Lunchables. About the Connection of Food and Class

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ABSTRACT

In a joint project, we are dealing with the relationship between 'food' and 'class' in and outside the field of family care relations. We used the context of the workshop to describe our research approach and project in general and to discuss with the participants related issues that concern us in our work. The text at hand focuses on the connection between 'advertising' and 'class' using the example of German food commercials, especially from the 1990s and 2000s, and deals with the thesis that although advertising spots of these decades do not depict lifeworlds in materially precarious conditions for reasons of sales strategy, they cannot completely avoid references to the precarious living conditions of their target group. Thereby, they also intervene in parent/child relationships in an intentional and potentially harmful way. We take the analysis of these commercials as an opportunity to reflect on empowering possibilities of intervention in the context of 'food', 'class' and 'care' work.

CV

Philipp Hagemann (*1991 in Ahlen/FRG) and Alexander Wagner (*1987 in Hoyerswerda/GDR) were socialized in so-called "bescheidenen Verhältnissen", come from cultural studies disciplines, work together on topics of postcolonial theory, and want to steer their textual thinking into other fields of action and thus work through techniques and methods of the humanities in a critical-productive way.

Philipp works as a research assistant in the Department of Philosophy at the University of Paderborn. He studied English and Philosophy and was a teacher for both subjects at a comprehensive school. In a qualification work, he deals with the implications of racism-critical theory and educational work for teaching philosophy in schools.

Alex is a research assistant in the field of Modern German Literary History at the University of Wuppertal. He did his doctorate on continuities of German colonialism at the time of National Socialism. His fields of activity include the relationship between literature and 'knowledge', gender and media history, postcolonial theory, popular culture, the border areas of art and science, and the history of the GDR and East Germany after the "Wende".

Currently, they are engaged with setting up a Research Lab for Interventions Against Classism (Forschungslabor für Interventionen gegen Klassismus).

KEYWORDS
class, nutrition, care, mother/son relationship, food advertisement, precariousness, ready-to-eat food, intervention, *FLINK, Lunchables, *Kinder Surprise*

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Our project is also about giving visibility to such knowledge and similar survival strategies, valorising and recontextualizing them with a sense of empowerment.

Our project addresses the relationship between 'food' and 'class' in general and especially within familial care relationships from different perspectives. We used the context of the workshop to briefly outline the premises of our research and engage in a conversation with participants about larger issues and contexts that concern us. Because it was a workshop, we took the liberty to share with participants some provisional ideas from our working process and our thinking on the matter. The most important premise is our own origin from a so-called "humble background". We grew up in different social contexts: as the youngest of four children in a small town in North Rhine-Westphalia, and as the only child of a single mother in an East German town hit hard by the upheavals of the so-called "Wende". At the same time, we both experienced during our childhood and adolescence how an important part of the parent-child or, in our case, the mother-son relationship is established through the provision of food and what special circumstances inform this situation when economic conditions are precarious. Aside from the indubitably negative aspect, the sense of shame and many instances of discrimination, the experience of growing up in low-income circumstances has at the same time trained our perception and brought out a certain sensitivity to classist patterns of discrimination, even if quite subtly embedded in larger contexts. The same is true for certain forms of knowledge and survival strategies in the working field of everyday crises.

At the moment, we are engaged in setting up a Research Lab for Interventions Against Classism (Forschungslabor für Interventionen gegen Klassismus), whose German acronym *FLINK refers to an on-demand delivery service and actor of exploitation in the gig economy that is quite successful in Germany. This of course raises questions far beyond dealing with foodstuffs, and we have based our work on a set of categories that guide our actions and thinking at all times. These are gender, materiality, power, space, knowledge, race, the reflection of our own presumptions and positions as well as those of the people we meet and the contexts we visit, plus n, with "n" being a mathematical variable to indicate that it is an extensible set. We are, for example, particularly interested in the spatial aspects of the relationships we examine, like family relationships that are closely linked to living conditions in rented apartments. Space as a sphere of knowledge (re-)production and social power relations also plays a crucial role in the conception of exhibitions and other educational forms. This applies to the materiality of food and the things needed to produce, buy, prepare, and consume it much in the same manner as it does to the material setup of an exhibition, a website, a publication, or

other means of producing and disseminating research results. 'Knowledge' plays a particularly important role. Above all, we think of specific skills, practices, and knowledge that we would tentatively describe as survival strategies in the area of everyday crisis. We were able to observe and learn from our mothers and other people how they tried, despite their very limited financial resources, to meet specific standards, but above all to live up to a role expectation of a 'good mother', which is closely associated with food-related actions and a context of domestic care work as well as with concepts of 'emotionality' and 'love'. These practices and their formation were often motivated by a feeling of shame stemming from cultural norms of what makes a 'good mother'. Our project is also about giving visibility to such knowledge and similar survival strategies, valorising and recontextualizing them with a sense of empowerment, for example, by making collected life hacks and techniques accessible to others in a way that identifies, explains, and acknowledges those developing them and the circumstances in which they were developed.

One important part of our work is the conception of interventions. We understand them as actions and processes with which 'knowledge' is intentionally transformed and which always have a practical, publicly visible dimension. They are accompanied by research and further discussion, framed by larger agendas and programmes, floating freely between various different sets of theories. To prepare such formats, it is important to analyse the phenomena that influence the perception of relevant contexts. These include concrete experiences of people involved as well as popular cultural artefacts and class and nutritional knowledge in mediatised form, for example, as product designs, advertising, and distribution structures. For this purpose, in addition to conversations with each other, with other people concerned and experts from different fields, we explore nutrition-related material of all kinds, whether it is specific foodstuffs, historical and present-day TV commercials, the fast-food packaging, research literature, cookbooks, photos of family celebrations, or menus. To somewhat expound on one of our theoretical questions here, the difficult reconstruction of class relations subtly embedded in media contexts, we have chosen a ready-made food for schoolchildren that has remained popular in the US to this day, but had only a brief product life in Germany: Lunchables.

Lunchables is a prepackaged meal offered by the US company Oscar Mayer, today a part of the Kraft Heinz Group. Allegedly out of a crisis of Bologna sausage sales, four designers developed a new possibility for more attractive marketing of this and similar meat products in 1985, while simultaneously providing American mothers with a time saving alternative to home-cooked meals to feed themselves and their families with work and school-break meals.[1] The product was launched in 1988 and, three and a half decades later, still has by far the largest market share in the preportioned-lunch segment (with a purported 84 per cent in children's "combination l unches" in 2018[2]). It will officially be part of the School Lunch Program in the US for the first time in the school year 2023/24, allowing schools to offer Lunchables to students in their cafeterias.[3] If you are not familiar with the product, you may have a look at its composition and appearance (for example online) before reading on.

Through its advertising strategies, this market actor with a wide presence in the US structurally intervenes in the relationship between mothers, who were identified as the ones primarily responsible

[1] See https://www.sfgate.com/shopping/article/history-of-Lunchables-15369850.php (accessed 28 July 2023).
[2] See https://www.theatlantic.com/family/archive/2018/11/lunchables-30-years-invented-history/576025/ (accessed 28 July 2023).
[3] See https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2023/mar/14/lunchables-school-lunch-programs and https://edition.cnn.com/2023/03/13/business/lunchables-in-schools/index.html (accessed 28 July 2023).

for the production of school meals not just in the market studies of the Lunchables inventors, and their children, for whom these meals are intended. In terms of design language, the earliest packages were modelled after the already well-known TV dinners,[4] addressing on several levels the time regime of both mothers and children as well as the premises of eating culture in schools.[5] At the same time, it would be worthwhile to take a closer look at this style of ready-to-eat takeaway food as part of the operational catering for individuals in the military.[6] In 1998, Lunchables were also introduced in the German market. Far less successful than in the US, however, they disappeared from supermarket shelves again by, at the latest, 2007.[7] The product breadth offered in Germany was kept to a minimum; to our recollection, only two basic Lunchables variants ever made it to the German market, with turkey ham or "pizza salami" and cheese to put on crackers, while the product range in the US is highly diversified and was even broadened over the years, for example, with supposedly healthier ingredients as "fun fuel" or variants with cinnamon buns and "Mexican" nachos. As the first generation, fed Lunchables during school breaks, was coming of age, reflections gained traction on the internet about the eating culture of, for example, young urban, often "class-travelling"[8] academics, such as the popular charcuterie board. It offers an assortment of cheeses, sausages, and other delicatessen arranged on a massive wooden board to be eaten with crackers or bread. From the perspective of a childhood with Lunchables, the arrangement and composition of products on the board then appears in memes and Reddit posts as a "fancy" version for adults.[9]

Referring to what is probably the only German-language TV commercial for Lunchables from 1998, we want to show the intricacies of the reconstruction of class relations in the design of mediaticised artefacts that serve to market a product.[10]

For obvious reasons, advertisers will tend to avoid any realistic portrayal of 'poor' people in their advertising; the history of television ads is pretty clear in this regard: historically, the advertising perspective of audiovisual product commercials in 'Western' contexts has invariably focused on the middle class, which for the most part also happens to be the target group. In other words, the middle classes as the basis of 'Western' retail, consumer and popular culture are, in line with the logic of the market, also the main addressees of that culture's consumer-product advertising. If anything, the middle-class gaze goes upward, most likely representing, where it does not confine itself to middle-class milieus, middle-class ideas of upper-class life, such as fantasies of the luxury lifestyle of the nobility at their (not too) decadent gatherings. If addressing other social contexts,

[4] See, e.g., Michael Moss, *Salt Sugar Fat: How the Food Giants Hooked Us* (New York, 2013), 192.

[5] Ibid., xxvi: "Lunchables, for one, are a marketing powerhouse, specifically designed to exploit the guilt of working moms and the desire of kids for a little empowerment. These ready-to-eat meals typically include pieces of meat, cheese, crackers, and candy, allowing kids to assemble them in whatever combination they desire. Food marketers wield pinpoint psychological targeting, and they didn't disappoint on the Lunchables ads: The ads stressed that lunch was a time for them, not their parents."

[6] The English-speaking Wikipedia article on Lunchables points to this connection, at least implicitly, by referring to the article "Meal, Ready-To-Eat" under "See also": https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lunchables (accessed 28 July 2023).

[7] The Lunchables flop in Germany is also noted by Oliver Nickel, "Haptische Reize in der Kommunikation effektiv gestalten", in Tobias Langner, Franz-Rudolf Esch and Manfred Bruhn (eds.), *Handbuch Techniken der Kommunikation: Grundlagen–Innovative Ansätze–Praktische Umsetzungen* (Wiesbaden, 2018), 195–222, at 211.

[8] 'Class-travelling' derives from the German term "Klassenreise" and refers to the process of changing one's social position, taking into account possibilities of non-linear social mobility. Cf., e.g., Betina Aumair, Brigitte Theißl (eds.): *Klassenreise. Wie die soziale Herkunft unser Leben prägt.* 3. aktual. u. erw. Aufl. Wien 2023.

[9] A quick image search of the two terms suffices to get an overview of this.

[10] To watch the ad on YouTube see https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u_KSv4exw-O (accessed 28 July 2023).

the ads almost universally use clear indicators signalling that what is shown is staged and ironical.[11]

We found that, in terms of class politics, product advertising in Germany almost always takes a 'middle' view, which generally can only represent any variation of 'race', 'gender', and 'class' as a fantasy informed by that view. This is even more true of ads from the 1990s (the decade of our childhood), which have been our main focus so far, than of present-day examples. At the same time, representing class structures in this context is apparently governed by special rules. This may be due to the fact that many products are actually aimed for a low-income target group and meant to be promoted to them, although advertising language does not have the means to represent this target group in a relatively non-discriminatory and, at the same time, promotionally effective way. Visible poverty is not good for business, carries a risk of being perceived as confrontational, correlates with negativity, is potentially unattractive even to those affected by it, and generally is in conflict with advertising's imperative of making the unbroken promise of a 'good life'. Moreover, most of those involved in the production of advertising still come from the middle rather than the so-called lower class and therefore simply do not have authentic experiential knowledge of life under conditions of permanent economic anxiety. Finally, the formation of 'Western' consumer culture is strongly linked to notions of social advancement, so that pictures of 'poor' people consuming certain products because of their social situation are simply not logical in terms of advertising strategy. Product advertising for people with low or no income is therefore, most certainly throughout the 1990s and 2000s and the German-speaking countries, almost always set in milieus without any visible experience of financial deprivation. Of course, the commercials in question nevertheless are implicit statements about social class relations, but for our considerations they are even more interesting as a discursive field in which possibilities of veiling while subtly introducing 'class' as a marker of difference in actually middle-class, financially secure diegeses are negotiated. Our observation is that complete suppression of any reference to precarious conditions is not achieved in the spots, nor can it be if the precarity is in fact inscribed as a consumer truth in the very products advertised.

One example of this is the mentioned German Lunchables commercial of 1998, which goes as follows: We are looking over the shoulder of a woman arranging a bouquet of flowers in a vase. In the background, the family dog is lying in its basket. A boy, apparently the woman's son, comes walking toward her, routinely and without having to say a word to his mother reaches for a flat object wrapped in sandwich paper on the counter between us and him, and turns to leave with a look of disappointment on his face. The setting of the scene, a single-family house with an open-plan kitchen from which a French door leads into the garden, as well as the mother's relaxed activity of decorating the home with cut flowers while the lunch packet for the son is already ready on the counter, indicate that there is no shortage of either money or time here. Maternal care work, the commercial shows, is not a problem of stress or financial hardship, but above all a question of recognition, and its success above all depends on the judgement of those cared for. It is hence a private matter that can be optimised with knowledge (conveyed by ad-

[11] For example, in the well-known "medieval" campaign for Rügenwalder Mühle sausages, in which a representative of a kind of a "Reichsbürger" sect, living in the countryside obviously outside the society, barges in on a group of housewives in a butcher's shop, buys, or perhaps robs, the shop empty, and returns on horseback to his community that awaits him gathered around a red windmill with sausage-shaped sails. The situation with the blond hunk who, with a few seductive half-sentences and a penetrating look, makes the timid, whispering female shop assistant hand over all the fat sausages unmistakably echoes scenes from dime novels, Victorian-style romance movies, and similar fantasies of petty-bourgeois women being overpowered by handsome country lads. To watch the ad on YouTube see https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MwYQMpd_eZA (accessed 28 July 2023).

vertising) and money (paid for the advertised product). The female voice-over says, "Making a school lunch sandwich every day that children like, that's hard, even for the best of mothers. Not an easy task, really." The text opens up the range of meaning of the domestic crisis shown to include problems faced by mothers in less privileged circumstances: lack of resources, time stress, multiple workloads, and psychological pressure, among other things, can make it difficult to provide one's child with a balanced and appetising, socially accepted meal every day. Fittingly, what is shown on the image level omits the two most important parameters needed to assess the child's disappointment: apart from a brief partial shot of her upper body, we are neither shown the mother nor what the snack actually consists of. In the two following scenes, which again show the boy taking an unhappy look into a typical German lunchbox, while the father, being the 'good' parent who gets a goodbye smile from his son, is leaving the house in a suit and a sibling comes running from the garden, wet from the rain, we do not see what exactly annoys the boy. Imagining what the probably 'boring' school snack is that is not to the child's liking is left to the viewer, as is the fleshing out of the mother as a person with a body and a psyche. Introduced by "Luckily, there are now the new Kraft Lunchables", the solution offered shows the child taking much delight in a concrete product. Now he looks straight into the camera, which puts us as observers of the scene in the position of the 'good mother' who, for whatever reason, has turned her role as a provider of a 'good' school lunch into a consumer decision, hands over the purchased product to her child without further ado, and gets a "Thank you, Mummy!" in reward. The boy leaves the house with a quick buoyant stride to the same cheerful bouncing sound that accompanies the stacking and unstacking of crackers and slices of cheese and ham shown before as a fun expression of childlike individuality. In the background we see the kitchen table, familiar from the other scenes, now for the first time set for a meal and associating the child's being fed potentially questionable instant food with reminiscences of family dinners, recontextualising it as 'loving', 'homemade', and 'motherly'. With, for the first time, no other family member (dog, father, sibling) in the picture, the intimacy of the mother-son relationship is maximised. In this visual enactment, the happy and well-cared-for child as the presumed objective of maternal care work represents the most important part of a repaired relationship. Outwardly, the problem here was a gustatory miscommunication, though, given the logic of the product, lack of time and money would have been a much more likely cause, and one that diegetically calls for the quasi-elimination of the mother, who, in some abysmal way, seems to be the real problem here, since she apparently, for whatever reason, is unable to satisfactorily fulfil, with her competences and resources, the role of caring provider. We also learn that the ingestion of turrets of fatty salty bites promises to lead to good school performance and a high social standing among classmates, although the greedy looks of the other children, who apparently still are equipped with 'ordinary' school meals, remain somewhat ambivalent, some of them watching the boy and some the food. The buying decision thus also holds a promise of social advancement along classical middle-class narratives of education and social prestige.

It should only be noted, though, that the commercial follows obvious models from a US context. One ad in particular is identical in setting to the last detail of the family constellation,[12] but at the same time has, first, stronger references to probable food insecurity in the household shown ("Isn't this your doggy bag from last night?") and second, a son who more openly complains about perceived mistreatment by being given what he sees as an inappropriate lunch packet than his mutely frustrated German counterpart. Also,

[12] To watch the ad on YouTube see https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=86Dk1I9cRmY#t=01m52s (accessed 28 July 2023).

the question he asks his mother upon looking into the brown paper bag, "Are you mad at me?", indicates that conflicts within the family may be acted out manipulatively by rationing out disliked foods. Both the probably problematic family relationships and the nagging son are, however, presented as ironic and comedic by the female voice-over narrator and the whole setup of the spot.

The status of 'successful son' and 'good mother' achieved in the Lunchables ad by buying and consuming the advertised product points to the function of characters appearing in (food) commercials to serve as role models for the recipients in making their choices as buyers and consumers. This becomes evident in another commercial from the 1990s, this time for the Ferrero brand's Kinder Surprise. In just a few quick shots, interactions within a well-off suburban family are presented as particularly witty, creative, and harmonious.[13] When the daughter asks her mother, who is about to go grocery shopping in her BMW convertible, to bring her "something exciting, something to play with, and chocolate!", the son, overhearing her, takes the opportunity to offer himself as a shopping consultant who recommends buying Kinder Surprise to his mother on the way to the supermarket. The daughter's wish for excitement, a plaything, and chocolate will be fulfilled, as is shown in three inserts, by buying Kinder Surprise, which consists of a small toy that cannot be seen beforehand placed inside a plastic capsule placed inside a chocolate egg. While in the Lunchables commercial, it is the mother who, from off-camera, presents the solution to the food task posed to her, here, it is the son who even collects a fee for his advice in the form of his own Kinder Surprise. To satisfy children's needs and wants in relationships of feeding and upbringing and to achieve positions idealised in society and neoliberalism, like that of the smart businessperson, which require resources that are basically finite and, depending on social class, differently available, like time, money, recognition, or health, both commercials offer an (ostensibly) efficient and timesaving solution that looks particularly attractive in view of customers' potentially scarce resources and is associated with a fantasised positive experience. This way, ads targeting conditions of precarity can recommend seemingly simple solutions without having to represent, that is expressly address, those conditions. At the same time, questions about the complex conditions for 'success' in parent-child relationships or for attaining prestigious social positions are answered in an under-complex way that potentially undermines parental care work in that the 'knowledge' provided consists, first and foremost, of specific, recommended consumer decisions.

Our assumption is that food advertisemens are important producers of meaning, charging foods, their purchasing, provision, and consumption with semantic significance and thereby implicitly addressing class relations. These meanings can be, and in fact are, received by customers, which is why we consider their analysis and discussion to be a resource for class-political self-empowerment. Specifically, interventions can start out from where food marketing has informed food and nutrition-related speech, thinking, emotion, and action in the social or familial milieus of one's own childhood and youth and, for example, has promulgated variably applicable but also semantically diffuse 'valorising vocabulary' like 'fresh'.[14] This, of course, first applies to products

[13] To watch the ad on YouTube see https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4hjUVShDhCY&ab_channel=schollek (accessed 28 July 2023).
[14] See, e.g., Erasco's canned "noodle pot" (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MtO2lNZPICE&ab_channel=VhsChorizo) or Dr. Oetker's Die Ofenfrische frozen pizza (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V1x6eG2CkfI&ab_channel=StephanCooper) (both accessed 28 July 2023). We know from our own experience the relevance of describing meals as 'fresh' when served, regardless of how they were prepared. Beyond valorising the meal, the attribution of 'freshness' can be understood as an act of symbolic 'refreshment' of the social relations between the persons involved in the meal, e.g., mother and son. Depending on the context, though, it can also be indicative of feelings of shame on the part of the food-providing parent, if there is a sense that the meal prepared is not socially accepted.

for which advertising actually exists. At the same time, the analysis of such branded products can be expanded by examining the marketing and design language of products that imitate branded products or are offered by the same brands under a different name and for less money through discount outlets. It should be noted that class affiliations are also intersected by other social dimensions. For example, it can be assumed that discursive formations around the advertisements of (semi-)ready meals discussed above, which decidedly address a 'white' population, are less significant in contexts shaped by conditions of migration. Consequently, the techniques, knowledge and forms of feeding children may vary greatly within a common or related class background. An examination of the connection between 'class' and 'food' would therefore also benefit from the observation category 'migration' and the analysis of the inclusions and exclusions that come with the conditions of a migration society as well as the different survival strategies developed therein. In order to approach these contexts in a discrimination-sensitive way, to counteract perspective-related reductions in complexity, and to arrive at less narrow research results, it is indispensable, however, aside from the reflection of one's own social and theoretical framework, to involve the most diverse actors possible in all steps of the analytic process.

Specific class and nutritional knowledge can be generated, updated, reflected, and revised by actors interested in class relations by joint engagement with biographically relevant, pop-cultural artefacts of their own food-related socialisation.

Learning to identify codes that mark class differences as well as strategies and techniques used to veil, while still implicitly addressing, class-related precarities in advertising appears to us to be an important means to make different class origins understandable and discriminatory structures addressable. This is all the truer since classism is first only felt diffusely by many of those affected by it and can only much later be recognized and named for what it is. Media analyses insightfully addressing the sometimes strongly classist portrayal of, for example single mothers, unemployed and low-wage earners in reality TV shows[15], might be accompanied by approaches in which, for example, the meals of one's own childhood and youth are jointly remembered, prepared, and eaten together in a kind of re-enactment and discussed with respect to their class-related significance. Finally, another possibility of publicly effective intervention in contexts of 'class', 'food' and 'care' would be the appropriation of food-marketing techniques to repurpose them in an artistic manner, for example in the context of exhibitions or in adbusting manoeuvres, so as to give public visibility to structural social injustices.

[15] See, e.g., Insa Härtel, "Gespaltene Einstellung: Messiesendungen im Detail," in Irene Nierhaus, Kathrin Heinz and Rosanna Umbach (eds.), *WohnSeiten: Visuelle Konstruktionen des Wohnens in Zeitschriften* (Bielefeld, 2021), 318–334.