

Dressing the body, Feeding the body

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How can one doubt that food is one of the most important components of any cultural constellation? How could one forget that one of the most ambitious reconstructions of universal mythological thought, in the anthropology of the 1900's, was a "mythology of cuisine", from the opposition between raw and cooked? How can one put aside the importance of the studies on "sacrificial cuisine", in classic Greece, in order to delineate the origins and discontinuities of Western culture? How can one deny that a study on the apple or on cheese seems to be the most secure path (even if not the most linear) to understand the central role of the body in the symbolic universe of man? Nonetheless... I am not interested (and perhaps I would not be capable of) trying the umpteenth hybridization between Lévi-Strauss, Detienne, Vernant and Camporesi. Instead I want to think about a more modest discussion – which adheres more to cultural current affairs – on the reasons why today, in journalistic productions, in artistic projects, in sponsors' agendas, food seems to be taking the place of fashion. There is no doubt: fashion, which until the end of the past century seemed to be the element most adapt to reassuring the bond between material culture and immaterial culture, in today's viewpoint sets the pace, while food's shares rise. It isn't so much fun to dress bodies anymore, and these bodies first and foremost need to be fed.

Perhaps it isn't so simple. As usual, we have to deconstruct, take apart ideological discussions that culture makes about itself, discussions that are always justifications, mystifications. Much can be learnt [from such mystifications](#), of course, but on the condition of turning them upside down, of revealing the unexpressed and hidden motivations. There's no doubt that food has often played an important role in the moments of incubation and birth of a new culture, when it dealt with criticising the rhetorical idealism that identifies culture with products "from above", from thought, and recuperating a relationship with the [materialness](#) of the body, with essential human needs. I'm thinking about the origins of modernity, [about](#) Rabelais, and the fearful theory of banquets, of the feasts of *Pantagruel* and *Gargantua*, and the capacity for the two Rabelaisian giants to devour large quantities of game, piglets and whole calves. But the greed and enormous appetite of Gargantua, according to the French humanist, were a mere metaphor for the hunger of knowledge that accompanied the birth of modern man. And today, perhaps being full instead of being hungry characterises our relationship with knowledge, an abundant and available good (that is apparently easy to achieve) as we have never seen before in the history of humanity – and never mind if we often confuse knowledge with information. Perhaps we must go back further in time, and see if Trimalclone's dinner, in *Satyricon*, is not a possible model for the discussions on food today. The current fustigator of traditions will certainly find an easy correspondence between vulgarity, vanity, excess and exhibitionism thrown into ridicule by Petronius and concentrated into the eccentric dishes of that banquet, and our current situation. However, here the analogy doesn't last long, because it cuts out some of the most important components of the discussion on food that exists today: that of slowness (Slow food), of the recuperation of the relationships with territory and craftsmanship, and the anti-industrial production of food.

It is not here, therefore, that we must search for the reasons of the current issue of food as an analytical instrument (and weapon) for culture and politics. Perhaps the observation on the simultaneous cultural decline [of the discourse](#) on fashion and the rising of the

discourse of food is not as extemporaneous as it may have seemed at a first glance, and hides a parallel that deserves to be dealt with more deeply. There are certainly economical considerations that can have a certain importance (the difficulties - exasperated by the current crisis - of the entire fashion industry, a difficulty that the food industry has suffered to a much lesser extent for obvious reasons), but this is a factor that in my opinion must not be viewed too economically. It's likely that the influence of the production components last longer and deals with new and lasting global characteristics of the production model, more than in similar situations.

Fashion began to be introduced into the cultural world very early during the 20th century, but the process took off between the 50's and 60's, and the Roland Barthes book (*The Fashion System*, 1967), represented this rising moment. In the 80's the process became almost sanctified, but the roots were there. Let's ask ourselves why fashion had this role in that cultural, social and political panorama, why fashion became fashionable in structuralist culture (and sometimes in post-structuralist culture). The 50's and 60's were the climax (but in hindsight, could also be the beginning of the downfall) of classic capitalism, of fordist capitalism, of matter and material capitalism. What mattered (as in the 19th century, of course, but on a much greater scale) were coal and steel, rock and cement, heavy chemicals. There was a common culture and viewpoint for lighter and more flexible materials, like plastic; but it was always matter. Energy, and immaterial products, existed already, but were on the side, and the instruments were the way to guide production and distribution of material merchandise. Sometimes they were needed to rebalance a situation that relied principally on materiality and heaviness.

Culture had already taken on that role – perhaps it had always had it. But traditional culture – humanist or scientific – was too elitist: too “heavy” (metaphorically, but still too heavy) for newsmagazines. Other counterweights were needed; other cultural devices that would continue and amplify the fast march toward communication via images that had begun some decades before in the second half of the 19th century, first with illustrated magazines and then with cinema. This device was television, with its electromagnetic image, an image that was “immaterial” compared to the chemical image of photography and cinema. It was always matter upon final analysis, but this time there was no tangible trace of the world on film, there were no silver rooms or emulsions that gave a certain consistency to the image. There was just an electronic device that bombarded a cathode tube from the inside and recreated faces and streets, objects and landscapes, on its surface. It's a paradox that these images which do not exist, which have a reference but not a material trace on a physical support, soon became the greatest guarantee for the reality of bodies, of images and events of which they assume to be the faithful mirror. As opposed to the big cinematic screen, immersed in a dark room and therefore creator of an almost magical rapport with distant and magnificent faces of the actors, the little cathode screen was a window onto the real world, which dramatised and gave comic relief from “life”, without being pretentious and without wanting to have the symbolic hold (and therefore ambiguous, potentially false, almost dream-like) of cinema.

Television was (and in some respects still is) a primary element of immateriality – or lightness – when compared to the heavy, hyper-organised, massified world of the fordist society. But capitalism of long-lasting goods of consumption needed other mediations between the world of goods and that of imagination, which were already interacting but not yet interlaced and fatally united as they are today. Industrial design already existed, as did object design, but this design was too close to the merchandise and too pervasive, it bestowed merchandise with a cloak of elegance or it bathed them in an aura of unreality.

Design declared the difference inside the single piece of merchandise, but did not function enough as an element of general differentiation: it was too concrete, because it was presented with the object, and too abstract, because it was a general model (ideological and mystified most of the time) of the creative process. A single piece of merchandise was needed, a single productive sector, that symbolically created that “sensitively hyper-sensitive” character (to say it like Marx) of merchandise in general. That single piece of merchandise became items of clothing – their mystical character, their “metaphysical subtleness”, their “theological whims”, became fashion.

Clothes had a defined function, answering a primary need, but could also appear (as an illusion!) to be a symbol of the superfluous. They needed productive power, but seemed (especially luxury items) to escape the machines – recreating nostalgia of a world of craftsmen, of hand-made products. Naturally that was not the case. Fashion becomes a cultural phenomenon when it ceases to be fashionable, or rather when it escapes the imperatives of classical *haute-couture*, when great designers start to think about *prêt-à-porter* - all things that are known, have been analysed, said and repeated. The essential aspect that must be observed, I believe, is that in those years fashion was a “cultural cover” of the productive system because it was a sufficiently hybrid sector: it was an industry but it evoked craftsmanship, it leaned toward mass production but it seemed to be a part of “creativity”. Its function was parallel and complementary to that of design. It started from above (high fashion) and reached the bottom (“elegant” clothing of department stores), whereas design followed the opposite path. If we think about the *streamlining* of the 30’s, of those objects (like William Gibson says) that “seem to come out of a wind tunnel”, and a designer like Raymond Loewy, who began with pencil sharpeners that looked like spaceships and ended up with the S-1 locomotive that looked like a schizophrenic radiator. It was not yet the era of Philip Stark and Stefano Giovannoni, where designers became stars with an orange-juicer shaped like a spider that can’t even juice a cherry. Until the 50’s and 60’s the **fancy** was just to get experience: the designer can begin with furniture, but has not made it until he/she designs a washing-machine, or even better, a locomotive.

However, at the end of the 70’s, and during the 80’s, the capitalist system changes shape, and perhaps something else too. The production system of merchandise is overturned, and with it the world is turned upside down for the umpteenth time – capitalism has always done this, it’s its job, to turn the world upside down, put the head in the place of the feet and the feet in the place of the head, and keep doing it, but with the head and feet that each time change shape, and no one recognises them anymore. In the course of 10, 15 years, the traditionally important sectors for capitalism, for production activity, are no longer sectors where long-lasting goods are produced, nice heavy things (that naturally always last less, but this is obvious), are no longer cars, or locomotives. All these are still produced, obviously, but they are not at the heart of the system, it is no longer the sector where there is more profit to be made, it does not give rhythm or dictate the agenda to all the other productive compartments. The new merchandise, those that count the most, guarantee a greater added value and rise at an accelerating rate, and bring with them all the other merchandise, are **now** immaterial goods. The capitalism of knowledge has arrived, and the most contested merchandise, the most precious, the most needed, is the most immaterial that there is: the linguistic, imaginative, relational capacities of human beings.

Capitalism manages to get its hands and claws on our most intimate sphere, on what each one of us retains to be most personal, most creative, light and even fun, in other words, immaterial. Cognitive-relational Capitalism begins. The production activity rapidly colonises

a territory that up until that point had been spared (in certain respects) from the process of valorisation, that which was the typical and uncontaminated reign of the intellectual. From one moment to the next the intellectual (and every human being when frequenting the territories of culture – be it high or low, refined or popular) finds his or herself deprived of that which was a reserve: besieged, threatened, but not yet conquered. Ok, this world sucks, work is alienating, society is oppressive, but I can still walk, go to the movies, read a book, choose a dress, talk to friends, think about stuff, write a book. In all this there is a dimension that, in part, is untouchable by the valorisation process.

This is no longer the case. Today we are at work for the global capital, whether we like it or not, whether we know it or not, 24 hours a day, we are working for the global capital even when we criticise it, even when we insult it, even when we try to deconstruct its mechanisms, in certain ways, because capital learned to gain profit from our relational activities, from our linguistic capabilities, from our affections. This does not mean that capitalism is invincible, that the sphere of value has eaten us whole, because the complete symbolic transparency – the dream of capital – is structurally unrealistic, because the excess of the world on language is something that no capital can repair; this excess and this world reserve, this infinite resource of possibility, can always be relied on to deconstructed and reconstruct language, to escape the bite of valorisation. Much invention is needed; new roads must be walked on – paths of theory and practice. All this cannot be done as it was done 20, 30 or 40 years ago.

It must be said that the first to discover these new territories of conflict were women, in the USA but mostly in Europe, and quite a bit in advance, that is between the 60's and the 70's of the 1900's. Feminism, it's true, at the start created a whirlwind, mostly in the rebellious and antagonistic movements where it was created, rather than on a greater social scale, but it had a great value, first of all in indicating the primary ambition of theoretical and practical action in the general symbolic dimension, and not just on a tighter "social" and political scale, but it placed the issue of the body into the argument, proposing a political stance on bodies. It was feminism and feminists that saw that the immaterial was becoming the new territory for the hunt of capital, and that the conflict between those who have the means for production and those who don't and live on their work grew extensively, moving onto territories that traditionally seemed to be outside of this conflict.

In a situation where the cultural field loses its traditional autonomy and becomes a moment of economical, social and symbolic conflict, as it is inside the process of valorisation, it's understandable, I believe, that this culture tries to find a weight, a materiality, not to refuse the new virtual territory, but to move inside it maintaining a link to more secure dimensions. What is more important, more material, more basic, what determines behaviour and thought processes more than food?

It is for this reason that food becomes now **the** "cultural object", or one of the new and more important cultural objects, that can be analysed, dissected and on which **can be created** new conflicts.

I would say that the most important political valence of Slow Food is in this, in the fact that capitalism is literally eating our thought-processes, our ideas, our language, and so we must try to resist, or move the conflict, the counter-position, the deconstruction, onto other territories: for example the way in which we eat, we feed. It's true that the existence determines the essence, that our stomach determines the chemical, biochemical and electromagnetic secretions of our brain as well.

Here we can, if we can, better construct the conditions for lucidity, understanding, analysis,

inventiveness, to face the territories where capitalism of knowledge, semio-capitalism, challenges us to build our lives every day. “Make your life a work of art”, the [historical avant-garde](#) said more than a century ago. Make you [table](#) a work of art, we could repeat today – not, obviously in the banal sense of the grandmother's [doily](#), and not in the way in which the *Nouvelle Cuisine* of Bocuse and Marchesi did 20 years ago (mystifying but also denouncing a problem and opening a territory). It wasn't that, it wasn't the *décor* of food and the table, it was not the size of the food, it was not even the *cuisine du marché*, the freshness of the ingredients etc.: it was everything around all this, which expresses, in a confused way, a revival of “naturalness”, or relaxation, of slowness. Not just the “working with slowness”, of 1977, but eating slowly, feeding slowly, respecting and giving value to one of the most laborious biochemical processes that we have as living beings, or as mammals at least, and that is digestion. We are not oxen or cows, but we should learn to ruminate a little, just like the medieval [monks](#) who digested while reading, or meditating or [reciting](#) the bible, elevating his spirit in the hour of digestion, so today in some way the adept of natural cuisine and slow food recuperates a connection between more basic and material functions and the more elaborate and immaterial ones of the body.

It seems to me that food had become a central cultural object in the era of knowledge's capitalism because it is the most important counterbalance that can be found in the dematerialisation of productive processes, in the encompassment of thought-processes inside capitalist valorisation processes.

Obviously there are other factors, and I don't want to underestimate them: there's the acute, strong, and in some people's opinion scandalous presence of immigrants, of new bands of poverty that make up (as was for the USA between the 19th and 20th century) an irreplaceable economical resource, and in this sense they are welcomed by our [entrepreneurs](#), who are not sensitive to the conditions in which these immigrants are forced to supply their work force. We are condemning them, oppressing them, marginalising them in a way that perhaps is not just more cruel, but also more subtle than the one American capitalism [exerted](#), one or two centuries ago, with the successive waves of European immigrants. Now, as had already happened in the USA, in the case of African immigrants, of Latin Americans, Eastern Europeans, and the close Middle East and Orient, food is a form of cultural identity for them and a contribution to cultural hybridisation (and therefore enrichment) for us. Is it for this reason that one of the most virulent and xenophobe parties of this new Italian right wing government, the Lega Nord, gets angry and picks on the producers and vendors of kebab?

But the arrival of kebab, a food that has its origin in the middle east in many variations, which is invading the streets of Milan and Rome, of Florence and Bari, as it has already in Paris, London and Berlin, is one of the most relevant factors of the mutation of food habits of Italians and autochthonous Europeans – as well a fortunate instrument for survival for some (a very few, unfortunately) of them. It shows (as the Italian pizza is showing across the globe) not just how much food is a cultural crossroads, but also how its ethnicity and its roots in tradition are not incompatible with its internationalisation. It seems [in fact that the more food's ethnicity is strong, the more grows its capacity to spread all over the world, to show itself](#) as an alternative to local food, as a functional instrument of integration and mutation of autochthonous food traditions.

In conclusion, I would say that [on the one hand](#) food marks, in some way, the victory of the material over the immaterial, and marks a rebalancing of values, of weights, of strategies of activity and human behaviour in a situation where the immaterial often risks making us forget our body. On the other hand food, [peacefully](#) but irresistibly, reminds us that our

body continues to be a privileged instrument of our thoughts, even of the most noble (or vile) things that a human being can produce.