Luc Moullet’s Food Lessons

Origins of a Meal

Genèse d’un repas
Directed by Luc Moullet from an original script
Shot in 1977; released in 1980
115 minutes
Available for purchase (with English subtitles) on Amazon.com as part of a six-dvd boxed set published by Blaq Out (Paris) or for rental from Netflix.com

Over the past decade numerous important films have documented the production of what we eat and drink, often with the filmmaker taking a lead role as investigative reporter.1 Several of these films did extremely well at the box office, garnering numerous awards, and four of them—Super Size Me, Darwin’s Nightmare, Food, Inc. and The Cove—were nominated for Oscars.2 With all the recent attention given to such documentaries, it is easy to overlook Luc Moullet’s groundbreaking Genèse d’un repas (Origins of a Meal, France, 1980). With its handwritten title card and credits, Origins of a Meal was, thirty years ago, at the vanguard of the current wave of food-focused documentaries.

Moullet, born in Paris in 1937, belongs to the tail end of the French New Wave that emerged in France in the late 1950s. While the early New Wave films were made on modestly comfortable budgets, Moullet’s first film—a short entitled Un Steack trop cuit (An Overcooked Steak, 1960)—was financed on a shoestring by Jean-Luc Godard’s producer, Georges de Beauregard. In the film a young woman prepares dinner for her ill-mannered thirteen-year-old brother. An Overcooked Steak is no celebration of French terroir, as we might expect in the New Wave films of Claude Chabrol. It is, rather, a home movie (quite literally—the film stars Moullet’s younger brother Patrice) complete with a sibling food fight. After September 1960 and a series of flops, the New Wave directors floundered. De Beauregard abandoned the film, which Moullet ultimately finished at his own expense. Ever since then he has consistently practiced frugality while working in the most extravagant of the arts.

Moullet shot Origins of a Meal in black and white on 16mm film, which for a time in the 1960s and 1970s was regarded as a viable alternative to 35mm (16mm film is considerably cheaper, and 16mm cameras are smaller and more portable). Even though black and white limited the film’s theatrical options, it was still considerably cheaper than making copies in color.3 Made in 1977, but released only three years later, the film begins as Moullet and his wife, Antonietta Pizzorno, frontally placed before the camera, are eating a simple repast. In voiceover Moullet announces the film’s brief: “You recognize these things, but you don’t

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know what they are: tuna, an omelet, and some bananas. I don’t know either. To find out, I asked for an advance… from the Centre du cinéma. They gave it to me.”

Over the course of an hour and fifty minutes, Moullet zigzags back and forth—sometimes abruptly—among France, Senegal, and Ecuador, investigating the handling and processing of his lunch foods and interviewing twenty-eight food-industry employees. Origins of a Meal is packed with a wealth (at times a surfeit) of information, a hallmark of Moullet’s style. If the overabundance of detail is an attempt to ironize the documentary impulse of his film, the result is no less illuminating, particularly in regard to tuna and bananas.
The investigation begins with an interview with M. Graffin, a food buyer at a U Prix supermarket near the Barbès-Rochechouart metro station in Paris, whom Moullet questions about the high-quality brand of tuna he and his wife are having for lunch. Graffin points out that the company, Pêcheurs de France, has a misleading label: on one side we see a Breton fisherman, complete with cap and pipe, while on the other we read, in much smaller print, “Dakar Senegal.” This observation prompts Moullet’s first trenchant remark in voiceover:

Not only do the Senegalese work for a tiny wage, but they don’t even get the credit for their work. The Bretons get the credit. Brittany is reassuring. It’s familiar. A product declaring it was made by black people would put the French off. The only African product accepted by the French is Banania, which associates black people with children. Banania is all very well, but the evidence of white superiority is everywhere.

From here Moullet engages in a series of interviews to better educate himself and the spectator about the tuna, eggs, and bananas on his plate. He learns, for example, that the French have a distinct bias for bananas from the French overseas departments and territories (Martinique, Guadeloupe). One fruit and vegetable buyer tells him that Martinique bananas are always superior and that Ecuadorian bananas never ripen as well as French ones. Moullet counters that this is propaganda pure and simple, as disseminated by the Antillais importers. In fact, we subsequently learn that the Ecuadorian bananas imported into France are of a higher quality because they undergo three sortings before being shipped, while the Antillais bananas are sorted only once.

Documenting differences in wages and working conditions, Origins of a Meal dispels the myth that the cost of living is necessarily cheaper in Senegal or Ecuador than in France. In one scene, when the filmmaker interviews two French dockers in Dieppe (Messrs. D'Austerlitz and Bouy), the image track belies what we are told on the voiceover—another characteristic of Moullet’s style. The workers explain that many dockers suffer from heart and back problems because of the “speed, and the strain we put ourselves under.” Meanwhile, the image track shows us two overweight men standing over a conveyor belt inspecting...
boxes of bananas. They do not seem to be working particularly hard. This image is followed by a twenty-one-second silent shot of Ecuadorian stevedores hurrying up and down a ship’s gangplank, carrying multiple boxes. The pace is determined by the pay scale: the French are paid by the hour, the Ecuadorians by the box. One of the film’s most moving scenes occurs near the end (1:44:19–1:46:24). On a Sunday evening when workers around the world are resting, children in the port of Machala carry sixteen-kilo boxes of bananas—two to three boxes each on their shoulders—to a ship. On the voiceover an Ecuadorian nurse notes that this kind of work stunts the children’s physical growth.

Working conditions are occasionally better in Senegal, a former French colony, than in France. In Boulogne-sur-Mer, female workers in the tuna industry are not allowed to speak, except for an odd word during their shift. Nor can they sit down—even if pregnant—to perform their work. Meanwhile, tuna packers in Dakar not only converse but can also sit down all day at their jobs. The constraints on the French workers are due, Moullet is told, to the company’s concern for le rendement (productivity), but productivity turns out to be higher in Dakar than in Boulogne-sur-Mer. Still, the French workers are better protected at their jobs: they are given aprons, gloves, and an allowance for boots, whereas the workers in Dakar are unprotected.

One of the buzzwords of the past decade is outsourcing (délocalisation in French), and Moullet’s film reminds us that this trend began decades earlier. The French first established a fishing industry in Senegal in 1956 (four years before the country gained independence), following the strike a year earlier of French tuna workers seeking better working conditions in France. Senegal and other African countries offered French companies a significantly cheaper workforce, making it more profitable for them to produce tuna in Senegal and import it into France duty-free. Today, Moullet’s prophecy from the late 1970s has become all too true:

Workers around the world are being put in competition with one another. If there’s a strike, they move the factory offshore. There is even a pay disparity for the same job in the same country.

Inequities in pay scale exist not only between French and Third World workers but also between men and women. In Ecuador women are absent in the banana industry. In Senegal women are not allowed to work with machines and are paid half of what their male counterparts make. Moullet notes that the French workers are exploited, too, but at least they have health insurance and retirement plans (the average lifespan in Ecuador is fifty-two, but the retirement age is sixty). In his interviews Moullet concentrates on Thérèse, a young, pretty, Senegalese tuna packer, who describes a grueling workday that begins at 5 a.m. and often goes on past midnight.

Another concern recently addressed by Super Size Me and Food, Inc. is the excess number of calories in the Western-style diet, which has led to disastrous consequences, among them the spread of type-2 diabetes in children. Origins of a Meal similarly addresses overconsumption, as Moullet tells us that the average calorific consumption in France tips the scales at 2,700 to 3,000, well beyond the recommended 2,400 daily calorie intake.

In addressing economic and dietary concerns long before the current wave of food documentaries, Origins of a Meal goes beyond these later films in its wide-ranging conclusions. It is a film à charge against Western capitalism, specifically in its French and American manifestations. Moullet is anything but subtle. In one unforgettable statement he tells us that “Germany’s occupation of France was nothing compared to France’s occupation of Senegal.” In another, he takes aim at France’s primary national resource, the sale of military supplies: “France divided French Africa into fourteen small states in order to foster fictitious conflicts between them and create competition between the tuna factories of Dakar and Abidjan and sell arms to each country.” Senegal’s principal enemy is not Guinea or Algeria, Moullet tells us, but capitalist France.

Moullet cites as influences on his work the East German filmmakers Walter Heynowski and Gerhard Scheumann for the way in which they use science to analyze economic and political problems. Luis Buñuel’s acerbic Las Hurdes (Land without Bread, Spain, 1933) also served as a model, leading Moullet to develop his inductive, detail-packed method. This approach further enables him to draw conclusions about other foodstuffs imported into France. Near the end of Origins of a Meal, a long tracking shot shows foods lined up on a counter. Moullet recites:

Oranges from South Africa, dates from Algeria, palm hearts from Bolivia, coffee from Brazil, tea from Ceylon, shrimp from Chile, pineapple from the Ivory Coast, pepper from Guyana, orange juice from Israel, peas from Kenya, beans from Morocco, corned beef from Madagascar, rum from the Antilles, crab from Pakistan, prawns from Thailand, figs from Turkey, lemonade from Venezuela.

Moullet follows this litany with a wonderful gag. Undressing before the camera, his wife announces the country of origin of each article she takes off: her jacket is from Korea, her belt from Peru, her ring from Zaire, her
bracelet from the Philippines, her tunic from India, her T-shirt from Pakistan, her panties from Arab oil... until all that is left are her false eyelashes, also made from Arab oil! By now, the spectator is likely exhausted and overwhelmed by Moullet’s enumerative exposé, but the filmmaker doesn’t stop with this striptease. Instead, he turns the camera first on his mouth, telling us that the gold in his fillings comes from Kalahari, and then on his very film, telling us that filmstock is made from gelatine, a derivative of the cheek skin of cows or pigs, and “petroleum derivatives from the… Islamic countries whose workers see little of the riches from this black gold.” Moullet doesn’t spare himself in this inquiry, noting in the closing voiceover that

The profit I take from the film will be moral, but perhaps also material... And when choosing my images, I found myself emulating the overseers at the canny, as if knowledge were merely another subtle form of exploitation.

The purpose of Origins of a Meal and others of its genre is not only to raise consciousness but to encourage action. Six months after the release of Super Size Me, McDonald’s eliminated the “super size me” option and introduced more health-conscious items onto its menu. Inspired by Moullet’s agitprop film, I headed to my local Big Y supermarket. My first stop was the tuna aisle. Today, ever more consumers are avoiding both canned and fresh tuna due to its high level of mercury and the harvesting methods that kill thousands of dolphins every year. On the shelf before me were all the standard brands: Bumble Bee, StarKist, Chicken of the Sea. Each carried the de rigueur dolphin-safe logo, as well as the popular omega-3 marketing ploy. Curiously, though, all three major brands lacked a country of origin; only the Big Y store brand mentioned the provenance (Thailand). The source of the tuna matters, because mercury levels vary greatly. Canned tuna produced in Asia has the lowest average levels of mercury, while that from Latin America has the highest. From the tuna aisle I headed over to fruits and vegetables, where I saw only Dole bananas. I wondered what had happened to Chiquita. The fruit and vegetable buyer at the store told me that Big Y had not received Chiquita bananas for several years. An Internet search revealed that Chiquita had been accused, convicted, and fined for funding FARC, a Marxist rebel organization, and other paramilitary groups in Colombia in an attempt to undermine the local trade unions.

When Moullet made his film, globalization was generally viewed positively. Today, however, globalization has as many critics as advocates. Although the 1970s produced many political films, it is hard not to agree with one contemporary critic who deemed Origins of a Meal one of the very best of its kind. Clearly, Luc Moullet’s food lessons still remain relevant. We would be wise to read our food labels.

Notes
1. In Les Glaneurs et la glaneuse (The Gleaners and I, France, 2000) Agrits Varala looks at vegans and dumpster divers across France who scavenge agricultural surplus and supermarket castoffs out of need or disgust with the overconsumption around them. Morgan Spurlock’s Super Size Me (United States, 2004) investigates the effects, all negative, of eating three meals a day for one month at McDonald’s, with the director himself acting as the test subject. Jonathan Nossiter’s Mundavins (United States, 2004) denounces the “parkerization” of wine production throughout the world. Hubert Sauper’s Darwin’s Nightmare (France-Belgium-Austria, 2005) documents how Nile perch, introduced to Lake Victoria in the 1960s for harvesting and marketing to wealthy Europeans, now grow to huge proportions and eat all other fish in the lake, including their own young. Robert Kenner’s Food, Inc. (United States, 2009) explores the increasing industrialization of our food supply and the pernicious effects of taking a factory approach to producing what we put on our tables and into our mouths.

Laura Ghabert’s No Impact Man (United States, 2009) chronicles the efforts of Manhattan resident Colin Beavan and his wife and child to live carbon free for a year by not using motorized transportation, shutting off their Con Edison electricity, and eating only organic food produced within a 250-mile radius of their lower Fifth Avenue apartment. Finally, in Louis Pauhyos’s The Cove (United States, 2009) a group of activists, including the renowned dolphin trainer Ric O’Barry, goes undercover to expose the Japanese practice of slaughtering thousands of dolphins every year for human consumption.


4. Banana is a popular powder like Nesquik made from cocoa and banana flour. It is a symbol of French colonialism. For many years its logo was a Senegalese World War I infantryman and its slogan was y’a bon (“it’s good”), pidgin French supposedly reflecting the speech of African soldiers.


6. Heynowski (b.1927) and Scheumann (1930–1998) were the leading documentary filmmakers in the GDR. Many of their films focus on conflicts of decolonization and postcolonial struggle.


8. The last five minutes of the film, beginning with the striptease, can be seen on Youtube, at www.youtube.com/watch?v=ai-OpsYXDR0.

9. The Cove discusses in depth the effects of mercury consumption by humans.

