

Food Between Life and Death in the Cinema of Marco Ferreri and Itami Jūzō

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Abstract International cinema of every era has told of the relationship between men, women and food. In many cases it is presented as a common thread capable of binding every life impulse: sex, spirituality, greed, even death. In the cases of Italy and Japan, there are two directors in particular for whom the theme recurs with greater incisiveness: Marco Ferreri and Itami Jūzō, and especially in their works *La Grande Abbuffata* and *Tanpopo*. Both movies also represent a critique of the consumer society and the general decay of civil entourage. The characters thus contribute to representing a sort of mythology of the human being, each distinct in a grotesque, surreal and in many cases parodic way while they use food to translate their impulses. This essay aims to highlight the similarities between the main narrative strategies used by the two directors.

Keywords Food. Cinema. Ferreri. Itami. La Grande Bouffe. Tampopo. Symbolism. Life. Death.

Summary 1 Introduction. – 2 Criticism of the Consumer Society. – 3 “If You Don’t Eat You Can’t Die”. – 4 Cruelty and the Exposure of Death.

1 Introduction

The relationship between food and cinema dates back to the dawn of the history of the seventh art. In fact, as early as 1895 the Lumière brothers referred to it in *Repas de Bébé* (Baby’s Lunch), where we see Auguste feeding his little daughter. From that first moment there have been countless films that have shown how food can alterna-

tively become a symbol of the individual's condition and the driving force behind his actions, a metaphor for the primary instincts of the human being and a connecting element in the order of social rules. For this purpose, the aggregating and community value of the food itself is added in many cases, where the rituality of preparation and consumption defines the place of internal conflicts within the group and its communication dynamics.

Research on the subject has always been numerous: important philosophers, anthropologists, sociologists, as well as historians and film critics¹ have been dedicated to the analysis of how food permeates every cultural aspect of contemporary life. Moreover, in recent years there has been a furthering of research from a transmedia perspective, an interest also stimulated by the growing number of television programs dedicated to culinary art, as well as the multiplication of subjective perspectives on food in social media.

As recently pointed out by scholars Enrique Mirón, Santana González and Molina García (2020), the studies conducted until today have focused in particular on a few areas from which a general classification of films on the subject derives. The first group includes those films in which food becomes a symbol of social differentiation, i.e., Luis Buñuel's *The Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie* (1972) and Gabriel Axel's *The Feast of Babette* (1987). The second group refers to films in which dishes serve to enhance certain feelings, a category which could include, for example, *Eat, Drink, Love* (1994) by Ang Lee and *Como Agua Para Chocolate* (1992) by Alfonso Arau. Finally, the third group includes titles in which gastronomic personalities stand out, as in the case of *Julie & Julia* (2009) by Nora Ephron. While the three scholars suggest to also contemplate a fourth category dedicated to the representation of eroticism in gastronomy, it becomes necessary to add a further classification that implies the very close relationship between food and death and the dynamics of cruelty that link them, a sphere which also includes famous films such as Pier Paolo Pasolini's *Salò* (1975) and Peter Greenaway's *The Cook, The Thief, His Wife, and Her Lover* (1990).

The two films analysed in this essay, namely *La Grande Bouffe* (*La Grande Abbuffata*, 1973) by Marco Ferreri and *Tanpopo* (*Tanpopo*, 1985) by Itami Jūzō, can be traced back to all the categories just examined. Moreover, both directors, almost the same age and who died in the same year, 1997, have often resorted to the symbolism of food in relation to the socio-economic sphere in their filmographies.

1 The best-known essay on the subject is *Mythologiques I. Le cru et le cuit* (*Mythologique 1. The Raw and the Cooked*, Paris, Plon, 1964) by Claude Lévi-Strauss, through which the French ethnologist demonstrates, with the help of references to music and mythology, how the transition from the raw state of food (the natural condition) to the one after cooking (the cultural condition) represents the transformation of an elementary order into an elaborate system of codes that is typical of civilization.

La Grande Bouffe tells of a group of friends who retire to a Parisian villa with the intention of committing suicide by eating until they die: Ugo is a cook, Michel a television producer, Marcello a pilot, Philippe is a magistrate. The men are joined by three prostitutes, who, however, will leave the villa before their death out of disgust (for the excess of food and physiological functions of the men), and the teacher Andréa, the only woman who will remain to accompany their path towards death.²

In *Tampopo* the truck driver Goro and his young co-driver stop at a small restaurant to eat *ramen*. The owner, Tanpopo, a widow with a dependent child, tries to keep the restaurant going as well as she can, but with little success. Goro decides to help her become the best *ramen* cook in the neighbourhood. Various episodic portraits intersect their story, including that of a *yakuza* with his mistress who appears in several moments and who also opens the film by addressing the audience directly in the cinema, thus defining the fictional character of the entire film from the outset.

2 Criticism of the Consumer Society

The essays that refer to both films underline first of all how the stories represent, albeit with a surreal slant, a critique of the contemporary consumerist and materialist society in which the two directors themselves live. In the first case the idea is reinforced by the markedly decadent atmosphere in which the story unfolds, while in the second one the director opts for a parodic solution. Beyond the different approaches, the voracious and neurotic appetite translates the nausea towards the excess of consumption, therefore towards the altered idea of life itself, where food represents at the same time an element of pleasure and disturbance. Furthermore, in the case of *Tampopo*, everything is amplified by a continuous reference to Western elements which, now widespread and mixed with traditional and native ones, contribute to emptying the spiritual sense and making society more materialistic.³

² The names of the characters are the same as the actors who play them: Ugo Tognazzi, Michel Piccoli, Marcello Mastroianni, Philip Noiret and Andréa Ferréol. The professions of the five offer an interesting approach to the 'institutions' that regulate the society of the period and that suicide, as a metaphor, helps to break down. In this regard, at the presentation of the film at the Cannes Film Festival where it was booed by many (and later censored), Luis Buñuel called it "a monument to hedonism".

³ Many aspects are even parodic compared to Hollywood cinema, for example the cowboy hat worn by the protagonist Goro, while others refer directly to Western gastronomies imported into Japan: it shows how to eat pasta without making noise, how social status is also expressed by ability to choose courses on a menu written in French, and

Cooking and eating thus become rituals emptied of their ancestral function and shown as an exhibition of appearances and trends, in any case elaborated in their meticulous preparation and consumption. The refinement of the dishes exhibited in both films and continuously enunciated in their characteristics is not only mere exposure of waste, but represents “a system of communication, a body of images, a protocol of usager, situations and behavior” (Barthes 1979). For example, in a scene from *Tampopo* a ramen expert explains to his pupil that in order to taste the dish properly he must follow some basic steps: observe the bowl to appreciate the harmony of shapes and aromas; caress the surface of the food with the chopsticks; gently dip the meat in the broth apologising to the pork because it will have to wait before being eaten; finally, start with the ramen looking at the meat “with affection”.

Similarly, *La Grande Bouffe* exposes with great care the presentation of the ingredients and the stages of preparation of the dishes, especially that of the final course prepared by Ugo (the three liver *pâtés* of different animals whose combination should have represented the apex of his culinary creation), which later becomes an instrument for his own death. Food therefore loses any primary meaning as an element for subsistence and is transformed into a Dionysian simulacrum of the use of the senses. Faced with its symbol as an instrument of pleasure (culinary refinement), both films also exhibit the ingredients in their ‘vulgar’ and nauseating aspect: in the carcasses of animals abandoned in the garden in the final scene of Ferreri’s film, in the food analysed in the garbage cans outside the restaurants in Itami’s film.

3 “If You Don’t Eat You Can’t Die”⁴

Between the two extremes of life and death, the human being lives and subjectivises himself with the use of food and sex in an infinite range of experiences of enjoyment or pain, considered in a continuum of small and large obsessions. The body is the canvas on which these dynamics materialise, and therefore both directors explore it in every function, even extreme, through a continuous use of close-ups and extreme close-ups that mercilessly show its fragility.

Sex is one of the key elements of this human representation. In *La Grande Bouffe* it is orgiastic, enjoyed in the same way as food is con-

finally how all this creates repulsion (in the scene where an old woman sneaks into a supermarket to fingerprint various foods displayed on the shelves).

⁴ This is the phrase that Ugo says to Michel as he gorges him with mashed potatoes in the midst of an intestinal blockage in *La Grande Bouffe*.

sumed: breathless, disordered, obsessive and at times vulgar and grotesque. In *Tampopo* it is more joyful and directly consumed in the relationship with food, as in the scene where the *yakuza* licks his woman's body after sprinkling her with various dishes and ingredients.

Some foods recur in both films in their common symbolic values, in particular eggs and oysters. If in *La Grande Bouffe* the egg has a greater analogy with death, in particular when Ugo arranges some slices of it on his latest culinary creation saying that for the Jews the eggs represent precisely the idea of earthly end, in *Tampopo* the *yakuza* and his partner reach orgasm by passing a yolk from mouth to mouth, an erotic symbol often used in Japanese culture to indicate the thin thread that unites life and death.⁵ Oysters, in turn, are the voluptuous sign of an erotic alteration. In Ferreri's film, Marcello and Ugo compete for who eats the most in a short period of time, indicating the unbridled consumption to which they expose all their forms of pleasure. In Itami's film, on the other hand, the *yakuza* approaches an adolescent *ama* (oyster fisherwomen, usually not so young): the girl opens an oyster for him, which nevertheless cuts his lip, which then bleeds, staining the oyster itself, and with pleasure it is the girl who eats it, thus reversing the canonical roles of sexual possession.

Preparing food, then creating pleasure, is a male prerogative in both films as in society, yet in both movies this domain is reaffirmed and at the same time ironised. In fact, in Ferreri's film, speaking of Andréa, Ugo says: "she is also good at cooking", then the teacher from *Tampopo* says: "I never thought that a woman could become a good *ramen* cook". The woman actually provides the primary need for food through breastfeeding, an image strongly present in the two films. *La Grande Bouffe* introduces us to Philippe subjugated by the breast of his childhood nurse (later also his lover). For him, a diabetic and who in the end is the only survivor in the group of friends, death will come through the excess of sugar in the dessert with the shape of breasts that Andréa herself has prepared for him, stimulating him to consume it until he dies. In Itami's film, after an initial fight Goro regains consciousness in the arms of Tampopo who brings his head closer to her breast. In the ending, especially after the killing of the *yakuza* and Goro's departure by his truck, the camera slowly slides towards a bench where a woman sits breastfeeding her baby. A continuous process of life and death, therefore, which ideally crosses the stages of psychosexual development theorised by Freud, of which the

⁵ The erotic symbolism of the egg often recurs in Japanese cinema, as indicated by the scene of *In the Realm of Senses* by Oshima Nagisa in which the protagonist Abe Sada penetrates herself with an egg, that is, with the eye that examines her uterus as "the place that gives life".

woman-mother represents in a certain sense an exterminating angel who has the task of opening and closing the cycle of existence.

4 Cruelty and the Exposure of Death

The two films use a precise aesthetic of cruelty that intersects various moments of the narrative with grotesque tones, often leading to a visually strong exposure of the body that has lost all vital functions or otherwise resuming it in the moment it is about to lose it. In *Tampopo*, for example, in one of the erotic scenes between the *yakuza* and his woman we witness the agonising end of some dying shrimp in the plate *odori ebi* (live shrimp in an alcoholic infusion) that the man places on the woman's belly and from which movement she gets pleasure. In another scene, an elderly man in a restaurant risks suffocating by eating *mochi* and Tampopo literally saves him by pulling it out of his throat with a vacuum cleaner, then the man in gratitude offers her a turtle to eat after cutting it while it is still alive and making it bleed and agonise. Finally, in one of the sketches that enriches the film, a man runs home where his wife, in the company of her children and a doctor, is on the verge of death: to stimulate her to react, her husband orders her to prepare dinner, and in fact the woman gets up, quickly prepares and serves, then lies back in her bed and dies.

La Grande Bouffe exhibits even more clearly the body in its extreme vulnerability, hence its grotesque aspect in death. During the first evening at dinner, the four friends, while they eat, look at erotic slides of women from the early twentieth century projected onto the wall, but Marcello notices how it looks like a funeral, since all those women have long since died. The bodies of Marcello and Michel themselves after their death are exhibited from the window of the freezer door in which they are hung so that they do not decompose.

Finally, there is one sign above all that unites the two films in the exhibition of the lifeless body: a severed head of a pig. It is shown by Michel in Ferreri's film when supplies of meat arrive, and he wields it as a sign of a voluptuousness that anticipates the group's own design of death. In Itami's film, the pig's head is one of the ingredients displayed in the kitchen when the bums help Tampopo improve her cooking skills, a thing that causes her disgust. But it is above all in the film's finale that its symbolism will become dominant: when the *yakuza* is hit in the street by gunshots, his woman reaches him while he is agonising among statues that depict boar heads, and the couple's last words are addressed to the explanation of how the animal is cooked in the mountains.

La Grande Bouffe and *Tampopo* still represent two fundamental films in the history of international cinema and in many cases serve as inspiration for other directors who often quote some scenes, in-

cluding the title by Greenaway to which we have already referred. Ferreri and Itami both carried out an examination of the body (physical, social, political) through similar surgical instruments as anthropologists, offering us in their symbolic and grotesque representations a still strongly current and disturbing human sample.

