

Reality Bites: Consuming Food Television

Dewey Musante, *Georgia State University*

NBC's recently (and prematurely) cancelled *Hannibal* (2013-2015) not only intrigued viewers and critics alike with its in-depth character study of the deliciously devious characters created by Thomas Harris, its art cinema aesthetics, and gory excesses, it also performed the unsettling feat of making us question matters of "taste" in television. I use taste here in all its miasmas and connotations: between the high and low "art" of a body horror show about psychopaths, cannibals and "brainy" detectives, between class distinctions that center on the tongue—both pleasing it *and* consuming it, and, most importantly, in blurring the line between the repulsion and pleasure of "binging" on the shows affective and hypnotic aesthetics that, often exclusively explore Hannibal's preparations of different dishes—with or without the human ingredient. Although not a reality show about food, I would argue that *Hannibal* allows us to approach the interesting question of consumption and food on TV and the "politics" of such consumption in a fascinating, if skewed (or, perhaps, skewered) way by intertwining and complicating all these connotations of "taste" through television and food. *Hannibal* blurs the line between torture porn and food porn and seems like a relevant caveat to this interesting discussion about consumption, taste, food, and television.

Although class distinctions are not often clearly marked in show—besides a first season arc which focuses on a suburban hunter and his daughter who murder, butcher, and consume young girls like venison as opposed to the "upper class" effeteness of Hannibal Lector's haut goût ortolans—*Hannibal*, like many of the reality shows discussed on this roundtable, is preoccupied with the "manners" of representation (both at the table and socially). A running joke in both the show and Harris' books is the fact that Hannibal doesn't just eat *anyone*; it is only those who transgress his rules of social conduct (or get in his way). He kills and consumes with *distinction* (in a Bourdieuan sense). What is interesting to note about this dark comedy of manners, however, is that the show presents this structuring of Hannibal's palatal habitus (again, in a Bourdieuan sense *and* a bodily one) in a way that taints or maybe garnishes (or maybe both!) the style and form of the show—much as it does in a less subtle extent in shows like *Iron Chef* or *Hell's Kitchen*. The slow-motion shots of food preparation, close-ups of cleaved meat and drizzling sauce, flashing pans, and pristine, dew-laden ingredients often set the scene for many of *Hannibal*'s set-pieces and mirror the intensified montages of reality food shows, but with a fascinating twist: often we are unsure whether the delectable foods Hannibal is preparing are human or non-human.

On the one hand, this ambiguity works to complicate our affective interaction with the show—e.g. the tantalizing food clashing with the horrific implication that *we* may be desiring human flesh as well—a trait more in line with the horror genre than that of reality TV food programs (I hope). On the other, however, I would argue that it also represents the problematic taste and class slippage that is embodied by Hannibal himself. In other words, Hannibal's cultured nature is often *pleasantly* mixed with the brutal pleasure he finds in killing and eating human beings. Hence, although we can see the show operating within the same aesthetic bounds as reality TV food shows, the affective ambivalence this form incites often undercuts any easy distinction between "high" and "low" taste distinctions. Of course, I wouldn't argue that *Hannibal* is performing any conscious criticism of these reality shows, but I would suggest that the ways it

draws on their tantalizing aesthetic (classing it up a little in the process) present a curious dialectic between the pleasures and horrors of consuming in all of its connotations; a paradoxical *non*-distinction that both *Hannibal* and reality TV food shows seem to tap into.