Chapter 3
On the Face of Food

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"I do wish we could chat longer, but I'm having an old friend for dinner".
Hannibal Lecter in *The Silence of the Lambs* (Jonathan Demme, 1991)

Abstract Face and food are both essential interfaces of social life. Their intersections in history and cultures are still underexplored. Humans see faces in food, as in the cognitive phenomenon of pareidolia; they turn food into the face of deities, as in Pastafarianism; they create artworks in which food compose faces, like in Arcimboldo; the face of non-human animals turned into food is often concealed, whereas other kinds of food, like the Japanese "character bento" and "chigiri-pan", are anthropomorphized through the attribution of a face. Disquietingly, certain drugs, like the so-called "bath salts", seem to urge users to cannibalize the face of other people. Face turned into food, food turned into face, face removed from food, face instilled in food: what happens, from the semiotic point of view, when food is visually given a face and what, on the opposite, when this face is hidden?

Keywords Face · Food · Semiotics · Exhibition · Occultation · Vegetarianism

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3.1 Sweet Simulacra

Hopefully it will not read inappropriate to begin this article with two personal anecdotes, one from my childhood in Southern Italy and the other one from a more recent past. For Christmas and for Easter, people of Lecce, in Apulia, "the heel of the Italian boot", keep the tradition of eating sweets made out of *pasta di mandorla*, literally "almond paste", which is similar to marzipan but contains more ground almonds and less sugar.[1] For Christmas, pastry shops in the city sell cakes in the shape of fish, whereas for Easter, cakes are sold in the shape of lambs. Both come in different dimensions and some of them are particularly lavish (Figs. 3.1 and 3.2).

A former assistant of my father used to give one to my family as a gift for Christmas and then again for Easter: huge fish and gigantic lambs would then emerge from cardboard trays wrapped in immaculate silky paper and elaborately tied ribbons, their scales and mouths and eyes and tails or, for Easter, their curly fleece and little ears, recreated through delicate strokes of pale chocolate, their profile neatly sculpted into the sweet paste, often filled with pear jam or with *faldacchiera*, a concoction of slowly cooked yoke, pear jam, and chunks of dark chocolate. The most skillful cooks, usually the grannies, would prepare these sweets at home, using molds with the appropriate shape and form, but the best *pasta di mandorla* in Lecce, my hometown, is still made and sold by "le Monache", as locals simply call them, that is, the cloistered Benedictine nuns of the beautiful baroque convent of Saint John the Evangelist, nuns who, like many cloistered devotees in the Catholic world, dedicate themselves to the production of sweets.[2]

Their fish and lambs are, indeed, exquisite; furthermore, buying them through the wheels of the nunnery, that is, the wooden revolving windows through which, for centuries, the pious women have kept secretive and selective contact with the

[1] On the food of Lecce, see Foscarini (1987); Patience Gray, the food writer and author of *Honey From a Weed* (1986), briefly wrote about these cakes (1977: 30); see also Tarantino and Terziani (2010).

[2] For a history of the Convent of the Benedictine nuns of Lecce, see De Meo et al. (2006). Mary Taylor Simeti, the food writer and historian of Sicilian food, wrote a book that recollects the memories and recipes of Maria Grammatico, one of the nuns of the cloistered Istituto San Carlo, Erice, Sicily, also devoted to the production of confections (Grammatico and Simeti 1994). The book, *Bitter Almonds: Recollections and Recipes from a Sicilian Girlhood*, narrates the story of a woman, Maria Grammatico, sent as a child to a cloistered orphanage in Erice, on the western coast of Sicily, where she learned to prepare the handcrafted pastries, especially marzipan confections, that were sold to customers outside the convent walls. As Mary Taylor Simeti points it out in the introduction to her book, the tradition of nuns preparing such sweets might be very old: there is historical evidence that, at the end of the sixteenth century, nuns of the Diocese of Mazara del Vallo, in Sicily, were prohibited to make cassata, the typical Sicilian cake with ricotta and almond paste, during Holy Week, lest the preparations distract them from prayers. Systematic production of confections in cloistered convents, though, began in the 1860s after the newly formed Italian State confiscated the Catholic Church's properties, pushing convents to find revenues in alternative ways, among them the making and selling of almond cakes. The second chapter of Simeti (1986) is devoted to the story of these delicacies.

Fig. 3.1 Almond-paste cake in the shape of fish sold in Lecce for Christmas (From https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Pesce_di_pasta_di_mandorle.jpg. Last accessed 22 November 2019)

Fig. 3.2 Almond-paste cake in the shape of lamb sold in Lecce for Easter (From https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Agnello_pasquale_pasta_mandorle_salentino.jpg. Last accessed 22 November 2019)

world (wheels that were once used also in order to entrust abandoned orphans to the care of the nuns), adds a ceremonial, mysterious, and almost sacred touch to the festive pleasure of purchasing these sweets: from the semi-dark hole in the thick baroque walls of the convent, a shadowy hand emerges, usually old and pale, holding a simple package tied with an ordinary cord.[3] The minimalist wrapping, though, enshrines the best, and also the most expensive, *pasta di mandorla* of Lecce.

The sacredness of the gesture of buying these almond fish and lambs indeed is not diminished by the commercial exchange. As a matter of fact, these cakes are meant to be deeply connected with the two most important Christian festivities, at the beginning and at the end of Jesus's life; their shapes, moreover, are evidently related to Christian iconography: with the fish graffiti that, according to legendary tradition, the still persecuted Christians would draw in the Roman catacombs and in other secret places so as to mark their cryptic religious affiliation (a secretive marking that, by the way, was also adopted by seventeenth-century persecuted Christians in Japan)[4]; but also with the lamb,[5] that is, the sacrificial animal *par excellence* in the Abrahamic religions, an ancestral and probably even pre-monotheistic tradition according to which the fidelity of the religious community to its transcendence is to be periodically reaffirmed through the ritual killing of a member of the group, usually the most defenseless one, so as to symbolically fortify, through the sacrifice of the designated individual, the sacred cohesion of the group.[6]

[3]Carlo Levi, famously author of the novel *Cristo si è fermato a Eboli* [Christ Stopped at Eboli] (1945), describes buying almond-paste cakes from a cloistered convent of Erice in the book *Le parole sono pietre: Tre giornate in Sicilia* [translated as "Words are Stones: Impressions of Sicily"] (Levi 1955): "We wanted to taste the famous cakes of almond paste and the mustazzoli made by the nuns of a cloistered convent. We entered the atrium and expressed our wishes to a sort of shadow behind a double grate and shortly, without any accompanying words, the pastries appeared on the wheel, tender flowers of green and pink and violet and azure, and we left our money in their place" (Engl. trans. 1958: 165).

[4]See Stroumsa (1992) and Rasimus (2012); on Japan, see Leone (2018c).

[5]See Nikolasch (1965), Skaggs and Doyle (2009), De Lang and Marijke (2017), and Benarroch (2019).

[6]Furthermore, as pointed out by Tarantino and Terziani (2010): "In the Christian tradition the almond is a symbol for the soul, and its oval shape encircles holy figures in medieval imagery. When nuns in Sicilian convents use finely ground almonds for their feats of confectionery, we can experience the incarnation of the spiritual raised to the nth degree" (49).

3.2 Sweet Sacrifices

Only the group that is able to sacrifice one of its own members will be able to secure the favor of the deity.[7] Yet, in monotheisms as well as in other religious traditions, the mechanical force of the human sacrifice is replaced by the symbolical force of the animal sacrifice. The animal is offered to the deity because its spiritual appetite is molded after that of its human devotees, but also because, through the animal, a replacement takes place.[8] The animal is, indeed, a simulacrum. In many ancient cultures, and to a lesser extent also in the present-day societies, the non-human animal is not given the same dignity of a human. It is used as food, but even as food, its primary purpose is to allow the displacement of tension and conflict within the community: eating non-human animals, but even more sacrificing non-human animals, avoids the tragic embarrassment of seeing a fellow human being, a member of one's own community, as the next meal, or the next sacrificial victim, and avoids also the risky endeavor of finding material and symbolical food through war. In the sublimation of the human sacrifice, as well as in the sublimation of cannibalism, the human community creates, in the topology of its spiritual space, a meta-level, in which both the starving of humans and that of the deity can be appeased without resorting to human bloodshed. Killing non-human animals might indeed be the most fundamental traditional instrument of social cohesion.

When families of Lecce gather together for the lavish festive meals of Christmas and Easter, they eat and drink through extravagant banquets, which culminate in the apical moment when someone, usually the father, unwraps the white package, discloses the wonderful sweet animal inside, either a perfectly carved fish or a perfectly carved lamb, and presents it to the family: at this moment, exclamations of marvel ensue, if the simulacrum appears as well shaped and colored, but also manifestations of hilarity burst, when some home-made almond fish or lambs manifest the countenance of bulky whales or bulls, due to the poor artistic skills of the local granny.[9]

The shape is, indeed, important. In traditional southern Italian families, as in many traditional families across the religions of the book around the Mediterranean, a true sacrifice would take place for Easter. Christian housewives in Lecce would try to secure, often weeks in advance, the youngest suckling lamb from the local butcher; some would even choose it directly at the farm, and then wait for Easter so as to bake it and offer it to the family as the main dish of the ritual meal. That killing, cooking, and eating of the little animal was in line with a millenary tradition of sacrifice, replacing the innocent child with the innocent lamb, and quenching,

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[7]Literature on sacrifice is extensive. Among the most recent and relevant contributions, see Murray (2016), Alison and Palaver (2017), Pesthy-Simon (2017), Foraboschi (2018), and Terrin (2019).

[8]See García Fernández et al. (2015) and Van Straten and Folkert (2016).

[9]The hilarious Facebook page "Agnelli di pasta di mandorle brutti" collects images of these missshapen sweets.

through the killing, the material and symbolical thirst of the deity, which is nothing but a counterpart of the symbolical thirst of the community.

3.3 A Semiotics of Sacrifice

As the meta-level of the animal sacrifice would sublimate, thus, the basic level of the human ritual killing and eating, so the communal eating of the lamb-shaped almond cake would take the sacrifice to a third meta-level. Whereas anthropologists study these superimposing dimensions through gathering evidence about their ethnological and social instantiations,[10] the semiotician is rather interested in the language of sacrifice: what signs are necessary, so that the sacrifice maintains its identity, even in a sublimated sphere?[11] At each meta-level of sublimation, indeed, the semiotic setting of the sacrifice loses some properties while acquiring some other features. The sacrificed animal shares with the sacrificed human two essential characteristics, which are life and motility. The two are connected: animals use their motility exactly to prolong their lives, seeking either to chase food or to escape being chased as food[12] Life, in turn, can be defined in relation to motility: everything that, in the universe, prolongs its existence by purposefully moving through space, is alive.

Sacrificed animals, like sacrificed humans, add to the symbolic efficacy of the ritual exactly because they would rather escape, and exert their motility so as to run away from the priest, or from the butcher, so prolonging their, the animals', lives. The energy of the sacrifice is due to this resistance, an energy that would be lessened, or even disappear, should the animal victim be replaced with an inert one. Religions are rarely interested in the sacrifice of plants. Vegetables and fruits are offered to the deities in many religions but are not properly sacrificed to them. That is because vegetables too purposefully move in the environment so as to prolong their lives, for instance through stretching their roots in search of water or their leaves in search of light; yet, the degree of this motility is lesser than that of animals not only quantitatively, but also qualitatively: vegetables do not make good sacrificial victims not only because they can move in space but not through space, and could not, as a consequence, seek to escape from the sacrificial knife; indeed, the qualitative nature of their motility is also different: they purposefully move in space so as to seek more nutrients, but they do not do so intentionally.[13]

Indeed, the more capable of intentionality a victim is, the more powerful the sacrifice. Christianity has stretched this equation so far as to instituting its entire theological identity around the figure of a self-sacrificing god: a plant cannot escape

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[10]Among the most recent contributions, see (Kitts 2018).

[11]For a sketch of semiotic typology, see Hastings (2003) and Janowitz (2011).

[12]For a theoretical introduction to a biosemiotics of motility, see Leone (2012).

[13]For a semiotic perspective on intentionality, see Leone and Zhang (2017).

ritual killing; a non-human animal can; a human can even, contrarily to most animals, voluntarily decide to die in sacrifice, hence the symbolical powerfulness of martyrs for the shaping of a spiritual community[14]; but nothing can beat the paradoxical image of an omnipotent god that lets his own son offer himself in sacrifice: that is the ultimate sacrificial scenario, because it combines the highest potentiality of resistance to death with the humblest acceptance of it. It is a sacrifice that epitomizes the Christian idea of community.

3.4 Sacrifice and Sacred Face

The lamb-shaped almond cakes of Lecce do not emanate the same symbolical aura; they cannot move, suffer, or try to escape, and offer themselves placidly to the knife of the father. Yet, if they are just a sweet but inert ersatz of living lambs they are, nevertheless, symbolically more than simple objects. Their being shaped in the effigy of lambs, indeed, turns them into strange creatures, into artifacts that, while being deprived of purposefulness and motility, like plants, and even more of intentionality and motility, like animals, and even beyond that, of language and motility, like humans and humanoid deities, lamb-shaped almond cakes are, nevertheless, endowed with agency.[15] The sacrificial potential of such cakes is lesser than that of the animals that they, the cakes, represent, which is lesser than that of the humans that they, the animals, replace, which is lesser than that of the gods that they, the humans, imagine. Yet, these cakes are better sacrificial victims than plants. The former, by virtue of their shape and iconic resemblance to the animal victims they stand for, can exert a symbolical action that is precluded to the latter. The main hypothesis of this chapter is that such symbolical action, and the sacrificial potential that it underpins, is strictly related to the iconic emergence of a face, which is in turn complexly related with the iconic emergence of a gaze, which is in turn also related with the emergence of some eyes.

Again, some anecdotal evidence will lead to the formulation of such hypothesis. When I was a child, my father would make the first cut to the almond-made fish, or to the almond-made lamb, and this initial cut would always be inflicted at the central part of the animal body, right in the belly. My mother would jokingly say that my father, a mighty sugar-eater, would do so in order to get the thicker slices, replete with pear jam, but, in reality, nobody in Lecce would cut these cakes starting from the head. Once that I, still a child, jokingly decapitated one of these sugary lambs, I was scolded by my mother. That was not supposed to be done, I was told.[16] There were even superstitions, if I remember well, related to eliminating the head of

[14] See Leone (2018b).

[15] See the classic Gell (1998).

[16] In Christianity, beheading is inflicted on many martyrs, including Saint John the Baptist, but not to Jesus; cfr Baert and Rochmes (2017).

one of these sweet effigies too soon. On the contrary, one was supposed to keep cutting from the middle towards the head and the tail, until these cakes were actually turned into monsters composed of head and tail only, like those that swarm in the paintings of Bosch. Indeed, in Italian as in English, people say of something that "non ha né capo né coda", "neither head nor tail", to point at its indecipherability. More precisely, this way of cutting the cake was instrumental to preserve its gestalt and, most importantly, the face of the effigy.

3.5 En-visaging and De-facing

A general research field that an ERC project of mine currently explores is the dialectics between, on one hand, visual processes of *en-visaging*, as I call the semiotic operation of attributing a visage to something or someone, and *de-facing*, as I call the opposite semiotic operation of eliminating something's or someone's face. In my mind, this dialectic is related to the one between anthropological practices of humanization and de-humanization. This both visual and socio-cultural dynamic is central, I believe, also in the complex symbolic domain that connects food, sacrifice, and the community.

What are, then, the relations between face and food? First, a face can hardly become food, for two reasons mainly. On the one hand, most cultures and their respective languages do not conceive of edible vegetables and non-human animals as being endowed with a face. A face is attributed to vegetables only in specific circumstances that do not normally include eating them; carrots, zucchinis, eggplants are not usually "seen" by cultures as having faces, although, as we shall see, they can be given one under special conditions, as it famously happens with pumpkins for Halloween; as regards non-human animals, most cultures distinguish, also in language, between the face of a human and the equivalent of a non-human animal, for the designation of which usually another word is used, like "muzzle" in English or "muso" in Italian. A muzzle is a kind of a face but it is also less than it: it is a face stripped of the phenomenological, aesthetic, and especially ethical aura that characterizes faces; that is why, when we want to ethically "promote" a non-human animal, we start consider its muzzle as a face, as it commonly occurs with pets. The converse is also true: when we want to demote a human being, we start consider her or his face as a muzzle, as it is the case of several idiomatic expressions in many languages, such as, in Italian, "brutto muso", literally, "ugly muzzle". In Italian it can be said of animals, and even of human beings, although usually of women, that they have a "bel musetto", literally, a "nice muzzle", but a "brutto muso" is normally attributed to humans with derogatory intents. In any case, humanized animals usually receive a face, whereas dehumanized human beings usually receive a muzzle.

In both circumstances, however, edibility is not an option. Neither a face nor, to a lesser and different extent, a muzzle can be eaten, because what they designate is usually not simply a part of the body but the phenomenology of it in social

interaction, resulting from the exposition and arrangement of this body part, that is, the frontal side of the head, to others, or to a mirror, or even to an imaginary other (as it occurs when we modify our face while talking to ourselves). Hence, the face cannot be eaten not only because it is human, for the muzzle cannot be properly eaten either. Neither of them can be eaten because they are intrinsically alive: a face, indeed, emerges from the conjunction of a head, with all its component, and life. Thus, it is actually the head of a person or of a non-human animal that can be eaten, or even the components that cultures and languages single out in such heads, like mouths, ears, eyes, chins, cheeks, or even inside of heads, like tongues or brains; the difference between eating a head and eating a face is very similar, although not identical, to the difference between eating an eye and eating a gaze: some food cultures turn eyes into food, but gazes can be eaten only metaphorically and, actually, they more often take an active part in the metaphor; we can say of someone that she or he eats someone else with her or his gaze, but rarely the opposite is said: nobody's gaze is usually eaten by nobody, for the simple reason that eating something *ipso facto* implies the end of its motility, intentionality, and life, so that eating something that is alive expresses a paradoxical and, as a consequence, extreme possibility in food cultures.

Indeed, the more cognitively, emotionally, and pragmatically complex a living being is, the less socially acceptable it is to turn it into food while it is alive. Whereas fruits are eaten when they are technically still alive, although with the kind of life that can be imputed to vegetables, only in rare circumstances are animals, including non-human animals, eaten alive. In cannibalism, the human body is usually already dead when it is turned into food, also for a living human would probable resist its being turned into an edible matter; incidentally, that also introduces a difference between normalized cannibalism and abnormal cannibalism: Hannibal the cannibal, as well as vampires, disconcert not only because they feed on human flesh and blood, but also because in many cases this happens when the victim is still alive, moving, and suffering.

Disquietingly but interestingly, moreover, certain drugs, like the so-called "bath salts", seem to urge users to cannibalize the face of other people. More commonly, some non-human animals are also sometimes eaten alive, for instance worms in certain kinds of ultra-fermented cheese, octopuses in some particularly extreme Japanese recipes, or molluscs; in all these cases, though, the faces of what we eat are not seen or they are barely so. With the exclusion of these abnormal exceptions, though, what cultures eat is not normally faces as actuality but faces as potentiality, dead faces that cannot be used as faces anymore and in which, moreover, the capacity of acting as faces is downplayed or eliminated.

3.6 Heads

What many food cultures eat, indeed, is heads, not faces. The face disappears not only when the head is stripped of its life and, therefore, its expressive potential, but also as a consequence of cooking. A face is supported by a skeletal structure but its own substance must be fleshy and malleable, exactly for the purpose of moulding itself into many expressions. Although it is exactly this soft, expressive substance that cultures sometimes turn into food, they systematically transform it before doing so. Cultures eat skin, and sometimes they even consume it without separating it from its flesh, but that is rarely done with heads. Many traditional societies eat mutton heads, for instance, yet when we see these heads, when they are cooked or even when they are on display in a butchery, ready to be cooked, what we see is usually a bloody conjunction of skull, tendons, muscles, and facial organs that hardly let the idea of a proper face emerge.

There is a complex but systematic relation between the transition of societies into modernity and the inclination to turn heads into food. In many modern societies, eaters are displeased or even disgusted at the sight of heads of non-human animals turned into raw food (like mutton heads); they are disquieted at the sight of animals turned into food and served with their head visible; and, in most cases, they would never accept eating the head or the facial parts of a non-human animal. On the one hand, this rejection of the head as food shows some latent hypocrisy. Once I was in a Piedmontese restaurant with Umberto Eco. In traditional Piedmont restaurants, as in many other parts of world, the tongue is still eaten, for instance in the famous "bollito misto". As one of the diners, a lady, would protest that she would never eat a tongue because it had previously been in the mouth of an animal, Eco yelled at the waiter: "Waiter, that is disgusting, we cannot eat something that was in the mouth of an animal; please, bring us eggs instead!".

I must say, however, that having spent much of my pre-vegan time in Iranian contexts, where the tongue is a delicacy and is often prepared with many different recipes, what mostly puzzled me while eating it was not its previous location, but its previous function: that tongue had been not only part of a mouth but also part of a face, meaning that it was instrumental to create its expression, and it was now turned into food and chewed into my own mouth by my own tongue. This kind of considerations are recurrent in present-day reactions to the prospect of eating what many pre-modern food cultures would eat without too much perplexity: not only heads, then, but also tongues, chins, cheeks, ears, whole muzzles, and even eyes.

3.7 A Patterned Geography of Head-Eating

A complex but patterned geography of face-eating can then be drawn, depending on how societies relate to the idea and the practice of feeding on head- and facial parts. Such map should be not only spatial but also temporal, and take into account differences in terms of class and gender.

Khash (Armenian: խաշAzerbaijani: xaş; Georgian: ხაშიKhashi), *pacha* (Persian: پاچه;Albanian: paçe; Arabic: باجة;Bosnian: pače; Bulgarian: пача;Greek: πατσάς),*kalle-pache* (Persian: کلهپاچه;Turkish: kelle paça), *kakaj šürpi* (Chuvash: какай шӳрпи)or *serûpê* (Sorani Kurdish: سه روپێ)is a dish of boiled cow or sheep parts, which often includes the head. It is a traditional dish in Afghanistan, Albania, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Georgia, Greece, Iran, Iraq, Mongolia, and Turkey, but with different popularity in the present-day societies of these countries.

Whereas the heads of *kalle-pache* are still commonly on display in a busy street of present-day Iran, Italians would now mostly be squeamish about the public offer of animal heads. Compare, for instance, the way in which a popular Italian website of recipes, *Cuoca a tempo perso*, present two lamb heads in one of its pages.[17] The juxtaposition of the smiling face of the cook and author, touching her cheeks in a relaxed posture, and the decorticated heads of two little lambs in the recipe picture, should indeed be shocking, but the contrast is somehow anesthetized by the Instagram-like composition of the ingredients: the two heads harmonically arranged on a perfectly white chopping board, with no stains of blood whatsoever; the gentle touch given by the display of innocent herbs, both in a traditional basket and beside the heads; even the Italian name of these body-parts, which in the title of the recipe are not called "teste", that is, "heads", but "testine", that is, with a diminutive form, "little heads", as though to beautify the beheading of the two kids. Despite this edulcorating presentation, though, the writer feels urged to explain:

> The baked little head of lamb is a classic of Italian regional food and among the recipes that are a little hard: old flavors, by now forgotten, which we rarely reproduce at home. A little bit because of the difficulty of finding the ingredients, but above all [we can say it], because we are squeamish about eating certain kinds of food. This special ingredient, though, is a stronghold of poor food, where nothing is thrown away and little is needed to turn a very poor kind of food into a King. Offer it to the table the day of Easter together with the rest of the lamb and certainly you will find some aficionados.[18]

[17] http://www.cuocaatempoperso.com/2018/03/testina-di-agnello-al-forno-con-erbe.html (last accessed 22 November 2019).

[18] "La testina di Agnello al forno e' [sic] un classico di tutte le cucine regionali e le cucine un pò [sic] hard: vecchi sapori oramai dimenticati che raramente rifacciamo nelle nostre case. Un po' forse diciamo per la reperibilità di prodotti ma soprattutto perché (si può dire) ci fa senso mangiare certi alimenti.

Pero' [sic] da sempre questi alimenti cosi [sic] particolari sono stati un caposaldo delle cucine povere dove non si butta nulla e dove basta poco per far diventare Re un alimento molto povero.

That, however, might not be true in present-day Italy anymore. Lamb eating is being increasingly stigmatized. This traditional food is more and more avoided even during Easter banquets. Offering lamb heads to family and friends over Easter lunch might be severely frowned upon. Indeed, more and more, the West wants to conceal the face of animals while eating their meat, especially if such animals, as in the case of lamb, are unanimously considered as “cute”. An aristocracy of beauty, indeed, reigns also among non-human animals. Moreover, whereas the indexical link between meat and the animal bodies whence it stems is concealed through packaging,[19] the packaging of heads and faces as meat is increasingly rare, and judged as a monstrosity in most present-day post-modern societies.

3.8 Conclusions

Turned into an instrument of cultural semiotics, though, this map should lead to more general questions than the simple distribution of taste and distaste across history and geography. The fact that a society stops eating the head and facial parts of non-human animals, especially of mammals but also of birds and fish, reveals a deeper trend, which is at the same time aesthetic and ethical. On the one hand, societies tolerate less and less being reminded that what they are eating used to be alive and have a face; on the other hand, this hypocritical removal of the face from food is complexly linked with the decline of the idea of food as sacrificial matter, as sacred matter, and as the centre of a spiritual and ritual practice. With modernity, human cultures seem to repress more and more the idea that, when eating non-human animals, they are actually using them as sacrificial ersatz of human beings. Eating animals is what allow humans not to feed on each other, yet the unconscious cultural inclination to strip animals of everything that they have in common with humans, and therefore primarily of their faces, is instrumental to this practice of substitution and repression. The part of humanity that is in animals is eliminated so that the part of animality that is in humans may be preserved. Vegetarians and even vegans though are not immune from this symbolic circle, which is the cultural expression of the biological necessity of feeding life with life: outside of the sphere of language, this necessity is just part of the fabric of nature, yet within language, and therefore within cultures, the natural need of feeding life with life immediately turns into the cultural tragedy of having to feed life with death. Since our birth, we survive thanks to the death of other previously living beings, but modern individualism cannot cope with this sense of dependence, which in pre-modern and especially spiritual cultures would give rise to a whole series of rituals and practices meant to appease the mourning of food, for instance through

Mettetela in tavola il giorno di Pasqua insieme al resto dell'agnello e troverete sicuramente qualche appassionato”.

[19]For a thorough examination of the semiotics of meat and fish packaging, see Leone (2018a).

praying before, while, and even after producing or consuming food, or through ritual fasting.[20]

The post-modern society celebrates food more and more; it turns the production of food into a feast, its consumption into a joy, its refinement into a cult. Everything that reminds eaters of the part of death that inevitably food entails is repressed, removed, concealed. The face of animals disappears. It reappears only in simulacrum, as a fiction, to nervously reassure eaters that they are feeding on the image of a face, and not on a face itself. The post-modern society celebrates food more and more, and it should continue to do so. After all, eating is what allows us to be, both in nature and in culture. Yet, one is left wondering whether societies should also, to a certain extent, mourn food, and while accepting the impossibility of eliminating the death of food from the food of life, acknowledging it. Acknowledge the suffering that our food is made of, that our bodies are made of, that even our thoughts are made of. That would perhaps partly diminish the arrogant modern pleasure of treating food as simple matter, but would remind eaters that what they eat in food is not only materiality, but also spirituality, the spirituality of what had to stop being so that we might continue being, of life that ended so that life might continue.

If that is not a definition of what a sacrifice is, then what is?

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[20]See Leone (2013).

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