Food Discourses in *Ninotchka* and *One, Two, Three*: Hollywood and the Colonization of the East  
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**Introduction**

Culture, as Richard Dyer (1998) points out, produces and endorses “forms of thought and feeling in society ... Who we think we are, how we feel about this, who we believe others to be, how we think society works, all of this is seen to be shaped, decisively, perhaps exclusively by culture and to have the most profound social, physical and individual consequences” (1998:8). Among other cultural products, films play an important role in transmitting sociocultural values to the audience who, as a consequence of the act of viewing, construct opinions, ideas, beliefs, etc., about social reality. As E. Ardévol points out, the power of cinema, video and television in the construction of one’s look onto human societies cannot be underestimated (1995:28). This relationship between power and the media had already been highlighted by Gramsci when he defined the concept of hegemony as the practical strategies used by the dominant power in order to spread a certain “‘world-view’ throughout the fabric of society” (Eagleton 1994:198). Through institutions such as schools, families, media, churches, etc., power exerts control in an invisible way, it becomes a habit, a “spontaneous practice” (1994:198). As Robert Lapsley and Michael Westlake observe, from 1968 on, film theory itself wedded politics and became concerned with how mainstream cinema contributed to “maintaining the existing social structure” and with how “cinema functioned ideologically, how meaning was produced, and how it involved the spectator” (1988:1-2).

With this idea in mind, this paper will deal with the image of Eastern European Countries proposed by some Hollywood films during World War II and after. The mainstream film industry of this period could be said to have...
worked as a part of what Gramsci called “hegemony”, to have been one of the means for transmitting certain values and creating consensus, in other words, to exert the power of the dominant (U.S. American) capitalist system in an effective way. The portrait of the East drawn by Hollywood, in fact, was far from neutral; most films of the war and post war period insisted on showing the Anglo-Saxon lifestyle as the most desirable one. The ideological operations underpinning mainstream cinema have been the main object of film studies for the last three decades and hardly anything new can be said about them. With this paper we hope to originally contribute with a topic which has only sporadically been taken into account when considering Hollywood discourses: food.

What this analysis will try to show is that the use Hollywood made of food, contributed to the creation of a stereotype, an oversimplified image of the inhabitants of Eastern countries and that it predisposed (western) audiences unfavourably towards Eastern culture and politics. To illustrate this idea, we have resorted among other things, to anthropology, in order to analyse the two classical films which most overtly used food to show the supremacy of western sociocultural values over those of Eastern European countries. The films in question are: Ninotchka by Ernst Lubitsch (1939) and One, Two, Three by Billy Wilder (1961).

NINOTCHKA

To begin with, attention must be drawn to the importance of Paris as the main setting for this film: as shall be seen, the French capital, an acknowledged symbol of *haute cuisine* and *joie de vivre*, was, for this very reason, the perfect springboard for the launching of western or rather U.S. capitalist ideas. From the twenties onwards, in fact, a new ethic started spreading in the United States: what Susman refers to as “the hedonistic consumer ethic: spend, enjoy, use up” (1984: 123). Twenty years later, The New York World Fair (1939-1940) became the epitome of consumerism; after the Depression and the war, and in spite of radical socialist movements, people, as Susman argues, “were shown the possibilities of life as a festival, as a magic show, and they accepted consumer capitalism [...] So it was that the Fair became a rather generalised advertisement for something the 1930s had begun to call the American Way of Life” (1984: 128).
As shall be seen, what the film is portraying and defending is exactly this American consumer ethic. The fact that the story takes place in Paris will not deceive the critical spectator: the protagonists are Hollywood actors and the message they convey is typically American. In other words, the film exploits the audience’s recognition of Paris as a site of pleasures (food, love and night life among them), and strategically develops a link between this popular image of the city and capitalism. As a result, in the context of the film, capitalism is positively associated with an enviable way of life, and at the same time Paris (and Western Europe at large) becomes synonymous with the U.S.

It is now time to turn to the film and see how this strategy works as the story unfolds. Three Soviet comrades, Irianoff, Buljanoff and Kopalski, are sent to Paris in order to sell the jewels confiscated from a member of the Russian aristocracy when the communists came to power. However, their mission is hampered by the intervention of Duchess Swana, a Russian exile in Paris, who claims the jewels as her own. With the help of her friend Leon, the duchess sabotages the economic transaction which would have gained the Russian government a big amount of money. Thus, from the beginning, the film offers an unfavourable picture of Russia as a country with financial difficulties, whose representatives, the three comrades, are easily duped and persuaded to prolong their stay in Paris. In fact, Leon initiates them to the pleasures of food, drink and love, and it won’t take too long before the comrades learn to appreciate what France has to offer in this respect. The first time they are shown having a meal, they are happily drinking champagne, laughing and chatting. What is implied is that once the repression of pleasure that characterised their lives in Russia is left behind, they are free to yield to their impulses and become able to enjoy themselves.¹

When the Russian government realise the three comrades’ failure to accomplish their mission, they decide to send a special envoy, Ninotchka, to Paris in order to set things right.

¹ French food is used by Woody Allen in Love and Death, 1975 (a parody of War and Peace), in the opposite way when the protagonist and his comrades in the army prepare to fight Napoleon. In order to motivate the soldiers for the war, an officer warns them that if they lose, they will be obliged to eat croissants, soufflé and other typical French dishes, to which the soldiers unanimously react with horrified protests.
Ninotchka, played by Greta Garbo, is a member of the Russian army and can be said to represent Eastern culture at large. She is portrayed as a tidy, disciplined, serious, stubborn, strict, and hard-working woman. She lacks feelings and is rather practical and efficient. Her encounter with Leon, played by Melvin Douglas, an educated, high class, pleasure-seeking, and imaginative man, is the core of the film and the metaphor for the cultural clash between East and West. The two different ways of conceiving the world will become evident through food.

After taking Ninotchka for a walk around Paris, Leon invites her to his place and offers her a drink; she refuses though, saying that she is not thirsty. Leon insists and also offers her food, but the woman, once again, turns down the invitation explaining that she has already had all the calories she needed for the day. The different sociocultural values that motivate the two protagonists’ food behaviour start to become explicit in this scene. Leon, by offering food and drink, wishes to show his hospitality, to “break the ice” and start a new relationship. In his view, food is the expression of sociability. In Ninotchka’s view, on the contrary, food satisfies basic nutritional needs, and it is considered only from a functional perspective.

The rest of the film shows, on one hand, Leon’s attempt to gain Nina’s friendship, and on the other, the woman’s effort to accomplish the task she has been assigned by her superiors. Little by little, the spectator will see how the clear-cut differences between the protagonists are smoothed out, until Nina, as her comrades before her, yields to the “French/American” way of life.

Following the recommendation of a taxi driver, Nina goes alone to a “workers’ restaurant” where she asks for “raw carrots and beets”. The owner complains about her order—“This is a restaurant,” he remarks, “Not a meadow”—meaning that the food she has ordered is too simple, and gives her the menu suggesting she have, instead, fish soup and an omelette. Ninotchka retorts that she does not care, she “never think[s] about food”. Her comments and food choice, once again, reflect her values: she only wishes to satisfy her appetite and favours the nutritional aspect of food over the hedonistic one. Her main interest, as she explains to the maitre, is “the future of the common

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2. The confrontation between these two world views is reflected, throughout the film, in other human activities. For Leon, for example, love and sexuality are expressions of pleasure, whereas for Nina, the goal of sexuality is human reproduction.
people,” which presupposes her privileging of collectivity, shared property, and self-denial for the welfare of the nation. What is implied is that for a Russian, elaborated food is synonymous with personal pleasure and goes against the principles of communism.

The maitre, on the other hand, insists that enjoying “good” food is also essential for the well-being of common people. This cannot be understood by Ninotchka because she is not able to see the social function of food. As Lévi Strauss argued (1962), food, in order to be consumed has to be “good to think”, apart from being “good to eat”. For Ninotchka, due to her upbringing, food simply does not fall within the category “socially useful”. This fact, in itself evident and devoid of moral implications from a sociocultural perspective, acquires a different significance within the U.S. American ethnocentricity informing the film.

Ninotchka’s rejection is, in fact, treated by the film in terms of “insensitiveness”. This becomes evident when Leon, who has overheard her conversation with the maitre, accuses the woman of being disrespectful: “the good old man believes in food just as you believe in Karl Marx”. Russians, in this light, appear as insensitive people, who can work as hard as machines but who lack feelings as well as taste for good food.

Leon tells Nina that in order to set things right with the maitre she will have to show she is eating with appetite and “relish”. This invitation to change her food behaviour, and accept what is offered by the maitre, is in fact an invitation to change her sociocultural values. The incorporation of food implies the assimilation of its nutritional as well as its symbolic qualities (Fischler 1992). This becomes clear as Leon’s insistence to eat is accompanied by his remarks on the need to live by the day, relaxing, smiling and so on.

Nina, still reluctant to eat, even refuses Leon’s company at her table and is unable to laugh at his jokes. Her stubbornness and coldness is overemphasised by the fact that the workers around her, who, according to her ideological background, should be suffering the alienating effects of capitalism, seem to actually enjoy their meal in the company of other people, and

3. This is different from Ninotchka, who, as mentioned above, rejects Leon’s company and insists on eating alone. This is yet another sign of her conceiving of the act of eating as a mere means of satisfying her appetite.
they even appreciate Leon’s wit. The film seems to argue that finding pleasure in food is not a sign of the decadence of capitalism, a privilege (and a flaw) of those belonging to the high class as Leon, but a sign of sociability. The fact that the workers and Leon share the same food and the same sense of humour also implies that the former are accepting the *status quo*, that is, social differences brought about by capitalism. The whole scene, apparently “only” a matter of food, can be read as a critique of the classless society proposed by communism while it subtly fosters the spectator’s engagement with the protagonist, representing Western ideology.

Eventually, Ninotchka too, is seduced by Leon’s ways and humour, and she bursts out laughing, joining the general mirth of the diners. This is a turning point for the relationship between the protagonists. From now on, Ninotchka starts liking Leon, and begins to accept him, together with the culture he represents. This opening of this Russian woman to western values is, again, made explicit through food. The two protagonists’ next encounter takes place in another restaurant, this time a luxurious place full of elegant people, all chattering and eating in a relaxed way. On this occasion, Ninotchka, far from feeling uneasy in a milieu which represents everything her government would condemn, appears to enjoy the Western “dolce vita.” As she herself explains to Leon after the dinner, she was brought up on goat’s milk and as soon as she joined the army she started drinking vodka, but, now, with Leon, she is drinking champagne and she likes it. With this drink Nina symbolically accepts Western culture, while she leaves behind her “Eastern” background.4

This change in Ninotchka’s attitude towards capitalist culture is not only reflected by her food behaviour: she has taken to western clothes and to the Parisian carefree atmosphere; she is not concerned about wasting money as she was on her arrival from Russia and she now generously provides her comrades with the Francs necessary for their outings in Paris. Last, but not least, thanks to Leon, she now believes in the existence of love and no longer views the relation-

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4. Vodka and champagne are the favourite drinks chosen in this and other similar films in order to represent the different ways of life of Eastern and Western countries. The former symbolizes the Eastern culture of schnapps: it is caloric and nutritive, it is consumed daily during and after the meal, in ordinary glasses etc. Champagne, on the other hand, is associated with celebration, happiness, relaxation, etc.
ship between a man and a woman in the utilitarian terms of procreation. The film shows us that the eastern lifestyle is only possible as long as the western way of life remains unknown. Once Eastern people have come in contact with western life, they easily forget about their home and their anti-capitalist ideals.

At the end of the film Ninotchka and her comrades have to go back to Moscow; the advantages of western culture are now emphasised by way of showing Ninotchka in an exaggeratedly negative Russian environment. Nina has exchanged the luxurious suite in Paris for a house crowded with men, women and children, where there is no privacy at all. The little room she has been allocated is like a corridor, constantly used by the rest of the tenants (and by the house supervisor) to accede to other parts of the building. The film clearly suggests that in this place there is no intimacy because such is the aim of the Russian government: the lives of citizens are kept under control even when they are in their homes.

Ninotchka’s nostalgia for Paris and the longing for a way of life she had come to appreciate are manifested again through food. Ninotchka invites the three comrades over for dinner, in order to celebrate the bygone Parisian days, and decides to cook a French omelette; due to rationing, each of the comrades has to bring his own egg and she herself has to steal some. During the gathering, Nina receives a letter from Leon, but it has been censored and the dinner ends with a note of sadness. After these scenes, the spectator cannot but disapprove of a country which has been characterised as poor, subjected to strict ideological control, devoid of freedom and privacy.5

The last shots bring a sudden change of setting and show the three comrades running a restaurant in Costantinople; the narrative ellipsis is hardly noticed by the spectator, who, by now, sees the Russians’ flight from their country as a ‘natural’ conclusion to their process of westernisation. Ninotchka’s compatriots have entered the restoration business and have

5. This negative image is further stressed as Leon, who has lost trace of Ninotchka, is denied a visa to go to Moscow. The officer at the embassy is deaf to Leon’s entreats, and the latter ends up threatening to boycott Russian tourism. His menaces significantly involve food; “no more caviar, vodka [...] no more borsch.” In Leon’s mind, these products are representative of Eastern food culture; such comments in this and similar films help to create a stereotyped image of Eastern food which would be worth analyzing further.
found the opportunity to offer, as they say, “our Russia.” In their restaurant customers will not only find the Russia of borscht, beef stroganoff, blintzes and sour cream, because, as one of the comrades says: “we are not only serving food, we are serving our country, we are meeting friends”. The film seems to be giving Russian culture a chance. The variety of food mentioned here suggests that there is more to Russian food than vodka and nutrients and that, likewise, there is more to Russian people than hard work and political propaganda. They also like to enjoy themselves, make friends and so on.

Yet, the suggestion that only within a western context is this emergence of the “Russian identity” possible, reveals that this “other Russia” is in fact a fantasy fulfilling the American imperialistic wish. As Susman argues, one of the characteristics of American history has always been the way the nation dealt with the appearance of foreign ideas, movements, and people which caused fear. What was “other” from the native culture was only accepted once it was proved to have been “Americanised” (1984: 11). Such is the strategy of this film, which subtly but effectively, shows the three comrades and Ninotchka in a favourable light because, together with champagne they have accepted capitalism-based values, that is, the American Way.

One, two, three

Two decades later, Billy Wilder directed One, Two, Three (1961), a satirical comedy which consciously showed how the U.S. was trying to bring capitalism to the East. The film’s central motif is, in fact, the attempt on the part of the American executive MacNamara (James Cagney), to open a branch of Coca Cola in East Berlin. Differently from Ninotchka, Wilder’s film does not

6. Ninotchka, thanks to the complicity of her comrades and Leon, has been sent to Constantinople as well. The last shot show her acceptance of an engagement to Leon, and the two lovers kissing.

7. Fifteen years after the release of Ninotchka, its remake Silk Stockings (1957), directed by Rouben Mamoulian, offers the same message. The genre is, this time, the musical, and the protagonists are the well-known Hollywood stars Cyd Charisse and Fred Astair. This film follows the plot of Ninotchka and uses the same food discourses in order to convey a capitalistic-hedonistic message that could be summarised by Nina’s words “champagne is more fun to drink than goat’s milk.”
insist on the pleasures and advantages of western lifestyle nor does it need the charm of Paris in order to do so because, so to speak, the superiority of American life is taken for granted.

As Susman argues, in the thirties, Americans started being aware of being a culture, they “began thinking in terms of patterns of behaviour and belief, values and life-styles, symbols and meanings [...] The phrase American Dream came into common use; it meant something shared collectively by all Americans [...]” (1984:17). Coke was a drink that represented successful capitalism and at the same time was “popular” in the sense that it was for everybody (an all American drink); thus, it was the perfect symbol for American culture, and the best way to “sell” it. In the film, Coca Cola appears to be a good product because it will bring economic benefits to West and East alike. In other words, it will spread capitalism and those which, by then, were considered to be its obvious advantages. Following C. Fischler, this operation can be viewed as an attempt to reform society by reforming food habits, a practice which became common in the 19th century with the Health Reformers (1996: 367). In this case, the reforming wish trespasses the limits of U.S. territory and affects the countries on the other side of the Berlin wall, performing what Flandrin and Montanari call “MacDonaldisation” of society (1996).

Given that the differences between East and West are already assumed (and so is the supremacy of Western culture), One Two Three is more concerned with overemphasising divergences and with how long it takes for reluctant Eastern representatives to accept Coca-Colonization.8

On the one side of the confrontation we find Mr. MacNamara, head manager of the Coca Cola branch in West Berlin. He is the typical product of capitalism, an executive eager to expand the Coca Cola market, in order to be promoted and go back to the United States. His nearly farcical characterisation, instead of working against the capitalist principles the protagonist embodies, elicits the audience’s engagement. As MacNamara fires out words and wit at such incredible speed one cannot help being affected by his contagious energy and enthusiasm, as when he speaks of Coca Cola as the first American com-

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8. According to Bill Bryson (1994), “Despite its occasional setbacks Coke has long been a symbol of American culture [...] As long ago as 1950, it inspired a word for American cultural takeover of the planet: Coca-Colonization.”
pany to break through the Iron Curtain and sell Coke to Russia, or when he learns that Coke barrels are being smuggled into the Eastern sector.

On the other side there is the inevitable Russian envoy, three men who have come to meet McNamara in order to obtain the formula of Coca Cola. Yet, there is nothing the three Russians can do against MacNamara’s persuasion skills: their resistance to a deal which would leave the control of the economic operation in the hands of the United States is easily broken when the executive lets them believe that in return for the deal, they will have access to his beautiful secretary (also his lover). The Russian representatives quickly accept MacNamara’s conditions which include the system of royalties and payment in U.S. dollars.

Similarly to what happened in Ninotchka, the first image of Russia that the film offers, is not a flattering one: the three Russians are shown to be naive and powerless against American economic strategies, not to mention the fact that they are driven by excessive sexual impulses. In fact, obtaining the secretary is, throughout the film, their main motivation for the establishment of a Coca Cola branch in East Berlin.

Just as it happened in Ninotchka, once the feeble resistance of the Russian envoy is overcome, the capitalist representative will have to confront a harsher adversary. This time the staunch communist is played by a young man, Ado, who has married Scarlet, the daughter of MacNamara’s boss, when the girl had illegally crossed the frontier in search of amusement. MacNamara, who is in charge of the girl, will devote all his efforts to separating the two lovers, destroying the legal evidence of their marriage and thus, save Scarlet from communism and himself from being fired or from a new destination far from the U.S. It is the wish of the MacNamaras, in fact, to be able to return to their home country, which is referred to as the best place where MacNamara’s children could be brought up. Mrs. MacNamara draws her husband’s attention to their American identity expressing her nostalgia for the U.S. in terms of food: if her husband keeps changing jobs around the world, their children won’t be able to eat peanut butter sandwiches.

It is worth stressing the fact that the ethnocentric point of view according to which the American lifestyle is better than others, is supported in this film by the use of foodstuffs which are more typically American (peanut spread and Coca Cola), whereas in Ninotchka it was champagne, a
French drink, the product chosen to represent western culture and its “superiority.” This confirms that in the sixties the process by which the U.S. had started to see themselves in terms of culture (see Susman above) had already been consolidated, and they had forged their own symbols. Americans in One Two Three are shown to believe in their culture and in the “goodness” of their values; they no longer need to borrow food emblems from other (Western) countries in order to “colonize” the East.

Going back to the plot, the executive deceitfully sends Ado back to East Berlin with a cuckoo clock which strikes the hours showing an American flag and reproducing the American anthem; on top of it, he attaches to Ado’s motorcar a sheet with the legend “Russians go home.” As a consequence, Ado, accused of spreading American propaganda, is arrested as soon as he crosses the border and is made to confess to being a traitor and an American spy. This new confrontation between East and West corroborates the naive image of Eastern people given by the film at the beginning and, at the same time, the audience gains a negative impression of the Russian regime, since the methods used by the police to extort Ado’s confession, even in the humorous context of the comedy, appear to be rather brutal.

Once Mr. MacNamara is informed about Scarlet’s pregnancy, he decides to go to East Berlin and rescue Ado. He succeeds in crossing the border by bribing the Eastern police with some bottles of Coca Cola, and seeks the help of the three Russians with whom he had negotiated at the beginning of the film.

The moment has come for the film to “pop” into Eastern territory and give the audience a glimpse of the way people live there. As happened with Ninotchka’s Russia, what we see of East Berlin is not encouraging: Mr. MacNamara meets the three Russians at a hotel bar where they are drinking vodka and listening to an orchestra playing. The atmosphere of the place suggests all but enjoyment: customers (all wearing the same uniform) are either sleeping at their tables or dancing in a dull, mirthless way to the sound of boring music.

9. Something similar happens when Mrs. MacNamara threatens her husband to leave him because, due to overwork, he neglects his family. Mr. Macnamara tells her not to worry and promises their children will study in Oxford and eat marmalade for breakfast. The longing for America, represented by peanut butter, is extended to Anglo-Saxon culture in general.
As soon as MacNamara and his secretary arrive, things change and the bar turns into a happy, funny place. Amidst the rock ‘n roll music, the drinking and the dancing, the American persuades the Russians to help him get Ado out of East Berlin. Invariably, the capitalist logic, according to which everything has got a price, triumphs, as MacNamara succeeds in “buying” the Russians by offering his secretary just as he “bought” the police at the border when he offered them Coca Cola. The implication is that pleasure is an American prerogative, and that Eastern people are all-too happy to be given the chance to consume, to import food and love in their hedonistic aspect, thus accepting Western sociocultural values.

Once Ado is taken back to West Berlin, MacNamara’s main objective becomes turning the young communist into the perfect match for the daughter of a capitalist. This turns out to be a difficult task, since Ado is still hostile to capitalist society; yet, for the sake of the coming child and given that his reputation in the East, due to MacNamara, is now that of a traitor, he finally agrees to learn how to behave as a perfect businessman. MacNamara, in order to make him even more desirable as a son-in-law, has him adopted by a penniless German nobleman, in exchange for money. Among the many changes involved by the process of Ado’s “capitalisation,” the film puts stress on his food behaviour.

The way Ado behaves at the table resembles that of a “savage:” he eats with his hands, devours food like an animal, etc. MacNamara and Scarlet try to quickly teach him basic table manners such as how to use cutlery, as well as other rules about food combination (for example, that white wine is not a good match for chicken). Ado’s animal status is corrected through proper food behaviour. As Millán observes, commensality is a negation of human animality and a (spectacular) demonstration of social culture” (1997: 235). Not only is American culture shown to be superior, but it is suggested that Americans are the only “humanised” people and that, as such, they can undertake the education of those who are not.

The content of MacNamara’s “educational programme”, which eventually performs Ado’s successful transformation, is emblematically

10. The young man who formerly spat on every symbol of America, in his words, “money”, “Fort Knox”, “Wall street”, and “Coca Cola colonialism,” has by the end of the film learnt the capitalist lesson so well that Scarlet’s father accepts him with no reservations whatsoever.
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summarised by the menu the executive has chosen for the final banquet at the Hilton, which includes, among other things, venison on almond grids, peaches flambé and king-size Coca Cola in individual ice-boxes. As a reward for the way MacNamara has “taken care” of Scarlet and of the company, his boss promotes him to vice-president and sends him back to the States, a move by which MacNamara recuperates his wife (about to leave him on account of his love affair with the secretary) and children, only too happy to eventually go and live in their home country.

The final scenes of the film show Mr. MacNamara and his family happily drinking Coke after getting it out of a Coke machine. The soft drink becomes, more than ever, synonymous with the American Way: it provides wealth and happiness and keeps the American family together.

Conclusion

We hope to have succeeded, with the analysis of Ninotchka and One, Two, Three, in drawing attention to yet another strategy used by Hollywood in order to spread its ideological message. Both films take advantage of food as a receptacle of sociocultural values and use it to create a negative image of the East which has survived almost to today. The kind of information large audiences were provided with by mainstream cinema during and after the war served, no doubt, to perpetuate western ignorance about Eastern food culture, but it also offered an exaggeratedly stereotyped view of Eastern politics. Vodka and communist repression seem to have been the most popular association in the western imaginary concerning the East, as it was constructed by Hollywood, at least until the end of the cold war.11 It would be interesting to carry this study further and consider other, more recent films in order to see how food discourses have evolved in Hollywood colonizing representation of the sociocultural values of the West and the East.

11. Other films which have been left out of this analysis, in which food is just superficially mentioned, develop the same association between vodka (and caviar) and repressive or “evil” Eastern regimes. It is the case of 007 movies such as Living Daylights (1987) in which the East appears as a traditional enemy.
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