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**Nourrir le sens**

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Simona Stano

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## EDITOR'S NOTE

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## Introduction

- <sup>1</sup> In his famous essay "Toward a Psychosociology of Contemporary Food Consumption", Roland Barthes (1961) suggested that food "is not only a collection of products that can be used for statistical or nutritional studies. It is also, and at the same time, a system of communication, a body of images, a protocol of usages, situations, and behavior" (Engl. trans. 1997, p. 21). In this sense, it represents a "sign" through and through that is highly structured and involves substances, practices, habits, and techniques of preparation and consumption in a system of differences in meaning.
- <sup>2</sup> 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" (Fieldhouse 2013, p. 30). Already in the 1950s, in fact, Barthes pointed out the ideological connotation of food, insisting precisely on various examples taken from the food universe in his analysis of modern-day "mythologies" (Barthes 1957; Engl. trans. 1972). In his view, myth is a second-order semiological system, namely a meta-language that is able to naturalize specific worldviews by converting signs into signifiers to be associated with new meanings. And food is evidently one of the most emblematic domains traversed by such dynamics, either as

regards its national (or exotic) connotations (such as in the case of wine, fries and other “alimentary sign[s] of Frenchness” (*Ibid.*, p. 64) analysed in *Mythologies*) or the ideological implications of its aesthetics (such as in the case of “ornamental cookery”, see *Ibid.*, pp. 78-80) and practices.

- 3 Drawing on these premises, this issue of *Signata* enhances the reflection upon the meaning-making processes underlying past and present mythologies of food, focusing in particular on: (i) the link between food practices and behaviours, on the one hand, and cultural processes and ideological investments, on the other; (ii) the crucial role played by communication and collective imaginaries in such dynamics; and (iii) the theoretical and methodological implications of these processes, especially as related to the potential of semiotics in fostering a critical approach towards them. In order to do so, it includes relevant contributions by scholars and researchers dealing with a variety of food-related texts, discourses and practices, thus pursuing a project that has increasingly gained visibility in the semiotic field in the last decades. Though later than other disciplines (such as anthropology, ethnology, sociology, history, geography, etc.), in fact, semiotics has progressively made its way into the domain of the so-called “food studies”, based on the idea that food substances, discourses and practices can be interpreted as parts of a continuous process of creation and transfer of meaning, and therefore used to infer information about their creators, their environments, and the relations between them. Not only can the “*science that studies the life of signs within society*” (Saussure 1916, Engl. trans. 2011, p. 16) help us understand better food-related behaviours and attitudes, but the analysis of such behaviours and attitudes can shed new light on food as a “network of interrelated embodied processes of semiosis” (Parasecoli 2011, p. 647). It is precisely in this sense that this issue of *Signata* marks an outstanding progress, providing a unique dialogue between semioticians, anthropologists, art historians, media and communication studies experts, which reveals a series of fundamental, yet still often overlooked, dynamics that make food emerge as that “system of communication, [...] body of images, [...] protocol of usages, situations, and behavior” described by Barthes (1961; Engl. trans. 1997, p. 21, quoted above), through which identity and otherness are continuously re-modelled and confronted with each other.

## 1. Food, culture, and ideology

- 4 Selecting, cooking, buying, as well as sharing and representing food are acts through which the systems of values, principles and expectations involved by specific ideas of one’s own and others’ identity are circulated, enforced or transgressed (see in particular Eckstein 1980; LeBesco & Naccarato 2008; Stano 2023). This originates a process of continuous translation and stratification of codes, which, however, tends to remain unperceived, neglected, unseen. Hence, if the foodsphere is made of virtual potentialities, “food mythologies”—or ideologies—can be understood as the discursive choices that actualize only part of such potentialities, while hiding the fact that these pertinentisations are not the only possible ones (cf. Eco 1990; Lorusso 2017).
- 5 It is in this sense, for instance, that the first paper included in this collection, “The Right Face of Food” by Massimo Leone, questions the relationship between the face and food, offering a thought-provoking reflection on our interaction with what we eat, and in particular, with its forms and placements. As the author interestingly recalls, in fact,

in many traditions, there are “right” and “wrong” ways of placing, arranging and eating food, which are not a mere matter of etiquette, but reflect specific ideological valorisations. Focusing on relevant examples, such as macrobiotic gastronomy and bread, the article suggests that cultures tend to project onto food the same principle of “faciality” by which they shape human relationships. Hence—it concludes—what drives us to assign a face to food and to normalize our approach to it is our intrinsic “semiotic nature”, that is to say, our distinctive aptitude to transform every asymmetry into a difference that reflects a system of meanings and values.

- 6 Moving the focus of attention to a highly debated issue in contemporary European gastrospheres, Anna Maria Lorusso explores, in “The Boundaries of the Edible”, the processes of cultural negotiation entailed by the recent introduction of insect-based products in such contexts, reflecting on the fundamental role played by common sense (i.e. “that special shared sensibility, typical of every cultural community”, as the author describes it) in generating consumers’ pathemic reactions to these products, on the one hand, and the discursive strategies adopted to foster their acceptability, on the other. As a result, the paper further stresses the need to reject any materialistic view based on convenience or on “ecological” (as Harris 1985 would put it) logics, remarking the importance of meaning-making dynamics and valorisation processes.
- 7 Similarly, Marcel Danesi’s “The Semiotics of Fast and Junk Food” provides a critical look at fast and junk food, conceiving them as sign systems with inherent meanings that change and adapt to cultural shifts. As the author shows, in fact, both these trends represent historical paradoxes, as they are not continuations or evolutions of previous food codes, but rather semiotic artifacts interweaving with the emergence of consumerist societies, which have produced their own patterns of unconscious symbolic meanings. In other terms, they symbolize such societies, reminding us that, as culture changes, food tastes do as well—and such changes, in turn, contribute to shaping new lifestyles, practices and trends.
- 8 The cultural dimension is also particularly emphasised by Mohamed Bernoussi in “How to Recognize the Political Regime of a Dish”, which addresses the crucial issue of the processes of “translation” of the culinary code (cf. Stano 2015), suggesting the idea of a fundamental connection between specific foods, on the one hand, and particular political regimes, on the other. More specifically, the paper compares two famous dishes, *soupe* from France and *harira* from Morocco, to highlight that, just as political regimes, “taste regimes” involve constraints, compromises and adaptations that extend well beyond material factors, embracing axiological prescriptions and ideological investments.
- 9 Similar dynamics are also central to Adrien Mathy’s “Sémiotique du carnage: la chair animale comme unité indicielle et symbolico-discursive”, which stresses the semiotic characterisation of animal flesh as both an indexical and symbolic-discursive unit. More specifically, the article addresses the ideological dynamics underlying carnist discourses, pointing out the paradoxical process of erasure and at the same time a spectacularization of the link between meat as a culinary object, on the one hand, and non-human animals as beings endowed with moral status, on the other.
- 10 A parallel perspective can be found in “Formes de sacrifice animal, alimentation et dissimulations médiatiques” by Gianfranco Marrone, which also revolves around the relation between men and non-human animals, reflecting in particular on the idea of sacrifice and its meaning in contemporary times. Through the analysis of a various

texts, ranging from TV programmes and movies to awareness campaigns and agri-food parks, the author insists on the concept of internaturality to point out the connection between the idea of a loss of meaning of sacrifice in present-day societies and the changes that have affected the relationships between humans and animals (i.e. “man and animals, man and other men through the animal, the animal with other animals through man”), with the unavoidable reference to the cultural context, on the one hand, and to the sacred dimension, on the other.

## 2. Communication, collective imaginaries, and (new) mythologies of food

- 11 The above-described dynamics have become even more evident and important in present-day “gastromania”—i.e. the contemporary “obsession” with food, which comes together with the infinite possibilities of talking about it (Marrone 2014). Nowadays, in fact, not only do we eat food, but also and above all, we talk about it, we describe it, we comment on it, we share its pictures on social networks, etc., investing it with multiple meanings and values that in turn mediate our gastronomic experiences. What is more, in contemporary societies, the process of industrialisation of agri-food systems has eroded the sociocultural constraints that used to regulate the gastronomic universe (such as the ones described by Lévi-Strauss 1958, 1962, 1964, 1965; Douglas 1966, 1972, 1973; Bourdieu 1979), allowing for more autonomy and freedom in food choices, but at the same time creating insecurity and “gastro-anomy” (Fischler 1979). Food has thus increasingly become the object of individual decisions, which has further increased the role of contemporary mythologies in (re)establishing an “order”, that is to say, a logic or system of reference, in everyday eating.
- 12 This makes the understanding of how food-related institutions, marketing agencies, media companies, art systems, and other public and private actors interact constitutively in the negotiation of food meanings and practices more important and necessary than ever.
- 13 It is precisely this need that leads Francesco Mangiapane, in “Wine as Represented in Contemporary Cinema: A Semiotic Review”, to investigate the mythologies emerging from a series of movies representing wine—which, in the gastromaniac era, as the author points out, has progressively gained visibility as an autonomous cinematographic subject. Moving across a wide corpus including titles such as *A Tale of Autumn* (1998), *Sideways* (2004), *Mondovino* (2004), *A Good Year* (2006), *Natural Resistance* (2014), *Saint Amour* (2016) and *The Last Prosecco* (2017), the paper highlights some crucial thematic figures that reveal particular ideological connotations of wine. One of these is *inheritance*, which is generally represented as a way to retrace one’s own life path backwards, reuniting, through wine, with one’s deepest identity. Another crucial figure is the *vineyard*, or the “countryside”, whose collective, slow rhythms are usually opposed to the frenetic individual life of the city, making of the so-called *terroir* a multi-sensorial and stratified “semiotic machine”, which is precisely what allows the protagonists of the movies to overcome the conflict between their past and their present, relaunching it towards the future.
- 14 Martina Corgnati interestingly addresses such dynamics from a historical point of view, focusing on a series of 14<sup>th</sup>-century mural paintings and frescoes in Northern Italy to

underline their fundamental role in renewing ancient iconographies of food, as well as in revealing new, relevant aspects concerning both the material and the symbolic dimension of specific products and practices. More specifically, her paper “On the Holy Tables” scrutinises various works by Giotto, Duccio di Buoninsegna and Pietro da Rimini, illustrating the different types of food that they represented, for the very first time, clearly and meticulously on the tables, thus allowing to identify different kinds of dishes and delicacies that had so far remained undefined, and pointing to their symbolic significance.

- 15 In a more markedly diachronic perspective, Jesús Contreras’ “From the Food Myths of the Past to the Food Myths of the Present” compares a series of ancient and modern food myths, on the one hand, to present-day mythologies in the food realm, on the other hand, highlighting their different functions and effects of meaning. When dealing with the former, the author reviews various narratives such as the Biblical passages relating to manna, the Aztec myth of the arrival of corn and the Inca legend concerning the origin of the potato, as well as more recent texts such as Thomas More’s *Utopia*, Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World*, and John R.R. Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings*, pointing to their crucial role in providing solutions to the various types and degrees of problems related to potential food shortages and/or to the need to ensure food supply in exceptional circumstances. On the other hand, recalling various examples of contemporary food myths, especially as related to digital communication, Contreras argues that these generally concern foods to which particular dietary features are attributed, either beneficial or harmful. He explains such a change recalling the processes of medicalization and nutritionalization (cf. Scrinis 2008, 2013) of food that have contributed to “banishing the gods and cultural heroes typical of classical myths” (as the author puts it), evidently altering the concept of myth itself. In fact, digital technology has made it easier to produce and share texts about food, improving access to information and knowledge, but also resulting in the spread of alternative narratives and unverified information (Stano 2021). These are interestingly often referred to precisely as “food myths”—an expression that no longer recalls the idea of myth as a “sacred”, and hence a “true” story (cf. Eliade 1963), as it was conceived in ancient societies, namely as a form of knowledge rooted in the divine world “revealing” the exemplary models for all human rites and significant human activities (from diet to marriage, from work to education, etc.). Since modern times, this idea has been replaced first by a conception of myth as a primitive and “pre-logic” form of thought contrasting science (see, for instance, Tylor 1920; Frazer 1890, new. ed. 1922; Lévy-Bruhl 1935), and then by its understanding in terms of a cognitive operation that is different from, but as valid as—and complementary to—the scientific logic (see, for instance, Malinowski 1926; Lévi-Strauss 1978; Popper 1994; Niola 2012; Ortoleva 2019). However, a negative connotation of the mythical discourse persists in contemporary culture, where the word “myth” itself has become a synonym for “lie” or “illusion” (in Greimassian terms), which needs to be unveiled or—to use a more popular term—“debunked” (Stano 2021). Drawing on these considerations, Contreras devotes particular attention to the functioning mechanisms and the effects of meaning arising from a series of relevant cases studies, thereby pointing out the “mythical construction” of some widespread dietary regimes (such as the Mediterranean diet) and practices.

### 3. Making sense of food and nurturing meaning

- 16 The above-described dynamics do not simply concern our foodways, that is to say, “the traditional activities, attitudes, beliefs and behaviors associated with the food in [our] daily life” (MacDowell *et al.* 2015, p. 2). They also affect the way we can think of, and therefore investigate, such foodways, and more generally food, pointing out the need to adopt a critical approach towards it, that is to say, to identify the devices through which particular connotative systems<sup>1</sup> concerning food end up being perceived as denotative meanings, “natural” implications, “spontaneous, innocent, indisputable” (Barthes 1957, Engl. trans. 1972, p. 117) representations. In this sense, as we pointed out in Stano (2023), semiotics can play a crucial role, since it does not wonder about the genesis of such systems, but rather explores their structures and criteria of pertinentisation; “it does not question their veracity, but rather uncovers the textual strategies underlying their messages” (*Ibid.*, pp. 318-319).
- 17 Accepting such a challenge, Ugo Volli’s “A Signifying System Almost Devoid of Semantics” reviews the most significant semantic hypotheses for the analysis of the food system (e.g. the “circumstantial theory”, the “identity theory” and the “flavour theory”), questioning them and proposing to consider the food code as a monoplanar (or, at most, slightly biplanar) signifying system, pointing to its weak and often only extrinsic semantic organization, that is to say, to its “appearance” (in the terms introduced by the author himself in Volli 2017). In this view, semiotics can profitably contribute to its analysis by examining the morphological and the syntactical dimensions. Hence, the paper suggests a general theoretical framework for the analysis of food, encompassing different levels: ingredients (which are organised in specific combinations and follow a particular hierarchy); single foods (whose morphological organisation can be effectively analysed recurring to the idea of matrix introduced by Barthes 1967); dishes (where syntax becomes particularly relevant, because they entail various possible combinations of taste, temperature, proprioceptive sensations, colours and cultural compatibility of materials); meals (with their own syntactic organisation, depending on complex rules of succession or co-presence); and cycles (which can be daily or longer, e.g. weekly or even yearly).
- 18 A thought-provoking reflection is also provided by Jean-Jacques Boutaud, who focuses on the figurative dimension of food and its very diverse forms and manifestations, relating them to a specific semiotic interest for food and taste. Recalling and further developing a reflection that has caught the author’s attention on several occasions (see in particular Boutaud 1997; Boutaud & Verón 2007; Boutaud 2005, 2020, 2021), his article “Le figuratif de l’alimentation” finely reconstructs the theoretical debate on the figurative, then applying it to food and—more properly—to the gustatory experience. Hence, it introduces a model organised by scales, which allows recognising the figurative in the entire spectrum of food—i.e. not exclusively as related to nutrition, food products, or the act of eating *per se*, nor primarily linked to taste and to the gustatory image, but embracing the encompassing power of food as a form of life and of the culture that originates it.
- 19 This concludes a collection that is extremely rich and varied, not only in terms of areas of investigation and fields of application, but also as regards the tools offered by the semiotic approach for studying the dense interweaving of texts, discourses, practices, axiologies and ideological investments characterising the foodsphere, as well as for

creating new theoretical and methodological models to do so. It is a collection that further emphasises how producing, preserving, preparing, gathering, marketing and consuming food are acts through which meanings and values can be circulated, promoted or transgressed, therefore representing a key component of culture. It is a collection that, ultimately, underlines the importance of further nourishing the analysis of the processes by which food and foodways “make sense”—of themselves, as well as of our own and others’ identity, and the way this is unceasingly re-constructed—for “nurturing meaning” itself.

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## NOTES

1. As highlighted above, the idea of ideology as a connotative system was introduced by Barthes (1957), and 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” (Eco 1968, Engl. trans. in Robey 1990, p. 163). For a further discussion, see in particular Stano & Leone 2023.

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## AUTHOR

### SIMONA STANO

Simona Stano is Associate Professor of Semiotics at the University of Turin (UniTo, Italy) and vice-Director of the Centre for Interdisciplinary Research on Communication (CIRCe). She served as Senior Researcher at the International Semiotics Institute (ISI) from 2015 to 2018 and collaborated as Visiting Research Scholar with various universities around the world, including the University of Toronto (Canada, 2013), Universitat de Barcelona (Spain, 2015-2016), Kaunas University of Technology (Lithuania, 2015-2018) and New York University (United States, 2019-2021). Prof. Stano deals mainly with food semiotics, corporeality and communication studies, and has published several papers, edited volumes (including special issues of top semiotic journals such as *Semiotica* and *Lexia*), and three monographs (*Eating the Other. Translations of the Culinary Code*, 2015; *I sensi del cibo. Elementi di semiotica dell'alimentazione*, 2018; *Critique of Pure Nature*, 2023) on these topics. In 2018 she was awarded a Marie Curie Global Fellowship for a research project (COMFECTION, 2019-2021) on the semiotic analysis of digital communication, especially as related to food.

Email: [simona.stano\[at\]unito.it](mailto:simona.stano@unito.it)