Mocking Cream

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I have always been perplexed by the cream pie. It seems to be the one dish made expressly not to be eaten. I have never seen one on a menu nor ever found its recipe in a book. It isn’t surplus and neglected produce like the rotten tomato— that other notorious alimentary projectile — but made

deliberately to be thrown.

For all appearances, cream pies are no more than short crust and Chantilly at best, possibly shaving cream at worst. They are not especially appetising or, I suspect, flavoursome; unlike a lemon meringue pie, say, with its tart, gently yielding custard and sweet, satin-textured crust. Perhaps meringue might be too hazardous to throw. It seems the Bakewell tart will not do either, nor the tarte Tatin, nor even, suspecting that the preference is for an American dish, the pumpkin pie.

Flavour is evidently not a consideration; the cream pie, like the live blackbird-filled creations set before Tudor kings, is a purely visual pastry. Moreover, it is the pie’s visual properties in action that are crucial; its filling is light enough to splatter and tacky enough to hold the shell to the victim’s face for just a few moments. Like the acting style of silent cinema — the medium that first popularised the pie in the face — its performance has to be exaggerated.

As a comic gesture, the pie in the face entertains firstly because it has a victim. The space between his or her dignity and the unanticipated impact of the pie is filled with the viewer’s laughter. The greater the fall from pride, the bigger the joke; indeed, the more carefully groomed the victim, the funnier it is to see it all undone.

The violence of this formula, the underlying dependence of jokes to be ‘on’ someone, receives ample expression in the assault on the victim’s face and explosion of cream filling but the knowledge that ultimately no physical harm has been caused eases any guilt the viewer may feel for laughing. It takes a particular set of circumstances, and a particular sensibility, to find an assassination funny, for example.

So what is it about the cream pie in particular that has made it a staple, not just of slapstick comedy but of political or social dissent? Desserts, as many restaurant reviewers lament, are not often taken seriously. They are frivolous, inessential to the business of nourishment and hardly menacing. A cream pie does not — save for those with intolerance for lactose or gluten — pose any inherent threat, so its sudden launch into the face of a victim is doubly unexpected.

Additionally, and despite the cream pie often merely standing in for a genuine dessert, it remains notionally edible and someone — another victim — is thwarted when the pie explodes in the principal victim’s face. As one who struggles to perfect short crust pastry, I know I always feel a pang of dismay on behalf of the baker.

Then, remembering the origins of the pie in the face as necessarily a sight gag, there is the spectacle of the victim after the attack. With the face blanked out for a moment by the circular dish or pastry shell, individuality vanishes. The victim immediately transitions from three dimensionality into two, both physically and as a character. A mask, like those of Greek theatre, descends over the face and its emotional range narrows into a caricature of shock. The pastry falls away and here are the cavities of eyes and mouth open wide in astonishment. An archetypal figure of humiliation.

It is this anthropomorphic aspect of pie throwing that makes it so effective. For a moment, the victim becomes something other than him or herself, is reduced to something simpler and excluded from the company of whole beings. Put simply, he or she becomes an object of ridicule. Perhaps it is not so perplexing that the cream pie is a recipe made just for throwing but that there is such an appetite for seeing it served up.