

THE LANGUAGE OF (UN)PALATABILITY, (IN)DIGESTION AND BEING FED (UP) AT THE THRESHOLD BETWEEN THE 2 HS – HUMOR AND HORROR – IN *THE MENU*

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Abstract

The paper looks at the 2022 film production The Menu, which is a horror comedy that manages to be convincing – we shall argue – because of the smart manner in which language is used. We start from a justification for this idea, finding it in the first scenes. Still in the introductory part, we establish the roles of the main character, Margot, as well as some of the features of her companion, Tyler, and state the functions played by language that shall be followed throughout the whole analysis in the way it is used. The body of the analysis focuses on the terminology specific to the field of food and cooking, looking at the people involved or staff, procedures, insights on the cuisine served and the show that the experience turns out to be, and, last but not least, the descriptions of the courses and the hints that they provide on the situation. The final part of the investigation bearing on the dishes is not only descriptive, assessing the lexis, but also looking into the intricacies of language use, namely its psychological effects and subtle impact, the way in which it blends horror and humor, boosts tension gradually, and creates reality at the threshold of competing outlooks on fine dining which see it as either deserving art or arrogant nonsense. The approach is a blend of linguistics and cultural studies, with a focus on the collaboration between language and psychology, paying attention to how the former creates the dynamic of the other.

Keywords: food culture, haute cuisine, identity, psychology, linguistics

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1. Introduction. Why language – an argument

In the cinematic production *The Menu* of 2022, Chef Julian Slowik, a master of fine dining, invites a party of twelve people on Hawthorn Island for a degustation, with the intention of killing everyone, including his staff and himself by the end of the night. He puts up a performance, introducing every one of the five courses with a preamble-discourse related to the theme of the respective dish, all of which make up a symphonic whole culminating with the dessert, for which the guests symbolically become ingredients dressed up as sweet sophistications only to be set on fire. The most prominent couple is foodie rich-boy Tyler and Margot – an escort who replaces his ex-girlfriend, and the only one who in the end makes it out of the island alive. Far into the midst part of the film, we realize that Slowik bears a grudge against all the guests, with

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the exception of Margot, who is there accidentally, and that the dinner is in fact a punishment, but also meant to be a final lesson for their sins, of arrogance, carelessness, exploitation of and disrespect for others and art. Lillian Bloom, who is accompanied by her editor, Ted, has often made snide comments on Slowik's work along his career, as well as destroyed others'; despite the fact that Richard and Anne Leibrandt are regular customers, he is unable to name a single dish that he has served in the chef's restaurant; the once successful film star George Diaz is accompanied by his assistant, Felicity, whom he has taken for granted and kept as a mistress through the years, a reason why she wants to move on and leave him; Soren, Dave, and Bryce are cocky businessmen who have gotten involved in illegal transactions and deceived innocent people; Slowik's own alcoholic mother was unable to protect him from a violent father and from trauma during his childhood.

The introductory scene of the film makes it clear from the very beginning that what is about to occur is an extremely exclusive event, as the total number of the customers is twelve, which would apparently make it unprofitable, except that every individual is, in a compensatory manner, charged "1250 a head" (McKay *et al.*, 2022). The uniqueness of the occasion is emphasized as well through the way in which Tyler tries to prevent Margot from smoking, with arguments of the type: "It will kill your palate.", and hence "ruin your ability to appreciate them" i.e. the "super delicate" "flavor profiles" (*ibidem*). Besides drawing our attention to the experience and highlighting its once-in-a-lifetime quality, putting it forward as expensive, out of the reach of every-person, an honor to be part of and a complex event, it introduces us to the sphere of *haute cuisine* through the last phrases mentioned above. If one discusses flavor profiles, then (s)he is clearly a connoisseur, automatically leaving every-person a bit dumbfounded, with the effect of feeling a novice at what is about to occur, and consequently inappropriate and even excluded to some extent. We are made to feel a bit small, or at least aware that this is the way the ones in the know will perceive the others, who are not, as outsiders and rednecks who lack the style and class to appreciate what will be going on – kind of like Margot. Her lines place her at the other end of the spectrum, in the shoes of the rookie, of every-person, of the inappropriate, but also, at the same time, of the one that the masses can relate to – so, likable, congenial – and moving ever so slightly to the role of the circumspect who is treading the fine line of mocking the pretentiousness of it all as arrogance and snobbery, and, through this, the person who has a healthy common sense (the implication being also – unlike the others). Margot's lines make this stand – her placing herself at the opposite pole from the overenthusiastic Tyler – visible: to his request not to smoke so as to avoid ruining her palate she exclaims "Fine. Jesus.", and when she finds out how much the experience costs she replies, after a curse, "What, are we eating a Rolex?" (*ibidem*). Her jokes and unpretentious, colloquial language bring her closer to the regular receiver of the information, to the "girl next door", as she characterizes herself, and in contrast with Tyler's uppity attitude (*ibidem*). She indeed condenses in her personality producer McKay's declared intention of putting an exclusive culture under a question mark (De redacția online Zile și Nopti, 2022).

From the start of the movie, it is evident that the characters' *language provides invaluable hints* as to who they are, the categories that we can place them in, their personality features, the way they are perceived and received by the viewers,

influencing us and telling us how to see them, *manipulating our outlook and/or teaching us ways to look* at them and at the experience that they are about to have. Tyler and Margot's ways of speaking propose alternative ways to consider the same reality. At the same time, *language creates tension and opposition* as early as this introductory part, alongside humor and irony, *blending possible approaches of the same situation, mixing in these approaches ingredients like: humor and the comic; the relaxedness and unpretentiousness of every-person; the posh and/or arrogant and/or potentially elitist, exclusive and/or elegant stance; but also, among all these, the tension coming from contrast that will ultimately and gradually evolve into horror*. Language shows its importance at this early stage of the development of the action, pointing, through the way in which it is used by the two characters, to the manner in which it will hold the roles of manipulating emotions, of pacing the dynamic of occurrences, of creating suspense and of combining the opposite stances of humor and horror, either passing rapidly from one to the other or holding them present together simultaneously. In this quality, language is profoundly intertwined with psychology. Last but not least, as we shall see, *language and the manner of speaking supplies for Margot – who turns out to be the protagonist – the ruse for her escape*, in the context in which everyone else shall die. In the end, the right words create the appropriate psychology in context, triggering the desired reaction.

In what follows, we shall analyze the way language fulfils the functions introduced above. In order to manage this, we will have a look at it not only in terms of specialized, specific vocabulary, i.e. the one of (*haute*) *cuisine*, or register (which we have already pointed out above), but also pace, a quantitative and qualitative glance, metaphorical suggestions, and from a pragmatics perspective, following the implicatures.

2. Food terminology and creating effects with it

What is evidently the central happening of the film is a gourmet tasting and the object of "*haute cuisine*" or "*grand cuisine*", i.e. "the cuisine of 'high-level' establishments, gourmet restaurants, and luxury hotels", "characterized by the meticulous preparation and careful presentation of food at a high price", involving "premium ingredients", "exotic and varied flavors", "complex techniques", "looking like architectural wonders" and characterizable by adjectives such as "extravagant", "rich" and "opulent" (*Haute cuisine*, 2022). We shall examine the language used to describe the people involved, the procedures or actions resorted to, the insights on food, the terminology depicting the actual dishes, as well as the impact, effects and consequences of the language on the reception of the cultural object that the film represents, in other words what language manages to do in terms of shaping perception for both those inside the cinematic world and those outside it.

2.1 People

Lillian Bloom distinguishes herself among the guests from the beginning, as she comments on the culinary experience the most. Described as a "food critic", she acts as an authority in the field, who can pass judgements that are deemed valuable, trustworthy, entitled and noteworthy, which makes her more enlarged and significant verbal inputs on food (in comparison with the other guests') in the film logical (McKay *et al.*, 2022). She

discovered Slowik, at times being dismissive and critical towards his work throughout the years. Tyler uses the term “foodie”, i.e. a person eager to have food tastings, and informed about and interested in gastronomic experiences, to designate someone else in the film, but the characterization would apply to him as well (*ibidem*).

Slowik is, of course, “Chef” (*ibidem*). The way Elsa, his right hand, uses the word as a title, without the definite article, and pausing after she pronounces it as if almost taking a moment, suggests, primarily, Slowik’s power position, authority, and aura of nobility. However, in the suggestion of utmost respect entailed in the special use of the term, we also feel an extra meaning component, namely a touch of excess, a kind of deference that goes beyond what is unanimously deemed as normal, which becomes suspicious, as if he were more than a central figure or role model, taking up godly qualities. The respect in Elsa’s voice seems just a tiny bit off, as if something were not quite right. It very subtly points to how Slowik becomes more of a sect leader figure, having brainwashed all his apprentices into followers, instead of a teacher. When the guests are shown the cottage where Slowik lives – but only on the outside, as nobody is ever allowed to enter – Margot, the voice of conscience, jokes about him being “the Lord High Emperor of Sustenance” (*ibidem*). To be more precise and practical, Slowik is “Executive Chef”, as he describes himself, which is different from the Chef-Owner, the one who would also hold the restaurant instead of merely managing or running it (Different Types of Chefs, 2022).

Elsa describes the staff as a “family”, instead of a group that displays “*esprit du corps*” – as one of the guests puts it (McKay *et al.*, 2022). What these very brief characterizations do is draw our attention to how involved the people working in the art of *grad cuisine* can get and are, as well as indicate indirectly the special nature of the business, implied by the way in which superlatives are resorted to to characterize the professionals, specifically Slowik’s team, this special nature being the reason why they get so caught up in it. The use of a French phrase brings the flavor – if we were to employ a pun – of sophistication and elegance as features that the speakers mean to associate with the art and practice of cooking, as knowing French or a foreign language makes one intellectual and thus refined. Also, French would be the appropriate language in context, as a lot of expressions and terms belonging to the specialized terminology in question were historically borrowed from it.

Jeremy Loudon is the member of Slowik’s team who will commit suicide as an illustration of the way in which someone who has failed to be great enough or is *manqué* in his vocation can make a “mess” out of his existence. He is called a “*sous-chef*”, the “Second Chef, Under Chef”, i.e. the right hand of the head chef (Different Types of Chefs, 2022). Slowik’s visible personnel is most likely made up of senior chefs (*chefs de partie* or station chefs, who manage the stations) and specialized chefs, experts in various areas, such as sauce chef, meat chef or pastry chef (*ibidem*). The other positions that are equally not pronounced as such, but are implied and evident, are Elsa’s, who, we realize, plays the part of the “*maître d*”, welcoming guests, seating them at the tables as well as having other management duties, and a sommelier in charge of wine services, who comes to Tyler and Margot’s table a few times to bring in various assortments of the beverage (Restaurant Job Descriptions & Titles, 2022).

2.2 Procedures

During a tour on the premises, the guests are explained that the dairy cows' meat is kept in the smokehouse for 152 days to "age" and "relax the protein strands"; in case it is served on the 153rd day – Elsa explains to a curious camper – the altered bacteria shall enter the person's blood flow, reach the spine, and cause paralysis and subsequently death, which is all, of course, avoided, as they are "pros" (McKay *et al.*, 2022). Elsa's language mixes her apparently usual manner of speech, which is, as expected, pompous and aloof, with an informal one, but which she uses as a concession made to the others, unversed in the mysteries, subtlety and profundity of the secrets of food preparation (as opposed to who and how she is), and thus less fortunate, but also less refined, intelligent and elegant. Whenever she nevertheless concedes to use informal or colloquial language, she does it from the full height of her skill, in a manner similar to how an adult would use a child's gibberish to become the child's equal in his/her immaturity or innocence, but with an extra condescending ingredient in Elsa's case, as if she accepts to stoop low, to become a fool to level with the redneck rookies. That is the impression rendered by her as she repeats the phrase used in the question addressed by the curious guest, i.e. "all hell would break loose", to describe the effects of imperfect timing in consuming the meat (*ibidem*). Elsa's language contains the essence of what the *haute cuisine* culture mongers are stereotypically portrayed to display in terms of attitude on the negative side: apparent excessive politeness which in fact hides arrogance, haughtiness, derision towards those who are outsiders, the apparent desire to serve people covering in reality a need to make fun of and even scorn the ignorant in the field, and, we can further speculate, a tendency towards perfectionism in a sphere that seems more manageable and that hides and compensates for a sense of failure in other areas of one's life i.e. a compensation effort "to make up for a deficit" (Hayes and Stratton, 2022: 67), a sublimation or displacement mechanism, i.e. "the redirection of instinctual energies towards more socially acceptable goals" (*ibidem*: 362), and a superiority complex masking an inferiority one. Later in the film we see the way in which Elsa confirms these character features mentioned last as, the moment she is under the suspicion of having made a mistake, her leading role is threatened by Margot and she feels the danger of being replaceable hovering over, Elsa's psychotic criminal inclinations are triggered, and she pursues the protagonist with a knife (and not only) with the clear intention of killing her for no other fault than seeming to be fit to take her place.

The apparently light manner in which Elsa quips, combined with the comic of having everyone *bouche-bée* at the dire consequences that they might face as a result of the staff making any mistakes, the group laughing forcedly and unconvincedly while in fact terrified, along with the horrific picture of a slow and painful suffering and death create the unique blend of humor and horror permeated with the ingredient of the absurd that this scene introduces in the context, as it is, of course, unfathomable for one to die from eating meat one day later than one is supposed to, especially given the lengthy duration of the intended aging period for the meat. Elsa's speech and the mix of exaggeratedly formal, polite language with condescendence, black humor and the horrendous create tension and slowly slip us into blurry expectations, preparing us for the dreadfulness to come.

Verbs describing the actions taken for the preparation of the food are enumerated by Elsa during the initial tour of the property: “harvest”, “ferment”, “slaughter”, “marinate”, “liquify”, “spherify”, “gel” – all preceded by the pronoun-subject “we”, to suggest the unity of the team; “innovate” is what the cooks do before the guests (McKay *et al.*, 2022). The enumeration of these actions is meant to suggest quite a number of things: the complexity of the work involved, its seriousness (giving the work symbolical weight), the knowledgeability and thus professionalism of the makers, and, through these, the privileged nature of the guests for having the opportunity to attend the demonstration, and perhaps, ambivalently and sarcastically, that they are both lucky/worthy and not necessarily worthy of having the experience. In the enumeration, Elsa uses the verbs as ammunition, spits them, launching them as weapons in order to show off and to manipulate the others’ feelings.

Nouns referring to devices used for procedures also appear among the specific vocabulary of cooking. A “Pacojet”, which Tyler notices a cook to be using, “can produce a powdered, snow-like texture”; an “immersion blender” is used to get a “hyper-decanted” wine (*ibidem*).

Examples of adjectives that describe the procedures and techniques used for cooking will appear in section 2.4, dedicated below to the actual courses and dishes, and are to be expected in the context. At this point, we are just going to mention the fact that they are not only of the neutral type (of which examples will be given in the section indicated in the previous sentence), simply mentioning the technique used for the respective raw material, but also negative, describing failed procedures, such as in the second-course emulsion that seems “split” or “broken” – something that Bloom notices (*ibidem*). She tells Ted how she makes her own bread that is “rustic”, “peasant-like”, “yeasty” – adjectives that suggest procedures, even though they do not describe them *per se* (*ibidem*).

2.3 Insights

Tyler introduces the notion of interpreting the way the experience and the dishes make one feel, by mentioning “the balance of the products” or “the mouthfeel of the mignonette” (*ibidem*). However, the expert who has the most numerous entries in this respect, as well as the most superior, is Lillian Bloom.

Lillian Bloom calls the venue a “biome of culinary ideas”, which “functions like an epicurean salon”, as Bloom’s companion and editor, Ted, puts it, who seems desperate to look in-the-know, to please and be validated, so he resorts to the arsenal of the most sophisticated language and allusions in order to appear as smart; but Bloom corrects him, saying that “biome” is the more appropriate description – to which he, of course, gladly and immediately concedes (*ibidem*). Margot, who overhears the exchange, concludes, as the voice of reason that she represents: “We have reached the base camp of Mount Bullshit.” (*ibidem*) The pair’s exchange introduces two notions coming from other very different fields of science, namely biology and philosophy, respectively a noun and an adjective: the biome and the epicurean approach. What this achieves is point to a connection between food and food sampling, on the one hand, and the other two spheres of knowledge dragged into the picture, making us understand that this art/practice that constitutes the central theme and context of the film is related to life/living and to life philosophy. Another thing that the analogy manages is to claim

profundity for the experience, as, since it relates to the origins and study of life itself as well as to theorizing about existence, it is deep and meaningful beyond appearance, which means that it should not be trivialized. The biome is a perhaps more scientific and showy term for an ecosystem or habitat, in the sense that regular people who are not specialized in biology would probably tend to know the meaning of the latter term rather than that of biome. This choice of the synonym less likely to be known by every-person relates to the inclination to elitism and snobbery, and to a desire to present the preoccupation with gourmet food as not for everyone, on both the production and the reception ends. Epicureanism is related to the Greek philosopher Epicurus, who lived around 300 BC, and to his teachings that encouraged people to the pursuit of happiness as the ultimate goal in life. His doctrine illustrated an empirical approach to life, to knowing it through what is palpable and through the senses. It was hedonistic, seeking for pleasure understood intellectually, as avoidance of suffering – i.e. “*aponia*”, the “absence of pain”, and “*ataraxia*”, the peace of mind – rather than that of the senses, so prioritizing the pleasures of the mind as superior to those of the body (Epicureanism, 2023). The corresponding adjective, epicurean, has come to mean something related to this trend of thought: a person “fond of or adapted to luxury or indulgence in sensual pleasures; having luxurious tastes or habits, especially in eating and drinking”, or “fit for an epicure” (or *connoisseur*) (epicurean, n.d.). We notice that the adjective denotes either someone that is in pursuit of luxury and refinement or someone who already possesses these features, i.e. either the aspiration or the accomplishment. The ambiguity and ambivalence reunites the two stands that all the agitation in the film is about, and which all the characters, except for Margot, are trying to prove themselves in: if they cannot be the makers of taste, they at least strive to prove to the others that they have good taste. The position nobody wants to be occupying is the complete ignorant in those matters – again, with the exception of Margot, who is the only one who does not struggle to prove herself or to appear as being something more. (In a parenthesis, the observation being made, is this the reason why she is the only one who makes it out of the experience alive? Is her less hypocritical nature what ultimately makes her the only one worth saving? Perhaps. Or, on a more philosophical and extreme note, is it an inability that excludes her from being part of the food chain and experience, and should be seen as a kind of punishment, her having missed the more profound meaning of it all and having remained on the outside of life itself – while paradoxically living – failing to complete the ultimate stage of living which is dying/extinction? Again, food for thought – pun intended.)

As we have already contended, Lillian Bloom is the character most likely to emit judgements and assessments of food in the most arrogant and knowledgeable manner, which she does. She describes the plate of the first course as displaying a certain “neediness”, as being “half-great” and “there in moments”, but still, in the chef’s defense, “clean” and “thalassic” i.e. “oceanic” (McKay *et al.*, 2022). She reads subtleties and interprets, seeing and assessing the concept, plunging into the why and how rather than the what, referring to the story behind the courses, its rationale, as well as even the feelings and drives that the food illustrates. The other characters have much drier descriptions: the movie star says it is “good”, one of the party of three young businessmen describes it as “solid” or “suburban landscaping”, which are linked more with denotation than connotation (as in Bloom’s speech) (*ibidem*). She refers to the

provocation in the second course, consisting of its meagerness up to the point of suggesting mockery, as “fiendish” and “outrageous”; editor Ted characterizes the event that clearly becomes, by the fourth course, a performance, as “theatrical but minimalist” or “*minimirasuto*” in Japanese style, and “playful”; subsequent to Loudén’s suicide, which creates a dish called a “mess”, Lillian claims that it is “stagecraft”, as if in an attempt to convince herself that it cannot be real (*ibidem*). Slowik himself characterizes the experience as a “show” and as “exclusive”, and at some later point reveals the guests as “ingredients in a degustation” (*ibidem*). The *umeboshi* is “fantastic”, with “waves of ferment” that can be felt while tasting it (Bloom points out), Tyler’s lamb with vegetables is “bullshit” in Slowik’s terms, Margot’s cheeseburger is a “real” one (*ibidem*). The last part, the dessert, is made to illustrate the “ruin” of Slowik’s life and art, so it needs to be awful, “the most offensive assault on the human palate ever contrived”, which is probably sugar as a substance and, moreover, a plain version of it, i.e. everything that is “wrong” with people and which is nevertheless associated with “innocence”, “childhood” and “Mom and Dad”; hence, it needs to be purified by fire that transforms the participants, who are thus “cleansed” into “martyrs” or “heretics” (*ibidem*). The vast majority of these adjectives are subjective, opinion ones (Adjective order, 2022). Some of them pertain to classy, formal vocabulary, and/or poetic language – mostly those used by Bloom and Ted. Her words and word associations manage to be evocative, as they are rich in connotations. But even Bloom sometimes uses simple superlatives that acquire a lot of weight, given her expertise. The others use informal, plain opinion adjectives, like “solid” or “good”. Colloquial terms – this time nouns – are made to insult and criticize some dishes, mainly Loudén and Tyler’s. Some of the adjectives almost personify the food as if it were an agent, endowed with intention and volition, meaning to act towards certain ends – an example being Slowik’s use of “offensive”. The (sometimes radical) contrast between pretentious descriptions and colloquial, very simple ones, contributes to tension build-up.

Margot is the voice of reason and of the every-person, who pinpoints what the courses seem like to such an individual, who has no particular interest in the art of gastronomy and who is more practical-minded rather than a philosophical enthusiast. To her, the first course, the theme of which will be the island of Hawthorn, is resumed as a “rock”, when she encourages Tyler “Just eat your rock.”; the second is an attempt at “basically insulting” the customers because of its puniness; during the third, which consists of tortillas engraved with embarrassing moments, as she feels insulted, she signs and calls Elsa to take the food back – and is the only one who dares to do that, while Tyler, depicted as photographing the food on the tortilla feels guilty and thinks of a way to “make it right somehow” (McKay *et al.*, 2022).

2.4 Food description

The first instance of actual food description is on the boat to Hawthorn Island. The first dish introduced by Chef Slowik is “raw local oyster in a *mignonette* emulsion with lemon caviar and an oyster leaf” described by Tyler as “one of his classics” (*ibidem*). The emulsion has a foamy consistence, probably intended to suggest the sea foam formed by waves crashing to the shore, and the noun “lemon” is used to point, for the caviar, to its yellow color, so employed metonymically – “replacing a word or term with something associated with it” – and metaphorically – achieving “a direct comparison

between two unrelated things” – at the same time (“Figure Of Speech”, n.d.), the same as the noun “leaf” made again to indicate color, i.e. a small amount of green jelly used on top, as if mainly for decoration purposes. *The combination of metonymy and metaphor* plays a vital role in these haughty food descriptions, because it serves the function of suggesting rather than pinpointing, the very mental process of connecting the dots between the hinted and the actual reality being considered elegant, subtle and intelligent, features that would hopefully transfer to the food to characterize it as well. This very artifice is metonymic and metaphorical itself. The food tells a story, providing either through its constituents or in its appearance, visually, a symbolism and a background, following a thread and telling a narrative. This translates into the idea of the food concept, and it will be detailed by Tyler a little later on, as they reach the location of the event and are seated at their table, having begun the culinary experience.

Tyler seems to be knowledgeable about the actual ingredients, explaining that the yellow color of the so-called caviar is given by “alginate”, i.e. the pompous term for a composite made of algae which Margot describes, using language at the opposite pole, which is simple and humorous instead of superior, as “pond scum” (McKay *et al.*, 2022). Tyler’s pompousness, or the trope of “grandiloquence” (i.e. “grandiose” speech or terms), is achieved with the help of the hyperbole, i.e. “an emphatic exaggeration” that Tyler resorts to through superlatives from his first lines in the film (“Figure Of Speech”, n.d.). As soon as he refers to the culinary experience, in his discussion with Margot, he characterizes it as “huge”, “magical”, “madness”; when he likes a sauce he exclaims “embalm me in it” (McKay *et al.*, 2022). His choice of words suggests that his expectations rather aim at something ostentatious, flamboyant, edgy, targeting the out-of-the-ordinary for the sake of showing off rather than for actually experiencing or experimenting. In and through his words, Tyler reveals himself as superficial, a man of appearances rather than essences. He also reveals himself to be a man of extremes, his vocabulary hinting at a potential lack of reasonableness, composure and even at psychological imbalance. Even though he truly knows his food, we are left with the impression that his interest is fueled by the luster that it provides for the experiencer before others rather than what he feels while experiencing. In fact, it will soon become obvious that he does not feel much, in the sense that he displays psychopathic traits, since he goes to the event knowing that everyone will die, has invited Margot to it just to have some company – again, knowing fully well that she is bound to be killed and making this decision in her stead – and does not seem to care much for his own life – all of which determine us to seriously question his ability to feel anything relevant generally speaking. His seeming incapacity to feel empathy when it comes to serious matters, such as people’s suffering and life loss, contrasts with his enthusiasm for food details and the prospect of the luxury and polish involved in the outing, a contrast which only manages to make him look utterly deranged. The naturalness with which he acts out this irrationality is chilling, as if he were a monstrous child, who gets (over)excited about the things that we have mentioned, and manifests this excitement in his descriptive language, getting even to become lyrical and philosophical, but is incapable of feeling guilt, remorse or fear related to the fact that he has knowingly brought Margot and himself to their own deaths. To sum up, in Tyler’s case the way he speaks points to character and offers cues as to how he truly is at his core.

Just to have a look at Tyler's lyricism and philosophical bent, expressed while in the mindful but excited mood that he gets anticipating the tasting of Slowik's dishes, we may quote here a fragment from his diatribe: chefs are worth idolizing, unlike achievers in other domains, because they "play with the raw materials of life itself. And death itself."; gourmet cuisine is "art on the edge of the abyss, which is where God works too" (*ibidem*). *Hyperbolization* is in place in these lyrical-philosophical descriptions more plainly than ever, contributing to the presentation of gastronomy as vitally important (perhaps above all else), and of the chef as a demiurge, rightly and logically almighty. *Allegory* is in place as well, likening cooking, eating, offering food and consuming it as a dynamic encompassing (the meaning of) life and living, which are the "overarching theme" or story that they portray, Chef being the "storyteller" (Tyler's phrases) (*ibidem*). The same philosophical stance and relation between food and life, so food as a sacred experience in the way in which life/living is, can be detected in Slowik's words. He makes his guests aware of the fact that they "ingest" "fat, salt, sugar, protein, bacteria, fungi, various plants and animals and at times entire ecosystems", an image in which humans seem to be predators at best, the last link in the food chain, and parasitic creatures in a gloomier outlook of a hidden misanthropist; Slowik begs them to "taste, savor, relish", "be mindful", "accept" and "forgive" instead of merely eating (*ibidem*). He highlights the utter unimportance of them and of what happens in the room as opposed to the perfect balance of nature, whose grandeur contrasts with their quality of being a "frightened nanosecond" (*ibidem*). Slowik's speech is also practical in the mention of nouns depicting ingredients and of verbs describing actions related to eating, or, rather, types of eating that are more refined. However, the last two verbs in this presentation, along with the way he characterizes human nature transform the tasting into not only a spiritual experience, but also the ultimate spiritual experience, a kind of alpha and omega of all such experiences, as acceptance and forgiveness are among the final accomplishments in the journey of life, usually occurring last in every (traumatic) experience and being the last in one's existence along the road of maturity (both literal and figurative maturity), a sort of apogee that is then unavoidably followed by demise, to make way for a new cycle of life and death. The recommendation to forgive rings the bell of what a person does before dying or when the life cycle of an experience is nearing its end, when the individual accepts, forgives and is forgiven himself/herself. This very speech contains again a hint that this experience is of the ultimate type, that it is not just one in a series, but the absolute one.

The first stage of the tasting is a small *hors d'œuvre*, starter, appetizer or "*amuse bouche*", often showcasing the "artistry and showmanship of the chef" (*Amuse-bouche*, 2023). In this case, it is a "compressed and pickled cucumber melon, milk snow and charred lace" (McKay *et al.*, 2022). The "first course", entitled "The Island", consists of "plants from around the island, placed on rocks from around the shore, covered in barely frozen, filtered seawater which will flavor the dish as it melts", and "scallops" on top; it has bountiful "nutrients", and edible symbols for "soil", "water" and "air"; the accompanying wine is "*premier cru*", a "single row of wines" (*ibidem*). Each course is made a prelude speech by Slowik, meant to create the concept, the story and the thread, trace or connection between the parts of the menu that ultimately make it unitary and contribute to the grand narrative that the menu aspires to mirror. Before the first course, Slowik reminds the guests that the island is a self-sufficient, perfectly

harmonious system that does not need the presence of a human being in it, and people are only a disturbance, as nature is “timeless” as opposed to the unimportant, fleeting, humiliating nanoseconds that people stand for (*ibidem*). This approach is meant to oppose the human being as just an undignified, inadequate and figuratively small predator in comparison with a self-reliant, thriving environment. It can be interpreted as a ruse to determine the guests to appreciate a course that is otherwise a mix of very simple, cheap and ordinary ingredients – fragments of algae and plants, a piece of something resembling an anthill, of a dubious consistence, frozen seawater and just a tiny bit of mollusk on top. However, this ordinariness is taken more than just one step further in the second course, which is a sum of just a few drops of a few liquid or fluid mixes, sitting in tiny round cavities on a big white plate. Slowik introduces it with a discussion of bread having been the food of the poor, “flour”, “water”, and “grain” much more available than “fruits” and “vegetables”, hinting at the Christly offering of bread and wine, reaching the conclusion that, since the guests are not commoners, they will not be offered bread – at a restaurant famous for it – thus teasing them doubly, through this absence on the plate of “unaccompanied accompaniments” along with the meagerness and appearance of the quantities (*ibidem*). The paradox of not receiving something because one is more rather than less, synthesized in the last expression mentioned above that plays on alliteration, the bafflement of expectations and the offensive mockery that can be read in the servings and between the lines of the chef’s tirade, creates tension and frustration. The third dish, “Memory”, evokes for Slowik, as he explains, a particular taco Tuesday night when he, as a child, had to protect his mother from being suffocated to her death with a telephone cord by his drunk father, and thus stabbed the man in his thigh with a kitchen utensil. The result is that the audience is being served a steak with scissors thrust in it, or, more sophisticatedly, “house-smoked Bresse chicken thigh *al pastor*” and “tortillas made with heirloom masa” engraved with relevant scenes from the personal histories of the people seated at every one of the tables, which is a new tailoring of the dish, used for the first time (*ibidem*). The engravings are snapshots of highly unpleasant (in the sense of threatening or embarrassing) moments from the characters’ lives: for the Leibbrandts (a senior couple) they depict scenes from a time when Richard had surgery for melanoma and a dinner he had with his mistress; for Soren, Dave, and Bryce, they show details of their illegal financial transactions; Tyler’s contains his own image with a phone in his hands while he was taking photos of the food earlier in the evening, despite the specific request not to do so coming from the staff. Course number four is called “The Mess”, in which Slowik introduces sous-chef Jeremy as a head chef *manqué*, who blows his brains out on a tarp previously placed on the floor and decorated with small branches of plants especially for the occasion – a stage within a stage, descended into the audience and thus slowly having made the audience a stage-to-be, which is a detail that is still lost on the guests at this time. The white cloth on which the suicide takes place, just like a Japanese *seppuku*, and Jeremy’s short, monosyllabic, barked answers are yet in the minimalist and, ironically-indeed, Japanese style, like the whole performance, as if bitterly illustrating Ted’s words from just a few minutes before. Then comes the fourth course, as written for us viewers of the film on the screen: “pressure cooked vegetables, roasted fillet, potato confit, beef jus, bone marrow”, the highlight and connector with the previous horrific scene being, of course, the bone marrow, the

message of which is rendered more powerfully by the mention “R.I.P. Jeremy Louden” meant to scatter away permanently, at least for us viewers, any self-delusion that the killing was not real; the post scriptum-like quality of the last reference points, sarcastically, to its seemingly by-the-by, minor-detail nature, which is hair-raising in itself (*ibidem*). The fourth course introduces physical violence and makes the event a horror scenario openly. The violence is so crude that some of the guests still voice loudly their opinion that it must be just make-belief. The “palate cleanser” preceding course six appears described on the screen as well, as “wild bergamot and red clover tea” (*ibidem*), the simultaneously comic and horrifying ironical implication being that the guests and viewers alike are prevented from getting indigestion – literally and figuratively speaking – after the gruesomeness that we have witnessed. It is obvious at this point, and has gradually become so from the very first concrete and metaphorical bites, that the dishes are comments on reality and on the events and characters partaking them. As Slowik comments himself on the tea, it helps as a “soothing balm” when people are faced with “hard home truths”, these truths being the ugliness in their past lives depicted on the tortillas, but also the danger they are in and the frightening prospect of their demises as certain no later than that very night (*ibidem*). Course six is anticipated by an outdoor scene in which *sous-chef* Katherine, formerly sexually harassed by Chef, is allowed to ritually enact her revenge by stabbing Slowik in front of everyone to see, with his consent and encouragement. Then, the men are given the chance to escape and allowed to wander free on the property with a forty-five-second head start and for a limited amount of minutes while they are hunted down, the women being served a sixth course in the meantime – “Man’s Folly”, i.e. “dungeness crab, fermented yogurt whey, dried sea lettuce, umeboshi, kelp” (*ibidem*). Umeboshi is “Japanese pickled plums”, with a very intense salty, sour and pungent taste (Warwick, 2022). The foamy look of the dish, along with its marine taste supplied by the algae in its composition as well as its constituency, of dried plums, can be read as having a symbolical nature, as a subtle comment on male potency or (the prospect of) lack thereof, which is both comical and horrific, given the context of men being pursued outdoors – with the implication of a concrete or figurative threat to their manhood – while women eat this mix on the inside of the very premises, taking a moment to themselves to unwind. Tyler’s demonstration dish, that he is required to make after Slowik reveals that Tyler knew everyone would die when he took Margot with him, results in what is presented on the screen, humorously, as “Tyler’s Bullshit”: “undercooked lamb, inedible shallot-leek butter sauce; utter lack of cohesion” (McKay *et al.*, 2022). The written description for the menu item is humorous because of its informal, colloquial title, which contrasts in terms of both register and interpretative rather than merely descriptive language with what usually appears on fine dining restaurant menus, and because of the contrasts of register that it contains itself in just two lines of discourse, i.e. between the vulgar title and the formality of the comment at the end. Subsequent to his fiasco, he is given the indication to hang himself, which he does, the morale in his case being, besides the public humiliation of acknowledged failure in cooking, i.e. the lack of the validation and approval that he so much craved from the chef, that he is taken away the opportunity and privilege of seeing the finale of the show, which, to him, must be worse than death. As Margot manages to radio for help and a coast guard officer appears (who in reality is Slowik’s man), he initially

plays the role of a potential savior, threatening Slowik with a gun, but his intervention turns out to be part of the performance, of the metaphorical menu, as the pistol is simply a lighter which he uses to light a candle on one of the tables. What is managed with this stunt is play sadistically with the guests' nerves, feelings and expectations (and ours'), directing them through an emotional roller-coaster, throwing them cruelly from the relief of having escaped death into the despair of it all being a hoax. The cheeseburger Slowik cooks for Margot at the end, entitled "Supplemental Course: A Cheeseburger", commented upon "just a well-made cheeseburger" is the final dish and the perfect one, which – the implication goes – requires very few words to describe, as perfection generally does (*ibidem*). The dessert – the "s'more" – is "unethically sourced chocolate and gelatinized sugar water imprisoned by industrial-grade graham cracker", so fine dining made out of something mundane and unhealthy (*ibidem*). The chefs spread broken biscuits, sauce and wine on the floor, adorn every guest with marshmallow corsets and chocolate hats, for the ensemble to be set on fire and explode.

In terms of vocabulary, we predictably notice in the course presentations above the presence of nouns denoting the food ingredients or items, which are either the raw materials that go into the composition of the courses, or the resulting prepared foodstuffs, and nouns denoting elements of nature and the environment, sometimes geographical, since the concept of the menu relies on an allegory with the island as a self-supporting ecosystem, life, nature and evolution. Then, there are adjectives referring to how the ingredients have been made or cooked, therefore involving various techniques or procedures, appearing, in terms of syntactic distribution, before the respective nouns.

Wine-related vocabulary bears on its typical taste descriptions. The flavor of the wine preceding the third course is "Slavonian oak, rich cherry and tobacco notes, and a faint sense of longing and regret", according to the sommelier, where the predictable vocabulary bearing on the wine's notes is followed by an unpredictable description that no longer refers to taste, but to feelings, which creates its own tension, above that coming from all the other phrasings mentioned above so far, because it tells the guests how they should feel instead of allowing them to figure that out by themselves and have a personal response to it. After the sous-chef's killing, Tyler and Margot are served a "biodynamic" wine, with "no added sulfites, a bit of barnyard funk" and a "wonderful match with roasted proteins" (*ibidem*). Proper nouns accompany these characterizations, i.e. those of the wines themselves, like Chassagne-Montrachet, Pinot Noir, Cabernet Franc, those of famous producers, like Caroline Morey, Ross Cobb, who also have come to represent brands, and those of the region of their production, such as "domaine Breton" (*ibidem*). Most of the terms are, unsurprisingly, French.

The presence of phrases from other languages is meant to suggest the cuisine as international, all-encompassing, made by a cultivated, refined, citizen-of-the-world individual who knows no boundaries. The wine is from a first growth, as the French phrase translates, which refers to its class and depicts a very expensive wine amounting to "hundreds of pounds" (Grainger, 2009: 60), pertaining to a very narrow area of production, namely an individual vineyard (*ibidem*: 82), the *grand cru* and *premier cru* being "legally protected and with particular significance in France" (*ibidem*: 84). The steak is "*al pastor*" (Spanish phrase), meaning "shepherd style", referring to both the manner of serving, i.e. in the street and shawarma style, and to the marinating method

for the meat (Al pastor, 2023). However, these phrases also play the role of annoying and provoking, just like everything else. Proof of this is Elsa's reaction when accountability is required from her by one of the three businessmen, who asks her what those images of financial irregularities are, and she deliberately misreads the question, refusing to answer appropriately, breaching Grice's Cooperative Principle in pragmatics and the conversational maxims, by insisting that they are "*tortillas deliciosas*", only to mock, annoy, intimidate and terrorize the inquirer more (McKay *et al.*, 2022). The passage from English to Spanish gives dramatism to the conversation between the no longer successful movie star George Diaz and Felicity, his assistant and mistress who wants to dump him. Spanish generally being a fast-paced language, its employment in a fight gives the sensation of an increased rapidity of developments, of heightened suspense and, again, enhanced pressure and a burdensome situation.

The presentation of each dish on the screen, as in a menu, with a title in capital letters followed by the description of the contents or ingredients helps mark the stages of the experience, which is both the dinner and the movie, showing its development and thus increasing its dramatism and creating tension and suspense. It can also function as a clue to the fact that the participants in the experience are about to be consumed (by the fire, in the end), subsequent to them being adorned so as to represent items in the dessert and thus literally be part of the meal. In this way, they are the experience in a manifold sense – used as props for it, becoming immersed in it, co-creators, makers and addressees, senders and receivers, just as they are part of life and bound to give life to things and then perish themselves. The spatial arrangement of the hall is open architecture, with tables for the small groups or pairs of guests, and the space where the cooking takes place, visible to the invited and placed a bit higher up as if on a stage. The chef descends from this improvised makeshift stage in the audience among the tables. As if in, for instance, stand-up comedy shows that involve the viewers, transforming them in actors and participants, active rather than passive, senders of messages rather than bystanders, the same will happen here until the end, and the end will be the ultimate end, as if only by and in death is the performance of life truly complete, realistic, genuine, and only in this way can art become life and hold equal value. Absolution for sins can be achieved as well only through self-sacrifice.

After the violence breaks loose, Lauden dies and Liebrandt's wedding-ring finger (ironically) gets amputated, and Slowik tells Margot that everyone is going to die, he also asks her which side she decides to be on, i.e. where she is to be "seated", with "those who give or [...] those who take" (*ibidem*). This comment is part of a series in which Slowik intentionally uses the *double entendre*, as his words can be perceived as having a literal meaning, but also a figurative one. In the first-level, literal interpretation, the ones making the food are the givers, and the customers and thus, naturally, the consumers, are the takers; but metaphorically, the makers are also underappreciated craftspeople, artisans, creators, and the others are just destroyers of their work because they are not mindful and respectful in their act of consumption, they do not pay homage to the thing whose eradication they cause. Taking the idea one step further by expressing it in cruder, harsher terms, Slowik says, addressing the Leibbrandts, that he is an artist "whose work turns to shit inside your gut" – again, concretely – as raw as the observation may be – and symbolically (*ibidem*). Coming back to the use of double meanings, Slowik does not only perform the move of

extrapolating a concrete meaning to a symbolical one, but also its reverse, making a figurative meaning literal. We witness that in the way in which Doug Verrick, his “angel investor” – a name given to rich people who invest and protect small or risky businesses, especially in their incipient stages – is literally attached a pair of angel wings, held above the ocean with strings and then slowly lowered into the water and drowned, while appearing to be hovering in the night, with the guests watching this whole theatrics through the glass wall of the restaurant; hence, he becomes the “fallen angel” (*ibidem*). The image of the white winged man floating against the night sky is macabre, given its combined silliness and horror (taking into account the predictable outcome). Etymologically, the angel investor was used historically when well-off individuals supported particularly “theatrical productions that would otherwise have had to shut down” (Angel investor, 2023), which is ironic, since Slowik uses a makeshift theatrical performance casting Verrick in it, for which the spectators have indeed paid in their turn. As Slowik is trying to help Margot decide which side she should take, he points out that she should stick with her kind, i.e. that of service providers, implying that they offer something of themselves to be consumed by the others and hinting at her job as an escort. As a general conclusion on the presence of the *double entendre* in discourse, we can say that it mirrors and pairs the one on the plates, in the dishes, where hints are dropped as to the evolution of events and to Slowik’s interpretation of reality and the characters, who are told how they are in his eyes. The makeshift angel, Verrick, would be hilarious if he were not doomed to die, but the cacophonous mix psychologically functions as an enhancer of terror, creating mental and emotional dissonance, in which not only image but also language play a massive role.

To those who pay extra attention to the screen, the master value of language is identified when it provides the key to staying alive. And Margot pays attention to Slowik’s words, which is what takes her out of the experience alive. She acts according to the chef’s principles, manipulating him with them so as to find an escape. To this end, she uses his regret of no longer being able to cook with passion and love, but only mechanically, along with one of his beliefs that he quotes from Martin Luther King – “freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor, it must be demanded by the oppressed” – as ingredients to concoct a solution to her own freedom (McKay *et al.*, 2022). In this, she ironically contradicts Slowik’s assessment of her being a taker and an eater, as she proves herself capable of designing a success recipe of her own, both in food terms and in terms of strategy. For starters (pun intended), she takes control and the central position on the symbolical stage of the restaurant by clapping her hands – which is an instance of non-verbal “language” used by Chef more times throughout the dinner to exercise power over his guests and team. Then, she claims she does not like the food and wants to return it, holding the chef responsible for the fact that it lacks joy and love, and, moreover, that she is still hungry; then, as the chef inquires what to prepare for her, unable to breach the etiquette (the way she correctly intuits he wouldn’t have been able to), she orders a burger, indicating that it be a quality one. As part of the intelligent strategy that she applies as a psychological game to have Slowik hooked, she finds logical and valid reasons to support her dissatisfaction as if building a case in court, to make her argument irrefutable, so that the man have no possibility to reject it and dismantle her game. She says food is not supposed to be an “intellectual exercise” instead of something to relax and enjoy, or “obsession” instead of love, and

that even his “hot dishes were cold” (*ibidem*). In order to be convincing, to get his attention by proving he has had hers, which suggests respect, intelligence, willingness to cooperate but also, last but not least, the equal standing that partners have in conversations or the implied partnership and trust that cooks and customers have, she throws back at him the phrase he used previously of this night being one of “hard home truths”; in this, she clearly uses his words against him, especially if we take into account the quote from Luther King as well (*ibidem*). She makes him see that he has failed in his main mission of his life – pleasing the customer – and, moreover, he has “bored” her, which depicts him as lacking skill, purpose and intelligence, shortcomings that she knows would impact him the most, coming from a customer, and given his obvious inflated ego as well. Then, she challenges and dares him, doubting his ability to fulfil her wish, throwing at him the comments “I don’t think you can.” and “Show me.”, targeting the same ego through negative motivation and, through positive motivation, requiring him to satisfy her hunger, as she emphasizes again the fact that she is starving (*ibidem*). With language, she creates an opportunity for herself to make another exit from the show than the one envisaged by its designer; and her words save her life. As he prepares the cheeseburger, and when she tastes it and enjoyment can be read on her face, Slowik is seen smiling. Pursuing her line of logically motivating all her moves, Margot explains, after having shown her appreciation for the burger, and thus having gotten Slowik to a point of concord between them instead of opposition, that “my eyes were a little bigger than my stomach” – something that the chef has generally seen happening before and can agree with as well, which he does loudly, saying that he can understand it – and only then plays her endgame with the line “Can I get the rest to go?” (*ibidem*). Slowik’s perplexity and conundrum are visible on his face, when he realizes that his honor would force him to acquiesce, at the point and in the context where they have gotten in their exchange. Realistically, he lets her go because she has managed to make him cook with pleasure again, and prove that this pleasure is and can be indeed perceived and appreciated by a consumer. She is also the only one he had no bone to pick with in the first place. The reason why the other guests encourage her to leave, and have no trouble accepting that she will be saved whereas they will all die is, besides fellow-feeling, that they appreciate her cleverness, the way in which she has made her escape working the rules of the system created by Slowik and manipulating him at his own game, but also, and perhaps with precedence, that she has managed to make him cook with dedication and find meaning in it again after such a long time.

3. Conclusions

In the beginning, language is used as a marker of sophistication, elitism, meant to impress and convey, along these ideas, that of professionalism and *savoir faire*. It is resorted to in such a manner as to fuel and inflate people’s egos, for them to feel privileged for being part of the culinary experience taking place on Hawthorn Island, which seems to be working on everyone except Margot, which places her in the position of the rational and reasonable every-person who regards the whole affair with suspicion and who manages to have healthy reactions and attitudes when something is indeed wrong around her. Her language is plain, straightforward, assertive, colloquial at times, and the way it contributes to her image of a genuine level-headed individual is yet another function of it at this initial point.

The paper has, on the one hand, looked into the specific vocabulary of the type of gastronomic experience proposed in *The Menu*. In this respect, we have noticed that the vocabulary comprises nouns bearing on the people involved in the business, on food ingredients and foodstuffs, adjectives characterizing these, borrowings coming mainly from French but also from other languages etc. It is also typically and particularly pompous, pretentious and often highly formal. On the other hand, at more advanced levels of interpretation, language manages to juxtapose the comic and the horrific, as well as manipulate on a psychological level. Additionally, we have seen how language artifice can create meaning subtly, like the way food items are selected so as to represent comments on the context and people involved, how double meanings are employed for the same purpose, as well as how the proper and clever use of language can save a person's life. As far as the course explanations appearing on the screen are concerned, they usually contain a descriptive part, where ingredients are mentioned, most of the times with metaphorical adjectival couplings, followed by a comment that is often explanatory as to what is happening in the movie, marking various moments or deeds, highlighting them or ultimately bringing dark humor into the picture. Metaphor and metonymy play an important role in these elevated food descriptions, as they tie the dishes to a concept and manage to be extremely evocative, relying on rich connotations. The most relevant conclusion would remain how wisely-used language can turn the tables on a situation, vanquishing a psychopathic interlocutor into submission, and thus being a life-savior. The protagonist manages to escape because she has paid attention to what has been said and knows how to manipulate her murderous partner-in-dialogue with words.

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