

Roadrunner: A Film about Anthony Bourdain

Morgan Neville, director

CNN Films, HBO Max, and Focus Features, 2021

119 mins.

A recurring quip on the BBC podcast “Kermode and Mayo’s Film Review” (aka “Wittertainment”) is that *Jaws* is “not about a shark.” *Roadrunner: A Film about Anthony Bourdain* prompts a similar conclusion about its stated subject. Nominally about the late chef who first shot to fame with his 2000 “tell all” memoir, *Kitchen Confidential: Adventures in the Culinary Underbelly*, and the journey from behind those kitchen doors to the media star who ate noodles with President Barack Obama in Vietnam for an episode of CNN’s “Parts Unknown,” it is less a film about Bourdain than one about absence, artifice, and the limits of storytelling.

There is plenty of Bourdain in the film, much of the footage previously unseen because it predates his media persona: a young chef ordering vegetables on an old-school mobile device while sitting on the pavement outside Les Halles (the New York restaurant where he became executive chef in 1998); “Tony” at home with then-wife (1985–2005) Nancy, who brings him baba ghanoush and apple juice while he clumsily types with two fingers and chain smokes; Bourdain in the kitchen of Les Halles receiving the news that *Kitchen Confidential* was about to be a *New York Times* best-seller, after which he proclaims, somewhat ominously, “Anything that happens to me beyond that [kitchen] door, I’m suspicious of.” Indeed, this archival material is so rich in nostalgic detail as to almost raise suspicion itself: who, in an era before social media, could have predicted that these private moments of a chef who never sought fame might one day have value for a wide audience? Why was this recorded in the first place?

That question is never answered directly but the film’s narrative is one of an unlikely rise to fame—or to the “publicness” that resulted from emerging from behind kitchen doors to traveling the world with a camera crew in tow. It was not an easy transition: behind-the-scenes footage of his first trip to Japan for “A Cook’s Tour” (Food Network, 2000) exposes a sceptical figure still coming to terms with the construction he’d signed up for. As he narrates to the camera while being filmed walking “alone” in a rural setting on that occasion:

To be honest I’m not totally alone, because clearly someone’s shooting this. I always love those “desert scenes”—alone in the desert, yeah, but who else’s footprints are those? But look, this is pretty cool. And . . . well, I’ll tell you this—I’m having a lot more fun

walking forward than the camera person is walking backwards, I’m sure.

Such scenes may be useful reminders to media scholars and lay viewers of the edifice of various “reality” genres—food and travel among them—that rely on extensive editorial manipulation to appear as seamless as possible to assist the viewer’s suspension of disbelief. But they should not come as a surprise.

Neither should the story of its now-absent protagonist: “There is no happy ending,” viewers are reminded by Bourdain’s own voice-over in the trailer for the film, which will not stand up as a “bio-pic” as much as an homage to both a film subject and a director—less a *Julie and Julia* (2009, directed by Nora Ephron about the lives of Julia Child and food blogger Julie Powell) than a *Supermensch: The Legend of Shep Gordon* (2014, directed by Mike Myers about the erstwhile manager of, *inter alia*, Alice Cooper, Teddy Pendergrass, and, significantly for the food world, Emeril Lagasse, whom Gordon claims to have been instrumental in transforming into the first modern “celebrity chef”). With an opening montage of Bourdain’s musical and linguistic inspirations—Ernest Hemingway, Hunter S. Thompson, Iggy Pop, Lou Reed—and later clips of the chef being interviewed by the likes of David Letterman and Oprah Winfrey, *Roadrunner* follows the cinematic structure of a “fallen star” documentary like *Amy* ([Winehouse], 2015, directed by Asif Kapadia): dynamic, voyeuristic, and unsettling.

There is much here of potential value to film and media scholars, particularly as a pointed example on several levels of what sociologist Erving Goffman described as the difference between “front stage” and “back stage” in his seminal 1956 book, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, and in the distinction cultural anthropologists use between an “etic” (outside, looking in) and “emic” (aiming to endorse an internal validity, even from the outside) perspective. Yet, likely to overshadow any focus on Bourdain, specifically, is the meta-discourse around the director’s choice to employ an Artificial Intelligence (A.I.) firm to digitally generate fifty seconds of the chef’s “voice” in an almost two-hour film (Simonite 2021)—words that “Bourdain himself had written . . . He just—to the best of our knowledge—never uttered them aloud” (Rosner 2021)—and which has dominated much of the film’s media coverage since its release.

The debate about the ethics of such a choice is beyond the scope of this review, but also embedded in it, to the extent of the performative aspect of what we recognize as the authenticity of “food media.” The opening segment of the film shows

a beach with gently rolling waves, and we hear the familiar voice of its main character:

It is considered useful, and enlightening, and therapeutic, to think about death for a few minutes a day. What actually happens to my physical remains is of zero interest to me . . . I don't want a party . . . "Reported dead." Unless it could bring some entertainment value—in a subversive way . . . throw me in a woodchipper and spray me into Harrod's in the middle of the rush hour. That would be pretty epic. I wouldn't mind being remembered in that way.

If we accept these words as coming from Bourdain—who was sadly “reported dead” by suicide on June 8, 2018—it's also reasonable to assume that he would *not* like to be remembered as a subject of controversies about misinformation and the scourge of deepfakes that presently dominate our mediascape. But for fans of the chef, television host, and man—as far as his viewers “knew” him—the knowledge that he avoided needing to confront such matters is about as comforting as just seeing him in “person” again.

—*Signe Rousseau, University of Cape Town*

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On an Empty Stomach: Two Hundred Years of Hunger Relief

Tom Scott-Smith

Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 2020
288 pp. Illustrations. \$35.00 (hardcover); \$16.99 (eBook)

Those familiar with contemporary famine relief scenes may have chanced upon one of the more ubiquitous products in refugee camps and feeding centers. Plumpy’Nut, a French-manufactured sachet of peanut paste, dried milk, oil, sugar, as well as a number of essential vitamins and minerals, is meant to be kneaded in the packet before being opened and consumed. If reasonably tasty—often described as a more cloying sort of peanut butter—this quality is not its primary draw. Rather, three sachets are “prescribed” each day to children suffering from severe malnutrition in the absence of more varied and fulsome foods.

Less well-known, perhaps, are the many other objects and foods that govern daily life in spaces of hunger, like the relief food “Corn-Soy-Blend,” a bag of protein-fortified maize meal offered to slightly better-fed but still malnourished children.

Aid workers distinguish between children better-suited to Plumpy’Nut or CSB through the use of a bright plastic strip that measures the “mid-upper arm circumference,” a metric designed to assess malnutrition through the wastage of subcutaneous fat. These tools are all governed through manuals like the *Sphere Handbook*, a voluminous text used by four hundred humanitarian agencies to plan emergency relief projects in granular detail.

Tom Scott-Smith, a professor of refugee studies and forced migration, has turned his attention in *On an Empty Stomach* to the materiality and “thinginess” of relief feeding since the onset of reflexively humanitarian projects in the middle of the nineteenth century. At the heart of his anthropologically informed but primarily historical assessment is the disconnect between the aesthetic worlds of food and eating and the contemporary focus on nutrients and nutrition that overdetermine the presence of relief aid. The South Sudanese refugees who might be “prescribed” CSB or Plumpy’Nut might in fact be starving for *kisra*, a fermented, sorghum- or wheat-based flatbread served with okra, goat meat, or lentils. That these desires have no place in the world of relief feeding is, for Scott-Smith, a sign of how hunger has come to be measured in fully nutritional terms in the modern world. But moreover, he reads it as a sign that humanitarian hunger relief “is influenced by prevailing patterns of power, systems of thought, and approaches to governance” (xii), all of which have been radically transformed over the last two centuries.

These transformations, according to Scott-Smith, have been found in four historical currents. A global convergence upon the primacy of bureaucracy and rationalization has rendered hunger relief a project “based on social distance rather than proximity,” manageable through the accumulation of statistics, but at the cost of personal connection and awareness of people’s culture, background, and biography (13). An emphasis on equality and universalism has dispensed of nineteenth-century valuations of worth and subjective measurements of value, though once again in a way that sidesteps questions of culture or community. Commerce and capitalism have often turned hunger relief into a parallel project of surplus disposal, offering the poor or dispossessed “foods they have little desire to eat” (13), with starvation rendered a market opportunity. And the progressively increased role of modern science and technology in hunger relief efforts have rendered starvation a fully expert domain, with hunger “often tackled without political engagement” (14). Perhaps most damning, Scott-Smith reminds us, is that many of the new technical foods range, bluntly, from unappealing to “disgusting.”