

## INTRODUCTION – SEMIOTICS OF DIGITAL GASTROMANIA

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Since the adoption of Web 2.0, the Internet has chosen food and nutrition as its favorite topic. The *Chowhound* boards, for example, have been active since '97, a fact which speaks volumes about how much we owe the “great conversation” of online social media for the culinary megatrend we call — according to Marrone (2014) — *gastromania*. Indeed, food and discussion on the Internet are intrinsically linked, a now inseparable combination.

Throughout the world, bloggers and culinary influencers have thus become cult authors, able to accumulate large numbers of loyal readers — *followers* — able to access their favorite anywhere via the Internet (by reading and commenting on their blog or Facebook page), in bookstores (by buying their cookbooks), and around culinary festivals and sponsored gastronomic events. It is not rare that successful bloggers actually organize

paid cooking classes aimed at providing participants with the possibility of establishing even more direct contact with them. Thus, culinary writing on the Internet fits perfectly into the paradigm of the convergent culture typical of the digital sphere (Jenkins 2006), that works by constantly reformulating stories, texts, and characters according to the specificities of the various media. Bloggers and culinary *influencers* present themselves to the public as *intermedial heroes* (Marrone 2003) whose utmost desire is for media affirmation and popularity: for them, the blog is merely the starting point (or the legitimation instrument) of a professional career. Food writing on the internet thus takes on a political character for precisely this reason, generating texts and identities that are fighting to bring their authors out of anonymity and into trend leadership. Cuisine, therefore, becomes a political instrument of negotiation and construction of individual and group identities.

At the center of any culinary quest, there is a valuable object: the recipe. If culinary blogs emerge as collections of recipes, their authors talk about themselves as subjects of a pedagogical trail (in a usually self-centered narrative: “along the way, I’ll tell you my culinary trajectory”). At the same time, for the readers, the recipes become actual challenges to overcome in order to have access to the core of the blog’s editorial promise. In a sense, recipes require a double commitment, both that of the reader properly speaking, and that of the cook (or the aspiring one): a cookbook cannot be only read. Cooking the recipes of blogs becomes essential to realizing the universe of meaning which is the object of the narration. Doing this takes time and patience, and a medium or long-term endorsement in an affiliation process perfectly suited to the serial nature of the blog. Through recipe after recipe, story after story, therefore, the author’s culinary form of life gets outlined and, at the same time, an audience of faithful readers ready themselves to become its defenders and promoters.

On the other hand, on the internet, collective identities related, for example, to particular food subcultures: vegans, health-fanatics, subjects on a diet, etc. acquire more and more strength. These identities constitute themselves on the net and use the tools offered by social media platforms for exchanging information and managing their political coordination, socialization and interaction, preparatory to any proselytizing activity.

In this volume we have collected research papers on the cultural transformations which arise from gastronomic discourse on the net, between blogs and social networks. This online gastronomic discourse brings into question new and old media around peculiar stories and characters, and is capable of establishing itself as an instrument of interaction between users

in the post-media political context. There are semiotic and interdisciplinary analyses that investigate intermedial culinary narratives from the perspectives of narrative, enunciation, passion, experience, space, gastronomy, music, cinema, life forms, media and political rhetoric, etc., in search of general invariants on the articulation of culinary discourse on the net and beyond.

We open the volume with the paper “Veganism 2.0: gastromania, nutrition, and digital communication”, by Simona Stano, a scholar from Turin and New York, dedicated to the digital phase of the raise of veganism. She identifies and describes the main cultural transformations and forms of life promoted by “veganism 2.0”, based on a semiotic approach particularly attentive to the analysis of the narrative level and the patemic dimension. She carefully takes into account the intersections between so-called “gastromania” and other trends characterising contemporary foodspheres, such as “gastro-anomy” and the “ideology of nutritionism”, paying particular attention to the gastronomic discourse in present-day digital mediascapes and the complex dynamics characterising them.

In his paper “#foodporn: Fetishized sharing of food and its images” Francesco Piluso, a scholar from Bologna, uses semiotics in order to delve deeper into the analogies between the representation of food online and pornography. According to him the unary image of food is a further fragment in a series of multiple perspectives on the same object. Such potentiality is actualized in our (social) media culture in which the sharing and continuous remediation of images and pictures of food constitute a complex storytelling of the object. This, in turn, fosters further participation by the users. The ambivalence between the indifference of the pornographic image and the involvement in the serialization of the detail is synthesized by the Baudrillard’s notion of fetishism. The social (and) media scenery seems to exemplify and radicalize a sort of commodity fetishism, in which social relationships between users are shaped and mediated by (social) media relationships between images of food.

In “Gastromaniac. How (Food) Influencers Create Trust” Kristian Bankov develops ideas about the establishment of online trust which began in previous research. In the first part of the paper, he examines the pre-expressive level of trustworthiness with which each face is characterized in a different degree. In the second part, he develops an analogy between the brand mythology system, introduced by Laurence Vincent and the system of the influencer, with regard to the establishment of long lasting relations of trust in both cases. The paper concludes with case studies of two very different influencers, positioned on the opposite sides of the new “nutri-

tional correctness”, but very similar as a structure of establishment of the relation with their followers.

In “Semiotics of digital cacogastromania” Gabriele Marino, a scholar from Turin, further develops the topics of foodporn and food blogging. He examines Cucinaremale (“badcooking” or “cookingbadly”) — an Italian Facebook group created in 2014 which now counts more than 126,000 members. This group was conceived to let members post their everyday culinary disasters and amusingly show solidarity with each other, while struggling in a cruel world where — as the official description suggests — everybody seems to have become a professional cook. The well-illustrated paper proposes an analysis of the culinary ideologies at stake and a typology of the textual practices carried out by the cattivicuochi (“badcooks”). It provides a true manifesto against the global food craze better known as gastromania — a true cacogastromania (“bad gastromania” or “mania for the bad food”).

Then we have two precious contributions from the center of the semiotic studies of Gastromania — University of Palermo. Francesco Mangiapane and Alice Giannitrapani are part of the team of Professor Gianfranco Marone, the utmost reference of this kind of research. The two papers are more like chapters of a manual as far as they offer a systematic model for semiotic analysis in the frame of the structural approach and more specifically in the applied semiotic models of Jean-Marie Floch. Mangiapane orients his interest towards the blogosphere with the title “Semiotics, Blogs and Gastromania”, whereas Giannitrapani offered a more specialized research under the title “Gastromania on Italian TV”.

The paper by Reni Yankova “Imagination and Evolution of Taste” answers the questions of how does thinking and creativity influence the evolution of taste? How important is our imagination in the taste formation process? Are we able to create an unprecedented dish or we are obliged to follow certain rules and predispositions in our creative culinary experiments? The inquiry starts by looking at imagination itself. It traces this idea back to Aristotle and Kant, to define the essence of this controversial philosophical concept and to specify its function in reasoning. Then there is an analysis of certain aspects of creativity in taste, in order to observe the evolution of certain culinary tendencies.

Loukia Kostopoulou introduces the fascinating topic of cinema. In her paper “When food mobilizes emotions: Reaching foreign and domestic audiences” she explores food films and their symbolism. According to her food is a way of creating national identities and enhancing the sense of belonging. It also evokes the concept of ‘nostalgia’ and has the capacity to

mobilize strong emotions. The semiotic analysis of food underlines how the biosphere and the semiosphere intersect in various instances of human life. In cultural settings, food symbolizes substance and conveys different meanings. This research material focuses on the analysis of images (food, culinary preparations and different eating events) as portrayed in Tassos Boulmetis's 2003 film *Πολίτικη Κουζίνα/ A Touch of Spice*, and the domestic and international trailers of the film. The analysis is based on Lotman's notion of the *semiosphere*.

Federico Biggio breaks the frame of strictly culinary topics and opens the semiotic analysis towards a global brand which most of the people associate with the scenography of cooking — IKEA. In “Virtual tryvertising. Marketing strategies for empowered customers” Biggio aims at looking at the experiential marketing strategy of virtual tryvertising, by analysing the augmented reality application *Ikea Place*. It provides customers with a set of tools to prefigure a virtual representation of a piece of a furniture within a physical space, in order to appraise its fitness. The semiotic analysis takes into account user practices prescribed by the application and the promotional discourses of the company. The paper also considers the added value and the experiential gain for users that the adoption of this type of technology entails. This facilitates the understanding of Augmented Reality media not only as a mere strategy for commercial purposes, but as a tool for empowering the users' appraising skills traditionally used in the context of a dressing room of a physical store.

Good reading!