Books In Review

Appetites and Anxieties: Food, Film, and the Politics of Representation
Cynthia Baron, Diane Carson, and Mark Bernard
Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2014
viii + 334 pp. Illustrations. $31.95 (paper)

Appetites and Anxieties by Cynthia Baron, Diane Carson, and Mark Bernard comprises a bold advancement upon the growing body of scholarly work on the food film genre. The authors enlist the burgeoning work in food studies as a structure for informing how food has meaning and how it facilitates narrative detail in food films. With particular and detailed reference to prominent scholars on food studies—Warren Belasco, Carole Counihan, Marion Nestle, Penny Van Esterick—the seminal concept of foodways comes into play as incisive in understanding how the representation of food practices in food films connects with larger cultural structures.

The term foodways refers to the full trajectory of how connection with food proceeds in stages, each identified with a separate sort of activity: “from performance, production, and procurement to preparation, presentation, consumption, cleanup, and disposal” (p.18). The singular dominant focus of how food plays a role in mainstream film narrative is consumption, usually to depict the pleasure in eating (p.9). Examining films that feature food prominently provides insights into the cultural politics evident in film that adhere to food consumption especially. Moreover, placing a focus upon that full trajectory of activities, foodways-informed ideological analysis of film “contextualizes and denaturalizes mainstream representations of food” (pp.39, 41). The insights gained cohere with analysis of the film industry, as well as genre and auteurist studies (pp.51–52).

The authors provide a detailed account of the interlinkage of the corporate agendas of the food and film industries, evident in the rise of product placement in mainstream film, but also in the synergistic alignment of the cultural values that the two industries promote, and the fast-paced pleasures of consuming that both likewise sell in mass volume (pp.53, 61, 82). The aspects of foodways less palatable than what encourages pleasure in consuming food—the industry methods, the labor of procurement, preparation, and cleanup—are what mainstream food films avoid (pp.49, 61, 65).

The greater strength, though, of the text lies in the several close readings of seminal films that do not follow mainstream film’s easy acquiescence to the purposes of the food industry. Interesting examples of how food has meaning in ways other than what is on the dinner table, how food lies centrally in the unfolding of characterizations in film, and how people interact as they share a meal, can be found mostly outside of the mainstream, where the exploration of complex psychological, social, and cultural effects can reveal subtler treatment. In this context the authors provide wonderful discussions of selected scenes in fiction films: Bagdad Café (Percy Aldon, 1988), 301/302 (Cheol-su Park, 1995), The Texas Chainsaw Massacre (Tobe Hooper, 1974), How Tasty Was My Little Frenchman (Nelson Pereira dos Santos, 1971), Bugsy (Barry Levinson, 1991), Mysterious Skin (Gregg Araki, 2004), and Mr. Saturday Night (Billy Crystal, 1992). An appendix presents a fascinating interview with a Hollywood food stylist, Ann Schultz, who has managed food presentation during film production for dozens of productions over decades of work (pp.251–62).

There are also penetrating discussions of documentary films: Food, Inc. (Robert Kenner, 2009) and The Plow that Broke the Plains (Pare Lorentz, 1936). Documentary films that challenge the corporate food industry find little accommodation in how the corporate film industry controls production, promotion, and distribution of commercial film (pp.201–7).

The authors write progressively about ongoing agendas in food film scholarship. They include in passing a discussion of what constitutes the food film genre, yet without explicating at length what defines the genre (pp.83–88). Previous texts on food film have sought to catalog every time somebody ate something on camera, and thus there is little need to replicate or extend that kind of treatment, nor to sort out what might
comprise the semantics and syntax that would define the food film genre. (Very useful selective lists of food films and food studies texts are provided in appendices.) Rather, the foodways approach offers a way to focus on how food may appear in singular scenes with meaningful import, and without food being discussed as central to how a film fits into a particular film genre.

The text does invoke established theoretical structures that define standard research agenda in film studies: historicist studies, genre studies, auteur studies, national cinema studies, and, primarily, ideological analysis. This compound structuralism is amplified by the structuralism of foodways studies, and especially on the common ground of ideological analysis. The movement in the discourse and its particular analyses thus consistently rises toward the general and abstract—how specific film events reflect a larger social ideological phenomenon. Even the exercise in auteurist readings points to how filmmakers’ personal flair underscores aspects of social construction.

Within the conceptual apparatus that the text draws from food studies is the binary distinction between utopian and dystopian (pp.26–27). Utopian food films envision harmonious community in the sharing of food, while dystopian food films evince conflict relative to food. This distinction becomes an organizing principle for the chapters of the text, and it initiates detailed analysis of individual films. But as can be expected with any analytical binarism, it is the applicability of that conceptual structure to deeply variant multiplicities where it fails to capture nuance. In Eat Drink Man Woman (Ang Lee, 1994), widower master chef Chu prepares an elaborate Sunday dinner every week for his three grown daughters, nominally to affirm family cohesion. He is, though, painfully reluctant to explain to them that he aims to marry a woman who is far closer to their age than to his, and whom they treat as a sister. Secretly, he wishes that they would all leave the household so that both he and they could carry on with their separate lives. The onset of a complete loss of his ability to taste flavors nevertheless ruins all the food, which his daughters can hardly eat as a result. It is only when they have all moved out that the stress is relieved, and his taste returns. Therefore, it falls short to focus upon the food porn of the display of food in the opening scene and summarily to designate the film utopian (pp.20, 33, 85, 111).

Applying that same binary distinction to selected scenes in films by John Ford shows how difficult it is to make such a judgment when harmony and conflict intertwine, which is not uncommon for Ford films or for many films. Thus, it turns out that character interactions involving food registers somewhere vaguely on “the utopian/dystopian spectrum” in particular scenes in Ford films (pp. 170-72). But this simple binary distinction does not suffice, with or without association with food, to identify all of what is harmonious and what all is conflicting in those scenes. Nor does the utopian/dystopian distinction suffice to penetrate all of what is happening dramatically in those scenes. Thus, in reference to some films, the application of the utopian/dystopian distinction becomes misleading rather than insightful. These are, though, brief discussions in passing, in comparison to the longer treatments, where this binarism is not the sole conceptual cue.

But these are minor limitations, only briefly evident, in a book that undertakes to show “how foodways analysis contributes to ideological studies” of film, so as to “show that personal food beliefs and behaviors are joined to cultural norms and values, and that, to varying degrees, personal food choices mirror or challenge dominant belief and practices” (pp.225–26). Baron, Carson, and Bernard have collaborated to construct a rich but lively exposition of how foodways elevate the study of food film to a level of greater sophistication and penetrating insight.

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Secrets from the Greek Kitchen: Cooking, Skills, and Everyday Life on an Aegean Island
David E. Sutton
Oakland: University of California Press, 2014
xv + 256 pp. Illustrations. $34.95 (paper)

In his newest book about the Greek island of Kalymnos, Secrets from the Greek Kitchen, David E. Sutton gives cooking the place it deserves in anthropological research: at the center of studies of everyday life. For Kalymnians the flavor of food constitutes a core social value, and taste, Sutton argues further, is a total social fact. Studying cooking as a cultural practice thus also allows exploring cultural reproduction more generally. Using ethnographic observation to show how cooking matters on Kalymnos, the author argues against the claim of the demise of homemade food and the loss of cooking skills in contemporary Western societies.

Theoretically, Sutton situates his project within material culture studies, anthropology of the senses, and anthropology of learning and skill. He proposes a synesthetic or “gustemological” approach to studying cooking (see also Sutton 2010), which he puts into practice by using video recording. Since these videos are accessible online (on UC Press’s website and on YouTube) they also present his research in an innovative way. Despite an evocative description of the multisensory and synesthetic dimensions of cooking knowledge, however, his