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Critique of the culinary reason

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Abstract: Present-day economically developed societies devote unprecedented attention to food. The culinary discourse, in all its facets, gains increasing centrality in cultures. Institutions, media, and common people are obsessed with what they eat. In Italy, a country already aware of itself with regards to food, gastronomy turns into the main concern, the most debated and cared of system of norms. Social phenomena like Slow Food and Zero Kilometer originate in Italy and then conquer the world, claiming that improving the quality of food is the way for a better planet. But what is the deep cultural meaning of this massive trend? What lies behind the culinary reason? Aesthetic neutralization of socioeconomic conflicts, chauvinistic marketing of stereotypes, and anti-intellectual subversion of sensorial hierarchies, the article contends.

Keywords: food obsession, slow food, zero kilometer food, cultural semiotics, cultural critique, social conflict

To reminisce about eating and drinking, the sorts of pleasures that are as fleeting as yesterday's perfume or the lingering smell of cooking, is not the mark of a free-born man.

– Plutarch, *Moralia*, 686c

1 *La grande abbuffata*

In 1973 Marco Ferreri's¹ movie *La grande abbuffata*, the four protagonists seclude themselves in a villa and eat until they die. Since its first screening at the Cannes Film Festival, the movie was interpreted as ferocious satire of consumerism (Mereghetti 2002: 942; Scandola 2004). Food was a metaphor for the meaningless routines of desire and gratification in late capitalism (Grande 1980; Gantrel 2002; Saponari 2008). But in the first decade of the twentieth century, spasmodic yearning for culinary pleasure has lost its metaphoric patina. It has become the

¹ Milan, 11 May 1928–Paris, 9 May 1997.

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direct embodiment of consumption. Immoderate passion for food is no longer the signifier of late capitalism. It is the signified (Ritzer 2001, 2013).

Even visionary director Marco Ferreri could have hardly foreseen the current cultural panorama in an economically advanced country like Italy: TV and radio channels are replete with programs where skillful chefs or clumsy starlets rattle off recipes (Chaw 2003; Krishnendu 2007; Urroz 2008); reality shows featuring masochistic self-styled cooks in competition and sadistic experts chastising them rank among the most viewed broadcasts (Marrone 2013; Moutat 2013); increasingly lavish and preposterous cookbooks invade bookshops (Bower 2004; Ferguson 2012); everybody writes them: not only famous chefs, but also actors, football players, politicians; their sales are indeed spectacular; television chefs are venerated more than rock stars; their public appearance requires the deployment of security force; bookshops cafés turn into full restaurants and even sell refined groceries together with – and increasingly instead of – books; a movement called “Slow Food” – which advocates better quality nutrition – conquers first Italy then the whole world; it turns into a philosophy of life, then into a religion; its founder, Carlo Petrini, is revered as a guru; pope Francis honors him by a personal phone call (Petrini 2003; Andrews 2008; Leitch 2009); Slow Food entrepreneur Oscar Farinetti establishes slow food grocery stores, called “Eataly,” first in Italy then all over the world; he is among the prime supporters of the major Italian center-left party and rumored as a potential future minister (of food?); Slow Food opens its own university in Pollenzo, near Turin, attracting food scholars internationally; another trend, “Zero Kilometer” – championing local over global food – inspires a growing number of food producers, grocery stores, and restaurants; serious scholars, including reputed semioticians, write articles, essays, books on food; scientific journals devote special issues; academic associations organize seminars and congresses; universities devote master programs; the 2015 Milan Universal Exposition chooses as its title “feeding the world.”

Not only is the public space filled with the scent of food. In private too, people talk about food, debate about food, describe what they ate, are eating, or will eat, plan to cook food, buy food, consume food. Purchasing exquisite food, dining at exclusive restaurants, knowing the most elite groceries, the most cliquish street markets, the most secretive recipes: eating better than other people do is the ultimate status symbol of the twenty-first century. Pictures of magnificent food are among the most common posts in social networks (Mcbride 2010).

This is a global trend in advanced economies. Cookbooks are a massive success in Italy as in the US, in Canada as in Japan. Everywhere, young people of all genders feel morally obliged to retrieve their grandmothers’ recipes, recuperate their

ancestors' cooking tools from where their feminist mothers had abandoned them, and revel for hours in the preparation of archaic dishes, to be proudly served over the next feast (Holtzman 2006). The present-day obsession with food is particularly spectacular in Italy. A country internationally acclaimed as source of gastronomic delight, Italy is more and more embracing the cause of spreading good quality food around the world as a sort of religious mission, as the country's vocation (Kostioukovitch 2009). Preserving premier Italian food from heinous imitations; teaching "barbaric" countries with no food culture how to shop groceries, cook, and eat; engaging in ferocious battles against abominable fast food coming from abroad; showing the world that Italy eats better than the rest of the planet: present-day Italy is espousing gastronomic evangelism to the extent that it becomes definitional: if you are Italian, you must eat truly well; and if you don't eat well, you are not a true Italian.

This trend might delight some cultural semioticians, their mouths watering at the fragrance of *tagliatelle* that pervades the Italian and the global semiosphere. Some cultural semioticians might even add to this tendency and draw profit from it, tailoring and selling their expertise to the food industry without asking themselves too many nasty questions (exactly as they did with the fashion industry in the 1980s and the advertising industry in the 1990s). However, if cultural semioticians aim at being not only gregarious gourmands, and not only nonchalant moneymakers, they must ask the simple question that underpins their profession: *what does it mean?* What does it mean, when the global semiosphere gets increasingly heated with the frenzy of food? What does it mean, when food becomes the main content that is sold and bought in the international cultural market? What does it mean, when Italy jollily accepts the role of "chef of the world," fashioning its entire public economy accordingly?

In Marco Ferreri's *La grande abbuffata*, reckless consumption of grotesquely elaborate food was a metaphor for the agony of desire in late capitalism. Today, that preposterous fixation with exquisite food has turned from allegory into reality. After exposing oneself even for a single day to the Italian plethora of signs, discourses, and texts that talk about food, one has the impression that *La grande abbuffata* is now. But what does it mean?

2 Aesthetic neutralization of social conflict

Jurij M. Lotman's semiotics models cultures as dynamic conglomerates of signs, discourses, and texts called "semiospheres" (1990). The topology of a semiosphere

is never stable. External elements constantly press at its frontiers in order to be translated in. At the same time, fragments of signification struggle inside the semiosphere to gain predominance in cultural memory and topological centrality. As new elements are translated into the semiosphere, old ones lose the battle for hegemony. They are marginalized, forgotten, and expelled. Ultimately, the frontier of a semiosphere can be determined only as hypothesis, depending on the point of view the analyst adopts on a culture (Lotman 1985; Leone 2007).

As there is no static semiosphere – safe in the theoretical figment of the analyst – thus there is no culture without a deontic dimension (Greimas and Courtés 1982, *sub voce* “deontic”). In every semiosphere, a particular category of texts suggests, indicates, or even prescribes what human beings *should* do. Be they written, oral, or other expressions, they dictate ways for existential improvement. They crystallize dynamic paths of agency within the semiosphere (Leone 2009a). Religious traditions revolve around these texts (Leone 2013a: Part X: “Teleologies of Religious Meaning”). Prompts to change, however, to gain value in life either as individuals or in collectivity, feature as well in philosophical disquisitions, political manifestos, and psychological treatises.

In pre-modern semiospheres, only philosophy and the arts would dispute religion as the main deontic agency advocating existential change. But philosophers and artists would mostly address the individual, whereas collective teleology was characteristically the core of religious discourse. With modernity, revolutionary ideologies and psychoanalysis increasingly replaced religion, as well as philosophy and the arts, as the prevailing deontic discourses. In late modernity, however, three main trends supplanted the political and Freudian secularization of the deontic dimension: new age spirituality as bland de-secularization of ethics (Leone 2014a); medical science as quantitative standard of individual improvement; aesthetics as the domain where social value can be gained and lost.

Every deontic discourse entails a foe. In pre-modern semiospheres, the foe of religion was metaphysical evil. It could be defeated only through collaboration between humans and gods. In modern semiospheres, the villain was not transcendent but immanent: in order to enfranchise themselves, humans should not defeat evil metaphysical agents but other evil human beings. In Marx, the deontic discourse prescribed liberation from an enslaving class; in Freud, from a tyrannizing superego. In late modernity, finally, humans fight neither against bad gods nor against bad humans. They struggle against bad taste (Lipovetsky and Serroy 2013). The present-day frenzy for eschatological food too rests on a deontic text, the “Manifesto for the Defense of- and Right to- Pleasure” that delegates from around the world

signed on December 21, 1989 at the Opéra-Comique theatre in Paris. It was the symbolical beginning of Slow Food. Here is the manifesto in its integrity:

Questo nostro secolo, nato e cresciuto sotto il segno della civiltà industriale, ha prima inventato la macchina e poi ne ha fatto il proprio modello di vita.

La velocità è diventata la nostra catena, tutti siamo in preda allo stesso virus: la vita veloce, che sconvolge le nostre abitudini, ci assale fin nelle nostre case, ci rinchioda a nutrirci nei fast food.

Ma l'uomo sapiens deve recuperare la sua saggezza e liberarsi dalla velocità che può ridurlo a una specie in via d'estinzione.

Perciò, contro la follia universale della "fast life," bisogna scegliere la difesa del tranquillo piacere materiale.

Contro coloro, e sono i più, che confondono l'efficienza con la frenesia, proponiamo il vaccino di un'adeguata porzione di piaceri sensuali assicurati, da praticarsi in lento e prolungato godimento.

Iniziamo proprio a tavola con lo Slow Food, contro l'appiattimento del fast food riscopriamo la ricchezza e gli aromi delle cucine locali.

Se la "fast life" in nome della produttività ha modificato la nostra vita e minaccia l'ambiente e il paesaggio, lo Slow Food è oggi la risposta d'avanguardia.

È qui, nello sviluppo del gusto e non nel suo immiserimento, la vera cultura, di qui può iniziare il progresso, con lo scambio internazionale di storie, conoscenze, progetti. Lo Slow Food assicura un avvenire migliore.

Lo Slow Food è un'idea che ha bisogno di molti sostenitori qualificati, per fare diventare questo moto (lento) un movimento internazionale, di cui la chiocciolina è il simbolo.

[This century of ours, born and raised in the name of the industrial civilization, first invented the machine, then turned it into its model of life.

Fastness has become our chain, we are all prey to the same virus: fast life, which upsets our habits, assails us even at home, make us eating secluded in fast food restaurants.

But *homo sapiens* must recuperate her wisdom and free herself from speed, which can reduce her to an endangered species.

Therefore, against the universal madness of "fast life," one must choose the defense of tranquil material pleasures.

Against those – and they are majority – who mistake efficiency for frenzy, we propose the vaccine of an adequate portion of guaranteed sensual pleasures, to be practiced in slow and prolonged enjoyment.

Let's start at table with Slow Food, against the trivialization of fast food let's rediscover the richness and the aromas of local food.

If "fast life," in the name of productivity, has modified our life and threatens the environment and its landscapes, Slow Food is, today, an avant-garde reply.

True culture is here, in the development of taste and not in its impoverishment; progress can start from here, with the international exchange of stories, knowledge, projects. Slow Food guarantees a better future.

Slow Food is an idea that needs many qualified supporters, in order for this (slow) initiative to become an international movement, whose symbol is the little snail.]

Previous deontic semiospheres would have waged their battle against evil food through different texts. They would have identified alternative villains. In the pre-modern deontic dimension, the religious discourse would have enjoined: “Thou shall not eat from the tree of McDonalds!” Then, exegesis would have clarified that fast food is the terrestrial embodiment of an evil metaphysical force, which feuds with the good divinity over influence on the humankind. Whoever eats from the prohibited tree, magnifies the strength of the transcendent foe; whoever abstains from it, adds to the cause of heaven (Röbkes 2013). In the modern, secularized discourse of collective and individual ideology, immanent agencies would have replaced transcendent emissaries. The Freudian mindset would have contended: if you eat fast, you are actually titillating your oral libido. Through a frantic rhythm of ingestion, you seek to compensate your underdeveloped sexuality. You counter the anxiety through which your superego encroaches upon the thought of your ineluctable perishing (Bersani 2006). Marxian theory would have focused not on psychical but on social structures. Fast Food embodies the exploitation of a socio-economic class. Abominable food and frenetic consumption are nothing but a travesty. Deprivation of time for physiological needs and infected nourishment are symptoms of a socio-economic structure where work force is fed only for the sake of its reproduction. Marketing is the hegemonic agency that bestows a patina of desirability upon junk food, Gramscian exegesis would have appended (Albritton 2009).

Albeit very different from each other, these three deontic approaches would share a common quality (Ricoeur 1965). They would all frame food not as evil, but as expression of evil. Moreover, they would all situate the (metaphysical, subconscious, or socioeconomic) wicked agency behind fast food outside the subject’s reach. Counterstrategy would be fashioned accordingly: praying the good divinity for protection against evil food; taming the unconscious through psychoanalytical dialogue; subverting the socioeconomic structure that impinges on the nutrition of proletarians.

The incipit of Slow Food’s manifesto is reminiscent of Marx (most of the delegates would come from leftist experiences): “this century of ours, born and grown in the name of the industrial civilization ...” However, no external agency is denounced. The industrial civilization does not grow out of thirst for profit but, impersonally, from “this century of ours” (Peace 2006, 2008). The dimming

of any specific agency through the evocation of impersonal collectivity continues further: “Fastness has become *our* chain, we are *all* prey to the same virus.” In the post-Marxist discourse of Slow Food, what inflicts dementedness to human behaviors is not a wrongful spirit, a repressed libido, or an oppressed social class; it is a metaphoric, generic virus that infects all, no distinctions made. “Fast life ... that assails us even at home”: again, fastness is treated not as symptom, but as autonomous agent that attacks “our” lives independently from whom we are. Fastness itself is the foe of Slow Food’s narrative (Osaldiston 2013). Since there is no external agent behind fast food, betterment of life requires neither the cosmic triumph of the good divinity over the crooked one, nor deliverance from the tyrannous superego, nor, God forbid, a revolution that dethrones the exploitative class. If fast food is the foe, then let’s start eating slowly, and everything will be OK.

Since the inception of Slow Food, and more and more with its becoming a global ideology, we have, indeed, sought to eat slow. However, everything is not OK. Why? Did Slow Food overlook an ingredient of the salvific recipe? The date on which Slow Food released its manifesto cannot be left unnoticed: December 21, 1989. The Berlin Wall had started its inexorable fall on November 9. Materially and symbolically marking the end of a terrible seclusion and the epilogue of an era, the Branderburg Gate was open the day after the manifesto was read at the Parisian *Opéra-Comique*. Is it malicious to discern in the onset of Slow Food the swift reaction of a group of leftist intellectuals to the disruption of an ideological epoch? Answering this question would demand an in-depth study of the manifesto’s ideological history and context. But most historians and sociologists have been so busy with subscribing to the Slow Food declaration that little energy has been devoted to its critical assessment. The suspect remains that Slow Food and its manifesto partake of a *Weltanschauung* whose genesis coincided with the downfall of the regimes inspired to Marxism. In the geopolitical circumstances of the late 1980s and early 1990s, any discourse advocating the advancement of the humankind through the radical transformation of socioeconomic structures would sound as inexcusably nostalgic. Leftist ideologues did not abandon the messianic idea of deliverance but turned it into what Marxism would have called a “superstructural” mission: in order to free the world, let’s not dismantle the capitalistic engine of fast food; rather, let’s slow down food: aesthetic, sensorial revolution will change humanity for the better (Paxson 2005).

Was it more or less conscious, disillusioned desertion of a failed ideology? Or was it attempt to make it survive under aesthetic cover? What is certain is that Slow Food has not changed humankind. It has certainly contributed to the

spread of awareness about the need of protecting and fostering the production and consumption of healthy and sustainable food. We are aware of the aesthetic relevance of *culatello* as never before. However, aesthetic enhancement has not affected the socioeconomic structure of fast food to the least. For most, *culatello* remains terribly expensive (Simonetti 2010). A small socioeconomic elite around the world can rejoice about existentially upgrading through the unrushed consumption of refined dishes. However, for most people in advanced economies – and increasingly so with the lingering of the economic crisis – fast, cheap, unhealthy, unfair, and unsustainable food is still the answer. Teaching them how good *culatello* is will not suffice, if they don't have money to buy it, and time and space to consume it. Not to speak of the so many in the world that starve. For them, the relative speed of food consumption is a secondary problem given that there is hardly any food to be consumed.

Slow Food fans will contend that changing the world was not among its objectives. But again, is it malignant to suspect that aesthetic messianism is actually proving as a formidable source of false consciousness (Schneider 2008)? Slow Food grocery stores, *Eataly*, spread throughout the world like McDonalds; advertise like McDonalds; hire and employ workers like McDonalds. Are they “using the weapons of the enemy” in order to change the world for the better, as *Eataly* supporters claim (Marrone 2011)? Or, more realistically, are they koshering the socioeconomic unbalances of capitalism through a patina of aesthetic evangelism? Perhaps, it is not a coincidence that the main patron of *Eataly* figures among the main supporters of the new Italian democrat leadership. Both champion a post-Marxist ideology where socioeconomic classes do not conflict any longer, but harmoniously cooperate to prepare a wonderful dinner. Is it being terribly *démodé*, asking how the delicious, slowly consumed cake will be shared?

3 Marketing of stereotypes

Cultures devote much energy to define their limits. Lotman's theoretical model, the semiosphere, captures the effort topologically. On the one hand, complex transduction systems determine what signs, discourses, and texts are meaningful in a culture. On the other hand, tensions pervade the semiosphere both internally and at its borders. It is a struggle for identity, authenticity, and belonging (Leone 2012a, 2012b). National cultures are particularly prone to the anxious (re)definition of what is authentic, of what is spurious. In the process, shibboleths are constantly created (Leone 2009b). From the semiotic point of

view, a shibboleth is a distinctive feature whose perceived presence/absence decides of the inclusion/exclusion of a cultural element in/out of a semiosphere. Comparison of a token with a type is the simple semiotic mechanism through which shibboleths work. Does the token match the type? Then it is in. It does not match? Then it is out.

However, biases affect the comparison as well as the setting of the type itself. Who decides what is typical in a culture? Who presides over authenticity? Who declares belongingness? Majorities and minorities take ephemeral shape around shibboleths. But semiospheres are rarely democratic. Instead, their topology is irregular, erratic, and even chaotic. Polycentric agencies exert their power so as to influence inclusion and exclusion (Leone 2012c). In nationalisms, political agency and its discourse dictate cultural seams. It is a violent, painful process. It frequently involves not only stigmatization of alien signs but also ostracism of bodies. Those whose meaning is inauthentic are marginalized, cast off. The brutality of it is all the more perplexing since it has no factual ground. From the semiotic perspective, shibboleths are nothing but habitus. They crystallize discursive lines of acceptance and hostility. What they decide to exclude, they might as well include, and vice versa. Every community is imaginary. But the rhetoric of authenticity can be so pervasive as to give rise to a second nature. Shibboleths turn from cultural to naturalized thresholds (Leone 2010a). Nevertheless, what rhetoric has done, rhetoric can undo. Showing how both necessary and illusory every culture is: that is the most important task of the cultural semiotician: being a maverick, being a contrarian, taking on the nasty duty of breaking the violent enchantment of culture while certifying the inescapability of language.

In no dimension of existence do cultures include and exclude more drastically as in sensorial perception (Stoller 1997). They enjoin individuals to immediately categorize as familiar or alien what they see, hear, smell, touch, and taste (Wise and Velayutham 2009). Cultures also exert their secluding agency in the arena of food. Bio-politically, what is more effective than linking the idea of a community to what is ingested and turned into body? Religion founders sense it immediately: change the way in which a group of people eat, what they consider as licit or illicit food, and you'll have ipso facto a community (Freidenreich 2011). Dietary rules delineate a religious semiosphere more incisively than verbal commandments. But food turns into shibboleth also in defining "secular" identities: the nation, the region, the city, and the family (Hayes-Conroy and Martin 2010).

Whereas Slow Food has turned the temporality of eating into the criterion of a new community (eat fast, you are out; eat slow, you are in; Meneley 2004), another major trend of both the Italian and the global culinary semiosphere is

focusing on the spatiality of food: Zero Kilometer (*Chilometro Zero*). Slow Food extols the value of slowness over fastness. Zero Kilometer, that of proximity over distance. The environmentalist undertone is evident: if you eat tomatoes that come from your Italian village, instead of those that come from Morocco, the earth will be spared the pollution caused by useless transportation. However, the semiotician's thankless job includes the duty to insinuate that the environmentalist discourse too, as unconditionally praiseworthy as it might seem, features multiple ideological nuances. Zero Kilometer dictates to Italian consumers not only that they should prefer local to Moroccan tomatoes, but also that they should give up exotic pineapples over familiar apples. Desire to protect the environment from polluting transportation should weigh more than craving for distant pleasures. Zero Kilometer affects grocery shops as well as restaurants. If you eat in a Zero Kilometer *trattoria*, forget about papaya salads: what does not grow in your town's orchard is banned.

Again, faced with this new phenomenon, semioticians should ask their professional question: what does it mean? What does it mean, when a community increasingly finds that curiosity for exotic cultures is not worth its environmental costs? When proximity is praised over distance? And what is closer to the imaginary center of the community, ideally at "zero kilometers" from it, ipso facto becomes more desirable? The semiotician's malicious suspect is that a marketing of stereotypes underpins the extolment of proximity. It is both political and economic marketing. Zero Kilometer, as well as Slow Food, can be categorized with the countless trends that flourished around the world at the turn of the millennium, reacting to a supposed globalization of economy, society, and culture. In Lotman's terms, no-global movements consist in the rhetorical attempt at disrupting the idea of a supranational semiosphere. Its frontiers, it is contended, are "unnatural," generated by pernicious agents like the global financial power. In order to counter them, a new discourse should reveal the "naturalness" of smaller, local semiospheres. Global financial power induces consumers to desire pineapples, so that the profit of few is accumulated through exploitation of distant lands and pollution of the environment. Giving up faraway pineapples for closer apples will change the world for the better.

But the deontic message of Zero Kilometer is disputable. Insistence on the environmental noxiousness of overcoming distance is strengthening the cultural habitus of proximity. What is close is good. What is far is bad. Whatever brings distant cultures in closer contact is frowned upon, especially if it entails environment costs. The strenuous battle waged in Italy against the construction of new fast train lines ("No TAV" movement in Piedmont) or new gas pipelines ("No TAP" movement in Apulia) share with Zero Kilometer the idea that socio-cultural proximity must be defended over distance, and that sustainable virtual

connection with remote lands should replace polluting physical binding. But is this replacement of physical through virtual globalism really coming at no cost? And are its benefits as evenly distributed as it is purported?

From the political point of view, Zero Kilometer is dangerously germane to chauvinism; it is its environmentally friendly face. From the economic point of view, its action is not immune from the agency of lobbies. Political populism has hijacked socioeconomic hostility toward the discontents of globalization in Italy as well as in other advanced economies. The demagogic rhetoric of no-global populisms has often resulted in overt xenophobia, with alien food among its targets (Ott 2012). Regional secessionist parties in Italy invented the atavistic primate of local food and recipes while stigmatizing the invasion of food from abroad. Kebab – seen as the gastronomic epitome of the Arab culture – as well as Chinese restaurants turned into enemy number one and two. Top administrators in cosmopolitan Milan promulgated laws against the consumption of kebab in the streets of the metropolis (but were jailed for corruption a few years later); mayors in Tuscany prohibited the display of red lanterns outside the premises of Chinese restaurants; others imposed the presence of local ingredients in restaurants' menus. People continued consuming tons of kebabs in the streets of Milan, red lanterns made their reappearance soon after they were removed, and Tuscan restaurants kept offering their costumers what their chefs pleased.

However, where chauvinism and overt xenophobia failed, the environmental discourse succeeded. Zero Kilometer supporters sincerely care about the environment: that is not the point. The point is that their rhetoric of proximity inevitably leagues with populist localisms. Labeled as environmental friendly, consumers find it more acceptable to value the local more than the global, the close more than the distant. They fail to recognize that commerce with distant lands has been for millennia not only one of the greatest sources of profit, but also one of the best antidotes to war. While there is commercial trade between two cultures there is no war, and vice versa. Certainly, the terms and modalities of trade can be adjusted so as to minimize human exploitation and environment impact. But the idea of a society that consumes only what it produces is not only utopian. It is dangerous. Echoing the autarchy of twentieth-century regimes, it embodies the dream of a culinary gated community (Modigliani 2007; Leone 2009c). Eating the food of the other, although it might entail some environmental externalities, is a fundamental ritual of peace (Rose 2011).

Zero Kilometer is not economically unbiased either. While grocery stores and restaurants in Italy rhapsodize over the excellence of local food, parallel agencies wage a planetary battle against “the culinary fake” (Staglianò 2006; Doll 2012; Mueller 2012). How do Canadian cheese producers dare call it “Parmesan” and sell it under “Italian-sounding” brands? Only Parmesan cheese

produced in Italy should bear this name and be commercialized accordingly. The issue is enticing for semiotics, the discipline that studies everything that can be used to lie (Eco 1976, 1987; Scalabroni 2011). What is “true” Parmesan? What is fake? From the semiotic point of view, no Parmesan is ontologically true. Rather, complex rhetorics circulate in the global semiosphere so that “communities of belief” take shape apropos the authenticity of food.

Cultural elements deemed to be “unique” and “irreplaceable” often occupy the core of a semiosphere. Much symbolical energy is spent to continuously reproduce this idea of uniqueness. Value indeed stems from it, and the possibility of a hierarchical topology from value. A culture in which nothing is unique, and everything can be reproduced, is without center and, therefore, without sacredness. The arts play a fundamental role in guaranteeing the uniqueness of value in semiospheres. Artistic signs still substantiate the bulk of a culture’s patrimony, pace Walter Benjamin’s contention on the cultural disease of their technical reproduction in the modern era (1980 [1939]), and despite the pernicious encroachment of the market on the aesthetic sphere (Berger 1972). Patrimony defines whom and what is entitled to inhabit the center of a semiosphere. Signs, discourses, and texts that are situated here are, by definition, priceless: no effort will be spared to trade their faithful memory to the future.

Yet, no cultural patrimony, for as much as it is defended, is immune from change and falsification. Everything that is cultural can be falsified; and everything that is falsifiable is culture. *Mona Lisa* irradiates its symbolical aura from the center of the Louvre, which is in the center of Paris, which is in the center of France, which once was in the center of the world. But as the geopolitical center of the world moves elsewhere, it is not unthinkable that *Mona Lisa* will one day move as well, not only geographically but also symbolically. Its capacity of defining one of the pillars of French culture, the absorption of Renaissance in Northern Europe, might diminish and perish. The world might one day venerate *Mona Lisa* in Dubai, or in Shanghai; or, more realistically, a wall scroll painted by Ma Lin will replace *Mona Lisa* as global embodiment of artistic sacredness.

Not only external agents erode the central patrimony of a semiosphere. The idea of uniqueness dissolves also internally, through falsification, parody, and trivialization. In pre-modernity, attempts at falsification would attack the aura of *Mona Lisa*; in the modern era, Duchamp’s parody jeopardized the centrality of the painting in the world’s cultural patrimony; in the post-modern era, neither falsification nor irony are needed any longer to deface Leonardo’s portrait. Countless mechanical reproductions undermine its value. *Mona Lisa* is everywhere – on cups, aprons, t-shirts, toilet paper – and therefore is nowhere. It is certainly no longer symbolically in the Louvre, at the center of the European Empire’s museum.

Internal strivings to corroborate or falsify the patrimony of a culture pervade all semiospheres. On the one hand, titanic efforts are made to still-frame as many cultural elements as possible on an immutable Mount Olympus. It is the tendency of nationalistic mindsets, wherein everything, from language to history, from the arts to fashion, is canonized. Several European nations have long sought to immortalize their culture – and particularly their primary modeling system, language – through the institutions of academies (*Académie française* in France, *Accademia della Crusca* in Italy, *Real Academia de la Lengua* in Spain). Yet, attempts at entrenching language in unchanging patrimony have systematically failed.

On the other hand, indeed, feeble vibrations or telluric movements constantly destabilize semiospheres, pulling old signs out of a culture's patrimony, pushing new signs in. The invention of "world heritage" and the establishment of an international cultural bureaucracy seek to centralize and stabilize the global definition of value. Yet, students of UNESCO procedures know that its acts result from the convergence of national pressures and socioeconomic lobbies. Again, power stems from the ability of certifying value, from placing new *Mona Lisas* into new *sancta sanctorum* (Leone Forthcoming). UNESCO increasingly places food in its lists of intangible cultural heritage. Local agencies enact the same practice in relation to specific products. Italian labels and institutions have been established to attest the veracity of Italian wine, Italian cheese, Italian slow food. The purpose is simultaneously symbolical and economic: exclusivity generates value both politically – as fundament of a community's identity – and economically – as entity that can be exported and sold. International trade is the result of mutual recognition among semiospheres. Money is the measure of the extent to which a culture's rhetoric is successful. The reason for which French consumers are not ready to pay for Moroccan wine what they pay for Italian wine is not ontological. It does not rest on the chemistry of wine. It is rather semiotic: Italy's rhetoric successfully places "its" wine at the center of the global semiosphere, in competition with France and few other nations. Much of the economic success of Italy in the aftermaths of Second World War pivoted on the ability to persuade the world about the value of drinking, eating, driving, and especially wearing cultural elements stemming from the imaginary core of the Italian semiosphere.

Yet, the creation of value systematically backfires under the form of kitsch. Parasitic reproductions daily abrade *Mona Lisa's* aura as symbolical center of French aesthetics. Similarly, cultural falsification constantly attempts at the value of intangible heritage, no matter how intensely protected. But different signs show various degrees of resistance to falsification. Everything that means can be falsified, but not with the same easiness. Falsifying *Mona Lisa* would

require exceptional skills. This is why *Mona Lisa* is at the core of the European semiosphere. Placing this painting at the heart of its most prestigious museum, Europe celebrates the glow of authenticity that emanates from it. Looking at *Mona Lisa*, despite the copies, the parodies, and the kitsch, reassures the viewer about the stability of culture. Until *Mona Lisa* will be in the Louvre – thus goes the illusion – the gods will not migrate from Paris to Dubai (or from the first arrondissement to the suburbs).

But does a form of Parmesan cheese show the same degree of resistance to falsification as *Mona Lisa*? Despite all the efforts of specialists, bureaucracies, and institutions; despite the invention of labels, seals, and certificates; despite even the establishment of special “private detectives” who roam the world looking for fakes to chastise, a form of Parmesan cheese results from technique, not from genius. It is craft, not art. Whereas technical reproduction imperils *Mona Lisa*’s aura, a form of Parmesan cheese has never had any aura, because not only its reproduction, but also its production is mechanical. Take some milk, salt, and rennet; apply the right technique: voilà. A falsifier might well have access to Leonardo’s pigments, but not to Leonardo’s technique, because no technique is sufficient to falsify *Mona Lisa*. This is the ultimate paradox of semiospheres: they attribute utmost value and topological centrality to signs whose creation escape cultural transmission. We venerate and reproduce *Mona Lisa* because we cannot reproduce Leonardo.

On the opposite, current attempts at bestowing an aura of uniqueness to local food are preposterous and, to a certain extent, pathetic. Moved by economic interests and identity anxiety, they often resort to rhetorical invention of the territory and its tradition: only cows from Reggio Emilia, that eat local grass (?), and breath local air (?) can produce the milk indispensable to “create” authentic Parmesan cheese (Greene 2008). However, bureaucratic efforts to protect the authenticity of food are doomed to fail more ruinously than royal attempts at canonizing languages. The authenticity of food cannot be certified because, put bluntly, there is no such thing as authentic food. There is an authentic Leonardo – not immune from episodes of falsification – but not authentic Parmesan cheese. Not only is the latter much easier to imitate than the former – despite the mystique of Italian cows. It also answers to a completely different logic of recognition. A Canadian lady who has bought a copy of *Mona Lisa* on her honeymoon to Paris might well believe that what hangs over her fireplace in Toronto is the original painted by Leonardo, whereas the Louvre would hold a copy. The rest of the world will be ready to contradict her. But what about the “fake” Parmesan cheese that she keeps in her fridge, thinking that it is authentic Italian Parmesan cheese? Reggio Emilia detectives might well try to persuade her of the contrary, but they will have to persuade as well the millions of Canadians who believe exactly the

same. Since food can be produced mechanically, beliefs about its authenticity are a matter of rhetoric, not of ontology.

This is another paradox of semiospheres: what defines the sancta sanctorum of cultures not only cannot be reproduced; it cannot be sold either; its value is definitional but not economic. Pictures, reproductions, glimpses of *Mona Lisa* can be sold, not *Mona Lisa* itself. Its cultural centrality is such that cannot be turned into exportable meaning. When a society thinks of selling the core of its cultural patrimony, as the Greek society envisaged selling the Parthenon during the economic crisis, that is the beginning of its end as a cultural semiosphere. On the opposite, what of a cultural patrimony can be sold *must be* inauthentic.

The current attempt at selling food as ultimate aesthetic experience is giving rise to a preposterous discourse of uniqueness, with a chauvinistic undertone. Technically reproducible goods are bestowed with an aura of sacredness to be sold and bought as quintessential expressions of cultures. Yet, since the quintessence of cultures has no price, stereotypes and their entrenched discourse of marketing populate more and more the core of semiospheres. Champagne and its Heideggerian relation to *terroir* is purported to embody the French Weltanschauung as intimately as Poussin's *Seven Sacraments*. No matter if there is an exact copy of an eighteenth-century castle towers over the Taittinger estate in California; no matter if the sparkling wine that is produced there is chemically identical to that produced in France. The former is just "sparkling wine," the second true Champagne, for Californian bubbles lack inmost relation to the French *genius loci*.

Semiotically, food producers' titanic efforts to lay claim of authenticity strive to impose an *intentio auctoris*. The intrinsic quality of food and its aesthetic reception do not count. What matters is only the ritual baptism of the product. Brands are given semantic status of proper names. They are attributed a signature. But faking the logo of the Italian label for the protection of authentic wine (DOC or DOCG) is not the same as faking Leonardo's signature on *Mona Lisa*. It is rather like faking the logo of Adidas on a pair of shoes (Crăciun 2013). Leonardo's signature is an index that means the presence, in time and space, of a unique, irreproducible body, able to create *Mona Lisa ex nihilo*. Brands' signatures are not indexes but symbols, conventional statements about the authenticity of the relation producer/product. The former signifies because there cannot be any more instances of it; it is a sign whose tokens do not survive the body that produces them. The latter signifies because there can be infinite instances of it; it is a sign with no connection to life, despite the rhetoric efforts to turn it into archetypal expression. A logo is no archetype. It is stereotype. A perfect reproduction of a signature that is not an index of its body is a fake. A perfect reproduction of a logo that is not a symbol of its brand is not a fake of the same kind. It becomes a fake

signature only by virtue of an enchanting discourse of naturalization, as if a company was a body able to sign its products one by one.

Food rhetoric of proximity invents shibboleths whose content is not only environmental sustainability. They signify also political identity under aesthetic cover. Economic agencies behind it are evident: they seek to create and sell value. Yet, food is not art, it is technique. Technically produced shibboleths are paradoxical. On the one hand they must preserve the indexical sacredness of authenticity, the signature. On the other hand, they must indefinitely reproduce that signature in order to sell it. As a consequence, they fill the core of semiospheres with stereotypes of authenticity, whose populist mindset is only a byproduct of marketing. “Not in my plate” becomes just another expression of “not in my backyard.”

4 Subversion of sensorial hierarchy

Semiospheres hierarchically arrange not only signs, discourses, and texts but also the senses. Religious cultures have fought for centuries over which senses should better receive the sacred: through the ears only (*ex auditu fides*) or through images as well (Leone 2010b). They have crossed swords also over the place of taste in human existence. Complex systems of fasting characterize almost all religious cultures, whose bio-political control of communities stems from determining not only what but also whether they eat, and when (Leone 2013b). “Secular” semiospheres vary too, both historically and contextually, as regards their ways of ranking taste in relation to the other senses.

The Greco-Roman culture would often include contempt for food among its criteria of philosophical excellence. Unrestrained talking about food was particularly stigmatized as sign of a poor spirit. Thus Theophrastus², the successor of Aristotle in the Peripatetic school, in *The Characters of Men* (3) ironizes over the garrulous men who “tell[s] dish by dish what he had for supper” (Loeb translation). Plutarch³ in the *Moralia* (686 c-d) pillories the irrelevance of food as topic of philosophical discourse:

To reminisce about eating and drinking, the sorts of pleasures that are as fleeting as yesterday’s perfume or the lingering smell of cooking, is not the mark of a free-born man: only the delights of philosophical discussion will remain perennially fresh, feasts that be enjoyed again and again. If pleasure were only a physical thing, Xenophon and Plato would have left a record in their Symposia not of the conversation, but of the relishes, cakes, and sweets served at Callias and Agathon’s houses. (Loeb translation)

2 Eresos, Greece, c. 371 BC – Athens, c. 287 BC.

3 Chaeronea, Boeotia, c. AD 46–Delphi, Phocis, c. AD 120.

However, no Latin author better than Petronius⁴ poured scorn on the intellectual vacuity of the man who prattles on about food. The venomous passage from *Satyricon* (66) deserves a long quotation:

“But,” demanded Trimalchio, “what did you have for dinner?” “I’ll tell you if I can,” answered he, “for my memory’s so good that I often forget my own name. Let’s see, for the first course, we had a hog, crowned with a wine cup and garnished with cheese cakes and chicken livers cooked well done, beets, of course, and whole-wheat bread, which I’d rather have than white, because it puts strength into you, and when I take a crap afterwards, I don’t have to yell. Following this, came a course of tarts, served cold, with excellent Spanish wine poured over warm honey; I ate several of the tarts and got the honey all over myself. Then there were chick-peas and lupines, all the smooth-shelled nuts you wanted, and an apple apiece, but I got away with two, and here they are, tied up in my napkin; for I’ll have a row on my hands if I don’t bring some kind of a present home to my favorite slave. Oh yes, my wife has just reminded me, there was a haunch of bear-meat as a side dish, Scintilla ate some of it without knowing what it was, and she nearly puked up her guts when she found out. But as for me, I ate more than a pound of it, for it tasted exactly like wild boar and, says I, if a bear eats a man, shouldn’t that be all the more reason for a man to eat a bear? The last course was soft cheese, new wine boiled thick, a snail apiece, a helping of tripe, liver pate, capped eggs, turnips and mustard. But that’s enough. Pickled olives were handed around in a wooden bowl, and some of the party greedily snatched three handfuls, we had ham, too, but we sent it back. (Loeb translation)

Even more peremptorily, Stoicism epitomized the classical disdain not only for food talk but also for food itself in Epictetus’s⁵ words: “It is a sign of a stupid man to spend a great deal of time on the concerns of his body – exercise, eating, drinking, evacuating his bowels, and copulating. These things should be done in passing; you should devote your whole attention to the mind” (*Enchiridion* 41; Loeb translation).

The imperative to neglect the body and exclusively concentrate on the mind reflected the Stoic mindset. Present-day commentators might be relieved that modernity has rejected the separation between mind and body. Feuerbach’s materialism even dignified food as substance of the spirit. Yet one thing is acknowledging the continuity between what we eat and what we think, another thing is wallowing in a semiosphere where all we think about is food. All we talk about is food. Exploring the public as well as the private Italian arena, one garners evidence that obsession for food, typical of this culture, has reached unprecedented levels. Not only focus on food institutions, media, and people. Food is becoming the primary modeling system of the Italian semiosphere.

4 Titus Petronius Niger; Massilia, AD 27–Cuma, AD 66.

5 Hierapolis, Phrygia (presumed), c. AD 55–Nicopolis, Greece, AD 135.

Italy is turning, in its self-awareness and image abroad, into the land of “good food.” In the hierarchical topology of senses, taste attains prominence, comes to be measure of all other senses and experiences. Again, semioticians face their professional question: “what does it mean?” What does it mean, when a culture identifies so convincingly not with its literature, arts, music, and philosophy, but with its food? Why has the profession of chef become the most coveted by young Italians?

There is no simple answer to these questions. The “aesthetic immediacy” of taste plays a significant role. In a semiosphere that more and more rejects, in the name of pragmatism, any mediation as well as any complex system of judgment, food is the sensorial frame that perfectly embodies the anti-intellectualism of the current Italian society. Of course, great skills and a long training are necessary to become a “master chef”; yet, in the popular imaginaire turning into a kitchen virtuoso follows a different path as becoming a reputed surgeon. The chef’s training, it is believed, rests on innate talent, socially diffused competences, and apprenticeship through imitation. It is a training that, like that of singers or soccer players, is not burdened with verbally encoded knowledge and a formal, bureaucratic control of learning. Not the institution will judge who is a great chef, but its audience.

This is the second element of food that appeals the present-day popular culture. Food is not only popular, but also populist. In the contemporary imaginaire, the culinary experience entails an aesthetic judgment that is both Manichean and unconstrained by complex forms of evaluation. I like, I dislike: food turns into the material version of Facebook aesthetics, where the sensorial immediacy of ingestion sweeps away any need to verbalize complex nuances. Words are important in the culinary world, but are ancillary. They struggle to present food but must stay in the background. The unfathomable smell of kitchen takes the foreground, and lingers well after words have lost their meaning. In a semiosphere so inclined to dismiss the value of words and articulation, food therefore evolves into the perfect metaphor of aesthetic naturalness: one becomes a great chef through developing natural talent; one receives the pleasure of great food through simply ingesting it.

But what is problematic about that, in the end? After all, the apprenticeship of painters is similar to that of chefs, and the non-verbal rhetoric of judgment in the arts is germane to that of food: artworks captivate us beyond words. However – although many ultramodern voices have flagged as snob conservatism the intellectual resistance to include food among the arts – it is evident that food is not painting. Painting has no recipes, and its artworks are not consumed by aesthetic reception. Is therefore the art of food more similar to that of music? It is, but with the fundamental differences that in music we certainly value

execution, but we value composition much more. There would be no Celibidache without Beethoven. But who first composed the “carbonara”? Despite all the ennobling efforts of the present-day media, the art of food is not art but craft. As a consequence, a semiosphere that is engrossed in food will not display the same semiotic features as a semiosphere for which music, or painting, or literature is the central activity. By relishing food and food talk, contemporary societies celebrate the ultimate pop degradation of aesthetics, one in which creativity has no individual creators and aesthetic value coincides and disappears with its consumption.

5 Conclusion

Paul Ricoeur famously contended, through a monumental array of works (1983–1985), that narratives are cultural devices for coming to terms with the paradoxical experience of time. Semiospheres are macro-narratives too, and time is one of their main concerns (Leone 2014b). Ultimately, a semiosphere’s complex topology of meaning is about time. It is not about temporality, which is the structural rendering of time in discourse. It is rather about existential time. A semiosphere’s topology is both the consequence and the embodiment of the way in which a culture and its members collectively cope with the idea of death, with the ghost of existential finitude.

Most of the phenomena that originate from the contemporary frenzy for food, including marketing endeavors, revolve around the concept of experience. More than ever people are ready to credit the aesthetics of food because they are hungry not only for delicious dishes, but also for what they embody: an immediate, engrossing, and simultaneous confirmation of existential presence. I eat, ergo I exist. I feel the pleasure of ingestion, ergo I am alive. New technologies facilitate cultural acceleration and the consequent loss of collective memory. Everything looks more impermanent than ever: ideas, words, and institutions. Voices coming from a distant past through literature and the arts are no longer able to soothe the existential starvation. People want to be, and want to be now. They want to see and be seen, touch and be touched, feeling that they exist not through reconnection with a remote past or projection into a threatening future, but through present experience. And what more than the ingestion of a succulent bite, of an exquisite sip, will confirm existence?

A nervously suckling humanity it is, scared more than ever to detach its lips from the breast of the world, lest the vacuity of it all swallow existence at the first abstinence.

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