“Honey, I Nuked Dinner”
Semiotic Implications of 1950s TV Dinner Advertising

Sarah Barnett

ABSTRACT
Meals and mealtimes have long been an important time in American culture. However, what meals are made of, how they are enjoyed and what they mean to those who eat them has changed dramatically over time, especially since the 1950s. The TV Dinner and its subsequent advertising act as a cultural artifact in order to examine and understand this change in society. Through a semiotic lens, this article will explore several advertisements from the 1950s regarding TV Dinners and fast food. Through discussing the convergence between advertising, TV Dinners, and how we presently view food and meals this article hopes to enlighten the reader of the changes in thought. By further awareness and understanding it is then possible to attribute these changes in the way we see mealtimes to the advertising of the food itself.

KEYWORDS
Food Advertising, Advertising, Television, Semiotics, TV Dinners, Frozen Food, Fast Food, Swanson, McDonald’s, 1950s, Food Modification
I am studying the cultural meaning among middle class Americans regarding meals as a nourishing social experience and base of everyday traditions, to a mere consumer commodity. Through a textual and semiological analysis of food advertising in the 1950s, focusing mainly on TV Dinners, I hope to uncover the basis of this interesting change in Americans’ daily eating traditions. I want to understand how advertising has changed the way we alter our daily eating behaviors and also what place food holds in our society by focusing attention to the TV Dinner and its place as a cultural artifact. Even though Swanson’s 1950’s TV Dinner seems to hold a small place in America’s history, its implications are vast. By examining the TV Dinner’s place as an innovative and exciting invention in the history of our eating practices, a cultural narrative regarding the trajectory of food production will unfold through my advertisement analyses. I plan to examine the historical context in which the TV Dinner emerged in addition to the advertising that came along with it, modernity and technology within food, the modification of food from nourishment to fuel, the conformity and sameness that it encouraged in its consumers and ideas of new directions in food advertising and consumer behavior that it promoted. I will examine all aforementioned sections of study through analysis of several print ads of the 1950s. Food was not always the industrial product of agribusiness that it is today. Although few would argue that perceptions of food have not changed, the acknowledgement and discussion of its drastic modifications is only just coming to light. We need to understand the history and ideology behind the
essential changes of food development as well as the motives that led us to this technologically charged interpretation of what food once was. Through analyses of advertisements it will be easier to see the progression of thought imposed on us by these agribusinesses and large corporations.

Project Data

The first category that I will consider is a historical context of the period in which the TV Dinner and its subsequent advertising was first produced. I will examine the coincidental convergence between advancements in Swanson’s production and advertising. I think this is important to include because without some of the larger governmental and cultural changes taking place in America, the TV Dinner might not have ever come to fruition. The TV Dinner emerged on the American TV tray in 1954 as a result of the Swanson Company’s over abundance of turkey, and the creative idea to merge with the increasingly popular Television to advertise what was called a “dinner without dishes”. The combination of a surplus of material food products and an increasing fascination with convenience came together to support the success of this unique product. Through an article by Linda Shrieves entitled, “Frozen Dinner: Still Hot at 40” I was able to get a taste for the atmosphere that the TV Dinner was being brought into. The first TV Dinner to arrive in stores was a pre-made Thanksgiving dinner compartmentalized within a metal tray like that of an airline. The appeal of a no hassle meal that the whole family enjoys spread rapidly among mothers who had recently entered the workforce during World War II. While wanting to keep their jobs and newfound sense of extended responsibility, the 1950s nuclear family lifestyle included being the perfect housewife and mother no matter the circumstances. Enter the rise of the
futuristic, easy, and tasty TV Dinners. With advertisements encouraging customers to “trust” and rely on the home cooked tastes that Swanson provided, all the while hammering home the point that with these innovative meals, “you can do it all”, Swanson was engaging in calculated target marketing. This segmented targeting of housewives was used because of the purchasing power that women had. While men made the money, women bought the groceries, and without an appeal to them, Swanson knew its opportunity to infiltrate the American household would be lost. Although women were marketed and advertised to prior to their new cultural standings, they were never given the sole responsibility of making decisions as large as buying dinner. Ads focused on make-up, weight loss products or certain cigarettes engaged women as the target in the past, but this period changed the way women were marketed to altogether. Additionally, one didn’t have to be able to cook if TV Dinners were being served. As culinary prowess was once a highly desired aspect of a woman, now with the TV Dinner involved, reading directions was the only prerequisite to a full meal. Of course, without innovative advancements in processing in all food storage and production, mainly the ability to freeze food, the TV Dinner would never have come along. Paul Josephson’s “The Ocean’s Hot Dog” reveals many insights into this newly booming idea and isle of the grocery store, frozen foods. Similar to Swanson’s turkey surplus, fish sticks, another 1950’s snacking staple, was developed out of an excessive amount of fish. Josephson examines the relationship of the overabundance of generic proteins with the heightened use of frozen food technology in order to create a new an exciting product for the American people. Through the budding popularity of the TV Dinner, fish sticks were also sometimes marketed as “Bake and Serve” dinners to capitalize on this modification
of the market. When it was previously imperative to be able to “Master the Art of French Cooking” with the popularity of Julia Child, now the emphasis was on being able to be a working woman and a mom who could balance it all. Families were no longer judged by the perfection of the dinner table; instead, the focus was taken away from the food and the traditional ritual of nightly dinner and placed on the innovations at hand, the television and the TV Dinner.

Since I will be analyzing several advertisements of TV Dinners and food from the time, a discussion of advertising in general is helpful. While we are all familiar with what advertising is in this contemporary time, it was not always as blatant. The powerhouse decade of the 1950s in advertising was in response to two things according to Stephen R. Fox in his book *The Mirror Makers*, the baby boomers and the drift to the suburbs (172). This move to the suburban frontier and emphasis on the nuclear family paired with the rise in women in the workplace and marketplace made for significant changes in advertising’s importance. Though advertising has traditionally been successful through targeting specific demographic markets among active consumers, or those Americans with purchasing power, the 1950s gave way to some new targets. Mothers, and working mothers emerged as the new household purchasers and became who to market most family commodities to. Items ranging from household appliances to groceries were now appealing to the woman of the home. The TV Dinner caught on to this development from the beginning and made it a point to keep mom in the forefront of their ads. Through my in depth analysis of the ads, Roland Barthes’ *Mythologies* and a general understanding of semiotics is crucial. Barthes’ claim that myth is a language fits nicely into my examination of TV Dinner advertisements. It is not necessary to have
words to describe the implications and meanings of images when the cultural myth and understanding is in place as it is within the ads I will explore.

Going hand in hand with an analysis of advertising and continuous emphasis on advancements in technology is my next area of study; culinary modernism. Through this term, I mean to explain the ways in which we as Americans try to make everything, including and especially the food and meals that we eat, contemporary. The excitement and pressure to be on the cutting edge of everything is a distinctly American burden. However, when paired with food development, the desire to be revolutionary is even more important. Food is an important aspect of life in all cultures, but the incorporation of food in all parts of life is a uniquely American development. We combine eating food in so many parts of life that any social interaction is seldom without at least some sustenance. Of course European culture places eating in high regard, but our obsession with snacking, being full and making sure we don’t get hungry goes beyond placing meals in high esteem. As the postwar years gave way to a new time in our country and acted as the basic launch pad for modern technologies and constant information flow, the Television existed at the center of it all. With increasingly more Americans, approximately two-thirds by 1955 according to Lynn Spigel’s book *Make Room for TV: Television and the Family ideal in Postwar America*, being able to purchase televisions, watching TV and staying informed through this new technology was the thing to do. Instead of sitting around a dinner table, one of the oldest American traditions, the focus was the new technology looming in the living or family room (75). We engaged in conversation less, existed in our homes in a more idle state during mealtimes and the connectedness of our lives on an everyday basis through sharing daily events at
mealtimes no longer happened. Even if Swanson didn’t advertise their TV Dinners to be delicious, mothers across the country would still flock to the freezer isle to collect them for that night’s meal because the concentration of dinner was no longer how good the food was, but what was being broadcasted that evening. Although Swanson made sure to appeal to taste, the focus on the technological advancements of the TV and the dinner that you ate in front of it were certainly more interesting to consumers. In “Meals To Come” by Warren Belasco, an in-depth study of the allure of technology paired with food comes to light. He acknowledges the distinction between European and American food cultures by claiming that European gastronomy historically focuses on artistry, whereas Americans are obsessed with practicality and compactness (172). Americans crave futuristic components in everything, food not being an exception. From the intention of a TV Dinner, watching TV while one at a meal, to the compartmentalized structure of the tray, this frozen box was a technological item of the times. Introductions of preservatives and the continuation of processed meats, such as the ubiquitous chicken act as everyday generics in our lifestyles. “Making Meat” by William Boyd illustrates some of these “advancements” in our relationship to meat, especially chicken. The abundance of the bird, due to artificial growing practices by American agribusiness; lead conveniently into developments of processing like in the cases of Swanson’s turkey. Our entanglement with technology went all the way to sponsor a “chicken of tomorrow” contest to find a low cost way to manufacture “meat type” chickens”. Such widespread interest and investment in altering food that once occurred naturally, into byproducts of technology, is so common that we hardly notice it today. If we are told that something tastes good, then more likely than not, we will eat it without much of a second thought of what it is or how
it got to our plates. Although I don’t want to stray too far from my thesis, I think it is important to look slightly at the place that food holds within Science Fiction movies with Jean P. Retzinger’s article entitled, “Speculative Visions and Imaginary Meals”.

Examining futuristic influences on food is important because so much of our cultural focus in the postwar era of the 1950s was on the future and new technologies. The TV Dinner is a direct connection between technology and food and therefore space like or more scientific representations of food are significant places to observe. Food is something that we all share and a universal familiarity, a benchmark within futuristic glimpses and especially films. It is how we understand and make sense of ourselves in relation to these moments of the future that occur either in fiction or, as with the case of missions to the moon, reality. By reading Retzinger, it is clear that she believes food is the intersection of technology and culture.

There are two crucial details in understanding the changes that the TV Dinner and its advertising had on American culture that have not been given enough credit and notice. These two elements are the encouragements made by the advertisements to leave the home with your family to eat dinner out, and the emphasis on conformity and being like every other family in your neighborhood or community. Food ads of the time were engaging with the many transformations that general American culture was faced with. Namely, the introduction of women to the workforce, advancements in technology in all realms of culture, and the desire, in itself for all things new and different. The emergence of McDonald’s, and other fast food franchises such as Burger King, represented a new opportunity for families to leave the house and eat dinner together at an affordable price point and food that everyone would enjoy. While Americans have always gone out to
restaurants to enjoy meals, the McDonald’s corporation came to fill a void in the food industry. Cheap, quick, uniform food that pleased every member of the family was a novelty that has yet to cease entertaining and satisfying consumers. The development of TV Dinners and fast food chains such as McDonald’s was happening almost simultaneously. With Ray Kroc, McDonald’s key advertising and business player, coming to the company in 1955, the two cultural phenomenons were advancing at almost the same rate. As TV Dinners and their advertisements were inviting Americans to stray from the dinner table to the TV tray and television, McDonald’s was encouraging them to leave the house. Although the family would eat together at a table inside McDonald’s, this is a drastically different experience than eating at home. The conversation does not revolve around the family members and the goings on of their days; instead the focus is on the food and the surroundings. The nuclear family was a lifestyle choice and aspiration and with its inception came many expectations. Although Swanson began to change the idea that women had to cook every night, the incorporation of Swanson into the home made it so the TV Dinner was the new norm. While eating TV Dinners might have been a trend, they were also a change in lifestyle and an elemental distortion of the way we view eating.

Perhaps my most crucial portion of the project will be dealing with food previously interpreted as nourishing entity becoming food as a consumer commodity. Through exploration of several articles I will try to uncover the various influences that this phenomenon feeds on and articulate my own point in conjunction with these. Starting with Lizabeth Cohen’s “Plastic Cages” I will help the reader along with a description of “niche marketing” or “target marketing” previously mentioned.
Advertisers during the 1950s discovered that instead of trying to create demographics to better sell their products, they would prey on ones already existing, such as wives and mothers that were unemployed, or mothers newly entering the workforce. Specifically, advertisers wanted to appeal to white women of the typical American middle-class. Their original demographic consisted of women who were too busy to cook every night.

However, with the rise of popularity of the TV Dinner and the fact that the product was being purchased on account of its allure and not necessity, the advertising scope slightly broadened. TV Dinners and eating in front of the television was largely in vogue. Cohen contributes greatly to the concept of the codependent relationship of consumers and advertisers by explaining its novelty and important place in the business world.

Advertisers and their clients were able to see consumer feedback and therefore target more accurately to the desired demographic. At the same time that advertisers are harassing us with what we should buy in order to be who we want to be, we are feeding them with information of what we want to buy every time a purchase is made. In Becky Mansfield’s “Imitation Crab” several claims revolving around consumption are made. Mainly and most useful, is the notion that consumption is the point at which economy and culture combine. As Mark Bittman’s article “Is Junk Food Really Cheaper?” states, “we are living in a socially acceptable food carnival” because of the many codependent relationships I have mentioned. We no longer have time nor want the time to enjoy food in the proper and previously acceptable ways. The attraction of modified food, intrigue with technology and appeal of not having time to enjoy your food, come together to encourage the shift of how we imagine food. The television and the TV Dinner brought us into a time where information, being productive and not having time to eat were what
we should be focusing on, not what we put in our mouths. A critical piece of writing to assist in the explanation of this most integral point of my work will be Marcelo Jacques Fonseca’s article, “Understanding Consumer Culture: The Role of “Food” as an Important Cultural Category”. As culture is becoming progressively more commoditized in every aspect, it should come as no surprise that we view the practice of eating and food in general in this product based opinion. Becoming aware of this, however, is essential.

The advertisements I will use are gathered from Internet archive sources and chosen for their specific attributes lending themselves to my areas of study and focus. While most of them are TV Dinner advertisements, including one McDonald’s advertisement creates a full picture for the project and reader. Firstly, I will analyze a Swanson ad that features a woman with a grocery bag filled with TV Dinners and her husband looking on behind her. The main copy reads, “I’m late- but dinner won’t be”, implying that dinner is up to her to figure out, and Swanson has therefore simplified her life. The family is interested and excited to have TV Dinners as their meal no matter if mom is cooking it or not. Although my next ad is not a Swanson ad, the Armour Star Company competed in the frozen foods market and is therefore relevant. The ad is particularly applicable because of the copy which reads, “For America’s newest habit- TV Meals: Armour Star Beef Stew” set inside of a television like graphic on the upper left hand corner of the ad. The main image on the page is of the beef stew being advertised. This imagery might be simplistic, but the effect and purpose of the ad is hardly the food, it is the intention of what you will do while you eat your beef stew. Watching TV and incorporating it in dining practices is the selling point of the ad and the product it is selling. This new cultural practice is what the TV Dinner implies. The
activity done while eating the product is the reason it is being sold. The advertisers want the buyer and their family to eat microwavable meals, silently watch TV and maybe see another TV Dinner ad while they eat. Although they have already purchased the meal, this tactic helps to ensure that they will purchase it again. For my third ad, I will discuss a Swanson ad depicting a compartmentalized TV Dinner tray complete with fried chicken as the main course and “mixed vegetables” and “buttered potatoes” as the sides represents this fascination with sameness. The copy of the ad merely describes the food in the picture, but the implications of ease and uniformity scream off the page to exemplify that by simply buying this cheap meal, you could be just like the neighbors. By looking at a McDonald’s ad from the period it is clear how important this concept of eating out with the family was. The ad I will examine is a picture of a family in a car pulling in to a McDonald’s parking lot, the copy reads, “Let’s eat out!” Nothing too creative or elaborate needs to be done in the ad because the people were already so eager and attracted to the idea of going out to dinner with the family. In addition, the format of the McDonald’s meal or the Swanson TV Dinner represents another aspect that is central to the changing developments of the time. The fact that McDonald’s is the same in every restaurant location, and that Swanson meals will taste the same every time, symbolize the universal craving of all middle-class Americans to be, look, and eat like each other. Uniformity was a desire that all Americans strove towards during these times. Lastly, our obsession with food modification can be seen in many ads of the period, but one Swanson ad in particular. The image on the page is of a TV Dinner with steak as the main course and a woman’s hand cutting into the steak with a fork. The copy reads, “Trust Swanson for Swiss steak you can cut with a fork. Trust Swanson for the best in frozen dinners.”
Although it could be argued that being able to cut steak with a fork signifies how tender it is, steak should have to be cut using a knife and a fork. The fascination with this modification and how it subtly implies that a knife is not needed, and therefore another dish element can be deleted, adds to the swift progression of change in relation to food. The steak is so soft and tender that it only needs a fork comes to mean that it was engineered for our eating pleasure and convenience. We don’t need to hassle with a knife and fork anymore, now, only one utensil is necessary.

**Methodology**

For the methodology of my project I will utilize a semiotic analysis of advertisements of the 1950s. I will use a semiotic approach and deconstruct each element of the advertisement in relation to the subject of study it applies to. I plan on having at least one advertisement that corresponds directly to each of my focuses within the project. By detecting the signs and signifiers in each of the ads I hope to bring a more relatable and realistic side to some of the more complicated or dated research. This is an obvious step to take in my project because of the emphasis on the relationship between the Swanson Company and American consumers. Advertising and its more signifying elements bridges this gap and acts as a language in which to better understand the motives and decision making of the consumer and the advertiser and therefore the shifts of thought regarding food.

**Tentative Conclusions**

Through my research, I expect to understand that the 1950s advertising of TV Dinners proved to change the ways in which we identify with meals and eating. I expect to find that the semiotics explored through the advertisements introduced new
information about the times in which they came about. Additionally, through discussing technology such as the TV in conjunction with eating meals, I expect to find that technological fascinations with food furthered the changing notions that we have in regards to it. I will conclude that through semiotics, TV Dinner advertising reveals more about the advertisements themselves, the times in which they emerged, and the product itself, in order to understand how we look at meals.