

The Representation of Food as Power Struggle in the Menu

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Abstract. The paper attempts to analyze the representation of food related to identity and power relation in *The Menu*. The film is centered on serving and consuming the food. Food has been considered domestic and apolitical. However, food has long been the one that determines the differences on gender, race, and also class. Certain race and class only permit eating food in certain way and considered others as inferior. The analysis is used cultural theory and film analysis in seeking how food is aesthetically treated and consumed. It is showed that food is a sign of power struggle in achieving defined identity and social class. Both the chef and customers exercise their power and hegemony as well as shows personal narrative

1. Introduction

Food is an essential part of human's life. It is a basic necessity that keep us alive and it is considered to be apolitical and domestic. However, dining is not only having something to eat and drink. It is "a substance upon which civilizations and cultures have built themselves" [1]. Each culture marks each own taste, living standard, and social polarization. There are type of food for certain class, geography etc. Thus, food is reflected people roles, status, and identity which marks their struggle to achieve its symbolic meaning. Food and its relations to culture, politic, and society have been sought by scholars since modern era. Llyod [1] examines the relation between food and identity that can be traced back to the modern period. He divided society based on eating habits into three distinct groups; manual laborers and household servants, second group is urban professional, artisan and wealthy country and the last group is the gentry and nobility. Each group has certain rules that must be obey in consuming and developing their symbolic meaning. Weller and Turkon examine the immigrant experience in maintaining cultural identity through food [2]. Consuming and preparing the food is used to cope with the cultural change and their way to adapt to the new place.

Scholars also examine the representation of discursive food in literary work. Food and literature were considered as different and unrelated entity. However, it turns out that both is the product of culture. Food is part of human adaptation to its environment. It makes different geography have different taste. Sar, Putra an Giri [3] examine the aspect of gastronomy in Japan folklore which attached in the way people produce and consume food. Gastronomy is related to the belief system existed in the society and determine ways of life. Kish and Contois [4] explore the influence od Food instagram in changing ways and what we eat. The social

media changes dining not only having food but display it. Lok explores the flavors and spices which symbolizes home, national histories, and family legacies in Amitav Ghosh's *The Glass Palace* and Romesh Gunsekera's *Reef* [5]. Ajulu-Okungu [6] examine the power and sociality of food and drink in Abdul Gurnah's *Dottie and Pilgrim's way*. The two-protagonist used food to negotiate dislocation across racial and social differences. The authors used third person in delivering its story but since it focused on the main characters, readers seem to read first person narrative. The abundance or scarcity of food define the social level and racial differences. However, food and drink also help the main characters to unite family and gain power. Bletzer [7] examine the agricultural worker's depiction in the novel. Through the description on food, the novel shows the eating cultivate the hospitality among people.

Although various researches have analyzed food in various field of study, this analysis is hoped to be one of discursive examination on Literature and Food. Using Literary Gastronomic method, cultural theory and film studies, the paper focuses on the representation of food in relation to the class and power struggle in *The Menu* film. The film is directed by Mark Mylod which depicted the culinary experience in remote Island. Food is fundamental throughout the course of the story. As depicted in the title, the film is about a multiple course in a luxurious restaurant in an isolated island. All of the customers all high-class society except Margot, who is paid to be Tyler's fake girlfriend. The presentation of food as luxury and rare experience marked a cultural sign of the class in which they belong as well as determine the habitus and capital they owned. This, paper aims to explore the power relation that occurred in a social arena created. Each character struggles in achieving power and hegemony.

2. Method

The analysis is used literary gastronomy as well as cultural theory as its bases of analysis. Gastronomy is a study that relates food and literary work. Its belief that food has a complex relation with the people, culture and class [9]. The ideas of expected etiquette, manner, appearance relating to certain class can be traced back to early modern writings [1]. People can be judged on how and what they did and ate which then identify their class and status. Food marks the class where they belong and manner in which they should have performed. Certain kind of food only belong to certain class, while others could not attain it. Xu [10] underlines that "the way we eat is inseparable from the ethnic and war".

In addition, although it is associated with mundane life, food is political, contextual, and geographical. The ruling government and religious guidelines gives rules on what can be eaten and what is forbidden to be eaten. Llyod highlighted the ideas of "feasting and fasting" that shows religious identity [1]. People must follow the rules and they are warned if they ignoring it. Sin is one of the punishments for people who disobey the eating rules set by religious guidelines. At certain times, for example when there is a chronic drought, the government also uses religion to regulate people's diet.

Lloyd said that the government used religious regulations to prohibit people, especially the upper class, from having extravagant activities [1]. However, the government can also apply certain food or drink rules that may and may not be consumed, for example, prohibition of consuming marijuana in certain countries or rules limiting its use in other countries. Not only consumption, the government also regulates the production and distribution of food ingredients. This effort is carried out so that there is an even distribution of food needs of the community. However, this also shows that food is a site of struggle. In fact, food has also become national branding [6] by giving food a local image and trying to attract tourists to visit. Groups, associations, and governments around the world work to promote specific foods and dishes as 'typical' of communities and places, as well as use them as elements of soft power, often with high-profile chefs and cookbook writers serving as their cultural ambassadors, a practice referred to as gastrodiploamacy [6]

3. Results and Discussion

Food as Cultural Signifier in The Menu

Food has been considered in building local and national identity. It is an everyday activities and part of essential necessities; however, people can be identified by what and how they ate. Globalization increases the tendency to the homogenization taste. Nevertheless, high class sets the bar high for certain food which make it unattained by the common people.

The Menu, film that highlights on the production and consumption on food for high class people. Only a high-profile person who can enjoy the service in Hawthorne, which is an exclusive restaurant in an isolated island. The customers are pampered with luxurious and excellent service right from the start begin the journey in a ferry to reach the island. Through Tyler's characters, readers are informed that each the courses cost \$1250. Thus, those who can eat there is the most elite person. Each night they only serve 12 people.

All of the characters who became the customers in Hawthorne are introduced upon they embarked on the ferry. Tyler and Margot, his hired girlfriend, became one of Hawthorne's customers. At the beginning of the scene, Tyler is described as a food lover and eager to feel the experience eating in Hawthorne. Several other character depictions are seen through Tylers' point of view. The first group to board the ship were three accountants who were also Hawthorne investors. Both Weather couples with whom Margot ever acts as their daughters as well as lovers. Then, Lilian Bloom, a food critic for Saveur. And the last, a wasted actor with his assistant As noted by Wilson quoted from Sutton what we eat determine our identity [5]. Food in The Menu becomes a signification of culture in high class society. A restaurant can only can be reach by taking a ferry. A beautiful scenery and rare ingredient of food signify exclusivity. The customers are served by multiple courses as seen below



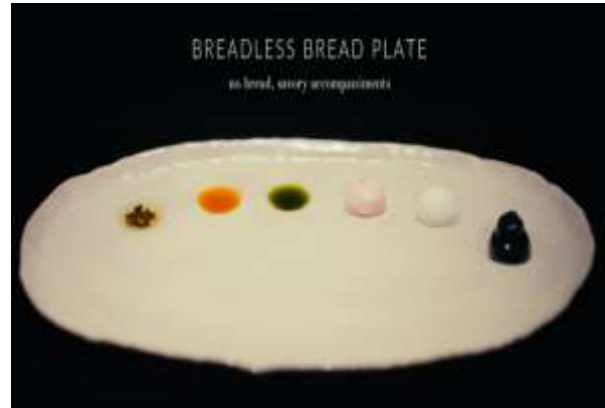


Figure 1 Series of dining courses

This is the first food serves in the ferry. A Raw Oyster in mignonette emulsion with lemon caviar and oyster leaf. After they are embarked on the island, all of them are escorting by Elsa to see the process of food production as well as the life of the workers which is very organized.

The luxury of the food is seen through the ingredient, the setting, and also the way the food is consumed. Food is served as an art that not just being eaten but also enjoyed. Perfection is implied in the production of the food. All of the crews follow the order from the chef.

Food as a site of Struggle

Power relation is one of the themes that is distinctly seen in *The Menu*. The characters presented with their own agenda in attending the dinner. Tyler has long been waiting to have the experience in tasting Chef Slowik's food as he is a fan. He even fakes his relationship to be able to go there. Food critics has an agenda to review and judgement of the food they ate. Three accountants are the one who invest in Hawthorne restaurants, they feel they have privilege there. Wasted actor intends to increase his popularity by lying that he is a friend of famous chef in front of his assistant.

All of them are struggling to make meaning through their consumption and prove their entitlement to their status. All of the characters are a social actor who always negotiates their perception, disposition, and preferences to be able to be categories as part of certain arena in social field. Here, food signifies power.

Lilian Bloom as food critics, has power to break or make a chef's career. Ted, Lilian's editor always agrees on whatever Lilian Boom's said to win her. He is afraid to show his own opinion and corrected at once when it is different with Lillian. At first, Lilian seems to have privilege in Hawthorne, she turns eating into intellectual exercise in which she tries to identify the ingredient and the process of making the food. By reviewing everything, she always finds fault of the food.

Tyler is Chef Slowik's fans. He is a foodie who can identify the ingredient of the food and appreciate it. However, Tyler represents the irony of those who know the process of food making without ever make it on his own. Three accountant's friends are one of the investors. In that case they think have more privileged than others. It is one of the reasons they demand a bread in second courses.

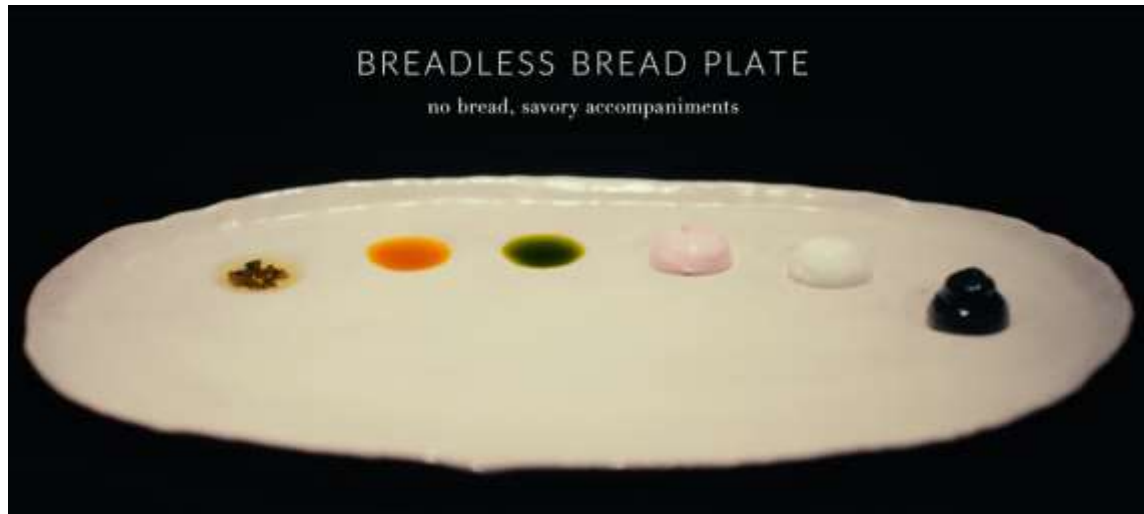


Figure 2: Controversial Course: Breadless Bread Plate (00.22.36)

In the second course, the customers are served by breadless bread plate which begins to make the customers questioning with the menu presented. Although, most of them think this as the dramatic performance. They are divided into two categories, giver, and taker which represent those who serve food and those who consume. The customers think that they have already paid, so they are the one who have power. However, in a remote island and closed building surrounded by chef Slowik's men. All of them are trapped and must follow the chef order.

Slowik's power is shown from his way in clapping his hands when giving order to his staff. He is not only a chef but also influencer. He has power to influence all his staff and even influences Tyler to hang himself after he fail to make a decent food. Margot who is actually not part of the high society, at last can escape herself after she complain the food served is not her liking and demand a cheese burger as real food that is not focuses on fancy design but on the real thing that can be taste by common people.



Figure 3. Cheese Burger ways to freedom (01.32.20)

Cheese burger identify the freedom on the demand of fancy and aesthetic food which is considered as important part of cuisine but sometimes meaningless. People are more focus on the appearance not on emotional evoking from tasting a good food.

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4. Conclusion

The menu used food as cultural signifier to identify the high-class culture. Not only as representation, it also used as a satire to the way people produce and consume food. Food gives shape to people identity, in this case divided into two big categories, the giver and taker. Chef and his staff are the giver, who produce the food for the customers as taker. Food becomes an arena of struggle where social actors tried to achieve it status and class.

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