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Celluloid Flavours. A Brief History of Food in Film

Abstract: The aim of the essay is to analyse selected images and the ways in which food functions in films. The author attempts to demonstrate how durable and intense are the connections between food and film. The text constitutes a type of a catalogue presenting examples of culinary meanings in film, which are as diverse as possible, although the provided examples certainly do not exhaust the topic and their selection is to some extent subjective. The text is written from the perspective of film studies, with some important consequences thereof. Primarily, description decidedly dominates over analysis and interpretation, the possible directions of which are only signalled. The author demonstrates that culinary issues in films often carry a metaphorical and symbolic potential, thus becoming a carrier of information regarding the cultural and socio-political context in which the film was made. As a film specialist, she is interested in the manner in which culinary themes (i.e. food and various actions related to it) constitute an element of a film's narration by defining the presented world, providing the characterisation of the protagonists and their interrelationships, creating moods, evoking emotions etc. Both types of filmic culinaries, i.e. those inside and outside the film itself, are described and signalled in the context of concrete films (or scenes).

Key words: cinema, food in film, culinary motifs, the "food-dependent" genres.

Depiction of culinary motifs in cinematography has a long history. One fact that may be considered symptomatic in this context is that the first public screening of projected motion pictures by the Lumière brothers (on 28th December 1895 – a date referred to as the symbolic "birthday" of cinema) took place in the basement of a Parisian coffee-house called the Grand Café. The outrage of modern cinema-goers against eating during a show is seems unjustified indeed.

The present article is an attempt to enumerate examples of food-related images in film and their various functions. As it undertakes to demonstrate the long history and the intensity of the relationship between the culinary and the cinematic, the article contains references to the very beginnings of cinematography. Thus, it may be regarded as the author's personal catalogue of varied examples of the significance of culinary images in film. The list is by no means complete, nor does it exhaust the scope of the subject, while the choice, though based primarily on the cinematic canon, is to some extent subjective. Most cinema-goers probably remember a favourite (though not necessarily tasty) dish from the big screen: the gazpacho from *Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown* by Pedro Almodóvar (1988), sultan's cream from *Dziewczyny do wzięcia* by Janusz Kondratiuk (1972), the blue leek soup from *Bridget Jones' Diary* (2001, directed by Sharon Maguire)... It may be hoped that the list of delicacies presented below might constitute a good starting point for further discussion on the various flavours of cinema.

The article was written from the point of view of film studies and, as it has been stated above, it presents a kind of a list. Such an assumption has a number of significant consequences. First of all, description must take precedence over analysis and interpretation, the possible course of which shall only be suggested. Thus, the article mentions a large number of subjects, which could become the basis for separate articles. These motifs may be divided into two groups: those referring to non-cinematic contexts and those strictly related to the world as presented within the film. The present article shall repeatedly demonstrate that culinary elements in cinema production often have a symbolic and metaphorical potential and convey various information about the cultural, social and political context in which the film was made. As a specialist in film studies, I am also, or perhaps primarily, interested in the methods in which culinary motifs (eating and the related activities) are woven into the narration of films: they define the world depicted in the movie, outline the personalities of the characters, help create a certain mood, stir emotions etc. Both of the mentioned types of the aspects of food-related motifs in film (touching on the inner and outer context) shall be delineated and identified in the framework of specific movies or scenes.

The inventors of the cinematograph, the Lumière brothers, created very short movies which focused primarily on documenting actual events: scenes from their own everyday life and snippets from the life of the city and its inhabitants. It was therefore natural that the subject of food should arise. One of the first moving pictures by the Lumière brothers, shot in their family garden in the spring of 1895 (i.e. before the cinematograph was introduced to the general public), shows a scene related to eating: Louis Lumière filmed his brother Auguste having a meal with his wife and infant daughter. The general term 'meal' is used here for a reason, as the specific type and hour of the said meal is difficult to specify. In Polish terminology the movie is referred to as *Śniadanie dziecka* (*The baby's breakfast*), while in the catalogues of the Lumière brothers it appears as either *Repas de bébé* (i.e. *Feeding the baby*) or *Le Déjeuner de bébé* (*The baby's lunch*). The nature of the meal aside, the movie unquestionably focuses on food. Thus, the subject of eating entered the big screen, although it must be emphasised that the entry was not particularly splendid. The inventors were simply exploring the potential of their device by filming, so to speak, at random. Their brief movies depicted scenes from everyday life. The content was decidedly less important than the actual possibility to immortalise a snippet of reality in the form of a moving picture.

Arguably the first movie to feature food in a more meaningful way was *How Bridget Served Salad Undressed*. Various versions of it were made by different film studios (e.g. the American Mutoscope Company, 1898, Biograph, 1900), and numerous remakes of it appeared very soon (e.g. *Serving Potatoes Undressed*, 1902). The plot was based on one of the series of anecdotes popular in the United States at the end of the 19th century, focusing on the adventures of one Bridget McKeen, an Irish immigrant working as a servant. These took the form of jokes as well as cartoons printed in newspapers and on postcards. Bridget was not possessed of a sharp intellect and thus repeatedly found herself in awkward or troublesome situations, inflicted damage or put herself in danger. In the case of *How Bridget Served Salad Undressed* the humorous situation stems from a verbal misunderstanding. Bridget is asked by the master of the house to serve the salad *undressed*, upon which she brings the dish being un-

dressed herself.¹ The funny little film about the servant is of significance in the context of the relations between food and cinematography, because it was probably the first instance of a food-related situation being used as a reference to a particular social and cultural context. The risqué joke carries a number of implied information, e.g. concerning the stereotypical views, the attitudes towards immigrants and the characteristic features of American humour in late 19th and early 20th century.

The depiction of food was also involved in the history of film censorship, due to one particular work of the pioneer of British cinematography, Charles Urban, a movie entitled *Cheese Mites* (1903). Less than a minute long, the film (a part of a series entitled *The Unseen World*) shows bacteria crawling on a piece of stilton, as viewed through a microscope. The film was deemed to be “gross” and to discourage people from eating cheese, which, predictably, elicited a nervous reaction from cheese producers afraid of a downturn in sales. Due to their protest, *Cheese Mites* was banned from cinemas. As Sarah Smith ironically observes: “One of the first films to be banned in Britain contained neither sex nor violence, but cheese” [Smith 2005: 18].

Food and eating started to be associated with certain movie genres as early as in the days of silent films. According to Rebecca L. Epstein, the “food-dependent” genres included the western (with the saloon as one of the major locations), slapstick comedy (with their famous cake fights) and the horror, which typically breaks the culinary taboos [Epstein 2007: 219].² It must be emphasised that early attempts at filming food were plagued

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- 1 This movie is only one of the many based on the same series of anecdotes. Other examples include *The Finish of Bridget McKean* (1901), in which Bridget (played, incidentally, by a sturdy male – a fact which, in turn, reflects the stereotypical image of the physique of Irish women) causes a fire that proves fatal for her. It must be added that at the end of the 20th century, a similar series of jokes appeared in the United States (and was to some extent reflected in cinematic imagery), this time featuring an intellectually limited immigrant from Poland [cf. Musser 1991: 45].
 - 2 In this context the author mentions contemporary movies – *The Silence of the Lambs* and *Alive*, yet similar examples may easily be found among silent films. Everybody seems to remember the scene of the first dinner in the castle of Count Orlok (*Nosferatu – a Symphony of Horror*, 1922, directed by Friedrich Wilhelm Murnau), during which the guest injures his finger and is disturbed by the way the host reacts to the drop of blood falling down the hand.

with problems of a strictly technical nature, related to the lack of colour and sound. This subject is discussed in more detail e.g. by Steve Zimmerman in his *Food In Films. A Star Is Born* [Zimmerman 2009: 26–28]. In the age of silent cinema, the depictions of food were limited to black and white images lacking any aural effects. Can a silent colourless film scene convey the sensuality of the moment of biting into a juicy apple? It is due to such technical limitations that culinary scenes were rather scarce in silent movies and did not have the potential of metaphorical images. The sole purpose of the food fight scenes mentioned by Epstein was to create a humorous effect and to spur the audience into laughing. “[...] Comedians did use food in their films, but mostly to create sight gags, and in those instances the focus was on the joke, not the food”, writes Zimmerman [Zimmerman 2009: 26].

There were, naturally, exceptions to this rule. These include Charlie Chaplin’s *Gold Rush* (1925). One fact that is important in the context of the present discussion and of which most viewers seem unaware, is that the director drew inspiration from actual experience related to food (or, more precisely, the lack thereof). Chaplin admits in his autobiography:

I read a book about the Donner Party, who, on the way to California, missed the route and were snowbound in the Sierra Nevada mountains. Out of 160 pioneers, only 18 survived, most of them dying of hunger and cold. Some resorted to cannibalism, eating their dead, others roasted their moccasins to relieve their hunger. Out of this harrowing tragedy, I conceived one of our funniest scenes [Chaplin 1964: 299].

The scene he refers to is of course the one in which the hungry Tramp decides to serve his own shoe as a meal for himself and his companion. It must be added that this is done for a special occasion – Thanksgiving. The scene, filmed in extraordinary detail, became a part of the movie canon, not only due to the exceptional comicality, but also the meticulous presentation (the shoelaces arranged like spaghetti, the nails licked and sucked on like bones) that is highly evocative of the feeling of hunger experienced by the characters in the movie. Humour goes hand in hand

with drama. Thus, Chaplin's movie becomes a unique statement for all the abused and the maladjusted living on the margins of the American social system. The hunger felt by the characters in *Gold Rush* is manifested in yet another scene, in which Big Jim in hunger-induced hallucinations mistakes Tramp for a large chicken, which he decides to hunt and eat – nearly killing his friend. Thus, the film touches, albeit delicately, on the issue of potential cannibalism.

Chaplin's works would indubitably constitute a crucial turning point in narratives referring to the topic hunger. Especially since – as Steve Zimmerman observes – *Gold Rush* is not the only movie in which the master of slapstick comedy utilises the motif. The author of *Food In the Movies* emphasises that there was a significant autobiographical aspect to such scenes:

During Chaplin's successful twenty-year career of making silent films, food and eating scenes (especially those portraying hunger and abandonment) play an important role which, given his Dickensian childhood, is not that surprising. Living from hand to mouth as a child in the care of mentally ill mother, their condition aggravated by the death of his estranged alcoholic father, undoubtedly left a vivid and lasting memory [Zimmerman 2010: 135].³

The third food-related scene in *Gold Rush*, more poetic and metaphorical than the other two, is most often referred to as the "Roll Dance".⁴ Tramp, who has tragically fallen in love, is waiting to receive his sweetheart for New Year's dinner. The girl plays a joke on Charlie by making him believe she would spend the evening with him. Weary with the long wait, Tramp finally falls asleep and dreams that his beloved and her friends have come to visit. Tramp tries to be a good host and invents various ways to entertain his guests. Finally he forks two rolls and uses them as puppets in an

3 The connection between Chaplin's interest in depicting hunger and his difficult childhood marked with poverty was noticed also by other authors [see: Boyer 1993: 25–26].

4 It should be added that although the roll dance is uniformly associated with *Gold Rush*, it was not Chaplin who devised the scene. It was borrowed from a movie called *The Rough House* (1918) by Fatty Arbuckle.

elaborate dancing show. The girls clap their hands in applause. Tramp then wakes up to realise his actual situation – the girl had not come and the moment of happiness was only a dream... The authors of numerous analyses emphasise that the dreamed-up dinner conveys more than just illusory happiness. Eric Reinholtz suggests that the “roll performance” is a manifestation of the need for independence: “the lone prospector breaks the etiquette of formal dining by transforming the function of forks and rolls in order to win the attention of his female dining companions” [Reinholtz 2004: 269]. Ian Christie, in turn, perceives this scene as “a metaphor which elegantly and suggestively links food with sex” [Christie 1998: 188].

Chaplin was not the only slapstick comedian to realise that food and eating offered more than just the hilarity of a cream cake splashed over somebody’s face. Eric Reinholtz offers a food-oriented perspective (especially in relation to social rituals connected with eating) on the works of another master of slapstick, Buster Keaton, in which “the ritualized consumption of food serves as the springboard for a highly nuanced representation of inter- and intraclass relations that is as astute as it is humorous” [Reinholtz 2004: 268]. It must also be emphasised that significant scenes featuring culinary motifs appeared also in other genres of silent cinema. The wedding dinner from Erich von Stroheim’s *Greed* (1924) is a good example.

The real breakthrough in culinary imagery in movies came only in 1960s, for a variety of reasons. The first of those was related to the mentioned technical aspects of movie-making – the development of new technologies offered increasingly better possibilities of representing reality. No less important was the cultural and social context, notably the growing interest in cuisine. The credit for this change goes to Julia Child, an ordinary American woman, who decided to turn her passion for cooking into a way of life. In 1951 she was the first woman in history to graduate from the prestigious French school of culinary arts Le Cordon Bleu; ten years later the first issue of her influential cook book *Mastering the Art of French Cooking* was published in the United States. In February 1963 the Boston-based public television station WGBH started to broadcast her own cooking show entitled *The French Chef*. The “message” Julia Child

conveyed was very simple and unpretentious: cooking is a lot of fun. In her television performances in the kitchen she was always natural and charming, and happened to make mistakes; this gained her many fans and became a sort of a personal trademark as well as an asset. She was not a distant, inaccessible star; she'd spill liquids or drop appliances, she even managed to burn a dish or two. In her interpretation, French cuisine – associated with elegance, refinement and luxury beyond the scope of the ordinary citizen – became more “homely”, yet did not lose any of its fleeting culinary beauty or flavour. Frances Short notes that Child was “famous in part for the numerous errors she made on television” [Short 2006: 109]. Watching *The French Chef* still is an extraordinary experience, both on terms of cuisine and entertainment value. Despite the passage of time, Julia Child still inspires and fascinates, while in early 1960s she was one of the absolute icons of American (pop)culture. Steve Zimmerman argues that it was this renewed interest in cuisine and cooking that effected the change in the way food was treated by movie-makers [Zimmerman 2009: 28]. It began to appear more frequently on screen and, more importantly, acquired a meaning beyond that of a prop or an element of the stage design. Obviously, this tendency was observable not only in American cinema. Examples of movies and directors that accentuated food are numerous indeed. One European movie-maker whose works include deeply significant and meticulously planned scenes involving eating was the Italian master Luchino Visconti. His culinary discourse with the audience was conducted with exceptionally sophisticated cunning. In his analysis of the movie *The Leopard* (1963), Steve Zimmerman draws attention to the fact that although the crucial scene of the feast is beautifully filmed and elaborately staged, food as such is not the point of focus. This is all the more surprising given the fact that the director employed actual chefs to prepare all the dishes according to traditional recipes. One may therefore speak of a significant absence of food on the screen (even though the dishes were laid out on the tables during the filming of the scene) coupled with an exaggerated focus on the actions connected to consuming, including the relations, emotions and interpersonal ties defined through these activities:

Visconti never mentions what is on the menu, never shows any kitchen scenes of cooks preparing the food, and with one exception there are no close-up shots of any of the plated dishes or of people enjoying their dinner. The single exception, cleverly symbolic, shows Don Fabrizio, at the beginning of the meal, cutting through an unidentified three-tier baked Italian delicacy, of which one of the guests remarks, "Different layers in keeping with tradition". [...] At the scene progress, we see guests helping themselves to food served from platters held by servants, then subsequent shots of them cutting their food, taking bites and chewing, but the food itself is hidden behind candles, flower arrangements, drinking glasses, or otherwise too far removed from the camera to be recognizable. The emphasis is more on the refined behavior and hushed confabulation of the guests, the crisp efficiency of the inconspicuous waiters, all carefully arranged with a painter's eye for detail and lighting captured in luxuriant Technicolor by cinematographer Giuseppe Rotunno [Zimmerman 2010: 219].

Another turning point in the history of cinematic food depictions came in the 1980s with what some scholars call the emergence of an entirely new genre: the *food film*.⁵ This term describes a specific group of movies in which food and eating are not only present on screen, but become a key element in the plot and narration – they define the characters and the relations between them, expresses emotions, delineates the world portrayed in the film, etc. Ann Bower describes the characteristics of a *food film* in the following manner:

5 Scholars specialising in film studies still cannot agree on whether *food film* constitutes a separate genre, or is simply a descriptive category. I decided to spare the readers the nuances of specialist discussion, noting merely that I myself am inclined towards the former viewpoint. In my estimation, *food film* clearly has the potential of a separate genre, especially since it possesses the necessary semantic basis (this term is, of course, used in relation to the semantic/syntactic/pragmatic approach to film genre as described by Rick Altman), which includes the typical locations (the kitchen, the dining room, a restaurant, a food market, etc.), elements of the stage set and props (kitchen appliances, dishes, the table, plates and, naturally, food itself), as well as the personality of the main character (a cook or a gourmet – and usually both). Movies that focus on food also offer a specific type of syntactic structure (e.g. a meal is the climax of the story) and film pragmatics of a certain kind.

The camera will focus in on food preparation and presentation so that in close-ups or panning shots, food fills the screen. The restaurant kitchen, the dining room and/or kitchen in home, tables within a restaurant, a shop in which food is made and/or sold, will usually be central settings. And the film's narrative line will consistently depict characters negotiating questions of identity, power, culture, class, spirituality, or relationship through food [Bower 2004: 5–6].

Rebecca Epstein adds another significant and distinctive feature: “Over the past few years, food films have been making moviegoers salivate” [Epstein 2004:195].

The title of the first fully mature *food film* is usually given to *Babette's Feast* (1987) by Gabriel Axel.⁶ The story takes place in the late 19th century in a small fishing town in Jutland. Life there is slow and filled with religious worship, quiet contemplation and asceticism. Or was... as the local situation slowly but surely begins to change following the arrival of Babette, who fled the revolutionary turmoil of Paris. The woman takes up work as a servant in the house of the local minister's daughters, where she cleans and cooks – and all that have tried her cuisine must, if unwillingly, admit that it is a source of pleasure. In the puritan world of the village the sensual joy of eating inevitably brings shame, as all worldly pleasures are spurned as sin. One day Babette wins the lottery and decides to spend all the money on a feast for everybody. The dinner she cooks becomes a sort of a rite of passage for the locals. At first everyone is eating silently and meditatively, and slightly embarrassed (since Babette's dishes are sinfully delicious), with time the guests begin to smack their lips and lick their fingers more and more openly, and even start to smile and talk to one another. In the words of Mariola Marczak, “Babette's feast revived the community that had been in pieces” [Marczak 2000: 172]. The same author also emphasises the exceptional metaphorical potential of the movie, which transcends the realm of culinary literality – and consequently categorises the film as religious, due to, among other things, the theological symbolism of a feast, the references to biblical parables introduced into the plot

6 The script for the film was based on a novella by Karen Blixen.

and, naturally, the presence of religion within the world portrayed in the movie (the story takes place in a Lutheran settlement; the main characters include a minister and his two daughters) [cf. Marczak 2000: 173–175].⁷

The examples of *food films* are numerous. These tell very different stories and may be categorised as belonging to different traditional genres (*Chocolat* is a melodrama, *Vatel* a historical movie, *Simply Irresistible* a romantic comedy), but nevertheless share basic common features which make them into a characteristic and recognisable group.

An interesting step in the history of the *food film* genre was *Julie & Julia* (2009) by Nora Ephron. The plot is based on a culinary project (later turned into a book) by one Julie Powell, who challenged herself to spend one year to cook all five hundred and twenty four recipes included in the already mentioned famous book by Julia Child. Accounts of her progress and experience were regularly posted on her blog. Nora Ephron shows how cuisine may become a link between the stories of two very different people living in very different times.

Nora Ephron's movie may be considered a model example of the "genre confusion" surrounding *food films*. It is evident even in the material to be found on the producer's website, the movie's own web page and on the IMDb portal. The movie is described as a: biography, drama, romance [<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt1135503/>],⁸ the poster primarily invokes associations with biographical movies (the slogan reads: *Based on two true stories*). On the other hand, the food-related motifs are also emphasised, not only through the references to the profession and interests of the two main characters (the mentioned poster shows both of them in the kitchen). The producer's promotional materials describe the movie as a "delicious comedy about joy, obsession and butter", whereas the summary is con-

7 It must be noted here that the direction of Mariola Marczak's analysis is no exception. The author herself refers to many other scholars looking at the movie from a similar perspective (e.g. Dariusz Czaja, *Moment wieczny. O Uczcie Babette*; Wiesław Juszcak, *Dzieło a „granica sensu”*; Zbigniew Benedyktowicz, *Maria i Marta (Uwagi o Uczcie Babette)*; all of the works were published in: "Polska Sztuka Ludowa. Konteksty", 1992, no. 3–4). However, Marczak's analysis does not employ the term *food film*.

8 A similar Polish-language portal categorises the film as: biography, drama, comedy [<http://www.filmweb.pl/film/Julie+i+Julia-2009-465594>].

cluded with the exclamation “Bon appétit!”, aimed at encouraging viewers to see the movie [<http://www.sonypictures.com/movies/juliejulia/>]. Related websites also include recipes for the dishes prepared by the characters on-screen and give viewers the opportunity to share their own culinary ideas (dubbed *food-spirations*). A noteworthy aspect of this discourse is the tendency to use wordplay and references to the terminology connected strictly to cooking and eating. Thus, although the term *food* is not featured anywhere as such, one can get the impression that it becomes a kind of a supra-category, in terms of which the movie is to be categorised. Another element that appears significant is the attempt at embedding the plot of the movie within a broader context of the discourse related to culinary art (as exemplified by the mentioned possibility of trying the same recipes or sharing one’s own ideas). All materials related to *Julie & Julia* suggest that it is a biographical drama, but a “slightly different” and unique one, because it is so steeped in the culinary arts. The story exhibits food as a sort of a determinant, an absolutely indispensable element of the plot. In other words, the so-called commutative test,⁹ known e.g. from semiotic analysis, if applied to this example, would certainly show that the elements related to eating are crucial for the story and changing them to any other would require a change in the meaning and the structure of the entire work. The modification would be more profound and consequential than a simple alteration of the characters’ jobs and interests or the key locations, as it would have to encompass the very methods of conveying meaning within the work.

The important conclusion to be made here is that *food film* proves to be a category that exists above typical classifications (or perhaps *in spite of* them). Its representatives are found mainly in feature films, but there are also examples of animated movies – such as *Ratatouille* (2007, directed by Brad Bird) or *Cloudy with a Chance of Meatballs* (2009, directed by

9 As explained by John Fiske, the commutation method (also known as the commutative test) “involves changing a unit in the system and assessing the change in meaning, if any, that has occurred”, which in consequence makes it possible “to identify significant differences” and “to help us define that significance” [Fiske 1990: 109]. Rick Altman refers to the commutative test as a possible preliminary (though not fully satisfactory) method for a pragmatic analysis of film genres [see: Altman 1999].

Chris Miller, Phil Lord) – as well as documentaries. It is an outstanding example of the latter category that shall be discussed below.

The idea behind Peter Kerekes' *Cooking History* (2009) was to access the story of the most important armed conflicts of the 20th century, so to speak, through the kitchen door. For the protagonists of the movie he chose military cooks. The concept of food as life-giving is transformed into the image of food as a bringer of death – as soldiers are to be fed well in order to have the strength to kill. In Kerekes' film, food and the activities connected with it become a form of communication, a language shaping wartime memories and the opinions expressed. For the cooks serving in the military, cuisine develops into a means to fight the enemy, and not only due to the fact that they feed the army of soldiers. Sometimes the chefs find themselves at the frontlines of "culinary wars". One such situation is recalled by Branko Trbovic, who used to be the head chef cooking for Josip Broz Tito. He describes the fiasco of diplomatic talks as follows:

The leaders of the state were working on a plan to preserve the integrity of Yugoslavia. They met for the first time on 28th of March 1991 in Split. Franjo Tudjman invited them for lunch, and immediately nationalist games begun. He served Dalmatian ham with olives, Croatian dumplings and Dalmatian meat stew with vegetables. Only Croatian dishes, which Serbs eat very seldom. [...] In Belgrade the Serbs issued a counterattack. Slobodan Milošević and his wife organised a typical Serbian lunch, to settle the score with the Croats. [...] The third meeting took place at Alija Izetbegović's. He served Balkan cake, a Turkish soup with okra and roast lamb, and finally *tufahije* – a Bosnian dessert made of apples. The state of negotiations was clearly visible in the menu. In every successive meeting there was more and more nationalism and less and less hope for Yugoslavia as an entity.

Throughout the film Peter Kerekes uses the principle of culinary discourse very consistently. Food-related imagery appears not only in the accounts of the interviewed chefs, but also in the scenes devised by the director himself. Let us focus once again on the Yugoslavian part of the story and look at the manner in which Kerekes constructs the analogy between food and dictatorship. Branko Trbovic describes, among other things, the

special “culinary connection” he had with Tito: “I had to know what he liked and know him well. I may have had a different taste, but I got used to his preferences. Perhaps I did not like the same things, but I made an effort to make food appeal to him”. Listening to this passage, it is hard not to get the impression that in this context the meaning of the word ‘taste’ reaches beyond the scope of culinary connotations. The dictator’s cook recounts: “Tito was sophisticated. Tito was a gentleman. Everything had to be top-notch. The menu, the dining room, the service”. As background for this part of the interview, the audience sees a peculiar scene: a naked woman is lying on the table and two cooks are arranging cold meats, vegetables and other snacks on her body. From a person she is transformed into a dish for the dictator, who – figuratively, of course – consumes his supporters. An image comparing totalitarianism to cannibalism (and the dictator to a cannibal) is, of course, disquieting, but also disturbingly accurate, owing to the context created by Kerekes’ movie.

Continuing the subject of cannibalism, one is tempted to mention a characteristic tendency that has long been apparent in the history of food in film. Although “tasty” representations are prevalent (even the shoe in *Gold Rush* is portrayed from the perspective of the characters as a treat), there exist significant exceptions to this tendency. One example is the already mentioned disgusting portrayal of a slice of stilton cheese; yet in this case the image was not meant to convey any metaphorical message. One of the first instances of a “signifying” presentation of repulsive food is the scene from *Battleship Potemkin* (1925) by Sergei Eisenstein, in which the officers instruct the sailors to eat rotten, maggot-filled meat in order to humiliate them and demonstrate their power and authority. An excellent anti-culinary scene appears in *The Phantom of Liberty* (1974) directed by Luis Buñuel. A married couple invites some guests to visit on a lovely afternoon. The guests in smart attire approach the table, the lady of the house assigns the seats. There is only one detail that stands out in an otherwise ordinary space of a Parisian apartment – the table is surrounded by toilet bowls instead of chairs. The guests pull their pants down or gather their skirts and settle down; their defecating does not hinder the casual conversation on topics suitable for an elegant gathering: that

someone went to the opera, somebody else visited Spain (Madrid did not win their approval as the air was filled with the stench of – begging your pardon – food). The most engaging discussion arises around the subject of defecation and attempts to estimate the daily norm in this respect. Significantly, the course of the debate resembles conversations on the so-called pressing problems of modernity, such as famine. The meeting does not go without a social blunder, as at one point the daughter of the hosts loudly exclaims that she is hungry. Only sometimes one guest or other sneaks out surreptitiously to a quiet spot in order to eat something, which they do quickly and with apparent embarrassment.

Finally, there are movies in which the negative associations connected with food become the basic principle of the world as portrayed in the work. These might be dubbed *anti-food films* or *reverse food films*.¹⁰ As with the previously discussed category, food and eating constitute a key element of the plot and acquire a metaphorical meaning, yet these are not “tasty” movies and, to refer to the already mentioned description by Epstein, they do not make moviegoers drool, but provoke quite different physiological reactions, which mostly involve the gag reflex.

Arguably the first *reverse food film* in history was *Le Grande Bouffe* (1973). Marco Ferreri tells the story of four friends who go to a villa in the countryside with the intention to gobble (the colloquialism here is intentional) themselves to death. *Le Grande Bouffe* is a disgusting and perverse tale that places emphasis on the physiological issues related to this manner of committing suicide. It is a veritable spectacle of vomit and excrement, yet, of course, the movie conveys a deeper metaphorical message about the modern world consumed by a crisis of overabundance. Another example of *anti food film* is *The Cook, the Thief, His Wife and Her Lover* (1989) by Peter Greenaway. Almost the entire plot plays out in an elegant restaurant, yet food evokes decidedly unpleasant associations – most often it becomes the tool of humiliating or even inflicting emotional pain on a person. In the final scene the wife forces her husband to eat the body of her lover, whose

10 Since the issue of *anti food films* is discussed in a separate article, the present text will only briefly present the most important points and conclusions based on this analysis. For more detailed information see: Drzał-Sierocka [2014].

assassination he had paid for. Compelling a person to commit an act of cannibalism becomes a sort of a punishment, all the more sophisticated as it adds to the previous offence of manslaughter. It should be added that, similarly to *food films*, *reverse food films* transcend typical classification. Examples of such movies may easily be found among documentaries. There is a numerous amount of socially involved documentaries which showcase the inadequate conditions of food production (growing crops and rearing animals), as well as the economic, social, political and health-related consequences of the state of affairs. Examples include *Food, Inc.* (2008, directed by Robert Kenner), *Super Size Me* (2004, directed by Morgan Spurlock), or *Food Beware. The French Organic Revolution* (2008, directed by Jean-Paul Jaud). In these cases the message (the content) is usually regarded as more important than the form of the movie, and the directors of such documentaries are activists rather than film artists.¹¹

Naturally, in modern cinema food and eating also appear in movies that cannot be categorised as *food films*. In many cases, “significant” eating is presented only in a single scene, e.g. the memorable cake scene from *Once Upon a Time in America* (1984) by Sergio Leone, or the funny and terrifying execution scene from Quentin Tarantino’s *Pulp Fiction* (1999) featuring a big Kahuna Burger. On the other hand, *food film* crosses the boundaries of cinema to enter other types of audiovisual media. A good example of this expansion is the television series *Hannibal* (NBC, 2013) which utilises a fictional character named Hannibal Lecter, known from a series of movies, especially *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991, directed by Jonathan Demme; the television series maybe regarded as a prequel to the movie). Although *The Silence of the Lambs* cannot be classified as a *food film* (even if culinary preferences do constitute a crucial element of the personality of the protagonist), the subject of Hannibal’s tastes are expounded on in the television series – each episode features scenes of preparing dishes and eating; the images of meals carry more than just extraordinary meaning, not only in terms of metaphors (references to the Eucharist; defining the nature of the relations between characters etc.)

11 More information on such works may be found e.g. in: Drzał-Sierocka [2013].

but also emotions (not least because none of the characters beside the main protagonist are aware of what kind of meat is being served). This aspect is particularly significant from the perspective of the specificity of response. The audience and the protagonist know that the food on the table contains human meat, while the guests on Hannibal's feast become cannibals unwittingly. One may therefore speak of a unique communion based on a shared secret, and thus of an act of violence, not only literal, but also symbolic (from the point of view of the protagonist, inviting people to his dinners and feeding them human flesh is an act of dominance and a manifestation of power). The receptive situation is peculiar indeed. The audience sees artfully arranged and elegantly served dishes; the food looks very appetising. One is almost willing to be able to taste it. On the other hand, we know what the ingredients are. Would we really want to partake in such a meal? Consciously, we would probably refuse to taste human meat (as it is prohibited, disgusting, barbaric etc.). But if we had the chance to try it without knowing what is being served? There is something entrancing in the scenes of eating with Lecter, something that borders on the metaphysical and may evoke associations described by Jolanta Brach-Czaina:

The everyday activity of eating is an essential occurrence that conveys information about our fate and ought to make its participants aware of the peril and the gravity of the situation. Is it not strange that upon eating flesh we should experience the pleasure of taste, and not the feeling of gratitude, and never consider that we are witnessing a terminal event? By partaking of the flesh of another creature, we effect the transformation of death into life [Brach-Czaina 1999: 169].

Cinema offers more than engaging stories; it also provides us with thousands of recipes and formulas. All cinema-goers may find something for themselves, whether they be vegetarians or meat-eaters, lovers of sweets or spices, organic food activists or people who appreciate a wholesome burger. Despite the fact that taste and smell are not among the senses that cinema may influence directly, film artists learnt to stimulate them with other means: colours, shapes, associations. Some movies (or scenes) may be smelt and tasted. Such is the magic of the cinema...

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