

Lab Expo – Percorso di Antropologia / Fondazione Giangiorgio Feltrinelli

International Workshop  
*Aesthetics of Food and Cultures of the Senses*  
*Estetiche del cibo e culture dei sensi*

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**Ivan Bargna**  
**(University of Milano Bicocca)**

*Aesthetics of Food and Cultures of the Senses*

The taste, olfactory, tactile, visual, kinesthetic sensations that characterize our food experience are not individual and private experiences. Instead they define our relationship with food as it takes place in the social practices of food consumption, transformation, supply and production. Indeed, in all these different processes, economical, material (Harris 1985) as well as symbolic factors (Lévi-Strauss 1964, 1968; Douglas 1970,1985; Tambiah 1969) interact and combine with each other, mutually shaping themselves.

All these processes of taste and consumption reconfiguration have to be thought as the framework of the wider aestheticization process of daily life that covers all the spheres of social life, from politics to the moral and economical arena (Featherstone 1990; Rifkin 1995; Lipovetsky, Serroy 2013). The aesthetic dimension, like the sensible and emotional side of the experience, is a connective element in every society but in the contemporary world gains even more relevance, since the whole social structure is embedded with it. In the transition from a society centered on the working time, savings and sacrifices, to one that emphasizes consumption, leisure and entertainment, beauty and sensorial gratification become objects of mass consumption.

In spite of the globalization of the agri-food industry and the resulting taste homologation and impoverishment of food cultures, the construction of the local sense of community, hierarchy and social distinctions, it must be understood, as in the past, in establishing connections with the outside, in relation to the mobility groups, people, culture, food, culinary and body practices. The cultural dimension of cooking and of food practices cannot be split from the formation of trans-ethnic and trans-national tastes, from relations of exchange, domination and predation and from the re-appropriation of food items and dishes outside the area of their origins.

Be them dealing with hedonism or healthiness, food choices are moved mostly by individual motivations and tastes. Sensory food experiences tend to be reduced to the act of consumption: daily cooking time is decreasing while a vision of cooking is turning into leisure, as a strongly aesthetized and mediatized experience. The impoverishment of tastes is not only due to a simplification of flavors, but also to the loss of symbolic dimension, to the inability of creating meaningful and enduring relationships, whether “around the table” as much as by the retailers and the producers as well. Therefore, this impoverishment is not perceived by society, as it is well dissimulated by the illusion of the increasing opportunities to taste foods once unachievable, being ‘their social life’ (not the traceability of origins, but rather the social relationships built around the production and the distribution processes) nevertheless unknown to the consumers.

If the only choosing criteria becomes the free individual pleasure (influenced in fact by advertising and marketing), taste becomes de-socialized and backed out of any kind of sense of responsibility.

In an opposite direction seem to go the reflexive or critic patterns of consumptions, which move from concerns of social justice and individual needs of simplicity and sophisticated frugality.

Thus, taste and disgust trace borders and frontiers, impose exclusions, define belongings and then allow to discriminate, to distinguish, and to rank people inside each social group in terms of good and bad taste (Bourdieu 1979). They mark the difference between cooking and gastronomy (Goody 1982). Indeed the issue of taste is a political one, with clear economical implications. (Bayart 1989, Appadurai 1981).

**Ivan Bargna** is Professor of Aesthetic Anthropology at the University of Milan Bicocca and Professor of Cultural Anthropology at the Bocconi University. He was a member of the Scientific Committee of the Museum of Cultures in Milan. He carries out his research in Cameroon's Grassfields, where he studies arts, visual culture, and food practices. He is the author of numerous publications including *African art* (Milan 1998, St. Léger Vauban 1998; New York and London, 2000; Madrid 2000) and "Vi mangereste Bambi? Riflessioni antropologiche sull'alimentazione" (2009). In the framework of Lab Expo, together with the artist Paola Anziché, he has made the film *Il faut donner à manger aux gens. Cultural Food Practices in Cameroon* (2015).

**Thomas J. Csordas**  
(University of California, San Diego)

### *Food as Something Other*

Whereas food in its literal sense is defined in terms of nourishment and sustenance, as soon as food becomes defined in some other terms, as soon as its nutritive and sustaining properties become peripheral or incidental, as soon as it becomes a figure or metaphor, it is assimilated to the domain of the aesthetic. I want to explore this idea, the idea of food as something other.

**Thomas J. Csordas** is Professor and Chair of Anthropology and Director of the Global Health Program at the University of California, San Diego. Among his publications are *The Sacred Self: A Cultural Phenomenology of Charismatic Healing* (1994); *Embodiment and Experience: The Existential Ground of Culture and Self* (1994); *Language, Charisma, and Creativity: Ritual Life in the Catholic Charismatic Renewal* (1997); *Body/Meaning/Healing* (2002); and *Transnational Transcendence: Essays on Religion and Globalization* (2009).

**Nicola Perullo**  
(University of Gastronomic Sciences of Pollenzo)

### *Can cuisine be art? And why should we care about it?*

Whether cuisine can be considered art is a very old question that philosophy has posited frequently since Plato's time. In the history of western thought, many of the answers, primarily negative ones, began with a hypothesis to be verified as to whether cuisine had such characteristics that would allow it to be assimilated or included in the domain of the arts and in particular those which, from 1700 onwards, were defined as 'fine arts'. Beginning in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, reasons for considering a positive approach towards cuisine as art became more evident, thanks to the vast changes taking place in modern western society that, in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, led to a profound subversion of art in general, from Duchamp's *ready mades* to installations, collage and performance art. This subversion offered space for a positive answer to that old platonic question.

Usually, approaching the question as to whether cuisine is art involves trying to discern, through particular and exceptional culinary results created by great chefs, conditions, elements and structures that allow analogies with other already accredited art forms which do not require other justifications, and that imbue cuisine with this status. A common demonstration that cuisine is a form of art involves

discerning formal characteristics of a specific meal or particular dish that are analogous to ones in music, painting, sculpture, architecture, theatre, and performance art. Often, even the chefs themselves take this perspective, working with artists and imitating procedures or characteristics from other art forms. Naturally, there's nothing wrong with bringing cuisine closer to other forms of art; as in all human activities, cuisine thrives on a fruitful contamination from diverse knowledge and practices. My position, however, is that this strategy is not very effective.

I propose an inversion of perspective: to understand and accept the hypothesis that cuisine *could* be art, it is necessary to think of art *as a cuisine*. In other words, one does not proceed from accredited arts to cuisine, but rather from cuisine to art. This means definitively secularizing art and understanding it as a material practice, which is process and performance oriented, and contingent. As we already know, the possibility of understanding it in this manner is both ancient and modern at the same time. Ancient, because it is connected to a paradigm that has been relatively forgotten today, in which 'art' designated a technical capacity, a way of producing and a concrete know-how. Modern, because it regards a way of using it as a specific cultural experience, *aesthetic*, as well as a *consumer good*, which has been exponentially affirmed over the last hundred years. In the age of mechanical reproduction of artworks and of widespread aesthetics, art has become – or can be – other compared to its occurrences in terms of uniqueness and superior artifacts. I propose a theory that seeks to bring out the deep meaning of the values of the food, assuming that cuisine can be the art of everyday life in which aesthetic value and artistic value coincide.

*Nicola Perullo* was born in Livorno in 1970 and is an associate professor of Aesthetics at the University of Gastronomic Sciences. During his studies, he worked with Aldo Giorgio Gargani in Pisa, where he received his undergraduate and doctoral degrees, and with Jacques Derrida in Paris, where he did his post-doctoral work. In his previous work he referred to Wittgenstein and the philosophy of natural language, Derrida and deconstructionism, and Vico and the aesthetics of the 18th century. In his current research, Professor Perullo has focused on the relationships between philosophic thought and food to introduce an aesthetics of taste and gastronomy. Several of his works have contributed to a codification of this discipline in Italy. Currently, he is examining the connections between taste and perception, food and art, environmental ethics, and the philosophy of wine.

**Alessandro Gusman**  
(University of Turin)

*“Something is rotten in the State of Denmark”: smells, food, and the construction of disgust and moral boundaries*

A number of studies with a phenomenological approach have, in the last few decades, questioned the structuralist binary oppositions concerning taste and smell, showing that everyday sensorial practices are much more nuanced and interrelated.

Yet, when we move from these practices to the metaphoric use of smell and taste, we find that almost every society attributes “bad” or “good” sensorial labels to other groups: food and odors thus become powerful means to construct categories and boundaries. Due to their immediacy, sensory aspects of food create “smellscape” which are easily connected to different national groups, thus creating likes and dislikes. Sensory categories very often shift to moral categories, so that what taste (or smell) bad is “bad”.

Based on some episodes from my fieldwork in Tanzania and in Uganda and on a growing literature on these aspects, the paper shows how this moral use of senses often constructs basic oppositions; I argue that, while doing “sensory ethnography” is a multifaceted methodology in which a phenomenological approach is needed, when we analyze categories constructed starting from the senses, we can not easily discard other approaches, including the structuralist one.

*Alessandro Gusman* is Research Fellow at the Department of Cultures, Politics and Society and Adjunct Professor of Medical Anthropology at the University of Turin (Italy).

He has been doing research in Uganda since 2005, on the social and political impact of Pentecostal churches in the country and on the link between religion and the HIV/AIDS epidemic.

Since 2008 he collaborates with the “Ariodante Fabretti” Foundation, working on topics concerning death and terminal illness in the Italian context; more specifically, his researches focused on cemetery culture and transformations; funeral rites among migrant communities; palliative care (ongoing project).

Alessandro's research interests range from the anthropology of religion, to medical anthropology and the anthropology of the senses as well, in the effort to interlace ethnographic data with theoretical reflections.

He is the editor of the books *Strings Attached. AIDS and the Rise of Transnational Connections in Africa* (Oxford University Press, 2014) and *Altri addii. Trasformazione dei riti funebri in contesto migratorio* (Fondazione Fabretti Editore, 2010); author of the book *Antropologia dell'olfatto* (Laterza, 2004) and of several national and international book chapters and journal articles on the above topics.

### **Aïda Kanafani-Zahar**

**(Social Anthropology Department (LAS), French National Center for Scientific Research (CNRS), Collège de France, Paris)**

#### ***Le taboulé. Ici et là-bas. La traversée des frontières***

Emigration is an integral part of the Lebanese contemporary history and contributes significantly to the culture and economy of Lebanon. Throughout the 19th and 20th centuries, the Lebanese emigrated to different areas of the world (Latin and North America, Africa, Australia...). The 1840-1860 Mount Lebanon conflict, the First World War and the war of 1975 [1990], were landmarks of migratory history. As a reservoir of culture, food is part of the memory of those leaving and a means to keep it alive. In the places of mobility, restaurants, groceries, delicatessen shops, opened with an increasing rate over the years. Taking the example of *tabouleh*, the Lebanese emblematic starter and its Western counterparts, such as its French homonym, the aim of this paper is to analyze the process of crossing culinary borders by focusing on strategies of accommodation and adjustment that a food item undergoes according to tastes, norms, style tendencies, imaginaries, but also according to culinary categories. The articulation of food universes involves borrowing and innovation. It generates creativity. From a local dish having been elevated to the status of “institution” acquiring a national aura to a global salad displaying new features and new styles of presentation and consumption, *tabouleh* is an eloquent example of the crossing of culinary borders according to food identities and cultures that shape culinary categories.

**Aïda Kanafani-Zahar** is an anthropologist affiliated to the *Laboratoire d'anthropologie sociale, Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, Collège de France, Paris*. Her research on contemporary Lebanon includes food culture (traditional food preservation, production of sheep *confit* for the winter pantry, rural bread in its multidimensional aspects, festive tables, food categories...), religious pluralism, customary and state-regulated procedures of reconciliation, the 1975-1990 war (forms of violence, official management of the post-war, narratives). “*Liban. La guerre et la mémoire* (Rennes : Presses universitaires, Rennes, 2011) is her most recent book.

### **Simonetti Gianni Emilio** **(Polytechnic University of Milan)**

#### ***The Metamorphosis of Conviviality***

In this first part of the century – under her alienated forms – an ancient and tragic battle lives again. Yesterday was the one of Lent against Carnival, the famine against abundance. Today is the battle of the imaginary appetite against real hunger, with a variation, remove this hunger burying it with its representations and entrusting to the word the task to conceal symptoms, despite the good intentions of the agribusiness apparatus dominating the consumption.

Are the smart somersaults of new doctrine, the “artification” ones (in français), that leads to a visual addiction that ridicules the *gourmandise* and turn it into a parody of the performance the conviviality and its fantastic realms.

So commensality turns into social instructions for the “consumer-performer” subtracting what psychoanalysis calls *jouissance*. In this way the *gourmandise*, trasformed into a performance, is just illusory experience, is not realized in the enjoyment but is expressed as a “display of skills”.

*Gianni-Emilio Simonetti*, born in Rome, lives on Lago Maggiore (Italy). Writer and professor of cultural anthropology. Deals with material and visual culture.

**Poulain Jean-Pierre**

**(ISTHIA, University of Toulouse France - Taylor’s Toulouse University Center, Malaysia)**

***From «gastronomizing» French regional cuisines to decolonizing international gastronomy***

This text explores the process of “gastronomisation” of local cuisines witch is a total inversion of perspective by giving to cuisine the status of gastronomy. . The « gastronomizing » process cannot be downgraded and only considered as part of heritage. What we really intend is to explore this “quasi inverted” perspective through a socio-historical approach, by looking into the change in the status of regional cuisines in French culture. To be more specific, we would like to analyze how academic tradition and gastronomic literature on local food cultures have developed and been articulated.

The expression « regional gastronomy » would have not only come as a surprise to XVIIIth-and-XIXth century gourmets, chefs or « maîtres d’hôtel » but would not have made any sense at all. How can a cuisine born out of necessity be referred to as gastronomic? How can it be when it is the very distance, away from constraints, that generates food creation and aesthetization?

Contemporary interest for regional gastronomies that we shall call the « gastronomizing » process of local cuisine has undergone three major stages. The first one took place at the very beginning of the 19th century when « the local » became the place where old provinces were withstanding the risk of seeing their cultural identities being diluted into the construction of the nation. The second stage followed the discovery of French provinces by tourists from the 1930s to the 1970s. The last one consisted in a movement of systematic documenting from the 1980s, within the context of the « nouvelle cuisine ».

- **Jean Pierre Poulain**, socio-anthropologist, holds a PhD in 1985 at the University of Paris VII and a HDR in 2004 in University of Paris IV-Sorbonne. He conducts researches on the links between Food, Cultures and Health in the frame of CERTOP. He leads currently the chair of “Food Studies: Food, Cultures and Health” conjointly set up by university of Toulouse (France) and Taylor’s University (Kuala-Lumpur, Malaysia). Between his books: *Dictionnaire des cultures alimentaires* (PUF, 2012); *Sociologie de l’obésité* (PUF, 2009) ; *Alimentazione cultura e società (trad. It. il Mulino, 2008)*.

**Wathelet Olivier**

**(Innovation project leader - Anthropologist, Groupe Seb)**

***La cuisine de Pandore et Prométhée: regard sur la place des compétences dans la conception d'appareils culinaires domestiques***

Social relation with kitchen appliances emerge and evolve at the interplay of skills, dreams and social relation. Far from being simple, scholars and cultural critics use to show how much those relations are ambiguous. Defined as facilitators of daily work those tools are said to allow user to perform culinary task in line with goal of domestic cooking, healthy way of eating and offering conviviality. In the meantime, a critical standpoint might highlight the impact of technological tools on the learning and enskilment process, automation pushed by the machine leading to the reduction of experiential knowledge. Both view are strongly linked in the whole history of technology, thought under the mythical opposition between Prometheus and Pandora’s approach to machine.

In our talk, we would like to discuss how this opposition is relevant in the process of creating kitchen appliances. Engineers, marketing professional and designer deal with this opposition on a daily basis,

just like consumer pay a strong attention to this ambiguous relation when buying or manipulating those culinary tools. Relying on several innovation projects dedicated to French and international market, we will focus on the way the senses and social relation are perceived through this dual metaphor, and how they are transformed within the innovation process and the mundane usage of cooking appliances.

Beside the now mainstream discourse on the leisured dimension of cooking communicated through media in a nearly worldwide area, we would like to focus on the way culinary tools convey social meaning and culinary skills and how those are contested and transformed through their mundane use by consumer. As a conclusion, we would like to ask to which extent the user centered innovation approach – the mainstream and current trend in the so-called post-industrial era – is able to capture empowerment process that help people to make what they eat a valuable part of themselves.

*Olivier Wathelet* is anthropologist and innovation project leader within research team of the Groupe Seb, a French company inventing and selling small household equipment worldwide. Prior to join this position, he studied anthropology at the universities of Bruxelles, Montreal and Nice-Sophia Antipolis where he received his PhD about the cultural transmission of olfactory skills. He also worked at the Research Center of the Institut Paul Bocuse and at the Lyon's Hospice and has a long time interest in how design and anthropology might be a powerful duo to enhance innovation and increase people's empowerment in food and beyond.

**Christian Bromberger**  
**(University of Aix-Marseille)**

*Cooking, sensory experiences and regional differentiations in northern Iran*

Eating habits in northern Iran (province of Gilân) are characterized by a consumption of rice much higher than elsewhere in Persia, this high consumption giving a feeling of satiety, by an important use of green garden vegetables and kitchen herbs, which gives a feeling of visual satisfaction, by a predilection for acid flavours (especially appreciated are condiments with a vinegar base and fruit juices made from unripe fruit), this use of acid flavours giving a feeling of taste satisfaction, and finally a predilection for fish. These patterns contrast with those prevailing on the nearby Iranian plateau. Culinary and taste differences are, here as elsewhere, markers of regional identities, these contrasts resulting in reciprocal stigmatization. These oppositions are integrated into the hot/cold system, inherited from Hippocrates and Galen, a system which classifies and ranks, besides food, diseases, seasons of the year, ages, individuals and peoples. Food and cooking consequently appear as the fragments of a more general and integrative system which put into correspondence nutrition, medicine, climatology and anthropology.

*Christian Bromberger*, aged 68, is Emeritus Professor of Anthropology at Aix-Marseille University, an honorary member of the Institut Universitaire de France and was the Director of the Institut français de recherche en Iran from 2006 to 2008. He has published 250 works of research (books, articles and contributions to collective works) about the foundations, modes of expression and affirmation of collective identities in Iran (particularly in the very particular province of Guilan) and in the southern parts of Europe. In addition, he has carried out long-term research on the meaning of the popular obsession with football clubs and matches (*Le match de football. Ethnologie d'une passion partisane à Marseille, Naples et Turin*, translated into Italian). Furthermore, several of his works have a more general scope and aim to rethink the Mediterranean world and to renew the anthropological methods, concepts and subjects, particularly in regard to the contemporary Western world.

He has recently published a book on the social and cultural management of hair (*Trichologiques. Une anthropologie des cheveux et des poils*) and another about Guilan and his anthropological experience in this province (*Un autre Iran. Un ethnologue au Gilân*).

**Simona Stano**  
**(University of Turin - International Semiotics Institute, Lithuania)**

*Food Between Sense and Senses: Japanese Sushi and its Ethnic Variations*

Migrations, travels, and communications unceasingly expose local food identities to global food alterities, activating processes of both differentiation and homologation. Regional cuisines are increasingly becoming exportation goods and destinations for an international culinary tourism, spreading far beyond the area of their origins. On the other hand, the cultural dimension of food is increasingly tied to processes of domestication and re-appropriation of exotic ingredients, dishes, and food habits, which are generally readjusted to local tastes. Building on the analysis of specific case studies, chosen for their relevance among the wide range of ethnic restaurants, we intend to focus our attention on such processes, pointing out the delicate balance between social and cultural development within contexts of diversity and otherness, on the one hand, and the enhancement of forms of misunderstanding (La Cecla 1995), or even of an irreparable phagocytation of differences and alterities, on the other hand. Specifically, we will deal with sushi, which, according to the Western imaginary, is the most representative element of the Japanese cuisine. Often overlooking other elements typical of *washoku* — “the traditional dietary cultures of the Japanese” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan 2012) —, many Japanese restaurants abroad offer menus basically centred on this food, which, although certainly being emblematic of the Japanese foodsphere, is not its only constituent, and — which is even more important — is frequently subjected to processes of resemantisation affecting its aesthetic and visual configuration, along with its taste and its meanings. The analysis of specific examples will lead us to consider the strong link between the senses and the emergence of sense in food-related experiences, as well as the important role played by the so-called processes of “translation” of the culinary code (Stano 2014).

*Simona Stano* holds a Ph.D. in Sciences of Language and Communication (University of Turin, Italy) and a Ph.D. in Communication Sciences (University of Lugano, Switzerland). During her doctoral studies, she was a visiting scholar at the University of Toronto (Canada), where she also obtained a Research Fellowship.

Dr. Stano deals mainly with semiotics of food and semiotics of culture and has several articles and chapters of books on these topics, many of which presented as papers at national and international conferences. Her forthcoming monograph is entitled *Eating the Other. Translations of the Culinary Code*. She has also published several articles on communication, mass media, and visual and urban studies.

Since February 2015, Dr. Stano has been working as researcher at the International Semiotics Institute and Kaunas University of Technology (Lithuania). Furthermore, she has collaborated as examiner, teacher and supervisor of undergraduate and graduate students with the University of Turin and other national and international universities ([www.simonastano.it/?lang=en](http://www.simonastano.it/?lang=en)).