Social Food:
a Semioethic Perspective on Foodism and New Media

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Abstract

While Bronislaw Malinowski maintained that sexuality is the basis of social structure, his pupil, instead, Audrey Richards asserted that food is the real basis of human relationships. To support this idea, from an anthropological perspective, Claude Lévi-Strauss and Mary Douglas would seem to confirm the cultural and social importance of food. Through sociology, food began to be studied from the seventies onwards because of a general interest for the sense of the body, for social practices and rituals. Jean-Pierre Poulain, for example, in his alimentary sociological studies, defined the theoretical construct of "alimentary social space".

Since Roland Barthes began to analyze food as language, as a symbol of culture and ideology like literature and art, semiotics too with the other human sciences has been investigating different conceptual frameworks of food behavior, stressing the need to study food behavior in context, with a special interest in contemporary postmodern society.

So it is evident that now we are living in an *orthorexic* society in which virtually everyone, everywhere and always speaks about food. This phenomenon is called *foodism* and the *foodies* denote all the people who are obsessed by food.

In this article, a particular type of food obsession is analyzed as a phenomenon strictly connected with digital consumerism and its viral circulation through social networks such as Instagram and Facebook. It is the result of a way of communicating and of staying informed about everyday food habits, recipes or food news thanks to mobile phones which allow us to stay connected. The philosopher Luciano Floridi states we are *inforg* people, *inf*ormational *org*anisms interconnected in a *global milieu* shared by biological organisms and technological instruments. Foodism is analysed in the

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[1] The paragraphs 1 and 3 are written by Loredana La Fortuna. The paragraphs 2 and 2.1 are written by Raffaella Scelzi.

framework of the semiotics of new media from a semioethic perspective. An important aspect to underline is that this phenomenon is linked to the pervasive use of social networks among digital natives obsessed with sharing media communication forms and models about food in complete "virtual solitude". This particular need to share food photos is observed from a socio-semiotic perspective. What is involved is the creation of new meaning in new media through semiotic modalities.

Keywords: new media, sociosemiotics, food, identity, society, virality, semioethics.

1. The orthorexic phenomenon

Some time ago a black and white video by the director Tatia Pilieva appeared on Youtube with the title *First Kiss[2]*. The plot involved twenty couples of people who did not know each other and whose task it was to kiss each other. The camera focussed on the emotional emphasis and embarrassment caused by a kiss between people who did not know each other. The video became internationally viral, capturing the attention of the whole world and circulating on the social networks. More than sixty million people shared it when suddenly they realized it was the advertisement of a brand made by the famous Wren Studio fashion company. This phenomenon has a precise name. It is called *Brand content* and sometimes people who share it on the web platforms are completely unaware of it. This means that the viral effect has not stopped, but rather has produced a series of parodies which in the meantime have also become viral.

Among the parodies there is the video called *First sandwich[3]* realized by the humoristic site called *College Humor[4]*. This is addressed to people addicted to food and to sandwich lovers in which parody is focussed on the shyness and the lack of inhibition in eating any new food in the form of a sandwich. The stage directions that appeared in the video confirm this thesis and they quote: "Love is fleeting. A good hoagie is forever". A sandwich stands for something important in the life of people addicted to sandwiches, it becomes a fetishist object necessary to possess in order to be happy. According to this new connotation, food becomes a brand in everyday life thereby superseding the old idea of food as an instrument functional to

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[2] http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IpbDHxCV29A
[3] http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CvCjg_7-Hq4
[4] http://www.collegehumor.com/

health. Being a *foodist* dedicated to *foodism* means to be religiously involved in a sort of fetishism in the craft of cooking and communicating its language.

Food is a new religion, almost a new drug to the extent that in England, Steven Poole, a journalist for *The Guardian*, has written a book entitled *You aren't what you eat*. In this essay Poole argues against Ludwig Feuerbach when he maintains that we are what we eat, and criticizes *foodism* and its different media expressions as engendered by food culture today: food blogs, television programs, cookery books, and reality shows in which chefs are the protagonists. In one of his papers, published in *The Guardian*, entitled "Let's start the foodie backlash" (2012) Poole writes: "We are living in the Age of Food. Cookery programs bloat the television schedules, cookbooks strain the bookshop tables, celebrity chefs hawk their own brands in the supermarket, and cook in super-expensive restaurants from Chicago to Copenaghen are the subject of hagiographic profiles in serious magazines and newspaper".

In contemporary society, we continually speak about food and about the way we speak about food. Further implications come from speaking about food across the new media and above all the social networks where we are constant witnesses to foodist phenomena connected with photography, viral videos and other forms of food communication.

Here let us recall the work of the sociologist Guido Nicolosi in his book *Lost food. Comunicazione e cibo nella società contemporanea* (2007) where he states the following:

The study of forms and models in media communication about food, dominant in a given historical era and/or in a specific social group, can become essential to understand some of the deepest mechanisms in the socio-cultural organization of that age, or that society. [Lo studio delle forme e dei modelli di comunicazione mediatica sul cibo, prevalenti in un dato momento storico e/o in un particolare gruppo sociale, può diventare essenziale per comprendere alcuni dei meccanismi più intimi dell'organizzazione socio-culturale di quell'epoca o di quella società.] (2007: 26-27).

Nicolosi introduces the concept of "orthorexic society", that is, a society where people are obsessed by hyper-reflection à propos healthy food consumption. His definition is inspired by the language of medicine. In fact, the expression "orthorexic society" recalls the orthorexic nervous syndrome, a psycho-cultural disease studied by the scholar Steve Bratman (2001), who defined it as an obsession for permanent and appropriate nourishment characterized by hyper-reflection.

In the paper entitled *Modernità alimentare, società ortoressica e processi comunicativi* (2007: 29-49), Nicolosi clearly refers to the metaphor of an overweight society, used by Claude Fischler to describe capitalist society, defined as a greedy one, unable to share its food. However, according to Nicolosi, this metaphor seems too reductive to describe a society where the relationship with food has become more and more complicated.

Orthorexic society with its hyper-reflection and many ways of depicting the phenomenon finds expression through fragmented philosophical polyphonic discourse supported by scientific, sociological and semiotical considerations.

Interest in food has become so diffused to create a *social alimentary space,* according to the French sociologist Jean-Pierre Poulaine (2002: 228).

On considering eating primarily as an essential act for human survival, and not only as a physiological and material act, it is evident that food nourishing practices have always had cultural and social relevance. Barthes (1957) asserts this idea of food as a social act in his work *Mythologies*. Food consumption has always been a way to build, share and communicate social bonds, hierarchies and rules. On the other hand, in our contemporary consumerist society, food has exceeded these specific roles and has increasingly acquired new connotations. Food today has become a sort of *social currency*, a way to express people's lifestyle, tastes and attitudes. Today, identity can be defined through what we eat, also keeping account of the fact that people everywhere are speaking about food more than ever. Food is a constant theme in both old and new media in an endless cross-media exchange among TV, press and the web.

The philosopher Michel Foucault said in *Surveiller et punir: Naissance de la prison* (1975) that the human condition and human action is guided by unconscious subjectivity where external practices orient action, reducing the human being to the status of passive executor/product to be moulded for the market. Foucault claims that relations among forms of power structure the body and mind of modern man as part of a great power network to which we belong. According to Foucault, the aim of the sciences is to re-shape human behaviour by going beyond the boundaries of institutional power and giving birth to conscious power/knowledge. It is precisely what happens with food, food photography and sharing on the social networks.

Thanks to new disciplines such as linguistics, semiotics and sociosemiotics, it is now possible to reflect on the assertion of a new modern identity and conscious. It is through food conceived as language and eating conceived in terms of the dialogic unit known as the

utterance that we perceive ourselves, our emotions, experiences and sensations. As Susan Petrilli stated "as a human experience hunger or the need of food is a historico-social phenomenon; as such it is part of anthroposociosemiosis, it is experienced as a sign process". [La fame o bisogno di cibo come vissuto umano è un fenomeno storico-sociale; come tale fa parte della antroposociosemiosi, è vissuto segnicamente] (in Manetti et al. 2006: 208).

2. Food discourse

The word *foodie* was used for the first time in 1984 in England in *The Official Foodie Handbook* by Ann Barr and Paul Levy. It describes a person who is neither a professional "gourmet", nor a person who does not understand tastes or flavours. A *foodie* is an expert lover of food, he eats it, he studies it and he is looking out for any kind of innovation. He is passionate about good cooking and fully aware of the novelties. Today to be updated is easy, thanks also to smartphones and tablets and to their food applications which can be seen in real time.

In 1997 the first food blog was created and published in America with the name *Chowhound*[5]. This was an online bulletin board for the exchange of information about the best places to dine in New York. David Lebovitz[6] is a long famous blogger, a pastry chef who went to Paris from California. He wrote six books and his site is followed by millions of people. In 2001 Julie/Julia became famous as a blogger and creator of a recipe blog, but also because her project was translated into a successful Hollywood film.

Nowadays, in 2014, it is impossible to calculate the number of food blogs and forms on the new media platforms where people speak about food. New media are characterized by the presence of communication forms and models about food. An important contribution has come from new media studies and semiotics of new media which discuss the new forms of online social communities or civil participation. In a new bottom-up perspective, therefore, is celebrated the idea of convergence between the Internet and new media as presented by Manuel Castells in *Galassia Internet* (2001), in which he analyses important transformations which have occurred in the Internet Galaxy. The dominion of new media, hypertext and the new forms of cooperative communication in writing and new social practices emerges in all its importance.

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[5] http://chowhound.chow.com/boards
[6] http://www.davidlebovitz.com/

Among those forms may be counted food photography which evidences the re-mediation of food discourse through the re-production of photos on the web and, precisely, on social networks. Thanks to digital reality and graphic productions, photos evolve to the point of becoming highly professional. Even if the photos made by smartphones or with professional reflex cameras have precise characteristics, they have an international and "lighted style" influenced by the queen of foodstyle, Donna Hay[7]. These photos are dark snapshots taken from above looking down as they document each single moment in the process of making the final dish. The result is a precise and detailed context, the *mise en table* recalling past social practices, a vintage milieu.

2.1 Media and viral circulation

According to the author Andreas Hepp (2013) our culture is turning into a media culture with an unprecedented and peculiar increase in recourse to what is now commonly known as "new media." Cultures "moulded by media" give rise to media cultures or cultures of "mediatisation" (spelled with an "s") which are mass cultures presenting different media, that are constructed in the relation among different media and media users, but that are not dominated by any one type of media. Instead, the "mediatization"[8] condition (spelled with "z") consists of the simultaneous interrelation among a plurality of different media in any given instance of communication. This expression denotes the influences of technological media in media-saturated societies, where people use and experience several media everywhere[9].

In our contemporary society a continuous use of new media and among them Internet and digital practices, shows how we are every day in the need of being connected to the web through devices and various technological instruments. As Luciano Floridi declares in his book *Information. A very short introductio*n (2010), we are "interconnected informational

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[7] http://www.donnahay.com.au/

[8] To understand this subtle change I want to quote the words by Knut Lundby**:** "the concept of mediatization tries to capture long-term interrelation processes between media change on the one hand and social and cultural change on the other" (Hepp, Hjarvard and Lundby, 2010, p. 233)

[9] Mediatization is a meta process by which everiday practices and social reltions are historically shaped by mediating technologies and media organizations. We know that media do more then mediate but mediatisation shapes relations among individuals and between individuals and society, while mediatization "is a claim about a gradual transformation of power relations among institutions and publics." () "Mediatization starts out from the notion of replication, the spreading of media forms to spaces of contemporary life that are required to be represented through media forms" (Couldry 2008)

organisms or *inforgs,* sharing with biological agents and engineered artefacts in a global environment ultimately made of information," which he identifies as, "the infosphere" (p. 9). The "infosphere" refers to the information milieu which we, as inforgs, inhabit.

The *inforg* population differs from the cyborg which incorporates new technologies to augment its abilities. It operates in a new interactive sphere called *Infosphere* in which new information technologies create a new ontology of the world where the off-line and on-line barriers blur. This idea is supported by the concept of "collective intelligence" proposed by Pierre Lévy (1994) which finds confirmation in the idea of "connective intelligence" formulated by Derrick de Kerckove (1997). In the Age of mass communication we witness new forms of collective sharing of messages which create the illusion of participation: where hypertextual communication sender and receiver roles tend to be confused as much as sharing in the collectivity is an individual choice and not an imposition.

Another important aspect of this food phenomenon is viral circulation through blogs, sites, social networks like the famous Instagram and the different forms of digital textualities. When using cyberspace combined with new media, the result is an *exponential growing* effect producing *viral* texts, such as viral videos or viral photographies. Rheingold (2012) quoted "Reed's law" stressing the importance of the inter-relationship between the physical and social networks.

Keeping account of Eric Landowski's theory (1989) à propos the text that reflects all of society just like a mirror, we can make the claim that food discourses can be considered as "syncretic texts" (see Greimas and Courtés 1972) perceived globally as new media communication forms and models. In a same utterance-shot, the message is proposed and combined in a plurality of languages organized in a single homogeneous communication strategy. Syncretic texts used in social networks and combined with other forms of communication give rise to new forms of semiotic textuality specific to the web (Calefato 2011). Such textualities achieve *convergence* and mutual encoding which involve the relation between cultural expressions and informatics. These new forms of media textual genres have been studied by Paolo Peverini from a semiotic perspective with a focus on the mechanism that determines their social use, circulation and consumption. He calls media texts all the complex cultural texts whose single parts are coherent and contribute to the development of communicative processes based on pre-existent, autonomous elements (Peverini 2012: 7-10).

The sociosemiotic perspective recognizes communicative visual information and at once its aesthetic quality. On the other hand, according to Walter Benjamin (1931), as soon as

society passed from an aesthetic perspective to a social one, the need to possess the object through its image or the copy from a very short distance motivates recognition and re-production of the uniqueness of the object itself. This happens with food photography as well as with viral videos about food, mentioned above. The photos or the videos become an exclusive property just when re-cognised, re-produced and shared on the social networks. They are attractive because of the "aura", as defined by Benjamin, that resulted from the dawning of mechanical reproduction in art. This phenomenon can be socially analysed according to what Giorgio Agamben (Leland De La Durantaye 2009) describes as the "loss of experience" that has overcome our lives in mass society. The loss of experience, what we could also refer to as the loss of sense, is what has made our existence seem dull.

After looking at some forms of *foodism,* if we now reflect on the aim of this practice and the meaning of food today, no longer reduced to a mere biological need, food turns into a real simulacrum as stated by Baudrillard in his book *La scomparsa della realtà* (2009) [The disappearance of realty]. Our real life is transformed into a hyper-reality. We live life in a simulated world, a world which is no longer "natural." As a consequence, our behaviours in the virtual world are different from behaviour in "real" worlds, even if they aim to re-produce reality artificially and in a new social mediatic state of "virtual solitude". These new forms of cyber digital languages with the new discourse genres they generate, express the evolution or the mutation of humans, as Danesi affirms in *La comunicazione al tempo di Internet [Communication in the Internet Era]* (2013). This transformation is the result of a participatory culture, the Internet culture that started from hacker culture, a positive type of collective construction or viral culture that models social production where the birth of new forms of social life and communities play a strong role. In a place where new media and interpersonal relationship coincide, the technical elements and the rules of online social behaviour enable us to understand the new forms of "cybersociality" (Rheingold 2013. 17-18).

3. Crossing disciplines: semiotics, sociosemiotics and semioethics

In recent times semiotic studies have focussed on the analysis of food systems as significant entities: single food typologies of texts analysed in a new socio-semiotical perspective focus the attention on the study of food production and consumption practices.

Barthes in his general work of disclosing the ideology of consumer society, investigates the connotative value of food and its nutrition practices for the first time. Thus, he affirms:

"Qu'est-ce que c'est la nourriture? Ce n'est pas seulement une collection de produits, justiciables d'études statistiques ou diététiques. C'est aussi et en même temps un système de communication, un corps d'images, un protocole d'usages, de situations et de conduites." [What is food? It 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.] (Barthes 1961/1979: 979).

Therefore, Barthes introduces a new perspective on the reflection of food and his opinion is today our essential premise. Nowadays, we are certainly more aware of the fact that food and its practices have a pressing sign value: they permit mechanisms of exchange and practices of ostentation, establish hierarchies, become symbols of identity and belonging to a group. Food, as a fundamental cultural marker, underlines similarities and differences among groups, cultures and social groups, it defines trends and lifestyles (Bourdieu 1979/1984), but it is also true that, in consumer society, this happens in a completely new and non linear way.

In *Mythologies* (1972), Barthes had already analyzed different collective representations of mass culture as systems of signs and he also counted food among them: steak, milk, wine and a cookery he defined as "ornamental". The French semiologist studied these foods as myths, namely as the result of cultural demystification capable of transforming foods into objects of desire, into new status symbols. As a matter of fact, the phenomenon of orthorexy can also be defined as a kind of mythization of food, caused by history and by cultural and economic influences on current consumer society expressed in digital forms of communication.

To understand the phenomenon of orthorexy and the practices of social food, therefore, it is important to understand how the dynamics of consumer society have affected the relationship between man and food.

In *La société de consommation* (1974), Jean Baudrillard defines consumption as the process of communication that can transform objects into symbols. In consumer society objects lose their use value and acquire above all an exchange value. Thus, they become signs of a social code and contribute to defining new social hierarchies and new forms of identity. Baudrillard takes to the extremes the ideas of myth and its spectacularized function, to

identify the main feature of goods in the capitalistic system. Baudrillard as well includes food among his objects.

In modern industrialized societies, therefore, food turns into a consumer goods, whose connotative value is definitely more influential and determinant than its use value. The connotative value becomes ever more important when it is shown and shared, also thanks to the use of new media.

According to Daniele Tricarico in the book *Cucina nazionale a confronto. I percorsi della cucina italiana in Gran Bretagna* (2007), food has become a sort of lifestyle determined by consumerist individual choices and social and economic constraints. Pierre Bourdieu, in particular, in his book *Distinction: A social critique of the Judgement of taste* (1979/1984), stated that one of the essential characteristics of new bourgeois taste consists of a new morality in self-expression. Individuality seems to be the real essence of the modern consumer, even if simultaneously people tend to recognize themselves inside a community. Thus, social food practices can be interpreted as the main way of expressing the freedom of individual consumers in their choices, but also they must be considered as an expression of the passions, preferences and habits of an enlarged group.

In this perspective, the different forms of social food could be studied in the light of the philosopher Ferruccio Rossi-Landi's conceptual categories. Rossi-Landi's research on production and communication in social reproduction can be applied to food studies with very interesting results. As Augusto Ponzio states in the premise of the book *Semiotica e ideologia:*

"La riproduzione sociale è il processo complessivo per il quale ogni società si forma e procede, permane e si riproduce attraverso il lavoro umano, che istituisce rapporti mediati, i quali sono fin dall'inizio rapporti fra gli uomini. La riproduzione sociale è resa possibile dalla comunicazione e dunque dai segni, verbali e non verbali, che pertanto vanno esaminati considerandoli nel processo cui appartengono quale parte costitutiva. Anziché limitarsi allo studio dei rapporto fra segni o fra messaggi si tratta di risalire al lavoro sociale segnico-comunicativo di cui i segni e i messaggi sono i prodotti e alle forme sociali entro cui tale lavoro si realizza." (Rossi-Landi 1972 [1994]: 2). (Social reproduction is the overall process through which any society develops, proceeds and reproduces itself through human work, creating mediated relationships, which are from the very beginning relations among human beings. Social reproduction is possible through communication and therefore through signs,

verbal and non-verbal, which must be analysed in the process they belong to as a constitutive part of it. Rather than simply study the relationship between signs or messages, it is a question of going back to the sign-communicative social work of which signs and messages are the products, and to the social forms within which such work is carried out.) (Rossi-Landi 1972 [1994]: 2).

The philosopher, therefore, insists on the idea that semiotics should have a critical and demystifying function towards social behaviors that become object of study, and eventually promote an alternative social planning.

If we take up Rossi-Landi's invitation, semiotics in the specific case of food must not only analyze the new and complex questions that consumer digital and media society asks omnivores. Another task in today's world is to suggest a way of overcoming orthorexia and build a new relationship of sense between man and food. In other words, semiotics must become semioethics.

As Susan Petrilli writes in her article "Semioethics and translation" (2013):

"Semiotics is a *critical* science in a Kantian sense, that is, in the sense that it investigates its own conditions of possibility, but not only. Semiotics is also a critical science in the sense that it interrogates the human world today on the assumption that it is not the only possible world, it is not the *definitive* world, as established by some conservative ideology. Critical semiotics looks at the world as *a possible* world, one among many possible worlds, therefore a world subject to *confutation*".

Susan Petrilli and Augusto Ponzio have dedicated an entire volume to the concept of semioethics titled *Semioetica* (2003), a concept which outlines their approach and perspective to the relation between signs and values, signs and life in its diverse aspects. Semioethics retrieves the original nature of semiotics itself understood as clinical semeiotics. Semiotics "is called to diagnose symptoms, make a prognosis and indicate possible therapies to improve the future of globalization and the health of semiosis generally" (Petrilli, 2013). Viewed from a semioethic perspective, the task is to find ways of counteracting negative viral forms of media communications and models about food, homologated by digital reproduction through social networks in new media society.

4. Conclusion

Being a foodist and acting in a postmodern society means to be first a hyper connected *inforg* person. As a biological organism interacting in food discourse, being an *inforg* and a viral *prosumer* means to behave in a global digital milieu. Food is a new medium in a social and cultural context becoming more and more orthorexic, which generates a new relationship of sense between man and food and turns into a real new religion or simulacrum.

To analyse these phenomena with semiotic or sociosemiotic categories implies to go beyond the simple description of all the elements involved. The "semiotic animal" (Deely, Petrilli, Ponzio 2005) in the globalized world, where communication and production are characterized by the same social models of production, needs to react to the dominant market where the production and consumption system leads to homologating human habits and behaviours. Through semioethics it is possible to analyze the social system in terms that are rigorous and precise, with a special focus on contemporaneity. According to this approach it is important to evidence the communication-production relationships that dominate over the social in its different expressions and recover the relation between signs and values in a critical key.

With reference to the specific symptom of social malaise we are signaling with this paper, the semioethic perspective can contribute to rebuilding a correct, that is a healthy approach to food in human society. As Petrilli says: "With reference to human culture and society, to anthroposemiosis and, more specifically, anthroposociosemiosis, semiotics must listen to the symptoms of today's globalized world and identify the many expressions of unease and disease now proliferating – in social relations, in international relations, in the single life of single individuals, in the environment, in life generally over the entire planet" (Petrilli 2013). It is now necessary to interrogate food discourse and foodism and not just passively register the tendency to turn into a simulacrum or a new religion, a new and fast spreading social habit, a dominant and homologating practice strengthened and supported by the new digital forms and models of communicating. Instead, connective individual intelligence can be used critically and creatively to produce human expressions and social practices that are not reduced to the stereotypes and *clichés* of new media digital discourse.

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