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From the Farm to the Table

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Color and feeding, a compromise between necessity and desire: biological and cultural semiotic processes

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ABSTRACT

Food, and everything around the act of eating, configures one of the most elaborate, culturalized and codified kind of semiosis (the process of signification), with a long history in mankind. And the visual sense, particularly color vision, plays a key role in this semiosis, perhaps even more important than the senses of taste and smell, because while these are anchored exclusively in food itself, vision and color are present both in food and in all the complex network of relationships that have feeding as its axis.

Even when feeding is a basic need for our survival, because we are living organisms, this act does not escape from the social frames that regulate and codify every human action. As an activity that is executed in various instances along a day, every day of our life—a good deal of time in our life is devoted to eating and their adjacent activities—, it acquires sense because of being a social act tied to the history of every culture.

COLOR IN FOOD: NATURE OR CULTURE?

The social discourses that describe and prescribe food are numberless: from medicine to economy, from religion to industry, from the discourse of subjective preferences to the scientific discourse. In parallel, food has been functional to culture. The rituals about eating impose taboos, the prohibition of eating certain things or in certain contexts imposes a social law that organizes, by means of this activity, the way in which a social group functions. Cultural anthropology, whose paradigm is represented in Lévi-Strauss’ The raw and the cooked (1964), explains how cultures are organized starting from tabooing behaviors relative to the basic needs, such as sexuality and feeding. It is possible to organize systematically a cultural typology according to the prohibitions around consumption of food. In Figure 1, the culinary triangle (whose vertices are raw, cooked and rotted) shows the possible relations (Lévi-Strauss 1968 [1981: 428]). If we consider the chromatic transformations that are involved in those processes, we can think in taboo colors (non-edible chromatic stages of food). For instance, the excessively reddish coloration in cooked cow meat is interpreted as raw, and for this reason is rejected by the diner. On the contrary, the course towards rotted in the case of the blue cheese is accepted and appreciated by the gourmet, while the same coloration is rejected in bread or other food.

Culinary art, gastronomy and other regulations such as nutrition and diet are born at certain stage in the culture. Everything presupposes an order and a logic to introduce a control. With time, culture has become more complex, the act of feeding turned out to be an spectacle, and the “food-sign” is consumed independently of the “food-object”. The discourses of marketing and media show the activities related to eating as an spectacle: think for instance in gourmet TV channels. An economic law is imposed as a regulating means, abundance and eccentricity are in opposition to extreme famine. Then, the limit appears articulated from the medical and
aesthetic discourses that introduce the culture of diet. It is a rational hunger, self-imposed as a sublimation of the excess (the lack of measure understood as sin, gluttony). The pathological manifestations associated with food would be bulimia and anorexia, on one extreme, and morbid obesity, on the other one, documented by cultural and historical definitions.

At the basis of the discourses about feeding, as a veil, it seems that the intention is to exert a control on the pleasure of eating, a function associated to nutrition. Whether or not the eating person recognizes the color of the food does not change its nutritious properties at all. Color has an informative, emotive, evocative, playful function, motivating the consumption of food; this is the reason why food color is so relevant for industry and marketing.

At the beginning of human life, shapes and colors are not relevant for the satisfaction of hunger. The baby cries, and he calms down when receiving the signals from his mother-food: he smells and touches her skin, hear her voice and the beating of her hearth. Since his vision is deficient, the olfactory, auditory and tactile signals are fundamental for survival. The newborn baby does not know the color of his food; infant milk formulas imitate this color, but it is not a relevant information for the consumer, it is relevant for the adults, for whom the similarity facilitates the substitution in terms of verisimilitude.

Feeding involves a complex set of semiotic processes: physiosemiosis, biosemiosis, and cognitive semiosis, three stages that appear recursively in a chain of events in which color works as a sign. In physiosemiosis, radiation interacts with foodstuff, producing physical and chemical processes that determine the material characteristics of food. In biosemiosis, living beings interact with foodstuff, reacting primarily to their sensorial aspects, basically seeing it. In cognitive semiosis, food is recognized, categorized and evaluated by its sensorial aspects, and more elaborate signs are created from this (Figure 2).

All the processes implicated in biosemiosis and cognitive semiosis are shared both by human beings and other animal species. One difference, however, is the nature of the biological processes, because different species have dissimilar kinds of vision systems, reacting to radiation reflected or transmitted by foodstuff by seeing color in a different way. Another difference is the nature of the cognitive processes, because species use different kind of languages or sign systems and have singular cognitive competences, with which they categorize the external world and communicate their experiences and knowledge mainly in an intra-specific way. All this results in the fact that color, as a useful sign for finding and selecting food, works differently for every species. But let’s concentrate on human semiosis.

Within the field of anthroposemiosis, that is, semiotic processes confined to human beings, the representation of food is a highly relevant issue. Intentionality and the weight of culture,
with their codified meanings, cross over all the stages, covering with their influence and transforming the basic act of feeding (a biological need) into a very complex and sophisticated semiotic process that has countless particularities along the history of human culture. But color is important from the most basic stages, not only in the sophisticated forms of cultural codification of food and eating in nowadays (Figure 3). The interpretation of a meal will depend on the interpreter, on his subjectivity, like or dislike inclinations, the social frames that regulate the act of feeding in every culture and the contexts that frame eating as a symbolic performance.

Everything confirms that we never eat an object, but a complex, sophisticated sign, even when it is just a simple red apple (and before thinking about the biblical emblem of sin).

Figure 3. Semiotic triangle showing the process of interpretation, adapted from Peirce (1931-1935).

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336