



# Noëmi Lakmaier

*Intoxicated and loosened by the wine some dinner guests begin spinning on the spot, using the table as leverage.*

It is this presence of the viewers – the voyeurs – that changes an everyday social activity into a performative spectacle. Their presence acts as the catalyst that galvanises the event and creates a tension and a divide between ‘Them’ – the passive observer – and the ‘Other’ – the objects of their gaze.

*Some guests turn towards the window and wave at the crowd in the street. A few people outside wave back then continue with their conversation.*

Through this interplay between observer and observed, notions of ‘We’, ‘Us’ and ‘Them’ are put into question and keep the performance active. When an event, such as a dinner party, becomes the subject of the viewer’s curiosity, participants are collectively turned into living objects.

*A blueberry, catapulted by a spoon, flies across the room.*

Their actions are no longer wholly autonomous, but led and spurred on by the spectator’s gaze. While the voyeuristic gaze itself is a response to an action, the action in turn becomes a response to the gaze.

*The table is strewn with discarded, blueberry-spotted napkins. One napkin lies on the floor next to a dropped mussel shell. Empty wine glasses stand next to half-drunk cups of coffee, with uneaten chocolate truffles scattered between them. One glass lies on its side next to a large red wine spill on the crumpled table cloth. The candles are almost burned down; a few drops of wax have left small green marks on the table cloth. An orange gerbera has been pulled from its vase and is starting to wilt.*

The dinner guests have left the table. The crowd on the street has dispersed.

WE ARE FOR YOU BECAUSE WE ARE AGAINST THEM

*A dinner party for eight guests*

*Alongside a street-facing window of a large, bare room, heavy white cloth covers a long table prepared for eight dinner guests. Each space is laid with a set of wine and water glasses. White linen napkins, folded into the shapes of crowns are placed between silver cutlery. Small white vases filled with orange and yellow gerberas and long green candles in tall, slender candle holders decorate the table. Elegantly dressed waiters stand by waiting for the guests to arrive.*

The act of feasting together and therefore the dinner party is a uniquely human activity. As far as we can go in recorded history there is evidence of such gatherings of invited friends and strangers coming together to share food. Over the centuries the shared meal has developed into one of the most prevalent and important social events men and women participate in – its continued relevance affirmed by the popularity of television programmes such as, Channel 4's, reality show 'Come Dine With Me'.

*Eight identical grey balls surround the dinner table: the guests have arrived and are struggling to find their balance at the table, only their heads and arms are visible, protruding awkwardly from the objects.*

No other animal would plan an event, provide food and drink and share it with unrelated others without a fight, all while engaging in polite conversation. The deep rooted need to eat in company, alongside the use of complex language, may be among the most prominent social attributes that set humans apart from all other species.

*The guests rock back and forth like giant animated toys. Some cling anxiously to the edge of the table to stabilize themselves.*

Above all the formal dinner party is an exercise in asserting hierarchical structures and social etiquette. It is an opportunity for guests and host alike to show off their wealth, manners and social skills. A challenge of fitting in with the group for each participant, that can at times give rise to feelings of self-doubt and fears of being shown up as not-good-enough or identified as 'Other'.

*The guests chit-chat over their drinks. Fighting to gain control over their movements they bump into each other and laugh at each others' clumsiness, disguising their discomfort.*

Maybe this is why such dinners are generally private events, for invited dining guests only, closed to outside observers who have no part in the meal. Some participants may be more confident about their social standing and their table manners than others, or in fact of higher status, intellect or education, but within the dinner scenario everybody at the table is fundamentally in the same position – eating.

*A crowd has gathered in the street, watching the scene through the window. Some wave; others point and laugh.*

The desire to eat in company is so inherent to human nature, that the active desire not to eat in company tends to be associated with eating disorders and underlying mental health conditions. Food, which should nourish the body and give pleasure, turns into a destructive weapon in the fight with distorted body image and the fear of losing control. Eating, or not eating, becomes a secretive act, a tool in the struggle to regain control when all other sense of control seems unobtainable; it is no longer a social activity to be shared with others.

*Children press against the window to get a better view, banging on the glass.*

Yet even people with a healthy relationship towards food and their bodies tend to feel uncomfortable being watched during a meal by someone who is not eating. There is something intrusive in the act of passively watching others eat. Despite, or maybe because of, this passivity outside observers to a meal, who do not take part or contribute to it in any way, fundamentally change the dynamics of the meal.

*A delivery man stands distracted from his job, staring across the street.*

The act of watching is a purely voyeuristic one; looking for the sake of looking and deriving a sense of pleasure or amusement from it. When a dinner party becomes the object of the public gaze it puts the very essence of such an event into question, shifting its purpose and meaning, from an intimate and private occasion to a public spectacle for the gratification of uninvited others.







The Laboratory delivered many lectures on subjects of the sea, Day 1 at 11 am was a lecture on the feeding habits of whales, day 2 Marine time, or how the clock feels all wrong underthesea. Day 3 Life of a sailor who never gets off a boat. Day 4 How the sailor regains her balance and how the small fish transmit light. Then the lecture which interests you most, I suspect: dinner with shellmen and shellwomen.

Shellhouses built from unconscious materials. Dream coats we inhabit. Our grey unconscious, like a Londoner's suit, suggesting our dreams could be as colourless as our lives. The projections from our underworld as insipid

as smog. The Captain's blog. A surreal tale of how we eight crew members all found ourselves transformed into shells. Shellshocked. Shells of our former selves. And in the morning we were sailors again. Fat suits Heads peeping out we can barely move. We have become monstrous in

At a symbolic level meals signify transformation, one state to another, transubstantiation. As if we might be reborn when we hatch from our shells. We have eaten from forests of knowledge and now we are allowed this simple rebirth. She feeds us, but at what price? Toys, we have become,

What crime did we commit that we deserve such punishment? We are never told. Even in the Bible no-one ever got punished by a meal. Well, betrayal and food perhaps. But in Sade they do...and meals are laid out in fanciful detail. Pleasure and pain coterminous. The Last Supper, actually was the second last supper because there is in fact an ongoing meal up in Heaven with an infinite number of courses and at which the place settings are all marked. Where do all these other meals fit in? Parody? Pastiche? Precursor? Who will be the first to crack?

Numb I feel. Numb. I picked up pins and needles later that were scattered all over the floor. Hundreds and thousands of them. In my foot, my leg, and then gone, disappeared like an apparition.

Secret.. ions, all shelled creatures have them. Revenge rather old testament but we are made fools, imbeciles and inadequates, we are rendered old, infirm, not able-bodied; the waiters paternalise. We are all drowning,

Jesus was a sailor and he walked upon the water. We are all drowning, drowning or else cracking, crack crack the step of shells on the beach, Joycean, underfoot.

gluttony

obesity

## *The First Hour*

this time is different. This meal is not the passage from life to death, (although she tries to cook us til we crack) but death to life, shed the old skin like a snake. The boats didn't sink bringing in our dinner. Aphrodisiac meal, I am cooking. The first supper, amniotic paradise that we replay in

Try to breathe in your shell and you will smell the scent of yourself and the fibreglass cooking together. Lobster in a pot, screaming, hissing. Out of the neck hole, puffs of heat start to emerge.

## *The Second Hour: large purple wine stain*

I am looking for this promised transformation, this rebirth, but it is like waiting for a miracle; epiphanies happen best when you're not looking, when you're looking the other way. Feed us to check we're alive. So sad we turned into our Ball and chain.

She poured vinegar on my wounds. Then olive oil and wine. We are neither one nor the other tonight, living liminally between animal and human, day and night, cosiness and claustrophobia, life and death. Sometimes death can come when you least expect it. Perhaps it may have attended our meal; who knows how long the body can last without allowing its internal rivers to circulate freely.

We were always destined to be food, she said, looking at herself and remarking on how closely she resembled the food on the plate, the blueberries, the mussels, born in manglers all eight of us. Did the tide turn? I thought I saw it, out of the corner of my eye, the blind spot though, so perhaps it was nothing. The first supper, the amniotic paradise that we replay in

We are become stones, she said. Can you turn this stone into bread? Eight rocks we became guarding eight tombs, all rolled away and then cracked. Imprisoned in half-life. Why turn us into stones? Stones of the desert, grey large stones, rocks, like hearts unfed. This is dinner though I suspect revenge.

How do you like my mask? Does it become me or better I remove it? A sailor's dreams are frequently moist and sooner or later she dreams of shells. The utopia of the shell. Try to escape from your shell during dinner and you will find that velcro is a tough medium.

mythological, for one night only. Magic happens. Clad in grey fibreglass, cooking, at last we are animal. Drunk. A little seasick now, and later, in the night sweats thinking of death come to me with its promise of encasement. Promise of hard clothes to

Happy is the crustacean. Lacan's alientaing armour of a character identity. We hold hands, all of us. One or two look above for photo opportunities. I drop a napkin, ask the waiter to pick it up. We are innocent inside. Unbearable heat. We have become

A restaurant critic I will become in order to adequately critique this art. The mussels were very good but I found grains of sand in one. The fish was a little small but I was hungry. And the blueberry creme anglaise excellent, though to mirror one's dinner so visually and symbolically is a strange sensation. Roland Barthes says, the text is an onion.

And at the end we toast and toast because we have now learned how to manoeuvre within our constraints, and we clink red and white glasses on either side, two at once, and we hold hands all of us together, seance, and then we bang spoons on glasses, on our grey bodyshells, on our coffee cups, on different parts of our shells, infernal orchestra to end this meal, percussive, hands bashing out a beat too, joyful celebration of the end, and then one of us hatches and it is over. (When we crack into colour, out of black and white. Free the inner flowing life that she tried so hard to stop.) Let out your colourful dreams. Be free; run from your shell and don't look back.







