

The Protean Character of Jello, Icon of Food and Identity

Jello is an obvious American “icon,” so well established that it has almost universal recognition, so intimate a part of familial life that it widely represents us, and identifies us, in our domesticity. The brand name is known to 95% of Americans and the product used regularly in 66% of homes (*History of Jell-O*). The history of Jello depicts the roles of an icon in popular culture, and the stories of Jello today reflect the cultural character that is being shaped in our milieu. The word itself has become a successful generification, escaping the trademark to romp *sans* hyphen and capitals as a common term for any flavored gelatin, and furthermore to preside in arcane titles of legal, scientific, and internet technology research articles. The visual image and the concept of jello have come to have greater uses and meanings than the thing itself. Jello is an icon in the sense that icons attain and exert mysterious power in our communal psyche. Indeed, jello, as we shall see, in one of its recent roles, has even been cast as the essential being of our personal psyches.

1900-1930: from Nursemaid to Artiste

Jell-O became generic and iconic by feeding various modern developments in food, childcare, women’s roles, and advertising. Although the official history of Jell-O stresses an invention and unique marketing, other flavored gelatins were advertised in the *Ladies’ Home Journal* before Jell-O’s 1902 debut. In 1900 the gelatin ads addressed the domestic concerns of

the magazine audience: digestible food needed by stressed urban commuters and thin, consumption-threatened children (“It’s Not Like Pie It’s Healthy” read a Knox ad of March [42]); food untainted by factory poisons (“The Transparency Is Proof Of Its Purity,” a Knox ad explained of its see-through illustration in June [33]); food so easy to prepare that a child could make it for a sick friend, as a Cox ad suggested; and economical food that appeared a dainty treat. Removed from agricultural life, the isolate housewife could turn to gelatin to make reliable food her nervous family would eat; the happy past was represented in Knox ads by the plump, bare-chested white and black children, especially the latter, in cooks’ hats, serving the molded gelatin. Early Jell-O ads repeated these themes, while pushing a two-minute preparation, illustrated with the trademark little girl and kettle of boiling water. The more children eat of it the more they want, and the better it is for them, advised an ad with a recipe for lemon Jell-O with marshmallows (Dec. 1905: 48).

Jell-O made children along with mothers its market. A 1915 ad pictured two children with the Jell-O their “Mama” gives them when they’re good, and offered the free booklet featuring Rose O’Neil’s cartoon Kewpies. The same ad offered women a story booklet about the bride who couldn’t cook, with the recipes she learned, illustrated by a Boston artist (Dec. 1915: 81). Jell-O furnished cultural enrichment in the form of a recipe booklet “Desserts of the World” with scenes “in ten colors and gold by a great artist” (Feb. 1910: 88). Thus Jell-O stepped in to replace the vanished farm orchard and pantry, and supplanted the vanished kitchen and nursery servants or relatives who had fed and entertained the children with fairy tales; and also appealed to a romantic feminine identification with art.

The advent of full-color ads in 1915 brought the curvaceous shapes, luscious shimmering color, and teasing transparency of Jell-O to epitomize the feminine qualities “Delicate-Delightful-Dainty” of “America’s Most Famous Dessert.” The artistic qualities and proper elegant setting of Jell-O were celebrated in original paintings for 1920s’ ads, such as Post-Impressionistic still lifes by Marion Powers and Giro (Guy Rowe) which render textures of teacakes, silver, fruit, glass, tapestry, flesh, and Jell-O into Cezanne or Matisse-like compositions (*LHJ* 1925—Jan: 111, March: 183, May: 211, June: 160). In answer to the Depression, in 1930 Jell-O advertised its economy

in making dinners with leftover tuna or stale cake, while putting “surprise” and “a *thrill* in your dinner today!” (Jan: 47, July: 87, March: 131, Sept: 51).

Everyman’s Jewish Humor

Jell-O has been such an intimate part of American lives that it is more inherent than an influence. In a review of *Everyman*, the latest of Philip Roth’s autobiographical novels, Claudia Roth Pierpont emphasizes his cultural representation (“America and Philip Roth grew up together” [86]) and his “teetering balance” of satiric rage with nostalgic praise for American life. She dates this balance to his authorial infancy, when *Portnoy’s Complaint* depicted the home of mother’s magic “in which sliced peaches miraculously defy the law of gravity” via Jell-O (84). The Jell-O looms large in the reviewer’s memory of the novel because it appears at key points: the early childhood descriptions of the all-powerful and seductive mother; the scene of Alex’s dinnertime masturbations, when he worries about “sticky evidence” while his father complains through a mouthful of red jello; and the “real Jewish meal” where “the jello is kosher too, sure, of course” (11, 44, 20, 84). This Jell-O is the icon of American maternal domesticity with its commercial magic of sweetness and seduction; it is so loaded with the desired virtues of feminine care that it is impervious to satire.

During Alex Portnoy’s and Philip Roth’s childhoods, Jell-O use soared, not only from the rise of electric refrigerators. In 1934 Jell-O advertising engaged with the favorite family entertainments of the decade, and for eight years its commercials were musical and comical skits on Jack Benny’s live radio *Jell-O Program*. Print advertising in the *Ladies’ Home Journal* extended the integration of sponsor and show, in full-page color comic-strip ads, with Jell-O in Benny plots, touts for the show, and Jack and Mary’s recipes. Through extensive mutual promotion, Jell-O was identified with the fun and cultural vantage of America’s favorite radio comedian, and vice versa. Alexander Portnoy envisions ideal fatherhood as “sitting at home listening to Jack Benny with my kids” (248). As a boy he learned comedy from the show, and mastered its impression of the Jewish salesman to make his parents laugh hysterically (95).

Benny, born Benjamin Kubelsky, used such Jewish humor from vaudeville in a combination of variety show and situation comedy where he was

alternately host-commentator and comical character (Simon and Conaty 58-9, 68-70). Like the protagonists in Roth's novels, Benny represented both the immigrant inheritance and the American everyman; commentary on Roth and Benny has key similarities. Like Roth's teetering balance between satire and fond humor, Benny creates an uncertain laughter at the illogical, arbitrary world he conceives of; it has "surreal events" that defy understanding (Henry 11). The "self-deprecating" Jewish, or ghetto, humor of Portnoy (Roth 264-5) was displayed in Benny's prancing and pouting effeminate characterization. Yet this pose also delivered Benny's critical send-up of the threatening John Wayne type (Henry 8). Jell-O as the sponsor of Benny's comedy, with its advertising integrated into his performance, assumed the cultural vantage Benny held forth for his vast audience. In amusement for adults and children alike, it made glamorous, powerful American success look at once attainable and disdainable, inferior to the laughter shared by the comedian and his audience in their recognition of pretense, and enjoyment of absurdity.

Cold War Techno-Magic

In a novel published thirty years after *Portnoy's Complaint*, satire of the American home in the succeeding, suburban generation vies with a different nostalgic humor, in the Jell-O scene of Don DeLillo's 1997 *Underworld*. This chapter appeared as a story in *The New Yorker*, titled, "Sputnik: A small tribute to Jell-O, the most American of American foods, on its centenary" (8 Sept 1997: 76-9). It has parallels with Roth's Jell-O depictions of mother's magic and son's autoeroticism that might imply an updated or corrected satire. DeLillo's housewife of 1957 does amazing things with Jell-O recipes and molds, including feeding her husband and son lemon chicken mousse and diagonally striped parfait desserts that make her son dizzy when he gazes into the Kelvinator and feels the throb of science fiction forces at work there (518). The son is elsewhere occupied in masturbation. His mother has caught him with his head inside a bowl of her anti-pasto Jell-O salad. He claimed he was testing a scientific theory; she suspects "sexual curiosity" and "unnatural" stimulation in the "jellified gunk" on his mouth (521).

DeLillo's Jell-O is not primarily an agent of Oedipal guilt, however, but rather of domestic involvement in the military-industrial competition of the Cold War. The "endless motorized throb" of the refrigerator and the "science fiction force" sensed in the Jell-O imply seductions by the conspiratorial systems of atomic weaponry and civil religion of paranoia (518).

Critics differ on the humor in *Underworld* but usually tie it to the Jell-O chapter. The comedy of satire is the means of "combating a society best described by the pseudomagic of Jell-O," Ira Nadel holds (177); but David Remnick locates the "black comedy" humor in DeLillo's delight in the language of the "techno-crazed" 1950s' society depicted in the chapter (127, 131). DeLillo evokes the charm of its techno language, and he surrenders satiric criticism to nostalgia for the era of innocence and trust. In the novel, Jell-O is a metonym for the seduction by language as well as other pseudomagics: "It was a push-button word, the way so many things were push-button now, the way the whole world opened behind a button that you pushed" (*Underworld* 517).

The Cold War obsession with connected powers and controls is illustrated in the novel's paranoid linkage of Jell-O molds and condoms, soup cans and car bombs; the paranoid system of thought provides a structure of meaning and identity in the novel (Knight 292-4). The collapse of the Cold War then leaves nostalgia for the sense of central forces and mysterious conspiracies that had unified people and directed their lives, whether in support or protest of the ruling system.

The post-Cold-War era of global economy in which we now live supports the nostalgia in the novel, because this economy seems uncontrollable and unreal, connected to suspicious trends of downsizing, customized and fluid production, and world government (Knight 292-3). Beyond our domination by media and violent images, DeLillo has observed, we do not know yet what the present era is; we cannot perceive its character, or ours within it (Remnick 138).

"the jello of your minds"

Perhaps Jell-O in its current cultural nexus can inform us about ourselves. Its status suggests, first of all, that the global economy will not convert world foodways to this perhaps most American taste: Jell-O has not

ever appealed to palates abroad. As an actual food, Jell-O reflects American provincialism and at least a degree of isolation. Those who share recipes online share a penchant for their grandmothers' covered dish salad offerings, melanges of vegetables and marshmallows or other cream-cheese goo. The social core of this retro taste, lodged in large family or church gatherings, prevails in the so-called "Jell-O Belt." This geographical crescent in the Southwest is a swath through Utah, Arizona, and southern California where Jell-O is famously popular with the area's numerous Mormons. Lime Jell-O is officially the state snack food of Utah, for instance. There are obvious simple reasons for the iconic Jell-O to characterize Mormon foodways, within their family-centered and church-based activities. Perhaps, however, more complex factors as well relate the uniquely American food to this most American-original religion, which is also the fastest growing. Its early history, like Jell-O's, features entrepreneurship, marketing, and technological methods for conservative aims. Its genealogical mission to the family epitomizes the American quest for ancestral roots. If Jell-O images an adherence to family bonding and a collusion of generational desires, it appropriately serves a religious body with a mission to family that extends not just from cradle to grave but beyond, as its genealogical searches collect the ancestors for eternal family reunions.

Jell-O characterizes a child-centered culture in the persona of its spokesman since 1988, Bill Cosby. Like Jack Benny before him, Cosby makes ethnic humor widely available, with absurdity the common cause. Rather than Benny's "everyman" figure, though, Cosby personifies an American "every child" common denominator. Positive values of education, as on *The Electric Company*; diversity; and innocence, in despite of strictures, enwrap Cosby's Fat Albert and other blunderers. Unconditional positive regard and inclusiveness have gained favor in the past twenty years. Cosby's recent castigation of the trend to glamorize gangster fashion brought surprised criticism of him, as though his reasonable, moral warning violated his authorized role as a spokesman for youth. Jell-O is a metonym for sweet and curious amusement, without critical discrimination. For "correcting the ills of the black community with up-by-the-bootstraps straight talk," Cosby is characterized by Joshua Alston as "the vanilla comedian turned culture warrior." Cosby's denunciation of absentee fathers, black-on-black crime, and gangsta rap at a 2004 civil rights celebration is still known by the cute

name of his “Pound Cake Speech”; but it shocked his African-American audience at the time, and his activism still seems “jarring,” as well as deeply controversial, for reasons Ta-Nehisi Coates has explained.

The popular uses of actual Jell-O coincide with a pseudo-juvenile persona. Prominent internet sites feature its combination with alcohol, for playful intoxication. Recipes abound, most from women jump-starting parties with accelerated alcohol intake. One kitchen experimenter reported making the “Ultimate Jello-O Shot—Gelatin Viagra,” with the highest possible alcohol concentration (*myscienceproject*). A commercial version of gelatin snack cups with 12% alcohol has been marketed to college students as “Zippers” for its fast action; the Community Anti-Drug Coalition warns of its temptation to children (“Not Average Jello”). The appeal of two to eight jello shots is a quick, carefree escape, according to somegirl’s online “Ode to Jello,” which drew six feminine affirmations for its stupidity, risibility, and true reflection of the jello-drunk.

Jell-O is also a medium in sports, for women’s jello wrestling. Is jello wrestling a sport, though, or a stunt? It is both. Officially, Amateur Female Jello Wrestling embraces the sporting contest and also its seemingly opposed burlesque. It claims outright to be “a Female-run Sports Satire” mixing sportsmanship and showmanship so the contestants display “their sense of humor as well as their bootie!” The shows once a month in New York are preceded by lessons for newcomers, which include “fun stunts” and aid in preparation for joining the performance as a staged character (*Amateur Female Jello*). The jello medium seems to elide a distinction between serious assertion of strength, body pride, or competition, and satire of self, sport, or gender conventions. Sliding easily between sport and satire, jello wrestling hasn’t the friction of opposed or differing functions. It is neither sport nor ironic satire; it’s a suspension of both, a jello.

The artist Elizabeth Hickok arouses several of our ambivalences in her artwork *San Francisco in Jell-O*. Photographic views of the nightscape reveal the sparkling jewel-tone colors and intricate shapes of the city—and/or of Jell-O. The overall views project the iconic impression of the ultraromantic city of dreams, freedom, and artistic experiment. In detail, the jello medium strikes us with the craft of the illusion we see, and perhaps the commercial craft in the delusion of the San Francisco in which we believe, that caters to our taste for the escapist or psychedelic. The Jell-O city, more

densely suffused with light and color than any actual vision, appears luscious.

One of Hickok's photographs of her jello assemblage, without any identifying caption except her name as photographer, heads a recent *New York Times Magazine* article on the current insecurity of home values. This picture of shimmering lime green, orange, cherry, and raspberry townhouses cracked and melting into their reflections tellingly indicts the current real estate debacle—and popular susceptibility to the false promises that supplied it—far more drastically than does Roger Lowenstein's factual text. The look of jello itself speaks to us.

In Hickok's artwork *San Francisco in Jell-O*, the city imitated in molded gelatin is more complimented than mocked, for numerous reasons. The instability and transience of Jell-O underscore the city's vulnerability to earthquake, and emphasize its delicate status. Further, the spectacular architecture, engineering, and environment of the city are rendered in a domestic distortion that celebrates the city as its experimental camp or queer domain. Too, as we feast our eyes on the panoply of jiggly fluorescence, we acknowledge the sham and vacuity of what we enjoy. A verse comment on Hickok's *San Francisco* posted by "VVOI" summarizes our suspended ambivalence: "Why, o why, am I so shallow / As to like the art in Jell-O / As to find the playful pretty / And misjudge *silly* for *witty*?" Being at once silly and witty, the jello art in its appeal disallows us the distance and disavowal that irony requires.

Jello has become a common metaphor for whatever defies categorization or precedented solution, in the difficulty of "nailing jello to the wall" (Silva, Tung). It provides a slippery figure of speech in the name of punk rock musician Jello Biafra. Eric Reed Boucher chose this name in 1978 as "an ironic combination of a nutritionally poor mass-produced food product and mass starvation" in Biafra, the doomed African country, during its attempted revolt from Nigeria ("Jello Biafra"). The pseudonym represents his musical career in that he has tried to combine opposites of comical or absurd pranksterism with serious political protest against corporations and censorship. But he is not able to use "Jello" ironically, nor pranks seriously. Although he may accurately assert that Jell-O offers poor nutrition, for most people it represents a wholesome food, popular for children and trea-

sured by the adults who share their personal recipes online. “Jello” cannot be reduced into an ironic contradiction to its popular connotations and uses.

Jello Biafra himself was seduced by its own marketing catch phrase when he adopted “There’s always room for Jello” as a slogan in running for mayor of San Francisco in 1979. His platform included a plan to make businessmen wear clownsuits while in the city, yet Biafra has complained that his campaign is not remembered seriously. Jell-O the successful corporate food product is not compressible into a solid defined meaning that can be subverted to irony in protest. The musician’s intent in his pseudonym may not have been exactly irony, anyway. By another account, he selected the name at random for “the way the two images collide in people’s minds” (angelfire).

In a similar instance, the image of a heavy metal band apparently clashes with the bland childhood food favorite in the name of the band Green Jello, which was changed to Green Jelly after a General Foods copyright challenge. But no irony was intended in the name, because the band set out to be the worst band possible, with kiddie cartoon video promotions and popularity with children via *The Gong Show* (Coleman). The band meant to be jello-like in the sense of childish imitation.

It might seem that the following names and phrases present clashing images or concepts: “Psycho-Jello,” “Alien Jello,” “Ode to Jello,” “the beautiful pool of jello in which all good gerbilists will bathe for eternity in heaven” (“Truth Behind”), “Now hear the jello of your minds and liZten tWo MY madness” (“Jello and Earth collide”). Where these terms appear, however, in the domains of popular culture blogs, meanings are too indistinct to clash. “Jello” seems both a pervasive, indigenous element and an artificial or surreal alternative—like the popular culture content. A youth site reviewing “the Harry Potter universe” and Nintendo and Sony games, “Alien Jello” explains itself as “You know, strange and gooshy.” The blog of a middle-aged farm woman whose interests include Wal-Mart, vacuum cleaners, and bowling, interprets life through the sagas of the soap opera *The Guiding Light*, and produces her philosophy under the penname “Jello Monkey.” When “Jello and Earth collide,” as another Web philosopher notes, they “make pudding.”

Thus “Jello” can defy interpretation, as in this blogger’s invocation: “Now hear the jello of your minds, and liZten tWo MY madness.” This

“jello” may portend commercial-fed vacuity, or Wordsworthian child-soul wisdom, or physiological brain waves. The metaphor is suspended among several target domains, to describe it in current metaphor theory (Gibbs); this diffusion of reference disallows communication by metaphor, or irony, or oxymoron. In slang, a “jell,” or jello-brain, is mindless. According to Jell-O lore, however, the brain waves of men and women have been shown on an EEG to be identical with the jiggles occurring naturally in lime Jell-O (Jell-O Museum).

Actual experiments lie behind the report of the jello brain waves. In 1969 and in 1974 Dr. Adrian Upton ran the test in an intensive care unit. His purpose was to show that hospitals could not rely on flat EEG readings to pronounce patients “brain dead,” because signals running from other hospital equipment would register as waves. Upton tested Jell-O because its “consistency and density” resembles brain tissue’s (Wyman 92-3). This context has been dropped from the “news” on the internet that our brains test identical with lime Jell-O.

And what does it “matter” anyway? If we have a mindset that colorfully jiggles, somewhere between silly and witty, or we’re just reverberating our electronic appendages, we are being ourselves in the American character of our Jell-O, as described in *Jell-O: A Biography*, “bright, brash, sweet, unsophisticated, lighthearted--even lightweight” (Wyman x). Brilliant, absurd, gorgeous, fake, whatever: we can’t be nailed to the wall.

Susan Grove Hall
Louisville

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