

# REALITY BITES INTO THE MOVIES

CATHY LOMAX

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## Fast Food is put in the frame as a cultural marker.

Cinematic history is piled high with food. From gastronomic film pornographies devoted to highbrow eating, to paeans to the 1950s stuffed full of chrome and cheeseburgers. It is the lowbrow, day-to-day end of this spectrum, the throwaway appearance on the screen of the everyday and especially fast foods that I find really interesting. While the movies spin their dreamy escapism to their junk munching audience the low-key appearance of sinkers, Pop-Tarts and Quarter Pounders subtly define their times and quietly place a character without shouting out that THIS FILM IS ABOUT FOOD.

Because of its lowly status and the suggestion that it is very bad for you there is something thrilling about the appearance of junk/fast food on the screen. America is the ruling power of cinema and fast food; money spinning exports that are linked and intertwined throughout their young histories. Lana Turner one

of the shining stars of Hollywood's golden era was even discovered sipping a milk shake at the counter of Schwab's drug store (or was it a coke at the Top Hat café as an alternate history states). The temple of American fast food is of course the diner. In Britain we saw what they looked like and knew what was on the menu long before we visited our own home-spun versions because we had seen Grease, American Graffiti and Happy Days. The Frosty Palace Malt Shop where Grease's Danny and Sandy have a difficult date sounds as exciting and exotic to me as the recently defunct Michelin starred temple to gastronomy El Bulli. Double Polar Burger, cherry soda with chocolate ice cream, Dog Sled Delight and even Eskimo Pie feature in Frosty's eclectic Arctic themed menu – wow. Director Quentin Tarantino takes 50s pastiche one step further as he critiques the contemporary fashion for reviving Americana in Pulp Fiction (1994). From the infamous discussion about what French McDonalds call a Quarter Pounder (the Royale of course) to the ultimate pop culture themed diner - Jack Rabbit Slims - where Vincent (John Travolta) orders a 'bloody as hell', Douglas Sirk steak and Mia (Uma Thurman) has the Durwood Kirby burger and a five dollar shake. Tarantino delights in the nuances of America's 'great' cultural heritage whilst at the same time lampooning its shallowness.

During the great depression of the 1930s and 40s food became an ultimate object of desire. Sullivan's Travels (1941) features Veronica Lake's hungry 'tramp' staring longingly at a pile of sinkers (doughnuts) at a simple lunch stand before cramming one into her mouth. Another Preston Sturges scripted film, Easy Living (1937), places food alongside fur and jewellery as dreamed of luxuries. After being given a fur coat our hungry heroine spends her last few coins on a coffee in a futuristic automat. Unable even to manage a dime to spring one of the glass fronted food-containing windows, one of the staff takes a shine to her and surreptitiously opens the 'beef pie' window. This leads to a comedy confrontation, a lever is fallen on and all the glass slots snap open; 'food, food, all free food' shouts an over excited diner – anarchy ensues. To an audience struggling though the end of the depression free food was a high pitched fantasy.

The 1990s small wave of Generation X / slacker films, featured food that was every bit as unfocussed as the young protagonists. Reality Bites (1994) directed by Ben Stiller, stars Winona Rider as a recent high school graduate living away from home for the first time. Her main source of income is her gas card – a parent funded credit card that can only be used at gas stations. Short of money she starts to buy all her gro-

ceries, Pringles, Coca-Cola, cling-film wrapped sandwiches, at the gas station and consequently lives on a diet of the kind of trashy food that satisfies an immediate hunger but soon makes you feel really sick. 'The empty calories of modern culture' as the Gastronomica website so succinctly puts it. As the young stars lie around this empty food perfectly mirrors the nothingness of their lives.

The very successful teen vampire film franchise, The Twilight Saga, is based on a series of books by Mormon mum Stephenie Mayer. The series is full of food and abstinence (big subjects for the mainly female audience) with her vampires not only refraining from eating normal food but also eschewing human blood in favour of the animal variety. Bella, the human heroine, emphasises their difference by spending a lot of her time cooking very down to earth dishes such as baked potatoes, grilled cheese sandwiches and chicken enchiladas all of which are described by Meyer in great detail. At one point (in one of my favourite ever cultural food references) Bella even puts a couple of Pop-Tarts in the toaster. In the first film of the series, Twilight (2008) directed by Catherine Hardwicke, the vampires, who have long forgotten how to, are seen cooking Italian along with a TV chef in order to produce a meal for Bella. A nice parallel with a generation of urban Americans who have forgotten how

to cook as take-out and eat-out food is so easily and cheaply available.

Everyday lowest common denominator food is really important for its absolute ordinariness, its zeitgeist-y, transient quality describes a time like nothing else and its appearance on the screen sets this transience, creating a permanent memory record. The photographer William Eggleston who often photographs food was once asked what it said to him. A man of few words he replied, 'I've never really thought about it', he paused and added 'food does exist, sort of like cars exist'.

**Cathy Lomax, 13.09.11**  
**She waited for the window to open,**  
**2011, oil on paper, 23x30.5cm**

**Cathy Lomax, 16.01.11** **She bought**  
**food at the gas station, 2011, oil on**  
**paper, 23x30.5cm**

**From Film Diary series** – a visual diary of all the films Cathy Lomax has watched wherein she selects one image from each to make into a small, rapidly executed painting, providing a record of what it was that drew her in and kept her rapt.

