

Not Just Sweet – Talking about Chocolate

Tiina Mäntymäki
Englannin kielen laitos
Vaasan yliopisto

Ruoka ei ole milloinkaan vain ruokaa, eikä sitä voi tarkastella pelkästään ravinnon näkökulmasta. Ruoka ja ruokahalu ovat kulttuurisesti rakentuneita – ne ovat osallisina monimutkaisissa prosesseissa, joiden avulla määritellään sosiaalisia eroja, rajoja, siteitä ja vastakkaisuuksia. Kielellä on tärkeä merkitys näiden määrittelyjen rakentumisessa. Esitelmässäni tarkastelen yhtä kulttuurisesta näkökulmasta erityisen kiinnostavaa tuotetta, nimittäin suklaata. Suklaassa sulautuvat yhteen länsimaisen tuotannon, kulutuksen, kulinarismien ja ruumiillisuuden historia. Suklaasta puhuttaessa puhutaan samalla identiteeteistä, seksuaalisuudesta, etiikasta ja yhteiskunnan sosiaalisesta rakenteesta. Tarkoitukseni on analysoida, miten suklaasta puhutaan lehtimainoksissa ja kertoa millaisia merkityksiä nämä tekstit, joita kohtaamme kaikkialla joka päivä, välittävät meille.

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1 Introduction

What is chocolate? Chocolate is a collective noun comprising an infinite number of products, mainly made of cocoa beans and sugar, which can be bought in department stores, railway stations and special shops – in case we desire something more exquisite than the standard assortment from ordinary shops. However, chocolate is not only a commodity with a functional meaning, and as such it cannot be treated merely in terms of material, as merchandise or nourishment. Like food that is never “just food” (Caplan 1997: 3), neither is chocolate “just chocolate”, but rather, a cultural process, a system of communication. Following Barthes (1961/1997), chocolate can be studied in terms “myth”, as a type of speech, which incorporates in itself both past and present practices, social differences, boundaries, contradictions, symbolic meanings and their interpretations (Barthes 1961/1997; Counihan & van Esterik 1997: 1; Meigs 1988/1997: 95; Sceats 2000: 9).

Chocolate was originally introduced to Europe in the 16th century by the Spanish conquistadors, who had acquainted themselves with the substance in South America. Chocolate, along with coffee, tobacco, sugar and other products that arrived in the

European market as a result of the efforts of the traders from different European countries, is closely connected with the colonial past and the neo-colonial present of the west. Still to this day, the historical origins and the cultural legacy of this commodity are clearly visible in the imagery through which chocolate takes on meaning as a commercial product in the consciousness of the contemporary consumers.

Like any other consumable, so is chocolate widely advertised in different media. The kind of visual advertising that we encounter every day in the streets, stores and magazines have sometimes been regarded – because of its wide distribution – as perhaps the most important form of visual art in contemporary societies. From this perspective, advertising can be seen as playing a crucial role in the formation of a contemporary aesthetic which combines verbal language with visual images, and does this with the objective of promoting commercial aims. This kind of process through which commodities are turned into desirable signifiers is treated by Raymond Williams (1961/1999: 416–419) as a magic system, a term that directs attention to the process of meaning creation together with the speech produced in the process. The chain of signification that transforms material objects into objects of desire can be treated as a specific type of speech. In this context, however, speech is not merely understood as verbal activity, but as “any significant unit or synthesis, whether verbal or visual” (Barthes 1972/1994: 110) that we as audience, readers or interpreters can make sense of. Thus, the most central criterion for what can be treated as speech is that it means something.

In this text I consider how two chocolate ads come take on meaning in terms of speech as defined above. The first one advertises *Lindt Excellence*, an exclusive brand of dark chocolate, and the second one promotes a group of *Divine* products. The advertisements featured in the magazine *Olive* in November 2007. The primary target group of the magazine is not what could be called serious professionals but rather, people who are interested in food, and for whom this interest is an important identity marker. Due to the profile of the magazines the chocolate brands advertised in them also strive to profile themselves in terms of specificity: In the case of *Lindt Excellence* the ad functions as a marker for an eligible lifestyle and the kind of taste that is connected with it, whereas

the *Divine* ad highlights the importance of ethical choices as constituents of consumer identity. In both cases the ads participate in the construction of what, following Barthes (1972/1994), could be called the myth of chocolate, in which the history of western production, consumption, and body merge. The myth itself is about power, about the production of knowledge and gender, questions that I discuss in the following part.

2 Lindt's and the discourse of expertise

The primary objective of the *Lindt* ad (Fig. 1) seems to be to convince the consumer of the exquisite quality of the products. The ad does this by the construction of what I like to call a *discourse of excellence*, which is based on references firstly to a long tradition in the manufacturing of chocolate and secondly the accumulation of expert knowledge attained over centuries. The discourse is constructed through the interplay between text and pictures.



ADVERTISEMENT FEATURE

The chocolate masters

Great chocolate isn't just about a high cocoa content – the master chocolatiers at Lindt know that there's more to achieving excellence

Even if a bar of chocolate says 70 per cent cocoa on the label, it doesn't always mean you're getting the best quality chocolate. The type and origin of the cocoa beans, the fermentation, roasting process and the final blending of ingredients all play a part in creating the unique flavour that slowly unfolds in your mouth.

No one knows this better than the master chocolatiers at Lindt. Their expertise embraces 160 years of knowledge passed on by their predecessors, which they now use to make Lindt Excellence 70 per cent.

The master chocolatiers select the finest hand-picked cocoa varieties from South and Central America – these amount to only five per cent of the global cocoa bean harvest. The beans are fermented to release their essence then gently roasted in a secret, traditional method. They are then mixed in a specific ratio according to origin and maturity to deliver the best aroma and flavour. Here the finely tuned instincts of the master chocolatiers comes into play.

The final stage involves grinding the beans to several thousandths of a millimetre before combining them with the other ingredients to create the fine consistency for which Lindt chocolate is famous. The distinctive thickness of every Lindt bar also contributes to the end result: a perfect sheet, a crisp snap or breaking off a piece, the bitterness, aroma and that gorgeous lingering taste all reveal the true excellence.

THE SECRET OF THE CONCHE
Conching is key to creating the rich aroma and depth of flavour of Lindt Excellence 70 per cent bars. Invented by Rudolph Lindt in 1879 and perfected ever since, it involves stirring and warming the chocolate in the conche to blend the solid and liquid components together, creating each particle with even texture. Sugar crystals evaporate and a perfect balance is achieved. For more details, visit lindt.com

Make sure you try the delectable Lindt Excellence 70% dark chocolate bar free with this issue of *elbe*

Invented by
Ludwig Lindt 1879

Conche

Lindt
EXCELLENCE

Figure 1. Lindt's Excellence

In the title of the ad promoting *Lindt's* dark chocolate the *Lindt* refer to themselves the “chocolate masters”. The word “master” suggests both a person who masters a skill, a virtuoso, and to someone who is hierarchically superior to other people. The superiority emphasised in this advertisement is based on specialist knowledge. According to the text the master chocolatiers of *Lindt* “know” better than anyone else that the common belief that high cocoa content alone guarantees excellence is not enough, and that “true excellence” is something that has to be “achieved”. All this does not come easy; what is needed is time, uncompromising work by several generations, “unrivalled passion for craftmanship” and a “finely tuned instinct”.

However, knowing what to do with the raw material is by no means not enough. In order for the product to become an exquisite source of sensual pleasure which the ad emphasises, the raw material has to fulfill the strict qualifications defined by the chocolate experts of *Lindt*. For this product, specially selected, “finest hand-picked cocoa varieties from South and Central America” are used. Expert knowledge regarding the raw material paves the way for the manufacture of excellent products. The cocoa beans are “fermented to release their aromas, gently roasted to a secret, traditional method, mixed in a specific ratio according to origin and maturity”, and “grinded [sic] to several thousands of a millimetre”. Only when all these qualifications are filled, it is possible to produce “quality chocolate with the unique flavour that slowly unfolds in your mouth”.

The picture in the ad shows a man in a white chef’s uniform with the brand logo printed on his hat. He is holding a whisk that he is just about to sink back into a pot obviously filled with liquid chocolate. His intense gaze expresses uncompromising concentration; we are undoubtedly watching a specialist performing a vital and important task. On the whole, the picture supports the overall message of the text suggesting that the manufacturing process requires abilities beyond the usual, and that the possession of these abilities is associated with maleness. The *Lindt* ad combines knowledge with the ideology of the exquisite and does it in the language of hegemony, with the help of which power relations are defined and boundaries drawn. In order to achieve excellence

specialist knowledge is required, and this knowledge is incorporated in the construction of masculinity put forward by the ad.

Advertising is a communication process, a triangular relationship involving the producer, the advertising agency and the consumer (MacRury 2002: 41). Consequently, the sphere of excellence promoted by the *Lindt* ad is not only restricted to the manufacturer but involves also the customer, who through their choice of this brand become incorporated in the community of those with a discriminating palate, as Stephen Mennell (1997: 329) calls the genuine gastronome, one who approves only of the most delicate and specific culinary sensations. The magic of the ad lies in its ability to make good use of the consumer's willingness to be absorbed into this world of excellence provided by *Lindt*. Who would not like to belong to the *crème de la crème*? Purchasing a bar of *Lindt's Excellence* will give consumers access to the finely tuned instinct, passion and secret methods of the Swiss specialist, i.e. his knowledge. A boundary is drawn by the advertising strategy chosen by Lindt between those with refined tastes and those with merely coarse appetites (see Woloson 2002: 133), and the consumers are given the opportunity through purchase of this product to "climb the social pyramid with [their] mouth[s]", as E. N. Anderson (2005: 139) writes. Only through connoisseurship can the consumer become integrated into the group of sybarites. The product, the bar of chocolate is thus transformed into a signifier of the unique pleasure of knowing (and being).

In the west knowledge has traditionally been divided into two domains. The first one is the domain of rationality governed by the ideal of objectivity and logical thinking. This kind of knowledge – often connected with the thinking of the French Enlightenment philosopher Descartes – which can be acquired through rational thinking and scientific methods is regarded as "real" knowledge as opposed to what Sandra Harding (2004) calls "folk science", the kind of knowledge produced by people closed outside the dominant conceptual frameworks of rationality and objectivity in order to understand the world in which they live. The first kind of knowledge, which occupies the status of hierarchically superior ways of knowing, has traditionally been regarded as a male sphere (see e.g. Harding 1986; Haraway 1991). Rationality and logical thinking have

been associated with power, men and masculinity – an overwhelming majority of prominent philosophers and scientists have been men. However, in addition to this kind of established, “hard” knowledge another, culturally marginalised tradition of knowledge has been alive, namely the tradition referred by Harding with the term folk science, which, because of its marginalised status occupies the position of the culturally feminine. The tradition has been seldom positively recognised; it has been referred to in terms of black magic, superstition or in its least threatening form, merely feminine nonsense (for feminine ways of knowing see for instance Rantalaiho ed. 1986).

In the *Lindt* advertisement, the manufacturing of chocolate is constructed as a male sphere defined by specialist knowledge and the power connected with it. *Lindt*'s 1879 founder, Rolothe Lindt, is himself mentioned in the text, and by so doing a direct line is drawn from the male founder to the present generation of chocolatiers as personified by the man in the ad. The special status of the man within chocolate making is created with choice of vocabulary: this man with an uncompromising attitude towards his work is the master who knows what he is doing.

Interestingly, however, the discourse of excellence in the *Lindt* ad seems to combine characteristics from both the rational male tradition and the female tradition tinted by mystery¹. While the description of excellence connects with the overall cultural definition of masculinity, which draws from the underlying assumption that specialists in most cases are male, the description of the manufacturing process, by contrast, connects with perhaps the most central female task thinkable, that of nurturing and preparation of food. However, the chef – or chocolatier – is not a role constricted to the home by normative conceptions of gender, but a profession practised in the public: The discourse of expertise is inherently a discourse of the public realm. In our cultural imagery women's knowledge, which is confined to the private, is denied the status of expertise just because of its public nature. In our cultural imagery male activities requiring expert knowledge are carried out professionally outside the home (Mäntymäki 2004: 261–262; 2006: 198). This is well brought out by the picture. The way in which the man is portrayed convinces the reader that this is for real: Here we have a male

specialist absorbed in a task requiring expert knowledge. The realism and the situation are very untypical for a portrayal of a woman in a chocolate ad.

Moreover, the finely tuned instinct required from the manufacturer of quality chocolate as well as the secrecy around the process remind us of another aspect of the gendered nature of knowing, i.e. the juxtaposition of the male way of knowing by motivation and its female counterpart, knowing by instinct only. However, the instinct referred to in the ad text is not just any irrational, instinctive grasping, but the result of hard training, through which an artist-like sensitivity is acquired. As such, the finely tuned instinct is another modality of knowing in a special way, well documented as a male tradition in our culture by for instance Edgar Allan Poe and Arthur Conan Doyle, whose well-known rational geniuses Alphonse Dupin and Sherlock Holmes had their irrational sides. The success of these crime solving specialists was guaranteed by the skilful use of their finely tuned instincts in combination with rational deductive activity. In the male tradition of knowing instinct is not excluded; instead, it is trained to become the sidekick of rationality.

3 The reproduction of the female body

While the *Lindt* ad strives to introduce the consumer into the world of exclusiveness, the advertisement for *Divine* – a Ghanaian fair trade product – combines the promotion of quality with ethical aspects (and pleasure). Like *Lindt*, *Divine* relies on at least seemingly informative advertising.



Figure 2. The ad for *Divine* chocolate

The history of chocolate, like so many other ingredients and products originating in the former colonies, is bleak. It is filled with greed, exploitation and suffering (Woloson 2002: 125–126). In the *Lindt* ad this history is present only through a brief reference to South and Central America as the source of raw material. The ad for *Divine* (Fig. 2) chocolates, in contrast, makes use of the consumers' awareness of the baggage of colonisation by highlighting the ethical aspects of fair trade. The ad is part of what Jill Lane calls a “dense semiotic network that associates chocolates with colonialism, Africans and [---] with blackness” (2007: 358). Moreover, in the ad gender becomes intertwined as an important constructive unit to this network.

The ad titled “Sent from heaven” consists of – in addition to the title – a short lead and a 108 words long text. Although short, the text contains three clearly distinguishable parts with three separate functions. In the first part the reader is addressed directly: The pronoun “you” is used in order to create an intimate relation between the speaker representing the product and the addressee, the potential customer, who thereafter is

immersed in the verbally constructed pleasure of chocolate. The second part of the text is informative: it accounts for the relations of production of the *Divine* chocolates. The short text – actually just one dangling sentence – is written neutrally in the third person. The consumer is not addressed directly. The neutral tone is explained by the text's objective: to convince the consumer of the ethical nature of the trade. In the third part the customer is once again openly addressed and included in the community of *Divine*. This part contains information about the national chocolate week and the stores which sell *Divine* products.

The first part is interesting because here the text describes one of the most recurrent themes in chocolate ads, namely the product's potential for creating pleasure. The title convinces that this brand, called *Divine*, is "sent from heaven". This product "eases" the buyer "gently" into autumn. It does this with "tempting" and "delectable" new bars which are "full of juicy currants and delicious almonds in gorgeous dark chocolate". The new bars come handy when in need of a "quick choc fix". The text addresses the consumer's desire for the sensual pleasure which he or she knows chocolate can evoke. The brand name and the logotype with a little heart in the middle emphasise the metaphorical reference to love and pleasure. However, the subtle references which the ad makes with its choice of words to sexual pleasure seem to suggest that this pleasure in fact is male. "Tempting" and "juicy", the "gorgeous dark" bar representing the female body can provide for a quick shock fix for the paying customer. The vocabulary reminds us of something: these words could very well be used when describing a woman.

It has been pointed out by a number of researchers how the language of sweetness is nowadays almost exclusively used when describing women and children (Mintz 1997: 361; Woloson 2002: 16). Caitlin Hines (1999: 147), for instance, in her study of the associations of women with food, shows how women are often equated with desserts in language. Although *sweet* most of the time carries positive connotations (Sobo 1997: 260), it can also incorporate negative meanings. Hines points out, that women, often constructed as sweet objects, are trivialised, reduced to sexuality and equated particularly with peripheral food items. A woman can be referred to as a "cookie" a

“tart” a “cherry pie” or “hot chocolate”, all of which are expressions which highlight sexuality and the objectification of women’s bodies. (Hines 1999: 147–148.) This way of conceptualising cultural femininity also underlies the message of this ad. The choice of vocabulary suggests, like in a number of other ads, that what is actually traded is the female body.

In this ad the body that is traded belongs to a black woman but it is not necessarily a question of her body adopting a position as an object of desire, of a metaphorical becoming chocolate. Although the thought of her offering herself as an object of desire is undoubtedly present, another association becomes perhaps even more emphatic, that of the relationship between primary production and refinement as spheres regulated by conceptions of colonialism and gender. In the ad, a happily smiling middle-aged black woman in a traditional African outfit carries a basket with two cocoa beans in it. The picture supports the overall message of the ad, which is the ethical nature of the production of the commodities in question. The message is positive: This woman can smile happily because she can support herself and her family as a farmer of cocoa beans. At the same time, however, the picture carries other associations. The image of the black woman carrying cocoa beans is a variation of the commonly known theme of woman as a provider of food and nurturing, but in this case it does not only make visible the relationship between the production of raw material as being a female sphere as opposed to the sphere of male expertise required by refinement. It also connects with the history of many of our previous luxury products, which came about as a result of colonisation and the exploitation of the areas and their people. Jill Lane (2007: 385) points out, that chocolate, because of its colonial past is already a racialized consumer object. Despite the fact that the black woman in the picture is smiling happily there is no escaping the fact that traditional images continue to live strongly in our collective memories. This ad seems to suggest an association between Africa, femininity and primary production and Europe, masculinity and refinement representing civilization and knowledge.

4 In conclusion

Chocolate is both material and immaterial. The material side is what we can nowadays buy in every supermarket or – if we want to indulge in more exquisite pleasures – at the chocolatiers. The material side cannot be separated from the immaterial. When we start talking about chocolate, we immediately become engaged in the “dense semiotic network of chocolate” mentioned earlier. So, the immaterial side of chocolate, that is, the ways in which it is spoken about is, as a matter of fact, speech about society, our values and ways of understanding or relating to the world in which we live.

The ads that I have discussed in this paper speak about society through chocolate. They speak about chocolate’s history, about colonisation, how the relations of production have changed and are changing, and how chocolate is becoming an opportunity for allegedly ethical consumption for the critically aware western buyers. Thus, the ads also speak about our cultural past, our dreams and customs. In addition, they speak about social categorisation and about taste. Moreover, they tell the story of gender through iconographic representations of men as experts and women as nurturers or sexualised bodies. In this sense, chocolate is material magically turned into discourse.

Notes

¹ Women are almost without exception represented in chocolate ads in terms of mystification. References to the female body and sexuality are recurring.

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