

FOOD, IDEOLOGY AND CRITICAL SEMIOTICS¹

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ABSTRACT: Food is intrinsically related to ideology. This is evident since the very definition of “edibility”, with different cultures selecting, within a wide range of products with nutritional capacity, a more or less large quantity destined to become, for them, “food”. And it is further remarked by the extreme variation characterising taste and “eatability”, as well as by the broad range of possible systems of classification and categorization of food, based on the most diverse principles. Food choices and practices, in other terms, can be seen as acts of signification allowing people to establish and sustain their identities. These acts, as well as the multiple cultural representations that support and are supported by them, serve as vehicles through which ideological expectations are circulated, enforced, and transgressed. This papers deals with these crucial issues from a semiotic point of view, resulting in the identification of the main aspects that should characterise a critical approach to food and food ideologies.

KEYWORDS: Food; Ideology; Myth; Meaning; Critical Semiotics.

A gourmet challenged me to eat
A tiny bit of rattlesnake meat,
Remarking, “Don’t look horror-stricken,
You’ll find it tastes a lot like chicken.”
It did.
Now chicken I cannot eat
Because it tastes like rattlesnake meat.

Ogden Nash, *Rattlesnake Meat* (1968)

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1. Edibility, eatability, and ideology

Like clothing, urban artefacts and other aspects of everyday life, eating is not only one of the primary human needs, but also a system of signification and communication. As Roland Barthes effectively pointed out in his fundamental essay *Toward a Psychosociology of Contemporary Food Consumption* (1961, p. 21–5), food represents a “sign” through and through, since it is highly structured and involves substances, practices, habits, and techniques of preparation and consumption in a system of differences in meaning. Far from simply entailing material needs or physiological processes, in fact, food concerns all the activities, discourses, and images that surround and are associated with it (Pezzini 2006; Volli 2021).

As such, it is intrinsically related to *ideology*:

Just as there are political ideologies which express beliefs concerning how people ought to behave in social relationships, so there are food ideologies which explain how they are to conduct themselves with regard to eating behaviour. Food ideology is *the sum of the attitudes, beliefs and customs and taboos affecting the diet of a given group*. It is what people think of as food; what effect they think food will have on their health and what they think is suitable for different ages and groups (Eckstein, 1980). (Fieldhouse 2013, p. 30, our emphasis)

Such a reflection evidently recalls Umberto Eco’s definition of ideology as a *system of knowledge*, that is to say, as a system of assumptions, beliefs and expectations, which interacts with a message (in the case we are considering, a food product, habit or any other “alimentary text” — in Volli’s terms (2021) —, also including the domain of food representation and communication) and determines the choice of codes through which to decode it (cf. Eco 1968, p. 93–4).

In fact, this is evident since the very definition of “edibility”. Every culture selects, within a wide range of products with nutritional capacity, a more or less large quantity destined to become, for such culture, “food”. In most Asian countries, for instance, people consume larvae, locusts and other insects. In Peru it is common to farm guinea pigs and llamas and eat their meat. Several Australian inhabitants habitually consume snakes or kangaroos. By contrast, these substances are generally considered inedible — or, if anything, “non-edible” — by most

Western eaters. In fact, as mentioned above, although we eat, first of all, to survive, in the cultural domain food assumes meanings that transcend its basic function and affect people's perceptions of edibility (Danesi 2004, p. 194).

What is more, a subtle, yet crucial, nuance of meaning distinguishes what is *edible* from what is *eatable*: while the former is defined by its safety ("safe to ingest", Merriam–Webster 2022), with no further indications, the latter is characterised by an explicit reference to how it tastes ("at least palatable or tolerable to the taste", *ibidem*), and therefore more markedly involves aesthetic, ethical and sociocultural dynamics.

This leads to a crucial consideration: undoubtedly food habits, preferences and taboos are partially regulated by ecological and material factors, as defended by cultural materialism (see in particular Harris 1985). However, all food systems are structured and given particular functioning mechanisms by specific societies and cultures: our biological need for nourishment is inserted in a system of values, and, either according to totemic logics (Lévi–Strauss 1962), sacrificial mechanisms (Détienne and Vernant 1979), hygienic–rationalist standards (as in Western dietetics), or aesthetic principles (as in gastronomy, cf. Stano 2019a), all cultures classify products with nutritional capacity as edible or inedible² (Stano 2015b), eatable or uneatable³. Choices are made which are assertions of identity (Back 1977), as testified by the fact that even in the same ecological environment, with similar technological resources at their disposal, different groups are likely to make different choices among the available resources (Fieldhouse 2013), preferring some products over others.

It is in this sense that, recalling Lotman's reflections (see in particular Lotman 1984), we can describe the food universe as a "foodsphere" (Stano 2015a) — or, better, as a system of interconnected foodspheres — to highlight the inherently cultural and semiotic nature of food choices, habits, practices and rituals. Exactly like the semiosphere, each foodsphere is characterised by peripheral spaces, where new elements can be accepted in signifying dynamics, and core areas, where the dominant systems are located. The relationship between the core

2. In this respect, it is particularly interesting to recall Eleanor F. Eckstein's (1980) distinction between "food" (what is deemed edible and is therefore eaten) and "poison" (what is not).

3. As interestingly exemplified by the processes of signification associated with disgust and its resemantisation in contemporary cultures (see Mazzocut–Mis 2015; Stano 2019b).

and the periphery is incessantly negotiated, with peripheral elements moving toward the centre and interacting with the main components according to rules changing over time. Such “movements” and the specific “rules” regulating food systems are usually unwritten and tend to remain unperceived, until they are broken or faced with otherness. In fact, research has shown that exposure to unfamiliar food is likely to bring forms of ethnocentrism to the fore:

Food habits are an integral part of cultural behaviour and are often closely identified with particular groups, sometimes in a derogatory or mocking way. So, the French are ‘Frogs’, the Germans are ‘Krauts’, the Italians are ‘Spaghetti eaters’ and the British, ‘Limeys’. (Fieldhouse 2013, p. 31)

In this sense, as Igor L. de Garine (1976, p. 168) suggested, forms of ridicule and even xenophobia displayed with regard to food products and habits can be seen precisely as a criterion for determining the limits of cultures, and showing the silent work of ideologies.

However, as Claude Fischler (1990) interestingly observed, if on the one hand, we tend to fear the risks associated with new foods (*neophobia*), opting for prudence and resistance to change, on the other hand we suffer from a sort of biological need for food variety, which drives us to adapt to environmental changes and explore a multitude of new foods and diets (*neophilia*). Such a contradictory condition (which the French scholar describes as the “omnivore’s paradox”) is particularly evident in contemporary societies, where migratory flows, tourism and media systems have made the processes of translation across different food cultures become increasingly evident and consistent, affecting much faster than in the past the local foodspheres and becoming part of them (Stano 2015a). Hence, the distinction between the global and the local dimension has progressively blurred, making recognised meanings and identities no longer clearly defined, but rather expressed through several and multiple (re)interpretations (Matejowsky 2007, p. 37; Stano 2020; Sedda and Stano 2022).

Nevertheless, while exposure to other food cultures can broaden cultural relativism and openness toward alterity, it might also foster new forms of closeness and rejection. The importance attributed on *authenticity* in contemporary foodspheres is emblematic in this sense. While ethnic restaurants and shops are increasing in number, and in many

city markets local products are complemented with spices, vegetables and other foods required for the preparation of exotic dishes, people's interest in "authentic" food products and experiences has also evidently raised. According to Alan Warde (2000), in fact, seeking authentic replication of dishes from foreign cuisines is a basic attitude towards ethnic food and its diffusion. However, as David Grazian (2003) effectively pointed out, authenticity is a "network of commodified signs, social relations, and meanings" (p. 17), that is to say, an idealised representation of reality — in semiotic terms, an effect of meaning. Hence, the food-sphere is in constant transformation and re-definition, through more or less gradual or "explosive" (cf. Lotman 1992) processes that mediate between boosts and resistances to change, incessantly re-writing the meanings and values associated with food.

Such dynamics concern not only the selection of edible substances and their "palatability" (that is to say, their ascription to the realm of "eatable" products), but also the classification of such products in specific categories or classes, based on nutritional values, cultural habits, emotional importance, or a combination of these criteria. Several scholars have insisted on the cultural determination of the process of categorisation of food. Derek Jelliffe (1967), for instance, highlighted the contribution of religion, economics and sociocultural factors in modelling food behaviour, suggesting a distinction among "cultural superfoods" (i.e. the main staple foods of a society, regularly involved in its religious rituals and myths), "prestige foods" (rare and expensive, reserved for important occasions or people), "body-image foods" (contributing to health by maintaining a balance in the body), "sympathetic magic foods" (thought to have special properties which are "incorporated" by those who eat them), and "physiologic group foods" (limited to people of a particular age, sex, or physiological condition). Similarly, Schutz, Ruckerand and Russell (1975) identified four common food-use factors (i.e. utilitarian, casual, satiating and social) based on people's personal judgements, stressing that the material dimension is only one of the multiple aspects underlying food taxonomies. Bass, Wakefield and Kolassa (1979) then suggested that foods can be categorised according to their actual use by the body, their actual use in society, and their perceived use by the body and in society, further insisting on the sociocultural dynamics affecting any system of classification.

What is more, scientific categories have also progressively come into

play in such a process of categorisation, especially in Western food-spheres (Messer 1984), giving rise to a real “ideology of nutritionism”:

Nutrition scientists, dieticians, and public health authorities — the nutrition industry, for short — have implicitly or explicitly encouraged us to think about foods in terms of their nutrient composition, to make the connection between particular nutrients and bodily health, and to construct “nutritionally balanced” diets on this basis. ... *This focus on nutrients has come to dominate, to undermine, and to replace other ways of engaging with food and of contextualizing the relationship between food and the body.* Nutritionism is the dominant paradigm within nutrition science itself, and frames much professional — and government — endorsed dietary advice. But over the past couple of decades nutritionism has been co-opted by the food industry and has become a powerful means of marketing their products. (Scrinis 2008, p. 39, our emphasis)

As we remarked in Stano (2021), the nutritional dimension, which in itself would not constitute an alimentary text (Marrone 2016, p. 188) has thus become the main criterion for assessing the edibility and even the eatability of food, in a reductionist process based on the de-contextualisation, simplification and exaggeration of the role of nutrients. Hence, as Marino Niola (2015) puts it, “while once we were the ones making our diet, now it is our diet that makes us” (our translation) — neglecting that dietetics should not eliminate but rather organise food-stuffs; it should not prohibit but rather regulate food choices; it should not restrict but rather direct one’s possibilities (cf. Marrone 2019).

Finally, it should be remembered that not only food products, but also their practices of preparation and consumption (or abstention) are minutely ruled in every culture, even in the most familiar and informal meal: a number of class, gender, economic, social and cultural aspects intervene on such dynamics, and it would be very difficult, or in any case extremely artificial, to apply the same set of rules inherent in a certain culture to another one. As Claude Lévi–Strauss (1965) interestingly remarked, not only there is a correlation between certain oppositions related to food, such as raw *vs.* cooked, and the semantic oppositions, such as Nature *vs.* Culture⁴, but also the practices and rituals related to eating reveal the social and cultural characterisation of food, which reaches its full satisfaction in public environments, relying on a

4. For a detailed discussion of the Lévi–Straussian model, see in particular Stano 2015b.

process of “civilization” (of appetite, as discussed by Elias (1939), and also of manners, techniques, aesthetics, etc.) that cannot be disregarded. As Volli observed,

in order to be meaningful, every food system should be “ours” and not “theirs”: we cook and eat this way, at this time, in this order, with these ingredients and without those others — because *this* is the polite way, the right recipe, and because *this* food is tasty, while others are disgusting. ... Every way of feeding tells us first of all something about the differential identity of the people choosing it. In this sense, nutrition is a self-oriented marker, and an identification device. (2015, p. xiv)

2. Language, communication, and contact

Based on the elements outlined above, food has been often compared to language. Lévi–Strauss, for instance, referred to cooking as a “language in which [every society] unconsciously translates its structure” (1965, Engl. Trans. 1997, p. 35). Several other scholars have emphasised this aspect also in relation to other dimensions of the foodsphere, claiming that, exactly as language, food allows us to express our values, beliefs, morals, etc. — in other words, our “cultural identity”. Furthermore, it is a powerful means of communication with other people, and one of the most immediate way through which we can come into contact with other cultures (Montanari 2006).

Increasing efforts have been therefore devoted to the analysis of the constituent elements of the “food language” (as well exemplified by Lévi–Strauss’ (1958) reflections upon the concept of “gusteme”), as well as to the understanding of the structures of opposition and correlation according to which they are organised — that is to say, the specific “grammars” underlying the food code. Moreover, particular attention has been paid to its “processes of translation” (Stano 2015a): being food not a random assemblage of elements, but rather a unified and coherent system, its passage across different systems tend to imply operations of filtering and domestication, which have relevant consequences on the level of meaning-making and, more specifically, on the recognition and valorisation of otherness. Massimo Montanari (2006) provided an interesting example of such dynamics referring to the 15th and 16th century European explorers and conquerors’ attitude toward the gas-

tronomic universe of the so-called New World. Confronted with new food sources and experiences, they found it hard to theoretically ‘classify’ them, and so “filtered” them through their own criteria and habits. In the anonymous *Relatione d’alcune cose della Nuova Spagna, & della gran città di Temistitan Messicò. Fatta per un gentil’huomo del Signor Fernando Cortese* (1556), for instance, *maize* is presented as “a grain like a chickpea” that sows cobs “like panic-grass”, while *tortillas* are described as a “kind of bread”, and turkey is defined as a “big chicken like a peacock”, thus persistently referring to the Mediterranean culinary tradition with which the author was familiar. And even from the practical point of view the acceptance of these new foods in the European context remained for a long time absolutely marginal, as proved by the case of potatoes: easily accepted in regions characterised by a soil ill-fitted for the cultivation of wheat or rye, the American tuber was mostly rejected or submitted to treatments aiming at integrating it into the process of bread making in France, where bread represented an unavoidable element of people’s life, both on the material side (as it was the main ingredient of soups and other dishes, prevailing on meats and cold cuts) and the symbolic dimension (with particular reference to Christianity). It was only at a later stage that it was introduced as a new *cultivar* in those regions and increasingly adopted on European tables (see Poulain 1984; 2002).

Such mechanisms have further increased in modern and contemporary societies, where the multiple modes of interaction of the economic, political, social and cultural spheres have come to affect food-related matters, and these in turn to influence the former, “in a series of on-going dialectical relations characterized by the constant generation of forms of complexity” (Inglis and Gimlin 2009, p. 9). Such processes do not merely involve food products, but also embrace the systems of valorisation and meaning-making related to the foodsphere:

When he buys an item of food, consumes it, or serves it, modern man does not manipulate a simple object in a purely transitive fashion; this item of food sums up and transmits a situation; it constitutes an information; it signifies. (Barthes 1961, Engl. Trans. 1997, p. 29).

What is more, the last decades have seen a boom in the representation of food and foodways, resulting in a diffused “gastromania” (Marrone 2014), namely the “era of celebrity chef worship, culinary boot camps,

lush food magazine spreads, gastroporn imagery on television and in film, stores selling nothing but cookbooks, and heavily travelled chow-bound websites” (LeBesco and Naccarato 2008, p. 1). Not only do we eat food, but also and above all we talk about it, we comment on it, and we share its images on various social networks, thus investing it with multiple meanings and values that in turn mediate our gastronomic experiences. Therefore, the ideological characterisation of food has become increasingly evident, calling the attention of several scholars from different fields. We will consider in the following paragraph the main aspects related to the semiotic analysis of this issue, focusing on both the level of general reflection on ideology as a process of signification and its specific application to the food domain.

3. Food, myth, and ideology

Since the first structuralist studies on food symbolism (see in particular Lévi-Strauss 1964, 1966, 1968, 1971; Douglas 1966; 1972; 1984), different facets of the sociocultural characterisation and connotation of food have been explored and described, recalling crucial aspects related with what we have described as the ideological dimension of food. More specifically, Roland Barthes repeatedly asserted the importance of food-related practices as acts of signification allowing people to establish and sustain their identities. “These acts — and the broad range of cultural representations that support and are supported by them”, as LeBesco and Naccarato (2008) remarked, “also serve as vehicles through which ideological expectations are circulated, enforced, and transgressed” (p. 1).

Barthes insisted precisely on food and its representations in his famous work *Mythologies* (1957), where myth is described as a “second-order semiological system” or “metalanguage”, which exalts certain values and narcotizes others, thus naturalizing specific visions of the world. In such a view, mythology “is a part both of semiology inasmuch as it is a formal science, and of ideology inasmuch as it is an historical science: it studies ideas-in-form” (Engl. Trans. 1972, p. 111). The French semiologist, in other words, places ideology on the level of the processes of meaning-making, and more precisely of connotation, highlighting the process of deformation of the denotative meaning

operated by the mythical discourse and denouncing the parasitic and deceptive character of this operation. By transforming history into nature, myth converts the reality of the world, which is historical and contingent, into a “natural” and “eternal” image of the world: it “is read as a factual system, whereas it is but a semiological system” (*ibid.*, p. 130). Semiology aims therefore at “de–naturalizing” myth, deciphering the codes and discursive constructions of the ideology that produces it, which tends to remain unperceived. As a discipline or discourse on meaning, in fact, the “science of signs” can provide effective tools to trace ideology in forms, that is, where one does not generally seek it (Barthes 1994 [1968]).

Mythologies therefore charts the interconnections between particular cultural texts, certain aspects of culture, and specific ideological values, devoting particular attention to food: the essays “Wine and milk” and “Steak and chips”, for instance, relate food to nationalism, as well as to capitalist ideology. Highlighting the role of both wine and meat in the French alimentary and social life, Barthes interestingly describes the ambivalent mythology of such “totem–foods”, particularly insisting on their “redeeming” potential. Wine is described as a “converting substance, capable of reversing situations and states, and of extracting from objects their opposites”, thus acquiring a sort of alchemical “power to transmute and create *ex nihilo*” (Barthes 1957, Engl. Trans. 1972, p. 58). Thus it can serve as an alibi to dream as well as reality, depending on the user of the myth. This also applies to steak and its “full–bloodedness”, which is supposed to benefit all temperaments, “the sanguine because it is identical, the nervous and lymphatic because it is complementary to them” (*ibid.*, p. 62). As we mentioned above, such characterisations take on an evident national connotation: “knowing how to drink [wine] is a *national* technique which serves to *qualify the Frenchman*, to demonstrate at once his performance, his control and his sociability” (*ibid.*, p. 59); similarly, “steak is in France a basic element, nationalized even more than socialized. ... it is a French possession” (*ibid.*, p. 63). However, while the latter projects its “French spirit” onto chips, with which it is generally associated, making it become another “alimentary sign of Frenchness” (*ibid.*, p. 64), the former rather stands out for its opposition to milk, which remains an “exotic” substance despite its increasing consumption in the country.

The semiologist’s reflections then go beyond food items and their

mythologies, encompassing food aesthetics: in “Ornamental cookery”, he analyses the process of beautification brought about by food photography in the French weekly *Elle*, somehow prefiguring contemporary debates on gastromania and “food pornography”. Highlighting how the representations hosted on the magazine foster a dream-like cookery, or “idea-cookery” (*ibid.*, p. 79), Barthes’ essay warns about the effects of such an ornamental, “genteel tendency”, which makes products near and inaccessible at the same time, and their consumption “perfectly ... accomplished simply by looking” (*ibid.*), thus detaching the readers from the primary nature of food and the real problems concerning it. Hence the potential of food products, representations and practices as sophisticated ideological signifiers fully emerge, and the naturalizing power of the distortion operated by myth and the ideology that produces it is revealed.

4. Food “myths” today and the quest for a critical semiotics of food

The above-illustrated conception has somehow survived, also being taken to the extreme, in present day’s recurrent adoption of the term “myth” to refer to fake news and misinformation, especially in the food domain. “The truth about many common food myths”, “Healthy Eating: 21 Food Myths You Still Think Are True”, “33 food myths that just aren’t true”, “Food myths debunked”, “Fact or Fiction? 9 Common Food and Nutrition Myths” are but a few of the multiple articles and online posts that can be encountered through a rapid online search or taking a look at food and fitness magazines. While recalling the same need outlined by Barthes to deconstruct mythical discourses, such expressions take on a further connotation, marking a crucial difference from the French scholar’s reflections. In fact, they conceive myth as a “lie” opposed to “facts”, that is to say, as a denial of a “truth” that need to be “unveiled”.

Moreover, Barthes clearly stated that “myth cannot possibly be an object, a concept, or an idea; it is a mode of signification, a form. ... Myth is not defined by the object of its message, but by the way in which it utters this message” (Barthes 1957, Engl. Trans. 1972, p. 107). This has a crucial implication: a critical approach to “food myths” and the ideologies underlying them, cannot be focused on the truthful-

ness of food communication's content. Rather, it focuses on the discursive strategies through which particular contents related to food take on specific meanings, and the processes through which such meanings are naturalized within a foodsphere.

Whoever decided that *escargots* or raw oysters were delicacies in France, and more generally Europe, while insects had to be avoided?⁵ Why do Americans love milk and dairy, when these same foods evoke feelings of disgust in other societies? How did healthy concerns about sugar, gluten and other nutrients arise in contemporary Western food-spheres, while they are not relevant in other food systems? And above all, why are such choices and the criteria of pertinentisation underlying them perceived as “natural”, “instinctive”, often unquestionable, whereas innovation and change tend to encounter forms of resistance and opposition⁶? If culture is made of virtual potentialities, ideology can be seen precisely as “the discursive choice that actualizes only part of these potentialities (as is inevitably the case, because there is no discourse that can encompass everything)” (Lorusso 2017, p. 51; cf. Eco 1975), while hiding the fact that such pertinentisations are not the only possible ones (cf. Eco 1990).

Leaving aside any interest in the reasons of food ideologies, in their links to reality, therefore, a critical semiotics of food has to analyse them by investigating the devices through which particular connotative systems⁷ end up being perceived as denotative meanings, “natural” implications, “spontaneous, innocents, indisputable” representations (cf. Barthes 1957, Engl. Trans. 1972, p. 117). It does not wonder about their genesis, but rather explores their structures and criteria of pertinentisation. It does not question their veracity, but rather uncovers

5. In fact, entomophagy was practiced also in Europe in the past. Aristotle, for instance, expresses his appraisal for cicadas in their chrysalis state, while Pliny reports the consumption of insects among the Romans (cf. Harris 1985). The Bible (*Leviticus* 11, p. 20–25) also refers to the consumption of insects, distinguishing between species allowed and forbidden for human consumption. For a more detailed analysis of such aspects, as well as of the crucial role played by food communication in contemporary attempts to promote insects as “the food of the future”, see Stano 2018b.

6. Innovation is not always opposed in the food domain, as demonstrated, for instance, by several experiments in *haute cuisine*. However, a general praise for “tradition” can be observed, not without contradictions (see in particular Marrone 2012; Stano 2018a).

7. The conception of ideology as a connotative system is not confined to Barthes, but has been further supported by other scholars. Umberto Eco, for instance, defined it as the “final connotation of the totality of the connotations of the sign or context of signs” (1968, p. 96, Engl. Trans. in Robey 1990, p. 163).

the textual strategies underlying their messages — whether they are pointed to as “food myths” to be debunked or rather celebrated as unveiled “truths”.

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