

Elaine Martin, U. of Alabama

ACLA CONFERENCE  
Puerto Vallarta, Mexico, April 1997

PAPER PROPOSAL

Changing Conceptions of Gender and Food  
from Old World (Europe) to New (Latin America)

Literary texts have represented the consumption of food for hundreds of years in varied ways and for varied purposes, ranging from commentary on human behavior to biting social satire. In Western literature these representations have often stood at odds with one another in method, intent and perspective: for every Epicure there has been a Gargantua. In the affluence of the postwar period, food has once again been taken up as a topic by writers and filmmakers as both social commentary and critique, but with new twists. In this paper I examine three stories/films to demonstrate the difference between "Old World" representations such as Marco Ferreri's *La grande bouffe* (France, 1973) and *Babette's Feast* (Denmark, 1987, dir. Gabriel Axel) and "New World" conceptions such as Laura Esquivel's *Como agua para chocolate* (Like Water for Chocolate, Mexico, 1989; film version, dir. Alfonso Arau, 1992).

In *La grande bouffe* the four actors, who appear under their own names, carry bourgeois consumption to its logical conclusion by gathering at the country estate of one of them to eat themselves to death. Ferreri uses Rabelaisian excesses to satirize "the materialism, vulgarity and suicidal madness of our society." One can interpret these suicides as the death of male virility, the death of the capitalist consumer social order, and/or the death of European colonial hegemony; strong "textual" arguments can be made for all three of these readings. *Babette's Feast*, although technically an "Old World" text by virtue of its European identity, functions as an intermediary between the other two works. Based on a short story by Isak Dinesen, the film opposes "northern" (here Danish) denial, repression, and austerity with "southern" (French) sensuality, pleasure, and voluptuousness--as represented through food. The food and its preparation as well as its consumption represent two very different world views: bourgeois repression and control, i.e. the stultification and over-socialization of the unchanging old world (Denmark) versus the sensuality, freedom and classlessness of the old-world-in-revolution (France).

In contrast to these social critiques of Europe and the old social order via food, *Como agua para chocolate* demonstrates an exuberant, earthy, and sensual use of food as it is linked to both rebellious human emotions (against unyielding Old World social rules) and political revolution (against colonial forces). Food is not merely the frame for specific events, but actually permeates those events, flavoring and influencing their development.

According to Sandra Cisneros, “[it is] the most delicious, the most original, the most sumptuous feast of a novel to ever emerge from the kitchens of the New World.”

These texts invite analysis at several different levels: 1) food preparation and consumption in the framing context of human desire and awareness of the body, 2) the political meaning of food including its potential as a weapon, 3) feminist interpretations and uses of the food motif, 4) new world/old world appropriations of different types of food for different purposes (e.g. celebration, iconoclasm, magic, death), 5) the evolution of food in the work of art from theme to structuring device, and 6) the transition from text to film and the accommodations and “rewritings” that ensue from this change to a new medium.