

# Pornography, Art and/or Food

In November 2000, way before porn studies had become an academic commonplace, I visited a porn conference, *Pornography and/or Art*, in Vevey / Montreaux (Switzerland). It was organized by the local design university.

I arrived in the town late in the evening, just in time for dinner. Our host, a small man with deep hypnotic eyes, took us to eat to a one-star Michelin restaurant on the shore of the lake of Geneva. He was the director of the school and a member of the Swiss Academy of Gastronomy. (I shall, from here on, refer to him as D.)

The name of the restaurant was Hotel du Lac. From there you could see the lake of Geneva and the mountains behind it, peaks covered in snow. The other speakers were mostly old, real academic survivors, who had already studied porn when it was a career suicide -- so they were all brilliant and socially witty.

My paper was mostly about the anti-porn movement in gender studies, but most scholars were actually still fighting for something I thought belonged to the 1960s, i.e. sexual liberation. An English lawyer presented legal cases against erotic artists, a Dutch philosopher discussed Jan Saudek's photos, and somehow the organizers had got Wendy Steiner to come and present her thinking which had already at that time gained fame through her success book *The Scandal of Pleasure*.

D took us to the last table of the room. It was soon dark, and as the windows were on the side of the lake, you couldn't see anything. D raised his glass and said: "To pornography".

Max Ryyänen

I was far away from home, many of the speakers knew each other well, as they had probably met in their marginalized colloquiums over the years, and when hours passed and the awkward situations and discussions just continued, I felt that I am in some kind of late Stanley Kubrick or David Lynch movie. At one point two of the scholars talked about 'the material' in a way which sounded like code language and I got paranoid. Had I landed in some kind of an illegal porn or human trafficking circle? Who were these people in the end?

The food made me a bit relaxed though – not to mention the wine that was served with it. Some of the guests who came from Third World Food Countries (like Finland), performed their wishes to the waiter in a very performative way to show off that they, too, knew something about the upper-class Central European culinary arts, but I could read D's face: I knew that he thought they were uncivilized jerks.

For me this was the momentum of my life as a food lover (which I was going to become). If I played my cards well I could get the meal of my life. As D talked in a conservative, nearly antiquarian way, like a character from an Alexander Dumas book, I tried to imitate him. I said, pointing at the menu, that "I think it would be best if I just trusted you, Sir, with this – as you seem to be highly qualified in the culinary arts: you are even a member of the Swiss academy of gastronomy". D looked at me in a suspicious way, so I added, "I eat anything you say".

I had definitely done a slick move. D lowered his chin, only a half inch but enough to make a gesture, and said only one word – like a Dalmatian Count in a decadent Luchino Visconti movie: "Monsieur..." He looked very satisfied.

We ate and drank the whole evening and made a huge bill for this design school which had made a hardcore deal with Swatch, and was, so, according to a member of the staff, "loaded". Fantastic plates, elevated versions of local recipes, followed each other for hours. It was like a concert where a 'genius of the romantic period', without any shame for being appropriative, would have played symphonic versions of local folk songs – or this is what I ate, the others had classical French plates, and I knew that I had something special as D had fixed the order.

At the time, nobody in Europe talked about eating bugs (and I was at that time not yet into crickets myself), but D claimed all food problems would be soon fixed with ants. He explained all the interesting recipes he had tested with worms and spiders, but not really in a convincing way – he was more like trying to make them sound disgusting as one female scholar made a noise every time he mentioned a bug – and then he continued by commenting on restaurants in the cities where all the guests were from. Helsinki got 'her' share. D had written an essay on the herrings of Hotel Tornio for a gastronomic book that had sold so well that he had been able to buy a beautiful house at the shore of the lake. He talked about Finns in a very romanticized way, but as I was getting good culinary education, I did not want to tell him that I am not a silent, pure-hearted, non-civilized beast living in the forest.

But I made the mistake of saying that I had never eaten in Tornio. D repeated his gesture and lowered his chin, only a half inch again, but this time it happened without respect. I could see a cold critique in his eyes. And he did not say monsieur.

The perverse atmosphere became even more intense when D got to the main dish. He pulled a small metal box out from his shirt (it was hidden at the height of his chest). Inside of the box there was a small knife, a magnifying glass and other microscopic tools. He cut the meat up and watched it with the magnifying glass.

I had had a bit too much wine and the food was an ecstatic experience. But it was culturally quite extreme for me – the guy studying all the food critically with pornographic eager, a photographer showing pics with blood and extreme piercings from a Franco B book, and then all these semi-crazy old academics, porn scholars telling their weird stories and sticky jokes. At best I felt that I was in a chapter of Casanova's memoirs, but mostly I felt that I am nearly in danger. It was as if at any time, any moment, it could all just turn into a sadomasochistic orgy.

When we left – and I felt relieved – D pulled slowly on his leather gloves like in a Truffaut film where the director wants to show that the bourgeois is sick. He turned around and gazed at the chef, who had come out from the kitchen, probably to hear his judgment, keeping his hand on the backside.

D made his half-inch bow again, and said (after a second of silence which intensified the moment), "Monsieur" ... There was a lot of dignity in the expression, and even a child would have understood that the restaurant was in no danger. The work of the chef was approved. The chef nodded back.

The lunch next day was delicious. It was fish, but somehow I don't remember anything else than the fact that it was fantastic –

the restaurant had a star as well, or maybe even two. (It was called Le Restaurant.)

But I was young and I made a mistake. The second evening I left searching for a Le Corbusier house and I did not attend the dinner. I would never do anything so stupid anymore, but I did not yet understand how important good food is, and how unimportant modern European art was. I recall standing in the rain watching a cubic house. I also recalled that Josef Weschberg, my favorite gastronomic writer, told a story in his memoirs about a deer plate his aunt had made and a kitschy evening in the opera he chose to go to, and the fact that this was the last time he chose art over food.

The next morning D came to pick us up from the hotel. He nodded like a living question mark and said that he had been knocking on my door many times. I was a bit ashamed, as I had, inexperienced as I was, not said that I would not join the group. D was anyway very disappointed. He said: "Your punishment will be, that everybody else will be describing to you in detail what you missed!"

On the last day D was on fire. He explained all the dirty tricks he had done in the university, the people who he had smoked out from the organization and the warm connections he had to the Swiss police. He was a manipulative man of power.

I was so afraid of him that the whole crazy story was not amusing as long as I stayed there. Next day, on my way to the airport, I saw him in Geneva, coming out from a fancy chocolate shop. He saw me, but did not do a single gesture. I had become air.

# Food, Culture Identity

Only later I felt a bit sad that I did not go to the food museum of Vevey. On the other hand, it was run by Nestlé. Did the museum present documents of all the ethical problems the company had ended up having? I doubt it. But the museum did cooperate with D and his design school, and I still get chills when I think about the uncanny food culture of Vevey.

*"And soon, mechanically, weary of  
prospect of a depressing morrow, I re-  
the tea in which I had soaked a morsel  
had the warm liquid, mixed with the  
than a shudder ran through my whole  
on the extraordinary changes that  
exquisite pleasure had invaded  
detached, with no suggestion of its o-  
of life had become indifferent to me  
brevity illusory — this new sensation  
that love has of filling me with a pre-*

Marcel Proust, 'In Se

Simon