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ON THE METAPHORICAL AND SYMBOLIC NATURE OF FEASTING IN GABRIEL AXEL'S *BABETTE'S FEAST* (1987)

Abstract. Gabriel Axel's *Babette's Feast* (1987), adapted from Isak Dinesen's *Anecdotes of Destiny* (1958), offers a masterful exploration of the symbolic and metaphorical dimensions of feasting. Acclaimed internationally – winning an Academy Award for Best Foreign Language Film and recognition on the Vatican's Best Films List – the film transforms a meal into a profound spiritual experience. This article argues that the climactic feasting scene functions metaphorically as a biblical Last Supper, expressing themes of sacrifice, reconciliation, and transcendence. Employing Brandt and Brandt's (2005) six-space model of conceptual integration, we show how the scene's complex meaning emerges through the interplay of spaces: semiotic, presentational, referential, virtual, and those of relevance and meaning. Our cognitive-linguistic analysis reveals how Axel's adaptation encodes a message of unity and grace, portraying the feast as a liturgical act. The study also proposes that the six-space model offers a productive framework for examining, both figuratively and symbolically, rich scenes in multimodal media.

Keywords: feast; liturgy; Last Supper; conceptual integration; metaphor; symbol

O METAFORYCZNEJ I SYMBOLICZNEJ NATURZE UCZTOWANIA W FILMIE G. AXELA *UCZTA BABETTE* (1987)

Abstrakt. Film *Uczta Babette* (1987) w reżyserii Gabriela Axela, będący adaptacją opowiadania Isaka Dinesena *Anecdotes of Destiny* (1958), stanowi studium symbolicznych i metaforycznych aspektów ucztování. Produkcja ta zdobyła międzynarodowe uznanie – otrzymała Oscara za najlepszy

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film nieanglojęzyczny oraz została wpisana na Listę Najlepszych Filmów Watykanu – a przedstawiony w niej posiłek stanowi głębokie doświadczenie duchowe. W artykule argumentujemy, że kulminacyjna scena uczty pełni funkcję metaforyczną, odwołując się do biblijnej Ostatniej Wieczerzy i wyrażając tematy ofiary, pojednania i transcendencji. Wykorzystując sześcioprzestrzenny model integracji pojęciowej skonstruowany przez Brandta i Brandt (2005), pokazujemy, jak złożony sens sceny wylania się z interakcji przestrzeni semiotycznej, prezentacyjnej, referencyjnej, wirtualnej, relewancji i znaczenia. Zaprezentowana w artykule analiza ujawnia, że adaptacja Axela wyraża przesłanie jedności i łaski, przedstawiając ucztę jako akt liturgiczny, natomiast zastosowany sześcioprzestrzenny model może stanowić skuteczne narzędzie do badania obrazów o wysokim nasyceniu metaforycznym i symbolicznym w mediach multimodalnych.

Słowa kluczowe: uczta; liturgia; Ostatnia Wieczerza; integracja pojęciowa; metafora; symbol

INTRODUCTION

Cinema is a complex form of art which possesses a unique ability to communicate with the audience in a number of ways and via various modes. Film-makers take advantage of a wide variety of means and resources at their disposal to create films which serve not only as entertainment, but also a medium which is supposed to convey deeper emotions.

Food and feasting have long had a symbolic presence in cinema. Meals, repasts, banquets, feasts and foodstuffs often signify universal themes: death (poisoned meals taking the lives of the innocent/the guilty), love (when eating alludes to making love), camaraderie (consuming meals with friends to unite) and many more.

One can hardly ignore the fact that food is a hallmark of our identity and culture. It performs a substantial role in many religions. Take, for instance, Jewish customs and traditions which pivot on kosher Passover and Shabbat meals. In turn, for Muslims, who abstain from food during Ramadan, it is crucial that food should be halal. As far as Catholicism is concerned, a meal (the Eucharist) is at the heart of ritual worship. In fact, food plays a significant role in Holy Scripture, where it is used as a symbol on numerous occasions.

Babette's Feast, a celebrated literary and cinematic work, has been analyzed from various perspectives, including its theological, cultural, and gastronomic dimensions. These analyses have enriched our understanding of its narrative complexity and thematic depth. However, to the best of our knowledge, no attempt has been made to examine *Babette's Feast* through the lens of Brandt and Brandt's (2005) six-space model of conceptual integration. By employing this framework, we aim to fill this gap, demonstrating its utility in that this approach offers what others seem to lack: a semiotic link between the characters

and the audience. For this reason, among others, we believe that the model in question may be successfully applied to decipher the meaning of metaphorically-laden scenes in films.

A further motivation for our study stems from the film's unique reception history within Christian cultural discourse. Notably, *Babette's Feast* was included in the Vatican's list of the best films of all time, a catalogue disseminated on Catholic-affiliated platforms such as "Decent Films – Film Appreciation and Criticism Informed by Christian Faith". This recognition is not merely an honorary distinction but a meaningful interpretive cue, signaling the film's perceived theological and ethical resonance within Catholic thought. Because the Vatican's list functions as a culturally sanctioned framework for identifying films of particular spiritual and moral value, its inclusion shapes how many viewers – especially those engaging with cinema through a religious lens – approach the film's symbolic content. We believe that the Vatican affiliation matters because it situates the film within an institutionalized tradition of Catholic interpretation, reinforcing the relevance of conceptual tools capable of capturing its doctrinal and semiotic depth.

In this article, we explore one of the most iconic feasts in the history of literature and, given its successful cinematic adaptation, in the history of film as well. What makes the feast so remarkable is its symbolic meaning, which ought to be interpreted by readers and viewers alike.¹ The purpose of this article is therefore to analyse *Babette's Feast* from a cognitive perspective. Both the short story and its cinematic adaptation have been studied extensively by researchers (see the literature review below). However, we approach the narrative through the perspective of Catholic tradition, framing it within Brandt and Brandt's (2005) model. This allows us to demonstrate how multiple elements contribute to comprehending the deeply symbolic message encoded in both the story and the film.

We specifically examine the representation of the feast and its liturgical aspects in Gabriel Axel's film, based on Karen Blixen's short story (published under her pseudonym, Isak Dinesen). The film is abundant in religious references, and as such can be interpreted as a significant step in fostering dialogue between the Church and broader cultural spheres. By framing the narrative within the six-space model, we aim to highlight the intricate interplay of theology, culture, and semiotics, revealing how the film's symbolic messages resonate with audiences on multiple levels.

¹ Note that more than one interpretation of the feasting scene has been proposed. The fact that we have deliberately chosen one particular reading does not mean that we disregard other interpretations.

In our paper we provide an overview of existing research on *Babette's Feast* and relevant studies on metaphor, multimodality, and film analysis, establishing the context for our discussion. We introduce Brandt and Brandt's (2005) six-space model of conceptual integration, outlining its framework and relevance to the study of highly figurative scenes in film. We provide a concise account of the key events and themes in *Babette's Feast*, focusing on the elements that underpin our analysis. In the analytical section we apply the six-space model to the feasting scene, demonstrating how the interplay between the meaning and semiotic spaces reveals the metaphorical and symbolic layers of the film. Finally, in the concluding section, we synthesize our findings, highlighting the significance of the model in understanding the spiritual and emotional dimensions of the film.

1. LITERATURE REVIEW

Babette's Feast has been interpreted in various ways and Blixen herself embraced the possibility of diverse readings of her work. In fact, the multidimensional character of Blixen's writings invites multiple interpretations, and she thought highly of readers who were inclined to draw their own conclusions from her texts (Brantly, 2017).

As observed by Brantly (2017), *Babette's Feast* has been discussed from a number of vantage points,² one of the most prevalent of which is reading the tale from a Christian perspective. Given a vast number of allusions to the Bible (e.g. the wedding at Cana, the Last Supper) and religious symbols (e.g. the role of wine and food served during the feast; some of them are more explicit, but many appear under the guise of something else) included in the text, and, consequently in Axel's film, this reading is easy to support. A number of researchers draw parallels between Babette and Christ suggesting that the feast symbolizes the Eucharist or Liturgy (see e.g. Wright, 1997; Beck, 1998; Lane, 1999; Servais, 2017). In this article, we follow this train of thought and we perceive the feast as an event rich in religious symbolism and one whose structure may be said to resemble the liturgy.

² Brantly (2017) discusses the main areas of researchers' interest that revolve around *Babette's Feast*, such as Blixen's dialogue with Kirkegaard's philosophy (e.g. Mullins, 1994; Schuler, 1997), the story of Babette in the context of feminist art (e.g. Barr, 1990; Goodwin, 1990), class war (e.g. Shapiro, 1991; Hansen, 2003), "demonic/diabolical" references included in *Babette's Feast* (e.g. Stambaugh, 1988; Hansen, 2003), and the psychoanalytic approach to the story, giving meticulous attention to the problem of loss (Rashkin, 1995).

It is important to note, however, that the film's interpretive richness does not depend exclusively on a Christian worldview, although the Christian-liturgical lens offers a particularly coherent and historically grounded reading. Viewers with limited or no Christian background may still construct meaningful interpretations by drawing on broader cognitive mechanisms such as embodied schemas (e.g., SHARING IS UNITY; EATING IS BONDING) or culturally widespread metaphors of nourishment, hospitality, and transformation. For such audiences, the meaning of the Last Supper may not emerge explicitly, yet the scene's affective and interpersonal structure remains accessible through universal experiential patterns.

There has been a plethora of works devoted to metaphor in monomodal and multimodal events, such as films or advertisements. Among the most recent and notable contributions, let us highlight merely a fraction of them due to space constraints, e.g. Rohdin (2009), Urios-Aparisi (2010), Poppi and Urios-Aparisi (2018), Coëgnarts and Kravanja (2012, 2014, 2015, 2016), Winter (2014), Gordejuela (2021), Forceville (2016, 2020, 2024), Gibbs (2018), Bort-Mir and Bolognesi (2022), Hidalgo-Downing and O'Dowd (2023).

Film, as a multimodal medium stimulating both our senses and the mind, may serve as a great source of metaphors and has been investigated by researchers from various disciplines. The complexity of film structure allows us to delve into its nature from different angles. As far as cognitive linguistics is concerned, we argue that Brandt and Brandt's (2005) six-space model of conceptual integration is a suitable framework for analyzing highly figurative scenes in films because it provides a structured way to explore the cognitive and emotional connections between a film's characters and its audience. This model³ emphasizes how meaning emerges through the blending of multiple mental spaces, allowing for a nuanced understanding of figurative or symbolic content.

In the context of film, the model facilitates the analysis of how characters' experiences, actions, or emotions are interpreted by viewers. It helps explain how cinematic elements such as dialogues or visuals are integrated into the audience's perceptions, creating a shared understanding of the film's content. This interplay between the internal worlds of the characters and the interpretive processes of the audience enhances the depth and relatability of figurative scenes, making Brandt and Brandt's model particularly effective for such analyses.

³ In a similar vein, Grząsko (2025) discussed the duel of the anthems scene from *Casablanca*, adopting Brandt and Brandt's six-space model of conceptual integration, which was suitable for the analysis of a metaphorically-loaded content that one may encounter in this film.

2. THE THEORETICAL MODEL

Brandt and Brandt's six-space model of conceptual integration, developed in 2005, is an extension of the conceptual integration theory, also known as "blending theory" (BT), initially proposed by Gilles Fauconnier and Mark Turner in the 1990s. The theory aims to explain how humans blend different mental spaces to generate new meanings, ideas, and concepts. The six-space model is a more elaborate version of the original four-space model of conceptual integration, offering greater depth and precision in analyzing complex cognitive processes.

In fact, the six-space framework draws not only from the blending theory, but also the Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT) and cognitive semiotics. From the latter, it incorporates the directional view of the relationship between the source and target, by which we understand a mapping that links the contents of two input spaces: a reference space which adverts to the actuality and a presentation space which refers to the figurative meaning. In turn, from the BT it borrows the notion of a blended space, in which the elements from the input spaces are merged. It is worth noting that Brandt and Brandt's framework has a different focus from Fauconnier and Turner's work in the BT, as Brand and Brandt's model puts emphasis on the semiotic processes, hence the emergence of the semiotic space in their six-space model.

The earlier work underscored the basic fact of conceptual blending, in which elements from one mental space are fused with elements from another, distinct mental space⁴ in order to generate an emergent structure (a new mental space) filled with elements drawn from the input spaces. Of particular interest to the researchers (see Turner & Fauconnier, 1995; Fauconnier & Turner, 2002) was the potential of this new space to serve as a domain of imagination. Therefore, the processes of conceptual blending take place in the conceptual integration network incorporating input spaces (there are at least two input spaces composed of pieces of information from cognitive domains), a generic space (a structure shared by the input spaces) and a blended space (which serves to integrate structure from the input spaces) (Turner & Fauconnier, 1995; Fauconnier & Turner, 2002; Coulson, 2006).

Brandt and Brandt (2005), Brandt (2010) and others investigated the idea of conceptual blending within the context of spoken discourse and semiotics. While the BT focused on relatively abstract situations, Brandt and Brandt put

⁴ In contrast to CMT, in which there are only two domains, the BT allows for projections from at least two input spaces to the blend (Turner & Fauconnier, 1995; Fauconnier & Turner, 2002).

real-world discourse at the center of their analysis. The question they posed did not concern how the concepts might be merged, but rather how they are amalgamated to create meaning. Moreover, one of the major weaknesses of the BT is that it fails to elucidate the contextual circumstances in which blends are constructed (e.g. Coulson & Oakley, 2003). This aspect is taken into account in the revised six-space model of conceptual integration.

Brandt and Brandt's model consists of six interconnected mental spaces. The very process begins with the act of *semiosis* which takes place between (a) speaker(s) and (an) addressee(s) in the semiotic base space. It is here that the event of communication occurs. Then, the reference space including actuality is created. The content of this space is inextricably intertwined with the content of another space, namely the highly figurative presentation space. Having the reference space and the presentation space at our disposal, we may construct a blend in the virtual space. However, in order to fully grasp the meaning of the blend, which at this stage lacks an emergent meaning, we must establish a relevance space. This space contains the "knowledge of the issue the speaker has in mind when evoking the presentation as a sign for the reference" (Brandt & Brandt, 2005, p. 234). Finally, a mapping between the blend and a relevant schema allows us to propose the metaphoric meaning within the meaning space. Once the entire interpretative process is completed, the emergent meaning is immediately projected back to the base space and, most importantly, to the addressee(s) of the message (Brandt, 2010). Through this six-space model, Brandt & Brandt's framework clarifies how complex metaphors, like those in *Babette's Feast*, are constructed in the mind, enabling viewers to engage with both literal and symbolic layers of meaning.

3. PLOT SUMMARY

Replete with religious symbolism, *Babette's Feast* is a multi-layered story exploring themes such as art (and by extension, the role of an artist), reconciliation and various shades of sacrifice, set in harsh and unwelcoming Jutland. The structure of the film is coherent and can be divided into three parts. The film begins with a flashback to the period when the sisters, Martine and Filippa, were in the prime of their lives (circa 1836). They⁵ live with their pious father, a pastor, in a community which renounces any form of pleasure, enjoyment

⁵ Let us stress the importance of the sisters' names. Given the religious background of their father, the women were named after two Lutheran reformers: Martin Luther and Philipp Melanchthon.

and comforts of life. The sisters represent the sacred world, and the irony lies in the fact that they reject its beauty even though they embody physical beauty themselves as two strikingly attractive young ladies. Both, Martine and Filippa have suitors (Lieutenant Lorens Löwenhielm and opera tenor Achille Papin, respectively) who represent the secular world and its values. However, the sisters decide to separate these two worlds and sacrifice personal desires for the sake of their faith and piety. They dedicate themselves to serving God instead of choosing marriage or career aspirations.

The second part of the film is marked by Babette's arrival. A French cook arrives in Jutland in 1871 and explains that she is a refugee who fled from Paris after losing her husband and son. Although Martine and Filippa cannot afford to employ the woman, she offers to work for free as their housekeeper. As far as the congregation is concerned, since the pastor's death the members of the community have plunged into apathy and intolerance; they argue and bear grudges against one another. On the surface, they are still religious, but their faith has become superficial.

The final part of the film revolves around the feast and its preparations. Fourteen years after her arrival, Babette wins 10,000 francs in a lottery and asks the sisters for permission to prepare the feast in honour of their late father, the pastor. She does not reveal her intention to spend the entire win on the dinner. Given that Babette has never requested anything before,⁶ the sisters consent to it. And so, Babette prepares an authentic French dinner. Initially, the sisters have grave misgivings about the housekeeper's idea, they have nightmares and are afraid of some diabolic forces that might possess them and the community. The sisters summon the flock to broach the subject of the dinner and warn people of its potential sinful nature. The parishioners give a pledge to be indifferent and to use their tongues for prayer rather than tasting. All in all, the dinner turns out to have healing properties and the meals prepared by Babette rekindle people's senses and unite feuding neighbours.

⁶ She says, "Ladies, I have never asked you for anything. Hear my prayer today. It comes from my heart." Hereafter, if quotations in this article are not footnoted, they are obtained from the English subtitles of *Babette's Feast*, directed by Gabriel Axel ([1987] 2007), Twentieth Century Fox Home Entertainment), DVD.

4. THE ANALYSIS

The starting point for the analysis is to construct the semiotic (base) space, which is the situation of communication. As described by Brandt and Brandt (2005, p. 225), “A semiotic (base) space is a mental space in which the cognizer represents the situation of cognizing.” It might be a scene of communication or a scene of reflection. The former entails the participants in the construction of shared meaning, the latter entails “the reflecting subject and the situation in which the reflection takes place, as represented by the subject” (p. 225).

In this paper, the act of communication takes place in somewhat unusual circumstances, because we diverge from Langacker’s (2009, p. 153) “face-to-face two-participant interaction” and lean towards a synergy between a collective speaker (the actors) and (collective) hearer (the audience or an individual watching the film). Therefore, the process involves the actors playing their roles and common people watching the film *Babette’s Feast* and, most importantly, the feasting scene in which the film reaches its climax. Note, however, that in this case we should construct the following metonymic chain:⁷ ACTORS (ASSUMING THEIR ROLES) FOR THE DIRECTOR FOR THE AUTHOR OF THE STORY (ACTORS FOR GABRIEL AXEL FOR ISAK DINESEN/KAREN BLIXEN). Each element of the chain provides conceptual access to the next: the actors’ performances stand metonymically for the director’s interpretive choices, which in turn stand for the narrative and symbolic structure supplied by the author.

The scene under discussion may be understood both literally and figuratively, in the context of the whole film and, most importantly, in terms of the religious elements included in it. Therefore, on the one hand, the audience is watching a sumptuous feast hosted by the French cook Babette, but, on the other hand, one may not ignore the fact that the audience may be aware of a symbolic meaning behind it. Naturally, a layperson will rely on their intuition when interpreting certain scenes and thus may not grasp all the meanings hidden in the film. Researchers, in turn, will seek for symbols that will allow them to decode the message(s) encrypted in it.

The semiotic (base) space is composed of at least three types of determinations: the inner sphere of *semiosis* (circumstances relevant to the expressive act) is inserted in the *situation* (circumstances which pertain to a given situation

⁷ Metonymic chains are discussed in many studies as involving multiple conceptual shifts, breaking up “complex conceptual mappings into simple, well-motivated mappings with a strong experiential basis” (Hilpert, 2007, p. 80).

as framed by those who are involved in it), which, in turn, belongs to the outer sphere of *pheno-world* (conditions universally provided) (Brandt & Brandt, 2005, pp. 225–226).

Based on the above, in this paper the very process of *semiosis* (the act of the community members attending the feast and experiencing metaphysical “transfiguration”) co-occurs with the *situation* (all the background information that allows the audience to understand the scene; here it is the plot of *Babette’s Feast*, the audience’s religious background and experience). The *pheno-world* goes beyond the boundaries framed by the plot. This outer sphere is the source of knowledge which, among other things, includes universal (and especially religious) values and attitudes accepted in our world.

The reconstruction of the symbolic meaning conveyed in the feasting scene entails establishing the presentation space and the reference space which serve as the input spaces. While the presentation space is highly figurative, the reference space refers to actuality which is taken literally. The reference space always stems from the semiotic space (Brandt & Brandt, 2005, pp. 227–228).

As far as the reference space is concerned, in our analysis it comprises the feasting scene which lasts approximately 25 minutes (1:05–1:30). The whole feast may be divided into five major parts, which are described in detail below. It all begins when twelve guests arrive at Filippa and Martine’s house to commemorate the centenary year of the late pastor’s birthday. The dinner is prepared by the French cook Babette, who decides to “sacrifice”⁸ her lottery win and spend it on the feast. Once the guests gather, they sing a hymn to dear Jerusalem. This collective act of singing creates a sense of unity and shared spirituality. When Löwenhielm (now a general) and his aunt arrive, the congregation moves to the table set elegantly. The tablecloth, tableware, and candles look as if they had all been borrowed from a gourmet restaurant. Juxtaposed with modest townspeople and Jutland’s harsh climate, it all seems to be out of place. People say a prayer: “May the bread nourish my body. May my body do my soul’s bidding. May my soul rise up to serve God eternally.” And so, the actual feast comprising a seven-course menu is about to begin.

As in the *Café Anglais*,⁹ the guests commence their feast with an hors d’oeuvre, namely *Potage à la Tortue* (turtle soup) served with Amontillado sherry. Being

⁸ We put the word in inverted commas, because Babette does not perceive the act of offering her money to the feast negatively. There is no intention of giving up, but rather she feels like giving the best of herself to the sisters and the whole community. It comes from her heart and therefore it may be perceived as a gesture of love.

⁹ A famous French restaurant, where, in all likelihood, Babette used to work as a cook. During the feast, General Lorens Löwenhielm often alludes to the place renowned for its exquisite dishes.

accustomed to following an abstemious diet limited to ascetic and tasteless dishes (boiled fish and ale-bread soup), the flock tries its utmost to ignore the lavishness of a banquet which for them is connected with evil forces. Lane (1999, p. 23) stresses that the guests are appalled when they see the soup because they have given a pledge that they would follow a strict diet and abstain from deriving any pleasure from eating. One of the guests alludes to the wedding at Cana by reminding that “the food is not important.” The turtle itself petrifies the community. According to the Old Testament, it was an unclean animal and therefore it should not be consumed.¹⁰ Lane (p. 23) puts forward a hypothesis that the congregation’s redemption will not be linked with its rituals. Quite the contrary, it is connected with something they have failed to experience just because they rejected certain aspects of life.

Then comes another specialty of the chef, namely blinis Demidoff served with Veuve Clicquot champagne of 1860 vintage. Initially reluctant to relish the food, the guests cannot help but derive pleasure in worldly goods, although they try to conceal it. The only person who is aware of the excellence of the menu is the General who cannot stop marveling that he is eating such extraordinary dishes among people who are not showing any emotions. While the others’ glasses are filled once per course, the General is the only person whose glass is filled whenever it is empty. It is so, because Babette is perfectly aware that he is a man of experience. Having been in Paris, Löwenhielm may be said to be familiar with various dishes and beverages and thus he stands out from the group. And like in Cana, when the first miracle attributed to Jesus occurs, the members of the congregation seem to experience a kind of miracle when, despite having taken an oath to ignore the worldly goods here represented by Babette’s dishes, they start to talk and recollect, among others, the pastor’s sermons.

The main course, *cailles en sarcophage*¹¹ served with Clos de Vougeot Pinot Noir and endive salad, blurs the line between the spiritual (or even celestial) and physical appetite. Given its name, there are at least two interpretations of the meaning of this particular dish. Some researchers claim that quail served in sarcophagi may refer to the Bible and the Israelites’ wandering through the desert. The hungry and tired Jewish community was supplied with quail/manna from God. Moses said that “it is the bread the Lord has given you to eat”

¹⁰ In the Old Testament, Apostle Paul proclaims the list of foodstuffs appropriate for consumption (Romans 14:14).

¹¹ The General recounts how impressed he was with the taste of the *cailles en sarcophage* that he ate at the Café Anglais years ago. He says they were created by a female chef who was able to transform a meal into a “kind of love affair”.

(Exod. 16:12–15). Note that bread symbolizes Jesus who called himself “the living bread that came down from heaven” (John 6:51). The very fact that cailles (quail) are prepared in sarcophagi has also a figurative meaning, because sarcophagus literally means “flesh eater”. Thus, the dish may represent the Eucharist (Wright, 1997; Lane, 1999, p. 24).¹²

While the General verbally expresses his appreciation for Babette’s talent, his fellow diners still attempt to ignore the fact that they are eating exquisite dishes. Still, we see that they smirk and are able to experience a whole range of different tastes not familiar to them up till then. In the background we can hear the melody of “Jerusalem, Jerusalem”.

And so, the time has come for Savarin au rhum avec des figues et fruit glacée served with champagne. The guests quench their sense of taste with a rum sponge cake with figs and candied cherries. They are also served cheese and fruits (among others, grapes, papayas, pineapple) accompanied by Sauternes wine. In contrast to the first part of the film in which a palette of muted/subdued gray, beige and blue, brown and black prevails, the beginning of the feast (or even the moment when the foodstuffs arrive at the shore by boat) marks the juncture when the vibrant colors are more dominant. The richness of colors symbolizes the richness of life.

One can hardly ignore the magical power of the beverages served during the feast. It is not only the dishes, but also the wine, performing a similar role to the blood of Christ, that takes part in the act of reconciliation. The townspeople comprehend spirituality and piety in the form of rejection of any pleasure, which they perceive as a wicked force. It turns out that they are spiritually immature and their faith seems to be superficial.

After a lavish meal, the General delivers a speech which serves as a moment of reflection and contemplation:

Mercy and truth have met together. Righteousness and bliss shall kiss one another. Man, in his weakness and shortsightedness believes he must make choices in this life.

¹² In turn, Rashkin (1995) adopts a psychoanalytic approach and she claims that *Babette’s Feast* is a story about different kinds of loss. Therefore, the death theme is also present in the menu and especially in the dish in question. The phrase “ma petite caille” uttered by Babette in the film means “my beloved, my darling”. We know that Babette lost her relatives in France. She orders quails, kills them and then buries them in their sarcophagi. The birds symbolize her loved ones. Likewise, Veuve Clicquot is an allusion to her widowhood, because the brand name means “Widow Clicquot”. Rashkin (1995) argues that the aim of the feast may not be to establish or assert her identity as a real artist who pays tribute to the art of cooking. She may not do it to sacrifice herself and show that she owes something to the sisters. The reason behind it is that she buries France. In fact, it may be an act of self-preservation.

He trembles at the risks he takes. We do know fear. But no. Our choice is of no importance. There comes a time when our eyes are opened and we come to realize that mercy is infinite. We need only await it with confidence and receive it with gratitude. Mercy imposes no conditions. And lo! Everything we have chosen has been granted to us. And everything we rejected has also been granted. Yes, we even get back what we rejected. For mercy and truth have met together, and righteousness and bliss shall kiss one another. (Axel, [1987] 2007)¹³

The meal becomes an opportunity for reconciliation, as feuding members of the community have found common ground. After bearing grudges against each other, they set aside their differences, share jokes and let bygones be bygones.

When the feast comes to an end, the flock moves to the living room where everyone is offered coffee with vieux marc Grande Champagne cognac. There is a blessing which echoes the conclusion of a church service. The act of blessing offers a sense of closure and spiritual fulfilment. Filippa plays and sings another hymn and the feast comes to an end. As observed by Servais (2017, p. 433), the congregation has just found a new way of praising God.

In short, the entire dinner embodies the characteristics of a symbolic liturgy, as it encompasses the essential elements: singing, eating, drinking, a sermon, reconciliation and a final blessing.

Now, let us establish a presentation space. As argued by Brandt & Brandt (2005, p. 23), the “presentation space is highly figurative”. In this model, thanks to the presentation space, figurative or symbolic elements of a metaphor can be represented. The presence of this mental space makes it possible to establish mappings between the abstract and concrete elements of a metaphor, which results in the creation of a conceptual blend. When applying this to *Babette's Feast*, one may argue that in the presentation space the feast in the film is transformed into something more important and complex than just a meal eaten by a group of people – it is imagined and conceptualized as a liturgical event, rich in Christian symbolism and spiritual significance. Thus the feast is not interpreted as mere physical sustenance but, more importantly, as spiritual nourishment, based on the metaphorical association with Christian liturgy, and the Last Supper in particular.

In the presentation space, one should take into consideration both visual and ritualistic aspects of the event taking place, depicted in detail in the reference space. As for the visual setup of the feast, one should emphasize the fact that it is portrayed in a way that clearly evokes the imagery of the Last Supper during which Jesus dined with his twelve disciples. It is, therefore, no coincidence

¹³ This monologue occurs during the dinner scene, 1 hour and 22 minutes into the film.

that the feast was attended by twelve guests. This is of course a clear parallel intended to invite the viewers to make this connection. What is, however, different is the role of Babette, who is not seated at the table with her guests, but is busy preparing and serving the dishes.

On the other hand, the feasting scene is full of ritualistic elements such as the singing of hymns, the sharing of food and wine, and the final blessing. What needs to be emphasized at this juncture is that all these elements mirror the structure of a Christian liturgical service. Their aim is to transform the feast into a symbolic representation of a religious service, where the act of gathering together and eating a meal embodies something sacred – the event during which the act of transfiguration takes place.

One must not overlook the fact that the symbolism of the feast can be analyzed on a few planes. First and foremost, the food served during the meal has a significant symbolic value. For example, as mentioned before (see our discussion of the reference space), the quail in sarcophagus dish can be interpreted as a metaphor for the Eucharist. In Christian religious practices, the Eucharist involves the act of transfiguration of bread and wine offered on the altar into the body and blood of Christ, which symbolically represent his sacrifice and resurrection. Similarly, the quail dish, prepared in a sarcophagus, alludes to themes of sacrifice and resurrection, the fundamentals of Christian theology. This culinary metaphor involves one of the basic mappings between the reference space and the presentation space by drawing a direct link between the food eaten by Babette's guests and the physical act of eating, the body of Christ, and the spiritual significance of the Eucharist encompassing the act of Transfiguration and Communion.

Additionally, another symbolic layer of Babette's feast is the impact of the event on the guests. The change in the hearts of the people gathered at the table can also be interpreted as a transition or a transformation, contributing to the overall transformative schema. This symbolic awakening mirrors the Christian belief that participating in the Eucharist offers spiritual renewal. During the meal shared by the characters in the film, the previously strained relationships are healed, and the people gathered at the table become more friendly and benevolent towards one another. This transformation taking place in the hearts and minds of those taking part in the feast maps the metaphorical connection between the feast and a religious service, where the communal act of worship leads to spiritual growth and unity.

Another element that the feast shares with Christian liturgy is a homily, an important part of the Liturgy of the Word. In *Babette's Feast*, General Löwenhielm's

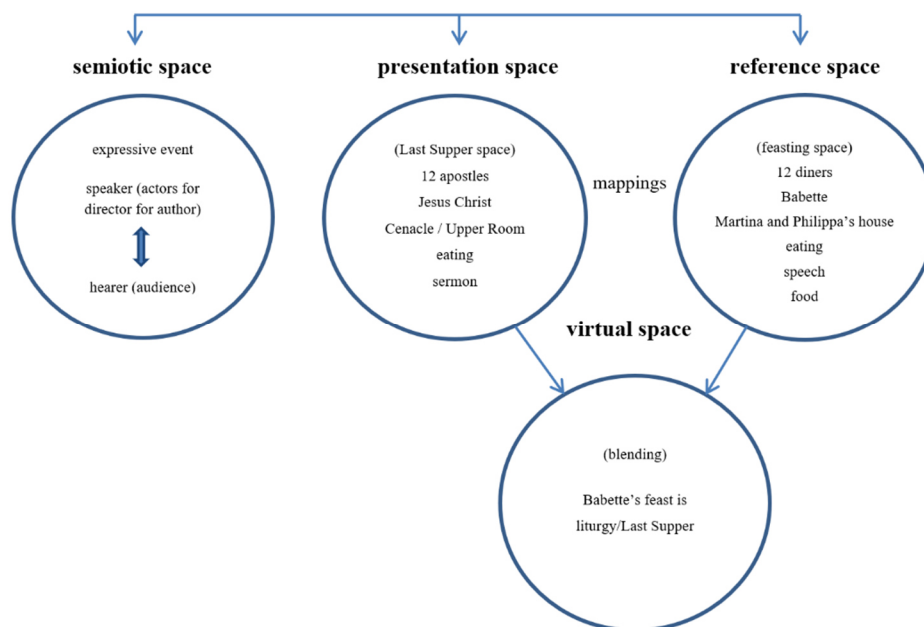
speech may be interpreted as this key liturgical component. The General's words "mercy and truth have met together" and his reflections on the grace of God resemble the themes commonly addressed in sermons and strengthen the liturgical atmosphere. The role of the speech is to express the spiritual message of the feast and to "immerse" the audience in the metaphorical blend of the secular and the sacred.

In the presentation space, the feast in *Babette's Feast* is elevated from a simple social gathering to a profound religious experience. The metaphor BABETTE'S FEAST IS LITURGY becomes a vehicle through which the audience can interpret the feast as an embodiment of the Last Supper, with all of the accompanying spiritual implications. The rich religious symbolism and the ritualistic elements found in the presentation space and depicted in detail in the reference space, such as the food eaten during this event, the speech given by the General, the singing and the change in the hearts and minds of all the participants, allow the feast to be interpreted as a metaphorical liturgical event, where the physical act of feasting is intertwined with spiritual significance.

The mappings between the reference space and the presentation space lead to the emergence of a conceptual blend which exhibits a deep connection between the secular feast and the sacred liturgy, allowing the audience to perceive the feast not just as a social gathering combined with food consumption, but as a liturgical event accompanied by spiritual transformation. The correspondences between the reference space and the presentation space enable *Babette's Feast* to be understood as a framework through which the material embodies the spiritual. Therefore, using the metaphor of liturgy – BABETTE'S FEAST IS LITURGY – helps to explore the themes of sacrifice and spiritual renewal (see Figure 1).

In *Babette's Feast*, the virtual space involves the metaphor FEAST IS LITURGY/MASS, which is embedded within a larger metaphorical structure, BABETTE'S FEAST IS THE LAST SUPPER. In the case of the metaphor FEAST IS LITURGY/MASS, the feast is conceptualized not just as a social or communal meal but as a religious service, specifically akin to a Christian liturgy or Mass. The elements of the meal – such as the preparation, the gathering of the guests, the sharing of food and drink, and the presence of ritualistic practices like hymns and blessings – are all reinterpreted through this liturgical lens. This recontextualization allows the feast to be understood as an event with deep spiritual significance, where the act of dining parallels the sacred rituals performed during a Mass.

Figure 1. Mappings between the reference space and the presentation space



In turn, the broader metaphor *BABETTE'S FEAST IS THE LAST SUPPER* encompasses the *FEAST IS LITURGY/MASS* metaphor, positioning the feast as a symbolic reenactment of the Last Supper, the final meal Jesus shared with his disciples before his crucifixion. In this virtual space, Babette is metaphorically aligned with Christ, offering a sacrificial gift in the form of a lavish meal, just as Christ offered his body and blood during the Last Supper. The guests, like the disciples, partake in this sacred meal, which carries themes of sacrifice, communion, and spiritual renewal.

Having established the virtual space in which the blend emerges, we may proceed to the discussion of the relevance space. As Brandt and Brandt (2005, p. 234) emphasize, the relevance space encompasses the knowledge related to the topic that the speaker considers when using the presentation as a sign to indicate the reference. In the context of relevance space, the authors (p. 37), argue that "the metaphoric meaning is a product of a mapping between the blend, in its pre-emergent-meaning state..., and some *relevant schema*, which structures the blend and makes its strange figurativity meaningful." In the case of *Babette's Feast*, this *relevant schema* may be termed *transformative schema* because it involves the act of transformation taking place in the hearts and minds of the participants of the feast. The blend attracts different schematic mappings that

include various actors, actions, and roles within a narrative. Thus the relevance space interacts with the virtual space in that a number of relevance-driven mappings may be established between them. The mappings in question are both structural and thematic correspondences which involve the agent, the act/action, patient and instrument.

First and foremost, a mapping between the Twelve Apostles and the twelve people at Babette's table can be established. The participants of both events perform the roles of agents. In both cases, the participants are key figures in a communal event that has deeper spiritual or existential connotations. The apostles represent the followers of Christ, and the people at Babette's table could be seen as followers or witnesses to Babette's generosity.

Another mapping involves eating and feasting. The act of feasting parallels the symbolic act of communion in the Christian tradition. In the Last Supper, the act of eating bread and drinking wine symbolizes partaking in the body and blood of Jesus Christ. Similarly, the act of eating at Babette's table becomes a transformative experience for the guests, signifying not just physical nourishment but spiritual or emotional enrichment. The blending of these acts in relevance space highlights how feasting, in both religious and secular contexts, can be an act of communion and transformation. Feasting at Babette's table results in undergoing a change, a change in the hearts of those who take part in the feast.

Yet another mapping between the virtual space and the relevance space involves the transformation of bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ, referred to as transfiguration in liturgical terms, on the one hand, and eating food at Babette's table causing a change in the hearts of the participants, on the other. Therefore, food performs here as an instrument used in the process of transformation. In Christian tradition, the bread and wine are symbolically transformed into the body and blood of Christ which functions as an act of spiritual nourishment. In Babette's feast, the meticulously prepared meal by Babette herself is not just ordinary food but something carrying deeper meaning. The guests at the table can be compared to the apostles who receive something more than just food. The meal to which they are invited is a sign of grace and generosity while the manner in which it is cooked and served evokes deep artistic experiences. What is more, the consumption of this food effects a change of their hearts and minds. A similar transformation, referred to as transfiguration, takes place on the altar during every Holy Mass and is experienced by the congregation at the moment of receiving Holy Communion. Thus the mapping here suggests that food in both scenarios transcends its materiality to become a vehicle for spiritual nourishment.

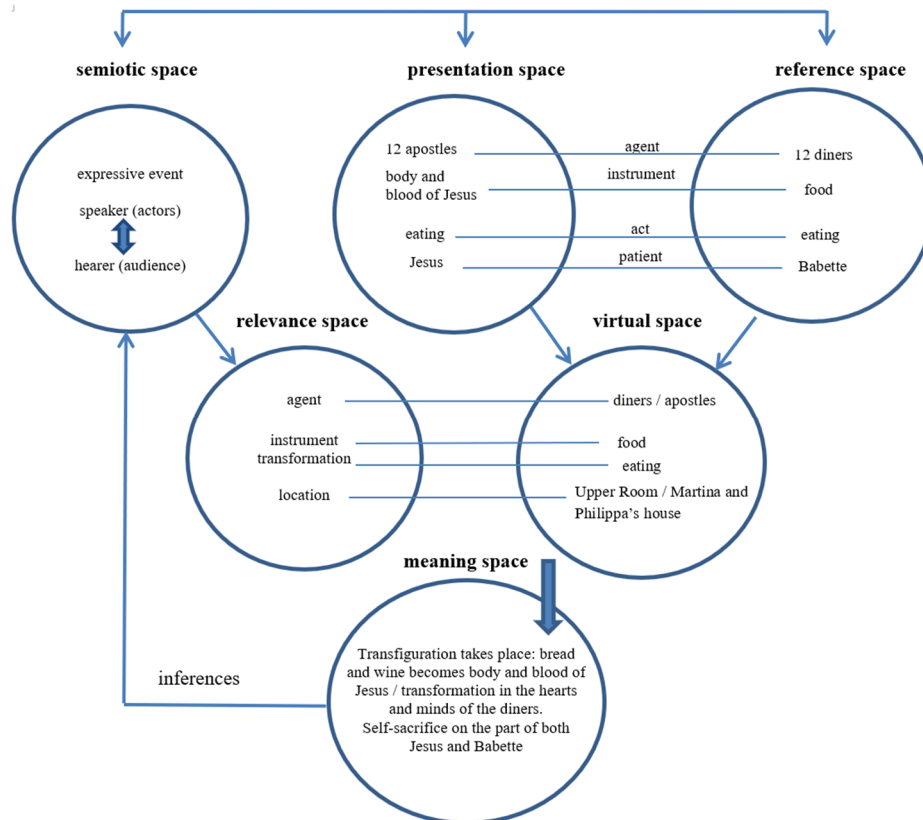
Finally, the role of patient is performed by Jesus Christ and Babette. Both Jesus and Babette embody the theme of self-sacrifice, but they do so in different contexts. In Christian theology, the sacrifice of Jesus is interpreted as the ultimate act of love and redemption. He gave up his life on the cross to redeem the sins of humanity, offering salvation to all who believe in him. This sacrifice is both physical and spiritual, symbolizing divine grace and the idea that true love often requires selflessness. His act is transformative, reconciling humanity with God and setting the foundation for Christian faith and values.

In contrast, Babette's sacrifice is more personal and is of both material and artistic nature. When she wins a small fortune in the lottery, instead of using it to her own advantage, she chooses to spend all of it to prepare an extravagant feast for the villagers. This act represents her sacrifice of her wealth and the use of her artistic skills as a chef. Like Jesus' sacrifice, Babette's feast is transformative in that it melts the villagers' rigidity and rekindles their sense of community, forgiveness, and joy. Both examples of sacrifice share themes of generosity, transformation, and the elevation of others at a personal cost. Jesus' sacrifice is unparalleled and eternal in that it offered spiritual renewal, while Babette's is earthly and less significant but offered a moment of shared human connection and grace. However, in both cases, the act of sacrifice leads to profound change in those who benefit from it. The mappings discussed above are depicted graphically in Figure 2.

The meaning space results from the blend structured by the transformative schema. In the meaning space, the feast is no longer just a metaphorical concept, but it becomes a real experience for the audience. The blend of the feast with the liturgy and the Last Supper in particular culminates in a rich, multi-layered understanding of the event. The audience perceives the feast as a moment of transformation, where the physical act of eating carries deep spiritual meaning. This blend allows viewers to experience the feast as a symbolic representation of Christian themes of sacrifice, communion, and spiritual renewal.

The meaning space captures the profound impact of the feast on the characters and, by extension, on the audience. The characters undergo spiritual transformation, which influences the audience's perception of the feast. The initial understanding of the meal as a simple gathering and food consumption is transformed into a sacred event, the culmination of the metaphorical journey established through the virtual and relevance spaces.

Figure 2. Mappings between the presentation space and the reference space juxtaposed with the mappings between the relevance space and the virtual space



The blend in the meaning space also incorporates the theme of sacrifice into the audience's emotional and intellectual experience of the film. This theme provides the emotional and spiritual weight that makes the metaphorical blend in the meaning space so impactful, ultimately allowing the audience to experience the feast as a profound, sacred event that transcends the ordinary and touches upon the divine.

CONCLUSIONS

The analytical exploration of the metaphorical and symbolic nature of feasting in Gabriel Axel's *Babette's Feast* (1987) reveals the multilayered significance of the central banquet as a transformative act that transcends mere consumption. The feast, as depicted in the film, emerges as a metaphor for artistic creation, spiritual redemption, and the bridging of human divides. Through Babette's selfless act of preparing the meal, the narrative presents food as a medium of grace, capable of reconciling opposing worldviews, such as ascetic spirituality and earthly indulgence.

The symbolic role of feasting is further enriched by its contextual interplay with themes of sacrifice, and cultural integration. Babette's feast operates as a cultural dialogue between French haute cuisine and the austere, Lutheran environment of the remote Danish community. It exemplifies the power of art and generosity to evoke shared human experiences, breaking down barriers of guilt, fear, and prejudice.

The central metaphor in *Babette's Feast* conceptualizes the meal as both a liturgical event (FEAST IS LITURGY/MASS) and as a reenactment of the Last Supper (BABETTE'S FEAST IS THE LAST SUPPER). This dual metaphor elevates the feast from a mere social gathering to a profound spiritual experience, aligning it with the Christian concepts of sacrifice, communion, and spiritual renewal.

The metaphor emphasizes the transformative nature of the feast, not just in a physical sense, but also in terms of emotional and spiritual change. Just as the Eucharist symbolizes spiritual nourishment through the transfiguration of bread and wine into Christ's body and blood, Babette's meal is portrayed as a spiritual trigger, leading to personal transformations in the hearts of the guests.

The mapping between Babette and Christ highlights themes of sacrifice. Babette, like Christ, offers a gift (the feast) to others, yet her sacrifice is earthly and personal rather than divine. This juxtaposition underscores the idea that acts of generosity and selflessness, even in different contexts, can lead to significant change and healing in both individuals and communities.

In both the Christian liturgy and Babette's feast, food functions as a vehicle for spiritual nourishment. The meal at Babette's table, like the Eucharist, transcends its material nature, symbolizing the spiritual nourishment and transformative power that food can hold when seen through a liturgical lens.

The advantage of applying Brandt and Brandt's (2005) model in our analysis lies in the interaction between the meaning space and the semiotic space. The former emerges as the point where the metaphorical blending of the feast with

Christian liturgy and the Last Supper reaches its full impact. This blending transforms the audience's perception of the meal, making it a symbolic and sacred event, transcending its ordinary nature. The latter space emphasizes the reciprocal connections between the film's characters and its audience. Through the interplay between the two spaces, the audience is invited to experience the feast as a moment of transformation, where the themes of sacrifice, communion, and renewal resonate deeply.

The transformative schema impacts not only the story's characters but also the audience. The spiritual renewal experienced by the characters at the feast is mirrored in the emotional and intellectual experience of the viewers, who come to perceive the feast as a sacred event that touches upon the divine, adding depth and spiritual weight to the film's themes.

In conclusion, *Babette's Feast* uses the metaphors of liturgy and the Last Supper to convey deep spiritual themes of transformation, sacrifice, and renewal. The meal is not just an act of eating but a symbolic ritual with profound emotional and spiritual significance, culminating in a transformative experience for both the characters and the audience. In our analysis, the six-space model proves effective in capturing the nuances of the feasting scene, highlighting its complex meaning and the dynamic interplay between the film's characters and its audience.

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