

They can eat.

The role of food in the construction of a mediated message through the analysis of a press photo.

By Titusz Tarnai

Where to begin? Food is fuel. All animated beings organise the world according to their need to obtain the caloric energy necessary to make them function, to keep them alive. One of the main aspects of life is to sustain the organic machine, to actively acquire the right resources, upon which the other main function: the preservation of the species through reproduction can be achieved. This biological baseline being the shared goal, first of all binds the human race to the rest of animated lifeforms, creating an inseparable familiar relationship between us and them. Yet more interestingly, the quest for input is imprinting a structure onto mental functioning, which although primal and omnipresent, remains elusive to a complete understanding in its overall effects and consequences, as many alimentation miseries and mysteries remain up until today.



Tue., June 6, 2017 - Canadian PM Justin Trudeau and former US president Barack Obama met for dinner Tuesday at Liverpool House in St-Henri after Obama gave a 70-minute keynote speech to Montreal Board of Trade.¹

Nations, like humans, remain in struggle for energy supply, the politics of national economies continue to reflect the competition for the limited resources. Thus the picture of two world leaders engaged in a conspiring dialogue taking place in a tucked away restaurant kitchen, a sort of back room getaway, draws its symbolic power from the intersection of power, health and alimentation.

¹ <https://www.thestar.com/content/dam/thestar/news/canada/2017/06/07/justin-trudeau-and-barack-obama-reignite-bromance-over-dinner-in-montreal/obama-trudeau.jpg.size.custom.crop.1086x724.jpg>

When I stumbled upon this particular press photo, I was caught up in trying to articulate a research which would drive further my experiences in working with children suffering adiposity. Still devoid of the words necessary to grasp the essential problem, my sentiments were taken up by the undefined relationship of love, the lack of thereof and nutritional reactions as manifest in the case of children with eating disorders.

As a tentative prelude to explicate a theory of eating disorders in psychoanalytic terms, the aim of this present paper is to chart the contemporary condition of eating. A biological necessity and a cultural practice at once, nutrition in terms of developmental depth psychology, coincides at the beginning of life with sexuality in the analytic sense, when the infant is coupled to the breast of the mother. Thus eating is charged with preverbal magic, which continues to accompany the human being throughout his entire life. It is almost as going back to the beginnings of the universe, nanoseconds after the big bang, where everything was still so condensed and undifferentiated, laden with potential.

Back to the photo. What do we see here and how does the theme of alimentation add to the meaning of the image? Quoting the lifestyle magazine *Eater Montreal*'s headline, "Obama and Trudeau Have A Liverpool House Dinner Date in Montreal"², "And the internet loves it." More particularly, the relationship of the two protagonists has been interpreted in an other headline: "Fans of the Obama-Trudeau bromance will surely appreciate the fact that they shared a rib steak at Montreal's Liverpool House earlier this week."³

Bromance. Sympathy.

A bromance is a close, emotionally intense, non-sexual bond between two men. It is an exceptionally tight affectional, homosocial male bonding relationship exceeding that of usual friendship, and is distinguished by a particularly high level of emotional intimacy. The emergence of the concept since the beginning of the 21st century has been seen as reflecting a change in societal perception and interest in the theme, with an increasing openness of western society in the twenty-first century to reconsider gender, sexuality, and exclusivity constraints. (...) Bromance is a portmanteau of bro (or brother) and romance. Dave Carnie is credited with coining the term as editor of the skateboard magazine *Big Brother* in the 1990s to refer specifically to the sort of relationships that develop between skaters who spent a great deal of time together. The term did not attain broad currency until approximately 2005 when the theme became more prominent in the motion picture industry. Numerous examples exist of intense homosocial friendships throughout history – such relationships were common between men and also between women.⁴

² <https://montreal.eater.com/2017/6/7/15753636/obama-justin-trudeau-montreal-dinner-liverpool-house>

³ <http://nationalpost.com/life/food/serving-barack-obama-justin-trudeau-a-huge-honour-says-david-mcmillan-of-montreals-revered-joe-beef>

⁴ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bromance> retrieved 16:54 Sept 7 2017

The photo depicts two adult males sitting at a table facing each other. Both emanate an aura of youth and self confidence. The table is set for dinner⁵, plain table cloth, a variety of glasses are set next to napkins and menu booklets. Both are sporting ironed shirts, sleeves rolled up. The asymmetry of the moment that their postures are carrying suggests a fierce but controlled exchange of give and take. Aggressions are kept at bay, refined to affection⁶.

Health.

Did they have much of an appetite?

They ate everything. We cooked a bit cleaner. Both of those guys are pretty healthy, so we put together a healthy menu — a little less butter, less cream.

Did they put any ketchup on anything?

No, I would tell you right away.⁷

The table is located in the corner of the room, suggesting privacy and intimacy. The privilege of a separation to the wider society of commoners is accentuated thus and is further heightened by a series of spatial factors. First of all, the room contains this single table, leaving their occupants unrivalled. Second, the proximity to the source of food and beverage further suggests the privilege of the seating position. The bar, with its devices of service and providence on one side, and the door to the adjoining kitchen speak of an uninterrupted access to food and drink: the two are the first to be served, not to be overlooked. Such nodes of access introduce the theme of the breast as immediate and unconditional source of nourishment. So whereas the framing scenery contains all the references: jars, cups, glasses, the coffee machine to joyful alimentation, the counter and the matrix of bills enhance the idea that everything is taken care of, that justice and equality (among the brothers) are maintained. The thin door opening to the kitchen, as a source of endless surprising joys, the diligent santa claus cook, adds another facet to the phantasy of being on the receiving end of amazing treatments.

Dominating the wall overhead is a board sign in the shape of an arrow written 'Restaurant'⁸ in it. The decoration piece polarises the space in a very subtle manner. If one follows the arrow, it turns up to lead into nowhere, exposing the piece as pure decoration. But this is not the most important dimension of the sign in the context of the picture. It yet coincides with the flow of information at the instant of the picture taken. Trudeau appears to emanate, to dominate, whereas Obama appears to be caught in a moment of reception, somewhere between acknowledgement or criticism: he is to digest what Trudeau is cooking up. Yet this is still a side note, a product of the moment, which heightens the dynamics of the photo rather by coincidence. More characteristically, the sign appears to the viewer as an instrument of ushering out: 'This is not for you, the place that you are looking for is over there, move on.'

⁵ cf. Farb P, Armelagos G., 1980, Consuming Passions, Houghton Mifflin, Boston: Dinner vs. Breakfast: dinner is a structured meal, with a defined order.

⁶ Is culture all that what keeps them from eating each other?

⁷ interview with David McMillan, the owner. in: <http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/montreal/trudeau-obama-macmillan-1.4149250>

⁸ Restaurant: -> Eating out. (vs. acting out)

Move on, but where to? What is this mystical place: the restaurant? How did the concept and role of the restaurant evolve and how could its contemporary role in culture be grasped? What can account for the proliferation of alimentation related enterprises and locales in the fabric of western cities be understood? And how does the phenomenon reflect back to the contemporary nutrition related cultural complex? Restaurants have in the last decades become the ubiquitous institution in the urban landscape. They line up in historic streets, terraces flourish, old markets, stores and workshops of all sorts are converted into that what seems to be the default business model: Catering food and drinks.

Take for example the Vienna Naschmarkt. An institution with a firm tradition of being a gateway to goods and flavours from around lets say the world. The central and prestigious market of Vienna has in the last decades experienced a fundamental shift. The market stands are being refurbished to gastronomic entities. The market has become a venue for a particular slice of the population, terraces are bustling and bursting, one can observe the endless row of tables and chairs with people seated to enjoy food, drinks served. The situations at the table seem to repeat themselves, looking closer, the overall variety of activity appears reduced and streamlined. The change in bodily action and communication that has resulted of the place being a source of ingredients to a place of ready made foods is startling once compared.

Bargaining, offering, tasting, judging, hustling, bumping into others, acquiring space, being rude or polite, offended or offensive, cheerful, disappointed, pushing and being pushed, lashing out, being stolen, begged, convinced: The interactions associated with market trade place the participants into an active role, allowing for the testing and emergence of a variety of mostly spontaneous encounters. One potentially goes home with bags full of tasty booty and a mind full of fresh emotions. The market as a psychosocial generator, a place to which our psyche seems to contain much (mirroring) affinity. Since I have begun to buy my grocery on the market as opposed to the supermarket, I learn about the nature of an evolving relationship between the providing merchant and the supplied client, which stems from the repeated encounter, a periodic reenactment of giving and taking, of recognising the other. Yet, what I buy at the market, I will have to cook myself. At which point we arrive at the postulation of the latent existence of an archaic luxury, namely being cooked for. And so this is why the deli restaurant is the fulfilment of the promise of the oriental spice stand. Long before electric appliances along with social revolutions have eradicated the need or the availability of additional personnel in the domestic realm, the minimal staff of bourgeois households had to contain a maid and a cook. Whereas today we might experience difficulties accepting the presence of such foreign creatures in the flat, the floor plans of turn of the century apartments reflect the essential presence of cook and maid. Reading Kafka's *Metamorphosis*, it is the cook who is retained in the household, her self secure character, she appears to be the only one unimpressed by the proceedings in Gregor Samsa's room, contrasted to the anxious maid, speaks of the cook's positional relevance. Being cooked for, having meals provided, is on one hand an economic advantage, as more time can be spent on other, productive, aspects of life, but it also contains an unavoidable element of regression to an infantile stage. One is seated, passively, in a mode of expectation, of being fed, the body rests, the posture is predefined. The element of pacified anticipation is foregrounded and in the case of i.e. the restaurant with a view heightened to an aesthetic element.

Etymology: Borrowed from French restaurant, present participle of the verb restaurer, corresponding to Latin restaurans, restaurantis, present participle of restauro (“I restore”), from the name of the 'restorative' soup served in the first establishments.⁹

Yet looking at the history of restaurants, it appears that they too, as markets, date back to the origins of civilisation. Division of labour must have resulted in the first formal arrangements of food vending.

In Ancient Greece and Ancient Rome, thermopolia (singular thermopolium) were small restaurant-bars that offered food and drinks to customers. A typical thermopolium had little L-shaped counters in which large storage vessels were sunk, which would contain either hot or cold food. Their popularity was linked to the lack of kitchens in many dwellings and the ease with which people could purchase prepared foods. Furthermore, eating out was considered a very important aspect of socializing. (...) In Pompeii, 158 thermopolia with a service counter have been identified across the whole town area. They were concentrated along the main axis of the town and the public spaces where they were frequented by the locals.¹⁰

Eating in public is in western culture at least, coupled with representative and other social functions. To see and to be seen is one punchline. In smaller communities, the village restaurant was next to the church the main place of gathering, and whereas in the church, communication as such was highly formalised and unidirectional, the restaurant came to being as a de-facto local parliament, where concerns and issues could be raised, discussed, group dynamics enacted, gossip perpetuated. In that sense, the presence of the two men in power too resulted in a rather tumultuous imbalance of the local ecology around the diner as the news spread and hundreds of people gathered waiting for hours to get a glimpse on the celebrities.

Having entered the discussion of the visual dimension, another aspect of the photo comes to light: the choice of encounter tells a tale of focus and introversion. The relinquishment of having a view, opting for intimacy as opposed to a scenic environment, potential grandeur is exchanged for the basic human need of security. The functional womb, the solidity of the walls, the photo in itself is understood immediately as an intrusion, a discovery, eliciting maybe certain levels of guilt in the viewer. The angle of the camera is unstable and eccentric, in somewhat of a rush, the eye level of a standing photographer, who slightly tilts the vertical angle thus contributing to the boyish appearance of the two protagonists, caught in the middle of an intense exchange. In Freudian terms, this voyeuristic event would reflect back to the moment of the discovery of the primal scene, the moment when the infant, in his phantasy or in reality, catches a glimpse of the parents, mother and father, making love. In the restaurant date, a displacement upwards takes place: genital contact is sublimated to oral or mental contact. Genital joy to shared oral pleasure, to be found in companionship in the original sense of the word: the sharing of bread (and wine). I eat with the one I love, with the one I want to love or make love to, with the one I want to conquer. And yes, the number of people at the table, the chef's table, is exactly two. No advisers, no aides, no staff, heightening not only the dimension of personal and

⁹ <https://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/restaurant>

¹⁰ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Restaurant> : Ellis, Steven J. R. (2004): "The Distribution of Bars at Pompeii: Archaeological, Spatial and Viewshed Analyses", *Journal of Roman Archaeology*, Vol. 17, pp. 371–384 (374f.)

figural autonomy of the two leaders to iconic levels, but also allowing for the dimension of love to enter into the frame. Conspiracy, a conspiring encounter, does touch the act of making love in terms of being hidden from oversight, of doing something that escapes the control of others, and thus is up for speculation. What were they talking about? Will we ever know? The official statement keeps a close lid on the contents: In a tweet Wednesday, The Obama Foundation stated that the two leaders were discussing “their shared commitment to developing the next generation of leaders.” The next generation?! Oops! So there was some sort of germination or fertilisation going on! Inquiries of the reporters towards the chef if he had overheard something spicy were met with the professional discretion of the same and except exposing a somewhat raw paparazzi style curiosity for intimate details in which the reporters become the peeping organs of the observing class, did not yield any evidence of juice.

But let’s continue the exploration of the image, its composition and iconography, and not dwell too much on psychoanalytic hypotheses. Once we continue the journey, passing the overhead arrow, towards the upper regions of the photo, the narrative again splits into a duality. Above each politician’s figure we find a picture in the picture. The wall in the upper regions is decorated with two images which appear to be photographs or at least reach a level of figural photo-reality to be considered as photos or prints.

The two pictures feature one and the same motive. Peterbilt trucks have since the advent of poster prints continued to be one of the central motives of US folklore. Here the industrial product is stylised to an object of identification: power, freedom, a certain level of recklessness or defiance. Thus it is not unusual to find such phantasy inducing imagery in North American gastronomic units. Peterbilt trucks have over 500 appearances in Hollywood movies or TV series, with the Model 379 alone being featured in 263 distinct reels, and the Model 359 coming second with 229. (http://www.imcdb.org/vehicles__make-Peterbilt.html 17:26 Sept 10 2017). Yet the configuration of the two motives again throws up a series of questions. There seems to be what appears an imbalance or polarity. The smaller picture on the left features an upright and functional truck, protruding towards the viewer. The extreme wide angle perspective is highlighting the tip of the truck, a dynamic of arrival, of in- or extrusion is created. The right picture in contrast depicts a vehicle of the same class yet in a countering position. The right picture being slightly larger in dimensions, features a truck lying on its side. An apparently unplanned position, the vehicle appears wounded, passive, yet without the element of disgrace: It is gracefully inert, awaiting its fate, exposing its otherwise unclad underbelly to the camera. The two pictures evoke a dichotomy of the protruding small and the passive large: a somewhat coded yet dramatic encounter of Oedipus with Iocaste.

At this point the investigation arrives at a point, where it is best broken off, the immersion halted and reversed to allow for the posing of larger questions. The presence of sensual material in the domain of the alimentary, the contamination of the eating place with potentially sexual symbols, which is evidenced in the present image, and which undoubtedly adds to its ungraspable beauty, leads us to ask to the nature of this collusion. Does the environment continue to perform functions, which its inhabitants are forced to sublimate? What we do know from the interviews, is that the corner table is the favourite place of PM Trudeau. He likes to dine exactly there. “Justin eats there regularly. Obama said, ‘What should we eat here?’ and Justin said, ‘Let them do what they do.’ And we did what we do usually and it went well.”, testifies Mr. McMillan.

The psychology of a restaurant visit follows a predefined script beginning with the allocation of place. A reservation is being made in advance, or the alternative improvised somewhat anxious search for a table, both arrive at the point of relative happiness to have finally come to an incontestable spatial security: A place in the world, which though being occupied, granted access, falls short of possession. In Adlerian terms, the struggle of life is much defined the quest for superiority, overcoming one's private anxieties, aiming for the achievement of an individual secure position. One does not want to possess, but rather one wants to occupy a territory. The restaurant offers a quick emulation of this quest, one is allowed to playfully take position and enjoy it for a while. Did we get a fine table? Does that one over there not offer a better view or a superior position? Who gets to sit where? How is one welcomed and treated? How well does the waiter play his part in providing respect and attentiveness? The visitor is much at his mercy, when it comes to the psychic success of the dine. Not many people decide to leave the table due to difficulties with the waiter, the dependencies are complex and subtle. Yet in the course of the encounter, the guest will inevitably develop a certain affect for the person serving him. Let them do what they do: the phrase adds to the legend of trust and resilience. Trudeau jumpstarts the relationship to the serving personal: he is not interested in details, in lengthy declarations or anxious questioning. Whatever comes out of the breast, he will be there to ingest it. On one hand, nothing can poison him, on the other hand he submits to the challenge of surprise. Thus the quirky little chamber with all its intimate details, the homey wallpaper, the candles on the table, the framed pictures, all come to life as an ensemble of feeding trust: here at grandma's kitchen, you boys just do your boys thing. And thus this is how we are surprised to get to know two persons, who we have gotten used to be public figures, who are carefully managing their appearances as persons beyond doubt, rock solid paternal leaders, now coupling up, being able to share, to submit. The tension that arises from the suggested submission to being treated and the comfort and joy that is drawn from the same fact, immediately throws back the viewer to his happier past: when he was a kid and was waiting for something delicious to come out of the kitchen.

They can eat, and surely they can pay. As all restaurant visit ends with the expression of a sort of gratitude, which somehow automatically develops out of the provider-receiver relationship, the visit to a restaurant allows for the enactment of gratitude. Thus there is a dimension in the picture, where the powerful sons allow themselves to be entangled, to feel gratitude towards the commoners, the public¹¹. The public parent and the leader sons: the given constellation has the ability to repair the disparity, to remedy the latent envy of the viewer, which as a side effect, has been feeding from the ambivalent processes of identification. And so we leave the image with the closing phantasy, that they, too eat, they are alive, vulnerable, mortal, thus they are ok. Having tried to unravel that connotation of humbleness, which gains momentum when further contrasted to luxurious banquets or to the beefy greedy fast food intakes of Obama's successor, we might be led to conclude, quoting McMillan, the chef owner, that "They're fit guys. They can eat!"

¹¹ 'The two politicians feasted on oysters, asparagus, halibut with morel mushrooms and lobster spaghetti, while surrounded by other diners who happened to have reservations.' - The Star