

WHEN FOOD MOBILIZES EMOTIONS: REACHING FOREIGN AND DOMESTIC AUDIENCES

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Abstract

This paper aims to explore food films and their symbolism. Food is a way of creating national identities, and enhancing the sense of belonging. It also evokes the concept of ‘nostalgia’ and has the capacity to mobilize strong emotions (Mintz 1996). The semiotic analysis of food underlines how the biosphere and the semiosphere intersect in various instances of human life (Danesi 2004). In cultural settings, food symbolizes substance and conveys different meanings. This research material will focus on the analysis of images (food, culinary preparations and different eating events) as portrayed in Tassos Boulmetis’s 2003 film *Πολιτική Κουζίνα/ A Touch of Spice*, and the domestic and international trailers of the film. The analysis will be based on Lotman’s notion of the *semiosphere*.

Keywords: food films, isotopies, semiosphere, symbolism, film trailers

1. How are films promoted online?

Digitization has changed the way films are distributed and promoted. In this respect, Crisp (2015) acknowledges that films are circulated more diversely now than in the celluloid era and, more importantly, the different age groups do not perceive the notion of film in the same way.¹ Distribution (both formal and informal) takes place online, through different file formats and platforms (or multi-platforms), thus allowing film directors to reach wider audiences. Not only has film distribution turned film release into an event but it has also changed viewing habits. This shift has significantly affected film promotion as well. In recent years, the movie industry has embraced social media due to its greater impact on a film's promotion. Some decades ago, it was common to watch film previews in movie theatres. However, in recent decades, film trailers are promoted online through social media, Internet platforms, YouTube or the film's official website, thus, allowing mass exposure. This new reality has undeniably affected the film industry and it has become part of the film's branding strategy. In this fashion, a range of promotional material (trailers, teasers, spoilers, posters etc.) is created in order to cater for different age groups and cultures (foreign or domestic audiences). One of the most common ways to promote a film is through film trailers.

What exactly are film trailers and how is their promotional aspect mediated? Film trailers are film paratexts² closely linked to their original text. Film paratexts can be described as syncretic texts, since they combine or merge different sign patterns.³ With regard to their structure Kernan (2004) notes that film trailers combine promotional discourse and narrative pleasure, blending advertising with the seventh art. Some trailers are very original and innovative, they have the ability to release intense emotions and motivate viewers (Kernan 2004). Among their distinctive features, it can be noted that they induce feelings of curiosity and attraction and comprise an element of exaggeration or even raise familiar emotions to the viewers (see Johnston 2009, 2013; Hesford 2013; Kostopoulou 2019). They include

¹ As Rosenbaum (2010: xiii) aptly explains, "People nowadays don't always mean the same thing when they use terms like 'cinema,' 'film,' 'movie,' [...] Older viewers typically refer to what can be seen in 35mm in movie theatres and read about in publications on paper. Younger ones are more likely speaking about the DVDs watched in homes and the blogs on sites accessed on the Internet".

² The term was coined by Genette (1997).

³ Syncretic communication can be seen as manipulative at times (see Greimas & Courtés 1986).

a varied stylistic rhythm, an alternation between *perception*, *affection* and *action images* in Deleuze's sense, and various styles of music. Often film trailers use recognizable aspects of a film, including actors, music, and plot to appeal to the emotions (*pathos*) or enhance the film's credibility (*ethos*).⁴ Furthermore, film trailers can follow the narrative line of the film, keeping the linearity of the storyline, or they can mix the original scenes, creating an interesting montage that does not follow the storyline of the film.⁵ They can also follow a middle ground, keeping the linearity and changing some parts of the film (Federico 2017). The case under study will be food films, a specific genre that has grown in popularity in recent years.

2. Food and culture

Food studies is an interdisciplinary field that attracts the attention of researchers from various disciplines, namely social sciences, translation studies, anthropology, psychology, marketing, and recently, film and television studies. As early as 1964, Claude Lévi-Strauss wrote a seminal essay on the semiotic difference between 'raw' and 'cooked' food in which he explained that cooked meals were the foundations of various religious and social practices. He also noted that cooking meals is one of the distinct differences between nature and culture. All human beings are said to cook their meals in one form or another. Roland Barthes (1961 [2008]) notes that food is a system of signification. It is a bearer of meanings that are closely connected to a given culture. As Tierney and Obnuki-Tierney (2012: n.p.) note:

Food is unique as a metaphor for the self and for social groups through two interlocking mechanisms that assign symbolic power. First, food is *embodied* in each individual and therefore operates as a *metonym* by being incorporated as part of the self. Second, food has historically been consumed collectively by a social group—the rise of solitary dining being very much a modern phenomenon.

From a sociological perspective the image of food unites people and binds them together. As Parasecoli (2011: 646) explains, “[the] encounters with other cuisines can be involuntary, sometimes causing reactions that can be as intense as disgust, or voluntary, as in the case of culinary tour-

⁴ Smith (2007) notes that *ethos* is one of the most common forms of persuasion in film trailers, as it depends on the knowledge of a director, the actors, etc. in order to convince the audience to watch the film. Also see Zanger (1998) and Yanagisawa et al. (2014).

⁵ For more information on the contrast between films and trailers and the different types of narrative/anti-narrative trailers see Federico (2017).

ism". He suggests (ibid.: 647) that semiotics can help us better understand "behaviors related to culinary encounters" and "shed new light on food as a network of interrelated embodied process of semiosis". In the same light, Stano (2015: 18) stresses the need to expand "the analysis of food hybridisations and intersections to the contemporary world". She thus proposes not to focus exclusively on *food-material* but also on *texts, discourses* and "*practices* of preparation, and especially the consumption of different dishes (making their symbolism explicit [...])". Furthermore, food is used as a way of creating national identities and enhancing the sense of belonging. It also evokes the concept of 'nostalgia'. It is often the case that images of food are used in posters and film trailers as a way of summoning nostalgic feelings and to stress the need of belonging in a community. In this sense, Harbottle (2000) observes that the sight of familiar food evoked nostalgic thoughts of family. Thus, it becomes evident why such images accompanied by happy family members are so immensely exploited in the advertising sector.

Food also has the capacity to mobilize strong emotions (Mintz 1996). Mere images of food can heighten human senses and evoke different emotions in the viewer's mind. On a denotative level food is associated with survival but on the level of the semiosphere⁶ food and eating has acquired several connotations, thus becoming metonymies of the self, of nostalgic reunions, and of sensuality.⁷ In terms of worldview and lifestyle, people perceive gustatory differences in cuisine as a way of contrasting the idea of 'us' and 'them' (Danesi 2004: 199). In fact, Danesi uses the term *cuisine* to designate the system of connotations attributed to food. He posits, "[c]uisine informs us as to what certain people eat, how they make it, and what it reveals about them" (Danesi 2004: 193). Furthermore, table rituals and manners that accompany the consumption of food are shared by specific members of a group; thus, sharing food becomes a factor of inclusion or exclusion.

This article, while accepting the interdisciplinarity of food studies, has three main goals: a) to delineate the functions of food in cinema, b) to ex-

⁶ The term semiosphere was first coined by Lotman in his seminal 1984 article published in *Sign System Studies*. Semiosphere is the semiotic space, outside of which semiosis cannot exist (Lotman 2005 [1984]: 205).

⁷ In the issue of food and sensuality, Laine (2005: 105) explains, "In Western cinema, food and drink have often served as symbols for life and sensuality. The enjoyment of food is used to celebrate the pure physical joy of life and sensuality, reminding us of our immediate corporeal sensations, and affirming the vitality of human life. A number of films about food use food imagery in a "carnavalesque" fashion".

plore its symbolism and c) to decipher how food scenes are retained in film trailers to appeal to domestic audiences and raise familiar emotions. Danesi's notion of food as a symbol and Lotman's notion of the semiosphere will be used to this end.

3. Food imagery and symbolism in films

Throughout cinematic history food has played a pivotal role in “revealing aspects of characters’ emotions, identities, cultural backgrounds, fears and aspirations” (Bower & Piontek 2014: 177). As Ferry (2003: 2) observes, film narratives and images can help us identify changing structures in society and shifts in cultural identity. In fact, one of the first films by the Lumière Brothers (*Repas de bébé*) consists of a single shot depicting Auguste Lumière, his wife, and their child having dinner.⁸ Since then, a number of films can be acknowledged where food is an integral part of the storyline.⁹ Due to the growing number of food films several scholars recognize the creation of this new film genre.¹⁰

The centrality of food in films and its symbolic function have been analyzed by many researchers (Telotte 1985; Poole 1999; Nicholson 2001; Ferry 2003; Zimmerman & Weiss 2005; Baron 2006; Shugart 2008; Mangiapane 2013, 2015; Parasecoli 2015 etc.). In fact, Bower (2004: 3) comments that food “is part of the semiotic process of film-making” while Mangiapane (2015: 1) considers food as a marker of subjective and inter-subjective shifts:

Putting food in the middle of a story, be it literature or cinema, turns it into a powerful tool of subjective and inter-subjective shift. Eating becomes a basic transformative act, so that, by means of the food, social ties may be reconstructed, relationships reshaped, the entire life of individuals, communities and even entire countries reconstructed.

⁸ It was part of the Lumière brothers’ film program in December 1895 thus marking cinema as a theater-going experience (Bower & Piontek 2014: 177).

⁹ For instance, *Le Grand Bouffle* (1973), *Babette’s Feast* (1988), *Delicatessen* (1990), *Eat Drink Man Woman* (1994), *Soul Food* (1997), *the Blue Diner* (2000), *Chocolate* (2000), *Tortilla Soup* (2001), *Le Diner* (2001), *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* (2005), *Ratatouille* (2007) etc.

¹⁰ Mangiapane (2015: 1) explains, “[i]n recent years, the Culinary Cinema has even become a genre, celebrated in festivals internationally”.

What is very important is to distinguish between food films and those which do not belong to this genre. Food is a recurrent motif in food films; it has “symbolic priority over other motifs” (Nicholson 2001: 280). Food, in these films, acts as the central axis of the plot (Shugart 2008), a marker of crisis, and a conveyor of feelings such as “resentment, love, compensation, anger, rebellion, withdrawal” (Poole 1999: 3). Food can also be depicted as the point of encounter of the self and society. It is apparent from the above-mentioned analysis that the connection between food and film is prominent. It revolves around the self and images of solitary eating, the family and images of family reunions and, finally, food is depicted as an object or locus of sensuality.

4. Methodology and corpus

The present research is a qualitative analysis of food representations in Tassos Boulmetis’s film *A Touch of Spice*. Firstly, some main food representations will be examined in terms of their symbolic and narrative function. Secondly, I will analyze the promotional trailers of the film for the domestic and international audiences and examine the ways in which a different promotional strategy was pursued, in order to emphasize different aspects of the film. A semiotic analysis of the different semiotic codes (visual, verbal, aural) was carried out, in the aims of deciphering how the synergy of these codes enhances the persuasive function of the film trailer.

The film trailers analyzed are the domestic and international trailers for the 2003 film *Πολιτική Κουζίνα/A Touch of Spice*, written and directed by Tassos Boulmetis. It should be stressed that it is a multilingual film in three languages — Greek, Turkish, and English — and belongs to the cinematic genre of comedy-drama. The domestic film trailer lasts 2:28 minutes and was distributed by *Village Films*. The international film trailer lasts significantly longer, namely 6:10 minutes.

5. Analysis of the material

A Touch of Spice is considered a food-centric film since all the main narrative actions revolve around it. Food in the film assumes symbolic and narrative functions. It is used to convey the characters emotions, portray normative gender roles and their subversion, and finally, mark crisis moments. The making of food and family reunions around the table have always been commonplace for Greeks. The reproduction of these scenes evokes a sense of familiarity in the domestic audience. The filmic medium, after all, offers instances of sensory experiences. In this frame of thought,

(Parasecoli 2015: 39) expounds, “[t]hrough lighting, framing, editing, and photography, film scenes featuring food preparation and consumption seem to have the power to draw the audiences into the narration by offering surrogates of sensual experiences of flavors and aromas to which they do not have physical access”.

We observe that the film criticizes normative gender roles. i.e. that women should learn how to cook, and always cook together. Furthermore, one of the secondary characters is expected to learn how to cook, in order to get married. Thus, as in the case of Visconti’s *Obsession*, a woman’s good cooking abilities make her a good housewife (Parasecoli 2015: 37).¹¹ Drawing on Lotman’s notion of the semiosphere, Parasecoli (2011: 648) illustrates that “The semiosphere thus constitutes the very possibility of semiosis; in the case of food, it is the possibility that the ingestion of necessary nutrients engenders the creation of embodied meaning and communication”. He goes on to explain how flavor sensors can act (ibid.: 651), “as border points of semiosis, allowing new extraneous substances to become part of the system, or to be refused”.

The encounter with unusual ingredients constitutes a very clear example of this phenomenon: something that before was not part of the sphere of the edible and culturally acceptable substances can be included through flavor receptors in the dynamics that allow food acceptance, adaptation, and transformation.

A Touch of Spice embraces the contrasts between men and women in relation to cooking norms. Food scenes show that, while it is normal for men to cook or help in cooking in Istanbul, this is not the case in Greece. This cultural divide is quite obvious and striking to the main character Fanis, who was accustomed to seeing his grandfather in the kitchen preparing meals for his family and friends. The clash becomes greater once Fanis and his family are deported to Greece. From the semiosphere of the citizens of Istanbul of Greek origin, the viewer is transferred to another reality: i.e. the semiosphere of Greeks, wherein normative gender roles do not allow men to cook. The clash between the former and present reality, is so intense that the normative institutions (the church and the school), which in that era were the main institutions besides the family, intervene to rehabilitate Fanis and place him into what was considered a normative gender role. Of course, this clash between former and current reality revolving around

¹¹ As Parasecoli (2014) expounds (cited in Parasecoli 2015: 37), “According to fascist propaganda [...] kitchens embodied the heart of the home, enlivened by women whose moral and patriotic duty was to provide physical and spiritual sustenance despite the food scarcity”.

food has a humorous touch and is a counterpoint to Fanis's disappointment with his new home and reality. This motif is quite common. Food becomes the locus of rebellion, of the protagonist (the self), and of societal norms. In this light, Parasecoli (2015: 39) informs us that: "Not only habits but also ideas and images about eating provide prescriptions and standards that determine acceptable actions and behaviors, participating in the reproduction of the existing cultural and social order".

Moreover, food seems to mark peak narrative moments in the film. As stated in the former section, it marks a moment of crisis. One very significant scene is when the family is united around the table only to hear the doorbell ring, announcing the negative news that they are due to be deported. The same motif is replicated at a later stage in the film when Fanis and Saime are preparing a cake for Saime's daughter's birthday and the bell rings once again to signify critical news. Hence, the bell marks a crisis moment, a subversion of what would have been a romantic happy ending.

In another scene, food seems to enhance the sensuality between the main protagonists Fanis and Saime, both in their infancy and later on when they reunite after years of separation. Thus, food has an intense representational, metaphoric and narrative power. It is used to convey strong emotions, to underline crisis moments and peak narrative points and, finally, to express the sensuality or carnal desires of the main characters.¹² In a similar vein, in Visconti's *Obsession* (1943), the kitchen becomes the ideal setting for "a very sexually charged interaction, turning food from an element of respectability and family life into a tool of seduction and sensuality" (Parasecoli 2015: 37). This function of food is used very commonly to depict sensuality or intense carnal desires in films. Instances of said food scenes are those in *Tom Jones* (1963) and *Life is Sweet* (1990).

6. Compositional structure of film trailers

Film trailers are multimodal texts combining text, image and music to enhance their promotional aspect. They can be considered a "hybrid" genre since they promote the film and narrate a story (Maier 2009). They are known as coming attractions or previews and are advertisements that provide a quick glimpse of the promoted movie. Belonging to the genre of advertising, trailers are considered syncretic texts with an embedded notion of manipulation. Maier (2009) claims that in film trailers there is a synergy of semiotic systems: "visual, verbal and aural evaluative devices are

¹² See also Bordo (1993) on the symbolic function of food in Victorian literature and its link to sensuality.

co-deployed to maintain or subvert each other's evaluative load both on the diegetic and non-diegetic levels". The structure of film trailers has evolved considerably throughout the years and has gone from creating the desire to watch a film, to providing a detailed account of the film (Marich 2005). Thus, from describing the film in every detail we have moved into an era of less informative trailers.

Trailers appeal to the viewers' familiarity. They remind audiences of their own personal experiences (Kernan 2004). They are created on the basis of an underlying movie concept. The trailer's genre acts as the primary informative agent and the promotional effect is built around this. Some of their main traits are: montage of dialogues, sounds, and music from the movie advertised; the presence of a non-diegetic voice-over narrator (usually a male voice); intertitles; information about the actors, the director, the production company, the day of release, prizes; and information on the production process, etc.

6.1. Domestic and international film trailer

The domestic film trailer lasts 2.28 minutes. The introduction, main part, and climax are evident in the trailer. The stylistic rhythm is attained with the alternation of five musical themes¹³ and the use of comments in the form of intertitles in the climactic part of the trailer. Emphasis is placed on the close-ups of the protagonists, some of who are renowned actors in Greece. Also, the fourth music theme (1.28-1.48) is introduced by the song *Τα λιμάνια* and interpreted by Natasa Theodoridou. Both the song and the singer are easily recognizable to the domestic audience. Hence, the emphasis is clearly placed on the appeal of credibility (appealing to *ethos*). The use of an orange bold typeface in the introduction of the film title reminds the audience of spice, and more specifically of cinnamon. Moreover, the title in Greek *Πολιτική Κουζίνα* seems to evoke both the cuisine of the citizens of Constantinople, and the word Politics. This play on words obviously represents the two main themes in the film, namely food (cuisine) and politics (referring to the political issues in the film). In fact, Fanis seems to navigate between these two main themes. As Mangiapane (2015: 5) aptly notes, "having been expelled from his beloved Constantinople and forced to emigrate to Greece, he is indicated as Greek by the Turks and as Turk by the Greeks, embodying an identity of hybrid between the two cultures". The domestic film trailer is not very linear since it mixes several scenes of the film, aspiring to create intense curiosity on the part of the viewer as to

¹³ See Kostopoulou (2019).

the final outcome of the love affair. It could be placed somewhere in the middle between narrative and anti-narrative trailers based on Federico's (2017) typology.

Typography is, according to Stöckl (2005: 205), "the 'dress' of a text". In this sense, the use of a specific typeface or color in the film title is not unintentional, since several connotations are implied.¹⁴ In the film, the use of a more personal typeface in the word *κουζίνα* (cuisine) inspires the promise of a personalized experience to the viewer. Slope, as noted by van Leeuwen (2006: 148) is highly metaphorical. It is associated with handwriting and can be connotative of the 'personal' or the 'organic' (ibid.).

The international film trailer is rather longer, lasting 6:10 minutes. The promotional aspect revolves around the romantic love story between Fanis and Saime. This is present in the collage of images and in the insertion of a red flying umbrella in the trailer, used to signify the passion between the two characters. The number of images of culinary preparations and food is reduced to a minimum, since this theme is not one of the main ones used to promote the film. The presence of a non-diegetic narrator should be highlighted. The male narrator guides the international audience through the storyline and the main characters. The international trailer is more linear compared to the domestic one, in the sense that it follows the chronological structure of the film, leaving the viewer with no doubts as to the storyline and the final outcome.

The English title *A Touch of Spice* reminds the foreign viewer that the film not only revolves around spice, but also has a sexual connotation. The typography of the title follows the same pattern as the original title, namely the first part of the title (*A Touch*) in capital letters and the second part in small letters. The color used in the title is also orange, and the word *spice* is intersemiotically translated and written in a handwritten format as in the original title. In a comparison of the two trailers in terms of isotopies¹⁵, there are a number of significant elements that can be noted.

In the domestic trailer the following main isotopies can be identified: the isotopy of food/ cooking preparations, isotopy of conflict, isotopy of separation, isotopy of return. The isotopy of food/cooking preparations is evident at the beginning of the trailer and is a recurring pattern throughout

¹⁴ As to the use of capital letters in film subtitles Chaume (2004) highlights that they are used as a paralinguistic sign representing the volume of voice. Diaz Cintas & Remael (2007) remark that that they are used as a sign of expressiveness. I would note that this is also the case in the capital letters of the word *Πολιτική*. Only the first part of the title is capitalized for emphasis.

¹⁵ See Greimas (1986).

the trailer. All the main isotopies have a connection to the isotopy of food/cooking preparations. When uprisings begin, the viewer sees a diplomat smashing a nut, and at the verbal level, there is a metaphor about garlic symbolizing upcoming danger. While the two protagonists are about to separate for the first time at the train station, they say that when they meet again Saime will dance and Fanis will cook for Saime. Finally, when Fanis returns, one of the first things he does is to cook for Saime and her daughter, and, while at the party, conflict arises again with the return of Mustafa.

In the international trailer the main isotopies are: the isotopy of food/cooking preparations, isotopy of seduction/passion, isotopy of conflict, isotopy of separation and the isotopy of return. Although images of food permeate the trailer, this motif is not the only one in the trailer. The theme of the love affair is also dominant both at the verbal level, with the narrator giving details about the feelings of the protagonists and images of passion (the protagonists kissing each other, image of a red umbrella traveling across the sky, and images of conflict between Mustafa and Fanis in the sauna re all related to the love affair). Thus, in the international trailer food is a recurring motif, while nonetheless, the isotopy of passion is also dominant.

7. Conclusive remarks

It can be seen from the above-mentioned analysis that films have long explored their prominent relationship with food, and this has led to very interesting food narratives. Having analyzed the centrality of food in *A Touch of Spice*, I would conclude that food is a central character in the film and is the locus which everything revolves around. It is also the space of “personal and inter-personal shifts” (see Mangiapane above). Fanis experiences a personal shift when he is deported to Greece and he is no longer allowed to cook, as he used to in Istanbul. The main narrative shifts occur during culinary preparations. The family is seated around the table when the bell rings and news concerning their deportation is announced. Fanis and Saime cook while planning their reunion and then the bell rings again. Mustafa comes to impose a shift in their relationship.

Interestingly, food images are replicated in the domestic film trailer. Several close ups of images of food being prepared, or cooked meals are reproduced in the trailer, leaving the viewer with the impression that food is a leitmotif. This is done deliberately, in order to attract the domestic audience, who have the experience of preparing and having meals. The preparation of food and family meals are imbued in the mentality of Greeks and

even more so of the Greeks who originate from Istanbul. This brings joyful images of food and family to the audience, evoking both a sense of nostalgia and a sense of belonging. Moreover, “[t]he use of images in the [domestic] film trailer (the basilica of Aghia Sofia, images of Istanbul, images of spices) tries to evoke a sense of nostalgia, of familiarity [...] The reproduction of these images both in the film and the film trailer stresses a sense of belonging, inspiring the viewer’s participation” (Kostopoulou 2019: 406).

This is not the case in the international trailer of the film. In it, the main promotional aspect that is emphasized is the romantic story between the two main characters, and images of food are less present, and the political conflict between the two countries is also less focused on. The probably reason is that foreign audiences are less touched by these themes, since they are not acquainted with Greek culture and history.

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