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# Facing Food: Pareidolia, Iconism, and Meaning<sup>1</sup>

SIMONA STANO\*

ITALIAN TITLE: *I volti del cibo: Pareidolia, iconismo e senso*

ABSTRACT: Making faces out of food is a practice as common as eating. An extensive number of visual representations, ranging from artworks (such as the well-known imaginative portraits by the Italian painter Arcimboldo, as well as several experiments in contemporary photography) to religious images (such as the famous Pastafarianism's Flying Spaghetti Monster), from object design to marketing communication, etc., feature faces made of foods. Even more interestingly, food has been the object of several acts of pareidolia: first spotted by a customer in 1996, the "Nun Bun", a cinnamon roll baked at the Bongo Java Coffee Shop in Nashville, became famous worldwide for its resemblance to Mother Teresa of Calcutta; in 2004 Diana Duyser's 10-year-old grilled cheese sandwich bearing the likeness of the Virgin Mary was bought on eBay by the Golden Palace Casino for \$28,000; in 2011, as Kate Middleton was about to get married to Prince William, a 25-year-old British man and his girlfriend found her "portrait" on a jelly bean, which was later sold at an auction with an opening bid of £ 500. And several other examples could be added to this list. Such cases are particularly interesting, as they recall crucial issues related to the processes of meaning-making underlying "non man-made" facial images: who or what is their author? Do they suppose any form of intentionality? What can be said about the Model Reader they establish? And what are the effects of meaning deriving

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from them? This paper addresses these questions, as well as other fundamental issues concerning spontaneous facial images, by focusing on a series of relevant case studies related to the emergence of the face in food visual patterns.

KEYWORDS: Food; Face; Pareidolia; Iconism; Meaning

## 1. Introduction

Making faces out of food is a practice as common as eating. An extensive number of visual representations, ranging from artworks to religious images, from object design to marketing communication, etc., feature faces made of foods. Let us consider, for instance, the famous imaginative portraits by the Italian painter Giuseppe Arcimboldo, which combine fruits and vegetables of various kinds to give origin to human-like contours. In the series *The Four Seasons* (Fig. 1), for instance, portraits made of seasonal products are used to represent specific times of the year: *Spring* looks like a smiling young woman made of flowers and vegetables; *Summer* juxtaposes seasonal fruit and vegetables in another female figure, whose bright colours stand out against the dark background; *Autumn* resembles a man's face made of a pear (nose), apple (cheek), pomegranate (chin) and mushroom (ear), all ripe to bursting; *Winter* recalls the image of an old man, made up of an aged tree stump, with pieces of broken-off branch and scratched bark for his features, and a swollen mushroom as his mouth.

The same operation characterises other visual representations, such as the so called *Flying Spaghetti Monster* (the deity of Pastafarianism), whose giant face is made of spaghetti and meatballs, and an increasing number of photographic experiments and “food porn” posts featuring face-like images made of assembled foods of different kinds.

Food design is also rich in “faced” products, from plates inviting children to use food to dress up the bare faces they host on their surface to toasters allowing adults to have breakfast with holy, pop and also “selfie” sandwiches. Not forgetting a series of widespread practices involved in festive rites and also everyday life, such as pumpkin carving in the United States or fruit carving in Thailand and Japan. And several other examples could be added to this list.



**Figure 1.** Arcimboldo (1563-1573) *The Four Seasons*, oil on canvas [from top left to bottom right: *Winter*, 1563, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Wien; *Spring*, 1563, Real Academia de Bellas Artes de San Fernando, Madrid; *Summer*, 1563, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Wien; *Autumn*, 1573, Louvre Museum, Paris].

Even more interestingly, food has been the object of several acts of *face pareidolia*, that is to say, the phenomenon consisting in seeing faces in confused visual environments, such as inanimate objects or abstract forms. Contrarily to the intentional representation of faces by means of food, such a phenomenon relies on the unintended emergence of the face in food visual patterns, recalling crucial issues related to the meaning-making processes underlying “non man-made” facial images. Who or what is their *author*? Do they suppose any form of *intentionality*? What can be said about the *Model Reader* (cfr Eco 1979) they establish? And what are the *effects of meaning* arising from them? This paper aims at answering these questions through the analysis of a series of relevant examples, which will be analysed in the following paragraphs.

## 2. Face pareidolia and food

Face pareidolia is rather common in the food universe, as a number of mass and new media messages (e.g., online posts, newspaper articles, etc.), as well as scientific papers, point out. In 1997, even the famous *Late Show with David Letterman* ironically covered this topic: recalling politicians, actors and TV stars, Letterman and Shaffer sarcastically talked and sang about “pastries that look like celebrities” in an episode, making fun of face pareidolia — by suggesting that, basically, one could identify any face in any pastry — and depicting it as a sort of American “mania”, or “attitude”.

In fact, in the past, pareidolia used to be considered a sort of obsession, a pathological sign, and more specifically a symptom of psychosis. However, research has shown that it is not only a normal, but also a very common human phenomenon, which is probably linked to adaptive reasons:

Our visual system is highly tuned to perceive faces, likely due to the social importance of faces and our exquisite ability to process them. ... This tendency to detect faces in ambiguous visual information is perhaps highly adaptive given the supreme importance of faces in our social life and the high cost resulting from failure to detect a true face.

(Liu *et al.* 2014, p. 61-76)

The face, in fact, is fundamental to interpersonal interaction (Leone 2019b, p. 132), as it allows us to recognise other people (i.e. their feelings, their emotions, their state of health, etc.), as well as ourselves. Even at a more general level, moreover, “the brain has a bias favouring seeing something rather than nothing, so that it tends to jump to a pattern that makes sense of a situation” (Margolis 1987, p. 38-9). This recalls the phenomenon known as *apophenia* (from the Greek ἀποφαίνω, “to make explicit”), that is, the tendency to perceive unmotivated connections and meaning between unrelated things described by psychiatrist Klaus Conrad (1958).

However, face pareidolia is not purely imaginary. Rather, as research showed, it has a basis in physical reality, relying on the activation of a specific brain region called right fusiform face area (rFFA), which is the same that plays a crucial role in processing real faces (see in particular Gauthier *et al.* 2000; Kanwisher *et al.* 2006; Richler *et al.* 2008; Liu *et al.* 2014). Hence,

a number of scientific studies have investigated the neurophysiological processes involved in face pareidolia, with respect to various aspects, from the differences between adults and infants (e.g., Le Grand *et al.* 2001; Kato and Mugitani 2015), to those between men and women (e.g., Pavlova, Scheffler, and Sokolov 2015; Proverbio and Galli 2016), human beings and primates (e.g., Beran *et al.* 2017), etc.

However, it is essential to remark that, “because the images [generating the pareidolic effect] do not actually contain faces, face pareidolia clearly requires substantial involvement of the brain’s interpretive power to detect and bind the faint face-like features to create a match with an internal face representation” (Liu *et al.* 2014, p. 61). Despite being a congenital human faculty, in other words, face pareidolia also depends on interpretative processes that cannot be neglected — even though most of the existing studies tend to do so, as they focus exclusively on biological and physiological aspects.

Drawing on these considerations, the following paragraphs deal with the analysis of specific examples of “food face pareidolia” in order to better explore the hermeneutic processes associated with such a phenomenon.

### 3. General *versus* specific pareidolic faces

If we look at occurrences of face pareidolia in the food realm, a clear distinction imposes itself: the one between *general* and *specific* pareidolic faces. While the first category includes images resembling undefined facial configurations, the latter makes reference to images recalling the face of particular people. The following paragraphs explore relevant case studies in both categories, thus leading to more general conclusions on the meaning-making processes they foster and the forms of authorship and readership they suppose.

#### 3.1. *General food pareidolic faces*

The category named “general food pareidolic faces” includes the majority of images that can be found on social media (such as Facebook or Instagram), which are generally associated with hashtags such as “#iseefaces”, “#foodpareidolia”, “#pareidolia”, etc. The eidetic, topological and chro-

matic configuration of such images generally allows perceiving<sup>2</sup> a sort of “zero degree” of the face, with no further specification in terms of gender, age, or personal identity.

As effectively shown by the examples illustrated in Fig. 2, we generally find only a few elements, such as two lines or rounded elements, often of the same colour (which we recognise as the eyes), placed in the upper part of a bigger rounded form (the contour of the face), in a specular position, just above a central smaller element (recalling the nose) and, below, a line or a variously shaped form recalling the mouth. The eidetic level is then essential in suggesting the emotive characterisation of such pareidolic faces, which is in fact the element making them differ from each other: smiling beverages, pastries, steaks, peppers or eggs, surprised zucchini and muffins, horrified peppers and tortillas, angry tarts, winking pizzas, and so on and so forth.

This involves interesting effects of meaning: food ceases here to be an inert material, a simple object subordinate to the eater’s or cook’s intentionality, to become itself provided with *agency* (since it allows the *constitution* of the observer as a patemic subject, and hence the passage to the phase of *disposition* and the deployment of the canonical passional program as illustrated by Greimas and Fontanille (1991)); or, at least, it looks endowed with the capacity to express its own feelings (a form of “subjectivity”, we might say).

In any case, the result seems to affect, although partially and generally only temporarily, the narrative program of the eater/cooker. As Leone interestingly argues in *On the Face of Food* (forthcoming), in fact, “a face can hardly become food [...]. [M]ost cultures and their respective languages do not conceive of edible vegetables and non-human animals as being endowed with a face”. In fact, most of the messages condemning the consumption of meat or other (generally animal-based) foods resort precisely to the face to highlight the ethical implications associated with eating, which are rather common and usually emphasise the presence of the face by recurring to visual and sometimes also verbal enunciative *embrayages*. Such a discursive strategy can also be found in the movie *Sausage Party* (Vernon and Tiernan 2016), where the association between

2. For a discussion of the visual conditions that are necessary and sufficient for a face to be perceived, see Leone 2019a.





Figure 2. Examples of general food pareidolic faces.

vegetables and children and the effect of “inedibility” resulting from it figuratively find expression in providing them with a face, even if they do not have one in nature.

Moving back from representation to unintended emergence, such an effect is evidently weaker: indeed, we can easily imagine that the foods portrayed in the pictures in Fig. 3 (first line) were eaten just after such pictures were taken). Nonetheless, an alteration of the narrative program of the subjects entering in contact with such “faced foods” can be detected: the cook or eater stopped cooking or eating such foods to take a picture of them and so became first of all an *observer*, favouring the logic of present-day “gastromania”<sup>3</sup> and “food porn” over that of the stomach. What it is

3. Gianfranco Marrone (2014) uses the word “gastromania” to describe the fact that, in contemporary societies, not only do we eat food, but also and above all we talk about it, we comment

more, as we highlighted above, a passional program that was not expected to take place was activated.

Such dynamics draw the attention to another crucial issue: how do pareidolic faces emerge? What or who marks the passage from simple food materials to faces? It is clear that they do not properly result from human intentionality (which, if anything, is reduced to an accidental discovery, a response to something similar to the *punctum* that Roland Barthes (1980) described in relation to photographs, which — it is worth reminding it — is a characteristic inherent to texts themselves, not a result of the observer's will or action). By contrast, these faces can be seen either as the product of chance (such as when a food is cut in a way that reveals a face in its interior — while the cut is unquestionably performed by the cook or eater, in fact, pareidolia occurs in a “regime of accident”, not of “manipulation”, in Landowski's (2005) terms<sup>4</sup>) or, at the most, as a creation of Nature itself (whose creative capacity results in the alteration of the usual visual configuration of food, originating the pareidolic effect, even prior to any intervention by a human agent).

Actually, when (more or less explicit) visual alterations by human agents occur, such as in the examples shown in Fig. 3 (bottom), the resulting effect is evidently different — with a shift from unintended emergence back to intentional representation.

on it, we share its pictures on various social networks, etc., thus investing it with multiple meanings and values that in turn mediate our gastronomic experiences.

4. In Landowski's view, there are four regimes underlying meaning-making processes: the “regime of programming” is based on the principle of regularity and arises when the aims previously set by subjects are achieved; the “regime of manipulation”, founded on the logic of intentionality, follows the classic model of interaction between a subject and an object; the “regime of adjustment”, based on the logic of perception, refers to the progressive acquisition of special skills and expresses insecurity; finally, the “regime of accident” is based on the logic of chance and risk, therefore opposing the system of programming since it is untied from any pre-established behaviour.



Figure 3. Examples of altered general food pareidolic faces.

### 3.2. *Specific food pareidolic faces*

The category we identified under the name “*specific pareidolic faces*” include food visual patterns resembling the face of a specific person — generally a celebrity or a deity.

Fig. 4, for instance, shows the famous “Nun Bun”, a cinnamon roll baked at the Bongo Java Coffee Shop in Nashville, which in 1996 became famous worldwide for its resemblance to Mother Teresa of Calcutta. Just below it, there is Diana Duyser’s ten-year-old grilled cheese sandwich baring the likeness of the Virgin Mary, which in 2004 was bought on eBay by the Golden Palace Casino for \$ 28,000. Another interesting case appears in the bottom of the figure: when, in 2011, Kate Middleton was about to get married to Prince William, a 25-year-old British man and his girlfriend found her “portrait” on a jelly bean, which was later sold at an auction with an opening bid of £ 500.

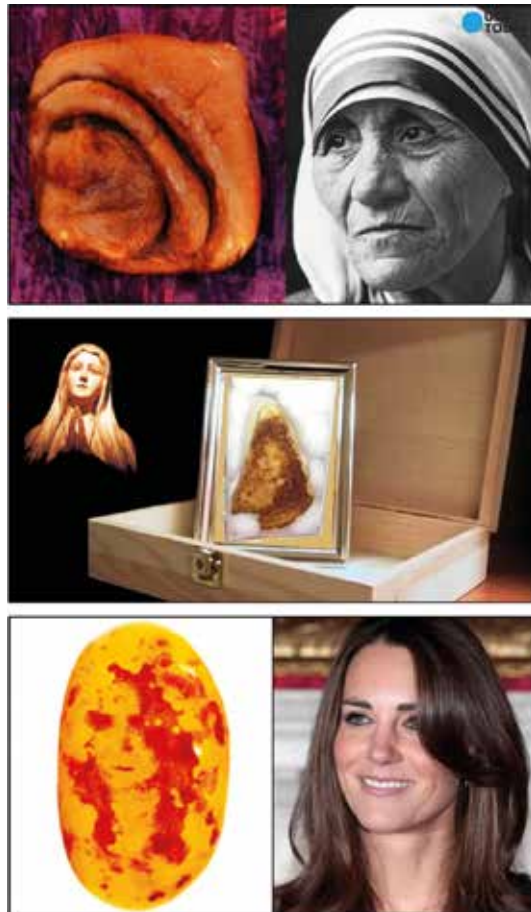


Figure 4. Examples of specific food pareidolic faces.

Several other examples could be added to this list, but, beyond the peculiarities of each example, it is interesting to reflect on the general meaning-making processes activated by such images. Inedibility reaches its peak, not so much by virtue of a passional process affecting the observer, as we described when analysing the previous cases, but because of the different “creative intentionality” behind such pareidolic faces, which rather than chance or Nature, is now represented by a *transcendent* agent (with celebrities, politicians and royal members being equated to deities).

Food thus becomes an *index* (in Peircean terms) of such transcendence, that is to say, a surface on and through which it manifests itself in and to the immanent world. As such, food substances become untouchable objects of cult, which have to be protected in plastic boxes or by means of other materials (as it happened for the above-mentioned examples), not so much to prevent them from decay — in fact, pareidolia seems to make them enter the regime of an unnatural durativity, with sandwiches and buns inexplicably never going bad nor sprouting a spore of mould —, but rather to stress the need for a different interpretation of their meaning. They cease to be simple means of sustenance or ephemeral tasty experiences, to become prodigious effigies, *simulacra* of celestial or worldly Gods. As such, they should not to be consumed, but rather preserved, contemplated and venerated (and for this reasons they are generally considered worth great amounts of money). What is more, they generally become divination *omina* and a tangible way to miracles: the Bongo Java, for instance, still claims that “the NunBun was not but very well could have been used to prove Mother Teresa was a saint”, while, according to Diana Duyser, her holy sandwich brought her blessings, including a \$ 70,000 won in a nearby casino.

As in other forms of pareidolia, however, *iconism* evidently prevails over indexicality: it is not just any food, but food that *looks like* deities or celebrities — and in the specific cases we are considering in this paper, like their faces. This raises a very important issue, which mainly remained implicit in the case of general pareidolic faces (and unfortunately still tends to be neglected in many studies on pareidolia), but is fundamental: the so-called “problem of iconism” — which is crucial in semiotics and was at the heart of Umberto Eco’s reflection. Reproaching the so-called “weak iconism” of those who understood the iconic sign as “something similar to objects, something spontaneous, based on analogical relationships” (Eco 1970, p. 240, our translation), already in 1970 the Italian semiotician suggested that icons should be rather conceived as “a social product, that is, an object of convention” (*ibidem*), bearer of history and ideologies. Therefore, if on the one hand, it is unquestionable that particular eidetic, topological and chromatic configurations underlie face perception as a result of the activity of a particular area of our brain — and so we can reasonably expect general pareidolic faces to be easily identified by everyone —, on the other hand, specific pareidolic faces, relying on codes that

are not equally universally shared, remind us that similarity always results from conventionality.

So, for instance, a music or movie lover with no particular interest in religion would probably spot a resemblance to Francesco Guccini rather than to Jesus on the pancake portrayed in Fig. 5, or the reference to a less celestial Madonna or the actress Marlena Dietrich rather than to the Virgin Mary on Duyser's sandwich. And a young child who is in love with cartoons but has no specific interest or knowledge in religion would possibly see Mad Madam Mim or Mr Magoo rather than Mother Teresa in the Nun Bun. And so on and so forth.



Figure 5. Examples of specific food pareidolic faces.



This explains why, in spite of what happens with general pareidolic faces, paratexts are frequent in such cases: photographs, and sometimes also graphics, or mirrors, are used precisely to clarify the recognition codes that isolate the pertinent characteristics on which the identified similarity is based.

It is in this sense that pareidolia requires us to reconsider a long-standing yet still open issue, in semiotics and more generally in philosophy (let us consider, for instance, Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*), to which Peirce himself paid attention by means of the concept of "hyponicon" (CP, 2.226): the need to move away from the naive theory of an "objective similarity"; a naive theory that, nonetheless, has imposed itself in different fields, as Eco (1970) already complained five decades ago, and which risks underlying any purely physiological interest in phenomena of this type. Although being a congenital faculty in man, pareidolia very much depends on the observer's past experiences and visual culture, that is, on the specific visual ideologies that, in each culture, shape our instinct of recognition of the visual forms and the consequent attribution of agentivity on them.

This conventional, *symbolic* nature, after all, emerges clearly if we consider cases of "sacred pareidolia" (as it is sometimes referred to) in cultures where the face of God cannot be represented: similarity passes here through the verbal language, with faces replaced by names. Yet these foods are perceived (and sometimes banned, as Fig. 6 clearly shows) as "looking like" God, and the effects of meaning resulting from them do not differ much from the previously described ones.



Figure 6. Examples of food "sacred" pareidolia in the Islamic world.

#### 4. Conclusions

If we go back to the above-mentioned David Letterman and Paul Shaffer's show, we can now see that, although certainly sarcastic and extremely emphasised, their message was not completely unfounded. In a certain sense, in fact, it is true that pareidolia reflects a specific culture's "attitude", at least in the sense that it cannot be fully understood without taking into consideration those cultural grids that shape similarity, and hence iconism — thus making certain resemblances emerge more easily in some semiospheres, such as the ironically depicted American one, than in others.

Conventionality, in other words, does not merely concern the intentional representation of faces aimed at emphasising the ludic and aesthetic dimension of food, or rather at denouncing its ethical implications; but it also shapes and guides the unintentional emergence of the face in food visual patterns. The contemporary process of aestheticisation of food and eating promoted by the mass and especially the new media is particularly interesting in this sense: cases of food pareidolia have always existed, but have evidently increased in present-day "gastromaniac" era, which has elected such a process of aestheticisation as one of its main pillars. A new and different look to food has thus imposed itself, making pareidolia occur more frequently — not because of a change in the conformation of food, but rather as a consequence of the spread of such a new code affecting visual representation and interpretation in the food realm.

The cases analysed in this paper, although limited to a defined corpus that could certainly be extended, clearly highlight that the pareidolic sign is a complex and multifaceted one, which requires to be interpreted exactly as other signs, without establishing direct and determined correlations with its objects. Although hardly perceptible in the generally rather simple images used in neurophysiological experiments and reflections, this fact is fundamental, and clearly points out the need to complement those studies with a semiotic analysis focusing on the interpretative processes inevitably supposed by any pareidolic occurrence.

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