

Food and Communication

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Introduction

"Food" as a subject and topic of study is becoming increasingly popular. It has become a hot topic in a range of publications, TV shows, and even on the Internet, with growing numbers of websites, blogs, and podcasts. At the same time, food-related issues ranging from safety scares and environmental concerns to the fight against hunger have acquired visibility in the news, coming to the forefront of public and political debates at the local, national, and international levels. Movements that focus on food as an instrument to introduce social and economic changes show an increasingly wide and savvy use of communication and media. Also, the food industry and its lobbies, in their constant effort to sell more products to more people in more areas of the globe, employ modern and effective techniques of communication, from advertising and packaging to direct promotions and events.

We cannot underestimate the impact of this media barrage on the ways we experience and represent ourselves as individuals and as members of social, economic, and political groups. Food provides what can be perceived as a universal experience: people all over the world need to get food, prepare it, consume it, maybe share it, and dispose of the leftovers. The dishes and the ingredients might change, the specifics of customs and habits might also differ, the abundance of food or the lack thereof might be apparent, but the whole of humankind shares the fundamental experience of the biological need to eat. As the physical necessity assumes a cultural dimension that in its naturalness and normality seems to provide stable meanings and social practices, food, its production and its consumption can offer a privileged point of view for looking at the way various models of subject identity, communities, trade networks, economic interests and political alliances are created, negotiated, questioned and, sometimes, eliminated in the encompassing, worldwide webs of meaning established by the global network of mass media. In this sense, the analysis of food-related communication can offer new insights into how food bestows much more than nourishment, or mere sustenance, in a whole host of social, cultural, and political phenomena.

The purpose of this unit will be to provide analytical tools to achieve a better understanding of how food operates as a system of communication and, at the same time, how food-related communication and media represent food. We will explore not only food-focused media such as cookbooks, magazines, cooking shows, films, and the internet, but also the communication practices connected with marketing (advertising, packaging, and design), health (dieting, nutrition, food safety) and socio-political issues (sustainability, biodiversity, food security, food sovereignty). We will also examine how food is employed by various media for all kinds of different goals, even when their main focus is not food but, for instance, cultural and identity wars,

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environment, climate change, social inequality etc. As Roland Barthes pointed out, food is "a system of communication, a body of images, a protocol of usages, situations, and behaviour. Information about food must be gathered wherever it can be found: by direct observation in the economy, in techniques, usages and advertising; and by indirect observation in the mental life of a given society".

1. Interpreting Food Communication

In the first part of the module we will focus on how food operates as a system of communication. Food, dishes, traditions, values and practices are not just relevant components of everyday life, they also function as markers of cultural and social aspects of individual and communal identities. As such, individuals and communities routinely interpret them to gather information about their social environment and clues about expectations and possible behaviours.

For instance, religions rely on food and eating habits as means to affirm their norms and identify their followers. In Europe, where the Christian, Muslim and Jewish faiths have interacted for centuries, each religion also defined itself in terms of diet and food taboos. The Italian word for aubergine, *melanzana*, comes from the expression *mela insana*, unhealthy apple, a definition given to the vegetable because it was widely consumed in the Jewish communities, which in turn had adopted it from the Arabs.

Social classes were often recognizable from what people ate, and how. At different times, sugar, spices –and more recently truffle as well as caviar– were adopted as symbols of conspicuous consumption, only to lose their fascination as precious and rare ingredients when the changing historical situations made those same ingredients cheaper and easier to purchase.

Gender identifications are also closely connected to food. Some ingredients, dishes or ways of consumption are sexualized and perceived as either masculine or feminine. In US culture, for instance, grilling outdoors for special occasions is considered appropriate male behaviour in mainstream culture. In many societies women are still in charge of shopping, meal preparation and, at times, of growing vegetables and raising animals in courtyards and orchards near their abode. Although the kitchen has at times become an arena of female affirmation and autonomy in male dominated societies, everyday cooking for a family is still largely considered a feminine activity, while professional engagement as a chef is perceived as an acceptable masculine career.

All the examples given above reaffirm the fact that food is as exclusive a human behaviour as language, and it is subject to interpretations just as language is. As Lévi-Strauss has pointed out, "Cooking, it has never been sufficiently emphasized, is with language a truly universal form of human activity: if there is no society without a language, nor is there any which does not cook in some manner at least some of its food." In this sense, like any other cultural phenomenon that can be interpreted and understood in social interactions, food can be considered as "an ensemble of texts" that carry meaning and as an element of communication, both voluntary and involuntary. We might bring chocolate as a present when we are invited to

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Lévi-Strauss, Claude (1978). *The Origin of Table Manners* (p. 471). New York: HarperCollins Publishers.

some friend's place for dinner to express our gratitude and our friendship, but the same chocolate can be offered on a date to convey affection and romantic interest, or devoured in solitary consumption, or offered to guests as a sign of appreciation. Parents might communicate their affection for their children by providing food for their sustenance, but also at times by preparing their favourite dishes as a treat, or by taking them out for a special meal to celebrate an achievement.

In this section of the module, we will acquire concepts and tools to analyse the presence and use of food in media and communication. To do that, we first have to explore the wide range of meaning that ingredients, dishes, and food traditions can assume in interpersonal and social interactions, besides their obvious biological function. In the rest of the module, we will then examine how those meanings are embedded, used, and at times exploited in all kinds of communication, even when the main focus is not actually on food.

1.1. Semiotics of Food

In our daily lives, we take familiar ingredients, dishes, meals, and food-related practices for granted: they are so natural and normal that they become transparent, if not completely invisible. We are so used to them that we are oblivious to their actual meanings and to the impact that these meanings have on our personal and social interactions. However, what we eat, how we eat it, when, and with whom are not random elements. Every ingredient, each single dish, the way meals are organized, all the components of a specific culinary tradition carry significations that can be interpreted and provide information about the individuals involved. Nevertheless, these food-related phenomena do not express their full meanings in isolation, or taken independently. Instead, they are mutually connected and acquire their full sense only in relation to other elements in the same context and to the context as a whole.

We may argue that these elements are correlated in systematic, non-casual ways that constitute structured codes, that is to say sets of rules that allow their interpretation and understanding. To comprehend Morse code, we need to know the rules of production and composition behind the long and short beeps; to use a language, we have to know the words, their meanings, and the ways words are connected with each other to make sense (the grammar). Similarly, to fully grasp the meaning of an ingredient, a dish, or food-related practice or belief, we need to understand the way they are used in the community whose culture they represent. If I am offered something to eat, first of all I need to be able to recognize it as edible matter, and then I need to have the information to know what to do with it. How many times have we found ourselves in food-related predicaments where we do not know what to do, where to begin, what the acceptable behaviours are, in which order we are

to consume the meal, or how to pair its different components? That happens precisely because we are not familiar with the specific code according to which that meal is structured.

Any individual that participates in a community's culinary tradition in terms of habits, practices, and values, is at least able to recognize dishes, and often also to produce dishes that are recognizable as specific recipes, to individuate the more common ingredients, and to understand if a food-related behaviour is acceptable or deviant. Each community is thus able to engage in meaningful interactions around eating and ingestion. Yet, as we will see, the meanings attributed to food and, to a large extent, its form, can never be completely fixed and defined. On the contrary, the members of the community uninterruptedly negotiate and transform these significations and values.

The different elements that allow us to understand and use food in everyday life are also practical tools in a kit acquired through experience in all kinds of cultural, social, economic and political relations. Each element in a culinary tradition is in turn part of several interweaving networks of meaning, practices, concepts and ideals, and the full width of its meaning and value cannot be fully grasped without analysing its interaction with other apparently unrelated domains.

We can define these networks as "signifying" because they help us make sense of reality, allowing us to comprehend our cultural environment and to act within its rules and boundaries. The analysis of these various signifying networks is fundamental to understand how food is recognized and interpreted by different actors, whose identities are constructed and performed precisely in their use of these meaningful structures and in their interaction and negotiations with others actors to define them.

Semiotics, the science of signs, its production, and interpretation, can offer effective analytical tools to achieve a better understanding of our perceptions and engagements with our own and other cultures' foodways. We can read meaning in foods and dishes even when they are not specifically or intentionally produced to act as signs. When a family gets together to share food, outsiders can infer a great deal of information about their socio-cultural background, their economic status, their ethnic origin, their religious beliefs, and their emotional and power dynamics from what the family members eat and how.

One of the basics tenets of semiotics is that everything in a culture can be considered a form of communication, and that as humans we are constantly engaged in semiosis, the process of making sense and giving meaning to the reality that surrounds us. For this reason, it can be argued that cultures include a variety of codes that underpin communication and social activities. Food happens to be one of these codes, based on a limited –although very

wide– variety of edible substances, practices, beliefs, and norms that form a network of interconnected systems in which the meaning and the use of every single component is determined by the other components. These multiple systems cannot be examined in isolation, but only in their interrelations and utilizations in social practice. The concept of system, introduced by linguistics and structuralism, can in fact prove to be a useful instrument when analysing foodways, as the definition by Emile Benveniste, for instance, reveals:

Whoever says system says arrangement or conformity of parts in a structure which transcends and explains these elements. Everything is so necessary in it that modifications of the whole and of the details reciprocally condition one another. The relativity of values is the best proof that they depend closely upon one another in the synchrony of a system which is always being threatened, always being restored. The point is that all values are values of opposition and are defined only by their difference.

Benveniste, Emile (1971). *Problems in general linguistics* (p. 47-48). Coral Gables: University of Miami Press.

Food allows signification and communication precisely because elements in any foodway are correlated in systematic, non-casual ways that constitute structured codes. According to Umberto Eco, "there is a signification system (and therefore a code) when there is the socially conventionalized possibility of generating sign-functions... There is on the contrary a communication process when the possibilities provided by a signification system are exploited in order to physically produce expressions for many practical purposes". As a consequence, if one element in a system changes over time, the system as a whole changes with it.

When linguists, anthropologists, and cultural theorists first tried to apply a semiotic analysis to food, their first attempts were clearly influenced by linguistics, since language is the human semiotic code that has been studied longest. For instance, the anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss proposed the category of "gusteme", which would be the equivalent of a phoneme in linguistics, that is to say the minimal unit of sound that can distinguish a word from another.

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Like language, it seems to me, the cuisine of a society may be analysed into constituent elements, which in this case we might call "gustemes" and which may be organized according to certain structures of opposition and correlation. We might then distinguish English cooking from French cooking by means of three oppositions: endogenous/exogenous (that is, national versus exotic ingredients) central/peripheral (staple food versus accompaniments) marked/not marked (that is, savoury or bland). We should then be able to construct a chart with + and - signs corresponding to the pertinent or non-pertinent character of each opposition in the system under consideration.

	English cuisine	French cuisine
endogenous/exogenous	+	-
central/peripheral	+	-
marked/not marked	-	+

Lévi-Strauss, Claude (1967). *Structural Anthropology* (p. 85). Garden City NY: Doubleday.

However, it is clear that Lévi-Strauss was not referring only to actual sensory elements, but also to cultural aspects of the network of semiotic systems that compose foodways. The flavour features of each product, like the primary tastes (sweet, salty, acid, bitter) and their various nuances (tart, astringent, spicy, balsamic, and so on and so forth), are part of a taste continuum that can be only roughly divided into discrete and pertinent units, forming n-dimension oppositions. Unlike language, however, food does not allow any satisfactory categorization of the sensory experience. "Astringent and pungent are also basic taste sensations noted in Sanskrit and Hindi treatments of taste... Attempts have been made to isolate a test of basic tastes for as long as this sense has been investigated. Aristotle chose seven and toyed with their kinship with seven basic colours. Theophrastus selected eight basic tastes: sweet, oily, bitter, harsh, pungent, sour, astringent, saline."

While both language and food can be used as tools for communication, we cannot apply the same semiotic categories to them. The influence of linguistics would lead us to look for food meanings similar to what we could call concepts, or ideas: something we can provide a definition for, with precise features logically arranged as in a dictionary. Since food is closely connected to practice, its meaning is instead a socially sanctioned function. When we think about trying to eat something new, we actually establish a new function for a previously useless object. Any element of the environment around us can potentially become part of the human diet, explaining the continuous tension between neophilia, the curiosity of trying new foods, and neophobia, the concurrent fear of being poisoned. Any food immediately finds its place in the basic opposition edible/inedible, which inherently constitutes a cultural system, since it is a structure based on difference and opposition, whose elements are reciprocally defined. At the same time, depending on the cultural resources and on the personal attitudes of the eaters, foods can be considered more or less familiar and more or less palatable, which places them on two continuums going from "totally exotic" to "totally familiar", and from "totally palatable" to "totally unpalatable". Nattō, heavily fermented soy beans often

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consumed in Japan for breakfast, can be immediately classified as edible since we can see other people consuming them with gusto, but that does not make them more familiar or palatable if we are not used to their peculiar taste and texture, which in many Western cultures would fall under the heading of rotten. Japanese tourists can find themselves in the same predicament when facing cheese like Roquefort or Gorgonzola, both characterized by green-bluish mould.

All of these components in the meaning of foods are clearly defined by differences and oppositions that nevertheless, due to their nature and close connection with the personal experience of every individual, have neither the character of necessity nor the strict coherence of linguistic concepts. Yet, they do signify. The cluster of basic meanings about a specific food widely shared by a whole community to the point that they are perceived as natural and constitutive to the food itself can be defined as denotations. The different signifying components of any food, however, are not only part of a structured system of symbols and meaning, but also practical tools in a kit formed through experience to accomplish concrete goals, and their connection is totally contingent, not necessary or logical as in the case of a dictionary definition of a word. A socially sanctioned code is thus established around food, forming a semiotic community, an ensemble of users sharing the same food-related competence and capable of engaging in meaningful communication and action. Through social interaction within the community, the semantic field of the sign-function referring to specific foods can be enriched by the contribution of others. Through mere repetition, part of this information may be included among food denotations, those socially accepted elements that eventually can be perceived as natural and objective. Other information can be discarded, considered as merely transitorily relevant, or alternatively used in creative and personal ways by various members of the community, originating the equivalents of what are defined as "connotations" in linguistics, that is to say, the set of secondary, associated, at times subjective, and often variable meanings attributed to a word. In the case of food, the denotations for an apple would be all the elements that define it as such, as an edible element with specific characteristics; its connotations could include its possible culinary uses, the traditions connected with it, but also concepts such as wholesomeness, healthiness, or even sin (the temptation in Eden). As theoretical as these reflections might sound, in the next sections we will see how connotations can be exploited to achieve ideological effects, to entice consumers, or to convince voters in political debates.

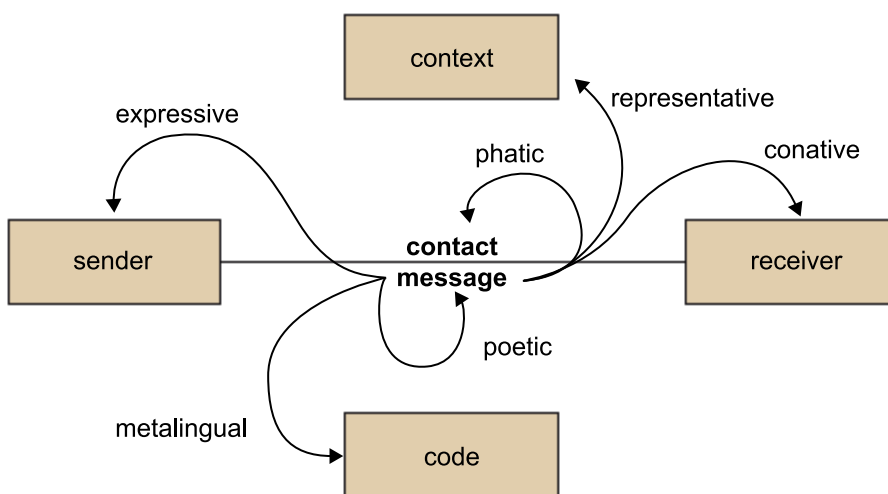
While the denotations are widely shared and stable overall, the connotations are the result of cultural and social negotiations, so the meaning of each element can be changed and used for different goals, influenced and

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determined by the social organization of the participants involved in the communication around food and also by the conditions of their interaction. For instance, the shape of a cheese, its milk and fat content, its ageing methods (which play a huge role in the final flavour) can evolve over time because of economic constraints, environmental and climate variations, and cultural and social factors involving producers, distributors and consumers. In fact, cultural norms, expectations, and context can affect the use of culinary systems. For instance, chitterlings (or chitlings, cooked pig's intestines) from the Southern USA, are often identified with black culture as one of its culinary expressions: soul food. However, such a traditional dish is prepared in different ways and acquires a different social meaning if it is offered at the reunion of an African-American family in Georgia, or it is placed on the menu of a hip soul-food restaurant in New York that is trying to cash in on the renewed interest for these kinds of dishes in urban environments. In Italy, pasta and fagioli (soup with pasta and beans) can run the gamut from peasant fare to family comfort food to a sophisticated albeit nostalgic wink to a rural past in a fancy meal.

To fully analyse the ways in which food denotations and connotations are employed, it can be useful to recur to Roman Jakobson's theory of communicative functions, **which highlights six main components:**



- The sender, in our case, the person who prepares a dish in the kitchen, distributes food at an event or through a charity, sells it in a shop, offers it as a gift, and so on; it is important to underline that there may be no voluntary decision to use food as a form of communication, but that does not imply that other people will interpret that food and thus become the receivers of a communication.
- The receiver, the person for whom a dish or a meal is cooked, who receives a dish as a gift or as a right, to whom the food is served or sold, or simply the person that sees food prepared, distributed, sold, eaten, or thrown away and infers meaning from it.

- The contact (or channel), the part of the physical world that is edible to humans and which can potentially become part of a foodway and, as a consequence, of food-related communication.
- The message, the content of the communication and all that allows a message to be sent or meaning to be inferred: it can include food itself in its material aspects, a practice regarding food production, preparation, distribution, consumption, and disposal, or the meaning attached to an ingredient, dish, meal, or entire food tradition; for instance, renouncing meat during Lent for Catholics corresponds to their desire to show their devotion to God; serving champagne and caviar during a reception expresses refinement, luxury, exclusivity, etc.
- The code, the set of rules that allows the system to function; in our case, the cultural, social, and material rules that allow the production and the consumption of food in recognizable and understandable ways; for instance, cheese might not be a recognizable element of a culinary code for a Chinese farmer in the same way that tofu might not even be acknowledged as food by an African farmer. These rules include what ingredients can go together in a dish, what techniques are applied to certain ingredients, how dishes and courses are organized in a meal, how meals are distributed over the day, or during a year, and so on.
- The context, the general material, cultural, social, economic, and political background against which the food-centred communication takes place.

In analysing linguistic communication, Roman Jakobson paired each of these components to a specific function of the communicative act, that is, particularly centred on that component. His reasoning can be extended also to food.

For instance, he pointed out that if the focus of the food-related communication is on the sender, its function will be interpreted as "expressive", aimed at revealing and conveying aspects of the feelings, beliefs, values, and goals of the sender. Food can definitely be used in this way: to express affection, respect, or even hate. If food is prepared, sold and distributed to have an effect on the receiver, then the function of the communication can be defined as "conative". Food marketing and advertising, aimed at convincing consumers to buy certain items, can fall into this category, but it can also extend to more personal matters. How many times has a romantic dinner been used to lure a lover into something (or at least to conceal guilt)? Moreover, we need only think about the emotional and sentimental value of certain dishes: at particular moments, somebody might succeed in gaining our trust by preparing for us a particular dish that reminds us of our infancy, of our mother, of certain memories. When the focus of the communication is on the "message", that is to say, on food itself, with its material and technical qualities, its preparation, and its flavour, the function

can be defined as "poetic", just as poetry attracts attention to sounds, words, and rhythm in language. This can include noticing and commenting on the flavour, texture, or appearance of an ingredient or a dish, and so on. However, when the attention is on the technical aspects of a dish, on recipes, or on practices connected with an ingredient or a recipe, the function of the communication could be defined as "metaculinary" (modelled on the semiotic expression "metalinguistic"). When the focus is on the effort to turn some objects in the world into edible elements or to attract somebody's attention by making something available for consumption to create the possibility of a food-related communication, the function is described as "phatic". In linguistics, this would correspond to utterances that do not necessarily have a meaning but which purely aim to attract somebody's attention and establish a "channel" to initiate the communication. Food communication can also focus on the context in which the communication takes place, so food can be used to refer to class (champagne and caviar at an elegant reception), religion (Catholics giving up meat during Lent), gender (an American man grilling hamburgers in the back garden), and other similar factors. To borrow a linguistic expression, the function of the communication is then "representative", creating narratives and providing information and meaning about the context surrounding the communication itself. However, these apparently straightforward and instructive meanings are never neutral, but can be tweaked and influenced both by senders and receivers to create different mental pictures of their environments and contexts. The capacity to recognize the different functions in which food can be used (and exploited) provides us with better analytical tools to go beyond face value in food-related communicative interactions and unpack their actual significations, goals, and strategies.

Although we have used language as a term or comparison in the analysis of food-related communication, the cohesion of a culinary system, compared to a linguistic one, is far less binding. We could describe it as "thin coherence", in the sense that members of a specific semiotic community recognize the same culinary set of elements organized in a system and therefore they are able to engage in meaningful symbolic interaction, but the meanings of signs can never be completely fixed and defined, revealing themselves as variable and incomplete. Their content and, to a large extent, their form too, is uninterruptedly negotiated between the users of the system, and between them and all kinds of external elements. This characteristic poses the problem of diachronic changes, that is, of transformations over time: food systems have evolved and continue to evolve faster and more extensively than linguistic systems. Just like languages, food systems can absorb new foreign elements from the outside, adapting them to the internal dynamics of the system which is in turn transformed as a whole by the new additions.

For instance, the availability of sugar, its role in various culinary systems, and its social and cultural signification have visibly mutated over time. With the arrival of sugar to Western Europe during the Middle Ages, the culinary

systems of the courts developed a specific role for the new substance, which was considered a spice. As the system absorbed cooking techniques from the Muslim world, sugar was employed in new ways to produce candied fruit, sorbets, and all manner of desserts. When the expansion of sugar plantations in the Caribbean colonies expanded production, Western societies saw the establishment of dessert as a separate part of the meal, and the development of pastry as a codified set of techniques. From the 19th century, sugar became available to the masses, assuming for instance a fundamental role in the nutritional patterns of British industrial workers. Nowadays sugar is singled out as the main reason, together with fat, for the obesity problem that has reached epidemic proportions in many Western countries.

Each element in a food set presents combinational potentialities, the way that signs usually do. In linguistics, for example, signs can relate to each other on two levels: syntagms, which are combinations of signs forming more complex strings such as sentences, and paradigms, which are clusters of elements associated in different ways within one's competence so that they can occupy the same position within a syntagm one at a time. In the case of food, different ingredients can enter compositions to form dishes, but this does not happen by accident. Only certain ingredients can be present at the same time in a specific dish; adding different ingredients would make it into something that most users of that "food sign" would not recognize or would recognize as something distinct and separate. For most Italians, for instance, cocoa powder does not belong in a tomato sauce; on the other hand, Mexicans will happily add chocolate to their mole sauce. So, we can say, cocoa powder is not part of the syntagm "tomato sauce" for Italian eaters. On the other hand, scallion could replace onion without any major changes in the perception of the users. We can say that both onion and scallion are part of the paradigm of "tomato sauce" for Italian eaters, in that they can replace each other as components without making the result unrecognizable.

Different dishes can be organized in various meals with specific structures. For instance, the syntagm of the Italian formal meal can be described as a sequence of appetizers - first course - second course - side dish(es) - fruit and/or dessert - coffee and/or liquor. Each position in the syntagm can be occupied by a variable number of dishes composing the specific set of choices corresponding to that position; for instance, the first course can be pasta, rice, or a soup, while sweet dishes would be out of place. In the case of the Anglo-Saxon meal, we can identify an appetizer, a main course with some side dishes, and dessert. An everyday Chinese meal is composed of a bowl of rice with a choice of dishes, all served at the same time. These syntagmatic strings are not necessarily linear and irreversible, as in the case of language. While there is a difference between "the boy hit the ball" and "the ball hit the boy", in meals such as buffet dinners each eater can determine the order of what he or she is going to eat. Only by understanding the syntagmatic and paradigmatic rules of a food-related system and of the code that underlies it are we able to engage productively in communication, able to fully understand and produce fully understandable

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"Deciphering a meal."
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actions and objects. For instance, when engaged in food aid, experts may be baffled by the refusal of a needy population to consume certain items provided to them for free; however, at times they take no consideration of the codes that regulate that population's foodways in order to ascertain what is acceptable, what is replaceable, and what on the other hand would need a long process of acculturation and appropriation to become part of that culinary code. A registered dietician in a hospital might have a difficult time convincing older Asian persons affected with diabetes to give up rice with their meals, which for those persons would be tantamount to renouncing the key element of their culinary codes. To allow students from different ethnic backgrounds to explore and experiment with each other's cuisine, a schoolteacher might have to create a learning environment where children are exposed in a constructive way to each other's culinary codes, avoiding refusal and disgust and creating a collective, new culinary code that integrates diverse cultural elements.

As the level of complexity grows (as in the case of phonemics vs. syntax vs. rhetoric vs. aesthetics, in the field of linguistics), in order to be decoded, food codes must be interpreted in connection with wider "texts", that is, with other signifying networks, whose interactions can explain the competence of both senders and receivers in the communication process. Not only can the place of each signifying element vary according to the transformations of the whole system, but its very identity depends on the articulation with other networks of which it becomes part. For this reason, a specific food cannot be decoded on the basis of its flavour, visual aspect, texture, or temperature alone; the full scope of its denotations and connotations cannot be grasped without analysing its interaction with other discourses, practices, and cultural fields.

We are all endowed with a specific depository of culinary knowledge that constitutes what is called "competence" in semiotics, that is to say:

the ability to perceive phenomena in our environment as signs, i.e. to understand the connection between present, (partially) hidden, and entirely absent phenomena... The ability to produce and transmit signs, either subconsciously or genetically triggered, or the result of a learning process, consciously and creatively; the ability to store information and form interpretive habits on the basis of either genetic programming or memory and learning processes.

Johansen, J. D.; Larsen, S. E.; Gorrée, D. L. (2002). *Signs in use: an introduction to semiotics* (p. 30). London / New York: Routledge.

However, culinary systems are never closed. New dishes can be absorbed from other systems or simply created, which explains the influence of migrant communities and tourists, the growing relevance of media, the influence of famous chefs, and the success of cookbooks. Members of a semiotic community would probably perceive new contributions either as developments of their own codes, or as alien elements that can eventually be absorbed into the code, slowly widening the community's shared experience. The development of culinary traditions in the United States is a clear example of this process. Successive waves of immigrants brought dishes and products that in the space of two centuries have shaped the American diet. For instance,

pizza, a relatively recent acquisition, is now considered an all-American staple; the same is true of hot dogs and coleslaw, both of foreign origin. And the more recent trend of fusion food, which has heavily influenced the development of American cuisine in the past few years, can in itself be considered an example of how an indigenous code can absorb and transform extraneous elements into something new.

1.2. Food as discourse

Food is pervasive in contemporary post-industrial cultures, influencing the way we perceive and represent ourselves as individuals and as members of social groups. However, the ubiquitous nature of these cultural elements makes their ideological and political relevance almost invisible, buried in the supposedly natural and self-evident fabric of everyday life. Meanwhile, our own flesh becomes fuel for all kinds of cultural battles among different visions of personhood, family, society, and even economics. The way we conceptualize and experience our physical needs –including the way we choose, store, prepare, cook, ingest, digest, and excrete food– is far from being neutral or normal. As part of those personal and social experiences that are usually considered a mere expression of "natural" instincts and mundane needs, eating becomes politically and culturally sensitive. Food's neutrality and ordinariness can normalize various cultural and social dynamics, making them invisible and allowing ideologies to operate more efficiently, extending their reach to the most intimate aspects of individual lives.

Eating and cooking, in their seeming triviality and familiarity, offer an apt environment for the embodiment and actualization of values, attitudes and behaviours that reflect widely accepted and culturally sanctioned templates. In the body, ideology achieves material existence. Food-related practices all share an ideological function in the sense that they tend to introduce, legitimize, and strengthen specific values and goals for society at large through the repetition of gestures and behaviours. For instance, the daily preparation of meals by a married woman goes beyond just making food for her family, but reinforces and confirms her role as a carer as well as social and personal expectations of her as a nurturer. The ritual repetition of the same dishes for specific occasions and celebrations discretely highlights the importance of these occasions and the cultural values behind them.

An interesting case study to illustrate the ideological use of food in communication, media, social interactions, and even political debates, is that of the ingredients, dishes, or traditions that enjoy a special position in the definition of individual and communal identities, and with which communities feel a particular affinity. Examples include pasta for Italians, beer for Germans, *kimchi* for Koreans, sake for the Japanese, and champagne for the French. It is important to understand how these specialities are recognized and interpreted by different actors, whose identities are constructed and acted out precisely in their use of these meaningful elements and in their interaction

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Inness, Sherrie (Ed) (2001). *Kitchen Culture in America: Popular Representations of Food, Gender, and Race*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

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Inness, Sherrie (Ed) (2001). *Pilaf, Pozole, and Pad Thai: American Women and Ethnic Food*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press.

Bibliographical reference

Avakian, Arlene; Haber, Barbara (2005). *From Betty Crocker to Feminist Food Studies: Critical Perspectives on Women And Food*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press.

and negotiations with others actors around them. These dynamics affect the image that members of a certain culinary community nurture of themselves and of their social position in the ongoing negotiations that uninterruptedly define and redefine these "identity foods" within the communities that produced them, the larger bodies of which those communities form part, the different social strata and political groups within them, with their specific agendas, the media that use those elements in different ways according to their editorial needs, and the consumers and their sense of who they are and what they like (or are supposed to like).

Power and the ideals it promotes –such as tradition and authenticity– are not always imposed on the subject from the outside, but are embodied autonomously through norms and regulations. No government could convince its citizens that a new ingredient or dish is part of their traditions: Dutchmen would not buy into any media campaign trying to impose blue corn as a national product any more than Belgians could be convinced that reindeer is a common source of meat protein. Although tradition and authenticity, as cultural constructs, cannot be considered as a direct consequence of political, economical or social forces, they are shaped and marked by them. Tradition and authenticity are the result of the reiteration of highly regulated and ritualized practices, norms and processes that respond to ideals and cultural models, and acquire material reality and visibility in the very body of each individual, which thus enters the domain of cultural intelligibility. Russians enjoy vodka and Irishmen appreciate stout because these beverages are part of their habits to the point of often being employed as negative stereotypes. Nevertheless, both populations can actually recognize different qualities, also knowing when and how to drink, and which is the best food to pair with the beverages. Repeating these actions with regularity, and reaffirming the connected cultural values, Russian and Irishmen define themselves and are acknowledged as such. At the same time, Russians and Irishmen would easily be able to spot foreigners by the way they deal with their traditional beverages.

How do these "identity foods" acquire their status and their special place? For a better understanding of their nature and social function we can interpret them through Roland Barthes' concept of "myth": a special kind of "sign" that in its entirety (meaning and material form) becomes form for another sign and is given a different meaning. Barthes famously analysed a magazine cover representing a young black man in a French uniform saluting the French flag with his eyes raised aloft. The basic meaning of the picture, the content that all viewers more or less shared (its "denotation"), was just that: a black soldier saluting a flag. At the same time, different meanings (or "connotations") could be given to this picture; depending on the context, it could represent nationalism, French pride, the attachment of the colonized to the colonizer, and so on.

Bibliographical reference

Barthes, Roland (1972).
Mythologies (p. 109-59). New
York: The Noonday Press.

If we applied this kind of analysis to French champagne for instance, the place and methods of production, ingredients, history, and marketing would define it as a particular and high value product, distinct or opposed to other sparkling wines –say German *Sekt*, Italian *spumante* or even American champagne. However, champagne itself acquires further cultural and social signification as a symbol of affluent consumption, refinement, cosmopolitanism, and luxury. Practices around champagne consumption, such as the capacity to understand and recognize different styles or producers, or how and when to enjoy it, can help define an individual as French or, in different contexts, as a Francophile, as a worldly gourmet, or just as a snob.

We can use the same approach for all kinds of food. Just think about the expansion of McDonald's all over the world. In each place, the same basic menu, which denotes fast food and standardized items, can assume all sorts of secondary connotations, becoming the symbol for reliability, modernity, hipness, hygiene, and even refinement, depending on the different cultural contexts.

In many ways, food items can constitute what Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe define as "floating signifiers", that is to say, elements of signifying networks whose meaning and role within the larger cultural system are constantly submitted to an ongoing negotiation among various forces and agencies that express themselves through those very signifying networks. Nevertheless, these negotiations require some stable anchorage that protects communication from implosion and eventual impossibility, providing stability to the social discourse as a whole. Traditional foods can offer a good example of how the same element takes on different meanings depending on the context. A simple, traditional, rustic dish can be used in a conservative agenda as the opportunity to express xenophobic attitudes, highlighting the local components to refuse anything coming from outside; however, the same dish can be included in a more progressive agenda to underline the role of local know-how, the importance of labour, and eating as a communal experience that builds community beyond ethnicity.

Floating signifiers can easily migrate across media, in an increasingly integrated world of communication where digital technology allows fast transmission of cultural elements. To continue with the examples we have used, champagne is often used to advertise products that have nothing to do with food and drink but which express luxury. So, champagne might be paired to fast cars, expensive watches, etc. Fast-food items are quoted in hip-hop tracks, represented as an iconic element in visual arts, end up in the design of textiles, are used in posters protesting against globalization, and so on.

Bibliographical reference

Laclau, Ernesto; Mouffe, Chantal (1985). *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (p. 93-148). London / New York: Verso.

The French theorist Jean Baudrillard wrote extensively on these topics, most of the time with a very critical voice. What happens when this transmutation from medium to medium and context to context becomes as fast-paced and intense as in today's culture? Baudrillard advanced the hypothesis of a reality based on "matrices, memory banks, and command models" that can be reproduced an infinite number of times and where real and imaginary are blurred into a new dimension, the hyperreal, totally unanchored to reality. The age of simulation thus begins with a liquidation of all referents –worse: by their artificial resurrection in systems of signs, a more ductile material than meaning, in that it lends itself to all systems of equivalence, all binary oppositions and all combinatory algebra. It is no longer a question of imitation, nor of reduplication, nor even of parody. It is rather a question of substituting signs of the real for the real itself. The growing impact of media on contemporary societies has generated autonomous fields of meaning where facts, events, and trends are largely determined by the media themselves in a phenomenon that the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu termed "the circular circulation of information". The relevance of a piece of news or a show does not lie in what it refers to, but to the fact that it simply exists, creating a wide-spread effect of auto-referentiality where images and information bear little or no connection with what used to be called reality.

In this process, certain signifiers bounce around, reflected and distorted, acquiring different and even controversial meanings. However, their presence or omnipresence as signifiers, as elements of communication regardless of their actual sense, is reinforced. Their life might be shorter, but their temporary interaction with the rest of the communication network is much more intense: the ripples travel faster and further in the global meaning pond. Signifiers, always incomplete, open, and negotiable, acquire different meanings when they are integrated in different cultural, economic, social, political, and even material contexts, all the while somehow acquiring a life of their own.

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Baudrillard, Jean (1983a). *Simulations* (p. 4). New York: Semiotext(e).

Baudrillard, Jean (1983b). "The Implosion of Meaning in the Media." In *The Shadow of Silent Majorities* (p. 93-109). New York: Semiotext(e).

Baudrillard, Jean (1988). *The Ecstasy of Communication* (p. 12). New York: Semiotext(e).

Bourdieu, Pierre (1998). *On Television* (p. 23). New York: The New Press.

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Parasecoli, Fabio (2008). *Bite Me: Food in Popular Culture*. Oxford: Berg.

2. Food and media

The growing impact of media on contemporary societies has generated autonomous signifying networks where facts, events and trends are largely determined by the networks themselves. The relevance of a piece of news or a show does not lie in what they refer to, but to the fact that they simply exist, creating a widespread effect of autoreferentiality where images and information bear little or no connection with what used to be called reality. Images and information heavily influence other signifying networks. In the case of food, TV networks, book, magazines, and now the Internet effect our perception of what good eating is supposed to be, what the acceptable body weight is, what the effective diets are, what products are best to buy, what measures we need to take to protect ourselves from contamination, and so on. Recipes created by famous chefs can become so glamorous and perceived as "high end" that a middle-class housewife might want to try them to impress her friends. Advertising tries to differentiate food products in order to induce new needs in the consumers and boost sales. The average supermarket customer is used to choosing among various brands of the same kind of products, each of them variously connoted as "designer food", "family food", "diet food", "organic food" and "luxury food". Similarly, a certain product or dish can become for the media the "marker" of a place or a culture, creating a new perception. Balsamic vinegar was little known in Italy (outside Emilia Romagna, the region where it is produced) until the media connoted it as refined and rare, and famous chefs started using it instead of normal vinegar. Now it is one of the markers for "high-end Italian cuisine", even if one can buy cheap versions. Something similar happened to the Czech Prague ham, a pork leg slowly cured in brine, then smoked with birch wood and left to age. Only recently has this exquisite meat gained international renown, due to the increase in tourism to the Czech Republic and to the attention of media always looking for new products and trends.

Media representations of food, its production, and its consumption interact with the way individuals perceive and experience their own bodies, their individual identities, and their social and political identifications. Anthropologist Arjun Appadurai noticed in his 1996 *Modernity at Large* how imagination and fantasy have become a fundamental social practice, playing an important role in shaping everyday life for many people all over the world and interacting with other spheres of cultural, social, and political life.

Global mass media offer to many individuals and communities throughout the world new filters through which they can perceive and represent their daily lives. Movies, TV, and other forms of visual media are particularly relevant because they provide visual elements, aural clues, and narrative components (almost like floating pieces of plots, characters, and dialogues) that can be borrowed by individuals, subcultures, and whole communities to make sense of the everyday experience. As a consequence, new narratives, changing identities, and possible practices reflected, created, and made visible by mass media become part of a shared global patrimony that participates in the constitution of contemporary subjectivities. It is not unlikely for food lovers in post-industrial societies to look for new stimulation in media that present faraway places and culinary traditions as elements that can be added to their ability to vary their eating habits but also to increase their cultural capital. Conversely, youngsters in modern Indian cities might be enticed by the images proposed by videos and movies to embrace fast food, which can be constructed as modern, hip, and refined.

However, there are huge margins for disruption in communication processes between the preferred interpretations on the side of the production of the message and the actual reading and decoding processes on the side of its end users. In other words, media producers often find their message failing to get across to their audiences in the way they had planned; at times, it is completely distorted or accepted quite selectively, depending on the cultural, social, and political environment. For instance, if an advertiser uses champagne in a commercial to give an aura of luxury and refinement to a product, but then consumers perceive it as pretentious, the communication has not achieved its goal.

In this section we will focus on how food is represented in various types of media, and what roles it plays both when it is the main focus of the communication, and when the attention is on something else.

2.1. Food porn

Before we begin our exploration of food representations in media, it is important to discuss a contentious concept that has influenced recent debates on the topic: gastroporn, also referred to as food porn. In general, the concept defines all those food representations that are focused more on the elements of communication than on the actual consumption of food; just as with pornography, the visual, aural, and narrative elements substitute the actual sexual act by soliciting desire and creating similar levels of bodily excitation. However, the act or object represented is never actually experienced in reality. Although the concept as such only appeared in the 1970s, the semiotician Roland Barthes had already explored the relevance of visual pleasure in food representations in his 1957 *Mythologies*.

Bibliographical reference

Appadurai, Arjun (1996). *Modernity at Large*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Bibliographical reference

Hall, Stuart (1980). "Encoding/decoding". In Stuart Hall, Dorothy Hobson, Andrew Lowe and Pane Willis eds. *Culture, Media, Language*. London: Unwin Hyman.

Bibliographical reference

Barthes, Roland (1957, 1972). *Mythologies*. New York: The Noonday Press.

In this category, for instance, critics would consider the luscious photographs in glossy books and magazines, usually close-up shots with fading backgrounds, designed to highlight the moistness, texture, and almost tangible qualities of the food represented. At times the close-ups are so close that the frame cannot contain the whole ingredient or dish. Lighting plays an important role in visualizing food in an atmosphere that emphasizes sensuality and the material qualities of the object represented. As a matter of fact, there are professionals, known as "food stylists", who help photographers to achieve the desired effect by preparing and displaying the food. Since what counts are the visuals, not the substance or the taste of the food, the ingredients and dishes are often actually not edible; for instance, soap would be added to coffee to create a light froth, or white glue is used instead of melted cheese. Furthermore, the photographed objects must be able to withstand long exposure to the bright light of a set, so they are prepared in order to maintain their luscious aspect for a long period of time, which sometimes requires using wax or polish on the food.

Interestingly, these kinds of photographs are found mostly in printed material with high production values, such as books or glossy magazines, which can be purchased as a gift or for personal entertainment. However, despite the growing sales figures for this kind of publications, it is unlikely that the readers engage in actual cooking. It would seem, rather, that pleasure is found in contemplating the pictures and imagining not only the possible flavours of the final dishes, but also their preparation and presentation.

Similar techniques are adopted in many culinary shows on TV: extreme close-ups, use of lighting, lens filters, and artificial amplification of sounds allow the viewer to participate in the preparation and to make up for the lack of smell and flavours. Film also uses the same tricks to make the food more appetizing on the screen, especially in movies that focus on food as their main topic. In this case, the actors are often trained by chefs in order to be able to repeat the gestures and movements of real cooks in the kitchen.

2.2. Recipes and cookbooks

Due to both their recreational value and their practical utility, cookbooks can actually constitute an introduction to aspects of the material and social life of the communities and cultures producing them, which otherwise would not be visible. They also offer us new ways to look at known features of those same communities, uncovering original and unexpected information.

First of all, recipes themselves can tell us a lot about how food and food preparation are considered in a specific culture. They can tell us what technical and professional expectations are projected on the cook: recipes change noticeably if they are written for professional chefs or if they are meant for family cooks, usually women. Cultures have different approaches to cooking, which is reflected in how recipes are written. In the US, for instance, recipes

tend to be very precise in the description of the ingredients (and of the possible substitutions), in the quantities required for each ingredient, and in direction for the preparation. On the other hand, until a few years ago, recipes in Southern Europe were much vaguer about these elements, to the point that, for instance, in Italian recipes you could find the indication "q.b." ("quanto basta", that is "as much as it is needed") after certain ingredients, implying that the cook, usually experienced, would have known what to do. Also, many practical steps were skipped or given for granted. Why waste ink to explain how to pluck a duck if everybody is supposed to know how to do it? However, in recent years, with growing numbers of working women who do not have the time or do not want to transmit their culinary knowledge to the new generations, and with men taking to the kitchens out of passion or necessity, recipes are becoming much more descriptive, to make up for the lack of experience.

Through recipes, cookbooks interact with their readers. These texts do not limit themselves to reflecting a culinary world, but actually participate in defining the very reality that they are supposed to explain and the cultural interpretations readers might generate about it. From this point of view, recipes and cookbooks can be fully considered as actors in food-related social practices and consumer culture. "Cookbooks contain not only recipes but inscribed cultural tales which can be understood as productive of the culinary culture that they pretend only to display, and performative in their attempt to do things with us. We reveal cookbooks to be sites of aestheticized consumption."

For example, by delimiting a certain portion of a culinary tradition and focusing on it, cookbooks can legitimate the perception of that portion as something autonomous, well defined, and displaying specific characteristics. A few years ago many American cookbooks (and chefs) mentioned or described "Italian Northern Cuisine", a concept covering any culinary tradition that was different from the Italian-American traditions, which were somehow identified as Southern. Although "Italian Northern Cuisine" comes across as quite vague to Italians, due to the diversity of local regional traditions in that area, the definition took hold in the US market, to the point that cookbooks, restaurants, and even food products started referring to it and using it.

Bibliographical reference

Brownlie, Douglas; Hewer, Paul; Horne, Suzanne (2005). "Culinary tourism: An exploratory reading of contemporary representations of cooking". *Consumption Markets & Culture* 8(1), p. 7.

In developing countries, cookbooks can represent attempts at defining a national identity around food, by selecting some traditional dishes and giving them status of "national dishes", or at creating modern images of the local culinary culture which can better reflect ideas about progress and development. In India, for instance, cookbooks can express the dynamics of the cultural dialogue taking place between members of the same social class from different ethnic backgrounds who are trying to build a common language to talk about reality, including food. In some African countries, they can reflect the efforts of the local government to turn the local cuisine into tourist attraction, creating a "national" cuisine in the attempt.

Cookbooks and recipes on culinary traditions from other cultures also offer interesting elements for reflection. Curiosity for all things foreign has sustained a certain interest in the so-called "exotic" cuisines. Ethnic products fill many shelves in large supermarkets and stalls in outdoor markets; ethnic restaurants are also multiplying in Western countries notoriously impermeable to foreign food, such as Italy, and ethnic recipes are the object of TV shows and magazine articles. Western consumers' interest in ethnic dishes and exotic products (even when they are manufactured in Western Countries and not actually imported) can constitute, as Lucy Long argues, "exploratory eating" or better, "culinary tourism," which "utilizing the sense of taste, smell, touch, and vision, offers a deeper, more integrated level of experiencing the Other. It engages one's physical being, not simply as an observer but as a participant as well".

This form of culinary tourism allows us to momentarily "travel" to far-away lands without leaving our everyday space. This attitude is widely expressed in cookbooks that try to introduce foreign culinary traditions in terms of culture, customs, techniques, ingredients, and dishes that can be reproduced in any kitchen. However, the attitude towards "exotic" cuisines raises plenty of questions about our relationship with otherness: is it the outcome of a real interest in different cultures, or is it rather another more modern and discreet form of exploitation and consumption?

Theorist Jennie Germann Molz has pointed out:

"culinary tourism may not necessarily be about knowing or experiencing another culture but can actually be self-serving, enhancing the consumers' cultural capital and sense of worldliness; it can be about performing a sense of adventure, adaptability, and openness to any other culture. Food and eating are mobilized as material symbols of the global in travellers' performances of cosmopolitanism through which travellers simultaneously transgress and reinforce their own culture norms".

Molz, Jennie Germann (2007). "The Cosmopolitan Mobilities of Culinary Tourism". *Space and Culture* (10(1), p. 77).

The fact that authors of cookbooks on "exotic" culinary traditions very frequently limit themselves to vague acknowledgements of the people from whom they learned the recipes or by whom they were taught has been often pointed out as a form of neo-colonialist exploitation. After all, these

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- Appadurai, Arjun (1988). "How to Make a National Cuisine: Cookbooks in Contemporary India". *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 30(1).
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Bibliographical reference

- Long, Lucy M. (1998). "Culinary Tourism: A Folkloric Perspective on Eating and Otherness". *Southern Folklore* (55(3), p. 182).

first-world authors protect with their own copyright what they have written about the work and the practice of communities that receive no recognition or financial compensation. The fact that most of the people from whom recipes are taken for "exotic" cookbooks are women adds a further layer of problems in terms of gender inequalities. The copyrighting of recipes has also emerged as a relevant issue in the Western culinary world, though for different reasons. How can chefs protect their original creations from free-riders, if all that can be copyrighted is written texts? On the other hand, some chefs find that when other professionals copy or get inspiration from them, their status and visibility are actually increased.

The problem of copyrighting specific recipes or techniques does not present itself in the same way when chefs write cookbooks as a tool to express their culinary vision or as a means for self-promotion. In this case, recipes are often provided in very vague terms, focusing rather on the ideas and the inspiration behind them. Recent examples of this trend include volumes by famous chefs such as Ferran Adrià and Miguel Sanchez Romera in Spain, and Grant Achatz in the USA. Other chefs are patenting tools and tableware that they have created to implement new techniques or to prepare and serve their dishes.

2.3. Newspapers, magazines, and guidebooks

The growing relevance of food in the media of post-industrial societies is also reflected in the growing number of magazines and daily papers that dedicate pages or whole sections to ingredients, cooking, recipes, or culinary traditions. Columns are often managed by one person that creates a relationship of trust and intimacy with the reader, acting as a counsellor and a guide. The character and tones of these sections depend on the media outlet and its readership. Women's magazines often tend to deal with issues of domesticity, providing ideas on how to make food enticing and varied for the family, frugality, explaining how to save money without renouncing the pleasures of the table, and of self improvement, focusing on how to learn new things to surprise friends and family and boost one's social capital. However, in upscale lifestyle magazines for women the focus is often on originality, creativity, uniqueness, and knowledge to increase cultural capital and cosmopolitanism. At times, in this type of magazine, attention is paid both to cooking and consumption. In men's magazines, articles about food and cooking tend to reflect preoccupations about masculinity, where eating often becomes a way to improve one's fitness, and cooking is part of public displays on special occasions, like cookouts, sporting events, and other celebrations. However, with the increase in single men and so-called "metrosexuals" in urban environments, it is not rare for men's magazines, including the upscale ones on lifestyle, to include actual recipes, both for daily consumption and for entertainment.

Besides sections and columns in generalist media, there is a growing number of specialized magazines completely dedicated to food, which range from providing recipes and advice for cooks to turning food into a lifestyle, especially when reporting on upscale restaurants, culinary traditions in exotic destinations, and exclusive and expensive products. Many of these upscale magazines use glossy pages and exquisite photography (often in the food-porn style) to entice their readers and create interesting models of consumption aimed at increasing social and cultural capital.

In fact, together with recipes, food and restaurant reviews constitute a genre that has constantly occupied an important position in printed media since Frenchman Grimod de La Reynière published his first critiques on shops and eateries in Paris in the early 1800s. The success of this type of journalism and its impact on the industry, to the point that the most prestigious and authoritative media outlets can make or break a chef with their write-ups, has led to the development of restaurant and food guides, which can range from local to national in their scope. Reviews in newspapers, magazines, and guidebooks can follow various models: they can be the direct reflection of the knowledge of single experts, the result of a collective effort where a commission of various experts compares its outlooks to reach a common judgement, or the sum of great numbers of readers' opinions, in which case publishers limit themselves to tallying and organizing the information received from non-professional restaurant-goers.

Food magazines and guidebooks share editorial and cultural elements from travel guides, another important literary genre that has played a fundamental role in shaping contemporary leisure habits. For instance, critiques of restaurants and shops are often connected through itineraries or organized in sections that can vary from a neighbourhood to a city or even to a whole country. At times, feature articles can be written about the exploration of an area occasioned by the curiosity about a single ingredient, a dish, or a specific tradition. Food then provides the narrative for the travel. These stories are often accompanied by photographs that add interest to the piece by allowing readers to participate visually in the trip without leaving their couch. Moreover, travel guides proper always contain a "Where to eat" section in which authors not only give advice about restaurants, markets, and shops, but also introduce readers to foreign culinary traditions, often functioning as a cultural intermediary. As a matter of fact, a critical analysis of travel guides and their food sections can provide useful information about the preconceptions and bias of a culture toward another: different kinds of food can be framed as appetizing, scary, disgusting, strange, or familiar, thus appealing to different categories of travellers and consumers.

A very visible trend is the growing popularity of wine columns. Although in France and Mediterranean countries wine has always been an important part of the everyday diet, until the 1960s its consumption was mostly limited to bulk products, while connoisseurs formed closed circles that did

not communicate with the public at large. However, in recent decades, increasingly larger sections of consumers have shown interest in consuming high-quality wines beyond the best known ones, such as champagne, Bordeaux, or burgundy. This change in consumption patterns has also been paralleled or, some say, stimulated by the explosion of wine writing in countries that, despite being important wine producers, were not traditionally wine consumers and limited wine drinking to high-end restaurants or female consumption. For example, in the United States, consumers have only recently shed their perception of wine as a woman's drink, partly because it is now clear that wine connoisseurship requires expertise and professionalism, elements that some men tend to enjoy and that are frequently considered as masculine.

Unlike food writing, which more or less employs current language even when it sounds celebratory, excessive, and rhetorical, supposedly to entice readers to participate in the gustatory experiences of the writer, wine critiquing has created a code that can appear as mysterious, pretentious, and even nonsensical to the non-initiated. Descriptions of sensations, scents and colours are often metaphorical, referring to flowers, plants, foods, and objects that might appear strange in describing a wine, such as "chicken shit" for rustic pinot noirs or "tomato leaf" for sauvignon blancs. However, the growing interest in wine consumption and the resulting mainstreaming of wine writing are making this language more and more familiar to large sections of readers.

2.4. Performance

Many practices surrounding the production, acquisition, preparation, and consumption of food constitute performances that, besides their intrinsic interest, can help us to analyse the place that food occupies in a culture. Furthermore, at times they are quite spectacular in themselves: think about the skill of a Chinese chef making noodles by beating them down on a floured surface or of a sushi master employing his knives. Production can also be spectacular, as in the case of tuna fishing in Western Sicily or coconut picking on many tropical islands. These activities constitute an important arena for the performance, reproduction, introjection and also critique of different templates of gender, race, ethnicity, class, and religion. For instance, in post-industrial societies, the growing interest in manual know-how and skills involved in traditional production has acquired qualities of nostalgia and the search for a supposedly lost authenticity that stimulates many urban dwellers to travel to the countryside to watch farmers harvest crops, kill and butcher pigs, or make cheese. Similarly, fishermen getting back to port in the morning with their catch, or hunters carrying their prey can all become performers if they carry out their activities in the presence not only of outsiders, but also of members of their own communities that have different

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- Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, Barbara** (1998). *Destination Culture: Tourism, Museums, and Heritage*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, Barbara** (1999). "Playing to the Senses: Food as a Performance Medium". *Performance Research* 4(1).
- Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, Barbara** (2006). "Making Sense of Food in Performance: The Table and the Stage" in Sally Banes and Andre Lepecki, eds. *The Senses in Performance*. New York: Routledge.

professions. Outdoor markets often turn into live theatres, with sellers trying to attract customers, negotiations going on, and food on display to attract passersby.

The value of these practices as spectacle has often turned them into tourist attractions. As a consequence, festivals, fairs, and events have developed around them with the goal of drawing visitors and potential consumers. Of course, when daily activities are self-consciously performed for outsiders they necessarily change in character and substance. Cooking too, especially in societies where convenience and expediency have become prevalent, can constitute a performance. For many consumers, going to a restaurant implies participating in a specific practice, "seeing and being seen" and, when the chef is well known, being exposed to a celebrity. The spectacular aspects of cooking have caused many restaurants to build open kitchens, where patrons can actually observe chefs and cooks preparing their meals. In some exclusive restaurants, having the possibility to sit and consume food at a special table in the kitchen, becoming privy to the chef's activities, is considered an honour.

The repetition of daily gestures and practices around food can also constitute voluntary or involuntary performances that construct and reinforce certain aspects of gender and identity. For instance, the breakfast rituals that every family develops, the coffee breaks that parse office life, and the simple act of grocery shopping underpin social roles and dynamics of subject formation. Many behaviours and practices are actually learned through processes of acculturation and socialization during childhood, and they are very specific to each cultural environment. The 1935 seminal study by anthropologist Marcell Mauss on the "techniques of the body" has been followed by research unveiling the constructed and cultural nature of many occurrences in body language, body posture, proximity, and movement that are normally perceived as natural.

Power and the principles it promotes are not always imposed on the subject from the outside but materialized through norms and regulations in the body itself. Although we perceive our body as natural –we are actually taught to perceive it as such– it would be naive to assume that these crucial elements of the embodied experience are irrelevant of any power agency (as diffuse as it can be). Power needs to be reinforced with legitimacy, so that its subjects voluntarily adhere to its dictates and rules. The only way to do this is to employ the narratives, prescriptions, objects, and practices, including "techniques of the body," that facilitate the transmission and diffusion of symbols and ideas in the public space of communicative and material exchanges. These elements all share an ideological function, in the sense that they tend to propose, legitimize, and strengthen specific values and goals for society at large. They also reinforce the ideals of order and rationality that still constitute the core of most political orders. These subtle forms of control are usually excluded from the public discourse to create the illusion of the neutrality and naturalness of a body that instead constitutes

Bibliographical reference

Mauss, Marcel (1973, 1935).
"Techniques of the Body".
Economy and Society 2(1).

the battlefield for cultural, social, and political struggles. To be fully effective, power relationships need to be embodied and played out by the individual subjects. We cannot exclude food and ingestion from power struggles. The way we categorize and experience our physical needs, including how we choose, store, prepare, cook, ingest, digest, and excrete food, is far from neutral or natural.

Growing attention has been paid to food both in scholarly research on performance and in performance arts. To mention just two recent examples, in spring 2008, the Umami Food & Arts Festival took place in New York City, with various artists performing and showing their work at several Manhattan venues. In winter 2008-09, the MACRO (Contemporary Art Museum of Rome) organized "Girovagando", where the exhibition space was organized as a "kitchen" where famous chefs performed, a "dining room" for the visual arts, and a "living room" for music and other performances.

2.5. TV and celebrity chefs

One of the most visible trends in contemporary media is the growing presence of food on television. Besides being the focus of many commercials aimed at selling products, a phenomenon that we will analyse in a subsequent section, it has become the main theme for many shows, and even for TV stations broadcasting food-related material 24 hours a day. The Food Network in the U.S., UKTV Food in Britain, and the Gambero Rosso Channel in Italy have become mainstays for TV audiences, providing a daily feed of food-themed shows and recipes. Scottish-born Gordon Ramsay, one of the many chefs who have become media stars, has had multiple shows on different TV channels on both sides on the Atlantic, from *The F-Word* and *Ramsay's Kitchen Nightmares* on Channel 4 in the UK and BBC America to *Hell's Kitchen* on Fox in the USA. Numerous chefs have become public figures, exerting their influence at different levels. The Food Network star Rachel Ray has her own daytime talk show, while the English *enfant terrible* Jamie Oliver has stirred the UK authorities to improve school menus after a series of shows in which he uncovered the horrors of canteen eating and its toll on the younger generations of Britons. He has recently embarked on a similar endeavour in the *Jamie Oliver's Food Revolution* show, in which he succeeded in changing the school meals in an American town. Spanish chef Ferran Adrià has managed to make a name for himself all over the world with his innovative –some say *gimmicky*– creations, while the new trend of molecular gastronomy, analysed by scientists such as the French Hervé This or America's Harold McGee and spearheaded by chefs such as the above-mentioned Adrià and the British Heston Blumenthal, is changing the way high-end restaurants manipulate, prepare, and even conceptualize food. Besides writing best-selling books, famous chefs have in turn become the topic of books, TV segments, radio shows, and magazine feature articles.

As in the case of magazines, newspapers, and guidebooks, TV networks and shows deeply affect our perception not only of what good eating is supposed to be, but also the social and cultural expectations associated with food preparation and consumption. Recipes created by famous chefs can become so glamorous, perceived as "high end," that a middle-class housewife might want to try them to impress her friends. Unfamiliar ingredients and techniques can be introduced to inexperienced cooks looking to widen their repertory. Foreign cuisine can be performed in a secure and reassuring framework that makes it accessible and less threatening to consumers who would not go out and taste new stuff in ethnic restaurants. For instance, Julia Child introduced French cuisine to the average American back in the 1960s, when that culinary tradition was perceived as extraneous, exclusive, and slightly classist. In other cases, when foreign chefs explain their traditions to viewers, TV shows can provide reassuring performances of domesticated culinary otherness that turns it into just another item in a wide array of consumable products.

Nonetheless, culinary education cannot be the only motive in cooking shows. Shows need to be entertaining, light-hearted, and enjoyable in order to attract enough viewers to secure sponsors and advertisers. For this reason, in the past few years many shows have been moving from pure instruction, where a chef teaches dishes with great attention to details and techniques, using a step-by-step approach, to shows where the chef constructs his or her own persona as an entertainer, with specific sound bites, recurring jokes, and light bantering meant more to amuse than to instruct. Shows are frequently taped in front of live audiences, which allow hosts to be more interactive, with in-studio spectators standing in for the TV viewers when they taste the dishes prepared, smell the scents coming from the stove in front of the chefs, and so on. Food porn, as a set of visual and aural techniques that enhance the participation of viewers who do not have actual access to the food, clearly can play a huge role in this sort of programming.

Hosts and authors also take into consideration the everyday constraints of the average viewer in terms of ingredients, skills, and time available. The results are shows that communicate the easiness of cooking, while providing useful tips and shortcuts and making the viewers feel good about not wanting to spend too much time or money on cooking. These sorts of shows interact with and feed off cultural expectations of gender roles, which are still prevalent in many societies. Working women feel pulled at times between their professional life and their duties as family members; TV shows and celebrities can reassure them that finding easy ways to put food on the table can be part of being good housewives. Similar shows can also be geared towards men, since cooking can be represented as a fast and practical task that does not threaten their masculinity and the established gender roles.

The presence of men on TV cooking shows is not new. Even in past decades, those male figures were acceptable because they represented a respectable professional career, and not the daily chore of nurturing a family. However, in

recent years the amount of testosterone in food shows has definitely increased. Successful cooking competitions and reality shows purposely stage tensions and clashes among strong male characters to increase their spectacular aspects. Moreover, when there are women among the contestants, they have to demonstrate strength, determination, and spunk to keep up with their male opponents.

The overall popularity of food TV is increasingly dependent of the presence of celebrity chefs, often created by the media itself. Writers and authors are always looking for new personalities around whom to build shows that can then become the core operation for large marketing campaigns including book publishing, magazines, cooking implements, branding, participation in events and appearances in conferences and non-food shows. For chefs who already have their restaurants and professional fame, TV often means reaching the mainstream and achieving celebrity status.

2.6. Film

In the past few decades, food has come to the forefront in cinema, to the point of prompting discussions among critics, scholars, and film buffs about the possible emergence of a "food film" genre. Since the 1980s, women have been especially prominent in movies where food appears conspicuously, such as the classics *Babette's Feast* (1987) and *Like Water for Chocolate* (1992), the crowd pleasers *Chocolat* (2000) and *No Reservations* (2007), and the recent big hit *Julie and Julia* (2009).

Why is food so present in movies? What processes of identification with characters and objects are activated in the viewer when food is involved in the cinematic action? Eating is a truly universal activity, and its emotional and cultural power is enormous. It is able to elicit visceral reactions and strong feelings. Does the recognition of food and actions related to it help viewers to identify with the characters and events they see on the screen, making the film experience more intense? In her 1981 essay "Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, and Excess", Linda Williams defined horror, porn, and melodrama as "body genres", focusing on violence, sex, and emotion, which provide physical jolts and "sensations that are on the verge of respectable". Williams wonders whether the body of the spectator is caught in an almost involuntary mimicry of the emotions and sensations shown by the body on the screen, when exposed to these "body genres". It is arguable that similar dynamics are in action in "food films".

Bibliographical reference

Williams, Linda (1981). "Film Body: An Implantation of Perversions". *Ciné-Tracts* (3(4), p. 701).

In Food, Film, and Culture, James Keller argues that "the cinematic hunger artists manipulate gustatory imagery in order to increase the sensory response of the film audience to a medium that cannot access smell or taste, but, nevertheless, seeks to create a full sensory response to a strictly visual and auditory medium. Food cinema thus invokes the gustatory appetite in a fashion similar to the arousal of the libido through romantic and sexual imagery, accessing the full sensory experience of the actor and, subsequently and vicariously of the audience." However, for Keller the spectators' involvement seems to be condemned to be purely metaphorical.

(The filmmaker) has no access to the audience's palates, but can only invoke appetite and desire in a strictly visual and auditory medium, the most important ingredients in the gustatory experience – smell and taste – remaining inaccessible to the audience. Thus food can only ever be metaphor in film as it can never be consumed by the audience, save in a visual or auditory sense... The audience members know that they cannot have a taste of onscreen food, and they must suspend disbelief in order to convince themselves that the film sustenance is actually substantive for anyone, even the actors... Nowhere is the manipulation of appetite and desire more blatant than in food cinema. The director mobilizes the audience's appetites, steering the resulting energies into contexts extraneous to the pursuit of nourishment. The inclusion of culinary imagery in film creates a tension within the viewer, exciting the appetite but refusing fulfilment, drawing out desire and attaching it to objects unconnected to the slaking of one's thirst or the gluttoning of one's appetite.

Keller, James R. (2006). *Food, Film and Culture: a Genre Study* (p. 3-5). Jefferson NC: McFarland & Company.

Memory seems to play a key role especially in contemporary films that revolve around food, a theme that in the past few years has become central in all sorts of film genres, following the growth of general interest in food and eating in Western societies. The evocative potential of moving images acquires a particular depth and power when cuisine and ingestion are used to convey feelings and emotions that would otherwise be difficult to express visually or verbally. It is often when women are involved that food and cooking reveal their deeper connections with memory, especially with activities that involve meal preparation, nourishing, and nurturing. Needless to say, these chores are identified with a bodily dimension that has been historically considered as not very intellectual, since it deals with the sheer survival of individuals, families, and communities, rather than with personal achievements and spiritual aspects of life. When the lead characters are women, films often shift towards genres such as biography, memoir, sentimental journey, and romantic exploration, where visual and narrative elements concur to put viewers in touch with the more emotional and mundane aspects of life: pleasures and sorrows, affections, memories, and the joys deriving from activities such as cooking.

This aspect is particularly strong in the so-called "magic realism" novels by authors like Gabriel García Márquez (particularly *A Hundred Years of Solitude* and *Love in the Time of Cholera*) and above all Jorge Amado, who has dedicated the novels *Gabriela, Clove and Cinnamon* (*Gabriela, Cravo e Canela*, 1958) and *Dona Flor and Her Two Husbands* (*Dona Flor e Sues Dois Maridos*, 1966) to smell and taste. Both novels were adapted for the big screen as amusing

Bibliographical reference

Keller, James R. (2006). *Food, Film and Culture: a Genre Study* (p. 1). Jefferson NC: McFarland & Company.

and touching films, starring the sensual Brazilian actress Sonia Braga and directed by Bruno Barreto respectively in 1983 and 1976. The character of Dona Flor in particular finds in food a conduit through which she can express her sensuality and also develop her business expertise, affirming herself as an individual. Food plays a more crucial role in the book than in the film, but some scenes remain unforgettable. Right after the death of her husband Vadinho, Flor relives their passion by thinking about one of his favourite dishes, *moqueca de siri mole*, a soft-shell crab stew with coconut milk and red palm oil, and the memory of the sensations that punctuated their sexual bliss carry her back to the first night after the wedding, when his mouth tasted of onion, one of the main ingredients of the recipe. During one of her most lonely moments, she compares herself to a hot, steaming dish that no man consumes and enjoys.

Emotions and feelings are actually incorporated into food in the novel by Laura Esquivel *Like Water for Chocolate* (Como Agua para Chocolate, 1989), which was made into a film in 1992. The protagonist Tita (actress Lumi Cavazos), brought up in the kitchen by the Indian cook Nacha, is condemned to celibacy in order to take care of her mother in her old age. Her love interest Pedro (Marco Leonardi) decides to get married to one of her sisters so that he can be close to her. During the preparations for the nuptial banquet, the tears of sorrow of Tita for her lost love end up in her sister's wedding cake, provoking desperation and stomach upset in all those who taste it. Later on, Tita's passionate feelings, concentrated in a bunch of roses Pedro gives her, end up in a dish of quails with rose petals, which has such a potent effect that one of her sisters has to run to an outdoor shower to calm herself. The passion unleashed by Tita's dish is so potent that her sister ends up burning the whole wood shack where the shower is located, attracting with her scent a revolutionary soldier who takes her away naked on horseback.

In the 1999 novel by Joanne Harris, *Chocolat*, brought to the screen in 2000, chocolate brings back to life a whole village suffocated by the traditionalism of the local mayor and other oppressive characters. Vianne, an independent woman travelling around with her young daughter, is a descendant of the Mayas and has inherited the faculty to be able to use chocolate to treat any emotional trauma. The sweet substance comes to embody all that is passion, body, and sensuality, able to transmit feelings and recollections. Chocolate, probably for its supposed effects on women, appears in many films, novels, and also TV commercials as the favourite substance in the fight against feminine depressive states.

However, other foods would also seem to have the power to revitalize women and the men around them: in the 1985 Japanese movie *Tampopo*, the eponymous character, a young widow with a child, finds herself in the quest for the perfect ramen noodles. Her search for taste, texture, and technique,

with the help of a cohort of unusual male friends, helps her to focus on who she is and her goals as a professional, although it often seems that it is the men who know better and are more aware of what she actually needs than herself.

Not all women in the kitchen appear to be so defenceless and in need of guidance. In the 2007 Walt Disney animated and Oscar-winning blockbuster *Ratatouille*, the story of the rat Remy and his culinary achievements in one of the most successful restaurants in Paris, the female chef Colette shows her male co-workers that she doesn't need anybody's help in the kitchen. Her encounter with the sweet and disaster-prone Linguini mellows her out a bit, but she remains in charge. In a world dominated by men, Colette shows how skills and determination are necessary for a woman to succeed, despite the movie's motto, "Everybody can cook".

We cannot continue without a short mention of *Babette's Feast* (1987). Babette, a French refugee in a Danish Protestant village, decides to spend all the money she won on the lottery to offer a memorable dinner to the villagers, whose faith makes them impermeable to any sort of sensual pleasure. The only dinner guest who actually is reanimated by the fantastic dishes and the spectacular wines is a general for whom Babette's flavours transport back to his youth as a soldier in France. In the dinner, Babette's mysterious past is translated into actual sensory elements, a communication that most guests are unable to decode. She does not care: her generosity and her desire to express her gratefulness towards her hosts know no bounds.

In this film, the connection between food and memory also deals with the issue of cultural heritage. The food that Babette prepares is quintessential French, and is represented in clear contrast with the plain, often boring food of the religious Danes. French cuisine is also a protagonist in *Vatel* (2000), where Gerard Depardieu plays the homonymous chef of Louis XIV, the Sun King, who is fabled to have killed himself because of a late delivery for a royal banquet. In the previously mentioned *Like Water for Chocolate*, besides highlighting the personal story of Tita, food is used to reflect the various aspects of Mexican cuisine, from the bourgeois, French-inflected dishes to the traditions connected with the Indian and Creole population. Representations of food are often used to contrast the traditions of the past with the new generations' approach to food: good examples of this tension are Ang Lee's *Eat Drink Men Woman* (1994) and its American remake *Tortilla Soup* (2001). In the first one, a famous chef from Taiwan who is losing his palate tries to keep his family together by preparing elaborate Sunday meals, which allow him to artistically display his skills and his knowledge of traditional dishes and ingredients. The second one follows almost verbatim the same script, but the focus is on a Mexican family in California.

Cultural heritage also looms large in films that highlight the gender, class, race, and ethnicity elements connected with food. In *Soul Food* (1997), an African-American child tries to reunite his family around the tradition of

Sunday dinner, overcoming tensions that hinge on class, marriage problems, and generational misunderstandings. Similar contrasts emerge around food in *What's Cooking* (2000), where in multiethnic Los Angeles four families (Mexican, Jewish, Vietnamese, and African-American) get together to share the Thanksgiving Feast only to expose their tensions and their pain. In the French *La Graine et le Mulet* (2007) an older North-African man tries to regain the respect of his estranged wife by attempting to open a couscous restaurant on a boat in the port of Marseille, only to face the diffidence of the (mostly) white patrons and resistance from his own community. The kitchen can also become the arena for the confrontation of masculinities, as in the Norwegian *Kitchen Stories* (2003), where a social scientist is sent to observe the eating habits of an older, solitary man, and the two very different individuals end up becoming friends. In the Spanish *Chef's Special* (2008), a gay chef learns how to balance his desire for success and experimentation in the kitchen with his relationship with his son and love for a closeted football player, while in the Italian *Lezioni di Cioccolato* (2007) a building contractor stands in for an injured Egyptian mason in a class on how to make chocolate and eventually discovers new ways to express himself. In Hong Kong's *The God of Cookery* (1996) a celebrity chef falls into disgrace and has to rebuild his fame from scratch, with the help of a female street-food chef.

The power of the media, celebrities, and food critics appears frequently in films that feature restaurants as the background for the plot, from the 1976 *L'aile ou la cuisse*, arguably the first film in which a food critic is the protagonist, all the way to *Ratatouille*, with its fearsome critic Anton Ego. In *Big Night* (1996), two Italian immigrant brothers lose everything in their attempt to create an unforgettable feast for the singer Louie Prima, while in *Dinner Rush* (2000) two generations of male restaurateurs battle to affirm their vision for their restaurants, while the local critic pontificates on their work. In *Spanglish* (2004) a young chef has to face his insecurities, as he becomes famous thanks to raving critic reviews.

While so far we have focused mainly on films whose main themes are eating and cooking, food is also featured in films that do not necessarily focus on it. Since food's neutral and often uncontested character can reveal aspects of cultural and social dynamics that are better concealed in other contexts, very revealing material can be found in films where we would not necessarily look for it, arguably because scriptwriters, filmmakers, and actors feel freer about elements that under other circumstances would be erased and made invisible. When the spotlight is not on them, characters in films may reveal a lot about themselves while engaged in the production, acquisition, and consumption of food, which has the potential to be used to uncover social and power relations that would not otherwise be noticeable. In other words, food-related scenes may provide a space for subtle representations of subject identities and social dynamics to be conveyed. For instance, in gangster films, food and eating scenes often become occasions for the exploration of violence. In Francis Ford Coppola's *The Godfather* (1972), gangsters are killed in restaurants,

or eat take-away Chinese food while waiting to go on a killing spree, while in Takeshi Kitano's *Brother* (2000) young criminals face off in front of their superior during otherwise very formalized meals. Historical films often feature representations of banquets and unusual food traditions that are used not only to place the action in a precise period of time, but also to underline power, class, race, or gender issues. In Luchino Visconti's *The Leopard* (1963) the fabulous dinners organized by Sicilian nobles at the time the island is being invaded by the Italian army allow the author to point out issues of social and gender inequality. In *Satyricon* (1969), Federico Fellini recreated an excessive feast in the Roman Empire to comment on the clout of power, desire, and excessive consumption.

The reflection on food in film is just the beginning, but the literature available is already abundant and growing. You can refer to the bibliography for more material on the topic.

2.7. New media: the Internet and video games

The popularity of food is reflected also in its growing presence in the new media, especially on the Internet. Many magazines, TV channels, TV shows, and publishers have websites whose single themes are food and cooking. Advertisers are also aware of the growing relevance of Internet communication, so they create interactive websites for their products, where consumers can search for information, watch videos, or play games. These strategies are particularly effective with children, who are already familiar with the use of computers, electronic appliances, and video games. In these cases, the websites reinforce the visual communication that is already used in advertising and packaging in terms of design and messages, and also use characters toward which children can feel positive emotional connections.

Some game designers have actually created video games about cooking, hoping to attract the attention of girls: in the virtual reality, players can learn about ingredients and dishes, while adding an element of competition, which is inherent to that form of entertainment. While the games do not add to their actual cooking skills, in many ways they reinforce gender roles, while at the same time providing some knowledge and instruction. However, food-based games on systems like the Wii, which require physical activity to play, have recently been designed to appeal to male audiences too.

With the advent of Web 2.0, food blogging and social networks such as Twitter and Facebook have come to constitute particularly interesting phenomena. Unlike corporate communication, where consumers are on the receiving end of the message even when websites include forums and the possibility of responding to posts, in the case of blogs and social networks individuals decide to make their voices heard through words, photography, videos, and audio. The common use of digital video recorders, audio recorders and cameras make the posting of multimedia very easy and inexpensive. As a consequence,

many food lovers now keep track of their cooking experiments, restaurant outings, dishes and wines they have tasted, giving their opinion and often positioning themselves as connoisseurs. These interactions subvert the usual communicative roles where experts exert authority and claim legitimacy to judge other people's work, by affirming that anybody can be an expert. At times the popularity of certain blogs turn their authors into celebrities, who then pass onto food writing, TV shows, and even films, as in the case of the famous "Julie and Julia" blog, which has recently become an award-winning motion picture.

3. Marketing food

The growth of the food industry in post-industrial societies and the cultural relevance of consumption in determining processes of subject formation have made the competition within the food industry to acquire new consumers and to maintain old ones particularly intense. After all, there is only so much food that can be consumed, so efforts to create new products to entice buyers and attract them away from the competition are fundamental in determining national and international markets. However, the growing obesity epidemics that have struck not only the first world but also developing countries have made food marketing extremely controversial, especially when the targets are children. In this section we will analyse some aspect of food marketing, including cases where it is used in social and political communication that is not aimed at selling, but at achieving change and development.

3.1. Advertising

Rational motives are not the only element in food choices we perceive as consumers and buyers. Advertisers always try to find the best ways to access not only our reasoning, but also those emotional brain functions that affect value and action. At any rate, recent research in neuroscience seems to indicate that emotions feed into our thoughts and influence them, including the conscious ones that we like to consider completely rational. In order to find ways to stimulate our interest, advertisers try to attune their communication tools precisely to those mechanisms that control attention, excitement, and pleasure in our brain. In so doing, advertisers also ensure that the memories they create are durable and positive. Commercials and advertisements need to be more than memorable; they must aim at reinforcing the recollection of the brands they promote.

We use our existing concept of the brand (our memory of the brand, if you prefer) to help us to decode this advertisement; and in turn, our decoding of the advertisement has an impact on our existing concept of the brand. So (provided the advertisement is not so disastrously obscure that it fails to evoke the brand concept at all . . .) there is a direct connection between our memory of the advertisement and our memory of the brand.

Du Plessis, Eric (2005). *Advertised Mind: Ground-Breaking Insights Into How Our Brains Respond To Advertising* (p. 171). London: Kogan Page.

In commercials directed at children, their favourite cartoon characters often promote certain products, creating a pleasurable connection between the positive feelings about the beloved character and the consumption of the product itself. For example, if a child is emotionally attached to Mickey Mouse and Mickey is shown together with a certain brand of cereal, the child is likely to attach positive feelings to that cereal. Commercials directed at adults often work on the same principles. Hence the abundance of more or less explicit sexual undertones in advertising: we all recall seeing girls promoting certain

brands of beer. First, the sexually-charged image captures the attention, and then the arousal that it provokes helps to reinforce the memory and the pleasurable feelings connected to it. Other products and brands target more behavioural and reflective levels of memory. This is the case for commercials that depict lifestyles perceived as positive and desirable. This strategy goes well beyond the printed advertisement or TV commercial: events, shows, and happenings are organized to attract the attention of the media and reinforce the strength of the brand. For instance, alcoholic beverages often throw A-list parties in fashionable bars or clubs to accentuate their hipness. Champagne can be used in commercials promoting expensive watches, silk clothes, or vacation in exclusive resorts. At the other end of the spectrum, rustic foods can be adopted by commercials that promote contact with nature, trips to supposedly "authentic" destinations, or environmentally-friendly products.

Of course, consumers cannot be considered as helpless dupes with no defence against the shrewd promotional techniques of advertising. As marketers are well aware, myriad elements interact with the actual effectiveness of commercials: social and cultural values, monetary constraints, personal likes and dislikes, historical contingencies. On the one hand, products are created for certain segments of the market, supposedly characterized by a defined set of preferences determined by social status, cultural capital, engrained and acquired habits, and desire for distinction. On the other hand, consumers continue to show an unbridled creativity in negotiating their relationship with markets and products, even when they appear to have no power. As French scholar Michel de Certeau pointed out:

Culture articulates conflicts and alternately legitimizes, displaces, or controls the superior forces. It develops an atmosphere of tensions, and often of violence, for which it provides symbolic balances, contracts of compatibility and compromises, all more or less temporary. The tactics of consumption, the ingenious ways in which the weak make use of the strong, thus lend a political dimension to everyday practices.

De Certeau, Michel (1984). *The Practice of Everyday Life* (p. xvii). Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.

Whatever the relations of power in the marketplace, designers, marketers, and advertisers can rely on a stable element: the desire for ever-growing consumption, which has become one of the main characters of contemporary Western society.

3.2. Packaging, endorsements, and product placing

As consumers become shrewder and less permeable to traditional advertising strategies, especially printed, radio, and video commercials, marketers have been exploring other venues to promote their products and reinforce their brand power. Packaging has proven to constitute a fundamental tool to reach potential consumers right at the moment when they are making their purchase choices, both on the Internet and in actual shops. Packaging must be able to attract customers by communicating messages that reinforce the main traits of the products and its branding, to the point of causing what

semioticians call "redundancy", that is to say, the repetition of the same message over and over, albeit through different channels. For instance, if an industrial food product promotes itself as "healthy," the packaging will aim at making consumers forget that what they are buying is actually and evidently mass-produced. Such product might use a packaging material and colours that carry connotations of naturalness and wholesomeness; printed images on the packaging might refer to nature, such as wild or cultivated landscapes, crops, and the images of the main ingredients before processing. Representations of the freshly picked crops are quite common on frozen foods, helping consumers to reconnect with the original products in their natural state. Quite often, images on food packaging present connotations of authenticity and nostalgia, trying to entice consumers to bucolic hyper-realities of rural worlds that they very often may never have experienced in the first place. In addition, health claims may be visibly displayed on packaging, often underlining some nutritional facts (while concealing others); this allows marketers to use scientific information to entice potential buyers, even if the information is completely out of context and it is far from suggesting an actual healthy diet.

Packaging is particularly important for foods geared towards children. Colours tend to be very bright, the images proposed are fun and often include characters that have become popular either on TV shows or on commercials, as mentioned in the previous section. Foods may also include action figures from an upcoming film, working through cross-promotion agreements: the film characters fix themselves in the memory of the children, enticing them to see the film and to buy other related merchandising, while the food is chosen in order to get the figurine, reinforcing the product's positive mental associations.

Packaging is not the only variable in direct marketing. The positioning of a product on a shelf also appears to be a crucial element. Consumers need to find it easily, especially during advertising campaigns, so it has to be placed in the right aisle or section of the shop or supermarket. Moreover, the height of the shelf on which it is positioned is very important: as a matter of fact, food companies pay premiums to have their products placed at eye level, so that even consumers merely passing by can see them. Lower or higher positions are definitely less interesting. Special exposure can be achieved with display cases in places with frequent transit of potential consumers. Acknowledging impulse buying as a potent drive, marketers try to strategically place small, cheap, and often unhealthy products right at the checkout points, so they can be easily added to the grocery without being evaluated too long. Furthermore, products might be offered for free tastings, hoping to lure new clients, both inside shops and in public places, often during sporting events, concerts, and other occasions of entertainment.

The overall goal is to make food products a part of the consumers' positive experiences. To achieve that goal, marketers also pay celebrities to endorse and promote their products, adding connotations of glamour

and exclusivity to them and associating them to desirable (if unattainable) lifestyles. These strategies work particularly well for luxury items, when related to entertainment, music, and film stars, and to energy and health products in connection with sporting champions, models, and other fit celebrities. Overweight celebrities often become spokespersons for diet plans or slimming products, especially with pictures taken before and after consumption of the products or starting the diet. Chefs can also become perfect promoters for brands and products. It is not uncommon for famous chefs and restaurateurs to establish joint ventures with the food industry to create products that can bank on their aura of refinement, professionalism, and taste. In these cases, the chef's image can actually appear on the packaging to reinforce the message.

Last but not least, product placement has recently gained attractiveness among marketers. Branded food items can appear in popular TV shows or films, even when the action is not focusing on the product itself. Their mere presence is supposed to reinforce the brand image and its presence in the consumers' mental universe.

3.3. Design

In the previous sections, we have explored ways in which marketing and advertising are paying attention to human psychology and culture. Another aspect that needs further analysis is design, which weighs heavily on food marketing in different points of view. First of all, it is important for processed food to have an inviting, easy to handle shape. Think about bite-size chicken nuggets, or ice-cream cones. Packaging, as we have already mentioned, is able to reach consumers exactly at the time when they are making their purchasing choices.

Also the success of food-related tools and kitchen appliances is closely related to their usefulness and design. Crockery, glassware, and silverware are chosen mostly based on their quality and design. Many chefs who are involved in experimenting with food and service often have designers create implements for specific dishes, and the fast-food industry is always looking for new ways to present and sell its products, such as boxes and other tools to allow consumers to hold food in their hands or on the go. The appeal of restaurants heavily relies on the design of their environment, their exterior, and even of their kitchen, now that it is often visible to patrons.

In many ways, design constitutes an important element in the communication between food producers, providers, and marketers on the one hand, and consumers on the other. The communication is based on all sorts of messages, from cognitive to sensual.

Donald Norman, a cognitive scientist, put forth the intriguing hypothesis that appealing things, able to elicit intense and positive emotions, are actually more successful. He often uses kitchen design objects as examples, but the same line of reasoning can be applied to food packaging, the arrangement of food on plates, and produce itself. Norman argues that the design and use of objects are influenced by strong emotional components. He actually identifies three different aspects of design, each responding to a different brain dynamic: the visceral, concerning appearances and related to immediate, almost mechanical reactions; the behavioural, connected with enjoyment and usability and corresponding to routine performances and learned skills; and the reflective, regarding intellectual and rational aspects.

The three levels also differ in their relations to time: while the first two are all about the present, about "now", the third level is not so much about immediate use as about the long run, the memories that objects solicit, and the future satisfaction derived from their possession. At this level, self-esteem and identification processes play a key role, as do customer service and interpersonal interactions.

Kitchen objects and tools can shed some light on these matters. They may be bought just because they are cute and then never used. This is often the case, for instance, with copper pots and pans, which usually end up as decorations because they are hard to keep clean and in good condition. At the same time they satisfy intellectual needs: the owners' desire to show their refinement and their taste, a nostalgic connection with the past, or just the will to display expensive objects. On the other hand, expensive pots and pans can be bought for their functionality and usability. In this case their quality not only satisfies behavioural requirements, but also ensures durable enjoyment for people who actually cook and can use them with pleasure over and over. Many Western kitchens are full of gizmos of all kinds, either received as presents or actually bought, whose main value is definitively reflective. It relates to the pleasure of owning something unusual or designed for very specific purposes, underlining the owner's expertise.

The relevance of these factors for food consumption is evident. If a product is meant for impulse buying, for instance a chocolate bar placed at the check-out of a supermarket, its packaging will, above all, be alluring, stimulating, and able to catch the shopper's attention. Its format and size should interact with the behavioural habits of consumers, without challenging them but sending clear messages about its content and use. Everyday products should more or less fall into this category, underlining their utility, ease of use, and performance.

The same category of products can play on different levels. For example, bottled water can be very straightforward: small transparent bottles can be kept in a pocket on the go, while larger bottles, usually in packs of six, underline convenience and practicality. On the other hand, certain exclusive

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and refined bottles are only sold in restaurants. In this case, aesthetic pleasure is paired with the reflective enjoyment of something supposedly rare. Luxury products have to appeal at a very intellectual level to be successful. Because of their rarity and high prices, they need to entice consumers' sense of taste and connoisseurship; in other words, they relate to the consumer's sense of self, reflecting their sense of distinction. Very often, the consumption of these products presupposes some sort of acquired taste: caviar, truffle, or *foie gras* have unusual flavours, whose appreciation is frequently associated with refinement, high social status, conspicuous consumption, and other values perceived as positive. Other high-end products also require knowledge: wine or cheese may not be necessarily expensive, but expert consumers tend to know what they like, are eager to try new products, and willingly share with other passionate consumers their thoughts and latest discoveries. Furthermore, a certain amount of information – regarding origins, production techniques, and the correct mode of consumption – is necessary to distinguish one product from another. The reflective aspect of this kind of enjoyment is obvious. In this case, visceral and behavioural values are not relevant, since consumers are not primarily attracted by the appearance or usability of the products. Connoisseurs would not pick their wines or cheeses based on packaging or labels. On the other hand, a supermarket shopper would probably be influenced by these elements and by other factors such as price and convenience.

3.4. Public relations and events

Food producers, both industrial and artisanal, have discovered the power of direct contact with potential future consumers. To this end, events are often organized to promote a specific product or category of a group of producers. Such events are organized not only for very exclusive and high-end products, but also for more mass-produced items. Of course, what changes is the type of event, its production value, and the messages it communicates. When truffle producers want to attract the attention of the media, restaurateurs, and upscale consumers, they might organize an event where some of the most famous chefs in a city get together to cook with the first truffles of the season. If some celebrity participates, it is even more likely that the event will have media coverage as a social occasion, multiplying the publicizing effect. Producers of expensive alcoholic drinks such as single malt whiskey or high-end wine often organize tastings where some of their top-of-the-line products are poured and which can be attended on invitation only, to increase the publicity effect and enhance the sense of exclusivity.

Special events can be organized for the press and other opinion leaders, where they are introduced to new products or to old products rebranded in an attempt to change their image. In this case, events are put together with public relations firms, who work closely with marketers to make sure that the most desirable people participate. Public relations firms are now also representing many individual chefs and their restaurants, informing the

press and opinion leaders about new openings, menu changes, and awards. Due to the importance of media coverage, as we discussed in a previous section, public relations firms are acquiring growing relevance in the field, especially when chefs become entrepreneurs and open various restaurants internationally, or financial groups invest in restaurants.

Moreover, events such as fairs or citywide celebrations can be organized to promote specific products. If a location is famous for an ingredient, dish, or food-related tradition, the local tourist board often uses these culinary elements to build attractions for visitors that can include tastings, conferences, eating competitions, re-enactment of historical events, etc. Aimed at attracting large numbers of people, the messages communicated are often about the affordability of the product, its connection with local traditions and communities, its availability, etc. At times it would not make sense to organize these events if the product were not available in great quantities for wide distribution. Similar strategies are used in tourist destinations to diversify the offer for visitors and provide activities that can make their holiday more enjoyable. While food has already become a tourist attraction in many parts of Europe, local authorities in developing countries are now also using it, trying to make it more palatable and acceptable to foreigners at the same time. Paradoxically, attempts at highlighting local food traditions can end up changing them in order to adapt them for mass consumption.

4. Social and political communication

Although communication about food is often aimed at selling products through various forms of marketing and advertising, at times, eating and ingestion become the objects of other kinds of messages, focusing on personal health and well-being, social issues, or political debates. In this section we will briefly analyse some of these occurrences, trying to highlight what communicative functions food can play in them.

4.1. Health and dieting

Over the past few decades, an ever-expanding wellness industry has taken root in most Western countries, offering services that cater to all kind of needs, from beauty resorts to massage parlours, from colonics to diet gurus. These businesses are the reflection of a growing preoccupation in large sections of society with nutrition and fitness. The image –and health– obsessed media amplify these themes with TV shows, news, books, magazines, and even pod casts, each geared towards different segments of consumers. Pop culture bombards us with a barrage of beauty and health tips, slimming products, food supplements, and, above all, diet regimens that promise fast and painless weight loss, long-term wellbeing, and a boost in self-esteem. Concentrating on health as their primary objective, but often taking also fitness and good looks into consideration, many citizens in post-industrial societies do their best to eat correctly, exercise, and maintain a wholesome and active lifestyle.

Personal health has become one of the main concerns in post-industrial societies, and the impact food can have on it is becoming the object of recurring and extensive communication. The public at large, constantly exposed by the media to results from scientific research mixed with folk remedies, has a hard time making sense of the new findings of the day, such as the supposedly beneficial effects of low-calorie life-long diets on ageing, or the anti-inflammatory and life-prolonging properties of the natural compound resveratrol found in grape skins and various berries. The focus of this communication is on food as building material for a better-looking, longer-living body, rather than as a source of pleasurable experiences or a marker of cultural identity, let alone a cherished and hated instrument for caring and nurturing. Free radicals and phytonutrients are battling to conquer consumers' imagination while the food industry is busy making claims on all sorts of nutrients to market new products and boost sales.

A given ingredient can be analysed by scientists and nutritionists, whose research is picked up in bits and pieces by newspapers, magazines, chat shows, and blogs, influencing consumer expectations and behaviours, creating fads and fashions, prompting changes in distribution chains and shopping habits,

while at the same time interfering with the industry development of new foods, which translates into nutritional claims, advertising, and marketing campaigns that in turn interact with consumers' perceptions and scientists' research.

Media and pop culture stimulate consumers with so many slimming plans, nutritional tips, discoveries, debates, and even food-centred scandals and scares that many have started to seriously doubt scientific research. It is hard to put faith in a diet if there is the risk that a new study will refute its benefits or even uncover its dangers. In the popular perception regarding nutrition-related research, what today is certain, tomorrow can become a lie. Most people trying to lose weight are actually not interested in the complexities of scientific protocols: the fact that truth is only temporary, until another theory disproves it, can be too much to bear, when their body, health, and self-esteem is at stake.

Despite variations in food choices, basic tenets, and general approach, diets very often offer similar, simple, and easy-to-follow solutions that those who embrace them are required to adhere to in a true act of faith. The fact that dieters do not fully understand the principles and the implications may actually ease their sense of insecurity, freeing them from the disturbing necessity of understanding complex scientific explanations and, above all, of making independent choices. Newspaper and magazine articles, TV segments, and the Internet often feed on this need for simple communication by offering piecemeal information and advice that directly connect a food with a health benefit, for instance, avoiding at the same time any complexity that might puzzle the reader or require more than cursory attention. As a consequence, nutritional information is fragmented, but at the same time each portion acquires its own life, generating urban myths and connecting with other circulating information in unexpected ways. In the same magazine, writers can advise readers to add fish oil to their diet to avoid the risk of developing both an irregular heartbeat and insulin resistance, to eat strawberries and black raspberries to reduce cancer risk, to drink soda to help quench their appetite, milk to reduce the risk of colon cancer, and wine for better breath. Readers are bombarded by a mass of unrelated information that seems to play with their health fears.

This situation also makes communication about well-being and correct eating habits difficult for public health organizations that fight all kinds of food-related problems ranging from obesity to malnourishment, from child nutrition to the needs of senior citizens. Despite the presence of different agencies working on these issues, both public and private, systemic and economic problems on the one hand, and cultural and social issues on the other make finding the right way to communicate complicated. How can you explain to a low-income mother that the cheap processed food that she is feeding in large quantities to her children to make up for other kinds of lacking

consumption is actually hurting them? How can you explain in plain words to a new immigrant that the traditional diet she is feeding her child is not the healthiest?

4.2. Politics and governance

Since the establishment of international agencies aimed at improving the living standards of populations in the southern hemisphere by fighting hunger, increasing levels of education in nutrition and hygiene, and by implementing projects for economic development, especially in rural environments, developing countries and their sponsors have actively focused communication and their media outlets on drawing the attention of possible donors, political constituencies, and even national governments to food security. With the multiplication of Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) that often rely on donations and the good will of private institutions, the relevance of political communication concerning food has reached new heights.

Another media field involving transnational corporation, national agencies and governments, but also international organization is communication on food safety. Frequent outbreaks of food-borne illnesses in the US and Europe show that even developed countries are not protected by malpractices in food production and manufacturing. It does not matter if it is salmonella in peanut butter, E. coli in spinach, melamine in milk, bird flu, or mad cow disease, the consequences of technology on what we eat, and indirectly on our bodies, are quite intuitive: whoever controls food has a solid clutch on our physical existence. Consumers are often acutely aware of the dangers associated with ingestion: growing fears of allergies, intoxication, poisoning, and even cancer all play a huge role in the acceptance of processed items and ingredients containing genetically modified organisms. For this reason, the food industry, civil society, and also national and international bodies are becoming acutely aware of the need to find effective ways to communicate with consumers about the safety of what they consume.

A diffused need for governance in this sector is felt in many sectors of civil society. For instance, the European Food Safety Authority is not supposed to have any enforcement authority: it can only pass its recommendations to the European Commission. However, in the event of emergency, it is granted an autonomous right of communication in order to provide information directly to the public, although it has to coordinate its communication with the Commission and the Member States. The World Health Organization also played an important role during the bird flu scare, making news and research available to the media outlets, which often turned to it as a reliable source of information. Consumer advocacy groups and grassroots organizations are acquiring growing relevance in this field, employing not only the usual

methods of political pressure, such as press campaigns, demonstrations, and specific demands to political representatives, but also embracing new forms of communication, such as viral videos, blogs, and social networks.

The food industry has realized how important it is to reassure its consumers about its products through advertising and other forms of direct communication (promotions, messages on packaging etc). However, as in the case of the growing problem of childhood obesity, it frequently finds itself on the defensive, trying to protect its economic interests without appearing to overlook consumer well-being. PR campaigns are then mounted to change the image of a product or a whole sector, especially after major cases, such as those mentioned before. However, especially in the US, the food industry resists any attempt at regulation, often by framing its communication about health and safety problems in terms of "personal choice". Why limit the offer of sugar, fat, or salt-laden products when they are not harmful if consumed in moderation and if consumers exert their freedom of choice and responsibility? For similar reasons, ongoing battles are being fought over labelling, traceability, product health claims ("helps lower cholesterol", "helps fight free radicals"), and even about the way nutritional facts are illustrated on packaging.

Although the close connections between the body and eating are self-explanatory, reflections about food as a political instrument to control bodies in their most fundamental and intimate dimension have been rare. As some currents in contemporary thought are trying to demonstrate, the body is far from apolitical, natural or given. The ways it is conceived, developed, controlled and disciplined, identified and interpreted are inherently political. The ways we choose, store, prepare, cook, ingest, digest, and excrete food determine how our bodies relate with the outside world and with other bodies. These elements become objects of interest for many power agencies that try to use them to reinforce their legitimacy through various narratives –such as identity, diversity, tradition, and authenticity– structuring the transmission of symbols and acting in the public space of communicative exchanges.

Power legitimacy is successfully reinforced when the ideological manipulation, which is more or less evident and disclosed in the public space, reaches private realms such as the body, sexuality, food habits, and nutrition. These more hidden forms of control are usually excluded from public discourses, creating the illusion of the political neutrality of the body, whose fluid constitution and cultural inscription in materiality become instead the battlefield for cultural, social and political struggles to exert control over the individual. The body, far from being natural, thus becomes the arena where power expresses itself in its more fundamental modalities. While cultural theorists have often pointed to sex as a site of these political struggles, food and ingestion have been left aside, regardless of their foundational role in the development of subjectivity.

As shown by the debates over genetically modified crops, globalization and dietary models based on fat –and sugar– heavy diets and mass produced goods, the presence of hormones in meat, or the increasing opposition to fast food in certain European political circles, food can become a nodal point in political debates. The food battles between the United States and Europe often assume a deeper, cultural character than simple wars to conquer larger shares of the consumer markets. Food can actually be used as a metaphor for otherness and, quite often, to affirm cultural superiority. For lack of information, or because of deeply entrenched identifications, the food of strangers can be looked upon as barbarian, uncouth, dirty, and even disgusting. An analysis of these phenomena can allow each subject to acknowledge its specific location within its culture, and in relation to other cultures. Unfortunately, this type of discourse is also often extended to the food of immigrant communities: tradition and authenticity can become weapons for discrimination and intolerance in political communication.

4.3. Activism and ethical consumption

In post-industrial societies, recent developments have changed the public perception of the ethical value of consumption. Until a few years ago, the focus was on consumerism as the negative expression of egoism and individualism that undermined the collective dimensions of citizenship, civil engagement, and political participation. Excessive attention on private matters and pleasure was considered as one of the causes for excessive material consumption in the West, which was at the root of problems such as social injustice, environmental damage, exploitation of the producers in the developed countries and above all in the southern hemisphere, as well as trading inequality.

With the growth of alternative food networks and fair trade, as well as the commercial success of sustainable, local, socially responsible, and environmentally-friendly products, consumption is increasingly considered as a possible positive force for global rural development. Along with efforts to address systemic-level issues, which remain fundamental for solving structural issues in development, education, investment, trade, and political stability, many private and public organizations are using communication and media to motivate consumers to change their household practices, behaviours, attitudes, and values regarding food consumption in order to switch to socially responsible products that can help economic development in the southern hemisphere.

This change of approach derives from a growing awareness of the role that consumption plays for the subject identity of many citizens in post-industrial societies, in terms of identification, taste, distinction, cultural capital, and even prestige and exclusiveness. Private preferences and choices are now considered not to be completely external to shared public interests of solidarity, leading to forms of ethical and responsible consumption embedded

in the rhythm of everyday life, including shopping, cooking, and eating out. This kind of consumption can constitute a new type of individual (or individualistic) activism that can be paired and reinforced by other forms of collective activism that include direct participation in organizations, social movements, and advocacy groups, as well as contact activism aimed at stimulating political and governmental authorities to intervene in specific issues.

Advocacy groups and NGOs can employ communication and media in different ways to enhance the success of these strategies:

- They can help frame daily activities as an arena where individuals can play out moral obligations connected with their status as consumers and their social and economic privilege.
- They can provide information and spread knowledge about food-related issues among consumers who are already sensitive to those sorts of problems.
- They can increase the number of responsible and ethical consumers by reaching out to segments of the population that are not yet involved. This requires employing accessible language and conceptual frameworks that can be shared by many, in order to avoid accusations of elitism.
- They can offer narratives and even storylines that can inform the acts of consumers by inserting them in worldwide trends and changes. While the stage of these private acts can be a shop or a kitchen, their connection with producers in other parts of the world turn them into global interventions. This can be important as many citizens increasingly feel that national governments have a limited political and economic impact on transnational corporations, while their choices as consumers can influence these companies by hitting their financial and commercial bottom line. This approach is a reflection of neoliberal theories that focus on the natural functioning of markets, preferences, and prices as solutions to economic issues, rather than on public or government interventions.
- They can insert private and individual consumers into loose networks and social movements that do not require any direct action or participation but rather offer various forms of identification and a sense of collective belonging that can reach global levels.
- They can make the ethical consumer not only visible, but also knowable to corporations, government, and even marketing agencies, in terms of measurable behaviours, through surveys, market research, and all sorts of searchable data that can be interpreted as expressions of sizeable trends and coherent patterns. This kind of information can also provide

interesting news to traditional media outlets, which can turn them into stories and coverage with a strong impact on public opinion.

This new approach to consumption, however, has many detractors, because it is accused of undermining the mobilization of individual citizens into collective public actions that can exert political and social pressure on international and governmental bodies to proceed in structural issues that require aid, investment, and political interventions. Many also consider making development dependent on the whims and desire of consumers in the first world very dangerous. What if the trends change? Furthermore, especially when traditional media outlets are involved, it is possible that complex and far-reaching issues are simplified into manageable sound bites that are accessible to mainstream audiences but which can fragment the overall picture, hiding parts of the reality. In the ethical point of view, many activists feel that focusing on specific acts of consumption does not stimulate individuals to actually change their values and beliefs, which in the long run can have a more durable impact on world inequalities. Some critics consider these new approaches as self-serving and self-righteous, connecting lifestyle choices in post-industrial society to livelihood struggles in the southern hemisphere.

The appeal to ethical and responsible consumption has reached beyond the forms of public communication that we have just discussed and also informs marketing, advertising, and even packaging. The semiotic instruments of analysis that we explored at the beginning of this module can actually be used to achieve a better understanding of this form of communication. For instance, in the case of many fair-trade products like coffee or chocolate, bits of actual information and narratives connecting consumers with the producers are printed on the packaging and on all kinds of promotional material, such as dispensers and display cases. Imagery is employed that underlines the origin of the products, including stereotypical representations of the producer population or graphic elements that remind consumers of the provenance of what they are buying. For instance, it is not rare to find images of farmers in traditional garbs, tropical animal and plants, or cultural-specific objects. Texts and graphics thus reiterate redundant messages that underline the difference and peculiarity of ethnic populations and their environments, offering them somehow as objects of consumption and "culinary tourism". By romanticizing them, the actual relations of production can be hidden or completely erased. On the other hand, these elements can reinforce the emotional connection between consumers and producers, which is crucial in establishing reflexive and ethical buying behaviours.

Summary

Conclusions

Back in the 1960s, French theorist Guy Debord (1994) announced that post-industrial societies were turning into cultures based on spectacle, where events, practices and even values acquire full value only when they become images to be consumed and objects of communication. Following Debord's interpretation, which argued that social relations are now filtered and shaped by mass media, Jean Baudrillard analysed contemporary communication as a factory of hyper-reality, of images totally detached from any connection with the reality that they are supposed to represent.

On the other side of the Atlantic, Marshall McLuhan observed how the increased speed of information circulation has turned the whole world into a "global village", a metaphor that found its perfect expression in the contemporary expansion of the World Wide Web on the Internet, where physical distance seems to exert a diminishing impact on social interactions between individual and communities, creating new forms of public spheres of exchange, discussion and even political debate at local, national, and international level. This aspect of globalization imposes an increasingly faster pace not only on communication and media use, but also on all human activities. The philosopher Edward Casey aptly labelled this pervasive phenomenon *dromocentrism*:

Dromocentrism amounts to temporocentrism writ large: not just time but speeded-up time (dromos connotes running, race, racecourse) is of the essence of the era. It is as if the acceleration discovered by Galileo to be inherent in falling bodies has come to pervade the earth (conceived as a single scene of communication), rendering the planet a 'global village' not in a positive sense but as a placeless place indeed.

Casey, Edward S. (1997). *The Fate of Place* (p. xiii). Berkeley: University of California Press.

The lack of a sense of place and the nostalgia for a close connection to specific environments and communities, amplified by the growth of fast global communication, together with the desire for more stable cultural identities, has a fundamental impact on the way food is produced, distributed, consumed, and even disposed of in post-industrial societies. Food producers, even artisanal ones, feel that the survival of their activities and of the traditions in which they are rooted can profit from media exposure on a global level, making their products more popular worldwide, more desirable, and as a consequence marketable at higher prices. In terms of distribution and promotion, access to media often allows the shift of a product from a commodity to a value-added specialty, with obvious advantages for all the parties involved. Due to a lack of direct connection with producers, most consumers acquire information not only about products but also about their

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own food-related traditions and dishes from specialized and general media, TV, and advertising. At the same time, a growing segment of consumers is trying to acquire greater control over their role in the food system by creating relationships with farmers and food producers, sponsoring farmers' markets, and even ordering food directly from the producers through the Internet. It would seem that consumers are learning to beat the media at their own game to break free from the excesses of what Debord aptly labelled "the society of spectacle".

At the same time, activists all over the world have realized how global communication can actually be used to achieve their economic, social, and political goals, especially when they are working on behalf of people who have little or no access to contemporary media. NGOs and international institutions can now easily organize and launch multimedia global campaigns aimed at attracting the attention of public opinion to concerns such as climate change, biodiversity, sustainability and exploitation, to name but a few. In this sense, consumption can become an instrument to involve private citizens into taking action regarding large global issues through their daily choices. For instance, buying fair-trade products has become for many individuals and families in industrialized nations a way to participate in economic and social struggles that otherwise would remain remote and intangible.

In conclusion, while it is important to critically examine and understand contemporary media and their interaction with food, it would be limiting to refuse to use the means that contemporary communication offers in terms of outreach and social action. For this reason, acquiring analytical tools to intervene in global media debates is not only desirable, but also fundamental.

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