

Małgorzata Kowalewska

Can one eat art? : The political, socioeconomic and artistic role of food in Peter Greenaways film "The Cook, the Thief, his Wife, and her Lover"

Kultura Popularna nr 2 (56), 156-164

2018

Artykuł został zdigitalizowany i opracowany do udostępnienia w internecie przez Muzeum Historii Polski w ramach prac podejmowanych na rzecz zapewnienia otwartego, powszechnego i trwałego dostępu do polskiego dorobku naukowego i kulturalnego. Artykuł jest umieszczony w kolekcji cyfrowej bazhum.muzhp.pl, gromadzącej zawartość polskich czasopism humanistycznych i społecznych.

Tekst jest udostępniony do wykorzystania w ramach dozwolonego użytku.

Małgorzata
Kowalewska

Can one eat art?

The political, socio-economic and artistic role of food in Peter Greenaway's film „The Cook, the Thief, his Wife, and her Lover”

Food film is a relatively new genre of film, albeit its status as such may be subject to discussion or interpretation. This term was coined in filmography at the end of the 20th century. Naturally, it doesn't mean that one can pinpoint a particular moment when directors started to use food as an element of scenography, or the main theme of a film (Drzał-Sierocka, 2017: 45). During cinema's infancy stage, there were instances of short movies in which food played a central part, e.g. *Feeding Baby* by the Lumière brothers (Bower and Piontek, 2013: 177–178). In the course of film history, food has been used in many scenes. Through food, audiences were shown cultural differences, urbanization, geography, class aspects. As Anne Bower and Thomas Piontek explain: “Simultaneously, food may propel a film's plot and reveal a great deal about characters, as viewers perceive who cooks, how serves the food, who pays, who eats, how doesn't, who gags on food or hoards it” (Bower and Piontek, 2013: 177).

In many films, food is presented as something which gives pleasure – what one might call: an utopian category of food films. But, consequently, there would be an antitype category – dystopian food films, in which food is presented from its dark and murky side (Baron, Carson and Bernard, 2014: 130). *The Cook, the Thief, His Wife, and Her Lover*, may be dubbed as an example of a dystopian food film. This conclusion may be considered as self-evident when one ponders upon this film's class aspects, humiliation, unappetising behaviour, and even cannibalism.

A large portion of *The Cook, the Thief, His Wife, and Her Lover* is inspired by arts. Through the paintings and visual aspects, Greenaway shows us something which is hidden at first glance. For a better understanding of these aspects, an introduction to the film's plot, the director's and political background, as well as a brief outlook on still life paintings is necessary.

Małgorzata Kowalewska – doktor kulturoznawstwa, badaczka związana z Uniwersytetem SWPS.

The Cook, the Thief, His Wife, and Her Lover plot

In *The Cook, the Thief, His Wife, and Her Lover* Greenaway tells a story which took place within 10 days, with ample accompaniment of food. At the beginning of each day, being an episode of the film, Greenaway presents the viewer with a menu of specialties for this particular day. As the title indicates, there are four main characters in the film.

Albert Spica (the theme thief) is an English gangster who owns the fine dining Le Hollandais Restaurant. He is a gourmand, but one could not really tell by his undignified manner of consumption – he is constantly burping, picking his teeth, and talking about defecation. His behaviour is also terrible towards other people.

The restaurant is run by a French chef Richard Boarst, but Spica doesn't seem to be bothered with his opinion. Spica treats other staff members, guests, and also his own wife – abhorrently.

Spica's wife Georgina, on the other hand, is sensitive, peaceful, elegant, and despises his husband's behaviour. On one occasion during dinner, she meets Michael, who becomes her and the titular lover.

Michel is a librarian. He reads his books in Le Hollandais, which puts Spica in fits of rage. When Albert discovered his wife's affair, he decided to kill Michael, as made evident by his own grotesque declaration: “I will find him and I will eat him”.

Finally, Spica's gang finds Michel and kills him in a slow and cruel fashion. They suffocate him, by forcing crumpled paper balls (made out of book pages) down his throat. When Geogina finds out that her lover is dead, she asks the chef to cook Michel's remains and serve this gruesome meal to Albert.

The film is a feast to the eyes, with many references to different art forms. At the beginning of the film a curtain is raised as if in theatre. A viewer immediately realizes that what we see is a spectacle. Greenaway's film is far from non-fiction, with ample hints that the audience is in for a show, not realistic depiction of true-life events. The costumes and set design suggest this is a theatrical piece more than a film.

Colours also play an important role in the movie. As the Raymond Armstrong describes:

(...) Greenaway uses color-coding, not simply to evoke atmosphere and emotion but – more importantly – to highlight the artificial of the action. The filmscape is topographically divided into six different areas each of which is quite distinctive in colour: the parking lot is arctic blue, the kitchen is jungle green, the dining hall is blood red, the toilet is heavenly white, the book depository is golden brown, and the hospital is egg-yolk yellow (Armstrong, 2004, 223).

It's also worth mentioning, that when Georgina and Albert Spica move from one space to another their outfits change colour. There are a lot of references made to different art forms in the film, including inspirations taken from famous Flemish and Dutch paintings.

Peter Greenaway – artist and director

Peter Greenaway is a Welsh director and screenwriter. When Greenaway was a child he used to travel with his father and brother to the Dutch seaside, where he had taken up interest in painting. This would later push him to enrol and graduate from Walthamstow Art School, back in England. He held Dutch landscape painters in high regard, which can be seen in his films (Jacobson, 2009: 20).

One cannot mistake Greenaway's films with Hollywood's storytelling manner. The director puts much weight on visual means, such as composition, colour, paintings, scenography. These are central to his films and take precedent over linear reconstruction of the story (Greenaway and Gras, 2000: VII-VIII). "Greenaway (...) wishes above all to bring the aesthetics of painting to filmmaking and to diminish the influence of narrative" (Greenaway and Gras, 2000: VIII). Greenaway intends to see visuals as if they would be subject to interpretation by a Renaissance audience. As Harlan Jacobson states, Greenaway is in agreement with Rembrandt's thesis that a painting is: „as an outrageous piece of theatre in which the painter bit the aristocratic hand that fed him by embedding within the painting a sensational charge of murder" (Jacobson, 2009: 20).

Thatcher era critique on society, politics and food

Greenaway was very much aware of the political and class aspects connected with his and other people's work. On one hand, he emphasized that his films are not "slices of reality", but on the other hand his films are thoroughly anchored in politics. *The Cook, the Thief, His Wife, and Her Lover* was a response to the Thatcher government. As Douglas Keesey said: "Having created a monster to get us angry enough to do something about Thatcher, Greenaway is unable to maintain an ambivalently hate-filled distance from Spica" (Keesey, 2006: 83).

Margaret Thatcher was the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom from 1979 to 1990 and the Leader of the Conservative Party. The government she headed aimed at implementing a free and responsible society. Her administration was established around the notion that the role of the government in people's lives should be minimal. She was of the opinion that the English government had turned from a welfare state to a "nanny state", which destroys peoples' responsibility, entrepreneurship and self-reliance. Thatcher's politics entailed limiting public spending, and reducing expenses on social services. She also reduced the power of trade unions and commenced extensive of privatisation projects.

The beginning of her tenure as Prime Minister were marked with sharp rises in unemployment levels (Minford, 2005: 53). The lion's share of the people out of work were representatives of the working class – miners, factory, steel mill workers etc. Their places of employ were often being shut down as a result of Thatcher's policies. Thatcher's critics considered her politics as resulting in greater social and economic inequalities, and while the gross domestic product increased, the working class's role in the society in general declined. Greenaway stated directly that Thatcher's politics were his inspiration for the film:

(...) CTW&L is a passionate and angry dissertation for me on the rich, vulgarian, Philistine, anti-intellectual stance of the present cultural situation in Great Brittan, supported by that wretched woman who is raping the country, destroying the welfare state, the health system, mucking up the educational system, and creating havoc everywhere (Siegel, 2000: 81).

Peter Greenaway's direction of the film, coincided with the rapid development of interest in food – described as foodism. This term was coined by Ann Barr and Paul Levy who wrote a handbook for people who have a keen interest in food (they called them foodies) *The official Foodie Handbook*. As they explained, in the '80s: "political climate was moist enough, the economy was warm enough" (Barr and Levy, 1984: 24) and people had good foundation to burgeoning their interest in food. It was a time when high-street shops started sprouting, food delivery developed, people earned enough and had possibility to pay for food, and at the same time there were low-paid workers who made that food. In that time also aspiring class emerged. Traditionally affluent castes of the society would rather dine well at home, but the representatives of the aspiring class preferred to go to restaurants. In United States the aspiring class used to be referred to as yuppies, with the British equivalent

being the Noovos or Noovs (from nouveaux riches) (Barr and Levy, 1984: 24). As Ann Barr and Paul Levy mentioned in *The Official Foodie Handbook* that food was a post-war passion for the bourgeois, but the emergence of a new class entailed a new approach to food. Peter Greenaway in an interview also admitted that food:

It's a big thing – has developed its own genre almost. In England, over the last two decades, the British people have finally decided that eating out is a good thing. Therefore they use dining out, Mrs. Thatcher's yuppies again, as a new sort of expression — not just to eat but to dress up, show off their wealth and all that (Kilb, 2000, 85).

It's also note-worthy that Greenaway named his main characters Albert and Michael. He used the same names at then popular French chefs – Albert and Michael Roux. They opened the first 3 Michelin star restaurant in Great Britain. They were called “godfathers of modern restaurant cuisine in the UK”. Still life paintings as inspiration for Peter Greenaway's film
As was aforementioned, Greenaway's film was inspired by Dutch paintings. In *The cook, The thief...* he used references to still-life paintings as well as table paintings. As Greenaway said:

Table painting touches on the genre of still life. The French always call it nature morte — dead nature, but in Anglo-Saxon culture it's still life. Still life dead nature — interesting cultural exchange there. Table paintings became virtuoso pieces, so that a young apprentice painter, in order to prove his worth, could show his ability to handle a group of portraits and also handle still life. Frans Hals painting, which hangs on the restaurant wall in CTW&L is also part of the genre, but it's there for other reasons too. Van Gogh's *Patato Eaters* even David Hockney have played with this genre and I wanted to play with it, too (Siegel, 2000: 80).

Still life are pieces of art having inanimate objects as their subject. Various objects were painted in this genre such as: animals, fruits, vegetables, flower, and also man-made items, e.g. connected with cooking or eating. The fundament for the development of still life paintings was an artist approach to the surrounding reality. The first still-life paintings which presented only inanimate items came about in the 16th century. The Still life genre flourished in this time, especially in the Netherlands. After the division of Netherlands in 1609, there were two main styles of presenting still life – the Flemish concentrated on colours and shapes, and the Dutch put less items, more restrained colours and a more insightful approach to particular objects. Dutch still life paintings were thoroughly implanted in reality. Inspiration was taken from life in all its forms, including food. These paintings also provide us with information about Dutch character, economical changes, and also class differentiations. When analysing food presented in Dutch paintings we can peer into the economical situation from the era. At first, the paintings presented a modest menu: herrings, cheese, or bread. Soon, for instance in Heda and Claesz paintings, more expensive fruits, sweets were shown. In

the latter part of the 17th century we can study new objects presented on paintings. These are connected with the diversification of the urban class and the emergence of enriched urban patriciate – the bourgeoisie. In typical paintings from that period we see southern fruits, crawfish, pates, and other sophisticated dishes (Chudzikowski, 1954: 7–11). Dead animals also made more frequent appearances, which was connected with the aristocratic aspiration of rich merchants who took a keen interest in hunting (Fecher, 1991: 8). The 17th century was also a period which has seen fervent development of zoology, ornithology and biology.

In the centre of Peter's Greenaway film there is a painting of Frans Hals shown. As the Ruth D. Johnston said:

Probably the Frans Hals painting *Banquet of the Officers of the St. George Civic Company* (1616), which dominates the principal setting of the film, *Le Hollandais* restaurant, most clearly links formal and sociopolitical concerns. First, this painting is actually reproduced, not merely «quoted» indirectly. Second, the setting in this film does not function as mere «background»; the group portrait therefore assumes primary importance in that it associates the emergence of bourgeois in Holland with concomitant development in Dutch painting of individual and group portraiture (Johnston, 2002: 20).

Hals was an artist known by his bad behaviour. He started feuds, beat his wife, didn't pay bills. Paradoxically, his paintings are considered to be exquisite examples of Dutch paintings of the time. He has lived through a peaceful time shortly after intense political and religious strife in the 17th century. One of his most illustrious paintings, which was “quoted” in the Greenaway film, is the *Banquet of the Officers of the St. George Civic Company*. It was his first serious order. The men presented on the painting – the Civic Company were a significant force in the clashes with the Spanish forces. In the 17th century their role has changed at a time of peace. The Civic Company's functions were mostly representative. The officers used to meet during sumptuous banquets, and manifest welfare of the hollandaise bourgeoisie. As the Seymour Slive wrote:

Documentary evidence confirms the impression that we are confronted by man who could consume gargantuan quantities of food and drink. Five years after the painting was made, the city officials noted in a set of fifty-two ordinances written to regulate the activities of Haarlem guards, that some of the banquets given to them lasted whole week (Silve, 2014: 36).

Food in Peter Greenaway's film

At the beginning of the film, Spica tortures his ex-employee chef by force-feeding him canine excrements. Spica was disappointed by his work, proclaiming that the chef didn't know what a 3 star meal is. Spica says: “I need to eat and drink very best and that's expensive”. This first scene is a prologue

for a subsequent scene where food is used as a tool of oppression. In Peter Greenaway's film, food in most scenes, is very distanced from pleasure. For instance, Michael – the lover, was killed by Spica's gang by force-feeding him his favourite book. This is made even more meaningful by use of a particular book – on the French Revolution.

Considerations about history of gastronomy and the rise of fine food, often begin with the French Revolution. It was a period during which cooks, who earlier worked exclusively for the nobility, had the possibility to open their own businesses and cook for a broader clientele for the first time.

The French Revolution changed what, where, and how people ate. The bourgeoisie had more money, since fifty percent of their income wasn't going for taxes and they wanted to eat well. Out of the ashes of the revolution emerged the modern restaurant, a purely French invention that began in Paris (Civitello, 2007: 193).

High cuisine moved from private homes of noble patrons (as it was before the revolution) onto the streets of Paris and other cities. Also, the way people consumed food changed – from grand buffets, to more intimate surroundings. Greenaway's decision to use a book about the French Revolution in a pivotal scene of the film was not by chance. He gives viewers direct information that the film presents food as references to class, and that sublime cuisine is not reserved only for the high-born.

The possibility to eat extraordinary food is a status symbol for Spica. He employs a French cook, because French cuisine is treated as something noble. He also tries to learn all of the French dishes' names by heart, and to pronounce them properly. In some of the scenes, it is made apparent that he doesn't have basic knowledge about food or gastronomy (for example he asked chef Richard: why does he want to prepare cold dishes if he has gas?). One has the impression that he is only showing off. Spica has an attitude toward his gang. He often humiliates them on account of his bad table manners for instance eating with his hands, improper hygiene.

Food is used deliberately as a tool of oppression. Spica and his gang abuse others by force feeding them, or inflicting pain with food-related items, such as forks. Spica also treats his wife brusquely by describing her his digestion, or asking her about her visit in a restroom. The culmination of the cruel aspects of food in Greenaway's film is the cannibalistic scene. As was mentioned in the plot summary, Spica's wife asked the chef to cook her lover and serve him as a dinner for Albert. She forced Albert to eat her lover, and at the end punishes her husband for the murder – by shooting him.

Cruelty is also shown in images of killing animals. In one scene, the restaurant's staff hold out plates with candles on them. One woman, with hands red with animal's blood, extinguishes the candle flame. The flame may be understood as a symbol of eternity but also evil, hell, and martyrdom. The film also presents paintings depicting dead animals, which may have a double meaning. These may be seen as an illustration of hunting as entertainment of the aristocracy and a status symbol. Moreover, they may be interpreted as an example of humans' ascendancy on nature.

In the film there is a great deal of references to the Bible, some of them connected with food. Georgina's and Michael's affair is a sin. For this sin, they were banished from the restaurant, naked, similar to the expulsion of

Adam and Eve from Eden. Georgina and Michael were held in a car with putrid meat. It may be regarded as a reference to hell, a place for sinners. In the last scene when Georgina told Albert to eat Michel it may be viewed as an indirect correlation with the killing of Christ and his resurrection. Spica also uttered the word: „Jesus” when he saw Michael, at which point Georgina corrected her husband by saying: “It’s not Jesus, it’s Michael”. Furthermore, when Spica starts to eat Michael, he was given wine, and thus, eating Michael may be interpreted as an Eucharistic feast (Zalewski, 1991: 47–48).

For the chef, food is a tool in his work, but he doesn’t have the possibility to control it. Peter Greenaway relates it to his work, or in general, an artist’s work. As he said:

The French chef in *Cook Thief*... is also me. With each film, I invite people to my table and I make the meal. I take the cultural systems I admire and try to set them in one place. I demand, as we all do, some sense of coherence, of order in the world. And we always defeated. This is the human condition (Greenaway and Gras, 2000: x).

The director, through food, shows class relations – winners and losers. Indirectly linked to Greenaway’s point of view on the political situation in England in the ‘80s, some characters were skimming the cream off the top, while others worked in awful conditions and were humiliated.

Conclusion

In my opinion, food is an important tool for Greenaway to show viewers his point of view on the changing world. He did not agree with then-current political situation, and Thatcher government and (as we can assume) abhorred the new class snobbism. Through the food he presents aspirational motifs with the accompaniment of shallow, churlish, and sometimes disgusting behaviour. There are direct references to the French Revolution which also can be treated as a motivation for changes or caution for a high class viewer, i.e. that they shouldn’t underestimate the working class. On the other hand, we can assume that extensive consumption blurs the sense of crucial matters, that people out too much time and effort into showing off.

In one interview, Greenaway stated: “Eating tells you a great deal about people – like all those young middle class people, the yuppies who go out to eat all the time at places where it’s more important that the tomatoes match the wallpaper than it is that the food tastes good or is nourishing” (Pally, 2000: 119). He put out a hypothesis that persons of the aspirational class are not only simply gourmand. Food is a symbol of status for them. They don’t delight in it at home, but they display their wealth with their visits to fancy restaurants. Such demonstrations are met with an apparently scathing review made in Peter Greenaway’s *The Cook, the Thief, his Wife and Her Lover*.

BIBLIOGRAPHY:

- Armstrong R. (2004). Consuming Passions: Peter Greenaway's *The Cook, the Thief, his Wife and Her Lover*, [in:] Bower A. L. (ed.), *Reel Food: Essays on Food and Film*. New York-London.
- Barr A., Levy P. (1984). *The official foodie handbook. Be Modern – Worship Food*. New York.
- Baron C., Carson D., Bernard M. (2014). *Appetites and Anxieties: Food Film, and the Politics of Representation*. Detroit.
- Bower A., Piontek T. (2013). Food in film, [in:] Albala K., (ed.) *International Handbook of Food Studies*. London-New York.
- Civitello L. (2007). *Cuisine and Culture: A History of Food and People*. Hoboken.
- Chudzikowski A. (1954). *Holenderska i flamandzka natura XVII wieku*. Warsaw.
- Drzał-Sierocka A. (2017). *Filmy do zjedzenia. Obrazy Jedzenia w kinie amerykańskim*. Gdańsk.
- Fecher E. (1991). *Martwa natura holenderska XVII wieku w zbiorach Ermitażu*. Warsaw.
- Greenaway P., Gras V. W. (2000). Introduction, [in:] Greenaway P., Gras V. W. (eds.), *Peter Greenaway: Interviews*. Jackson.
- Jacobson H., (2009). Every Picture Tells a Story. "Film Comment", (45) 1, (20–21).
- Johnston R. D., (2002). The Staging of the Bourgeois Imaginary in *The Cook, the Thief, His Wife, and Her Lover* (1990). "Cinema Journal", 41 (2), (19–40).
- Keesey D. (2006). *The Films of Peter Greenaway: Sex, Death and Provocation*. Jefferson-London.
- Kilb A. (2000). I Am the Cook: A Conversation with Peter Greenaway, [in:] Greenaway P., Gras V. W. (eds.), *Peter Greenaway: Interviews*. Jackson.
- Minford P. (2005). Inflation, unemployment and the pound, [in:] Roy S., Clarke J. (eds.), *Margaret Thatcher's revolution: how it happened and what it meant*. London.
- Slive S. (2014). *Frans Hals*. London.
- Siegel J. (2000). Greenaway by the Numbers, [in:] Greenaway P., Gras V. W. (eds.), *Peter Greenaway: Interviews*. Jackson.
- Pally M., (2000). Cinema as a total Art Form: An Interview with Peter Greenaway, [in:] Greenaway P., Gras V. W. (eds.), *Peter Greenaway: Interviews*. Jackson.
- Zalewski A. (1992). Gra bez reguł, [in:] Mazierska E., *Peter Greenaway* (ed.). Warsaw.