

Colonial Food Metaphors in Postcolonial Cinema: The Case of Michelange Quay's *Eat, for This is My Body* (2007)

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Abstract

This article analyses the use of imagery relating to food and culinary practices and their relation to colonial power dynamics and stereotypes in films set or filmed in post-colonial contexts. The colonial history of the Caribbean is particularly linked to the use of food imagery in the definition of colonial power dynamics and the representation of colonized and enslaved populations. The works of American-Haitian filmmaker Michelange Quay exploit this imagery as a critique of Haiti's colonial past and neocolonial present. The article focuses on Quay's *Eat, for This is My Body* (2007), an oneiric exploration of race, power, religion, hunger, food and freedom, set in France and Haiti. The film is analysed through the prism of "food metaphors" evoking cannibalism, starvation, and gluttony found in colonial discourses and which persist in post-colonial representations and imaginaries. The analysis shows how these metaphors are visually represented on film, and how they are used to constitute a new idiom with which to describe the postcolonial experience in Haiti.

Keywords: Food, colonialism, postcolonialism, cinema, Haiti, France, race, racism, cannibalism, anthropophagy

Contextual Introduction

Food and culinary practices have been an important focus of reflection in cultural studies, sociology and anthropology since the 1970s. This doubtless derives from "the notion that studying the most banal of human activities can yield crucial information and insights about both daily life and world view" (Voski Avakian & Haber, 2005: 1). As for the representation of food in film, it reveals "powerful, coded, cultural meanings that structure the arrangements of social life" (Ferry, 2003: 1). Writing in 2004, Anne L. Bower suggests that the study of food in film is a recent phenomenon, despite being "part of the way

that, for over a century now, movies have been telling us who we are, constructing our economic and political aspirations; our sense of sexual, national and ethnic identity” (Bower, 2004).¹ The study of food in film is a developing field, and there are still few analyses of the centrality of food in postcolonial cinema.² And yet, film and postcolonial studies are both “deeply involved with questions of representation, and they have much to offer each other concerning the forms and legacies of epistemological violence” (Ponzanesi & Waller, 2012: 3). Postcolonial studies examine different categories of cultural production: those that result from or replicate colonial or imperial epistemologies and representations, and those that represent the experience of the violence of these epistemologies, and resist and subvert them.³ At the intersection of these two disciplines, postcolonial film studies critically deconstruct work that derive from a colonialist imaginary and explore work that subvert, contradict and question this imaginary.

Food and food imagery are important aspects of colonial discourses and postcolonial theories. The colonial history of the Caribbean is particularly linked to the use of food imagery in the definition of colonial power dynamics and the representation of colonized and enslaved populations. Colonialist and neo-colonialist discourses reduce Caribbean subjects to “figures evoking pathological eating”, from the “the blood-thirsty cannibal” to the “glutton, the bulimic, the uncouth eater, the starved, the happy-to-be-starved” (Loichot, 2013: viii). Indeed, in colonial, and thus unequal, power dynamics, the colonized, exploited subject has been “systematically presented as less than human through their relationship to food in order to mask the responsibility of the colonial or imperial power for the hunger of the slavery or the postslavery subject” (Loichot, 2013: xvi). This relationship to food is often visually represented through the deployment of two principal images: “insatiable hunger” – often coupled with a consumption of raw food, a lack of discrimination in the mixing of foodstuffs, an absence of implements – and “a lack of need to eat” (Loichot, 2013: xvi). These two opposite extremes of gluttony and ascetism work hand in hand in colonial discourse. They make the colonial subject appear sub-, or beyond, human, justifying the need to civilize, in the case of the glutton, and to subjugate, in the case of the “frugal African”. In addition to the “forced hunger” of colonialism and slavery, Loichot identifies a “forced-feeding by the dumping of goods onto consumers to maintain a desire for dependency” in colonial and neo-colonial contexts (Loichot, 2013: xvi). This is the case with foreign aid in Caribbean countries such as Haiti, or in the French overseas regions in the Caribbean who are dependent on the French state, and France’s distribution system, for food imports.

The figure of the cannibal is also a representation of the colonized as an abject, gluttonous, indiscriminate and inhuman eater. However, the term has also been reclaimed by postcolonial and anticolonial theories to describe the colonizer. The latter consumes the colonized through exploitation and slavery, and more directly deprives the exploited subjects from food produced on their land – by either exporting it to the metropolitan centre or imposing its own goods and thereby disconnecting the people from their land, which no longer feeds them.⁴ This theoretical thinking on colonial “food metaphors” will now be used to read the Haitian film-maker Michelange Quay’s *Eat, for This Is My Body* (2007).

Michelange Quay’s *Eat, for This Is My Body* (2007)

Michelange Quay is a Haitian American director who studied in Miami and at the Tisch School of the Arts in New York. He has produced several short films both in the United States and in Haiti, one of which, *Gospel of the Creole Pig* (2004), was shown at the Cannes Film Festival. *Eat, for This is My Body* (2007) is his first feature-length film; it stars Catherine Samie of the Comédie Française theatre company and the award-winning Sylvie Testud. Quay’s cinema broaches issues of postcolonialism, the impact of colonial history and neo-colonial interventions on contemporary Haiti. Along with other internationally-

renowned Haitian filmmakers such as Raoul Peck, he has contributed to the promotion of Haitian cinema abroad, and belongs to a broader category of Caribbean filmmakers who have “achieved a visible presence over time, in their divisive material and in celebrated venues, confirming an international influence and impact on film culture” (Robinson, 2010: 68).

Works that explore the history and culture of postcolonial sites such as Haiti offer important insights into how the postcolonial experience can be articulated through artistic and literary practice. While seldom featuring in academic studies, *Eat, for This Is My Body* is one such work. An oneiric exploration of race, power, religion, hunger, food and freedom, the film is set in Haiti and France (or solely in Haiti, depending on the reading). The narrative structure of *Eat, for This Is My Body* can be divided into three parts. The first part features shots of different Haitian landscapes: the sea, mountains, urban shantytowns, a riverside, a quarry. There are also scenes of Haitian everyday life, including a scene showing a woman in labour, and a four-minute sequence depicting a voodoo dance ritual. The second part starts in a large, scarcely-furnished, dilapidated but clean room in a French chateau, in which an old white woman, played by Catherine Samie, lies in a king-sized bed. The woman utters a four-minute monologue – the longest continuous section of dialogue in the film – laden with biblical phraseology, in which she simultaneously denounces and defends her “childrens’” devouring and profaning her body.

After this monologue, the action follows a group of young black boys who walk through the Haitian landscape and arrive at the chateau in the French countryside. There they are given haircuts and dressed in tuxedos, after which they sit around an empty table with Madame, played by Sylvie Testud. Madame asks if they are hungry, and then suggests they “pretend” to eat. The next scene shows the children alone at the table where a large three-tier white cake has appeared and off which they proceed to tear chunks to eat and throw at each other. Next follow several scenes where a young black butler tends to the old woman, a group of Haitian women “jam” on synthesizers and mixing decks, and Madame and the butler interact and experience various role reversals. This movement ends with the butler leading Madame away from the chateau and back to the Haitian riverside along which the boys had walked on their way to the chateau.

The third part of the film mainly follows Madame as she walks along the river, through a busy marketplace and streets, ignored by passers-by. This is followed by a three-minute carnival sequence from which Madame is absent. Madame is also shown attempting to nurse a baby she finds abandoned in a deserted hospital, standing in a courtyard that gives onto the street where the carnival procession takes place, eating before an audience of Haitians, and lying on a beach in the penultimate scene of the film. The children reappear twice in this part, once playing war in one of the chateau’s empty rooms, and at the end on the beach where they dance around Madame’s body. The film ends with the butler awakening in bed, as though roused from a dream.

From this scant overview alone, the reader will discern images and metaphors infused with the issues of race, colonialism, violence, sexuality and power. There are several possible vectors along which this film may be approached: Caribbean carnival and music, motherhood, gender relations, and ecology. However, this article will hone in specifically on the imagery relating to food and culinary practices and their relation to colonial power dynamics and stereotypes in the film.

Cannibalism

Cannibalism is a key motif in Quay’s film, and in cinema in general. Eating and cannibalism are exploited in film to explore themes of sexuality, desire, violence, and consumerism. The depths of

human depravity are often represented in horror or mainstream films through the depiction of cannibals, be it the un-human anthropophagic tribes in colonial and adventure narratives like Tarzan or Indiana Jones, or psychopathic (white) characters such as Hannibal Lecter.⁵ These figures conform to two aspects of cannibalism analysed in postcolonial critique; the image of the savage and the figure of the white colonizer, bearer of civilization who nevertheless partakes in barbaric eating practices similar to the savage's. Both representations feature in Quay's film, blurring the lines between colonizer and colonized, and between 'savage' and 'civilized', as will be demonstrated further on.

The very title of the film is taken from the Biblical episode of transubstantiation in which Jesus offers his flesh and blood to his followers. This use of Western religious references harks back to the role of religion in the colonialist project, and the rhetoric of the white saviour's burden of civilizing the colonized "heathen" peoples. In an interview, Quay explains his use of biblical references:

This idea of transubstantiation, related to the flesh, is interesting. Maybe Jesus was proposing his apostles step out of themselves symbolically: I'm eating you, you're eating me, drinking my blood... [...] Such views are confronted in the movie because it has to do with The Bible and the conquest of a planet that was done. It's interesting to use the essence of that message against itself... (Barlet, 2008)

Quay depicts cannibalism as an act perpetrated by both the colonizer and the colonized. Colonialism and neo-colonialism are cannibalistic in their consuming of the Other's land and resources, and the devouring of the colonized body through labour and sexual exploitation. And then there is the colonial trope of cannibalism as indicative of the savagery of the colonized which justifies the need to invade and civilize. But with the rhetoric of transubstantiation, the idea of cannibalism encouraged and valorised by the colonizer de-stabilizes the concept of cannibalism as proper to the colonized Other, and suggests it is more of a Western construct.

Cannibalistic acts are never directly represented in the film; anthropophagy is merely suggested by the title, visual hints, and the old woman's monologue. The latter makes the most direct reference to cannibalism through the use of strong visceral imagery:

Je suis l'abondance. Je donne, je donne, et je donne, et je ne cesse jamais de donner de ma poitrine et de leur lait, je ne vois pas la fin. Mes enfants, mes enfants adorés et rétifs, ils prennent, ils prennent, ils ne donnent rien en retour. Ils coupent mes os pour en faire du charbon, ils griffent et arrachent la peau de mon visage. Ils me crachent dessus. Dans leur ignorance, ils me chient dessus, ils me pourrissent dessus, ils me profanent. Ils ont transformé mon corps en un désert. Pardonnez-leur. Car ils ne savent pas ce qu'ils font. Pardonnez-leur, car ils ont faim, tellement faim. [...] Je suis la nourriture. Je suis la nourriture. Je suis le mangeur de nourriture. Je suis le mangeur de nourriture. Je suis le mangeur de nourriture. Venez avec moi et nourrissez-vous de moi. Buvez, car ceci est mon sang. Mangez, car ceci est mon corps. Mangez chimpanzés noirs et ingrats. Mangez cannibales, sauvages, prognathes, pygmées. Mangez, Mangez, jusqu'à ce que vos ventres tendus éclatent. Mangez, jusqu'à la toute nouvelle génération. Mangez, mangez... car ceci est mon corps. Mangez, car ceci est mon corps. Mangez, mangez, mangez, car ceci est mon corps.

(Quay, *Eat, for This Is My Body*, 2007) ⁶

The image of the insatiable eater is evoked by "eat, eat, until your stomachs burst", and the mantra-like repetition of the words "eat" and "food". The idea of the indiscriminate cannibalistic eater is found in the

description of the “children” eating her bones and defecating on her. The reference to “charbon [charcoal/coal]” suggests that they not only eat her but also use her body to warm themselves, makes it seem as though the cannibals actually make exhaustive use of the bodies they consume. In the eyes of philosophers of cannibalism, the sixteenth-century author Michel de Montaigne being the most renowned among them, consuming the body of another is a productive act, since it entails adding to one’s own strength and knowledge. It is through this idea of selectively “devouring” the culture of the colonizer that cannibalism inspired many artistic and literary movements that developed in post-colonial contexts, particularly in Latin America. In his *Manifesto Antropófago*, or cannibalist manifesto, (1928), Brazilian modernist poet Oswald de Andrade described cannibalism as a metaphor that “permits the Brazilian subject to forge his specular colonial identity into an autonomous and original (as opposed to dependent, derivative) national culture” (Bary, 1991: 35). Thus, in Quay’s film, the old woman’s bones are put to good use for the well-being of her “children” as well as their cultural development.

The visual allusions to cannibalism in *Eat, for This is My Body* are established through scenes where characters eat and drink “white food” and milk. These eating scenes are audio-visually linked to shots of human bodies to suggest anthropophagy is taking place. A recurring image that contributes to this illusion in the second part of the film is that of a vat of churning milk. At different points, black and white characters appear or are made to appear as though they are in a vat. An example of this is a scene which starts with a shot of the vat, followed by a close-up of the milk churning inside it. This fades into a shot of an expanse of white liquid, into which the bodies of black children dive and disappear in quick succession. The image then shifts back to the vat, and the viewer is left to speculate as to whether the children are inside or not. Other scenes where the vat appears show the old woman sitting inside it, and the butler bending over it and dipping his face in the churning milk. These “vat scenes” or often superimposed onto scenes where characters ingest milk or white food. These can be taken for visual links to the contents of the vat, suggesting the contents of the vat, and thus the persons within it, are consumed by other characters. For instance, after the scene where the children seemingly dive into the vat, the milk is collected by the butler in a baby bottle and fed to the old woman, who in a subsequent scene is also shown sitting in the vat. Similarly, the scene that follows shows Madame making her way to her room and lying on her bed drinking milk from a baby bottle.

Sound is also employed to create audial links between eating and vat scenes. The sound of the churning milk is heard in the scene where the children seem to dive into the vat, from the close-up of the contents of the vat to the shot of the children diving into the white liquid, further emphasizing the fact that the children have effectively dived into the vat itself. At the same time, Haitian music plays over the scene showing the old woman in the vat and the following scene where the butler dips his head into the vat, right through to the next scene which follows Madame down the corridor to the room where she drinks from the bottle in bed, which suggests Madame is “drinking” the old woman.

Thus, the second part of *Eat for This is My Body* establishes a cycle of eating and being eaten in which all characters are involved. All those who have eaten from the vat are also dipped into it. They are simultaneously the eaten and the eaters. All save for Madame, who does not dive into the vat and only drinks from it. She only takes and cannot give. Yet this is fitting if this eating-and-being-eaten cycle is interpreted as symbolic of the unequal power relations at play in colonial and neo-colonial situations. The female characters in the film depend on the milk provided by the children, who are dissolved into it, and the butler, who feeds it to the old woman. The children are at the mercy of Madame, who feeds, bathes and clothes them, but does not go as far as the old woman in giving up her body for them to eat or drink. As in many colonial and anti-colonial discourses and artistic representations, the cannibal “has come to stand for a number of different ways in which relations between colonising and colonised bodies and notions might be imagined” (Sheller, 2003, 149).

All characters in the film are made to appear as though they partake in some form of cannibalism, but it is a concept and act that is tightly imbricated with the white female characters' words and deeds. The message of transubstantiation is very much "turned against itself" with this subversion of the white women's "sacrificial" stance, since in addition to offering sustenance they physically ingest those by whom they claim to be ingested. What is more, the Haitian characters are only portrayed as practising cannibalistic acts while at the French chateau situated in the former colonial metropole, whereas in colonial discourses and literature acts of cannibalism and savagery are typically "displaced" "from the narrative of Western modernity [...] followed by its recontextualization as an 'Other' to serve the purposes of Western fantasy" (Sheller, 2003: 144). Here the "Western fantasy" comes home. Thus, the film suggests that cannibalism as proof of savagery and as a metaphor for sacrifice is in fact a Western construct and a Western practice.

Extremes of Eating

Two other food-related metaphors from colonialist and racist discourses explored in the film are gluttony and starvation. The old woman's monologue in part two contains imagery describing the gluttony of her "children", such as the repetition of "nourriture", "mangez" "je donne", and the use of phrases "Je suis l'abondance" or "Je ne cesse jamais de donner. De ma poitrine et de leur lait, je ne vois pas la fin" (Quay, *Eat, for This Is My Body*, 2007). The scene showing the children eating the cake, is also an illustration of this discourse of "gluttony". The children take demonstrable pleasure in devouring the cake, and much of the cake is lost through the playful eating and throwing bits of it across the table. But it is the antinomy of gluttony, starvation, which features more prominently in the film. Starvation is addressed in *Eat, for This Is My Body* in scenes where Madame interacts with Haitian characters. For instance, in a scene in the second part of the film, Madame and the children are seated around a dining table. She asks whether they are hungry, they reply that they are. Madame then suggests they "pretend to eat", tells them to close their eyes, and utters: "Nous avons toute la nourriture du monde devant nous. Tout ce qu'on veut. C'est tellement bon. C'est tellement bon" (Quay, *Eat, for This Is My Body*, 2007).

She then prompts each child to say "thank you" for their imaginary meal, first whispering into the ear of the child seated to her left, which initiates a string of Chinese whispers around the table. When the tour of the table is complete, and the child at Madame's right whispers "merci" to her, she pauses knowingly, then pronounces "merci" aloud, looking at each boy in turn as they all reply in unison in ritual-like fashion.

Another ritualized performance where food is offered but not given, comes in the third part of the film where Madame "falsely" feeds an abandoned baby in a hospital. At the start of the scene, the camera follows Madame down the deserted corridors and up to the room where the baby is found. She takes off her shoes before ascending the stairs, and enters the baby's room with slow, deferential steps. The framing commences with a long shot of the room where the naked baby is shown lying alone on the floor at the centre of the frame, thus foregrounding the child's vulnerability. Madame then enters the frame, taking slow, deferential steps towards the baby, then sits beside it and proceeds to unbutton the top of her dress. The framing of the shot and positioning of the characters is redolent of religious iconography depicting the Virgin Mary and the infant Jesus. This impression is further emphasized by the following shot; a medium-closeup of Madame bare-chested reaching for the baby and putting it to her breast. The image replicates the intimacy of the Virgin and child paintings, and Madame's neutral expression also echoes the placid and emotionless face of Mary in such iconography. However, the continuous screams of the baby throughout the scene and the child's rejection of Madame's breast undermine this solemnity and ritualization. As with the invocation to the children to partake of and be

thankful for an imaginary meal around the table, this offer of sustenance is vacuous and bogus. Either the baby does not respond to Madame's attempt at maternal care or she simply does not have any milk in her breast to offer. Madame's attempts at feeding the Haitian children and hence replacing the mother, from whom they have been separated, are vain, yet motivated by a desire to civilize and educate through nourishment and induction into Western moral and religious codes. These ritualistic performances, alluded to in the film's title, and the imagery relating to transubstantiation and self-sacrifice are part of the film's overarching exploration of religious and spiritual themes. But they also demonstrate the message of Western Christianity being turned "against itself," and can be seen as a critique of the exploitation and starvation of enslaved and colonized peoples who are starved yet evangelized, physically exploited yet offered the promise of religious salvation.

Madame's failure to connect with the children and other inhabitants in the film and her visit to the former colony in part three can also be read as a comment on foreign intervention in Haiti, which ultimately does not benefit the local population. In the hospital scene, the milk is offered, but it does not reach the child. Aid is offered but does not reach the people.

Another scene that can be read in terms of colonial starvation or neo-colonialist exploitation shows Madame walking onto a stage and proceeding to eat in front of an audience of silent Haitians. Although her plate is full and well garnished, Madame only eats a spoonful before looking up at her audience. They merely observe her access to displayed plenitude, to "toute la nourriture du monde [all the food in the world]". But she has no need of all she has before her and consumes just a small portion, the rest is surplus, thus hinting at the imbalanced accumulation of wealth which is at the core of the economics of colonialism.⁷

The subversion of colonial and racialized "food metaphors" in Quay's work invites a reconceptualization of colonial and neo-colonial power relations. Quay claims, "I don't see her [the old woman] as a bad person. Nor do I see the black children wolfing down the cake of humanitarianism as bad" (Nayman, 2018: 40). The balance of power, conceptually at least, does not simply fall on the side of the white women in the film. While post-colonial reality, the consequences of colonialism and imperialism, is still ever-present in contemporary Haiti, its reach goes beyond the colonized; it also has an impact on the white women, whose grasp on reality and view of themselves are outdated and who are shown to exercise little influence over Haitians. The fates of colonized and colonizer are intertwined, for they belong to the same history.

Quay transcends the discourses of "the savage eater" and colonial exploitation to present a life experience in Glissantian "Relation", where "toute identité s'étend dans un rapport à l'Autre [every identity extends itself in relation to the Other]" (Glissant, 1990: 23) with varying power dynamics and different types of relationships.⁸ Quay asserts that "[i]n the movie, there's a desire to talk about people, either white or black. Any people!" (Barlet, 2008) The film reverses the discourse of dependency of the colony on the metropole and the developing country on charitable developed nations, the bearers of humanitarian aid. Madame is more dependent on the Haitians in order to define herself than they are on her. The scene that shows her walking through a marketplace ignored by passers-by, demonstrates this. As does her multiple failed attempts at "feeding" Haitian children, which can be seen as a manifestation of an unfulfillable maternal urge. Testud's character is obliged to face Haitian post-colonial and post-slavery realities. For Quay, the film explores

The expectations of these persons about the world. It's actually inside their heads, far from the physical reality. There is some sort of paroxysm of questions, and finally about

some sort of cosmic or spiritual practice. It's all about action; you have to go out into the world and meet people.

(Barlet, 2008)

The Haitian children “go out” and discover the former colonizer’s world, and Madame at the end “meets” the Haitian cityscapes and people. Much like Madame’s character is made to reconsider her perceptions of the Other and of herself, the viewer re-evaluates their own preconceptions and prejudices, including those regarding food metaphors and colonial discourses.

Conclusion

Through the analysis of Michelange Quay’s *Eat, for This is My Body*, the author has attempted to demonstrate how focusing on colonial and racialized metaphors of food and food-related practices can constitute a vector for both creation and analysis of post-colonial cinema. It has been shown that in Quay’s film, colonial power dynamics and neo-colonial relations are questioned through the exploration of cannibalism, starvation and gluttony. As Sheller and Dayan point out in their respective works, Haitian cultural and artistic practice have developed new “idioms” with which to articulate and commemorate the country’s past (Dayan, 1998: 37; Sheller, 2003: 145). Quay exploits some of these idioms, namely the image of the cannibal and the indentured labourer, in his films, developing a cinematic idiom with which to address Haiti’s past and present.

Eat, for This is My Body constitutes the ideal visual essay with which to explore the question of food and racist stereotypes, and can be used as a prism through which to view other films that explore postcolonial issues, or mainstream films that feature residual racial and colonial stereotypes found in contemporary culture. The study of the legacies of colonial and racialized discourses as conveyed through food and imaginaries about food and how they are reprised and articulated in postcolonial and mainstream cinemas is a vital area of research that may stimulate interesting connections and collaborations between the fields of film, postcolonial, cultural, and of course, food studies.

Footnotes:

¹ For examples of studies of food in film, see: Ferry (2003), Bower (2004). Keller (2006).

² See the work of Marks (2000), Bower (2004), and Mannur (2010).

³ The term “post-colonial” will be used in this article, as a temporal marker and not in reference to the non-hyphenated “postcolonial” of postcolonial theory.

⁴ There are numerous studies on relations between cannibalism and colonial, imperial and neo-colonial discourses and practices see for instance: Forbes (2008), King (2000), Loichot (2013).

⁵ Works that look at cannibalism on film, with a focus on the colonial context, include: Barker (1998), Brown (2003).

⁶ All translations, unless otherwise specified, are the author’s.

⁷ A similar critique of exploitation of local populations by an élite can be found in Quay’s *Gospel of the Creole Pig*, which explores contemporary Haiti, religion, and colonialism. The “Creole Pig” is a running metaphor throughout the film, a synecdoche for the Haitian colonial and postcolonial

experience. A recurring character is a well-to-do investor, who describes himself in the following terms: “hier je mangeais le porc, aujourd’hui je spéculé sur le porc [yesterday I ate pork, today I speculate on pork]”. He has shifted from being the “creole pig”, to profiting from it. From being a colonized subject, to a neocolonial exploiter. The agent of colonial practice may have changed, but the practice itself remains. Indeed, several scenes show the investor speculating on, eating, and defecating pork in various forms. This shows there is only profit to be made for himself, and none for his country, which can be seen as critiquing the exploitation of Haiti by foreign powers and local elites alike. (Quay, *The Gospel of the Creole Pig*, 2004).

⁸ Glissant’s concept of relation is a kernel of his work, see for instance *Poétique de la Relation* (1990); *Traité du Tout-Monde, Poétique IV* (1997).

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