

Once Upon a Taste in the East

A Different Picture Tale About Space Food

Sven Grampp

Abstract *There hardly seems to be anything less sensually appealing than space food. Space food is an indexical sign, a trace of the otherness and artificial requirements of life in space. In this 'non-sensual' form, space food is particularly attractive for the sensual representation of space missions in museums or documentaries nowadays as "a window into the 'techno-food' of the future" (Spence in this volume). I demonstrate that there is also another history of showing, imagining, and representing space food, which today has, to a large extent, vanished from popular cultural memory. During the so-called Space Race between the USA and the USSR from the 1950s to the 1970s, especially in Soviet news reports on space missions, space food was imagined as something that dissolved the categorical difference between 'natural,' fresh food and preserved, plastic-wrapped food. Mainly on a visual level, a lot of attention was paid to making food in space sensually appealing by presenting it within a home-like atmosphere.*

1. Making Senses of Nonsenses

There hardly seems to be anything less sensually appealing than space food. Water and air extracted, shrunk together, all ingredients carefully pureed, packed in plastic containers or aluminium tubes, strictly calculated according to calorie requirements. Entirely based on quantitative efficiency, NASA puts the mass of an average daily ration for a space traveller at 1.2 kg (cf. Smith et al. 2014: 7–14). Taste or even appealing appearance are simply unimportant. It is precisely in this 'non-sensual' form that space food is particularly attractive for the sensual representation of space missions in museums or documentaries, because it can open "a window into the 'techno-food' of the future" (Spence in this volume) (see for example fig. 1). Insofar, space food is an indexical sign, a trace – in a nutshell – of the otherness and technological requirements of life in space. In contrast, I would like to show that there is another history of showing, imagining, and representing space food, which today has, to a large extent, vanished from popular cultural memory.

Fig. 1: The sensual presentation of 'non-sensual' space food at the National Museum of the United States Air Force.



Source: <https://www.nationalmuseum.af.mil/Visit/Museum-Exhibits/Fact-Sheets/Display/Article/197687/space-foods/>.

During the so-called Space Race between the USA and the USSR from the 1950s to the 1970s, especially in Soviet news reports on space missions, space food was imagined as something that dissolved the categorical difference between 'natural,' fresh food and preserved, plastic-wrapped food, even rendering it irrelevant. Especially on a visual level, a lot of effort was expended to make food in space seem like food at home. As I will demonstrate, this mode of representation follows a specific ideological worldview. Space food operates in this case as a mediator for such a worldview. And it does so in a particular, sensually especially attractive way, namely via its "multisensory appeal" (Spence in this volume) through visualization. Soviet images present space food in a way that allows the viewers to not just see the food, but also to think about the smell, taste, or even sound of the food. This 'multisensory appeal' stems not only from the visual appearance of the food items, but also from various extrinsic factors such as the arrangement of the food, the choice of tableware, the depiction of communal eating situations, and the atmosphere of the surroundings. Especially in comparison with representations of space food in US news reports and popular culture at the same time (and nearly worldwide up to this day), it becomes quite clear how differently space food was presented on the other side

of the Iron Curtain. For this reason, I would like to start my analysis of Soviet representations of space food with some contrasting examples from the US-American context of broadcasting and popular culture.

2. Space Food American Style

In the American sitcom *The Lucy Show*, which first aired on the television network CBS from 1962 to 1968, a test takes place in the episode *Lucy Becomes an Astronaut*. The aim is to find out whether women are suitable for space travel. Lucy and her best friend have been chosen for this test. Most of the episode takes place in a locked room designed to simulate life in a spaceship cabin. From the moment they are locked in the simulation room, the two women are struggling with their situation. In particular, the prospect of only being able to subsist on space food in tubes leads to an extended exchange of grievances between Lucy and her friend. Her displeasure with the tube food is written all over Lucy's friend's face as she tries to eat it. The difference between 'normal' food and space food in tubes is highlighted again and again to draw humorous effects from this difference.

A very similar scenario can be found in the 1955 science-fiction film *Conquest of Space*. At the beginning of the plot, we find ourselves on a space station orbiting Earth (Westfahl 2009: 39–40). A crew has just been selected to travel to Mars. In preparation for this mission, the chosen ones are exposed to a special diet. They are only allowed to take pills, which results in all sorts of expressions of displeasure. In this scene, to clearly mark the contrast with 'normal' food, the dietetic food is contrasted with the opulent meals enjoyed by the other crew members, with dishes that include roast beef, heavy sauces, French fries, and fresh salad.

Amerika – a Russian-language magazine, financed by the US government specifically with the purpose of exporting it to the Soviet Union during the Cold War (see Rockwell 2012) – published, in late 1969, a detailed report on space food, which is compared with dishes from a restaurant mentioned in the text. This comparison also takes place on a visual level: Three plastic containers are juxtaposed with a decoratively arranged menu of steak, vegetables, potatoes, and baguette rolls accompanied by water and coffee. The image caption reads: “Пища в пластмассовых мешочках (слева), может быть, и не так вкусна, но по своей питательности она не уступает сытному земному ужину (справа).” [Trans.: “The food in plastic bags (left) may not be as tasty, but its nutritional value is no worse than a filling terrestrial dinner (right).”] (Amerika 1969: 70) This clearly marks a difference in terms of taste, which is clarified visually by the differences between freshly prepared food vs. hermetically sealed food, colourful vs. monochrome, displayed on dishes vs. wrapped in plastic bags, tasty vs. not very delicious. The September 27 1963 issue of *LIFE* magazine likewise published a report on space food. The cover photo already shows astronauts

during a parabolic flight test. We can see how the astronauts struggle to drink from plastic bags while being whirled around during the phase of weightlessness (fig. 2a). In the corresponding article, the visual difference between space food and 'earthly' food is marked not so much by the report itself as by the contextualization of the report in the magazine. The food for the astronauts, dehydrated, shrink-wrapped in plastic bags and with toxic or at least very artificial colour connotations (such as acid yellow, neon violet) on Page 32, contrasts sharply with advertising images that offer opulent fast food for immediate consumption, like the *Deluxe Hot Dog* on Page 46 (figs 2b-c).

Fig. 2a-c: 'Fast food' in space and on Earth.



Source: a-c: *Life* 27 October 1963, cover, p. 32, p. 46.

3. Soviet Space Food

Soviet reporting presented a different perspective. The alternative take on space food is clearly illustrated within a long article published in 1963 in the popular science youth magazine *Хочу все знать* [trans.: I WANT TO KNOW EVERYTHING]. The article *Меню космонавтов альманах* [trans: *Cosmonaut Menu Almanac*] not only explains how space food is produced, it also tells the long history of food conservation. Again, the illustration is particularly revealing. The image shows the transition from 'natural' food to preserved space food in tubes as a continuous transition from bottom to top (fig. 3). The transition from natural food into artificial space food takes place without a clear cut. The magazine shows a smooth, almost indistinguishable transformation process. Visually there are no clear differences between instant, cooked, baked, or completely untreated food. And against the white background and without further framing, the image conjures the impression of a food genealogy floating in space.

Fig. 3: On the genealogy of space food.



Source: ХОЧУ ВСО ЗНАТЬ, 1963: 23.

This strategy is very similar to the one discerned by Roland Barthes (1980 [1964]) in his famous analysis of a Panzani advertisement in the 1960s. In the advertising picture, preserved food (tomato cans) and fresh tomatoes are placed in a shopping net in such a way that a categorical difference between them is no longer highlighted, but rather blurred. More precisely: The connotations of fresh tomatoes – juicy, healthy, and fresh from the regional Italian market – become, through the spatial entanglement with the tomato cans on the photo, a quasi-natural quality of the latter. The difference between Panzani's tomato cans and space food remains, of course, obvious. Barthes is talking about conserved food down on earth 'for everyone' and not about food made for a few pioneers in space. Nevertheless, the strategy of blurring the boundaries between the separate states of food is in both

cases striking (and a common mode of food representation in advertisement until today).

The idea of connecting natural and preserved foods can be traced back genealogically to an era long before the Panzani campaign and the first space flights. For the Soviet Union, food was a particularly popular topic from the very beginning, especially in the ideological propagation of a new life or a 'new man,' respectively. We can trace this ancestry in книга о вкусной и здоровой пище [trans.: THE BOOK OF TASTY AND HEALTHY FOOD], a cookbook, illustrated with sumptuous colour photographs. The book has gone through eight editions since 1939 and is said to have sold around 3.5 million copies in the Soviet Union (Schlölgel 2017: 264–75). The cookbook contains many recipes, which are, above all, intended to demonstrate and promise that the socialist revolution will be accompanied by culinary prosperity. In addition, this cookbook celebrates the rationalisation of cooking and, especially, food preparation. Among other things, the preservation of meat in cans and the compression of beef broth into stock cubes are proposed in order to decrease the time needed for cooking. The crucial point is that unpreserved and preserved foods are depicted and described on the same level, especially in the editions from the 1950s onwards.

Fig. 4: The symmetry of living and conserved animals.



Source: книга о вкусной и здоровой пище, Edition 1952: 3–4.

For example, the visual framing of the introduction to the 1952 edition depicts canned food on a double page together with live animals (fig. 4). Not the method of processing live animals into canned meat is shown, but rather the categorical distinction between living and dead, fresh and preserved is flattened. They are literally

on the same (double) page. This is likewise true for the packaging of stock cubes, soups, desserts, lentil and vegetable dishes. They are visualised in a similarly aesthetically pleasing way on the same page in книга о вкусной и здоровой пище (fig. 5).

Fig. 5: The art of stock cube dishes.



Source: книга о вкусной и здоровой пище, Edition 1952: 27.

Another example: corn on the cob is, in this cookbook, not just presented as if it had directly come from the field, but is specially draped in green plastic packaging (fig. 6). This is a particularly revealing case because there is no actual reason for the additional plastic packaging. Based on this example, it is only a small step to situate natural food, canned food, bouillon cubes, and ultimately space food on the same level of taste, or even to value preserved or synthetically produced food higher and display it accordingly on the visual level.

Fig. 6: Corn draped beautifully in plastic.



Source: книга о вкусной и здоровой пище, Edition 1952: 59.

This last step was actually achieved in 1969 with a photograph taken for the New Year's season. On a photo in the January 1969 issue of the magazine *ОГОНЁК* [internationally known as *OGONIOK*, trans.: *SPARK*], cosmonaut Boris Volynov watches his daughter with affection as she eats space food from a tube as if it were a treat. At the bottom right edge of the picture is a box with New Year's tree decorations. We are obviously in a domestic, family environment at the time around New Year. The photograph suggests that this tradition now includes not only celebration decorations, but in addition space food from a tube for the little ones. The association of this food with outer space is thus taken back, instead it is inserted into the family sphere of life on Earth. Instead of biscuits, chocolates, or nuts, space tubes are the special treat – the categorical difference between biscuits and space tubes is removed.

The very first cooperation between the USA and the USSR in space, the so-called Apollo-Soyuz Test Project (ASTP), led to the release of the Soviet documentary *Экипажи кораблей Союз и Аполлон* (trans.: *The crews of Soyuz and Apollo*) in 1974.

Long passages of the documentary show the cosmonauts and astronauts visiting a restaurant. The joint training of the space travellers included sightseeing, such as a visit of the space museum in Kalúga, and afterwards, a small reception was held nearby, to which the international press was invited as well. Its main attraction: space food in tubes. In this case, too, the categorical difference between space food and food in dining establishments on Earth is levelled. Although the food from the tube is presented as a highlight of the meeting and thus as something unusual, space food has nevertheless already arrived in a restaurant on Earth.

As part of this first space cooperation between the two superpowers of the Cold War, a frequent exchange of symbolic gifts and gestures took place after the coupling of the Soyuz and Apollo capsules in Earth orbit on 17 July 1975. Of particular interest for the media was apparently – at least judging by the extensive coverage – *where* the astronauts and cosmonauts shared their meals. Menu plans were published in advance, photographic evidence of the joint ‘meal training’ circulated in magazines, and the finally realized joint meal in Earth orbit was broadcast live and transcontinentally on television.

The cosmonauts allowed themselves a joke in this context, which was frequently reported on: to celebrate the joint meeting in space, the cosmonauts presented the astronauts, quizzically facing the camera, with tubes that were decorated with the labels of two very well-known Soviet vodka brands. These ‘vodka tubes’ were used to make a ‘toast’ (Scott/Leonov 2004: 359–60). It soon turned out that these tubes ‘only’ contained a famous speciality of Russian cuisine, namely borscht (alcohol was strictly forbidden on board). Nevertheless, the gesture reveals a symbolic strategy: ‘homeland’ food (borscht) and ‘homeland’ spirits (vodka) had now arrived in outer space (even if only as a simulation for the time being). In these instances, broadcast live on television from the modules of the ASTP, viewers were frequently invited into the Soviet space station Salyut 4, which was in Earth orbit at the same time. Again and again, cosmonaut Pyotr Klimuk explained the plant experiments on Salyut 4 to the television viewers directly from the space station (DRA 1975).

Two ideologemes are deeply connected with this performance, which stem from a specific Soviet tradition. The first ideologeme states that terrestrial and extraterrestrial spheres are to be regarded as a homogeneous space. Or more precisely: these different spheres are made into a homogeneous space by ‘socialist’ efforts. During the reporting on the ASTP, the performance of this homogenisation took place primarily on a visual level. The second ideologeme establishes a local centre in this homogenised space that resonates in two directions: the starting point of all actions is the Soviet Union as the centre of power. Consequently, all achievements must also ultimately lead back to it.

To give some examples for the second ideologeme: the Soviet leadership insisted from the outset of the negotiations on the ASTP that the Soyuz rocket had to be the first to be sent into space from the Baikonur Cosmodrome (see Ezell/Ezell 2010:

186–90, 317–23). Thus, the joint mission had its starting point on Soviet territory. Years before the ASTP, the Soviet spaceport was repeatedly presented visually as the starting point of extraterrestrial networking of the world, for example in the opening sequence of an East German documentary from 1969: In *Wege ins Weltall* [trans. *Paths to the Cosmos*], the Baikonur Cosmodrome is the starting point of a graphically animated network initiated on planet Earth. ‘Paths into space’ means in fact that there is only one path into space, namely the one from the Soviet spaceport.

Many examples could be given to show that the paths to space often lead back to the Soviet Union, or, to add geographical precision, to Moscow. For instance, the Soviet film production *Вселенная* [trans.: *Universe*] from 1951 provides various facts of the universe. The film also speculates about possible exploration of the universe. The starting point of the journey into the universe is clearly marked visually in Moscow. After the journey leads to distant galaxies, the return to Earth takes place at the end of the film, ultimately ending back in Moscow, more precisely still within sight of Lomonosova University (Kohonen 2017: 32–33).

This spatial constellation is a Soviet ideologeme insofar as it is part of a tradition that was frequently used for propaganda purposes under Stalin at the latest. Since then, Moscow was presented as the centre of power. From there, all decisive movements started and there they all returned (Kohonen 2017: 31–35). In reference to extensive research on the Soviet conception of space in the Stalin era, Ihina Kohonen observes: “Moscow was like a magnetic pole whose field-controlled movement external to the centre. As if pressed by a centrifugal force, movement was directed outside of the core. Moscow organised power around itself in such a way that remote areas were directly related to the city centre and in a circular manner, so that the most sacred area was the Kremlin.” (Kohonen 2017: 32–33) Moscow can indeed be understood as a magnetic pole, or more precisely: as a reversibly adjustable centre, since all movement emanates from this magnetic pole centrifugally on the one hand and returns to it centripetally, on the other.

The opening and final sequences of the reports about the ASTP on Soviet television were designed in exactly this way: first they showed a shot of the Red Square (with the reference that this was an Intervention programme, i.e. a programme that was broadcast transnationally), followed by the image of a starry sky. This vision was then overlaid with a picture of the rotating Earth, which finally was enveloped by the logo of the ASTP mission. At the end of each ASTP special broadcast, the opening sequence was shown in reverse order. This means at the end the viewers would find themselves back at the starting point of the programme, right on Red Square in Moscow (DRA 1975).

This practice of centralisation and cyclical return is interesting above all – and this brings me back to the first Soviet ideologeme – because it relates to a certain form of space representation and thus a certain representation of food: the terrestrial and extraterrestrial spheres were homogenised or at least assimilated in a very

peculiar way. In other words, the extraterrestrial sphere underwent a process of domestication.

This is already true on the level of motifs: as mentioned before, plants grown in Earth orbit were held up to the camera during the coverage of the ASTP, to demonstrate once more the progress of plant experiments (DRA 1975). Above all, this was about the prospect of growing wheat, that is, of food production in space. Philosopher Peter Sloterdijk calls the establishment of space stations metaphorically an act of “implantation of a world into a former nothing” (Sloterdijk 2016: 179 [trans. SG]), which makes it “suitable as an environment for humans into the external world” (Sloterdijk 2016: 179 [trans. SG]). For the case at hand, the metaphor of implantation can be taken quite literally: A transplantation of plants is taking place in an ‘external world container’ while broadcast live all over the world.

The returning cosmonauts were also given plants by young pioneers on Earth live in front of the television cameras (DRA 1975). So, the ‘fruit’ of (Soviet) Earth is literally found everywhere. Or to put it another way: Soviet fruit or plants advance into Earth orbit, thus claiming spaces previously considered ‘other’ and transferring them back home. The Soviet agricultural state is thus expanded into the vastness of space. Space, in this sense, is not the place of transformative future technology, but rather the place of expansion for the agricultural heritage of the Soviet Union.

The Soyuz module was designed to offer a very ‘homely’ module for the gathering of astronauts and cosmonauts (see Meuser 2015: 39–40). In this module, the space travellers met for the first time in space, held press conferences together, spent their free time together – and above all: ate together.

On the design level, the Soyuz module represented something that, in the words of philosopher and media critic Günther Anders, can be described as “trinketification” (1994 [1970]: 65–66). ‘Trinket’ (German: ‘Nippes’) originally referred to small objects displayed for ornamental purposes, mostly in private settings, especially in the living or dining room. Examples include porcelain angel figurines or blue and white painted small smurf figures. Günther Anders took up this term, including its pejorative association, in the 1960s and 1970s to describe the relationship between events taking place in space and their representation on television. Through televisual reporting and its reception in the domestic environment, Anders argues, a very specific perception of events in space is prefigured. The result of this prefiguration is what Anders calls ‘trinketification,’ meaning that the events in space are diminished, trivialised, and thus perceived as ornamental objects among others in the living or dining room at home. ‘Trinketification’ would thus be a diminutive, even trivialising transformation of distant and alien occurrences into everyday life brought in private spheres through television.

Anders himself writes quite vividly in this regard: “The larger the space of what we have conquered and achieved, the tinier it seems to become, since, in order to reach us, it must first be ‘trinketified’ with the sun, moon, earth and stars, i.e. trans-

lated into the miniscule size of our television screens.” (Anders 1994 [1970]: 65 [trans. SG]) It is not the awareness “that we are looking into the infinite depth and vastness of space,” he goes on to explain, that is promoted by television reporting from outer space, but rather: “Conversely, when we sit in front of our apparatuses, we usually forget that we are in the universe together with our room and house and city and earth; no, we often even have the feeling that the universe is in our room: on the right is the record cabinet, on the left the liquor cabinet, and in the middle the universe floats as the third piece of furniture.” (Anders 1994 [1970]: 65–66 [trans. SG])

In the case at hand, the term ‘trinketification’ is meant to denote the transformation of the universe into a piece of furniture in the living or dining room, as Anders argues. What is at stake for me is not that the universe was in the viewers’ living or dining rooms during the Soviet television broadcast of the ASTP, but rather that an *extension* of the living or dining room into the universe was staged in the reporting itself. The universe is not in the living room nor in the kitchen, just as the living room or the kitchen is not simply in the universe, but instead the universe looks like an (admittedly fancy) living or dining room. The universe is inserted into the living room and/or dining room – in other words: it is quite literally domesticated.

Such a ‘trinketification’ is anticipated in a biopic about the Russian space pioneer Konstantin Tsiolkovsky from 1957. In *Дорога к звёздам* [trans. *Road to the stars*], the connection to home is not only highlighted by the ‘homely’ interior design of the space station, but by the choice of cultural activities as well: the cosmonaut receives a live transmission from the Soviet State Ballet, which is performing *SWAN LAKE*. The cosmonaut has made herself comfortable in a dressing gown. To the left of the picture is fresh fruit, which is now apparently available in space. This is the final stage of the homogenisation of outer space: Space has become so ordinary that the actual events no longer take place in outer space but on Earth. There is no longer a need to conserve food in plastic tubes. The extraordinary has been ‘transfigured’ into the ordinary, the extraterrestrial transformed into the terrestrial.

This kind of ‘trinketification’ is contemplated in a Soviet science-fiction film that hit the cinemas barely a year before the ASTP’s space flight. In *Москва – Кассиопея* [trans.: *Moscow–Cassiopeia*], a very young crew, namely children, set out on a space journey to the constellation of Cassiopeia. To survive this long journey, over 80 different simulation scenarios are installed in the ship, which – like the holodeck on the USS Enterprise in the series *Star Trek: The Next Generation* – make it possible to simulate a lifelike environment on board. In the case of *Москва – Кассиопея*, however, the simulations do not feature fantastic worlds or training scenarios for emergencies, as they frequently appear in *Star Trek*. Instead, real places from the Soviet homeland are chosen without exception – such as a lake district near Moscow or the family dining room of one of the young cosmonauts. Familiar foods and beverages can always be found in the simulation rooms, especially biscuits and tea from a samovar (figs. 7a–b). On the way from Moscow to Cassiopeia, the homeland – even if it is just a simu-

lation – should travel with the passengers and always be accessible. The dining room and the familiar dishes from Earth are travelling ‘with us’ into the universe.

Fig. 7a-b: The simulation of a dining room on the way to Cassiopeia.



Source: Москва – Кассиопея, USSR 1973, Screenshot.

4. Conclusion: The Dialectic of Multisensory and Non-Sensual Appeal

These future utopias in space are curiously the exact opposite of the presentation strategy employed in the cookbook described below, which was published around the same time as the biopic *Дорога к звёздам* and the movie *Москва – Кассиопея*. While the films are celebrating the premodern state of food (not wrapped in plastic or preserved), the cookbook celebrates corn wrapped in plastic as a modern achievement. In the socialist vocabulary common in the Soviet Union, one could understand this contradiction as a dialectical strategy of representation: At home on Earth, ‘we’ become modern, while in outer space ‘we’ become premodern and homely, or will at least return to such a state soon in the future.

With reference to experimental psychologist Charles Spence, one might explain the Soviet representation of food in space in a much more functional way. While the USA, in the age of the Space Race, tended to visualize food as “a window into the ‘techno-food’ of the future” (Spence in this volume), the Soviet side responded with visual forms of representation that compensated for and indirectly evoked the missing “multisensory appeal” (Spence in this volume) of space food. And because this ‘multisensory appeal’ could be evoked by depicting a homely environment and atmosphere – the grain from the field, the fresh fruit from the tree in the garden, the tea in the dining room enjoyed in community –, these elements were used and integrated into a Soviet tradition of representing space. The fact that food on earth is in turn infused with space food (tubes as sweets on New Year, corn aesthetically wrapped in plastic) can be understood as a complementary operation to make ‘our’ homes modern and technology driven.

The key point of these visual presentations lies in a dialectic of multisensory and non-sensual appeal: Not in space, but down on Earth a “window into the techno-

food of the future" (Spence in this volume) is opened. Space, on the other hand, offers a window into the traditional food of the past. In space, it will be as it has always been at home, and 'we' will eat in this inhospitable environment what 'we' have always eaten at home with our families, or always wanted to taste again because of the homely feeling associated with this 'multisensory' memory. This is the basic strategy of the long faded picture tale of Soviet space food.

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