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DIPLOMARBEIT

Titel der Diplomarbeit

A Semiotic Analysis of Food
in *Como agua para chocolate* and *Chocolat*

Verfasserin

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angestrebter akademischer Grad

Magistra der Philosophie (Mag.phil.)

Wien, 2010

Studienkennzahl lt. Studienblatt:
Studienrichtung lt. Studienblatt:
Betreuerin:

A 236 352
Romanistik - Spanisch
o.Univ.-Prof. Dr. Friederike Hassauer, M.A. (USA)

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank o.Univ.-Prof. Dr. Friederike Hassauer, M.A. (USA), for her encouragement and engagement in the supervision of this thesis; my family for their love and support throughout all my studies and for letting me come to Austria; and Michael for believing that I could succeed in the Austrian university system and his endless patience in guiding me through it.

Contents

1. Introduction	4
1.1. Definition and clarification of terms	5
1.2. Plot outline of <i>Como agua para chocolate</i>	7
1.4. Summary.....	9
2. The semiotics of food in discourse.....	10
2.1. Introduction.....	10
2.2. Metaphor – a linguistic perspective	11
2.3. Direct metaphors in <i>Como agua para chocolate</i>	14
2.4. Direct metaphors in <i>Chocolat</i>	18
2.5. Indirect metaphors in <i>Como agua para chocolate</i> and <i>Chocolat</i>	20
2.6. Summary	21
3. The semiotics of food at the collective level	22
3.1. Introduction.....	22
3.2. Barthes’ “Mythologies”	22
3.3. An ethnological perspective.....	26
3.3.1. Defining “the collective level” – the community	26
3.3.2. Food as a signifier for a community	27
3.3.3. Food as a signifier of status	29
3.4. A religious perspective.....	31
3.5. Food and community in <i>Chocolat</i>	33
3.6. Food, community and status in <i>Como agua para chocolate</i>	36
3.7. Summary	39
4. The semiotics of food as a sign of power	39
4.1. Introduction.....	39
4.2. The politics of nutrition – an ethical perspective	40
4.3. <i>Kinder, Küche, Kirche</i> – a gendered perspective	42
4.4. Bakhtin and Carnival – a socio-psychological perspective	45
4.5. Food as a sign of power in <i>Como agua para chocolate</i>	46
4.6. Food as a sign of power in <i>Chocolat</i>	50
4.7. Summary	53
5. The semiotics of food in the construction of identity	54
5.1. Introduction.....	54
5.2. The concept of identity	55
5.3. Food and sexuality	57
5.4. Finding a voice	58
5.5. The Mexican Revolution as an example of identity-building	59
5.6. Food and the construction of identity in <i>Como agua para chocolate</i>	62
5.7. Food and the construction of identity in <i>Chocolat</i>	65
5.8. Summary	68

6. The semiotics of chocolate – a case study	69
6.1. Introduction.....	69
6.2. Origins.....	70
6.2.1. The signifier.....	70
6.2.2. Chocolate as a signifier of community and status in pre-Columbian America	72
6.2.3. Chocolate as a sign of ethnic difference and colonial power at the time of Columbus	74
6.3. Chocolate in Early Modern Europe	76
6.3.1. Chocolate as a sign of status in Early Modern Europe	76
6.3.2. The rejection of chocolate as a sign against decadence.....	78
6.4. The semiotics of chocolate in a multimodal society	80
6.4.1 The politics of nutrition	80
6.4.2. Chocolate, gender, sex and the media.....	81
6.5. Summary	83
7. Conclusion – Prospect and Retrospect.....	84
8. Resumen en español.....	86
8.1. Introducción	86
8.2. El signo y la semiótica	87
8.3. Los textos	87
8.4. La semiótica de la comida en el discurso	89
8.5. La semiótica de la comida a nivel colectivo	90
8.6. La semiótica de la comida como signo del poder	90
8.7. La semiótica de la comida en la construcción de la identidad	92
8.8. La semiótica del chocolate – estudio de caso	94
8.9. Retrospectivo y prospectivo	95
9. Bibliography.....	97
10. Filmography	101
11. Appendix	102
Zusammenfassung (Deutsch)	107
Abstract (English)	108
Curriculum Vitae	109

1. Introduction

Food is integral to the human being and to human society. With the possible exception of water, nothing is more life-giving, more vital, can be used for so many different purposes or take so many different forms in so many different contexts. It has fascinated both lay and academics for millennia. The study of food can be viewed as an interdisciplinary field relevant to several different branches of academia, from its purely chemical make-up in the natural sciences to its effect on an individual's mental or physical well-being in medicine and psychology via its social history and its role in different societies in anthropology and ethnology. While it has seen a revival of interest in both popular and academic culture over the last two decades, there has been a steady stream of theoretical works on the topic since man learnt to write.¹ Its universality can also be seen in the immense variety of films with food as a central theme, from Marco Ferreri's rather orgiastic *La Grande Bouffe* (1973), the bizarre Japanese comedy *Tampopo* (Juzo Itami 1985), the Danish film *Babettes Gæstebud* (Gabriel Axel 1987) based on the short story by Karen Blixen, the Greek-Turkish family saga *Πολίτικη Κουζίνα – Politiki kouzina* (Tassos Boulmetis 2005), and the somewhat surrealist dark Spanish comedy *Jamón Jamón* (Bigas Luna 1992) to the Chinese family drama *Eat Drink Man Woman* (Ang Lee 1994) and its Hollywood remake based around a Mexican immigrant family *Tortilla Soup* (Maria Ripoll 2001). While there are fewer classic novels devoted so entirely to food and eating, there are several key moments in literature which centre around food and have entered Western cultural consciousness, from the sublime – Proust's madeleine – to the ridiculous, e.g. A.A. Milne's Winnie-the-Pooh getting stuck in Rabbit's door.

This study is a transdisciplinary one, using insights from several disciplines to analyse food within a semiotic context. It will first identify specific instances where food operates as a sign or as part of a sign and then analyse how the semiotics of food in each instance are illustrated by examples taken from two books and their film adaptations, *Como agua para chocolate* (Laura Esquivel 1989/Alfonso Arau 1992) and *Chocolat* (Joanne Harris 1999/Lasse Hallström 2000). With a focus on the semiotics of food in relation to interaction between individuals and communities and a strong element of discourse analysis, the choice of more “popular” texts which are enjoyed widely and internationally was very deliberate.

¹ Food and cooking is an unavoidably “gendered” topic. The implications of this will be considered in Sections 4 and 5. It is interesting to note that historically, the provision of food was generally taken care of by the male, while its preparation in the home was largely the responsibility of the female. Nevertheless, perhaps as a result of the predominance of the male in written culture, most of the documentation of food and culinary habits before the last century was written by men, e.g. the Renaissance writer Platina (*On right pleasure and good health*, orig. 15th century) and Jean Brillat-Savarin (*Physiologie du goût*, 1889).

Furthermore, the film adaptations have also been included since semiotics deals explicitly with extralinguistic signs, and the multimodality of cinema often brings a further dimension to the analysis which is not possible in a purely literary text. The body of the study will be divided into four main sections, each concentrating on a particular aspect of the semiotics of food:

- The semiotics of food in discourse
- The semiotics of food at the collective level
- The semiotics of food as a sign of power
- The semiotics of food in the construction of identity

In each section, various theoretical aspects of each instance will be examined in individual chapters, drawing on different disciplines. The final chapter(s) in each section will analyse the semiotics of food in the texts with reference to the theoretical examples given in the previous chapters before concluding the section with a brief summary. To conclude the main analysis, the aspects considered in the research and illustrated by the texts will be summarised in an “epilogue” by applying them to a single food – chocolate – in order to show their application in the “real” world. After this section, the whole study will end with a retrospective and prospective conclusion.

1.1. Definition and clarification of terms

Before embarking on the study, it is necessary to define and clarify some terms which will be used frequently. This is in itself an arduous and highly contentious semiotic task, since even the definition of *semiotics* and the terms *signifier* and *signified* must form the first discussion. The research for this study drew on several different seminal works in the field of semiotics, particularly Umberto Eco’s *A Theory of Semiotics* (1979 [1976]) and Roland Barthes’ *L’aventure sémiologique* (1985), which themselves drew on the various traditions established by Saussure, Jakobson and Peirce. These original works were then coupled with some of the most up-to-date overviews and introductions to semiotics such as Daniel Chandler’s *Semiotics: The Basics* (2006 [2002]). Eco’s definition is one of the broadest: “Semiotics is concerned with everything that can be taken as a sign” (Eco 1979:7). To this, Chandler adds that “In a semiotic sense, signs take the form of words, images, sounds, gestures and objects” (Chandler 2006:2). More specifically, semiotics looks at signs in context, “how meanings are made and how reality is represented” (ibid.). In this study, the way food is used as a sign will be examined in the contexts of both the “real” world and the fictional world of the texts. This aims to show that the making of meaning and the

representation of reality can take place at various levels. By analysing and understanding one, it is hoped that it will become easier to analyse and understand the other.

Following both Barthes and Eco, who themselves use Saussure's terms, *signifier* and *signified* shall be used to refer to "the form that the sign takes" and "the concept to which it refers", respectively (Chandler 2006:14). The two figures below show Saussure's model of the sign and Chandler's equivalent illustration of the sign for a *tree*:

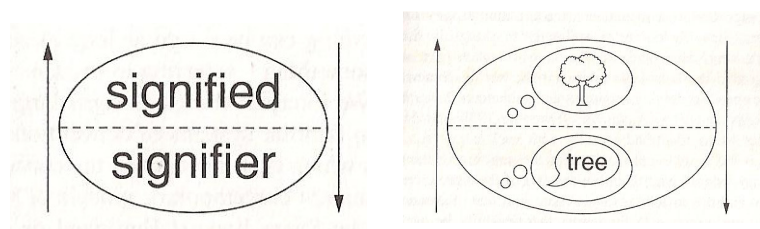


Fig. 1. Saussure's model of the signified/signifier (Chandler 2006:14-15).

The signifier in Chandler's example is the written or spoken word *tree*, while the signified is equivalent to the idea of a tree upon seeing or hearing the signifier. While Saussure's sign referred to linguistics only, this study will use the terms *signifier* and *signified* in a broader sense. It will also, for the sake of continuity and following Chandler's example, continue to refer to the *signifier* and the *signified* although the author is aware of other frames of reference such as Peirce's triadic sign (see Chandler 2006:29-34).

The main focus of the study, *food*, also needs defining. Unless otherwise indicated, the term *food* signifies foodstuffs and beverages in general as well as the processes of preparing, cooking, eating and drinking. When the signifier *food* refers to a particular foodstuff, drink or process as the signified, this will be clearly indicated.

A further term that will be used regularly throughout this study is *text*, which should be interpreted as both the literary text, i.e. a book, and a visual/multidimensional text, i.e. the film adaptation of the book. Though Barthes, for example, still distinguishes between "image" and "text", he writes that "a work conceived, perceived and received in its integrally symbolic nature is a text" (Barthes 1977:159). He was also, however, according to Jackiewicz, the first to propose the application of semiological methods to the study of film (Jackiewicz 1970:429), so it does not seem inappropriate to extend his earlier definition of a text to cover cinema as well. Dressler and Beaugrande's broad definition of a text constitutes "a communicative occurrence which meets seven standards of textuality [cohesion, coherence, intentionality, acceptability, informativity, situationality, and intertextuality]" (Dressler/Beaugrande 2002:Ch.1,§3,23). Since the films of *Como agua para chocolate* and *Chocolat* can certainly be described in these terms, this study will use the term *text* to refer to book and

film as a single entity for the sake of simplicity. When aspects of either the film or the novel alone are being analysed, this will be made explicit.

1.2. Plot outline of *Como agua para chocolate*

Tita (Josefita) de la Garza's repressive mother, Mamá Elena, has decreed that, as the youngest daughter, Tita must remain unmarried in order to take care of her mother until she dies. In order to be near the woman he loves, Tita's *grand amour* Pedro consents to marry Tita's eldest sister Rosaura, but their marriage is not a happy one, plagued by Pedro and Tita's unquenchable and – for the most part – unconsummated passion for each other. Tita's third sister, Gertrudis, runs away from the homestead after a meal cooked by Tita has unforeseen consequences, and becomes a general in the revolutionary army, returning home in triumph after their mother's death. This death is a catalyst for various aspects of the novel, one of which is an affair between Pedro and Tita in spite of Pedro's wife Rosaura and Tita's engagement to their doctor, John (an American). Tita has great affection for John and gratitude towards him but ultimately she realises she cannot love him as she loves Pedro. Eventually, Rosaura dies and they are free to marry each other, but "their love is too perfect and too intense to live in this plane of existence" (Loewenstein 1994). When Pedro dies at the point of their first free and mutual sexual climax, Tita feels unable to live a second life without him. She eats a box of matches which are set alight by the ardour of her emotions for Pedro and joins him, never to be separated again, while the homestead goes up in flames.

Como agua para chocolate was written by Laura Esquivel and published in 1989, and can be considered a thoroughly Mexican novel due to its origins and setting. It was released in 1992 as a film directed by Esquivel's then husband, Alfonso Arau, using internationally little-known Mexican actors and a budget which, though large by the studio's standards, reflected its country of production. Although the main area of conflict is the family home and the relationships between the various individual characters, ethnic identity, particularly Mexican identity, is a secondary theme. The presence of the Mexican revolutionaries and the inclusion of indigenous characters and traditional Mexican recipes contribute to a general sense of ethnic identity. Occasionally, the family's proximity to the US border becomes apparent, although ethnicity is neither a central focus nor a particular field of conflict.

The film stars Lumi Cavazos as Tita, Marco Leonardi as Pedro and Regina Torné as Mamá Elena. Although the setting is a decade later than the novel, just after the turn of the century, Arau follows the novel very closely in terms of both plot and dialogue, most of which is taken directly from the text. The film is considerably more conventional than the novel in terms of narrative structure, with a more linear chronology and little of the recipes which are interspersed freely in the narrative in the written text. It nevertheless makes use of less

conventional filming techniques such as frontal shots, most notably at the beginning and the end, where Tita's great-niece (Arcelia Ramírez) begins the narration straight into the camera, and when Mamá Elena's appears as a phantom. Other more uncommon features are brief flashbacks and an authorial narrator as a voice-in-off within the main body of the story. The food is 'described' by the camera in long close-ups, which is arguably somewhat simpler and easier for the audience than the rapid switching between the story and the recipes that takes place in the novel.

1.3. Plot outline of *Chocolat*

An English writer, Joanne Harris drew on memories of her eccentric French grandmother and the feelings and emotions she was experiencing with her own three-year-old daughter² to write the story of *Chocolat*. A young mother, Vianne, and her six-year-old daughter, Anouk, arrive in the fictional, provincial French town of Lansquenet-sous-Tannes on Shrove Tuesday to set up a chocolaterie, *La Celeste Praline*, opposite the church. The local priest, Curé Reynaud, objects vociferously to the temptation presented to his parish by the chocolaterie during Lent. However, his condemnation goes largely unheeded, if not exactly unheard, by the main characters in the novel who find solace and strength in Vianne and her chocolate. Joséphine, a victim of domestic abuse, leaves her husband; the elderly Armande makes the end of her life worth living; and her subdued grandson Luc finds the passion to ignore his repressive mother and live his own life. The arrival of a group of travellers, led by the proud and independent Roux, evokes Reynaud's sinister memories to draw the town into a battle of wills. Vianne, with her openly non-Christian, nurturing practices, finds herself in direct opposition to Reynaud and his strict adherence to the Lenten fast and all it entails, including a rigid sense of an exclusive community. Various incidents follow, including the arson of Roux's boat and Armande's birthday dinner and death. Reynaud's final, frantic attempt to oust Vianne by destroying her chocolate festival on Easter Sunday results in his own hubris, leaving Lansquenet to redefine itself in kinder terms. Ethnic identity – or the lack thereof – is thus central to the events that unroll in *Chocolat*, with Vianne, Anouk and the travellers embodying the exotic, dangerous "Other".

Due to the strong influence of Juliette Binoche (Vianne), who demanded to work closely with Harris on the screenplay of the film, Hallström's adaptation of Harris' novel with a cast including Johnny Depp (Roux) and Judi Dench (Armande) is, in her own words, "close in spirit, if not always in detail, to the book"³. Lasse Hallström's big-budget, Hollywood

² <http://joanne-harris.co.uk/v3site/books/chocolat/index.html> (03.02.10).

³ <http://joanne-harris.co.uk/v3site/books/chocolat/index.html> (03.02.10).

production mitigates the division between Vianne and the church with the introduction of a mild young priest just out of seminary, Père Henri (Hugh O'Connor), and by recasting Reynaud as the frustrated mayor, the Comte du Reynaud (Alfred Molina), who has been abandoned by his wife. A further significant change is the invention of a family history involving an indigenous Mexican grandmother, a so-called "Wanderer", and, as a consequence, the considerably more pervasive influence of Mayan tradition and legend (including the renaming of the shop to *Chocolaterie Maya*). There are also several minor changes, of which the most notable is the shift in narrative perspective. Where the novel's narrator alternates between Vianne and Reynaud as events progress in the novel, the film is narrated retrospectively as the voice-in-off of an adult Anouk (Tatyana Yassukovich). Harris herself describes the film adaptation as being "not quite as dark as the book" (ibid.) and the retrospective narrative gives it a distinctly fairytale feel, from the opening lines starting with the classic "Once upon a time..." (0:01:55) to the arrival of Vianne and Anouk in their red hooded capes (0:04:09). In contrast, the book's double narrative is very immediate. This is particularly so in Reynaud's final chapter, where his attack on the chocolaterie is experienced 'live' by the reader as it is broken down, not only by date, but also by time ("Easter Sunday, 4.00 a.m. [...] 5.10 a.m. [...] 5.20 a.m.", etc. Harris 1999:307ff.).

1.4. Summary

The two texts are superficially quite distinct in both content and form. However, food plays a critical role in both stories, underlining the themes that run through the texts. In both *Como agua para chocolate* and *Chocolat*, it acts as a sign in the power struggles between love and repression, the relationships between individuals, families, lovers, and enemies, and the construction of a fully-fledged identity. It furthermore forms the cornerstone of key incidents in the plot. By drawing on various academic disciplines such as social anthropology, ethnology and psychology, this study will first explore how food is used as a sign or as part of a sign in the "real" world with a focus on four particular aspects. Each section will be dedicated to one aspect: discourse, the collective level, power, and the construction of identity. At the end of each section, the research will show how food underlines the same phenomena in the two rather disparate fictional worlds of *Como agua para chocolate* and *Chocolat*. Finally, the last section will analyse how chocolate is used as a sign to conclude and summarise the discussion.

2. The semiotics of food in discourse

2.1. Introduction

The connection between language and food/eating has been widely acknowledged by academics of many disciplines, particularly by anthropologists such as Claude Lévi-Strauss and Mary Douglas, who describes “eating, like talking [as] a patterned activity” (quoted in Wierlacher 2008:80). It was, in fact, Lévi-Strauss who made the enormously significant step of transferring the principles of structural linguistics to the non-verbal field and thus opening up the field of semiotics to a non-verbal (or at least not purely verbal) discourse. Although Saussure had hinted at the possibility of regarding non-verbal communication such as customs and etiquette as belonging to the realm of semiology and the Prague School had made a few tentative attempts to do so, Lévi-Strauss’ application of the principles of structural linguistics to social phenomena such as marriage systems was groundbreaking (Burkard 2005:67). He further noted that there are as few societies that do not use some form of cooking in the preparation of food as there are societies that do not use language in some form (Leach 1991:35).

This section aims to explore how food is used as a sign within a language system in order to provide the basis for the analysis of food as a non-linguistic sign. It will examine how food is described and used to describe within various discourses in order to analyse the various levels at which food operates as a sign in different language and, to an extent, social contexts.

There is, for example, a crucial difference between food as a signifier for what animals eat, and food as a signifier for what people in “civilised”, i.e. organised, societies eat. This difference can, for example, be seen in German, where discourse about the former uses a different signifier (*Fütter*) from discourse about the latter (*Essen*). There are also corresponding verbs, *fressen* and *essen* respectively (a brief analysis of the intended misuse of these terms will follow later). Everyday discourse in English and Spanish does not make such an explicit differentiation with the signifier; food for animals is simply described (as *pet food* and *comida para animales*, respectively: Collins 2006). Lacking the concept of a conventionalised sign in their natural habitat, animals consider everything which their instinct tells them is edible to be food, including the meat of their own species. Humans, in contrast, once weaned off the mother’s breast, do not have such an instinct. Instead, the conventions or norms of the society in which they live dictate what can be considered appropriate for eating and on which occasion (Leach 1991:37). Incidentally, this reflects the differences in human and animal communication. While humans have conventionalised language systems peculiar to each particular community, animals appear to have more universalised, instinctual forms of communication. Thus the cooked meat of an animal is

designated a culturally acceptable form of nourishment and can be eaten within the framework of the community. Eating the flesh of one's own species, however, is considered to be of a natural but animalistic character, and in consequence can only take place outside the village (i.e. community). This can be seen in the comparison of two similar myths, one from the Gé and one from the Parintintin peoples of Brazil, shown in the following table.

M179 [Parintintin]	Einführung einer natürlichen und zoologischen Ordnung;	kannibalische Mahlzeit, außerhalb des Dorfes
M7-M12 [Gé]	Einführung einer kulturellen und alimentären Ordnung	Mahlzeit aus gekochtem Fleisch, innerhalb des Dorfes

Fig. 2. Comparison of M179 and M7-M12 (Lévi-Strauss 1971:405).

In this table, natural and animalistic eating practices leading to the consumption of one person by another takes place outside the community, while a cultural and alimentary process (i.e. meat cooked in or over a fire) takes place within the community's boundaries. Thus when a person is said to eat "like an animal" (in German, *eine Person frisst*), there is the implication that they are not acting like a human being and are thereby banished to eat outside the community and its accepted norms. In Lévi-Strauss' example of the Parintintin, this is shown literally: the person eats human flesh, which is not an acceptable source of nourishment for humans, and is therefore not permitted to eat inside the community's physical boundaries. In other situations it may be a forbidden food that is eaten, and the person is thus rejected from a social (or, more likely, a religious) community, where prohibitions on food are embedded in the discourse of that community. This will be considered in detail in Chapter 3. In yet other situations, it may be only a figurative form of speech, meaning that the person eating is not conforming to certain table etiquette, and is temporarily banished. This may be either physically (e.g. a child sent away from a table where adults are eating) or psychologically (the person is not physically excluded from the table but is made to feel that they are not behaving appropriately, often by being ignored). Thus formal similarities can be found between the overall "patterns" of food and talking/cooking and discourse, but, as shall be shown in more detail in the next chapter, food can also operate as a sign within a particular discourse.

2.2. Metaphor – a linguistic perspective

The semiotics of food in discourse will be analysed here through the example of metaphor. For the purposes of this study, the term metaphor shall be considered a hyperonym for all forms of comparison, including direct metaphors (of the "Juan is an animal" variety), similes

(“Juan eats *like* an animal”) and indirect metaphors (“Juan tears into his food, holding it in his fingers with no regard for propriety”, i.e. *he eats the way an animal does*).

The metaphor has been described and defined by several linguists. Umberto Eco describes it as “nothing more than the substitution of one sememe for another, through the innovatory amalgamation of one or several markers” (Eco 1979:109). As a *morpheme* is the smallest linguistic unit bearing meaning and a *phoneme* is the smallest unit changing meaning, a *sememe* is the smallest unit that can act as a sign vehicle (see Eco 1979:95ff.). Chandler explains the metaphor in Lakoff and Johnson’s rather more user-friendly words as “understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another” (Chandler 2007:127). He then defines it in semiotic terms as “a signified acting as a signifier for another signified” (ibid.). Each signifier is approximately equivalent to Eco’s “markers”, while the signifieds can be understood as Eco’s “sememes”. A third description, given by Haley and quoted by Keller, is that “Metaphor is a symbolic statement that represents one thing as an icon [...] of something else” (Keller 1995:178), underlining the element of *similarity* between the two sememes (hence, of course, the term *simile*). Certain idioms, of course, are conventionalised metaphors or similes, which are strongly embedded in a particular discourse such as that of a particular culture. This is especially noticeable when the idiom is food-related: in English, when the signified is unimportant or uninteresting to the speaker, he or she would use the signifier “I don’t care a fig”. In Spanish, however, the idiom is “no me importa un comino” (Collins 2000; Domínguez 1975:55).

As Keller points out, the metaphor is not a symbol, but the “Symbolifizierung” (*symbolification*) of an icon. Peirce argued that a sign could fall into three categories: symbol, icon and index. A symbol is a purely arbitrary and conventional sign, i.e. one where the signifier has no visible or logical connection to the signified (Chandler 2007:38). For example, there is no reason why the small, red, low-growing, semi-conical fruit should be called a *strawberry* and not a *grape* or even a *dog* other than that is the signifier which has been agreed by the community referring to it. Obviously, a community which calls it a *strawberry* would be an English-speaking one; Spanish-speaking communities have agreed on the term *fresa*, French *fraise*, and German *Erdbeer*. To illustrate the arbitrariness of a symbol, a small community in Burgenland, Austria, refers to this fruit as *Ananas* (the usual signifier for what in English is agreed on as *pineapple*). This could be traced back to the time when both strawberries and pineapples were unknown fruits in the community the usual signifiers were confused and mistakenly applied to the “wrong” fruits. Alternatively, and more probably, it could be a result of the metonymical misuse of the signifier for the *fragaria magna*, also known in Austria as the *fragaria ananassa*. However, as the community became accustomed to referring to strawberries as pineapples, it would have been too

confusing for them to change the signifiers, resulting in a small pocket of the German-speaking world which uses the signifier usually agreed on for pineapples to signify strawberries.

An icon, in contrast, is a signifier which bears a clear resemblance to its signified. In linguistics, a typical example is onomatopoeia: words such as *crunchy* or *crispy*, when spoken aloud, imitate the sounds made when eating something that could be described using these adjectives. In the discursive metaphor, this is taken a step further, as we have seen above in Chandler's definition, and the signified concept is used as a signifier for another concept, i.e. the word *animal* is actually a signifier for the signified object of a *non-human living being*, but when Juan is described as eating "like an animal", this *non-human living being* (i.e. animal) is used as a signifier for the *non-human-like behaviour* of a human being. When Keller talks about symbolification, he is referring to the departure from (even the forgetting of) the original similarity between signified and signifier. The symbolified representation thus appears to be arbitrary unless the interpreter is aware of the similarities in the connotations of both sememes (Keller 1995:169). Juan obviously does not in fact resemble an animal directly (he is a human being and looks like one). The effectiveness of the metaphor requires that the community associate animals with not having or being able to understand the concept of table manners, while it regards human beings as capable of understanding and abiding by those agreed upon by that particular community.

Similarly, Eco draws attention to the fact that the resemblance need not be directly between the signified and the signifier itself, but rather the area of common ground between two quite independent signifieds, which he names *semic identity*:

When the metaphor becomes customary, a *catachresis* takes place: two sememes acquire the same corresponding lexeme (that is: two content units possessing some components in common accept the same expression) (Eco 1979:109).

The example given is the shared semantic marker, or connotation, of "fidelity" and "defence" of both dogs and friars in twelfth-century European discourse, leading to description of the members of the Dominican order as the *domini canes* (*dogs of God*), in spite of the apparent lack of similarity between dogs and friars at a superficial level (Eco 1979:280).

When defining something, it is also important – sometimes even more useful – to define what it is *not*. It is thus necessary here to examine briefly the term *metonymy*, "which involves using one signified to stand for another signified which is directly related to it or closely associated [in a physical sense] with it in some way", i.e. "based on various indexical relationships between signifieds" (Chandler 2007:129). Peirce's third category, the index, can be understood as a sign in which a direct relationship can be seen, e.g. smoke is a sign that

there is, or has been, a fire. (Chandler 2007:42,130). Metonymy can thus be defined, as Jakobson does, as substitution by contiguity (items that are directly connected to one another). This differentiates it from metaphor, which Jakobson identifies as a procedure of substitution by similarity, i.e. items that resemble one another (Eco 1979:280). Metonyms often consist of the substitution of a part, individual or substance for a whole, group or form (although metonymy is also differentiated from synecdoche, a distinction which is of less relevance for this analysis; Chandler 2007:130). While a metonymic relationship may therefore appear to be metaphorical – Lakoff and Johnson offer the example of “‘The ham sandwich wants his check [bill]’”, where ‘the ham sandwich’ stands for the *person* who has ordered a ham sandwich (quoted in Chandler 2007:130) – there is a direct line of contiguity from one to another, in contrast to a ‘pure’ metaphor, where the correlation is purely based on an *imagined* similarity. Writing about cinema, Jakobson stated:

[le cinéma] s’est mis en utiliser une variété encore jamais vue de rapprochements synecdochiques (close-ups) et en général, de ‘constructions’ métonymiques (set-ups) [...] la ‘montage’ metonymique avec ses pasajes d’un plan à l’autre (lap dissolves) sont les comparaisons filmiques (quoted in Jackiewicz 1970:424, *sic*).

His point here being that cinema uses the camera shots to show synecdochical and metonymical relationships in a way that was previously unimaginable, while the soft cut from one scene to another can indicate a metaphorical relationship. While the latter is important for this section, the importance of these metonymical camera shots will be examined in Section 5.

2.3. Direct metaphors in *Como agua para chocolate*

There are two broad forms of metaphor present in the texts, the first of which is a direct metaphor (or simile), directly comparing one item with another. The most obvious starting-point for this analysis is, of course, the eponymous metaphor of “Como agua para chocolate”, found in context on page 132.

Por lo que fuera, pero tal parecía que la ira dominaba los pensamientos y las acciones de todos en la casa. Tita literalmente era «*como agua para chocolate*». Se sentía de lo más irritable (Esquivel 1989:132, *my italics*).

Tita’s mother has died and she has just discovered Mamá Elena’s secret love for José Treviño, whom she was unable to marry because he was of mixed race. This is the primary reason for her bitterness towards Tita’s desire to marry the person she loves in the face of tradition. Tita herself has just agreed to marry John, leaving Pedro furious and sulky. Rosaura has had her second baby and been told she cannot bear any more children. She responds to this by perpetrating the “tradition” instigated by her mother that the youngest (in this case her only)

daughter is not to marry but to take care of her until she dies. The combination of all these factors, plus Pedro's plea for her not to marry John and his confession that "ahora pienso que lo mejor hubiera sido huir con usted" (Esquivel 1989:130), Tita is livid. There are several instances in this passage where cooking is used either to relieve her feelings ("tomando la olla con furia, se encaminó hacia la cocina. Terminó el mole entre masculleos y aventones de trastes[...]", *ibid.*) or to reflect them ("El enojo que sentía por dentro actuaba como la levadura con la masa del pan[...]" ; Esquivel 1989:131). However, the metaphor of Tita being "como agua para chocolate" is the most interesting as it is one commonly used in colloquial Mexican (and other Central American) discourse.

First of all, it is important to identify and define the sememe used in the metaphor more closely, although an explanation is partly given in the sentence that follows: "se sentía de lo más irritable". A succinct definition is given in the blurb on the back cover of the book: "«Estar como agua para chocolate»: es decir, a punto de explotar de rabia o de pasión amorosa" (Esquivel 1989). Esquivel herself explains the background of the simile in more depth during her interview with Claudia Loewenstein:

We used to have hot chocolate with water, before the Spaniards came, because we didn't have cows. You had to wait until the water was just about to boil. That was the appropriate moment to make the chocolate. That is where the saying comes from. When someone is about to explode, we say that person is "like water for chocolate" (Loewenstein 1994).

As will be explained in more detail in Chapter 6, pre-Columbian chocolate was prepared with water, which is generally believed to have been brought to boiling point but not be allowed to boil before adding the chocolate. This is an extremely culturally-bound sign, as can be seen from the internet forum in the appendix, where non-fluent Spanish speakers state that they do not understand the calque translation of the title. While internet forums should be treated with scepticism as academic resources, the forum shows how various users relate to the phrase. It is taken from www.wordreference.com, an online Spanish-English dictionary based on the *Pocket Oxford Spanish Dictionary* and the *Diccionario Espasa concise inglés-español*, and can therefore be considered a reasonably reliable starting-point. Names have been anonymised as suggested by Benwell and Stokoe (Benwell/Stokoe 2006:ix), but the users' self-identification as native speakers has been left visible as this is important for defining the discourse from which they are writing.

As the forum shows, the Central American users whose communities have this cultural knowledge understand that the phrase "water for chocolate" signifies water cooking in a pot just before boiling point. With this cultural knowledge, the referent of nearly-boiling water can be used as a new signifier for the concept of a person who is so frustrated (with anger or passion) that they cannot remain calm any longer (the new signified). Curiously, this cultural

“knowledge” is in fact not knowledge in the sense of objective fact, but in fact a convention unconsciously agreed on by the community. Section 6 will show that both the Aztecs and the Mayans did not customarily heat water and then add chocolate. This practice in fact first became widespread among Europeans, for whom the solid chocolate bars which were then melted in hot water were easier to transport on the long sea voyages for Central America to Europe (Coe/Coe 1999:138).

It is interesting to note that it is difficult to translate or describe this concept without resorting to other metaphors such as *pent-up*⁴, *about to explode*, *need to release/vent*⁵ *their feelings*, *at boiling point* etc. What is particularly interesting in this example is, of course, the catachresis described by Eco when a metaphor becomes embedded in a language to the point that it may lose its original meaning. This can be seen in the definition of the phrase given on the book’s cover. The metaphor is defined purely in terms of the signifier at the second level (estar “a punto de explotar de rabia o de pasión amorosa”), without any reference to the background of the phrase, in effect “symbolifising”, in Keller’s words, the icon of a person “bubbling” with rage. The wordreference forum, too, shows that some of the Central American users jump straight to the secondary signification, illustrating a general catachresis. Finally, it is important to remember that the “translation” given by Esquivel in the next sentence (“se sentía de lo más irritable”) does not only mean, as it does in English, that Tita was easily annoyed or angered (OED). In Spanish, *irritar* still carries the Latin meaning of “excitar vivamente otros afectos o inclinaciones naturales [i.e. not just anger]” (RAE) – an apt description of Tita’s (and her family’s) mental state.

Curiously, the phrase “como agua para chocolate” does not appear at any point in the film other than the title. In fact, it appears to be Pedro who seems most perturbed at that point in the story. Although he does not express his anger verbally, he has such strong feelings that he breaks his glass when he makes his toast to Tita and John’s engagement (1:06:10). It is possible that Arau omitted the phrase from the narration in the film because he preferred to apply the simile to all the characters rather than purely to Tita. In an interview on the DVD, he gave the following explanation:

So in Mexico, when you say ‘I am like water for chocolate’, it means you are about to explode, in two different senses: out of rage, or erotically [...] it describes the attitude of all the characters, all the time... all the time, they are about to explode (Interview/ bonus material, 0:00:46-0:01:08).

Arau’s version thus suggests that every character is about to explode, from embittered and biting Mamá Elena to thwarted Pedro and even unfulfilled Rosaura, whose jealousy of Tita

⁴ This originally referred to rooms and buildings, from *penned*, i.e. enclosed (OED).

⁵ Originally: to make slits or outlets in something (sails, barrels, etc. to allow wind through) (OED).

explodes almost literally in the form of digestive malfunctions. Furthermore, the similarities between Esperanza and Tita are drawn visually, as Tita holds Rosaura's baby in the same posture as Nacha held her, singing the same lullaby as she cooks (1:05:46; cf. 0:04:36). Though this is actually a relatively relaxed pose, it implies that Esperanza will find herself in Tita's situation when she comes of age, and the cycle of frustration and agitation will begin again.

A second metaphor which is of particular interest is Tita's description of the first time she sees Pedro and experiences sexual arousal: "en ese momento comprendió perfectamente lo que debe sentir la masa de un buñuelo al entrar en contacto con el aceite hirviendo" (Esquivel 1989:21). The physical reaction that occurs when a fritter or doughnut batter is dropped in hot oil is a direct comparison of the prickling sensation of sexual arousal, and is thus arguably an iconic comparison. There is also, however, a second level of significance. Lévi-Strauss set cooked food against raw food as a fundamental opposition, but an opposition where the former develops out of the latter. It is the difference between culture and nature, the difference between cooking something in a purpose-built container and simply roasting it over a fire (Lévi-Strauss 1973:510). He also argues, however, that while roasted foods have an affinity to raw foods, boiled foods have an affinity to rotten foods (Lévi-Strauss 1973:515). It could therefore be argued that cooking foods brings awareness and consciousness but also approaches rotting. In the same way, the first knowledge of sexual arousal changes the child to an adult, and while this knowledge does bring greater awareness and consciousness, it can also lead to "degradation" (particularly in a more rigid moral sense, e.g. if the community does not approve of extramarital sex or homosexuality). Augustinian Christianity developed Paul's theory of Christ as the second Adam to give the first Adam the blame for original sin by eating the fruit from the Tree of Knowledge which awoke his sexual desire (*concupiscentia*) (Auffarth 2005:408). As well as being merely an iconic representation of the feeling Tita experiences when she first feels Pedro's gaze upon her, the image of a *buñuelo* being cooked in hot oil is a symbol of the sudden transition from innocent (or ignorant) childhood to conscious adulthood and the awakening of sexual desire.

This metaphor is particularly interesting, not just because of this secondary level of significance, but because it is repeated and therefore acts as a metaphor for itself as well. "Esperanza le dijo a Tita que al recibir la mirada de Alex sobre su cuerpo se había sentido como la masa de un buñuelo entrando al aceite hirviendo" (Esquivel 1989:203). The repetition of this heavily-laden metaphor implies that Esperanza's feelings for Alex are parallel to Tita's for Pedro, in the same way that the film stresses the similarities between them by showing Tita nursing Esperanza as Nacha had nursed her. Though it is not a standard phrase in Central American discourse as "como agua para chocolate" is, this

metaphor is firmly embedded in the discourse of the novel. Thus not only can Tita understand precisely what Esperanza means by this signifier, but the reader does as well. Consequently, the reader will also understand why Tita is determined not to allow Esperanza to become her successor, hence her passionate, and ultimately successful, battle to defeat Rosaura as Mamá Elena's successor and to break the spiral of repression.

2.4. Direct metaphors in *Chocolat*

In *Chocolat*, the simile selected for analysis comes early in the book and, in contrast to the first metaphor described above from *Como agua para chocolate* which has an absolutely central role, is of relatively little importance in terms of the novel as a whole and does not in fact feature explicitly in the film at all. However, it is an excellent example of the hidden layers of meaning which must be extracted from the various discourses which are present in the text.

At the opening of Curé Reynaud's first chapter, he is talking to his predecessor, who is lying in a coma, about the villagers of Lansquenet-sous-Tannes.

All I want is to guide them, *mon père*, to free them from their sin. But they fight me at every turn, like children refusing wholesome fare in order to continue eating what sickens them (Harris 1999:23, original italics).

At this point, he is speaking in general without any explicit reference to the other protagonist and narrator, Vianne. It is "Thursday, February 13", two days after Shrove Tuesday and the modest carnival that took place in the parish. At a sociolinguistic level, this statement does not have the impact of the phrase "*como agua para chocolate*" as it is not an idiom but simply a comparison written by the author. Nevertheless, the semiotics behind an apparently simple sentence are more loaded than might be expected. The referent here is a child's refusal to eat "wholesome fare" (i.e. foodstuffs that are considered healthy or healthful) because they are ignorant of its benefits and prefer to eat "what sickens them" – foods, in particular snacks, that are detrimental to their health, but which have many of the additives, salt, sugar and fat that make them irresistible to undeveloped palates. Chocolate, particularly solid milk chocolate or cheaper varieties with a low cocoa content, is a prime example of these foods in a Western (and particularly Anglo-American) context. The way different cultures may consider different foods to be either healthful or unhealthy will be explored in more detail in the next section. It is important to recognise that there are cultural implications such as these behind every metaphor, since metaphors rely on convention to balance the arbitrariness of the sign. A brief example that is relevant to this discussion is Marvin Harris' analysis of these sweet, fatty foods. He draws attention to the fact that "the fat and the rich were once synonymous",

i.e. fat was seen as a positive, whereas nowadays, “in advanced capitalist societies, fatness is a sign of a diet overloaded with fats and sugars, together with a lack of exercise, and is associated with poverty rather than wealth” (Harris 1995:162), clearly a negative.

Beyond the basic referent described above, however, there is also a further referent which is more deeply embedded in Christian, and particularly Catholic, discourse. This was touched on in the analysis of the *buñuelo* metaphor, but is of considerably greater relevance here due to the nature of the speaker, a Catholic priest who wants to “free” his parishioners “from their sin”. The description of the villagers as “children” is thus doubly loaded, as it refers both to their ignorance and wilfulness, as explained above, and to the church’s discourse in which it refers to its members as a ‘family’. There is a reminder of this given in the previous sentence when Reynaud uses the signifier “*mon père*” when speaking to his predecessor although he is biologically unrelated, as is made clear later on (Harris 1999:124). The sickness he is referring to is therefore not simply the physical disease brought on by excess sugar or salt such as diabetes, obesity or heart disease, but a ‘sickness of the soul’, otherwise known as *sin*. The Old Testament “versteht S[ünde] [...] konkret-dinglich als eine Art Krankheitsstoff, der auch unwissentlich übertragen wird und mit dem der Täter sowohl sich selbst als auch andere infiziert” (Koch 1992:484). The referent of “what sickens them” is consequently here not only chocolate, but a referent deeply embedded in the Christian consciousness as the cause of all sin – and another foodstuff: the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge eaten by Eve in the Garden of Eden (Genesis 2-3). Incidentally, it is curious that the apple has become a cultural referent for this fruit, although it is not mentioned as such in the Bible itself. Biedermann suggests that the association is an iconic one, as the Latin for apple (*malus*, *malum*) sounds similar to the word for bad/evil/sin (*malum*), and probably draws on the pre-Christian symbolism of the apple, which associated it with Dionysius and Gaia (Biedermann 1998:34-5). Is it too much to interpret Armande’s “clever winter-apple face” (Harris 1999:81) – another metaphor – as a sign of her godlessness? Perhaps. Yet it is surely not coincidence that she suffers from diabetes and ultimately dies before she can receive the last rites – albeit by choice – from what is essentially a sugar overdose. Thus the metaphor used here to liken the religious waywardness of Reynaud’s parishioners to the ignorant stubbornness of children refusing to eat is not simply a comparison using food as a sign referring to their lack of discipline, but also one in which the sign using food is rooted deeply in the cultural and above all religious discourse that plays a central role in the text.

2.5. Indirect metaphors in *Como agua para chocolate* and *Chocolat*

Both authors use direct metaphors frequently in their written texts. However, there is also wide use of indirect metaphor, i.e. a trope where a person's behaviour or personality is defined by their attitude to food. In semiotic terms, the latter can be regarded as the signifier, while their personality is the signified. Thus the sign is slightly more abstract than a purely linguistic one, even a symbol, as it is not a concrete object or concept which the reader should recognise if he/she has the necessary cultural background, but looser and more subjective. If Armande's death from uncontrolled diabetes is a sign of her godlessness and her giving in to sin, her desperate pleasure in food stems from her knowledge that her quality of life is limited:

'After a five-course banquet you'd want coffee and liqueurs, wouldn't you? You wouldn't suddenly decide to round it all off with a bowl of pap, would you? Just so you could have an extra course?' [...]

'I'm saying you need to know when to stop, Vianne. You need to know when to push away your plate and call for those liqueurs' (Harris 1999:241).

For independent-minded Armande, life in a nursing home and being told what to do "by kind nurses who talk to me as if I were in kindergarten" (Harris 1999:227) is a fate worse than death. She spends her last days as we presume she has spent her life – or wishes she had spent her life – "immoderate – and volatile" (Harris 1999:154).

Curé Reynaud, too, is described in terms of food and the poverty of his Lenten diet is used to underline the poverty of his spirit, contrasted with Vianne's open generosity – a contrast which will be explored in more detail in Section 4. During his first visit to the *Praline Celeste*, Vianne notes: "His small, tight smile is like an oyster, milky-white at the edges and sharp as a razor" (Harris 199:50). This is a curious simile, as standard literary connotations for oysters are characteristics not associated with Reynaud: on the one hand, the hidden pearl, and on the other, their reputed aphrodisiacal qualities. It could be argued that Reynaud, like an oyster, does hide a closely-guarded secret, although it is not of the pleasant nature one would normally associate with the semi-precious stones. Nevertheless, this hint at the pleasures of the flesh suggests at Reynaud's hubris in the final scenes of the book. "Milky-white", while perhaps being a direct description of the priest's wan complexion, also implies a childish innocence, however inappropriate (compare the German words *Milchbubi* and *Milchbubengesicht*, meaning 'mummy's boy', or even the English 'milksoy') and is contrasted with the precise cutting of a razor. It is a rather peculiar, but not unfitting paradox that reflects the conflict which rages within him. Curiously, the metaphor comes full circle. Vianne persuades him to accept the chocolates she has chosen specially for him, as she does with all her customers the first time they come into her shop. The box she hands him contains "a

dozen of my best *huîtres de Saint-Malo*, those small flat pralines tightly shaped to look like oysters” (Harris 1999:54). Thus the icon of the chocolates shaped to look like oysters is symbolified, in Keller’s words, to become a signifier for Reynaud’s closed character.

Similarly, the characters in *Como agua para chocolate* are largely defined by their attitude towards food and/or their ability to produce food. “A Nacha le molestaba mucho que desde niña Rosaura fuera melindrosa con la comida” (Esquivel 1989:31). Tita, in contrast, “no solo comía lo acostumbrado, sino que comía, además, jumiles, gusanos de maguey, acosiles, tepezcuintle, armadillo, etc., ante el horror de Rosaura” (stink bugs, edible caterpillars, crayfish, paca [a large rodent native to Central America] and armadillo; *ibid.*). Tita’s willingness to embrace new foods and sensations – particularly ones which Elena’s white, upper-middle class society would not recognise as acceptable foods – reflects her desire to break free from the norm set by conservative Mamá Elena. In contrast, Rosaura’s inability to appreciate food and cooking as a child extends into her adulthood and mirrors her rather dysfunctional life. On the only occasion she cooks for the family, it is a disaster and the entire household “se enfermó del estomago” (Esquivel 1989:49). Later, when she has her own children, she is unable to breastfeed them herself, and like her mother, must hand them over to another (in this case Tita) for nourishment. This can be read as both emphasising Rosaura’s role in the novel as Mamá Elena’s natural successor as well as reflecting her own lack of personal and sexual fulfilment with Pedro.

2.6. Summary

This section showed how food, like language, is a base factor in the formation of a community. It also showed how the use of metaphors employing food in a particular discourse binds a community together both by drawing on the frame of reference held in this discourse and by giving further information about characters in the communities by coding it in this frame of reference. In *Como agua para chocolate* and *Chocolat*, food metaphors are used within the texts themselves as part of the narrative. In the former, the eponymous metaphor establishes the text firmly in Mexican culture by using a well-known and culturally-bound idiom familiar to colloquial Central American discourse. In *Chocolat*, the comparisons drawn by the author are embedded in the Catholic discourse propagated by Curé Reynaud. At a second level, indirect metaphors are used in a more abstract way to represent a character’s personality by comparing it to a food or by using their attitude towards eating and their capability of producing food to mirror aspects of their personality in general.

3. The semiotics of food at the collective level

3.1. Introduction

In the last section, it was argued that eating, like language, is a patterned activity and the use of food in a particular discourse tightens the community by drawing on the frame of reference shared by the community. In this section, we shall move out of the realm of language and into the community. It will be argued that food is used as a sign to identify oneself with a particular community, to differentiate between communities and to distinguish different roles within the communities.

3.2. Barthes' "Mythologies"

Drawing on the relationship between signifier and signified in Saussure's sign – "not one of equality but of equivalence" (Barthes 2009:135) – Barthes used a "*second-order semiological system*" (Barthes 2009:137, original italics) which he called "myth". In the *Mythologies*, Barthes uses the concept of a "myth" to illustrate how food functions as a sign of collective identity. *Myth* he defines as a "type of speech", a "message", a "mode of signification", a "form" (Barthes 2009:131). It is not the object, idea or concept itself, but the way (even, although not exclusively, the medium) in which this is expressed and in which the object, idea or concept is represented. At the same time, he is careful to point out that "mythical speech is made of a material which has *already* been worked on so as to make it suitable for communication" (Barthes 2009:133). It is therefore not the forging of new paths, but a reiterative process along paths which have been travelled and are therefore known and recognised by many people. A myth must therefore be rooted in a particular discourse in order to be instantly recognisable as such. After explaining Barthes' myth in semiotic terms, his examples of mythologies concerning food will be used as a bridge to an ethnological and socio-historical overview of food's role in identifying and distinguishing communities in the next chapter.

Although technically Saussure's terms refer to a purely abstract system and it might make more sense to use Peirce's terms of *representamen* and *referent*, respectively, which allow for an object rooted in reality (Chandler 2007:30,33), as Barthes uses the terms *signifier* and *signified*, they shall be used here as well. However, Barthes' myth is not simply a sign. In a Barthesian myth, "that which is a sign (namely the associative total of a concept [signified] and an image [signifier]) in the first system, becomes a mere signifier in the second" (ibid.). Barthes portrays the concept of myth thus:

Language	1. Signifier	2. Signified
	3. Sign / I SIGNIFIER	II SIGNIFIED
Myth	III SIGN	

Fig. 3. Barthes' model of myth (Barthes 2009:138).

To an extent, it operates much as a metaphor does, i.e. using the signified of one sign as the signifier for another. What is specific to Barthes' myths, however, is that they are firmly rooted in a specific culture and its discourse, described by Barthes in terms of historicity and intentionality. The *meaning* (I SIGNIFIER) is thereby diminished and held as "an instantaneous reserve of history, a tamed richness, which it is possible to call and dismiss in a sort of rapid alternation" (Barthes 2009:141). The *concept* (II SIGNIFIED) is "at once historical and intentional; it is the motivation which causes the myth to be uttered" (Barthes 2009:142). It is important to remember that the concept is above all open, and depends very much on the "appropriation" of it by a particular group that will recognise it (i.e. a community with a shared culture and discourse). The *signification* (III SIGN) is the association of both form and concept, the myth itself. Thus the meaning is "distorted" by the form and changed into "gestures" (Barthes 2009:146): the original sign loses its concreteness and becomes a formality agreed on by the discourse of the society in which it is being used. This distortion as a consequence of the alternation of meaning does imply that "myth is a *value*, truth is no guarantee for it" (Barthes 2009:147, original italics), reminiscent of Eco's understanding of catachresis. It is also "always in part motivated, and unavoidably contains some analogy" (Barthes 2009:150). Nevertheless, Barthes adds that "just as, historically, ideographs have gradually left the concept and have become associated with the sound, thus growing less and less motivated, the worn out state of a myth can be recognised by the arbitrariness of its signification" (Barthes 2009:152). This corresponds to Eco's comment on the catachresis of metaphor in the last section illustrated forcefully by the discursive metaphor of "como agua para chocolate". The very fact that a myth has lost its motivation shows how deeply it is found in a community's consciousness:

myths generalise experience to bring about a consensus on how we perceive reality, encounter the human condition, and act in respect to the difference of others as a community [...] Myths provide interpretative archetypes for deciphering the meaning of the life-world we inhabit with a view to the present through the past (Pericles Trifonas 2001:11).

Curiously, Barthes' thesis continues by arguing that the "very principle of myth" is that it "transforms history into nature" (Barthes 2009:154). The usual sociological pattern cultivates and transforms nature, giving it a culture (and therewith a history) and enabling it to be contrasted with the natural world. In contrast, the essence of myth is that the artifice of its creation is ignored or forgotten. It leaves its recipients to take it for granted: "things lose the memory that they were once made" (Barthes 2009:169).

In this way, the original patterns which held great significance become modified and forgotten over time. In the *Éléments de sémiologie* (1964), Barthes defines food as a language system after Saussure, claiming it has both a set structure ("*langue*") and a "form" (i.e. the reality of its usage or "*parole*"). A menu, for example, sets out what dishes should be served and in which order; yet each person offering the menu will stray from it to a greater or lesser extent. Some people may even create the alimentary equivalent of a neologism by inventing a completely new recipe, which is then itself in turn accepted and institutionalised (Barthes 1985:31). As far as a menu is concerned, the various options for an entrée (e.g. soup versus prawn cocktail) are systemic or substitutive elements equivalent to metaphors, while the ultimate selection of dishes creating the sequence of a complete meal (e.g. soup as the entrée followed by beef as a main and finishing with ice cream as dessert) represent the syntagmatic elements of metonymy (Barthes 1985:56). Making such selections means using

la langue alimentaire, [qui] est constituée: 1. par les règles d'exclusion (tabous alimentaires); 2. par les oppositions signifiantes d'unités qui restent à déterminer (du type, par exemple: *salé/sucré*); 3. par les règles d'association, soit simultanée (au niveau d'un mets), soit successive (au niveau d'un menu); 4. par les protocoles d'usage, qui fonctionnent peut-être comme une sorte de *rhétorique* alimentaire (Barthes 1985 :31).

It should of course be noted that each culture, and even each community, as it has its own verbal language and idiolect, will have its own "langue alimentaire". This not only draws its community together by dictating what should be eaten and how, but also identifies the members of its community and differentiates them from other communities which eat different foods, in a different way and for a different purpose.

In the *Mythologies* themselves, for example, Barthes explores the myths of French mass culture, in which food (and drink) play a central role, rediscovering and analysing the artifice of their creation. Wine, for example, Barthes describes as "felt by the French nation to be a possession which is its very own, just like its three hundred and sixty types of cheese and its culture" (Barthes 2009:65). Despite its place in the revels of Antiquity and various other societies, Barthes describes it as the French "totem-drink". The term "totem" is taken from anthropology, and in his book on *Totemism* (1963[1962]), Lévi-Strauss outlines the two main areas of totemism as the confusion of two problems.

The first problem is that posed by the frequent identification of human beings with plants or animals, and which has to do with very general views of the relations between man and nature, relations which concern art and magic as much as society or religion. The second problem is that of the designation of groups based on kinship, which may be done with the aid of animal or vegetable terms but also in many other ways. The term “totemism” covers only cases in which there is a coincidence of the two orders (Lévi-Strauss 1963:10-11).

Wine, declares Barthes, is a “totem-drink”, and to the French what the dairy cow is to the Dutch and tea to the British (Barthes 2009:65). Using Lévi-Strauss’ definition above, it is thus to be understood that the French identify themselves with the drink (from the vine) as well as a sense of kinship or belonging. With this rather sweeping statement, Barthes presents the reader with both an anthropological concept of how important this item is to the community in question, and a clear if rather simplified illustration of how communities identify themselves, thereby distinguishing themselves from others, through the relevant “totem-foods”. It should also be noted that “magic” has an important role, as this attribute is very prominent in the portrayal of food. Barthes draws the reader’s attention to the fact that, “like all resilient totems, wine supports a varied mythology which does not trouble about contradictions” and refers to food’s “old alchemical heredity, its philosophical power to transmute”. In his example, wine has the “magic” to make a weak man strong, a reticent one talkative, a worker more eager, and an intellectual more virile (Barthes 2009:65-6). This “alchemical”, “magical” quality will prove to be of great importance for the analysis of food and its role in the construction of identity in Section 5, where a close reading of the texts will offer several practical examples.

Similarly, the *manner* in which food is consumed – the “protocole d’usage” – is said to communicate information about the person eating (or drinking). “Other countries drink to get drunk [...]; in France, drunkenness is a consequence, never an intention”; “Knowing *how* to drink,” he writes, “is a national technique which serves to qualify the Frenchman, to demonstrate at once his performance, his control, and his sociability” (Barthes 2009:66,67, original italics). If a community, such as “the French nation”, regards wine as a totem-drink and therefore a symbol of the values of the community, those who do not drink wine are understood to reject the values of this community as well:

inasmuch as society calls anyone who does not believe in wine by names such as sick, disabled, or depraved: it does not comprehend him (in both senses, intellectual and spatial, of the word). Conversely, an award of good integration is given to whoever is a practising wine-drinker [...] the absence of wine gives a sense of shock, like something exotic (Barthes 2009:67, original italics).

The identification with a particular food as belonging (or exclusive) to one’s own culture therefore implies by necessity, as seen in the quotation above, the “otherness” of a culture or a person from another culture who does not share this identification. In this case, wine is the

Barthesian “myth” which functions as a sign of French identity. In the next chapter, Barthes’ “myths” will be shown to form the basis for the ethnological study of various communities and their relationships to one another.

3.3. An ethnological perspective

3.3.1. Defining “the collective level” – the community

Barthes’ *Mythologies* argue that food can act as a sign of one’s identity and one’s belonging to a certain community. His example is that wine is regarded as a “totem-food” – itself a term borrowed from ethnology and social anthropology – for the French, while drinking wine “correctly” is a sign of being French. Of course, this begs the question of what “being French” actually means – a discussion far too large to explore in full in the scope of this study. One proposal comes from Benedict Anderson, who argues that “[the nation] is an imagined political community”:

imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear about them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion.

[...]

imagined as a *community*, because, regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship (Anderson 1991:6, original italics).

If “political” is replaced with “cultural”, Anderson’s definition of a nation – as a specific form of community – supports Barthes’ description of wine as a “totem-drink” for the French (nation). Thus the members of the French nation may be ignorant of each other’s existence, but they can remain content in the knowledge that across the “French nation” people are drinking wine in a controlled and sociable way. Should they encounter another member of the French nation, they could rest assured that they would be able to share a bottle of wine sociably and without the intention of drinking themselves into the ground. Of course, as Anderson himself acknowledges by naming nations “imagined” communities and Barthes noted with the example of M. Coty, the beer-drinking French president (Barthes 2009:67), the limitation of this is that in reality not all those who consider themselves French do drink wine in the manner described, if at all. On the other hand, this can also be considered an example of the difference between Saussure’s *langue* and *parole*, and the distinction between theory and practice.

In more general terms, “Kommunikation [ist] ganz offensichtlich ein *conditio sine qua non* menschlichen Lebens und gesellschaftlicher Ordnung” (Watzlawick et al 2007:13). Sweeping

though this statement is, defining the terms *communication*, *culture* and *community* tends to elicit such dramatic pronouncements from the academic community. “Culture and community are defined in terms of each other: culture is what a population shares and what turns it into a community,” writes Ernest Gellner (Gellner 1995:45), while Tyrell et al. declare that communication is the “Basisoperation der Gesellschaft” (Tyrell et al. 1998:15). Bourdieu writes that

Symbols are the instruments *par excellence* of ‘social integration’: as instruments of knowledge and communication [...], they make it possible for there to be a *consensus* on the meaning of the social world, a consensus which contributes fundamentally to the reproduction of the social order (Bourdieu 1991:166, original italics).

For the purposes of this research, it can therefore be said that *culture* consists of the norms (behavioural and otherwise) shared by a group that identify this group as a *community*. These norms are in turn established and enforced by means of *communication* comprising both verbal and non-verbal forms, which includes food acting as sign. These signs and symbols allow “consensus” by the community, resulting in an agreed culture and closing the circle. In the analysis of the texts, food will be shown to function as a sign or as part of a sign which reinforces the communities portrayed.

3.3.2. Food as a signifier for a community

What a certain group of people eat and what they consider a delicacy defines them as a community and differentiates them from other groups of people, or communities, who do not share the same eating habits or tastes. This chapter gives a brief illustration of how groups are differentiated by their consumption of a particular food and how this can be used as a signifier for them, which will later be seen in the analysis of the two texts.

The first example is a purely ethnological one. Harris quotes Igor de Garine (1980), who argued that “the Massa of the Cameroon reject a variety of sorghum that would double or triple their output, solely because they wish to remain culturally distinct from their neighbours” (Harris 1987:65). Harris contests Garine’s assertion that the differences in the agricultural and thus also dietary customs of the Massa, Tupuri and Mussey are solely cultural and not as a result of “etic, behavioural, ecological, economic and political” differences (ibid.). Both Lévi-Strauss and Leroi-Gourhan, however, point out that preferences in taste are developed through the cultural system in which one lives rather than through biological instinct (Leach 1991:37; Leroi-Gourhan 1980:361). It could be argued that culture itself can result from various factors, perhaps even including biological or ecological differences. However, the important question here is not how these differences have arisen but rather what they tell us about the two communities and their relationship with each

other. For whatever reason these differences exist, the three communities of the Massa, Tupuri and Mussey, though neighbouring and related, are clearly distinct. Though it is not the only differentiator, their contrasting uses of and attitudes towards the different varieties of sorghum clearly illustrate the cultural boundaries between the three communities.

In some cases, the use of a particular food as a distinguishing feature of the community leads to the use of it as a signifier for the entire community, much as Barthes' suggested with "totem-foods" as explained in the last chapter. This can often be seen in literature. Homer, for example, used foods to identify the communities he described:

so nennt Homer in der Ilias einen Scythischen Nomadenstamm, die Hippomolgen, Glaktophagen, d.h. Milchesser, obgleich schon der Name Hippomolg selbst einen Roßmelker, Roßmilchtrinker bedeutet; so nennt er in der Odyssee ein Volk, zu dem Odysseus auf seinen Irrfahrten gekommen, Lotosesser (Feuerbach 2000:295).

Though Homer's signifiers were neutral, such signifiers are often pejorative. For instance, Feuerbach noted that "Eselfresser oder Katzenfresser" were used to distinguish neighbouring communities in Germany (Feuerbach 2000:296-7). "Spaghetti Western" is the signifier for a subgenre of Western films produced in the 1960s and exemplified by Sergio Leone's *Man With No Name* trilogy starring Clint Eastwood (1964-1966). As well as sharing certain characteristics such as a lower budget and more violence than other Westerns, they were mostly made by Italian directors – hence their nickname.

Inside a community, food can also carry connotations of class. Eating a particular food can act as a signifier to identify which class an individual belongs to, as can their table etiquette and even their mealtimes and the names they give to each meal. In England, for example, "tea" for the working classes signifies a substantial evening meal, eaten about six o'clock, while for everyone else, it is a light meal with delicate sandwiches, scones and cakes, and tea (i.e. the drink, Fox 2004:309). As there are no examples of this in the texts, other than perhaps the indigenous foods such as paca, armadillo and maguey worms that Tita enjoyed and Rosaura refused, it shall not be considered further here. It is nevertheless a very interesting aspect of the semiotics of food that at least deserves a mention, not least because it does highlight the demarcation between oneself and the "Other" even without a larger community.

The way food is prepared can also differentiate between communities and can show that the person cooking comes from a different community to that of the person eating. Lévi-Strauss notes that for the Kaingang of South Brazil, boiled foods connote the tightening of familial or social bonds and should therefore not be given to the widowed or to the murderer of your enemy. Serving roasted foods is a sign of loosening these bonds. The Hidatsa Sioux of Montana roast for guests ("Exo-cooking") but boil for close family ("Endo-cooking"). This

practice is mirrored in their language, where the word *mi dá ksi* means both the palisade around the settlement and a cooking pot or pan (as they are both “containers”) (Lévi-Strauss 1973:517).

Drawing on ethnology provides several examples which illustrate how food is used both as a sign to differentiate between communities and as a sign for a particular community or collective ethnic identity. The way food is prepared for or served to visitors who are not from the community, or the discourse they use when referring to it, can also function as a sign of their otherness.

3.3.3. Food as a signifier of status

Within a single community, food is also used as a clear sign of status and the acknowledgment of hierarchy. Ross writes:

Among many hunting-horticultural societies, perhaps because pressure on game resources is much greater than among foragers, the distribution of meat within communities tends to reflect status to a considerable degree: that of men over women and that among men. Thus, among the Achuara, when families apportion out cuts of meat among their relations, it is likely that nothing will be given to the family of a man who is absent from the village. Among the Yanoama of the southern Venezuela rain-forest, Good [...] reports that meat in most cases is distributed to men, who in turn allocate portions to the women and children. Larger portions tend to go to the more important men, while lower-status men may receive none, especially in the larger villages where game is more sparse and demand is greater (Ross 1987:20).

A further example is given by Frazer:

When Sir Charles M'Carthy was killed by the Ashantees in 1824, it is said that his heart was devoured by the chiefs of the Ashantee army, who hoped by this means to imbibe his courage. His flesh was dried and parcelled out among the lower officers for the same purpose, and his bones were long kept at Coomassie as national fetishes. (Frazer 1922:LVI, par.8).

This quotation also illustrates the common belief that certain qualities such as courage or strength can be gained by eating something which has displayed these qualities in life. In the case of MacCarthy's demise, those at the top of the hierarchy were given his heart, believed to be the seat of his courage. Those with a lower status were only given his “flesh”, though by sharing the “meal” and the courage it was supposed to bring, the community of the Ashanti army was also reinforced, allowing the higher-ranking officials to communicate their need of the lower ranks.

Food can also be regarded as a symbol of status in settled communities. In her analysis of advertising in America, Katherine J. Parkin writes that “Ads promised that by serving certain

foods women could demonstrate and enhance their family's religiosity, social status, or national identity" (Parkin 2006:80). The role of food in religion will be dealt with in the next chapter, while identity will be discussed in Section 5. It is food's ability to determine (or at least the perception that food has the ability to determine) status which is of interest in this chapter. She argues that "America's fluid class system held out the possibility that, by acquiring economic wealth and adopting the lifestyle of the upper class, one could move up the social ladder" (Parkin 2006:100). Cooking the appropriate foods, and in the appropriate combination, for one's new socioeconomic status were an important symbol of belonging to this new class community (ibid.), which can be seen as Barthes' "règles d'association" in action. Fox, too, notes that people who call their midday meal "d'lunch [...]" are trying to conceal their working-class origins, remembering at the last second not to call it 'dinner', and that in England, eating eggs or chips is relatively classless, but eating both together is "definitely working-class" (Fox 2004:309,313).

Furthermore, it is not only food in terms of individual foodstuffs which can be used to signify status in a community. The mini-rituals around it, such as who is seated where at a table, who is served first and who gets the choicest cuts of meat, are also used to confer honour upon guests and thus indicate their special status in the community. This was of great importance in certain communities, and still is today, especially in communities where rank and status is clearly identified, such as royalty. It is still possible to cause enormous offence by not observing these traditions. A further instance in which food is used as a sign of status and/or honour, particularly as a guest, is due to the globalisation of business and politics. Though most people who work internationally accept that other cultures have different norms and attitudes to food and adjust their expectations accordingly, it is still horrifyingly easy to offend inadvertently. Paul Freedman offers an example from postwar Soviet politics:

Krushchev's first doubts about China, which later contributed to the Sino-Soviet rift, arose during a trip in 1954 when he and his entourage were served the famous Cantonese speciality 'A Battle of the Dragon and the Tiger' (long hu dou) which features snake and cat, provoking a horrified reaction from Krushchev and tears from two members of his delegation (Freedman 2007:8).

Since this is not of particular relevance to the texts, it shall also not be considered in further detail. However, it is of interest and importance in any consideration of food as a signifier of status, and further serves to illustrate how food can be used to differentiate between communities.

3.4. A religious perspective

Meals are at the heart of many biblical stories emphasising community, from the Passover (Exodus 12) to the feeding of the five thousand (Matthew 14:13-21) and the wedding at Cana (John 2:1-11), as well as Jesus' appearance to the two disciples on the road to Emmaus, where they only recognise him when they invite him to eat with them and he breaks the bread (Luke 24:30-31). Eating together is a potent sign of community, and one formalised in one of the central sacraments of the Christian Church. In imitation of the Last Supper, communion – as its name suggests – unites all those who partake while it excludes those who are not initiated into the community. Participation in this ritual constructs and reinforces the community, while the ritual itself is strongly conventionalised by the community in which it has developed.

Perhaps even more important than foods which signify membership of a community when eaten are the foods which signify this membership through being avoided or forbidden – Barthes' "règles d'exclusion". The Halal and Kosher cooking practices of Islam and Judaism, respectively, allow members of each religion to be identified easily, both positively and negatively – positively for other believers, negatively for their persecutors. Beside language and dress, Andrés et al. list food and eating customs as one of the most significant differences between the Muslim/*Morisco* and Christian communities in fifteenth-century Spain:

No menos significativa es la diferencia en la alimentación [...] Desde maneras especiales de sangrar a los animales, pasando por la repugnancia de comer cierto tipo de pescados, hasta la total exclusión en la dieta alimenticia de carne o grasa de cerdo. En su lugar predominaba el consumo de aceite de oliva, frutos secos, pasa y miel. También la fruta fresca y los productos de huerta y leguminosas eran importantes en su cocina. No consumían vino. Asimismo, los buñuelos y hojaldres eran característicos de su pastelería.

Finalmente, los aspectos de su cultura que más chocaban con la tradición de la casta cristianovieja dominadora fueron, desde luego, los de carácter religioso, aunque ya hemos indicado que por constituir un conjunto inseparable religión y cultura, prácticas como las alimenticias tenían mucho que ver con preceptos de aquella (Andrés et al. 1988:747).

This of course had serious consequences in inquisitional Spain. F. Peña writes: "hay signo externo de herejía siempre que hay acción o palabra en desacuerdo con las costumbres comunes del pueblo católico" (quoted in Andrés 1988:667), of which the aforementioned differences in eating habits were among the most obvious. Thus many *Morisco* (i.e. Muslim in this context) customs were forbidden between 1510 y 1526, including the "matanza de reses a la manera musulmana" (Andrés 1988:731). Practising this could lead to an accusation of heresy and a conviction by the Inquisition. Similarly, 111 Jewish women were informed on

in Toledo on the basis of unconventional cooking practices, and 56 burned at stake for rejecting conversion to Catholicism (Mintz 2003:24).

In Christianity, and particularly Catholicism, there is no general prohibition on any particular foodstuff, but rather restrictions on when particular foodstuffs may be consumed. The definition of fasting, “ecclesiastical in its genius, is unwritten in its origin, and consequently must be understood and applied with due regard for the customs of various times and places”⁶. In France, the website of the Conference of Bishops (*Conférence des évêques de France*) defines fasting thus:

Le jeûne a pour but de donner soif et faim de Dieu et de sa parole. Il n'est pas seulement un geste de pénitence, mais aussi un geste de solidarité avec les pauvres et une invitation au partage et à l'aumône.⁷

With regard to the ethnological perspective already considered in this section, it is interesting to note that the Conference of French Bishops highlight not only the penitent function of fasting but also the fast as a “geste de solidarité” or community with the poor.

According to this site, when Lent was established as a period of penitence during the fourth century A.D., fasting was extremely rigorous, and consisted of a single meal without meat, eggs, dairy products or wine. The Catholic Encyclopedia lists various variations of fasting over time and geography, but since this chapter is intended to provide a backdrop for *Chocolat* rather than an in-depth discussion of the fast itself, this is only given for further reference. Though the laws of fasting have become increasingly less strict over the years, the solid chocolate pralines Vianne sells are unlikely to be approved by any member of the Church as appropriate nutrition for Lent for a number of reasons: firstly, they are considered food, which traditionally was unacceptable, rather than a drink, which was. Secondly, they are often made with milk or liqueurs, which are also prohibited in many cases. The Catholic Encyclopedia also draws attention to the fact that “moralists are one in maintaining that a natural law inculcates the necessity of fasting because every rational creature is bound to labour intelligently for the subjugation of concupiscence”⁸. Since sexual desire is so closely associated with food, particularly sweet, “decadent” foods like chocolate, it is logical that Vianne’s wares fall under the laws of fasting at least implicitly if not explicitly. Her polite but very clear refusal to attend the church also “infects” her wares and, by extension, those who

⁶ “Fast”, in the Catholic Encyclopedia. Available online from New Advent. URL: <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/05789c.htm> (27.04.10).

⁷ <http://www.eglise.catholique.fr/foi-et-vie-chretienne/la-celebration-de-la-foi/les-grandes-fetes-chretiennes/paques/careme/le-jeune-en-questions.html> (27.04.10).

⁸ “Fast”, in the Catholic Encyclopedia. Available online from New Advent. URL: <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/05789c.htm> (27.04.10).

eat them, with a lack of piety. In contrast, fasting is a clear sign of a strong Catholic community and a denunciation of sin.

3.5. Food and community in *Chocolat*

Food lies at the heart of the communities in both *Como agua para chocolate* and *Chocolat*. The communities themselves, however, change over the course of the novels and films, starting with the De La Garza family in *Como agua para chocolate* and the village of Lansquenet in *Chocolat*. As new people come into contact with the community, the formation of the original community changes and new communities are formed. Since *Chocolat* exemplifies the divisions between communities, while *Como agua para chocolate* illustrates the role of food in emphasising status better, the order in which the texts are analysed has been reversed to reflect the flow of the study.

In *Chocolat*, these communities are relatively clear-cut. As stated above, the original community is the village of Lansquenet before the advent of Vianne and the travellers. They are bound together by the church, perhaps even more specifically by Reynaud, who is, as Vianne realises, the lynch-pin of the community. Harris does claim that “the Catholic church [is not] the villain of the piece; Reynaud uses his own interpretation of Catholicism to enforce his own agenda of control and self-denial”⁹. As the *curé* in Harris’ *Chocolat*, however, Reynaud is the direct representative of the church, and this distinction is not explicit. In Hallström’s version, though Reynaud is not its direct representative, the role of the church as the heart of the original community is emphasised from the opening sequences. As the camera pans into the village, the first image of the community is as a group inside the church listening to a sermon which begins “The season of Lent is upon us. This is, of course, a time of abstinence...” (0:03:00-0:03:10). Meanwhile, Vianne and Anouk battle their way towards the village. They are the first threat to the community, and Vianne’s business as a chocolatière sets her up in direct opposition to Reynaud and his fasting community, physically as well as psychologically. The story of *Chocolat*, in both novel and film, divides the original community into two new communities, with those who frequent Vianne’s chocolaterie on the one hand and those who boycott it firmly, holding tightly to the Lenten fast, on the other. Chocolate therefore becomes a totem-food for those who belong to Vianne’s “community”: it is the food that brings them together as a community but also one which allows them to construct their collective and individual identities, as will be seen in more detail in Section 5. Even if the members of the community do not identify themselves directly as members of a “chocolate”

⁹ <http://joanne-harris.co.uk/v3site/books/chocolat/index.html>

community, those outside it – such as Reynaud – do see chocolate as a symbol of their communal degradation.

Naturally, these communities are not rigid and there is considerable movement from one to the other as the characters' consciences prick or they become more independent of Reynaud. When the travellers arrive, food is used as a sign of welcome or rejection. Armande helps them to get the food they are prevented from buying in the local store ("It seems that Armande has ordered their food supplies herself, in her name, much Reynaud's indignation"; Harris 1999:120) and Vianne welcomes them into her chocolaterie, while Paul Muscat refuses to serve them in his café:

'Right.' Roux's face was expressionless [...] 'Closed.' Another glance around the room [...] 'Closed to us,' he said quietly. [...]

"I have the *chocolaterie* just opposite the church [...] Why don't you drop in tomorrow?' I asked lightly. 'I don't do beer, but I think you might enjoy my coffee.' Harris 1999:106-7, original italics).

The otherness of Vianne and the travellers is clearly underlined by food and their attitude towards it, which contrasts strikingly with the ascetic diet of the villagers. The unknown, dangerous quality of the "Other" that surrounds Vianne embodies itself in Reynaud's eyes in the food she is holding, food he misinterprets as some dangerous pagan ceremony:

I saw the flare of bluish fire rise from her outstretched hands, a burning something between her fingers lighting the surrounding faces purple...

For a moment I was frozen with terror. Irrational thoughts – arcane sacrifice, devil worship, live burnt offerings to some savage ancient god – leaped within my mind [...] Then relief. Relief, understanding and a searing embarrassment at my own absurdity as she turned back towards me [...]

'Pancakes. Flambéed pancakes. That was all' (Harris 1999:175).

A glamorous, extravagant version of a familiar dessert, perhaps, but not a dangerous unknown after all. Reynaud's projection of the exotic onto Vianne extends itself to the food she makes, while the reality is not nearly as threatening. The food the travellers cook is presented as exotic, outdoors food with a hint of Southern Mediterranean origins: "the fish grilled in the ashes of the brazier, the roasted goat's cheese, the dark pancakes and the light, hot chocolate cake, the *confit de canard* and the spiced *merguez*" (Harris 1999:177). Even Reynaud, however, senses that the warmth of the food and the grill mirror the warmth of the laughter and community – a community which he is not able to join.

One of the central events in the story, Armande's birthday dinner party, is simultaneously a gathering characterised by acceptance and her exit from the community of human life. Interestingly, though the event is more or less the same, it is portrayed quite differently in the

book and the film. Harris' dinner is a joyful occasion from the start, "with all my friends around me" (Harris 1999:243). Like the Last Supper, it is a moment where a community is constructed around a final meal before the protagonist's departure, unbeknown to the vast majority of the participants, who will later try to live true to the values of the community established in this moment. Even Armande's stuffy daughter Caroline is there, "prepared to enjoy herself if such a sacrifice was demanded", and satisfied that Armande has "...virtually *promised* she'd go to Les Mimosas [the local care home]" (Harris 1999:294,300, original punctuation). The travellers, who have come back specially from Agen, chatter comfortably with the Lansquenet folk even before they sit down to eat. It is a cheerful, easy party, a vibrant, vivacious end to Armande's life.

The change in narrative to Reynaud is abrupt but suggests that as far as they – Armande and her family, the travellers and the townsfolk – are concerned, they have found their peace with each other and the story is completed; the two disparate communities have been reconciled in a single, new community. From this point on, it is only Reynaud who is driven by hate and fury, a force reflected in the increasing pace of his narrative and the rather frenzied, minute-by-minute "live" relaying of his thoughts. Far from being the lynch-pin of the community, he is now only an outsider, excluded, marginalised and ridiculous: "Too late to turn the tide of public opinion against her"; "And that was how they saw me, père, crouching in the ruins of her window, face smeared with chocolate, eyes haggard" (Harris 1999:306,314).

Hallström, however, places the dinner not as the conclusion but as the climax of his film, combining it with the fire on board the travellers' boats which takes place over a hundred pages earlier in the novel. At Harris' dinner, most of Armande's guests are familiar with and now reasonably sympathetic to each other, with the exception of Caroline, who makes a gallant effort to overcome her prejudices. Hallström, however, portrays a clash of two still very separate communities as the villagers are confronted with Roux and Luc does not arrive. Armande is bad-tempered and disappointed, and the guests' immense awkwardness is reflected in their not-so-subtle behaviour: one of the three grey ladies shifts perceptibly away from Roux as he sits down, and Drou whispers audibly "What if the Comte finds out?" (1:16:37-46). Curiously, Hallström again makes it very clear – in a way that Harris does not – that it is the food which brings the guests together. Several long detail sequences of the food leads into close-ups of the guests tasting it tentatively. Here, the metonymical nature of the close-ups as described by Jakobson in Chapter 2.2 can be seen very clearly: eventually their murmurs of appreciation, reminiscent of Armande's first visit to the chocolaterie, swell and burst into laughter and easy conversation (1:17:24-29, 1:18:24-58). Incidentally, the dish that builds this community is almost the same dish as the one which provides the title for the chapter in which the De la Garza family finally breaks down – poultry with a *mole* chocolate

sauce. Where Harris portrays a group of friends eating together as a shared celebration of their community, Hallström depicts food as the medium through which a very disparate group of people are brought together and which allows them to communicate with each other as a new community. This new community is then further tested, and affirmed, when invited onto Roux's boat for dessert. The villagers' initial hesitation is overcome by their newfound, if fragile, sense of community and probably not a little by the tempting promises of more chocolate. It can be assumed that it is largely the community's acceptance of Joséphine and his own sense of exclusion from her new life as part of this community that prompts Muscat to set fire to the boats.

Interestingly, Hallström's Joséphine is not only accepted into the community of the chocolaterie but is in fact instrumental in retaining Vianne and Anouk as part of it. Towards the end of the film, Vianne, feeling that she will never be at home anywhere, drags a resisting Anouk down the stairs to follow the North Wind away from Lansquenet. Noises from the kitchen stop her, and she finds the community – including Caroline Clairmont – has come to help her get the chocolates finished for her previously heavily contested festival (1:41:08). Helping her make the chocolates is a sign of the villagers' acceptance of the festival and – metonymically – of Vianne herself. In accepting Vianne, they are also able to accept themselves and their own needs and desires. Before she came, Reynaud's repressive order was the norm to which those who wish to belong to the community had to conform. This changes completely with the advent of Vianne, who does not go to confession, does not have a husband and offers her customers tempting snacks rather than solid meals. Once the chocolaterie opens, those who speak their own idiolect, rather than simply repeating the *langue* preached by Reynaud, are given a voice and are able to be heard. The enabling of this communication in turn creates a community of its own with a culture of tolerance. Vianne's recipes have brought the community together and provided a medium through which they can express themselves and communicate with each other. In return, the community communicates its acceptance of the chocolate festival and its creator by helping to finish the pralines in time. Chocolate thus becomes an unconscious "totem-food" for this new community.

3.6. Food, community and status in *Como agua para chocolate*

The communities in *Como agua para chocolate* are not as straightforward and the issues that arise from the changes that occur in them are also considerably less neatly resolved. There are various groups or categories of characters that come in and out of the plot, but there is only one main community – that of the De la Garza family (including those who live

with the family such as Nacha, Chenchá and, of course, Pedro). The events that mark the entry of a new member into the community are celebrated with food, usually with unexpected effects that will be explored in detail in Chapter 5.3: Rosaura and Pedro's wedding, the baptism of Rosaura's children Roberto and Esperanza, and finally Esperanza and Alex' wedding. However, the breakdown of the community is also underlined by food. The incident of the *Codornices en pétalos de rosas* represents the disintegration of the De la Garza family under Mamá Elena's rule. The roses are given to Tita by Pedro, but Mamá Elena naturally insists on their disposal. Nacha's spirit comes to the rescue, dictating a pre-Columbian recipe for quail with rose petals which saves the roses from their fate. The *Codornices en pétalos de rosas* have a curious and varied effect on each member of the household. Rosaura excuses herself due to nausea; Mamá Elena senses an arousal which she feels obliged to condemn and tries to reassert her authority in vain by saying the meal is too salty "aunque reconocía que se trataba de un guiso verdaderamente exquisito" (Esquivel 1989:49). Pedro is filled with a "verdaderamente lujuria" (ibid.) and Tita goes into a meditative or transcendent state, present in body but not in spirit. In an extraordinarily violent rush of passion, Gertrudis strips off her clothes and runs away with a general from the revolutionary army, not to return until after their mother's death.

In contrast, Chenchá's *Caldo de colita de res* marks the beginning of a new, albeit only temporary, community based around the doctor. After Tita rejects Elena's authority by withdrawing to the dovecote from which John takes her back to his home, the oxtail broth eventually breaks Tita's silence to allow her, John and John's son Alex to be the "family" John dreams of (Esquivel 1989:110). It is also to be noted that John makes his proposal to Tita, asking Pedro (as the new head of the De la Garza family after Mamá Elena's death) for permission to marry her, over dinner – curiously, a dinner Tita finds herself unable to make from sheer agitation (Esquivel 1989:136,132). At another dinner, this time with John's aunt Mary, this new community around John and Tita is formally dissolved again as Tita tells him she cannot marry him after all.

Food also underlines status and the play of power, which will be explored in the next section. Mamá Elena is very much the head of the De la Garza family, and has no compunction about making it felt.

En el rancho de Mamá Elena la preparación del chorizo era todo un rito [...] Todas las mujeres de la familia tenían que participar: Mamá Elena, sus hijas Gertrudis, Rosaura y Tita, Nacha la cocinera y Chenchá la sirvienta. Se sentaban por las tardes en la mesa del comedor y entre pláticas y bromas el tiempo se iba volando hasta que empezaba a oscurecer. Entonces Mamá Elena decía:

- Por hoy ya terminamos con esto.

Dicen que al buen entendedor pocas palabras, así que después de escuchar esta frase todas sabían qué era lo que tenían que hacer (Esquivel 1989:15).

This example is in fact a fairly mild one, and simply shows the De la Garza hierarchy: Mamá Elena, her daughters (with Tita as the last), Nacha the cook and finally Chenchá the maid. With the exception of Pedro and a couple of male ranch hands, this is the De la Garza household, and after the death of her husband, Mamá Elena rules it with an iron fist. Though their time preparing the chorizo is not unpleasant and passes rapidly amidst chatter and jokes, there is no doubt that Mamá Elena's word is law, as can be seen by the others' immediate response to her declaration that they have finished. Everyone has a certain position and a certain task which she has to fulfill; everyone is secure in their hierarchy and there can be no negotiation of it. It is not insignificant that the first time Pedro Muzquiz' name is mentioned is over the preparation of the chorizo.

Una de estas tardes, antes de que Mamá Elena dijera que ya se podían levantar de la mesa, Tita, que entonces contaba con quince años, le anunció con voz temblorosa que Pedro Muzquiz quería venir a hablar con ella... [...]

- Pues más vale que le informes que si es para pedir tu mano, no lo haga. Perdería su tiempo y me haría perder el mío. Sabes muy bien que por ser la más chica de las mujeres a ti te corresponde cuidarme hasta el día de mi muerte.

Dicho esto, Mamá Elena se puso lentamente de pie, guardó sus lentes dentro del delantal y a manera de orden final repitió:

- ¡Por hoy, hemos terminado con esto! (Esquivel 1989:16)

With the reiteration of this familiar command, Elena expects the hierarchy to fall into place and her status as unquestioned head of the family to be respected. Tita's attempt to defend her position by talking back to her mother, rather than simply conceding and obeying as usual, fall on deaf ears; Elena storms "muy enojada de la cocina" and punishes Tita by not speaking to her for a week (Esquivel 1989:17).

A more striking example can be seen in the incident when the rebels come to the ranch requisitioning supplies. Elena hides her valuables, her daughter and her maid; she meets the rebels face-to-face as head of the household. The rebel captain acknowledges her status as such, first politely, asking if she is "la dueña de este rancho" and for her "cooperación para la causa", then in mock-deference by calling her "mi general" (Esquivel 1989:80-81). Although the rebel general realises that indeed most of the provisions are inside the house, he respects – however unwillingly – her "autoridad materna" (Esquivel 1989:82), and makes do with the relatively scanty supplies she allows him to requisition from the yard.

A further example, and one which is particularly interesting when juxtaposed with that above, is of course Gertrudis' status as the real general of revolutionary troops. When she

returns to the ranch, she begs Tita to make the *torrejas de nata* she loves. While preparing the dessert, Tita tells her sister of her worries, who pushes her to inform Pedro of the pregnancy, leaving Gertrudis to finish the *torrejas* on her own. As head of an army, however, Gertrudis has a legion of men at her command, and one of them is delegated with the task of making the *torrejas*, emphasising her superior status (Esquivel 1989:169). The implications of this in terms of gender will be analysed in Chapter 5.2. At this stage, it will suffice to point out that Gertrudis' delegation of the baking shows her status as head of her community.

3.7. Summary

Community lies at the heart of these texts, and food lies at the heart of community. From the patterns of speech and language, Roland Barthes developed his concept of the myth, a second-level sign rooted in a particular cultural discourse. This discourse and the culture surrounding it are often clearly embodied in the food and eating practices of the individual community, and thus also differentiate the community from others.

In some cases, these communities may be based on a concept of shared nationality or ethnicity, while in others they may be based on a shared religion. In *Chocolat*, the rules of Lent and the exotic, “otherness” of the incoming characters embodied in their unusual, slightly dangerous-seeming foods divide a previously united community into two new communities. Finally, the reconciliation of these two communities then forges a new, single community. In contrast, the community in *Como agua para chocolate* is constantly based around a single family. Food is used primarily to illustrate how this community gains and loses members and to underline status of those within it.

4. The semiotics of food as a sign of power

4.1. Introduction

At the end of the last section, the concept of status and hierarchy was introduced as one of the structuring elements in a community. In this section, food will be examined as an instrument of power. Firstly, it will be shown that the concept of nutrition is not necessarily objective and that it is often exploited to take advantage of being in a powerful position, with examples from recent sociological scandals centring on foodstuffs and large food manufacturer brands. While this may not seem directly relevant to the analysis, it highlights the question of who has the right to dictate what another person should eat and whether figures of authority really have the individual's interests at heart. Secondly, a brief consideration of gender in the

manifestation and perception of power will be considered. The relationships within a hierarchy and the way these are reinforced by food will then be brought into focus using Mikhail Bakhtin's theories of Carnival. As always, the section will end with a close analysis of the texts and the examination of how food is used as a sign of power in *Chocolat* and *Como agua para chocolate*.

4.2. The politics of nutrition – an ethical perspective

Nutrition may seem at first glance to be relatively objective in terms of whether or not one is receiving enough of a certain element or vitamin. However, even these seemingly standard values are culturally and/or sociologically bound. This was touched on briefly in Chapter 2.4, which quoted Marvin Harris' example of fatness previously being a sign of affluence, whereas today it is more commonly associated with poverty and a lack of education. This phenomenon is not restricted to cultural studies, but presents a dilemma in the medical sciences as well:

Crotty's argument, which is supported by others (see, for example, McKie et al. 1993), is that the scientific, authoritarian rules which underpin many modern public health programmes are symptomatic of a dominant medical culture, which as well as being moralistic, sexist and class prejudiced, is fallible to boot. For example, according to Crotty, current theories which encourage the reduction of fat in the population's diets are based on studies which exclude women, the elderly and children (Coveney 2006:19).

Even this quotation is, of course, only referring to contemporary Western (and primarily Anglo-American) society. If historical and geographical differences are taken into account, the perceived nutritional value of certain foods and foodstuffs varies even more considerably. As shall be seen in chapter 6, the peoples of pre-Columbian Central America considered the cacao bean to be an "ausgesprochenes Nahrungsmittel", due to its high fat content which provided a rich source of energy. It was also considered a tonic and used to suppress fevers, catarrh, digestive disorders and strengthen those lacking energy or appetite (Menninger 2005:119). In contrast, people living in Western society today, particularly Anglo-Americans, attribute cacao (in its more common form of solid chocolate) to being a contributor to heart disease and obesity due to the high fat content which was so valued by the pre-Columbians.

The issue of what constitutes nutrition and who decides it has had serious consequences in recent history. Crotty's argument that nutritional advice is given on a basis that "exclude[s] women, the elderly and children" is problematic enough, but the advice that she is criticising does appear to be independent and without any particular vested interest. It is only too

narrow. When a nutritional code is written by a body which does have a vested interest in a particular food, the objectivity of the code must be compromised.

One example of this is the widely-publicised infant formula (bottled baby milk) scandal which began in the 1960s and has not yet been resolved today. In spite of the disadvantages of bottle-feeding in comparison to breastfeeding, particularly in developing countries where extreme poverty, poor hygiene and limited or unclean water supplies are an additional risk, multinational corporations producing infant formula market their products as beneficial. They were accused of “distributing free samples and associating bottle-feeding with healthy babies to promote the use of infant formula by mothers who would have been better off breast-feeding their babies” in a pamphlet published in 1974 (Akhter 1994:658). This pamphlet supported an article in the *New Internationalist*¹⁰ the year before which named Nestlé expressly as one of these corporations. As a result, the World Health Organisation, in association with UNICEF and in consultation with representatives from the industry, drew up an *International Code of Marketing of Breast-milk Substitutes* in 1981.¹¹ There are still many, however, who feel that multinational corporations are not complying with the Code adequately and continue to promote infant formula over encouraging breastfeeding.¹²

A further issue that can arise from the propagation of nutritional codes is also an ethical one. Does our need for extra vitamins justify the transportation of exotic fruits such as kiwis and oranges halfway across the world? Does it justify the destruction and clearance of natural habitats to plant cash crops such as soya, coffee and, indeed, cacao or to produce biofuel for transport? Besides the question of space and the ethics of forcing people to plant cash crops for export instead of food for themselves, the producers of these foods find themselves increasingly exploited both financially and physically. More than 800 million people are starving. Of these, 300 million are children, and of these children, over 90 percent are suffering long-term malnourishment and micronutrient deficiency. More than 40 percent of Africans are “unable to obtain sufficient food on a day-to-day basis”.¹³ It seems hard to justify the prices of food in the developed world when faced with such statistics. These questions and other, even more sinister ones are addressed in reports by countless international organisations such as the UN as well as various films and documentaries such as *We Feed the World* (Erwin Wagenhofer 2004-5) and *Darwin’s Nightmare* (Hubert Sauper 2004).

¹⁰ ‘The Baby Food Tragedy’, *New Internationalist* 006, August 1973. Available online. URL: <http://www.newint.org/issue006/tragedy.htm> (25.04.10).

¹¹ http://www.unicef.org/nutrition/files/nutrition_code_english.pdf (25.04.10).

¹² For example, Joanna Moorhead, writing for the *Guardian*: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/business/2007/may/15/medicineandhealth.lifeandhealth> (25.04.10).

¹³ Figures are taken from the UN Millenium Project’s Fast Facts about Poverty, 2006: <http://www.unmillenniumproject.org/documents/UNMP-FastFacts-E.pdf> (26.04.10).

In this chapter, the question of nutrition takes on an ethical aspect which is, to an extent, unanswerable. It must be said that this ethical aspect does not in fact play a great role in the texts, although the general politics of nutrition, i.e. who dictates what should or should not be eaten, do. However, it is impossible to discuss the politics of nutrition at an individual level without acknowledging the problems that arise from these politics at a collective, indeed global, level as well.

A further and very different aspect of nutrition as power is the rejection of healthful foods. This is a sign used by several characters to reject the authority of the person promoting these foods. It is well documented that sufferers of many eating disorders, particularly anorexia nervosa and bulimia, often “feel they have little control over their lives, and that two areas in which they can have control are their food intake and their weight” (Lask/Bryant-Waugh 2000:171; see also Videbeck 2006:408). Though none of the characters in the texts explicitly suffer from eating disorders, it will be shown that several of them do use their control over food – and especially nutritious food – as a symbol of their power over their own life. Auffarth suggests that fasting also has particular significance for women in a religious context, allowing them to develop autonomy while withdrawing from their community. He also draws attention to secular hunger strikes as a means of wielding power, particularly in the face of a physically superior enemy, and their most famous proponent, Mahatma Gandhi (Auffarth 2005a:365).

4.3. *Kinder, Küche, Kirche* – a gendered perspective

In his book *Das Fremde, Das Eigene und das Andere: Die Inszenierung kultureller und geschlechtlicher Identität in Lateinamerika*, Karl Hölz argues that

Den Entdeckern erscheinen die fremden Länder und Inseln in Form von weiblichen Gestalten, die ihnen mal verführerisch bislang ungeahnten Sinnengenuss versprechen, mal aber auch in bedrohlicher Wildheit ihr kulturelles Selbstverständnis in Frage zu stellen scheinen (Hölz 1998:16).

The “Other” that the European explorers found in Latin America seemed a “female” one – sensuous but wild and very, very different from the male sailors, soldiers and missionaries that came “mit den Eisenwerkzeugen” and “Gerechtigkeit, Christentum und Frieden” (Hölz 1998:17).

Hölz’ description of the New World as taking the form of “weiblichen Gestalten” is clearly not literal, but rather draws on popular concepts of the masculine and the feminine as determined by colonial discourse with its “eurozentrische Überlegenheitstheorie mit den wertenden Paradigmen des Männlichen und Weiblichen” (Hölz 1998:8). Hölz argues that

these templates of imagined sexual identity (*gender*) have not changed, even with independence from the colonial forces which created this discourse originally. The nature of gender is a hugely controversial one and much too wide to be dealt with in detail at this point. In contrast to Hölz, several leading feminist theorists argue that it is impossible to homogenise the concept of being feminine (either in terms of sex or gender) so categorically. Judith Butler writes that “there is the political problem that feminism encounters in the assumption that the term *women* denotes a common identity” (Butler 1999:6, original italics). She argues that gender “is not always constituted coherently or consistently in different historical contexts, and [...] intersects with racial, class, ethnic, sexual and regional modalities of discursively constituted identities” (ibid). Thus it is impossible to create a template of what being a woman is. Elaine Showalter, for example, also

considers that Patricia Meyer Spack’s concept of a ‘female imagination’ can confirm the belief in ‘a deep, basic and inevitable difference between male and female ways of perceiving the world’. Such ‘essentialist’ or ‘biologistic’ viewpoints imply that there is something both intrinsic in the experience of being female and common to all women (Eagleton 1996: 2).

However, many writers like Hölz and Meyer Spack, while they recognise the difference between biological sex and a cultural construct of gender, insist that qualities and attributes can be categorised as “female” or “male”. As Hölz realises, these constructs of gender are closely connected to a particular discourse. A fascinating example of this is the humanist cleric Francisco López de Gómara’s description of the men he observed in Mexico:

Hay muy pocos crespos ni bien barbados, porque se arrancan y untan los pelos para que no nazcan. [...] Píntanse mucho y feo en guerra y bailes. [...] Hácense grandes agujeros en las orejas y narices, y aun en la barbilla, en que ponen piedras, oro y huesos [...] Son mansos, lisonjeros y obedientes, especial con los señores y reyes (quoted in Hölz 1998:17).

In this quotation, the Spanish Gómara marvels at (or scorns?) the attributes which Mexican society strived towards as manly, but which European society regarded as feminine. This can be seen in the semiotics of Gómara’s final sentence. His value judgement is betrayed by his use of the word “manso” to describe them: a metaphor with the sememe, as Hölz translates it, “sanft” or “soft”, even “gentle”, but which uses the signifier for an animal that has been castrated. The men López de Gómara met were probably excellent examples of Mexican manhood, yet he describes them in terms of emasculation. In early modern times, the feminine was not regarded as a positive in itself, but as a negative: in short, the feminine was what the masculine was not. As the masculine was the ideal, the feminine was considered a poor second.

While the essential attributes of being “feminine” or “masculine” (regardless of biological sex) have changed little, attitudes towards them have. Esquivel, for example, draws a distinction between the masculine and the feminine, but seems to prefer the latter. In her interview with Claudia Loewenstein, she relates the feminine to a world “of intimacy, of life, reproduction, and of the earth”, whereas she “would represent the masculine world as that outside of intimacy, life, and earth” (Esquivel 1994). In *Como agua para chocolate*, the characters which show “masculine” traits are generally the least admirable. In the *Four Archetypes*, Carl Jung defined the “ultimate feminine” in similar terms:

maternal solicitude and sympathy; the magic authority of the female; (...) any helpful instinct or impulse; (...) all that cherishes and sustains, that fosters growth and fertility (Jung 2001:15).

This study will draw on a differentiated view of gender. This is largely because this allows an exploration of the power struggles between characters which are “masculine” and “feminine”, regardless of their biological sex, and how food serves to underline them. It is also out of respect to Esquivel’s delineation between the “feminine” and the “masculine”.

If it is to be accepted that there is a difference between the masculine and the feminine, the manifestation of power between them can be explored. The German triumvirate (itself a word reflecting a male dominance of power, from the Latin *tri*, three, and *vir*, men) of *Kinder*, *Küche*, *Kirche* is an idiom signifying the woman’s subjugation – to producing and caring for her children, to cooking and cleaning, and to the laws of the patriarchal church. Of course, as Esquivel suggests, aspects of this can be interpreted positively. Reproduction can be seen as fertility, particularly as a symbol of nature’s generosity; caring, cooking and even cleaning as nurture, which in turn can be interpreted as empowerment of another; and even the church can be regarded as a symbol of community, although the example of *Chocolat* suggests that it is a repressive rather than empowering one. In contrast, the masculine is a symbol for the aggressor and repressor and all that is not natural in both the positive and the negative sense: being rational, conforming to society’s rules and the primacy of culture over nature, but also a lack of intimacy and an inclination to go against whatever might promote life in its fullest sense. The creation of food is therefore the domain of the feminine, while the distribution and consumption of it, in accordance with the rules agreed by a particular community, is the domain of the masculine. Furthermore, the kitchen is an enclosed space in which the feminine can or must create, whereas the masculine operates in the open. These “gender rules” are often seen in film, particularly when there is an ethnic element and traditional societies are enforced. Women appear inside the home, while men are portrayed outside, in the street or in other mini-societies outside the home such as social clubs or bars.

The ethnic aspect can also be involved in a gendered reading of power. In spite of often having a very strong warrior culture, indigenous peoples are frequently perceived as “feminine”, or, in Esquivel’s words, “close to the earth”, while the incoming colonialists are identified as “masculine”, trying to impose culture on nature. This perception is, of course, itself culture-bound as what seems feminine to the Spanish Gómara would have been regarded as masculine from an indigenous Mexican perspective. Nevertheless, working with the Western perception of “feminine” and “masculine”, it can be seen that an aggressive “masculine” culture or power often invades or consumes the passive “feminine” one.

4.4. Bakhtin and Carnival – a socio-psychological perspective

In the last chapter, the perception of a social hierarchy based on gender was seen, with the masculine dominating the feminine. Typically hierarchical structures are often also typically dominated by men, as can be seen in the example of the Catholic Church. This chapter will consider the inversion of these hierarchies which takes place during the period of Carnival and the theories Mikhail Bakhtin developed from it.

Bakhtin argues – rightly – that to explore Carnival in detail would be a mammoth task, and offers instead his theories on the carnivalisation of literature, with a particular focus on Rabelais and Dostoyevsky. In these essays, he argues that the influence of Carnival on literature can sometimes be very clearly seen. He defines the characteristics of Carnival as it being a period when the rigid hierarchies of the rest of the year are upturned and reversed. These hierarchies may be social or physical: masters and servants exchange roles, the superior faculty of reason gives way to the base faculties of eating, drinking, excreting and fornicating, and careful moderation is superseded by excess. Strictly hierarchically-defined qualities such as shame, piety and etiquette are abandoned. They are superseded by a free, intimate and familiar form of contact and the dominance of the marginalised. As a result, the main arena of Carnival is not the usual habitat of the marginalised (the geographic edges of society or the private sphere), but in and around the main square, which is often dominated by public offices, the strongest symbol of the social hierarchy. Carnival unites and blends polar opposites or “mesalliances” such as the sacred and the profane, the wise and the foolish (the merging of Barthes’ “oppositions”). Profanation is taken further by playing with the symbols of the highest power, and by giving priority to worldly and bodily desires (Bakhtin 1996:48-9,52).

It is not, however, an absolute rejection of hierarchies and their values, but rather the end of a cycle which allows for the regeneration of the society. Carnival celebrates change and the development of an ongoing process (Bakhtin 1998:51). This means that just as the lowest is

elevated and the highest belittled to the extreme, the “pathos” of Carnival forces the reversal of these positions and the hierarchies can re-establish themselves (ibid.).

In the Middle Ages and the Early Modern period which Bakhtin is writing about, the reassertion of the normal power hierarchies and the punishment of those who transgressed them was made very visible with spectacles such as the auto-da-fés mentioned in Chapter 3.4. In modern times, by contrast, the exercising of power is much less visible and it does not work when enforced with solely physical punishment. It is far more effective, argues Foucault, to allow power to work “at the level of the conscience: ‘the soul’” (Coveney 2006:7). If people believe they are being watched, they will begin to assume responsibility for power over themselves as well and discipline themselves accordingly, at least to an extent. The differences in these methods of control can be seen in the two texts. *Chocolat*, for all that it is more modern in setting and in production, draws on a very old structure of power reaching back to Bakhtin’s Middle Ages when a strong external Church hierarchy ruled to all extents and purposes. This can be seen in the character of Reynaud and those who come to the confessional, expecting him to castigate them when they break their fast. “I am deliberately brutal. It is what she wants” (Harris 1999:34). In contrast, Tita’s conscience takes the form of Mamá Elena’s ghost until she is able to assert her own autonomy and banish Elena’s “soul” from her mind.

4.5. Food as a sign of power in *Como agua para chocolate*

Throughout the play of power in the two texts, food plays a hugely important supporting, if not primary role. Meals highlight the disintegration or consolidation of a group and underline who has the power at any given moment. Food is alternately withdrawn, refused, and seized to shift power from one person to another. The kitchen, typically and traditionally the “woman’s domain”, is used to diminish characters by relegating them to it, but also forms a haven where certain female characters are safe and can even grow and assert their own autonomy.

In *Como agua para chocolate*, mealtimes become the site of a power struggle between Rosaura and Tita. While Tita tries in vain to concoct ever more delicious foods to provoke the acknowledgement she desperately desires from Pedro, Mamá Elena has “«pedido» a Pedro que se abstuviera de elogiar la comida” (Esquivel 1989:64) on Rosaura’s behalf. Every now and then, Rosaura makes an attempt to wrest her family back from Tita by assuming control of their food: “quién sabe si por querer impresionar a Pedro, su esposo, o por querer establecer una competencia con Tita en sus terrenos, en una ocasión [Rosaura] intentó cocinar” (Esquivel 1989:48). “Voy a darle de comer a mi hija. De hoy en adelante no quiero

que tú lo vuelvas a hacer” (Esquivel 1989:184). Conversely, when Rosaura realises that she is losing (control of) Pedro, she puts herself on a stringent diet, hoping to make herself attractive to him again and thus draw him back.

Seeing Tita’s close bond with her nephew, the increasing closeness to Pedro it brings and Tita’s resulting contentment, Mamá Elena exerts her power by putting distance between them. She sends Rosaura and her family to a cousin living in Texas. Here, ethnicity is neutral in terms of power, but there is no doubt that the mental distance imposed by Mamá Elena is reinforced by the physical border. When Tita receives news of the baby’s death, the blame she lays at Mamá Elena’s door inspires the beginnings of rebellion, while Elena must resort to physical violence to maintain a semblance of power.

- ¡Ya me cansé! ¡Ya me cansé de obedecerla!

Mamá Elena se acercó, tomó una cuchara de madera y le cruzó la cara con ella.

- ¡Usted es la culpable de la muerte de Roberto! (Esquivel 1989:90)

It could be argued that this scene shows negative proof of Bakhtin’s theories of Carnival. Since there is no period of licence in the De la Garza household, the rigid hierarchy is impossible to maintain. Without the inversion of the hierarchies and the elevation of its lowest members, the carnival cycle cannot take place. The chorizos that are being made in this scene can be regarded as a sign of the De la Garza hierarchy. As shown in Chapter 3.6 of this study, all the female members of the household take part in making them, with Mamá Elena clearly the head of the family, as she dictates when they can stop. When Rosaura, Pedro and Roberto are sent away to Texas and Tita loses all interest in what goes on around her, Chenchá “no quería imaginar lo que pasaría si Mamá Elena se enteraba que Tita no quería participar en la elaboración del chorizo” (Esquivel 1989:79). As it represents a family ritual and reinforces the family hierarchy, Tita must be present to play her part in both. However, the news of Roberto’s death prompts the breakdown of Tita’s respect for the hierarchy, and she runs out, leaving Elena and Chenchá to finish the chorizo in silence. Like the De la Garza hierarchy, the chorizos rot and must be abandoned.

Despite her rebellion, Tita is left feeling utterly powerless and alone. This is reflected in the foetal position John finds her in when Elena orders him to take Tita to the lunatic asylum. Once ‘safe’ in John’s house and away from her mother, Tita gradually asserts her autonomy by refusing to eat or to speak “«Porque no quiero»” (Esquivel 1989:104).

Mamá Elena represents a classic authority figure in *Como agua para chocolate*. In her interview with Claudia Loewenstein, she states:

ESQUIVEL: [...] I see the mother as being equal to the masculine world and masculine repression, not feminine. Mama Elena is the one who wants to impose norms and a certain social organization, and I see her as the rational part of things.

LOEWENSTEIN: Is that why it's such a hyper-masculine role?

ESQUIVEL: I do not represent the mother as a feminine figure, and I don't see her as a castrator--I mean she is not one woman castrating another woman. Rather, I see her as the norm or the world of the masculine [...] Mama Elena is a castrating woman because she is a product of a castrating society. She is also a victim of repression but with all her strength she was unable to rebel against tradition. Tita, of course, did (Loewenstein 1994).

It seems here that Esquivel is trying to argue that Elena is repressive and a castrator, but that these characteristics are not feminine. Thus they cannot be innate in Elena but rather a consequence of her experiences in society which she then perpetrates. It is certainly a rather mixed metaphor to say that a woman can castrate another woman, though it is difficult to find an appropriate expression with a female focus. She is therefore both a victim of the power of the masculine social order and equal to it.

The fact that Elena sees herself as equal to any man is shown very clearly at Roberto's christening. Tita is happy for the first time in her life, as she is able to fulfil her maternal needs by being surrogate mother to Roberto and thereby also surrogate wife to Pedro. Tita's happiness is mirrored in the guests when they eat the *mole*, and her blossoming relationship with Roberto and Pedro grows in the relative shelter of the kitchen. Suspicious of Tita and Pedro's happiness, Elena announces that Rosaura and her family (i.e. Pedro and Roberto) will leave the homestead to live in San Antonio, Texas. In doing this, she essentially castrates Tita by removing the sources of both her new-found sexuality and her maternal femininity. Elena also declares herself equal to any man explicitly, denying that she needs a man around to defend the homestead:

- Nunca lo he necesitado para nada, sola he podido con el rancho y con mis hijas. Los hombres no son tan importantes para vivir [...] Ni la revolución es tan peligrosa como la pintan, ¡peor es el chile y el agua lejos! (Esquivel 1989:75)

Incidentally, it is curious that she uses another Mexican idiom involving food to deride the danger of the revolution, saying it would be worse to suffer eating a hot chilli without any water to quell the burning taste. Though this is all Elena means, the metaphor comes with other semiotic baggage as well. The chilli's burning taste can function as a sememe of the typical fire imagery used to signify sexual arousal, and the lack of water to quench the fire the impossibility of satisfying this lust. By using this idiom and declaring that it is worse to be on fire and not be able to put it out, Mamá Elena in effect acknowledges her own violence in separating Tita from Pedro.

It is true that she does successfully defend the homestead and its female members when the revolutionaries come requisitioning supplies (Esquivel 1989:81). In this scene, food again lies at the heart of the play of power between Elena and the revolutionary general. Not only do the provisions they are wrangling over mean hunger or survival for the two parties involved. It is also an important tactical play of power, as the general knows she is hiding vital supplies and Elena is well aware that he can kill her to get them. It is curious, however, that Esquivel writes that it is Elena's "autoridad materna" (Esquivel 1989:82) which stops him, rather than her masculine show of power as she wields her rifle – a classic phallic symbol. It could therefore be argued that Esquivel's assertion that Elena is equal to the masculine world rather than a part of it is valid.

It could also be argued that Elena herself was similarly castrated by the repressive social order which forbade her love for the mulatto Treviño. Again, "castration" is perhaps not the most appropriate term, as she continued to have sexual relations with him and even produced a child by him (Gertrudis). Then again, Tita's castration is also only temporary. Of course, the other side of the argument is that Elena's affair with Treviño in fact effectively castrated her husband. Interestingly, this comes across much more strongly in Arau's film, where the heart attack that kills him is a direct consequence of learning that Gertrudis is not his daughter. While Elena may be in part the victim of a repressive, 'male' society, she herself wields a considerable, repressive, 'male' power which effectively castrates – however temporarily – her daughter (and even her husband). The impulse to use this power derives largely from situations in which food and feeding play a central role.

Gertrudis, in contrast, takes on the positive aspects of masculinity and wields a power that is very much felt in the outside world. Esquivel stated:

Gertrudis represents the first stage of feminism, breaking away, total sexual liberation, in fact a masculinization. She goes out and becomes a part of the revolution. She becomes a general, she participates in the public phase of the revolution, she kills people (Loewenstein 1994).

As well as her movement from inside the home and the domestic sphere to a life outside in the public space, her "masculinisation" also manifests itself in her nearly insatiable libido:

Me dejó [el revolucionario que la cogió del campo] porque sus fuerzas se estaban agotando a mi lado, sin haber logrado aplacar mi fuego interior. Por fin ahora, después de que infinidad de hombres han pasado por mí, siento un gran alivio (Esquivel 1989:111).

Far from being a victim of masculine abuse and bought as an object, as is a common perception of prostitutes, Gertrudis is attributed with the needy sexual drive that is one of the most popular myths about the nature of the male. From masculinisation in the sexual sphere

Gertrudis develops a masculinisation in the social sphere and becomes a general in the revolutionary army: a position of abstract authority and practical power. The clearest sign of her power is the brief incident already mentioned in Chapter 3.6 – the delegation of making the *torrejas de nata* to her sergeant. As well as showing that she is in a position of superiority, the inversion of the usual gender roles is surprising, amusing, and subversive. While Gertrudis lives a life on horseback and in the open, her sergeant is relegated to the kitchen – the woman’s sphere. His difficulty reading and lack of familiarity with the ingredients show that he is not “at home”, but the success of the *torrejas* suggests that this role-reversal and the inversion of power it portrays are absolutely viable.

4.6. Food as a sign of power in *Chocolat*

In *Chocolat*, the struggle for power between the two communities representing very different attitudes to food lies at the heart of the whole novel. Where the battle for authority is fought on an individual level in *Como agua para chocolate*, it is on a much more identifiably collective level in *Chocolat*. The debate that rages throughout the story of *Chocolat* is an age-old one. The battle between Lent and Carnality was famously recorded by a Spaniard, Juan Ruiz, the Arcipreste de Hita, in the *Libro de Buen Amor*. In *Chocolat*, the representation of this battle is largely portrayed along gender lines. Reynaud represents the “masculine”, extremely rigid system of norms dictated by the Church. His protégé Paul Muscat is vicious and violent, both sexually and otherwise. In contrast, Vianne promotes an attitude to food and, by extension, to life which is much more nurturing, intimate and life-affirming. The introduction of the mysterious, indigenous “Wanderer” woman whom Vianne’s father marries on his journey to South America to discover new medicines in Hallström’s film strengthens the parallel between the feminine, living beyond the norms of society, and the indigenous, healing woman.

Though we have already seen Harris’ claim that Reynaud uses the Church as an instrument to wield his own power, by having him as the Church’s representative and pitting it against Vianne’s clearly non-/pre-Christian practices, Harris does invite the appearance of a battle for power between believers and non-believers. On the one hand, Reynaud and his “interpretation of Catholicism” form a strict, “masculine” social order which is essentially ascetic and punishing, a patriarchal, rational culture over nature. This can be seen in his condemnation of the villagers’ greed and their lack of self-discipline, giddily admitted in the confessional, and his own ever-increasing abstinence (“I eat a single meal a day, and then only the plainest and most flavourless of foods”, Harris 1999:235). His attempts to reinforce

the social order drive him to greater and greater extremes. In the end, however, his frenzied efforts to regain control over his wayward flock fail and he is left a victim of his own greed.

On the other hand, Vianne offers a more nurturing, creative, “feminine” approach that ignores the social order and encourages intimacy. The goddess she honours, Eostre, is the old Teutonic goddess of the dawn and linked to the Babylonian goddess of fertility, Ishtar. Ishtar, in turn, is the “morning manifestation of the star Venus”, the Roman goddess of sexuality (Sykes 1995:96-7). Venus and Ceres, with whom Pedro compares Tita, are two sides of the same coin: sexuality and its consequence of motherhood. The fact that Anouk’s imaginary friend, Pantoufle, is a rabbit is a further sign of the fertility that is associated with Eostre. Thus Vianne is not only distanced from the Christian religion that shapes Lansquenet, but is directly linked to fertility and sexuality. Her chocolates unlock hidden passions, many of which are not socially acceptable. Even the names of her pralines are tempting:

The names are entrancing. [...] *Nipples of Venus*. I feel myself blushing beneath the mask. How could anyone order something with a name like that? (Harris 1999:311).

The “Nipples of Venus” are named for their shape, “plumply white in the light of my torch, tipped with darker chocolate” (ibid.) – an iconic signifier. Beyond the iconic element, however, they are also loaded with suggestive symbolism. Venus is the goddess of sexuality, her breasts classic erotic imagery. Chocolate nipples which can be taken into the mouth and eaten – Freud would have had a field day. As well as a purely sexual object, however, the breast is the most obvious sign of fertility and nurturing – not merely iconic but indexical, as it is from the nipple that the mother’s milk comes. As can be seen in the scene where Pedro catches a glimpse of Tita’s breast as she feeds Roberto, breasts can be both erotically sexual and deeply maternal. It is significant that Reynaud succumbs to these first as they are a sign of precisely that which he rejects in Vianne – both her sensuality and her caring nurturing. Thus eating the Venus’ nipple is not just a sign that Reynaud is giving into temptation generally but also a sign of his capitulation to a gentler, “feminine” order. It is arguable that as a celibate priest in the novel and even as a man abandoned by his wife in the film Reynaud is, to an extent, also a figure who has been castrated by his own enforcement of the repressive social order. His rebirth as a humbler, more “feminine” character with the paradoxical potential for sexuality can be seen very clearly in the film, as it is promised that he does finally manage to ask Caroline Clairmont, called Carolina in the film, to dinner (1:48:52-4).

Though the novel opens with Shrove Tuesday and a modest Carnival, Reynaud’s hubris is in fact a better starting-point for an examination of Bakhtin’s theories in *Chocolat*. Like Mamá Elena, the more he tries to tighten his grasp, the more they slip through his fingers. The Lansquenet Carnival is a sober affair, with children dressed up as fairytale characters and a small procession, not the long period of licentiousness and the inversion of psychological and

physical hierarchies that Bakhtin describes. As if to emphasise this, Reynaud follows the procession in “the old-fashioned soutane of the country priest” (Harris 1999:14), ordering the children to tidy up as they move along. Lansquenet therefore lacks a period in which freedom is permitted to balance and thereby reinforce the rigid hierarchy the rest of the year. In consequence, it only takes the arrival of Vianne and her lavish chocolates to break down the hierarchy so ardently maintained by Reynaud. The location of her shop is not only significant because it is in geographical opposition to the church, but also because it opens onto the main square, the traditional Carnival playground.

With Vianne’s chocolaterie pitted against Reynaud and the abstinence promoted by the Church, food lies at the heart of this power struggle. It is the focus of the struggle, but it also signifies a way of life and a way of thinking that is greater than indulgence or abstinence alone. Joséphine Muscat describes it very succinctly:

‘There’s a line across Lansquenet [...] and if you cross it, if you don’t go to confession, if you don’t respect your husband, if you don’t cook three meals a day [...] Then you’re crazy!’ she spat. ‘You’re crazy, you’re abnormal’ (Harris 1999:72; Hallström 0:34:52-0:35:13).

The character of Joséphine will be explored in greater detail in the next section. This quotation, however, illustrates clearly the *langue*, in Saussurean terms, of Lansquenet: the social order to which everyone in the community is expected to adhere. Perhaps surprisingly, though cooking and the mini-ritual of three meals a day is often thought of as an archetypically feminine activity, Joséphine defines them as part of and even a contributing factor towards the masculine, rigid social culture. However, it is clear that not everybody speaks the *langue* they are supposed to but have a distinct *parole* of their own. The articulation of this idiolect and the translation of the marginalised to the centre can be seen in the renewed social order at the end of the texts, where the novel renames Muscat’s café as *Café des Marauds*, while Hallström calls it *Café Armande*.

With Vianne and Joséphine, Armande is another strong female character who uses food to underline her power struggles with her daughter, Reynaud’s most faithful disciple, Caroline Clairmont. Forbidden foods and how they are used as a sign to build and reinforce religious communities was explored in Chapter 3.4. In addition to the religious mandate against sweet things during Lent, however, Armande is diabetic and should not eat any sugar. Harris’ Armande revels in her rebellious consumption of Vianne’s chocolates as she enjoys ruffling Reynaud’s feathers by refusing to go to church and by aiding and abetting the travellers. She refuses to go to the nursing home where both her food and her life will be “pap” (Harris 1999:241). Rather than relinquishing power over her own life, Armande, like Tita and sufferers of anorexia, rejects the “wholesome” and health-giving foods (including insulin

injections) which would ensure her longevity. Instead, she deliberately chooses to overdose by having Vianne organise an enormous and lavish dinner on Good Friday, resulting in her death – but on her terms. Armande’s rejection of the insulin and the sugar-free drinks she is told to take is faintly reminiscent of the politics of nutrition debate: who should decide what is good for another person? Even if, objectively speaking, these supplements will extend her life, are they truly beneficial for her? Is it really Reynaud’s place to tell her what is right, or not right, to eat? The study does not claim to have a final answer to these questions, but simply hopes to highlight some of the dilemmas that they pose and show that food is used both to ask and – to an extent – answer them.

4.7. Summary

At the beginning of this section, real-life situations such as the Nestlé baby milk scandal were examined to illustrate the politics of nutrition and how certain communities use nutrition to wield power over other communities. Following this, the German idiom “Kinder, Küche, Kirche” was used as a starting-point to define gender before exploring the gendered perceptions of the concepts of the “masculine” and the “feminine”, and how food relates to these. The kitchen and the woman’s role in making and preparing food was of particular interest, as was the man’s role in reinforcing the social norms surrounding food as a means of reinforcing the community. Finally, Bakhtin’s theories of Carnival were introduced. As certain foods – and even more particularly, the quantity and quality of the food consumed – are central to the various aspects of Carnival, these can be regarded as a means of further reinforcing a society with a rigid hierarchy. The consequences of not allowing a period of licentiousness and the regenerative cycle of Carnival, resulting in the breakdown of this rigid society, were of even greater importance to the texts.

In the close analysis of the texts, it was seen that both texts use food as a focus for as well as a symbol within power struggles. In *Como agua para chocolate*, the power struggles are on an individual basis between Mamá Elena and her daughters, particularly Tita. The vast majority take place at mealtimes. As a “masculine” figure, Mamá Elena’s authority is constantly underlined by her orders for her daughters to cook or prepare something, while Tita uses food to undermine her mother’s authority. Like many sufferers of anorexia, she even at one point rejects food in an attempt to establish her control over herself in a world in which she feels utterly powerless. In contrast to Tita and Elena, Gertrudis becomes a “masculinised” figure with considerable power under her in the form of her revolutionaries, but in a positive way compared to Mamá Elena’s bitterness. Many of the characteristics she displays are “masculine” and are underlined by her distance from the archetypal female chores. Rather

than cooking, she is killing; instead of being portrayed in the kitchen, she is outside, on a horse, dancing. There is even a certain amount of role-reversal as she pushes her male underlings into the kitchen.

In *Chocolat*, the battle for power is led by individuals, but it takes place at a collective level. Vianne and the “feminine”, nurturing, world of plenty stand on one side, while Reynaud’s “masculine” world with its repressive social order and diktat of abstinence for forty days forms the other. Although the novel opens with Lansquenet’s modest Carnival, Bakhtin’s theories are embodied in the whole story, where the lack of a real counterpoint to Reynaud’s culture of repression results in the breakdown of the rigid society and hierarchy he desperately tries to maintain. Food underlines these struggles as Vianne’s bountiful indulgence is shown in her invitations to taste the delicious pralines with their decadent names and in her open generosity to the travellers Reynaud despises. Reynaud’s abstinence and his attempts to control what the members of his parish are eating reflect his lack of emotional generosity and his need to control his parishioners’ general behaviour.

As Reynaud tries harder and harder to control his parishioners, they slip further and further out of his grasp and closer and closer to Vianne. Rather than assuming them under her control, however, she empowers them, giving them the confidence to take care of themselves. Food and each side’s attitude to food are the focus of this conflict, but also operate as a sign for their attitude towards life. Even the rejection of food can be used as a means of asserting authority over oneself and one’s life, as can be seen in the case of Armande.

Power is central to almost any relationship. Since these texts are built around communities, as was seen in Section 3, power and authority play a vital role in the development of each story. After approaching food’s role in the manifestation and representation of power from three very different perspectives, the texts were analysed to find specific instances as well as overall themes where food played a crucial role as a sign of power.

5. The semiotics of food in the construction of identity

5.1. Introduction

Having considered the manifestation of power between both groups and individuals in the last section, this section aims to show how food is used as a sign in the process of the empowerment of a single individual and the construction of their identity. As the person becomes free of another’s authority, they must build their own identity. Since discovering one’s own sexuality is a large part of discovering an independent identity, particularly in

adolescence, the study will introduce the concept of identity and then briefly explore the connections between food and sexuality. A further stage of identity-building is finding a voice and being able to express one's own opinions and feelings – and to have these heard. The theoretical part of this study will therefore end with this before moving into the analysis of the two texts.

5.2. The concept of identity

In their analysis of *Discourse and Identity*, Bertha Benwell and Elizabeth Stokoe quote Taylor, saying that “the concept of ‘identity’ [...] was unthinkable before the sixteenth century”, while “today, it is a heavily theorised, academic concept that is a paradigmatic product of its historical conditions, formulated and reformulated in strategic ways by the period or movement under which it arises and the preoccupations of its theorists” (Benwell/Stokoe 2006:17). From the internal “*project of the self*” of the early philosophers and psychologists, recent identity studies treat identity as “fluid, fragmentary, contingent and, crucially, *constituted in discourse*” (ibid., original italics).

Taylor claims that the notion of identity grew out of the humanist perspective of the Renaissance which greatly influenced Enlightenment thinkers such as Descartes and Locke. Though their work was very different, both philosophers promoted a principle of “reflexivity”, i.e. a rational, reflexive capacity of the mind, which “centrally underpins the project of the self” (Benwell/Stokoe 2006:19). With the Romantics, this developed from a concept based on cognition to one based on sensibility, feeling and the expression thereof (ibid.). The next – perhaps greatest – influence on the concept of the self came with Freud and the advent of psychoanalysis at the beginning of the twentieth century. As a medical discipline, this introduced a social element into the concept of identity, firstly by establishing norms of social behaviour against which an individual could be compared, and secondly by examining the individual and his/her psyche in terms of socialisation processes within their community (i.e. the family). Lacan's development of these processes, in which individuals “come to recognise or identify themselves and integrate into social life” (Benwell/Stokoe 2006:20), placed them “in the discursive realm” (ibid.). Although agency can help an individual to reflect upon his/herself by providing an external, objective perspective, it can also influence the construction of the self according to social norms (Benwell/Stokoe 2006:21).

The second half of the twentieth century also saw the introduction of identity as a collective concept: not only awareness of oneself against others, but as part of a group entity including others who shared particular values or qualities. These collective identities may “intersect” with each other, and an individual may identify him/herself as having several different

collective identities (Benwell/Stokoe 2006:24-5). Whereas previously these were largely based on, for example, location or population, newer theories, such as Lave and Wenger's theory of "Communities of Practice", are based around "'an actor articulating a range of forms of participation in multiple communities of practice' [...]. Examples of such communities might include work colleagues, a class at school" (Benwell/Stokoe 2006:27, quoting Lave and Wenger).

In contrast to concepts of collective identity, postmodern theories of identity "emphasise concepts such as 'fluidity', 'migration', 'diaspora', 'crossing' and 'decentring'" (Benwell/Stokoe 2006:22), i.e. concepts of movement, change, and fragmentation. Thus the 'easy' labels of ethnicity and nationality, and even gender or sex, become diffuse and complex. In spite of, or perhaps because of this, there are ever-increasing aids to constructing an identity, and the border between the subjective and the objective are increasingly blurred (e.g. in reality TV or virtual space).

Collective identities also offer a certain "subjective security"; for example, "the membership of a specific, named collectivity may be a *marked* and politically motivated strategy to make oneself and one's interests 'visible' and 'included'" (Benwell/Stokoe 2006:28, original punctuation, quoting Spivak). Though it is argued that "collective self-identifications simply legitimise the conditions of inequality that give rise to them in the first place" (ibid, paraphrasing Wilmsen and McAllister), their "marked and 'othered' status led to a concept of historical group subjectivity and is thus central to gay and civil rights movements" (ibid.). Feminist movements are also included. While these groups do not play a particular role in *Como agua para chocolate* or *Chocolat*, it will be seen that by assuming a "marked and 'othered' status" certain characters find a voice and an empowered position in the community similar to the successful (if still incomplete) results of the gay and civil rights movements.

A particularly strong voice in feminist, queer, and gender studies, Judith Butler emphasises the importance of performativity in the construction of identity. This implies "non-essentialism, transience, versatility and masquerade"; "subjects may enjoy performative agency through the repetitive 'iteration' of signs or acts: stylised, conventionalised gender performances which are informed by the authority of historical, anterior voices" (Benwell/Stokoe 2006:33). Identity can change and different identities may be assumed or created for different situations. Historical precedents shape a gender identity by assigning signs or acts to a particular gender. By using these signs or carrying out these acts, the subject attaches him/herself to that gender.

Identity is a concept which itself is determined differently according to the context in which it is being examined. Identities can be at an individual or a collective level. Older theories

believe that identity is intrinsic, while more recent theories argue that identity is a fluid, in part fragmentary concept. It can change and it can be shaped – whether consciously or unconsciously, identity can be chosen. What identity the characters in *Como agua para chocolate* and *Chocolat* are born with, choose, or have thrust upon them will be explored in the following chapters. Moreover, these chapters will also analyse how food is used as a sign of a particular identity or as a sign chosen or “iterated” to shape a particular identity.

5.3. Food and sexuality

An active awareness of one’s identity tends to come with adolescence and growing autonomy from the adult figures in their life. In her discussion of the causes of anorexia nervosa, Videck writes that “two essential tasks of adolescence are the struggle to develop autonomy and the establishment of a unique identity” (Videck 2006:408). Though writing from a very different perspective from the academics arguing over what constitutes this identity, it is undeniable that with autonomy comes a strongly-defined sense of identity, whether it is innate and “discovered” or a construct within an external framework.

Part of establishing an adult identity is of course also coming to terms with one’s own sexuality. In Chapter 2.4, parallels were drawn between boiling oil cooking batter for *buñuelos*, which changes its basic nature from raw to cooked; the Fall in Christian theology, where eating the fruit from the Tree of Knowledge changed Adam and Eve, awaking their sexual awareness and their sin; and the first knowledge of sexual arousal, which changes the child to an adult. The analysis of the texts will show that this does not always have to happen when the characters are chronologically still adolescents. Instead, this change and the resulting awareness of both their sexuality and their own, valid identity can also happen when the characters are chronologically adults, representing the leap from being emotionally or psychologically still a child to being a fully-developed adult in every sense.

Food, perhaps unsurprisingly, as in the Genesis story, may be the catalyst for this change. Its oral nature connects it not only with talking but also with sexuality. Many foods are considered aphrodisiacs and thought to heighten sexual pleasure or desire, as can be seen in Isabel Allende’s extensive list of supposedly stimulating foods *Afrodita: Cuentos, recetas y otros afrodisíacos* (2003). Though not a particularly academic work, *Afrodita* certainly highlights the (Barthesian) myths surrounding the indexical connection between food and sex. Lévi-Strauss draws parallels between a voracious alimentary appetite and a similarly voracious sexual one, even when the latter is denied publicly (Lévi-Strauss 1973:510). As was seen in Chapter 3.4, much of the motivation for fasting lies in the denunciation of sin, represented at least in part by sexuality. Both the excessive consumption of food, seen as a

lack of control over the body not unlike the situation in Bakhtin's Carnival, and the consumption of certain foods deemed to increase sexual desire such as red meat, are thus rejected in the Lenten fast.

While many foods are thought to increase or promote sexuality, others can be seen as symbols of the change from child to adult. They are therefore both restricted and revered. Nevertheless, whatever their ultimate purpose, they are all signs which are very clear, and often strongly conventionalised.

5.4. Finding a voice

In constructing an identity, it is crucial to also find or construct a voice, and still more important to let that voice be heard. In both *Como agua para chocolate* and *Chocolat*, the characters that will be examined are all adults as they construct their separate identities. Because of this, it can be argued that their identity and their voice develop simultaneously. The emergence of this development is constantly underlined by food.

One of the primary ways in which food acts as a sign of this development is as the cornerstone of the construction of identity. A single event, such as a meal, triggers or completes a process which allows an individual to free him/herself from the shackles of another's power, develop their own autonomy and construct their own unique identity. A more interesting way, however, is one which returns to discourse, albeit of a non-verbal nature. In both *Como agua para chocolate* and *Chocolat*, food is used as a means of expression and as a sign to communicate emotions which otherwise cannot – or may not – be articulated. Barthes was quoted in Chapter 3.2, describing food's "old alchemical heredity, its philosophical power to transmute" (Barthes 2009:65). In the *Mythologies*, he described food as totemic and able to transform a collection of diverse individuals into a single, wine-worshipping French nation. In the subsequent chapter, it was shown how food is transformed into a sign vehicle, invested with the power to designate someone a leader, a guest, or a member of a particular community such as a family. This chapter will show how food becomes a sign vehicle imbued with emotions which themselves have a transformative power over those who eat this food. In this way, a character who has not yet realised his/her potential as an autonomous individual with a unique identity is able to make his/her voice heard, albeit usually unconsciously. It therefore also seems reasonable to follow newer theories, including Butler's, that discourse construes identity and not vice versa. In the texts, the creation or use of a non-verbal discourse almost always precedes the character's realisation that he/she can be an autonomous individual.

The common belief, mentioned already in chapter 3.6, that certain qualities such as courage or strength can be gained by eating something which is known for these qualities, is in fact also an example of a non-verbal discourse being used to construct or develop an identity. Frazer gives several examples of early and primitive peoples' beliefs in the medial quality of certain foods (particularly of animals killed in the hunt):

Thus, for example, the Creeks, Cherokee, and kindred tribes of North American Indians "believe that nature is possest of such a property as to transfuse into men and animals the qualities, either of the food they use, or of those objects that are presented to their senses; he who feeds on venison is, according to their physical system, swifter and more sagacious than the man who lives on the flesh of the clumsy bear, or helpless dunhill fowls, the slow-footed tame cattle, or the heavy wallowing swine [...]"

The Namaquas abstain from eating the flesh of hares, because they think it would make them faint-hearted as a hare. But they eat the flesh of the lion, or drink the blood of the leopard or lion, to get the courage and strength of these beasts. The Bushmen will not give their children a jackal's heart to eat, lest it should make them timid like the jackal; but they give them a leopard's heart to eat to make them brave like the leopard. When a Wagogo man of East Africa kills a lion, he eats the heart in order to become brave like a lion; but he thinks that to eat the heart of a hen would make him timid. (Frazer 1922:LI,pars.2,4)

He also quotes a "North American Indian who thought that brandy must be a decoction of hearts and tongues, 'because,' said he, 'after drinking it I fear nothing, and I talk wonderfully'" (Frazer 1922:LI,par.7). The metonymy of magic as described by Marcel Mauss (Mauss 1999:98) combined with a belief in the powers of transference make this a potent and widespread practice. These foods are thus considered indexical signs of bravery, since there is a direct connection of cause and effect and are eaten in a conscious effort to strengthen an identity as a courageous fighter.

5.5. The Mexican Revolution as an example of identity-building

Just as an individual struggles "to develop autonomy and the establishment of a unique identity" (Videck 2006:408), a nation can do so as well. The next chapter will show how Gertrudis does this by becoming a general with the revolutionaries, and how food is used as a sign in this process of emancipation and the construction of her new identity. In order to gain an insight into how an identity can be constructed at the nation-state level as well as to illustrate in greater detail the backdrop against which *Como agua para chocolate* plays out, this chapter will sketch some of the key events and constituents of the Mexican Revolution which resulted in a new constitutional identity that still forms the basis of government in Mexico today.

A hundred years after Michael Hidalgo's call for Mexican independence in 1810 and 89 years after the *Tratados de Córdoba* and the subsequent *Acta de Independencia del Imperio Mexicano* were signed in 1821, the events surrounding the election of 1910 plunged the country into revolution. The stability that existed under the Porfiriato (named after Porfirio Díaz, president from 1876-1910) was seen as increasingly hypocritical; what was "ostensibly a liberal republic" had turned into a dictatorship "riddled with corruption and tyrannical use of power" (Mitchell 2007:3). When Díaz agreed to stand down and hold an election, then reversed his decision in 1910, a landowner named Francisco Madero issued a call to arms. Mitchell draws attention to the fact that Madero used "Díaz' own anti-reelection cry" (ibid.), thus using Díaz' discourse to legitimise his own activities. When Díaz was eventually overthrown in 1911, Madero was elected president. His own presidency was beset by attempted coups, and when the Victoriano Huerta, his most loyal general, revolted against him in 1913, Madero's term in office ended and he was assassinated. The "Constitutionalist" army led by Venustiano Carranza which rose up in opposition to Huerta gathered forces in the form of Pancho Villa's División del Norte, whom Gertrudis joins, Álvaro Obregón and Pablo González as well as fighting in coordination with Emiliano Zapata in the south. The intervention of the United States, supported only by Villa, deposed Huerta but also prompted a split among the Constitutionalists, with Villa and Zapata against Carranza and Obregón. In 1915, the Villistas suffered defeat in Celaya and eventually split away from Zapata as well. The following year saw the gradual spread of Constitutionalist control and a new government under Carranza which drew up a constitution in Querétaro, establishing the beginning of Mexico's legal identity as we know it today.

There has been a resurgence of interest in the role of women during the Mexican revolution recently (e.g. Linhard 2005, Olcott et al. (Eds.) 2006, Mitchell/Schell (Eds.) 2007, Smith 2009). It is curious that the signifier for the "myth" of the *soldadera*, the popular image of the woman accompanying the troops into battle, is misleading. They were usually not fighters, but the female relatives of fighters, with "the task of carrying the domestic realm, literally on their backs, to the battlefield" (Linhard 2005:34). They were also known as "Adelitas" after the popular song which described a woman named Adelita who followed a soldier's camp for love of the sergeant (Olcott 2006:6). Though Linhard argues that the nature of battle meant the delineation between follower and fighter was often blurred (Linhard 2005:34), Martha Eva Rocha states that the women officially recognised as veterans of the Revolution were "the teachers and professional women who acted as spies, publicists and couriers for various revolutionary factions" (Rocha 2007:15). Curiously, Linhard draws attention to the fact that very few women identified themselves as a *soldadera*, to the extent that in interviews with Pancho Villa's four widows, each "refers to herself as his real wife and considers the other women to be merely his soldaderas" (Linhard 2005:35). This is probably

because *soldaderas* were often regarded as “the ‘chief cause of vice, illness, crime and disorder’” (Linhard 2005:34, quoting Salas, *Soldaderas in the Mexican Military*, University of Texas Press, 1990). Thus by refusing to use a discourse in which being a *soldadera* had negative connotations, each of Villa’s widows constructs an identity for herself in contrast to the other widows as an upstanding, righteous and rightful wife.

This process of separating oneself from others through discourse can be clearly seen in signifiers for food. In Chapter 3.3.2 it was shown how different communities use different signifiers for the same signified, or the same signified to refer to different signifieds, e.g. the Spanish *té*, French *thé*, and English *tea* to refer to the hot drink made from the boiled leaves of *camellia sinensis*. Even in the English language alone, a person can attempt to construct a middle- or upper-class identity by using the word *tea* for a light, early-afternoon snack instead of the heavier supper they previously used it for when they considered themselves working-class.

In order to show their autonomy from their former colonisers and thus strengthen their own new identity, many freshly-independent nations adapt their discourse to include, or give increasing weight to, indigenous signifiers for many items. As was shown in Section 3, food is one of the parts of culture with which people identify most closely as well as being one which is often extremely varied across communities due to etic, economic and geographic factors. It is therefore also one of the most obvious in national or ethnic discourse. It is true that this process is more likely to have happened a hundred years earlier with the break from Spain rather than with the revolution forming the backdrop for *Como agua para chocolate*. Nevertheless, ethnic differences between Castilian Spanish and Mexican Spanish can be clearly seen in Esquivel’s novel. The novel uses *chabacano* rather than *albaricoque* for apricot, *guajolote* rather than *pavo* for turkey, and names several foods eaten by the native Mexicans that the rather stuffy, society-conscious Rosaura eschews: “jumiles, gusanos de maguey, acosiles, tepezcuintle, armadillo” (Esquivel 1989:31; see p.19 of this paper for a translation). Mintz suggests that it “seemed easier to change the political systems of [Russia and China] than it would have been to change their basic diets” (Mintz 2003:23); the example of the Mexican Revolution would confirm this. On the other hand, it could be argued that a “national” diet can provide an element of continuity and security for those caught up in political change. It is only important that it is embedded in a new discourse to legitimise it as part of the new order. It can therefore be argued that the establishing of a separate discourse and the construction of identity are two sides of the same coin, and each is active in the shaping of the other. It will also be seen that the development of a revolutionary Mexican identity is reflected in the discourse which itself shapes the development of identity among the characters in Esquivel’s novel.

5.6. Food and the construction of identity in *Como agua para chocolate*

As a story about three daughters, the construction of identity plays a central role in *Como agua para chocolate*. It could be argued that Rosaura never in fact achieves an autonomous identity. Esquivel writes that “the mother and Rosaura represent the same thing. Rosaura accepts society and doesn't want any changes in the traditions” (Loewenstein 1994). Gertrudis, like the anti-re-electionists in Mexico, breaks away violently from the old, repressive regime to pursue her autonomy and develop a new identity.

Gertrudis' emancipation begins with the *codornices en pétalos de rosas*.

Parecía que habían descubierto un código nuevo de comunicación en el que Tita era la emisora, Pedro el receptor y Gertrudis la afortunada en quien se sintetizaba esta singular relación sexual, a través de la comida (Esquivel 1989:50).

In this quotation, Esquivel herself describes the situation as a “new code of communication” although it is in fact possible to interpret it as a classic semiological, if non-verbal, sign with the food made by Tita being the signifier, her love for Pedro the signified, and Gertrudis, in Barthesian terms, being both the sign itself “synthesising” signifier and signified and providing the signifier for a new myth of (more or less literally) unbridled passion. By tearing off her clothes her body is liberated, igniting the wooden shower-hut with “el calor que despedía de su cuerpo” (Esquivel 1989:52). The myth of unbridled passion is reinforced by the fact that she is swept onto a charging horse and gallops away, copulating as they ride. The fact that it is a revolutionary who “saves” her (or “kidnaps” her, depending on the perspective) emphasises her break with the old order and the need to construct a new identity. The exaggerated symbolism of this scene and its humorous take on classic myths and archetypes highlight its importance both in the story and for Gertrudis' life as an independent person with her own unmistakeable identity. In the film, the dramatic soundtrack not unlike a spaghetti Western (0:31:50) underlines both the humour and the symbolism still further.

The *codornices en pétalos de rosas* also illustrate an important moment in Tita's development. Having experienced her moment of sexual awakening when she felt Pedro's gaze upon her and compared it to the *buñuelo* entering hot oil, she now has her first experience of sexual intercourse – even if it is not physical.

Tal parecía que en un extraño fenómeno de alquimia su ser se había disuelto en la salsa de rosas, en el cuerpo de las codornices, en el vino y en cada uno de los olores de la comida. De esta manera penetraba en el cuerpo de Pedro, voluptuosa, aromática, calurosa, completamente sensual (Esquivel 1989:50).

Here, again, is a reference to the alchemy described by Barthes discussed in detail in Chapter 3.2. The quail in rose petals becomes an indexical sign with a direct chain of cause and effect:

Pedro has given Tita the roses, she has made them into food, he eats the food, she enters his body. The mix of “feminine” and “masculine” imagery (as analysed in chapter 4.3.) in this scene is curious. On the one hand, the recipe is dictated magically to Tita by Nacha, an indigenous Mexican, a strong mother figure (Nacha took over feeding Tita when Elena’s milk dried out and taught her how to cook), and a spirit (she is dead at this point in the story). On the other, it is Tita who penetrates Pedro’s body in an inversion of the usual gender roles in sex. In assuming the male role of penetration, Tita foreshadows Gertrudis’ role as an army general, a “typically” aggressive, masculine role. However, as this comes without a permanent rejection of her mother’s authority as Gertrudis’ role does, Tita cannot yet construct a solid identity. Nevertheless, it is a beginning.

It is interesting to note that although Tita is not yet able to establish her own identity, the incident of the roses and the meal made from them does hint at an attempt to build a separate identity. Though she cannot reject Mamá Elena’s authority and keeps the roses, she does manage to evade it by cooking their petals and thus connect with Pedro much more strongly than she would have done had she simply left them in a vase. Curiously, the film takes a moment in the scene where Tita pricks her finger on the roses further than novel to portray Tita in an unusual light (literally as well as figuratively). In the novel, this is alluded to almost flippantly. The chapter begins impersonally as part of the recipe: “Se desprendan con mucho cuidado los pétalos de las rosas, procurando no pincharse los dedos”. This is followed by the humorous observation – signalled by the ironic use of the phrase “pequeño detalle” – that “Tita era incapaz de recordar este pequeño detalle ante la intensa emoción que experimentaba al recibir un ramo de rosas, de manos de Pedro” (Esquivel 1989:45). The problem of agency in the construction of identity is highlighted by the very different tone of the film, as it gives a very different image of Tita, shaping the film viewer’s concept of Tita quite differently from that of the novel’s reader. Where the reader “sees” Tita as love-struck and absent-minded, the film’s audience sees her as a martyr. The long detail shot of three large scratches on her breast from the roses (0:26:31-37) is reminiscent of portrayals of saints in the Christian tradition and even Christ himself with his crown of thorns.

In the first half of *Como agua para chocolate*, food does form a non-verbal discourse which allows Tita to express herself (albeit unwittingly) before she is able to separate herself from her mother and construct an independent identity. Before Rosaura’s wedding to Pedro, Mamá Elena tells Tita: “Te vas a encargar de los preparativos para el banquete y cuidadito que yo te vea una mala cara o una lágrima” (Esquivel 1989:28). Once she has swept out, Nacha encourages Tita to let her feelings out, sensing that Tita is “a punto de colapso nervioso” (Esquivel 1989:31). Between her hysteria and the memory of a tense, brief encounter with Pedro, Tita and Nacha manage to finish the cake. Though Nacha cannot

discern that Tita's tears have affected the flavour of the fondant, both she and then all the guests who partake in it at the wedding are filled with a terrible "nostalgia" (Esquivel 1989:36,39). Nacha dies from it, clutching a photo of an old sweetheart, and all the wedding guests – including, incredibly, Mamá Elena – are overwhelmed by a fit of weeping which leads to

una intoxicación rara que tenía algo que ver con una gran melancolía y frustración que hizo presa de todos los invitados y los hizo terminar en el patio, los corrales y los baños añorando cada uno al amor de su vida (Esquivel 1989:39).

In this way, the wedding cake acts as a sign of Tita's sadness and frustration at Pedro's marriage to Rosaura. Although Tita follows Elena's instructions to the letter, this sign allows her to speak without words. It also gives Pedro a perfect excuse to postpone having sex with his wife for several months (Esquivel 1989:40) and with it the consummation of his marriage and his new identity as Rosaura's husband.

In contrast, instances in which Tita begins to assert herself and find freedom from her mother and thus start to establish a unique identity are marked by food having a euphoric effect on those who eat it. At Roberto's christening, for example, Tita creates an identity for herself in "“el puesto de madre sin título oficial” (Esquivel 1989:73). Quite content to be in this role, the *mole de guajolote con almendra y ajonjolí* which she serves at the christening evokes “un estado de euforia que los hizo tener reacciones de alegría poco comunes” (Esquivel 1989:74). However, without a permanent break from her own mother's authority, this identity as a “madre sin título oficial” is only fleeting.

Tita's final meal takes place at Esperanza and Alex's wedding. Although the story can end with a “happily ever after” and the assurance that she will assume her “rightful” identity as Pedro's wife, the construction of her identity in fact takes place simultaneously with the construction of Esperanza's. Again, the role of agency is debatable here, as is the nature of identity as intrinsic or external. There is also the chicken-or-egg question of whether identity is influenced by external factors such as environment or discourse, or whether someone's identity shapes their discourse. Tita is certainly a significant influence in the shaping of Esperanza's identity. Though her pact with Rosaura puts Tita in charge of Esperanza's food while Rosaura takes care of her education, Tita soon succeeds in strongly influencing her niece's education both formal and otherwise – through food: “Tita, por su parte, se encargó de enseñarle algo igual de valioso: los secretos de la vida y del amor a través de la cocina” (Esquivel 1989:204). As discussed in Chapter 2.3, the parallels between Tita and Esperanza are made very clear. In the film, Tita nurses Esperanza in exactly the same pose that Nacha nursed her. In the book, Esperanza tells Tita that she has felt Alex's gaze on her body with the same metaphor of a *buñuelo* hitting boiling oil that Tita used when she felt Pedro's gaze on

her for the first time. Now, by giving Esperanza all the advice, support and encouragement she did not get as a young girl, she is able to help Esperanza construct an identity free of her mother's repressive authority, and thereby simultaneously also her own. It is no coincidence that the meal served at Esperanza's wedding is a patriotic one:

Los chiles en nogada no sólo se veían muy bien, sino que realmente estaban deliciosos, nunca le habían quedado a Tita tan exquisitos. Los chiles lucían con orgullo los colores de la bandera: el verde de los chiles, el blanco de la nogada y el rojo de la granada (Esquivel 1989:205).

This event is therefore a celebration of Esperanza blossoming into adulthood, secure in her autonomy from her mother. With Esperanza's emancipation comes Tita's, who has succeeded in breaking free from Mamá Elena and her successor Rosaura. As a backdrop to these, Mexico has also emancipated itself from the power struggles that marked the Revolution but also from the repressive "peace" of the Porfiriato. Throughout this process, food acts as a sign, culminating in these *chiles en nogada*. As well as the obvious symbolism of the tricolour dish imitating the colours of the new flag, here the dish also functions as a symbol of an identity being construed and celebrated.

It is ironic that this takes place at a wedding, when some of Esperanza's autonomy is compromised by her union with Alex. However, the fact that she has chosen to construct an identity as Alex's wife – an identity she had to fight for – allows it to be seen as a positive sign. Similarly, it could be argued that Tita has spent her life trying to construct an identity as Pedro's life partner – an identity which is completed at Esperanza's wedding and its aftermath. "Rosaura, in fact, should be considered the one who commits an unfaithful act, even though she's Pedro's official spouse", declared Esquivel in the interview with Claudia Loewenstein. "[Tita and Pedro's love is] too perfect and too intense to live in this plane of existence" (Loewenstein 1994). It could be argued that the moment of their first free and open love is also the moment where Tita's identity as Pedro's love mate is consummated. There is therefore no need for the story to continue, and they both die.

5.7. Food and the construction of identity in *Chocolat*

The construction of identity is perhaps even more clearly portrayed in Hallström's film than Harris' novel. Perhaps surprisingly, it is not Vianne who constructs her identity over the course of the novel, but the secondary characters: Luc, Armande, Joséphine. In the film, even Joline Drou develops her identity from drudge to femme fatale in her own humble way. A prim schoolteacher and crony of Caroline Clairmont in the novel, the film character of Joline is a dowdy housewife with an apathetic husband and dreams of unlikely passion. The first

time she comes into the chocolaterie, she buys an attractive box of chocolates. “Can you put a ribbon on it?” she asks Vianne. “Then I can pretend they are for my husband.” Vianne smiles and packages the pralines Joline has bought, then gives her a little packet. “And these are for your husband,” she says conspiratorially. “Unrefined cocoa nibs from Guatemala – to wake the passion.” “You’ve obviously never met my husband,” sighs Joline. “You’ve obviously never tried these,” Vianne replies (0:15:07, 0:15:23-37).

When she comes home, one glance at her snoring, unshaved husband is enough for her to fling the chocolates away. The next sequence shows a direct cut from M. Drou scoffing the chocolates to him to a near shot of Joline scrubbing the shower. The image then swings up to show Drou coming towards her stealthily before returning to a near shot of her sizeable behind in its faded pinny (0:17:12-24) – a cheerful subversion of the gaze used to objectify women and their body parts in mainstream cinema. The conclusion of the scene with the frenzied lovers glimpsed through the bedroom window and the triumphant crowing of a Gallic rooster leaves the cocoa nibs’ aphrodisiacal effect in little doubt. Later scenes in the film show Joline and then both Monsieur et Madame Drou back in the chocolaterie, barely able to contain their newfound lust – *como agua para chocolate*, in fact.

Joline: Do you have any more of those bean thingies, please?

Vianne: Oh sure. Umm... how many do you want?

Joline: How many have you got? (0:25:55-0:28:04 and again at 0:47:54)

Though of minor importance in terms of plot, this is a very illustrative sequence. Firstly, the Guatemalan cocoa nibs are a sign of the exotic, the unknown, wild “feminine” as described by Hölz in Chapter 4.3. Since they “awaken the passion”, these unfamiliar cocoa nibs can be read as a symbol for a wild, unknown passion Joline has not yet “tasted”. Secondly, the camerawork itself and the direct cut from M. Drou eating the chocolates to him stalking his wife in the bathroom underlines the indexical nature of the chocolates as a sign of passion – a theme that is reiterated throughout the film. Like Tita and Esperanza, Joline becomes aware of her own sexuality. From being a slave to the housework – a rather Barthesian myth and a gendered stereotype – Joline takes an active role in her own development. Her voice may be somewhat inarticulate, but it is heard, allowing her to build an identity as a content and fulfilled adult.

The role of Vianne’s chocolates in constructing an identity for Armande is also portrayed much more strongly in the film than in the novel. Harris’ Armande is a cheerfully rebellious character who takes delight in her forbidden pleasures, describing her hot chocolate as “Sodom and Gomorrah through a straw” (Harris 1999:84). Hallström’s Armande, however, is bitter and crabbed, and again Vianne’s chocolate acts as the indexical sign of a release from the clutches of age, a repressive society, and a restrictive diet. It also becomes a sign for old

passions, helping her recall the secrets of her forgotten past (0.26:13-35). In both the novel and the film, Vianne offers her support and love, largely in the form of her hot chocolate, rich and sweet and literally deadly for diabetic Armande. This allows the eccentric old lady, who was previously tolerated only because she is Lansquenet's oldest resident and she knows Reynaud's secret past, to construct an identity as Luc's grandmother, a decadent hostess and, crucially, a woman completely in control of herself and her body. Lured in by Vianne, Luc too learns to emancipate himself from his rather repressive mother and begin to construct and rejoice in his own identity – as a sensitive poetry lover in the novel, as an artist in the film. His illicit plates of cake in Vianne's chocolaterie mark the beginnings of his rebellion against his mother, while his full-hearted participation in Armande's birthday dinner shows the active construction of his identity as her proud and loving grandson.

The character who develops most in *Chocolat*, however, is Joséphine. At the beginning of the story, she embodies the gendered stereotype of the weak, passive woman. She has an abusive husband and steals from others to give herself a sense of worth. She describes cooking viciously as part of the repressive social order's subjugation of a woman to her husband: “if you *don't* cook three meals a day and sit by the fire thinking decent thoughts and waiting for [your husband] to come home...”; “A job? What can I do? Apart from clean – and cook – and wipe ashtrays and – pull pints and dig the garden and screw my h-husband every Fri-Friday night – ” (Harris 1999:72,187); “if you don't pretend that there is nothing more in your life than to serve your husband three meals a day and give him children and vacuum under his ass...” (0:35:12-14). Hallström adds a scene to the film which illustrates Joséphine's fear of her husband poignantly. Vianne offers her a rose cream and asks her whether she thinks there is too much cointreau in it, thereby validating her opinion and offering her a voice. As Joséphine accepts it tentatively, her husband bellows down the stairs, wanting to know what she is doing. Terrified, she spits out the chocolate, relinquishing – perhaps even rejecting – the right to her own identity autonomous from her husband (0:29:23-45).

Vianne's overtures of friendship and her refusal to give in to Reynaud's bullying, however, eventually give Joséphine the courage to leave her husband. For both Tita and Vianne, and now also for Joséphine, the kitchen and cooking do not represent the chains of three socially acceptable bland meals a day but a 'room of their own' where they reign supreme if not always unchallenged. Vianne's kitchen represents not only a shelter but also a space where Joséphine can grow and release herself from the autonomy of her husband. As she learns to make the pralines under Vianne's guidance, she also learns to construct her own identity free of her husband. Her more careful appearance and happier demeanour reflect her newfound confidence and an identity a world away from the passive, abused wife she used to be. The process is completed as she takes over his café when he is driven out of Lansquenet.

Again, Hallström emphasises Joséphine's transformation to and the construction of a new identity as a strong, confident woman more explicitly than Harris. As Vianne tries to leave the chocolaterie, defeated by Reynaud, she is distracted by noises coming from the kitchen. The villagers have come to help her prepare for the festival, led by Joséphine. "How do you like these almonds?" she asks Vianne. "Are they chopped fine enough? Are they okay, Vianne?" (1:41:08-20). She is partly seeking approval – that everything is okay, that she has done the right thing – but it also a curious role reversal of the scene at the beginning of the film where Vianne asks her opinion of the rose cream. Now Joséphine, like Gertrudis, is no longer a repressed, passive character, but a woman in a position of authority. She has succeeded not only in constructing a new identity for herself but one which is also publicly acknowledged by others.

It can be argued that Hallström's Reynaud also undergoes an important development in terms of identity that is clearly marked by food at every stage. Perhaps surprisingly, Harris' Reynaud disappears quietly at the end of the novel, as if he were not such an important character after all. The Reynaud of the film, however, changes from a blustering, self-important aristocrat to a humble, even timid villager. To an extent, it is his consciousness of his own identity as one of a long line of Huguenots in comparison to Vianne's own ephemeral ethnic identity which prompts her to concede defeat and try to leave Lansquenet. Part of this lineage includes a close association with the church and a self-image of extreme righteousness in terms of observing the Lenten fast. In this case, it might in fact be more appropriate to talk about the *de*-construction of identity. Since hubris is the fall of pride, it is not out of place to say that Reynaud in fact deconstructs his identity as the pompous and blue-blooded mayor after his attack on Vianne's window display. The subsequent reconstruction of his identity involves a restructuring of his discourse to acknowledge, among other things, that his wife has left him and to talk about food in positive terms. It is significant that he is shown eating cake calmly and that his first move in his budding relationship with Carolina is to ask her out for dinner.

5.8. Summary

Identity is a difficult concept which first emerged in the early modern era and has changed subtly over time and depending on who is defining it. Some of the major controversies of modern concepts of identity are the role of agency and whether it is intrinsic, external, constant or fluid. For many people, finding or constructing an identity comes hand-in-hand with separating oneself from an authority figure such as a parent, discovering one's sexuality and finding or creating a voice.

Interestingly, the construction of identity does not only have to take place at an individual level, but can also take place at a national level. A brief outline of the Mexican Revolution and the role of its *soldaderas* was given to illustrate how the Mexican nation developed a new constitutional identity which broke away from the old repressive order and to show how signifiers can be used to construct or define an identity in contrast to another. Discourse and semiotics often play a very large role in the construction of a national identity as they usually differ from community to community and from one historical period to another. As one of the central elements of culture, food is often one of the most important factors in the construction of a national identity and/or discourse.

The construction of identity, and the semiotics of food within it, is a major theme in *Como agua para chocolate* and *Chocolat*. Food acts as a very clear sign in the processes of identity-building, sometimes as a sign of passion and sometimes to signify the emancipation of the characters – particularly the female ones – from repressive authority figures. *Como agua para chocolate* drew strongly on parallels with the Mexican Revolution, while in *Chocolat*, Hallström's film adaptation offered several instances where either minor changes in the script and storyline or the added dimension of the visual text provided even more food for thought than Harris' novel.

6. The semiotics of chocolate – a case study

6.1. Introduction

Of all the myths of industrialised Western society, chocolate is one of the most potent. From a stimulating aphrodisiac to a comforting panacea for all ills, a signifier of love, passion and temptation (indeed sometimes all three), a “kleiner Dank” (Lindt) and a “merci”, something to share or something to hide, chocolate is believed to say or do it all. It appears in the title of both texts and plays a particularly strong role in *Chocolat*. This section of the study, however, will analyse several aspects of chocolate in “real life”, some of its history, its controversies, and its myths. The aim of this section, and the reason for including it in a piece of research about literature, is to show how the aspects which have been studied in relation to the texts have a corresponding function in the “real” world. It should act as a summary of the themes explored in the study and offer an insight into how a single food can act as a sign in discourse, at the collective level, of power and in the construction of identity. Finally, it should also pave the way for the conclusion of this study and offer some suggestions as to where further research could begin.

6.2. Origins

6.2.1. The signifier

In order to discuss the semiotics of chocolate in discourse, it would be necessary to select a particular discourse to analyse, which could constitute a monograph in itself. In order to keep this section brief but also to give an insight into the origins of chocolate, this chapter will concentrate on some of the linguistic implications of the word *chocolate* and how these betray its roots in pre-Columbian America. At the beginning of Section 2, the close connection between food and language was discussed, and in Section 3, the importance of food as a symbol or “totem” for a community was analysed. In Chapters 5.4 and 5.5, it was argued that the names of food can act as a sign of cultural imperialism or independence. This chapter will show how the signifiers for chocolate reveal its cultural origins and track the changing political culture in its homeland.

What Europeans understand today by the signifier *chocolate* (in English and Spanish) – a sweet usually in solid or powdered form – differs considerably from what it signified (and in fact still signifies) in the countries of its origin. “Chocolate” is in fact now used as a generic term for everything made using the seeds of the cacao tree (*Theobroma cacao* L.) as a base. Its geographic origins, according to the earliest European reports from the beginning of the eighteenth century, extend along the Río Magdalena, the Amazon, the Orinoco and the Guyanese hinterlands. The heartland of the cacao bean comprised the Maya and Aztec empires of Central America (Mueller 1957:4), which passed the terms *chocolate* and *cacao* on to their Spanish conquerors. Incidentally, the ‘official’ signifier, or Latin name, for the cacao tree (*Theobroma cacao* L.) was invented by Linnaeus. *Theobroma* signifies ‘food of the gods’, though which gods he was referring to is not quite clear. Linnaeus felt the original name *cacao* was too “barbaric”, and relegated it to second place (Coe/Coe 1999:20). At a semiotic level, *theobroma* draws heavily on the myths (in the general and Barthesian sense) of those who consume it, while Linnaeus’ rejection of the original name is a clear sign of the Europeanisation of cacao and, by extension, the cultures of pre-Columbian Central America.

According to relatively recent linguistic study, the signifier *cacao* reveals the probable origin of the signified foodstuff, which was much earlier than the Mayan or Aztec civilisations. Dakin and Wichmann state that

Although both words were borrowed into Spanish from Nahuatl,¹⁴ the facts that the cacao beans come from southern Mesoamerica and not the central Nahuatl area and

¹⁴ In this paper we use *Nahuatl* to refer to the language, including all dialectal variants, and the word *Nahua* to refer to the people whose language was one of those variants, regardless of whether the latter contained *tl* or only *t* [original footnote from article].

that chocolatl (/cʰokola:tl/), the written form of the word for ‘chocolate’ later found more generally in Spanish and Nahuatl documents, does not appear in early Colonial Nahuatl sources from central Mexico, have led linguists and ethnohistorians to look for non-Nahuatl origins for both words (Dakin/Wichmann 2000:55).

Sophie and David Coe, following Campbell and Kaufman, believe that the words *cacao* (**kakawa*) and *chocolate* are loan words from the Mixe-Zoque language probably spoken by the Olmec, whose civilisation experienced its peak around 1000BC. The words were then passed through the Izapa peoples to the Mayans and eventually to the Aztecs (Coe/Coe 1999:42-26; see also Dakin/Wichmann 2000:56). Dakin and Wichmann, however, argue that these signifiers are in fact Uto-Aztecan. From a semiotic point of view, it is interesting that one of their arguments for the Uto-Aztecan origin of **kakawa* is an iconic element present in the Uto-Aztecan language. Since the Uto-Aztecs often used iconic signifiers, the fact that their word, *kakawa-tl*, makes sense as an iconic signifier suggests it is indigenous rather than a loan word. If it were a loan word, it would seem to be a completely arbitrary and conventionalised sign as the speakers would not understand any iconicity present in the original language.

The early Spaniards compared the seeds to objects from their own experience, such as the almonds they knew in Europe, and noted that the cacao seeds were a little larger. Using a different simile based on their own environmental history, the Nahuas saw the resemblance of the seeds to small mottled bird eggs, and just as the Spaniards compared them to almonds, they perceived the seeds as egg shaped, so that the word for cacao, as found throughout most of Mesoamerica bears resemblance to cognate words for ‘egg’ in Southern Uto-Aztecan languages [...]. Furthermore, we should note that if the term *kakawa-tl* is a native formation of Nahuatl derived from **kawa*, the term would fit into a pattern of reduplication used in the language to indicate an object that is similar to the referent of the non-reduplicated term (cf. Canger 1981). For example, in the derivation of *kokone:tl*, ‘doll,’ from *kone:-tl*, ‘child,’ it is clear that *kokone:tl* refers to an object similar to a real child (Dakin/Wichmann 2000:59).

Further arguments, which are equally interesting and perhaps more convincing but less relevant for this study, refer to the components and composition of the proto-Uto-Aztecan term **ka-pa* (hard pod/shell) which, they believe, only makes sense as an indigenous Uto-Aztecan word (Dakin/Wichmann 2000:60).

Dakin and Wichmann acknowledge a potential weakness in their argument in the early Mayan drinking vessels discovered at a burial site. These vessels show hieroglyphs which Stuart deciphered as denoting “*kakawa*” and traces of cacao in a chemical analysis (Dakin/Wichmann 2000:66; Coe/Coe 1999:57). They concede that it is unlikely that Nahuatl would have been the dominant language in the Mayan territories of the cacao-growing regions, and that these vessels might therefore seem to be proof against their claim that *kakawa* is in fact a word from the Aztec rather than Mayan socio-linguistic family. However, they justify their argument by speculating

that Nahuatl speakers were responsible for perpetuating the importance of the cacao bean as an item of trade, a highly valued luxury commodity. It is reasonable to suppose that the buyers rather than the sellers should have been responsible for the diffusion of the name of the cacao beans (Dakin/Wichmann 2000:67).

Though the Mayans may have had and used cacao before the Aztecs, Dakin and Wichmann argue that the name originates from the latter, as it was they who popularised it.

6.2.2. Chocolate as a signifier of community and status in pre-Columbian America

The role of food as a signifier of both community and status was examined in Section 3. In both texts, movement between communities is marked by food, and in *Chocolat*, the two very separate communities are marked by their very different attitudes towards food. Status plays a less prominent role in the texts, although authority is often shown against a backdrop of food, eating, or cooking. In Mayan society, chocolate was the reserve of the elite. The only occasion in which classes of Mayan society other than the nobility might enjoy chocolate, according to ethnohistoric research, was at engagement and marriage ceremonies (Coe/Coe 1999:76). There are several levels at which cacao operated semiotically in such instances. First, it was prepared as part of the feast given as a sign of acceptance and welcome to the “in-laws”. Second, this coming together was itself called “*chokolaʼj*”, “drinking chocolate together” (ibid.). Thus the signifier (the name of the feast) is both metonymic, using chocolate to mean the whole feast, and metaphoric, as it signified the union of the two families. Finally, the latter was symbolised again with the exchange of cacao beans between the bride and groom, much like the exchange of rings in Western society:

Die Hochzeit verläuft so: die Braut gibt dem Bräutigam einen kleinen bunt bemalten Schemel und gibt ihm außerdem fünf Körner Kakao und sagt zu ihm: ‚Diese gebe ich als Zeichen dafür, dass ich euch zu meinem Bräutigam nehme.‘ Und auch er gibt ihr einige neue Röcke und weitere fünf Körner Kakao und spricht dazu die gleichen Worte (Thompson, quoted in Coe/Coe 1999:77).

The Pochteca (traders) too had a certain etiquette surrounding chocolate which was strictly observed. Mueller writes that, upon their return from a trading voyage, the family of the trader would host a feast to which all their family and business partners would be invited. More important guests, such as business partners, would be given a vessel and 200 cacao beans, while the less significant guests would receive artistically carved cacao stirrers (Mueller 1957:14).

The Lacandón Maya also differentiated between “secular” and “sacred” chocolate. “Secular” chocolate was prepared by “die Hausfrau” with an iron handmill, while “sacred” chocolate, reserved for temple use, could only be prepared by “die Ehefrau des Zeremonienmeisters” on

a *metate*. Spices also had specific purposes, and the use of a particular spice would signify the secular or sacred nature of the finished chocolate (Coe/Coe 1999:78-9).

Among Mayan society, consuming chocolate was also a sign of belonging to the upper classes. Coe and Coe write that “das Leben und selbst der Tod der Maya-Elite [...] waren wahrhaft luxuriös” (Coe/Coe 1999:55), an assumption attested to by the images on drinking vessels, such as those mentioned earlier, found in the burial grounds of the Mayan elite. This one from the late Classical period, now in the Princeton Art Museum (c.750 AD), depicts a woman preparing a foamy bowl of chocolate under a throne.

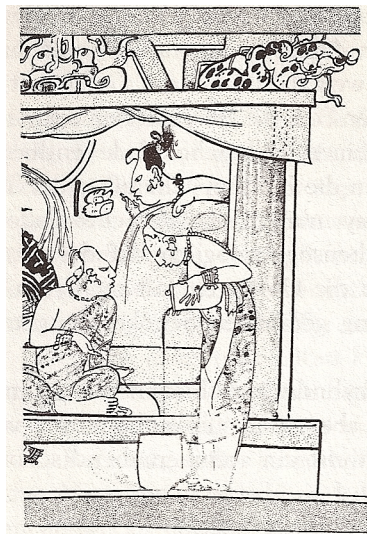


Fig. 4. Palace scene on a Princeton vessel,
Mayan late classicism (c.750 AD):
A woman pours chocolate from one vessel to another.
Earliest depiction of this method of creating foam.
(Coe/Coe 1999:60)

There is a semiotic circle in the importance of these vessels in the graves of the ruling classes. The burial of the vessels with the dead elite demonstrates their perceived value, as they were seen as fitting – even necessary – accompaniments for the journey into the underworld, equivalent to the jaguar-fur-lined garments and the jade jewellery that the corpse wore (Coe/Coe 1999:55). On the other hand, the care and skill with which they were painted not only signifies the value of the vessel and its expensive contents, but also the value of the deceased. Since these treasures were reserved purely for the elite classes, the burial of them with the corpse affirms his/her status even after death.

The Aztecs, too, reserved chocolate for the elite classes: “[Schokolade war] dem Königshaus, den Würdenträgern und Adligen, den Fernhandelskaufleuten und den Kriegern [vorbehalten]. Es scheint, dass die einzigen einfachen Bürger, die die Chance bekamen, von diesem Luxusgut zu kosten, Soldaten auf dem Marsch waren” (Coe/Coe 1999:114). Even

among these elites, chocolate was regarded as a luxury item, “Ambrosia aus den reichen und exotischen Ländern Anahuacs”, which was not drunk as a mere accompaniment to the food but on its own with tobacco after the meal, much as port, brandy and cigars follow an elegant meal in Europe (ibid.). Only the Emperor (as observed by Bernal Díaz de Castillo at a banquet held by Motecuhzuma) was permitted to drink chocolate during the meal itself (Coe/Coe 1999:115-6). From a semiotic point of view, the separation of the chocolate from the meal has a threefold purpose: firstly, it emphasises the superior status of both the chocolate itself and those who drink it. Secondly, it signifies the end of the meal. Finally, like brandy and cigars in the “(with-)drawing room”, it may have signified that an environment in which more “serious” topics could be discussed had been established. The latter is not clear from Coe and Coe’s descriptions, but can be presented as a hypothesis for further research.

In the guilds, the vessel in which the chocolate was served indicated one’s social position, with the higher-ranking members drinking out of fine pumpkin gourds (*Kürbisschälchen*), and the rest from pottery cups (*Tontassen*) (Coe/Coe 1999:118). They also explain that, while Motecuhzoma Ilhuicamina had laid down a law prohibiting the consumption of such luxury goods (the drinking of chocolate, the smoking of tobacco, the eating of meat and the wearing of cotton, feathers and flowers) by anyone who was not a soldier, traders were permitted to do so as they were considered part of the fighting classes (ibid.). Semiotically speaking, this created a clear distinction between the two communities of soldiers and non-soldiers on the one hand, and raised the prestige and desirability of being a soldier – of considerable importance to the famously warmongering Aztec nation – on the other.

6.2.3. Chocolate as a sign of ethnic difference and colonial power at the time of Columbus

The example of chocolate is an illustrative one as a sign of ethnic and cultural difference. The last chapter showed how chocolate and cacao were used to welcome people into a community and as a signifier of status within that community. In *Chocolat*, the tension between the Lansquenet locals and the travellers who have no identifiable ethnic identity is underlined and highlighted by their very different attitudes to food. This chapter will explore how the differences in the use of cacao can be read as signs of differentiation between ethnic communities.

Though the Aztecs and the Maya used a similar method of preparation, the former usually drank it cold, whereas the Maya, as far as is known, always drank it hot (Coe/Coe 1999:105,143). At first, the Europeans were completely ignorant of the value of cacao in terms of both taste and monetary importance. Columbus encountered a Mayan trading ship loaded

with cacao beans on his fourth voyage in 1502 (Mueller 1957:22; Coe/Coe 1999:129-131). Though he realised that the beans were valuable, he was unable to work out why:

Diese Mandeln [i.e. the cacao beans] schienen ihnen sehr viel wert zu sein, denn als sie mit ihren Gütern zusammen an Bord gebracht wurden, beobachtete ich, dass sie, sobald eine dieser Mandeln auf den Boden fiel, sich allesamt hinabbeugten, um sie aufzuheben, so als ob ein Auge heruntergefallen wäre (Coe/Coe 1998:131).

Without a translator, this could not be expressed and the Spanish “community” would not be aware of this medium of payment until the conquest of Mexico in 1519. Once it had understood this, however, it lost no time in using it as a sign of its power. As the Aztecs had before them, the Spanish accepted payments in cacao beans as tributes from their conquered peoples (Menninger 2004:76,222-3). These tributes in the form of a highly-prized foodstuff formed a tangible sign of conceding to the Spanish imposition of power. Having established Montezuma’s loyalty to the Spanish emperor, Hernán Cortés made even him

hacer una estancia para V.M., y [Montezuma] puso en ello tanta diligencia, que dende dos meses que yo se lo dije, estaban sembradas setenta hanegas de maíz y diez de frijoles, y dos mil piés de cacap [cacao], que es una fruta como almendras, que ellos venden molida; y tiénenla en tanto, que se trata por moneda en toda la tierra (Cortés 1866:94).

This was a clear sign of the Spanish Empire’s establishment of power over the Aztec emperor and, metonymically, the former Aztec empire. It also served as a sign of the new Spanish conquerers’ wealth, both symbolic and indexical. The replacement of the cacao bean with the Spanish peso as the trading currency in 1536 was a clearer sign still.

Even once they had recognised the worth of the cacao bean as a currency, however, it took considerably longer for the Europeans to adapt to the taste of the American drink, and to adapt the drink to their tastes. The Italian Girolamo Benzoni, for example, wrote in 1575 that chocolate “schien eher ein Getränk für Schweine zu sein als für die Menschheit” (Coe/Coe 1999:133; cf. a slightly – though not significantly – different translation by Mueller 1957:26). As already mentioned, the Aztecs generally drank it cold and spiced with chilli. The vast majority of Europeans preferred to drink it (if at all) hot and considerably sweetened with sugar and spices such as cinnamon. Sugar itself was only brought to Mexico with the Spaniards (Coe/Coe 1999:135,137,138; Mueller 1957:26).

Surprisingly, the practice of adding chocolate to boiling water, giving birth to the phrase “como agua para chocolate”, in fact also dates from the Conquest. Although making the chocolate bubble and foam was of the highest importance, as this was considered the best part of the drink, it appears to have been achieved by moving the concoction vigorously rather than boiling water for it. This can be seen in the Princeton vase and in the following

description by Fray Bernardino de Sahagún's Aztec informants, whom he recorded in his encyclopaedic work the *Historia general de las cosas de Nueva España* (16th century):

‘Sie mahlt den Kakao [die Bohnen]; sie zerstampft, bricht und zerkleinert sie zu Pulver. Sie sortiert sie aus, verliert und trennt sie. Sie durchtränkt sie, durchfeuchtet sie, weicht sie ein. Sie fügt sparsam, zurückhaltend Wasser hinzu; sie reichert es mit Kohlensäure an, filtert es, siebt es, schüttet es hin und her, bringt es zum Sprudeln; sie läßt es eine Krone bilden, stellt Schaum her; sie entfernt die Krone, läßt es dickflüssig werden und trocknen, gießt Wasser dazu, rührt Wasser hinein’ (quoted in Coe/Coe 1999:106).

Though water was used in preparing chocolate, it seems to be added in small quantities and, importantly, without heating it first. In fact, Guatemalan nuns are credited with the invention of the chocolate “bar” which was easy to store and transport. To this was added hot water (presumably providing the origin of the phrase) and sugar. Though Coe and Coe also argue that the Aztec warriors had previously used similar products to make “instant” chocolate on the march, they draw attention to the fact that it was actually the Spanish who propagated them as they were more convenient for transporting to the Old World (Coe/Coe 1999:138).

The role of the woman in the preparation of food in general and chocolate in particular would later prove crucial in the development of food and ethnicity in Central America after the Conquest. Coe and Coe describe “eine Art Hybridisierung oder Kreolisierung” of the invading culture with the local one (Coe/Coe 1999:136). The exchange of elements in their respective diets – the use of maize rather than wheat by the Europeans, the introduction of fruit trees and domestic animals into the American smallholdings – can be interpreted as a metaphor for the intermarriage that was taking place at a social level. This created a new Creole culture that shared elements of, but was also different from, both original cultures (ibid.). Thus food not only acts as a sign to differentiate between cultures, but can also be regarded as a sign of the merging of previously separate cultures.

6.3. Chocolate in Early Modern Europe

6.3.1. Chocolate as a sign of status in Early Modern Europe

It is not known precisely when cacao was first brought to Europe. The first written proof came with a delegation of Kekchi Mayan nobles who visited Prince Philip with a group of Dominican monks from Guatemala in 1544. The list of presents they brought with them records not only pottery vessels and the lacquered pumpkin gourd drinking bowls used by the higher-ranking members of their society but also various chillies and vessels with carefully-prepared chocolate (Coe/Coe 1999:156-8). Nevertheless, Coe and Coe are also careful to draw attention to the fact that this is only the first recorded proof of chocolate being brought to

Europe. They argue that it is very likely that the constant movement of soldiers, civilians and above all church representatives between the Old World and the New brought chocolate back with them long before 1544 (Coe/Coe 1999:158). In the light of the community-defining aspect of the semiotics of food that has been explored in detail already in this paper, it does seem unlikely that offshoots of religious communities in the Americas would not have shared knowledge of this very widespread and important foodstuff with their order in Europe. Curiously, however, the first official records of cacao being traded commercially were not made until 1585 (Coe/Coe 1999:158; Mueller 1957:35).

The fact that cacao was a sign of status in the Americas and only drunk by the elite combined with the need to import it to Europe made it a favourite of the wealthy upper classes. With its high price, in part due to artificially inflated customs charges intended to maintain its premium status, came a guarantee of exclusivity (Graf 2006:73). Perhaps unsurprisingly, the spread of chocolate was a sign of the spread of the Spanish imperial 'community', i.e. Spanish imperial rule. More precisely, it was a sign of increasing Spanish imperial alliances, as it spread with the marriage of its womenfolk, who largely insisted on taking their beloved chocolate with them. Thus, from Spain, it reached first Italy, then France with the marriage of Anna of Austria, Philip III's daughter, to Louis XIII; the Netherlands; Vienna; and only towards the mid-seventeenth century did it eventually reach England and Germany (Mueller 1957:41-65; Hoffmann 2008:21).

In France, chocolate became so popular among the upper classes that the Marquise de Coëtlogon was said to have "während ihrer Schwangerschaft so viel Schokolade getrunken, dass sie einen Knaben gebar, der war schwarz wie der Teufel" (Madame de Sevigne, quoted in Hoffmann 2008:20 and Coe/Coe 1999:189). Hoffmann suggests wryly that explaining her affair with her African servant would have been considerably less well-received (Hoffmann 2008:21). Thus while having an affair with an African servant would have been a sign of depravity, having a "chocolate" child was received and even appreciated as an indexical sign of being elegant and fashionable to the extreme. Curiously, Menninger notes that the European nobility also had Moors serve their chocolate. Though she does not provide an explanation for this practice, it can be assumed that there are several semiotic processes at work. Firstly, it is arguable that the Moor or African's dark skin tones recalled the rich brown of the chocolate (as the Marquise de Coëtlogon used to her advantage), invoking an element of iconicity between the server and the served. Secondly, the Moor often represented the exotic. This was popular imagery throughout Europe, illustrated most famously by Shakespeare's *Othello* (probably 1603). Despite the fact that cacao came from Latin America, rather than (North) Africa or the Middle East, its high price confirmed its status as a luxury and it is possible that the use of Moors to serve it was a sign of this.

6.3.2. The rejection of chocolate as a sign against decadence

The fight against decadence is a strong theme among Reynaud's "bible groupies" in *Chocolat*, where the abstinence of Lent plays a central role. Similarly, Mamá Elena fights a losing battle against her rebellious daughters. As the Massa, Tupuri and Mussey tribes of Cameroon appear to reject certain varieties of sorghum so as not to be identified with each other (Harris 1987:65), as described in Chapter 3.3.2, certain social communities rejected chocolate in order to distinguish themselves from those that did consume it. Whereas in post-Columbian America chocolate was consumed across the social classes, in Europe chocolate was associated exclusively with the aristocracy, as seen in the previous chapter. With the advent of an aspiring bourgeoisie, chocolate began to filter down through society as some of the middle class tried to use the signs of aristocracy to construct a new identity for themselves (Graf 2006:76).

However, as a result of the excessive intake of chocolate by the nobility and its consequences (such as the Marquise de Coëtlogon's surprising "chocolate" baby), the consumption of chocolate came to be regarded by the enlightened middle classes as increasingly decadent, wasteful, overindulgent and the cause of social and mental disorders:

the rich 'feed liberally, fare well, want exercise, action, employment... and thence their bodies become full of gross humours, winds, crudities, their minds disquieted, dull, heavy' (Robert Burton, 1621, quoted in Burnett 1999:71).

Though this was written about the English upper classes, the sentiment in France was the same: "Der aufgeklärte Bürger trank lieber Kaffee, der für einen klaren Geist sorgte, und zwar in Gesellschaft mit Gleichgesinnten im Café" (Hoffmann 2008:21); Graf writes that

selbstverständlich [hatte] auch der bürgerliche Kaffeekonsum einen sozialen Zweck zu erfüllen: im Kaffeehaus konnte der Bürger demonstrieren, dass er zu dem aufstrebenden, sich bildenden, Kaffee trinkenden Bürgertum gehörte. Der Bürger zeigte mit seinem Besuch im Kaffeehaus nicht nur, dass er zum Bürgertum gehörte, sondern er distanzierte es sich damit bewusst vom «Nicht-Bürgertum» (Graf 2006:89).

The new coffee houses thus provided a means by which one could signal a) one belonged to the coffee house community, which was ambitious, hard-working and educated; b) by belonging, one was oneself ambitious, hard-working and educated; and c) that one was consciously, deliberately, *not* part of the overindulgent, lazy, decadent aristocracy. Unlike England, France and Germany, Spain lacked a developed bourgeoisie and therefore remained a strongly chocolate-loving nation (Coe/Coe 1999:253).

A further division could be seen along broader geographical and religious lines. Chocolate was preferred in Southern Europe and by the Catholic Church, for reasons which will be discussed shortly. In contrast, coffee was regarded as a drink of the northern, protestant

bourgeoisie and seen as the sign of an enlightened, reformed society for the reasons named above (Coe/Coe 1999:246).

Perhaps surprisingly, the Catholic Church also had a quarrel with chocolate within its own walls. This quarrel lasted well over two hundred years and throws an interesting angle on the polemic at the heart of *Chocolat*. Some sections of the Church claimed that the nourishing aspect which made it a staple of the Aztec warriors' diet meant chocolate was a food rather than a drink. It should therefore be considered unsuitable for consumption when fasting, a view first propagated by Juan de Cardenas in 1591 (Coe/Coe 1999:179; Mueller 1957:38). Being either for or against chocolate as an appropriate part of the fasting diet was a clear sign of which community in the Church you belonged to. This view that chocolate was inappropriate during the fast was contradicted vociferously by the Jesuits. Among them was a certain Farronius, who wrote in 1664:

‘Du bist ein erfrischender Schauer, der das Herz benetzt, die Inspirationsquelle für einen Dichtergeist. O süßer Trunk, Geschenk der Sterne, Du kannst nur ein göttlicher Trank sein’ (quoted in Hoffmann 2008:17).

It is true, however, that their commercial interest in the cacao trade may have had more influence on their religion than they would have been prepared to admit. Equally, it is not clear whether the Dominicans' rejection of chocolate as a suitable Lenten beverage was wholly on puritan theological grounds, or because they tended to stand against the Jesuits on principal (Coe/Coe 1999:179). On the other hand, Bernal Díaz had reported after the banquet with Motecuhzuma that chocolate was supposed to have an aphrodisiac effect, which would certainly make it an unsuitable substance for consumption during a period of abstinence (Coe/Coe 1999:180,183). Thus, much like Barthes' wine in the *Mythologies*, chocolate earned a reputation built largely on myth – but which caused great consternation to both those who believed it and those who did not. In 1569 Pope Pius V declared that drinking chocolate did not break the fast, but the discussions raged long into the eighteenth century (Mueller 1957:39). Aside from the eternal abstinence-carnality polemic which was explored in detail in Chapter 3.4, the question of breaking the fast obviously had implications for the community. The debate can of course be summarised as a semiotic question: if the signifier (form) for chocolate is “drink”, then the concept behind it is “acceptable”; if it is “food”, then it is not. Following Van Houten's invention of the cacao press in Holland, which enabled the separation of cacao butter and cacao solids (Graf 2006:159), the advent of the mass-produced, solid chocolate bar from the beginning of the nineteenth century did bring an end to most of this debate, as chocolate was now clearly identifiable as a food rather than a drink.

6.4. The semiotics of chocolate in a multimodal society

6.4.1 The politics of nutrition

To claim to discuss the semiotics of chocolate in today's society, with the enormous range of media at our disposal, is madness, but this section aims to outline some of the main areas which were touched on by the texts and their application in the "real" world. In Chapter 4.2 some of the issues concerning who has power over food were touched on, and whether one person has the right to say what and when another person should eat. This was the crux of the subplot built around diabetic Armande in *Chocolat*. Though some foods are forbidden as they put her health at risk, she is unwilling to allow people to tell her what she can or cannot eat and thereby take away her fierce independence in other spheres as well. This has resonance with the Nestlé baby milk scandal in which women in developing countries are encouraged, implicitly or explicitly and against the recommendation of organizations such as UNICEF, that Nestlé infant formula is more beneficial for the baby's health than natural breastfeeding. While this may have elements of truth in certain cases, such as when a mother does not have an adequate supply of milk, there are clearly many other interests, such as financial and commercial ones, at stake.

The world which the signifier *chocolate* now represents is a very different one from that of the pre-Columbians. The increased demand for chocolate has put inordinate pressures on the cacao-growing world, which now extends through most of the tropics including Central Africa. The issues of cash crops and fair trade mentioned briefly in Chapter 4.2 are very prominent in the production of cacao. While the Fair Trade symbol makes it easy to recognise chocolate from relatively protected cacao-producing communities, there are hundreds of brands which do not use fairly traded or grown cacao (or indeed any of the other ingredients used to make a chocolate bar).

Meanwhile, in developed countries the question of whether chocolate can be considered healthful is yet to be answered. Even for diabetics like Armande, there are few definitive answers. Most scientists argue that the high quantities of sugar and fat present in most chocolate negates any minimal nutritional value. However, there is again a semiotic question at stake: what is meant by *chocolate*? When dark chocolate with a high percentage of cocoa solids is being signified, there is considerably less sugar and fat than when the signified is a gooey, sticky sweet mess such as a Mars Bar.

Then there is also the question of unquantifiable value, whereupon the discussion moves back into a semiotic field. It true that chocolate, particularly of the dark, high-cocoa-content variety, contains some theobromines and serotonin which have been proven to release mood-lifting hormones (Coe/Coe 1996:30). However, most scientists agree that these are in minute,

even negligible quantities. Yet people desire it foolishly, like Reynaud's "children refusing wholesome fare in order to continue eating what sickens them". Chocolate has an identity in the Western world – fluid and fragmented, but incredibly potent. The construction of this identity takes place in a semiotic arena: that of discourse both verbal and non-verbal. This discourse is largely established, conventionalised and constantly reinforced by the media. Valentine's Day, Christmas and, of course, Easter have all become occasions on which one is expected to express love and belonging to a community (which in most cases is not of the church, but may be a couple, family, school or workplace) by buying chocolate.

6.4.2. Chocolate, gender, sex and the media

The final section concentrated on issues of identity, which are often influenced, even construed, by gendered discourses. While the question of what gender is and whether it is possible to define an "ultimate feminine" or "masculine" is debatable, the study followed Esquivel to analyse the texts in terms of traditional perceptions of masculine and feminine. These discourses are very clear in *Como agua para chocolate*, although the characters' gender is determined more by behaviour than by sex. As Esquivel herself indicated in her interview with Claudia Loewenstein, Mamá Elena and Rosaura represent a strict, cold, unnatural, "masculine" authority which represses the natural feminine. Gertrudis, in contrast, represents the appropriation of a "masculine" power by a warmly "feminine" character. Tita, and later her niece Esperanza, represent the "feminine" developing with an identity that is fully autonomous and fulfilled sexually and emotionally. In *Chocolat*, gender is divided along more traditional lines, where Reynaud represents an aggressive, cold and unemotional "masculinity" while Vianne stands for openness, loving and nurturing in a classic "feminine" role. The main focus of the study in terms of gender was first power and then the construction of identity with the character's emancipation from a repressive authority figure. This process also necessitated finding a voice and allowing it to be heard, usually through the medium of food. Part of this process also includes a growing awareness and understanding of one's own sexuality and the right to embrace it.

In contrast to its role as a warrior's drink in Aztec culture, in Early Modern Europe chocolate became known as a "female" drink, taken in bed in fragile cups known by the very "feminine" signifier *trembleuse* (Graf 2006:58-61). The age of advertising has constantly reinforced this image. Chocolate is seen as a gift for women, a panacea for women, and a means to tempt women in a subversion of the Adam-and-Eve story. It is a sign of comfort food, of girly companionship, of seductive temptation.

In Western society today, chocolate is largely credited with the ability to construct an identity. It would be more accurate to credit it with being a Barthesian myth – perhaps even a “totem-food”, not necessarily to a nation but to a generation. By eating chocolate, people hope to become stronger, passionate, tempting. They eat chocolate in order to construct the identity advertising promises them. These promises are made even clearer by advances in technology which allow advertisers to use visual semiotics (e.g. filmic techniques) to emphasise a point. Cadbury’s Milk Tray ran a series of nineteen advertisements from 1968 to 1984 featuring a “James Bond-style hero who dives off cliffs, pilots helicopters through storms and speed boats over waterfalls ‘all because the lady loves Milk Tray’”.¹⁵ These advertisements drew on cinema archetypes, themselves based on traditional gender roles, to create an intertextual reference in the mind of its audience and customer base. The “lady”, in the tradition of the James Bond films, is represented most frequently as parts – long slender legs and a slim hand with elegantly varnished nails which reaches for the Milk Tray left by her rugged “agent” (see Figure 4).



Fig. 5. The last scene of a 1970s Cadbury’s Milk Tray ad showing an imitation of the classic James Bond silhouette.¹⁶

By buying Milk Tray, men identify themselves as the strong, fearless, active, sexually attractive James Bond. Women are portrayed almost purely as sex objects, in keeping with the female characters known as “Bond Girls” (memorably “Pussy Galore” with her unambiguous name or signifier, from *Goldfinger*, Guy Hamilton 1964), lacking a distinguishable personality and very much following contemporary cultural ideals of beauty. Besides the objectification of her sexuality, however, it represents the woman who “loves” her Milk Tray as incredibly desirable, since such a man is prepared to risk so much to bring her the present she wants. In contrast, the *Bridget Jones’ Diary* generation of the 1990s struggles to balance the expectations of women presented to them in the media as independent career women and domestic goddesses with an equally successful husband (“I WILL NOT / sulk about having no boyfriend, but develop inner poise and sense of self as woman of substance

¹⁵ <http://www.cadbury.co.uk/CADBURYANDCHOCOLATE/OURSTORY/OURPRODUCTS/Pages/milktrayfudgecruch.aspx>

¹⁶ http://i.dailymail.co.uk/i/pix/2010/01/20/article-1244330-07EDECoBooooo5DC-180_634x395.jpg

without boyfriend, as best way to obtain boyfriend”; Fielding 1996:2). For them, chocolate is the comfort food to turn to when things get rough, and the romantic outlook seems so bleak that it doesn’t matter if a few extra kilos are gained in the process.

Oh, why am I so unattractive? [...] Hate the New Year. Hate everyone. [...] Anyway, have got giant tray-sized bar of Cadbury’s Dairy Milk left over on dressing table, also amusing gin and tonic miniature. Am going to consume them (Fielding 1996:17).

In the German edition, the title is translated as *Schokolade zum Frühstück*, a phrase intended to demonstrate the hopelessness of Bridget’s situation which is so depressing that she ignores social custom and comforts herself with chocolate even at breakfast time. However, it is ironic that this was in fact the custom, as seen in Chapter 6.3.1, of the European aristocracy whose primary purpose in life was to make a socially advantageous marriage and a sign of the material wealth which allowed it.

Perhaps surprisingly, neither *Como agua para chocolate* nor *Chocolat* fall into the trap of using chocolate to embody any of the myths surrounding it. It could be that they are saved by their settings of the early twentieth century, which preclude a discourse aggressively shaped by mainstream advertising and the strong influence of the media. Tita’s desperate desire to be married comes not from the pressures of society, but is rather an act of rebellion against it. Even in *Chocolat*, where Vianne’s chocolates are perceived by Reynaud’s “bible groupies” to be dangerously seductive and destructive, they are in fact the opposite and enable her customers to construct their own identity as individuals with strong, independent personalities.

6.5. Summary

From its earliest origins to its ubiquitous role in today’s society, chocolate has played a large and active role as a sign. The identity of chocolate itself has been fluid and shaped largely by external factors such as availability, price and even how it is embedded in the discourse of its time. Although what it signifies has changed over the course of time, the fact that it acts as part of a sign has not. Nor have the functions of these signs altered much – they show status, differentiate between different communities, express or evoke emotions. In this way, chocolate also acts as a sign which allows individuals to construct an identity for themselves by using chocolate to bring themselves certain characteristics associated with the sign. These signs and the associated characteristics, such as comfort, passion and temptation are firmly rooted in the discourse of post-war advertising. Naturally, the multimodal possibilities of the twenty-first century uses semiotics to make an even greater impact.

7. Conclusion – Prospect and Retrospect

This study's aim was to analyse the semiotics of food at four different levels using two novels and their film adaptations to illustrate these in practice. The texts, *Como agua para chocolate* (Laura Esquivel 1989/Alfonso Arau 1992) and *Chocolat* (Joanne Harris 1999/Lasse Hallström 2000) were chosen because in many respects they are very different texts but are bound by several common themes including family, the use and abuse of power, women and gender and the construction of identity. Food, of course, is also a very prominent, if not the central theme of both texts and underlines the portrayal of the themes listed above. The film adaptations were included as in many instances the multimodal aspect of cinema literally brought an extra dimension to the semiotics being examined. In some cases, the director's decision to adapt the story slightly also had an impact on how food was used as a sign or as part of a sign in the illustration of a point. Since one of the cornerstones of research throughout all the main sections was the discourse and importance of communities, the choice of "popular" texts as opposed to highly "literary" ones was also made very consciously.

The first aspect to be explored was how food is used at a purely discursive level. The concept of metaphor was explained and examples of direct and indirect metaphors using food were taken out of the body of the texts and analysed in the context of the discourse in which it was embedded. In *Como agua para chocolate*, it was shown that the eponymous title is an idiom firmly rooted in Mexican social culture, while the metaphors in *Chocolat* drew largely on religious discourse.

Discourse and culture are dependent on community, since without a group of people to share, use and understand a discourse and the broader culture that goes with it, these would be lost. The second level of the analysis was therefore how food operates as a sign at the collective level. Drawing on Roland Barthes' concept of a myth as a sign for the rather abstract notion of a nation, the study then looked at how concrete communities use food as a sign to distinguish themselves from other communities and to designate the status of their members. From this ethnological analysis of real communities, the signs examined were then applied to the fictional worlds of *Chocolat* and *Como agua para chocolate*.

Following on from the order of status in a community, the third main section explored the way power is tussled over, maintained, or rejected and how food is used as a sign of this. A brief digression into the ethical questions that arise from the abuse of power in the production and distribution of food came back to analyse how power has traditionally been held back from groups at low levels of social hierarchies, particularly women. The study asked how conventional concepts of the feminine and the masculine – regardless of biological sex – are attributed with power and how this is demonstrated by food. It then examined

Michael Bakhtin's theories of Carnival as a perfect example of how food, particularly eating, is associated with the lower hierarchies of the body politic and can therefore be a measure of whether social power, by extension, is maintained. Both *Como agua para chocolate* and *Chocolat*, however, proved Bakhtin's theories inversely, i.e. both showed that without a period of licence where the power hierarchies are reversed, it is impossible to maintain them. They also showed how characters used the rejection of food in a voluntary inversion of the body politic to assume power they are otherwise denied.

The natural consequence of becoming empowered or autonomous is to construct one's own identity as there is no longer the possibility, or the obligation, to repress oneself and one's desires. After a brief introduction to the concept of identity as well as why and how it can be constructed, the two stages of creating an autonomous identity were examined. The first is the acknowledgement of one's desires, particularly sexual desires, and of the right to have them. The second is to find a voice which not only articulates these desires but also allows the autonomous individual to be heard and accorded space in the community. In order to provide more information about the backdrop for *Como agua para chocolate* and to show how Mexico was reconstructing its identity at the time the novel was set, the keystones of the Mexican Revolution and the role of the *soldaderas* was outlined briefly. With this as a model, the study analysed how principal characters in both texts, with a particular focus on female characters, found their autonomy from a repressive order and developed a fully-fledged identity. It also examined how food played a crucial role both in the process of constructing this identity and then confirming the character's autonomy and identity as a fulfilled individual.

The final section acted as summary of the analysis but also showed how chocolate, as a central feature of both texts, illustrates the semiotics of food at each level discussed in the main body of the analysis. At each stage of its history, from its origins in pre-Columbian America through its role as a status symbol in Early Modern Europe to its presence as a Barthesian myth and a totem for a generation in our society today, the case study explored how chocolate has functioned as a sign or part of sign at each level of the main study's focus.

Because of the ubiquitous nature of food and its highly symbolic nature, this study was purposely very broad and drew on several disciplines to analyse the semiotics of food in specific areas. It would, of course, be possible to extend any of the four main topics into a fat monograph; it would probably even be possible to take each chapter. We are living in an age of globalisation and have already seen a huge surge of interest in cross-cultural studies and etiquette – perhaps one of the most practical uses for the study of semiotics today. Further areas of interest, relevant to discourse, might be language and code-switching in food advertising, particularly for “exotic” foods. Food as a means of integration, or as a measure of

it, represents a fascinating tool for sociologists and even politicians struggling to get to grips with an increasingly multi-ethnic population. This would be relevant to both the wielding and yielding of power and the construction and reconstruction of identity on a national as well as individual level. Finally, the debate on fair trade and the politics of food production and distribution is louder and fiercer than ever. Interestingly, however, the increasing movement towards “going green” and acting environmentally consciously, even at a corporate level, suggests that the future might bring a movement towards social conscientiousness as well. Whether it is money, power or genuine concern that motivates it is of course a source of further debate. Finally, it would be interesting to consider different methodologies which would allow the measurement of food’s role in reflecting, changing and even constructing society.

Throughout history, food has acted as a sign or as part of a sign for a myriad purposes, goals and even achievements. In this study, a small selection of carefully-chosen examples was given from both the “real” world and the fictional worlds of *Como agua para chocolate* and *Chocolat* in the hope that by understanding the one, we can gain a better understanding of the other. Chapter 3.3.1 quoted Bourdieu, who wrote that “symbols are the instruments par excellence of social integration” (Bourdieu 1991:166). The semiotics of food is both far-reaching and fascinating, pervading all aspects of life and crossing disciplines and even nations. By understanding it and using it in turn to understand the world around us, we can use it to strengthen our global and our individual communities.

8. Resumen en español

8.1. Introducción

Sin comer, el ser humano no podría sobrevivir. Por ser elemento fundamental para la supervivencia, la comida tiene lugar en casi todos los ámbitos de la vida. Este trabajo pretende explorar varios aspectos de la comida y la manera en que funciona como signo o parte de un signo y analizar cómo estos aparecen en *Como agua para chocolate* y *Chocolat*.

Es importante puntualizar que para hacerlo, hay que tener un enfoque amplio. Dado su papel en la sociedad desde la prehistoria, hubiera sido tentador escribir una «historia universal» de la comida como signo. Naturalmente, esto no está al alcance de un trabajo como éste. Sin embargo, esta tesis hace referencia a múltiples disciplinas para intentar ofrecer una visión global y equilibrada que refleje el alcance tanto de la semiótica como el de la comida. Para restringir el campo de estudio considerablemente sin perder esta óptica, el trabajo elige

analizar la semiótica de la comida en base a dos textos. Este enfoque permite explorar varios aspectos del tema que tienen sus equivalentes en el mundo «real». Por otra parte, al explorar cómo actúa la comida como signo en la realidad, se hace posible entender mejor cómo funciona en el mundo ficticio de los textos.

Después de bosquejar el concepto del signo y el argumento de las dos obras, la parte principal del trabajo considera cuatro perspectivas para el análisis de la comida como signo:

- el discurso
- el nivel colectivo
- el poder
- la construcción de una identidad

La siguiente parte a la vez resumirá los argumentos principales del análisis y ofrecerá un punto de vista alternativo para explorar como el chocolate se ha desarrollado como signo a largo del tiempo. Se concluye el trabajo con alternativas para desarrollar los temas con más profundidad o aplicarlos a la realidad del comercio y de la política.

8.2. El signo y la semiótica

Como base teórica se refiere a varias obras fundamentales de la semiótica como *A Theory of Semiotics* por Umberto Eco (1979 [1976]) y *L'aventure sémiologique* por Roland Barthes (1985) además de la nueva introducción a los estudios de la semiótica por Daniel Chandler (*Semiotics: The Basics*, 2006 [2002]). Estos estudios se aprovechan sobre todo de las tradiciones lingüísticas de Ferdinand Saussure, Roman Jakobson y Charles y examinan los signos y su función tanto lingüística como no lingüística. Trabajando con los conceptos del *significante* y del *significado* sugeridos por Saussure, esta tesis pretende analizar cómo funciona la comida en las dos obras como signo o parte de un signo. Se consideran no sólo las novelas originales de Laura Esquivel y de Joanne Harris, como también las películas basadas en los libros, ya que el cine añade otra dimensión que amplía las posibilidades de crear o utilizar signos.

8.3. Los textos

Como agua para chocolate, por Laura Esquivel (1989), narra la vida de Josefina de la Garza (Tita), desde el momento en que su madre le da a la luz sobre la mesa de la cocina. La historia de esta familia es una historia de represión, de deseo frustrado y de daño emocional profundo, pero es a la vez una historia de emancipación, de la realización del propio ser y, sobre todo, de amor. A lo largo de la novela, la comida subraya los momentos claves del

argumento y los sentimientos de los protagonistas. Esquivel eligió una estructura no convencional de doce capítulos, en la cual cada uno empieza con una receta. Dentro del capítulo, el estilo narrativo también es extremadamente fluido, ya que los métodos de ejecución de cada receta se mezclan con la narración de la historia de Tita. Además, la narración no sigue un orden cronológico dentro cada capítulo, sino que salta entre temas del presente, mientras cocina Tita, y cosas del pasado.

La película del mismo nombre, realizada por Alfonso Arau (México 1992), sigue la narración de la novela bastante al pie de la letra, aunque sea ligeramente más sencilla por ser más cronológica, y no salta tanto entre receta, historia y el pasado como lo hace el libro. Sin embargo, utiliza muchas tomas largas en primer plano de la comida, para introducir una escena o un momento significativo. El tema secundario de ser mejicano¹⁷ se nota algo más destacado en la película, por ser una producción enteramente mejicana, en contraste con la adaptación de *Chocolat*, que se realizó en Hollywood.

La película *Chocolat* se distingue bastante de la novela original de Joanne Harris (1999), aunque los temas principales son más o menos iguales. El libro narra los asuntos que siguen a la llegada de Vianne Rocher al pueblo de Lansquenet-sous-Tannes un martes de Carnaval. La narrativa se hace desde su mirada y la del cura Reynaud. Éste intenta controlar la población de Lansquenet a través de la iglesia y muy pronto se encuentra en oposición directa con Vianne, que ofrece chocolates dulces y tentadores a la venta y una oreja para escuchar gratis. La comida y la abstención juegan papeles claves en esta historia del conflicto entre una comunidad tradicional y algo represiva y las fuerzas exteriores que van al pueblo y le retan a abrirse.

Así como la película de Arau, la adaptación para el cine de *Chocolat*, realizada por Lasse Hallström (EEUU, 2000), es formalmente menos original que el libro de Harris. Sin embargo, es interesante observar que la comida está más presente y más activa en el desarrollo de la acción en la película que en el libro. Además, hay una influencia maya más presente por añadir el personaje de la abuela indígena de Vianne y por cambiar el nombre de su tienda a «Chocolaterie Maya».

Aunque las dos novelas, y todavía más las dos películas, no se parezcan mucho, ni por ambiente ni por forma, los temas que corren por ambas obras tienen mucho en común: represión y autoridad contra el desarrollo del individuo y su identidad, un sentido de comunidad y quién la constituye, el uso y abuso del poder, la familia, el papel y el lugar de la mujer en la sociedad. El tema más importante es, por supuesto, el de la comida. No sólo tiene

¹⁷ Por comodidad de la lectura, la autora utiliza la forma masculina de adjetivos y sustantivos descriptivos. Eso no denota, en absoluto, una tendencia machista.

una presencia muy marcada en ambas obras, sino que también enfatiza los momentos claves de la acción e incluso desencadena ciertos acontecimientos. Funciona como signo por derecho propio, y además aúna otros temas principales.

8.4. La semiótica de la comida en el discurso

La primera parte del trabajo explora la comida como signo a nivel lingüístico. Se ofrecen varias definiciones de la metáfora en términos semióticos, y luego se analizan metáforas directas e indirectas elegidas de los textos que utilizan la comida como semema.

Basándose en las obras de Eco, Chandler y Keller, esta tesis define la metáfora como un significado que se usa para explicar otro significado, es decir, utiliza características compartidas para describir una cosa en términos de otra. Este capítulo también explica la diferencia entre un índice, un ícono y un símbolo según las teorías de Peirce. Otro término importante para el análisis es la definición de *catacrexis* de Eco, quien usa este término para una metáfora de la cual el significado original ya se ha olvidado (Eco 1979:109). En este caso, la semejanza se ha perdido y la metáfora se convirtió en frase idiomática y puramente simbólica. Por consiguiente, saber y entender el contexto cultural del discurso en el cual se usa la metáfora es esencial para comprenderla.

Las obras muestran dos tipos de metáfora. La primera es la metáfora directa, es decir, una metáfora explícita que se encuentra en el cuerpo del texto. El ejemplo más obvio que esta tesis analiza es la del título de la obra de Esquivel: «Como agua para chocolate». No sólo esta metáfora está incorporada firmemente en el discurso de la novela sino también es una frase idiomática que se encuentra a menudo en el discurso centroamericano, sobre todo mejicano. Se investiga un forum en la red que muestra cómo centroamericanos usan la frase en su discurso pero también cómo algunos ya han olvidado parte del significado original del modismo. Lo analiza para desglosar los elementos tanto lingüística como históricamente, y se considera su aplicabilidad a los personajes. Las demás metáforas analizadas no forman parte del discurso regular sino del discurso de las obras en cuestión. Dicho esto, sin conocer el discurso de la obra es imposible entender las metáforas que aparecen en él, y se pretende demostrar que hay varios niveles en los cuales se las puede entender. En *Como agua para chocolate*, el discurso es muy personal, mientras en *Chocolat*, es institucional y tiene base firme en el discurso católico y sus actitudes hacia la comida, la sexualidad y el pecado.

El vínculo entre la comida y el comportamiento es fundamental para el segundo tipo de metáfora. Ésta es la metáfora indirecta, que muestra el carácter de una persona por lo que come o por su manera de hacerlo. En contraste con la comida abundante ofrecida a todos por

Vianne, el cura Reynaud come poco e insípido, y quiere privarles a sus feligreses del placer de la comida; asimismo, a Tita le encanta cocinar y comer las exquisiteces desconocidas, mientras que su hermana Rosaura no puede alimentar a su familia y además muere de problemas gástricos, que reflejan su carácter deteriorado por estar casada con un hombre que ama a su hermana.

8.5. La semiótica de la comida a nivel colectivo

Está claro que en las dos obras, que se centran en una familia y en la población de un pueblo, la comunidad tiene papel importantísimo. La segunda sección de la parte principal de esta tesis empieza con las teorías de Roland Barthes (2009 [1957]) sobre el «mito» como signo para una comunidad y cómo la comida puede funcionar como «tótem» para unir y simbolizar una nación. Sigue con evidencia de la etnología que demuestra que comunidades se distinguen de otras por lo que comen y cómo la comida funciona como signo consciente de esta diferenciación. Da ejemplos de comunidades que se identifican por una comida específica y explica cómo otros usan esta comida como signifiante para la comunidad hasta en el discurso. Se refiere a las obras de antropólogos como Claude Lévi-Strauss, Eric Ross y Sir James Frazer para mostrar cómo pueblos indígenas preparan la comida de manera diferente si la dan a miembros de su comunidad o a extranjeros. Además, los cita para demostrar cómo la distribución de la comida puede designar estatus a las figuras autoritarias dentro la comunidad.

Después de analizar cómo la comida puede ser un signo de demarcación entre comunidades geográficas, transfiere el enfoque a las comunidades religiosas y cómo usan la comida como signo de pertenencia a tal comunidad. Ofrece ejemplos de la Inquisición Española y luego explica brevemente los principios básicos de la cuaresma que tiene relevancia particular en *Chocolat*. El análisis de los textos comienza esta vez con *Chocolat* y expone como el tema de la comunidad y del «otro» es central en esta obra. Naturalmente, la comida subraya e incluso inicia los cambios en la comunidad de Lansquenet. Es interesante observar que en *Como agua para chocolate*, mientras se usa la comida para indicar la expansión y el colapso de la comunidad de la familia de la Garza; la jerarquía familiar se refleja una y otra vez en los rituales culinarios de la casa.

8.6. La semiótica de la comida como signo del poder

Esta parte empieza haciendo una breve digresión que considera aspectos del uso y abuso del poder con referencia a la comida. No tiene relación directa con el enfoque del trabajo, pero

evidencia claramente como se puede usar la comida para resaltar o incluso explotar el propio poder. Observa que las personas sin poder usan por veces su control sobre la comida rechazándola, para así establecer o ganar control sobre su propia vida. Esto no sólo se observa en situaciones políticas sino también en casos personales, como de adolescentes quienes quieren afirmar su autonomía ante sus padres, y desgraciadamente en extremo entre mujeres jóvenes que sufren de trastornos alimentarios.

Después de esta sucinta digresión se vuelve a un tema central en ambas obras. Aunque uno/as teórico/as¹⁸ afirman que sea imposible crear el concepto de lo «femenino» (por ejemplo Butler 1996, Elaine Showalter en Eagleton 1996), otro/as, incluso Laura Esquivel, distinguen entre lo «feminino» y lo «masculino». No obstante, reconocen que no tiene necesariamente nada que ver con el sexo biológico. Consideran el mundo femenino como íntimo, creativo e intuitivo, mientras ven el mundo masculino como un mundo de distancia, razón y del ejercicio de poder que a menudo es destructivo o represivo (Loewenstein 1994). Además, a veces alegan que una nación indígena muestre muchos aspectos de lo femenino, mientras una nación invasora sea agresiva y por eso masculina. Aunque Esquivel presente lo femenino como positivo y sus personajes «masculinos» no son por gran parte muy simpáticos, a lo largo de la historia europea las mujeres, y lo que se considera características «femeninas», eran definitivamente de segundo grado.

El próximo capítulo bosqueja las teorías de Mijaíl Bajtín sobre la carnavalización de la literatura. Estas teorías plantean que la literatura tiene características del Carnaval, es decir, las jerarquías se invierten por un período limitado, lo inferior se hace superior y viceversa. Estas jerarquías son tanto sociales como físicas; entonces, los señores ceden el paso a sus criados, la facultad superior (y «masculina») de la razón cede a las facultades fundamentales como comer, beber, excretar y fornicar, y la moderación cede al exceso. Incluso se puede decir que lo femenino vence a lo masculino. A consecuencia de eso se puede decir que hay intimidad (una característica «femenina») que no sería posible durante el resto del año. No obstante, es extremadamente importante acordarse de que el Carnaval es un periodo delimitado y cíclico que termina con la reafirmación de las jerarquías establecidas.

El análisis de *Cómo agua para chocolate* se centra en la lucha de poder entre Tita y su madre. Aunque Tita nunca tenga hijos, es el personaje más materno del libro y personifica lo femenino como figura a la vez materna y sensual en contraste, el de Mamá Elena incorpora todas las características «masculinas» de autoridad represiva y no natural. Se discute la cuestión de la castración planteada por Esquivel (Loewenstein 1994), y como la comida refleja o representa estos asuntos. El tema del poder en *Como agua para chocolate* acaba por

¹⁸ Usa aquí ambos géneros dado que cita solamente mujeres aunque este argumento obviamente no se limite a las teóricas femeninas.

explorar cómo la tercera hermana, Gertrudis, consigue ganar poder en el mundo masculino como generala de un ejército revolucionario y como la comida exalta esto.

La lucha de poder entre lo femenino y lo masculino también toca un papel central en *Chocolat*, y estos conceptos abstractos también se incorporan en personajes del respectivo sexo biológico. Vianne representa la intimidad y los marginalizados y apoya a los otros personajes a desarrollarse, mientras Reynaud está aferrado al poder que le da la iglesia y lucha constantemente contra lo natural que no corresponde a los roles sociales.

Ambas obras muestran las características carnales descritas por Bajtín en cierto punto. Tita deja de ser la inferior de la jerarquía familiar para hacerse la cabeza tácita de la casa, y representa lo femenino, el deseo sexual y naturalmente la comida en abundancia y, en algunos casos, lujuriosa. En varios instantes incluso sublevase a la autoridad de Mamá Elena. Vianne, también, incorpora lo femenino y lleva consigo comida que es rica y dulce y que pretende despertar la pasión. Como escribe Bajtín, los espacios públicos ganan importancia: sus amigos viajeros viven al aire libre, y su tienda se encuentra en la plaza mayor enfrente de la iglesia. No obstante, el ciclo de Carnaval no puede completarse. Elena y Reynaud no permiten que haya un periodo de libertinaje y en consecuencia cuanto más intentan agarrarse al poder, más se le escapa de las manos.

8.7. La semiótica de la comida en la construcción de la identidad

La parte anterior intentó demostrar que el rechazo a la autoridad de los padres es un paso fundamental para madurar. Con la nueva autonomía viene la necesidad de construir una propia identidad y de encontrar una voz para expresarla. Puesto que este proceso normalmente ocurre en la adolescencia, se supone que también ocurra a la vez al encontrar la propia sexualidad. No obstante, si una persona no puede hacer este proceso en la adolescencia, es posible que lo haga cuando ya sea adulto en los demás aspectos. En este caso, la figura «adulta» de quien tiene que emanciparse, no son necesariamente los padres, sino cualquier otra persona dominante que le controle la vida.

Esta parte comienza con una discusión del concepto de la identidad y de la posibilidad de construir una propia identidad basada en Benwell y Stokoe (2006). Plantea brevemente teorías históricas sobre la identidad, si es posible construirla y cómo hacerlo. Considera el papel de la performatividad que propone Butler (en Benwell/Stokoe 2006) y la importancia de ser parte de un grupo «marcado» para establecer la propia identidad. Sigue en el próximo capítulo por analizar la sexualidad en el contexto de la construcción de la identidad y cómo la comida está vinculada con el deseo sexual y la lujuria.

El último capítulo teórico de esta sección explora cómo se expresa la autonomía y el desarrollo de la propia voz. Se refiere de nuevo a los etnólogos para mostrar que a lo largo del tiempo el ser humano utiliza la comida para construir su identidad y expresarla. Después de este capítulo una breve digresión muestra cómo una nación puede construir una identidad tanto como un individuo. Bosqueja temas claves de la revolución mejicana que reflejan los aspectos de la construcción de la identidad y del proceso de desprenderse de otros que el trabajo ya propuso. Además de describir el fondo histórico de *Como agua para chocolate*, argumenta que México, tal como los personajes de los textos, se separó de un gobierno tirano e hipócrita para construir una nueva identidad autónoma y con una voz fuerte en forma de constitución. Analiza brevemente el papel de las mujeres en la revolución y el discurso que se usaba para hablar de ellas y que ellas mismas usaban para definirse. Acaba por considerar el papel de la comida y el discurso sobre la comida en la construcción de una identidad nacional.

El análisis de los textos empieza por una receta central de *Como agua para chocolate* – codornices en pétalos de rosas – que representa el colapso de la familia de la Garza, el principio de la rebelión de Tita y el despertar sexual de Gertrudis y su huida del rancho. Sigue por explorar cómo otras recetas le dan una voz a Tita aunque ella no lo hace adrede. Sus sentimientos se transfieren a la comida y todos los que la comen experimentan su frustración o su alegría. Sin quererlo, Tita exprime sus emociones y por hacerlo, se escapa del control absoluto de su madre. Hecho esto, el próximo paso es desprenderse conscientemente de ella, lo que hace después de la muerte de su sobrino. El nacimiento de su sobrina Esperanza y los equivalentes que encuentra en ella, le dan a Tita una segunda oportunidad. Está determinada de que Esperanza no tenga el mismo destino que ella misma y por ayudarla a que construya una identidad autónoma de su propia madre, Rosaura, Tita consigue lo mismo. Le enseña a Esperanza «los secretos de la vida y del amor a través de la cocina» (Esquivel 1989:204), y no se sorprenda que el plato que Tita sirve a la boda de Esperanza sea chiles en nogada de los colores de la bandera. Como México ha conseguido construir una identidad nueva y autónoma, también lo han hecho Esperanza y Tita.

Quizás sea sorprendente que muchos personajes construyan una identidad nueva en *Chocolat*, pero no el personaje principal. Es cierto que al final de la película de Hallström, Vianne tira las cenizas de su madre por la ventana para que el viento le libere de llevarla de país en país. Sin embargo, el personaje que cambia más en *Chocolat* – tanto en la película como en la novela – es Joséphine Muscat, quien está casada con el protegido de Reynaud, un hombre truculento y abusador. Como resultado de su amistad con Vianne, Joséphine encuentra el coraje para abandonar a su marido y desarrollar una identidad autónoma. La

comida acompaña cada paso de su viaje desde esposa pasiva y muda hasta mujer activa y elocuente que puede ayudar a los demás.

Otros personajes que se desprenden de una figura autoritaria y represiva son Armande y su nieto Luc. Armande es diabética, anciana y extremadamente astuta. Luc tartamudea y tiene una pasión secreta por la poesía. Vianne les une a pesar de su madre, la hija de Armande, que sólo les tiene reproche porque no quieren hacer lo que la sociedad de Lansquenet espera de ellos. Armande usa su control sobre su comida para decidir el fin de su vida, mientras los encuentros ilícitos de Luc y su abuela en la tienda de Vianne le permiten crecer y construir su personalidad, liberado de una madre represiva.

8.8. La semiótica del chocolate – estudio de caso

Acabada la parte principal de la tesis, esta sección analiza la semiótica del chocolate para resumir los argumentos principales del trabajo. Empieza por los orígenes del cacao y por analizar los nombres del mismo para explorar la semiótica en el discurso e ilustrar la importancia del significante y del significado. Este capítulo se refiere a las discusiones etno-lingüísticas para concluir que los aztecas y los mayas no eran los primeros que reconocían el valor del grano. No obstante, dado que no hay documentación para saber más de los pueblos antiguos, el próximo capítulo analiza como el chocolate y el cacao actuaban como signos en los costumbres de los aztecas y de los mayas. La manera de preparación se diferenciaba entre las dos culturas y tenían varias costumbres para honrar estatus dentro de sus comunidades. Por la mayor parte, valoraban extremadamente el cacao y tenían muchos rituales en cuanto al consumo.

La diferenciación entre comunidades étnicas se hizo muy clara con la llegada de los europeos a los países centroamericanos puesto que no conocían el cacao en absoluto y tampoco les gustaba cuando finalmente entendieron que era una sustancia de enorme importancia para las sociedades que querían dominar. Sin embargo, no perdieron tiempo cuando lo comprendieron, y lo usaban para mostrar su superioridad sobre los imperios conquistados. El trabajo sigue por analizar la importancia de la mujer en la difusión del chocolate por casi toda Europa durante la Edad moderna y cómo volvía a funcionar como demarcador, esta vez entre el norte burgués y protestante y el sur aristocrático y católico, dominado por España.

La invención de la prensa de cacao por van Houten en el siglo XVII cambió la naturaleza del «chocolate» para siempre. Ya no lo tomaba exclusivamente la aristocracia, sino que era asequible a todos. Con la disponibilidad en masa viene también una presión enorme sobre los productores. La cuestión de la ética en la producción de la comida y las campañas para el

comercio justo tienen mucha relevancia para la producción del cacao, azúcar y otros ingredientes del chocolate, mientras el debate sobre los beneficios y los peligros del mismo para la salud sigue en boga. La tesis vincula estas discusiones con el personaje de la diabética Armande y con la pregunta de quién tiene derecho de dictar la comida de otra persona, y, por extensión, de controlar su vida.

Acaba por analizar cómo el chocolate ha desarrollado una identidad semiótica a lo largo de los siglos y sobre todo cómo el discurso presente en los medios de comunicación toma un papel formador en nuestra sociedad desde la segunda guerra mundial. Recuerda los conceptos de lo «masculino» y lo «femenino» en cuanto al género (social), como los describe – entre otros/as – Laura Esquivel. Observa cómo los medios perpetúan sobre todo el mito de las paradojas de la mujer. Por un lado, la ven como pasiva y a la espera de un hombre, y por otro, a la vez sexual y deshumanizada, materna y tentadora. Los medios, y aún más la publicidad, presentan el chocolate como alimento muy feminizado, tanto en el contenido y en los personajes de la publicidad, como en la representación del mismo chocolate. No obstante, es interesante observar que ninguno de los textos utilice el chocolate para reforzar los estereotipos. En cambio, tanto en *Como agua para chocolate* como en *Chocolat* se representa la comida como medio para realizarse y construir una identidad. Hasta cierto punto forma parte crucial en la construcción de la expresión del personaje para así separarse de otros personajes dominantes o autoritarios.

8.9. Retrospectivo y prospectivo

La última parte de la tesis concluye el trabajo pero también propone varias posibilidades para desarrollar en más profundidad los temas principales. Por la naturaleza de este trabajo, fue imposible analizar todos los aspectos de la comida como signo. Por esta razón, se limitó el enfoque a las dos novelas y sus adaptaciones para el cine. Esto permitió que la tesis tuviera una estructura lógica y que no se perdiera la perspectiva. Simultáneamente, los cuatro aspectos elegidos ofrecen una visión amplia de posibilidades para considerar la comida como signo. El trabajo pretende entonces, dar una comprensión equilibrada del tema y acaba sugiriendo campos de estudio adicionales para el desarrollo futuro de la investigación.

El enfoque de la conclusión, en cuanto a los puntos prospectivos, es la aplicación de las teorías estudiadas en el mundo ficticio sobre el mundo «real», sobre todo en el ámbito político o de negocios. La manera en que la comida actúa como signo en los cuatro campos que esta tesis pretende analizar, tendrá mucha importancia para un mundo cada vez más internacional. Los fenómenos de la «aldea global» y de la globalización significan que la delineación entre comunidades tradicionales es año tras año más borrosa. Se ven los efectos

de eso en la comida de cada comunidad y en el discurso que tiene para adaptarse a esta influencia. Con la migración, es importante construir nuevas identidades tanto para los migrantes como para los lugares y las ciudades a dónde van. Para unos, la comida es el último recuerdo que traen de su patria; para otros, es un medio para identificarse con el nuevo ambiente. Las cuestiones del discurso, del colectivo y de la comunidad, del poder y de la construcción de identidad son entonces cuestiones, que no sólo son importantes en la literatura, sino que también – o quizás sobre todo – en el mundo «real», político y comercial. La comida funciona como signo a varios niveles en cuanto a estos temas. Después de estudiarla en *Como agua para chocolate* y en *Chocolat*, la tesis concluye sugiriendo que la semiótica de la comida puede ofrecer un método para abordar – o por lo menos investigar – estos asuntos en la realidad. La comida es parte fundamental de nuestra vida y de nuestras fantasías. Si comprendemos qué significa, podemos usarla para fortalecer nuestro discurso, nuestras comunidades, nuestras fuerzas e, inclusive, nuestro propio ser.

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10. Filmography

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Tortilla Soup, dir. Maria Ripoll 2001. USA: Samuel Goldwyn Films/Starz! Encore Entertainment.

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11. Appendix

Forum from www.wordreference.com discussing the meaning of the phrase “Como agua para chocolate”. Date of thread 18.02.06-26.03.07. URL:
<http://forum.wordreference.com/showthread.php?t=102564> (05.05.10).

WordReference.com Language Forums

Dictionary and thread title search: Spanish-English

WordReference Forums > Spanish-English / Español-Inglés > Spanish-English Vocabulary / Vocabulario Español-Inglés

como agua para chocolate...

Register

User Name: Password:

Spanish-English Vocabulary / Vocabulario Español-Inglés Palabras, frases y dichos.
Words, phrases and idioms.

1 Kleiner Bauch Trick:
1 Kg Bauchfett lösen sie pro woche durch diesen komischen alten Trick.

Trick 

Post Reply Page 1 of 2 1 2 >

Thread Tools

18th February 2006, 09:30 AM #1

 Senior Member

Join Date: Sep 2004
Native language: The Netherlands-Dutch
Posts: 289

como agua para chocolate...

Hola a todos!

I've been asking around but still don't get it:
what exactly does this mean: como agua para chocolate?

I've seen the film but I don't understand the title. I can translate but I want to know the meaning and what would you say in English, which expression?

Have a nice weekend!!
Ireille

☺ Wat ge niet wilt dat u geschiedt, doe dat ook een ander niet ☺

18th February 2006, 10:03 AM #2

 Senior Member

Join Date: Feb 2006
Native language: Brit now living in Spain
Posts: 620

Re: como agua para chocolate...

Según mi diccionario, se usa en Méjico y quiere decir (en inglés) furious.
A ver si alguien nos lo puede confirmar.

18th February 2006, 10:31 AM #3

 Senior Member

Join Date: Jul 2005
Location: Barcelona, la gran encisera
Native language: Catalunya: català i castellà
Age: 25
Posts: 1,722

Re: como agua para chocolate...

Quote:

La idea de mezclar el chocolate con la leche no surgió hasta el siglo XVIII; de ahí que la expresión 'como agua para chocolate', que significa estar hirviendo o airado, haga referencia a la manera americana de prepararlo.

Quote:

The idea of mixing chocolate with milk did not appear until the 18th century, giving rise to the Spanish expression 'like water in chocolate', which means that something is boiling or someone is angry and refers to the American way of preparing the drink.

Fuente: <http://www.parador.es/castellano/rev...14EnlaMesa.pdf>

18th February 2006, 01:28 PM #4

 Senior Member

Join Date: Oct 2005
Location: Yo, en México; mi corazón, en Madrid
Native language: Mexico - Spanish/English
Age: 43
Posts: 2,071

Re: como agua para chocolate...

I'd just like to add that, Como agua para chocolate is a very common saying in Mexico. This phrase in itself implies - as it has already been said - that the person who is "like water for chocolate" is at a moment of high passion, if I may, and by "passion" I mean deep sentiments.

Since the movie dates to early twentieth century, and deals with strong human emotions and their expression through food, the title is very appropriate.

Have a great one, all ☺

18th February 2006, 02:57 PM #5

 Senior Member

Join Date: Sep 2004
Native language: The Netherlands-Dutch
Posts: 289

Re: como agua para chocolate...

 made me think again...

un ejemplo: when the kid said to her: "wish I had a mom like you", she was deeply touched, she was felt? like 'agua como chocolate'.
Or is it just used in case of lovers?

Could you (anyone) give me some examples how to put the expression in a sentence, please?

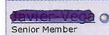
Thanks!!

 **Chau**

😊 Wat ge niet wilt dat u geschiedt, doe dat ook een ander niet 😊

 Quote

18th February 2006, 03:29 PM

 **sevenvego**
Senior Member

Join Date: Feb 2005
Location: El Defectuoso
Native language: Mexico espanol
Posts: 230

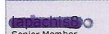
Re: como agua para chocolate...

I don't know much about cooking. But I guess that the origin of the expression is that when people prepare water in which to solve chocolate, they would heat it until the point of boiling.

So if that is true, "water for chocolate"="boiling water"="uncontrollable passions".

 Quote

18th February 2006, 05:50 PM

 **Impetito**
Senior Member

Join Date: Jan 2006
Location: El Defectuoso
Native language: Mexico-Spanish
Posts: 4,727

Re: como agua para chocolate...

The complete expression is "**estar** como agua para chocolate" or "**ponerse** como agua para chocolate", so:

The expression means being angry but being unable to express it in an open way. Don't talk to Maria because "está como agua para chocolate..." meaning she's absolutely mad but cannot really express it. Imagine somebody with smoke coming thorough her ears, but not being allowed or able to express it.
"Se puso como agua como chocolate cuando le dijeron que no tenía razón."
Roughly translated, "she got mad when somebody told her she wasn't right".
I hope it helps.

 Quote

18th February 2006, 06:23 PM

 **carolaparis**
Senior Member

Join Date: Feb 2006
Native language: Brit now living in Spain
Posts: 620

Re: como agua para chocolate...

Speechless with anger, then. Nothing like the title of the film in English!

 Quote

18th February 2006, 06:40 PM



 **lauraparis**
Senior Member

Join Date: Oct 2005
Location: Yo, en México; mi corazón, en Madrid
Native language: Mexico - Spanish/English
Age: 43
Posts: 2,071

Re: como agua para chocolate...

Indeed, it doesn't make much sense when translated into English as *Like Water for Chocolate*, and although in Spanish it does mean that someone is stark raving mad, its use for the movie has much to do with the sentiments that humans sometimes feel, and how they are (unable?) to express them (note that by sentiments I don't necessarily mean passionate love, but emotions in general, which are very deep).

I saw it a while back, and I don't remember the details, but I hope this helps and makes sense! 😊

 Quote

18th February 2006, 08:17 PM

 **lauraparis**
Senior Member

Join Date: Sep 2004
Native language: The Netherlands-Dutch
Posts: 289

Re: como agua para chocolate...

Oh sure!!! it makes sense!!!

bit by bit, I'm getting it 😊

think it's clear now 😊

thank you all for helping me out

besos!!



😊 Wat ge niet wilt dat u geschiedt, doe dat ook een ander niet 😊

 Quote

23rd February 2006, 03:50 PM



 **lauraparis**
Junior Member

Join Date: Feb 2006
Location: shanghai china
Native language: chinese spanish taiwan
Posts: 8

como agua para chocolate

from the book by laura esquivel
del libro escrito por laura esquivel

i really need to know what the phrase "literally", means, and how she might have other symbolism. also why she made it as her title.

thanx lot!

ps, this book rocks!

 Quote

23rd February 2006, 03:54 PM



 **lauraparis**
Senior Member

Join Date: Sep 2004
Location: Puerto Rico
Native language: Puerto Rico/Español & English
Posts: 13,508

Re: como agua para chocolate

Hi  and welcome to WordReference.

como agua para chocolate = like water for chocolate which means that things/events are or are going to get very heated (<- direct symbolism to water needing to be extra hot in order to make good chocolate)

Saludos,
[img alt="smiley face icon"]

[Quote](#)

23rd February 2006, 04:31 PM

#13

Junior Member

Join Date: Feb 2006
Location: shanghai china
Native language: chinese spanish taiwan
Posts: 6

Re: como agua para chocolate

u guys are awesome, you reply so fast. you people are the best, this is an awesome forum. if anybody needs help with chinese or other spanish things or even english vocab i'm willing to help. i'm dedicated to make my contribution to the forum. i'm lovin it, (like mcdonald's)

[Quote](#)

23rd February 2006, 04:34 PM

#14

Senior Member

Join Date: Jan 2006
Location: Puerto Rico
Native language: English & Spanish - Puerto Rico & US
Posts: 16,272

Re: como agua para chocolate

Quote:

Originally Posted by [img alt="user icon"]
from the book by laura esquivel
del libro escrito por laura esquivel

i really need to know what the phrase "literally", means, and how she might have either symbolism. also why she made it as her title.

thanx lot!

ps, this book rocks!

The literal meaning: "Like hot water ready for chocolate."

I'd say she was "hot and ready" for a sweet, all-consuming passionate affair.

[Quote](#)

23rd February 2006, 04:42 PM

#15

Senior Member

Join Date: Mar 2005
Location: New York
Native language: USA English
Posts: 743

Re: como agua para chocolate

Thanks from me too! I never realized that.

[Quote](#)

23rd February 2006, 05:10 PM

#16

Senior Member

Join Date: Jan 2006
Location: El Defectuoso
Native language: Mexico-Spanish
Posts: 4,727

Re: como agua para chocolate

I would agree with [img alt="user icon"], check the other posts. The phrase is a Mexican adagio, and i'm sorry to tell you that most of the post in this thread are mere speculations about the meaning of the phrase. I hope the following gives you some right info.
cheers

The complete expression is "**estar** como agua para chocolate" or "**ponerse** como agua para chocolate", so:

The expression means being angry but being unable to express it in an open way. Don't talk to Maria because "está como agua para chocolate..." meaning she's absolutely mad but cannot really express it. Imagine somebody with smoke coming thorough her ears, but not being allowed or able to express it.
"Se puso como agua como chocolate cuando le dijeron que no tenía razón."
Roughly translated, "she got mad when somebody told her she wasn't right".
I hope it helps.

[Quote](#)

23rd February 2006, 07:01 PM

#17

Senior Member

Join Date: Jan 2006
Location: Western Massachusetts
Native language: English, USA
Posts: 2,187

Re: como agua para chocolate

Quote:

Originally Posted by [img alt="user icon"]
I would agree with [img alt="user icon"], check the other posts. The phrase is a Mexican adagio, and i'm sorry to tell you that most of the post in this thread are mere speculations about the meaning of the phrase. I hope the following gives you some right info.
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"Se puso como agua como chocolate cuando le dijeron que no tenía razón."
Roughly translated, "she got mad when somebody told her she wasn't right".
I hope it helps.

¡Que interesante! It makes perfect sense in terms of the story. She was not allowed to show her anger at her mother (or her sister) when her mother tried to prevent her from getting married and having a normal life.
Gracias por el significado de la frase.

[Quote](#)

23rd February 2006, 07:04 PM

#18

Senior Member

Join Date: Jan 2006
Location: Puerto Rico
Native language: English & Spanish - Puerto Rico & US
Posts: 16,272

Re: como agua para chocolate

Quote:

Originally Posted by [Masood](#)
I would agree with [Masood](#), check the other posts. The phrase is a Mexican adagio, and i'm sorry to tell you that most of the post in this thread are mere speculations about the meaning of the phrase. I hope the following gives you some right info.
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"Se puso como agua como chocolate cuando le dijeron que no tenía razón."
Roughly translated, "she got mad when somebody told her she wasn't right".
I hope it helps.

You're right. In Puerto Rico we use the same phrase, with the same meaning. Duh!

7th July 2006, 12:11 PM

[Starla](#)
Senior Member

Join Date: Jun 2006
Native language: "Std." German with (mainly) southern tendencies
Posts: 4,061

Re: como agua para chocolate...

¡Hola!

A mí también me intrigaba saber lo que quería decir. Me encanta la peli -creo que la vi unas tres o cuatro veces- pero no le vi en absoluto el sentido al título. Luego busqué un poco y di con este hilo ya algo "entradito en meses".

Muy interesante, muchas gracias por sacarme de mi anterior duda 😊

Quote:

Originally Posted by [Masood](#)
I'd just like to add that, *Como agua para chocolate* is a very common saying in Mexico. This phrase in itself implies - as it has already been said - that the person who is "like water for chocolate" is at a moment of high passion, if I may, and by "passion" I mean deep sentiments.

Por lo que sé, el título que le pusieron en alemán -a contrario del en inglés- no es la traducción literal del original, sino (la traducción literal del título en alemán al castellano es ...)

☺) "Chocolate dulciamargo".

[Masood](#) -por si estás por ahí...-, ¿tiene sentido este título desde un punto de vista mexicano, y cuadra con la idea que quiere transmitir la película?

Gracias!

¡Saludos!

بالنسبة للعربية - PLEASE use Arabic script for Arabic words and terms whe replying to my threads. شكرًا جزيلاً

20th March 2007, 08:09 PM

[Laura Esquivel](#)
Member

Join Date: Mar 2007
Native language: Finland, Finnish
Posts: 32

Como agua para chocolate

Una obra de Laura Esquivel, pero qué significa?

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Zusammenfassung (Deutsch)

Ohne Essen kann man nicht leben. Essen ist somit nicht nur ein Grundelement unseres körperlichen Wohlbefindens, sondern es spielt auch eine wichtige Rolle in der Entwicklung des Menschen als Individuum sowie als Mitglied einer Gemeinschaft. Obwohl es unmöglich wäre, eine umfassende Analyse der Semiotik des Essens, bzw. auf welche Weise Essen als Zeichen verwendet wird, im Rahmen einer Diplomarbeit zu fassen, versucht diese Studie anhand zweier Romane und ihrer Verfilmungen einen Einblick in dieses Thema zu gewähren. *Como agua para chocolate* (Laura Esquivel 1989/ Alfonso Arau 1992), und *Chocolat* (Joanne Harris 1999/Lasse Hallström 2000) teilen, obwohl Unterschiede in Handlung und Handlungsort bestehen, mehrere Themen, die u.a. die vier Bereiche dieser Arbeit im Bezug auf Essen veranschaulichen:

- Die Semiotik als Zeichen im Diskurs
- Die Semiotik als Zeichen innerhalb und zwischen Gemeinschaften
- Die Semiotik als Zeichen der Macht
- Die Semiotik als Zeichen in der Identitätsbildung

Bei jedem dieser Schwerpunkte werden theoretische Ansätze aus verschiedenen wissenschaftlichen Feldern behandelt, danach werden die Texte jeweils in Detail und im Bezug auf das relevante Thema analysiert. Somit soll der Einblick in die „reale“ bzw. fiktionale Welt ein größeres Verständnis der anderen ermöglichen. Der Hauptteil der Arbeit endet mit einer Zusammenfassung der wichtigsten Argumente in Form einer Fallstudie, die auf der Anwendung dieser Theorien mit Schokolade basiert. Zum Schluss bietet die Arbeit eine Aussicht auf weitere Forschungsmöglichkeiten mit besonderem Fokus auf die praktische Anwendung der Semiotik des Essens als Instrument der sozialen Integration in einer globalisierten Welt.

Abstract (English)

Food forms such an integral part of our lives that many are unaware of the extent to which it reflects but also influences the world around us. While an extensive or fully comprehensive study of the semiotics of food would be beyond the scope of a Master's thesis, this study aims to offer an insight into how food can be used as a sign or part of a sign by analysing two novels and their film adaptations: *Como agua para chocolate* (Laura Esquivel 1989/Alfonso Arau 1992) and *Chocolat* (Joanne Harris 1999/Lasse Hallström 2000). Drawing on semioticians such as Umberto Eco, Roland Barthes and Daniel Chandler as well as various academics from the respective fields of this transdisciplinary study, the semiotics of food are examined under four broad headings:

- the semiotics of food in discourse
- the semiotics of food at a collective level
- the semiotics of food as a sign of power
- the semiotics of food in the construction of identity.

In each section, a theoretical introduction and examples from the “real” world are given before the texts are analysed in close detail with respect to the relevant topic. It is hoped that the combination of examples from both the “real” and the fictional worlds will allow for a greater understanding of how food operates as a sign or as part of a sign in both. The main body of the study concludes by summarising the main arguments in the form of a case study based around the application of these theories to chocolate. Finally, the entire thesis ends with a brief conclusion and an outlook for further study with the particular emphasis on the practical application of the semiotics of food as a means for social integration in a globalised world.

Curriculum Vitae

Personal Details

Name:	Miya Komori	Date of Birth:	14.03.1984
Place of Birth:	Traralgon, Australia	Nationality:	British

Education

2007-	University of Vienna, Austria. Modern Languages (Romanistik)/Spanish; minor in History of Art. Mag.Phil.
2002-2006	Gonville and Caius College, University of Cambridge, UK. Modern and Medieval Languages/Spanish and German. MA (Cantab). Senior Exhibition (in top 25% of class for two years).
2004-2005	Universidad de Zaragoza, Saragossa, Spain. ERASMUS Exchange Year.
2003	Cambridge Society Scholarship for “Internationalen Hochschulkurs für Germanistik”, Humboldt Universität, Berlin, Germany.
2006	St George’s School for Girls, Edinburgh, UK. A-Levels (Matura), grade A: French, German, History; AS-levels, grade A: Maths, English. Academic Scholarship.

Work Experience

2008-	Exchange Lecturer for English Business Communication, WU Vienna University of Business and Economics, Austria.
2007	Language course teacher, MODUL Private University, Vienna, Austria.
2006-2008	Language Assistant in Business Colleges (HAK Floridsdorf, HAK 1, BHAK13), Vienna, Austria.
2004-	Freelance translation, proof-reading and language teaching (in academic, business and general fields), Saragossa, Spain and Vienna, Austria.

Publications

- due 2010 “Going North: food and language contact in Spanish migration cinema”; co-editor with Verena Berger (University of Vienna), *Polyglot Cinema: Language Contact and Migration in France, Italy, Portugal and Spain*. Vienna: LIT.
- due 2010 “Finding a voice in the Kitchen: Discourse and Identity in Laura Esquivel’s *Como agua para chocolate*”, in *Paradigmata: Die Zeitschrift für Menschen und Diskurs*.
- 2008 “LPC to Training Contract – Making it Pay”, *Top Training Contracts: A Top Employers Site*.
URL: <http://www.training-contract.co.uk/lpc-to-training.html>