Feasting with the Outlander

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1. Food and Cinema

Food in films, as well as in life, may be approached in various ways. There's the good-tempered bully in a magical Rome of the fifties who pretends to be American but does not resist in front of a plate of macaroni. There is the family meal in which conflicts emerge unexpected at the apparent cordiality of the table. There is a classic wild sex in the kitchen. There is the sad Fanis that uses food as a bulwark of identity after being expelled from the city where he was born. And the list could go on, in a roundup that would embrace the whole history of the seventh art. In recent years, the Culinary Cinema has even become a genre, celebrated in festivals internationally. But what have in common the many dishes cooked and consumed during the countless banquets in the movies?

Putting food in the middle of a story, be it literature or cinema, turns it into a powerful tool of subjective and inter-subjective shift. Eating becomes a basic transformative act, so that, by means of the food, social ties may be reconstructed, relationships reshaped, the entire life of individuals, communities and even entire countries reconstituted. Eating and cooking, in the movies, in short, are not only eating and cooking. They mean much more.

Thanks to the food, the ruthless critic of *Ratatouille* (2007) finds a *perspective*, reconciling himself with his sadness, the Protestant community of *Babette's Feast* (1987) turns out again united, Emma Recchi from *I Am Love* (2009) finds a new bond with the world beyond hypocrisy and bourgeois formalities. It goes without saying that the gratitude of the diners for injecting sense in their own lives may be recognized in their devotion to the cooks, meant as protagonists of the films and responsible for such great blisses. The action of the cooks in the movies operates at a level at the same time wider and deeper than the mere culinary expertise (which, by the way, is not always necessary), calling into question the human rate traceable in the individual and political experience of eating by the subjects involved. Thanks to their exceptional nature, the cooks make people fall in love with them: *Babette's Feast*, *Like Water for Chocolate* (1992), *Chocolat* (2000), *Woman on Top* (2000), *Bella Martha* (2001), *Spanglish* (2004), *Lessons in Chocolate* (2007), *Estomago, Una storia gastronomica* (2007), *No Reservations* (2007), *Mediterranean Food* (2009), *I Am Love* (2009), *Romantics Anonymous* (2010), *The cook of the President* (2012) are just few examples of the multitude of titles which associate food and love stories. But devotion may also be declined in other directions, for example, towards friendship and mutual respect, or even professional recognition or simply recognition of status led by the appreciation received for having prepared a lunch or a dinner memorable. What need does a mechanism of this kind answer?

Restricting our investigation to the contemporary culinary cinema, an observation arises. The current gastronomic megatrend fits into a broader context of emancipation from the industrial society. In reference to the taste, the industrial approach has given the worst of itself, pursuing what has been called by many an actual "ice age" of food, sacrificed in the name of production needs and standardization. Already since the seventies, scholars and intellectuals have been thinking over how this industrial model was ultimately dysfunctional, revealing its evil nature. A precise economic structure created to respond to basic needs (education, health etc.) ended up taking the upper hand over the needs themselves, definitely subduing the humanity which was initially called to protect. *Schooling* took the place of Education, *Medicalization* of Health, *Transportation* of Movement, and so on. Ivan Illich has proposed, already since then, a metaphor to get out of this subordination: returning to conviviality. By this notion, he meant to refer to a substantial humanization of the relationship between man and environment, replacing the categorical imperative of production (based on a system of deficiency) to the one of conviviality (based on the autonomy of the gift). A step like this would allow the return of liberty lost due to the industrial mechanisms of production. Today we live in the middle of the post-industrial era, in a time of collapse of the organizational structure so sharply criticized by Illich. We witness also to the emergence of new organizational models, characterized by the desire to protect the autonomy of the individuals and to share goods and services until recently sole dominance of the industrial sphere. In this process of de-industrialization does not escape the world of food, which constitutes the central metaphor of Illich: conviviality is celebrating spontaneously the table, is fulfilling biological needs without sacrificing aesthetics, is recognizing nourishment to its most profound nature of cultural act. This is possible as long as nutrition and taste are considered inseparable parts of the gastronomic experience, only *a posteriori* split according to ideological positions made by the various cultures. So we understand how the problem of corporeality and the one of the relationship between body and soul is immediately turned into a political issue. It is starting from these aspects at the same time ethical and aesthetic, social and political that culinary cinema tells its many stories, so different in appearance, yet all focussed - we'll see - on rethinking in depth the act of eating. Celebrating the table becomes a way to position the self in the group up to include the whole of humanity in an idea of community that is, at the same time, political (*I eat as in my community*), ethical (*my community eats the right way*) and even religious (*humanity should eat as my community does*). In order to let such a configuration emerge from the obvious of the everyday life, showing all its anthropological importance, culinary cinema needs outlanders, people who, looking from outside at a particular social group, might reveal the arbitrariness of its way of eating and announce the verb of the culinary shift. In the culinary movies countless foreigners burst, unexpected, in societies and communities, couples and families, in order to stage the relativity and, at the same time, the importance of cooking and eating customs. Almost all the characters of this strange genre, foreigners or not, have a problem of inclusion / exclusion with respect to some group.

They are subjects who, to many different reasons, find themselves at the edge. It's from their marginal position that they need to affirm or deny the culinary expertise inherited, up to be integrated into a new social group. To them, considered as outlanders, is ascribed the task of announcing that other ways of eating are possible, and that any stance on food can only be placed in relation to the others' one, equally meaningful and interesting.

That is to say that, for instance, some food may be considered as *good*, *clean* and *fair*, to resume the famous triad of Petrini, just if someone else, somewhere else, finds it *bad*, *dirty* and *unfair*. Precisely for this purpose, all culinary films enact subjects in transition. It's all about subjects that, during the canonical hour and a half of the format, are found to change diet or way of cooking, and then group affiliation and identity.

Delivering on this kind of considerations is an attempt to rid the discourse over culinary cinema from the elitist scenario where some critic confined it. Investigating over food in the movies means, from our point of view, to think its role within the various cultures or, reversing the perspective, means studying the cultures through it. In other words, the way we will investigate the subtle bond that links films and food is not going to be the one of the cinema experts. So that the stylistic or aesthetic result of the single film is not the reason of our consideration, nor our consideration follows a logical or his-

torical interest or makes any account of a so called "policy of the author". Similarly, the intent of this survey is not strictly culinary, it doesn't mean proposing a philology of gourmet dishes in the movies or revealing the recipes used in some favourite film. Literature is full of titles of this kind. What to pursue is rather a thought over the culinary narratives circulating in the current media landscape. They consists of stories that most of the times keep a foundation in the movies but that sometimes redeem from them, turning themselves into common sense, currency of the culinary discourse *tout-court*, proliferating in various media. Starting from the fragments that the media constantly rework, the articulation of these narratives may be recomposed, considering them as "thought experiments". Just for the fact of being tales, narratives, stories, movies bring into play proper "thought experiments": they pose problems, they test heroes, indicate solutions to the problems themselves. They are therefore able to 'anticipate the experience', creating an inventory of general issues and local solutions that everyone can use at his sake. Positioning with respect to these stories is a way to shape identity. In order to face the eventualities of life, everyone appeals, if only to reject them, to this repertoire guarded in the tales. And there's more. Studying a text with reference to its narrative structure leads to widen the spectrum of analysis to other texts and other narratives.

This is what Jurij Lotman used to call *semiosphere*, meaning the significant horizon that is built in the connection between texts in a continuum that can virtually extend to consider the entire culture but that can be effectively explored by isolating consistent and coherent portions of it. Once adopted such a point of view, new questions arise: what are the contours of the transformations told in the movies? May culinary systems, capable to structure real political ideologies of food, be identified? and are these political ideologies be generalizable up to become existential? Is there a peculiar language through which food operates this kind of shifts? Can it be represented at in the cinema?
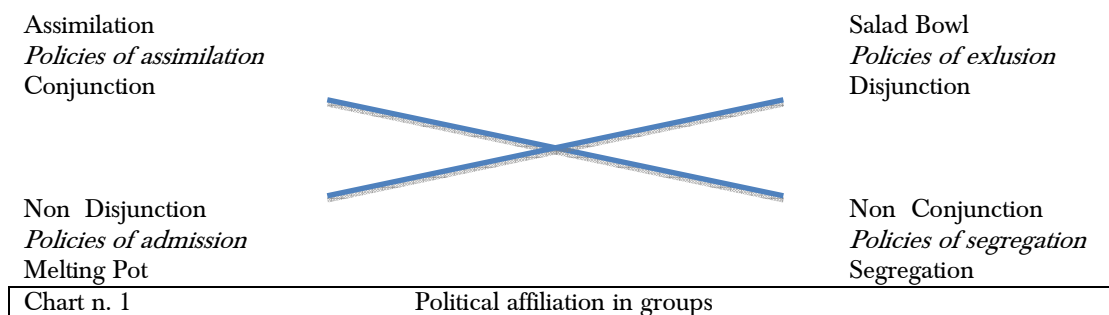

2. Political Models

It is possible to draw a typology of the ethnic transitions described in the films, with reference to the different strategies of connection between the self (my group) and the other (the other groups). In the relationship with other people, policies of *exclusion* (willing to mark the difference between the groups, holding them disjoint) or policies of *assimilation* (willing to absorb the other in a defined social model) can be implemented. Still, there are *admission* policies when a group admits new members as long as they are available to soften their prior identity in the name of their new affiliation. And, finally, *segregation* policies where the group does not want to contemplate the other as interlocutor, simply giving him the chance to build a self-sufficient and independent ethnic enclave within itself.

Policies of *assimilation* match a pattern that cancels the identity of the other, while within the policies of *segregation* can be recognized approaches that encourage the establishment of real enclaves willing to isolate the other. If these two regimes are hardly compatible with modern integration policies, the debate of Western democracies is focused on the other two options built, incidentally, by culinary metaphors. We can associate the policies that support the *disjunction* of cultures to the metaphor of *salad bowl*, container in which, despite being all mixed, the ingredients remain distinct. Policies that focus on *admission* may be related to the positions that support the need for cultures to work as a *melting pot*, that is a casserole in which all the elements merge forming a hybrid system in which the primitive elements are no longer recognizable in their original form.
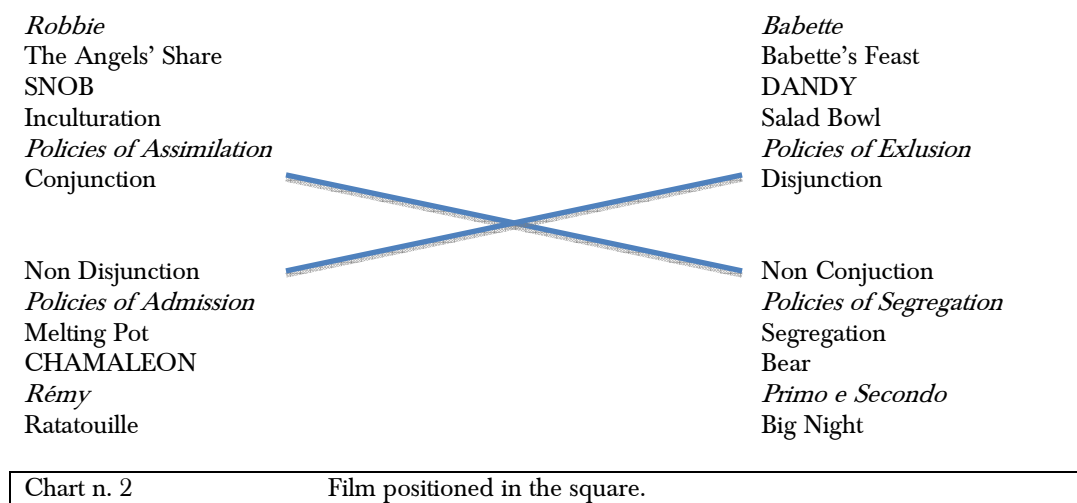
In a semiotic square:

Assimilation	Salad Bowl
Policies of assimilation	*Policies of exlusion*
Conjunction	Disjunction
Non Disjunction	Non Conjunction
Policies of admission	*Policies of segregation*
Melting Pot	Segregation

Chart n. 1	Political affiliation in groups

Each of these positions represents a real *form of life*, and *affiliation*, whose features are not, at this point, difficult to discern in the culinary films. Robbie, the protagonist of the film *The Angels' Share*, behaves like a real *snob*: he uses his expertise of whisky taster to divest his signs of affiliation (he used to be a deviant hooligan) and assume other ones, looking forward to be integrated in a upper social environment. Babette, haughty bourgeois communard, acts as a perfect *dandy*: she only looks for a legitimacy of her diversity, exasperating the signs of it. She squanders her entire fortune to celebrate a dinner capable to explain her identity to the unsuspecting diners. The dishes she prepares and the ingredients that she uses are exactly the same she was using in her Parisian restaurant. In contrast, the rat Rémy of the film *Ratatouille* is a perfect *chameleon*: staunch supporter of the idea that everyone can cook, he prepares a mestizo and innovative ratatouille that permanently changes the perception of the dish: millions of people worldwide are convinced that the ratatouille cooked by the mouse matches the traditional dish and don't even suspect the existence of the vegetable stew that the Frenchs have been preparing for generations. Finally, the poor Primo and Secondo of *Big Night* refuse to hybridize their culinary expertise with that of the new American group that admits them. They act so as *bears* hunted in a hostile environment. Their restaurant will work as an actual enclave, destined to succumb against the power of the scenario in which it operates.

Here's a scheme to sum up:

Robbie	*Babette*
The Angels' Share	Babette's Feast
SNOB	DANDY
Inculturation	Salad Bowl
Policies of Assimilation	*Policies of Exlusion*
Conjunction	Disjunction
Non Disjunction	Non Conjuction
Policies of Admission	*Policies of Segregation*
Melting Pot	Segregation
CHAMALEON	Bear
Rémy	*Primo e Secondo*
Ratatouille	Big Night

Chart n. 2	Film positioned in the square.

The proposed scheme has here been used to position four gastronomic films but it can clearly be applied as a model to screen many other films about food.

The *snob* is someone who has to deny his identity by adhering to policies of assimilation; he is forced to abandon every sign of his previous identity in the name of *acculturation*. This position is often represented in the cinema, featuring characters who want to get rid from an unwell past, changing life with mixed success. There are fortunate cases as, for example, that of Toula, heroine of *My big fat greek wedding* (2002), who succeeds in redeeming from her heavy ethnic heritage by marrying a boy from a good Anglo-Saxon family; or like that of Zinos, greek immigrant in Germany protagonist of *Soul Kitchen* (2009), who succeeds to launch a trendy restaurant despite the many hardships that will come from his family. There are less fortunate cases, like that of *Adua and Her Friends* (1960), in which a group of prostitutes attempts to break free from the degradation of their profession by opening a restaurant: just when the conversion looks complete and the owners transformed in excellent *restaurateurs*, they succumb to their past deviance, falling back into prostitution. There is, moreover, Raimundo Nonato, the protagonist of *Estomago - Una Storia Culinaria* (2007), who manages to make a career in the city thanks to its talent of chef and his kindness that hides a dark side of murderer. The examples could continue.

The *dandy* is instead one that aggravates the signs of difference by implementing policies of *exclusion* against those who do not fit with his identity. He also maintains the necessary distance with those belonging to other groups who he wants not to be confused nor hybridized with. The model derived from such attitude is that of the *salad bowl*, an idea of coexistence that is based on the reciprocal acknowledgement of the diversity and refusal of melting. This way of marking the difference is usually granted in the end of the competition. Most of the times dandies in the culinary film easily succeeds to convert the others who are called to compete with. There are many characters that can be recognized in this position. In *Haute Cuisine* (2012) Hortense Laborie can bend the entire kitchen of the Elysee to her philosophy of food and make even the President Mitterand fall in love with her. Vianne, protagonist of *Chocolat* (2000), whose plot is very similar to *Babette's Feast*, prevails on the bigoted community Lansquenet; Mario, the hero of *Bella Martha* (2001) will, with his flamboyantly eccentric attitude, take over the restaurant in Hamburg where he works under the direction of the the beautiful chef Martha. She will not resist to his charm and will become his wife

The *chameleon* is one who manifests a hybrid identity and is admitted into the group by virtue of his own funambulism: he is not totally assimilated into the group but still deserves to be acknowledged for his mediation effort. His presence helps to dilute the identity of the group that admits it, creating a third Creole one, result of the mix of his culture and that of the group which admits him. It is the *melting pot*, an idea of coexistence that is based on the reconciliation of differences in the name of greater belonging that is created by the fact of widening the circle of membership. If Rémy is the prince of all chameleons, other personalities from the culinary movies can be recognized in this position. In *An American in Rome* (1954), Alberto Sordi embodies a funny hybridization between the American bully subculture along with the good mood which is usually recognized to the Italians. Flor, heroine of the film *Spanglish* (2004), cannot really adjust to life as an immigrant in the United States, until she understands (with the help of a cook) that studying English and opening to her new context does not mean giving up her native culture. Indeed, she might look for a recognition (and an ascendant over men) by not hiding her hybrid identity. The same applies to Fanis, character of the film *A Touch of Spice* (2003). He will be found to make a virtue of necessity: having been expelled from his beloved *Constantinople* and forced to emigrate to Greece, he is indicated as Greek by the Turks and as Turk by the Greeks, embodying an identity of hybrid between the two cultures. Finally, *Mediterranean Diet* (2009) addresses the issue of gender inequality in the field of professional cookery: Sofia, the protagonist of the film, tries to reconcile her success as chef with her expectations of woman (marriage, children, etc.). She comes up building a far-fetched *ménage à trois* that will be absolutely functional to her success as a chef.

The *bear* is the one who, however, cannot (and doesn't want to) be integrated. He just want to cut out an independent niche in the space of the ethnic group who hosts him. Case in point, in addition to the brothers of *Big Night*, is the one of Slimane, hero of *Couscous*, who, after having worked all his life as
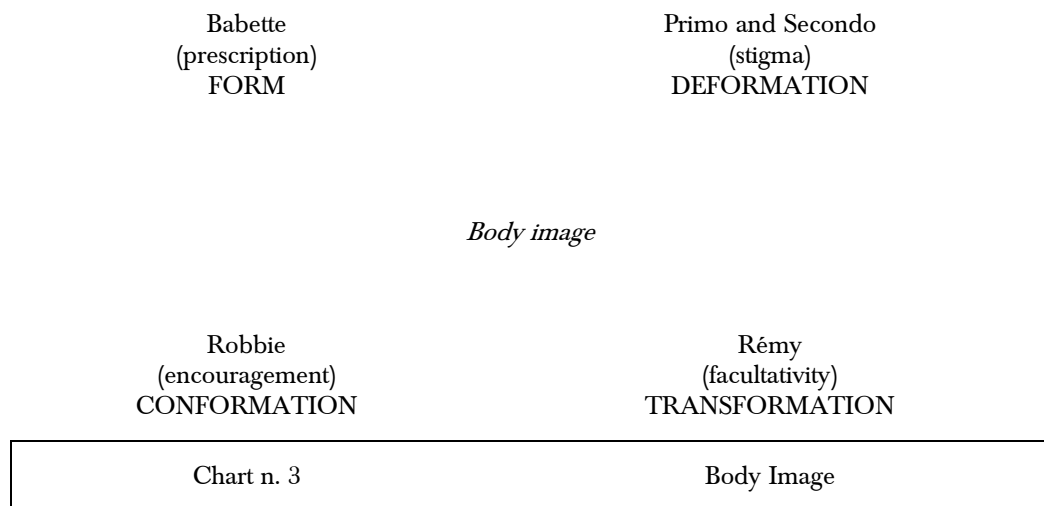
a employee of the dockyards, at the age of sixty decides to fulfil his dream of opening an ethnic restaurant. The success of his venture will cost a lot to him but will not represent a pale integration perspective, given that every effort is aimed at building a perfect ethnic staging whose goal is to please the customers rather than treating them as equals.

3. Somatic models

The protagonists of these stories become, then, leaders of their own culinary quest, to convert as many diners as possible to their diet, that is to say to their identity. They adopt strategies of pressure on their interlocutors that cross the body image (changing diet) to more general proposals of social behaviour. Here are four other forms of manipulation of the body related to the diet. On the one hand, Babette proceeds with a systematic attitude, explaining the rules of an actual culinary system in order to transform the one adopted by the believers of the Lutheran community. Her proposal implies a judgement of their habits, which she wants to modify to make the pious Lutherans achieve her idea of optimal form in physical and moral terms. On the contrary, Primo e Secondo proceed stigmatizing the behaviour of their culinary diners, accusing them of being "Philistines" while blaming their demands for *deformation* of Italian culinary canon. In turn, Harry, the social worker who is charged to take care of Robbie in the movie *The Angels' Share,* does not act against him as the other people do, that is blaming on him. Harry assumes towards Robbie an attitude of encouragement aimed at ensuring that he comply his lifestyle to that of the majority considered normal. Finally, Rémy acts relieving his diner (Ego) of responsibility, not asking him to engage directly in the venture of change. Rémy just ask Ego to act on his behalf: the ratatouille prepared at the end of the film has exactly this task, realizing the transformation of Anton Ego from outside, despite the initial scepticism and despite the pot presents itself as very ordinary and traditional.
Here therefore a new scheme:

Babette	Primo and Secondo
(prescription)	(stigma)
FORM	DEFORMATION

Body image

Robbie	Rémy
(encouragement)	(facultativity)
CONFORMATION	TRANSFORMATION

Chart n. 3	Body Image

This model is likewise archetypical and applicable to other culinary films. A leader suggests a *form* when the attitude taken towards the quest for a change is connected to an explicit duty. What is being done is a change of *form of alimentation,* which implies a reformulation of the statute of what is health and welfare. So does Babette, prescribing her diners a shift in the way they eat. Even though only for a limited time, she radically changes the idea of health and moral correctness of her diners. The idea of *deformation* focuses on the stigma of eating behaviours, which are deemed improper. The other is accused of being deviant, claimed as a warped subject both physically (obesity, disease) and morally. Primo e Secondo think their fellow Americans as individuals without any food culture, stigmatizing

their behaviours and accusing them of being sinners. Similarly proceed films like Super Size Me (2004). They show the symptom: obesity as a cause of an improper alimentary conduct. The regime of *conformation* may be recognized in case the person who promotes the change proceeds without indicating an obligation but rather encouraging diners to take charge of their diet. In this case we have a reference to exact standards and desired behaviours, converging on which the diner will gain an advantage. This is the case of the attitude that Harry takes towards Robbie in *The Angels' Share* and that Robbie takes towards his fellows: changing behaviour is desired but not mandatory.

Last, there's the *transformation*, which has to do with the attitude of who raises up the diner any liability in the process of changing and delegates the action of change to a drug or a plate. It is the policy of Rémy, who entrusts his culinary, political and existential message, to the ratatouille who will act on his behalf, shaking deep inside the feelings of the critic Anton Ego.

4. Degrees of pleasure

At this point, the existential core which articulates these groups, their competition and the emergence of rival leaderships, must be investigated. Many films, as noticed, face the issue of food as a sensory experience, responding to the problem of its so called "ice age" brought by the industrial society or particularly radical religious regimes. Cinema represents an elegy to the rediscovery of the flavour and loves to tell stories of liberation from a diet meant as too rigid in the name of a culinary gumption disavowed. The level of æsthesia everyone would indulge to accept becomes a fundamental parameter of the culinary narrative. Culinary movies are part of the massive movement of revaluation of the body, churning heroes who, just to bring their message to humanity, are not afraid to challenge the authority. Now, though most of these films - *Babette*, *Chocolat*, *I Am Love* and many others - points to the reconstruction of a right balance between soul (awareness, control) and body (sensory, passion). Other stories meet this same *glaciation,* focusing on the opposite excess indicating two possible solutions: repenting (this is the case of *9 and 1/2 weeks*) or, instead, succumb to the pleasure as in the case of *La Grande Bouffe*. It is worth to note that such framework is also able to include films that make use of food as a device of eroticism. Such a direction is explicable within the macro-movement just described to æsthesia from anæsthesia.

Schematically:

Alimentary Industry		Cinema culinario	*Nove settimane e mezzo*	*La grande abbuffata*
ANÆSTHESIA	IPOÆSTHESIA	ÆSTHESIA	IPERÆSTHESIA	DEFLAGRATION
DISFORIA		EUFORIA	DISFORIA	
→				
Chart n. 4			From Anæsthesia to Deflagration	

In very few cases this attitude is reversed: a recent example is *The Great Beauty* (2013) that targets the attitude of Catholic *gourmandise* against the example of holiness of Sister Maria, who shocks, in her exceptionality, the members of the elite group of the Roman high society protagonist of the story.

The Great Beauty		Culinary Cinema
ANÆSTHESIA	IPOÆSTHESIA	ÆSTHESIA
EUFORIA		DISFORIA
Chart n. 5	From Æsthesia to Anæsthesia	

Æsthesia must not be confused with gluttony, to the extent that gluttony is related to *anæsthesia*, direct outcome of the industrial production: if it is true, as Linguini in *Ratatouille* says, that every good gourmand can only be a tad overweight, fatties bear the sign of bulimia, which is functional to the industrial production. Gluttons aren't able to distinguish critically flavours: they just eat everything. Many films take up the issue, including famous works like *Super Size Me* (2004) or the more recent *Cloudy with a Chance of Meatballs* (2009).

There is one last notation, which has to do with culinary heroes hitherto met: the fact of being unexpected, marginal, unpredicted. As if to say that culinary culture transcends everyone, everyone may get a gastronomic training, capitalizing on the network of relationships highly informal yet fully operational handed down in a given domestic culture. This wealth of knowledge is only marginally integrated into the system of formal education. Its transmission comes naturally *convivial*, based on the logic of the gift. *Anyone can cook*, the slogan repeated in the fiction by chef Gusteau means, then, even above all, this: everyone has the background able to activate this heritage but only some will be worthy interpreters of it. When this happens, we add, there's nothing more to do but joining the miracle of the cookery, which includes, affiliates and positions us in the world.

5. Notes on sources

A thorough analysis of the films, *Babette's Feast*, *The Angels' Share*, *Big Night* and *Ratatouille* is contained in Mangiapane (2014).

Many are the titles that have been investigating the delicate relationship between cinema and food. See Bouwler (2004), Keller (2006), Cramer et. al. (2011), Frye & Bruner (2012). In Italy, Giorgioni, Pontiggia & Ronconi (2002), Lapertosa (2002), Termine (2009) and Colombo & D'Aloia (2014). Fundamental is, moreover, the contribution of Bragaglia (2002), who proposes a systematization of the historical-anthropological issues raised by the seventh art in relation to food.

The notion of "thought experiment" is derived from the philosophy of science (Kuhn, 1977) which thinks the notion of experiment not only in reference to actual tests done by scientists in the laboratory but also as a preventive moment of validation of any theory. Before proceeding to the laboratory test, every theory must overcome a number of virtual testing, of "thought experiments" that scientists do during their theoretical definition's activities. Such a practice can exclude most of incorrect assumptions, leaving the laboratory test the final say on the theoretical validation. Thanks to the reformulation of Marrone (1995) the notion of "thought experiment" is assimilated in the semiotic theory, identifying the exemplary value that the stories carry with them, useful to position the reader to the problem raised by them ("If I were in the shoes of that character, what would I do?"). Each story, thus, can be considered as a process of articulation of a given problem and its possible outcomes. These outcomes are function of programs of action and passionate reactions, structuring in this way a real narrative "common sense".

The movie Babette's Feast, based on a story by Karen Blixen (=Dinesen), has been studied by myself (Mangiapane, 2013), in addition to Appelbaum (2011) and Marrone (2014a). Big Night has been analyzed by Visalli (2010).

The model of analysis of political affiliation in groups is by Landowski (1997), while mine is the recognition of the most popular political theories (Inculturation, Segregation, Melting Pot and Salad Bowl) in the types he identified. The idea of using the modality of "having-to-do" as a tool for the reconstruction of the body image comes from Boutaud (2013).

The reference to Conviviality, as revolutionary practice and anti industrial is to the work of Ivan Illich (1973).

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