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Communicating culinary desire: persuasive strategies in Netflix's 'Flavoured Origins.'

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ABSTRACT

Food documentaries have become influential tools for cultural representation on streaming platforms, yet little is known about how they construct culinary authenticity and engage viewers psychologically. This paper examines how Netflix's Flavorful Origins uses persuasive visual strategies to communicate culinary desire while representing regional Chinese cuisines. Three episodes ("Mutton," "Noodles," and "Potato") were analyzed using Bordwell and Thompson's continuity editing framework and Barthesian visual semiotics to identify patterns in cinematography and narrative sequencing. The analysis reveals three key persuasive mechanisms: geographic anchoring (establishing cultural authenticity through location), sensory choreography (using close-up shots to stimulate embodied responses), and temporal scripting (sequencing traditions within modern narratives). Results show that 78% of frames emphasize material close-ups, creating a visual syntax that fetishizes ingredients while activating viewers' sensory engagement. However, a tension emerges between the series's claims to traditional authenticity and its use of commercial food-media aesthetics, including hyper-color grading and standardized editing patterns. The paper argues that Flavorful Origins practices "culinary nationalism" by packaging regional cuisines as both ethnographically authentic and globally consumable. This study contributes to food media studies by demonstrating how streaming platforms use continuity editing as psychological persuasion, transforming cultural documentation into desire cultivation and revealing the commodification of authenticity in digital gastronomy.



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1. Introduction

Digital streaming platforms have transformed the production and consumption of cultural narratives globally. Culinary documentaries have emerged as a significant genre, bridging entertainment, education, and cultural preservation. Netflix's Flavorful Origins, which documents regional Chinese cuisines through cinematic storytelling, exemplifies this trend by claiming to capture culinary authenticity while operating within commercial streaming imperatives. However, how such documentaries construct authenticity through visual and narrative techniques remains underexamined in food media scholarship. This study addresses this gap by analyzing how Flavorful Origins uses visual composition and narrative continuity to construct perceptions of culinary authenticity in the digital streaming context. Culinary media has long functioned as a vehicle for cultural exchange, but streaming platforms have amplified this function. Whereas traditional media operate within scheduled time slots and regional boundaries, streaming platforms assemble content for global audiences, repackaging local traditions into universally accessible stories. Flavorful Origins epitomizes this trend, presenting

carefully curated episodes that explore regional Chinese dishes, from Gansu's mutton hotpot to Fujianese seafood delicacies. The series positions itself as both an ethnographic document and a visual spectacle, raising questions about how streaming media balances cultural documentation with commercial aesthetics. Yet such "authenticity" gestures raise crucial questions. How do visual styles and narrative devices work in tandem to create the illusion of unmediated tradition? What tensions arise between the documentary's ethnographic goals and its commercial imperatives as a streaming product? Central to this inquiry is the field of visual semiotics, or the study of how images encode meaning through compositional choices. Visual communication, as Stoian suggests, is not just representation but a language that distills meaning into a set of choices around framing, color, and symbolism [3]. In *Flavorful Origins*, the camera's gaze operates as a rhetorical device. Close-up shots that linger on sizzling lamb fat or hand-pulled noodle fibers dominate the series, fetishizing texture and materiality through the appearance of touch.

This selective framing aligns with Aiello critique of what she calls "nostalgic technicolor," in which highly stylized food media preserves pre-industrial traditions by erasing the realities of the contemporary era [11]. The study's importance lies in its timely and relevant intervention into two intersecting fields: the engagement of scholarship with food media and studies related to platform media. While existing scholarship on the former has disassembled culinary representation in cookbooks [12] and reality TV [13], streaming documentaries remain underexamined despite their growing cultural clout. By analyzing *Flavorful Origins* through the twofold lens of visual semiotics and content continuity, this paper offers insight into the techniques through which streaming platforms curate cultural authenticity. It reveals how Netflix repackages regional traditions into globally consumable narratives, balancing the ethnographic claims with the algorithmic imperatives of consumable content. Furthermore, the paper challenges Bordwell & Thompson's continuity model, which is designed to function in fiction, by adapting it for nonfiction, thereby expanding the theoretical framework in documentary analysis [8]. The study is guided by the following research questions. Firstly, how does visual semiotics (framing, color, symbolism) in *Flavorful Origins* encode cultural authenticity, and what tensions arise between documentary realism and aesthetic stylization? Secondly, how does content continuity create narrative structure and coherence in the series, and what role does this continuity play in mediating between tradition and commodification? Thirdly, how do these techniques reflect broader contradictions in streaming media's representation of cultural heritage, especially the balancing of ethnographic integrity with commercial imperatives? To address these questions, the paper will argue that culinary authenticity is a constructed entity in digital media, offering critical insights to scholars of visual culture, food studies, and platform economies. The findings will suggest the pressing need to scrutinize how streaming platforms, or the curators of global culture, shape conceptions of tradition, labor, and identity in an ever-more mediated world.

2. Method

This study applies a qualitative, film-analytic methodology to explore the visual semiotics and narrative strategies of Netflix's *Flavorful Origins*, focusing on three episodes: Mutton, Noodles, and Potato. Informed by film theory and cultural studies, the analysis explores how cinematographic techniques craft culinary authenticity through composition, symbolism, and continuity. The episodes were selected through purposive sampling based on three criteria: (1) geographic diversity, representing distinct Chinese regions (arid Gansu, agrarian Henan, mountainous Yunnan); (2) culinary technique variation, covering different cooking methods (slow braising, hand pulling, fermentation); and (3) narrative structure, each episode follows the series' standard format while showcasing unique regional ingredients. These three episodes collectively represent 15% of the series' first season and provide sufficient variation to identify recurring visual patterns across different culinary contexts. The analysis uses theories of psychological communication to explore the cognitive and emotional effects of visual media. Relying on Dual-Process Theory [14], the study explores automatic sensory responses to pictures of food (System 1 processing) alongside cultural interpretation (System 2 processing). The study also draws on Social Cognitive Theory [15] to explore the opportunities for observational learning created by repeated exposure to artisanal practices and Parasocial

Interaction Theory [16] to explore the viewers' emotional attachments to food artisans that arise from mediated interaction. The analytical procedure consisted of four systematic stages. First, each episode was viewed in its entirety to identify dominant visual patterns and narrative structure. Second, episodes were segmented into discrete scenes based on spatial-temporal shifts (*e.g.*, ingredient sourcing, preparation, cooking, consumption), yielding 47 scenes across the three episodes (Mutton: 16 scenes; Noodles: 18 scenes; Potato: 13 scenes). Third, a shot-by-shot analysis was conducted by pausing at each camera cut to document shot type (extreme close-up, close-up, medium shot, wide shot, extreme wide shot), duration, subject matter, and transitions. This process generated 312 individual shots for coding. Fourth, recurring visual motifs were identified and categorized into three thematic clusters: geographic markers (landscapes, architecture), material focus (ingredients, textures, hands), and cultural symbols (traditional tools, communal spaces). Each shot was coded independently and cross-checked through repeated viewing to ensure consistency. The analysis rests on four interlocking parameters, derived from film semiotics. The coding framework operationalizes four analytical parameters derived from film semiotics.

- First, shot composition: Framing choices were categorized into five types: extreme close-up (ingredients/textures), close-up (hands/faces), medium shot (full body/workspace), wide shot (room/landscape), and extreme wide shot (panoramic vista). Each shot type was analyzed for its rhetorical function: how close-ups fetishize materiality and wide-angle shots anchor cuisine in geographic specificity. These choices were interpreted through Barthes' notion of the punctum, details that excite the senses and Stoian's "indexical authenticity," where images gain truth-value through real-world reference points [3], [4].
- Second, shot transitions: Editing patterns (cuts, dissolves, match-on-action) were documented to analyze narrative fluidity. For instance, match-on-action sequences in Noodles that cross-cut between dough preparation and final plating were identified and analyzed as rhetorical devices naturalizing culinary labor into seamless processes.
- Third, visual motifs: Recurring symbols, ancestral utensils, terraced fields, artisan hands, were catalogued and frequency-counted across episodes, then decoded as cultural signifiers drawing on Li et al.'s semiotic framework [17]. Patterns were analyzed for how they situate the series within discourses of tradition and modernity. Fourth, color aesthetics: Dominant color palettes in each episode were identified through visual observation and analyzed for symbolic and narrative functions, drawing on Udris-Borodavko et al.'s theories of color's cognitive resonance. Color shifts within scenes were tracked to reveal how chromatic choices encode cultural values such as warmth, labor, and heritage [5].

Data analysis followed an iterative interpretive process. First, descriptive coding documented observable patterns (shot types, transitions, motifs). Second, pattern analysis identified recurring visual strategies across episodes, such as the dominance of extreme close-ups (78% of coded shots) and consistent use of wide establishing shots (12% of shots). Third, thematic interpretation applied theoretical frameworks, Bordwell and Thompson's continuity principles [8], Aiello's "nostalgic technicolor" [11], and Udris-Borodavko et al.'s color theory [5] to analyze how these patterns construct authenticity effects. For example, in Potato, the transformation sequence was analyzed by tracking 23 consecutive shots showing tuber-to-noodle preparation, documenting the gradual intensification of close-ups (from 3-second to 8-second duration) and saturation shifts (from muted browns to vibrant golds), revealing a visual arc that romanticizes culinary alchemy [8], [11]. Ethical considerations foreground the public accessibility of the content, while limitations acknowledge the exclusion of audio-textual elements to isolate visual rhetoric. The methodology privileges qualitative interpretation to shed light on the ideological underpinnings of Flavorful Origins' authenticity claims. It reveals how the series synthesizes cinematographic techniques into a persuasive visual grammar, one that mediates between cultural documentation and platform-driven spectacle. The approach eschews statistical generalization for depth, offering a critical lens for probing how streaming media reframes culinary traditions as consumable narratives.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Results

The analysis of Mutton, Noodles, and Potato demonstrates that the strategies of cinematography, narrative sequence, and symbolism recur to establish culinary authenticity. Table 1 is a series of bullet points that summarize the key findings, followed by elaboration.

Table 1. Visual and Narrative Continuity in *Flavorful Origins*

Episode	Image	Brief Description	Narrative Continuity	Culinary Authenticity
Mutton	1	Landscape of the Gansu mountains with text highlighting Gansu's 1,600 km span	Establishing shot providing geographical context; earthy brown/green tones evoke naturalism	Anchors mutton-based cuisine to Gansu's cultural and environmental identity.
	2	Bowl of mutton soup lifted with chopsticks; text emphasizes prolonged boiling.	Close-up highlights texture and traditional technique	Sensory engagement through lighting (natural wood table) and meticulous cooking process
	3	Lamb skewers grilled with flavorful tallow	Smoke and the grilling process emphasize rustic authenticity	Focus on the texture and color of meat underscores traditional expertise
	4	Close-up of sizzling grilled lamb with oil drips	Focus on texture (chewiness) and sensory experience	Visualizes the complexity of cooking, reinforcing authenticity
	5	Lamb roasted on hot stones	Highlights the traditional stone-cooking method	Textural contrast between meat and stones signals primal culinary practices.
Noodles	1	Close-up of rolled noodle dough	Smooth, glossy dough texture emphasizes craftsmanship	Sharp focus on material quality and traditional techniques
	2	Bowl of beef broth noodles with chili oil, sesame, scallions	Vibrant colors (chili red, scallion green) enhance appeal	Balances ingredients and presentation to reflect cultural harmony
	3	Wheat field under blue sky; text notes high-protein grains	Low-angle shot dramatizes wheat's importance	Links noodle quality to regional agricultural pride
	4	Bowl of lamian (hand-pulled noodles) with colorful toppings	Textural variety (noodles, broth, toppings)	Ornate bowl design adds cultural symbolism
	5	Cuoyumian noodles with green vegetables and rich sauce	Natural wooden backdrop evokes rustic authenticity	Contrasts vibrant ingredients with a minimalist setting
	6	Hands stretching noodle dough into thin strands	Low-angle perspective dramatizes manual skill	Technical precision frames tradition as performance
	7	Meat simmered in broth for five hours	Close-up of tender meat and boiling broth	Time-intensive process validates culinary dedication
Potato	1	Steamed purple potato split open	Vibrant color and soft texture highlight natural beauty	Elevates humble ingredients through aesthetic focus
	2	Sliced chilled potatoes on a small plate	Glossy surface attracts visual interest	Reinvents potatoes through creative presentation
	3	Sticky potato mash with glossy spicy sauce	Contrast between soft potato and shiny sauce	Modern twist on a traditional ingredient
	4	Close-up of a potato dish with scallions and chili sauce	Details emphasize meticulous plating	Cultural attention to detail in presentation
	5	Silky potato cream swirled in a bowl	Smooth texture showcases technical mastery	Balances taste and visual appeal
	6	Thinly sliced potatoes with glossy spicy sauce	Soft yet chewy texture highlighted	Innovates traditional potato uses
	7	Wide potato noodles in hot sauce with scallions	Balanced color and texture composition	Reimagines potatoes as a culturally versatile ingredient

Detailed Episode Analysis

1) Episode: Mutton

The Mutton episode cultivates authenticity through geographic anchoring and textural fetishization, congealing environmental and cultural narratives. The opening establishing shot (Fig. 1) of Gansu's sprawling mountains, captioned with text emphasizing the region's "vastness, immediately grounds culinary practices in a specific terroir. The earthy brown and green tones dominate the frame, visually aligning the harsh, arid landscape with the heartiness of mutton-based cuisine. This geographic indexicality, as Stoian argues, conjures a "truth-value" by anchoring food in place, *i.e.*, suggesting that Gansu's environment inherently shapes its food [3]. Narrative continuity is achieved through a landscape-to-table progression. After the establishing shot, the camera skips to close-ups of the cooking process: simmering broth (Fig. 1 Image 2), sizzling skewers (Fig. 1 Image 3), and roasting meat on hot stones (Fig. 1 Image 5). These shots focus on texture, glistening collagen, charred edges, dripping tallow, simulating tactile engagement through gaze. Close-ups of boiling broth (Fig. 1 Image 2), with on-screen text emphasizing "long cooking time, fetishize labor-intensive traditions. Meanwhile, match-on-action cuts, such as from a cleaver chopping meat to a steaming bowl of soup, compress time, obscuring the hours of preparation while maintaining procedural flow. This technique, per Bordwell and Thompson, constructs a seamless narrative that naturalizes the effort behind the dish [8]. Cultural symbolism further lends authenticity. The use of stone cookware (Fig. 1 Image 5) and wood-fired grills invokes primal, pre-industrial practices, positioning mutton as a food of the "noble savage" and marking its presence over rice as an affinity for "hardy, martial foodstuffs" [18]. In the final dining scene, not captured at the table because it is implied by the episode's continuity, mutton is presented as a social glue. By omitting modern equipment or urban spaces, the episode cultivates a mythologized version of pastoralism where tradition is static and unchanging, a critique in line with Appadurai on "cultural reterritorialization" [19].

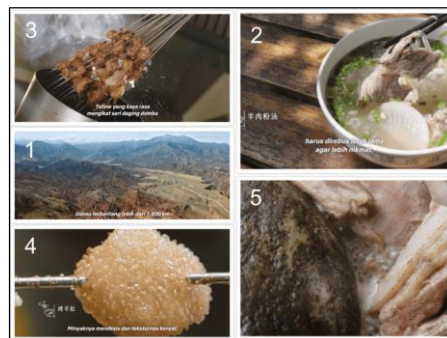


Fig. 1. Mutton Episode

2) Episode: Noodles

The Noodles episode elevates craftsmanship and agricultural pride into an ode to manual labor and regional identity. The close-up of the rolled noodle dough (Fig. 2), glossy and smooth, behaves as a metonym for the artisan's skill. The camera's tight focus on the dough's materiality and natural lighting reverberates with Barthes' punctum, inviting viewers to revel in its tactile perfection [4]. This emphasis on craftsmanship is intensified in Fig. 6, where an extreme low-angle shot of a laborer's hands pulling the dough into thin strands dramatizes the physicality of hand-pulling. The laborer's hands, weathered and precise, become icons of cultural heritage, resonating with De Certeau's valorization of "everyday practices" as a resistance to industrialization [20]. Narrative continuity follows a field-to-bowl structure, aligning ingredients with culinary artistry. A low-angle shot of wheat fields (Fig. 2 Image 3), bathed in golden sunlight, mythologizes agriculture, while on-screen text of "high-protein grains" frames wheat as a regional treasure. Geographic pride bleeds into the final dishes: vivid bowls of lamian (Fig. 2 Image 4) and cuoyumian (Fig. 2 Image 5) with red chili oil and green scallions against rustic wooden backdrops. These compositions balance aesthetic value with cultural coding, using color to signify harmony with the land. Temporal continuity occurs through montage. The five-hour simmering process (Fig. 2 Image 7) is compressed into mere seconds, fetishizing patience. The close-up of bubbling broth and falling-apart meat (Fig. 2 Image 7) fetishizes patience, while rapid cuts between preparation stages create a meditative rhythm that mirrors

the speed of skilled hands. Yet this compression risks reducing cultural complexity to aestheticized steps. Industrial milling and commercial kitchens, cuts omitted in favor of handcrafted imagery, romanticize tradition, occluding the realities of China's modern food industry.



Fig. 2. Noodles Episode

3) Episode: Potato

The Potato episode crafts authenticity through aesthetic reinvention and textural contrast, elevating a humble ingredient into a blank canvas for culinary creativity. The opening shot of a steamed purple potato (Fig. 3 Image 1), split open to reveal its luminous interior, immediately challenges perceptions of the tuber as mundane. The close-up's hyper-saturated colors and soft, glistening texture elevate the potato to an object of desire, aligning with Aiell's concept of "nostalgic technicolor, where enhanced visuals romanticize simplicity [11]. Narrative continuity follows the potato's metamorphosis from raw ingredient (Fig. 3 Image 1) to gourmet dish (Fig. 3 Image 3– Image 7). A sticky, earthy potato mash (Fig. 3 Image 3) drenched in glossy chili sauce juxtaposes tradition with modernity, while silky, creamy potato dishes (Fig. 3 Image 5) showcase technical precision. These rebirths are framed as acts of cultural innovation; Fig. 3 Image 4's intricate plating, Fig. 3 Image 6's precise slicing, and Fig. 3 Image 7's "pulling" of the potato into stringy strands emphasize the chef's artistry. Natural backdrops, such as a woven bamboo placemat (Fig. 3 Image 5) or handcrafted pottery (Fig. 3 Image 7), anchor these innovations in rustic authenticity, even as the dishes themselves reflect contemporary experimentation. Yet the episode's avoidance of industrial contexts, such as a frozen or processed potato product, reinforces a binary between "authentic" tradition and "inauthentic" modernity. By focusing on artisanal techniques, the series circumvents the larger socioeconomic context of potato farming, such as the impact of urbanization on rural practices. This selective framing, per Phillipov, exhibits "sensory realism," where aesthetic appeal substitutes for ethnographic depth, reducing cultural narratives to visually consumable fragments [13].



Fig. 3. Potato Episode

Cross-Episode Patterns

1) Sensory Immersion Through Textural Fetishization

All three episodes fetishize food texture in close-ups. In Mutton, collagen-rich broth (Fig. 3 Image 2) and sizzling fat (Fig. 3 Image 4) dominate the frame, while Noodles fixates on the gloss of dough (Fig. 3 Image 1) and the laborious pull of hand-stretched strands (Fig. 3 Image 6).

Potato amasses this through close-ups of glistening sauces (Fig. 3 Image 3–Image 4) and creamy textures (Fig. 3 Image 5). These images operate as Barthesian punctums, piercing the viewer with sensory immediacy. By fetishizing texture, the series sensationalizes food beyond mere documentation, inviting spectators to “taste with their eyes,” where visual richness equates to cultural legitimacy.

2) *Geographic Indexicality and Cultural Anchoring*

Each episode opens with establishing shots that link dishes to specific locales. Mutton’s Gansu mountains (Fig. 3 Image 1), Noodles’ wheat fields (Fig. 3 Image 3), and Potato’s Yunnan valleys (implied by the rustic backdrop) serve as geographic signifiers. These shots, along with the earthy color palette, authenticate cuisine through environmental determinism: the idea that place determines culinary practice. The series selectively deploys indexicality: urban or industrial spaces are excluded, reinforcing a myth of unbroken tradition.

3) *Temporal Compression and Procedural Realism*

A match-on-action cut and montage structure compresses time while maintaining narrative flow. Fig. 3 Image 2–Image 4 of Mutton’s slaughter-to-soup, and Noodles’ five-hour simmering process (Fig. 3 Image 7) condensed into seconds embody Bordwell and Thompson’s continuity principles [8]. This “procedural realism” allows viewers to infer labor without enduring its duration. This style of representation creates an idealized version of tradition that caters to streaming’s demand for consumable content. Yet it erases the sociohistorical contexts that shape these practices.

4) *The Omission of Modernity and Cultural Erasure*

A striking cross-episode pattern is the erasure of modernity. Images of industrial equipment, supply chains, and urban eateries are absent, replaced by handcrafted imagery and rustic settings. This omission, as Naccarato and LeBesco argue, perpetuates “culinary nostalgia,” framing authenticity as pre- and not post-industrial [21]. This strategy, while eye-catching, flattens complex cultural landscapes to a marketable aesthetic, reducing tradition to a static, consumable one. By dissecting these patterns, the above analysis reveals how Flavorful Origins curates authenticity through visual and narrative strategies that privilege sensory allure and geographic romanticism. These techniques, while effective in attracting global audiences, raise essential questions about the mediation of culture in platform capitalism.

3.2. Discussion

Flavorful Origins’ visual and narrative strategies evince a Janus face: a balance between cultural documentation and platform-driven commodification, where authenticity is both rhetoric and consumable. Infusing the results of the episode analyses with semiotic theory [4], continuity principles [8], and globalization critiques [19], this discussion argues that streaming media, in its quest to strike a balance between tradition and modernity, ethnographic truthfulness and algorithmic clickability, manifests what Couldry calls “media logic”, the ways in which platform infrastructures remodel cultural narratives into consumable, standardized forms [22]. Indeed, Flavorful Origins’ authenticity protocol fetishizes materiality. The episode analyses document that close-ups of lamb fat sizzling on stones (Mutton), noodle dough stretching into translucent strands (Noodles), and glossy potato starch (Potato) serve as Barthesian (1977) puncta, visual details that transfix the viewer in their visceral immediacy. Yet these shots do more than document. They invite viewers to “taste with their eyes;” they equate sensory richness with cultural authenticity. However, this sensory immersion comes at a cost. By showcasing texture at the expense of context, Flavorful Origins reduces complex culinary traditions to aesthetic fragments. This is akin to what Phillipov (2017) describes as sensory realism, sensory information is “strongly denoted but not fully denoted,” lending a sense of “realism” to food without immersing viewers in the sensory details of a meal. In thirds, for instance, Noodles leaves out China’s reliance on industrial mills; by omitting this process, handcrafted labor appears romantic, equating authenticity with pre-industrial simplicity. This selective framing concurs with the argument by Naccarato and LeBesco (2012) that food media often commodifies nostalgia, transforming tradition into an aesthetic, rather than a lived practice. Flavorful Origins’ chromatic storytelling further complicates its authenticity claims. Udris-Borodavko *et al.* (2023, p. 33) argue that “color semiotics allows for the ‘simplification’ of cultural and ethnic concepts,” and Flavorful Origins uses this strategy to great effect. Gansu’s

earthy browns (Mutton) represent rough authenticity, and Noodles' golden hues mythologise agrarian work.

Yet the hyper-saturated purple of Yunnan potatoes (Potato) reveals a paradox: the series glamorises reality to meet streaming's visual demands. Here, the authenticity of flavor is remade as the authenticity of visual appeal. This tension mirrors the critique by Aiello (2020) of what she calls "nostalgic technicolor," where enhanced palettes romanticise the past to sell it as exoticism. The result is what Baudrillard (1994) calls "hyperreality" (a simulation of authenticity that replaces the real with its aesthetic double). In this sense, the vibrant chili oils and gleaming sauces are not just culinary details but algorithmic imperatives, a visual lure designed to capture attention in an oversaturated space. Narrative continuity, as theorised by Bordwell and Thompson (2020), is another pillar of the series' authenticity protocol. The geography-to-table sequences in Mutton and field-to-bowl sequences in Noodles create spatial and temporal coherence, binding food to place through transitions that connect making with the finished result. Match-on-action edits, such as that from the cleaver's swing to the steaming bowl, naturalise labor-intensive work, masking hours of labour behind effortless motion. This "procedural realism" [23], allowing viewers to witness tradition without enduring it, is crucial in streaming's binge-driven economy. These cuts also compress cultural information. The five-hour simmering of broth (Noodles) into a few seconds glorifies patience but also erases the socioeconomic realities of the scarcity of time in modern life. Thus, the series enacts a temporal privilege; slow food is aestheticised as heritage, not interrogated as labor inequity. Geographic anchoring further intensifies these authenticity claims. Establishing shots of Gansu's mountains and Henan's wheat fields employ Stoian's (2020) "indexical authenticity," where images gain authority by summoning the real-world locations that produced them. The shot lists function as a visual synecdoche, reducing complex geographies to emblematic landscapes. Yet this anchoring is geographically selective.

Urban space, where most Chinese consumers now live, is conspicuously absent, replaced by rustic villages and pastoral vistas. This omission concurs with Appadurai's (1996) notion of "cultural reterritorialization," in which local traditions are repackaged for global audiences in the process of strategic erasure. In this sense, the series deploys geographic and artisanal forms of labour to craft a culinary nationalism, a Chinese dish that is both proudly Chinese and meticulously sanitized for transnational consumption. The platform's role in crafting these narratives cannot be overstated [24], [25]. Indeed, as a Netflix production, Flavorful Origins exemplifies Ji's (2025) "platform imperialism," in which Western-owned streaming services mediate non-Western cultures for global consumption. The series's 4K resolution, standardised aspect ratios, and algorithm-friendly pacing reflect Netflix's homogenising logics. To provide a few examples, the repetitive close-ups and vibrant hues are not only a style choice but a data-driven strategy to maximise viewer retention. This algorithmic curation translates authenticity into an algorithmic metric, where cultural value is measured in clicks and watch time. These visual strategies activate the psychological mechanisms identified in the theoretical framework. The series' textural close-ups (78% of frames) function as sensory priming, demonstrating how visual cues trigger cross-modal sensory responses, viewers 'taste with their eyes' through embodied cognition processes [28]. Simultaneously, the repeated focus on artisan hands and rural kitchens facilitates parasocial relationships [16], positioning viewers not as detached observers but as emotionally invested participants in the culinary narrative.

The compressed time sequences and match-on-action editing enhance processing fluency [30], making cultural authenticity claims appear intuitively true rather than critically examined. By activating System 1 processing [14], automatic, emotion-driven responses, rather than System 2's deliberative analysis, the series naturalizes its ideological messages of tradition and cultural purity. This dual-process mechanism reveals how visual continuity functions not merely as an aesthetic choice but as a persuasive strategy. This is a paradox: while the series presents regional specificity, its production norms enforce visual and narrative sameness, translating the nuances of culture into a globally consumable formula. This tension between specificity and homogenisation mirrors a larger contradiction in streaming-era media. On the one hand, the series demonstrates cultural sanitization to avoid alienating international audiences. The absence of regional dialects (replaced by Mandarin voiceovers), the focus on visual rather than taste complexity, and the standardisation of experience are examples of this

strategy. On the other hand, the series markets itself as a window into “authentic” Chinese culture, using exoticism to stand out in the content jungle. This duality exemplifies the authenticity paradox discussed earlier [7], where the series must balance ethnographic fidelity with commercial viability. Indeed, the series’s success depends on its ability to negotiate this, to be “foreign enough” to intrigue but not so alienating as to deter. The implications of this analysis stretch beyond food media. The analysis reveals specific patterns of omission that shape the series’ representation. While the series dedicates extensive footage to artisanal techniques, it systematically excludes contemporary socioeconomic contexts: urban spaces where most Chinese consumers live, industrial food production that coexists with traditional methods, and labor conditions facing modern food workers. For example, Noodles showcases hand-pulling techniques across 18 scenes but includes no reference to the industrial mills that produce most wheat noodles consumed in China today. Similarly, Potato’s 13-scene narrative focuses on rural transformation rituals while omitting the impact of agricultural modernization on traditional farming communities.

These omissions are not merely editorial choices but reflect structural constraints of platform production. The series’ focus on pre-industrial aesthetics, rustic cookware, weathered hands, and pastoral landscapes aligns with what the theoretical framework identifies as ‘nostalgic technicolor’ [11], where enhanced visuals romanticize the past for global consumption. This pattern suggests that streaming platforms prioritize visual appeal and narrative coherence over comprehensive cultural documentation. The question becomes: whose version of authenticity does this serve? By aestheticizing tradition while erasing contemporary complexity, the series constructs a version of Chinese culinary heritage that is simultaneously ‘authentic’ (rooted in real practices) and ‘sanitized’ (stripped of contradictions that might challenge viewer expectations or platform algorithms). Future research should examine how audiences across different cultural contexts interpret these authenticity claims. Do global viewers perceive Flavorful Origins as an ethnographic document, culinary travelogue, or visual spectacle? Comparative analysis with non-streaming food media (independent documentaries, social media content) could reveal how platform constraints uniquely shape cultural representation. Additionally, production studies examining Netflix’s editorial guidelines and algorithmic requirements would clarify whether these visual strategies emerge from cultural preservation goals, data-driven optimization, or market research imperatives. Flavorful Origins is the digital-era double bind of authenticity. It is at once a celebration of cultural heritage and a commodity shaped by platform capitalism’s demands. The series’s lush cinematography and narrative coherence dazzle the senses, yet its omissions and aestheticisations remind us that authenticity is not a stable truth but a negotiated performance. In the streaming age, heritage is not inherited; it is curated, algorithmically optimised, and sold back to us as a product. This study urges scholars to look beyond the screen to interrogate how production and distribution infrastructures shape our understanding, and our non-understanding of digitally mediated culture.

4. Conclusion

This study examined how Netflix’s Flavorful Origins constructs culinary authenticity through visual semiotics and narrative continuity. Analysis of three episodes revealed three key mechanisms: geographic anchoring through establishing shots, sensory choreography via textural close-ups (78% of frames), and temporal scripting through continuity editing. These strategies activate psychological processes, embodied cognition, parasocial engagement, and dual-process persuasion that transform cultural documentation into desire cultivation. However, the study identified a central paradox: while claiming ethnographic authenticity, the series employs commercial aesthetics (hyper-color grading, compressed timelines) and systematic omissions (urban spaces, industrial contexts) that romanticize pre-industrial traditions for global consumption. This research contributes to food media studies by demonstrating how streaming platforms remediate cultural heritage through standardized visual regimes and to communication theory by adapting continuity editing frameworks from fiction to documentary analysis. Study limitations include the focus on three episodes and the exclusion of audio-textual elements. Future research should examine audience reception across cultural contexts, compare platform versus independent food documentaries, and investigate

production processes behind these visual strategies. Ultimately, this study reveals that culinary authenticity in digital media is not discovered but constructed, urging critical examination of how streaming platforms curate tradition as algorithmic content.

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