

THE SEVENTH ANNUAL FILM AND ANALYSIS PROGRAM

POWER AND AUTHORITY

“Where love rules there is no will to power: and where power predominates, there love is lacking. The one is the shadow of the other.”
- Carl G. Jung

“A Matter of Taste” / “Une affaire de goût” (2000)

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It is known that the taste--whatever it is--is improved exactly as we improve our judgment, by extending our knowledge, by a steady attention to our object, and by frequent exercise... The cause of a wrong taste is a defect of judgment.

- Edmund Burke (1729 - 1797); Irish orator and statesman

When Jean-Pierre Lorit was interviewed about his role as the taster, he said that what most surprised him was how different viewers could view the film in such different ways. Apparently, when *A Matter of Taste* was shown in Japan, two spectators were convinced that Nicolas ate Frédéric after killing him. Now it is understandable how they might have come to this conclusion, but it would have implied a different state of mind within Nicolas than the one that occurs to this author.

Indeed, the opening credits and following scene set up a visual and aural symphony that does seem to equate the tools of food preparation with murder. Even in the fraction of a second before we see anything, we hear the sound of a knife being sharpened by a steel; we see a large kitchen with close-ups of hands busily cutting foods, preparing foods. The metallic sounds of various kitchen tools rhythmically transforming the raw ingredients into dishes ready to be consumed seems to anticipate a harmonic feast of sensual delights. And yet, it is quite evident that the bloody clothes that Béatrice hides in the very next scene had anything to do with food preparation but only with murder. The film agenda is human butchery - butchery that is both psychological as well as physical.

Are we just preparing animal meat for sale or savoring, or, are we witnessing a human slaughter - whether it is violent... or cruel... or bloody? Or... is it all of the above? Hey... maybe those Japanese viewers were on to something.

What happens between Frédéric and Nicolas is just as much of a love story as it is a fight to the death for control of one's life. If we look at the Webster's International Dictionary to try and better understand the meanings of the word "taste", we get two very different definitions - one in opposition to the other. In the first, to taste is "to consume a sample of (food or drink prepared for another) in order to test whether poison is present". This is, of course, the explicit reason that Frédéric hires Nicolas, the same reason used by Kings in the past to employ tasters to protect them against assassination. For Frédéric Delamont is a corporate king for our times. He has power and privilege both of which are afforded by the massive amount of capital he has amassed or probably inherited. Yet, for all his power and potential to engage with others, Frédéric has a terror of engaging with the outside world that manifests as a severe negation of it. He is in terror of elevators, of germs, of garbage in wastebaskets, of ingesting fish or cheese. Contact with any of these makes him feel trapped and he organizes his life around avoiding them. We might think of Freud's prescription for living based on the pleasure principle: Frédéric takes inside of him what of the world he accepts and keeps outside of him whatever he refuses. For Frédéric, the world is a poisonous place and he refuses much. Indeed, his chief aversions - to fish and cheese - correspond

with his inability to engage intimately with either women or men, as we know from the symbolic meanings of the smells of these foods.

The second definition of the word “taste” is to become acquainted with something by experience so as to gain firsthand knowledge of it. Frédéric is someone who is afraid to experience life firsthand. He creates a fictional childhood history of himself for Nicolas, to explain his food aversions. Implying a link between these and how his father lived and died, Frédéric spins a yarn about his father, the owner of a cheese shop, who traveled by boat to do business, fell into the sea, drowned, and was presumably eaten by fish. The implication is clear - his food aversions are linked with an antipathy to his father. Then he coldly and arrogantly negates his story by asking Nicolas: “Truly, do I look like a shopkeeper’s son?” Frédéric tries to present himself as too perfect to even have a history. We know that human development is influenced by the inputs of both mother and father; yet his mother is conspicuously absent in Frédéric’s fantasized history. A piece of the truth emerges much later when he wakes up in the middle of the night in his family’s country home with an anxiety attack: he tells his doctor that he was 10 years old in his dream and suffocating; that it was in this house that he was afraid of the dark, imagining slimy creatures crawling out of the floor; that he is still afraid (suggesting that not his mother and indeed no one helped him conquer his imagination by distinguishing it from reality); that once he heard his mother sobbing and he must have been so disturbed that he slipped and fell off an imaginary bridge that protected him against the slimy animals; it was then that

he discovered that his father had just died. What seems to be implied in this screen memory is the confluence of his mother's abandoning him to his imaginary terrors and his father's abandonment at least through his death if not also by his lifetime neglect. What is surprising is that Frédéric admitted to Nicolas upon arriving that he rarely went there as a child because his mother had "problems with nerves" so that they never left Lyons! We can only guess from the lay terminology and from the content of Frédéric's anxiety dream that "problems with nerves" had something to do with his mother's psychotic and/or depressive pathology (Mary-Eleanor Yack, personal communication). We also know that his parents were not too involved with him because, when he goes skiing with Nicolas, he tells him that he was sent to this chalet as a child to ski with his governess. He must have been a very lonely child who could find no loving means of connecting with the world around him. Frédéric has turned into a desiccated adult, someone who is not truly living; he is incapable of selling his childhood country home because of "too many memories", meaning that he cannot mourn the past or move forward. He is in a psychic retreat, a narcissistic bubble outside of time and space, trying to preserve himself from the pain of living (Steiner, 1993).

This he does by hiring Nicolas as his taster. Frédéric confesses near the end that if Nicolas had not come into his life, he would have killed himself. Thus, Nicolas stands between Frédéric and biological death. To stave off this death, Frédéric makes a desperate unconscious pact with Nicolas: he wants Nicolas not only to taste the pleasure and pain of life for him because he is too

cut off from true life to experience it directly but also - and this is where the tale gets dark and deadly - he wants Nicolas to actually give up his own identity to become a better version of Frédéric and negotiate experience for him.

What Frédéric becomes enamored of is Nicolas' *inner certainty* of what he is tasting and his confidence in being able to translate his experiences from the private world of his senses to a shared symbolic world which he can describe to Frédéric. This way, Frédéric tries to taste true experience although he is incapable of functioning in a truly symbolic world by way of having an integrated sense of himself because, to do that, he would need to experience the world through his own senses, which he either did not get or he refused to take from his mother.

The reference here is to Lacan's (1966) developmental theory of the Imaginary Register of tasting the world through the senses versus the Symbolic Register of fully communicating with others through language and an appreciation of a wider cultural frame of reference. This phase pulls the child away from the early relationship with the mother, as language and social codes (or the Law of the Father) take over as the major source of meaning for the child. In other words, the Symbolic Register represented by the father provides the child with a social identity.

The parental neglect hinted at in Frédéric's early childhood would also explain his symptoms and his terror of being trapped in relation to them. Such ongoing neglect must have felt like an eternity of deadness and helplessness for a young child not yet familiar with the passage of time. One gets the sense

that he did get trapped experientially when he was very young - at a point where he had just begun to recognize himself as a separate entity. Lacan called this first moment of self-recognition the mirror stage, and it refers to the moment, some time between six and eighteen months, when the baby sees its reflection in a mirror and suddenly recognizes that he is seeing himself. Yet he envies the image which seems more perfect and integrated than he feels within himself. This may *seem* paradoxical, but becomes much clearer when we consider that the baby's reflection is perceived as an *ideal object*, whereas his inner experience is as a nascent *subject* who acutely senses his own insecurities and incompetencies; in other words, he sees his reflection as perfect, whereas he knows he is not. The paradoxical contrast between one's objectified idealized image and one's subjective self is brilliantly illustrated in Oscar Wilde's novella, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Wilde depicts Dorian as changing places with his own portrait, such that he remains ageless and beautiful while it is the portrait that reflects his debauchery and cruelty by aging over the years. Dorian's Faustian pact with his objectified double is one that helps him deny the transience of time, the losses of life and the sadness of aging and death (Bell, 2006).

The pact that Nicolas enters into with Frédéric is also one that involves an objectified double. In addition, it illustrates very clearly how an insecure individual with an unclear sense of himself enters into a master-slave relationship in which the slave, Nicolas, must perform those tasks in reality which the master, Frédéric, is either unwilling or unable to do. Nicolas chooses

to become Frédéric's double, his mirror image, in exchange for the opportunity to glean from Frédéric's privileged lifestyle some life experiences he would never have had otherwise. And Frédéric delights in Nicolas' becoming an ideal image of himself: there is even a scene enacted of Frédéric's mirror stage as he looks into the mirror in a washroom and recognizes Nicolas' similarity to him in terms of dress, height, weight and even shoe size. Frédéric wants Nicolas to have the same taste and smell as he so after a while Frédéric would *know* what Nicolas tasted and he wouldn't even have to ask him to describe it. He is describing *a wish for total fusion*.

On the one hand, the master seeks prestige and self empowerment through his power to control the slave, to get the slave to realize his needs for him; in this way, the master feels he is free of needs and dependencies. Yet he desires most of all for the slave to recognize his (the master's) freedom. The slave, on the other hand, has been stripped of his individuality by his master's need for him to give up his own needs and desires and replace them with those of his master; in other words, the slave has been objectified and negated by the master's desire. The interpersonal dilemma of Hegel's master-slave dialectic is that each of the two people in such a dyad needs to *both* assert an independent self *and* recognize the other as an individual. Yet, this produces a tension between two extremes: at a moment when one is asserting one's independence, one cannot recognize the other's individuality, and at an alternate moment when one is recognizing the other's independence, one is negating one's own individuality. If the tension between these two extremes is

maintained, each of the two individuals in the dyad can move freely between the two extremes. But if there is no possibility for mutuality in the expression of one's subjectivity, then the relationship breaks down into one of domination (Kaloianov, 1993; Kamal, 2004; Steinhart, 1998; Stroud, 2003).

The more Frédéric demands of Nicolas, the more he expects Nicolas to become his ideal self - someone who is free to do everything that inhibits Frédéric. And he seduces or tricks Nicolas into giving up *everything* that defines him as an individual - such as smoking, his love of cheese and fish, his hatred of tripe, even his wish to indulge in a sexual relationship with a woman (which Frédéric deflates with his angry prohibition - "Your role is to taste, not consume"). It also seems to me that at the moment when Nicolas is able to taste *tripes à la grand'mère* and enjoy a previously detested dish, he actually becomes a slave. Meanwhile, Frédéric wants Nicolas to attain the high standard of perfection that he himself was never able to reach. All these things Frédéric refuses to taste for himself because, I think, he unconsciously associates tasting life with his mother with whom he had too much of an ambivalent relationship to ever allow himself to identify with her femininity.

And the more Nicolas does become Frédéric's ideal self, the more Frédéric realizes Nicolas is paradoxically a unique individual who is separate from him. This causes Frédéric to envy Nicolas and he tells him as much. Now the problem with envy is that it destroys something that is good or useful. Thus, even though Nicolas has been useful to Frédéric as a mirror of what he would like to be, Frédéric begins to feel persecuted by Nicolas' ability to taste

and to live, because of the discrepancy between them. This divergence is most apparent when Nicolas goes skydiving despite his terror of doing it. When he jumps, he says “Watch me”, as a young child says to his mother when experiencing something for the first time. This can be seen as an ironic counterpoint to his double’s experience which probably had hardly any support from his own mother. Nicolas said he liked being sucked into the unknown, as terrifying as it was. Well, we understand the unknown as the Dark Continent which is woman, something Frédéric avoids and fears as it represents his missing inner femininity. He was only able to tolerate marriage for a short two years because, he says, they did not have equal views (except for wine); in other words, he had not wanted a partner, only a double.

The other problem with having a double in one’s life who is one’s ideal self is that Frédéric has come to believe that he is just an insecure shadow without Nicolas, that he cannot cope without him, that indeed he has grown dependent on him. And as he cannot tolerate this dependency, calling it addiction, he wants them to “cleansing their systems” by having Nicolas go to the desert “to taste solitude for him”.

There are two crises of disillusionment in their relationship - one for each of them. The first belongs to Nicolas, who discovers upon his return from the desert that he has been shunted aside for another taster in his absence. Nicolas realizes that he has been able to fully recognize Frédéric by tasting solitude for him, yet Frédéric has refused to recognize him by tasting his absence, which is tantamount to killing him off.

Frédéric has his own crisis of disillusionment when he breaks his leg skiing and subsequently realizes that Nicolas is neither his double nor his slave. How can Nicolas be the same as he when he doesn't have a broken leg? How can Frédéric be a whole person when all he is is a broken leg? And when Nicolas, belatedly, breaks his own leg, Frédéric rejects the gesture toward fusion because he realizes that the lack of simultaneity means they *cannot* be clones.

Although it was always Nicolas who had tried to resist the fusion between them, it is he who falls into a depression of abandonment and requires hospitalization. When he reads that Delamont shares have crashed, he seems comforted by the thought that Frédéric has also suffered through their separation. Yet the implication of their mutual suffering is that *they are still fused and unable to function independently*.

When Frédéric summons him for the last time, he taunts Nicolas relentlessly and cruelly. *Each seems to realize that they can be neither together nor apart*. The last scene between them involves an extraordinary visual sequence. Frédéric is in the tub with eyes closed; the camera backs up, and we see the samurai knife in Nicolas' hand; he stares at Frédéric, who opens his eyes, looks up to Nicolas, then down at the knife, then up again with a smile of acceptance. I had the distinct impression that he wants Nicolas to taste death for him. And he does.

Frédéric's tragedy is that he cannot tolerate the lack of anything and its resultant desire. He hired Nicolas to try and fill in the gaps. At the point of

the skiing incident, Frederic saw himself as fused with his taster so that if his taster could go down the hill without problems, so could he (Smith, personal communication). When he fell and broke his leg he discovered that he indeed was not fused and this realization led to the quick downfall in their relationship, their breakup and his death as he finally understood he could never be twinned with someone else nor function independently. When he comes to realize that he is in an impossible situation, he no longer wants to live. Yet he wants to control his death in the same way he has controlled his life - by getting Nicolas to taste it for him. Nicolas' tragedy is that he learns to do his job too well. He unconsciously recognizes Frédéric's desire to die rather than experience unsatisfied desire, and he responds by killing him in an act of symbolic servitude. Nicolas consciously thinks he is freeing himself from that death which is his emotional slavery or his imaginary rivalry with Frédéric. But in the moment of killing him, Nicolas becomes a true slave to his true master - which is Death.

The philosopher, Leo Strauss, is reputed for saying that if all values are relative, then cannibalism is just a matter of taste. However, Leo Strauss argued against relativism, suggesting that some values *are* better than others. So we may not agree with those Japanese viewers. Or... could we say that, in killing Frédéric, Nicolas is simply responding with his already cannibalized soul. In this case, it might make sense if he tasted Frédéric in return.

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