

# The Odesa Image in Odesa-Themed Restaurants

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**Abstract:** The popularity of Odesa-themed restaurants across the world presents an opportunity to explore a possible core of the Odesa city myth, sedimented into consumer space. The article analyzes 63 enterprises in seventeen countries, examining the cuisine, interiors, restaurant concepts, media reviews, and visitor reports on social media. The theoretical framework of this study revolves around the concept of memory entrepreneurship, the concept of travelling mnemonic plots, and instruments of marketing semiotics, especially the “cultural mélange” phenomenon. The surveyed restaurants reveal a specific picture of an Odesa “memoryscape,” formed as a dense palimpsest. The key themes are the motifs of an inverted world and of a lost Paradise. The plot of the Odesa myth in restaurants outside Odesa can be described as a temporal loop, starting at several points simultaneously, traversing the space of the world, then collapsing and returning to the departure time in a gesture of grief over the lost paradise.

**Keywords:** Odesa city myth, nostalgia, memoryscape, Odesa-themed restaurants, entrepreneurs of memory.

**W**hile the name “Odesa”<sup>1</sup> inevitably triggers interest all across the world, the years of the city’s glory belong to the past. In this regard, it is surprising that the name “Odesa” remains popular in different parts of the world and in rather unusual contexts. Many cities give rise to powerful narratives that associate certain expectations with a given city. In the mass perception, Paris is the “city of love,” New York is “the world’s melting pot,” and San Francisco is a “city of freedom” in the hippy sense. If we hear the name “Verona,” our mind immediately evokes the image of Juliet’s balcony in Shakespeare’s famous play *Romeo and Juliet*. In fact, people who recognize “Juliet’s balcony” in the word “Verona” do not necessarily read Shakespeare; they live in a “cultural bouillon” where complex artistic constructs are constantly sedimenting into simple triggers: Verona—balcony, New York—Empire State Building, Paris—Eiffel Tower. Frequently, a mythological image proves

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<sup>1</sup> This article transliterates Odesa from Ukrainian, following EWJUS policy on transliteration of Ukrainian geographic and place names. However, the transliteration from Russian—“Odessa”—is preserved in the cases where it is actually used, without implying any conclusions as to the restaurateurs’ ideological or political convictions.

to be more powerful than the picture of reality, and individuals see not a real city but an embodiment of their expectations. Needless to say, such representations frequently tend to annoy the city's citizens.

The Dutch researcher Jan Paul Hinrichs notes in surprise that he saw many goods marked "Odessa" (in transliteration from Russian) on a Dutch classifieds site: a wedding album, a leather coat, a floor lamp, paving stones, a samovar (9). Hinrichs also cites the Bee Gees' music album *Odessa* and Frederick Forsyth's novel *The Odessa File*. Neither has any connection with the real city, though (Hinrichs 9). It is interesting that the city's name is sometimes quoted without any connection to the city as such. What is attractive in the word "Odesa" for a person exploring a classifieds website searching for a new floor lamp or a wedding album? The name of the city as something exotic lives its own life, while the real image of a prosperous city has vanished over time.

I started pondering this question after encountering somehow Odesa-themed places (restaurants, shops, hotels, etc.) beyond Odesa. In no way did they evoke associations in me with the city that I live in. However, something presumably resonates in one's soul when entering an Odesa-themed restaurant, whether it is in another Ukrainian city (for example, Cherkasy) or in Dresden.

The fact of the Odesa theme's popularity in the consumer space motivated me to analyze the image of Odessa in such specific enterprises as thematic restaurants and cafes. Why restaurants? Such venues exist not only as places offering food but as spaces with a particular atmosphere, triggering a kind of cultural game. Restaurants are not establishments of high culture that are bound to standards of objective representation, scientific approach, or the like. Nobody is seeking an educational experience: people come here not to extend their knowledge but to engage their senses and evoke familiar emotional encounters with Odesa, whether real or imagined. Each restaurateur is free to represent his or her own ideas, but obviously a restaurant will be successful only if visitors are able to read the message. Analysis of this message reveals primarily the visitors' expectations, not an individual restaurateur's vision.

Thematic restaurants are a very interesting medium of commemorative senses. The presence of historical messages in a public space, especially in the commercial field, is one of the marks of "overload with the Past," as described by Aleida Assmann in her 2020 book *Is Time out of Joint?* Even within a commercial space, the desire to relax implies plunging into a certain palatable historical atmosphere. To this end, the phenomenon of "memory entrepreneurship" combines profit-seeking with artistic innovation (Narvselius 417). The success of commercial enterprises offering a "historical atmosphere" reveals to researchers a special form of historical memory that proves to remain invisible in other academic approaches.

“Odesa thematic restaurants” are popular the world over and represent an idea of the city that exists in the minds of people who have probably never been to Odesa. I prefer to speak here in terms of the “city myth”—in the context of Roland Barthes’s interpretation of Myth as a semiotic structure. If we use the Odesa image (sign) as a signifier and complement it with new meanings which are what is signified, we obtain a complex semiotic structure representing the nature of that city’s myth. My aim is to reveal the main elements of this semiotic structure, the way these elements are combined, and the way the senses sediment into a final structure. In this context it is important to note that the major literary images of the city appeared in the nineteenth and in the first half of the twentieth centuries.<sup>2</sup> The research undertaken allows us to state that it is the presentation of the Odesa myth in the commercial field which makes it possible to identify new elements of its city myth which remain unperceivable within other analysis of this subject based on “high culture” materials.

#### METHODOLOGY

My aim was to trace the Odesa myth in everyday consciousness, outside of Odesa itself, by analyzing the concepts of Odesa-themed restaurants in different countries. I have collected representations of the Odesa myth beyond the physical location of the present-day city, in spaces where thoughts about Odesa are quite likely to be counterintuitive. The restaurants which I focus on are all businesses bearing the word “Odesa” in their name as well as restaurants identified as serving “Odesa cuisine” or using the Odesa theme in their concept (such as “Deribas,” “Langeron,” “Duke-Duke,” “Liubchyk,” etc.). For example, I analyzed the “Babel” restaurant in Moscow but did not consider “Babel” in Kyiv (the latter advertising “old Kyiv cuisine”).

In total I analyzed 63 venues in seventeen countries (Australia, Belarus, Canada, Philippines, France, Estonia, Germany, Georgia, Israel, Ireland, Latvia, Poland, Russia, Türkiye, Ukraine, UK, and USA; full list of restaurants is in the Appendix). In addition to Ukrainian cities (Kyiv, Lviv, Dnipro, Cherkasy, and Uman) Odesa-themed restaurants are popular in Russia (Moscow, Krasnodar, Krasnoïarsk, Cheliabinsk, Khabarovsk, Nizhnii Novgorod, Penza, Perm, Pushkin, Saratov, St. Petersburg, Toliatti, and Iaroslavl). There are also well-known “Odesa” restaurants in German cities (Berlin, Cologne, Dresden, Dortmund, and Übach-Palenberg) and in the USA

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<sup>2</sup> I would add the following note: One notable exception is Ivan Kozlenko’s recent novel *Tanzher* (*Tangier*), discussed by Vitaly Chernetsky in this special issue.

(notably “Odessa” in New York, which is in a part of the city popularly known as “Little Odessa”).

I personally visited the Kyiv restaurants “Liubchyk,” “Little Odesa,” “Odesa Boulevard,” “Odesa-Mama,” “Chernomorka”; the Lviv restaurant “I love U Odessa”; the eatery “Odesa” in Uman (Central Ukraine); the restaurant and the bistro “Odessa” in Wrocław (Poland); and the “Neue Odessa Bar” and “Odessa Mama” restaurant in Berlin. Colleagues in other countries (Belarus, Estonia, Israel, Latvia, Germany, United Kingdom, and Canada) visited Odesa-themed restaurants at my request.<sup>3</sup> This information allowed me to draw several conclusions and emphasize some aspects of the Odesa myth that had not been previously evident.

Due to the fact that I could personally visit only a minority of the existing venues, I asked myself how correct my conclusions would be. However, in today’s world it is specifically a venue’s website and its pages on social networks that constitute the establishment’s main communication tool, and accordingly I decided to explore the restaurants’ self-representation on the Internet and to analyze reviews by local media and visitor reports in social media. This enabled me to compare the restaurateurs’ offerings against the visitors’ ability to read their messages. Today’s media transparency provides a special space where different venues largely find themselves within a shared realm and where they can react to each other. Overall, I identified 63 respective restaurants in seventeen countries. To be sure, only a few of them present an elaborate concept that has been thoroughly implemented (these include “Odessa-Mama” and “Babel” in Moscow and “Langeron” in Cheliabinsk). Several “Odesa” restaurateurs (Lara Katsova in Moscow and Aleksei Noskov in Cheliabinsk) are quite acclaimed bloggers who have developed solid communities; thus, exploring their blogs provided a wealth of material for the analysis.

I understand that certainly a great number of “Odesa” venues remained unconsidered due to their poor presence on the Internet, as many locally oriented restaurants do not feature websites with global access (e.g., for travellers). Therefore, when visiting Wrocław (Poland) I easily found three establishments bearing the name “Odessa”—a café, a restaurant, and a mini-

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<sup>3</sup> I thank Aleksei Kamenskikh, Gera Grudev, Ievhen Kuz'min, Anna Misiuk, Artur Fredekind, Elena Feofilova, Anton Rassadin, Kateryna Semeniuk, and Kandis Friesen, who made photo reports for me and, when possible, interviewed the owners about their motives in using the Odesa theme in their establishments. The “Odessa” restaurants in Montréal, Netanya, Cologne, Perm, Istanbul, Dresden, and Tallinn as well as “Kommunalka” in Minsk, “Kādreiz Odesā” in Riga, “Deribasovskaya” in Perm, “Babel House” in London, and “Odessa-Mama” in St. Petersburg appear in the field of my colleagues’ research, and they had collected data on my behalf, by visiting the restaurants in person.

market—none of which targeted tourists. Very similar to the Wrocław ones is the “Odessa” restaurant in Poznań (also Poland), and we may assume that more such establishments undoubtedly exist. Likewise, the “Odessa” restaurant in Netanya (Israel) could not be found on any “trip advisor”-type website, and I was able to obtain information about it only through personal local contacts. Finally, I chose to analyze venues with varying price categories, which allowed covering both the simplest and the more sophisticated messages conveyed in their “Odesa” theme.

As for the actual research method, I searched Odesa-themed restaurants on the Internet, analyzed their concepts, the instruments of their representation on social media, visitors’ feedback, and the texts of local culinary reviewers; I also visited the available venues and collected the materials of my colleagues’ visits, read the restaurateurs’ blogs, and analyzed the menus, interiors, and communication strategies of different restaurants. Next I analyzed the sourced materials in the context of available literature on the Odesa myth, aiming to discover possible topics which seem to have been overshadowed in surveys of high culture.

#### PRELIMINARY FINDINGS AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Proceeding to the analysis of the Odesa consumer myth, I shall outline below the existing forms of the Odesa theme in world culture. The nineteenth and early twentieth centuries saw the development of a global perception of an active trade city: Jan Paul Hinrichs says that the “European Myth” even includes the idea of money-making opportunities in Odesa (16). We should also inevitably mention the dreams of Honoré de Balzac’s Father Goriot (how to trade macaroni from Odesa), Mark Twain’s recognition of America on Odesa’s streets, etc.

Since the early twentieth century, several waves of emigration from Odesa (or through Odesa) have taken place. In the beginning there was economic emigration to the US, political emigration to different countries of the world following the revolution in Russia, and emigration of representatives of future Israel to the then Palestine. At the end of World War II, for many European prisoners of war, people who had been sent to forced labour in Nazi Germany, and inmates of concentration camps Odesa became the point of transfer for their repatriation after 1945. These categories of people were concentrated in Odesa and sent back to Europe by sea.

A great wave of Jewish emigration from the USSR since 1971 has created the phenomenon of “Little Odessa” in New York. The Odesa myth gained additional features in the Soviet era that were unknown to those who had left immediately after the Bolshevik Revolution and the establishment of the

USSR. After 1991, the strong post-Soviet emigration exported those features. The different waves of emigration injected people into the outer world at different stages of the Odesa myth evolution. Contemporary describers of the Odesa myth mention the 1920s as a crucial point in its development, but what about the influence of people who emigrated before the so-called “Babel myth” took root? In the Russian Empire, Odesa had a very colourful image as a city of trade, mercantilism, egoism, cheapness, and sin. It was perceived also as a place of opportunities, an open gate—and this is what reminded Mark Twain of his homeland during his visit to Odesa.

Within Odesa’s cultural space, the picture of the Odesa myth is described using terms such as “Babel’s Odesa” and “Zhabotinskii’s Odesa.” The early-twentieth-century Odesa writers Isaac Babel and Vladimir Zhabotinskii described their home city through different optics: Babel from the perspective of a marginal area called Moldavanka (*Odesa Stories*) and Zhabotinskii (*The Five*) from Odesa’s central street Deribasivs'ka. One of the tasks of my exploration was to find whether that confrontation was visible from the outside.

#### THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The starting point for my research on the Odesa myth in thematic restaurants outside Odesa was Eleonora Narvselius’s investigations on transnational memories in EastCentral European borderland cities, based on restaurant message analysis. Narvselius develops instruments to reveal popular requests for historical atmosphere that are very often missing in the memory “canon” (Assmann’s term). Using the example of analysis of restaurant concepts in the Ukraine-Poland border zone, Narvselius shows that sometimes it is the commercial realm which enables the documenting of people’s desire to submerge in a certain theme. This is impossible to reveal through formal commemorative practices. They may be nostalgia motifs—for instance, one’s desire to find himself or herself in the atmosphere of a hypothetical Austria-Hungary of Franz Joseph I. The longevity of certain mythical perceptions may be revealed only through the context of a designed space, in which one engages as though navigating a game. Commercial enterprises have taken up the Odesa theme in the creation and marketing of such spaces. My research required the analytical methodology to question the past in thematic restaurants.

Narvselius proceeds in her exploration from the notion of memory entrepreneurs suggested by G. Mink: “Commercialization of memory cultures has been a growing transnational phenomenon, which in turn has created a demand for special kinds of memory entrepreneurs combining profit-seeking with artistic innovation, cultural activism and political

intuition” (qtd. in Narvselius 417). The success of such commercial enterprises offering a historical atmosphere reveals to researchers a special form of historical memory that has been proven to remain invisible in other academic approaches. As Narvselius points out,

the restaurants provide a very narrow space for reflexivity and critical engagement with otherness; as a customer one is expected to enjoy the experience and thus confirm the suggested narratives, images, and performances. As a product of entrepreneurs who try to balance their cultural engagement, commercial interests, and personal allegiances, thematic restaurants suggest selective, impressionist, and sometimes overtly misleading interpretations of the past. However, their strengths stem from working with emotions (longing, curiosity, excitement, pride, but also shame, guilt, regret) and sensory expressions. (Narvselius 422).

While realizing that memory entrepreneurship has often been the subject of research, I stress that it is specifically Narvselius’s approach which is applicable to my subject: it provides a toolkit for working with commercial exploitation of the theme of a multicultural and non-existent (vanished or imagined) space.

The development of the Odesa myth outside the city could be explored in the context of Astrid Erlil’s concept of travelling mnemonic plots: different forms of collective memories emerge in social contexts, in frames created by *Homo Symbolicus* (6). The notion of memoryscape, described by Paul Basu in the context of his multi-sited ethnography method, allows using different types of mnemonic phenomena in common research. These methodological instruments are useful in the analysis of any city myth.

The peculiarities of circulation of the Odesa mythology encouraged me also to explore works on the phenomenon of nostalgia. I used Svetlana Boym’s assertion about the nature of the Myth as a plot device, rather than a strict iconography. In her turn, Assmann offers ways of understanding the phenomenon of admiration for the past in the collective memory of recent decades. In her text, *Is Time out of Joint?* she reveals the mechanisms of people’s interaction with the past in everyday life and demonstrates the specific forms of nostalgia that take form in a “vanishing” of the future.

The research object involves the specific methodology of marketing semiotics, especially the “cultural mélange” phenomenon. Particularly important was Helena Grinshpun’s analysis of interpretative patterns in the consumption space, and the emphasizing of cultural mechanisms of continuous reproduction in the context of changing social circumstances. In the context of my research, the fact that Grinshpun analyzes cultural phenomena in foreign cultures was particularly important.

The above methodological guidelines are needed to analyze commemoration messages within a commercial facility. Certainly, in

analyzing the Odesa myth in restaurants beyond Odesa, I had to consult the literature engaging specifically with the Odesa myth. The fundamental studies on the Odessa myth focus our attention on the realm of “high culture”: literature, music, and cinema. Therefore, for my work these substantial studies provide a rather common field for viewing the Odesa myth. Patricia Herlihy and Charles King offer a broad lens for viewing a multicultural city, focusing on (but not limiting themselves to) the imperial period of the city’s existence. Rebecca Stanton, Svetlana Natkovich, Jan Paul Hinrichs, and Gregory Freidin explore the Odesa myth by focusing on varied aspects of fine literature by Odesa-based authors, written in Russian in the first thirty years of the twentieth century. Steven Zipperstein and Jarrod Tanny concentrate on the culture of Odesan Jews. Anna Makolkin maintains that it is possible to describe Odesa as an Italian town, while Tanny offers a vision of “a city of rogues and schnorrers.”

A particular perception of Odesa as a city within today’s Ukraine is now being developed by Ukrainian scholars—Iaroslav Polischuk, Ivan Monolatii, Iaroslav Hrytsak, and Mykhailo Haukhman. Authors from Odesa (Il’ia Kaminskii, Mark Naidorf [Naydorf], Volodymyr Poltorak, and others) work intensively with the Odesa myth in different genres, ranging from academic research to journalism.

It is important to cite the cultural and socio-anthropological research studies conducted on contemporary Odesa such as, for instance, the explorations by Tanya Richardson, Vira Skvirska, and Caroline Humphrey. Skvirska and Humphrey deconstruct the world view of today’s Odesans based on the assumption of a need for a viable and attractive cosmopolitan setting. For me, important in this exploration is the researchers’ growing confidence in the option for listing Odesa as one of a number of cosmopolitan cities that is multicultural and open to the world.

Canadian anthropologist Tanya Richardson’s approach to the specificity of Odesa’s multi-layered culture furnished me with an additional tool for analyzing my own material. Not only is the fact of the city’s multicultural nature important, but also the specificity of combining varied elements in a single mythological plot. Richardson relies on the analysis of Babel’s texts offered by Elena Karakina, an Odesa-based literary historian. Karakina deconstructs Babel’s way to create a space of *a-topia*, where a marginal part substitutes for the entirety. Richardson reveals the persistence of this plot in perceptions of Babel’s texts in the late Soviet consciousness and extends that vision beyond literary studies. The methodological guides of Karakina and Richardson were very helpful in deconstructing the phenomenon of chronological mixes that I discovered in my study.

Working with the Odesa myth in thematic restaurants, I use the notion of sedimentation, relying on the notion’s phenomenological vision that is described by Maurice Merleau-Ponty in his book *Phenomenology of*

*Perception.* The researcher described the process of automatic perception of information through the intensity of certain messages and wordings in the life space. Our behaviour may be guided by irrational reflection. Our unconscious responses and preferences are formed by socio-cultural information that we mutually create and absorb from the different environments where we are engaged as actors. The things circulating in the media space sediment in our consciousness as part of our knowledge about the world. It is specifically the knowledge about certain elements of the cultural space which are not part of our professional or personal life that interests me in exploring the Odesa myth in restaurants. Thus, the phenomenological setting has provided the overall socio-philosophical frame for the research.

#### RESEARCH RESULTS: UNUSUAL MENTIONS OF ODESA IN THE CONSUMPTION SPACE

The number and diversity of “Odesa” restaurants makes it possible to state that the Odesa phenomenon has a high level of commercial demand. Taking into consideration Hinrichs’s aforementioned observations about commercial websites, we can assert the relative attractiveness of the word “Odesa,” sometimes without special triggers. A large proportion of the “Odesa” restaurants demonstrate nothing special except the name. For example, the analyzed “Odessas” in Poland (Wrocław and Poznań) are regular Polish restaurants for locals with traditional everyday food, where the restaurateurs explore nothing but the name. We can see some additional meanings in Wrocław’s “Odessa” mini-market, which offers products from the entire post-Communist space. The mini-market’s signboard is decorated with the flags of six countries: Lithuania, Ukraine, Georgia, Moldova, Armenia, and Russia, but the shop represents a wider region than what is marked on the signboard—I discovered goods there from Kazakhstan, for example. This shop is popular among people from the former Soviet space, who work in Poland due to the poor economic situation in their own countries. Odesa appears here as a sign of post-Soviet internationalism. At the same time, Wrocław’s “Odessa” bistro and “Odessa” restaurant evince no sign of Odesa, neither direct nor metaphorical.

The same relates to the “Odessa” restaurant in Bolton (US) and to the “dancing restaurant” “Odessa” in Perm (Russia). It was quite surprising to discover “Port Odessa” in Baku (Azerbaijan), where the illusion of being on the Black Sea shore is created against the background of the Caspian Sea. Sometimes the commercial use of the Odesa brand generates ridiculous situations: there exists a holiday resort called “Little Odesa” in the Carpathian Mountains. The best season to visit this “Little Odessa” is winter, for skiing.

Yet, what is the message conveyed by the restaurants where the image of the city is still present? To start, I will try to find a common core in what is understood as the “Odesa cuisine,” and then I will offer some thoughts about the venues’ interiors and concepts.

## RESEARCH RESULTS

### *The Food Offered in Odesa-Themed Restaurants*

If we try to reveal something common in “Odesa restaurant” cuisine, we will be confused. I mentioned the local food in Wrocław’s restaurants, and this is not an isolated case. We will find European, Ukrainian, Russian, and Jewish cuisine here, advertised in combinations, as a rule: “European and Ukrainian” (“Kādreiz Odesā” in Riga), “Russian and Ukrainian” (“Odessa” in Dresden), “Russian and French” (“Odessa” in New York), “kosher, Ukrainian, Italian” (“Odessa” in Saratov), Ukrainian (“Odessa” in Tallinn), etc. Sometimes it is just seafood restaurants, like “Odessa” in Istanbul, or “Liubchyk” in Kyiv. We can also find quite exotic offerings, from dumplings (“Deribasovskaia” in Perm) to Greek food (“Odessa” in Übach-Palenberg) and Japanese sushi and American steak (“Odessa-Mama” pub-restaurant in Krasnoiarsk).

Sometimes restaurants specifically offer “Odesa cuisine” (“Liubchyk” in Kyiv, “Duke-Duke” in Moscow, and others), which leads us to attempt to explore the content of this notion. As a rule, “Odesa” venues offer something with fish; sometimes, though, the only mark of the Odesa theme is *vorschmack* (a baked herring hors d’oeuvre or *zakuska*). Often this is complemented with an “Odesa” fish dish—primarily *barabulia* (red mullet), which is actually found on the Crimean coast, not in the Gulf of Odesa. As a rule, restaurants are rather unsystematic in their presentation of “Odesa cuisine” and merely claim to be offering it by using the specific attribute: “Odessa” in Cologne serves “caviar à la Odesa”; at “Ah, Odessa” in Penza (Russia) they offer inscrutable “Odesa sausages”; and cold meats in St. Petersburg’s “Odessa-Mama” feature on the menu under the name “My Street of Miasoiedov” (from the lyrics of an Odesa-themed song mentioning the name of a street that is consonant with the word *m’iaso* ‘meat’). A Jewish theme is present as a background for the menu, but mainly through the *vorschmack* appetizer, whereas specific dishes of Odesa’s Jewish cuisine (which is distinctive from Israeli or other Jewish cuisines) are not featured there. Sometimes a restaurateur amuses its patrons with Jewish names of a hypothetical cook (inscriptions like “from Chef Aunt Sara,” “Odesa dinner from Aunt Tsilia”) or with a picture of the restaurateur’s Jewish granny (as does Lara Katsova in Moscow’s “Duke-Duke”).

Restaurants with more advanced concept themes explain the phenomenon of Odesa cuisine not in the context of specific dishes but through the prism of a unique atmosphere of homemade, simple, rich, and shared repasts. Moscow's "Odessa-Mama" proclaims that Odesa cuisine is "a good meal in good company." "Molecular cuisine? Dukan? Omnivore? Forget that nonsense! Only potatoes with cracklings and mackerel with onion!"—this review of Riga's "Kādreiz Odesā" stresses that the Odesa cuisine relies on "pure tastes," without an accent on spices.<sup>4</sup> Dishes from different cultures contribute to the Odesa cuisine phenomenon: in Saratov's "Odessa" (Russia) they explain that the Odesa cuisine is more than a "set of trivial dishes"—rather that it was collected from all parts of the world and tested by many generations. We see this message about the multinational nature of Odesa cuisine in the concepts of many restaurants.

Restaurateur Aleksei Noskov from Cheliabinsk points out in his *LiveJournal* blog (restoratoralex) that an Odesa restaurant "is not for joking. It is a restaurant to eat and talk. And the Odesa cuisine is not about fashion or a trend. It is about lifestyle." We see a professional elaboration of the "Odesa cuisine" concept shown by the Moscow restaurateur Lara Katsova, who proudly cites her Odesa origin. Satiety as a feature of the Odesa food is complemented by generosity: Katsova uses this combination, offering each visitor a portion of *vorschmack* for free.

A first glance at the image of Odesa cuisine in restaurants gives an impression of chaos. But this chaotic picture could be interpreted in the context of statements about the multi-ethnic nature of the Odesa cuisine. In his review of Odesa cuisine, Renee Hickman quotes Odesa historian Valerii Suntsov—in Odesa the dishes have lost their ethnic boundaries. The surprising mix of cuisines in the menus proves to be a reflection of the common perception of this cuisine phenomenon. The Odesa cuisine is not defined by a peculiar ethnic tradition; it blurs ethnic boundaries. The main feature of the Odesa cuisine is based on the value of rich and simple homecooked food. In this context, it is not surprising to see the everyday local food store in Wrocław called "Odessa" or the Greek food restaurant in Übach-Palenberg.

### *Restaurant Interiors: A City of the Past?*

Interiors are as important for a restaurant as the cuisine. In my research I observed that restaurateurs opt for quite varied languages to tell the Odesa story, and the range of expression of these establishments is kaleidoscopic. I propose here my view on the multi-layered message that is represented to a

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<sup>4</sup> All translations in this study are my own.

varying extent in different restaurants. These restaurants' visual messages create an impression that their visitors come to different venues with entirely different desires. Attentive reading of these messages, however, reveals a single story that is told in different languages.

I should start this examination with the remark that many restaurants do not use anything Odesa-specific in their interiors. These include the restaurants "Odessa" in Dublin, Wrocław, Poznań, Übach-Palenberg, Istanbul, Montréal, Iaroslavl, Perm, Nizhnii Novgorod, "Little Odessa" in Avignon, the "Neue Odessa" bar in Berlin, etc. Sometimes we find anchors, lifebuoys, or fishing nets: at the café-bar "Odessa Corner" ("Odesskii ugolok") in Moscow or "Ah, Odessa" in Penza. Thus we can testify to the commercial attractiveness of the Odesa brand, which can work without additional efforts by the restaurateur. I mention these examples to avoid the feeling that every Odesa-themed restaurant presents a unique concept. Sometimes, the name by itself is for sale.

A common feature of Odesa-themed restaurants is the nearly total absence of representations of the actual contemporary city in the interiors. Instead, the city is represented with old architecture, old maps, and portraits of people from the past—very often including signs of the Soviet era. Selected restaurants present a very specific message of the past: namely, "Bar Odessa" in Sydney demonstrates the spring of Greek Independence through portraits of the members of the secret organization "Filiki Etheria." Most "Odesa" restaurants, however, represent the image of the so-called "Old Odesa" in a variety of forms. Sometimes they create the "Old Odesa" image by presenting the interior of a *brasserie*—a French-style city café with simple food and atmosphere. Round wooden tables and chairs, interiors from the early twentieth century (evoking Walter Benjamin and the figure of the *flâneur*). We see such interiors, for example, in the "Odessa" restaurants in Paris and Krasnodar, in "Kādreiz Odesā" in Riga, and others.

I would like to mention here a fast-food chain in Ireland that is not directly within the scope of my interest. While Beshoff Bros' "Fish 'n Chips" is not an "Odesa" restaurant, I discovered that it presents the image of an important aspect of the Odesa memoryscape. The founder of the company, Ivan Beshoff, was a sailor on the *Potemkin* battleship according to his testimony ("Ivan Beshoff"). After the suppression of the mutiny on the battleship in 1905, Beshoff tried to escape to Latin America and stopped in Ireland, where he ultimately established an eatery serving fish and potatoes—the starting point for the fast-food chain. Still today, the venues of Beshoff Bros' enterprises are decorated with pictures of the *Potemkin* and portraits of Ivan Beshoff at different ages. He was a rather picturesque and mysterious figure, lived an extremely long life (more than a century), and was famous for his drinking prowess. Therefore, Ireland's "Fish 'n Chips"

chain is mentioned here as an example of the Odesa memoryscape's persuasive presence in the overall commercial field.

The current city is represented in the "Odessa" restaurant in Toliatti as several small pavilions constructed over a large area that one can wander through and explore at will. Each one has "an address"—nameplates with Ukrainian inscriptions ("вулиця Дерібасівська" or Deribasivska Street, for example) referring to the contemporary city in Ukraine.

Very interesting is the presence in a couple of restaurants of an image of the "Seventh Kilometre" suburban flea market. This market still operates in Odesa today, but I hesitate how to interpret the image—as a current sign of the city or as a reference to the 1990s. Namely, in the 1990s the Seventh Kilometre was a legendary place, helping people to survive the post-Soviet misery. Odesa in restaurants is the city of the past—quite varied, but still the past.

### *Chronological Mix Phenomenon*

A very interesting feature of Odesa-themed restaurant interiors is the presence of chronological mixes. I believe that it deserves special attention and needs interpretations other than those stemming from a possible lack of education among either the restaurateurs or the patrons. I offer two favourite examples of such mixes.

The "Deribas" ("Дерибасъ") restaurant in Moscow is decorated in the style of the NEP (New Economic Policy, a special regime of Soviet Communist economics, launched in 1921 and allowing for some private entrepreneurship) with references to "Ostap Bender" (a character in I. I'f and E. Petrov's novels *Dvenadtsat' stul'ev* [*Twelve Chairs*] and *Zolotoi telenok* [*The Golden Calf*]). On the wall, the visitor sees an oddly fixed chair (one of the eponymous "twelve chairs"). So, the ensuing mix: Josip de Ribas (Deribas) was one of the founders of Odesa and its port in the late eighteenth century, the NEP is a twentieth-century program, and Ostap Bender is a fictional conman. What connection can there be between a historical person and a fictional character? Another mix in the "Deribas" interior is the combination of outdoor and indoor signs. Additionally, we see a Jewish theme: the listed Chef's name is "Aunt Sara" (an allusion to the above-mentioned Babel's Moldavanka).

Another eclectic mix appears in the "Langeron" restaurant in Cheliabinsk. The restaurant is on the second floor, so visitors have to walk up a flight of stairs while looking at a serving table, chairs, and floor lamp suspended upside-down on the ceiling. Near the entrance, one sees a picture of Alexander Langeron, governor-general of the Imperial Russian province (on Ukrainian territory) of Novorossiia and Bessarabiia (1815–22). After meeting Langeron, visitors find themselves in a Soviet *kommunalka*

apartment, with wallpaper layers overlapping one another. Lace lampshades are hanging from the ceiling, amateur paintings decorate the walls. A special place at the restaurant is a fake veranda with lace curtains, which creates a feeling of proximity to the sea. A local journalist admitted his strong desire to open the window and look out at the sea, although outside the window there is only Molodogvardeitsev Street in the landlocked Siberian city. Again we see a combination of features from different times: a developing city of the nineteenth century and an odd Soviet-type dwelling with several families sharing a single flat.

Such mixes of different, often contradicting ambience are widespread in Odesa-themed venues. In Cherkasy's "Odesa-Mama" restaurant we also see portraits of Pushkin and nineteenth-century mayors in the interiors of a communal flat (a photographic printer, a radio, bottles, theatrical decorations, etc.). Meanwhile, another non-coincidental chronological mix is offered by the "Odessa" bar in Sydney. It is themed by the activities of the secret society "Filiki Eteria" which—in Odesa at the beginning of the nineteenth century—plotted a revolt to achieve independence for Greece. The bar is connected with a restaurant, "1821," which celebrates Greek independence. The "Odessa" bar presents a gallery of "Filiki Eteria" activists and other fighters for Greek independence. The venue's site explains the connections between Odesa and Greece, expressing gratitude to the city where Greek independence was born. At the same time, we see tokens of the Russian Empire (it is logical, for during the period of "Filiki Eteria" Odesa was part of the empire) and, incongruously, of the Soviet Union. Numerous hammers-and-sickles are displayed alongside the Fabergé eggs in the bar's gaudy interior.

It is amazing, but these incongruous mixes do not create a feeling of something unnatural. I assume here the presence of the so-called cultural mélange or code-switching approach. In marketing semiotics, these notions imply the effect of attractiveness that emerges through using signs from different cultural spaces in one interior (Grinshpun). However, in order for the enjoyment effect to happen, this shifting of codes has to follow a certain logic. What unites the time layers presented in the interior—of numerous Odesa-themed restaurants? First is the epoch of Odesa's fantastic economic rise in the first decades of the city's existence. Second is the NEP as a short period of "fast money" and carefree life of enterprising people against a backdrop of all-round misery. In this layer, we see "Ostap Bender" as a perfect risk taker, a charming person with an indefatigable passion for money, and nearby stands Babel's "Benia Krik," who was perceived in late-Soviet and post-Soviet mass culture as Ostap's "brother"—an aristocratic gangster (this image is very different from Babel's real "Benia"). The third layer is the Soviet communal flat (*kommunalka*). The latter surprisingly complements several reference points of the Odesa myth: Babel's Jewish

Moldavanka, the Soviet communal flat with its explosive yet brotherly environment, and probably legends about Odesa's underground manufacturers of imperfect goods in the Soviet 1970s (the *tsekhovyky*). The latter, third element of that mythology is understandable only in post-Soviet countries or to visitors of immigrant-oriented restaurants. The fourth layer is the 1990s. Through the optics of these chronological mixes, we can explain why the Seventh Kilometre flea market is featured in the interior of a restaurant. This market is an important part of post-Soviet survival in the 1990s. For a great number of people, it was a place that generated fast money against the backdrop of total collapse. Taking into consideration the fact that the Seventh Kilometre was the biggest such suburban market in Eastern Europe and served neighbouring cities and even countries, we can say that Odesa accepted its mantle as a city of lively trade and "relatively legal" money ("Ostap Bender"'s definition). It is noteworthy that the market is featured in one of the backgrounds of the novel by Ukrainian writer Ivan Kozlenko, *Tangier* (2017), devoted specially to "rebooting" the Odesa myth.

All these layers of meaning have a common focus: it is an atmosphere of fast and easy money, economic and personal freedom, and liberation from banal and grey life, social conventions, and bureaucratic restrictions. Ethnic stereotypes work here, with their emphasis on the Jewish sense of entrepreneurship. Different triggers activate in the visitors' awareness a feeling of the holistic atmosphere of the described space. The chronological mixes in Odesa-themed restaurants contribute to the development of a more saturated message. It is important to recall the nature of memoryscape, which uses different modes of memory; and interaction between different modes of memory creates creole or palimpsest forms of memory (Basu 116). Restaurants reveal a specific picture of the Odesa memoryscape, formed as a dense palimpsest.

#### LANGUAGES OF THE ODESA MYTH IN DEVELOPING RESTAURANT NARRATIVES

The message of Odesa-themed restaurants could be conveyed in different languages (language being understood in its broad sense as a semiotic system). Although the expressive means are quite varied, they allow a reading of the same message. I distinguish two languages of the Odesa myth representation in the studied restaurants.

##### *"Sarochka-Style" Language*

I identify the first language as "Sarochka-style" because it relies on the message of pseudo-Odesa jokes about "Izia and Sarochka." The storytelling of these restaurants is rather primitive in that it exploits primarily ethnic

stereotypes, and the main feature in Odesa-themed restaurants, styled superficially, is “Jewish culture.” Examples of such restaurants are “I love U Odessa” in Lviv and Dnipro, “Small Odessa” in Kyiv, “Odessa” in Penza and Dresden, and “Deribas” in Khabarovsk, among others. These restaurants use superficial perceptions of the “Odesa image”—striped sailor undershirts, underwear on the clothesline, plump women (corporeal abundance in this language represents economic prosperity and freedom from social conventions), and jokes in a pseudo-Jewish style. It was quite challenging to analyze such venues due to the personal feeling of distaste they evoked in me. What is more, vulgar jokes are based on a pretended Jewish accent. The “Deribas” restaurant in Khabarovsk even uses that accent on its signboard—they write “Де`рибас,” referring to the “Jewish manner” of pronouncing the letter “R.” Waiters in such restaurants are commonly dressed in sailor shirts and Ostap Bender-style white peaked caps. Such restaurants can demonstrate their creativity by playing Odesa-themed movies (“Small Odessa” in Kyiv) and featuring performances by “Odesa” bands (“I love U Odessa” in Lviv). The websites of these restaurants are decorated with pseudo-Odesa jokes and figures of speech. Not only budget venues use that style but also the hyped restaurants of Lara Katsova in Moscow (“Barkas” and “Duke-Duke”).

Sometimes the “Sarochka-style” is further enriched with chronological mixing. This language is exemplified in the grill-bar “Odesa-Mama” in Cherkasy, “Odessa-Mama” in St. Petersburg, and others. The comic image of Odesa is complemented here with theatrical elements: meeting with “Ostap Bender,” NEP-era-style decorated special venues, a Soviet communal flat with homemade preserves, etc. The interiors of the “Soviet” venues are abundantly decorated with pictures of Odesa’s mayors and photos of “Old Odesa”; we see this concept in the Cherkasy restaurant. “Odessa-Mama” in St. Petersburg features not only a seascape on the ceiling and lifebuoys on the walls but also pictures from “Odesa movies.” The “Kommunalka” restaurant in Minsk offers the same stereotypical decorations (I must say lifebuoys with the inscription “Kommunalka” look quite absurd), along with the interiors of a cargo container from the “Seventh Kilometre” market. This venue looks like a museum of everyday Soviet life with a refrigerator, a radio, a sofa-bed, a wall clock, and so on. Facsimiles of pre-Revolution Odesa newspapers are found juxtaposed with Soviet posters and pictures with trite jokes on the container wall. Plasma screens play Soviet comedies that have no connection to Odesa. Today’s newspapers are used as placemats under the plates, but the menu offers “basic Soviet salads.” Particularly curious is an excerpt from a review in the local media, which states that “the venue will be appreciated by the 30+ clientele”; thus, we can see an element of nostalgia here.

*“Anti-Sarochka” Language*

Another language used in Odesa-themed restaurant messages is one that I have identified as “anti-Sarochka,” due to its emphatic opposition to the venues described above. These restaurateurs claim to present not a superficial but a profound sense of the Odesa myth. The concept of “Odessa-Mama” in Moscow (it is a chain, with two such restaurants in Russia’s capital) immediately dismisses superficial expectations: “You expected that Aunt Tsilia and Uncle Izia would meet you at the door and take you through a lobby decorated like in the film *Liquidation*<sup>5</sup> to an old-style dacha in the south, speaking with you in Odesa dialect, which is a specific mix of Isaac Babel, Liova Zadov, and Mikhail Zhvanetskii? Well, NO!” (“Kontsepsiia”). This restaurant’s concept clearly rebels against external, superficial features of the Odesa myth. All these ridiculous Aunts Tsilia and Uncles Izia, special accents, etc., are not the features of the real Odesa myth. Instead (they say), the real Odesa myth represents itself on a different level—the level of feeling “at home.” After denouncing the “fake Odesa features,” the restaurateur defines the message of his own business: it is a “decent city café with indecently delicious food.” And he goes on: Odesa food is an antidepressant. In the surrounding world, where one finds Moscow with dirty wet weather, everyday common aggression, bad news from the stock-market, etc., one can survive only by plunging into the healing atmosphere of Odesa-themed restaurants. Here, visitors will find simple food, in good company. I quoted earlier the statement from Moscow’s “Odessa-Mama” concept about the Dukan diet and the omnivore kitchen that the restaurant encouraged the visitors to throw away. The Odesa atmosphere arises from friendly interaction at a shared table with food that was brought down to the shared yard by neighbours of different ethnicities. The text describing the “Odessa-Mama” concept refers to Jewish spoken structures but without banal jokes. (“Kontsepsiia”).

More sophisticated is the concept of Moscow’s “Babel” restaurant. Isaac Babel’s words “I think about Odesa, and my soul is torn” (“Я думаю об Одессе—душа рвется”) are used as an epigraph in the restaurant’s concept. An understanding of the context of these words adds meaning to the message; however, no one counts on the patrons’ knowledge of that context. Babel wrote these words in his diary during his Red Cavalry times. The Civil

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<sup>5</sup> *Likvidatsiia (Liquidation, 2007)* is a popular Russian miniseries about efforts to liquidate criminal gangs and the “Banderite underground” in post-World War II Odesa. The film treats the “Odesa atmosphere” in a technically exacting way that exploits the myth of Odesa in a filmic language and articulates a highly representative schemata of local social types.

War nightmare transforms the Odesa memories into a “paradise lost” picture.

The interiors of Moscow’s “Odessa-Mama” and “Babel” demonstrate the desire to refrain from exploiting vulgar triggers such as sailor-vests and pseudo-Jewish jokes. They are quite laconic, as befits an “Odesa” enterprise: “Odessa-Mama,” for example, uses a loft style without marine-related decorative signs—except for an anchor-shaped lamp suspended from the ceiling. On the other hand, while we may also find here references to the “Seventh Kilometre” market, the restaurateur shows the ability not to explore dusty images but to see the core of the Odesa myth. The “Babel” restaurant demonstrates a variety of bourgeois coziness, with just a shade of “over the top”: as a concession to the popular Odesa image, we see a picture of a plump woman in a vest on the menu.

To this language of conveying the Odesa myth, I would also add the restaurant called “Langeron” in Cheliabinsk, although it is abundantly decorated with different “Odesa signs.” As mentioned above, a local journalist felt he could miraculously find the sea behind the *trompe l’oeil* window. Langeron’s restaurateur Aleksei Noskov describes his desire to return to his childhood in a communal flat in an old house on Proletars’kyi Boulevard (before the Bolshevik Revolution and today again renamed the French Boulevard), where all the neighbours created a warm and habitable world (restoratoralex). It is the same message as that offered by Moscow’s “Odessa-Mama,” but here conveyed by an individual voice with an undertone of nostalgia. We can see parallels in Babel’s quotation about the “yearning soul” and Noskov’s story of his happy Odesa childhood. The main emotion of this restaurant is nostalgia, memories of Paradise. Moscow-based restaurateur Katsova also explores nostalgic motifs: she decorates her restaurant with a portrait of grandma Ester Markovna Trakhtman and decorates her blog with numerous stories about happy travels to grandma in Odesa. Katsova anchors the effect of a “visit to childhood” by practising the role of a loving mom toward her guests: she personally meets diners in “Duke-Duke,” and in addressing the readers of her blog she uses the greeting “*Deti moi!*” (My children). While acknowledging the high quality of her media product, I nevertheless have some reservations about the authenticity of Katsova’s “Odesa memoirs” for the reasons stated earlier, in the “‘Sarochnka-Style’ Language” section.

#### THE ODESA MYTH OF “PARADISE LOST”

Nostalgia is a very important notion when we seek to reveal the basic elements of the Odesa myth in the broad everyday consciousness. As Boym said, nostalgia is pain caused by temporal rupture and restlessness. Giving

way to nostalgia, a person is compensating for their lack of roots with a feeling of “returning home” (Boym 41). In “Odesa” restaurants, we see this yearning for a return home to mother/grandma, for a trip “back home” to “childhood,” the *dacha* (cottage), school holidays, or family festivities. Katsova describes the food at her venues as “homemade, understandable, good-natured, nostalgic, and very touching, like childhood” (“Na naberezhnoi”).

The configuration of the “Odesa nostalgia” appears more understandable through Michel Foucault’s notion of *heterotopia*. The Odesa myth in restaurants works through an image of a non-existing perfect world due to the combination of several dimensions (both chronological and topological). The Odesa nostalgia is multi-layered; Richardson explores it in her book *Kaleidoscopic Odessa*. Referring to the place of Moldavanka in the Odesa myth, Richardson emphasizes that it is a place that cannot exist. In *Kaleidoscopic Odessa* we read how Babel created his own variety of high culture through appropriation of the low one: a marginal Odesa area occupies the place of entire Odesa and proves to be the embodiment of opposition to everything inanimate and dull (Richardson 113–15). Thanks to Babel, the Odesa myth acquires the features of an *a-topia*—a non-existent place—and several chronological spaces meet at that place. In Babel’s image of Odesa, boundaries become eroded between what is sublime and what is low, or at the centre and the periphery. According to Richardson, “Moldavanka is a kind of a fractal in Odesa: a part that fully represents the entirety” (138).

Taking into consideration the fact that Babel wrote about Odesa in Moscow, we understand that he was thinking about a city that did not exist for him. Babel memorized Odesa before the 1917 Revolution but proceeded to describe an imagined post-Revolution city. It is the first layer of nostalgia—on the cusp of the 1920s and 1930s, Babel memorializes the pre-Revolution city. After Babel’s death, his works were taken out of the cultural space in the USSR, returned for a short while in the 1960s, and then again in the so-called *perestroika* time. People in the 1960s were nostalgic for Babel who had been nostalgic for pre-Revolution Odesa, and at the end of the 1980s he brought together all these moments in one nostalgic gesture. We see this nostalgic hub, understandable for post-Soviet people, in Odesa-themed restaurants.

The combination of what is unconnectable (high and low, centre and margins) in Odesa nostalgia has one more dimension. Richardson refers to the idea of Odesa-based literary historian Karakina about the combination of capital and province in the city image. If housefronts refer to the capital, then the village yards are the province (Richardson 119). This admiring attitude toward both the yard/province/homemade and the housefront/capital/high culture is frequently represented by restaurateurs

through including both outdoor and indoor elements into the venue interiors. A restaurant interior is sometimes decorated with street-lanterns, street-signs, with hanging laundry, etc. Such a technique was used, for example, in Saratov's "Odessa," Moscow's "Barkas" and "Deribas," Krasnoïarsk's "Odessa-Mama," and others. Sometimes a street scene is painted on the walls of the restaurant.

Nostalgia in "Sarochnka-style" venues mainly refers to the desire for liberation from social conventions. The "Paradise Lost" here is a place where we can laugh aloud (the image of Odesa as a city of humour is explored according to the visitors' sense of humour) and ignore the social rules. Liberation from social rules reveals itself in the form of impolite speech and neglected table manners. Some people perceive the peculiarities of Odesa speech as a basic characteristic of the Odesa phenomenon, and very often they see it as permission to speak incorrectly intentionally (though Odesa speech is itself a complex linguistic phenomenon and subject of research in its own right). The "freedom at the table" at these restaurants is seen in the context of a rich table and is very often embodied in figures of large women. Pictures of enormous women with tiny men in combination with pseudo-Odesa jokes are popular here. At Katsova's restaurant we can see small figures, painted in monochrome colours, of plus-size women in swimsuits, doing physical exercises. The feeling of liberation arises here through the instruments of *kitsch*.

### *Nostalgia beyond the Post-Soviet Space*

In restaurants in Europe and the US, we see a somewhat different type of representation. However, here nostalgia is also very often the main motive. The Odesa-themed restaurants in Dresden, Köln, and New York have a nostalgic note too, but here we see nostalgia for the USSR. Sometimes these venues also look like the embodiment of Soviet dreams about a perfect food establishment. In a review of restaurants in "Little Odessa" (the popular name for Brighton Beach in Brooklyn, New York City) from 1983, *New York Times* journalist Brian Miller describes the local restaurant menus: dumplings, borsch, the renowned Soviet potato-shaped *kartoshka* cake, etc. This type of nostalgia "feeds" the Odesa mythological image, which shrinks to Brooklyn's "Little Odessa."

In this context, I want to refer to Charles King's book *Odesa: Genius and Death in a City of Dreams*, where the decline of Odesa after the 1917 Revolution is vividly described. The last chapter of the book is devoted to "Little Odessa." Readers retain the impression that Odesa, after its obvious decline, has moved across the ocean and settled in a truncated form in New York, something like the "eternal" Roman Empire that moved from territory to territory between 962 and 1806. Such a vision chiefly supports the image

of a city that has ultimately returned to the Past. The definition “Little Odessa” overlaps with the images of the real Odesa and shifts the associative series to a space of an exotic criminal area of the civilized world.

The American crime drama *Little Odessa* (1994), directed by James Gray, reveals this sense—the word “Odessa” can be heard as a definition of a specific New York mafia, whose representatives have odd names and no principles. New York as a multi-ethnic space proves to be a wonderful place to reload Odesa’s criminal myth with picturesque gangsters and curious, Jewish-sounding speech. And the “suburban” part of Odesa (from Odesa’s perspective, New York is a very distant suburb) replaces the entire city once again. The “Babel nostalgia” structure appears surprisingly resilient.

It is obvious that venues which reproduce the rather Soviet dream about much-food-in-stores are created by emigrants for emigrants. Are “Odesa” venues perhaps created precisely only where there is a strong post-Soviet diaspora? In fact, no. I note once again Sydney’s Greek bar, with references to the city where Greek independence was born. And this is not the only example. Thanks to my colleague Kandis Friesen, who became my ambassador in Canada, I learned about the motivation for creating “Café Odessa” in Montréal. It is actually a store where one can buy coffee beans and have coffee or tea, so there is nothing Odesa-specific on the menu. However, the café is decorated with numerous old photographs of Odesa and—remarkably—books! The café owners have a passion for Babel’s legacy; they have never been to Odesa but truly believe that it is a fantastic city. In other words, the Canadian entrepreneurs captured the Babelian nostalgia through texts. They are people who have nothing to do with Odesa, Ukraine, or the post-Soviet space, but they fell in love with this attractive nostalgic image and tried to learn as much as possible about the city. Today’s Odesa is present here as well, via several Ukrainian coins mounted into the tabletops.<sup>6</sup>

### *Elements of the Odesa Myth Plot*

When we keep in mind the “Odesa cultural archive” and observe its representation in Odesa-themed restaurants, we reveal sedimented elements of the city myth. The myth developed as a result of the economic “miracle” in the nineteenth century. Odesa’s economic power declined dramatically after the 1917 Revolution but later improved with the cultural renaissance in the 1920s. After that, the city myth set off on a “free-floating” journey. Analysis of the Odesa myth sedimentation is interesting because of the high level of commercial demand for it, combined with the lack of

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<sup>6</sup> Not far from this café in Montréal there is a fish store named “Odessa”; unfortunately, I was not able to investigate the history of its establishment.

reproduction of a mythological reality. That is, the Odesa-themed restaurants allow us to see the “core Odesa myth” as it is, without the support of materials presented in other, “high culture” venues.

The commercial demand for the name “Odesa” reveals the main trigger of the Odesa myth: the image of a place with money. The chronological mixes in Odesa-themed restaurants are built out of signs of the “fast money” times (the first decades of the city’s development, the NEP period, and the “Seventh Kilometre” market in the deprived 1990s). In addition to the chronological mixes, signs of the “bourgeois” mode of life work for this layer of meaning: some “Odesa” restaurants are decorated as *brasseries*. The *brasserie* language allows one to “read” Odesa as an accomplished place of “bourgeois” life. Paradoxically, this message is found next to the Soviet dream of abundance in the shops (e.g., hundred different types of sausage). In my collection, I have a photo of an “Odessa” shop in New York that represents this dream: a Soviet-style grocery actually offering “a hundred kinds of sausage.”

Odesa is perceived as a city from the past and evokes associations with literary characters. King justifiably remarks that Babel produces a peculiar effect: when we think about Odesa, literary characters arise in our mind, not historical personalities (200). This is the reason why the pictures of real people and characters from literature that are found alongside each other in “Odesa” restaurants look so natural. The key theme is the motif of an inverted world. It is demonstrated sometimes through a direct visual message (an inverted dining table, suspended from the ceiling), sometimes through the demonstrative transformation of a marginal place into an elite one (variations around the theme of Babel’s Moldavanka, communal flats, etc.). The popular image of plump women next to tiny men appears to be a variation of an inverted world in Odesa-themed restaurants—women here are Big Mamas who do not care about diets. The “Anti-Sarochka” restaurants use a trickster logic—it is their way of playing with an inverted world. They entice their visitors into a game with puzzles and hidden meanings, as if to say: “So you are expecting a certain set of images? We will turn your picture of Odesa upside down. We know the special code.”

Like in the Middle Ages, where the picture of an inverted world was represented on the days of Carnival, the carnival world finds its representation in Odesa-themed restaurants. Sometimes exaggerated hilarity is the main trigger in these enterprises. In this context, the statement on the webpage of the “Odessa” café in Iaroslavl is meaningful: “We have no relation to Odesa, but when we were there, it was so funny that we decided to create a spot of humour in our city” (“O nas”). For a great number of Odesa-themed restaurants, it is a widespread practice to use jokes (you can read them on the walls and on the webpages—or even listen to them when using the bathroom). These jokes are generally not reflective of the

traditional Odesa humour; instead, they exploit existing ethnic stereotypes (the toilet is a good place for such a cultural product, emphasizing its vulgarity).

An essential element of the Odesa myth is the motif of “Paradise Lost.” A popular aspect in the concepts of Odesa-themed restaurants is the theme of an escape, or flight to childhood. That Paradise Lost acquires the features of an *a-topia*, a place that does not exist, and where the “high” and the “low,” the “central” and the “marginal,” the “housefront” and the “yard” meet. This outline of the “Odesa lost paradise” refers us to Babel’s fantasy on the theme of Moldavanka that took the place of the entire Odesa. Zhabotinskii’s novel *Piatero (The Five)* could have become a second pillar of the Odesa myth, supporting the image of Odesa centred around Deribasivs'ka street, but the Soviet ban on Zhabotinskii as a Zionist resulted in a re-orientation toward the semi-banned Babel. An initially alternative myth filled the vacant space of another Odesa, thus producing the effect of an *a-topia*. Within a restaurant interior this can be shown with a combination of the yard and the indoor space—visitors find themselves in several spaces at once, meeting in the *a-topia* point.

## CONCLUSION

The plot of the Odesa myth in restaurants far from Odesa can be described as a temporal loop, starting at several points simultaneously, going through the space of the collapsed world, and returning to the departure time in a gesture of grief over the lost paradise. The paradise in the Odesa myth has the image of an inverted world—featuring childhood happiness, a feeling of holidays at granny’s home in the company of multilingual neighbours, meeting in a shared yard with their homemade food. It is a space of open opportunities that allows to neglect social conventions; a city of people who “know how to live,” flamboyant adventurers longing for fast and easy money. In this desire, they are spontaneous and sinless like children.

I would argue that it is specifically the analysis of representations of the Odesa image in restaurants, such as what has been presented here, that provides the possibility to see one of the elements of the “Odesa myth” that has so far been hard to identify using other sources. Indeed, when people think about the Odesa myth, they typically focus on relatively distant historical moments. At the same time, we observe that, for instance, the “Seventh Kilometre” is one of the key locations where the plot of Kozlenko’s novel *Tangier* develops (and this novel is overall a reflection on the evolution of the Odesa myth).

The *a-topia* of Odesa-themed restaurants allows us to see the elements of the city myth, hidden in the optics of “high culture” analysis. On the other

hand, the mythology of the communal flat and of the “Seventh Kilometre” seems to be invisible in literature-oriented research. The first such exploration of its type, the present study identified the “itineraries” of the “travelling” Odesa myth and revealed the peculiarities of the construction of the city’s image in a globalized digital world.

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## Appendix. List of Odesa-themed restaurants

№	Country	City	Restaurant name
1	Australia	Sydney	Bar Odessa
2	Belarus	Minsk	Коммуналка (Kommunalka)
3	Canada	Montréal	Odessa
4		Toronto	Odessa Deli & Desserts
5	Estonia	Tallinn	Odessa
6	France	Avignon	Little Odessa
7		Paris	Café Odessa
8			Pizza Odessa Montparnasse
9			Pizza Odessa Luxembourg
10	Germany	Berlin	Neue Odessa Bar
11			Odessa Mama
12		Cologne	Odessa
13		Dortmund	Odessa
14		Dresden	Odessa
15		Ubach-Palenberg	Odessa
16	Georgia	Batumi	Port Odessa Beach Resort
17	Israel	Netanya	Odessa
18		Ashdod	Gambrinus
19	Ireland	Dublin	Odessa Bar
20	Latvia	Riga	Kādreiz Odesā
21	Philippines	El Nido, Palawan	Odessa Mama
22		Panglao	Seafood Odessa
23	Poland	Wrocław	Odessa restaurant
24			Odessa bistro
25		Poznań	Odessa Bar
26	Russia	Moscow	Бабель (Babel)
27			Одесса мама (Odessa mama)
28			FF Restaurant and Bar
29			Одесский уголок (Odessa corner)
30			Дерибас (Deribas)
31			Дюк-Дюк (Duke- Duke)
32		Cheliabinsk	Ланжерон (Langeron)
33		Khabarovsk	Дерибас (Deribas)
34		Krasnodar	Одесса-мама (Odessa- Mama)

35		Krasnoiarsk	Одесса-мама (Odessa-Mama)
36		Nizhnii Novgorod	Одесса (Odessa)
37		Penza	Ах, Одесса! (Ah, Odessa!)
38		Perm	Дерибасовская (Deribasovskaia)
39			Одесса (Odessa)
40		Pushkin	Одесса (Odessa)
41		Saratov	Одесса (Odessa)
42		St. Petersburg	Одесса-мама (Odessa-Mama)
43		Toliatti	Одесса (Odessa)
44		Iaroslavl	Одесса (Odessa)
45	Türkiye	Istanbul	Karaköy Odessa Seafood Restaurant
46	Ukraine	Cherkasy	Одеса-мама (Odesa-Mama)
47		Kyiv	Любчик (Liubchyk)
48			Маленька Одеса (Little Odesa)
49			Одеський бульвар (Odesa Boulevard)
50			Odessa
51			Одеса-мама (Odesa-Mama)
52			Причал 14 (Pier 14)
53			Цаца (Samogon Fish Bar)
54			Баркас (Launch)
55			Черноморка (Chernomorka)
56			Рыба Пила (Saw Fish)
57			Селёдочная (Herring Place)
58		Lviv	I love U Odessa
59		Dnipro	I love U Odessa
60		Uman	Одеса (Odesa)
61	USA	Bolton	Café Odessa
62		New-York	Café Odessa
63	UK	London	Babel House