

Food as Story and Spectacle in *Big Night* (1996)

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ABSTRACT

Big Night (1996), one of the earliest American examples of a food film, is comprised of two distinct but intertwined aesthetics. One involves immigrant restaurateur brothers, Primo (Tony Shaloub) and Secondo (Stanley Tucci), and another involves a competing establishment run by conniving Pascal (Ian Holm). Tucci and Scott use *mise en scène* and camera work to portray the spectacle of food as a corollary to authenticity. Primo and Secondo's restaurant focuses on offering genuine Italian food from their childhoods while Pascal's restaurant is all about showmanship, not food. Tucci and Scott film each restaurant in starkly different ways to link the identity to the spectacle of food. Unlike much of the dialogue which concerns business and uneasy personal relationships, spectacle in *Big Night* focuses on food. While the main narrative strand explores character tensions, much of the running time and screen space showcases Italian food being prepared, eaten, and enjoyed.

Big Night (Campbell Scott, Stanley Tucci, 1996), one of the earliest American examples of a food film, showcases the distinct but intertwined aesthetics of two spaces. One involves the restaurant of immigrant restaurateur brothers, Primo (Tony Shaloub) and Secondo (Stanley Tucci), and another involves a competing establishment. The brothers' restaurant, Paradise, is a place of simple authenticity in which Primo serves as chef while Secondo runs the business. Secondo must somehow make money despite his brother's uncompromising culinary ethic that constrains the restaurant's menu and budget. Nearby is the highly successful Pascal's, run by another Italian immigrant, Pascal (Ian Holm), who duplicitously treats Secondo as a brother yet he plots to ruin Paradise so as to acquire the talents of Primo. Directors Scott and Tucci use *mise en scène* and camera work to portray the spectacle of food as a corollary to authenticity, which is significant because the brotherly feud shows the ease with which identity can be lost following a bid for assimilation after immigration.

Although spectacle is a "fundamental cinematic concept," it has proven difficult to define (Brown 157). Critics Sheldon Hall and Steve Neale note, "As an aesthetic phenomenon, spectacle has proven easier to exemplify than to define" (5). Critic Simon Lewis highlights that spectacle "seems to be fairly straightforward," but understanding how it functions is complicated (214). Lewis also argues that while spectacle can be the antithesis of narrative, the two are closer than previously acknowledged: each "*transmits information* to the spectator" (216). Likewise, Patrick Keating outlines a "cooperative model" of diegetic elements, including spectacle, that "work together to produce an intensified emotional response" (4). *Big Night* exemplifies this definition; scenes that push the narrative line and those that focus on the food itself (its preparation, cooking, serving, and consuming) work together to create the movie's emotive tableaux.

Unlike much of the dialogue which concerns business and uneasy personal relationships, spectacle in *Big Night* focuses

on food. While the main narrative strand explores character tensions, much of the running time and screen space showcases Italian food being prepared, eaten, and enjoyed, crucially, as a spectacle.¹ However, spectacle can also be any moment that is meant to be appreciated in terms other than as a means to advance the narrative. In a later book, King defines spectacle as “the production of images at which we might wish to stop and stare,” which describes the food in *Big Night* (4).

The competing settings of the individual restaurants are showcased early in the film by Secondo walking through each restaurant. To establish the uncompromising nature of Paradise, Scott and Tucci predominantly use long shots, deep focus, minimal camera movements, and sparse editing. The restaurant is portrayed as it seems, with no pretense or pretension, only excellence. In the first scene, the three primary characters associated with Paradise—Primo, Secondo, and the taciturn waiter Cristiano (Marc Anthony)—prep for the evening as the camera remains in a long shot of the kitchen and the three characters (Fig. 1). The opening sequence is just over two and a half minutes long with only one cut, when Secondo leaves the kitchen and enters the front of the house. Secondo walks through the dining room, sets up the bar, and opens the front door. Within the first few minutes of the film, the whole space of Paradise has been clearly laid out.

By opening with two lengthy shots, *Big Night* viscerally demonstrates Paradise’s authentic but constrained personality. In *The Way Hollywood Tells It*, critic David Bordwell notes that average shot length in American films shortened from 8-11 seconds before 1960 to 3-6 seconds by 1996. Thus, these opening shots set a specific pace and feeling of continuity (121-22). The two brothers are always proximate; not even editing gives them escape. The success of one is absolutely dependent on the success of the other, but the brothers do not see eye-to-eye. There is little clutter or colour in the kitchen or dining room, emphasizing that food, not atmosphere, is primary in Paradise (Fig. 2).

Conversely, Pascal’s emphasizes pizzazz as made clear when Secondo walks through the space early in the film. The first time we meet him, Pascal reinforces that he is a businessman who gives customers what they want; Primo, the food artist, repeats that customers must learn to appreciate authentic food. While Pascal’s has the trappings of a stereotypical Italian restaurant that includes plates of antipasto, comically classic songs like “O Sole Mio,” and numerous trays of pasta, the real attractions are live singers and the omnipresent showman Pascal, who lights desserts on fire and dramatically uncorks bottles tableside (Fig. 3).

In stark contrast to Paradise, Pascal’s symbolizes how easy it is to lose one’s identity after immigration and assimilation. Pascal is who Secondo hopes to be—a successful businessman with a busy restaurant—yet the spectacle of his restaurant makes it clear



Fig. 1 | Primo, Secondo, and Cristiano work in Paradise’s kitchen in *Big Night*, 00:02:56. Rysher Entertainment, 1996.



Fig. 2 | Secondo readies the dining room for the night’s service in *Big Night*, 00:03:25. Rysher Entertainment, 1996.



Fig. 3 | Pascal’s restaurant with live singers, Pascal’s wife and dog, and loud décor in *Big Night*, 00:24:29. Rysher Entertainment, 1996.

that Pascal has sold out his heritage. While Primo believes that great food is about communion with God, Pascal exploits facile Italian stereotypes to be a successful American businessman. In the final confrontation between Secondo and Pascal, the latter claims, “I am a businessman. I’m anything I need to be at any time.” To claim the identity of a businessman, though, Pascal admits that everything else is exploitable.

¹ Critic Geoff King notes that spectacle in Hollywood action films can be summed up as “Dinosaurs. Sinking ships. Fantastic cities. Spaceships. Alien landscapes. Explosions (lots of explosions). War. Disasters,” and, generally, the “scale and impact” of special effects (178).



Fig. 4 | Unlike Primo, Pascal has no problem serving big portions of spaghetti with meatballs in *Big Night*, 00:24:06. Rysher Entertainment, 1996.



Fig. 5 | The two brothers make pasta in *Big Night*, 00:41:05. Rysher Entertainment, 1996.



Fig. 6 | The labor-intensive preparation of authentic Italian food by hand in *Big Night*, 00:41:25. Rysher Entertainment, 1996.

Accordingly, Pascal’s restaurant illustrates how he has rejected authentic Italian culture. Instead of static camera work, scenes at Pascal’s are dominated by oneiric Dutch angles and spinning tracking shots that confuse the eye. Although the camera portrays the same spaces in both restaurants—the kitchen, the front door, the dining room, and the bar—there is no clear spatial logic or connection. In *Paradise*, the kitchen is paramount, but at Pascal’s the camera does not even enter it. Unlike *Paradise*, Pascal’s is dark, cluttered, and infused with a lurid red light (Fig. 4). While the simple, bright, uncluttered space of *Paradise* allows the food to shine, the ambience of

Pascal’s does everything possible to obscure the food, which, although popular, is inauthentic. Like Pascal himself, the food served at his restaurant is empty of any real connection to culture or heritage. The diners who eat there are being served their own reductive ideas of what Italian food is rather than experiencing a different cuisine.

Even more damning than the décor is the fact that Pascal does not subscribe to Primo’s scrupulous respect for the traditional food of his homeland, as demonstrated by the lingering shot of spaghetti and meatballs, which connotes the Americanization of Italian food. Primo will never compromise because he understands that assimilation comes at a cost. While Pascal is rich, he cannot claim any identity other than one as businessman; while he appreciates Primo’s food, he is unwilling to do the work to present traditional food to his American diners. Selling out his culture has made him rich, but it has not made him happy or fulfilled. He appears to know that his wife is sleeping with Secondo but does nothing about it. He chases his own chef out of his restaurant after setting his apron afire. He ruins the man he claims to share brotherhood with. Pascal will do anything for money and his inauthentic food is linked to his inauthentic self.

The spectacle of food truly begins once Pascal fools Secondo into thinking that a famous jazz musician will visit *Paradise*, thereby offering hope for the restaurant’s salvation. Primo and Secondo go all out, investing their last resources into the “big night.” Much of the second act features this event. Despite familiar tension, the spectacle of cooking emphasizes brotherly harmony; their food (and the heritage it represents) is more important than their individual differences. Shots of food preparation focus not on the characters—and in fact it is often difficult to distinguish the brothers—but on cooking techniques (Fig. 5), often through bird’s eye angles (Fig. 6).

Alternatively, the camera is constantly in motion around Pascal in the dining room, never lingering on diners or cooks. Meanwhile, in *Paradise*, particularly during the big night itself, the camera deemphasizes story and lingers on the enjoyment of food. These moments of bliss are in shallow focus to emphasize the bodily sensation over narrative drive. While most of the diners at the celebration are nameless (Fig. 7) and without significant narrative presence (Fig. 8), the camera nevertheless lingers on facial expressions and epicurean appreciation. The spectacle comes from the overwhelming pleasure of Primo’s food while there is almost no such pleasure in Pascal’s restaurant.

After the financially ruinous big night, the film ends with an almost five-minute-long shot of Secondo cooking an omelet, part of which he serves to his brother, implying that the two are united even in defeat. This scene is both cooking spectacle but it also, in Keating’s words, cooperates with narrative to close the film with an emotional catharsis. The final lengthy shot returns to the minimally edited, deep-focus style of the beginning to show that integrity and authenticity are still important. The big night ends with Primo and Secondo arguing. Secondo screams that he has done “everything” to try to make the restaurant a success while Primo has done “nothing” Primo responds by

saying that he has tried to teach Secondo but he has “learned nothing.” The final confrontation of the night involves Secondo and Pascal. Secondo tells him that what Primo has is rare and that Pascal will “never have him.” Secondo has finally learned what Primo has been trying to teach him: inauthenticity kills. The last scene in which Secondo cooks the omelet is filmed in the same style of minimal camera movement and editing as the beginning, demonstrating that the lesson has been learned as now Secondo’s cooking is filmed in the same way that Primo’s cooking had always been filmed. Without words, the two brothers are reconciled as Primo accepts and eats the food his brother has prepared. *Big Night* helped launch the food film trend that continues to accelerate today, but its attention to the craft and labor of preparing traditional food remains unmatched. ■



Fig. 7 | The camera lingers on this nameless character in *Big Night*, 01:19:20. Rysher Entertainment, 1996.



Fig. 8 | The camera lingers on another nameless character in *Big Night*, 01:19:15. Rysher Entertainment, 1996.

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