandblasted.

The architects seemed to have been fully aware of designing the setting with these elements to stage a spectacle, the representation of an idea of modernity and a society that aspired to it. Robert Mallet-Stevens, as well as being an architect and designer was also a cinematic scenographer, and the designer in the '30s of the *Cafés du Brésil*²⁸ chain, recommended that the café is “a work of architecture that is well-lit, well-ventilated, in which the customer can gaze at a show where the main actors are the other customers²⁹.” The café is a theatre and its architecture provides the scenic devices needed for the success of the show. In the main room, which sometimes takes the form of an amphitheatre, tricks and perspective gimmicks alter the space. A fundamental role is entrusted to the lighting, modulated using the latest inventions in the field of illumination. The indirect kind originated from luminescent tubes dissimulated by frames or inserted into cuts and folds in the ceiling. Direct lighting emanated from lamps and wall-mounted sconces, or from backlit glazed walls. This variety of light sources was further multiplied by the presence of mirrors, in which the glances of the customers could cross and multiply. Inside this brand-new and almost unreal spatiality,

tables and pillars clad in mirrors and metals also appeared to be mechanical elements: like the cylindrical tables of the *Presto* bar, which looked like pistons, or the composite pillars of Mallet-Stevens' *Café du Brésil*, with which supporting elements and capitals meshed like toothed wheels or the heads of bolts and that in some cases even became glazed cylinders. It was wholly natural that the "real" coffee machines, the percolators, always polished to a shine, were on show. Usually located on the counter, transformed to differentiate it as much as possible from that of the *bistro*³⁰. One example of this was the coffee counter of *La Maison du Café*, designed in 1933 by Charles Siclis, an almost forgotten designer³¹, the author of the most visually striking cafés. In his *La Maison du Café*, the sinuous shape of a frescoed wall was picked up by the counter, given further movement and rhythm to set off the coffee machines, with their chrome-plated cylinders that matched the cylindrical volumes of the percolators. An interior that sought to be supremely modern but that basically repeated the approach of the *Café du Percolateur* of the 1855 Universal Exposition.

Heirs and Successors

As often happens to what proposes to anticipate the future, i.e. being equalled and exceeded, so the *Automats* were surpassed by the materialization of what they evoked: the dreaming vision of an automated modernity, but when this had actually been achieved it soon demanded faster, more efficient and more globalized formulas. The last Horn & Hardart Automat closed in New York in 1991 to make way

for a branch of the Burger King chain. Fast food restaurants bested the *Automats* for commercial and economic reasons since they offered higher margins, and whether this occurred because they were more or less human than the *Automats* is debatable³². Considering the economic and contractual conditions of those who work in them, surely the fast food outlets invest less in the "human" component than in their operating mechanism. If the aspect of wages lies outside our topic of interest, the relationship between the "human" component and the forms of automation instead fully impacts the arrangement and perception of space. By comparing the interiors of Burger King or McDonald's premises with those of the 1950s *Automats*, we can certainly observe in the former a lower investment in the quality of materials and finishes, however it was above all the hardware of the fast service mechanism that had changed.

Observing the interiors of an *Automat*, we can assume that the structure which cost most was none other than the system of distributors, the wall of display drawers with their prepared dishes in plain sight. This is a system integrated with the walls and therefore created or anyway adapted to the shapes and sizes of the premises, probably complex to construct and maintain, while to operate it requires several workers. Its equally important secondary function is, as we have seen, to evoke the idea of a maximum freedom of choice along with the playful novelty of automatism. In fast food outlets these evocative, story-like motives have no more reason to exist, at least not when it comes to the modes of

choice and service. The meals are chosen on the basis of images, and the remainder of the standardization has reached levels such that the products are the same throughout the world. But above all, automatism, for contemporary consumers hooked on computers and smartphones, certainly holds no fascination. Thus, the wall of displays, the most expensive item of equipment/furnishing but also the most powerful in defining the rhythm, light and character of the space, disappeared. In its place are people who collect the products from the kitchen and put them onto trays. What is apparently a more human interface, given the very short timeframes, does not imply any real, greater interaction with the customers. Instead, there is a lower expenditure for the company, since these are underpaid workers in precarious jobs and probably less expensive than the wall and its management. The impression is that the machines may be less evident, but it is the people who are treated like machines³³.

Although fast food outlets arose in premises that were once *Automats*, subsequently it was the colossus Starbucks with its chains of coffee shops that took the place of the *Automat* in American coffee culture, undeniably enriching it with a greater and more refined choice of tastes, blends and, nowadays, also of preparation methods.

Travelling Sielaff's journey in reverse, the Starbucks brand, born in Seattle, landed in Europe then spread to every other continent. The economic and cultural aspects of this planetary success have begun to undergo various analyses³⁴.

Wishing to attempt a comparison between the spatial logic of the *Automats* and that of Starbucks, it becomes evident that the tension to the future of the former, which translated into the invention of space, objects and practices, corresponds, in the latter, to an attention to the reassuring that is realized through the creation of welcoming environments and as many family customers as possible.

The construction of a story through the interior architecture and furnishings of the rooms is one of the main aspects that help define the identity of a brand, and so Starbucks' investment in economic and design terms in these elements is very high.

Inside the company, 300 people, divided into 18 design studios distributed all over the world, work on designing the brand's cafeterias³⁵. On particular occasions, this global team sees the additional intervention of external architects, as in the case of the project for the Fukuoka Starbucks designed by Kenjo Kuma in 2011.

But to better define the type of narration proposed by Starbucks cafés, it is not the premises designed by starchitects as those more common and widespread ones which, as explained on the company's site³⁶, are designed following 4 basic concepts.

There are cafés of the *Heritage* type, which evoke the "mercantile" character of the first of the company's stores in Seattle's historic Pike Place Market, with concrete floors, worn wood and large community tables in a turn-of-the-last-century feeling. According to the site, the artisan-style premises were inspired by the Modernism of the '30s, however, the description is that of spaces which recall industrial

environments with exposed steel beams and brick walls.

The premises of the *Regional Modern* type evoke bright, loft-like, light-filled spaces made welcoming by regionally inspired furniture and fabrics to create “a calm and contemporary respite from the clamour of the fast-paced world”.

Finally there are the *Concept Stores*, unique, specially designed environments that represent the brand in major cities.

In various forms, the cafés are always designed to offer a sensory experience of immersion in coffee which involves, in addition to taste, sight, smell, and hearing³⁷. “Never in a Starbucks will a violet appear because it is not part of the palette, which ranges from the green of the raw bean to the deep brown of the roasted bean.³⁸ The woods feature warm colours and the lights the white of milk froth.”³⁹

To obtain a relaxed atmosphere, the prevailing colours are natural hues and neutral tones while the furnishings are mostly made of natural materials. On the walls are paintings and graphics chosen to enrich the experience of pleasant stimuli but that do not disrupt or upset with overly serious messages. The music that is diffused is at a volume that covers the private conversations of customers but is not so high as to disturb them. A study of customers’ preferences has resulted in a compilation of songs that fit the mood at different times of the day⁴⁰. Through the air wafts the coffee aroma that is at the centre of the sensorial experience, in different tastes and qualities, so that everyone can find their own favourite version. As for the ways to drink it, customers are

offered a variety of options: small tables with chairs, suitable for drinking, eating or even working alone, or comfortable chairs placed around low tables (i.e. coffee tables!) for those who wish to sit in a more relaxed way or for those with a group of friends.

These premises tell of the birth of new habits, such as working in the café, which blurs even more the boundary between work and leisure, and the return to longer breaks, the café as a place in which to linger a while, where a very long coffee is sipped while doing other things. A taste and a “comfort” that can continue, if desired, also on the street, thanks to the coffee-to-go formula, thereby blurring the confine between café and city.

The Starbucks’ designers then describe the last type, the *Concept Store*, the company flagship, as well as “explorations” of possible innovations to the café space. One example of this is the *Starbucks Reserve Roastery* concept: very large premises which, as the name indicates, also include the roasting. The largest, over 2,700m², is the one created in Shanghai.

Here, in the centre, stands a huge tank containing 40 tons of coffee beans and clad in small copper panels engraved with Chinese characters corresponding to terms such as *Arabica*, *Coffee Maker*, etc. The beans depart from here for processing which is all visible, using large machines in burnished metal connected by copper tubes. The beans are finally collected in handmade leather baskets before being ground.

There is a false ceiling of hexagonal, hand-veneered aluminium tiles. In the café it is possible to enjoy coffee obtained using different preparation methods with the usual choice of different seating arrange-

ments. A whole line of furniture, emblazoned with the R of *Reserve Roastery* was specially designed and hand-crafted in wood worked in such a way that every corner is rounded and pleasant to the touch. We can also find a playful aspect, indeed the pleasure of attending the transformations of the coffee is raised to the nth degree through Augmented Reality which affords access to further information on the equipment and operations using mobile phone Apps.

In this environment, as in the first French cafés at the large expositions, much of the space's character is entrusted to the exposed and dominant machinery.

But the way in which the materials are treated rather than evoking the reality of contemporary production, tends to make it seem archaic or to transpose it into a world of fantasy. And because this fantasy is nonetheless reassuring, it maintains a strong bond with the past and local roots, or, as the anthropologists say, it becomes indigenous.

The machine is no longer associated with something futuristic, but becomes a part of everything which, being material, is opposed to the digital, that of Apps, the real contemporary and intangible technology.

The feeling those who enter have is not of exploring an innovation, as claimed by the designer, but of becoming children again, entering a big, fun machine involving coffee, a fairy-tale chocolate factory of Willy Wonka⁴¹. As the executive chairman of Starbucks stated: "When people open the door, their eyes light up as if it were Christmas."⁴²

One aspect on which the communication of the brand insists is the adherence to strict criteria of ecological sustainability in the materials used in the buildings and related processes. Starbucks has obtained LEED certification for 750 of its outlets, thus becoming one of the most widely certified companies for a commitment to "a sustainable and prosperous future through a green building programme"⁴³.

Basically, this is a form of reassuring users, a profiling of eco-aware patrons, the promise of a time-space capsule that is cosy and politically correct.

The history of the *Automats* and their various heirs tells us, in addition to changes in daily routines, of a change in expectations with respect to the future which alters the type of storytelling required from architecture.

The future, it is known, is no longer as it once was, and certainly, it is no longer something "to play at". The game is instead to dive into a reproduction of local tradition created by a global brand. The future is a complex unknown variable to be considered carefully, with an eye on sustainable informed consumption, and from which to take a break every so often – for a coffee, of course.

Notes

- 1 L. Basso Peressut, Remo Dorigati, Elisabetta Ginelli, *L'architettura del caffè: tradizione e progetto in Europa*, Abitare Segesta, Milan 1994.
- 2 See G. Agamben, *Gusto*, Quodlibet, Macerata 2015.
- 3 Treccani Italian Dictionary, <http://www.treccani.it/vocabolario/ricerca/gusto>, last consulted on 25.02.18.

- 4 The company Automat GmbH., the owner of “automatic café-restaurants”, no longer exists, while the company founded by Max Sielaff, Sielaff GmbH & Co., is still active in the field of automation and robotics and still produces vending machines today.
- 5 C17: from Latin, from Greek, from *automatos* spontaneous, self-moving. Collins English Dictionary.
- 6 G. Letourmy, “Le Café Mécanique”, in D. Christophe and G. Letourmy, *Paris et ses cafés*, Ed. Action artistique de la Ville de Paris, Paris 2004.
- 7 The fan belongs to a private collection, see Georgina Letourmy, *Le Café Mécanique*, op. cit.
- 8 J-B-A Paulin, *Une révolution à Paris. Percolateur hydrostatique Loysel*, in “L’illustration”, 22 March 1857, quoted by Peressut, Dorigati Girelli, *L’architettura del caffè: tradizione e progetto in Europa*, op. cit.
- 9 The appearance and role of this item of furniture are described in Peressut, Dorigati Girelli, *L’architettura del caffè: tradizione e progetto in Europa*, op. cit.
- 10 A. Epple, *The “Automat”*. op. cit.
- 11 A. Epple, *The “Automat”*. op. cit.
- 12 The phenomenon of the *Automats* scattered among the large European cities of the early 1900s, their role as a precursor of globalized standardization and their local forms have mostly been studied in terms of social, economic and food culture history standpoints, while the inherent architectural aspects have been virtually ignored. One departure from the point of view of the history of consumption practices is an essay by Angelika Epple, “The “Automat”. A History of Technological Transfer and the Process of Global Standardization in Modern Fast Food around 1900”, in *Public Eating. Public Drinking. Places of consumption from Early Modern to Postmodern Times*, monographic number of “Food & History”, magazine of the European Institute for the History and Culture of Food, Brepols Publishers n.v., Turnhout (Belgium) 2009, vol. 7, no. 2.
- 13 *Automat-Restaurants. Patent Sielaff*, ed. Berlin NW Spenerstraße 23, Berlin, date uncertain.
- 14 H. Czech, “Cafés”, in C. Grafe, F. Bollerey (eds.): *Cafés and Bars. The Architecture of Public Display*, Routledge, New York-London 2007. The author argues that it is always the café that determines the conditions for the behaviour of the patrons, as an expression of whoever manages it.
- 15 The Smithsonian’s National Museum of American History retains an entire section of this first American *Automat* complete with mirrors, marbles and wooden frames.
- 16 The cost remained the same from 1912 to 1950. C. Hughes Crowley, *Meet Me at the Automat: Horn & Hardart gave big city Americans a taste of good fast food in its chrome-and-glass restaurants*, in the “Smithsonian Magazine”, August 1, 2001.
- 17 One of the few examples conserved till today is the façade designed by the architects Platt & Brother for the *Automat* that opened on Broadway in 1930, with floral Art Déco decorations in polychrome terracotta, nowadays protected as a piece of architectural and artistic heritage. See
- 18 Advertising of the *Automat* Horn & Hardart of Times Square in 1939.
- 19 C. Hughes Crowley, *Meet Me at the Automat*, op. cit.
- 20 D. Rabina, “*The Maxim’s of the Disenfranchised*”: *Automats in the cultural imagination of New York*, in “miNYstories” an online magazine of the Pratt Institute’s School of Information, December 2012.
- 21 Des Moines Art Center Collection, Iowa.
- 22 B. Abbott, *Changing New York*, Dutton, New York 1939.
- 23 See C. Ampatzidou, *Automat Dialogues*, Architecture Film Festival Rotterdam website, https://www.afr.nl/themes/the_automat_dialogues.html last consulted on 28/01/18.

- 24 M. F. Crowe, R. W. Bowen, *San Francisco Art Déco*, Arcadia Publishing, San Francisco 2007.
- 25 As occurs today in *Kaiten-zushi*, Japanese fast food outlets with conveyor belts, born in the same years – the 1950s, seems to have no connection with this American version.
- 26 We have already dealt with the issue of the café space as an ideal place for the experimentation of the architectural avant-garde in Giuseppina Scavuzzo (ed.), *Uno spazio del caffè*, EUT, Trieste 2016.
- 27 J. Vajda, *Le café parisien. Échanges de vues*, in “Labyrinth” no. 9, June 2001, pp. 59-76.
- 28 R. Mallet-Stevens presented a prototype for the *Café du Brésil* at the Paris International Exhibition of 1937, see “L’architecture d’Aujourd’hui”, no. 9, September 1937.
- 29 R. Mallet-Stevens, *Les Restaurants*, in “L’architecture d’Aujourd’hui” no. 12, December 1938, p. 45.
- 30 J. Vajda, *Le café parisien. Échanges de vues*, op.cit.
- 31 This little-known architect had a monograph dedicated to him by A. Tavares, *L'étoile filante, Charles Siclis: l'architecte-mystère du Paris de l'entre-deux-guerres*, Éditions B2, Paris 2016.
- 32 A new chain of automatic restaurants, *Eatsa*, where you can order dishes based on quinoa using a tablet, has opened in the United States. Considerations on a comparison between this new formula and the old *Automats*, also from the aspect of remuneration and the rights of their respective employees, can be found in the influential blog on food and catering called *Eater*: Joshua David Stein, *Automats: The Utopian Future or a Return to a Dystopian Past? The reincarnation of the automat brings up complex moral questions*, <https://www.eater.com/2015/9/16/9334659/automat-eatsa-history-future>, last consulted on 28 February 2018.
- 33 Ibid.
- 34 Among the vast literature on Starbucks, we mention here, also for its reference to the narrative dimension, T. Clark, *Starbucked: A double tall tale of caffeine, commerce, and culture*, Little, Brown, New York 2007.
- 35 *Inside The Global Design World Of Starbucks*, <http://sprudge.com/insidethe-global-design-world-ofstarbucks-69025.html>, last consulted on 20.03.2018
- 36 <https://www.starbucks.com/coffeehouse/store-design>, last consulted on 20.03.2018.
- 37 A. Desai, *The Function and Design of Cafés Throughout Time*, a thesis at Cornell University, <https://courses.cit.cornell.edu/dea150/files/2011%20files/Project%202.pdf>, last consulted on 28.01.18.
- 38 Interview with Liz Muller, vice president of global design of Starbucks, *How Starbucks is using design to sell coffee* in “Architectural Digest” of Dec. 2017.
- 39 Ibid.
- 40 T. Clark, *Starbucked: A double tall tale of caffeine, commerce, and culture*, op. cit.
- 41 This refers to the fanciful story for children, later a film, by Roald Dahl, *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, 1964.
- 42 *How Starbucks is using design to sell coffee* in “Architectural Digest”, op. cit.Q2A
- 43 LEED stands for Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design and is the certification of the sustainability of buildings issued by the U.S. Green Building Council. See <https://new.usgbc.org>



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