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GREENAWAY & FOOD

The undeniable bond between life and nutrition was exalted by Arcimboldo in the second half of the 16th century. In his food-animal-anthropomorphic paintings, he gave life to icons of nourishing still-life. The act of ingestion has held a key role in psychology since Freud's "oral phase".

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The history of cinema is studded with ordinary meals and banquets. Food is often exploited in order to give structure to convivial scenes. Its consumption can rise to a metaphor for the lowest of human instincts - something pushed to the extreme in "La grande abbuffata" (Marco Ferreri, 1973) or in symbiosis with sex as in "Tom Jones" (Tony Richardson, 1963) - as much as to be part of the triviality of daily feeding.

A refined aesthete and profound connoisseur of the human mind, Peter Greenaway analyses the multiple facets of feeding through two films which are quite different, but which share a common thread. Leaving aside considerations of the putrefaction of organic substance (including food) in "A Zed and Two Noughts" (1985), it is possible to single out an indirect approach and a more strictly allegorical one.

In "The Belly of an Architect" (1987) ingestion and the related processes turn into the image of a phagocytosing craving. Victim of a sort of greedy frenzy of living, Stourley Kracklite "consumes" and destroys every single item forming the core of his existence. From his relationship with his wife, and meandering through professional activities, everything is annihilated in a slow, inexorable path of self-destruction. This eventually leads to the "consumption" or catabolism of his own physical being.

Whether from the spillover of psychic ailments to the body, by a sort of revenge of fate or by destiny, cancer attacks his belly. This is the very pivot of digestion. The disease represents the outcome of a bitter conflict between natural eating processes and the unfettered 'gut-level' quest for results: performance at all costs.

Assuming that we are not only what we eat, but also how we eat, Greenaway conveys an invitation to search for a balance far from the media bombardment daily pushing us towards harmful competitiveness. Resolution comes at last in the form of suicide, the inevitable outcome of the conflict between "feeding on", and living in harmony with, his surroundings.

The story of John Belushi comes to mind. He was a bit part actor, remembered most for his duet with Dan Akroyd in "The Blues Brothers" and his role - much loved by trash movie fans - in the legendary "Animal House". He died right after entering his 30s. The autopsy revealed that his body was ravaged by a series of excesses that reduced him to the condition of man over twice his age ... hunger for life, for experimentation, or perhaps the sad effect of the glittering star system lights and of being the toast of the town.

"The Cook, The Thief, His Wife & Her Lover" (1989), set in a London restaurant, exemplifies the visual and iconographical triumph of food. First, there's a positive vision of food: food is beautiful, to eat well is important and the one who orchestrates such a wonder - the title's cook - cannot but be a refined aesthete. His countenance, now cynical and amused, then compassionate and benevolent, bears a sort of universal message. Just as Shakespeare's Prospero gave a spiritual testament, Greenaway's Cook offers another.

Life is an endless process consisting of a combination of small, sharp details. The act of nourishing is part of the everyday headway along the path of the existence. But idyll doesn't exist in concrete terms. Every positive element has a negative counterpart; everything meets with birth and decay. Food is not only sustenance and pleasure, but also the source of leftovers, scraps, and the obvious consequence of eating. This contrast is the source of dolly shots that proceed from the kitchen through the sumptuously laid tables to end in the restrooms, "seasoned" with scornful wisecracks of a criminal - the thief - whose sole refinement is the passion for good cuisine. He embodies the same frenzied concupiscence which already used up Stourley Kracklite and his belly

.... but this time Greenaway goes far beyond dissatisfaction. He wanders through a cruel and revolting sadism and lands in the dimension of sexuality. As immoderate as hunger, and both unsatisfied and insatiable at the same time, sex assumes in the thief a connotation of childish frustration in front of his incapacity to draw a true fulfilment from it. On the other side is his wife, once a goody-goody and now weaned from the harsh reality of the world after the merciless vexations of a man too blind to grasp her value. She turns her appetite elsewhere. During her quest for a balance between sexual life and fluidity of events, an affair with another man breaks out. The relationship is sealed by an oral - not by chance - rapport in the toilets. Shrewd calculating woman, the way she pursues an alimentary harmony is applauded by the sarcastic eye of the director who looks omnipotent in the face of her vengeful delirium. Hard to say where the game ends up and where vanity banquet begins. The spectator is invited to the real meal. Our fork, knife and spoon - or according to different cultures, sticks, hands, etc. - are called remote-control, eyes to see, ears to hear...are we really so different from the wife, once we are conscious of the lobotomy we are continuously subjected to by the media? How many times do we let ourselves go to explosions of haughtiness just because we're exasperated by myriads of previous audiovisual stimuli which created a basis of rage, strong enough to make us brood over revenge? Revenge is said to be a dish best eaten cold, or cooked, as in the fate of the wife's unfortunate lover. Antihero par excellence, he appears to represent the other possible attitude towards everyday slop. If the thief is a sadist, the lover's masochism in accepting compromises which range from lies dictated by opportunism - deceiver and partially victim of his own deceit - to the fact that he escapes and hides... also the ostrich who hides his head in the sand instead of facing dangerous, uneasy situations, reality in one word.

A cheap sacrificial lamb, the lover is the symbol of a sleeping mankind so stuffed with poison and corrupting non-truths to be bound to an ineluctable fate of dissolution...to die means to decompose, to become rottenness, to turn into food itself, but for worms; Greenaway's sentence is pitiless and without appeal, passivity leads to defeat only. Not everything is lost: the salvific role inside the cruel game of parties seems to point at the possibility - for a few, at least - of shaking off the sluggishness and to make "them" take back the clouding lies and of awakening to a new feeling of conscious awareness. Surely it needs some food for its mind, this mankind benumbed by fast-food non-culture.

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