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Massimo Leone

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# The Right Face of Food

Massimo Leone

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## AUTHOR'S NOTE

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Man ate of the bread of the angels; he sent them  
food in abundance.  
(Psalms 78:25 – RSV)

## Introduction

- 1 The purpose of this article is to reflect in an original and innovative way on our interaction with food, and in particular, with one of its aspects in relation to consumption: that of its form and placement. In many traditions, there are 'right' and 'wrong' ways of placing, arranging, and eating food. This may appear to be a mere matter of etiquette, but instead, this article would like to show that such is not the case. As a matter of fact, this happens because food is as close as there is to the objectification of life, and as such, it receives all the connotations that, in a cosmology, characterize not only the nutritious and the harmful, but also the positive and the negative, the good and the bad, the advantageous and the detrimental. The article provides numerous examples but focuses especially on the cardinal element of much Western gastronomy, namely bread. Bread, the article discovers, is not placed or consumed in any one manner, but in 'the right way', following an axiology that projects an entire ideological axiology onto a small loaf of bread. Generalizing this insight, then, the article suggests that cultures tend to project onto food the same principle of 'faciality' by which they shape their relationship with the bodies of other humans. Recognizing the face of food means being able to consume it without it harming the overall balance of the cosmos, and entering into a harmonious relationship between

the one who eats and what is eaten, between the face that is fed and the food that feeds it.

- 2 In order to support its hypothesis, this article refers to the theoretical framework of semiotics, broadly understood, in several of its declensions: the structural semiotics of mostly continental European matrix and of Francophone expression, to highlight the textual system that is organized in the patterns of food consumption and the meaning that is released from it; the semiotics derived from the reflections of semiotician and philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce, mostly of Anglophone expression, to attempt to explain how bread or other elements become part of a semiosis in which small mutations of the representamen involve a different way of referring to the object and triggering chains of interpretants; and finally, to the semiotics of J.M. Lotman to grasp the anthropological weight of practices related to the “face of food” in a more general context in which the topology of food is related to that of an entire cosmology.
- 3 Food and face hold multiple relations. Food is primarily what sustains life, and the face is essentially an animal device—perhaps the most important one—to look for food or to escape from becoming food in the environment.<sup>1</sup> In the framework of language, meaning, and cultures, this basic relation complexifies, although it still impacts subsequent developments. They can be arranged according to Algirdas J. Greimas’ generative path and structural semiotics. Starting from the most superficial, food can acquire a face, as has been explored by Simona Stano in several works, and especially in a recent article entitled “Facing Food: Pareidolia, Iconism, and Meaning” (Stano 2021). Food can either receive a face intentionally, for instance when a cookie is given chocolate nose, eyes, and mouth, or manifest one unintentionally, for instance when the face of Jesus is seen in a piece of burnt toast (Leone 2023). In both cases, the typical plastic configuration of a face, whose philosophical properties have been commented upon by Deleuze and Guattari in *Mille Plateaux* (1980), emerges in the material structure of food, either on purpose or spontaneously, and gives rise to the facial figure. The equation that juxtaposes food and face in a culture surely has different traits depending on whether the food is intentionally provided with a face (as is the case with many ritual foods, for example, the almond paste lambs eaten in southern Italy for Easter), or manifests one by virtue of the well-known phenomenon of pareidolia. Even in the second case, however, as in every pareidolic manifestation, having seen a face in the food no longer allows one to forget about it, but obliges one, so to speak, to “facialize” the food, to bestow upon it the dignity of a body and, therefore, of a head and face.
- 4 The result materializes and visualizes at a plastic, figurative, and iconic level another essential relation between face and food: food can manifest a face, but a face can also become food. When it does so metaphorically, through either the plastic hazard of pareidolia or the figurative artifice of food design, this relation is somehow sublimated by its subsumption at the purely visual level. It is, however, a brutal relation, and essentially one that is underlain by the primary and direct dialectics between a subject and an object. In natural evolution, indeed, the continuous struggle between predators and preys is ultimately a struggle between faces and food. In the natural environment, a living being is either a face, looking for food and sex for survival and reproduction, or it becomes food for other faces. Pareidolia is a widespread phenomenon and obviously does not only concern food. Faces are known to be glimpsed in many spontaneous visual configurations, including clouds and tree trunks. Seeing a face in food, though,

has a peculiar meaning, as it fits into the subject/object and eater/eaten relationship that typically arises between humans and food. If, as the philosophical tradition inaugurated by Levinas perfectly grasps, humans recognize a face in order not to kill, and when they do not kill, then recognizing a face in food triggers a paradox, because food is exactly what we kill in order to feed ourselves and survive. In this sense, the “facialization” of food cannot be explained solely by reference to processes of anthromorphization or cuteness: it is not just a matter of humanizing an object, or of making it “cute” but of humanizing food as a simulacrum of the human so as to ritualize the paradox that makes us see a subjectivity and even a pole of intersubjectivity in what we kill to survive. In this sense, facialization is a rhetorical device that, on the threshold between life and death, allows the death of food to be transformed into the life of the body that feeds on it, but without this being configured according to a death narrative. In essence, when we give food a face, it is because we want the very thing we make dead, so that it can make us alive, to seem alive too in the process.<sup>2</sup> In cognitively complex animals, and dramatically, in human beings, face and food can hardly coexist. As I have shown in a paper entitled “On the Face of Food”, first presented in New York at the splendid conference organized therein by Amy Bentley and Simona Stano on October 14–15, 2019, then published in the volume issuing from the conference and edited by the two scholars (Leone 2021), as soon as the face is turned into food, it immediately loses its phenomenological and ethical qualities of face, which are incompatible with the practices of eating, with few—mostly horrific—exceptions. Food cultures in the world eat heads, not faces, and even heads are quite rare, more and more excluded from the realm of food in complex and industrialized societies. My main point in that article was that the progressive exclusion of heads and, therefore, of faces from contemporary food, with few—mostly archaic—exceptions, results from the somewhat hypocritical desire for concealing or edulcorating the brutal subject-object relation between face and food. When humans eat other non-human animals, the former ultimately partake in the annihilation of the latter’s faces, that is, of what allows animals to live and reproduce through nourishment and sex. Hiding signs of faces from food means distancing the disquieting truth that surviving constantly depends on the annihilation of other living beings. As I have shown in the article “Digiunare: Istruzioni per l’uso” [“Fasting: Instructions for Use”], published in Italian in *E/C* in 2013, Jainism takes the awareness of the inherently violent nature of food to the utmost, designating ritual self-starvation as the noblest way of ending one’s life (Leone 2013).

- 5 Indeed, vegetarians, vegans, and other categories of human eaters abstain from eating faces, or rather from turning faces into food, yet this is true only at a certain level. As I have indicated in the article “On Muzzles and Faces”, published in a special issue of the *International Journal for the Semiotics of Law* on “Personhood” edited by Jenny Ponzio (Leone 2022), a long and complex philosophical reflection—which, in its contemporary development, starts from Levinas and continues with Deleuze & Guattari, Derrida, and, more recently, Donna Haraway—bears on the question whether non-human animals have a face or not. As soon as human beings singularize non-human animals, as in the case of a pet, for instance, they start to see their faces, and not only their muzzle and, therefore, to be squeamish about the idea of eating them, more and more so in contemporary societies.
- 6 This and other phenomena vividly indicate that distinguishing between human faces and non-human muzzles essentially results from a deep-seated semiotic ideology,

common across all human cultures, which established human exclusivity and the exclusion of other non-human animals, also through the dialectics between face and muzzle. A muzzle is, essentially, a face one can dispose of, so that muzzling someone means turning it into the object of an asymmetric relation of power, akin to the one underpinning the evolutionary dialectics between faces and food. A living being is stripped of his or her face and given a muzzle, and ipso facto, it can be eaten without too much remorse. Vice versa, a non-living being is given a face, like in the case of the festive almond cakes in the shape of lambs that were the object of the incipit of my New York lecture, and ipso facto, eating it becomes a tabu, or at least must be framed by ritual so as to tame any guilt and remorse.

- 7 The native English speaker is probably not as aware as the Romance language speaker of the etymological origin of the word “remorse”, which indicates a “biting again”. Paraphrasing Ernesto De Martino’s wonderful title on southern Italy tarantism, *La terra del rimorso* [“The Land of Remorse”] (1961), one could say that “ogni morso è un rimorso”, meaning that every bite entails a possibility of moral remorse about the necessity of sustaining one’s life through terminating the life of other beings. In “Food, Meaning, and the Law”, subtitled “Confessions of a Vegan Semiotician”, I have explained my personal choice of abstaining from food that used to be part of an organism endowed with a face (Leone 2018). This simple rule does not obviate some problematic cases, like those of animals whose face is not visually arranged like in mammals. For some of these tricky cases, a keener observation is sufficient to dispel any doubt. Who can deny, after seeing the Academy Award-winning film *My Octopus Teacher* (Pippa Ehrlich and James Reed, 2020), that octopuses have a face? But what about the face of oysters or sea urchins? Should I yield to my brother’s insistence to eat pasta with sea urchins, a delicacy of coastal Salento, just because, as he claims, “sea urchins are not really animals”?
- 8 During a congress of the Italian Association of Semiotic Studies, held in Siena, October 25–27, 2019, I presented a keynote on ventriloquism in which I claimed that the dignity of life should not be recognized in a scopo-centric way, that is, by bestowing a face uniquely to those creatures that are able to receive a representation of the world through their eyes. Instead, more generally, such dignity should be seen every time that a mouth, of whatever shape and functioning, opens onto the world looking for food. As I suggested in that talk—which was then published in French in a Festschrift dedicated to Jacques Fontanille (Leone 2021 *Visage*)—life, essentially, is an open mouth, or better, a mouth that can open; this definition entails, among other things, also the possibility to define the attempts at a non-violent ethics, at a non-subjugating politics as those in which mouths are open not onto food but onto language. It is indeed quite extraordinary, and certainly deserves much philosophical reflection, that the valve through which human beings receive food and air is also that which is used to express language.<sup>3</sup>

## 1. Food and facet

- 9 As my philosophical investigation on the face evolves, however, mainly in the framework of the ERC project FACETS—which I direct at the University of Turin<sup>4</sup>—I feel the urge to further expand my definition of face, also stimulated by a recent lecture I gave, as part of the Italian celebrations for Dante’s 700th death anniversary (Leone,

2023). Dante used all the Italian words for “face”. He used “*viso*”, which at his époque had, and today only partially retains, a deep etymological and semantic relation with “*visio*”; “*viso*” for Dante, like its equivalent in other languages, including the English “visage”, links the semantic definition of the face with its being both the source of vision, what is primarily offered to the vision of others, and what is primarily seen by others. My visage is that from which I see, that which I first see in others, and that which others first see. But Dante also used “*volto*”, which at his time had a more concrete meaning, linked to that of “*volgere*”, “to turn”, and therefore to the idea of directing one’s attention to a face, or the attention of others to one’s face, a word that has no equivalent in English. Dante also used “*sembiante*”, which hinted at the changing phenomenology of the face, and has an English equivalent in “semblant”. Finally, the *Commedia* and the other works by the Italian poet also contain the word “*faccia*”, which in Dante’s lexicon had to do precisely with the idea of “facet”, or, to say it in more semiotic terms, with the idea of aspect, or even aspectuality, that is, the point of view from which a face is looked at, but also the idea that a face consists in the partiality of a point of view. As I pointed out in the introduction of a special issue of *Lexia*, published in 2017, and devoted to the concept of “aspectuality” (Leone 2017), Peirce’s definition of what a sign is crucially involves the idea of an internal, mental, and cognitive aspect, that is, a respect, or angle from which the object is signified, the ground in relation to which an interpretant turns it into the origin of semiosis.

- 10 If one considers this extremely enlarged acceptance of the word “face” as facet, as angle, as respect from which meaning is received, then every sign ends up having a face, and the human face ends up being just the most macroscopic manifestation of a semiotic mechanism that is much more general and present not only among humans, and not exclusively among non-human animals or living beings, but also among non-living objects. More generally, indeed, everything that is involved in semiosis starts having a facet, or face, and semiotics itself can be redefined as the discipline that studies everything that has a face, given this enlarged definition of it. It is the partiality of perception itself that grants everything that is perceived a face, yet this phenomenological partiality also begets an axiology. Reality is received as meaningful because it is received as multifaceted, yet this multiplicity is never neutral. Living and non-living beings are linked by a sort of phenomenological magnetism through which some facets of reality acquire a positive connotation, entailing attraction, whereas others exude a negative connotation, begetting repulsion.
- 11 Design seeks to master the secrets of this mysterious system and to enshrine them in its creations. Specialists define as “affordances” the ways in which designed objects seek to predetermine the facets through which they will be seen, thought of, desired, and used. The notion of affordance, however, is also a particular instance of a much more general category. The human face, for instance, also is an affordance. It is the affordance that biological evolution has selected as the best fit in natural evolution and, subsequently, in cultural exaptation. By showing our face to others, or by looking at the faces of others, by predisposing our face to be seen or by judging how the faces of others have been predisposed to be seen, we implicitly yield to a very long natural and cultural selection that has turned the face into a formidable affordance of both biological and social interaction. If we cover our face, as during the pandemic, then we contradict the deep-seated laws of this primary affordance of our own body. But what

covers the face, like a veil or a mask, in turn becomes a new affordance that works as a sort of new face.

- 12 Yet if every face is an affordance, then the contrary is also true: every affordance entails a face. From this point of view, then, “face” can be defined as the respect from which an object implicitly requires to be considered and turned into a sign, into a ground for semiosis. Fabricated objects therefore start having a face. In many circumstances, it is evident where the face of an object is. In a car, for instance, design pushes us to identify not only a front and a back, but also a sort of face, with the two lights as big luminous eyes and the mouth just above the plate. There is, therefore, a further possible relation between food and face. Food can be given or stripped of a face at the figurative or plastic level of visual meaning, and it can be attributed or denied a face in the subject-object relation between predators and preys. But food also has a face at a more abstract, general level, which is that of the axiology resulting from its natural and cultural affordances.<sup>5</sup>

## 2. Facing food

- 13 A banana does not have a face, although it is frequently given one in popular culture artifacts such as comics, cartoons, or advertising, yet it certainly has affordances, which stem from its natural shape as well from the necessity of grabbing, holding, peeling, and biting into it to eat it. Humanity, therefore, is divided by an axiology of affordances, depending on whether a banana is peeled starting from its upper facet or from its lower one. As we have learned from Jakobson, Hjelmslev, Calabrese, and others, symbolical polarities often turn into semi-symbolical axiologies (Leone 2004): as a banana can be peeled either starting from the top or starting from the bottom, it can therefore be “good” or “bad” to eat it starting from one extremity or the other. The projection of facial affordances onto food may also involve vegetables: the way we grab a tomato, wash it, put it on a cutting board, chop it, and toss it into a salad has many alternatives, yet one of them is selected as appropriate since it approaches the vegetable “from the right side”.
- 14 At a very abstract philosophical level, the fact that food might have a “volto”, a “facet”, and therefore a “verso” and a “recto”—the fact, that is, that food is not axiologically neutral, but contains a direction, an internal and consubstantial vector—relates to an imagination of being that conceives of it not as a smooth dimension but as a striated one (to refer again to Deleuze and Guattari’s famous phenomenological dialectics). “Being” is neutral only as a Kantian *noumenon*, as a transcendental abstraction. In its phenomenological existence, instead, being exists as a non-neutral pattern, as a spontaneous alternative that intrinsically contains a difference, a polarity, an option, and, therefore, an embryo of meaning.
- 15 Most eaters in the world experience this naively; they realize that there is a right way of approaching food and that there is also a wrong way, or at least that some facets of food are preferable to others. This projection of an axiological pattern onto the shape of food and its affordances is not so strange, if one considers that food is primarily related to the idea of energy and to the very basic practice of extracting it from other living beings in the environment. As they have learned to differentiate among better or worse sources of nutrition, humans have also developed approaches to differentiate among more or less preferable facets of food. Some of these axiological patterns

become part of social memory and culture, are formalized, and, in some circumstances, even integrate normative discourses. Such formalization is particularly evident in cultures that are generally “obsessed” with the recognition of axiological polarities, like all those Asian cultures that categorize reality in accordance with the spiritual principles of yin and yang, the Chinese philosophical concept that describes opposite but interconnected forces as grounding all manifestations of the universe.

- 16 This general principle might also be interpreted as stating that life itself presents a sort of affordance, which is basically related to the very elemental opposition all living beings experience between day and night, between the presence and absence of light and heat, in the fact of being in contact with a hospitable world favorable to survival, and in the fact of seeing that world sink into darkness at sunset and then be reborn at each sunrise. This primordial philosophical concept was then absorbed by several Asian spiritual and religious systems of belief, including Taoism as the most philosophically relevant of them, and intertwined with a few practices and normative settings, some of which pertain to food.
- 17 In this realm, the traditional spiritual dialectic of yin and yang was combined with the observation—at first spontaneous, then meticulous, and finally even scientific—that food has an internal facet, and not only an external face. Animals turned into food might lose their face, for instance, and yet, even the internal structure of their flesh shows an axiological morphology, which is even more evident in plants: since a fruit does not have a clear face, the face of a fruit becomes the direction of its internal facets, of its vegetable flesh. There is one concept and one word that designate the internal facet of life, and this word is “fiber”, a term which is now extremely popular also in digital technology, since it is through fibers that our digital lives are connected, exactly as it is through fibers that our natural lives receive nutrition from other living beings.

### 3. Food and fiber

- 18 What is a fiber, then? Most definitions of it are simply topological: it is a natural or artificial element that is significantly longer than it is wide. The topology of fibers, though, is a consequence and an expression of their function, which is that of stringing and streamlining elements together along a certain direction of force. This is the case in vegetable fibers, which are arrangements of cellulose; in animal fibers, which are arrangements of proteins; in mineral fibers, like those of the asbestos group; and in artificial fibers, which somehow imitate the structure of the natural ones, such as regenerated cellulose fibers, metallic fibers, carbon fibers, glass fibers, etc.
- 19 The etymology of the word “fiber” seems to indicate that its history and usage have always referred to a topology of dissymmetry. According to the Forcellini Italian etymological dictionary, “*fibra*” would originally designate what is at the extremity and, in particular, at the extremity of a severed object, from the Germanic root “*find-ber*” or “*finber*”, which refers to the end of something but derives from the Proto-Indo-European \*b<sup>h</sup>eyd- (“to split”), hinting at the operation of dividing. In Latin, “*fibra*” came as a loanword according to the most recent etymologies, meaning “radical or sheathing leaf”. In a nutshell, the first instances of the word and concept of “fiber” in the Indo-European cultures might have designated what divides to protect, which is, after all, what fibers do both in nature and in culture: they string elements together and separate them from the environment to protect their content.



- 20 The word “*fibra*” in Italian and its equivalents in other modern languages have often been used especially in connection with the development of modern anatomy, indicating a long, thin, cylindrical, histological element wrapped in a sheath-like membrane, that forms part of some tissues (connective, nervous), or is its constituent element (as in muscle tissue). But then, the word is also used metaphorically, in order to indicate what constitutively composes a certain being, for instance when Italian poet Petrarch writes that “*Non ho medolla in osso, o sangue in fibra, / ch’i’ non senta tremar*” [“I have no marrow in bone, or blood in fiber, / That I do not feel trembling”] (*Sonetto* 145).
- 21 It is, however, in the modern lexicon of botany that the word “fiber” finds its most common use, designating an elongated, fusiform, or filiform cell, with a very thickened or sometimes lignified membrane, and a few pore channels, mostly oblique, which has a supporting function and is part of the sclerenchyma tissue. From such central definition, the word “*fibra*” then came to also indicate those fibers that are human-made and often derived from the natural ones, that is, fibrous material, of vegetable, animal, or mineral (and also artificial) origin, provided by nature with such structure and properties, in terms of strength, pliability and elasticity, as to be susceptible, by means of appropriate mechanical processing, to be transformed into yarns and fabrics.
- 22 Fibers therefore become, in both the lexicon and the imaginary it expresses, the constitutive elements not only of animal and vegetable bodies, but also of the artificial bodies created by human intelligence and creativity. In Italian as in other languages, then, “*fibra*” ends up referring to what constitutes not only a body but also a life, its inner constitution and essence, and ultimately also “strength, energy, vigor, vitality” (also in the moral sense), as well as “the intimate secret principle of something”, which poetry often associates with the idea of vibration: When something completely pervades a soul, like a sentiment, for instance, then all its fibers are set into motion and vibration (which is connected to the fact that “*fibra*” in Italian also indicates the cord of the musical instrument).
- 23 This etymological excursus does not amount to a mere display of erudition; it is, on the contrary, necessary in order to show the complex cultural hybrid that, in many food cultures, was generated at the crossroads between the semantics of fibers, the idea that food might be patterned according to an axiological morphology, and the background of ancestral cosmologies often merged with scientific and technical knowledge through a New Age reception of Asian spirituality. All of this seems very complicated, but it gave rise to a phenomenon that is part and parcel of the everyday of millions of people around the world and might be nicknamed “the mythology of fiber”. Like all mythologies, this one too is not entirely mythological, meaning that it rests on some scientific facts, or at least hypotheses. As the Harvard School of Public Health points out, fiber is “a type of carbohydrate that the body cannot digest”. Most carbohydrates are broken down into sugar molecules (glucose), whereas fiber cannot, and instead, it passes through the body undigested. Fiber is thought to help regulate the body’s use of sugars, keeping hunger and blood sugar in check.
- 24 Present-day food science and culture, then, is replete with research, communication, and initiatives meant to increase the quality and consumption of fiber for a healthier lifestyle. It is paradoxical that a whole mythology of food has been created around an element of the vegetable constitution that humans cannot digest. Yet the paradox is only apparent. In reality, non-digestible food must become the object of a whole rhetoric of nutrition (scientific research being a sophisticated part of it), because too

much digestible food, and especially sugar-rich food, is around. Thus, on the one hand, the market sells to human beings quantities of sugar and a lifestyle that is so frantic that it needs large intakes of glucose, whereas on the other hand, the market also sells the antidote to energy-rich food, which is exactly that nutrient that humans cannot digest and must eliminate, while nevertheless feeling full meanwhile.

- 25 This mythology is typical of the postmodern times, since it rests on what seems to be solid scientific evidence but does not question its deepest rationale: on the one hand, it is true that fiber cannot be digested and helps one in feeling fuller and having regular bowel movements; on the other hand, the lifestyle that causes humans to eat undigestible food is never questioned. But fiber is at the center of an even more fascinating mythology, which adopts the discursive style of the science of nutrition (including that which encourages the consumption of fiber), but then couples it with a certain dubious interpretation of ancient Asian cosmology to capitalize on both in the creation of a new market proposition.

#### 4. Cutting matters

- 26 The typical example here is the macrobiotic diet. The latter has developed a whole theory about how ingredients should be cut in relation to their inner fibers, which, in this theory, become an indexical manifestation of the cosmological principles of yin and yang. Many texts have popularized this system of beliefs on fibers in food, but few have been as influential as *The Book of Macrobiotics*, published by macrobiotics' main disseminator Michio Kushi in 1987. In the chapter magniloquently entitled "Dietary Principles for Humanity"—which immediately reveals the universalist ambitions of the author—a specific section is devoted to "Yin and Yang in Daily Food".
- 27 The section starts with a few sentences that are reminiscent of the discourse of evolutionary biology: "Food is the mode of evolution; the way one species transforms into another. To eat is to take in the whole environment: sunlight, soil, water, and air" (1987, p. 88). These two initial sentences might be read as a quite poetic way of hinting at what science itself considers as evidence, that is, the interrelation of all the elements in bringing about the composition of food (sentence one) and the fact that, through food, different animal and vegetable species relate to the human one. One might be favorably disposed after reading this passage, but this positive attitude towards the book and its author must only pave the way to the cosmological affirmation that follows: "The classification of foods into categories of yin and yang is essential for the development of a balanced diet" (*Ibid.*). The skeptical reader could then question: why is it so? Why should we entrust with the categorization of food a system of beliefs that was elaborated in China centuries ago, instead of relying on the classifications of food provided by modern science, by chemistry and nutrition science?
- 28 Kushi's book is rhetorically arranged to induce the reader to embrace this binary categorization of everything and especially of food. A complex table follows, which explains how to recognize nutrients as yin or yang, followed by a pseudo-explanation that reads, instead, as an apodictic statement:
- Natural order governs the plant kingdom. Foods that are condensed and grow below ground such as burdock, carrot, and other root vegetables are yang, those that are expanded and grow on the ground such as onion and squash are more

balanced, and those that grow above ground such as kale are yin. Fruits that grow high above the ground are even more yin.

- 29 This categorization is intuitive but random, based on a limited range of fruit and vegetables (how would it work with Amazonian fruits, for instance?), but for those readers who embrace it, it begets a whole series of practices, in which food is perceived as endowed with a natural axiology, directly descending from the original yin and yang categorization. From the conviction that food has various cosmological facets, it also derives the recognition of their affordances, which visually and texturally manifest themselves exactly under the guise of fibers. Vegetable food has internal fibers, animal food has them, and they are an expression of the irradiation of yin or yang principles working through them.
- 30 Hence, cutting food appropriately in the macrobiotic system means following the ‘natural’ direction of fibers. Instructions on how to chop vegetables can be found in a number of macrobiotic cooking handbooks, both in print and online; a nice example is in the website <https://www.basicsofhappy.com>, which is run by a blogger who defines herself as a Japanese living in London, and therefore, again, as a biographical bridge between East and West, between Japan and the English speaking world. A section of the website contains nice pictures and simple captions about how to cut vegetables in a macrobiotic way: the upper half of an onion is yin, the lower half is yang, the vertical direction is along the grain, whereas the horizontal direction is against it; the outer part is yin, the inner is yang, so that the macrobiotic way of chopping an onion is radially, respecting the disposition of the inner fibers of the vegetable. Similar instructions are given about other vegetables, following the same rhetoric: an arbitrary axiological structure is projected onto the asymmetric morphology of the vegetable and associated with the binary cosmology of yin and yang, whence derives a specific way of polarizing the morphology and organizing its cutting. The projection of a cosmological binarism onto the asymmetric morphology of food and its consequent facets gives rise to an axiology that is often enunciated in terms of “good” or “bad” cutting, which is in turn tantamount to the “natural” or to the “artificial” way of approaching food. Although the fact that a blade is, since prehistoric times, an artifact cannot be denied, the coupling of its function with cosmology opens a dialectic between a “natural” way of cutting food, which is along the internal fibers, and an “artificial” way of doing it, which is against them. It is evident that there are no more or less “natural” ways of cutting food, but the fact of positing this alternative is a fundamental and quite usual rhetorical move to valorize the proposed system of cutting as more ethically appropriate than the common one. It is, after all, the common rhetorical pattern of the prophetic voice.
- 31 These and similar instructions awaken the skepticism of the rationalist reader, who cannot help but wondering how in the first instance some abstract principles such as yin and yang find their way into the shape of an onion. The arbitrariness of their identification seems to have the only purpose of self-sustaining a re-enchantment of food, which is somehow rediscovered through the projection, onto it, of a new articulation and, therefore, of a re-motivation. People cut vegetables without too much thinking about it, as they intuitively consider fit, or as they have learned from their parents, friends, or Western cooking teachers. But then, this automatic gesture, this habit of cutting, is rearticulated and re-motivated by a rhetoric that awakens a new semiosis within it: cutting, therefore is not simply making food into tiny pieces so that

they may be better cooked and eaten; it is, instead, the token of a cosmic cooperation with the right face of the world.

## 5. Convexities and concavities

- 32 This axiological determination of food is even more compelling in the case of food that is clearly fabricated. It is evident, for instance, in the case of bread. The bibliography on the symbolical meaning of bread is extensive. Its shapes have attracted the attention of anthropologists. As Consuelo Manetta points it out in her 2016 article “‘Our Daily Bread’ in Italy: Its Meaning in the Roman Period and Today”, “the very shape of a loaf of bread often assumes symbolic meaning. Many ceremonial breads of Sardinia are shaped as animals, fruits or vegetables; they metaphorically remind of the offering of first fruits. These values are also related to life’s evolution and to mating practices linked to sexual reproduction” (2016, p. 40). On the shape of Sardinian bread, Italian anthropologist Alberto Maria Cirese published, in 1977, the article “Arte plastica effimera: I pani sardi” [“Ephemeral Plastic Art: Sardinian Breads”], in the collection of essays *Oggetti, segni, musei* [“Objects, Signs, Museums”], published by Einaudi the same year. In it, the anthropologist expounded on a reading that was clearly inspired by semiotics and that found its definitive formulation in the 1992 essay “Il pane cibo e il pane segno”, in the edited volume *Antropologia e storia dell’alimentazione: Il Pane* [“Anthropology and Food History: Bread”], by Cristina Papa. In it, Cirese writes that “la sagoma, lo spessore, la dimensione [del pane], è quasi sempre simbolica, anche nei pani quotidiani” [“the outline, the thickness, the size [of the bread], is almost always symbolic, even in everyday breads”] (*Ibid.*, p. 29); “la forma non nutre: veicola informazione e non calorie” [“the shape does not nourish: it conveys information, not calories”] (*Ibid.*).
- 33 In a more recent contribution, published in 2007, and entitled “La tradizione e l’uso del pane nel Mediterraneo: Spunti per un’indagine antropologica” [“The Tradition and Use of Bread in the Mediterranean: Hints for an Anthropological Investigation”], Italian anthropologist Paolo Palmeri dwells at length on the symbolical meaning of bread shapes and on the superstitions linked with them. He reports that in Sicily, bread must not be put upside down on the table: “non si mette rovesciato sulla tavola perché è come se si volgessero le spalle al Signore” [“bread is not put upside down on the table because it is as if one turns one’s back on the Lord”] (2007, p. 5). In an article entitled “Consumo di pane nella società dei consumi” [“Bread Consumption in the Consumer Society”], published by Tullio Seppilli, in the already mentioned 1992 collection edited by Cristina Papa, the author contends that the custom originated from the desire for—or the fear of—leaving uncovered the sign of the cross that was commonly incised into a loaf of bread during its baking.
- 34 A popular tradition places the origin of this superstition precisely in Turin, where it would have first spread because of an edict by Charles VII, which obligated bakers to sell bread to hangmen. Nobody indeed would accept having such a job anymore given that bakers would not sell them bread, since they were associated with death and thought to bring bad luck. Bakers in Turin therefore abided by the law but started to place loaves of bread reserved to hangmen upside down, so as to distinguish them from others. Some traditions even link the invention of “pan carré” [sliced bread from a squared loaf] to some baker’s intention to create a bread that “could not be reversed”.

These and similar etiologies are probably farfetched, but confirm that the form of bread, especially in Italy, contains a “right face” and a “good face”, which also work as affordances when bread is put on the table or eaten in the form of a sandwich.

- 35 The deepest semiotic meaning of the axiology, however, is to be looked for elsewhere, starting from the observation contained in the article by Massimo Montanari “La cultura del pane, fra Mediterraneo e Mitteleuropea” [“The Culture of Bread, Between the Mediterranean and Central Europe”], published in the 1992 collection by Oddone Longo and Paolo Scarpi, *Nel nome del pane* [“In the Name of Bread”]. Montanari writes that the Jews had with bread

un atteggiamento culturalmente ambiguo: da un lato il pane rappresentava una fondamentale risorsa dell'alimentazione quotidiana; dall'altro era incluso — in quanto cibo fermentato, cioè “corrotto” rispetto alla purezza originaria della materia prima — fra i prodotti che non potevano godere di uno statuto ideologico alto, sacrale”.

[“a culturally ambiguous attitude: on the one hand bread represented a fundamental resource of the daily diet; on the other hand, it was included—as a fermented food, i.e., “corrupted” with respect to the original purity of the raw material—among the products that could not enjoy a high, sacred ideological status”].

(Montanari 1992, p. 27)

This historical reference encouraged me to rethink the issue of the affordance of bread, its “right face”, and superstition in different terms.<sup>6</sup>

- 36 The element that introduces an axiology into bread is not the ingredients that make it up but the principle of leavening, which means that in every loaf, there is a leavened side and a flat side. This projects onto bread an asymmetrical morphology that immediately lends itself to a coupling with the also asymmetrical cosmologies of many cultural traditions: the convex side is associated with growth, fertility, the sun, light, warmth, and more abstractly also with goodness and good fortune, while the reversal of this convex side into its concave opposite—for example when breaking the unwritten rule that prescribes how to place a loaf of bread on a table (with the flat side against the surface and the convex side facing upwards, precisely)—just as immediately evokes negative scenarios of misfortune and abjection. To corroborate this hypothesis, one need only compare such traditions with those found in cultures that eat cooked but unleavened cereal forms, and which therefore do not present any morphological asymmetries, or at least not the dialectic between convex and concave. A good example are Venezuelan arepas (which are also eaten, it should be noted, in Colombia and Panama): since they are flat and unleavened, on which side they should be placed in their basket or eaten does not matter, while other traditions and beliefs emerge with respect to other aspects of their morphology (one must fill and stuff them without piercing the wrapper, for example).

## Conclusion

- 37 In conclusion, the initial hypothesis could be reaffirmed that not only the human possesses a face, and not only the animals that most resemble it, but also plants, and even inanimate objects, including food, which derives from animate ones but transforms their form more or less radically depending on the culture. Of course, in this very broadened sense, the face becomes a general semiotic principle that receives

plastic and figurative investment along a very wide range, from the face proper of the human to the face conceived of as a Dantean “*faccia*”, as a facet and, ultimately, in theoretical terms, as an aspect, or even as a respect as understood in the semiotics of Peirce. Everything that makes sense, in short, presents itself to the human species not as a flat, smooth being without respect or capacity, but inexorably as a being endowed with a face, which emanates meaning precisely because this face exists, emerges from being, and is perceived as an asymmetrical morphology onto which the cognition of the human species, and especially its imagination, then projects axiologies often encapsulated by culture as traditions. This, then, makes irresistible the thought that food, like humans, other animals, and plants, must also be “appropriately faced”, a belief that on the one hand gives rise to popular traditions and folkloric customs about how to eat food in order not to incur bad luck (e.g., as seen in this article, how to put bread on the table, how to cut it, how to distribute it, and how to eat it), while on the other hand, it is welded to general cosmologies that also derive from the consubstantial asymmetry of the human Umwelt. The forms and facets of food are then associated with general cosmic principles, like the yin and yang of ancient Chinese cosmology, for example, and become the basis of widespread beliefs, which also re-emerge in the New Age form of macrobiotic cooking. This, and other new belief systems, may surprise and even irritate contemporary rationalist thinking, especially when they propagate medical inaccuracies about the supposed health properties of food or ways of cutting it “along the fiber”, but at the same time, they are a testament to the extent to which human imagination and its way of extracting meaning from the environment follows lines deeply rooted in the history of the evolution of the species and its cognition. No matter how sophisticated our cultures, our metalanguages, and our techniques become, a part of us humans will always see something right, or something wrong, in the way we pick up a piece of bread.

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## NOTES

1. Literature on both food and the face is extensive, whereas that which combines the two elements is more limited. On the face as a biological device to obtain food from the environment and to avoid becoming food for the environment, see Leone 2022.

2. From this point of view, the present paper would tend to deconstruct the idea that food in certain contexts is given a face 'just for fun' (as it seems to be suggested by some recent literature; see Wilk 2021); there is indeed something mysteriously terrible and tragic in the fact that, for instance, food for children is sometimes given a face.
3. I have examined the spiritual implications of this valve in a long essay entitled "Signs of the Soul", published in the journal *Signs and Society* (Leone 2013 *Signs*).
4. See <http://www.facets-erc.eu/>.
5. The face is a very complex semiotic locus, and it would therefore be reductive to pigeonhole it into the categories of this or that school of semiotics, not the least because it is not a sign but a conjunction of signs, or rather of signic potentialities continually in the process of becoming, some of which are actualized while others remain latent, in a very elaborate evolution that begins with the prenatal face and reaches death, always at the intersection of biology, psychology, and society. But if one were to use the vulgate of Peirce's semiotics to triadize the face and its relation to food, then one could say that there is an iconic component to this relation, in that some form of asymmetry or dissymmetry must be grasped for the face to manifest itself in an object, in food, but also in the head of another human being; this iconic dissymmetry is then anchored by perception on the one hand to a supposed indexical substratum of biological origin (organs are, for example, located in the convex part of the head, in the so to speak protruding part, and not in its concavities, let alone in the flatness of the nape of the neck), while on the other hand, this asymmetry is made to correspond, semi-symbolically, to an inherent asymmetry among the axiological configurations circulating in the semiosphere (of a head, one would say that it is beautiful when one looks at its face, not at the nape of the neck, which is instead often associated with connotations of impersonality and unconsciousness). But how artificial this triadic breakdown is! It is easy to realize it as soon as one understands that, for example, the back-front symbolism of the head is often naturalized precisely by reference to its natural indexicality.
6. But perhaps this case study and the semiotic and anthropological reflections it provokes can be generalized. In the case of bread, and particularly of leavened bread, the concave-convex, or rather flat-curved dissymmetry, plastically and semi-symbolically refers back to other oppositions, most of them semantic, such as those between fecundity and sterility, growth and stagnation, abundance and famine, which in some cases, however, are also traversed by a plastic dialectic between that which grows and that which does not, between that which swells with life, somewhat like a mother's womb, and that which instead remains sterile and flat. And yet, this plastic opposition and its plastic-symbolic counterparts cannot be unique and isolated; instead, the world of food seems to be imbued with semi-symbolic systems in which certain plastic dissymmetries are coupled with semantic dissymmetries. Some of these plastic dissymmetries may concern color, for example, that between faded and lively (think about the Italian adjective "colorito"). And it is also plausible that many of these dissymmetries give rise, as if by metaphorical reference, to the dissymmetry that characterizes affordances par excellence, namely those of the face, which presents, yes, a right/left symmetry, but which is also consubstantially characterized by a flat/spread and top/down dissymmetry. The face is, from a plastic point of view, a dissymmetry that summons us, as Deleuze and Guattari had intuited in their own terms. To find the same dissymmetry in the inert, and especially in food, is then to project onto it the essential dialectic between a dissymmetry that tends toward life and a flatness that, instead, signals the attenuation and even the extinguishing of vital momentum.



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## ABSTRACTS

The article questions the relationship between the face and food. The face is, theoretically speaking, an affordance that one recognizes in the environment when it presents itself as endowed with meaning; this explains the origin, in anthropological, evolutionary, and cognitive terms, of folkloric traditions that assign a face to food, a correct direction to its handling, or that even associate its shape and fiber with entire cosmologies, as in the case of macrobiotic gastronomy. Ultimately, what drives humans to assign a face to food and to normalize the human approach to it is the intrinsic semiotic nature of the species, and thus the innate aptitude to transform every asymmetry into a difference that is a harbinger of meaning and axiologies.

L'article interroge la relation entre le visage et la nourriture ; le visage est, théoriquement, une affordance qui est reconnue dans l'environnement lorsqu'il se présente comme doté de sens ; ceci explique l'origine, en termes anthropologiques, évolutifs et cognitifs, des traditions folkloriques qui attribuent un visage à la nourriture, une juste direction à sa manipulation, ou qui associent même sa forme et sa fibre à des cosmologies entières, comme dans le cas de la gastronomie macrobiotique. En fin de compte, ce qui pousse les humains à attribuer un visage à la nourriture et à normaliser l'approche humaine envers elle, c'est la nature sémiotique intrinsèque de l'espèce, et donc l'aptitude innée à transformer toute asymétrie en une différence porteuse de sens et d'axiologies.

## INDEX

**Mots-clés:** visage, pratiques, religion, formes de vie, cultural studies, geste

**Keywords:** face, practices, religion, forms of life, cultural studies, gesture

## AUTHOR

### MASSIMO LEONE

Massimo Leone is Professor of Philosophy of Communication, Cultural Semiotics, and Visual Semiotics at the Department of Philosophy and Educational Sciences, University of Turin, Italy, part-time Professor of Semiotics in the Department of Chinese Language and Literature, University of Shanghai, China, associate member of Cambridge Digital Humanities, University of Cambridge, Director of the Institute for Religious Studies at the “Bruno Kessler Foundation”, Trento, and Adjunct Professor at the University of Caracas, Venezuela He has been visiting professor at several universities in the five continents. He has single-authored fifteen books, edited more than sixty collective volumes, and published more than six hundred articles in semiotics, religious studies, and visual studies. He is the winner of a 2018 ERC Consolidator Grant and of a 2022 ERC Proof of Concept Grant. He is editor-in-chief of *Lexia*, the Semiotic Journal of the Center for Interdisciplinary Research on Communication, University of Turin, Italy, co-editor-in-chief of *Semiotica* (De Gruyter), and co-editor of the book series “I Saggi di Lexia” (Rome: Aracne), “Semiotics of Religion” (Berlin and Boston: Walter de Gruyter), and “Advances in

Face Studies” (London and New York: Routledge).  
Email: massimo.leone[at]unito.it