Food Porn in *Titus Andronicus*, *Chocolat* and *I Served the King of England* 
(*Obsluhoval jsem anglického krále*)

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Abstract
This essay studies scenes that focus on food and eating in the films *Chocolat* (2000) and *I Served the King of England* (*Obsluhoval jsem anglického krále*, 2006). To assess whether or not they constitute food porn we compare and contrast such scenes with the description of an unwholesome recipe for cannibalistic eating in *Titus Andronicus*, which anticipates our contemporary food obsession. At its most basic (and controversial), food porn names the alluring visualisation of certain foodstuffs, which renders food the object of erotically tinged desire. Serving different purposes in the two films, such eroticisation of food can be more than self-referential insofar as it indicates human interactions framed as power relations. Showing chocolate making and eating, in *Chocolat*, actually visualises a woman’s exertion of power over the women and their husbands in a bigoted French village in 1959, intended to awaken the people’s benumbed desire. Not food proper is the object of desire in the Czech film, but the young woman
served up as ocular side dish to the moguls dining in a stylish Prague restaurant before the outburst of WWII. By contrast, food eroticisation is completely absent in Shakespeare; at stake is a verbal (and implicitly visual) concern with the transformation of flesh and body parts into ingredients for seemingly festive consumption. Visualising food, in Titus, implicitly visualises the reclaim and exertion of power in the fictional Roman polity. In all these cases, the concern with food vectorises power relations and may fluidise gendered hierarchies, an issue which food porn scholarship rarely addresses.

Keywords: Titus Andronicus (Shakespeare); Chocolat (director Lasse Hallström, 2000); Obsluhoval jsem anglického krále (I Served the King of England, director Jiří Menzel, 2006); food porn

This essay studies food-related scenes in the films Chocolat (2000, director Lasse Hallström) and I Served the King of England (Obsluhoval jsem anglického krále, 2006, director Jiří Menzel). We start from the premise that tipping the presentation of food as a visualised object towards generating desire might make desire override the imaged food to such an extent as to warrant the comparison of food images with sex pornography. At its most basic, the term food porn (Rousseau 934-935; Dejmanee 2-4) describes “the act of styling and capturing food on mobile gadgets, eliciting an invitation to gaze and vicariously consume, and to tag images of food through digital platforms” (Ibrahim 2). Food becomes the object of alluring visualisation in close-up photography or shooting, through soft focus framing, but also in painting or even in verbal description. Fetishising food (in Ibrahim’s terms) renders it the object of often erotically tinged desire. Food eroticisation serves different purposes in the two films, if closely related through the common focus on male/female sexual relations as power relations. To better scrutinise the films’ food scenes, we compare them to an incipient concern with food – and associated power relations – in Titus Andronicus Act V, scene 2.
We do not wish to argue that Shakespeare anticipates our contemporary food porn practices. At stake in *Titus* is a verbal and implicitly visual concern with the transformation of flesh and body parts into ingredients for festive, if cannibalistic, consumption within a revengeful plot. Food is focused on, therefore, as the means to exert power by the (temporarily) disempowered.

**Conceptualising Food Porn**

That the concept of *food porn* can be fruitfully applied to describe certain food scenes in films is suggested by the definitions given by Signe Rousseau (originally in 2014) and Erin Metz McDonnell (in 2016):

The term food “porn” can refer to still or moving images of food and/or eating across various media, including cookbooks, magazines, television, blogs, websites, and social media platforms like Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and Pinterest. Evocative descriptions of food and eating in literature can also be described as food porn. The term is often used positively, to suggest that the food depicted is desirable or is depicted in a way that makes it desirable – the latter of which could depend on the aesthetics of composition (including lighting, extreme close-ups, color saturation) or on the person or people preparing or eating the food. While the connotation is often of “guilty pleasure,” or allowable “indulgence,” the term can also (sometimes simultaneously) negatively connote food which is regarded as “bad” and which should be avoided. (Rousseau 934)

The term [food porn] can refer to the food object – including its presentation and the production of still or video images – and also to the increasingly common practice of photographing food for social network or public sharing. (McDonnell 240)

The two definitions have different merits. Rousseau discusses the media where food porn may occur, the connotations of the term through the creation of “‘legitimate’ and ‘illegitimate’
desires when it comes to eating” (Rousseau 935), and the sources of food porn desirability. McDonnell defines as food porn not only objects (the object of interest and also its display), but also practices (food imaging as either practice, including dissemination options, or result). Furthermore, food porn as “a cultural object” is “situated within the twin forces of conspicuous consumption online and food as an art form in the age of digital reproduction” (McDonnell 239). Between them the two theorists offer a fairly comprehensive definition of food porn and suggest the concept’s applicability beyond social media dissemination of certain types of food images.

Ordinarily, people may dismiss food as mere “fuel for bodies” (Ibrahim 3). However, uses of it and, nowadays (though not exclusively), also of its images assign food as “a site of consumption, pleasure, morality and renewed aesthetics” (Ibrahim 3). When one attends a party or a wedding/funeral, some of the symbolic associations of food become most manifest. Why and how should food have been turned into an object of gazing comparable to pornography? Why should (analogue or digital) close-up photography of food trigger gaze-grounded desire?

Richard Magee has identified “a performative dimension in food that also links it with sex” (qtd. in McBride 38) – in a facile analogy (McBride’s term) – by “involving visceral, essential, and ‘fleshy’ elements” (38). Drawing on Magee, Yasmin Ibrahim argues that “food pornography takes the form of glossy lush photographs of voluptuous and sinfully rich desserts, or of fantasy recipes and lifestyle images” (3). The early description of such images uses a moralistic-religious register (“sinfully rich”) rather incommensurate with what many of the producers and consumers of food porn, or of the two films, may feel. However, “fantasy recipes” sounds much more compelling since it renders food porn images “so removed from real life that they cannot be used except as vicarious experience” (Magee qtd. in Ibrahim 3). Fantasy is the very fabric of film as an artistic genre and also of the promises or dreams the two films depict. In this connection, Magee raises another salient point:
Food, when removed from the kitchen, becomes divorced from its nutritive or taste qualities and enters a realm where *surface appearance is all-important*. The interest here is in creating a graphic simulation of real food that is beyond anything that the home cook could produce. (qtd. in McBride 38; our emphasis)

Both pornography proper and high art – both reflective media that dabble in illusion-making, if for different purposes – are concerned with surface appearance.

In cooking shows, sensual gestures by the hostess, as well as her sensual descriptions of how she is cooking (McBride 38), may account in part for the sensuality of food porn. More often than not, though, it is the soft lighting and colour saturation, but especially the camera work, which elicits the desiring gaze and the “porn” affixation. Camera angles which permit extreme close-ups often detach the food from its environs (let alone from its preparation) to focus on colours, textures, volumes or fluidity. According to Tisha Dejmanee, “[f]ood porn’ styling aims to literally give ‘body’ to food over the flat surface of the digital screen through compositions and angles that emphasize height, surface, and depth” (439). In this connection, it is noteworthy that, historically, the body has been associated in European culture with femaleness. Giving “[body’ to food” is anything but gender neutral, as the history of the European nude proves with respect to the female body and still lifes with respect to fruit (and aphrodisiac foodstuffs). To the extent certain food porn compositions or images focus on body fluids and their oozing (Dejmanee 436-441), this gender-specific association is further endorsed. Thus, through the contemporary “application of a pornographic visual aesthetic to food,” “visual aesthetics … emphasizes the pleasurable, sensual dimensions of food, derived from (but not actually employed in) human sexuality” (McDonnell 239) and, more broadly, associated with the sensuousness of the human body, hence the name food porn.

McDonnell regards contemporary food porn as “both a voyeuristic practice and a visual aesthetic” (240). Voyeurism
transpires from the *challenge* (McDonnell’s term) which food porn mounts against the conventional, if strictly modern, association of sustenance as consumption of food “with care work – a form of labour that provides for the emotional and physical wellbeing of others” – and moreover “demarcate[s] a special social space” (McDonnell 241). “[S]ocial intimacy” (241) is thus opened to the gaze, and food is turned into “an object worthy of gazing” (240) – of “risqué food voyeurism” (241) – also due to “the inherent possibilities of voyeurism afforded by the Internet” (241) as the most far-reaching image dissemination machine.\(^{12}\) Drawing on Pierre Bourdieu’s *Distinction*, McDonnell contends that the intertwined choice of the object of food porn and practice of taking pictures of it functions as a marker of habitus – “the desire to cultivate and display refined food tastes” (McDonnell 241) – for upwardly mobile individuals. Food porn indicates the twenty-first century *nouveau riche*’s “participation in high cultural capital” as “a form of conspicuous consumption” (241).\(^{13}\)

We shall see, however, that there is scope for more than a “public demonstration of social prestige” (McDonnell 241) in what the two films suggest. To anticipate, we would argue that not “high cultural capital” is at a premium in *Chocolat*’s food scenes, but something akin to the radical feminists’ consciousness raising. The protagonist engineers an awakening from the rigid conventions of what we would call *conspicuous piety*, viz. a public proclamation/show of one’s allegiance (perhaps no more than lip-service) to Catholic practices of outward righteousness despite one’s actual (repressed) feelings. Likewise, *I Served the King of England*, whose protagonist is an arriviste and whose central food scene is openly sexually provocative, nevertheless moves towards questioning the “high cultural capital” which conspicuous food consumption evokes: whereas certain characters feast their eyes on, later others physically consume, the scene’s overt eroticism.

In this respect, Dejmanee suggests a theoretical avenue worth exploring. She regards food porn as “the most prevalent of several currently circulating terms [e.g. ‘organizational porn’; ‘real estate porn’; ‘ruin porn’; ‘disaster porn’] that use the marker *porn* to
indicate an aesthetic of excess” (Dejmanee 429). Unlike other porn-compound notions, all of which refer to “subjects that narrate the ambivalent affects of consumer capitalism” (430), with “vivid details to evoke strong reactions in the viewer” (429), food porn cannot, however, “disassociate from pornography’s explicit sexual associations” (429). Indeed, the three works we examine here do indicate an aesthetic concern with excess: excessive or perhaps absent-minded religiosity, compounded by xenophobic intolerance to non-assimilating aliens and, to offset it, excessive concern with desire engendering, in Chocolat; excessive concern with gratifying one’s senses, in I Served the King of England; and excessive revenge for an, admittedly, excessive crime (also through its replication and doubling of Ovid’s Philomela rape story), in Titus Andronicus. Furthermore, the three works’ aesthetics of excess may work through implicit or explicit sexual associations.

Yet, food porn is a controversial topic. Speaking about cooking shows, Rousseau contends that food modifications operated behind the scenes – “some of which likely contribute to rendering the food inedible while making it look better – reinforce the priority of fantasy, or unreality, rather than any perceived eroticism or explicit sexuality of food porn” (936). For Rousseau, unreality overrides eroticism. In like vein, Frederick Kaufman interprets food porn, alongside sex porn and voyeurism, as “measures of alienation, not community,” which therefore “belong to realms of irreality” (in McBride 45). On the other hand, Alan Madison argues that if TV (through cooking shows) fosters food voyeurism, as some critics uphold (e.g. Chan 48, 52; McDonnell 239-242), then all TV or cinema is voyeuristic (in McBride 45). Madison further contends that in a consumerist society where sex sells, advertising by means of sensuous photography, thereafter classified as pornographic, runs ethical risks such as rendering sex porn an acceptable, harmless practice (in McBride 40, 41, 42). People get “desensitized” to the pejorative sense of the term pornography (Madison in McBride 42) and to the gender-specific humiliation of those represented engaged in the practice for the spectators’ vicarious gratification.14 According to Will Goldfarb,
rather than a visual genre sui generis, food porn emerges when “people analyz[e] the watching of the cooking” (in McBride).

Be that as it may, technologically enabled, mass-encouraged food porn shares its *gaze elicitation* with sexual pornography (McDonnell 242). Both forms encourage the viewers’ “desire[] to visually consume” that which may appear, or even be, “exotic and amazing” (McDonnell 242), as well as, at least momentarily, unreachable.

The Concern with Food in *Titus Andronicus*

Visual, not just physical, unreachability characterises the unsavoury recipe of *Titus Andronicus* (V.2.187-201), whose protagonist devises a savage plot against Tamora, the mastermind of his downfall and loss of sons. Titus reveals his revenge plan, part of which concerns baking his daughter’s two rapists, to his very would-be victims (or rather ingredients), now tied up and hanged upside down:

Hark, villains, *I will grind your bones to dust,*
*And with your blood and it I’ll make a paste,*
*And of the paste a coffin I will rear,*
*And make two pasties of your shameful heads,*
*And bid that strumpet, your unhallowed dam,*
Like to the earth, *swallow her own increase.*

This is the feast that I have bid her to,
And this the banquet she shall surfeit on;
For worse than Philomel you used my daughter,
And worse than Progne I will be revenged.
And now prepare your throats. Lavinia, come,
Receive the blood; and when that they are dead,
*Let me go grind their bones to powder small,*
*And with this hateful liquor temper it,*
*And in that paste let their vile heads be baked.*
(*Titus Andronicus*, V.2.187-201)

Irrespective of this scene’s rendition on the stage or screen,15
Titus’ insistence on “grinding the bones” of Chiron and Demetrius and mixing the resulting dust with their own blood to “make a paste” for the human-meat pie is blood-curdling. Not coerced cannibalism as revenge interests us here, though, but the context of this recipe description. At this point, the script plays up to the Elizabethan theatre’s convention of describing elements to be seen (or heard) – to be imagined by the spectators – in the absence of setting and other stage paraphernalia we are used to nowadays. Ekphrasis – i.e. the description of an object, whether or not a work of art – was often resorted to, as in Titus’ recipe for revenge, for reasons having to do more with stage practicalities than with aesthetic sensibilities, in an age that cherished its revenge drama tradition.

Showing food, inTitus Andronicus, implicitly visualises the exertion of power, Titus’ over Lavinia’s rapists and over their mother, Tamora, who – unbeknownst to Titus – approved of the rape plan. Yet the power game is far from straightforward. Titus, the Roman general who has just vanquished the Goths, declines the Senate’s offer to crown him emperor in favour of Saturninus, the first born of the late emperor. To spite his younger brother, Bassianus, to whom Titus’ daughter is engaged, Saturninus proposes to Lavinia (in fact, as customary, to her father), yet immediately changes his mind when the young Andronici challenge the new emperor’s decision to marry their sister. Before long, Saturninus avenge his alleged humiliation: he imprisons and executes Titus’ sons Martius and Quintus, framed for the murder of Bassianus in the woods, and banishes his other son, Lucius, before disowning Titus himself. Falling into disgrace with the new emperor involves, for the protagonist, complete loss of political-military power – viz. his symbolic emasculation – right at the height of his military glory. This is the Titus whose daughter is raped and maimed by the twin sons of Tamora, the Goth queen and now wife of the Roman emperor. Titus, therefore, plans to avenge his triple loss of power, reputation and hand. She whom he wishes to punish by executing her sons – son for son, rather than rapists for their crime – is Empress Tamora, the most powerful
woman in the Roman empire, though, for the patriarchal polity, a powerless woman nonetheless. Through his revenge on an ungrateful emperor and his scheming wife, Titus can reclaim symbolically some of his lost power, if disguised as legitimate punishment.

By contrast, neither film is concerned with grisly revenge and/or cannibalistic banquets. Unlike Titus Andronicus, both offer (at times) lavish feasts for the characters’ eyes and palate too, as well as for the spectators’ eyes.

Food Porn and the Return of/to the Senses in Chocolat

Lasse Hallström’s Chocolat (2000), based on Joanne Harris’ novel, tells the story of Vianne Rocher (Juliette Binoche) and her six-year-old daughter, Anouk (VICTOIRE THIVISOL). The nomadic mother is the interracial offspring of Georges, a French pharmacist who joined an expedition to Central America, and Chitza, a wanderer of Mayan origin, whom he fell in love with over a cup of chilly cocoa; he married and brought her over to France, only to be fairly soon left (and deprived of their very young daughter too). Travelling with the north wind, like her mother, in the winter of 1959 Vianne reaches Lansquenet-sous-Tannes, a remote village of bigoted people governed by an overly zealous mayor, the wife-abandoned Comte de Reynaud (Alfred Molina). Vianne is unwelcome: the smiling single mother wearing bright coloured tight-fitting dresses would make the perfect black sheep of any righteous Christian community. Neither her refusal to attend church nor her preparations to open her Chocolaterie Maya – a chocolate shop with products based on ancient Mayan recipes – during Lent could possibly ingratiate her with the villagers and their mayor. Her decision to organise a chocolate festival on Easter Sunday threatens to disrupt the village’s much-beloved tranquillité (as the female voice-over, adult Anouk’s, announces at the beginning of the film).

However, Vianne’s spice-flavoured chocolates win her a few friends and a disciple, Josephine (Lena Olin), the abused kleptomaniac wife of an alcoholic café-owner, Serge Muscat (Peter
Stormare). Vianne’s chocolates can work miracles on the benumbed senses and libido of the villagers, as well as on the waning zest for life of her elderly landlady, Armande Voizin (Judy Dench). Scenes that show Vianne (and later her friend Josephine) making chocolate arguably work as food porn.

Before we examine such scenes, though, it is noteworthy that *Chocolat* – like *I Served the King of England* – thematises the spectatorial position, thus offering a model for the film audiences to align with. Two schoolboys spy through holes in the newspaper sheets covering the windows of Chocolaterie Maya before the shop opening (*Chocolat* 00:11:24-00:11:40). Their eyes – framed by the holes – capture Vianne’s preparation of mysterious ingredients for her chocolate products. The scene also helps to orientate the spectators relative to her ideological outlook – one boy remarks that he’s heard Vianne is an atheist – before ushering in the earliest chocolate food porn scene. Ironically, soon afterwards, Charly, the dog of Guillaume Blérot (John Wood), will engage in voyeurism (and sniffing) through the door left accidentally ajar. Apparently, all gazes, human or animal, get riveted on the preparations. By the time the first trayfuls of chocolates emerge into the display window (00:12:06-00:12:17), still screened by the newspaper sheets, the place has been the object of apprehensive scrutiny by many villagers on various occasions. With the opening of the window curtains (00:12:40), the theatrical staging of Vianne’s benign plot becomes as apparent as the film’s explicit concern with the theatre of the food porn gaze.

When Vianne is shown (frontally) stirring the thick chocolate (00:11:41-00:11:46) for pouring into moulds, the camera zooms in on the pot. Yet, not the pot (or stirring hand) comes into full focus, but the beaming warmth of the thick, creamy brown paste (00:11:43-00:11:46) – the object of the spectators’ visual desire and the stand-in for the villagers’ dormant erotic desire. The latter is indicated both by the chocolates thus produced, the “nipples of Venus” (00:12:09), and by the hesitant “a woman riding a white horse” (00:13:41-00:13:42) voiced by Yvette Marceau (Élisabeth Commelin) as the image seen on the spinning Mayan wheel. Yvette
receives pepper triangle chocolates as most suitable for her adventurous spirit (00:13:50-00:13:58), under the reproachful gaze of Caroline Clairmont (Carrie-Anne Moss), the daughter of Vianne’s landlady and stern mother of Luc (Aurèlien Parent Koenig), whom Vianne will reunite with his grandmother.

Other scenes are just as apt to stir the spectators’ craving. One of them shows Vianne inducting Josephine, who has fled from her home to the chocolaterie haven, into the art of chocolate making. The nipples of Venus are the very chocolates a novice should learn to prepare (00:46:44-00:47:08), aren’t they? Bearing one such tray to the chocolaterie, in the scene, Vianne presents them accidentally to the unannounced mayor, before taking the opportunity to invite him to try one (00:47:12-00:47:20). Soon after the doubly embarrassing encounter – for the ascetic-minded Comte has unsuccessfully tried to persuade Josephine to return to her husband – two scenes indicate simultaneous catechisms by the Lent and Carnival figures or their stand-ins. Laughingly enough, a befuddled Serge – seated side by side with young boys – learns (or rather proves he has not learnt) the basics of virtuous Christian conduct. Conversely, his wife demonstrates how well she has learnt the basics of chocolate making; during the scene, the spectators can let their gaze linger over the creamy texture of chocolate or imagine its taste when Josephine’s lips gauge its temperature (00:49:14-00:49:35).

Asked by Armande to throw her a 70th anniversary party, Vianne, aided by Josephine, prepares a Mayan spiced feast. The camera lingers on the two women grinding seeds for or sprinkling chocolate flakes over incredible gravies and dishes, preparing chocolate shells or manually grinding cocoa (01:15:22-01:16:06). Almost all is seen framed by the doorway; the open door invites more than a peeping Tom’s gaze in terms of intense desire. At the party proper, there are again moments of food porn rendered in slow motion to flute music. Pouring the chocolate gravy – brought in delicate china and passed from hand to hand – over the roasted chicken leg or beef pieces can thrill as much the viewers’ senses (01:17:50-01:17:59) as, directly, the diners’ (01:18:47-01:19:26).
Yet another scene shows Armande’s birthday party guests (Caroline and Luc among them), coordinated by Josephine, preparing the chocolates (01:43:46-01:44:48) for the chocolate festival which Vianne would apparently miss, given her departure plans. Panning shots and close-ups succeed one another, as does the focus from one activity or actor to another, to culminate with Josephine presenting Vianne thinly chopped almonds to seek for her expert approval. While the shooting and editing technique dilute the intensity of food porn here, the notion of a translation of art from the expert chocolatière to her now experienced disciple may suggest that the object of food porn in this film would not vanish with Vianne’s pending departure.

The food porn scenes climax towards the film’s end – and Lent’s end. On Easter Eve night, after a tearful prayer in the chapel, the mayor breaks into the chocolaterie, apparently illuminated about his mission. He slashes at the display window exhibits (01:47:22-01:47:58), foremost among which – and shown before all others – is a naked Venus, the first deceptively empty chocolate idol to be smashed to pieces. Before long, on tasting accidentally a shard of the chocolate wreckage, the Comte falls prey to desire (01:47:59-01:48:10). Henceforth, he will gorge himself on the chocolate arrangements (01:48:13-01:49:13), and the camera focuses on his satisfied, chocolate-smeared face as much as on what is left of the exquisite chocolate sculptures he has preyed on. This is the transfigured – anti-crucified – state in which Père Henri (Hugh O’Conor), the village priest, discovers the mayor, asleep, on Easter morning, and from which Vianne wakes him up with a mysterious refreshing drink (01:49:39-01:50:39). The Easter Sunday sermon, the first one not ghostwritten by the mayor to preach crucifixion of one’s flesh/desire (Gal 5.24), is followed by the chocolate festival, which starts with a close-up of a plate of colourful chocolates (01:52:36). The spirit of chocolate is risen!

If showing food, in Titus Andronicus’ ekphrastic scene, implicitly visualises the exertion of power, Titus’ over Lavinia’s rapists and their mother, showing chocolate making and eating, in Chocolat, also visualises the exertion of power. Yet the vector of
power starts from a woman – by definition a member of the most disenfranchised group, and, here, a nomadic alien to the village – and affects other women (and their husbands) to ultimately reach the mayor. Vianne successfully restores not a lost form of power, but rather common sense and sense-grounded enjoyment; extreme Christian asceticism as a form of self-denial amounts rather to a denial of life, her chocolates appear to demonstrate. By the end of Lent, the sensuous (and sensual) will have gained the upper hand in the village. With this shift of affects, another restoration obtains too, as if by Mayan magic: Vianne lets go of her mother and settles down in the village. The power of her mother’s nomadic tradition has ceased to work its spell on Vianne; the power of her ancient chocolate recipes (and cocoa remedies), with their mouth-watering preparation, has remained intact, the spectators may safely assume.

Food Porn and Porn Gaze in *I Served the King of England* (*Obsluhoval jsem anglického krále*)

Not food proper becomes the object of desire in the Czech film *I Served the King of England* (2006), but a young woman. Served up as a visually-appealing side dish to the moguls who dine in an upscale restaurant in Prague, subsequently she will be consumed sexually by the front waiter at the very same table. Jiří Menzel’s film, based on Bohumil Hrabal’s novel, presents the adventures of Jan Díte before, during and after WWII, organised as a from-rags-to-riches-and-back-to-rags story of thwarted great expectations. As a young man, Jan (Ivan Barnev) starts off as a sandwich vendor at a railway station, prone to cheat his customers of their change and also to try the financial greed of passers-by. Counselling and even aided by Mr Walden (Marián Labuda), an erstwhile cheated customer who admires his resourcefulness, Jan makes his way up from a piccolo in an ordinary restaurant to one in the Hotel Paříž. Once at the latter, Jan learns the balletic movements of the popular front waiter, whose position he schemes to wrest for himself on his way to becoming, he hopes, the maître d.’ With the Nazi occupation of Prague, Jan
fully reveals his opportunism publicly; yet, made redundant for his collaborationism, he finds an even better employment opportunity. During the war Jan works as a waiter on Aryan breeding machines in the Hotel Tichota, now turned from an upscale brothel into a eugenic resort. Here fortune will finally smile on him: Jan gets rich overnight by preying, through his Nazi wife, on the deported Jews’ stamp collections. But not for long: as soon as they ascend to power, the communists imprison him, alongside the bourgeoisie of Czechoslovakia.

It is at the Hotel Paříž that the central food porn scene is shown. The restaurant has a mysterious upstairs lounge where only the very rich elderly males of the city – including the hotel owner – can dine (00:44:00-00:44:58). They have paid for more than a culinary feast (00:47:29-00:47:38) at a bagel-like table, under the watchful eyes of the front waiter. The table encompasses a softly lit, eye-level revolving stage on which lies a beautiful, alluring, semi-nude young woman. She takes small bites from the dainty morsels (00:48:20-00:48:22, 00:48:33-00:48:38) or sips from the glass of champagne (00:48:24-00:48:32) offered by the gentlemen who eat their food and visually eat her too (00:47:59-00:50:34) until they fall asleep, if too old (00:50:25). Bathos notwithstanding, the eroticism of the scene is overtly apparent, as are the various societal strictures on all participants: the elderly can freely feast their eyes on the young woman; conversely, she and Jan have to repress their own sexual desire. The rich patrons’ vicarious sexual consumption, moreover, thematises the spectatorship of the Czech film as male and heterosexual (see also Mulvey 836-838). Their social position – and the rules of the restaurant game – cannot permit sexual intercourse here and now. Ironically, the men wield financial and patriarchal power over the woman, which nevertheless cannot be fully exercised for they have to observe certain rules of social decorum (and hypocrisy, considering where they dine). She remains but an intangible visual side dish, one going alongside and being physically placed beside the main dish, meant to enhance the flavour of the latter.
Yet what an appetising dish the woman is, fresh looking and also a fresh live illustration of the female nude subgenre. The latter interpretation is not our over-eroticising of the scene for the sake of demonstrating the tipping of food porn towards porn. Rather, it is one borne out particularly clearly in the aftermath of this dining scene. The patrons out, after generously tipping the waiter, Jan can finally feast himself on the young prostitute, whose bared breasts and imperceptible head beacon invite him over to her onto the table (00:51:00-00:51:25). For a while, the camera shows only the fast revolving bagel table, symbolic of the dizzying intensity of the two young people’s sexual desire (00:51:26-00:51:52). The half-spoilt dishes on the table (00:51:28-00:51:47, 00:52:03-00:52:05), reminiscent of the “wreckage of the meal” in the Dutch “still life of disorder” (in Norman Bryson’s terms),27 metaphorise the spoiling of the woman herself through her visual and now sexual consumption. When the camera returns to the prostitute (00:52:00-00:52:02), we see her in the rectangular mirror Jan has raised sideways for her to contemplate herself garnished with fruits and vegetables (00:52:07-00:52:19), the leftovers of the patrons’ feast.28 Is it Jan’s intuitively aesthetic (or rather pragmatically culinary) tribute to her beauty but especially sexual enticement for only her breasts and genitals are thus covered?29 No Pomona, but a fruit-embellished Venus, the prostitute turned into a live nude sculpture is now framed, in the horizontally poised crystal surface, as (and reduced to) a two-dimensional canvas – an erotic painting.30 Save the angle and décor, Jan’s composition cites the faux female narcissism of Velázquez’s The Toilet of Venus, aka The Rokeby Venus (c. 1647-1651); the glowing, pearly tones of Venus’ smooth skin, in Velázquez, may have inspired the soft glow of Menzel’s food porn proper. With this climactic moment, the food porn scene has come full circle. First, there is the appetising visual display of actual food (shown in close-up), as in still lifes and contemporary food porn. Second, the patrons eat while visually feasting on the female body (languidly reclining on the revolving table/stage like on a huge tray), which displaces sexual intercourse ocularly and renders visual consumption metaphorically cannibalistic. Third,
social peers enjoy actual sexual intercourse, if behind the scenes and merely suggested. And finally, the nude female body as erotica is explicitly aestheticised as erotic art (and art quotation) for her and Jan’s eyes, and vicariously for the spectators.’

Power flows in the food porn scene of I Served the King of England in more directions than one. There is the obvious association of the elderly patrons with economico-financial power; the conspicuous consumption which it affords becomes at the same time a display of such power. However, there is also the self-appointed power of the underlings to play to their heart’s content, although exclusively in the absence of – and chronologically after – their better-offs. Most compellingly, Jan acts as a reverse Pygmalion who turns life into art.

Jan’s signature gesture can arguably shed a new light on his agency in the food porn scene. Jan habitually throws a handful of coins onto the floor to see if the people, including the rich restaurant patrons, will start hunting for the money, which they always do. His hilarious social experiment turns Jan from a subjected individual into an agentive subject with a good grasp of human nature, or perhaps of greed alone. Mutatis mutandis, he plays at God both in the signature scenes and in the food porn scene, in the former as a social experimenter, in the latter as an artist. On the other hand, greed afflicts Jan too, alongside a prurient need to boast. The latter, rather than the former, will get him imprisoned: Jan boasts to the communists entering his hotel (sic!) that now he too is a millionaire. Nonetheless, the erstwhile agentive subject is not acknowledged as one by the bourgeois with whom he shares humiliating prison chores. The nouveau riche finds himself ostracised in carnivalesque terms by his fellow millionaires, some former clients of the Hotel Paříž upstairs dining lounge. His power is no less illusory than the illusion Jan created by framing the young prostitute as a latter-day Venus, in accordance with the allegorising convention of the nude genre illustrated by Velázquez’s The Toilet of Venus yet debunked by Manet’s Olympia and Courbet’s L’Origine du monde already in the 1860s.
Conclusion

Food porn (or merely concern, in Shakespeare) becomes, in all three cases, the vector of power relations. Titus uses the recipe discourse to outline his revenge plan to his first pair of victims, the rapist brothers, before reaching out – through them – to the second pair, Tamora and Emperor Saturninus, all four guilty of undermining or ruining his early position of power. When Titus describes the unpalatable recipe he thereby furnishes the prompts for a mental picture – for Chiron and Demetrius, onstage, and for the audience, offstage – of carnage (the twin brothers’), so highly elaborated as to delude everyone through banquet trappings commensurate with his imperial guests. Unlike Shakespeare’s protagonist, Vianne and her aides, in Chocolat, make trayfuls of chocolates, some of which are the nipples of Venus, in a clear instance of fetishisation of the female body familiar from the arts (including religious iconography) and pornography. In a bow to the stereotyped notion of consuming the woman visually, sexually or otherwise, the first of the figural chocolate sculptures smashed to pieces in the window display is a Venus. More consistently than in Chocolat, in I Served the King of England the young woman gets framed (in every sense) by the end of the food porn scene. Accordingly, she sees herself (narcissistically) as Venus – in mythology, as in painting, a conceit for the commodification of women as prostitutes. Our interpretation is endorsed by Dejmanee’s conclusions about digital food porn by female bloggers:

In a hypersexual context in which the exploitation, regulation, and objectification of women’s bodies is predictably commonplace, “food porn” plays with ideas of the pornification of the female body, while inversely generating attention toward individual and select postfeminist subjects’ empowerment through creative labor. (445)

Playfulness and aestheticisation of food porn may only mystify ideological and ethical issues traditionally obfuscated in
high art, in genres like still life painting, genre painting or the female nude. They can cater to aesthetic and other sensibilities, seemingly those of a public inclusive of both genders. When one recalls, however, that many female nude paintings were commissioned as wedding gifts to be hung in matrimonial bedrooms, one should rather reconsider who forged whose aesthetic sensibilities to which, *mutatis mutandis*, food porn, the nude genre and pornography cater.

**Notes:**

1 A good starting point to assess the academic interest in the representation of food – and associated values – in films are the essays collected in Anne Bower’s *Reel Food*, which document an emerging food film genre.

2 A related conceptual distinction is that between *hunger*, a universal, regularly occurring body drive, and *appetite for food*, which psychotherapist Daniel Cappon defined in 1973 as “a state of mind, an inner mental awareness of desire that is the setting for hunger” (qtd. in Mennell 374). For a psychological approach to food and eating, see Smith.

3 Food images in magazines such as *Elle* (for a working-class readership) yield to fetishistic adoration, Roland Barthes suggests in his “Cuisine ornementale” essay. Ornamental cookery creates magical artifice – a dream cuisine – solely for visual consumption (Barthes 121); the gentility of seeing food deflects attention from the brutality or coarseness of (preparing) the ingredients (120).

4 For the relationship between ideologised food and power (as other- and self-governmentality), see Coveney.

5 An earlier and vastly different landmark in the European history of (representing) a concern with food eating is the carnivalesque *Gargantua and Pantagruel* (1532-1564). François Rabelais describes his protagonists gorging themselves on foodstuffs and drinks, often couched as interminable lists. Gargamelle, pregnant with Gargantua, not only devours tripe galore (Book I, chapter iv, 15-16), which triggers her delivery (I.vi), but also drinks wine heartily before philosophising on it (I.v). After feasting at his father’s bountiful table (I.xxxvii, 109-110), Gargantua accidentally swallows six pilgrims hidden in a lettuce salad (I.xxxviii). Rabelais travesties the battle between Lent and Carnival – anticipating Brueghel’s painting – as territorial hostilities between King Lent and the
Chitterlings of the Wild Island. Lent’s anatomy (Rabelais’ term, IV.xxx-xxxii) renders the king an embodied Mardi Gras feast rather than an ascetic (IV.xxxii, 589-590); the Chitterlings’ giant sausage armies (IV.xxxvi, 598-599) are vanquished by Pantagruel and his culinary-named cooks (IV.xxxvii-xli). Other cooks elsewhere bear pots and baskets packed with foodstuffs (IV.lix-lx, 657-660) as the Gastrolaters’ lavish offerings to their “ventripotent god” Gaster.

6 “This pervasive food sharing through mobile images is part of our digital literacy today” (Ibrahim 1). Strictly speaking, such digital literacy concerns sharing food images, not food proper, and whatever values/sentiments they elicit.

7 Should one therefore brand the Apollo Belvedere “sculpture porn”? Our query draws on art historical facts such as Winckelmann’s “homoerotic encounter” (Prettejohn 29) with this particular sculpture (as well as with others), conducive to desiring contemplation (qtd. in Prettejohn 29). For Winckelmann, aisthesis – here a clearly sensual element – grounds aesthetics, if in the argument of his History of Ancient Art (1764) rather than of an aesthetics tract proper.

8 See also Chan on “the cooking show as fantasy” (52) and generally on food as one of the pleasures, alongside sex, fantasised about (53).

9 Our point here is not intended in a moralistic sense.

10 Tellingly, there is a “perceived ‘gendering’” pattern of TV food programmes in relation to the domestic environment, with female chefs typically shown “in a kitchen/domestic backdrop” and male chefs “in a professionalised or industrialised set-up” (Packham 87). The “testosterone-stuffed celebration of knives, fire, meat and manhood” (Hogan qtd. in Packham 92), with an “emphasis on butchery” (Packham 93), in the MasterChef endorsement of ruthless combative masculinity (91-94), recalls Titus Andronicus’ cooking-travestied masculine reassertion.

11 The plating may remain in focus. “‘Food porn’s’ elaborate settings and mood building allude to the treatment of the female body in fashion magazines” (Dejmanee 443); according to Krishnendu Ray, “cuisine has a lot in common with haute couture” (qtd. in Dejmanee 443): fashion cycles and food styling “replicate[] and circulate[] similar props and aesthetics” in the Internet age (Dejmanee 443).

12 McDonnell examines exclusively “food as an art form in the age of digital reproduction” (239). How is one to interpret food consumed in
public places, for instance at the restaurant, on private or more institutionalised occasions – as the two films focus on? It would be interesting to investigate, moreover, how (or whether) McDonnell’s definition can account for historical cases of conspicuous consumption recorded pictorially or textually, where the modern notion of the “social intimacy of hearth and home” (McDonnell 241) was suspended (or rather inexistent) from the outset, and food and eating provided an object for admiring (or awed) social gaze intended to reinforce sociopolitical hierarchies.

13 Kaufman has noticed a historical coincidence between the advent of the yuppie and of the foodie, to whom “many of the same cultural fetishes apply” (in McBride 42).

14 However, Dejmanee (3-4) refutes such arguments in her analysis of digital food porn in the postfeminist context of female bloggers engaged in food creation and photographing.

15 Julie Taymor, for instance, switches abruptly from the arrest of Chiron and Demetrius (02:19:45-02:20:12) to showing them hanged upside down – first exclusively to Lavinia (02:20:17-02:20:31) – before they hear the charges (02:20:35-02:21:24) and Titus’ revenge plan (02:21:25-02:23:23), including the staccato-delivered recipe (02:21:48-02:22:12, corresponding to Shakespeare’s V.2.187-192, save Ovid references); the early preparation steps, throat-slashing and exsanguination, are all Titus (Anthony Hopkins) does himself (02:22:41-02:23:46).

16 Particularly gory scenes, rape included, were by convention played offstage in Elizabethan times.

17 Saturninus’ recanting of the marriage offer to Lavinia may be a mere pretext to shower his attentions on the alluring prisoner Tamora, to whom he proposes on the spot.

18 Through rape, Lavinia is now “damaged goods”; accordingly, her father has lost face socially.

19 Aaron the Moor, Tamora’s secret lover and the brothers’ rape advisor, plays a grim practical joke on Titus by faking a barter allegedly proposed by the emperor: Titus can trade his left hand for the lives of his sons Martius and Quintus, sentenced to death.

20 One cannot gauge the extent to which the actual spectators might do so as a function of gender, self-awareness, religious, social, educational and sexual background, and so on.

21 The image is repeated when Vianne (aided by Josephine, not shown)
prepares Armande’s birthday feast (01:16:31-01:16:33). This time the preparation is interrupted by the onset of the north wind season, viz. the sign for Vianne that she ought to prepare for leaving, not feasting.

22 Indeed, Yvette will eagerly return – with her husband, Alphonse (Ron Cook) – to buy some more aphrodisiac chocolates, after the amazing taste she perceives in her mouth while sampling them in the shop and the stupendous love-making she experiences at home after Alphonse has enjoyed his unrefined Guatemalan cocoa chocolates.

23 A comparable descriptive case (if lacking any visual parallel) occurs in the confessional: Luc admits breaking his promise to himself – never to return to the chocolaterie – because of the delicious hot chocolate (00:51:02-00:51:14); Widow Audel confesses the mystifyingly innocent look of the cream-filled chocolate sea shells gifted by Guillaume Blérot (00:51:15-00:51:27); and Yvette admits: “It melts, God forgive me, ever so slowly on your tongue and tortures you with pleasure” (00:51:28-00:51:35). The editing makes the three confessions sound like one continuous, modulating flow of ekphrastic text, which substitutes words for images, themselves substituting for sensations.

24 The scene is announced aurally right when Vianne is climbing downstairs, ready to leave the village, or perhaps already reconsidering it, after the urn with her mother’s ashes has been smashed accidentally on the stairs. Now Vianne is the spectator of the scene.

25 We ignore incipient food porn scenes, such as when, at the Hotel Tichota, Jan’s mentor, Mr Walden, enjoys the food sight revealed by the waiters who have just uncovered the dishes (00:36:15-00:36:26).

26 Her name is disclosed to Jan privately, when he wonders who the French lady going upstairs may be, by Skrivánek (Martin Huba), the maître d’: she is Julinka (Sárka Petruzelová).

27 In *Looking at the Overlooked: Four Essays on Still Life Painting*, Bryson brands the “still life of disorder” in Dutch still life painting those compositions that feature half-eaten food (including peeled lemons), overturned goblets and precariously balanced plates; such “wreckage of the meal” suggests that the diners have left (Bryson qtd. in Ciobanu 152).

28 The scene is anticipated, with another woman and with money for embellishment (00:35:04-00:35:30), when the maid invites Jan himself in one of the rooms not occupied by the Hotel Tichota lecherous guests.

29 Visually, the image foreshadows that of Kern Saxton’s film *Sushi Girl* (2012), despite the different contexts of the garnishing of the two female
characters.

30 We have taken our cue from an interpretation of the fruit dish crowning Mrs. Ramsay’s dinner party, in Virginia’s Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse*, as referential to multiple pictorial genres from still life to genre painting to the female nude (Ciobanu 149-155).

31 The recipe’s intended deployment will render not only his imperial enemies cannibalistic aliens, but Titus himself no less barbarian than the Goths (Goldstein 99-100).

32 Krishnendu Ray cogently remarks about food porn: “there is something about food, which is both so essential to life and still unavailable to so many … that makes any playfulness, any degree of aestheticization, open to the charge of excess and moral decay” (qtd. in Dejmanee 445). Food porn practices by women, Dejmanee contends, depart from feminist “revolutionary politics” to be but “mild protest … against the conditions of hypersexuality and rigid body discipline in which the postfeminist subject is enmeshed” (445). Women’s food porn is “flawed by its continued self-reflexive focus on the female subjects already most privileged and idealized by postfeminist culture, as well as the valence of pleasure in the current era, which often serves to guide postfeminist politics in and of itself” (445). Such ideological and aesthetic narcissism in women’s food porn, we suggest, is rather patriarchy’s consumerist backlash, apt to erode women’s gains in the feminist struggle for self-representation.

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