

Exploring Mental State of the Head Chef on the Film the Menu (2022)

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ABSTRACT

Lacanian psychoanalysis is a framework that helps interpret the hidden subconscious meanings in a film's story and the psychology of its characters. The Menu (2022) presents Chef Slowik not only as a villain, but also as a deeply disturbed individual who suffers from psychological problems, including psychopathic tendencies. He loses his original passion for cooking and can no longer express his identity or emotions through food. This failure to communicate with others through his dishes reflects Lacan's idea of failed self-expression and gradually leads to Slowik's psychological collapse. Using a descriptive qualitative approach, this study examines how Chef Slowik's objet petit a represents his inner sense of lack and how it eventually turns into jouissance, functioning as a form of criticism toward the Symbolic Order represented by Hawthorne restaurant. The findings show that Slowik's objet petit a appears through dialogue and objects in the film, and it is this desire that ultimately drives his actions, speech, and the dishes he serves to elite guests as a critique of the existing Symbolic Order.

Keywords: Lacanian psychoanalysis, objet petit a, jouissance, symbolic order, The Menu

INTRODUCTION

Film has increasingly been recognized as a complex cultural text that not only entertains but also reflects psychological, social, and ideological structures within society. As an audiovisual medium, film possesses a unique ability to represent unconscious desires, internal conflicts, and symbolic tensions through narrative, dialogue, visual composition, and character construction. Because of this complexity, film studies have adopted interdisciplinary approaches, including psychoanalysis, to uncover meanings that are not immediately visible on the narrative surface. Psychoanalysis, particularly the framework developed by Jacques Lacan, has proven to be a productive analytical tool in film theory because it emphasizes language, desire, lack, and the symbolic systems that shape human subjectivity (Mukarromah & Zamroni, 2018; Lacan, 2014). Lacanian theory allows researchers to examine how characters are constituted by social structures and how their desires are continuously shaped and frustrated within the Symbolic Order. Since film narratives often resemble the structure of fantasy or dreams, Lacanian psychoanalysis provides a strong foundation for interpreting the hidden psychological mechanisms that drive cinematic characters and their actions (Weinmann, 2021).

One contemporary film that vividly illustrates such psychological and symbolic tensions is The Menu (2022), directed by Mark Mylod. The film presents Chef Julian Slowik not merely as a villain, but as a deeply conflicted individual who suffers from psychological disturbance and emotional collapse. Although Slowik achieves success, authority, and recognition within the elite culinary world, he gradually loses his original passion for cooking and becomes unable to express

his identity and emotions through food. This failure of self-expression reflects Lacan's notion that the subject is fundamentally divided and shaped by the Symbolic Order, which imposes rules, hierarchies, and expectations that inevitably produce lack (Lacan, 2014). In *The Menu*, the fine-dining restaurant Hawthorn functions as a rigid symbolic system that prioritizes prestige, perfection, and elite validation over genuine human connection. As a result, Slowik's creativity becomes alienated, and his culinary art transforms into a site of frustration, repression, and psychological suffering. This phenomenon reflects a broader cultural condition in which creative labor is increasingly subordinated to market demands and elite consumption, leading to emotional emptiness and loss of meaning.

Previous studies that apply Lacanian psychoanalysis to film largely focus on issues of identity formation, trauma, and interpersonal relationships between characters. While these studies successfully explain how lack and desire shape character behavior, they often treat visual objects and material elements as secondary to psychological analysis. This creates a clear research gap, particularly in relation to *The Menu (2022)*, where food is not merely a narrative detail but a central symbolic medium. Existing research has not sufficiently integrated the concepts of *objet petit a* and *jouissance* within a critical analysis of the Symbolic Order using food as the primary analytical focus. As Lacan explains, *objet petit a* functions as the cause of desire rather than its object, while *jouissance* represents an excessive and often destructive enjoyment that transgresses the limits of the Symbolic Order (Lacan et al., 2020; Clemens & Grigg, 2006). However, few studies have explored how these concepts operate through culinary practices, menus, and dining rituals as symbolic expressions of desire, power, and resistance. This gap limits our understanding of how material objects in film can function as vehicles of unconscious desire and ideological critique.

For this research is urgent because it addresses the lack of comprehensive Lacanian analysis that connects *objet petit a*, *jouissance*, and the Symbolic Order through food as a symbolic medium. The main objective of this study is to analyze how Chef Julian Slowik's lost joy of cooking functions as his *objet petit a* and how this unresolved lack transforms into *jouissance* as a form of destructive critique against elite culinary culture in *The Menu (2022)*. By focusing on food, menus, and dining rituals as sites of symbolic meaning, this research contributes to Lacanian film studies by expanding psychoanalytic analysis beyond character psychology alone. Furthermore, this study contributes to literary and cultural studies by demonstrating how film can expose the psychological consequences of consumerism, elitism, and creative alienation. Ultimately, this research offers a new perspective on how Lacanian psychoanalysis can be applied to contemporary film to reveal the complex relationship between desire, power, and symbolic structures embedded in everyday cultural practices.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Every academic research requires a clear theoretical foundation to support analysis and interpretation. This study employs Lacanian psychoanalysis as its primary framework because of its ability to reveal the relationship between desire, lack, and symbolic structures within cultural

texts such as film. The following subsections outline the key theoretical concepts used in this research.

Film

Film is an audiovisual medium that combines moving images, sound, dialogue, and narrative to convey meaning and emotion to audiences. According to Sobur (2006), film functions not only as entertainment but also as a medium capable of influencing perception, values, and ways of thinking through visual and auditory representation. As a form of art, film reflects social realities, cultural ideologies, and psychological conditions embedded within its narrative structure. In contemporary society, film has become a powerful cultural product that mirrors human experience, social conflict, and ideological tension. Through its narrative construction, film is able to represent abstract ideas, emotional struggles, and unconscious desires in ways that are often more immediate and impactful than written texts. Therefore, film provides fertile ground for interdisciplinary analysis, including psychological and psychoanalytic approaches.

Film Analysis

Film analysis refers to the systematic examination of cinematic elements such as narrative structure, cinematography, mise-en-scène, dialogue, and symbolism to uncover deeper meanings within a film. Elsaesser (2021) explains that film analysis goes beyond surface-level storytelling and focuses on how visual and auditory techniques shape audience interpretation and emotional response. Unlike literary texts, films communicate meaning through a combination of images, sounds, and performance. Symbolic meanings are often conveyed through visual composition, lighting, camera movement, and object placement rather than explicit dialogue. As a result, film analysis enables researchers to explore psychological and ideological messages embedded in cinematic form. In psychoanalytic film studies, these visual elements are especially important because they often express unconscious desires and repressed conflicts.

Character

Characters play a central role in film narratives because they function as carriers of meaning, emotion, and thematic development. According to Bordwell and Thompson (2020), characters are not merely fictional figures but narrative agents whose actions and psychological development drive the plot and convey the film's underlying message. In many films, characters symbolize broader social conditions or ideological tensions. Their desires, conflicts, and transformations often reflect cultural expectations and psychological struggles experienced by individuals in real life. A well-developed character typically undergoes a character arc, which involves emotional or psychological change throughout the narrative (McKee, 2021). In psychoanalytic analysis, character behavior becomes a key site for examining unconscious desire, repression, and lack.

Lacanian Psychoanalysis

Lacanian psychoanalysis, developed by Jacques Lacan, emphasizes that human identity and desire are shaped by language, culture, and unconscious structures rather than by a unified inner self. Lacan argues that the subject is fundamentally divided, meaning that individuals are never complete or fully satisfied (Lacan, 2014). Central to Lacan's theory is the division of human experience into three orders: the Imaginary, the Symbolic, and the Real. These three orders

interact continuously to structure subjectivity and desire. Lacanian psychoanalysis is particularly useful for film analysis because films often operate like dreams or fantasies, making them suitable texts for exploring unconscious processes and symbolic meaning.

Lacanian Psychoanalysis: Symbolic Order, *Objet Petit a*, and *Jouissance*

1. Symbolic Order

The Symbolic Order refers to the system of language, law, social rules, and cultural norms that structure human life. According to Lacan, individuals enter the Symbolic Order through language, which shapes identity and desire while simultaneously producing a sense of loss or lack (Lacan, 2014). This order regulates behavior and determines what is considered acceptable, meaningful, or valuable in society. In cultural texts such as film, institutions, hierarchies, and social systems often function as representations of the Symbolic Order. These structures impose limits on desire and demand conformity, frequently generating frustration and alienation within the subject.

2. *Objet Petit a*

Objet petit a is one of Lacan's most important concepts and refers to the object-cause of desire. It is not a tangible object but a symbolic representation of a fundamental lack within the subject (Lacan, 2014). Because this lack can never be fully satisfied, desire continues endlessly. In narrative analysis, *objet petit a* helps explain why characters obsessively pursue goals that never truly fulfill them. The object appears to promise wholeness or meaning, but once approached, it inevitably fails to deliver complete satisfaction. As a result, desire is continuously renewed.

3. *Jouissance*

Jouissance refers to an excessive form of enjoyment that goes beyond pleasure and often involves pain, transgression, or destruction. Unlike ordinary pleasure, *jouissance* emerges when desire exceeds the limits imposed by the Symbolic Order (Clemens & Grigg, 2006). In Lacanian theory, *jouissance* frequently appears when a subject confronts the impossibility of fulfilling their desire. This excessive enjoyment can manifest in self-destructive or violent behavior, particularly as a response to frustration and unresolved lack. In film narratives, *jouissance* often functions as a form of resistance or critique against rigid symbolic systems.

Review of Previous Studies

Previous studies applying Lacanian psychoanalysis to film primarily focus on identity formation, desire, and psychological breakdown. Research by Kristiawan (2024), Ahmadifar et al. (2025), and Connolly (2007) demonstrates how lack and desire shape character behavior and lead to destructive outcomes. However, these studies largely emphasize character psychology without fully integrating material objects as symbolic mediators of desire. This study differs from previous research by positioning food as a central symbolic medium through which *objet petit a* and *jouissance* operate within the Symbolic Order. By analyzing culinary practices in The Menu (2022), this research extends Lacanian film studies beyond character analysis and offers a new perspective on how material culture functions as a site of psychological and ideological critique.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study employs a qualitative descriptive research method. The primary data source is the film *The Menu* (2022). The data consist of selected scenes, dialogues, and visual elements that represent psychological conflict and symbolic meaning. Data collection was conducted through repeated viewing of the film, scene identification, and dialogue transcription. The data were then analyzed using Lacanian psychoanalytic concepts, focusing on how *objet petit a* and *jouissance* are represented through narrative and visual elements.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

There are 17 main scenes in *The Menu* (2022) that manifest Chef Julian Slowik's *objet petit a* and *jouissance* as a form of criticism of the symbolic order. These include three scenes representing Slowik's *objet petit a*, five scenes showing the symbolic order within the Hawthorne restaurant, and nine scenes demonstrating Slowik's *jouissance* as a critique of that order. Together, these scenes highlight his desires, frustrations, and actions throughout the film. Each group of scenes focuses on different aspects, from Slowik's inner lack to the rules of the restaurant and his destructive responses to those rules.

Result

Chef Slowik's *Objet Petit a* as the Lost Joy of Cooking

The analysis identifies three key scenes that reveal Chef Julian Slowik's *objet petit a*, understood as the object-cause of his desire. First, at minute 52:18, Slowik states that he has spent years trying to satisfy guests "who cannot be satisfied." This dialogue indicates his recognition of a fundamental lack within his professional life. Second, at minute 57:32, Slowik explicitly expresses nostalgia for "the pure pleasure of simply feeding someone," revealing his longing for an earlier, more authentic relationship with cooking. Third, at minute 1:34:05, commonly referred to as the cheeseburger scene, Slowik prepares a simple meal for Margot and allows her to leave the restaurant. This scene visually and narratively represents his lost desire for uncomplicated culinary joy. These scenes demonstrate that Slowik's *objet petit a* is not fame, authority, or artistic perfection, but the lost joy of cooking as a meaningful human practice.

The Symbolic Order Represented by the Hawthorne Restaurant

The findings show that the Symbolic Order in *The Menu* (2022) is embodied by the Hawthorne restaurant through five recurring patterns. First, at minute 52:15, Slowik explains that his food is intended only for those who can afford it, indicating class exclusivity. Second, repeated scenes show kitchen staff responding uniformly with "Yes, Chef," emphasizing absolute authority and obedience. Third, at minute 42:53, guests obey Slowik's command to eat without resistance, demonstrating submission to symbolic power. Fourth, during every dish presentation, complex culinary language is used, reinforcing elitist discourse. Fifth, at minute 40:17, Slowik describes the pressure to constantly produce "the best food in the world," reflecting the oppressive demands of elite expectations. These results establish Hawthorne as a rigid symbolic system governed by hierarchy, language, and power.

Jouissance as Destructive Critique of the Symbolic Order

The analysis identifies nine scenes where Slowik's behavior manifests jouissance.

Key examples include:

Jeremy's suicide during "The Mess" dish (minute 41:52), where Slowik frames death as part of the performance. The taco dish (minute 31:53), which exposes guests' secrets and humiliates them. The final s'mores scene, where Slowik orchestrates collective death. These acts show Slowik deriving excessive enjoyment from transgressing moral, social, and symbolic boundaries, directly targeting elite guests as representatives of the Symbolic Order.

Table 1. Overview of Slowik's *objet petit a* and jouissance in The Menu (2022)

Lacanian Psychoanalysis Key Dimension	Scenes	Description
Slowik's <i>objet petit a</i>	3	Slowik's longing and underlying lack are expressed through his dialogue and actions, showing his desire for genuine connection, meaningful experiences, and the simple pleasures he can no longer fully reach.
Symbolic Order	5	Shown both in Slowik's actions and dialogue, as well as in the immediate responses of the restaurant staff and guests, repeatedly highlighting the rules, hierarchy, and expectations that structure the entire restaurant environment.
Slowik's <i>jouissance</i>	9	Slowik's jouissance as critique to the symbolic order are manifest in ways that stand out, often being destructive, directly harming the elite guests or delivering sharp and critical messages.

Discussion

Slowik's *Objet Petit a* and the Structure of Lack

According to Lacan, *objet petit a* is not the object of desire but its cause, emerging from an irreducible lack created by entry into the Symbolic Order. The results show that Slowik's lost joy of cooking functions precisely in this way. Although he achieves symbolic success, recognition, and authority, these fail to restore his sense of meaning. The cheeseburger scene is especially significant because it momentarily suspends the Symbolic Order. By cooking a simple meal

without elitist framing, Slowik briefly reconnects with authentic desire. However, this moment also confirms that such fulfillment cannot be sustained within the existing symbolic structure.

Hawthorne as a Failed Symbolic Order

The Hawthorne restaurant exemplifies how the Symbolic Order regulates desire through hierarchy, language, and exclusivity. The findings demonstrate that elite guests are less interested in food than in status, novelty, and distinction. As a result, culinary creativity becomes alienated labor. This supports Lacan's argument that the Symbolic Order promises meaning but structurally produces dissatisfaction. Hawthorne thus operates as a closed system that consumes desire without ever fulfilling it.

Jouissance as Transgression and Critique

When Slowik realizes that his *objet petit a* cannot be recovered, desire transforms into *jouissance*. His destructive acts represent excessive enjoyment derived from violating the very rules that once governed him. Scenes such as Jeremy's suicide and the taco dish illustrate how *jouissance* emerges through cruelty, humiliation, and spectacle. These moments function as a critique of elite consumer culture, exposing its dependence on shock, excess, and domination rather than genuine appreciation. Through *jouissance*, Slowik turns food into a weapon that reveals the emptiness of the Symbolic Order and the violence embedded within elite aesthetic systems.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that Chef Julian Slowik's psychological collapse in *The Menu* (2022) is driven by an unresolved sense of lack produced within a rigid Symbolic Order. Through a Lacanian psychoanalytic framework, the research demonstrates that Slowik's lost joy of cooking functions as his *objet petit a*, the cause of desire that continuously motivates his actions yet can never be fully recovered. Despite achieving authority, recognition, and perfection within elite culinary culture, Slowik remains fundamentally dissatisfied, revealing the structural impossibility of fulfillment promised by the Symbolic Order. Furthermore, this study finds that Slowik's destructive actions represent *jouissance*, an excessive and transgressive enjoyment that emerges when desire exceeds symbolic regulation. By transforming food into a medium of punishment and critique, Slowik directs his *jouissance* toward elite guests who symbolize consumerism, privilege, and cultural elitism. The Hawthorne restaurant thus operates as a symbolic space where hierarchical power, obedience, and exclusivity are exposed as empty and violent social constructions. Ultimately, this research contributes to Lacanian film studies by demonstrating how food functions not merely as a narrative element but as a psycho-symbolic medium through which desire, lack, and resistance are articulated. *The Menu* (2022) critiques the illusion that prestige, perfection, and consumption can provide genuine fulfillment, revealing instead the destructive consequences of a symbolic system that alienates creative labor from human meaning.

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CALAKAN: Jurnal Sastra, Bahasa, dan Budaya

Published by: Alahyan Publisher Sukabumi

ISSN: 2987-9639

Vol: 4 No. 1 (Mare, 2026), hal: 48-55

Informasi Artikel: Diterima: 01-01-2026 Revisi: 25-01-2026 Disetujui: 02-02-2026

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