

The desire to be in your body. Cannibalism as a metaphor for romantic love in *Bones and all* (2022).

El deseo de estar en tu cuerpo. El canibalismo como metáfora del amor romántico en *Bones and all* (2022).



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Abstract.

This article addresses the way in which romantic love is represented in the film *Bones and all* in order to show the way in which metaphor is used in audiovisual products to shape a narrative, in this case, how cannibalism is used to build a vision of love. By means of the semiotic analysis based on the Reformulated Semantic Model, the semantic marks that make such representation possible are established. Likewise, the concept of desire and jouissance from Jacques Lacan's perspective is used as a common origin to the diversity of desires present in the film and the way in which they are manifested.

Key words: Cannibalism. Love. Jouissance. Metaphor.

Resumen:

En el presente artículo se aborda la forma en que se representa el amor romántico en el filme *Bones and all* con la finalidad de mostrar la manera en que se emplea la metáfora, en los productos audiovisuales para conformar una narrativa, en este caso, cómo se recurre al canibalismo para construir una visión del amor. Mediante el análisis semiótico basado en el Modelo Semántico Reformulado se establecen las marcas semánticas que hacen posible dicha representación. Así mismo, se recurre al concepto del deseo y el goce desde la perspectiva de Jacques Lacan como un origen común a la diversidad de deseos presentes en el filme y la manera en que estos se manifiestan.

Palabras clave: Canibalismo. Amor. Goce. Metáfora.

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Introduction

The theme of romantic love is one of the most recurrent in art, and to represent it, various symbolic resources are used to convey the intensity of the emotions of those who star in such representations. Literature has resorted to various tropes and rhetorical figures, such as metaphor, to create concepts that sometimes manage to perpetuate in the collective imagination; these concepts have managed to permeate the cinematographic narratives in which the literary part is combined with the construction of image sequences, through which more than narrating a story is achieved: the expressive potential of this art facilitates the transmission in varying degrees of abstract issues such as desire or love.

The film *Bones and all* (Guadagnino, 2022) tells the story of Maren, a young woman who discovers her desire to eat human flesh and meets Leon, a lonely young man who shares her desire for meat and with whom she begins a romance. The aim of the present text is to show that cannibalism functions as a metaphor for love through the relationship between Maren and Leon, as well as the possible implications of giving in to the passionate impulse without restraint. To this end, the Reformulated Semantic Model (Eco, 2000) is used to explain the modification of the negative notions associated with cannibalism towards a manifestation of passionate love; likewise, the notions of desire and *jouissance* are approached from Jacques Lacan's psychoanalytical perspective, which is fundamental to understand the common origin of the diversity of desires present in the film as well as to explain what makes such metaphor possible, beyond the linguistic aspect. Therefore, the way in which desire develops in the protagonists and the main antagonist will be reviewed by identifying the characteristics of the characters and their behavior with the traditional model of romantic love.

Cannibalism: beyond hunger

The term *cannibalism*, coined around the year 1492, refers to the consumption of parts or tissues of individuals of the same species (Fernández, 2019, p. 40). Such practice is very ancient and, in many cases, was carried out in an orderly, medicinal and violence-free

manner. Yolanda Fernández explains that, in cases where cannibalism occurred in a violent manner, it generated a feeling of horror and its corresponding punishment, leading even to doubt the human condition of those who performed it. However, he also states that: "In contrast to other animal species, where cannibalism responds to population control, genetic, territorial, marital and even maternal sacrifice, among humans there is no reason to explain our cannibalism" (2019, p. 42).

In this sense, Sigmund Freud stated that cannibalism is a drive desire, like incest or the taste for killing, which has been socially proscribed (Leonardo-Loayza, 2021). The drives, defined by the same psychoanalyst, are internal stimuli that differ from endogenous needs such as thirst or hunger because these must be satisfied when they become intolerable; sexuality, on the other hand, "can be repressed, satisfied autoerotically or with another subject, sublimated, restricted, change its active goal into a passive one, or become the opposite (in reactive formation, for example), among other possibilities" (Lopera, 2019, p. 134). Therefore, cannibalism in human beings is inserted in the field of sexuality, an act of integration of the loved one that is often transferred to language with expressions such as "he is ready to eat him"; in this case it is the substitution of an intense desire -sexual, romantic- by an expression that refers to hunger; that is, cannibalism is invested with a symbolic character that represents the highest point of desire and passion.

Extension of meanings in art

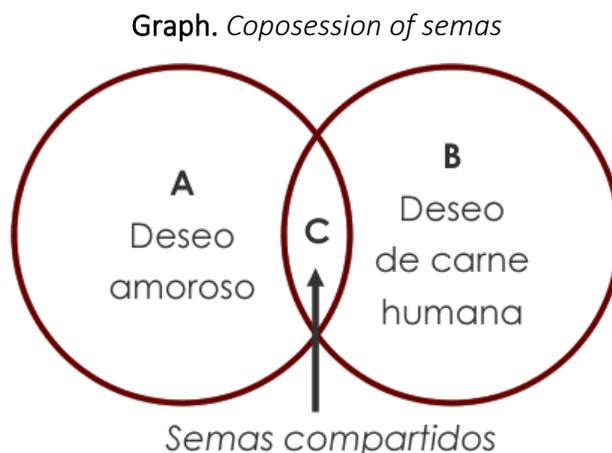
Semiotics, according to Umberto Eco, is the discipline that "deals with anything that can be CONSIDERED as a sign. Sign is anything that can be considered as a signifying substitute for anything else" (2000, p. 22). That is why any cultural production is susceptible to be analyzed through this discipline, since such cultural manifestations can be broken down into elements that fulfill the function of sign. Eco further points out that the signified is a semantic unit placed in a precise space within a semantic system, while the signifier refers to a series of positions within the same field and within different semantic fields (2000, p. 136). These positions constitute the *semantic marks* and can be denotative or connotative; the former

are those whose sum constitutes the cultural unit to which the signifier corresponds in the first degree, while the latter are those marks that contribute to the constitution of one or more cultural units expressed by the previously constituted semiotic function (Eco, 2000, p. 137). That is, denotation constitutes the primary meaning and connotation refers to the secondary meanings derived from it in a given circumstance.

Connotative semantic marks are widely used in art, since they allow the creation of concepts that express a vision of the world in an aesthetic way, as occurs in the metaphor which, according to Helena Beristain (1995), is a figure that affects the lexical-semantic level of language and is presented as an abbreviated and elliptical comparison, and is based on a relationship of similarity between meanings; although Beristain's (1995) definition focuses on the metaphors used in literature, it can also be applied to the visual aspect and, even further, to the behavioral aspect, if we consider that:

[...] the metaphor implies the coposession of semas (minimal units of *signification*) that occurs on the conceptual or semantic plane (or of the coposession of parts, given on the material or referential plane, when the metaphor is not linguistic -Group "M"-), and in this figure the partial identity of two meanings is manifested, parallel to the NON identity of the two corresponding signifiers. (p. 308).

It is because of this that, even in the visual plane and in the language expressed by behavior, it is possible to establish metaphors in which an element is used that, given its context of enunciation, refers to another with which it shares semas, as is the case of *Bones and all*, already that some of the semas of cannibalism are shared with those of the emotions associated with intense love, being psychoanalysis that which grounds the metaphor, as can be seen in the following graph:



Source: Re-elaboration based on the figure of Helena Beristain (1995).

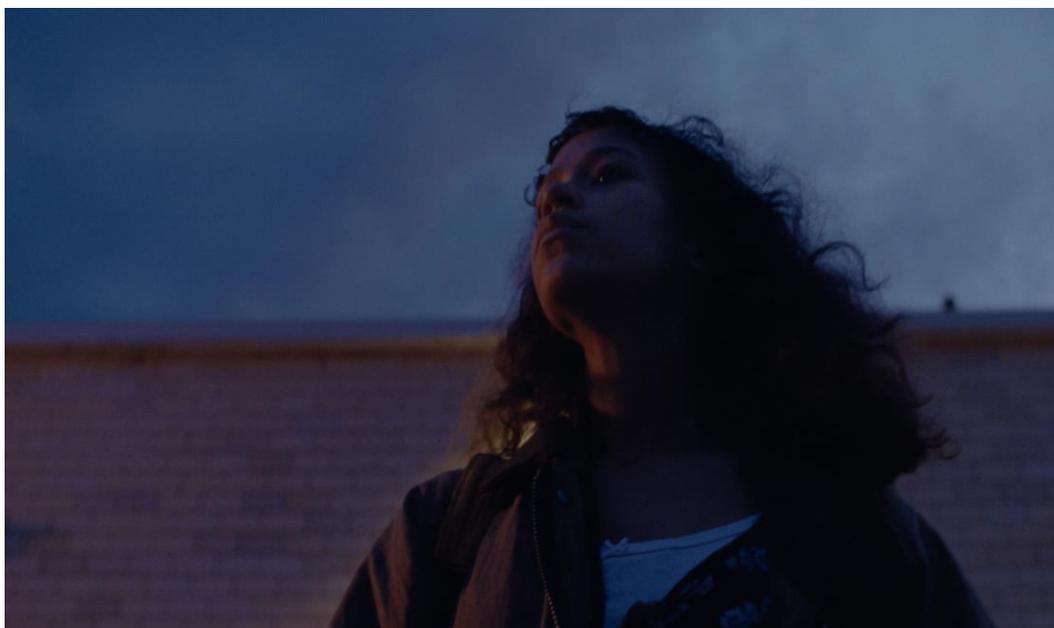
Thus, the letter C represents the point where the marks of both types of desire converge, which makes possible the use of one to represent and, at times, reinforce the presence of the other. This process, and the path followed by the expansion of signification, can also be explained by means of the Reformulated Semantic Model (RSM) which, Eco points out, "aims to insert into the semantic representation all the encoded connotations that depend on the corresponding denotations, together with the CONTEXTUAL and CIRCUMSTANTIAL SELECTIONS" (2000, p. 169). The aforementioned selections make it possible to distinguish the reading paths of the sememe and determine the assignment of many denotations and connotations, constituting semantic units that fulfill the function of change of path (Eco, 2000). In this case, the circumstance refers to the communication situation while the context is the characteristics and/or properties that describe the communication situation. Therefore, it will be the elements present in the film and the way they are presented that will guide the interpretation based on the culture in which it emerges.

Hunger for love

Maren was raised by her father; he took care of her until she was eighteen years old, at which time he sneaks out, leaving her some money, her birth certificate and an audio tape in which he explains his motives. The beginning of the film shows how Maren escapes from home to

go to a sleepover with her schoolmates, since her father forbids her to sleep outside; in a moment of closeness with one of her classmates, Maren gives in to the impulse to bite the girl's hand until she tears off part of her fingers, so she flees back to her father, who asks her if it happened again. The audio tape works as a narrator who explains the situation: Maren's father apologizes for leaving her and suggests that she look for her mother, from whom she has inherited this condition; he also explains that it all started when the girl was just a baby and attacked her nanny, who died due to the severity of the injuries.

Frame 1. *Maren on the journey.*



Source: Film *To the Bone*. IMDb (2022).

Maren listens to the tape as she makes the journey in search of her mother, which will lead her to meet Sullivan, an older man who approaches her because he "smelled her from a distance". Sully, as he asks to be called, explains to Maren that she is not the only one who feels that desire to eat human flesh, that there is a community he calls *eaters* or devourers and that it is possible to recognize each other among them due to the scent trail left by the meat. In addition to this explanation, Sully invites Maren to a house where there is a dying woman so that, once she dies, they can both devour her corpse. This encounter helps Maren to discover a new way of life that causes her rejection due to the moral implications, so she

decides to leave Sully and continue on her way. However, she meets Leon, another devourer whom she joins because he shows a different attitude than Sully.

Sully approaches Maren.



Source: Film *To the Bone*. IMDb (2022).

Leon accompanies Maren in the search for his mother, while the latter agrees to make a stop so that Leon can visit his sister, thus establishing a relationship of companionship and mutual support that derives in a romantic attraction marked by their condition, not only of devourers, but of individuals rejected by society due to their departure from normality. This trait, common in devourers, but manifested in different ways, can be understood as a hunger for love, if one takes into account the similarities between the desire for affection and the need for food. Despite Maren's rejection, Sully continues to follow them at some distance, as he does not accept that the young woman does not want to be with him. At this point both Leon and Sully represent two manifestations of passionate love: the first in its qualities of mutual attraction and the second in that of possession.

Rozzana Sanchez points out that the first type of passionate love:

It contains a desire for love and a sense of union with the other to remain forever, as it involves ways of feeling totally understood and accepted. It is an

expression of affection and warmth, happiness and the sharing of pleasurable activities, physical closeness, excitement and sexual enjoyment (2007, p. 391).

Leon and Maren's relationship arises from the young woman's desire to understand her situation and, at the same time, from her fear of facing such a circumstance alone. However, as the relationship progresses, it is shown that Leon, despite having been alone for some time, also needs Maren's presence to maintain a certain stability. This is mentioned in the film when the young men meet two men in the woods who want to camp with them because they share a taste for eating human flesh. At a moment when Maren moves away due to her discomfort in the presence of said men, one of them points out to Leon that he needs her more than she needs him and that perhaps love will set him free. Vercelli Flores (2019) points out that in the model of romantic love -heterosexual- it is aspired that the man should be masculine, strong and protective, conditions that Leon does not quite fulfill despite the fact that he tries to show himself strong; Maren, on the other hand, is a strong young woman with firm convictions, so their relationship goes out of such model to become a relationship of companionship and mutual support.

Frame 3. *Leon approaches Maren.*



Source: Film *To the Bone*. IMDb (2022).

Jacques Lacan (2000) refers that desire is a dialectic that can reconcile the imaginary with the symbolic, and has a triadic structure consisting of a signified and two signifiers: the object of desire -mental image- and its representation in the real world. Desire acts as a guide to find our pure being, since what is desired represents a lack in the inner world of the subject that needs to be filled; it is a manifestation of the quality of being that is elemental to constitute itself as a subject; however, the gaze of recognition of the other is necessary to affirm this quality, which is why the approval of the desired being is sought. But such recognition must be free, not forced through manipulation or violence.

Sully's character manifests the type of obsessive lover, who interprets the refusals as a pretext to persevere and that can lead him to harassment, which, explains Sanchez: "represents a situation of unrequited love, which drives the individual to the search for interaction (not mutual), which implies -unlike obsessive love- the use of force and displeasure between two people" (2007, p. 393). The difference pointed out by Sanchez is that, while an obsessive lover does not reach the use of violence towards the object of desire, in stalking it is common for the subject who carries it out to use violence to maintain control over the person he considers his possession.

Sully not only falls into the category of the obsessive lover -which will derive in stalking- but also, in a Lacanian sense, into the category of perversion since "In order to achieve his jouissance, the perverse needs this "third accomplice" and his presence and gaze, whether imaginary or real" (Leonardo-Loayza, 2021, p. 388). Since Sully wishes to have Maren by his side to increase his satisfaction by eating human flesh, even if she does not share that enjoyment, we can point out that Sully is perverse not because he eats human flesh, but because he *forces* Maren to be a participant in the act.

The roles played by the characters in the film's narrative are presented as follows (see Table 1):

Table 1. *Role of the characters in relation to desire and romantic love.*

Role of the characters in relation to desire (Lacan) and romantic love.		
<i>Sully</i>	<i>Leon</i>	<i>Maren</i>
Obsessive lover: Perverse, possessive, selfish.	Romantic lover: Insecure, complacent, protective.	Desiring subject: Strong convictions, refusal to be only an object of desire.

Source: Own elaboration.

Maren, in turn, goes through a process of maturation as she faces the world and puts her feelings for Leon and her ideal vision of life in a balance, although they manage to reconcile it when Leon accepts the uncomfortable part of his past and discovers that Maren has no problem with it; that is, she stops being completely complacent and loses that insecurity.

The Sublime Experience

Hélène Cixous writes "Love is when you suddenly wake up as a cannibal, and not just any old cannibal, or else wake up destined for devourment"¹ (2005, p. 78). The author points out that eating and being eaten belongs to the terrible secret of love since everything is oriented towards such absorption. The expression *bones and all*, from which the film takes its name², appears in a scene in which one of the men in the forest with Maren and Leon expresses that he and his friend have devoured whole corpses, so Maren asks if he means that they have devoured bones and all. Although the answer makes the young woman uncomfortable, the idea remains latent throughout the film until it reappears at the end of the film.

¹ "Love is when you suddenly wake up as a cannibal, and not just any old cannibal, but one destined to devour" (own translation).

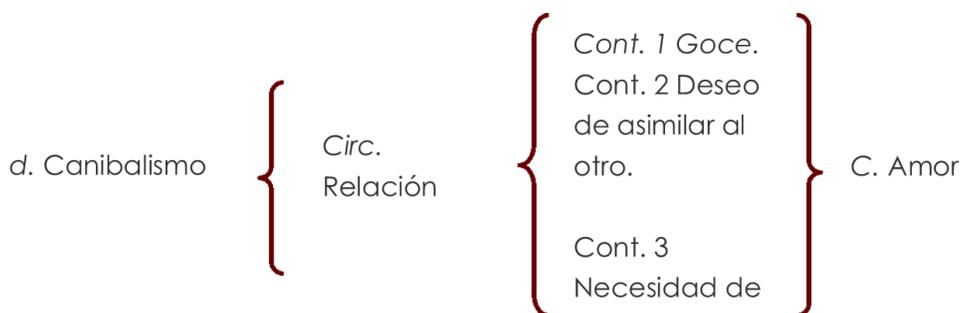
² Although the film is an adaptation of the novel of the same name, in this case the film will be considered as a text independent of the novel, since the meaning of the novel is different from that of the film.

The condition of devourer generates many moral dilemmas in Maren as she feels guilt for ending the lives of people to satisfy her hunger, which is why she wishes to find in her mother an answer to her situation; however, Maren meets her mother in a mental asylum and discovers that there is no cure for this condition or a formula to repress this desire. It will be after her reunion with Leon -from whom she had distanced herself after an argument- that she finds a different way to understand her condition: Leon explains to Maren that his father was also a devourer and that he had to eat him to prevent his father from devouring him and to protect his mother and sister, with which this action acquires a new meaning; for Leon, the condition of devourer is what allows him to protect his loved ones and, at the same time, to survive away from his mother and sister to avoid hurting them.

The Reformulated Semantic Model (RSM), in this case, helps us to understand the process of resignification of cannibalism in the context of the film as a different way of understanding love:

Figure 2. *Reformulated Semantic Model in Bones and all.*

Note: the letter "d" refers to denotation while the letter "C" represents connotation.



Source: Own elaboration.

As the previous figure points out, cannibalism corresponds to the denotation that, being in the circumstance of an interpersonal relationship and in the context of the enjoyment and desire that comes from satisfying hunger, we arrive at the connotation of romantic love since it presents similar characteristics. It is not surprising, then, that the first people the characters devoured had an emotional relationship with them: Sully devoured his grandfather, Leon his

father and Maren his nanny, who, given her situation, fulfilled the role of a substitute mother; in this way they integrate a loved one within themselves to fill a lack -emotional or physiological-.

Maren manages to meet her mother, although it does not turn out as she expected since she is in voluntary seclusion in a mental asylum due to her fear of harming someone, so she cannot give Maren the answers she was looking for; however, it will be the reunion of the young woman with Leon and her decision to live as a couple that will reduce her impulse to eat human flesh. Leonardo-Loayza points out that desire can come to control *jouissance* and channel it socially, because desire is a dialectical articulation in which the subject reencounters *jouissance* in the symbolic order (2021, p. 393). The love between Leon and Maren fulfills the function of filling an emotional lack, whereby the physiological need to fill a void is drastically reduced. In the same way, the sexual relationship functions as a substitute for the act of cannibalism since: "Metaphorically, to have sex with the other is to "eat him", to devour him, to make him part of one's own body" (Leonardo-Loayza, 2021, p. 394); thus, the symbolic integration of the loved one occurs without annulling him, which allows the repetition of the act and ensures the stability of the relationship: the desire for the other remains active and drives them to maintain the closeness to experience that *jouissance*.

Just as Sully is considered perverse because of his attempt to force Maren to participate in the act, and not because of the cannibalism itself, Leon and Maren's relationship constitutes a relatively healthy way of experiencing love; although both may be considered by society as undesirable beings due to their condition, together they find a way to live without harming others and resignify their desire, thus moving away from the traditional expectation in which a hierarchy is established in which the man is the one who commands and imposes his desires on his female partner, while the female partner expects great acts as a demonstration of love.

As explained in the preceding lines, the obsessive lover usually interprets rejection as an incentive to be more persevering, which is why Sully follows the trail of the young men until he finds the place where Maren and Leon live. Sully waits for them to leave the house

before entering and waits for Maren to arrive to try to convince her to leave with him and, when she refuses, Sully starts to become violent. Jean Baudrillard states that:

In the system of jealousy it is not uncommon for the subject to end up destroying the hidden object or being, out of a feeling of impossibility to totally conjure up the adversity of the world and of his own sexuality. Therein lies the logical and illogical end of the passion (1969, p. 113).

In other words, Sully desires to have Maren close to him as an exclusive object that serves to increase his enjoyment of eating human flesh, regardless of the fact that the young woman's values make her perceive the experience as unpleasant. Because of this, when the young woman makes clear her refusal to be what he desires, Sully feels a frustration that drives him to override Maren as a subject through violence. Leon's arrival prevents Maren from suffering any harm and, in the fight to defend himself, they end Sully's life; however, before dying, Sully attacks the young man and causes a wound in his chest.

Frame 4. *Leon and Maren.*



Source: Film *To the Bone*. IMDb (2022).

At the moment when they both discover that the wound is serious and that he will not survive, Leon asks Maren to eat him "to the bone". At this point the total devouring of another human being acquires a different meaning from the first mention: when Maren hears it from the unknown men she finds it uncomfortable because they do it simply because they want to experience the sensation, even when one of them is not properly a devourer; instead, in this case the act acquires a romantic connotation in which the other is integrated within himself. Likewise, the enjoyment is not only for the one who devours, since being desired by both parties, the devoured person also enjoys such integration, making it a sublime experience and a manifestation of the passion that surrounds love.

Amorous desire and desire for human flesh: the shared semas

As pointed out in the section on the extension of meanings, and following Beristain's definition, amorous desire and the desire for human flesh, also referred to as cannibalism, present a copossession of semas that makes their metaphorical use possible.

In the first place we find a desire for the other, which in the case of love impels to physical proximity while in cannibalism it is presented in a more literal way, impelling people to consume someone's body; in second place we find the desire to experience *jouissance*, which is due both to proximity in the case of love and to the act of practicing anthropophagy in cannibalism (in both it can be presented in its perverse form, that is, without taking into account the other's desire); thirdly, there is the sensation of a lack that can only be filled with the presence of the other, being a physiological aspect that drives to devour in the case of cannibalism, and an emotional lack that leads to the search for the beloved in the case of love; finally, there is the desire to be consumed by the other, which in terms of love refers to the emotional integration in the life of the beloved while in cannibalism is taken as the desire (presented by Leon) to be devoured by the beloved in order to remain together forever.

The aforementioned semas are the ones that integrate Figure 1 and have their foundation in the social notions of love and desire that can be explained by psychoanalysis, since in the case of love these semas are mainly presented in the symbolic order.

Conclusions

Cultural products resort to various tools to express contents in a poetic way, and cinematography can resort to rhetorical figures to bring them to the audiovisual field, as is the case of metaphor. By means of the Reformulated Semantic Model (Eco, 2000) we can represent the process through which cannibalism is re-signified as a representation of romantic love in its deepest elements. Thanks to the reading path carried out with respect to cannibalism and romantic love, we find that through the semantic connotative marks it is possible to express a vision of the world in art, since the context and the circumstances in which certain semas are placed propitiate a different connotation of these.

Since it is a fact that requires the intellection of a subject, but also appeals to social notions of certain themes (i.e., they operate at a symbolic level), it is essential to resort to semiotics to interpret the way in which the resignification that takes place in art operates, so that aspects beyond the merely linguistic are taken into account: through this discipline and tools such as the Reformulated Semantic Model, it is possible to understand the use of resources such as metaphor, image composition and behavior of the characters that integrate the text itself, as well as to generate reading paths that address various perspectives and that can be complemented with concepts from other disciplines in the humanities, such as psychoanalysis.

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