In this article my aim is to show how two Science-Fiction literary works develop the human need to identify and incorporate the strange in culinary terms and how such processes can lead to the disruption of their culinary system.

The two selected stories for this article, ‘Beyond Lies the Wub’ by the American author Philip K. Dick, first published in 1952, and ‘The Heart of a Snark’, written by the Russian author Sergei Lukyanenko in 2009, concentrate on the interaction between humans and alien creatures, where the culinary is central.

The American story narrates about an earthling ship on the Red Planet carrying a very peculiar Martian creature that will be the center of a social and culinary problem. The story begins the moment the crew are loading the ship with a variety of Martian animals, under the supervision of Captain Franco. Right before taking off, Peterson, a member of the crew, shows up, holding a ‘Wub’ on a leash; it is an extraordinary animal, fat and slobby, very much like a swine. Franco decides it might be good to be eaten during the trip and allows it to board.

Except for Peterson, the crew handles the Wub like a wild untamed beast. Captain Franco shows an equal level of curiosity and of appetite for the animal. While the men discuss how and when to eat the Wub, the creature suddenly starts to speak: ‘Really, Captain’, the wub said. ‘I suggest we talk of other matters’. (Dick, 1952, p.4), leaving everybody astonished.

After this realization, the Wub interacts separately with Captain Franco first and then with Peterson. In both of these talks, the Martian beast displays his intellect, talking about his curiosity for other intelligent life forms, the ancient race he belongs to and even his basic food and life habits. The conversation with Peterson develops amicably and smoothly, crowned by the Wub’s interpretation of the Odysseus myth. Franco, on the other hand, does not respond favorably to the exchange with the Wub and insists on killing and dining on him. Consequently, the Wub uses telepathy to paralyze the man and avoid any harm to himself. This event triggers both the Captain and his crew members to see the Wub as a dangerous creature. Only Peterson, who has developed an emotional and intellectual bond with the Wub, tries to dissuade them, but it is all fruitless and the Wub finally gets shot by Franco.

The story reaches its end with a depiction of the subsequent dinner, of which the main course is the Wub. In the end, only Peterson remains at the dinner table to discover that the Wub has possessed Franco’s body and wants to continue discussing ancient mythology as in their previous talk.

The Russian tale presents a group of humans on the quest for a Snark, an alien aquatic beast, owner of a miraculous heart with powerful healing properties when eaten. The action takes place in Lazarus city, a settlement on an alien planet. The establishment’s main activity consists in the ship tours that provide the means for such hunt.

The ‘Bad Rap’ is the ship led by Captain Robert that has been selected by Alex and Alina, a young couple from Earth ready for the adventure. The expedition goes smoothly, since the clients know their way around the ship and seem to be informed on how such a hunt should be executed. Their coexistence is also friendly and amicable. Captain Robert feels attached to his clients and pities them for whatever disease they must be suffering from. During the expedition, the human characters exchange thoughts, reflections and impressions surrounding the main subject at the center of any eating activity: that of ending a life to extend or improve another one. Although human scientists have assured that Snarks are not particularly intelligent, Robert infers that this is not the case and that they are smart, empathetic creatures.

The first proper encounter they have with a Snark is right before a tempest. The three people see a Snark appear in awe, swaying under the stormy sky, completely captivated by it: ‘The snark’s song was bewitching, especially when heard for the first time’ (Lukyanenko, 2009, p.1664). This event is significant for the consolidation of the bonds between the Captain and his clients.

After the storm passes, the Snark surfaces, but in the range of another boat, led by Miguel, another Snark hunter and colleague of Robert. The rules of the waters establish a border and a range of action for each ship, and consequently Robert and his clients cannot proceed to hunt the animal. But it turns out to be a waste, since Miguel’s boat does not succeed, and the Snark disappears under the sea.

The Bad Rap sails away. Because of Alex’s impeccable instinct, they find out that the Snark is hiding underneath the boat while it moves. After a perilous and captivating hunt, the Snark is penetrated by the harpoon and killed. Just in this instant the Captain realizes that his clients are foodies that have gone through the expedition to try a delicacy but were not sick nor in need of a health aid.

Both science-fiction stories plant a very basic human conflict in distant futures and planets: that of food. I refer to eating as problematic since it constitutes a junction of fear and attraction towards the unknown that is fundamental for our survival. Food is a complex item, a material entity that implies a semantic interpretation and a determined cultural transformation of one’s environment in order to be (Appadurai, 1981).
Disruption as the Dawn of Future Culinary Systems in Science-Fiction Short Stories

The human eating activity always answers to the culinary system of a particular culture. A group of classifications and rules apply to the ingredients and the actors in all phases, starting with the provision and ending with the consumption of food. The central category, the core of a cuisine, is to distinguish what is edible from what is not, a binary and quite complex dichotomy since not all that is biologically ingestible shall also be admitted as food. Based on this categorization, culinary systems create more complex taxonomies related to taboos, preferences, and the functionality of food in society (Fischler, 1995, pp.27–35).

The eating process develops through three operations. The first one seeks to solve the tension between neophilia and neophobia based on the omnivorous nature of homo sapiens, which allows him to incorporate food items from a variety of ecosystems, but also forces him to variability and therefore, leaves him exposed to the danger of the unknown and potentially harmful. The second operation, happening after this tension has been resolved, has to do with the incorporation of the food item. Eating implies identification with that which is ingested: chemically, the material aspects of the food will enter the body and become part of the organism. On the other hand, the incorporation operates symbolically and socially. There is a necessity to identify the food item, to be able to classify it – basically, to understand it. Finally, the third operation has to do with distaste, with all the barriers performing a protective function of the system (Fischler, 1995, pp.61–76).

This three-phased process of eating aims to fulfill the main function of a culinary system, which consists of the total bio-anthropological incorporation of an external element, external either because it stems from the realm of nature or because it belongs to a different culture (Fischler, 1995, pp.77–87), and accompanying narratives present the strange as an absolute Other. Both stories under discussion elaborate and incarnate this notion of the unknown in zoomorphic, fantastic and powerful creatures, reflected in the stories by the physical and spiritual identification of the alien creatures.

In this section I concentrate on the identification process of the alien creatures in culinary terms. As explained in the introduction, the main distinction that humans undertake of reality, when looking at it through the lens of a culinary system, is to determine which items are edible and which ones are not. The second operation of the eating process is reflected in the stories by the physical and spiritual identification of the alien creatures.

The Wub and the Snark in the spotlight of a culinary dilemma

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The Wub is a fat and slow swine-like land creature that seems to eat about everything and enjoy the pleasures of the lazy life. He is nevertheless praised by the Martian natives, and his meat is considered very good, as the Wub describes himself: ‘The taste, I am told, is good. A little fatty, but tender’ (Dick, 1952, p.6). The Wub’s high intellect is presented early on and put at the center of the moral debate about the culinary. Because of this similarity with humans and his deep reflections, the Wub is feared by Franco and admired by Peterson. When Franco identifies the Wub with a pig, he classifies him as edible, based on nutritional and pleasure functions. But after conversing with the creature and being a witness of the power of his mind, Franco’s determination to ingest him goes even further. He wants to eat the Wub as a way of conquering his intellect, and eventually to erase and deny it. The Wub tries to convince him to discuss other matters with him, such as the art of philosophy, but ‘the Captain stood up. ‘Philosophy. It might interest you to know that we will be hard put to find something to eat for the next month. An unfortunate spoilage—’’ (Dick, 1952, p.6). Franco is clearly sanctioning the need to eat as the priority.

The story presents the negative aspect of this situation in the bond with Peterson. His admiration and empathy rule the Wub completely out as edible, and he seeks to convince the rest of the crew to handle the creature with care and respect. The Wub’s intellectual capacity activates Peterson’s moral compass: “It was talking to me about myths”, he said. “It wouldn’t hurt anyone.” (Dick, 1952, p.8).

The Snark, on the other hand, is a mighty aquatic beast, beautiful and strong, that hunts its prey with electrical power provided by the lightning of furious storms that threaten the seamen’s lives. The creature requires a hunt, which measures men and beast in their abilities to prevail.
The flavour of this heart is introduced as a plus to its magnificent nature, as Robert indicates: 'Eat it raw. Don’t be scared. To top it all off, it tastes good' (Lukyanenko, 2009, p.1790). Although the Snark, just like the Wub, is known to be smart, it is the function of his heart as a food item which triggers the dilemma. The characters have different plans about this quest. Alina is fascinated by the animal’s beauty, while Robert disapproves of her admiration: ‘That was no way to think, or talk. You mustn’t admire a creature you’re about to kill and eat’ (Lukyanenko, 2009, p.1750). For Robert the only possibility that indulges the kill is that of health. The human culinary system is disrupted here as Alina and Alex contemplate beauty and pleasure as categories, and Robert only sees health as the valid explanation for the consumption of the Snark’s heart.

The opposition and tension between humanity, Snark and Wub departs from the human-alien dichotomy on a physical and symbolic basis, where the ‘us’ corresponds to the human axis and the ‘other’ to the alien axis. The stories take this categorization forward and portray the interaction on culinary terms: ‘we’ eat (or may eat) the ‘other’. Once the culinary structure is selected to operate the identification, the pure actor of ‘we’ is disrupted. Not all humans consider the alien creatures edible, at least not as a pure categorization. This disruption transforms the dichotomy into a social triangle, based on the category of the edible. But such distinctions are neither stable nor pure. A good example that illustrates this is the reference that both stories make to the eyes of the creatures. This feature brings together everything that has been analyzed separately regarding the identification process. The look is a hybrid feature of the body and the soul and the bond of empathy for both species. When Franco is pointing the gun against the Wub’s head, the creature asks the Captain if he can look him in the eye and do it. Franco is so determined that ‘staring down at the wub, into the gleaming, moist eyes, he pressed the trigger’ (Dick, 1952, p.8). The Snark surfaces and meets Robert: ‘The dark eyes gazed at the captain (…) Robert raised the harpoon. The snark’s eyes narrowed’ (Lukyanenko, 2009, pp.1767–1770). The eyes of the creatures reinforce the proximity to their killers but that does not stop them. The primal and the barbarian that keeps on stirring as magma in the central dilemma of culinary systems, awakens fiercely in the human characters.

Identifying these creatures in culinary terms in both narrations is complex and brings more questions while we are drafting the outline of their bodies and minds. Both beasts are conflictive to categorize, and the reader witnesses the atomization of the taxonomies that structure the human cuisine.

Dining on alien creatures

The encounters with both creatures result in meals that embody the restructuring of the culinary system. The process of identification of the alien creatures and also of the humans generates traces of disruption in the categories and rules that make a transformation of these systems necessary.

The feast of the Wub

The trigger is pulled and that is the only action that indicates the slaughter. With a sharp and almost cinematographic cut, the Wub is turned into dinner. The stages of the preparation, done by the ship’s cook, such as the details of the dismembering and cooking of the creature are hidden from the reader.

The scene presented is a banquet, served on a table. The meat, properly cooked, is garnished with vegetables and gravy, served with wine, as a celebration of Franco’s conquest over the Martian beast. The civilized and fancy event surrounded by a refined context of pleasant food and proper composition is a contrast to the previous barbaric and violent behaviour of Franco towards the creature.

The scene opens with a single sentence: ‘The taste was excellent’ (Dick, 1952, p.9). In Franco’s system, as stated, the nutritional function prevails, also encompassed with the notion of conquest. Franco is able to literally have a taste of his victory, having all his senses filled and nourished with it. He is also the only guest of this feast. The other crew members, troubled by the violent events that end up with the killing of the Wub, finally walk out of the common meal, disgusted and confused. Only Peterson stays, staring at his meal but not touching it.

The aspect of flavour is of extreme symbolic importance bonded to the victory, but it also means a twist when the Wub in turn possesses Franco completely and is the key element of the integration process. The Wub had been told about the taste of his flesh, but never tried it himself. This fact allows the assumption of a taboo towards eating his own kind, especially considering that his diet is plant-based and that his species is pacific, ‘too heavy to run, too soft to fight, too good-natured to hunt for game’ (Dick, 1952, p.5). But now, possessing Franco’s body and transforming himself, he inhabits a grey area that allows him to trespass the forbidden. The pleasure of eating flesh from his kind specifies the turning point during the integration process of the alien creature into a human being.

The ingestion of the flesh by Franco achieves the impossible transmigration. The transformation happens gradually and is observable. Franco starts referring to the meat as ‘only organic matter’ (Dick, 1952, p.9), proceeds to eat it eagerly combined with gravy, and finally proclaims: ‘I, myself, love to eat. It is one of the greatest things that a living creature can enjoy. Eating, resting, meditation, discussing things’ (Dick, 1952, p.9), proving the return of the Wub. He has now eaten his killer and eater and possesses not only his body but also his mind and spirit. The physical incorporation of the Wub’s properties carried by the chemistry of Franco’s body is so absolute and final that Franco disappears, being disintegrated in what he has eaten. The unknown, the mysterious and frightening power of the Wub, that has taken over Franco’s body, will go a step further through this supernatural action. Franco’s system is shattered and is overcome by this intruder that he meant to eliminate in the first place.
The hunt of the Snark’s Heart

The dramatic hunt culminates when Robert shoots the beast with the harpoon and Alex proceeds to finish it off with ceramic blades. The decision to avoid suffering as much as possible will also be the turning point for the authority of the couple imposing their culinary ways. The hunt and the kill are portrayed and executed with the reverence of a rite. The deck of the ship acts as a ceremonial altar where health and pleasure rituals shall meet. The area is washed of the blood, and Robert performs the harvest of the heart, with the precision of surgeon and the solemnity of a shaman. Alex, in a passionate and honoured gesture, provides Robert with the knives, and once the heart is gathered, Robert gives it to the couple. He then reconsider his role and walks away from them.

The brief and wild feast begins. Alex, who has shown himself to be a culinary artist, will scarcely season and slice the heart, to optimize the taste. The action of preparing and flavouring hints at the complexity of the pleasure notion. Alex considers that grilling would have been an adequate cooking method, but he adapts to the tradition of the expedition. The custom indicates a rushed meal, immediately after the kill, and the couple will adhere to it in order to be properly involved. They devour the delicacy on the deck, surrounded by the shed blood of the sacrifice and the carcass of the marvellous beast. Their system constructs and creates pleasure in seeking perfection and ultimate enjoyment, and as a part of it, they integrate and adapt to the context of the consumption.

Alex insists and finally persuades Robert to partake of the meal. The realization that pleasure was the motivation for this hunt astonishes the captain: ‘Rigid, Robert looked at them, those two figures standing over the bloody, gutted carcass. Like two scavenging birds over a beached snark’ (Lukyanenko, 2009, p.1808). He finds the taste of the heart delicious, in absolute contrast to his opinion of the couple, who he now sees as barbarians. The category of pleasure is something that Robert cannot comprehend. His culinary structure is flooded and disrupted, undermining everything he held certain about the hunt and the kill of the Snark.

A culinary system allows modifications, some of them structural. An example is the way some food items ‘migrate’ from being medicinal to being nutritional (Fischler, 1995, pp.165–174). The clash of the systems shows a shift of a structural element from health function to pleasure function. Such a movement is introduced by Alex when he tells the Captain: ‘We heard that snark heart isn’t only a medicine, it’s a delicacy’ (Lukyanenko, 2009, pp.1805–1808).

This is finally explained to Robert by his own colleague, who clarifies that pleasure belongs to the eating experience as well. The destruction and conquest of living animals is the core moral question that rules our survival. Eating flesh is as human as enjoying it and as to question the actions involved. It consists of a fixed codification because of the physical proximity. Miguel declares at the end: ‘We’re people, not angels. We’re always chowing down on someone’ (Lukyanenko, 2009, p.1824), which accentuates the empathy between human and beast. The Snark is a breathing creature, made of bleeding flesh that can also feel pain, which makes him a ‘someone’ and not a ‘something’. Miguel is compressing the complexity of meat consumption in the human culinary system.

Conclusion

The stories analyzed in this article show disruption in the eating activity of humans that splits them into social sub-groups, according to the way they perceive these new, unknown alien creatures. The question around the categories, rules and dynamics of their culinary system works as a starting point for further analysis but does not find a clear answer, confirming how complex the human relationship to food is. The actions that end the lives of fantastic alien beasts confront humans with their own shortcomings, incoherence, contradictions and void and with the disruption of their social bonds. Light years away, sailing in space, man faces the destruction of what he holds dear by very simple actions like that of eating.

The two banquets of alien beasts, performed by men of the future that have travelled through the stars and planets, show the baggage of conflicts and problems towards the eating activity that have moulded and haunted the moral notions and categories of homo sapiens.

The taste of the creatures’ meat is a key element in both stories to present disruption of the culinary systems and also to show the complexity of eating as a cultural act. The tasteful one-man-banquet presented in the Philipp K. Dick story is the aesthetic means of the narrative to consent to the transmigration of the Wub and its new existence inhabiting a human body. Pleasure as the couple’s motivation for a dangerous quest depicted in the Russian story brings Robert to question himself about the purity of his own culinary categories.

In terms of ingestion as incorporation, the eating of the Snark shows the food item being integrated through the categories of a culinary system. Here, the disruption comes for Robert’s system that does not allow pleasure as functionality valid enough for the kill and consumption. The eating of the Wub, on the other hand, presents this first direction at the beginning. The Wub shall be forced, groomed to be a food item. But in this action, the Wub will overcome the eater in the terms of his own system, fragmentizing him forever. As stated before, the incorporation of the Wub implies the vanishing of the Captain and the beginning of a new existence.

Reference list


