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What's Eating the Romanian "New Wave"?

Abstract: Without trying to identify a sub-genre in the Romanian contemporary cinema and without searching for the so called "cooking films", this paper is analyzing the usage of food and eating in the "new wave" films of the Romanian cinema. Treating food and food consumption as a social practice and using the concept of food semiotics, the author presents some of the most important usages of eating in the contemporary Romanian cinema.

Keywords: Romanian cinema, food, eating, taste, sensation, spectator, synesthesia.

The digestive system of the visual consumers

We are "visual consumers" (Schroeder 3-4), we consume and devour visual products and visual objects. Today Cinema is one of the most important technologies by which we absorb information through our most important sense: the sight. As Ian Christie has put it, cinema is in and by itself a form of consumption, a "devouring" of meanings, ideas and realities. This visual consumption takes place in a production world where the reproduction of images is made in a similar way to fast food. We consume pre-cooked advertising and film products, yet visual production is limited in terms of its scope. Cinema, and the other related video technologies, is fundamentally an art of two senses: sight and sound.

Pushing towards the limits of other senses has always been a question for the philosophers and practitioners of cinematic arts. One possible answer was the concept of haptic gaze (*regard haptique*), the term used by Gilles Deleuze (and borrowed from Alois Riegl), which explains how, using vision to stimulate the other senses, cinema has the capacity

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to put the viewer in a state of mind which allows almost tactile experience (Deleuze 25-26). This tactile capacity of visual arts, documented from Ancient art to that of the Renaissance, gives vision a capacity beyond its limitations. So the tactile function of the vision, pushing beyond the optical and into the sensory, allows cinema to be crossing the visual boundaries of the cinematic and reaching to the limits of tactility and even olfactory perception. The Soviet cinematographers, like Eisenstein, were among those pushing these limits further and further, some of them suggesting even that film should become an all inclusive medium of expression, one that would address "all the senses", which would physically move the spectators through the use of montage (Eisenstein 38).

It was Antonin Artaud (1971) who went on speaking about a "third type" of film making, one that would be a mixing of the "pure", visually based cinema, and the "psychological", emotion filled cinema. This third cinema would be a cinema of senses, of sensations produced by the eye, yet existing in the other senses too. Being a purely audio-visual form of expression, cinema can only stimulate those other senses in order to generate a feeling, a substitute for the real experience. Yet eating is one of the facts, like smelling and sensing odors, which refuses itself to the visual nature of cinema making. Eating and "tasting" art was one of the key issues for experimental artists, and cinema proposed some of the most awesome experimentations with

food in an aesthetic way. Crossing the line between the screen and the experience of the viewer, starting with the 16th and 17th century masters and (not) ending with the experiments of Viennese actionism, was a constant provocation, which reverberated into cinema (Keller 2006).

In this context, the question is if cinema can integrate the taste into its mode of production, if this peculiar sense can become a part of the visual "devouring" of cinematic production. Seeing how taste is used in some of the Romanian new cinema movies could provide some hints on the motivations and the techniques of how the movie makers are dealing with this issue.

Sitting at the table of the Romanian cinema

Cristian Mungiu ironically characterized the Romanian film by the fact that it is centered around a "scene at the table" (quoted by Chirilov 13), that is we can find an ubiquitous sequence in most of the Romanian films, in which the characters sit around a dinner table, allowing the director to build a *mise-en-scène* filled with psychological tension. Chirilov reviewed the wide variety of Romanian films belonging to the "new wave", from Radu Muntean's *The paper will be blue* or *Tuesday after Christmas*, where using the dinner table is a tool for insight into the characters' inner emotional world, to Florin Șerban or Marian Crișan where the table is an intermediary object, used to present relational dynamics between the characters. I believe that it is even more

important to see how these locations of the action, beyond the simple typology of the “table scene” could be suggestive for the deeper levels of significance into these films. Identifying a sub-genre in the Romanian contemporary cinema, one close to what was called “food films”, I suggest we should analyze the implications of the usage of food and eating in the “new wave” films of the Romanian cinema. Treating food and food consumption as a social practice we can identify the conceptual use of eating in the contemporary Romanian cinema. The physical nature of the act of eating shown on the screen goes beyond the relationships or the character development, it is about getting in touch, being moved by the cinematic production in a different way than the classical movies are doing it. It is my contention that we are witnessing a search for a multi-sensory, synesthetic experience, produced by the two senses (sound and sight) to stimulate other senses, widely practiced in European moviemaking (Marks 22).

Semiotics of food

Of course, there is a long history in the arts dealing with the relationship between color and taste (as it can be traced from Goethe to Klee), or the correspondence between the music and the images (as it is for Kandinsky), yet the role of taste in the visual arts is still a debated problem. One possible answer to this problem comes from the anthropology of culture, from a structuralist interpretation of

visual representations. One of the fathers of cultural anthropology, Claude Lévi-Strauss, argued in his seminal book describing the cultural distinctions between the primitive and the civilized (*Le cru et le cuit* 1964) that we can interpret the eating practices of a group as relevant for the entire cultural practices of that group. The hypothesis of Lévi-Strauss concerning the „preparedness” of aliments distinct from the “raw” nature of food in the wild, has a very pragmatic, interpretative ending. Preparing and using the food is to be considered as one of the first and most primitive layers of code making in human societies.

As human beings we not only eat food, we attribute characteristics to that food, that is we make the processed aliments relevant for our social status. Thus, following the “food trails”, we can identify the deeply rooted significations about social practices and social identities. So, if processing food is an indicator of the possibility of processing reality, of transforming that which is natural into a carrier of significance, by consequence any form of transforming a raw signifier into a secondary, “cooked” signified, becomes a form of semiotic. Here food processing is a primitive expression of semiosis.

Later, in *L'Origine des manières de table* (1968), Lévi-Strauss takes further his analysis, suggesting that culinary rituals are indicators of social structures, of the organization of human societies as a whole. Not only that the way we treat food is relevant for the way we operate

with meaning in society, but our table "rules and habits" become indicators of the emotional dynamic within the group. And, since eating contains the cultural practices of a given group, by interpreting these practices of eating we have access to the initial conventions, to the profound meanings otherwise hidden.

In the logic of the "semiotics of food" – the way we eat as a representation of the way we see the world we live in – we must follow the differences between our practices concerning eating. As in all cultures we attribute symbolic meaning to our food, from the Hebrew tradition of eating bitter herbs to remind the chosen people of their bitter life during the captivity, the Hindu interdiction of eating cow meat, due to the connection to the bounty-full Goddess of the Earth, or the Christian representation of the body and the blood of Christ by their food substitutes, bread and wine, we should look at food as never being just food. Food is always codified by the cooking and preparing practices, by the codes we embed in the act of making our food. These codes are based on a fundamentally structuralist approach to all forms of signs, where the permutation of an opposing set of terms (cooked-raw; fresh-rotten) become indicators of the qualities of the given cultural object, environment, of the social practices they take place in.

So, if cooking is a sign, a manifestation of cultural elaboration, that is invested with meaning, it is allowing us to have access to the embedded significance. One obvious expression of this significance is

that the relationship we have with food is an indicator of our social status, of the position we are taking in society. But the "code of food" is more complex, it carries more than the codes of social relationship or social hierarchies, it is an expression of power structures and cultural practices. And this, as Brower suggests, this cultural interpretative tool, can be used in films to "communicate important aspects of character's emotions, along with their personal and cultural identities" (Bower 1). So the interaction with food and the treatment of food as related to the actions on the screen must be seen as part of meaning creation in cinema. Food is an indicator of the ethics and moral values of the characters, but also of the inner dynamics of meaning production in any film.

Here I will be using some relevant examples from some of the most important cinematographers of the new Romanian cinema, like Cristi Puiu, Corneliu Porumboiu and Cristian Mungiu, in order to discuss the role played by eating in cinema. In the following analysis I will apply the binary structure of myth-making and myth interpretation proposed by Lévi-Strauss: savage – civilized, processed – natural, to give a description of the signification searched by the contemporary Romanian moviemakers.

Eating (in) cinema

Although food and nutrition play a fundamental role in our lives, the classic film practice deliberately ignored these functions, constantly avoiding

images of people eating. Eating was, in the traditional film canon, a gesture of irreverence. In a very Victorian way of thinking, eating in front of other people was not a nice gesture, and so the unsightly nature of the eating has put food, together with taste as sensation, outside the interest of cinema. They were the “missing meals and appetites” of early moviemaking (Zimmerman 2009). Because it was commonly accepted that movies cannot show their feelings of people who eat and even less what they taste when they eat, cinema excluded eating as a function and attributed it other roles.

Zimmerman describes three key ways classical cinema uses food and represents the act of eating. At the first level, food is a simple prop, it is an element belonging to the setup, used to localize or to contextualize the narrative within a historical or spatial frame. Here food is a function that allows the author to create subtext hermeneutics, and send us simple information. For reasons related to the arguments of the “pure” aesthetics of film, which makes eating an ignoble visual action, filmmakers started avoiding it by an ellipse, which can integrate eating in a temporal split, or they simply placed it in the background. This gave another important function of eating, which was early on used into movies, that is to indicate the fast passing of time. As Orson Welles does in the now famous sequence of the time passing by in the relationship between Charles Kane and his wife, the table is only a

background which allows the director to build intellectual significance. In an even more primitive way, eating allows time to be processed in the movies, most of the times the character sits at a table, then we see him standing up – he has finished eating, time passed by.

The third level of using the food in cinema is by attributing symbolic and metaphorical significance to it, building a deeper reference level into the scene (Zimmerman 9). This is best exemplified by the famous table sequence in Bunuel’s *Viridiana*. The action takes place at the table of apparently regular people, but it is a reference to the Last Supper of Christ. Another symbolic treatment of food is to build it metaphorically, from a simple material to a psychological tool. As it happens in the famous *Gold rush* sequence, where Charlie Chaplin eats a slice of his own boiled shoe soles, and later becomes himself a roasted chicken in the eyes of his antagonist, food is used as a narrative tool. This also happens in comedy films, where playing with food (throwing tarts or cream pies) are comic instruments, since food is always available, yet is only an object, devoided of its primarily quality, the taste.

The soup as the primordial liquid of Reality

The artificial nature of most of the traditional cinema productions was the fact that it seemed to ignore basic bodily functions: sleeping, excretion, eating were deliberately avoided since they did not seem to be important in the

narrative development. They were simply "dejection", shameful and disgusting references to our animality. Cinema was "disembodied" (Elsaesser), yet even these theoreticians, interpreting the role of senses in cinema are relying only on hearing, touching and thinking. As it was the case with other biological functions of our bodies, the cinema evaded the puritan constriction imposed on its modes of production, and during the 50s, together with the growing interest for realism in the European cinema, as it was with the British kitchen sink films, but also with the French Nouvelle Vague, the bodily actions became integral parts of the aesthetics of cinematic realism. In this respect, eating and cooking were considered fundamental parts of the realism of life, not only representing the materiality of the visible world, but also reshaping the universe where human beings live. This meant a return of the kitchen as a filmic space: many of the new Romanian films are beginning or are ending in the space of the kitchen.

In Corneliu Porumboiu's movie *Polițist adjektiv* (*Police, adjective*) we have an important use of the kitchen space and of the act of eating. The main character, the policeman, troubled by a moral dilemma, is all alone at the table, and we see him in a close up eating soup for several minutes. This is the point where the "Real" takes place, that "Real" which Roland Barthes has called (with respect to photography) the *punctum*. It is that hole, that single element which pokes out from the image and "pierces" the viewer, bringing him

into the created Reality (Barthes 26-27). The fact that Porumboiu puts his character in this deeply human position, making us witnesses to a fact of life otherwise ignored by cinematographers, has to do with the interest for realism of these young moviemakers.

Have you eaten yet (any Romanian cinema)?

Eating is also fundamental in another key film of the Romanian new wave. Cristi Puiu's *Cigarettes and Coffee* (*Un pachet de cafea și un cartuș de Kent*) is taking place within a "table scene". Unlike the Romanian movies before him, Puiu creates a context where we do not take part in a symbolic reconstruction of the world (like in Pintilie's ending of the *Oak Tree – Balanța*), but we are witness of a natural scene. A son greedily eats course after course, in the middle of the dialogue with his father, without caring about the spectator, without any courtesy towards his parent. This treatment of the realistic dialogue is, more importantly, relevant for the inner dynamics of the Father-Son relationship. The son eats incessantly, and the Father only gets a glass of water, which he never manages to drink, and which is chose also by his son, all the while watching the greed and almost gluttony manner in which his offspring becomes a representation of the capitalist consumerism.

There is no *plan-séquence*, as in other new wave movies. On the contrary, "Reality" is built upon other cinematographic techniques. The table scene

begins with a standard medium shot, and it starts *in medias res*, that is it begins when we already see an empty plate on the table, an indication that the son had already eaten a meal before, and now the waiter brings him the second plate, maybe even the third course, since it is an apple pie. We also find out that the son had already drunk a beer, since the waiter offers him another one. He refuses and condescendingly asks his father: "Have you eaten, yet?" And the father says twice that he is not hungry, although he looks starvingly at the son, as he starts eating the pie. From now on the son will speak only with his mouth full, with a total lack of respect for the father, and the sound of cutlery on the plate is counter-pointing his father's words. The son scornfully masticates while his father describes his life tragedy, the loss of his job, the desperation of a life time lost. In this context, the food becomes not only a metaphor of relationship, it is a narrative function, one positioning the viewer, by counter-shot over the son's shoulder, in his eating position. We are the ones who are "eating" the information about this person's life, we are chewing without feelings, we are tasting the deep despire.

Relevantly enough, the job the father used to have was also tied to food and to eating practices. He used to provide food for a worker's canteen, he was transporting peas, potatoes and noodles meant to feed the working class. "Now there is no one to be fed", says the father, all the while his son continues to eat. The references to processing food are constantly present during the entire

narrative. For example, later on in the discussion, we find out that the father is going to cook a potatoes soup – one of the simplest and cheapest meals, even for Romanian standards – another indication of the social status of the father. Here, the counterpoint becomes obvious and even transparent. While the "working class" is no longer fed by the government, a new social category of workers is born, one of capitalist extraction, which does not need society to be feeding them, they provide for themselves, they are the egoistic devourers, the emotionless eaters. This becomes more than clear when the son gets a coffee, and the father is still undecided about what to order, that the son asks for another piece of apple pie, and surreptitiously asks for a special part, a crunchier part of the pie. A cup of water, says the father, and the son decides for him, "bring him a Dorna". The entire scene describes, by simply showing eating and drinking practices, the power relationship between the two and their ideological universe. As we will see later, the father is unable to understand the difference between instant coffee and "Lavazza" coffee, as he is not able to understand the difference between the various types of bottled water offered to him. His incapacity to perceive the differences between different types of processing food is a manifestation of his incapacity to understand the cultural changes taking place in society, in the general transformation of his world.

While the crunchiness of the pie asked by the son is simultaneously an indicator of the crunchiness of the son towards the

father, his lips seem clenched in the sugar of the pie while telling his father what to do, and the choosy nature of his character. His mouth is filled with sweetness, yet the words he mutters are bitter and sour for the ears of his parent. Since almost the entire discussion between father and son is conducted with the son masticating his food, Cristi Puiu is leaving us with the bitter taste in our mouth.

Human versus animal

Another important director of the new generation, Cristian Mungiu, is also using the table scene and eating as a device to create significance. As it happens in *Tales from the Golden Age*, in the episode dedicated to the killing of the pig, we see how social hierarchies are clearly indicated (not only in Communist time) by the food children have in their lunch box. In an apparently egalitarian society, young children were educated early on that some are "more equal" than others, and this showed in the food they were eating. The son of the militia officer is eating salami sandwiches, while his comrade is selling his intelligence for food. In the school the boys make transactions with food, one of them sells his help for the tests, for sausage and pork skin. Here, in a parodic manner, Mungiu (who wrote the screenplay of this episode, although not directing it) refers in an oblong way to the scarcity of food during Communist time, when people had to use primitive practices, like killing pigs in the courtyard of their block of flats, in order to provide meat to their family. The militia officer, who is supposed to uphold

the law, brings an "alive" pig in his apartment. This is paired in a symbolic way to the nature of his existence. The way people in Communist Romania found their food becomes an indicator of the primitive status of their very life. Illegal and illicit, the killing of the pig is done by the upholder of the law. And the solution they find to kill the pig, which is gassing the animal, is not due to their "humanism", but to their secretive way of life, since they want to avoid social participation, they do not want to share this food.

At the next level, we must note that the social value of the pig is here a reference to the lowest form of eating, there is nothing prestigious about the way people get their food, and the indoors slaughter is a reference to the dismantling of the intimate space, which should have been a space of non-violence. The apartment becomes a butcher's house, hinting to the "unclean" nature of Communism. The pig (not due to religious reference, but mostly because in Romanian "pig" is used as a swear word) becomes an indicator of the unclean relationships humans developed with each other. Finally, all the citizens of the Socialist Romania were brought to their lowest manifestations, their dehumanization being complete when we are witnessing their eating habits. The beastly nature of the "new human beings" becomes obvious in the discussions about the various options they have for killing the pig: strangulation, shooting, and finally it is the young school boy proposing the solution of "gassing the pig". Even children are debased from

their human condition to the animalistic, primitive state. If food is profoundly connected with our emotions and our passions, in a deep psychoanalytical way, the pleasure that we obtain from eating being linked to our sexual pleasures, when empty mastication takes place, it is only an expression of the void of any desire and pleasure, finally indicating the depletion of significance in the film itself.

This binary pair of significances, human versus animal, is also present in Mungiu's Palme d'Or winning movie *4 months, 3 weeks and 2 days*. On one hand there is the brutal abortion, which makes our stomach turn, in a very terrifying scene where we see the bloody fetus thrown on the floor of the bathroom, which is opposed to the polite and civilized manner in which Găbița, who just aborted, sits and waits for her food. "I was hungry", she answers her friend, and here slow development of the sequence gives us the awful sensation that the separation between the brutality of the killing of the baby and the animal state the woman was thrown in is very narrow. Here the symbolic boundary is broken by Otilia's gaze towards us in the end of the movie we are distributed as witnesses of the transformation of these women on the screen. They are falling from human beings into an animality caused by broken social relationships. Raped, abused and emotionally terrorized, they end up as devourers themselves.

Before, in the same movie, we have another table scene, which is taking

place in the house of the Radu family, when Otilia goes to visit her boyfriend, and where a ritualistic eating takes place. Even if food is about family, since cooking is done in the private space of the nuclear group which is bonded by eating together, in this scene eating is a method of social separation. During the entire time Otilia sits at the table, she does not eat anything, and the refusal to eat is equivalent with the refusal to integrate in that group.

Constructed at the borders of gore and horror films, *4 months...* is a movie where shock and disgust are used to obtain emotional reactions from the viewer. In this movie, eating is a form of violence, since all eating is based on an initial violence on a life form. Left almost dead in her hotel room after the brutal abortion, while Otilia searches panicked for her (and we are also searching with the main character), Găbița sits in the restaurant of the hotel, looking with an empty gaze outside the screen. No longer sick, now she is in the mood for a cigarette, while asking Otilia if she buried the fetus, she has ordered food. By this, she is finally devouring herself, and devouring her humanity. "What is this?", Otilia asks the waiter who brings a plate of meat, and the waiter's answer is more powerful, since the menu from the wedding next door is a list of body parts: "beef loin, pork loin, fried liver, breaded brain, marrows...". While Otilia settles for a bottle of sparkling water and Găbița looks emptily at the menu, the main character looks towards the spectator, breaking the wall

between the two worlds. It is now that the disgust becomes almost physiological, the tension built by the director reaches its peak when a very corporeal disgust, a visceral reaction coming from the visual encounter with the narrative generates an emotion that can be almost tasted. This is what Mungiu succeeds to do in this sequence – to make the spectator participate at the “taste” of the visual object (as in other sequences of the film, the spectator is involved by participation

to emotional or psychological tension by hearing and moving).

Sitting in the movie theater we are not only viewers. By using the final *décadrage*, the moving of the visual attention creates a connection between seeing, hearing and tasting. The final *mise-en-scène* is designed to create a visceral sensation within the viewer, one that we cannot experience without this reflexion of the camera into our mind. And this is beyond the simple witnessing of people eating or partying. It is a pure cinema of sensations.

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