

On the Theme

In Varda's documentary film, *The Gleaner and I* (2000), the scene of field gleaners picking up leftover potatoes touched me profoundly and sparked my interest in the supermarket potato shelf.

In the film, the potatoes discarded by industrialised harvesters made me ponder: what characteristics of potatoes meet industrial production standards? How do these standards shape the selection and presentation of potatoes? Varda's perspective made me realise that the potatoes on supermarket shelves go through two selection rounds. First, mechanised harvesting standards in the field determine which potatoes can be sent to the supermarket. Then, in the supermarket, consumers screen these potatoes based on personal criteria such as appearance, shape and even brand. When I witnessed a couple excitedly discovering and buying a heart-shaped potato in Waitrose, I deeply understood how consumer-level selection imbues these potatoes, once discarded by industrial standards, with new value and significance. These individualised selection criteria made the entire potato selection system more flexible, expanding the possibilities for evaluating them and making choices more diverse and inclusive. This observation made me realise the diversity and complexity behind the supermarket potato shelf, extending beyond mere product display, from field to shelf to dining table.

On the Process

In exploring the potato shelves, I was inspired by how Perec (1974, p. 46) described the streets. '*They are expected to form a line, and it's a serious defect in them when they don't do so.*' Perec writes, '*They are then said to be "subject to alignment", meaning that they can by rights be demolished, so as to be rebuilt in a straight line with the others.*' This made me realize how people's expectations shape the image of things, forcing them to respond to human expectations. Buildings not aligning on either side of the street are demolished, resulting in the straight and flat streets we see; similarly, potatoes not regular enough in shape are discarded, leading to the smooth and round potatoes we select in supermarkets.

So, what does something that meets our expectations look like? Perec responds to this question in a way similar to autoethnography. He uses a wealth of detailed descriptive language to describe the elements that constitute the streets in people's impressions, covering aspects such as space, numbering, direction, and more. This inspired me to use illustration to depict the impression of potatoes. This narrative allowed me to insert and incorporate my identity into the description of potatoes, and my memories and opinions became an essential part of the observation, revealing nuances under different evaluation criteria. As Gannon and Fauchon (2021) state, '*Here, the narrator's "voice" and "point of view" are actively engaged to "make sense".*' This approach has led me to a growing realisation that our perceptions of potatoes and how they shape our lives interact. The relationship between supermarkets and potatoes is a complex system of interactions, encompassing a multiplicity of cultural, economic and personal preferences influenced by our constant search for and challenge of criteria.

References

- The Gleaners and I* (2000) Directed by A. Varda. [DVD]. Reissued. London: Artificial eye, 2009.
- Perec, G. (1974) *Species of Spaces and Other Places*. London: Penguin.
- Gannon, R. and Fauchon, M. (2021) *Illustration Research Methods*. London: Bloomsbury Visual Arts.