

# SENSE OF PLACE AND TASTE IN A TOUCH OF SPICE

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In our time, films are widely recognised in educational, cultural and literary studies. When a film's vivid visual and audible aspects completes its well written script, it makes it worthwhile to be taken as a subject matter for such studies. In many respects, the sights and sounds of films are quite distinct from those created in literary works. "Its modes of productions and contexts of reception" differ. (Pope; 1998:3) A film's enduring effect remains in the mind for a long time, if there is a harmony between the verbal communications and the filmed image sequences. The Greek director and script writer Tassos Boulmetis' film "A Touch of Spice" is a dramatic-lyric narrative cinema which gives an account of the events lived in a family both in Istanbul and in Athens, dating from fifties to the mid-sixties. These two settings are strongly emphasized as two different environments that create different sense of place in the minds and souls of the characters.

The paper will focus on the cultural codes that provide evidence and reference beyond the script. The script is mainly overloaded with the cuisine culture of the Greek population of Turkey that comes in a cluster of images and symbolic codes that highlight the theme of longing for one's own past and place. The film consists of contrasts and pairings in its structure. The contrasted elements function fundamentally to be pursued in a certain way in order to depict a reality of a way of life. It is difficult to distinguish one code from another; therefore, the symbolic and cultural codes will be used each in a turn through examples for the interpretation of the film. There are also recurrent patterns in settings of place and images of taste which are successfully schematized. The story has a binary structure, a structure of paired opposites almost made of two contrasting halves. In narration, one witnesses the story from Fannis's childhood point of view and at the same time from his adulthood which is accompanied with his Greek family's point of view. Both are very vividly interrelated within a social background and there seems to be no marked difference between them. One observes the fact that innocence surpasses the restrictions of politics. A sense of innocence is pervasive throughout the film.

It is written at the back cover of the DVD case of the film that "Fanis is a man torn between his Greek ethnicity and his emotional roots in Turkey, the country of his birth. Using the device of cuisine as a metaphor for national identity and personal feelings, we see Fanis grow from a boy whose grandfather imparts culinary and philosophical expertise from the Aladdin's cave of his spice shop, to a young man with true passion for food. Departed to Greece with his family as a young boy, Fanis returns home after 35 years for an emotional reunion with his grandfather...And his first love (Saime). A bitter sweet journey of the senses, set against the historical backdrop of the deportation of Greeks from Istanbul".

The film is divided into three parts. It starts with "Appetisers", continues with "Main Course" and finally concludes with "Dessert". One can infer that most of the scenes take place in the kitchen, dealing with the cooking culture. But the final title Dessert misleads one as the film doesn't finalize with a happy ending. The two lovers cannot unite. A bitter sweet taste merely remains in the memory. We have a large Greek family teaching the new members how to cook with spices. While the film is on one hand depicting the traditional Greek culture, on the other through dialogues tries to show how attached they are to the taste they want to obtain. It is a taste that they recall and cannot give up. To approach the film from a single aspect would not be fair. Its historical and political message weighs as effective as its cultural and psychological one. It's like a film being shot for a call to various humanistic values. To have a love for the sense of place is like longing for the sense of taste produced by the touch of different spices. In a way it is quite similar to a longing for the other. However, the description of the sensory impact on a child like Fanis is not actually displayed differently from that of an elderly person. Spice is the symbol of taste and the sense of spice will linger and linger on, just like the bitterness felt from being deported. It functions like a longing for one's own homeland.

The opening scene is notable for its vast dimension of space with its stars circulating in their orbits in a cosmic world. We have a philosophic reflection of space orchestrated with a meaningfully composed deep music by Evanthia Roboutsika. When one has the sense of being insignificant on earth, suddenly a red orbit slowly starts zooming in, becoming more distinct and turning into a red umbrella. The scene is extended for a few minutes until we pass into the real world with the printing machine in the department of Astronomy that starts recording a view of space on a film for the students to discuss. A unity is maintained between the opening and ending of the film.

The ending recaptures the spectator's interest with almost the same thematic note on the universe when finally after his grandfather passes away in Istanbul and Fanis separates from his old beloved friend Saime. He opens the old dusty shutters of the spice shop and starts to relive the past on the same table in the attic where he used to sit and imagine as he learned from his grandfather the story of the spices, their taste and meaning related to the universe. He finds in the dust some small red berries which symbolize Saime's red umbrella, a cinnamon bark which stands for Aphrodite with its sweet and bitter taste, and salt, the fundamental flavour that goes into all dishes. Like in the opening scene he draws on the table a universe with spices as his grandfather did and then blows them all from the table in joy implying complacency. He pays his tribute to his grandfather by recalling his childhood years.

There is a conflict which they are not directly related to, they read about it in newspapers and hear rumours of it. There happens to be war on an island, but its consequences endanger their peaceful existence in their beloved city. These events are given in a concealed manner. There is also a universal anti-war message that reveals the fact that people who are unaware of the hatred that exists among the countries' policies will suffer enormously for the decisions taken in their name. There was an upheaval in Istanbul where the stores of the non-Muslims were plundered and with the addition of the war in Cyprus a deportation policy was started for non-citizen Greeks.

In the sixties, the major character Fanis's grandfather who owns a spice-shop in Istanbul is a Greek Turkish citizen, but his son-in-law is not, and now it is too late for him to become a Turkish citizen, but he is given the choice to either become a Muslim and stay with his family or leave Istanbul for good. He chooses to go to Greece, a decision he confesses later to have regretted. The hardships of being a minority are highlighted throughout the whole film. It is ironic that Fanis's family is a minority in Istanbul and also in Greece. Being a part of a minority seems to be their fate.

The grandfather is always seen advising his customers to try out spices other than the ones they are accustomed to. When a young wife objects saying that the guests will dislike the dish she cooks, he says, "they might at first," but using cinnamon instead of cumin in meat balls will serve like magic. It will enable them to directly look at each other's eyes. The metaphor is also symbolic. Looking at each other's eyes is realizing the fact that they are expected to bond and enjoy each other's company to make life meaningful.

The first part ends at the train station which is an effective departure scene. There are three train station scenes. The first one is memorable for the embracement between Turkish and Greek friends during their departure. It's a quite moving emotional farewell scene. The two children, Fanis and Saime promise to visit, cook and dance again when they get together again. The second train station scene is an unsuccessful attempt to visit his girlfriend in Turkey. Dislocated from his roots, friends and place, he becomes quite bored and he secretly runs away from home in the middle of the night with his tin toy box of a miniature kitchen, which was a present from Saime, to get on a train to go back to Istanbul. The third train station scene is at the end when this time Saime leaves Fanis to unite with her husband in Ankara. In all these scenes they are desperately forced to separate bitterly from each other, but at the same time they serve as a means of expressing their affection for each other sweetly and sensitively.

In a few scenes the hardships of living in a new environment is depicted through an exaggeratedly humorous style. For instance, Fanis's grandfather's friends in the first part of the film, as they had to be deported from Istanbul, to their own country in Athens are described in a comic way. On their way to meet their friend who was expected to visit his family they come across a lady on the street who asks for an address. They altogether turn right, then left, east and west, futilely searching for a reference point, but there is none for them. It is implied that since they are displaced, they left all their reference points behind when they were deported from their beloved city of Istanbul. The same act takes place when Fanis wants to know from which direction they reached his home. Their acting as a clan of robots shows their lack of individuality and the loss of their sense of place. Another example is depicted in Part Three titled as "Main Course" when the whole family has a digestion problem, in fact they are nauseated every time they are confronted with a new dish because a meal is cooked differently from the way they are used to.

Telephone is used as a device which has a great impact on Fanis. The news about his grandfather's unaccomplished arrival is delivered through the phone in different settings. First at his own house in Athens, when he had his grandfather's friends at home enthusiastically waiting for him to come. The ringing of the phone always imposes a stress on him. The voice under the receiver never utters something nice. We do not hear the message but the gestures of the receivers are full of surprise, disillusion and sadness. It has a potential for creating a dramatic effect.

Again in the first and last part of the film there are two Turkish bath scenes, before the deportation and after it. Fanis in the former one as a child overhears his grandparents, uncle's and his friends worried talks on politics, but innocently cannot comprehend the severity of their own situation. He only understands how 'mussels can easily open up in the steam'. In the second Bath scene, Fanis as a professor of astronomy, acts like his grandfather does. He feels the same pain on his neck which was caused by an old wound.

For Fanis it becomes the pain of a wound caused by an old love and the feeling of exile. Fanis returns to Istanbul for the first time as an adult to visit his dying grandfather. At his funeral he meets his childhood love Saime. Under the rain, at the graveyard she opens the same red umbrella that she used to carry all the time with her as a child. The red umbrella is the symbol of love and passion. Fanis and Saime once again fall in love. Saime is separated from her husband Mustafa and lives with her child. But her husband does not want a divorce. Fanis invites Mustafa to the same old Turkish bath in Istanbul. The scene is like a replica of the first bath scene. For Mustafa the meeting place makes no sense whereas for Fanis it does, he wants to recall the past and uses the same example as his elders had done when he explains the reason to meet him there. He says, under the steam of the bath the souls easily open up like the mussels do. In both scenes a heavy, sullen dramatic effect in the atmosphere lingers successfully to function, when the worried minds open up in the steam. Fanis, as in the first bath scene, is mostly silent and talks very little; whereas Mustafa clearly states that Saime had accepted his offer to unite and will move with her daughter to live in Ankara with him.

Almost all the striking references underline a universal humane message that if one is forced to do something reluctantly an abnormality starts to disturb the self. The repressed in the unconscious finds a way to express itself physically like the typical unintended actions of the old men looking, talking and walking in the same way. ( Barry; 2002: 87) It is quite obvious that they feel safe being and acting together. The non verbal actions seem highly artificial but effective. They all have their ribbon tied sweet boxes the same size wrapped-up in white paper to give to Fanis as he is going to celebrate his grandfather's arrival to Athens with the appetizers. But all were, as several times before, once again disappointed when the telephone rings and passes over the message that Fanis's grandfather has missed the plane. Fanis has spent his childhood and youth waiting and longing for his grandparent and his girlfriend Saime to arrive. They have promised to visit him but never turned up. The two children for a long time wrote postcards and then rubbed spices on them before sending them to each other. After so many years they discovered that both kept the cards as gems and they still smelled 'a little'. A touch of spice helped to save their memories forever.

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