

# GospodinA:

## *Alimentary Animation and the Body as Projection Space*

Performing 1980s State Motherhood Through “Palatal” Cinema

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### Abstract

*GospodinA* is a performance protocol and practice-based research project in which alimentary gestures inherited from 1980s socialist Romania become the material of a documentary animation practice. Drawing on recorded transmissions between the presenter and his mother — a living archive of survival cooking under Ceaușescu — this paper proposes *palatal cinema*: a mode in which the mouth, hand, and digestive body function as projection spaces for state ideology and collective memory. The paper develops the concept of *alimentary animation* as a theoretical framework that reads food not as a static cultural object but as a time-based, transformative, and relational medium — engaging Suzanne Buchan’s pervasive animation, Paul Wells’s metamorphosis, Esther Leslie’s reading of Benjamin’s mimetic faculty, Thomas Lamarre’s animetic interval, Diana Taylor’s archive/repertoire distinction, and Richard Schechner’s restored behavior. It also responds to Alexander Schellow’s challenge to extend the theoretical framework beyond the Western-canonical tradition, engaging Amadou Hampâté Bâ on embodied knowledge transmission, Vandana Shiva on ecofeminism and survival practice, and María Lugones on decolonial epistemology. The presenter argues that alimentary gestures resist fixity in the same way animation resists indexicality: both operate through transformation, approximation, and the trace of absent originals. The paper analyzes the *Lick and Listen* performance protocol — in which participants receive a box containing a handmade powdered-milk chocolate embedded with gold wood screws, a square of commercial chocolate, and a QR code linking to an audio narration — as a concentrated instance of alimentary animation in which prohibition, desire, memory, and the trace of state-managed scarcity are simultaneously activated in the participant’s body. The five-course meal structure of *GospodinA* is analyzed as a durational composition, the caraway soup theorized as the alimentary gesture of leaving someone with safety.

**Keywords:** *alimentary animation, palatal cinema, GospodinA, expanded animation, survival cooking, socialist Romania, embodied knowledge, documentary animation, Ceaușescu, practice-based research, decolonial epistemology*

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## I. Introduction: A Note on Theoretical Risk

This paper begins with an acknowledgment. Alexander Schellow, co-coordinator of this PhD research and a theorist of drawing, gesture, and the moving image, offered a pointed critique of an earlier version of this argument: that the concept of *alimentary ekphrasis*, while interesting as an extension of the term's semantic field, loses analytical precision when pushed into the alimentary domain, because the core structure of ekphrasis — the representation of a representation, from one medium to another — does not map cleanly onto what food performance actually does.<sup>1</sup> He also noted that the theoretical framework remained “clearly sort of Western-canonical,” and that the connection to animation — which Schellow himself identified as the potentially more generative framework — remained “rather abstract.”

This paper takes those critiques seriously, not as corrections to be smoothly incorporated, but as productive pressures that have reshaped the argument's structure. The shift from ekphrasis to animation as the paper's central theoretical framework is a direct response to Schellow's suggestion that “a connection between *GospodinA* and an expanded concept of animation could lead much deeper” — that research on expanded animation “offers already a rich vocabulary for thinking about food as an animated, time-based, transformative medium.”<sup>2</sup> The ekphrasis framework is not abandoned but repositioned: it remains active in the paper's account of the five-course meal and in the theory of the taster as minimal unit, but the overarching framework is now alimentary animation rather than alimentary ekphrasis.

The engagement with non-Western and decolonial theoretical frameworks — Amadou Hampâté Bâ, Vandana Shiva, María Lugones — is equally a response to Schellow's critique that “other epistemological or decolonial perspectives on food and the body are not mentioned.” This omission was not, in the earlier version, intentional; it reflected the limits of a theoretical horizon that this paper attempts to widen. The Romanian context is not Western in any simple sense — it is an Eastern European, post-Ottoman, semi-peripheral culture that does not map onto the canonical geographies of either Western modernity or postcolonial theory — but it is equally not served by a framework that restricts itself to Mitchell, Heffernan, and Taylor. The decolonial references are engaged here not as obligatory gestures toward diversity but because they illuminate specific dimensions of the *GospodinA* practice that the Western-canonical framework cannot adequately address.

Finally, Schellow's observation that the text's “high density and degree of abstraction” risks obscuring “the truly lively sensible and materiality connected performative content of the project” has shaped this paper's writing strategy. The argument moves, wherever possible, from the specific and material toward the abstract, rather than the reverse. It begins with the object — the box, the screws, the chocolate, the pity lick — and lets the theory emerge from the encounter with that object.

## II. The Object: A Box, Two Chocolates, and Three Gold Screws

The *GospodinA* performance begins before any theory is invoked. It begins with a small white box placed in a participant's hands. The box is a confectionery box of the kind used for pralines or petit fours — transparent-lidded, clean, suggesting a gift. Inside, arranged with apparent care, are two items: a round, rough disc of dark handmade chocolate sitting in a fluted paper cup, with two or three gold wood screws pressed into its surface; and below it, resting directly on the box's mirrored base, a small rectangular square of commercial chocolate. A QR code is affixed to the side of the box, linking to an audio narration.

The screws are gold-toned wood screws — the kind a Romanian father of the 1980s would have kept in a toolbox, sorted into industrial metal trays. They are visually striking embedded in the dark chocolate: almost jewel-like, almost decorative, entirely out of place in a confectionery context, and yet, in this context, entirely at home. The handmade chocolate is rough-surfaced, dense, pale-brown rather than glossy — made from powdered milk, cocoa powder, sugar, and fat, a recipe of the kind that circulated informally between Romanian women during the shortage years. The commercial chocolate below is smooth, dark, precisely moulded: the available, the ordinary, the adequate-but-insufficient.

The participant is invited to scan the QR code and listen to the audio before doing anything else. The story they hear — narrated by the presenter — is as follows:<sup>3</sup>

*"When we were children... my mother once found powdered milk. Probably part of a ration for my younger brother. At that time, milk was very hard to find. I did not understand why, then. Children rarely do. This was Romania in the 1980s — years of extreme austerity, imposed by the Ceaușescu regime to repay a foreign debt. Food was rationed. Meat, oil, sugar, flour, milk — everything was controlled, distributed by the state, often simply absent. My mother wanted to make something special for us. Someone at the factory told her a recipe for homemade chocolate, and she decided to try it. We were extremely excited. When will it be ready? Soon. Soon. But it took longer and longer. Our father got involved. Searching for tools. Trying to fix something. Eventually... the chocolate had not worked. Dad said it was harder than rocks. He could not break it even with a hammer. We couldn't eat it. We were devastated. It had been poured into metal trays — industrial trays, used to hold screws and tools. It had hardened so much it could not be removed. We were allowed a pity lick... and then it was thrown into the garbage. Best chocolate I ever tasted. EVER."*

After listening, participants are invited to open the box and observe both chocolates carefully. They are explicitly instructed *not* to eat the chocolate with screws. They may taste the safe chocolate, or refrain. The performance closes with an invitation to reflect on absence, desire, and memory.

The object performs its argument before any explanation is offered. The screws embedded in the chocolate materialise in a single readymade the entire thesis of the work: the contamination of food by industrial and state material; the failure that becomes the thing itself; the prohibition that generates desire; the untasteable that nonetheless transmits memory. The two-tier structure of the box — handmade and impossible above, commercial and available below — is a literal

stratigraphy of the Romanian food economy under Ceaușescu: the thing that was attempted and failed, resting above the thing that was provided and resented.

The seriality of the object is equally significant. Twenty-seven identical boxes were distributed at the Vienna presentation of *GospodinA* at Ecstatic Truth X: Animating Hope (April 2026). The private family memory was transformed, through this multiplication, into a collective object: a shared sensory-political formation handed simultaneously to twenty-seven different bodies. This seriality replicates the structure of the survival kitchen itself, which was not a unique or exceptional practice but a distributed social formation: thousands of Romanian women, in thousands of kitchens, making the same improvisations simultaneously, without coordination, out of the same conditions of shortage.

### III. The Performance Protocol: GospodinA as Documentary Animation

*GospodinA* is the third iteration of the *ComPlex* series — a decade-long artistic research project investigating the residual life of socialist-era Romanian commercial and domestic spaces through performance, food, and embodied knowledge transmission. Where *AlimenTara* addressed the state alimentary store and *CofetARia* the confectionery shop, *GospodinA* turns to the domestic kitchen: the site of the most intimate, most politically charged, and most systematically underdocumented form of socialist-era food production.<sup>4</sup> The protocol involves the presenter cooking dishes from his mother’s repertoire of 1980s survival recipes while narrating, in real time, the recorded transmissions through which he acquired this knowledge.

The 1980s in Romania constituted an extreme instance of what scholars of socialist economies have called the “economy of shortage.” Ceaușescu’s austerity programme, introduced to service the country’s foreign debt, reduced per-capita caloric intake to levels incompatible with normal adult activity. Bread, oil, sugar, meat, and dairy were rationed; the black market became the primary site of nutritional supplementation; and the domestic kitchen became a laboratory of improvisation, substitution, and creative misuse.<sup>5</sup> The government’s Programme of Scientific Nutrition calculated, with bureaucratic precision, the minimum caloric requirements of the Romanian body and prescribed meals that bore no relation to the actual conditions of deprivation that constituted daily domestic life.

These conditions did not merely constrain cooking; they transformed its epistemological status. The ability to cook — to stretch a handful of ingredients across a week, to render the inedible palatable, to maintain the fiction of normal domestic life under conditions of structural violence — became a survival skill, a form of tacit knowledge transmitted urgently between women, and a site of both ideological compliance and quiet resistance. The domestic kitchen was simultaneously the primary site of the state’s biopolitical management of the female body and the primary site of its practical circumvention.

The presenter’s mother, Valeria, was thirty-two years old in 1982 when the National Program for Scientific Alimentation took effect. She fed a family of four through the decade that followed

using the intelligence embedded in the five recipes that form the core of *GospodinA*: caraway soup, cooked nettles, marrow bone broth, polenta with preserved vegetables, and rose petal jam. These are not archival documents; they are a living repertoire. In Diana Taylor's terms, they belong not to the archive — the domain of written recipes, official documentation, published cookbooks — but to the *repertoire*: the embodied knowledge that is transmitted through demonstration, narration, and the doing of things with hands and ingredients, and that exists only in its performance.<sup>6</sup>

Valeria is not an informant to this research. She is a co-researcher, and acknowledging this distinction is not merely a gesture of ethical correction but a methodological claim with real consequences. The repertoire that *GospodinA* seeks to transmit lives in her body, not in any archive that research can access. The presenter can only work with it by working *with* her — by cooking alongside her, by watching and then attempting, by being corrected, by doing again. Their working sessions have been recorded since 2021, and this documentation has its own epistemological complexity: the camera can capture the arc of her wrist, the speed of the gesture, the sequence of operations; what it cannot capture is what she is attending to in the moment that determines those operations — the visual, olfactory, and tactile information she is integrating in real time to know that *now* is the right moment.

#### IV. Expanded Animation and the Alimentary Gap

Suzanne Buchan's concept of pervasive animation establishes the theoretical ground from which this paper's central argument proceeds. For Buchan, animation is not a genre but a quality: the animatedness that distributes itself across material practices, bodies, and perceptual encounters wherever matter is rendered lively, transformative, and temporally complex.<sup>7</sup> This expansive definition has enabled animation studies to engage with digital culture, installation art, and performance beyond the cinema screen. What it has not yet engaged — the gap that *GospodinA* proposes to occupy, and that Schellow identified as the productive site for this research — is the alimentary: the domain of cooking, eating, digestion, and recipe transmission in which matter's capacity for transformation is most literally, most bodily, and most politically enacted.

Paul Wells's account of metamorphosis as animation's defining formal operation is directly applicable to the cooking process.<sup>8</sup> The dough that becomes bread, the raw egg that becomes custard, the cabbage leaf that becomes the skin of a *sarmale*: these are metamorphic transformations in Wells's strictest sense — continuous passages from one state to another without categorical break, which cannot be decomposed into discrete steps without distortion. The powdered milk that should have become chocolate and instead became a hardened, screw-embedded, untasteable object is a metamorphosis that failed at the level of material chemistry but succeeded at the level of cultural and political legibility: it became, through its failure, a more precise document of its conditions than any successful chocolate could have been.

Sergei Eisenstein's concept of plasmaticness — the capacity of animated form to dissolve fixed contours and regress to a state of pure potentiality — acquires particular force in the context of 1980s Romanian survival cooking.<sup>9</sup> Esther Leslie reads plasmaticness, through Walter Benjamin, as a utopian figure of bodily liberation — the cartoon body that can assume any form as a figure of resistance to the fixed forms imposed by industrial capitalism.<sup>10</sup> In the Romanian context, plasmaticness is simultaneously a figure of political constraint and of the bodily intelligence that finds a way through: the survival kitchen is precisely a site of plasmatic transformation, in which the fixed identities of ingredients are dissolved in the service of nutritional necessity, and in which the body that performs this dissolution demonstrates precisely the kind of flexible, non-categorical intelligence that animated form celebrates in its most utopian instances.

Walter Benjamin's account of the mimetic faculty provides the epistemological foundation for this alignment of the alimentary and the animated. For Benjamin, mimesis is not primarily visual imitation but a somatic attunement: the capacity to perceive and produce resemblances involves a bodily resonance, a "coming into correspondence" with the rhythms and forms of the world that operates below the threshold of conscious cognition.<sup>11</sup> Applied to culinary transmission, this suggests that the knowledge the presenter receives from his mother is not transmitted through instruction or documentation but through a process of bodily correspondence: his organism aligns itself with the rhythms, resistances, and durations of her practice, and in doing so acquires a form of knowledge that is neither verbal nor visual but somatic — animated, in the most literal sense, by the encounter between two living bodies engaged in shared material practice.

Thomas Lamarre's theory of the animetic interval contributes a further precision. For Lamarre, animation's specificity lies not in its subject matter but in its technical substrate: the multiplanar image field, with its constitutive intervals between planes, produces a distinctive temporality in which movement is generated through differential relation rather than continuous flow.<sup>12</sup> The animetic interval finds its alimentary equivalent in the gap between the transmitted recipe and the performed cooking, between the archived gesture and its re-enactment in the present body, between the original failed chocolate and the screw-embedded reconstruction that the participant now holds. This gap is not an absence but a generative spacing: the site where memory, approximation, and bodily intelligence combine to produce something that is neither a faithful reproduction nor an arbitrary departure but a *living variation* — animated, in the strictest sense, by the interval between what was and what is now possible.

## **V. Beyond the Western Canon: Embodied Knowledge in Decolonial Perspective**

Schellow's challenge to extend the theoretical framework beyond its Western-canonical horizon is not merely a methodological corrective but an epistemological one. The Romanian context of *GospodinA* does not map cleanly onto the geographies of Western modernity or postcolonial

theory, but it is equally not served by a framework that restricts itself to the canonical tradition. Romania occupies an ambiguous epistemic position: Eastern European, Orthodox, semi-peripheral, shaped by Ottoman, Habsburg, and Soviet pressures that do not reduce to any single category. The survival knowledge embedded in Valeria's kitchen is not Western rational-technical knowledge, and it cannot be fully theorized through frameworks developed to describe that tradition.

Amadou Hampâté Bâ's account of embodied knowledge transmission in West African oral and practical traditions provides a productive alternative framework. Bâ's central claim — that knowledge is not primarily stored in documents but in persons, transmitted through the living encounter between a knower and a learner, and that the death of an elder is “like a library burning” — describes precisely the epistemological structure of the *GospodinA* project.<sup>13</sup> The knowledge that lives in Valeria's hands — the precise angle of the scraping gesture, the olfactory reading of the broth's readiness, the calibration of heat by sound and smell — cannot be archived; it can only be transmitted through the living encounter that the research sessions attempt to sustain. Bâ's framework illuminates why the camera's presence in those sessions is simultaneously necessary and insufficient: necessary because it preserves the visual trace of the gesture; insufficient because it cannot capture the attentional structure — what she sees, smells, and feels — that determines the gesture's form.

Vandana Shiva's analysis of survival knowledge as a form of ecofeminist resistance is directly relevant to the political valence of Valeria's cooking practice. Shiva argues that women's subsistence knowledge — the knowledge of how to grow, prepare, preserve, and transmit food in conditions of systematic deprivation — constitutes a form of ecological intelligence that is simultaneously marginalized by dominant technical systems and essential to the survival of communities those systems have failed.<sup>14</sup> The survival kitchen of 1980s Romania is a precise instance of this structure: a domain of women's knowledge that was simultaneously depended upon by the state (which could not feed the population through its official channels and tacitly relied on domestic improvisation to fill the gap) and systematically devalued by the same state's ideological insistence on the scientific and industrial management of nutrition.

María Lugones's concept of the “colonial/modern gender system” — the interlocking structure of racial, sexual, and epistemic hierarchies through which colonial modernity organizes bodies and knowledge — provides a framework for understanding the gendering of the survival kitchen as a form of epistemic violence.<sup>15</sup> The *gospodin* — the housewife — was not merely assigned to the domestic sphere by the Ceaușescu regime; she was assigned to a domestic sphere that was systematically stripped of the material resources necessary to perform the tasks she was prescribed, and then held responsible for the failure to perform them adequately. This is not a specifically Romanian structure; it is a specific instance of the colonial/modern gender system's operation in a socialist context — the appropriation of women's reproductive and productive labor within a framework that simultaneously celebrates and devalues that labor.

What these three frameworks share — and what distinguishes them from the Western-canonical tradition that structured the earlier version of this argument — is an insistence on locating knowledge in the body, in the practice, in the living transmission rather than in the document or the institution. This insistence is also, the paper argues, the core claim of expanded animation theory: that animatedness is not a property of images on a screen but a quality of living, processual, materially engaged practice. The convergence of the decolonial and the animated is not coincidental; it reflects a shared commitment to forms of knowledge that resist fixity, that exist only in their performance, and that transform inevitably with each transmission.

## VI. Palatal Cinema: The Body as Projection Space

The concept of *palatal cinema* is the paper's central theoretical contribution. Cinema is conventionally understood as a technology of external projection: the beam of light that strikes a screen and produces, for the assembled audience, the illusion of movement and presence. Palatal cinema inverts this geometry: the projection space is interior, the screen is the body itself, and the “film” is the alimentary substance whose passage through the body activates sensory memory, political residue, and the trace of absent originals. The mouth, the hand, and the digestive body are not metaphors for a cinematic apparatus; they *are* the apparatus, in a mode of cinema that operates from the inside out.

The theoretical basis for this concept lies in Maurice Merleau-Ponty's account of embodied perception. For Merleau-Ponty, the body is not a container for experience but a medium through which the world is encountered: the motor schema, the habit-body, and the flesh of the world all describe configurations in which perceiver and perceived are entangled rather than opposed.<sup>16</sup> Applied to tasting, this framework suggests that the encounter with a flavor is not a passive registration but an active, durational event in which the tasting body is temporarily reconfigured by what it ingests. The body of the taster and the “body” of the food enter into a relation of mutual animation: each vivifies the other, each sets the other in motion, each carries the trace of the encounter after the encounter is over.

The cinema-theory pair *voir + entendre* — seeing and hearing as the constitutive modalities of cinematic experience — is replaced, in palatal cinema, by *goûter + entendre*: tasting and hearing, the combination of palatal sensation with the narrated, oral, and sonic transmission of alimentary knowledge. This pair names the specific sensory organisation of the *Lick and Listen* protocol: the participant holds the box, scans the QR code, listens to the audio story, opens the box, observes the chocolates, and is offered the option of tasting. The audio and the object arrive simultaneously, each inflecting and amplifying the other. The voice in the ear speaks of the chocolate in the hand; the chocolate in the hand gives material form to the voice in the ear. This is montage — not cinematic montage, operating between frames on a screen, but alimentary montage, operating between the sonic and the gustatory, between the archival and the material, between the narrator's past and the participant's present.

The “pity lick” is the performance’s most concentrated theoretical image. It names the gesture that was allowed: the tongue that reached toward what it could not fully have, the taste that was simultaneously real and insufficient, the flavor that was remembered more intensely precisely because it was immediately withdrawn. Carolyn Korsmeyer’s philosophical rehabilitation of taste as an aesthetic sense — her argument that gustatory experience involves complex cognitive and affective operations that parallel those of vision and hearing<sup>17</sup> — acquires its fullest political dimension in the context of the pity lick: a taste that is not merely a sensory event but a political event, a form of state-permitted experience within a regime that systematically managed and constrained bodily pleasure.

The prohibition structure of the *Lick and Listen* protocol re-enacts, in miniature, the structure of the original experience: the food that was there but could not be consumed, the desire that was generated and then frustrated, the pity lick that was simultaneously consolation and torment. What the participant is holding — the chocolate with screws, which they are told not to eat — is not merely an object but a compressed duration: it contains, in its material form, the entire temporal arc of the original event, from the excitement of anticipation through the extended waiting to the devastating verdict and the redeemed final lick. To hold it is to hold a time. To be prohibited from eating it is to re-enact, in the body’s desire and frustration, what a childhood in Ceaușescu’s Romania felt like from the inside.

## VII. State Motherhood and the Biopolitics of the Survival Kitchen

The concept of “state motherhood” names the specific configuration of the Ceaușescu regime’s biopolitical investment in the domestic kitchen. Under socialist Romania, the *gospodină* was not merely a social role but a political category: the housewife who managed the household food supply was simultaneously the primary target of the state’s demographic management and the primary agent of its practical circumvention.<sup>18</sup> Pro-natalist policies, compulsory gynaecological surveillance, and the criminalization of abortion produced a context in which the reproductive body was explicitly a site of state intervention; the domestic kitchen, adjacent to and continuous with this biopolitical apparatus, was similarly a site in which the state’s interest in the productive, reproductive, and nutritionally managed body was enacted at the most intimate scale.

Vandana Shiva’s framework of maldevelopment — the systematic destruction of subsistence knowledge by dominant development models — maps with precision onto the Ceaușescu food economy. The regime’s Programme of Scientific Nutrition was a form of maldevelopment: it replaced the accumulated, embodied knowledge of domestic food practice with a scientific prescription that had no relation to the actual material conditions of domestic life, simultaneously deskilling and overworking the women who were expected to implement it. The survival recipes that Valeria developed and transmitted — the caraway soup, the foraged nettles, the marrow bone broth — are not merely adaptations to shortage; they are instances of what Shiva calls “survival knowledge”: the practical intelligence that emerges when dominant systems fail and the body must find its own way through.

The gendering of this knowledge is not incidental but structural. The survival kitchen was overwhelmingly a female domain: it was women who managed the household food supply, women who developed the substitution strategies, women who transmitted the knowledge between households and across generations. Lugones's analysis of the colonial/modern gender system's epistemic violence — its destruction of pre-colonial forms of knowledge and agency — applies, with modification, to this socialist context: the Ceaușescu regime did not destroy a pre-socialist women's culture but rather appropriated its labor while devaluing its knowledge, simultaneously depending on domestic improvisation to fill the gaps in the official food supply and officially celebrating the scientifically managed nutrition that made that improvisation necessary.

Tim Ingold's concept of "making as growing" — the idea that skilled practice involves joining a material flow already underway rather than imposing form on passive matter<sup>19</sup> — describes the epistemological structure of the survival kitchen with particular precision. The survival cook does not freely design her dishes; she navigates a field of constraints, affordances, and material resistances that are partly natural (the properties of the ingredients available) and partly political (the regime of rationing and shortage that determines what is available). Her skill consists in the capacity to find, within these constraints, the line of least resistance: the form that the material, given its present condition, most readily assumes. This is cooking as a form of navigation through a state-determined material landscape, and it produces a knowledge that is at once practical, bodily, and politically saturated.

## VIII. Five Acts: The Dramaturgical Structure of *GospodinA*

The five courses of *GospodinA* are not five dishes. They are five acts in a meal that has an exposition, a development, a crisis, a resolution, and a coda. The dramaturgical framework draws on Richard Schechner's concept of restored behavior — behavior that is "twice-behaved," performed as citation rather than spontaneous act<sup>20</sup> — and on the concept of the taster as minimal unit of alimentary montage, derived from Eisenstein's account of the shot as the minimal unit of cinematic montage.<sup>21</sup> Each act carries a specific dramaturgical task; the whole's meaning depends on the sequence and proportion of these tasks.

### *Act One: Leaving Someone with Safety — Sup■ de Chimen (Caraway Soup)*

The caraway soup opens the meal with deliberate austerity. Historically precise: caraway seeds, water, salt, occasionally a potato. No fat, no stock, no protein. Calorically marginal, temporally compressed — this is the pre-shift meal, eaten standing or at speed, providing the minimum necessary to begin work. It is served in a plain ceramic bowl, at a temperature that begins hot and cools noticeably during eating, enacting the temporal pressure of the meal it references.

The caraway soup is the alimentary gesture of leaving someone with safety. Not the gesture of celebration, hospitality, or abundance — those come later, in the rose petal jam — but the

gesture of the minimum necessary care before departure: *you have enough to start, enough to go, enough to come back*. In the Romanian domestic economy of the 1980s, this soup was made before a long shift, before a journey, before a day whose demands exceeded the food available to meet them. To make it was to say: I have given you what I can. It is not enough but it is what I have. Go.

David Sutton’s account of “palatal memory” — the synesthetic quality of food memory, in which flavor activates multi-sensory recollection of a socially constituted past<sup>22</sup> — applies to the caraway soup with particular precision. Its flavor — the mild anise-warmth of the caraway in hot salted water — is not gastronomically remarkable; it is historically precise. To taste it in the context of *GospodinA* is not to experience the sensation of 1984 but to receive, in the body’s most intimate perceptual apparatus, the trace of a practice that was developed under those conditions and that carries them still.

#### ***Act Two: Foraged Complexity — Mâncare de Urzici (Nettle Dish)***

The cooked nettles arrive as the meal’s first gesture toward abundance, though it is an abundance the contemporary diner must learn to recognize. Nettles were foraged, not rationed; they fell entirely outside the state’s alimentary system, belonging to a parallel economy of knowledge and access. The woman who knew where to find them, when to pick them, and how to cook them without reducing their iron content was performing a form of expertise that the official nutrition programme did not acknowledge and could not regulate. This is Shiva’s survival knowledge in its most literal form: the knowledge of the land, the season, and the plant that exists outside the state’s capacity to control it.

#### ***Act Three: The Labor Argument — Ciorbă din Os de Măduvă (Marrow Bone Broth)***

The third course is the meal’s most technically demanding and philosophically charged. A single marrow bone, simmered for hours, yields a broth that is richer than the caraway soup but still — to any palate calibrated on contemporary food culture — extremely spare. This course is where the question of food and mortality is most directly addressed by practice rather than argument. The marrow bone broth is made from bone: from the biological residue of an animal’s death, slowly rendered into sustenance through hours of labor. Harold McGee’s account of the irreversible transformations of slow cooking — the denaturation of collagen into gelatin, the extraction of minerals and fats — describes a process that cannot be reversed, only used.<sup>23</sup> This irreversibility is the course’s argument: what was done cannot be undone; what was consumed in the service of survival left a trace in the body that no subsequent abundance can fully overwrite.

#### ***Act Four: Improvised Plenitude — Mămăligă cu Murături (Polenta with Preserved Vegetables)***

The fourth course opens the taster to maximum compositional freedom. Polenta — *mămăligă* — was simultaneously Romania’s most abundant staple and its most stigmatized food, associated

with poverty in a political culture straining to present itself as modern and industrial. The fermented vegetables alongside it represent the most creative zone of socialist-era domestic food practice: fermentation required knowledge, attention, and timing, transforming the summer's harvest into winter survival through a process simultaneously chemical and social, passed between women across generations. The sourness of the ferment against the bland softness of the polenta is one of the most complete flavor encounters in the Romanian culinary vocabulary, and it arrives in *GospodinA* as something approaching pleasure — not gastronomic luxury, but sufficiency fully inhabited.

***Act Five: The Reserved Sweet — Dulcea■ de Trandafiri (Rose Petal Jam)***

The meal closes with a spoonful of rose petal jam — a domestic preserve made in summer, kept for guests, never wasted on an ordinary meal. In the economy of socialist-era Romanian hospitality, *dulcea■* offered to a visitor was a significant social gesture: it meant the family had it to give, and giving it was a way of claiming dignity under conditions designed to strip it away. This act functions as a coda in the musical sense: not a resolution of the preceding tensions but a retrospective reframing that makes the whole sequence cohere. The sweetness arrives after austerity, after labor, after the productive ambivalence of the polenta; it arrives as something that was always there, preserved against the moment of need, which is now. The rose petal jam is already a speculative gesture in its historical origin: made in summer for an uncertain winter, it enacts the logic of preparation for futures that have not arrived but that will.

## **IX. Documentary Animation: Recipe as Score, Kitchen as Stage**

The proposition that alimentary gestures resist fixity in the same way animation resists indexicality requires careful elaboration. Animation's resistance to indexicality — its refusal of the claim to have captured the real that photographic media make — is not a weakness but a constitutive condition of its mode of address. Because animation cannot claim the evidentiary authority of the photograph, it is free to engage the real through transformation, approximation, and speculative reconstruction: to animate what cannot be directly documented, to give form to what has no form, to move between actual and possible in ways that photographic media cannot.

Annabelle Honess Roe's taxonomy of animated documentary modes — evocative, metaphorical, and re-enactment — provides a framework for situating *GospodinA* within the broader field of documentary animation practice.<sup>24</sup> *GospodinA* operates primarily in the re-enactment mode: it uses the body's performance of historical gestures to engage a past that cannot be directly documented. But it also operates in the evocative mode: the tastes, smells, and textures generated are not merely illustrations of the historical narrative but primary evidential materials — palatal documents of a past accessible only through the senses that experienced it.

The recipe, understood in this framework, is not a text but a *score*: a set of instructions that must be performed, each performance of which will differ from every other performance in ways

determined by the cook's body, the materials available, the conditions of the kitchen, and the interpretive choices made in the act of cooking. Like the animated film that acknowledges its constructedness, the recipe acknowledges its own incompleteness: it invites performance, variation, and the productive deviation of the living body from any fixed form. Rebecca Schneider's account of reenactment as "body-to-body transmission" describes this structure precisely: what is passed on is never identical to what was received, but is nonetheless recognizably continuous with it, making the past present not as identical repetition but as living re-inscription.

The kitchen, in this account, is a stage: not in the metaphorical sense of life-as-theater, but in the precise sense that Schechner gives to environmental performance — a space in which bodies, materials, and temporal sequences are arranged for the purpose of generating and transmitting meaning through practice rather than through representation. Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett's account of food as a performance medium identifies the kitchen and the table as the primary sites of alimentary performance, and argues that the exclusion of food from the institutional history of theater reflects not the inherent limitations of the medium but the institutional management of what counts as performance.<sup>25</sup> The *GospodinA* kitchen is a stage on which the survival cooking of 1980s Romania is re-animated — brought into temporary, partial, approximative presence — through the living body's encounter with historical material.

## **X. Speculative Food Montage: Past Crisis, Present Gap, Future Preparation**

If alimentary animation describes *GospodinA*'s relationship to the past — its reaching toward a historical practice it cannot fully recover — then *speculative food montage* describes its relationship to time as a whole: the way the meal holds past crisis, present structural gap, and possible future crisis in simultaneous tension within the tasting, thinking, feeling body.

The distinction between the documentary meal and the speculative meal is fundamental. The documentary meal is oriented toward the past: it reconstructs, as accurately as possible, what was eaten under specific historical conditions. Its primary claim is fidelity — to historical ingredients, preparation methods, temporal rhythms, and social contexts. The speculative meal uses the past's crisis knowledge not to document what was but to prepare the tasting, thinking, feeling body for what may come. *GospodinA* is both simultaneously. The historical accuracy of its recipes grounds it as documentary; the explicit orientation toward future food insecurity positions it as speculative. The two orientations produce together the temporal tripling — past crisis, present gap, possible future — that is the methodology's defining feature.

The gap between historical conditions and present reception is not an obstacle to this argument but its engine. A person who is actually hungry cannot speculate about hunger; they are inside it. The participant in *GospodinA*, free from actual need, is precisely positioned to receive the knowledge embedded in survival gestures — to learn, in a condition of safety, what their tasting, thinking, feeling body might do in conditions of unsafety. The caraway soup that opens

the meal is not a simulation of deprivation; it is a rehearsal of sufficiency — the discovery that warmth, liquid, and salt can be enough, that the body can begin its work from this minimal provision. This is speculative food montage in its most direct form: the past’s survival knowledge transmitted into the present body as preparation for a future that has not arrived but that several converging pressures suggest is approaching.

Schechner’s restored behavior, understood in this light, is not merely a concept for analyzing re-enactment but the foundation of a pedagogy of embodied preparedness. The alimentary gestures of *GospodinA* are restored not only as a form of historical memory but as a form of practical transmission across an uncertain temporal gap. The person who learns, through eating, that caraway and water and salt can be a meal — that this combination can be sufficient, can be made quickly, can sustain a body for a morning of work — has received something that no cookbook entry and no documentary film produces in quite the same way, because they have received it through the body that will use it.

The *12-Minute Sequence* — the chocolate box presented at Ecstatic Truth X — extends the speculative logic across three temporal registers in a single object. The first praline (the reconstructed powdered-milk chocolate with screws) addresses 1987: the crisis past. The second (a sympoietic chocolate produced at Coopérative Amandine, theorized through Donna Haraway’s account of making-together<sup>26</sup>) addresses 2026: the present of collaborative, ecologically conscious production. The third (a speculative synthetic chocolate under Liu Cixin’s “Final Owner” scenario of resource exhaustion) addresses 2075: the crisis future. The box is not a timeline but a *tasting sequence*: a twelve-minute durational event in which the eater moves through three temporal formations, each encoded in a distinct material and flavor profile. This is palatal cinema in its most concentrated form: a documentary animation practice in which the body is simultaneously projector, screen, and audience.

## **XI. The Transmission Problem: Accumulation, Sensory Literacy, and the Gap**

The knowledge that *GospodinA* attempts to extend into the present does not belong to the presenter. It belongs — in the sense that embodied knowledge belongs, which is partially, contingently, through practice rather than possession — to Valeria, who was thirty-two years old in 1982 and who fed a family of four through the decade that followed using the intelligence embedded in five recipes. The transmission of that knowledge is irreducibly partial. The knowledge that passes from her hands to the presenter’s during a session of documented cooking is not the same knowledge she has: he can replicate the gesture, but he cannot replicate the decades of repetition that have made the gesture automatic, efficient, and precise in ways he is still learning to see.

Bâ’s framework of knowledge-as-person illuminates the stakes of this partiality. If Valeria is, in Bâ’s terms, a library, then the research sessions are not data collection but a form of reading —

reading that must be done in her presence, with her body as the primary text, before the library closes. The urgency of this reading is not merely personal or sentimental; it is epistemological: what she knows about how to feed a family from almost nothing, about how to find food outside the state's distribution systems, about how to calibrate the body's expectations to the actual availability of sustenance, is knowledge whose utility the present moment may be approaching.

What Valeria has that the presenter does not yet have is *sensory literacy*: the capacity to read the state of a broth by its smell, to know by the resistance of the polenta against the spoon that it needs five more minutes, to register by the sound of the nettles in the water that the heat is too high. This literacy was not learned through instruction but through accumulation — through the repetition of the same operations over years, across seasons, in response to the particular pressures of a particular historical situation. The accumulation of sensory experience produced a knowledge that is not reducible to any of its individual instances, in precisely the same way that the meaning of a film is not reducible to any individual frame.

Taylor's point that the repertoire "requires presence — people participate in the production and reproduction of knowledge by 'being there,' being part of the transmission" describes the structure of this relationship precisely. Valeria's corrections during cooking sessions — "more water," "not yet," "that's too much, you'll lose the flavor" — carry information that the presenter cannot derive from watching alone, because they refer to sensory states that he is still training his body to register. The gap between his understanding and his inhabiting of the gesture is where the transmission problem lives, and it is a gap that no amount of documentation — video, written recipe, verbal description — can fully close. The camera produces its own ekphrastic document: a reaching toward the gesture that will always fall short of the knowledge inside it.

## **XII. Conclusion: The Meal You Cannot Reheat**

Palatal cinema is a critical practice in three senses. It is critical *as method*: it uses the body's encounter with taste, texture, and the transmission of alimentary gesture as a means of accessing historical and political formations that cannot be recovered through conventional documentary means. It is critical *as theory*: it extends expanded animation theory into the alimentary domain, proposing the body as projection space as a complement to the external screen of conventional cinema, and enriching animation's conceptual vocabulary with the non-spectatorial, haptic, gustatory, and kinesthetic dimensions that food performance makes available. And it is critical *as politics*: it makes visible the labor, the knowledge, and the political valence of a form of domestic practice that has been systematically rendered invisible by its gendering, its domesticity, and its proximity to the most mundane necessities of daily survival.

The *GospodinA* protocol does not claim to recover the 1980s Romanian survival kitchen; it claims only to re-animate it — to bring into temporary, partial, approximative presence a form of life and practice that is otherwise available only in the traces it has left in bodies, recipes, and fragmentary memories. This re-animation is animated in the full sense that Buchan, Wells, Leslie,

and Lamarre have given to that term: it is metamorphic, durational, mimetic, and intervallic. It transforms the material it engages; it inhabits duration rather than representing it; it works through bodily correspondence rather than cognitive abstraction; and it generates its meaning in the gap between what was transmitted and what is now performed.

The childhood story of the failed chocolate — with its progression from excitement to suspense to devastation to the redeemed pity lick — structures this re-animation as a durational experience with the affective arc of a short film. The participant who holds the box and listens to the story is not a viewer but a *taster-auditor*: a body positioned simultaneously in the present of the performance and in the past of the story, in the space between the two chocolates and the prohibition that separates them. The screw embedded in the chocolate is not a decorative gesture but the performance's most precise theoretical statement: the point at which the industrial and the alimentary, the state and the domestic, the edible and the inedible, meet and refuse to be separated.

Schellow asked whether the animation connection could be made more concrete. The answer this paper proposes is that animation is not what *GospodinA* references or illustrates; it is what *GospodinA* does. The survival kitchen is an animation apparatus. The palate is a projection surface. The recipe is a score for a performance that generates its meaning in the interval between what was transmitted and what is now possible. And the caraway soup that opens the meal — warm, minimal, sufficient — is the alimentary gesture of leaving someone with safety: the thing you make for someone before they go, when you have almost nothing, when you know the day ahead will be long, and when what you can offer is warmth and the knowledge that you tried.

The meal you cannot reheat is not lost. It is living, in the body that ate it, in the hands that will carry its gestures forward, in the knowledge that passes between people who share a table and attend to what they are receiving. Alimentary animation is the form that attending takes: the practice of reaching, through food, toward what other media cannot reach in quite the same way, and making the reaching count.

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## Notes

1. Alexander Schellow, email feedback to Rares Augustin Craiut, 2024. Unpublished. All quotations from this letter are used with permission.
2. Ibid. Schellow specifically named Suzanne Buchan, Paul Wells, Esther Leslie, and Thomas Lamarre as the relevant expanded animation theorists, and noted that none of them had yet addressed food directly, identifying this as the productive gap the research might occupy.
3. The audio narration, in English, is available at: <https://performingfood.com/2026/04/25/gospodina-2/>. A Romanian-language version, read by a child, is in preparation.
4. Rares Augustin Craiut, *GospodinA: Performance Protocol*, unpublished working document (Brussels: ERG / Universite de Liege, 2024). The word *gospodina* derives from the Romanian for housewife or mistress of the household, saturated with socialist-era connotations of domestic productivity and ideological compliance.
5. Gail Kligman and Katherine Verdery, *Peasants under Siege: The Collectivization of Romanian Agriculture, 1949-1962* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011); Katherine Verdery, *What Was Socialism, and What Comes Next?* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 19-38. On the National Program for Scientific Alimentation, see David Kideckel, *The Solitude of Collectivism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993), 49-73.
6. Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 16-21. Taylor argues that embodied knowledge constitutes a form of cultural transmission irreducible to the archival document, and that performance studies must account for both.
7. Suzanne Buchan, ed., *Pervasive Animation* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 3-12. Buchan traces the term through a range of media forms to argue that animation names a quality of encounter with matter and time, rather than a bounded genre. Her concept of animation's expanded field draws on Rosalind Krauss's structuralist account of sculpture.
8. Paul Wells, *Understanding Animation* (London: Routledge, 1998), 69-80. Wells defines metamorphosis as animation's most radical departure from live-action film: the capacity to transform one thing continuously into another without editorial cut, in which the identity of the material is preserved even as its properties are entirely reconfigured.
9. Tom Gunning, *Animation and Alienation: Eisenstein's Plasmaticness and the Cartoon*, *The Moving Image* 8, no. 2 (2008): 1-27. Gunning reads Eisenstein's concept through Bergson's vitalism, arguing that plasmaticness names a regression to the pre-individual that is simultaneously a figure of liberation and of terror.
10. Esther Leslie, *Hollywood Flatlands: Animation, Critical Theory and the Avant-Garde* (London: Verso, 2002), 58-64, 180-200. Leslie's reading of Benjamin's mimetic faculty as a somatic rather than merely visual capacity for correspondence is central to this paper's account of the alimentary transmission.
- 11.

Walter Benjamin, *On the Mimetic Faculty*, in *Selected Writings*, vol. 2, ed. Michael Jennings, Howard Eiland, and Gary Smith (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 720-722.

12.

Thomas Lamarre, *The Anime Machine: A Media Theory of Animation* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), xix-xxv, 77-84. The animetic interval is not the between-frames of Bergson's cinematographic critique but the within-image spacing that makes differential relation possible. Lamarre's ecological extension of animation theory in the final chapters of the book, which situates the animetic image within broader material and environmental flows, is directly relevant to this paper's alimentary application.

13.

Amadou Hampate Ba, *Amkoullel, l'enfant peul* (Paris: Actes Sud, 1991); and his collected essays on oral tradition in *Aspects de la civilisation africaine* (Paris: Presence Africaine, 1972). The library-burning formulation, often attributed to Ba in popularized form, derives from his UNESCO address of 1960: In Africa, when an old man dies, it is a library that burns.

14.

Vandana Shiva, *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology and Development* (London: Zed Books, 1988), 1-45. Shiva's account of the maldevelopment thesis, which argues that the dominant model of economic development systematically destroys the subsistence economies that sustain most of the world's population, provides a framework for understanding the Ceausescu food economy as a specific instance of a global pattern.

15.

Maria Lugones, *Heterosexualism and the Colonial/Modern Gender System*, *Hypatia* 22, no. 1 (2007): 186-219. Lugones argues that the colonial gender system not only assigns women to subordinate social positions but actively destroys the forms of knowledge and agency that existed prior to colonial imposition, creating what she calls the coloniality of gender.

16.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Donald Landes (London: Routledge, 2012), 144-160, 167-184. The motor schema names the pre-reflective bodily intelligence that structures habitual action; the habit-body is the sediment of repeated action that becomes available without conscious deliberation; the flesh of the world is the shared sensory medium in which perceiver and perceived are mutually constituted.

17.

Carolyn Korsmeyer, *Making Sense of Taste: Food and Philosophy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999), 87-141. Korsmeyer argues against the longstanding philosophical dismissal of taste as too proximate, too bodily, and too subjective for genuine aesthetic engagement, demonstrating that tasting involves temporal complexity, cultural mediation, and cognitive depth comparable to the acknowledged aesthetic senses.

18.

Gail Kligman, *The Politics of Duplicity: Controlling Reproduction in Ceausescu's Romania* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 1-30. Kligman's analysis of the Ceausescu pro-natalist programme, including Decree 770 of 1966 criminalizing abortion and the compulsory gynaecological surveillance of women of reproductive age, demonstrates the state's explicit investment in the female body as a site of demographic production.

19.

Tim Ingold, *Making: Anthropology, Archaeology, Art and Architecture* (London: Routledge, 2013), 21-33. Ingold's concept of wayfaring, in *The Perception of the Environment* (London: Routledge, 2000), 339-348, similarly frames skilled practice as navigation through a field of material affordances rather than the execution of a pre-designed plan.

20.

Richard Schechner, *Performance Theory* (New York: Routledge, 1988), 36-38; and *Between Theater and Anthropology* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1985), 36-37. Schechner's restored behavior has been extended by Rebecca Schneider's account of reenactment as body-to-body transmission in *Performing*

Remains: Art and War in Times of Theatrical Reenactment (London: Routledge, 2011), 2-10, 95-102.

21.

Sergei Eisenstein, *Film Form: Essays in Film Theory*, trans. Jay Leyda (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1949), 37-40. The taster is proposed as the alimentary equivalent of Eisenstein's shot: the minimal unit that carries enough sensory information to register as meaningful experience, positioned in temporal relation to what preceded and what will follow.

22.

David Sutton, *Remembrance of Repasts: An Anthropology of Food and Memory* (Oxford: Berg, 2001), 74-98. Sutton distinguishes palatal memory from Proustian involuntary memory by emphasizing its collective and social character: the flavor does not recover a private past but activates a shared sensory-political formation.

23.

Harold McGee, *On Food and Cooking: The Science and Lore of the Kitchen* (New York: Scribner, 2004), 79-85. McGee's account of slow-cooked bones describes a cascade of irreversible chemical transformations that parallel, at the material level, the historical irreversibility this paper addresses at the cultural level.

24.

Annabelle Honess Roe, *Animated Documentary* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 1-78. Honess Roe's re-enactment mode, which uses the body's performance of historical gestures to engage a past that cannot be directly documented, is the primary mode of *GospodinA*, though the performance also operates in the evocative mode: the tastes and textures generated are primary evidential materials rather than illustrations.

25.

Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, *Playing to the Senses: Food as a Performance Medium*, *Performance Research* 4, no. 1 (1999): 1-30; and *Making Sense of Food in Performance: The Table and the Stage*, in *The Senses in Performance*, ed. Sally Banes and Andre Lepecki (New York: Routledge, 2006), 71-80.

26.

Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 58-68. Haraway's sympoiesis names the co-constitutive entanglement of human and non-human agents in any act of material production, directly applicable to the cooperative chocolate workshop where the Amandine praline is produced.

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