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Ratatouille: An Animated Account of Cooking, Taste, and Human Evolution

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ABSTRACT *This paper analyzes the immensely popular animated film Ratatouille as a social and cultural document. It begins with a recapitulation of the movie's story line – a saga of an astute, ambitious and talented rat, who becomes transformed into an accomplished haute cuisine chef. The film illustrates recent anthropological writings on the central role of cooking in human evolution. It also shows how varieties of cooking and table manners provide key indications of the civilizing process. Ultimately, Ratatouille explores distinctions and similarities between “man and beast”. It communicates the idea that all living creatures share more in terms of aptitude and feeling than divides them.*

KEYWORDS *Animated film, cuisine, human evolution, human–animal relations, identity, Paris, France*

We thus begin to understand the truly essential place occupied by cooking in native thought: not only does cooking mark the transition from nature to culture, but through it and by means of it, the human state can be defined in all its attributes, even those that, like mortality, might seem to be the most unquestionably natural.

Claude Lévi-Strauss, The Raw and the Cooked: Mythologique, 271

Rats and People: The Story of Ratatouille

This article has a simple goal: to demonstrate the anthropological value of *Ratatouille* and, by implication, other animated films that have triumphed commercially. In the process, we may come to appreciate why animated movies like this one appeal to adults as well as children, and stimulate the imagination of viewers across the globe. *Ratatouille* has

experienced virtually unparalleled critical success in its field. Since its release in 2007, the film has received dozens of prestigious awards, including the 2008 Oscar for Best Animated Feature Film of the Year, the 2008 Golden Globe Award for Best Animated Feature, and the 2008 Annie Award, which honors excellence in the field of animation. Film critic circles in Boston, Chicago, Dallas-Fort Worth, Ohio, Los Angeles, Phoenix, San Diego, Toronto and countless other cities across the continent have all conferred upon this movie their highest acclaim. In every aspect of animation – direction, writing, voice acting, music, sound, editing, visual effects, and the like, *Ratatouille* was the recipient of nearly every nomination or award open to films of its type for the years 2007–2008.

Remy, *Ratatouille's* star rat, is not the first rodent to make it in Hollywood: the kingpin of the Disney empire of animation is none other than Mickey Mouse. This is not the place to give Mickey Mouse his due, other than to state that this character, when viewed together with the rats in *Ratatouille*, makes it impossible to underestimate the rodent as a cultural icon. These creatures constitute a longstanding and central part of an animation film tradition. Obviously, the popular success of their roles in large part reflects the filmmakers' multiple technical and artistic merits.

Consider simply the filmmaker's ability to allow us, as human beings, to identify with the rats. At the heart of the animator's art is the seemingly magical melding of image and idea, particularly as it is expressed in the creation of characters. To take stock of this process, let us first note that within the first few scenes of the film the animators efficiently present and resolve contrasting themes. Since the principal character is a rat, we must be provided with convincing evidence that (a) this character is indeed a rat, and (b) despite our probable prejudices against rats, we are willing to take a personal interest in this particular animal. Following an opening prologue and title, the film fades into a bucolic country house. As the point of view 'flies in' towards this attractive yet rustic abode – the animation here mimicking the technically challenging crane shots developed in the early days of Hollywood – the image is disrupted by the boom of gunfire, breaking glass, a tremendous crash, and a screech from within. The camera movement continues to approach the house while simultaneously zooming in on one of its windows. The windowpane shatters, and a rat, sheltered by an open book, flies into center screen. Here the action is stopped with a freeze frame, and the rat begins his opening monologue. As we can begin to appreciate here, the magical melding is actually the result of synchronous, filmic techniques – sound, image, and framing – playing together to literally bring the viewer into the story.

The rat's ensuing off-camera voiceover establishes him as our authoritative, first person guide, despite the visual information that he is frozen in mid-flight, a look of terror on his furry face. He invites us to contemplate his plight, and suggests that we go back in time to establish how he came to make such an unconventional exit. A preliminary point is the simple statement: 'What's my problem? First of all, I'm a rat. Which means life is hard'. The image then cuts to numerous, scurrying rodents as they make their way over obstacles into a compost heap of discarded food. Naturalistic patterns of movement, a kind of darting mobility, in addition to pointed snouts and stringy tails, force the viewer to see these images as an unsavory pack of rats. These impressions of swarming vermin, however, are undercut by the affable manner and self-conscious tone of the narration. The narrator is no run of the mill rat: through artful animation (stunning imagery and saturated colors) and skillful filmmaking (virtuoso camera movement and a narrative technique used in forms as diverse as *film noir* and conventional documentary), this rodent has been quickly and efficiently transformed into a sympathetic, or at least believable, character.

American popular speech in part bears responsibility for our mainly subliminal ability to identify with rats. We run in a 'rat race;' for a time young men sported a hair style with 'rat tails' trailing down their necks; an oft-quoted refrain from the movies includes the wise-cracking gangster accusing a cohort of being a 'dirty rat;' and 'ratting out' has come to mean the betrayal of someone's confidence, usually to the police or some other authority figure. The one word exclamation 'Rats!' expresses mild frustration. And the characteristic odor of a rat infestation has led to the saying 'I smell a rat' to convey the idea of suspicious circumstances.

Let us now turn to the film's plot. The principal subject of the opening sequence, and indeed the entire film, is a rat's love of gourmet food, perhaps the most surprising and intriguing aspect of *Ratatouille*. The main character, Remy, introduces us to his brother Emile, a comic side kick who is in every way an opposite of his brother. In contrast to Remy, he is a bit slow, rotund, and, with respect to food, entirely without discrimination. Emile also echoes the voice of their father, and hence serves as a reminder of what is considered Remy's misplaced ambition to cook. Remy, a young rat with an unusually acute sense of taste and smell, evolves during the course of the film from being a creature in the wild to achieving success as an accomplished French chef. Together with his brother Emile and his father Django, Remy forms part of a pack of rats that eventually inhabits Parisian streets and sewers, and that by the end of the film attain nearly human status.

At the beginning of the story, Remy saves his father from eating food contaminated with rat poison, and is therefore assigned the job of 'poison checker' for the colony – a distinction that he finds beneath his talents. He would rather apply his discriminating culinary tastes in other ways. He therefore prefers to steal fresh food from human kitchens rather than search for sustenance among piles of garbage, as the rest of the rats do. His father considers humans to be a dangerous enemy, and forbids Remy his culinary exploits. Nonetheless, Remy, idealistic and determined, defies his father's orders.

In a series of preliminary episodes, Remy, accompanied by his reluctant brother Emile, invades the kitchen of an old woman, and with immense admiration observes on her television set the great chef Gusteau at work. The television segment ends with the disturbing news that Gusteau's restaurant had recently lost a star in its ratings, the result of scathing criticism from the famous food critic, Anton Ego. This news has caused Chef Gusteau so much grief that he dies heartbroken. At this moment, the television clicks off, and the funereal scene is replaced by the reflection of the old lady in the darkened screen, roused from a nap and infuriated to discover rodent invaders in her house. As Remy and Emile frantically attempt to escape, the old woman blasts at them with a shotgun, only to bring down her entire ceiling. The audience shares the old woman's stupefied surprise, for the fallen ceiling reveals hundreds of equally shocked rats. The colony had established itself in her attic, and now was the time for a hasty retreat. Remy and the others escape from the old woman's wrath, Remy in the process salvaging an item from the kitchen shelf: Gusteau's celebrated cookbook, *Anyone Can Cook!* This scene brings us back to the opening image of the film, in which Remy crashed through the window under the protection of the cookbook.

Alone and desperate, Remy despairs of ever seeing his family again. At this point, the illustrated figure of Gusteau rises up from the open cookbook, advising him to 'go up and look around'. Remy is skeptical. 'You are an illustration. Why am I talking to you?' Gusteau replies, 'You have lost your family. All your friends. You are lonely'. 'Yeah, well, you're dead'. 'Ah, but that is no match for wishful thinking. If you focus on what you've left behind you will never be able to see what lies ahead. Now go up and look around'. And so begins a dialogue between Remy and the ghost of Gusteau that recurs throughout most of the rest of the film. While Remy often voices his doubts about communicating with a hallucination, he invariably follows his advice. And, in this case, he leaves the sewer for what awaits in the world above.

At this point in the film, Remy's behavior replicates what we know of vermin in urban environments. As much as rats are a part of the natural world, they insinuate their way into human habitats. Indeed, this insinuation is more than a figure of speech: they gnaw, claw, borrow, and squirm into our domiciles. They live, if not with us, in adjoining mini-apartments and adjacent alleys. This proximity is beautifully demonstrated in the montage by which Remy makes his way from the sewer to the heights of the Parisian skyline. By skittering between the walls of several apartments, deftly avoiding dangerous missteps and a spring trap along the way, Remy witnesses a series of vignettes emblematic of the human condition. And beyond this, the filmmakers insert unmistakable references to purported French national character: in rapid-fire sequences, the anonymous apartment dwellers appear as self-absorbed, obsessed with food, passionate to the point of violence, and recklessly romantic. *Vive la France!* Perhaps a more important correlation, however, is the sheer physical closeness of humans and other animals. How could the proximity of such a creature help but encourage an affinity with human characteristics? Here is an instance of liminality, applied spatially. The rat is betwixt and between, or on the threshold, precisely and primarily because of proximity.

To reinforce that sense of liminality, the filmmakers have taken certain liberties in the representation of rat appearance. The rats' fore paws in *Ratatouille* have been simplified: instead of five digits, there are just three fingers and an opposable thumb. This permits these creatures to perform all the dexterous tasks of cooking without drawing attention to the fact that they have been given hands: indeed, they function like human hands, but do not burden the viewer with the potentially unsettling visual impression of rats with little humanoid hands. Like their hands, the rats' feet are also simplified, with three toes instead of five. The rat bodies have been re-engineered to accommodate an upright stance, with legs elongated and shoulders built out to permit a wider, hominid range of motion.

Another aspect of the rats' transformation is in their facial features. Their eye sockets have been rotated slightly forward: the wide-angle vision of an animal of prey has been replaced with the forward focusing, binocular vision characteristic of predators. The arrangement of their eyes does allow the very human-like activities that Remy has acquired, such as reading and watching television. It is noteworthy that, as befits our media age, Remy's introduction to *haute cuisine* is not only experiential, but also televisual. The bit of television we do see – through Remy's eyes – also ingeniously forwards the plot, since we learn not only of his hero, the chef Gusteau, but also, as we have just mentioned,

of his demise and the corresponding fall in rating of his restaurant at the hands of the villain-critic, Ego.

The eyes of Remy are also the gateway to his emotional self, as they are manipulated by his creators to display a host of emotions – from pleasure to tenderness to fear. Of course there are any number of additional facial and somatic cues that are employed by the animators, working with some static features (the bulbous, comical nose) and others (ears, tail, hands and shoulders, stance, e.g.), which are pliable and highly suggestive in expressing a range of emotions. It is also true that these rats maintain the protuberant eyes of their natural prototypes, which brings us to the curious fact that many characters in this animated film possess very prominent, *sarpacu* eyes. The wide-eyed appearance of pupils surrounded by the whites of the eyes characterizes all the rats, Remy included, and of Remy's human nemesis in the kitchen, Skinner, whom we will encounter shortly. And in as much as Remy's physical traits are humanized, the facial features of Remy's upcoming confidant and collaborator, Linguini, are correspondingly depicted as rodent-like. Bulbous eyes, a receding forehead and chin, and a symmetrically protruding nose, to the point that it is almost snout-like, visually emphasize the affinity between these two characters.

We return to the story as Remy emerges from his ascent to behold the Parisian cityscape glistening in the night air. In the foreground is nothing other than Gusteau's famous restaurant. Remy exclaims his amazement, and the illuminated sign, a gigantic cutout of the great chef, replies that he has apparently led Remy to his restaurant. Remy hurries off to get a closer look. As he peers down from the roof into Gusteau's kitchen, he hallucinates and imagines the ghost of Gusteau appearing before him and urging him to become a fine chef.

Remy insinuates himself surreptitiously into the kitchen of Gusteau's restaurant, where he encounters Linguini, a recently hired garbage boy who has just accidentally spilled a pot of soup. Remy observes the gawky Linguini nervously and unsuccessfully trying to recreate the soup. Unbeknown to everyone in the kitchen (except the astonished Linguini), Remy adds just the right ingredients to save the soup from becoming a disastrous failure. Skinner, the new head chef, spots Remy in the kitchen, catches him in a jar, and asks Linguini to dispose of him in the river. Linguini, taking pity on the rat and realizing that he can use Remy's culinary talents to his own advantage, shelters Remy in his tiny apartment. With the help of Remy, Linguini achieves sudden culinary success.

The problem of how the rat manages to mentor Linguini is solved with nothing short of a hat trick. In an effort to evade detection, Remy has secreted

himself beneath Linguini's toque. Viewers are treated to the rat's point-of-view, through the transparent mesh of the hat's fabric. It is from this unique perch that we discover, along with Remy and Linguini, a transformative tactic. Faced with a fast-approaching tray that is about to collide with the rat-bearing hat, Remy jerks on Linguini's hair. The young chef executes a rubbery contortion, thereby avoiding a potentially disastrous crash. The pair quickly seeks the privacy of the bathroom, where, as they watch themselves in the mirror, they confirm that Remy can control Linguini's motor activity by manipulating locks of his hair. They simultaneously realize that this is the key to their working relationship. That evening they perfect the art of collaborative cooking in Linguini's tiny garret, but not before numerous work-a-day culinary mishaps familiar to all who work in the kitchen – minus the errant, airborne crepe that breaks a window, flies to the street below, and, if we believe our ears, causes a screeching automobile accident.

The rat-in-the-hat motif is used also to further an entertaining sub-plot of the film. Skinner is treated to quick glimpses of Linguini interacting with the rat: these snippets are quickly resolved to appear as if they did not happen. Thus, Skinner suspects that a rat is in the kitchen, but cannot confirm his suspicion. At one point, Skinner spies the silhouette of Remy under Linguini's toque. Convinced that he now has proof positive, Skinner ambushes Linguini as he returns from the back alley, triumphantly snatching off his toque. As luck would have it, Linguini has just given Remy a break, so Skinner comes up empty-handed. As the story unfolds and Linguini's 'skill' as a chef begins to command wider attention, the diminutive chef's desperate state of mind is expressed in his obsession with discovering the rat in the kitchen. After a particularly manic outbreak in his office, during which Skinner is compelled to express the disquieting voices in his head, his lawyer, after a suitably un-nerving pause, enquires, 'Should I be concerned about this?' And then adds, 'About you?' It is a rhetorical question.

Another dimension of the relationship between Linguini and Remy is the way that it relates to the art of animation itself. Walt Disney's Pinocchio came to life, losing its strings to become a 'real boy'. He did not have a developed sense of self: this was provided by Jiminy Cricket, acting as the voice of his conscience. In *Ratatouille*, Remy the rat is a true mediator. He provides the technical skills to manipulate Linguini's ungainly physicality. In addition, Remy is guided by his own nagging little cricket, in the form of the ghost of Gusteau, who chides him every time he is tempted to steal food or give up his quest to become a chef. The unlikely symmetry of the Rat internalizing the messages of Gusteau – who, as we and Linguini later discover, is actually

Linguini's father – is one of the several twists of plotline that make this film both intriguing and oddly satisfying. And finally, the metaphor of the rat controlling Linguini's every move, including the surprise kiss between Linguini and his adored colleague Colette, is parallel to the task of animation, wherein everything is purposeful, planned and choreographed to the nth degree, yet must appear natural within the parameters of the animators' world.

Later in the script the lawyer (Talon) returns with a snippet of information that reawakens Skinner's suspicions. In order to test a possible genetic link between Linguini and chef Gusteau, the lawyer procured DNA samples: a hair from the glass-encased toque of the departed chef Gusteau, and, with the help of Skinner, a corresponding sample from Linguini's hat. Talon noted that there were difficulties with one of the samples. 'I had to send it back to the lab'. Skinner asked why, and Talon replied, 'Because the first time it came back identified as "rodent hair"'. The issue of DNA as a genetic marker is a handy way to forward the story, with appropriate complications. On another level, however, we are being asked to consider inherent similarities between species. In as much as the rat is the epitome of a highly adaptable species, its instincts for self-preservation are not unlike that of *homo sapiens*. Further, the physiology of the rat is in many ways akin to that of humans, so much so that the rat serves as an excellent species for medical testing and experimentation. From this perspective, it is not all that strange to consider that a rodent, sitting atop Linguini's cerebrum, might embody and transmit a set of instructions that ensure the novice chef's survival. Of course the comic twist here is that instead of transmitting basic signals resolving a 'fight or flight' scenario, Remy is directing his hominid mannequin to slice, dice, and sauté, creating works of exquisite refinement.

Near the film's conclusion, we learn that Skinner, Gusteau's successor as head chef and the villain of the tale, stands to inherit Gusteau's restaurant should no other heir be discovered within two years. The deadline is fast approaching. Just in the nick of time, Remy is able to determine, through examination of Gusteau's will, that Linguini is actually Gusteau's son and legal heir. Remy also finds out that Skinner has been operating an unauthorized frozen food line under the name of Gusteau. Justice prevails. Linguini is declared owner of Gusteau's, Skinner is fired, and the frozen food line is brought to an end.

Meanwhile, food critic Anton Ego learns of the culinary revival underway at Gusteau's, thanks to the new chef Linguini. Ego issues a threatening announcement: he intends to revisit the restaurant to perform a critical update. Ego sits in

his study, eagerly absorbed in planning the attack. At the same time, Linguini, who has become increasingly cocky and self-assured, decides to create his own cuisine for this occasion without Remy's help. Insulted, Remy gathers his rat colony, which overruns the restaurant. Linguini manages to expel them. Soon thereafter, however, Remy returns to the restaurant to help Linguini, who is eventually forced to confess to the entire kitchen crew the secret of the restaurant's success – Remy the rat. Repulsed and angry, Colette and the rest of the staff desert Linguini, leaving him alone to prepare the evening meal, panicked at the knowledge of Anton Ego's imminent arrival.

Colette, regretful of her behavior and feeling sorry for Linguini, eventually returns to the kitchen to help. She is greeted with an astonishing sight. Hundreds of rats, working under the paramilitary precision of Remy's crisp orders, have taken over the cooking duties of the regular staff. This widespread cooperation between the rats and humans occurred as the result of reconciliation between Remy and his father, Django. Because Linguini had finally admitted to the staff that a rat was behind his success, Remy's father was convinced that rat-hating humanity might have some redeeming qualities. Even more importantly, cooking was what made his son happy, and Django gave to him his whole-hearted, albeit belated, support. In the now familiar mode of reversals, we witness a family drama amidst the rats (curiously devoid of female rats, or does), while the humans are primarily associated by the more acephalous bonds of a work-related, kitchen 'family'. As Colette had explained to Linguini, 'So you see, we are artists. Pirates. More than cooks are we'. And it became clear that this band of misfits, unlike what is termed the 'clan' of rats, could not survive the shock of inter-species collaboration.

For the evening fare, Remy selects ratatouille, a homey, down-to-earth dish, and therefore a risky choice. However, upon taking the first bite, Anton Ego launches into nostalgic childhood memories of being served ratatouille as a small boy and declares the meal to be superb. When the truth is revealed to him about who created the dish, he writes a superlative restaurant review in which he proclaims Gusteau's chef to be Paris's finest, at the same time keeping Remy's identity secret. Soon thereafter, however, health inspectors discover rat infestation at Gusteau's and unceremoniously close the restaurant. As a result, Anton Ego is declared a fraud and loses employment as a food critic.

The story has a happy ending, nonetheless, as we learn that Linguini, Colette, and Remy have opened a new bistro of their own, called 'La Ratatouille', where the rat colony as a whole is portrayed eating in small groups, in splendid civilized fashion, around cozy round tables. Anton Ego remains

involved in that he financially supports the establishment. And from the line of eager customers lining the sidewalk, one can surmise that it is a financial success as well as a gastronomic *tour de force*. And yet, the filmmakers remind us that this is indeed a story. Instead of characters falling ever deeper into the habitual behavior of their particular personalities over time, transformation is afoot. The gloomy critic is now a happy gourmand; the knife-wielding Colette is content in the kitchen; the ever-vacillating Remy, suited up in a tiny toque, is now a self-assured chef; and Linguini, an exception to the maxim that 'Anyone can cook', has found his true calling as a first-rate waiter. The message is simple, yet deviously complex: we can, man and animal alike, fulfill our dreams within existing social structures. In *Ratatouille*, the desire to cook – or at least to work in collaboration with an inspired chef – conquers even the highly competitive social hierarchy of a working kitchen. And while the rats may have adopted table manners, they have not sloughed off their working class accents. They too celebrate the success of the new establishment, but they are cordoned off from their human counterparts, discretely hidden by a curtain of hanging vegetation.

***Ratatouille* and the Civilizing Process**

As with any rich fictional tale, there are many ways to analyze what *Ratatouille* is about. From an anthropological perspective, a central theme in the film is what it means to be human, and specifically the way in which cooking and culinary taste serve to distinguish humanity from beasts. Wrangham (2009), in *Catching Fire: How Cooking Made Us Human*, provides a compelling argument that more than language, bipedalism, tool use, symbolic thought, and the like, it is the act of cooking – that is, transforming raw into easily digestible food by subjecting it to fire – that is the primary distinguishing feature of humanity. As Wrangham (2009) points out, the control of fire and the practice of cooking are human universals (p. 27). These activities are also unique to humans. He demonstrates convincingly that human anatomy – brain size, digestive tract, the design of our mouths and teeth, and other features of the human body – has been adapted through slow, lengthy evolutionary processes to the consumption of cooked food. As humans, we are who we are because of cooking. Wrangham states, 'When our ancestors first obtained extra calories by cooking their food, they and their descendants passed on more genes than others of their species who ate raw food. The result was a new evolutionary opportunity' (Wrangham 2009:81). The provocative thesis of *Catching Fire* is that 'We are tied to our adapted diet of cooked food, and the results pervade

our lives, from our bodies to our minds. We humans are the cooking apes, the creatures of the flame' (Wrangham 2009:14). 'We should indeed pin our humanity on cooks', concludes Wrangham (2009).

Superficially, the cartoon images in *Ratatouille* contradict Wrangham's principal proposition. Most obviously, animal and human characters in the film are to equal degrees animated creations. In this regard, writers Brad Bird and Jan Pinkava draw no distinctions between humans and other animals. Throughout the entire movie, there occurs no attempt to contrast the cartoon world with the real world, a trope that occurs, for example, in *Mary Poppins* (1964), where dancing penguins appear in the 'Jolly Holiday' sequence, or, a generation earlier, in *Fantasia* (1940), where Leopold Stokowski shakes hands with Mickey Mouse. In *Ratatouille*, rats and humans alike possess language and speech. Rats and humans also enjoy meaningful kinship ties. While the human characters in *Ratatouille* bear a mixture of human and whimsical names (sometimes culinary in nature), the rats are known mainly by straightforward human names. Both rats and humans display concern over food contamination – in the case of rats, contamination from poison; in the case of humans, contamination from rodent infestation. Rats and humans in the film also display an equally wide range of emotions, including fear and empathy, anger and love, insecurity and self-assurance. In both human and animal domains, too, leadership and social hierarchy infuse human relationships. Overall, then, the characters in this film – beasts as much as people – display human-like faculties and sentiments, at least as we commonly understand them in the Western world.

In contrast to character representation, the story line of *Ratatouille* shows major distinctions between the animal and human worlds. The entire film, in fact, could be interpreted as the tale of how a rat in the wild becomes not only human-like, but also civilized, by pursuing an interest in food and cooking. The opening of the film shows food critic Anton Ego mocking Gusteau's cookbook. 'Amusing title', he says, 'Anyone Can Cook! What's even more amusing is that Gusteau actually seems to believe it. I, on the other hand, take cooking seriously and no – I don't think "anyone" can do it ...' *Ratatouille*, in fact, proves Ego wrong by demonstrating that, yes indeed, even a rat can master the culinary arts. Through the pursuit of cooking, Remy in effect undergoes what Norbert Elias, in a magisterial treatise dating from 1939, called *The Civilizing Process* (Elias 2000). Elias, of course, employed the concept of civilization in a social evolutionary sense, to show the emergence of one class of humanity out of another. To Elias, the term civilization 'can refer to the type of dwelling or the manner in which men and women live together, to the form of judicial

punishment, or to the way in which food is prepared' (Elias 2000:5). It 'sums up everything in which Western society of the last two or three centuries believes itself superior to earlier societies or "more primitive" contemporary ones. By this term [civilization], Western society seeks to describe what constitutes its special character and what it is proud of . . .' (Elias 2000). But the term 'civilizing process' can be applied equally to distinguish humans from other animals. In this sense, throughout his personal development, Remy begins to differentiate himself more and more from his rodent community.

Although Remy's sensibilities are inherently human, they become developed and enhanced only via a connection with food and eating. For one thing, Remy can read. In fact, he is the only rat in the film who can and does read. It is largely via the written word – specifically reading *Anyone can Cook!* – that Remy learns the culinary arts. At one point in *Ratatouille*, when Remy is showing his brother Emile Gusteau's cookbook, Emile asks, astonished, 'Wait . . . You read?' Emile takes that revelation as constituting a potential danger to Remy. 'Oh, man. Does Dad know?', he asks Remy, with the implication that punishment would ensue if his father ever discovered his secret. Further, recall that it is Gusteau's cookbook that saves him from drowning. The film sequence in which Remy experiences a terrifying journey through the sewers of Paris might be the only moment in *Ratatouille* of a truly religious nature. The raging waters are reminiscent of the biblical Flood, and Remy's miraculous salvation constitutes a kind of rebirth. In addition, it is significant that a published volume – specifically Gusteau's *Anyone Can Cook!* – serves as a raft to carry Remy into Paris. This very book, a cookbook, deposits him practically at the doorstep of Gusteau's restaurant. It would be hard to deny that books are towering achievements and symbols of civilized life. A book about gastronomy is especially relevant to sophisticated urban life throughout the Western world today. The sewer sequence, incorporating salvation via the published word, functions in the film as a literal watershed for Remy between bestial and human existence. In as much as the animated spirit of Gusteau arises from the pages of the open cookbook, urging Remy to climb up from the sewer (and incidentally discover his restaurant above), the scriptural reference is compounded, as a civilizing text becomes the instrument of a near-religious experience.

Not only can Remy read, and not only are books essential to his survival, but he can also walk on two hind legs. Toward the beginning of the film, Remy, having just gone on a food-finding expedition with his brother Emile, walks together with him through open fields. Emile walks as rats walk, on all fours, while Remy is bipedal. The following exchange between them ensues.

Remy (to himself): He doesn't understand me, but I can be myself around him.

Emile: Why are you walking like that?

Remy: I don't want to constantly have to wash my paws. Do you even think about how we walk on the same paws that we handle food with? Do you ever think what we put in our mouths?

Emile: All the time.

Remy: When I eat, I don't want to taste everywhere my paws have been.

Emile: Well, okay, but if Dad sees you walking like that . . . he's not going to like it.

The food hunt results in each brother uncovering a different kind of food. Emile rummages through garbage and salvages the remnants of a bag lunch. Remy, in turn, discovers a big beautiful mushroom growing naturally in the wild. When Remy gropes through Emile's brown bag, he grows noticeably excited. 'Cheese?' he asks gleefully. 'You found cheese? And not just any cheese! Tomme de Chevre de Pays! That would go beautifully with my mushroom! And, and – this rosemary!' Remy picks wild rosemary from the fields, and decides to use that herb, together with the milky base of fresh grass, in his cheese and mushroom invention. The two rat brothers climb onto a rooftop, skewer the combination of ingredients onto a television antenna, which is situated in such a way that the food will catch smoke emanating from the chimney. 'The key is to keep turning it', states Remy, 'get the smoky flavor nice and even'.

Nearly from the outset of the film, then, Remy has discovered the essence of fine cookery, as many connoisseurs (especially followers of Alice Waters, creator of California new cuisine) would define it today: innovative combinations of fresh, locally grown ingredients. He also displays a keen interest in hygiene, specifically hygiene related to items like food placed in the mouth. The conversation between Remy and Emile is also noteworthy for revelation of Remy's bipedalism. It is especially significant that it is Remy's concern for food safety and hygiene that drives him to walk upright, rather than bipedalism being a chance mutation that served to the advantage of the human species. The importance of food consumption as a determinant of behavioral patterns illustrates Wrangham's (2009) overall claim that cooking has been primary in controlling the course of human evolution.

Elias (2009) gives dozens of apt examples, from medieval and early modern Europe, of how table manners and rules of gastronomic cleanliness came to define what westerners generally take for civilized behavior (pp. 99–109). Remy's refusal to handle food with dirty paws is one way in which he distinguishes his own standards from those of his fellow rats. This and other

proclamations in *Ratatouille* about cooking and table manners no doubt appear entirely at one with film viewers' standards and expectations. In fact, parents could easily interpret Remy's remarks throughout the movie as instructive: an entertaining, easy-to-swallow affirmation of daily warnings that they issue to their children. The film is therefore didactic.

To table manners and rules about cleanliness, Mennell (1997) adds another component of the civilizing process: appetite control. 'Appetite ... is not the same thing as hunger', he says. 'Hunger is a body drive which recurs in all human beings in a reasonably regular cycle' (Mennell 1997:316). Appetite for food, on the other hand, is, in the words of psychotherapist Daniel Cappon, 'basically a state of mind, an inner mental awareness of desire that is the setting for hunger. An individual's appetite is his desire and inclination to eat, his interest in consuming food. Eating is what a person does. Appetite is what he feels like doing, mostly a psychological state' (Cappon quoted in Mennell 1997:316). Of course, as Mennell (1997) demonstrates, appetite is not simply the mental state of each individual, but rather varies with cultural norms and expectations. Regulated appetite – in Mennell's terms essential to civilized food consumption – is a matter of self-control, which shapes both the timing and quantity of what we eat.

In *Ratatouille*, prior to Remy's discovery of Gusteau's restaurant, the little rat emerges from the sewer system to find himself isolated from his colony and feeling very lonely. Above all, he is hungry. He scurries among buildings in the human world. In an apartment kitchen, he spies a loaf of bread, and grabs it. Just as he prepares to take a bite, the ghost of Gusteau abruptly interrupts him.

Gusteau: What are you doing!?!

Remy: I'm hungry! I don't know where I am and I don't know when I'll find food again.

Gusteau: Remy. You are better than that. You are a cook! Cooks make. Thieves take. You are not a thief.

Remy: But I am hungry.

Gusteau: Food will come, Remy. Food always comes to those who love to cook.

In this passage, Gusteau – a character we might interpret as the material expression of Remy's super-ego – teaches Remy the difference between hunger and appetite. In civilized society, as compared with the animal world, hunger pangs should not determine the circumstances or timing of eating. Other considerations, like moral standards, should take precedence. Self-control,

according to Mennell, was one of the principal qualities that propelled the West away from the gluttonous habits of the Middle Ages and led to the emergence of strict rules about healthy eating, such as those that prevail today. He states, 'It is hardly surprising if people drawn from ranks of society, where the fear for centuries had been simply getting enough to eat did not immediately develop self-control when suddenly confronted with plentiful food' (Mennell 1997:332).

As a rat emerging from the wild into human society, Remy undergoes the same acquisition of self-control that, according to Mennell, took Western nations hundreds of years to develop. Hence, when Remy meets up with his father after having lived in the human world awhile, his father comments upon his changed appearance: 'You look thin. Why is that? A shortage of food or a surplus of snobbery?' Thinness, in Western society today, is a sign of gastronomic moderation in the face of overabundance, and indicates a healthy way of life, yielding a more beautiful body. To many Westerners, as well, thinness symbolizes moral superiority and high social status, reflected above all in the ability to exert self-control, which is a defining mark of civilized people. This pattern extends back to the nineteenth century, when 'eating less rather than more became a preferred pattern for those who were status conscious' (Brumberg 1997:173).

Popular opinion has long held France to be gastronomically superior to other nations, a reputation that it has enjoyed at least since the time of Louis XIV (Mennell 1985:109–33). Therefore it is not surprising that the film *Ratatouille*, despite being a product of California producers, artists, and writers, emphasizes Remy's intimate connection with France. Prior to finding his home in Gusteau's restaurant, Remy negotiates the streets and buildings of Paris. As he does so, and sprinkled throughout the film, viewers are treated to stereotypical, but evocative, images: nineteenth-century Parisian buildings, a beautiful panorama of Paris at night, lovers passionately kissing, a mime creating an invisible wall, a painter at work on a nude. Above all, however, is the French self-image of their country as the world epicenter of great cuisine. Even before the film's title appears on screen, we see a television set airing a program that shows the iconic Eiffel Tower, then pans to the top of the Tower from which we catch a dwarfed view of France. In fact, the first words in the film are uttered by a television narrator who states, 'Although each of the world's countries would like to dispute this fact, we French know the truth; the best food in the world is made in France. The best food in France is made in Paris, and the best food in Paris, some say, is made by

Chef Auguste Gusteau'. The film thus creates an association between Remy the rat and high cuisine – not merely high cuisine, but reputedly the highest cuisine, a potent symbol of civilization.

The Timeliness of *Ratatouille*

One reason for *Ratatouille's* enormous success is the film's incorporation of timely themes, including ethnic diversity. Names of film characters in *Ratatouille* assume a particular symbolic significance, especially when it comes to ethnic identity. The association of Remy with France is enhanced by his name, which is thoroughly French, and contrasts with that of his father, Django, who is known by a Romany, or Gypsy, name. Django in the Romany language means 'I awake', which in fact describes what happens to Remy's father when, at the end of the film, he comes to recognize that humans are not all bad. Emile, Remy's brother, also bears a French name, appropriate for his sympathy towards Remy and willingness to listen and learn about human habits. Chef Auguste Gusteau is obviously French, with a family name that has its root in the Latin word for 'taste'. A minor character in the film, Ambrister Minion, is Anton Ego's personal assistant and has a surname that translates from the French as 'peon' or 'subordinate'.

The kitchen staff at Gusteau's is ethnically diverse, as judged by names and physical characteristics. This situation meets our expectations of a Parisian restaurant, yesterday and today. The server Mustafa has a name of Arabic origin, which is in fact one of the names of Mohammed. Several of the cooks are unambiguously French. They include Pompidou and La Rousse, the latter of whom takes his name from the famous encyclopedic Larousse Gastronomique. Sous-chef Colette bears an eminently French name, and speaks with a French accent, although to some eyes she appears Asian or Eurasian in origin. The ethnic diversity represented in the film, together with the biracial romance between Colette and Linguini, reflect contemporary cosmopolitan life and undoubtedly account in part for the immense popularity of the film among western audiences today. At the same time, this film was released when, for a variety of reasons, ethnic tensions in France were running high. Thus, despite a kitchen romance and inter-species cooperation, at the end of the day, we are treated to a multi-cultural (even multi-species) kitchen staff serving an ethnically homogenous clientele. Of course, such divisions of ethnicity and class at the swinging kitchen door are neither the exclusive property of France nor Western colonialism in general, but may be observed in many parts of the world.

Other names in the film are descriptive of their dramatic roles rather than ethnic identity. This is the case, for example, with Anton Ego, whose surname expresses his inflated sense of himself, and with Linguini, who is depicted as tall and lanky, the shape of the pasta after which he is named. The chef who has taken over the kitchen is aptly named 'Skinner', referring to both a culinary technique and an intimidating interpersonal style. To be 'skinned alive' is a frightening prospect, and something that this diminutive character unleashes on his staff with a blood-curdling grin. To generalize then, the rats have human-like names in that they are somewhat random (we do not expect people named Baker to be bakers), and the animated people have names that reflect their characters, much like we might name a pinto horse 'Paint', or a spotted dog 'Spot'. This nominal reversal is one of many ways that ordinary rules are inverted to create a comical world, where animals act like humans, and humans reassert their animal nature.

Another feature of the film that probably resonates with audiences today is Colette's assertive feminism. As sous-chef, Colette is subject to the unpredictable demands of her white male superior, Skinner. After Linguini (with surreptitious help from Remy) demonstrates his ability to invent a marvelous soup, the furious Skinner sets out to prove Linguini incompetent. He orders Colette to teach Linguini how to cook. Colette is obviously unhappy about taking on this new responsibility. Linguini, all too aware of her displeasure, tries to ameliorate the situation by telling Colette, 'Listen, I just want you to know how honored I am to be studying under a ...' Colette cuts him off and stabs a knife through his shirtsleeve, thereby pinning him to the worktable. At this point Colette reveals her feelings about her status in Gusteau's kitchen.

No, you listen. I just want you to know exactly who you are dealing with. How many women do you see in this kitchen? Only me. Why do you think that is? ... Because Haute Cuisine is an antiquated hierarchy built upon rules written by stupid old men, rules designed to make it impossible for women to enter this world. But still I am here. How did this happen? Because I'm the toughest cook in this kitchen. I've worked too hard for too long to get here, and I'm not going to jeopardize it for some garbage boy who got lucky. Got it?

By the time she finishes her angry tirade, Colette has punctured Linguini's shirt and pinned him to the table with three knives. In just a few words Colette, Skinner's subordinate, clearly affirms her superiority over another white male, Linguini. In this passage, she also reveals herself to be an ambitious, successful woman in the workplace who has risen to her position against all odds.

The organization of the kitchen at Gusteau's restaurant, together with Colette's social position and professional posture, are perfectly understandable in a twenty-first century culinary environment. These features undoubtedly add to the film's timeliness and popular appeal. And, in as much as this scene's dialogue is punctuated with the repetitive stabs of razor sharp kitchen knives, the gender reversal is heightened, and its comic effect – it is somehow very funny – reminds us that laughter may act as a release from what we perceive, even subconsciously, as dangerous situations.

The issue of food quality control and safety is yet another of *Ratatouille's* timely themes. We have already mentioned human concern over food contamination from rodent infestation as it appears in the film. Remember, too, that in *Ratatouille* the rats' alertness to the possibility of ingesting poisoned food, as well as Remy's insistence on paw-washing before eating, mirror human concerns about maintaining cleanliness while eating. In addition to these matters, the film raises the conflict between fresh, local ingredients, slowly prepared to perfection in a masterful kitchen on the one hand, and fast-cooked, industrially packaged food, on the other. Skinner is evil not only for his capricious, domineering and snobbish behavior toward kitchen staff, but also for his involvement in the mass production of poor-quality frozen foods. Illegally using Gusteau's valued name on package labels, Skinner's products include Gusteau's French Pizza, Gusteau's Microwave Burritos, and a Chinese food concoction promoted through an advertising campaign that reads, 'Easy to cook, easy to eat. Gusteau makes Chinese food 'Chine-Easy!''

In one film sequence, where Skinner issues instructions to his advertising agent, François Dupuis, he enthusiastically plans for the debut of a new product with an American theme.

Skinner: I want you to work up something for my latest frozen food concept: 'Gusteau's Corn Puppies'. Like corn dogs, only smaller, bite size!

Dupuis: What are corn dogs?

Skinner: Cheap sausages dipped in batter and deep fried. You know ... American. Whip something up, maybe Gusteau in overalls and Huckleberry Tom hat.

Dupuis: Or as a giant ear of corn in doggie makeup?

Skinner: Yes, but with dignity.

Aside from expressing a stereotypical view of American fast food – which contrasts dramatically with Gusteau's carefully prepared French fare – Skinner's description of corn dogs falling on the ears of a health-conscious viewing public is nothing short of toxic. *Ratatouille* thereby echoes an extremely

popular concern of modern consumers, that of how to keep mass-produced food healthy and uncontaminated. How and what to eat is currently a prevalent topic of research and investigative journalism. It appears repeatedly in newspapers, magazines, and best-selling publications designed for the educated reading public (Nestle 2003, 2006, 2007, 2008; Pollan 2006, 2008, 2009). At numerous moments throughout the film, viewers confront issues related to food health and safety. This feature of *Ratatouille* adds to its timeliness and public appeal. Anxiety over healthy eating even extends to the matter of food safety for pets. Considering recent instances of serious pet food contamination (Nestle 2008), this issue should be of concern to any animal lover, including people who keep so-called designer rats as companion animals.

It was a stroke of genius for *Ratatouille* writers Brad Bird and Jan Pinkava to select a rat as protagonist for their story. As Birgitta Edelman has pointed out (Edelman 2005), the rat occupies an ambivalent status in the western imaginary. On the one hand, rats – constituting the most widely distributed rodents on earth – are generally (although not universally) 'considered to be an ugly, filthy, dangerous and disease-carrying specimen of vermin' (Edelman 2005:119). These creatures have long been regarded as intruders into the human world, spoiling crops and food, and spreading noxious germs among densely packed concentrations of city dwellers. Remember, too, that it was a particular species of flea, borne on the bodies of black rats, which were carriers of the fourteenth-century Black Plague. Since the arrival of sanitary and medical developments in the nineteenth century, rats have been especially associated with the symbolic, hellish underworld of sewers. Edelman (2005:124–5) explains that, with implementation of nineteenth-century health reforms,

the rat was now transformed into a creature which held a position in the animal world that was a homologue to the position of dirt and refuse in the new hygienic order of society ... The symbolic role of the rat seems to have grown in importance at a rate matching the importance of the novel draining system, the sewers, which gloriously separated and veiled the waste products from the sight and smell of the inhabitants above. The construction of the sewer system implied that dirt and refuse was [sic] rejected and deviated into a physical underworld, inhabited by rats and pigs. ... The fear that rats would leave the dirt and darkness of the sewers and attack the light and clean world above made the disgusting little rodent suitable to play a role in all kinds of narrative of horror. ...

Further, Stallybrass and White (1986:145) believe that 'the hierarchy of the body [is] transcoded through the hierarchy of the city'. That is, the sewer, the lower

part of the city, has come to represent the lower parts of the body, those parts that exude repulsive waste matter. The association between sewers and the lower part of the body is more than symbolic. It is immediate and direct, given that bodily waste eventually finds its way to the sewer. The sewer and vermin that inhabit the sewer are, to the western mind, chaotic, dark, dangerous and filthy, in contrast to the bright, orderly and safe world above.

On the other hand, rats in the modern-day world are also depicted as cuddly, affectionate creatures that make ideal pets (Edelman 2005:119). In Edelman's words, 'The pet rat is divided by a sharp break from the wild rat and has entered a world where anthropomorphized animals are treated like children, ascribed consumer needs like any other member of society (Christmas presents, birthday cakes, toys, "quality time", etc. Edelman 2005:132) and commemorated with obituaries and gravestones' (Brandes 2009). Edelman analyzes the process through which 'the rat has made an inverted trip from rejection to acceptance, from sewer to parlour, or from trap to lap' (Edelman 2005:120). Rats have been symbolically cleansed so as to make them suitable as pets. Their cages are meticulously cleaned, they are served food and water from sparkling dishware, and they are provided toys, like ropes and ladders for climbing and hammocks for resting, all designed for their educational benefit and amusement (Edelman 2005:131). Contrary to the image of the rat as dirty and disgusting, Edelman (2005:133) cites several actual characteristics of this rodent, which most westerners would consider appealing: 'The rat is small and furry, and it has a human-like diet and exists in a society, taking good care of its offspring. It is intelligent and playful and bonds easily to humans'. These are traits inherent to the rat that make this creature suitable for domestication and accord it a place within modern civilization. We should remember, too, the role of laboratory rats today as creatures we sacrifice for the benefit of human health.

Ratatouille plays on the dualistic cultural construction of rats that exists in today's world. In this film, rats are not all good or bad. They exhibit an ability to learn and become civilized, a process exemplified by the transformation of Django's vermin colony from garbage-picking, sewer dwelling creatures, indiscriminating about what they eat, into a pack of well-organized, rule-bound animals willing and able to help out in Gusteau's gourmet kitchen. Remy the rat is the prime example of a creature that undergoes change from animal to human. He, along with the rest of the rat colony, is associated with garbage and the sewer. But throughout the film he evolves into a different kind of being, gradually demonstrating inborn traits or acquiring new ones associated with humanity. Remy even becomes a kind of pet rat to

Linguini. Linguini takes him into his home, providing the little creature food and shelter. When the two of them have a falling out, and Remy temporarily abandons the human world, Linguini expresses deep remorse. Linguini returns home, only to find Remy gone. We view him pining over Remy's tiny sleeping area in fact, a tiny bed – now empty. It is above all Remy's interest in food and cooking that motivates him to learn and exhibit civilized behavior. Everything from his bipedalism to his attention to cleanliness and his thirst for reading can be attributed to his passionate involvement in the culinary arts. Hence he is a near-perfect fictional embodiment of Wrangham's admittedly controversial thesis. *Ratatouille* is above all a story of the civilizing process.

But this film is also a Proustian tale of the awakening of memory and emotional sensibilities through food. At the end of the tale, ratatouille, the culinary item, is finally introduced into the plot. Aside from finally revealing to viewers the meaning of the movie's title, the result of this narrative sequence is particularly poignant. Anton Ego has come to Gusteau's to experience for himself whether or not the restaurant deserves recent critical accolades. Stuck with the job of preparing a meal for this demanding snob, yet devoid of the service of the regular kitchen staff, Remy decides to prepare ratatouille. Upon hearing of this decision, Colette frowns and exclaims: 'Ratatouille? It's a peasant dish. Are you sure you want to serve this to Ego?' Remy proceeds to prepare his own version of this very ordinary fare. When Ego takes his first bite, he becomes rapturous and is mentally transported back to childhood. We view him as a little boy having just fallen from his bicycle, with skinned knees. As a consolation, his mother places a soothing dish of ratatouille before him. Ratatouille, a simple vegetable stew originating in Nice, France, proves as perfect a dish for Anton Ego the wounded child as for Anton Ego the food critic. Ratatouille becomes the medium through which Anton Ego is converted from a snobbish food connoisseur into a person who understands the power of uncomplicated, familiar, and healthy cuisine to produce emotional, as well as biological, nourishment.

As the film reaches its conclusion, satisfying in that it is both foredrawn and surprising, we are reminded of the many clever inversions employed to keep us engaged: peasant food becomes *haute cuisine*, rats become diners, and a critic becomes an adoring fan. The colorful imagery is a feast for the eyes, and the energetic thrust of the storyline, as revealed in imaginative angles, dangerous cuts, and wildly shifting points of view, provides a kinesthetic delight impossible to achieve in any other medium. In other words, this is art and anthropology at

their best: it is appealing, revealing, and, dare we say, fun. And so we hope this analysis may serve as a modest pitch for the uses of animated film in the larger work of understanding ourselves, as anthropologists, as moviegoers, as people.

In the film *Ratatouille*, the meal of ratatouille, as produced by Remy the rat, unites man and beast. *Ratatouille* the film and ratatouille the food communicate the idea that humans and rats ultimately share more in terms of aptitude and feelings than divides them. The film thus speaks to the growing passion for animal rights and awareness of harmony among all living beings. Yet *Ratatouille* is not a simple tale. Rather, this film is a multifaceted artifact, reflecting the complexities of our times, the comic play of stereotypes and their transformations, the changing values around food and its preparation, and indeed, not only what it means to be 'civilized', but what it means to be humane.

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