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Dining as a 'Limit Experience': *Jouissance* and Gastronomic Pleasure as Cinematographic and Cultural Phenomena

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[...] mechanically, dispirited after a dreary day with the prospect of a depressing morrow, I raised to my lips a spoonful of the tea in which I had soaked a morsel of the cake. No sooner had the warm liquid mixed with the crumbs touched my palate than a shudder ran through me and I stopped, intent upon the extraordinary thing that was happening to me. An exquisite pleasure had invaded my senses, something isolated, detached, with no suggestion of its origin.

(Proust, 1982: 48)

Hors d'oeuvres: The concept of *Jouissance*

It is with this gustatory pleasure, the soft crumbling of a delicate shell-shaped citrus tea cake upon the tongue, that Marcel Proust launches his magnum opus, *In Remembrance of Things Past*, his narrator transported untold distances in memory by the extraordinary, incomprehensible and exquisite pleasure of the senses visited upon him. But while both the excessive and unexpected pleasure of this iconic moment and the exquisite pain of memory and loss invade Proust's narrator, the dangerously orgiastic potential of true *jouissance* remains nevertheless contained – rare is the occasion when a literary character surrenders himself to the uncontained joy and pleasure of *gourmandise*. Yet this is precisely the topic of Marco Ferreri's 1973 film *La Grande Bouffe* where four friends reunite for a weekend of unadulterated pleasure – their plan is to dine themselves to death; their unlimited *jouissance*, in the

true Lacanian sense, takes them from the pleasures of the feast to the intended fulfilment of their collective suicide. Highly controversial at the time of its release, the film remains unabashedly excessive, marking one of the most unmediated cinematic relationships between food, pleasure and death. Subsequent films such as Gabriel Axel's *Babette's Feast* (1987) as well as Lasse Hallström's *Chocolat* (2000) and more recently Nora Ephron's *Julie & Julia* (2009) also present the particular relationship between French cuisine, the gastronomic and *jouissance*. Yet none of these subsequent films highlighting 'gastronomic *jouissance*' express its unlimited and ultimately dangerous nature to the same degree that *La Grande Bouffe* details it. In fact, these subsequent films detail not only the relationship between food and transcendently excessive pleasure and (often) pain, but rather, set the scene for the re-inscription of *La Grande Bouffe*'s orgiastic *jouissance* into the mechanic of the pleasure principle: 'not too much but just enough.'

And yet, despite calorie counting, despite the irrepresentable nature of true gastronomic *jouissance*, one could almost say that we have entered a new golden age of culinary surprise when restaurants such as *elBulli* or *El Celler de Can Roca* (to mention only two of the foremost examples) offer diners a singularly transcendental experience through molecular gastronomy. In so far as many of the dishes prepared in these restaurants explore the very limits of what could be considered a meal, diners are invited to share in the ephemeral delight that accompanies many of the novel techniques employed by the talented chefs. It is in the creative drive to transcend the dining experience, to move beyond the senses, and in the singularity of such a dinner, that we can read a new movement towards gastronomic *jouissance*. This is an experience which can perhaps be seen to culminate in *El Somni* as a total work of art: 'an opera in twelve courses, a dinner in twelve acts' (Aleu, 2014: 204) which took place in Barcelona in the spring of 2014. In exploring the relationship between gastronomy and *jouissance* we are at once guided by the psychoanalytic and the cinematographic, filmic representation being (arguably) the field in which *jouissance* finds its most complete expression. We can, in turn, look towards the contemporary molecular gastronomy movement, considering the implications of this movement as it relates to the cinematographic representation and the wider cultural issues at play in gastronomic *jouissance*. For *jouissance* can be seen to structure a certain form of gastronomic expression, from the cinematographic and orgiastic feasting of *La Grande Bouffe* to the exceptionally refined experimental playfulness we find in the form of molecular gastronomy at the tables of the world's leading chefs and