Pre-Raphaelite Food Politics or, Feasting on Desire: John Everett Millais, Social Norms and Women

Lidia Mihaela NECULA*

Abstract
Renowned for his infamous painting Christ in the House of his Parents *(1849-1850) or for* The Tragic Story of Ophelia *(1851-1852) which brought him domestic and international fame during his lifetime as a British painter, John Everett Millais (1829-1896) is known as one of the founders of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood (1848), a group of young and idealistic artists determined to instil vibrating energy and novelty into contemporary art which they considered to have been stifled by the prevailing conventions of the Royal Academy. Millais's works display microscopic attention to pictorial realism and manifest an almost fetishistic attention to photographic detail; and yet, it is despite this covert technique (or maybe particularly due to it!) that Millais' art manifests a certain politics springing from an exceptional daring in the way his paintings function as genuine social and cultural parables. Therein, the current paper looks into three of Millais' paintings (namely,* Bridesmaid *(1851),* Isabella *(1868), and* The Captive *(1882)), as mirrors that reflect and challenge while obliquely commenting on and criticising Victorian social norms (particularly those related to gender, gender roles, binary oppositions and desire) through the depiction of food. Hence, the main focus of the paper is not merely uncovering Millais' food aesthetics and the way he uses food as a subject of aesthetic interest but rather looking into Millais' food politics (and poetics) and the way food becomes a vehicle for expressing deeper societal concerns, class distinctions, moral lessons, and cultural exchanges.*

Keywords: *pictorial realism, social and cultural parables, food politics, desire, Victorian norms, societal concerns, class distinctions, moral lessons, cultural exchanges*

Of food and meaning(ful) voices

Forever and deeply entangled in our experiences of life or in our mental representations of the world *without* (outside of us), food has insinuated itself so deeply in our collective unconscious and has become such an important part of human behaviour that it can evoke emotions or bring people together while reflecting our cultural heritage or marking social differences, boundaries, bonds and contradictions. Seen like this, *food is life*, *food is history*, *food is culture* and, successively, *life, history and culture* can, in turn, *be understood through food.*

* "Dunarea de Jos" University of Galati, Romania lidia.necula@ugal.ro

Food – a powerful symbol chosen to represent various aspects of human experience such as desire, temptation, and social transgression – shares a very close relationship with the artwork of John Everett Millais, a prominent figure in the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood: both media (food and art) have a good grasp of a rich symbolic alphabet (through its diversity of *colour, texture, smell* and *taste* opening up possibilities to be elaborated and combined in infinite ways) enabling us with a *polyphony of experiences* that trespass their immediate form. Particularly in the three paintings under investigation, *Bridesmaid* (1851), *Isabella* (1868), and *The Captive* (1882), Millais uses art to explore themes of desire and social norms: women have a special relationship to food (used symbolically) and a particularly vivid experience of their bodies within the social co(n)text is so heavily (and lavishly) mediated through the visual, the tactile and the olfactory.

The images of food featured in Millais' paintings rely on the olfactory, taste and the visual, triggering off memories, emotions and cultural connections that vibrate differently with each new *reader/receiver/taster* catering for endless new interpretations and building new relationships since neither food nor art act like objects but rather react in relationships. It is through food and the way it is painted on the canvas (the colours chosen, the shades, the shapes and their position or the posture of the human sitters) that we begin to comprehend *the trinity of body image, eating* and *sexuality,* i.e., Millais' very own *political poetics* through which he reprojects the Pre-Raphaelite social construct(ion) of Victorian women and their bodies. Therein, it becomes obvious that Millais' portrayal of women both challenges and reflects Victorian social norms and expectations cast into doubt by the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood and their artistic credo.

The phrase *Feasting on Desire* suggests an exploration of the *politics* of desire and the way societal norms regulate and suppress individual wishes, all of which are reflected in Millais' art. In this respect, *reading* food in art or *feasting on food through art* gathers complete new meanings (also entailed by societal expectations in conflict with personal longing) set in a Victorian Pre-Raphaelite co(n)text, backgrounded by factors such as social roles and gender construction (especially since men and women delineate themselves differently, through their practices).

Of (inter)sections

John Everett Millais, a founding member of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, created some of the most iconic and detailed works of the 19th century. His paintings often contain rich layers of symbolism and social commentary where food plays a significant role in this symbolic language.

If we examine John Everett Millais' poetics, i.e. his *artistic techniques* and the way he uses *visual symbolism* to convey complex themes related to *the trinity*

of food, desire, and *social norms,* we could endeavour to say that Millais uses *the lens of food* to mediate a rich and nuanced exploration of the intersection between *art, society* and *individual desire* all co(n)textualised by colour, composition, and iconography.

Moreover, by looking over the array of Millais' paintings, it immediately becomes apparent that, despite the limited number of artworks devoted entirely or predominantly to food, three paintings feature fruits engaged in relationships with women, although *his* women are never shown with food in their mouths: fruits are always ready and waiting on the tray and, despite the *stillness* of their presence they do generate a *multiplicity of meanings* and *relationships* in the space of the painting foregrounding Pre-Raphaelite beauties.

Thus, *Isabella* (1868), *The Bridesmaid* (1851) and *The Captive* (1882) are particularly relevant for the depictions of food that are recurrent in the paintings and that intersect with broader social critiques of Victorian gender roles, social power dynamics, and the *commodification of human relationships.*

Unimportant at first, the presence of the fruits seems unrelated to the symbolic meanings Millais creates in the physical space of his paintings and as yet, it is exactly this deliberate setting of the fruit outside the woman's space, in isolation, that starts yielding new meanings in this *psychosocial space* of the painting. Moreover, critics have looked so far at Millais' paintings as generators of stories, forever revealing infinite layers of intertextual (and intratextual) information, some sort of framing narratives that get a 'voice' under the eyes of the viewer. Also, we could even affirm that Millais' paintings are closer to a 'roman à tirroirs' as, on the one hand, they enable the *psychosocial space* of the painting itself, while, on the other, by the means of the symbols carefully chosen, they generate a myriad of other enframed *psychosocial spaces.*

As such, in *Isabella*, *The Bridesmaid* and *The Captive*, the food is carefully chosen to embed within his art(ful) *politics* by the means of which Millais obliquely criticises a set of Victorian social norms (bridging the outrageous rather than the normal) becoming thus a psychosocial space where personal and social dynamics play out, carrying a symbolic weight that connects to the emotional, psychological, and social interactions of the characters.

In *The Bridesmaid*, the orange resting on the plate, in front of the young woman, functions as more than just a physical object and turns into a psychosocial space through a series of circumstances. First of all, in art, *oranges* symbolise both romantic and sexual desire, and, in the painting, the orange connotes the bridesmaid's societal role in the wedding ritual conveying social pressures surrounding marriage, fertility, and a woman's place in Victorian society. The way the young woman interacts with the orange (the copper-like fruit is on the plate, outside of her physical space) reflects the bridesmaid's inner emotional state as she is torn between her role (and the duty she has to fulfil) and personal feelings. Most probably, the bridesmaid's contemplation

while holding the wedding ring and passing the bride cake through it creates a psychosocial space where the fruit embodies unspoken thoughts of love, loneliness, or resentment which means that, in this case, the food here is a vehicle for psychological and social introspection.

Often associated with bitterness, sourness, and deprivation, the lemons resting on the plate in *The Captive* serve as a key element in the psychosocial dynamics between captor (absent from the painting) and captive (the young woman portrayed): as a rule, food usually represents connection or social interaction but, in captivity, where social interaction is limited, the act of sharing or withholding food becomes one of the few forms of communication between the individuals. Therein, this not only makes the yellow exotic fruits a central point of the psychosocial space (highlighting isolation or a perverse sense of companionship) but it turns food into a psychosocial space which brings to the fore such concepts as power, control, and emotional complexity.

While oranges are known to symbolise fertility and sexuality in art, lemons, on the contrary, symbolise bitterness and hardship, reinforcing, most probably, the suffering of the captive. However, food might also be looked at as a tool of control, since the status of the young captive woman implicitly entails the presence of her captor (even if he is absent), creating, yet again, a psychosocial space where the emotional states of both the captor and the captive are communicated through the act of giving or withholding food. The (offering/receiving) of lemons might suggest an ambiguous relationship between care and domination, where food is both sustenance and a reminder of the captive's vulnerable position, thereby enabling the emergence of the psychosocial space especially since food reflects the emotional undercurrents of isolation, dependency, and subjugation.

Finally, since *Isabella* is based on the tale from Boccaccio's *Decameron* about Isabella and her forbidden love, in Millais' painting, food is central to the psychosocial dynamics of family, power, and desire, all the more since the meal scene is filled with tension. Understandably, the shared meal fails to reflect communal unity or social customs (the family's gathering is occasioned by an (un)fortunate event and it reflects the social hierarchy within Isabella's family) and instead, the scene breathes out violence as the male representatives of Isabella's family (her brothers) dominate the atmosphere and through the symbolical representation of food (particularly through the cracking of the nuts and the spilling of the salt) it further generates rupture and conflict as both familial obligations and hidden desires are negotiated.

Moreover, the food at the table contrasts with Isabella's hidden love for Lorenzo and the brothers' aggression in the meal scene foretells their violent actions against the latter, making the act of sharing food a space for the escalating tensions between loyalty to family and personal desire.

In each of the three paintings by Millais, there is an art(ful) *politics* (and *poetics*) at work which endows food (the meal scene in *Isabella,* the orange and the bride-cake in *The Bridesmaid,* the lemons in *The Captive*) as a psychosocial space facilitating thus emotional expression, either as social power or as a reflection of internal psychological states further entailing relationships and social dynamics that govern the characters' lives.

Food as power and class struggle: '*Isabella*' (1868) feasting on desire

Based on a story from Boccaccio's *Decameron* retold in Keats's poem *Isabella, or the Pot of Basil,* Millais' *Isabella* (1868) displays his technical craftsmanship (and artful(ness)) with an almost microscopic precision of the brush: his *Isabella* tells the tragic story of a young woman who is in love with a man named Lorenzo, much to the displeasure of her wealthy merchant brothers who, presumably, murder the latter to maintain control over Isabella's marriage and wealth.

In his depiction of the events, Millais places food centre stage, assigning it a fundamental role in symbolising the power dynamics between Isabella, her brothers, and Lorenzo, so that, set against a Victorian background, this story becomes metonymical of all similar stories about the societal constraints of the time that commodified women and confined them to a single role.

The painting, which depicts a dinner scene, is filled with meticulous detail that draws from both Renaissance influences and the Pre-Raphaelite commitment to realism so that every aspect of the dining table (the wine, the salt, the nut shells, the food plates, the orange fruit) is rendered with dramatic precision, allowing the objects to take on symbolic weight. The composition itself reflects the tragic tension within the narrative as Isabella sits quietly next to her lover Lorenzo, facing her oppressive brothers on the other side of the table; their domination over the meal foreshadows the violence to come, embedded within the metaphor of the food on the table (including the split bloody orange, the crushed nuts or the salt cellar spilling its contents on the white tablecloth). Millais uses the nuts as a central symbol and the crushing of the nutshells by Isabella's brother becomes an act of aggression disguised as a domestic ritual, foreshadowing thus of Lorenzo's fate.

The brothers, seated at the table with Isabella and Lorenzo, are not merely eating but asserting their power over both their sister and Lorenzo through the symbolic gesture of male dominance and control: the nutcracker and the act of crushing and the split bloody orange are ominous symbols of the violence that will befall Lorenzo.

Although the composition of *Isabella* seems to be tightly focused on the figures of the two lovers brought closer by the plate (held by Lorenzo), the eyes of the viewer simultaneously zoom on the elements placed in the background, creating an almost intimate scene that centres on the ritualistic significance of food: the occurrence of the bloody orange split in halves is **symbolic** of

Lorenzo's being murdered [see Appendix A, Figure 1A]; the salt spilt on the white tablecloth is an implied omen [see Appendix A, Figure 2A]; the crushed nuts symbolise the annihilation of Lorenzo's masculinity but also the cracking of his head [see Appendix A, Figure 1b]; and the glass of wine connotes the sacrificial toast of the doomed Lorenzo [see Appendix A, Figure 3A].

The wine's deep dark red hue stands out against the soft tones of the rest of the painting, drawing the viewer's attention to it as one of the central elements of the composition. In Victorian society, wine was often associated with both ritual and indulgence and it was mainly used in sacred ceremonies such as the Eucharist but also linked to sensual pleasure. Held by one of Isabella's brothers in a symbolic gesture of toast, not drinking from it yet, the glass of wine suggests a moment of hesitation, a pause between the present and the future, between Isabella's present innocence and her future experience. The wine, rich in colour and symbolism, evokes ideas of temptation and fertility (Isabella's) and transformation (not only physical but also psychological, entailing a change in the relationship between Isabella and her brothers, currently using her as a commodity exchange) hinting at the deeper emotional and psychological layers of the scene.

As stated above, wine in Victorian society, particularly in the context of weddings, was often associated with ritual, communion, and transformation while in Christian symbolism, wine represents the blood of Christ, linking it to themes of sacrifice, redemption, and spiritual union. By positioning one of Isabella's brothers at the table with the glass of wine, Millais hints at the larger meanings embedded in this moment as the brother's almost hesitant gesture – as he holds the glass of wine but does not drink –, suggests a moment of transition away from the current state to Lorenzo's sacrifice, the symbolical spilling of the blood of the innocent becoming therefore evident that the food element (the wine) is used as a symbol of this transition. Interesting is also the depiction of the wine whose physicality is present despite its absence (in the empty glass) rendered through the almost tactile quality and the smooth surface of the transparent glass, but also through the fluid texture and deep colour of the wine in the half-full glass, rendered with extreme care, creating a sensory experience for the viewer.

Clearly, in this painting, food is tied to the representation of class and control in Victorian society, visible in the way Isabella's brothers use their wealth and authority to dictate the terms of their sister's life. Furthermore, a careful analysis of Isabella's portrayal on the canvas points to her passivity, as she sits at the table in quiet defiance, which contrasts with her brothers' aggressive relationship to food. The attention to the texture and form of the food enhances this symbolism and Millais's use of compelling hues on the nutshells, on the glass of wine or on the orange fruit contrasts with the soft,

passive figure of Isabella, who seems almost disconnected from the physical space she inhabits.

> We see the ill-fated loves of Isabella and the trade assistant of her brothers, who, sitting opposite, watch with rage how tenderly she takes the orange - the symbolically blood-red orange that Lorenzo has cut for her. The one in his idle rage cracks a nut as he would willingly crack Lorenzon's head, upsets the salt and viciously kicks at the greyhound that his sister fondles. The other looks with a treacherous smile across his wine-glass, a man to whom the 'serpent's whine'is natural; and the third watches, too, with well-restrained anger; while the nurse - 'an aged dame' observes with apprehension and foreboding the violence of the eldest and most demonstrative 'money-bag'. The ingenious composition, recalling in a measure one of Veronese's 'Feasts,' is supported by the excellence of colour, fine execution, and extraordinary finish which attains its highest perfection, perhaps in the head of Isabella. The drawing is as certain and as pure as Holbein's and far less hard than at first sight appears. There are passages of colour - such as the green cover to the kicker's chair - worthy of Van Eyck. (Harry Spielmann, 2008: 84)

The food on the table becomes a metaphor for control, as the brothers handle manipulate, and consume it. Millais's technique of layering intricate detail within the composition serves to deepen the symbolic role of food as a representation of power, manipulation, and violence. The shared meal, commonly held as a symbol of communal unity, is perverted herein into a site of conflict and violence particularly as Millais obliquely critiques the way Victorian society commodifies women (metonymically embodied by Isabella), reducing them to a pawn in the economic and social ambitions of the male figures in their lives.

Food as conformity and female passivity: *'The Bridesmaid'* feasting on desire (1851)

A contemplation on the role of women within Victorian society, particularly in relation to marriage and gender expectations, John Everett Millais' *The Bridesmaid* portrays a Pre-Raphaelite young beauty with impressive copper-blonde hair, flowing down her shoulders, and dressed in the luxuriant yellow garment of a bridesmaid, decorated at the neckline with an intricate floral corsage, tied with a ribbon that adds a touch of elegance and indicates her role as a bridesmaid.

The figure of the young woman is set against an abysmal and mystifying royal blue background which aggressively contrasts with the warm tones of the bridesmaid's hair and dress.

The composition of *The Bridesmaid* is simple but highly effective in focusing attention on the woman's figure and the symbolic elements that occupy her physical space in the painting. Millais uses a tight, cropped frame

that centres the woman and eliminates any extraneous background details. This compositional choice isolates the figure and draws the viewer's focus to her gesture and expression.

In the foreground, the viewer's eyes rest on an exquisite silver sugar caster and a plate with a piece of cake and an orange on it, adding a domestic touch that upholds the entire composition and possibly connotes wealth, fertility, protection, and abundance, all stereotypically attached to the idea of marriage. The delicate hands of the bridesmaid seem to be occupied with something, as she appears to hold a small item between her left index finger and her thumb, presumably a wedding ring, a posture that confers some pulsating energy to the stillness of the visual narrative. [see Appendix B, Figure 1B] The painting illustrates one of many Victorian marriage traditions according to which a bridesmaid would see a vision of her true love if she passed a piece of wedding cake through a ring nine times. (*The Bridesmaid* by John Everett Millais (thehistoryofart.org) accessed 24 August 2024)

> Known for a time as 'All Hallow's E'en', the picture represents the popular superstition that the bridesmaid who passes a piece of bride cake through a ring will see a vision of her beloved. It was painted in the same year as *Mariana* and the Hueguenot and is exquisite in handling. For the head, Mrs Nassau Senior sat. (Harry Spielmann, 2008: 146)

One of the most striking elements of *The Bridesmaid* is Millais' meticulous attention to detail, characteristic of the Pre-Raphaelite commitment to the highly elaborate, almost hyper-realistic style of early Renaissance art, i.e., *photographic realism*. Every aspect of the painting, from the bridesmaid's gown and hair to the silver sugar caster on her left or the piece of cake and the orange fruit on the plate, in front of her, is rendered with extraordinary precision. This level of detail creates a tactile quality that invites the viewer into the scene, making it feel immediate and real.

Moreover, on the canvas, the bridesmaid holds a central place. The painting is imbued with symbolic references to food and ritualistic consumption, highlighting, yet again, the women's role in Victorian society. The inclusion of food as a symbolic element, in the form of sugar (although out of sight, concealed behind the silver walls of the sugar caster), the orange fruit and the piece of the wedding cake, serves as a central metaphor for purity, sensuality, societal control and gendered expectations placed on women, particularly in the context of marriage and ritual in Victorian life. (En)trapped between the sacred and the sensual, the bridesmaid is caught in the liminal space between innocence and experience. The act of holding the ring simultaneously alludes to purity and sacrifice but also to fertility and desire, casting the figure of the Pre-Raphaelite young woman in a dual light.

The act of holding food (the small piece of the wedding cake), not yet consuming it, points to a deeper societal commentary on women's bodies and their function within marriage: the ring and the piece of cake held at chest level invite the viewer to contemplate the significance of this gesture, which can be interpreted as a moment of reflection, anticipation, or even uncertainty. The placement of the ring in relation to the fruit and the cake on the plate is key to the painting's symbolic power. The bridesmaid's dynamic gesture (passing the small piece of cake through the wedding ring (therefore not eating or tasting it) suggests a liminal state, a moment of pause between the past and the future, innocence and experience. Thus rendered with great precision by Millais, this gesture, emphasises the woman's role not only as a participant in the ritual but also as a symbol of Victorian womanhood, caught between societal expectations and personal agency.

The bridesmaid, with her solemn expression, becomes an emblem of the way Victorian society ritualised and controlled female sexuality, using food as a symbol of purity, sacrifice, and passive consumption. In this way, Millais obliquely criticises the rigid gender roles of Victorian society, where women were often reduced to symbolic functions in the rituals of marriage, expected to conform to societal expectations without expressing their desires or individuality.

Food as emotional symbolism: *The Captive* (1882) feasting on desire

The Captive portrays the graceful figure of a girl in an Oriental dress. Her expression, though serene, conveys a deep sense of resignation and emotional withdrawal as she is bearing before her a silver plate with two lemon fruits on it. The sitter was Miss Ruby Streadfield and this pleasing study in cool colours was at one time known as *Ruby.*

Much in a similar way to *The Bridesmaid*, in *The Captive,* Millais shifts focus to the interior through a dark, confined space intending to enhance the emotional weight of the painting: placed in the space *within* of the young woman (whose passive posture suggests that she is entrapped both physically and psychologically), the fruits become a marker not only of emotional and social confinement but also of limited agency afforded to women during the Victorian era. Despite the muted, sombre tones of the room bathed in dim, foggy light, two small bundles of yellow colour pop out on the tray (both a literal and a metaphorical barrier), somehow isolating, even confining the figure of the young woman within her environment.

Though less overt in its social commentary than *Isabella* or *The Bridesmaid*, *The Captive* uses the motif of food to explore themes of emotional and social captivity and it is the woman's ambiguous physical posture that can be read both as a provider (holding power as she hands out the tray to serve) and as a recipient of food (being in control as she reaches her hands to receive

the tray, being in a vulnerable, dependent position) that highlights her dual role in Victorian society, expected to nourish and care for others while being confined by the very domesticity she upholds. This power dynamic creates a psychosocial space where relationships are, yet again, defined by hierarchy and dependency, characterised as it is by a complex blend of compassion and dominance.

Nevertheless, not to be ignored is the idea of otherness embedded within the painting through the presence of the exotic fruits, the lemons [see Appendix C, Figure 1C}, in the context of Victorian England which could hint at themes of foreignness or *otherness*, especially if the captive in the painting is meant to represent someone from a different culture or background but also through the depiction of the beautifully adorned Oriental garment the young woman is wearing, reinforcing thus the idea of the captive as an *outsider*, whose very existence in this confined space is marked by difference and distance from freedom.

In conclusion, the lemons Millais portrays in *The Captive* add to the politics of his aesthetics and serve as a multi-layered symbol, intertwining themes of suffering, temptation, health, and alienation, hence enriching the painting's emotional and psychological complexity.

Some after-thoughts

Art has long been a medium for reflecting and critiquing societal values, and no movement embodies this dual role more vividly than the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood (PRB), an artistic group whose focus on aesthetic reform was entangled with a deeper engagement with the social issues of their time, obliquely commenting on Victorian values, class structure, industrialisation, and gender roles.

One of the founding members of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, John Everett Millais, like his fellow PRB artists, aligned himself with the *Arts and Crafts Movement,* which opposed the dehumanising effects of mass production and his particular use of *photographic realism* laid the foundations of a Millaisian *aesthetic poetics* (a genuine technical mastery where minute attention is given to intricate detail and vibrant natural colours that dominate the canvas) that also acts like a particular form of *ideological politics,* obliquely criticising not only the broader Victorian obsession with propriety, refinement and order but also the class-based moral structures of the era.

The Pre-Raphaelites' engagement with social commentary through art, which Millais also followed through, reveals how aesthetics can transcend mere decoration to become a powerful tool for cultural and moral introspection. Nevertheless, while they offered women complex roles in their art, the Pre-Raphaelites often portrayed them as passive subjects of male desire, trapped within the confines of beauty and unattainable ideals which attracted

criticism regarding their idealisation and objectification of women. And yet, despite all criticism, this particular portrayal reflects Victorian anxieties about women's sexuality and the fear of female independence, even as it challenges the moral purity expected of Victorian women.

The almost fetishistic depiction of food in art (and particularly in Millais' works of art) is a testament to its profound significance in human culture: whether as a symbol of abundance, a vehicle for moral allegory, or a means of social critique, food in paintings offers a rich tapestry of meanings and interpretations and, through the ages, artists have used food to explore the complexities of human experience, making it an enduring and evocative subject in the world of art.

While not overtly political, in works such as *Isabella* (1849), *The Bridesmaid* (1851) and *The Captive* (1853), Millais craftfully uses food to enhance the layers of meaning hidden within the psychosocial spaces his paintings thus create by means of rich visual narratives that explore power dynamics, gender roles, and personal identity. Hence, Millais's intersection of art and social commentary through depictions of food adds depth to the Pre-Raphaelite movement's critique of Victorian culture, making his paintings powerful reflections on the societal norms of his time. Therein, the food motifs and their relationship to the figures within these artworks, become vehicles intended to subversively construct a politics by the means of which the oppressive expectations placed upon women in Victorian society, particularly regarding domesticity, desire, and agency are subtly criticised so that both the subject and the viewer engaged in art feast on desire.

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Appendix A
Figure 1A, detail

Figure 2A, detail

Figure 3A, detail

Appendix B
Figure 1B, detail

Appendix C
Figure 1C, detail