12

Dining as a 'Limit Experience': *Jouissance* and Gastronomic Pleasure as Cinematographic and Cultural Phenomena

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> [...] mechanically, dispirited after a dreary day with the prospect of a depressing morrow, I raised to my lips a spoonful of the tea in which I had soaked a morsel of the cake. No sooner had the warm liquid mixed with the crumbs touched my palate than a shudder ran through me and I stopped, intent upon the extraordinary thing that was happening to me. An exquisite pleasure had invaded my senses, something isolated, detached, with no suggestion of its origin.
>
> (Proust, 1982: 48)

Hors d'oeuvres: The concept of *Jouissance*

It is with this gustatory pleasure, the soft crumbling of a delicate shell-shaped citrus tea cake upon the tongue, that Marcel Proust launches his magnum opus, *In Remembrance of Things Past*, his narrator transported untold distances in memory by the extraordinary, incomprehensible and exquisite pleasure of the senses visited upon him. But while both the excessive and unexpected pleasure of this iconic moment and the exquisite pain of memory and loss invade Proust's narrator, the dangerously orgiastic potential of true *jouissance* remains nevertheless contained – rare is the occasion when a literary character surrenders himself to the uncontained joy and pleasure of *gourmandise*. Yet this is precisely the topic of Marco Ferreri's 1973 film *La Grande Bouffe* where four friends reunite for a weekend of unadulterated pleasure – their plan is to dine themselves to death; their unlimited *jouissance*, in the

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true Lacanian sense, takes them from the pleasures of the feast to the intended fulfilment of their collective suicide. Highly controversial at the time of its release, the film remains unabashedly excessive, marking one of the most unmediated cinematic relationships between food, pleasure and death. Subsequent films such as Gabriel Axel's *Babette's Feast* (1987) as well as Lasse Hallström's *Chocolat* (2000) and more recently Nora Ephron's *Julie & Julia* (2009) also present the particular relationship between French cuisine, the gastronomic and *jouissance*. Yet none of these subsequent films highlighting 'gastronomic *jouissance*' express its unlimited and ultimately dangerous nature to the same degree that *La Grande Bouffe* details it. In fact, these subsequent films detail not only the relationship between food and transcendently excessive pleasure and (often) pain, but rather, set the scene for the re-inscription of *La Grande Bouffe*'s orgiastic *jouissance* into the mechanic of the pleasure principle: 'not too much but just enough.'

And yet, despite calorie counting, despite the irrepresentable nature of true gastronomic *jouissance*, one could almost say that we have entered a new golden age of culinary surprise when restaurants such as *elBulli* or *El Celler de Can Roca* (to mention only two of the foremost examples) offer diners a singularly transcendental experience through molecular gastronomy. In so far as many of the dishes prepared in these restaurants explore the very limits of what could be considered a meal, diners are invited to share in the ephemeral delight that accompanies many of the novel techniques employed by the talented chefs. It is in the creative drive to transcend the dining experience, to move beyond the senses, and in the singularity of such a dinner, that we can read a new movement towards gastronomic *jouissance*. This is an experience which can perhaps be seen to culminate in *El Somni* as a total work of art: 'an opera in twelve courses, a dinner in twelve acts' (Aleu, 2014: 204) which took place in Barcelona in the spring of 2014. In exploring the relationship between gastronomy and *jouissance* we are at once guided by the psychoanalytic and the cinematographic, filmic representation being (arguably) the field in which *jouissance* finds its most complete expression. We can, in turn, look towards the contemporary molecular gastronomy movement, considering the implications of this movement as it relates to the cinematographic representation and the wider cultural issues at play in gastronomic *jouissance*. For *jouissance* can be seen to structure a certain form of gastronomic expression, from the cinematographic and orgiastic feasting of *La Grande Bouffe* to the exceptionally refined experimental playfulness we find in the form of molecular gastronomy at the tables of the world's leading chefs and

which has, to a greater or lesser degree, come to inform and change the notion of what dining could, and should, be. This in turn impacts upon our comprehension of the everyday dining experience, contrasting the routine experience of a home-cooked meal with an experience that lies at the very edge of what is culinarily and gastronomically possible. This is the essence of a 'limit experience': an experience of the limits of the culinary and gastronomic arts and an intense experience bringing the diner to the limit of what he is able to experience, which is described by Michel Foucault as, the 'point of life which lies as close as possible to the impossibility of living, which lies at the limit or extreme' (Foucault, 1991: 31). This unites the technical, the artistic and the affective in a gesture that is singularly and impossibly intense.

Jouissance, drawn from the French *jouir* (to orgasm) is perhaps one of the most complex Lacanian terms, whose early appearance and association with intense, extreme pleasure belies the evolution of the term and the importance that it ultimately takes on within the structure of Lacanian psychoanalysis (Evans, 1999). First included in the seminar of 1958 (Braunstein, 2003), *jouissance* has become a term of such critical importance to Lacanian psychoanalysis that it can perhaps be said to be rivalled only by the *objet a*: 'it became a term rich in nuances, a term that would get progressively more complicated, multiplying and defining itself until it was transformed into the foundation of a new psychoanalysis: a "notion" without which all else becomes inconsistent' (Braunstein, 2003: 102). While *jouissance* is, from the outset, linked to pleasure, in Seminar VII, Lacan details the manner in which it can be seen paradoxically as implying both pleasure and suffering, its structural relationship tied in this manner to both the death drive and the pleasure principle. In considering Freud's *Civilization and Its Discontents* Lacan concludes that *jouissance* is evil:

> this formula nevertheless leads us to something that we have to resolve here, to something that remains on our hands from this adventure, something that changes the basis of the ethical problem, namely, that *jouissance* still remains forbidden [...] if we continue to follow Freud in a text such as *Civilization and Its Discontents*, we cannot avoid the formula that *jouissance* is evil.
>
> (Lacan, 1992: 184)

Underlying the notions drawn on through Freud's *Civilization and its Discontents* is the fact that *jouissance* can be seen as related at once to the law and to its transgression and thus, ultimately, to the pleasure

principle: 'That is clearly the essence of law – to divide up, distribute, or reattribute everything that counts as *jouissance*' (Lacan, 1998: 3).

The law prescribes a just and economic use of material, an economic amount of pleasure and enjoyment, true 'unlimited' *jouissance* is precisely that which is forbidden in that it exceeds the economic and transgresses the law established by the principle of pleasure:

> Even before the formulations of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle,* it is evident that the first formulation of the pleasure principle as an unpleasure principle, or least-suffering principle, naturally embodies a beyond, but that is, in effect, calculated to keep up on this side of it rather than beyond it.
>
> (Lacan, 1992: 185)

The pleasure principle aims thus at the maintenance of the psychic organism, the regulation of pleasure and of pain in economic terms, 'the pleasure principle follows from the principle of constancy' (Freud, 1961: 3) but also forms the boundary of law against which the spectre of *jouissance* rubs itself: 'the pleasure principle actually seems to serve the death instincts' (Freud, 1961: 57). As Lacan states:

> This track, this pathway, is familiar to us. It's ancestral knowledge. And what is this knowledge, if we don't forget that Freud introduces what he himself calls 'beyond the pleasure principle,' the pleasure principle itself not being overturned thereby? Knowledge is what brings life to a halt at a certain limit on the path to *jouissance*. For the path toward death – this is what is at issue, it's a discourse about masochism – the path toward death is nothing other than what is called *jouissance*.
>
> (Lacan, 2007: 18)

But contrary to pleasure conceived in a non-psychological sense, *jouissance* retains its inaccessibility, moving constantly out of reach:

> [. . .] *jouissance* presents itself as buried at the centre of a field and has the characteristics of inaccessibility, obscurity, and opacity; moreover, the field is surrounded by a barrier which makes access to it difficult for the subject to the point of inaccessibility, because *jouissance* appears not purely and simply as the satisfaction of a need, but as the satisfaction of a drive.
>
> (Lacan, 1992: 209)

Jouissance considered in these terms serves precisely as a motivator for the death drive in so far as the transgression implied in the fulfilment of the drive moves dangerously far beyond the normal inscription of the principle of pleasure. Likened to the potlatch, the act of 'pure' *jouissance* is violent and unpredictable, spectacular and destructive, even as it fulfils one of the most fundamental drives. Finally, for Lacan, *jouissance* implies a particular relationship to language – *jouissance* in its entirety is unavailable through language, echoing Freud's concept of resistance: there remains after analysis a kernel of *jouissance* which is beyond symbolisation, thus resisting the linguistic interventions of the analyst. Nevertheless, it is clear that language and symbolism are shot through with and underpinned by *jouissance* which Lacan later identifies with the *sinthome*, and that linguistic endeavours can approach and begin to identify, or initiate, the subject's identification with *jouissance* as *sinthome* even if the ultimate act remains inaccessible (Evans, 1999: 13).

For *jouissance* is fundamentally tied to transgression and it is this transgression, of art and nature, of ingredient and appetite, which, as we shall see, is at work in the relationship between *jouissance* and gastronomy. One only need look at the foundational creativity of elBulli, the veritable birthplace of modernist cuisine, as documented in *A Day at elBulli* (Adrià et al., 2008) to see the manner in which ingredients are transformed and sublimated, the dining process undercut and filled with wonder. The boundaries of sweet and savoury are transgressed, the relationship between hot and cold, liquid, solid and gas are transmuted and the diner is transported beyond a point at which food is a source of nourishment and into a realm where food, in its extensive intensity, touches upon the sublime. Consider the dish entitled 'Thaw' as detailed in a *Day at elBulli* (Adrià et al., 2008: 344–345) or 'Hibiscus paper with blackcurrant and eucalyptus' as elaborated in *Food for Thought: Thought for Food* (Hamilton and Todoli, 2009: 115). These dishes, in combining, as is the case of 'Thaw', a dizzying array of powders, jellies, sweet and savoury pralines and caramels, liquid nitrogen fabricated fake pine nuts, sorbets, airs, emulsions and infusions offer a visual and gustatory pleasure that sublimates the meal. The transmutation of the ingredients, as with the 'Hibiscus paper', transgressing the forms of presentation in order to elicit an intense experience of surprise and pleasure in the diner is a creative act which exists in parallel to the vision of transgression which we shall see in *La Grande Bouffe* and *Babette's Feast*. It must nevertheless be stressed that the *jouissance* and transgression undertaken within the realm of modernist

cuisine is inscribed into the pleasure principle in so far as diners do not pursue the fundamentally mortal ends associated with true *jouissance* and which only cinema is fully free to explore. Their food is, however, divorced from mere earthly concerns and in sublimating the psychoanalytic forms of *jouissance*, modernist cuisine nevertheless gestures towards a gustatory 'limit experience' (evoking the cinematographic reality of Ferreri, Halström, and Axel), embodying a simulacra which enables diners to voyage to the very edge of what is 'culinarily' and 'gustatively' possible.

A dinner to end all dinners: Cinematic representations of Gustatory *Jouissance*

In Marco Ferreri's infamous 1973 film, *La Grande Bouffe*, Marcello (Marcello Mastroianni), a commercial pilot, Michel (Michel Piccoli), a television executive, Ugo (Ugo Tognazzi), a restaurateur and Philippe (Philippe Noiret) a judge; retreat to Philippe's country house for a weekend of gastronomic debauchery (Ferreri, 1973). Escaping their privileged lives they dispense with administrative formalities before escaping to the privacy of the countryside. Among other provisions, upon arrival, they take delivery of a wild boar, two deer, a dozen hens, three dozen Ardennes roosters, a hindquarter of beef from the Charolais region and five lambs from Mont St Michel. As the produce is taken inside, Michel, brandishing a head of veal proclaims 'to be or not to be, that is the question' answered by Marcello: 'que la fête commence,'[1] a collective response to their existential question.

On this first evening, the sumptuous multicourse dinner is accompanied by a slideshow of pornographic photographs collected by Philippe, including pictures of his deceased relatives, soliciting a pointed remark that he's 'getting hot over a funeral' – the lines between life, pleasure (of both the carnal and gastronomic variety) and death itself begin to blur. This 'seminaire gastronomique' is no 'vulgar orgy,' even when Marcello organises the arrival of three prostitutes who join dinner on the second evening, together with Andrea, a school teacher, whose class had wandered the grounds of the mansion. The scene is set: Marcello, Michel, Philippe and Ugo, have formed a suicide pact, proposing to eat themselves to death. Faced with the increasingly grotesque and mechanical obsession with the production and consumption of food, calls of 'who is cooking, someone must cook' and 'eat!' the prostitutes flee, unable to swallow any more. As Michel suffers from catastrophic indigestion, Ugo, having prepared an enormous dish of 'medicinal'

mashed potatoes continues to spoon-feed Michel, 'Mange encore!' he says. 'If you don't eat you won't die!'

As they continue to eat, Marcello is the first to die, freezing to death. Having failed to climax with Andrea, he declares to the others that they cannot eat themselves to death because they are eunuchs, that 'there is no fantasy in this story'; he disappears into the night. Michel is the next to die, succumbing to his indigestion and flatulence. The corpses of Marcello and Michel stored in the cold room, Ugo prepares a colossal cathedral-shaped terrine of duck, goose and chicken paté, aided by Andrea and Philippe. While Philippe, who has momentarily lost his appetite, and Andrea leave the kitchen, Ugo continues to eat, mouthful by mouthful, savouring the delicate flavour, mechanically working toward his intended goal. Returning to the kitchen, Philippe and Andrea spoon-feed Ugo the last of his terrine as he too passes on. Philippe dies in Andrea's arms, as she in turn feeds him a breast-shaped jelly she has prepared. The film closes with the final delivery of provisions, carcasses thrown into the garden before a number of salivating dogs, as Andrea enters the house and the screen fades.

Scandalising the 1973 Cannes film festival and presented as a critique of societal consumption and the social excesses that marked its era, *La Grande Bouffe* can also be considered as the foremost example of gastronomic *jouissance* that has graced the silver screen. From the outset, Marcello, Michel, Philippe and Ugo endeavour to transcend the boundary of the pleasure principle, to go beyond their gastronomic tastes, such that it should lead to their deaths. While it is true that the intended consequences of their plans are ultimately mortal, the manner in which they go about this destabilises any simple notion of suicide, the effort and planning which goes in to the continuous production of culinary delights together with the component of their demise that speaks to the gastronomic pleasure they derive, marks the point at which they enter the realm of true *jouissance*. It would be easy to prepare and serve one single poisoned dish, an elegant and economic suicide which can be contrasted to the parade of Dionysian meals which move from pleasurable to macabre.

Their orgiastic feast grows more and more mechanical as the pleasure they take is stripped away: Michel suffers from indigestion, Marcello is sexually frustrated, the prostitutes abandon them to their sinister fate, yet at every turn the call is made, 'à table! Eat!' Their violent transgression as they move through the pleasure principle underlines the fact that their pleasure, in conventional terms, becomes lost and their continuation on this path necessitates an ever greater and more concerted

effort. Finally their gluttonous episode draws to its close in the fulfilment of their desire – the fulfilment of the death drive. Throughout the film their plan remains linguistically inaccessible, hinted at in conversation yet never openly discussed. They discover that in *jouissance* proper 'there is no fantasy': their collective suicide, illustrative of the death drive, unravels as they discover the pathological, repetitive and mechanically boring aspects of true *jouissance*.

In many ways the final dinner that features so heavily in *Babette's Feast,* Gabriel Axel's 1987 film, mirrors the *jouissance* that the four protagonists of *La Grande Bouffe* seek to enact. Having fled counter-revolutionary massacres in Paris, Babette arrives on the coast of Jutland, in the household of Philippa and Martine, where she is taken on as a housekeeper through an introductory letter sent by Philippa's former admirer, a celebrated baritone now living in Paris. For years Babette works for the sisters, who follow in the footsteps of their father, a minister, in dedicating their lives to good works, until one day Babette wins the lottery. Requesting that she personally prepare and pay for the dinner that the sisters had planned in order to celebrate the centenary of their father's birth, Philippa and Martine fear that this will be the final dinner that Babette will prepare in their house. As provisions for the dinner arrive (including a live turtle) the sisters begin to fear this 'godless indulgence' and strike a pact with their aging congregation: during the dinner none will speak of the food, lest the spell of the devil be upon them. Course after course arrives upon the table: an amontillado potage à la tortue (turtle soup); blinis Demidoff au caviar; caille en sarchophage avec sauce Perigourdine (quail in puff pastry with a truffle and foie gras sauce); a salad of Belgian chicory and walnuts vinaigrette; and finally a rum sponge cake with figs and glacé fruit. This mouth-watering feast, carefully prepared by Babette, is accompanied by rare wines such as an 1845 Clos de Vougeot and an 1860 Veuve Clicquot. Only Lorens, Martine's former admirer, now a celebrated general, articulates his surprise and delight at the sumptuous meal – the rest of the table clinging to their vow of silence.

The meal nevertheless has a powerfully transformative effect on the faithful, restoring their sense of community, reigniting passions and sweeping away grudges and arguments. Later, in thanking Babette for the meal, Philippa and Martine discover that Babette has spent her entire fortune on this single meal, 10,000 francs, the price of a meal for 12 at the Café Anglais, where she once was the chef and where Lorens once dined. Her power to 'unite the gastronomic and the spiritual, transforming the dining experience into a love affair' was once

legendary and Philippa and Martine question why she does not return to Paris and what she will now do with her life: Babette replies that an 'artist is never poor,' electing to remain in Jutland.

The extraordinary sacrifice of her winnings, the careful delicacy with which the meal is prepared, the manner in which her culinary art surpasses itself and brings about ecstatic transformation in the diners are all indicative of the degree to which Babette's feast opens into the realm of *jouissance*. This is reinforced by the silence that reigns during the banquet – the pleasure that dare not speak. For Babette, *jouissance* lies in the reclamation of her lost art; she seizes what she knows to be her last opportunity for true culinary expression. In cooking this final meal, Babette puts her past to rest, completing the veritable social death occasioned by her exile. Yet her *jouissance* is not unlimited, in the manner that Michel, Marcello, Ugo and Philippe experience it, although the planning, preparation and sacrifice, even the manner in which the gustatory and sensual (but not the carnal), are brought together during Babette's feast mirror the relationship between food and *jouissance* that characterise *La Grande Bouffe*. Babette's *jouissance* is already inscribed in the pleasure principle, she does not physically move from life to death, or to the fulfilment of the death drive in the same manner as the four friends of *La Grande Bouffe* – her movement is from life to life, the painful sacrifice and pleasure of the preparation are the price she pays in order to continue living. Similarly the *jouissance* of the twelve guests at 'Babette's last supper' remains inscribed within the pleasure principle. The feast nevertheless remains unspeakable, recalling the diner's vow of silence, yet their body language betrays a powerful and inexpressible experience – their *jouissance* is beyond the realm of language. *Babette's Feast* illustrates a certain degree to which true gustatory *jouissance* is both a point of resistance and desire in contemporary cultural life. Whereas the gratuitous excesses of *La Grande Bouffe* are abhorred, the search for new and extraordinary culinary experiences is at the heart of a burgeoning community of gastronomic aesthetes who, like Babette's guests, can be seen to partake in an indescribable communion of the senses, uniting 'the gastronomic and the spiritual, transforming the dining experience into a love affair' (Axel, 1987). As in the community of gastronomic delight that is formed in *Babette's Feast*, contemporary gastronomic pleasures are nevertheless partially re-inscribed into the pleasure principle, and do not mirror the extreme Dionysian excesses of *La Grande Bouffe*. The sheer inventive exoticism of modernist cooking and the techniques employed in these restaurants can be seen to offer diners a taste of the indescribable, as in *Babette's Feast*.

Chocolat, directed by Lasse Hallström (2000), offers a marginal variation on the dialectic between gastronomic *jouissance* and the pleasure principle. The *chocolaterie* opened by Vianne Rocher (Juliette Binoche) during the first week of the Lenten fast becomes a focal point for the renewal of the town in spiritual, moral and gastronomic terms, disturbing the staid tranquility which characterised Lansquenet-sous-Tannes before her arrival, 'awaken[ing] the passions' of the quiet village. It is however, the dinner that she prepares for Armande Voizin (Judi Dench) as a birthday celebration that truly underscores the notion of *jouissance* as represented by the death of Voizin. For Armande, as is revealed earlier in the film by her estranged daughter, is a chronic diabetic, who nevertheless resists being sent to the retirement home near Toulouse which Josephine (Lena Olin) reminds us is referred to as *la mortuaire* – the mortuary. Armande, insisting 'there are worse ways to die,' requests the feast, proposing that, together with a dejected Vianne (the mayor having spoken out against Vianne's chocolate 'temptation') they 'show the bastards [that] we're ready to go down dancing'. When Vianne resists, evoking Armande's condition, Armande replies that she 'needs this': 'You do this for me and I promise I check into *la mortuaire* tomorrow without a care in the world' (Halström, 2000).

The sumptuous dinner is everything that Armande desires: her grandson offers her a touching gift, the food served by Vianne and Josephine is excellent, and the dinner ends in festive dancing. After the guests have left, while clearing the dishes, Armande's grandson finds her dead – a consequence of the evening's indulgence. The persistent desire to continue feasting and her acceptance of death 'without a care in the world' underlie her *jouissance,* which, while temperate in comparison to the orgiastic scenes of *La Grande Bouffe* nevertheless ultimately fulfils the Lacanian structure of *jouissance* – pleasure at the price of death. The rest of the village inscribe their enjoyment into the notion of the pleasure principle: they are indulgent within limits. Even the discovery of the Mayor on Easter Sunday in the window of the *chocolaterie*, having finally ceded to his temptation and broken into the shop, devouring everything in transcendent gluttony, is inscribed into the principle of pleasure; normality returns, albeit in a less austere version. As in *Babette's Feast,* the gastronomic experience is portrayed as fundamentally transformational, even if the uncontained *jouissance* of Armande Voizin recalls the dark pleasures of *La Grande Bouffe*.

By contrast, Nora Ephron's *Julie & Julia* (2009) represents the complete re-inscription of gastronomic *jouissance* into the pleasure principle. Julie Powell's decision to cook her way through Julia Child's celebrated

French cookbook is based less upon the pleasure of cooking and more upon the desire to blog about her adventures and in so doing, become a published author. The film contrasts Julie Powell, as she decides to escape her lacklustre and depressing job by cooking every single recipe in Julia Child's *Mastering the Art of French Cooking*, to the experiences of Julia Child, who, living in Paris in the 1950's, attends Le Cordon Bleu in order to learn French cooking, and begins to collaborate with Simone Beck and Louisette Bertholle on a cookbook. While both characters derive pleasure from their culinary pursuits, Child has a more immediately pleasurable relationship to cooking, she does not cook in order to escape; she cooks out of sheer enjoyment and curiosity. Powell's enjoyment is more conditional; her initial foray into Child's cooking is related to her frustration with her job, ultimately becoming a great source of stress in itself. Nevertheless, in both cases there is a distinct lack of excessive pleasure: behind all the exuberance, the delight and enjoyment felt by both, Julia and Julie remain anchored and normalised. While the transcendental nature of their culinary experience is made repeatedly evident, especially in the manner in which both Powell and Child are able to forge a career out of their gastronomic flair, it is precisely in this manner that their pleasure and enjoyment are normalised.

Contrast this to Armande Voizin in *Chocolat*, and Marcello, Philippe, Ugo and Michel in *La Grande Bouffe* whose disregard for the fetters of occupation and acceptance of the ultimate price of their indulgence are key to the manner in which they embrace an unlimited gastronomic *jouissance*. For Powell, despite her tenacity and the manner in which her enjoyment wanes, and the near torturous manner in which she continues to cook through *Mastering the Art of French Cooking* (mirroring the deformation of pleasure implicit in the act of *jouissance*), the stated goal is not self-indulgence or orgiastic gastronomic delight, but rather the opportunity to become a writer. Her goal is resolutely economic, both psychologically and in the most banal fiscal sense of the word. One can furthermore contrast the actions of Julie and Julia with those of Babette, who sacrificed everything precisely in order to *lose,* to bid farewell to, her former occupation – in economic terms she gains nothing, the uneconomic nature of her *jouissance* being underlined by her statement that 'an artist is never poor'. Babette has gained in artistry what she lost economically. In opposition to this, Julie & Julia lose little and gain much, their enjoyment motivates them, folded in to the pleasure principle, their near-*jouissance* ultimately does little more than fuel the economic calculations of their new found occupation; any notion of sacrifice is a moot point.

Between *La Grande Bouffe* and *Julie & Julia*, we can read a transgressive continuum. *La Grande Bouffe* leaves no other option for the central characters other than the foregone conclusion of ecstatically destructive *jouissance* whereas *Julie & Julia* proposes nothing other than the re-inscribed systematic and economic ontology of the pleasure principle, excluding any true transgression. In this light, *Babette's Feast* and *Chocolat* present the problematic notion of *jouissance* and its relationship to gastronomy in dialectical terms, offering both a hint of true transgression, or as in the character of Armande Voizin, transgression itself, while nevertheless preserving the structure of the pleasure principle. If the cinematographic re-inscription of gastronomic *jouissance* into the economy of the pleasure principle can be seen as symptomatic of changing attitudes towards the representation and ultimately consumption of food, what can this movement tell us about contemporary food culture?

The *Pièce de la Résistance*: Gustatory *jouissance* and contemporary food culture

In his 1961 article, *Towards a Psychosociology of Contemporary Food Consumption*, Roland Barthes notes that 'in contemporary French society *food has a constant tendency to transform itself into situation*' (Barthes, 1997: 26), a notion which underscores much of what *La Grande Bouffe* represents as a critique of the 70s consumer society. Yet the 'situation' of consumption, the orgiastic, uncontrolled, violent portrayal of senseless gluttony, that is to say, the situation of *jouissance,* which characterises Ferreri's cinematic depiction of gastronomy, can be seen in more positive terms. The film is perhaps the last, if not one of the only truly unmediated cinematic depictions of the relationship between the culinary arts and *jouissance* as a subject that exists entirely outside the realm of the controllable, the rational and the economic.

The movement within subsequent films is a result not only of the re-inscription of the concept of gastronomic *jouissance* and of the culinary event into the pleasure principle, but also of changing attitudes in the consumption and portrayal of food. As Coveney details in *Food, Morals and Meaning: The Pleasure and Anxiety of Eating,* the consumption of food in Greek antiquity was related to self-control: 'Regime, then, implied the right amount (of food, sex, sleep and so on) at the right time. The importance of moderation, especially in regard to pleasure, was uppermost. Overindulging one's appetite, whether it be in sexual acts or food, was considered to be ugly and "improper"' (Coveney, 2006: 26). Similarly

for Harrus-Révidi, in *Psychanalyse De La Gourmandise* (1994), the return of the dominant notion of diet and of self-control has displaced a more unmitigated and carnal relationship with food, underlining an almost masochistic denial of pleasure or the utter re-inscription of food into the controlled economics of the pleasure principle.

A counterpoint to the culturally coded re-inscription of gustatory pleasure into the domain of the pleasure principle (of which the aforementioned films are symptomatic) can be seen in the molecular gastronomy movement. Initially coined by Hervé This and Nicholas Kurti during their preparations for a series of 'international workshops on the physical and chemical aspects of cooking' (This, 2006: 1), the term 'molecular gastronomy' underlines at once the properly scientific aspect of this movement as well as the broader interests of the science which reaches beyond mere cooking and considers as much the phenomena associated with eating as it does the extraordinary culinary transformations which characterise this form of cuisine. As Dwight Garner reported in his recent article for the New York Times, 'The End of Cuisine,' a certain measure of the success of molecular gastronomy can be seen in Nathan Myhrvold's influential, six-volume masterpiece *Modernist Cuisine: The Art and Science of Cooking* which, despite its size (2,438 pages) and price, has gone through four printings. Writing on the occasion of a dinner organised by Myhrvold for Ferran Adrià, the influential chef whose restaurant, elBulli, was for many years considered to be the best and most inventive restaurant in the world, Garner asks: 'Would this be the best meal of my life, or a long jolt of high-minded food-aversion therapy like something out of "A Clockwork Orange"? Was any of this even about food?' (Garner, 2014). Garner goes on to describe the meal, which Myhrvold intended as an *homage* to a dinner that he had enjoyed at Adrià's restaurant, elBulli: following a 'wildly deconstructed' Bloody Mary (a stick of celery garnished with an alcoholic mayonnaise, studded with microcubes of clam gel, lime juice sacs and dusted with tomato powder, horseradish, salt and pepper), the 50 course meal begins in earnest. Ferran Adrià is particularly taken and surprised by a dish which, at first glance, appears to be caviar but is in fact composed of a cluster of pressure-cooked mustard seeds together with squid ink and a number of other ingredients. His reaction to this dish highlights one of the hallmarks of modernist cuisine, the constant search for the new and surprising, pushing the very limits of flavour and of presentation, offering a particularly dynamic dining experience.

Molecular gastronomy, or modernist cuisine, can be read in terms of *jouissance* in the manner in which it promotes a 'limit experience,'

placing an accent on the power of gustatory delight and surprise, undercutting culinary tradition and the expectations of the diner. Many of the developments in molecular gastronomy are driven by research and experimentation as detailed in Hervé This' *Molecular Gastronomy: Exploring the Science of Flavor*. In considering the protein structure of yogurt, the molecules of caramelisation, or even the taste of cold (heating the tip of the tongue to 35°C produces a slight sweet sensation, while cooling the tongue to 5°C produces a sour sensation), Hervé This elaborates not only on novel forms of cooking, but also on the sensory and the papillary aspects of a dish which ultimately impact on the diner's experience. Even mastication is a topic that is ripe for discussion:

> What can we learn from the model [of mastication that Hervé This proposes] for culinary purposes? Depending on their physical characteristics, foods need a greater or lesser degree of mastication. The addition of compounds that make saliva more liquid (tannins, for example) or increase the concentration of liquids extracted by the teeth has the effect of reducing cohesion, which ought to lengthen the amount of time spent chewing and so add to the enjoyment one takes from a dish. (111)

Research on the perception and understanding of flavour is, of course, accompanied by technical and chemical research which enables processes such as spherification, a technique perfected by elBulli in 2003 (Myhrvold et al., 2011, Vol. IV: 184) and which, using a chemical process derived from the interaction between an algae extract and a calcium solution, allows liquids to be coated with a gel skin, enabling the creation of, among other dishes, 'apple caviar'. Another example of the unbound creativity and the search for a 'limit experience' can be seen in a dish served by Heston Blumenthal at his restaurant *The Fat Duck* in London. Entitled 'Flaming Sorbet,' diners are served what is intended to look like a campfire – a sorbet created with gellan (a compound which retains its solid form at high temperatures), nestled upon a bed of twigs, which hide a layer of dry ice. Whisky is poured over the dish and ignites, creating flames reminiscent of a campfire. At the same time a perfume mixture, scented with leather, wood, tobacco and whisky, is poured on to the twigs. The result is a nostalgic combination of odour, taste, visual experience and gustatory delight that is almost Proustian in the manner in which it evokes childhood memories of campfires (Myhrvold et al., 2011, Vol. I: 51).[2]

The manner in which, for modernist cuisine, technical invention informs the quest for a gustatory 'limit experience' is indicative of both the singularity of such a meal and of its 'unspeakable' nature. Diners, faced with such extraordinarily technical dishes are, like the villagers in *Babette's Feast*, silent. The complexity of the production and the singularity of the experience which is difficult, if not impossible, to achieve in a home kitchen testify to the movement beyond the ordinary or accepted economy of production and consumption that characterises a movement towards *jouissance*. This is, of course, a highly elitist pastime, which is informed by the economics of luxury products, and which today is associated with gratuitous expense (itself linked to *jouissance*). As Joan, Josep and Jordi Roca, in their preface to *El Celler de Can Roca*, write:

> Today gastronomy shows its polyhedral side as a recipient of the changes experimented by the parameters of luxury. The rituals of wealth are now focused on the quality of the details [...] Luxury is now sustained in the field of emotions, which has entered fully and triumphantly the world of gastronomy making an incredible turn. We relate to the idea of an emotional revolution, equipped with an invisible technology, product of our dialogue with science and that wants to convey generation after generation.
>
> (Roca *et al.*, 2013: 16)

The notion of gastronomic *jouissance* as tied to luxury can furthermore be read cinematographically in both *La Grande Bouffe*, considering the elevated social status and relative wealth of the suicidal gastronomes, and in *Babette's Feast*, wherein a veritable fortune is placed upon the table. While in *Chocolat*, Armande Voizin is a relatively wealthy landowner (Juliette Binoche's character leases the *chocolaterie* from her); in *Julie and Julia*, Julie struggles with her job, reinforcing the representation of gastronomic *jouissance* as elitist. Yves Michaud, in his essay on the philosophical implications of the contemporary luxury markets (*Le nouveau luxe: Expériences, arrogance, authenticité*) emphasises this shift towards the aestheticisation of food (Michaud, 2013: 32). For Michaud, luxury products ultimately exist in order to underline privilege, in marking a distinction between those who can and cannot afford such experiences (38), as well as being an ostentatious mark of pleasure and excess. This is evident at once in the interest generated by molecular gastronomy, and by exhibitions such as the recent *L'art fait ventre* (*A bellyful of art*) exhibition in Paris, which was

structured around the sociocultural representation of food, and culinary representation more generally, through sculpture, still-life, video installation and performance pieces (Feuillas, 2014). The further relationship between gastronomy and *jouissance* and the manner in which this impinges on current trends can be read in the nascent 'food porn' movement, wherein diners photograph particularly innovative or spectacular dishes, sharing the images on social media sites. The resulting gastronomic 'pornography' serves at once as a symbol of status and privilege, but also as a tool of inspiration, discovery and delight, reinforcing the objectified nature of avant-garde cuisine, where food is the chef's artistic vehicle of expression. In the same vein, one can consider the number of books which focus precisely on the 'art' of Ferran Adrià's cuisine, including *Food Art* published by Francesc Guillamet and Ferran Adrià (2010) or *The Photography of Modernist Cuisine* by Nathan Myhrvold (2013). More historically speaking, Serge Safran in *L'amour gourmand: Libertinage gastronomique au XVIIIe siècle* (2009), details the democratic nature of coffee and chocolate which became more openly available during the eighteenth century and entered the popular literary imagination through the writings of Sade, Casanova and Marivaux, among others. If we compare the availability of molecular gastronomy to the democratised popularity of the culinary inventions that marked the eighteenth century it becomes clear that that access to the cutting edge of contemporary gastronomic *jouissance*, both in its cinematographic representation and in terms of a more general culture, remains a luxury open to the happy few.

Yet neither the gastronomic excesses of yore, nor the gastronomic *jouissance* to be found at the tables of restaurants such as elBulli, The Fat Duck or El Celler de Can Roca, can be considered to evoke 'true' *jouissance*, even though they bear many of the hallmarks. There is no mortal end, despite the closing of elBulli or what Garner says of his lunch with Mhyrvold and Adrià: 'In my food- and wine-altered state, I began to meditate on the notion of death by senseless beauty' (Garner, 2014). Rather, the *jouissance* of such a meal is, to reference Baudrillard, a simulacrum. Such a meal is never more than a staged representation of the possibility (or impossibility) of *jouissance*. It is a simulation so convincing that it takes the place of the act itself, becoming at once the transcendent movement and its own inscription into the pleasure principle. And yet events such as the dinner entitled *El Somni* (the dream) held in the spring of 2014 in Barcelona, hosted by El Celler de Can Roca (which was in 2013 awarded the title of the best restaurant in the world) are nevertheless powerful interventions in the field

of gastronomic *jouissance*. Conceived of as the celebration of a marriage between opera and fine cuisine, *El Somni* references the Wagnerian ideal of a total work of art, described by Franc Aleu as 'a gift for the senses' (Aleu, 2014: 8), and by Josep Roca as a 'sensorial pressure cooker as has never been proposed by anyone before [...] a sensorial experience taken to the limit. To the limit of beauty and to the limit of expression' (2013: 13). Over 50 artists were called upon in the production of this dinner, divided into 12 acts. Each course was accompanied by video projections upon screens surrounding the table and upon the table itself, by a soundtrack composed specifically for each course, and by cutlery and tableware commissioned from local artists. For instance, the course entitled 'War' (goose *à la royale*) was served upon tableware made from recycled World War II relics splattered with 'beetroot blood' (2013: 63). The description of course IV entitled 'Under the Sea' is exemplary of the attention and reflection which characterises El Somni as an event:

> Life restarts with a drop that represents the pain of being born, an essential drop of a dark and extremely salty wine [...] placed on the skin of each person's hand so that they can lick the essence of the salt of life [...]. The seafood gradually arrives: now sea cucumbers on a sauce made of anemone emulsified with olive oil; now cockles with a ceviche; now an octopus tentacle with Parmentier [...].

The course was served upon 3D recreations of marine life (114), which together with the video projections and the soundtrack form a poetic synthesis, transporting the diner beyond the confines of the dining room, beyond the senses. Vincenç Altaió attests to the singularity of this event (or performance) in referring to the Last Supper:

> twelve dishes for twelve guests [...] a cloister given over to the arts, science and communication, Aleu has painted another Last Supper by employing the most innovative techniques in use today. The guests of yesteryear, religious apostles, are today apostles of creativity [...] Art, science and sensitivity in a total work. From ancient alchemy to transubstantiation and from there to synaesthesia. Tangible and intangible, cuisine and the arts.
>
> (2013: 201)

El Somni represents the very limit of contemporary gastronomic *jouissance*, inaccessible and indescribable, wherein food is sublimated into a singular limit experience. It also marks the point at which

gastronomic *jouissance* is re-inscribed into the pleasure principle, avoiding the mortal cost of the death drive, reflecting *jouissance* as simulacrum.

The relationship between gastronomy and *jouissance* remains powerful, given the pleasure and enjoyment that can accompany even the most humble of the culinary arts. We recall the celebrated scene where Marcel Proust's narrator is veritably undone by the small mouthful of *petites madeleines* – the importance of this scene both within the structure of the novel and more generally within the literary canon underlying the importance of the powerfully transcendent effect that gustatory *jouissance* can have – even when limited by the pleasure principle. It is thus that Ferreri's classic represents not only a parody of a society bent on wanton expenditure, but also the jubilant singularity that marks a particular moment in cinematographic gastronomy, where the pleasure principle is resolutely and unflinchingly transgressed. The ensuing evolution in the cinematographic representation of gastronomic *jouissance* can be seen to inform an understanding of the manner in which modernist cuisine, or molecular gastronomy, is represented as a form of *jouissance*, a luxury limit experience, ultimately confronted by the sensory limit of its impossibility and its re-inscription into the realm of the pleasure principle. Even then we would do well to remember that true gastronomic *jouissance* is only ever possible on the silver screen and even the most avant-garde forms of contemporary cuisine are only gestures towards an impossible *jouissance*.

Notes

A version of this article was previously published in the Zeitschrift für Kulturwissenschaften, see Brendon Wocke, "Gastronomy & Jouissance: From 'La Grande Bouffe' to 'Julie & Julia.' " *Zeitschrift für Kulturwissenschaften*, Vol. 1 (2012).

1. 'Let the feast begin'.
2. The introduction to the first volume of Myhrvold's *Modernist Cuisine: The Art and Science of Cooking* offers an excellent overview of the development of molecular gastronomy from a historical point of view.

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