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Pornographic Dimensions of Food, Culinary Practices and Consumption in Tim Burton's *Charlie and The Chocolate Factory*

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ABSTRACT

This research paper seeks to demonstrate the carnivalesque nature of Food Pornography as displayed in Tim Burton's eponymous 2005 cinematic adaptation of Roald Dahl's *Charlie and The Chocolate Factory*. This exploration is taken forward by a carnivalesque critique of Food Pornography in the film. To prove the thesis, Mikhail Bakhtin's *Rabelais and His World* and *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, and select articles in journals such as *Gastronomica*, *Cinema Journal*, *The Journal of Popular Culture* and *European Journal of Cultural studies* are critically studied along with other critics' writings on the Carnavalesque and Food Pornography. The motifs, themes and symbols illustrated in the film are analyzed in light of the data collected from the aforementioned secondary sources. This study seeks to make an original contribution to the corpus of writings on Food Pornography and the Carnavalesque in cinematic medium, precisely in the genre of children's fantasy films. The new findings prove the presence of carnivalesque ideologies underlying food pornography in the film, whose previous studies have limited only to examining the role of food in the context of capitalism, identity politics, temptation, power and the hegemony of hunger.

Introduction

Food has always been meant to be as much consumed by the eyes as it is by the mouth. In recent times, owing to the proliferation of visual content spurred by the internet, food has come to be presented in ultra-glamorous ways, in a bid to fetch more traction online - a practice that has grown in popularity and prominence. In fact, popular in many social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter and Tumblr is the hashtag #foodporn (Mejova et al. 2). As a result of this practice, a staggering paradigm shift in thought and process encircling the relationship between man and food has been observed. Consequently, capitalizing on the public's penchant for sensational visual content, many food companies have taken to adopting food pornography to lure audience into making profitable purchase decisions. Having the current trends in mind, Tim Burton's *Charlie and The Chocolate Factory* (2005), a cinematic adaptation of Roald Dahl's classic novel of the same name (1964), lends itself for a re-reading, necessitating a re-evaluation of the portrayal of food in light of the contemporary phenomenon of food pornography.

Research hitherto centring on *Charlie and The Chocolate Factory*, the original text and the movie (2005), in

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addition to ignoring the pornographic strain of food, has often brought the characters under the scanner, informing the audience about acceptable and unacceptable behaviours, and stacking criticism against the avaricious consumers, conveniently leaving the mass producer and

taste-maker Willy Wonka blameless (Trieu 144). Conclusively, studies have been singular in their approach, focussing primarily on the character flaws that lead to the downfall of each character, ignoring the stimuli in the surroundings that activate and elicit the sinister behaviour, meriting, thereby, an academic exploration into the pornographic dimensions of food and its associated acts in the film. This research paper sets out to address this gap, demonstrate the pornographic representation of food being culpable in eliciting such sinister behaviour in the children, and investigate the processes of production and consumption encircling food porn. Apart from these, the study has also undertaken to touch upon food porn's class implications, and its being used as an advertising tool.

As depicted in the novel, in the movie, Charlie Bucket belongs to a struggling working-class family, who is at the risk of facing starvation owing to his father's loss of job. As a result, there isn't enough capital to purchase proper food. The only meals they could seemingly afford is bland cabbage soup. Having consumed only bland food owing to his social status, Charlie's fascination with chocolate is piqued when Grandpa Joe narrates the story of Willy Wonka building an entire palace out of chocolate. Around the same time, Willy Wonka, the owner of the chocolate factory announces the dissemination of 5 golden tickets in 5 Wonka Bars, upon whose discovery children may get to go on a tour around the factory, with one of them standing a chance to win a special prize. During the tour, the ticket-holders, except Charlie, regarded as "models of bad behaviour", fail to sustain their respective places in the group (Stephens 42). The first ticket holder, typifying gluttony, Augustus Gloop "eats so many candy bars a day that it was almost impossible for him not to find one" (Charlie and The Chocolate Factory). On the other hand, Veruca Salt embodies greed as she forces her father into cheating by buying chocolate bars in mass numbers. Similarly, Violet Beauregarde, driven by obsessive addictive disorder, obsessively chews on gums, later temporarily switching to candy bars to bag the golden ticket. Lastly, Mike Teavee is portrayed to be a slothful boy, who cracks the code to find the golden ticket, which ultimately means nothing to him. In contrast to the aforementioned characters, Charlie is the only child character that is sketched with admirable qualities. However, a slight breach in his moral fibre is observed when he decides to buy a chocolate bar with a dollar he found astray in the streets, instead of surrendering it to his family. Nevertheless, Charlie quickly redeems himself morally when he offers to sell the golden ticket to help his family financially. Throughout the journey, his temptation is always kept in check, while other ticket holders give into eating "one forbidden thing or another" (Stephens 42). By resisting temptation, Charlie wins the company as a reward.

With the advent of research on food pornography, this narrative that, by and large, leans towards shedding light on the moral character of the children is endowed with a new dimension of understanding the operation of food in the text. Prior to the coinage of food porn, there existed gastro porn. The term gastro porn was coined by Alexander Cockburn in his 1977 New York Review of Books where he slapped the label "pornographic" on the unattainable and picture-perfect dishes, which elicited insatiable desires (qtd. in Ray 56). On the other hand, McBride supposed that the term "food porn", synonymous with gastro porn, was first used by Michael Jacobson, in the newsletter of Centre for Science in the Public Interest, referring to the type of food that was "so sensationally out of bounds of what a food should be that it deserved to be considered 'pornographic'" (qtd. in Ray 56). McBride, conversely, sees the term denoting "watching others cook on television or gazing at unattainable dishes in glossy magazines without actually cooking oneself" (qtd. in Ray 56). Frederick Kauffman, a food journalist, making a direct comparison between sex porn and gastro porn, supposed that both idealize and degrade the basic needs, through their sensational out-of-bounds, flawless portrayal of food (qtd. in Ray 56). According to Richard Magee, food pornography represents "glossily lush photographs of voluptuous and sinfully rich desserts" (Ibrahim 3). These images, he contends, are "so removed from real life that they cannot be used except as vicarious experience" (Ibrahim 3); this contention highlights the unattainable quality of pornographic food.

Expressing his dissent and discontentment, restaurateur Joe Bastianich, disagreeing with the connotation of food

pornography, brings to the fore its “definitional problem”, questioning if any given “beautiful picture of food” is “necessarily food pornography” (qtd. in Rousseau 753).

Besides these scholarly definitions, a major contribution to the meaning has been by the internet itself. In contemporary times, through websites like Reddit, “porn” has morphed into a general suffix, meaning anything that heightens emotions and is worth staring owing to its excessive, extreme depiction. Subsequently, it has resulted in the spawning of many types of porn, such as space porn, destruction porn etc (Bradley 243). Having this implication in mind, food porn could essentially come to refer to extreme, excessive depictions of food.

As a result of this definitional ambiguity, in this article, for the sake of argument, one may take up Michael Jacobson's definition of food pornography, which delineates it as being “so sensationally out of bounds of what a food should be” (Stagi 156).

Turning back to the film, besides being a cautionary tale, *Charlie and The Chocolate Factory* locates itself in the food-as-temptation story dimension seamlessly (Stephens 16). In food-as-temptation stories, food appears as a force trying to “coerce the child into mischievous behaviour” (Stephens 15). This coercion is a testament to the compelling capacity of food to elicit sinister behaviour from children. This being the case, food represented in an excessively visually stunning and sensational way adds a pornographic colour to the already-tempting food – An observation that is made in *Charlie and The Chocolate Factory*. In a film where food porn is used as a tool to lure children towards indulgence, Charlie acts as a foil to this agenda, he isn't enticed by the encompassment of food, while other ticket-holders are. While his keeping away from enticing food might be due to self-control, the peculiarity in behaviour of other children can be reasoned by the allure of food pornography.

With respect to representations of pornographic food, two observations can be made in the film. First, the decorative nature of food pornography could be presumed to be intended to impart in it “non-perishable qualities” (Ibrahim 5). This non-perishable quality is artificially created not only through a splendid presentation, but also through a measured, deliberate composition of food, in the film. In *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, although the chocolate palace is pornographic in the sense that it is “so sensationally out of bounds how a food should be” (Stagi 156) as it is larger-than-life, built solely for pleasure, it perishes, betraying the perishability and flawed nature of the food, and foiling Wonka's technique of food porn, as non-perishability and flawlessness are some of the salient features of food porn. Moreover, Wonka warning Prince Pondicherry to start eating his palace before it starts melting could be pointing towards his own anxiety concerning the imminent perishability of the food, which would act as a foil to food pornography, pulling down its flawless visual appeal. Hence, by suggesting to consume the food before it destroys itself, its flawless, pornographic nature is not tainted. Inevitably, the palace perishes, shattering its illusion of non-perishability. Perhaps, driven by the anxiety surrounding this failure of non-perishability that Willy Wonka undertakes to concoct candies and chocolate that surpass the usual span of perishability like the chocolate ice cream that doesn't melt and the everlasting gobble stopper.

Second, in food porn, food undergoes a process of defamiliarization, intensifying its pornographic nature. In his path-breaking essay *Art as Technique*, Viktor Shklovsky proposes that defamiliarization is the process of rendering unfamiliar or strange a quotidian object, elevating it from something ordinary into something extraordinary (qtd. in Romanow 2). Strikingly, food pornography engages in a similar process of defamiliarization by spectacularizing food, presenting it in manners that is “sensationally out of bounds” (Stagi 156). In the context of the film, a safe presumption that could be made is that as novel chocolate and candies became accessible and common because of the leak of the secret recipe from Wonka's chocolate factory, the commonness of the novelty dampened the pleasure of their consumption, necessitating Willy Wonka to even further delve into defamiliarization (Pleasure and Food) and exoticize chocolate.

Furthermore, there are many an innovative candy that Willy Wonka introduces to the group in the factory - A live chocolate bird that breaks open upon swallowing an egg-shaped shell, a chewing gum inhering a three-course dinner, a candy that causes hair-growth, a chocolate ice-cream that doesn't melt at all and an ever-lasting gobble stopper. These innovations, least said, are highly innovative, unconventional and bizarre. However, they are pornographic in nature, because Willy Wonka pushes limits concerning the presentation of food, actively engaging in the process of defamiliarization, estranging food to the extent of its being sensationally out of bounds.

Central to food porn is necessary for food to “transcend the realm of being used for survival” (Stephens 18). With respect to the film, chocolate does not operate on the sphere of survival, but on pleasure. Owing to this, the chocolate that's produced by Willy Wonka is representative of a target market that requires food for pleasure more than survival, a target market that has transcended hunger and starvation. Staying out of this target market are the Buckets. Because there is only one individual out of the 5 ticket-holders who is outside the target market, the representation of hunger is kept to a minimal in the film, confining only to Charlie's family, for whom food is consumed to keep away from hunger and starvation, to survive. This view is not true in the case of other characters, who see food only as a symbol of pleasure. This is the major character flaw of every ticket holder in the movie, excepting Charlie, owing to which they fall prey. They see food as pleasure, which, in turn, is harnessed to the greatest advantage by Willy Wonka who presents food in pornographic ways that triggers and even further intensifies their curiosity and gluttony, lending him a way to eliminate participants. On the other hand, perhaps, due to starvation, Charlie, though dazzled, does not give into being completely mesmerized by food, he sees food as a mode of survival that he doesn't get seduced by food.

Furthermore, the fall of the ticket winners is also caused to happen as pornographic food promises the eaters the prospect of tasting new or rare food drawing them to temptation and indulgence (Stephens 18). In the film, Augustus does find chocolate in his everyday life, but encountering an entire factory composed of chocolate serves as a source of novelty for him, resulting in his downfall. He is drawn by the exotic nature of the factory where everything is made of chocolate, including the gushing waterfall and the river. With respect to Violet, it is the promise of a new, rare food that packages within itself a three-course meal that draws her to taste the chewing gum and fall prey. In each of these cases, the characters are lured to temptation and indulgence by the pornographic food which offers them the rare prospect of tasting exotic food.

Following the representation of pornographic food and its contribution to the downfall of the characters, it is necessary to shed light on the consumption of pornographic food, in other words, to address how the pornographic food is consumed. This examination has resulted that consumption of pornographic food is marked by engaging in eating in the absence of hunger and mindless eating.

The only explicit time in the film where hunger is mentioned is when Wily Wonka says Charlie looks “starved to death” before offering hot chocolate, suggesting that he does eat only when he is hungry (Charlie and The Chocolate Factory). In stark contrast, other characters consume without any kind of explicit hunger. Such consumption of food in the absence of hunger, it can be surmised, is a result of food porn that lures them to binge on appealing food despite the absence of hunger.

Second, when Charlie breaks and shares the Wonka Bar he receives as part of his birthday and partly for his quest of golden ticket, Grandma Georgina takes the small piece she gets and relishes the smell. Her intense concentration while consuming, a direct result of lack of plenty at home, is to be contrasted with the mindless eating by the other children, who are seemingly disengaged from food, lacking consciousness, owing to the absence of hunger and presence of abundance at home. This mindless consumption and disengagement is also pornographic in nature, for in sex porn, people who are

watching and acting are actively detached from the experience. Similarly, in consumption of pornographic food, there's a certain detachment as it is simply a "mindless form of ingestion" (Trieu 145). This is very much valid in the case of Augustus Gloop, who as soon as Willy Wonka declares that everything in the room is edible, voraciously and clumsily shoves clumps of grass into his mouth. This bespeaks the absence of mindfulness during consumption of pornographic food.

Apart from food and consumption, it is indispensable to look into the culinary practices undertaken in preparation for pornographic food. In recent years, "visually succulent cooking procedures" have become necessary to ensure a flawless portrayal of cooking, analogous to sex porn where everything is made to look flawless (Spence 54). In *Charlie and The Chocolate Factory*, one doesn't encounter the rigorous processes that go into making stunning-looking food, for the food portrayed is glamourized and perfected for the eyes, showing no dirty spot or utensils needing a wash. Therefore, the rigorous work that is pumped into the production, which is not appetizing to gaze at, is conveniently hidden, with the food being "dislodged from the kitchen", endowing both the production and the product a flawless-like quality (Magee, 2007). This way, there is certainly a gap between what is presented in food porn as in the case of the chocolate factory and the "real goings-on" of a kitchen, professional or domestic (Chan 47). In contrast to the culinary practices seen in the factory, the cooking ways of the Buckets and the Oompa Loompas do not enter the realm of food porn as they are not detached from the kitchen, and the unappealing yet strenuous work that goes into each of them is readily shown. Furthermore, speaking on the chewing gum that packages a three-course dinner, Willy Wonka states that it would mark "the end of all kitchen and all cooking", equating ugliness with both the cooking area and the act (*Charlie and The Chocolate Factory*). In this manner, Willy Wonka ideates to glamourize and perfect kitchen and its associated actions, eliminating the chance of every little mess and ugliness in other households. Reiterating, all this glamourizing is undertaken to cook pornographic food.

Besides the pornographic nature of food and its associated acts, it is equally important to examine the class implications of food porn. Bourdieu postulates that while the bourgeois or the privileged class prefers "form and aesthetic over substance", the proletariat or the unprivileged class prefers the obverse (Bentley 91). This postulation urges one to view food porn from the perspective of class. In the context of the film, the implication is that food porn, although appealing to both the bourgeois and the proletariat, is preferred and given importance only by the bourgeois, namely Willy Wonka, Augustus Gloop, Veruca Salt, Mike Teavee, and Violet Beauregarde, who eat for pleasure rather than hunger. On the other hand, since Charlie and the Oompa Loompas eat to satiate hunger, preferring substance over form, they can be classified as the proletariat. From this, it can be concluded that food pornography, though enjoyed by both classes, is practiced and appreciated only by the bourgeois.

Aspiring to enable the consumers to grab a bar of chocolate from television at the comfort of home as and when it is advertised is to be symbolically understood as Wonka trying to break the voyeuristic experience offered by food porn as in sex porn and let the onlookers have a first-hand, real experience. However, it still remains ambiguous as to who can really afford buying television to access the chocolate, breaking away from the voyeuristic experience. Perhaps, it is only the bourgeois who can really break away from the vicarious experience of tasting food, as they can unequivocally afford television sets. In conclusion, the unattainability that food porn foregrounds, from the perspective of class, brings to the fore that it is unattainable only for the proletariat, not the bourgeois.

Lastly, since this is the age of mass production and omniscient advertising, it is imperative to view food porn through the lens of advertising. Food porn has been welcomed by the researches as "a new advertising approach", owing to its ability to grab attention (Sabuncuoglu and Gökaliiler 210). This being the case, it is important to evaluate Willy Wonka's representation of pornographic food from the perspective of advertising appeals. Appeals are factors that are

integrated into a product to make it desirable for a given target market. Advertising appeals are primarily of 2 types – Rational appeals and emotional appeals. To enable them to make a purchase decision, rational appeals focus on consumers' need for functionality and utility, whereas emotional appeals underscores their social and psychological needs. In *Charlie and The Chocolate Factory*, the chewing gum is essentially pornographic owing to its defamiliarized quality; it, evidently, serves both needs, because it intersects with both rational appeal and emotional appeal. Assuming the form of a chewing gum, it is emotionally appealing to the impulsive children who enjoy playful foods, meanwhile by being composed of a three-course meal, it is rationally more appealing to the adults, who, according to Willy Wonka could do away with cooking and kitchen. Therefore, Willy Wonka masterfully appeals to both children and adults alike. Conversely, from the standpoint of class, because the proletariat class hinges upon rational appeals and the bourgeois class emotional appeals, as the latter privilege form over substance and the former the opposite, the defamiliarized, pornographic chewing gum appeals to both classes.

From the study above, it has been thus proved that pornographic representation of food is accountable for the downfall of the characters. In addition, the study has critically evaluated the production and consumption of food porn and investigated the same from the viewpoint of class and advertising. Furthermore, this research paper contributes to the corpus on food pornography and studies centring on *Charlie and The Chocolate Factory*, both the original text (1964) and the film (2005). Research in this text could be further taken forward by focussing on the carnivalesque strain of food pornography.

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