

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of the Study

Food has become increasingly central to contemporary discussions of social inequality, particularly with the rise of luxury dining culture, social media-driven culinary aesthetics, and the growing popularity of “foodie” culture during the 2010s and early 2020s (Feldman and Goodman, 2021). Rather than functioning solely as a basic human necessity, food has increasingly been associated with prestige, lifestyle, and social status. The expansion of exclusive restaurants and curated dining experiences has transformed eating into a socially stratified practice that reflects distinctions in wealth, taste, and cultural identity (Kennedy *et al.*, 2018). These issues are frequently represented in contemporary films and other forms of popular culture that explore economic inequality, class privilege, and the lifestyles of wealthy elites (Carr *et al.*, 2023; Riggs, 2019). Within this context, food operates not merely as an object of consumption but also as a cultural symbol through which class relations and ideological tensions are represented.

Beyond its contemporary significance, food has historically functioned as a cultural marker that reflects collective identity, social differentiation, and relations of power, in addition to its fundamental role as a basic human need. Rather than being merely a biological necessity, eating practices are shaped by historical developments, social norms, and economic structures that assign social meanings to food and influence how it is consumed within society. Scholars in the sociology of food argue that food connects individuals to broader systems of social organization and cultural value (Poulain, 2017). Consequently, food functions not

only as nourishment but also as a symbolic medium through which social identities, cultural values, and power relations are constructed and negotiated (Frisnatiara *et al.*, 2023).

In contemporary capitalist societies, food has increasingly been transformed into a commodity whose value extends beyond its practical function as nourishment. The expansion of global markets, the commercialization of culinary culture, and the rapid growth of luxury dining have reshaped food into an object of consumption closely associated with prestige, exclusivity, and economic value. Fine (2002) argues that consumption under capitalism cannot be separated from material production because commodities acquire meanings that are influenced by economic interests and market relations. Consequently, food is valued not only for its use value as a basic human necessity but also for its exchange value within capitalist systems, where branding, rarity, and exclusivity contribute to its social and economic significance.

This transformation is particularly evident in the development of luxury dining culture, where exclusive restaurants, curated tasting menus, and refined culinary rituals have become symbols of prestige and social distinction. Historically, food has been associated with social hierarchy, as elite groups have used sophisticated dining practices to distinguish themselves from other social classes (Mennell, 1996). In contemporary society, dining is no longer understood merely as the consumption of food but as a cultural performance through which individuals express taste, identity, and social status. As a result, food increasingly functions as a cultural marker that reflects unequal access to economic and cultural resources.

Consequently, access to exclusive dining experiences is determined not only by individuals' ability to satisfy basic needs but also by their possession of economic and cultural resources. Luxury restaurants, premium ingredients, and specialized culinary knowledge are accessible primarily to those with sufficient capital, reinforcing social inequality through everyday consumption practices. This condition illustrates how food consumption operates within capitalist structures, where material resources and cultural practices work together to reproduce class hierarchy and social privilege.

Karl Marx's theory provides the foundational framework for understanding class relations, labor, and capitalist production within capitalist society. In *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, Marx (1990) explains that capitalism prioritizes exchange-value over use-value, transforming commodities into abstract carriers of value while obscuring the labor that produces them. Within this framework, food is separated from the conditions of its production, rendering the labor of workers invisible and reinforcing unequal access to material resources. This process contributes to alienation and consolidates power in the hands of those who control capital and production (Wright, 2015).

Building upon Marx's explanation of economic relations, Pierre Bourdieu (1984) expands the discussion by explaining how cultural practices contribute to the reproduction of class inequality. While Marx focuses on material access to commodities, Bourdieu examines how patterns of consumption themselves operate as markers of social position. Preferences for certain foods, dining styles, and culinary knowledge are shaped by one's habitus and accumulated cultural capital,

allowing dominant classes to present their tastes as natural and superior while marginalizing other forms of consumption.

While Marx explains the economic foundations of class relations, Bourdieu explains how cultural practices reproduce those class distinctions through symbolic capital. Therefore, the primary analytical framework of this study is Louis Althusser's perspective, known as Neo-Marxism. This study investigates how food functions not only as a commodity or symbolic capital, but also as an ideological mechanism that reinforces class domination in *Menu* through the concepts of the Ideological State Apparatus (ISA) and interpellation.

Previous studies have examined the film *The Menu* (2022) from various perspectives, including semiotic analysis, psychological criticism, stylistic approaches, and discussions of labor exploitation. These studies provide valuable insights into the satire, character motivations, language, and social inequalities depicted in the film. However, attention to how food-related dialogue functions as symbolic capital within an integrated Marxist framework remains limited. Specifically, few studies have examined how the representation of food in dialogue reflects class stratification while simultaneously functioning as an ideological mechanism that legitimizes power relations. Thus, this study fills that gap by examining food-related dialogue through Karl Marx's foundational concepts of class relations, Pierre Bourdieu's concept of symbolic capital, and Louis Althusser's Neo-Marxist theory of ideology.

The Menu is relevant because it portrays Hawthorn as a highly regulated social space where power, exclusivity, and legitimacy are determined through cultural practices and economic resources. The dining experience is more than mere

consumption; it serves as a mechanism for creating and maintaining social hierarchies, with kitchen staff positioned as laborers and guests as elite consumers. Food functions as symbolic capital that signifies prestige in this context, while simultaneously reproducing ideological class relations. Therefore, this study integrates Karl Marx's key ideas on class stratification and alienation, Pierre Bourdieu's theory of symbolic capital, and Louis Althusser's theory of Neo-Marxist ideas. Through this integrated framework, this study argues that food functions not only as a cultural symbol but also as an ideological mechanism that legitimizes class domination and reinforces social hierarchies in modern capitalist society.

1.2 Research Question

1. How is food represented as symbolic capital through food-related dialogue in *The Menu* (2022)?
2. How does the representation of food as symbolic capital reflect class stratification and ideological domination from a Neo-Marxist perspective?

1.3 Purpose of the Study

1. To analyze how food is represented as symbolic capital through food-related dialogue in *The Menu* (2022).
2. To examine how the representation of food reflects class stratification and ideological domination using a Neo-Marxist perspective integrated with Pierre Bourdieu's concept of symbolic capital.

1.4 Scope of the Study

This study focuses on food-related dialogues found in the transcript of *The Menu* (2022). The analysis centers on how food is represented through verbal

interactions as a representation of class hierarchy and power relations. This study applies Karl Marx's foundational theory, Pierre Bourdieu's concept of symbolic capital, and Louis Althusser's Neo-Marxist perspective to analyze food-related dialogue. The analysis focuses exclusively on dialogue and does not examine cinematic techniques, visual symbolism, or narration.

1.5 Significance of the Study

This study contributes to literary studies by demonstrating how food-related dialogue functions as symbolic capital through an integrated Marxist framework consisting of Karl Marx's foundational theory, Pierre Bourdieu's concept of symbolic capital, and Louis Althusser's Neo-Marxist perspective.

1.6 State of the Art

Recent studies on *The Menu* (2022) demonstrates an increasing academic interest in examining the film as a representation of contemporary social criticism. Existing studies have approached the film from diverse perspectives, including psychological analysis, semiotics, stylistics, translation studies, satire, and labor exploitation. Collectively, these studies have contributed to understanding the film's narrative complexity, visual symbolism, linguistic characteristics, and critique of capitalist society. Nevertheless, the discussion of food has predominantly remained peripheral, functioning as a supporting narrative element or visual symbol rather than as the primary textual focus.

Within Marxist-oriented discussions, previous research has primarily emphasized class conflict, labor exploitation, and consumerism. While these perspectives successfully reveal structural inequalities embedded in capitalist

relations, they provide limited explanation of how ideological domination is reproduced through everyday cultural practices. Likewise, studies drawing upon Pierre Bourdieu generally interpret food as an indicator of taste, distinction, or cultural preference, without examining its relationship to ideological processes that sustain class hierarchy. Consequently, the interaction between symbolic capital and ideological reproduction through food discourse remains insufficiently explored.

This study addresses that gap by examining food-related dialogues as the primary textual data through a qualitative textual analysis. Rather than treating food solely as a culinary object or narrative device, this research conceptualizes food as a cultural discourse through which symbolic value, ideological domination, and class stratification are simultaneously constructed. To achieve this objective, the study integrates Karl Marx's concept of class relations as its foundational perspective, Louis Althusser's Neo-Marxist theory of ideology as its principal analytical framework, and Pierre Bourdieu's concept of symbolic capital as a complementary perspective. Through this theoretical integration, the research offers a more comprehensive explanation of how food discourse operates as both a marker of social distinction and an ideological mechanism that legitimizes unequal class relations in *The Menu* (2022).

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