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**“The Significance of the Ideological Meal
Within the Food Film Genre”**

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Introduction: The Role of the Ideological Meal in the Food Film Genre

"Nothing would be more tiresome than eating and drinking if God had not made them a pleasure as well as a necessity." -Voltaire

There is nothing groundbreaking about a discussion of the worldwide predominance and utility of food. The reasoning behind its universal significance is rather self-explanatory. No matter one's background, eating is crucial for the survival of every member of the human race. Food is universal, first and foremost, because literally no one can live without it. But beyond its most fundamental physiological utility is a spectrum of qualities that add to the implicit importance of the practice of eating. The foods associated with a given culture have geographical and historical significance. The type and extravagance of the foods an individual eats within a culture vary just as greatly, and are often dictated by his or her socioeconomic status and what he or she can afford. Food and the rituals that surround its consumption are, therefore, inextricably linked with emotional aspects of life. Far from transpiring within a vacuum, even the simplest act of nourishing oneself puts an eater within a social and cultural context that adds multiple layers of meaning.

It is these culturally bound choices and traditions that elevate the status of the meal from a fact to a fascination. The variability of the eating ritual across the globe has unsurprisingly led to endless discussion and analysis of its diverse components. The potential source of the allure lies in food's duality; it is simultaneously unifying and segregating, familiar and exotic. And because of this dichotomy, people in both scholarly circles and more mainstream channels get a distinct enjoyment from making food their focus.

This enjoyment carries over even into realms where food's most appealing sensory components are absent. Despite its inherent inability to convey either taste or smell, cinema is a prominent forum for exploring cuisine and its nuances. According to Anne L. Bower:

visual artists use food partly because it is such a common element of their world.... This very commonness is part of what allows food to function so evocatively, drawing us into a film's characters, action, and setting. Food is part of the way that for over a century now, movies have been telling us who we are, constructing our economic and political aspirations; our sense of sexual, national, and ethnic identity; filling our minds with ideas about love and romance, innocence and depravity, adventure, bravery, cruelty, hope, and despair.¹

By analyzing films in which food is a vital focus, and not merely an incidental presence, this paper aims to separate food from its mere utility, to analyze and illuminate its more emotionally-charged elements, and to understand how these elements contribute to the overall purpose of the films in which they appear.

Without clear boundaries for discussion, the subject of food in cinema would be virtually limitless. The parameters of this paper are dictated largely by the content of the primary texts. That being said, the films incorporated here are by no means the only significant or relevant films that feature food in a prominent role. They were singled out from an extensive selection because they represent the greatest cross-section of the genre. The works range in release date from 1925 to 2007 and span more than a dozen countries. They run the gamut from shoestring budget independent documentaries to multimillion dollar blockbusters. Some are critically acclaimed, others virtually unknown. Yet they all share one vital characteristic: in one way or another, each illuminates some aspect, whether realistic or romanticized, of the complex and intriguing relationship between humans and what they eat.

¹ Bower, Anne L. Reel Food. (New York: Routledge, 2004) 3.

Though these films are conventionally categorized within a slew of different genres, such as romance, comedy, and thriller, it is also possible to consider the chosen texts (with a few noted exceptions) collectively as a genre in their own right. Aside from what each offers individually, the selected films also fit into the larger thematic framework of the ideological meal. The ideological meal, I propose, consists of four parts: choosing the menu, cooking, eating, and clean up. Regardless of the conclusion a film reaches or the values it espouses, each within the overarching food film genre approaches the stages of the meal in a strikingly similar way.

The first stage, choosing the menu, is an illustration of culture; it is utilized cinematically to both provide context and to set the stage for overarching cultural conflicts. The preparing and cooking process is the realm of the aesthetic, where dialogue and plot are pushed aside by imagery and representation. This stage consequently becomes a forum for exploring themes of loneliness and isolation. The eating stage, often centered on the symbolic dinner table, is the time for the development of the personal and interpersonal. The act of sharing a meal on screen is an equalizing process during which conflicts are resolved. The final stage, which includes clean up and the meal's other direct consequences, serves, by virtue of its omission, as a reminder of the limitations of film and its inherent unrealism..

Very few of the film texts devote equal attention to each stage. Rather, filmmakers navigate through this theoretical meal, deemphasizing some stages and entirely omitting others, to direct the audience's attention to film's overall purpose. By examining the cinematic decisions made within the context of each of these stages, it's possible to gain a better understanding of the filmmaker's purpose for his or her work.

Furthermore, it's possible to gain insight into both the underlying magnetism of the individual films, and of the food film genre as a whole.

Stage 1: Choosing the Menu – A Parable of Culture

“Tell me what you eat, I’ll tell you who you are.” -Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin

Before eating can take place, a decision must be made as to what will be eaten. The factors that enter into this decision-making process are countless, from accessibility and mood to familiarity and palate. Though it is not uncommon for films to manipulate the order in which a story is told, logic dictates that picking what to eat is chronologically the first step towards the completion of any meal.

Consequently, within the emerging genre of the food film, choosing the menu is the first of the four symbolic stages of the ideological meal. During this stage, perhaps because it often occurs first in the order of events, or perhaps for some deeper reason, filmmakers are apt to introduce and frame the cultural issues and conflicts which will be central to the film. Because one’s food carries such heavy connotations in so many instances, introducing the predominant forms of cuisine early on in a film, often before major plot points or even the characters are introduced, is a way filmmakers can quickly summarize the contextual world in which the story will transpire.

Author James R. Keller summarized the many realms and subdivisions of culture for which food is representative in the introduction to his book *Food, Film and Culture* when he stated:

In most cases, the filmmaker simultaneously links visual and sensual responses to ideas peripheral to food and its consumption. The culinary is highly suggestive of

abstract cultural processes, such as class, race, gender, ethnicity, history, politics, geography, aesthetics, spirituality and nationality.²

So many personal factors are involved in making menu selections and, consequently, much can be inferred about an individual simply by observing what he or she consumes. In an industry where time is money and audience attention spans are ever dwindling, introducing food, an object deeply charged with meaning, allows a film to quickly convey a wealth of information in the blink of an eye.

During the opening credits of the 1994 Korean film *Eat Drink Man Woman*³, for example, before a word has been spoken, the audience has an extensive body of knowledge about the type of family this is being depicted. Much can be determined from even a simple snapshot of the final table spread, which contains nearly two dozen items, including meticulously sculpted dumplings, frog legs, and noodle soup with pork. The person responsible for choosing the menu (though not necessarily all those that will be eating it) is from an older generation, Asian, and has a propensity for traditional Chinese fare. The overwhelming number of dishes placed upon a table set for four suggests that the person who chose the menu is both well-off financially and predisposed to overdoing him or herself. The elaborate nature of the preparations also suggests that the meal is of some emotional significance to the preparer, perhaps for a special occasion.

The nuanced menu choices serve a nearly identical role in the 2001 American film *Tortilla Soup*⁴, which is largely an adaptation of *Eat Drink Man Woman*. The film's title is the first illustration of the Mexican tradition that will pervade the film in the form of the cuisine. The spread created for the meal in the film's opening scene includes fried

² Keller, James R. *Food in Culture*. (London: McFarland & Company, 2006) 1.

³ *Eat Drink Man Woman*. Dir. Ang Lee. Perf. Sihung Lung, Kuei-Mei Yang, Chien-lien Wu. 1994.

⁴ *Tortilla Soup*. Dir. Maria Ripoll. Perf. Hector Elizondo, Jacqueline Obradors, Tamara Mello. 2001.

plantains, grilled cactus, squash blossom soup and copious amounts of chili peppers. The elaborate nature of the food again provides hints into both the socioeconomic class and the ethnicity of the person preparing the meal.

One food film that has reached a virtually iconic level because of its portrayal of the relationship between food and culture is *Soul Food*⁵. The film recounts the celebrations and tribulations of the Josephs, a successful African American family living in Chicago. Though they're divided among themselves on many issues, the menu choices at their weekly dinners are never a point of contention. The widespread embrace of the African American tradition as represented by these dishes illustrates that the history of black culture, and its relationship to contemporary American culture, is an integral part of the identity of each individual at the table. According to Keller:

The food that the Joseph family consumes –Southern fried chicken, deep fried catfish, chitlins, pig's feet, black-eyed peas, sweet potato pie, egg pie, sweet corn bread, greens, macaroni and cheese etc. –suggests the cultural duality within the African American soul. There is nothing particularly African about the comestibles that the family savors; however, many of the dishes are racially distinctive within African American cuisine.⁶

By considering the significance of these dishes in the historical landscape of the African American, is possible to understand how the family chooses to position itself culturally within their larger world.

In the three aforementioned instances, the reasons behind the menu choices are not explicitly explained. The cooks never discuss why they elected to serve the chosen recipes, and the diners do not ask. The underlying assumption is that these dishes were chosen as a result of the cook's strong ties with his or her ethnic background. But far

⁵ *Soul Food*. Dir. George Tillman Jr. Perf. Vanessa L. Williams, Vivica A. Fox, Nia Long. 1997.

⁶ Keller 167-168.

from this simple reading, the cultural significance of food scenes goes much further.

According to Jane F. Ferry, author of the book *Food in Film*:

Analyzing the food and dining images in...representative films should underscore how food's meaning germinates from the patterned system of social life for each specific social and cultural group. Close observation of the food-related scenes will peel away the material significance of food to reveal its symbolic embodiment of power.⁷

Though the unelaborated inclusion of culturally representative cuisine achieves the purpose of framing the story, films that leave room for explicit discussion of the menu selection process (even when this discussion does not directly address ethnicity or culture) open the door for an even greater wealth of information about the cultural and societal conflicts the characters face. In many instances, the food itself functions as a direct cause of the struggle. The menu, then, becomes a vehicle for raising the culturally relevant arguments and issues that will be pivotal throughout the work.

As discussed earlier, accessibility figures greatly into the first meal's first stage. The cultural aspect that bears the most influence on accessibility is class. Whereas poorer individuals are restricted in their food choices by what they can afford, those on the opposite end of the spectrum with unlimited funds at their disposal can gain access to additional food options that are unavailable to the masses. Rare or non-indigenous foods are viable only for the upper classes, and making expensive food choices therefore becomes a way of indicating one's social status.

A person's culinary habits, particularly when that person is on either end of the socioeconomic spectrum, are on par with classic signifiers such as housing and clothing in terms of the information they convey about wealth and status. Because of the showiness of food, constructing a demonstration of eating habits that deviate drastically

⁷ Ferry, Jane F. Food in Film: A Culinary Performance of Communication. (New York: Routledge, 2003) 4.

from the norm is a useful technique for filmmakers in the food genre. Whether the film depicts examples of extreme extravagance or barrenness, the act of selecting a menu is a mechanism by which to establish class struggle.

If access to food is hierarchical, the 2000 French documentary *Les Glaneurs et la Glaneuse*⁸ addresses individuals on the bottommost rung. In the film, whose title translates roughly to “The Gleaners and I,” cinematographer Agnes Varda follows some of France’s most marginalized inhabitants as they pick through the garbage in search of their next meal. While some wait beside grocery store dumpsters in Paris’ wealthiest neighborhoods, others lay in wait in the country’s growing regions, gathering what produce is left when harvesting is complete. In this instance, the menu is chosen for the diners, quite simply because they will eat whatever they can find.

Les Glaneurs and la Glaneuse dwells almost exclusively in the first stage of the meal. The second stage, the cooking process is not depicted because, often, it does not exist. In most instances, these gleaners do not have access to a kitchen space, as many live on the streets. Others are too hungry to invest the time needed to cook, or lack all the necessary ingredients. Except in instances where the food is eaten the moment it is found, the third stage of the meal is also not addressed.

The omission of all but the first stage is not accidental. Even when inclusion of the cooking and eating processes would have been feasible, the filmmaker made a conscious choice to focus instead on the gathering process alone, which signals her thematic agenda for the work. By virtue of omitting the next two stages, the filmmaker has suggested that the theme these phases embody, aestheticism and interpersonal relationships respectively, are less relevant to the film’s grand purpose than is the theme

⁸ *Les Glaneurs et La Glaneuse*. Dir. Agnes Varda. Perf. Agnes Varda. 2000.

of cultural conflict. Withholding images of these individuals eating heightens the impact of this theme of class conflict and allows Varda's depiction of injustice to pack a stronger punch.

Under this theoretical framework, a film constructed entirely around the act of picking and choosing what will be eaten means the promise of a bounty of class and socioeconomic conflicts. And this is precisely what the film provides. In addition to shadowing the lower class gleaners, the filmmaker interviews a number of their opponents, namely those who take issue with having their leftovers picked through. Varda speaks with a grocery store owner (who in this comparative context signifies the upper class) who began pouring bleach inside his garbage dumpster to discourage a pack of homeless teens from living off of its contents. In a similar fashion, one wine maker explained why he, unlike many other growers, refuses to let the impoverished pick from his vineyard after the harvest is complete. The fewer bottles of wine are prepared each year, the rarer and consequently more expensive each bottle becomes. If his grapes are accessible by alternate means, the value of his product will decrease as a consequence.

Through carefully crafted narration and editing, the narrator conveys quite clearly that her sympathies lie with the gleaners and not their wealthy adversaries. Though growers have the legal right to regulate what happens to their crops, the filmmaker bombards the viewer with images of fruit left to rot, juxtaposed with the starving people who are forbidden to harvest it. She shapes the growers' refusal to make their unwanted food available to the needy as selfish and morally deplorable. It is primarily through her crafting of the story around the emotionally charged stages of the meal that this perspective is able to rise to the forefront.

A film that takes a more lighthearted approach to class conflict within the first stage of the meal, yet addresses it equally as directly, is the 2007 Pixar film *Ratatouille*⁹. The animated piece features a rat named Remy, who is disgusted by his colony's eating habits. Remy ambitions transcend indiscriminately eating garbage to survive. He begins sneaking into a nearby human's house where he refines his culinary talents by watching television cooking programs and pilfering ingredients from the kitchen.

Though the film seems, on a surface level, devoid of serious cultural implications, the relationship between humans and rats throughout the film is symbolic of the relationship between high and low social classes in a given society. Remy is upwardly mobile, bored and embarrassed by his low class upbringing and desperate to demonstrate his cultural superiority by exercising his cooking skills. His father, wary and distrustful of humans, urges Remy to realize that they will always view him as inferior because of his background. Inspired by his favorite chef's catch phrase "anyone can cook," Remy is able to consolidate his two worlds. Through his atypical navigation of the first stage of the meal, choosing foods that are indicative of a higher social class and teaching his colony to do the same, he earns the approval of his human cohorts. Adaptability within this stage leads to the reconciliation of an earlier class conflict, and the two species are able for the first time to live together cooperatively.

Class struggle represents one of the most uniquely polarized battles of culture, as its participants are typically on opposite ends of a long spectrum. The difference between rich and poor creates an imbalance of power where one group has a considerable advantage over the other. It is conventionally understood that class is a fluid attribute. Through any number of circumstances, the rich may lose their money, and the poor may,

⁹ *Ratatouille*. Dir. Brad Bird. Perf. Patton Oswalt, Ian Holm, Lou Romano. 2007.

in theory, become rich. The idea one's class is not a permanent, inseparable aspect of one's identity removes much of the emotional ferocity from class struggles. The imagined potential for an ultimate resolution to the struggle depersonalizes the act of being marginalized.

But in examples from the film texts where the struggles do not involve class, but rather more permanent aspects of identity such as religion and ethnicity, the power struggle is significantly more nuanced and simultaneously more volatile. In such instances there is, strictly speaking, no superior group. Clashes of religion and ethnicity find members of every group struggling to preserve the ways of life that are personally meaningful from the influences of lifestyles they find foreign and unfamiliar. Ethnic mobility is not an option; to compromise one's ethnicity is to lose it. Thus advocating for the preservation of one's ethnic heritage is, for many, a fight to the death.

Though no ethnicity is intrinsically superior to any other, circumstances often place one in the dominant position. Immigrants, for example, are frequently faced with the challenge of preserving their equally valid culture from the pervasive influence of local culture. The more dominant and powerful culture in a given situation threatens to consume any differing cultures and integrate them, thus eliminating much of what makes them unique. Within the texts, the act of choosing the menu again reflects the clashes of ethnicity the characters face, and symbolizes both their means of coping with the conflict and their overall feelings towards the prospect of ethnic assimilation.

Gabriel Axel's film *Babette's Feast*¹⁰, which won the 1988 Academy Award for Best Foreign Language Film, demonstrates how arguments over food can not only highlight previously overlooked differences in ethnicity, but can also become a catalyst

¹⁰ *Babette's Feast*. Dir. Gabriel Axel. Perf. Stephane Audran, Bodil Kjer, Birgitte Federspiel. 1987.

for further struggle. The film, which is based off of a novel, follows the story of two elderly sisters living in Demark during the 1800s. Their father, a revered conservative pastor, has long since passed away. However, the pair continues to care for the community and espouse their father's virtues of piousness by means of Puritanical simplicity and abstinence. The sisters spend their days praying, or else cooking and delivering simple vegetable broth to the ill and elderly of the community.

When revolution breaks out in France, an old acquaintance sends a woman named Babette to take refuge with the sisters, beseeching them to take her in as a housekeeper. The quiet, grateful Babette watches as the sisters teach her how to make such simple dishes as ale bread for themselves and their many charges. Babette does not reveal that she was a world renowned chef while in Paris, and continues to prepare these demure meals for the sisters without argument for the next 16 years.

As an important religious commemoration for the sisters approaches, Babette learns she has won the lottery. She convinces the two sisters to allow her to prepare a traditional French meal in honor of the observance. The reserved pair's mild reluctance disintegrates into horror when the ingredients for Babette's feast begin arriving by boat. After observing the cage of chirping quails, the writhing giant tortoise, and the plethora of wine bottles, the sisters become convinced that Babette's cooking is that of the devil. So fearful are the women of the unfamiliar ingredients that they call a meeting to warn their guests of the evil they will shortly be subjected to. The group forms a pact that, regardless of what they taste, they may not comment upon or compliment the meal, as that would be encouraging the wicked qualities of extravagance and excess.

In this film the cultural divisiveness of the menu is staggering. Despite Babette's longtime unwavering adherence to the sisters' values and customs, the menu for one meal was a force strong enough to convince the pair that Babette was possessed by the devil. Though she was able to assimilate into the dominant culture of the household, that of the sisters, Babette's true identity shone through for the first time in over a decade when she was granted the opportunity to choose for herself what she would cook. In these two ways, the film asserts the deep cultural implications of the meal's first stage.

Along these same lines,. Stanley Tucci's 1996 film *Big Night*¹¹ demonstrates an instance where the culinary demands of the dominant culture prove to be too much for members of the visiting culture. The film follows the story of two Italian brothers, Primo and Secondo, as they struggle to keep their Italian restaurant afloat. Having emigrated from Italy to the New Jersey coast, the pair must work to understand the often confusing and conflicting eating habits of their American patrons.

The opening scene of *Big Night* demonstrates explicitly the cultural resistance the two men face, and how they as individuals differently address the problem. Excepting the space regularly filled by a friend of the brothers, only one of the restaurant's tables is occupied. As Secondo places their meal on this American couple's table, the woman picks disapprovingly through her dish, arguing that it is not the meal she expected. The scene proceeds:

Woman: Sir, is this what I ordered?

Secondo: Yes, that is risotto, a special recipe that my brother and I brought back from Italy. Delicious, I promise.

...

Woman: Didn't you say this was going to be rice with seafood?

Secondo: Yes, Italian Arborio rice, the best, and then shrimp and scallop.

¹¹ *Big Night*. Dir. Campell Scott, Stanley Tucci. Perf. Tony Shalhoub, Stanley Tucci. 1996.

Woman: Well, uh, I just don't see anything that looks like a shrimp or a scallop.

But don't I get a side order of spaghetti with this?

Secondo: Why, well, no.

Man: I thought all the main courses come with spaghetti

Secondo: Well, some yes. You see, risotto is a starch and it doesn't really go with pasta.

Following this exchange, the couple reluctantly gives in and orders a side of spaghetti with meatballs.

Jane F. Ferry discusses at length the cultural representativeness of food within the scene. She writes:

When the risotto with shrimp and scallops does not look familiar, the woman's culinary curiosity quickly turns to hesitation and rejections. She retreats to safety by requesting the known and familiar spaghetti. On a deeper symbolic level, resistance to the food may in some way kindle the ideational believe that 'you are what you eat'....Eating the food of another culture produces a sympathetic union whereby one assumes the essence of the culture. Eating, digesting, and assimilating foods of a foreign culture transfers the symbolic properties associated with foreign food into the eater.¹²

This crass and uncultured couple, with their begrudging approach towards a truly ethnic meal, typifies the film's portrayal of the American diner as both undiscerning of quality food and unwilling to embrace any culture but their own. This perspective is further demonstrated by the success of the Italian restaurant across the street, which has a constant line out the door, but serves Americanized dishes that Primo angrily refers to as "the rape of cuisine."

The conditions of life within such an unyielding culture are harsh, particularly for Primo, the older of the siblings, who is more tightly bound to his Italian roots. When Secondo returns to the kitchen with the woman's order for spaghetti, Primo throws a fit, refusing to cook the dish because the pairing would be improper. He is so enraged by the proposition that he throws a pot against the wall and sardonically suggests that he should

¹² Ferry 33.

prepare the woman a side of mashed potatoes while he's at it. Following this exchange, Secondo tells Primo he thinks they should remove risotto from the menu. He argues that it is expensive and time consuming to make, but the underlying truth they both recognize is that the dish is failing to sell because it's too Italian, and American diners don't understand it. Primo agrees sarcastically to the proposed menu change, spurning his brother's intentions by suggesting they replace the item with hot dogs.

Within the film, this first phase of the meal again paints a picture of the cultural battle that functions as the crux of the movie. As exemplified by the restaurant across the street, to be successful and accepted, one must let go of much of his culture. Because success and not cultural preservation is Secondo's priority, he sees assimilation as a viable option, whereas his brother does not. Though how they will navigate this difference is unknown at this point in the film, these two simple scenes about choosing the menu suffice to convey to the audience the essence of the conflict that will unfold.

Though it is an issue somewhat tangential to the thrust of the argument, a discussion of the menu would not be complete without a brief discussion of the role of cannibalism within the food film genre. Rather unexpectedly, cannibalism, in its various forms, runs rampant within the primary texts. The circumstances in which humans became the main course included nearly all of the forms as laid out by Carole A. Travis-Henikoff in her book *Dinner with a Cannibal*. In the Czech film *Jidlo*¹³ we see the practice of autophagy, or eating oneself. The Korean film *301/302*¹⁴ addresses "gastronomic cannibalism" in which "human flesh is dealt with and eaten without

¹³ Food/Jidlo. Dir. Jan Švankmajer. Perf. Petr Meissel, Gabriela Wilhemová. 1993.

¹⁴ 301/302. Dir. Chul-Soo Park. Perf. Eun-jin Bang, Sin-hye Hwang. 1995

ceremony (other than culinary), in the same manner as the flesh of any other animal.”¹⁵

Such films as *Soylent Green*¹⁶ (which only loosely fits within the genre) venture into the realm of “benign cannibalism,” in which the ingredient is ingested unknowingly.

Taken as a collective body, these cannibalistic texts are somewhat puzzling. What are the implications of the idea that human flesh is among the most commonly recurring ingredient in cuisine-centered films? The appeal of “mankind’s oldest taboo”¹⁷ likely rests, that simply, in the fact that cannibalism is the greatest of all food taboos. Though most modern cultures have an implied protocol for the variety of foods which foods lie outside the bounds of what is appropriate to eat, human flesh supersedes all others.

As the film industry is continually upping the ante with each successive release, surprising moviegoers has become an increasingly difficult task. To keep the audience’s attention, cinematographers often feel they must push the envelope further than those that came before them. In a genre that pivots around the culinary, the concept of eating human is the most exotic and surprising of circumstances a story can impose. Ironically, because the theme of cannibalism has been broached so many times, it too has ceased to be surprising within the genre. This choice of ingredient within food films illuminates a cultural problem now beleaguering the film industry. What this menu choice says about the culture at large (in this instance, the moviegoers) is that their metaphorical “hunger” for excitement and drama has reached a decisively improper level. How the food film genre will mitigate the battle between maintaining a sense of decency and the ever-

¹⁵ Travis-Henikof, Carole A. Dinner with a Cannibal: The Complete History of Mankind’s Oldest Taboo. (Santa Monica: Santa Monica Press, 2008) 24.

¹⁶ *Soylent Green*. Dir. Richard Fleischer. Perf. Charlton Heston, Leigh Taylor-Young. 1973.

¹⁷ Travis-Henikoff, Title.

present need to surprise the audience remains to be seen. But in the scheme of things, this culturally-sensitive conflict too fits into the framework of the ideological cinematic meal.

In many ways, the act of selecting the meal is a culturally coded process. The menu of choice may simply provide an indication of the chooser's ethnic, national or socioeconomic background. But equally as often in food film, the cuisine is the direct cause of culturally-oriented conflicts. Recognition of the link between culture and this first stage of the meal is therefore crucial to an understanding of what makes so many food films so emotionally impactful and resonant within their intended culture.

Stage 2: Cooking the Meal – An Aesthetic Isolation

“Some dishes are of such indisputable excellence that their appearance alone is capable of arousing a level-headed man's degustatory powers.” - Jean-Anthelme Brillat-Savarin

After the menu for the meal has been chosen, the process of preparing and cooking it must next take place. This phase, which represents the second stage of the ideological meal, is used by filmmakers primarily as a time for exploring the visual power of food, from both a purely aesthetic standpoint, and a symbolic one.

For food films to achieve their greatest potential and resonance with audiences, the intrinsic appeal of cuisine must be explored, even exploited. In a medium where the sensations of taste and smell can't be incorporated, sight is by far the most compelling sense to which food representations can appeal¹⁸. It is for this reason that, with only minimal exceptions, depictions of the meal preparation are dominated by striking visuals. Across the genre, aural information of every kind, though it is still present, takes a backseat to imagery during the meal's second stage.

The process of cooking and preparing the food provides an unparalleled opportunity for filmmakers to appeal visually to the audience. If the beauty and aestheticism of the food is to achieve its fullest impact, it must be afforded the crux of the film's attention, with little to distract from it. Consequently, filmmakers often choose to forego the use of dialogue during this stage and allow the food to speak for itself.

Whether inadvertently or otherwise, utilizing this stage of the meal to such an effect has a tangible impact on the characterization of the chef, and therefore notably influences the plot of the film. By virtue of this second stage's incompatibility with

¹⁸ Keller 1.

verbal interaction, it has developed into a major vehicle for demonstrating and exploring themes of isolation and loneliness. Though it is not the only end to which the food preparation stage can be used, it is the most deeply explored and most fully developed with the primary texts, and will therefore be dissected most closely within this discussion.

The trend of loneliness, for all the frequency with which it appears, is somewhat contradictory to expectations. Many of American media's most prominent depictions of cooking, from the inviting, comfortable friendliness of stars like Rachel Ray to exciting, fast-paced cook-offs during *Iron Chef*, hail cooking as an enjoyable hobby interwoven with a cherished pastime. Because of the diversity of these representations, and the fact that many of them have their roots outside of the United States, the mentality that cooking is enjoyable is presumed, from mainstream media, to apply across the globe.

Instead of showcasing cooking as a constructive and meaningful process, the dialogue-free scenes that pervade stage two tell a tale of individuals who use food to mitigate negative emotions. Cooking, for the chief chefs of the genre, is a way of escaping an unfulfilling life, clinging to a better place and time, or simply the greatest attempt at overcoming feelings of abandonment, inadequacy, and being underappreciated. The aim of this section is to examine how aesthetics are paramount during the cooking phase of food films, and to illuminate how these visuals prompt an illumination of the emotional suffering of the cook.

To understand why this phase is so important, one must first have appreciation for the extensive capabilities and functions of food-related visuals. An appropriate analogy used to relate food's overwhelming draw is its relation to onscreen depictions of sex. As Keller explains it, "the cinematic hunger artists exploit the audience's visceral response

to the imagery of food in a fashion similar to the manipulation of sex on screen.”¹⁹ So often, in fact, has the relationship been drawn between these two primal drives that the term “food porn” has entered into the lexicon as a means for describing the instinctive and consequently unshakable nature of the appeal that food related visuals have upon a viewer. According to this theory, food provides a means of arousing and drawing in audiences that is successful because it is both supremely tactile and, unlike pornography, unflinchingly embraced by the general population. This physical identification with the images on screen forges a vested interest in the imagery on the screen which is often subconsciously transferred to the characters and the world of the film.

With such a level of emotional acuity in place, the audience is primed for the far more subtle emotional battles to which they have simultaneously been introduced. Their proverbial hunger and engagement with the food will also make viewers more attuned to plot and emotional cues that are being presented. By examining how food films utilize aesthetics to draw in the viewer, and how cooking is used as a tool for illustrating emotional struggles, it is possible to better understand how the two aspects of the film are intertwined.

One movie that embodies the physical and emotional power of food visuals is the 2007 American film *Waitress*²⁰. The film tells the story of Jenna, a waitress in a small southern pie diner. Her days are a dreary, endless cycle of working for a thankless boss before returning home to her authoritarian, emotionally abusive husband Earl to prepare for an unwanted pregnancy. The reality in which Jenna resides is dreary and gray. Her home and her workplace are visually dingy and dull both inside and out. She is portrayed

¹⁹ Keller 5.

²⁰ *Waitress*. Dir. Adrienne Shelley. Perf. Keri Russell, Nathan Fillion, Andy Griffith. 2007.

as both physically and emotionally trapped in a drab and miserable world over which she has no control or input. The only reprieve that exists from this emptiness, for both Jenna and the viewers, is her cooking. Every afternoon, after she has completed her shift, Jenna is charged with inventing the next day's pie special. These periods where Jenna is cooking comprise the most emotionally charged within the film, for a number of reasons.

First, much of the food that appears throughout the film is visually stunning. Its aesthetic elements are vibrant and carefully composed, as can be seen during the baking sequence in the film's opening credits. Though Jenna's face is shielded from view, we see vivid, close up views of her hands pouring brightly colored mixtures into tins, or artfully cutting and weaving a latticework of dough. The power of food to play upon the "hunger" of the viewer is exploited to the fullest in this sequence. Beyond its simple beauty, the careful placement and juxtaposition of these moments within Jenna's otherwise visually unappealing life heightens their impact and significance. Experiences within the second stage of the meal therefore become what both viewer and protagonist look forward to.

Once this fundamental physiological differentiation has been created between the cooking stage and all others in Jenna's life, the emotional significance follows almost naturally. We come to understand the true depth of Jenna's loneliness by virtue of her relationship with cooking. Only when she is in the kitchen alone does she express any sort of contentment. The kitchen is the one realm of her life in which she has freedom to express herself honestly and creatively, in which her abilities and individuality, channeled into her unique recipes, are appreciated. The cooking stage is here, as in most other instances across the genre, a realm of isolation; Jenna's situation is unique,

however, because it is this alienation and separation from others actually renders the act of cooking more appealing, rather than less.

Another of *Waitress*' techniques that cements the relationship between the beauty of food and its simultaneously alienating nature is Jenna's tendency to engage in cooking fantasies to mentally remove herself from her unpleasant surroundings. When her husband Earl is first introduced and immediately begins grumbling about his bad day, Jenna closes her eyes and begins creating a recipe for "I Hate My Husband Pie. You take bittersweet chocolate and don't sweeten it. You make it into a pudding and drown it in caramel." During these frequently occurring fantasies, the screen displays a tight, overhead shot of the pie tin as the appropriate ingredients are added. In each instance, as Jenna is in the process of composing the recipe before the audience's eyes, her daydreaming is interrupted, snapping her violently back in to reality. The disruption of the pleasant escape for the audience is as visually jarring and unexpected as the mental interruption is for Jenna. We understand, through these mental asides Jenna's need to escape, as well as the critical, unavoidable pull that food visuals hold for each of us as humans.

Though mentioned briefly for its foray into the first stage of the meal, another film which dwells almost exclusively in the second stage (and utilizes visual elements to a unique end) is *Ratatouille*. The human protagonist of the film is a clumsy, gangly teen named Alfredo Linguine who earns a job as a garbage boy in one of Paris' most expensive restaurants. When one of Remy the rat's cooking creations is mistaken for the work of Linguine, the boy is hired as a chef, despite his abysmal cooking skills. After Remy discovers he can control Linguine's body movements by pulling on his hair, the

pair begins working together. The implausible secret that all of his movements are being controlled by a rat isolates Linguine from the other chefs in the kitchen and renders an already socially outcast individual even more unable to connect with his peers.

Linguine's isolation and failure to fit in within the kitchen spring largely from his strange and antisocial mannerisms. But these eccentric behaviors are often driven by the attempt to keep his secret hidden. In an unconventional tactic, filmmakers use the alienating nature of the kitchen to an effect that is not dramatic, but rather humorous. On Linguine's first day as a chef, while he and Remy are still in the process of developing their system, he is flustered by the head chef's angry instructions to repeat his initial dish. What results is a fast-paced scene where the boy's awkward figure, under Remy's control, saunters recklessly and unnaturally about the kitchen scattering dishes and awestruck people aside in his wake. The success of *Ratatouille*, a film about the cooking process, lies predominantly in its visual humor. Though it takes a very different approach from other films of the genre, it nonetheless fits within the scheme of the ideological meal because it utilizes imagery to illustrate the protagonist's strangeness and consequent social isolation.

Despite the ultimate embrace of the cooking process and reconciliation of isolation that occurs in the aforementioned examples, most genre films which raise these issues are ultimately unable to resolve them. For example, in 1984, filmmaker Karen Silverstein created a short, independent documentary titled *Gefilte Fish*²¹. The film, which runs only fifteen minutes in length, features interwoven demonstrations from the filmmaker's grandmother, mother and sister on how to prepare gefilte fish. The film,

²¹ Gefilte Fish. Dir. Karen Silverstein. Perf. Elizabeth Silverstein, Marcee Silverstein, Jill Silverstein-Newman. 1984.

though lighthearted in nature, is ultimately a demonstration of three women with irreconcilable differences in values who have consequently lost the ability to understand and relate to one another. By centering the piece around the perspectives of the women as they are cooking, rather than eating or choosing the menu, the film highlights the emotional distance between the women and their inability to connect on any significant level.

Visual and aesthetic elements play a drastically different role in this film from those previously discussed. Rather than a mechanism for drawing in the viewer, the unappealing, unsightliness of the fish and the process used to prepare serves a calculated negative function. The imagery throughout *Gefilte Fish* successfully keeps the audience at distance and emotionally unsteadies them. The process of viewing dead, beheaded fish being unceremoniously deboned brings about in most modern viewers a degree of unease that then gets channeled towards the struggle among the women.

How these women are unlike is the true focus of this film; the food preparation process is simply the vehicle through which the disparities come to light. Whereas the oldest woman says of gefilte fish, “it’s healthy, nourishing, traditional, and everyone likes it” her own granddaughter snidely writes the dish off as “hunks of dirty white meat” that “doesn’t even have the consistency of fish.”

The grandmother recounts a long and involved cooking process, which begins with the purchase of live fish, and continues with the removal of heads before an hour of manual grinding and chopping. The elderly woman, who is no longer physically able to complete the cooking, describes her old routine with a note of sadness and remorse. She then goes on criticize and bemoan the “newfangled” use of food processors to expedite

the process. She makes clear she views the cooking ritual as one of joyful memory and deeply rooted significance.

Interwoven with the eldest family member's testimonials are those of her daughter-in-law, who begins her cooking demonstration at the butcher and returns home to deposit the fish into her Cuisinart. She places a cinnamon-scented mixture on the stove, she explains, "because the smell of fish is so atrocious, so we all don't gag." To her, the preparation process is something of a necessary evil, what must be endured to reach the desired eating stage of the meal. The third of the interviewees, the filmmaker's sister, gives a demonstration of how, when she absolutely must serve gefilte fish, she begrudgingly forces open a jar of the product and arranges it carefully on a bed of lettuce to disguise the fact that it was not homemade.

Though the food is notably not beautiful or visually appealing in this instance, the filmmaker nonetheless utilizes aesthetic techniques to make her point. Each of these women, even the immobile grandmother, makes a very visual production of her own personal process. Whereas the mother enthusiastically brandishes her food processor in front of the camera and the grandmother shows off her hand chopper with an excited flourish, the youngest woman makes a prolonged and dramatic display of beating the jar of fish against the floor when she is initially unable to remove the lid.

The most striking visual decision of the filmmakers was the choice to depict the women separately. Rather than a discussion or sidelong demonstration, each of the three women presents her technique alone, cut off from the others. Visually, the demonstrations strike the viewer as being utterly unrelated, save for the dish in question. Emotionally, the demonstrations are equally as isolating because each woman expresses a

feeling of superiority in her method, and a complete inability to understand why anyone would follow any process but her own. It is the union of their physical and ideological separation that renders *Gefilte Fish* a strong example of the relationship between visuals, isolation and preparing the meal within the food film genre.

The 2003 Norwegian film *Kitchen Stories*²² takes a far more direct approach when it comes to linking cooking with alienation, despite the fact that the film makes little attempt to incorporate any of food's visual properties. The film satirically tells the story of a Swedish company that specializes in kitchen appliances and services. In order to most effectively advise the kitchen setup of their diverse clientele, they send a regiment of researchers to Norway to study and document the kitchen habits of single males. The researchers are warned repeatedly that to ensure the reliability of the study's results, they are forbidden to interact with the subject to which they are assigned.

When researcher Folke first arrives at the home of the participant Isak, his subject refuses to open the door, as he believes he was tricked into participating. Isak eventually relents after the program's coordinator becomes involved, however, for the first weeks of the two month-long study, Folke is exasperated to observe that his subject never uses his kitchen for cooking. Aside from an occasional unrelated activity, Isak actively avoids his kitchen, turning off the lights and leaving quickly whenever his observer arrives. Though he cannot explore other areas of the house, Folke begins to suspect, correctly, from what he hears and smells that Isak is performing his cooking in another room of the house in order to avoid observation.

The scenes that ensue between the two men are remarkable and strange as a result of their concerted effort to avoid interacting with each other. The movie develops into a

²² *Kitchen Stories*. Dir. Bent Hamer. Perf. Joachim Calmeyer, Tomas Norström. 2003.

passive battle of two men that are both lonely, yet in opposition to each other because of their conflicting needs and expectations of the cooking process. Isak believes he has the right to perform the ritual unobserved in peace and solitude, and Folke believes he has the right to observe the process in its natural state. It is not until the cooking stage has been bypassed and the two are granted an opportunity to eat together that the barriers come down and the two are ultimately able to become friends.

Some of the food film genre's most strikingly isolating scenes are those in which the protagonist, typically a skilled chef, pours his or her heart and soul into the cooking process for an unappreciative and ungrateful table of diners. This is the case in both *Eat Drink Man Woman* and *Tortilla Soup*, two films which are virtually identical in plot. In each work the opening sequence depicts the father, a professional chef, painstakingly preparing a beautiful, elaborate meal for his three daughters. When the daughters arrive, they are ultimately unhappy to be there. Carmen, the eldest in *Tortilla Soup*, describes the weekly meal as "the Sunday evening torture ritual" and criticizes her father's culinary decision to remove the seeds from the peppers before including them in the soup. The eldest daughter in *Eat Drink Man Woman*, Jia-Chien, similarly criticizes her father for over-smoking the pork. In both instances, the three children are unable to see the larger picture, the effort which their father devoted to the meal in order to bring the four family members together.

During these films, the daughters are being increasingly subjected to outside influences that threaten to loosen their ties to their family. The middle daughter announces her plans to move out of the house as the youngest enters into her first serious relationship. As a single parent and professional chef, the thing the fathers feel they know

how to do best is cook, so they ultimately devote their attention fully to this cause in hopes it will be enough to convince their daughters to stay. The idea that years of flavorful cooking have dulled each father's taste buds to the point of being useless only furthers this idea. Cooking, a former passion, has lost all of its intrinsic enjoyment and personal value. The second stage of the meal represents in the world of these films not an enjoyable experience, but rather a last ditch resort to maintain the status quo and fight off a future of loneliness..

This same pressure for approval and appreciation is the force that ultimately drives the protagonist, Song, over the brink of sanity in the 1997 Korean film *301/302*. Through flashback, we learn that Song has always taken great pride in her cooking. When her once loving husband becomes aloof and disinterested, irritated by her constant bids for approval, Song desperately tries to win back his affection through her artful cooking. But when her attempts have little impact, she resorts to cooking her husband's dog for dinner, and he promptly files for divorce.

The ordeal leaves Song convinced that her cooking is inadequate. Gaining approval for her culinary skills becomes an obsession, worsened by the discovery that each meal she has delivered to her neighbor Yun has been placed directly into the trash. Though there is nothing wrong with her cooking (Yun is simply anorexic), the refusal of two of Song's closest associates to acknowledge her effort creates in her a loneliness and sadness so great that she is driven to madness, ultimately killing and eating Yun.

In the scope of the food film genre these three films are primary examples of cooking's most frequently depiction as a sorrowful, empty, unfortunate obligation. Preparing the meal is the gloomiest and least optimistic of the three stages. It is

consequently the one that requires the most effort to be relatable to the audience. As audiences may attempt to distance themselves from this stage because of its unpleasant themes, the integration of appealing aesthetics are doubly important to ensure films about the second stage are relatable and personally meaningful.

Stage 3: Eating the Meal –Forging the Interpersonal

*“Never argue at the dinner table, for the one who is not hungry always gets the best of the argument.”
– Richard Whately*

The third stage of the ideological meal, eating, is the area within a film in which interpersonal relationships and conflicts are explored, and virtually always mended. Representations of the dinner table as a place of gathering and socializing are prevalent within mainstream media, a fact which renders this stage the most undisputed of the three. However, the food film genre takes the conventionally understood power of the act of eating to a deeper level. The dinner table, beyond serving as a gathering place for loving families, is a force for uniting individuals who have significantly less in common. The food film genre suggests, rather idealistically, that the simple act of placing individuals around the same table for a meal will bring them emotionally closer together, even in instances of complete strangers or mortal enemies.

The cinematic purpose of this stage is multifaceted. Chronologically, eating occurs last of the three major stages, and therefore often necessitates that the dénouement should occur in conjunction with the eating process. To offer up the sort of neat, happy ending that Hollywood films are so inclined toward, filmmakers are prone to utilize the uniting power of the table as a catalyst for solving conflicts. Even when these scenes are interspersed throughout a film, the final meal of a film becomes the largest, most extravagant, and most pivotal as a tool for cementing these relationships.

The uniqueness of this stage springs from the food film genre’s tendency to fulfill widely held expectations of the eating stage in often symbolic or unconventional ways. To be most accurate, the guiding principles of this stage are at work at any time the characters are working collectively to dispose of the food. Therefore, the dinner table

itself, though almost always present, is not crucial to the progression of this stage. It is, instead, a symbol and an easily employed plot convention. Even when the act of eating takes place on the go, this stage retains its primary function.

Overall, the third stage of the meal proves food's power as a great equalizer for people from all walks of life. All humans need food to survive, and the act of eating together reminds different individuals of their inescapable similarities as human beings. An examination of this stage as it appears in these texts will demonstrate how filmmakers have worked to expand and often challenge viewers' narrow expectations for the meaning of the eating process.

The parameters of the eating stage, though often confined to a dinner table, are also capable of stretching far beyond it. Phase three for this reason incorporates anything that happens to the food after the cooking stage is completed. A work that appropriately demonstrates how alternative means of consumption still cleave to these principles is Laurel and Hardy's slapstick comedy film *Battle of the Century*²³. When the two men leave a banana peel lying on the ground in front of a bakery, an emerging worker slips and falls, dropping his tray of pies. He retaliates by fetching a new pie from his nearby truck and throwing it into the face of Hardy, who quickly attempts to retaliate.

Bad aim takes hold and the pie instead strikes a woman passing by, who too joins in the fray. What ensues is a long montage of stray pies striking everyone in the vicinity. No one is free from the crossfire. Before long, a crass battle that began with three lower class men has expanded to include not only other working men such as the barber and dentist, but also characters such as the mayor, a wealthy woman in furs and opera glasses, and a man in the process of having his shoes shined. Money and status were not enough

²³ *Battle of the Century*. Dir. Clyde Bruckman. Perf. Stan Laurel, Oliver Hardy. 1927.

to spare the latter individuals from receiving a cream pie squarely in the face. This film therefore encapsulates symbolically the power that food has to bring people to the same level and to highlight human commonalities.

Though the participants of this dessert war touched on many walks of life, one individual, and by extension his entire group, was noticeably excluded. The only non-white person who appears in the film is the black man who works as the shoe shiner. As his customer is hit in the face, the shoe shiner stares in bewildered, uncomprehending shock. This befuddled look graced no other character's face throughout the entire segment, even those who were hit inexplicably from the safety of indoors. Though his customer and every other character is seen immediately charging to the scene, this worker shows no intention to act, nor any glimmer of the understanding that came so quickly to all of his white counterparts.

Battle of the Century is, as all films, a product of its time. It demonstrates how simple pies can level the playing field insofar as filmmakers believed it could be leveled. Whereas the idea of mitigating the difference between rich and poor was fathomable, the idea of placing black and white individuals on equal footing appears outside of the scope of thinking. As awareness of racial inequality has improved over the past century, however, the food film genre has adapted along with it in order to demonstrate this eating stage as one where racial equality can also finally be realized.

A second work which expands the scope of how the eating process equalizes individuals is the French film *La Grande Bouffe*²⁴. The film tells the story of four wealthy, professional men who grow weary of their empty and meaningless lives. They

²⁴ *La Grande Bouffe*. Dir. Marco Ferreri. Perf. Michel Piccoli, Marcello Mastroianni, Philippe Noiret, Ugo Tognazzi, 1973.

make a suicide pact in which they agree to literally eat themselves to death. A gruesome ordeal ensues in which the men partake of extravagant, expensive cuisine until they are long past the point of comfort, often resorting to force feeding one another in order to maintain their agreement. The end result is, as planned, the death of the four men from overindulgence.

Initially, there is little that ties these men to the outside world or to the average diner. Their gluttonous competition is a decidedly unusual practice that is decisively unrelatable to those outside of the arrangement. As such, these men begin the film as comparably wealthy, untouchable gentlemen. According to James R. Keller:

The manner of competition and death that the protagonists have chosen is indicative of their class status...The food is refined gourmet cuisine presented as works of art in an environment that is tastefully decorated. The table is always elaborately set, including fine china, silver centerpieces, and silver candelabra. The men dress for dinner and frequently address each other with a formality inappropriate to their activities²⁵.

However, over the course of the affair, the act of dangerously overeating becomes the source of their unraveling, leading them to engage undignified and formerly unthinkable behaviors in all aspects of life. These activities range from hiring a slew of prostitutes to pass among themselves and sharing beds with one another to lounging about in a state of slovenly disorder. By the time of their death, all four have demonstrated behavior they would have formerly deemed beneath them.

In their attempt to kill themselves off in a pleurably indulgent and refined manner, these men do quite the opposite, becoming reduced to their purest urges, including that to abandon the entire process. The rapid plunge in sophistication their behavior takes, and their consequent deaths, demonstrate that they are not the socially

²⁵ Keller 52-53.

superior beings they formerly imagined themselves to be. The act of eating the meal, in this sense, brings these men down from their ivory towers and illuminates the quality that they share with all other human beings: mortality.

The 1992 film *Like Water for Chocolate*²⁶ takes an alternative approach with the method in which the eating stage equalizes its participants. The story centers upon Tita, a young Mexican girl who is forbidden to marry her love, Pedro, because her mother demands that she, as the youngest, stay unwed to care for her when she is older. Tita is heartbroken when she learns that her mother has arranged for Tita's oldest sister to marry Pedro instead. As Tita, a wonderful cook, is preparing the wedding cake, she begins crying into the batter. The following day, as guests begin eating, they become so overcome with grief at the thought of their own lost loves that they begin crying violently and soon become physically ill.

The protagonist in *Like Water for Chocolate* is imbued with an inexplicable magical power to infuse her cooking with her own deepest emotions. The same phenomenon is demonstrated twice again in the film when the dish Tita prepares, rose petal soup or chilies, causes her fellow diners to become overwhelmed with romantic desire, as she is at being forced to live in close proximity to Pedro without the ability to act on her feelings.

In all other regards, the diners are emotionally unlike. The eldest sister is smug at having stolen Pedro away. Tita's mother is harsh and remorseless about her decision to refuse her daughter her true love. Yet in the act of eating together, each of these characters becomes compelled by a force stronger than herself to sympathize with Tita, and feel her plight in a very deep and undeniable way. Though the feeling is fleeting and

²⁶ *Like Water for Chocolate*. Dir. Alfonso Arau. Perf. Marco Leonardi, Lumi Cavazos. 1992.

passes as the meal ends, for a short period of time every single person at the table, regardless of what divides them, is inextricably emotionally linked to all others in a state of unadulterated emotional rawness.

Despite cinema's liberty to creatively explore the themes and ideas it upholds, the steadfast adherence to the convention of the dinner table is equally as crucial to the implementation of this final stage. Many of the films that address interpersonal relationships and human bonds in this stage were first discussed in the menu selection phase for their abundance of culturally-sensitive conflicts. In most instances, the conflicts that arise are resolved when the characters dine together.

At the beginning of *Soul Food*, the weekly Sunday dinner is the glue that holds the Joseph family together despite the siblings' bickering and measurable animosity. The dinners are the brainchild of the family matriarch, Big Mama, whose beneficence and love for her family are expressed through her cooking, and through her expert tableside maneuvering around the conflicts that arise between family members. This ritualistic meal, forty years running, is an extension of Big Mama herself, a safe haven of consistency and dependability within an increasingly confusing and unpredictable world.

After Big Mama falls into a coma, her daughters begin fighting contentiously about whether or not to continue the weekly meal in her absence. This prompts the youngest daughter, Bird, who has little cooking experience, to take charge, botching all of the recipes just in time to learn that none of her family plans to attend. The Josephs' disputes quickly become all-consuming following the dissolution of their meals, a tension which is heightened following Big Mama's death. Bird's husband loses his job and gets sent to jail for assault. The oldest sister Teri catches her husband Miles in the throes of an

affair with her cousin Faith. And the physical distance that has developed without Big Mama to uphold the dinner ritual prevents the sisters from seeking help from one another or confronting their joint problems.

The predominant yet mistaken assumption among family members following Big Mama's death is that her love and kindness were the sole forces holding them all together. Though she was a strong, positive influence upon the group, the meal itself was ultimately responsible for the continued solidarity that existed within the family. The act of coming together brought a sense of relief and mutual understanding that the three sisters misattributed solely to their love for their mother, discounting the importance of their relationships to one another.

The narrator of the film, middle sister Maxine's young son Ahmad, takes Big Mama's final words to heart, and sets about arranging a Sunday dinner in the hopes that it will repair the damaged family. After Ahmad tricks each family member to arriving at the house on Sunday, they all sit down to eat together once more. When the subject of Miles' infidelity arises, Faith stands to flee the table. But Maxine, channeling the spirit of her mother, demands that Faith stop running away and stay until the conflict has been resolved. Maxine demonstrates her newly found understanding of the power of the dinner table to encourage individuals to address what divides them so they may ultimately be united. The film concludes with the family discovering a hidden stash of money Big Mama left behind, their reward for returning to the all-important family dinner. This film is a quintessential demonstration of how the dinner table can function, albeit idealistically, as a solution to interpersonal conflict.

Big Night's concluding dinner table scene has a similar effect to the Josephs' upon the characters that come to call. There are several individuals who know no one else at the table, from the newspaper columnist who has arrived to cover the momentous meal to the car salesman that Secondo met earlier that afternoon. Those that were previously acquainted are riddled with contention and conflict. The tension that exists between Primo and Secondo is only heightened when the arrival of Secondo's girlfriend is followed shortly by that of his mistress. Other attendees, including Pascal who owns the popular Americanized Italian restaurant across the street and a florist who is the object of Primo's affection, add to a climate that is strained and uncomfortable when the guests first arrive.

Though guests are aided in the process by copious amounts of alcohol, all tension dissolves as the meal gets underway. As course after course is introduced, eaters are shown in states of enthusiasm and elation. Barriers between guests dissolve as the car salesman begins enthusiastically passing out business cards and Secondo's two love interests become enrapt in conversation. Even Pascal, overjoyed by the painstakingly prepared main course, floods the brothers with compliments and praise, a state quite unlike his previously composed and suave interactions with the pair.

At the conclusion of the meal, however, all of these good feelings go out with the trash. Secondo's girlfriend discovers his mistress' identity; Pascal reveals that his friend, a famous jazz performer who was slated to be the meal's guest of honor, never arrived because Pascal intentionally did not invite him; Primo and Secondo's differing views on whether or not to culturally assimilate to save their business brings the pair to physical blows, with Primo vowing to return to Italy as a result.

Though the meal prompted an abundance of happiness and goodwill among the guests, this film ultimately demonstrates the fragility of such unions. As in *Soul Food*, the key to maintaining strong bonds is consistency and repetition of the dining process. One artfully implemented meal was not enough to save Primo and Secondo's relationships; only through prolonged meaningful interaction could this truly be accomplished.

Big Night highlighted the oft ignored transience of the meal's unifying power. More so than in other examples, the film reminds viewers that the good feelings that come with the act of eating together often end when the meal does. However, true to American cinema form, *Big Night* invoked the reconciliatory power of the meal one final time to ensure the film concludes on hopeful note. The last scene of the film takes place the morning after this failed last hurrah. During one extended take that contains no cuts, the camera remains motionless, trained upon Secondo as he takes out a frying pan and prepares himself an egg. After Primo enters, Secondo finishes cooking and places two plates of eggs down. The brothers, seeing each other for the first time since their fight the previous evening, eat in a prolonged, yet comfortable silence. The film ends as Secondo places his arm wordlessly, encouragingly around the shoulder of his older brother.

The union of the second and third stages of the meal in this one powerful shot accomplishes multiple goals. Secondo, in the process of silently cooking the egg, is emotionally isolated and cut off from his brother, his closest companion. Primo's arrival allows the pair to reconcile their anger with one another, though not their actual differences. Though the film does not address how the brothers decide to solve their problem, the ease with which they are able to return to one another sends a message of hope to the audience and ends the film on a positive note. The nuanced and powerful act

of eating together proves, in more than one instance, to be a vital tool in temporarily overcoming differences and conflicts within the genre.

The Danish film *Babette's Feast* is yet another that culminates with one final, extravagant meal that ultimately bands together otherwise unlike individuals. In addition to the pious and devout celebrants of the important commemoration, an old acquaintance of the two sisters, a general, comes to dine at the feast Babette has prepared. He is a wealthy, worldly man, who is both accustomed to indulgences and entirely unaware of the pact the other diners have made to avoid complementing the inappropriately indulgent dishes they'll be served.

The general, who immediately recognizes the high quality ingredients and great skill that went into the meal, is surprised when he's met with indifference from all those around him. He mistakes their blasé behavior for being accustomed to such dining, and he gives the speech to the effect that he is honored to be dining on such exquisite food in such distinguished company. The act of dining here unites the general, though through misunderstanding, with a group of pious people he believed himself to be culturally superior to.

On a very different vein, the cuisine has the immediate effect of dissolving the struggles that exist between the other members of the dinner party. The sisters had previously expressed their concern to one another that their religious group had lost sight of its morals and values. Satisfied and rejuvenated by the first quality meal they've had in decades, group members one by one begin fondly reminiscing about their times together and the moments that defined them as a group. One dinner guest, who had earlier been bickering over a business deal with another, admits joyously how he had cheated the

man. The second replies with equal fervor that he knew this the whole time, and was happy to hear it. Though aided in their feelings by the unfamiliar influence of alcohol, these group members are able to overcome those things that of late divided them, primarily because they were given the opportunity to spend time together over a meal.

It is clear that filmmakers consciously incorporate the dinner table to facilitate the exploration of interpersonal themes. However, this association between eating a meal and socializing is so ingrained in the human psyche that characters within the films may act in a way that suggests their consciousness of this relationship. An example of this can be seen in the 2002 German film *Mostly Martha*²⁷.

The film tells the story of Martha, the head chef at a gourmet restaurant, who must take charge of her young niece after her sister is killed in a car accident. Martha is uptight and isolated, but expresses that she enjoys being so. She states on several occasions that she would rather stay home than socialize. She prefers to have members of her kitchen go about their business in a focused silence, and actively refuses to participate in conversations when they arise. Her belief that the cooking phase should be conducted silently and individually is just an additional demonstration of her inclination towards solitude.

Martha demonstrates her clear understanding of the relationship between dining and forging relationships when she refuses to eat with her coworkers. Though they all gather for a meal before the dinner rush begins each day, Martha opts either to sit off to the side with a newspaper or return to the kitchen to work. Whenever she is offered food, she replies that she gets sick if she eats in the afternoon and refuses any further

²⁷ *Mostly Martha*. Dir. Sandra Nettelbeck. Perf. Martina Gedeck, Maxime Foerste, Sergio Castellitto. 2001.

discussion. Martha's niece Lina demonstrates a similar understanding of the relationship between interacting and eating. Devastated by the loss of her mother, she angrily distances herself from her good-intentioned yet un-nurturing aunt. She stages her protest primarily through her refusal to eat, a decision which renders her, like Martha, impossible to get to know.

The link between dining and socializing, as mentioned earlier, is far from a novel concept. It pervades film, television and other media in the United States and abroad. However, the third stage of the ideological meal, the eating stage, has an even greater stronghold on cinematic practices of filmmakers because it is the stage that most often sees real world applications. An expectation is therefore built up for the third stage that precedes neither of the earlier two. Whether a filmmaker chooses to adhere to the narrowest conventions of this assumed relationship or strives to expand upon them, the eating stage remains the dominant realm for exploring interpersonal themes within the food film genre.

Conclusion: Washing the Proverbial Dishes

"Seeing is deceiving. It's eating that's believing." – James Thurber

After the plates have been cleaned and the stomachs filled, the food film genre declares the ideological meal to be complete. Outside of film, however, one vital stage remains. The act of cleaning up after the meal, a necessary part of the process, is hardly ever depicted on screen. The reason for this glaring omission is not discussed in the literature about the works, and can consequently only be explained through speculation. The third stage of the meal, as previously discussed, offers a convenient tool for wrapping up loose ends and ending a story on a high note. The fourth stage lacks aesthetic potential, as crusty dishes are a far cry visually from the food that once filled them. Though doing dishes is often also a collaborative effort, the joylessness and tedium of the chore diminishes the potential for relationships to develop during the process.

Tortilla Soup, the only film that addresses this real-life fourth stage, contradicts this final assumption, as the three sisters' cleanup transcends from an argument to a bonding moment when they begin playfully smashing dishes and waltzing across the kitchen (the image of which appears on the cover of the film). Aside from this unique moment, however, filmmakers can do little to add interest or intrigue to the act of scrubbing pots and pans. Even when the film explicitly addresses the fact that a mess has been made, as in *Mostly Martha* when a friend destroys Martha's kitchen while cooking her dinner, which person eventually cleans up afterwards, a matter of relevance to the story, is never conveyed.

This discrepancy between the comprehensive ideological meal in film and in real life reaffirms the limitations of the film medium. Though it can be illuminating and

entertaining, the study of the meal within the food film genre cannot be generalized to real life. The representativeness of menu selection, cooking, and eating phases apply to this genre alone. And though certain of these ideas can be applied to both realms, it should not be assumed for all. For example, though cooking is consistently represented as an alienating process in these texts, the real life act of preparing a meal is often not so.

Furthermore, when audiences are interacting with food not through a screen but in real life, the five senses are restored, and the meal need not rely solely on visuals.

Ultimately, filmmakers who strive to encapsulate the significance of food through a camera will always fall short. But, with an understanding of how the stages of the meal function within the food film genre, skillful cinematographers can nonetheless develop a piece that approximates the draw of literal hunger and resonates with viewers on both an emotional and physical level.

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