

# ***Como agua para chocolate* as a Food Film: Food, Family Ties and Emotion**

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## ***Abstract***

This research explores in which aspects *Como agua para chocolate* (Alfonso Arau, 1992) can be seen as a food film, and in which aspects the film surpasses this definition. Being the first Mexican film centered on Mexican food it prompted a reinterpretation on the relation between food, family ties and gender in Mexico. It also provided discussion abroad on Mexican food, somehow creating an erroneous image of Mexican food being part of a cultural cauldron involving sensuality and machismo. There are plenty of films that could be imagined by the spectators as food films, but I would argue that a film becomes a “food film” when food becomes the dominant symbol system in the development of the narrative. It is not a surprise that filmmakers in many genres consider using food to communicate emotions, but having a cook as the main character does not necessarily make it a food film. Why is food so important in a narrative? Essentially, because through it we can express copious emotions: love, sensuality, anger, rebellion, violence and so on, but also because it is part of the way that film contributes to the construction of a sexual, national or ethnic identity. As in *Como agua para chocolate*, showing in detail the preparation and the consumption of food can be used as a way of reassuring a cultural continuity.

So, what are the ingredients to make a film into a food film? First, food has to play a star role, not merely having importance when the film’s main characters are cooking. In other words, what is important is not the main character, but the ways the camera is used to focus on the preparation and presentation of food, making food fill out the screen. Also it is important to have the kitchen as the main setting in the development of the narrative, be it in a restaurant, a home, or a shop which sells food. Finally, the film’s narrative should consistently depict characters negotiating questions of identity, power, culture, class, spirituality, or relationships through food. Considering these three aspects, there is no doubt that *Como agua para chocolate* can be considered as a typical example of the food film genre.

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## I. Introduction

This research explores the ways the film, *Como agua para chocolate* (*Like Water for Chocolate*, Alfonso Arau, 1992) can be seen as a food film, as defined by Anne L. Bower (2004, 1-13), and in which aspects the film even surpasses this definition.

My approach is based on certain premises concerning the relationship between food, film, culture, and Mexico. The food culture itself takes primary importance as a device, on film, to reflect or to introduce familiar aspects of a culture, this being the central idea to such works as Keller's (2006), Bower's (2004), and Zimmerman and Weiss' (2005). It is the near nonexistence of works on the relation between Mexican food and Mexican film that prompted me to ask why there is so little interest in this kind of research.



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Related to the premise is the fact that almost no film in the Mexican industry, with the exception of *Como agua para chocolate*, has food as the main topic. It would be possible to imagine two other Mexican films belonging to the food film genre: *Cilantro y perejil* (*Recipes to Stay Together*, Rafael Montero, 1995), and *Corazón de melón* (*Melon's Heart*, Luis Vélez, 2003), but neither of them have reached a broad audience, nor have they inspired much criticism or discussion. Additionally, *Cilantro y perejil* focuses more on one couple's problems and how they try to solve them than on the subject of the food itself. *Corazón de melón* is merely a superficial love story that centers on a fat, unhappy girl and a Mexican chef.



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Commentaries on *Como agua para chocolate* tend to analyze the film through other points of view, mostly gender (Spina 1998, 210-26) or sexuality (Shaw 2003).

There is also a tendency among Mexican film critics to ignore the importance of this film, as evidenced by its lack of mention in such an important publication on Mexican film history as *Mexican National Cinema* (Noble 2005), and by the negative image of the film I

got in interviews with Mexican film researchers of the film. It should be pointed out that even when Mexican critics did assign some importance to this film it is because of its negative representation of the Mexican Revolution. However, I believe that this film represents a positive turning point in Mexican cinema.

The first reason for this viewpoint is that even though the film was produced during a period when the Mexican film industry was undergoing both an economic and creative crisis, it became a huge success with the public. Another reason is that the film successfully experimented with mixing the themes of the Mexican Revolution, magical realism and popular cinema. But most of all, being the first Mexican film centered on Mexican food it prompted a reinterpretation of the relationship between food, family ties, and gender in Mexico. It also provided discussions abroad of Mexican food, somehow creating an erroneous image of Mexican food being part of a cultural cauldron involving sensuality and machismo.

It is not very common in Latin America to have food-centered films, as is the case in some parts of Asia (especially China<sup>1</sup> and Korea<sup>2</sup>), or Europe (France, in particular<sup>3</sup>), but *Como agua para chocolate* provided exactly that local space needed for the exploration of such a regional theme.

However, instead of researching regional films centered on food, I will concentrate on an analysis of this film as a food-centered film. I will also consider other food-related aspects as presented, for instance, by Barnard (2004, 75-85) in his effort to find the meaning of modernity and its connection with food in the Malay films of the 1950s and 1960s, or Abrams (2004, 87-100) when relating food and race, in this case among the Jews, through film.

## II. Defining a food film

The literature on food film as a genre is still essentially restricted to three major works: Keller (2006), Bower (2004) and Zimmerman and Weiss (2005). Because of this restriction, food films as a genre are still regarded as a complete novelty, even in the area of film studies. There are, however, a number of films that could be perceived by the spectator as food films, but one could argue that a film becomes a food film only when food remains the dominant symbolic element as the narrative unfolds. To clarify this category, Zimmerman and Weiss provide a long and very informative list of films that could be defined as food films (2005).

It is not surprising that filmmakers in many genres consider using food to communicate emotions, but having a cook as the main character does not necessarily make it a food film, even though most of the films defined as food films have a chef as the main character, as is the case with *La grande bouffe* (*The Big Feast*, Marco Ferreri, 1973), *Babettes gaestebud* (*Babette's Feast*, Gabriel Axel, 1987) or *No Reservations* (Scott Hicks, 2007). When considering films connected or centered on food, it usually comes to mind that such films are related to some aspect of ethnicity, that is, food is a part of what defines a national culture as a whole. This may be the reason why it is easier to find food films, for instance, in China, India, France or Japan, than in more ethnically mixed cultures like the U.S., Canada, Brazil or Australia.

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1. For example (among others): *Sik san* (*The God of Cookery*, Stephen Chow and Lik-Chi Lee, 1996), *Jin yu man tang* (*The Chinese Feast*, Tsui Hark, 1995), and *Moh waan chue fong* (*The Magic Kitchen*, Chi-Ngai Lee, 2004).

2. For example (among others): *301/302* (Cheol-su Park, 1997). In the case of Korea it is also important mentioning that there are plenty of TV dramas and series also centered on food and its preparation.

3. For example (among others): *La grande bouffe* (*The Big Feast*, Marco Ferreri, 1973), *Delicatessen* (Jean-Pierre Jeunet and Marc Caro, 1991).

“Food has been part of film since films began, yet only recently have we given extended attention to the many and sometimes startling ways that food functions in movies” (Bower 2004, 3). But why should food be so important in a narrative? I would suggest that it is essentially because through this medium we can express copious emotions: love, sensuality, anger, rebellion, violence and so on, yet also through food, the film contributes to the construction of a sexual, national or ethnic identity.

As *Como agua para chocolate* demonstrates, showing in detail the preparation and the consumption of food can serve the function of reassuring a cultural continuity. It can also show, as in the example of *Nina’s Heavenly Delights* (Pratibha Parmar, 2006), how food not only reveals the cultural elements of a community (in this case, and Indian community in Scotland) but also the way food and sexuality can combine to express sensuality and to break prejudices. On the other extreme, cannibalism or food disorder, for example, it is possible to depict disruptions, and even political or religious opinions, an aspect we can see in such film characters as Elena and Rosaura and their lack of enjoyment when eating. A good example of a film that shows, through cannibalism, a way of criticizing dictatorship is *Delicatessen* (Jean-Pierre Jeunet and Marc Caro, 1991). As noted earlier, food has been used as a device in films since the beginning of cinema, but food film as a genre is still in the emulative stage.

So, what are the ingredients that make a film into a food film? First, food has to play a star role, not simply when the main characters are cooking or not, as is the case with *Como agua para chocolate*. What is important is not the main character, but the ways in which the camera is used to make the preparation and presentation of food that dominate the screen. The food and the process of preparing the various dishes are important not only in leading the spectator through the narrative, but also in creating a desire to taste the food as it appears on the screen.

This is the main distinction between food film as a genre and other genres: the effort to inspire the other senses—smell and taste—in connection with the food itself. This is the sensation the spectator experiences in watching the preparation of the quail in rose petal sauce in *Como agua para chocolate*. The preparation of food might also take the spectator to Japan in a search for noodles like in *Tampopo* (*Dandelion*, Juzo Itami, 1985) or *Udon* (Katsuyuki Motohiro, 2006)

It is also essential that the kitchen be the main setting as the narrative develops, whether in a restaurant, a home, or a shop where food is sold. The kitchen is the place where the narrative advances and where conflicts take place. If the dining table takes importance as the location for conflicts, it is not difficult to accept even

a film so complex as *Da hong deng long gao gao gua* (*Raise the Red Lantern*, Zhang Yimou, 1991) as a food film. The last, but probably the most important ingredient in making a food film is to assure that the narrative line consistently depicts characters negotiating such questions as identity, power, culture, class, spirituality, or personal relationships through food. Considering these three elements, there is no doubt that *Como agua para chocolate* can be considered as an ideal representative of the food film genre.

In the next section, I will carry out a comprehensive visual and textual analysis of the film, and through this analysis, it should become clear why, and in which aspects, *Como agua para chocolate* uses food to communicate other ingredients.

### III. Narrative, food and emotions

The film starts with a close-up of an onion being sliced while the narrator, who happens to be the grandniece of the principal character, starts to tell the story of how the women in her family are connected to food.

Opening the first scene with the slicing of an onion is practically a declaration that it is going to be a food film. The narrator then makes a connection with Tita's life: her emotions, represented by her crying, and the food, represented by the act of slicing an onion. Throughout the film, we can feel how the choice of a particular dish helps to define not only each female character, but also the Mexican national identity as a whole. These elements are further analyzed by López-Rodrigues (2004, 61-73).

The novel upon which the film is based (Esquivel 1989) is divided into twelve sections corresponding to 12 recipes,<sup>4</sup> as in a cookbook—in this case, one for each month of the year. In the film, the plot is structured around location and time. While abandoning the novel's organization according to recipes, the film maintains the importance of the food via the narrative, accompanied by beautiful food close-ups that have more screen time than most of the actors. Hence it is clear to the audience that food is the central character.

We are first taken to Rio Grande, North of Mexico, on September, 1895, and learn through the narrator that Tita, the main character, would cry while still in her mother's womb. Then, one day when Tita's mother, Elena, was slicing onions, she gave birth to Tita in the kitchen, in the middle of a torrent of teardrops. Then Nacha,

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4. All the recipes can be tasted at the restaurant which carries the same name as the novel and film located in Oaxaca. There, I had the opportunity to taste some of the dishes during my research for this paper in March, 2008.

their native Mexican cook, collected the now-dried tears, which were stalked as 20kg of salt to be used for cooking. This scene takes us to a world of magical realism through the drama of crying and birth, where even the dried teardrops become salt to be used in the cooking of food. We are also introduced to the way food goes through a process of “Mexicanization,” first through the direct influence of Nacha and then by Tita herself. The author explains the process this way:

One does see, in contrast, as evidence of Mexico’s cultural mixture, that the characters have renounced the indigenous frugality of eating only to satisfy hunger in favor of the Spanish gusto and abundance that turns any meal into a social event to be shared with friends and relatives. (López-Rodriguez 2004, 63)

We are then introduced to the rest of the family: the father and two other daughters, when gossip turns to the unfaithful origin of one of the daughters, Gertrudis, who becomes the reason for the sudden death of Tita’s father just some days after she was born. This incident leads to Elena’s breast milk drying, and Tita being taken under the direct protection of Nacha, who feeds her. Elena then proclaims that Tita will never be allowed to marry, because she must care for her till her death, as is the family tradition.

Thus Nacha becomes both protector, and cooking teacher of Tita from her childhood. Most of Tita’s childhood is spent in the kitchen, where she is preparing, serving or eating food. But since these early days, there is an attraction between Tita and Pedro, a boy from the neighborhood.

We are then taken to 1910, the year the Mexican Revolution began, and also the year when, at a house party given by Elena, Pedro proposes to Tita in the dispensary. Here again, emotions—love, as the case may be—are connected to food. But while accepting the proposal, Tita says that she cannot marry. Tita pleads with her mother to allow the marriage, but this ends in an unresolved argument. Some days later, on Tita’s birthday, Pedro and his father, Pascual, come to ask for Tita’s hand in marriage. Elena not only refuses, but makes arrangements for Rosaura, the eldest daughter, to marry Pedro instead. Chenchá, the younger native Mexican servant, overhears this and in surprise and anger reveals the news to the three sisters, who are waiting in the kitchen, which, once again, is the main focus of the narrative.

Nacha overhears from outside the house (when Pedro and Pascual are returning home) that Pedro has only agreed to marry Rosaura to be close to Tita. Consequently, Tita refuses to eat and starts to knit and cry. Refusing to eat is connected to unhappiness, and knitting is an attempt to conceal the unhappiness under the guise of a productive activity.

We could interpret this connection between unhappiness, refusing food, and knitting as a way of showing that food and libido are connected, while knitting is a work that can contribute to overcoming the libido. This sense is also expressed by the narrator, who relates that from this day on Tita always feels cold at night. No wonder Tita knits the same bedcover every night as a way of forgetting Pedro, a scene that repeats itself until the day she is taken away from the ranch by John.

Elena forbids Tita to cry over the marriage of Pedro and Rosaura, and determines, as well, that Tita is going to be responsible for preparing of all the food for the wedding reception. There is an interlude between Tita and Pedro, again in the kitchen, but Tita refuses to listen to Pedro's excuses for marrying her sister. The main dish, chosen by Elena, to be served in the wedding banquet is capons, a metaphor suggesting a wedding without sexual happiness, because the wedding between Rosaura and Pedro ends in the destruction of Pedro and Tita's dream of a life together.

While preparing the wedding cake (a cake prepared with 170 eggs) Tita cries inside the batter, while Nacha tries to console her. During the wedding ceremony, Pedro once again attempts to explain to Tita why he is marrying Rosaura, but Elena threatens to destroy Tita if she ever gets close to him again. When the guests eat the wedding cake, they start first to cry, then to vomit, becoming intoxicated by the cake. Here again sadness is connected to refusing food, vomiting, and intoxication, another way, in an extreme sense, of connecting food and pleasure.

Elena runs first to her room and to the memories of her mulatto lover, Gertrudis' father, but, then, goes after Tita accusing her of trying to destroy Rosaura's happiness by intoxicating the wedding guests. It is subsequently revealed that Nacha has died, apparently due to Tita's unhappiness. It is again in the dispensary where Nacha is found dead, this time bringing unhappiness, as before, into the realm of food.

Now married, Pedro refuses Rosaura's advances for a while, but finally they have sexual intercourse after about three months. Rosaura, after having sex for the first time—again the film connecting food and libido—decides to cook for the first time, but her cooking is awful and causes the members of the family to have bouts of diarrhea. The message here is that food must be prepared with love, not lust. Henceforth, the relationship between Pedro and Rosaura is one of sex, not love, and the food she prepares is hardly a symbol of happiness—a food that can barely be consumed.

Pedro gives roses to Tita in front of all the family thanking her for cooking for the family, but Elena demands that Tita throw the roses away. Instead, inspired by a

visit of the ghost of Nacha, Tita prepares quail in rose petal sauce.<sup>5</sup> The preparation of this dish is revealed in detail, underscoring the climax of the film as a food film. It represents all the potential love and passion that Tita nurtures for Pedro. When eaten, the dish produces a sensual heat in all the members of the family, especially in Gertrudis in whom—according to the narration—sexual intercourse between Pedro and Tita through the pleasure of eating is consummated. In a sense, the cooking inverts the traditional sexual order, making Pedro—the man—the passive recipient rather than the active transmitter of passion. In another interpretation of the film, Pedro is similarly seen as somewhat effeminate compared to the traditional way of portraying men in Mexican cinema (de la Mora 2006).

Here again the only member of the family not to feel anything positive from the food is Rosaura, who is the symbol of unhappiness in the family. But the heat in Gertrudis is so intense that she goes to take a shower, only to put the shower room in flames. Then Juan, a revolutionary whom she has met before, and reacting to the scent of the roses issuing from Gertrudis body, comes for her and carries her away. Subsequently there is gossip that Gertrudis is working in a *bordello* somewhere between the U.S. boarder and Mexico. The news prompts Elena to declare that Gertrudis is no longer her daughter and she burns all the memories related to her. In the meantime, Tita nearly discovers the truth: that Gertrudis is the illegitimate daughter of Elena and her mulatto lover. But she does not become fully aware of this truth until late in the narrative, hence contact with her sister continues.

When Rosaura gives birth to her son, Tita, in the absence of a doctor, is the first one to help her. Eventually, Pedro is able to summon John, an American doctor who lives in the area, and when he sees Tita he immediately falls in love. But she tells him she is not allowed to marry—a revelation he finds amazing and absurd. This could be seen as a way of criticizing a tradition brought from the Iberian Peninsula to Mexico that had not quite penetrated Texas, where John comes from.

While preparing food for the celebration of birth (*mole poblano* or *mole de guajolote*), a Mexican combination of chili, chocolate, pumpkin seeds, peanuts and tomato with Spanish ingredients such as raisins, almonds and sesame seeds, and tortilla), Pedro admires Tita's breasts.<sup>6</sup>

It is a lovely, sensual scene, again happening in the kitchen, connecting food, libido, tradition and motherhood. It is a moment so powerful that Tita, even if still

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5. This is the most popular dish offered at the restaurant in Oaxaca, according to the owner—interview conducted in March, 2008.

6. For details on these dishes as well as other Mexican national dishes, I would suggest consulting Long-Solís and Vargas (2005).

a virgin, is able to produce breast milk.

The Mexican traditional food prepared during this scene not only portrays of the way Mexican food came into existence—through the mixing of traditional native Mexican ingredients with Spanish ingredients—but also shows the sense of libido food can generate. López-Rodríguez (2004) notes that mole was, at one time, forbidden to women during the colonial period because of its supposed aphrodisiac quality. Here the narrative relies on the aphrodisiac quality of the dish to allow Tita the opportunity to get close to Pedro under the guise of breast feeding his son, Roberto.

This idyllic scene is interrupted by Chenchá, who comes with news about the Mexican Revolution and the cruelty of Pancho Villa. In this manner, that is, through the Revolution, spectators and film characters are abruptly returned from fantasy to reality. This is a common device used in Mexican films in which the narrative concentrates on the Mexican Revolution (Tuñón 1995).

Meanwhile, Rosaura is sick and without breast milk (again a reflex of her unhappiness), while Tita feeds her nephew by herself, but always without Elena knowing that she is able to do it.

Despite the hazards caused by the Revolution, Elena decides to send Rosaura, Pedro and their son to San Antonio. But before their departure, there is another scene that dramatizes the difference between Tita and Elena. We see Elena slicing watermelons with much violence, to which Chenchá comments that while Tita produces food, Elena is good only at destroying it. In this way, the narrative suggests how Tita, though her happiness is not consummated, has found contentment, whereas Elena has not. Where Tita uses ingredients and kitchen utensils to create love, a positive emotion, Elena's hands only destroy the food and turn the kitchen utensils in weapons. During the night before leaving, Pedro and Tita almost consummate their love through sexual intercourse, but they are interrupted by Elena.

Later a group of revolutionaries appear at the ranch trying to sack it, but Elena succeeds in keeping them away. In a way, this scene again demonstrates Elena's ability to destroy any possible change in the narrative. Another defining moment is the scene where Tita is bathing Elena—Tita, forever helpful and caring, while her mother, shows endless mistreatment and complaints. Then, from the rear of the kitchen, Chenchá arrives with the news that Roberto has died of starvation. Elena insists that Tita and Chenchá stop crying, but, for the first time, Tita disobeys her mother and accuses her of killing Roberto by having him sent away.

Here again starvation—the absence of food—is connected to unhappiness and death. But this is also the point where the narrative shows how food can also be the source of Tita's rebellion. For the first time in her life, she stands up against her mother and then locks herself in the pigeon house, remaining there for several days. Deducing that she has become crazy, Elena calls for John, the doctor.

John takes Tita away from the ranch—the first time in her life to leave—and she starts to live in his home in Eagle Pass. Free for the first time from her mother's control, Tita has no idea of what to do with her hands nor does she have any desire to eat—a condition emphasizing the connection between unhappiness and mental confusion. But in another scene, John explains to Tita the principle of combustion, and gradually there develops a connection between emotions, food-preparation, chemistry, religion, and the discovery of divine paradise itself.

It is amazing how tenderly John introduces Tita to the production of matches, much as one would follow a cooking recipe. But even more significant is the show of respect he has for women, especially indigenous ones. He kept it ever since receiving the information about their divine properties from his own native Mexican grandmother. Subsequently Chenchu visits Tita and brings her back to normality through the intervention of a Mexican chicken broth. Again, food works like a medicine, and after consuming the broth Tita relates to Chenchu that she is not going back to the ranch. John then proposes marriage to Tita and she accepts.

In the meantime, however, the ranch is ransacked by bandits, ending in Chenchu's rape and Elena's death. This event brings Tita back to the ranch and alters the course of her life. During Elena's funeral, Tita and Pedro meet again, and as a consequence of Elena's death, Rosaura gives birth prematurely to a daughter, Esperanza. John declares that Rosaura is too sick to care for the child, so Tita takes responsibility.

Esperanza is kept in the kitchen with Tita and always cries if she is taken away, especially if she is in the company of Rosaura. Here again, the kitchen becomes the center of the narrative and the ultimate representative of happiness. Moreover, Esperanza embodies the essence of modern Mexico, since she contains within herself the tradition and love for cooking through the influences of two surrogate mothers, Nacha, the indigenous one, and Tita, the white one. John's son, Alex, expresses his wish to marry Esperanza in the future, but Rosaura says this is not possible because she will have to take care of her according to family tradition. Tita, angry with this declaration of Esperanza's future, prepares some food that will further affect Rosaura's health, beginning with certain digestive problems. Here the narrative connects anger and the loss of health through food.

I would disagree with López-Rodríguez' interpretation of Rosaura's digestive problems as the personification of Mexico's traditionally patriarchal society not being able to digest the Revolution (2004, 67). I see it more as a way of showing that unhappiness and the absence of sexual pleasure leads to the refusal of food as a means of not being able to produce it in the first place, as we see in Rosaura's inability to cook. In the case of Rosaura, the absence of emotions (aside from jealousy and unhappiness) makes it impossible for her to digest or produce her food with any degree of pleasure. Moreover, while the Revolution may have modified the Mexico's traditions, it has not actually changed the country's patriarchal system. Thus it would seem strange to interpret Rosaura's digestive problems as a metaphor of the patriarchal system fighting against the Revolution, when in fact the system was fighting to survive through it.

John asks for Pedro and Rosaura's consent to marry Tita, and they accept. But inwardly Pedro is burning with jealousy. He then comes unexpectedly to Tita's room and for the first time they have sexual intercourse, an act that causes fire and tempest emanating from the ghost of Elena.

Feeling miserable due to her digestive problems, Rosaura asks Tita for some advice on how to get Pedro back. Tita not only suggests that she take mint leaves for bad breath, but decides to prepare a special diet to help her control her flatulence. Again food is seen as cure for someone's unhappiness and sickness. In fact, Tita's anger towards Rosaura has abated, since she believes she is carrying Pedro's child. However, while preparing *rosca de Reyes* (ring-shaped nuts and dried fruits cake), Tita is persecuted by the ghost of Elena, who puts a curse on her and the child she is supposed to be carrying. During a party where the cake is served, the ghost of Elena appears again and Tita faints, but she is saved by the unexpected entrance of Juan and Gertrudis, who have arrived with their group of revolutionaries, and they transform the party into a dancing one.

This scene depicts the Mexican Revolution as a way of breaking the traditions of the Mexican aristocracy, which is represented here by the ghost of Elena. From this point on Mexican society is to be a more open one, the dance, serving as the metaphor for this major change.

In the kitchen, Gertrudis tells Tita that the only thing she misses in her life as a revolutionary is the comfort of home food. Here the narrative connects two opposed emotions: reality and brutality, as represented by the Revolution, and tranquility and happiness, as represented by food. Tita tells Gertrudis she is pregnant, and Gertrudis sees this as a sign that Tita and Pedro can finally be happy with each other. This dialogue might be interpreted as the way Mexican society viewed women before the Revolution and the way they were viewed after.

Tita then lets Pedro know she is pregnant and Pedro proposes that she go away with him, but she refuses because of her responsibility to Esperanza. Gertrudis asks one of the revolutionaries in the group to cook for her, but he can not succeed. Once again, this brings to the narrative the traditional connection between women, kitchen and food. But since the Revolution has resulted in a more open society and has elevated the position of Mexican women, the male revolutionary ultimately succeeds in preparing the meal, which is approved by Tita. Another interpretation is offered by de la Mora (2006). He suggests that this scene is a criticism of machismo, where the male is finally placed in a position of weakness, while the female succeeds easily and without restriction.

Intoxicated, Pedro starts serenading Tita, and at this moment the ghost of Elena appears once more to Tita, but Tita shows no fear and casts the apparition away by telling her mother she already has found out about the truth of Gertrudis' origin. According to the narrator the ghost of Elena leaves forever, but not before punishing Pedro by catching him in a fire that almost kills him. With the complete disappearance of Elena's ghost, Tita discovers that her pregnancy was only the product of her imagination. She nurses Pedro's scars caused by the fire, and the ghost of Nacha appears to help, Tita assuming her love to Pedro in front of Rosaura for the first time, when he calls for her instead of Rosaura to take care of him.

The appearance of the ghost of Nacha for the second time in the narrative tells us that despite her demise her indigenous traditions will continue to survive through Tita. Tita tells John that she cannot marry him because she has had a sexual relationship with Pedro and is no longer a virgin. John says that he doesn't care and still loves her. To him, what is really important is her happiness.

The film then shifts to 1934, and we are shown in minute detail the preparation for *chiles en nogada*, another very traditional Mexican food, created to celebrate Agustín de Iturbide's signing of the Treaty of Córdoba in 1821. In this treaty Spain recognized Mexico's independence, marking as well the colors of Mexico's national flag. The flag's colors are represented by a combination of green of the peppers with creamy white sauce and red pomegranate seeds. Hence the narrative chooses to highlight through this wedding ceremony, Mexico's new status as an independent nation.

We hear from some of the guests that Rosaura died several years ago because of indigestion. More specifically, she died of what had symbolized her presence throughout the narrative: the impossibility of consuming food in a healthy way.

After eating, all the guests are filled with happiness and sensuality. Pedro proposes marriage to Tita while they dance, and she accepts. After all the guests have left, Pedro and Tita, alone in the ranch for the first time, share unbridled sexual intercourse, but Pedro dies during the orgasm. Tita, remembering John's words on combustion, and guided by the ghost of Nacha for the last time, creates a fire and leaves together with Pedro to Paradise.

According to the narrator, we are told that the only thing that survived the fire, which completely consumed the ranch, was Tita's diary, where she kept her recipes. Finally, with Tita's and Esperanza's ghosts on the narrator's back, the family's story and its connection with food comes to an end.

## IV. Final remarks

The narrative of *Como agua para chocolate* takes the spectators to a unique set of metaphors for libido, food, national identity and feminine emotions, constituting one of the rare examples of food film in the Latin American region.

As mentioned, the careful way in which the camera always focuses on food makes it clear that the film was intended to have food as its central character. The food conveys to the spectator three important aspects of the narrative: the essence of Mexican cuisine, the creation of a Mexican identity through history and food, and the evolution of women in Mexican society.

Above all, Esquivel and Arau try to show Mexican food ultimately as a mixture of native Mexican, Creole and Spanish ingredients thus reflecting the essence of Mexican identity and society. Despite the coexistence of these ingredients during occasional moments of major conflict, the final result—Mexican food—represents a combination of the best of each genre, resulting in a new and superior taste to that which existed before.

*Como agua para chocolate* has attracted considerable critical attention both positive and negative since its release, and it was hugely successful abroad, especially in North America. That it surpassed its "Mexicanness" to become a broad gastronomical statement of how cooking of all origins can be universally related to creativity, sensuality, emotions, and gender makes the film all the more amazing. In short, food as a central device propelled its success at home and internationally.

What makes the food film genre unique and important is exactly this aspect. Ethnically structured devices, such as food, stimulate our other human senses—not just sight and sound. Moreover, the food film genre is able to produce for the spectator a much broader sense of identification than other film genres.

Because other film genres usually carry character-focused narratives, the viewer is restricted to seeing himself/herself in the character. This can put the viewer in a vulnerable situation, causing him to boo or cheer instead of identifying or becoming intimate with the characters. But on the other hand—and surprisingly so—many of us can easily identify with a narrative mediated through food, even if the topic line focuses on a completely different ethnic background. Even if we don't identify with the ethnic or regional roots presented in such films as *Fried Green Tomatoes* (Jon Avnet, 1991), *Como agua para chocolate*, *Tortilla Soup* (María Ripoll, 2001), *Chocolat* (Lasse Hallström, 2000) or *Yin shi nan nu* (*Eat Drink Man Woman*, Ang Lee, 1994), viewers can still identify with the kind of family, group, or couple solidarity that comes through the sharing of food.

As in any other film genre, there is a pattern intended to attract viewers. In the case of the food film these patterns are, as mentioned, food playing the star role, the importance of the kitchen as the venue, and the resolving of conflicts through the intervention of food. But as with any other film, food films can be mixed with other genres, resulting in variations that would lead to different expectations from different viewers. It is also importantly true that, as with other film genres, the food film is in a constant state of evolution, but being quite new as a genre, its topic matter is far from being exhausted in contrast to such genres, as the western film.

Thus, depending upon approach, a film can fall into the food film category or simply be a film that makes effective use of food as a form of symbolism, that is, the semiotic use of food as a very powerful and multivalent element. For example, there would be no doubt among scholars or viewers that in viewing a film like *Como agua para chocolate*, or *Yin shi nan nu* (a film where food preparation dominates the narrative in such a way as to interpret Chinese traditional culture) as food films. A revealing (and controversial) contrast would be such films as *Pulp Fiction* (Epstein, 2004, 195-208), *Dracula* (Davis 2004, 281-96) or Alfred Hitchcock's *Notorious* (Greven 2004, 297-310) as food films.

Topics concerning ethnicity and sexuality are particularly adaptable to the food film genre (as with *Como agua para chocolate*), since food is directly related, and indeed, it is a very important symbol in terms of semiotics to introduce a reinterpretation of sexuality.

As mentioned earlier, one of the most recent, and best, examples of a film allocated to the food film genre that treats both issues—ethnic identity and continuity, and sexual identity and discovery—is *Nina's Heavenly Delights*.

Food is, without any doubt, the most effective and powerful semiotic means by which to communicate ideas concerning cultural formation and identity. In this way, viewers can bypass nationality and its particulars to create a complex system of symbolism, which they can identify with without having to take a personal position (as is the case in other film genres).

Though based on a novel (Esquivel 1989), by taking a different approach, *Como agua para chocolate* not only introduced the food film genre to the Latin American film industry, but also propelled a boom of other newly successful Mexican films and the return of foreign attention to Mexican cinema. This success opened the North American market to other notable Mexican films such as *Amores perros* (*Love's a Bitch*, Alejandro González Iñárritu, 2000), *Y tu mamá también* (*And Your Mother Too*, Alfonso Cuarón, 2001) and *El crimen del Padre Amaro* (*The Crime of Father Amaro*, Carlos Carrera, 2002).

The uniqueness of *Como agua para chocolate* centers on the way the film wonderfully mixes sensuality, food, nationality and fantasy. It is difficult to imagine another film that could reveal in the same way the importance of food in the rise of Mexican identity as personified in a cookbook.

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