

Sociological Explorations of Food: Interconnections, Aesthetics, and Rituals in Culinary Practices

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Abstract

This article explores the sociological dimensions of food, emphasizing its social significance, aesthetic qualities, and ritualistic aspects. It investigates how food creates social bonds, influences power dynamics, and shapes hierarchies. It examines the sensory qualities and cultural contexts that generate culinary experiences, including the concept of “food as art”. Additionally, it highlights the symbolic and transformative nature of food rituals, exploring their impact on ethical and aesthetic sensibilities. Overall, this article offers a sociological perspective on the multifaceted nature of food, providing insights into its role in shaping social relationships, cultural identities, and human societies. Through the interconnections, aesthetics, and rituals of culinary practices, it delves into the complex dynamics, cultural meanings, and lived experiences associated with *foodways*.

Keywords: Social relations, Cultural meanings, Foodways, Philosophy of food.¹

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1. Introduction: food and identity

The assertion that “man is what he eats and eats what he is” carries both materialistic and symbolic implications that intertwine in the complex tapestry of human identity. While the materialistic perspective, influenced by Feuerbach, emphasizes the physiological and nutritive aspects of food as the foundation of human existence, it is essential to recognize the broader cultural and symbolic dimensions that shape our relationship with food.

Feuerbach’s materialistic view, rooted in the notion of nourishment as the basis of human functions, represents a deterministic understanding of the interplay between food and identity. According to Feuerbach, *“foods become blood, blood becomes brain and heart, substance of thought and feelings. The foundation of human culture and emotions lies in human nourishment”* (Feuerbach, 1850, 50). However, it is crucial to acknowledge that this perspective fails to account for the cultural construction of taste, dietary practices, and the dynamic nature of food symbolism.

The connection between food and identity extends beyond the physiological realm, encompassing religious and cultural practices, which often crystallize in dietary regulations, aiming to maintain purity and prevent contamination. The act of consuming certain foods is associated with notions of abomination or sanctity. Feuerbach himself queries, *«Isn’t someone who eats something repulsive and disgusting truly an object of disgust and repulsion for us?»* (Feuerbach, 1862, 77). Nevertheless, it is important to recognize that the repulsion towards certain foods is not inherent to the foods themselves but culturally generated, functioning as markers of identity and ideological differences.

Cultural factors play a significant role in shaping our perception of taste and disgust. What may be considered repulsive in one culture could be considered a delicacy in another. This demonstrates that taste and disgust are predominantly social constructs rather than purely sensory experiences. Our repulsion towards certain foods is often influenced by cultural conditioning, mental schemas, and preconceived notions. This interplay between physiology and cultural construction of taste is complex and dynamic, with influences working in tandem or even contradiction. The relationship between nature and culture in shaping our food preferences is very far from unidirectional or deterministic.

Nevertheless, the symbolic dimension of food should not be overlooked. Food choices and dietary practices are deeply intertwined with personal and collective identities. They serve as markers of cultural heritage, social status, and group affiliations. In this sense, what we choose to eat or not to eat becomes an expression of our identity. However, it is important to recognize that food choices are not solely determined by identity but can also be

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influenced by factors such as personal taste, health concerns, or ethical considerations.

To delve deeper into the complex interplay between food and identity, scholars have examined various dimensions of food culture and symbolism. Pierre Bourdieu's concept of "cultural capital" highlights how food choices and preferences are markers of social distinction and class identity (Bourdieu, 1979). Mary Douglas, in her seminal work *"Purity and Danger"*, explores the symbolic significance of food practices and the construction of boundaries between the clean and the unclean (Douglas, 1966). Claude Lévi-Strauss investigates the structural aspects of food symbolism and its role in the formation of cultural meaning (Lévi-Strauss, 1964). These scholars provide valuable insights into the intricate connections between food, culture, and identity.

Basically, while the materialistic perspective emphasizes the physiological foundations of human existence, it is essential to recognize the broader cultural and symbolic dimensions that shape our relationship with food. Food choices, dietary practices, and cultural meanings associated with food play a central role in constructing personal and collective identities. The interplay between taste, cultural constructs, and individual identity is a complex and dynamic process that cannot be reduced to a simple cause-and-effect relationship.

Exploring the multifaceted nature of food and identity requires an interdisciplinary approach that draws from fields such as anthropology, sociology, cultural studies, and gastronomy. By examining the social, historical, and cultural contexts in which food practices and preferences emerge, we gain a deeper understanding of how food shapes and reflects individual and collective identities.

In addition to the aforementioned concepts, the notion of "foodways" provides valuable insights into the cultural and historical dimensions of food practices². While Carole Counihan's research on gender, food, and identity sheds light on how food choices and preparation contribute to the construction of gender roles (Counihan, 1999). And further notable contributions can be found in the works of scholars such as Arjun Appadurai, who explores the

² Social scientists specializing in the study of food practices often utilize the term "foodways" to explore the cultural, social, and symbolic dimensions surrounding food consumption. It encompasses an examination of why certain foods are chosen or avoided within a given culture, as well as the processes of food acquisition, preparation, and the cultural significance attributed to these practices. As such, foodways transcends the realms of basic sustenance, recipes, and taste, delving into the intricate layers and profound implications of how and why we consume food. According to Harris, Lyon and McLaughlin (2005, VIII-IX): «...*everything about eating including what we consume, how we acquire it, who prepares it and who's at the table – is a form of communication rich with meaning. Our attitudes, practices and rituals around food are a window onto our most basic beliefs about the world and ourselves*».

global flows of food and the impact of globalization on local culinary practices (Appadurai, 1988).

By incorporating these and other relevant scholarly perspectives, we can enrich our understanding of the intricate relationship between food and identity. Such an approach allows us to move beyond a reductionist materialistic view and embrace the complexity and richness of food as a cultural and symbolic phenomenon.

2. The representational dimension of food

The identity between being and eating can be understood at a materialistic and physiological level, but it is not sufficient to comprehend the relationship between food and individual and collective social existence. In this sense, the most valuable contribution to understanding this relationship comes from being what one does not eat – a cultural construction, a result of selecting possibilities, and a consequence of individual or collective choice (with its implications of freedom or constraint). This can be understood in two ways.

On one hand, it refers to contextual prescriptions and prohibitions. In this sense, what one does not eat, should not eat, or chooses not to eat qualitatively characterizes both the individual and the group, just as much as what one does eat. On the other hand, this issue can be interpreted more broadly. It means that human existence must remain inscribed, without seductive reductionism, «*within the omnivorous logic of the whole alimentary system*» (Riva, 2015, 50). In this sense, the expression “man is what he eats” attains its full meaning in freedom.

In other words, transcending the narrow scope of organic exchange theory, human beings are defined not only in biochemical terms but predominantly in symbolic terms. It is also evident that the representational dimension is not limited to the food itself as an object but extends to the processes of its preparation and consumption, regardless of the specific objective or symbolic characteristics of a particular food. Often, the symbolic and ritual aspects of food preparation and consumption are more potent than the communicative function of the food itself. In such cases, the symbolic determinants, historically or originally linked to the substance of the food itself, predominantly manifest through the technique as representation, as a theatrical performance.

Human practice is the result of two interrelated dimensions: doing and representing, technique and language, material culture and systems of representation, practices and discourses (De Benedittis, 2013, 11). While the distinction between these two realms has a logical coherence, it struggles to translate into a definite empirical articulation. On one hand, doing is a form of

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representing (and representation is impossible without doing). Technique not only presupposes language but is language itself (and conversely, language always has an indispensable technical dimension). Technique is discourse, and discourse is (and has) technique.

Acknowledging that there are specifically communicative phenomena related to food, completely dematerialized and purely signifying, preceding, following, parallel... essentially autonomous from its material production, what needs to be emphasized is that, regardless of these phenomena, there exists a specific representational and meaningful dimension in the technique of food preparation. Sometimes, this meaning exists even apart from the food product itself, having significance for itself.

There are striking cases in which the technique of food preparation and consumption becomes a symbolic representation of great intensity and precedence over the symbolism of the food being ingested. Consider the Japanese tea ceremony, which encompasses codified rituals in every aspect of its enactment: from the architectural features of the spaces where it takes place to the decorative elements within those spaces, from the utensils used to the sequence of gestures, positions, and timing to be observed. Everything converges towards a situation in which the central act of consumption is not the act of drinking the tea but participating in the aesthetic experience constituted by the application/representation of the technique of its preparation within a specific environment, accompanied by a set of behaviours related to ingestion. These behaviours are “related” but not functional since it is evident that, in this case, there is no means-end relationship between the technique of preparation/consumption and the intake of the food. There is a reversal in which the preparation itself becomes the end.

Particularly, Japanese culture is permeated with the concept of emptiness. The tea ceremony is a shining example of a practice that embodies this idea. In the Buddhist view of the world, every being has an empty essence, meaning that the essence of each being is not exclusively its own because it can only exist in relation to the essence of other beings. Essentially, “empty essence” means “essence of emptiness,” signifying that every being is characterized by a lack of autonomy, by a void of the absolute. Emptiness is the condition of existence for any being, in the sense that everything is based on a regime characterized by relationality and transitoriness. Even emptiness itself does not escape this state of things, as it does not have *absolute* reality or self-consistency (many Buddhist texts speak of the “*emptiness of emptiness*”).

Apart from the emblematic case of the tea ceremony, there are numerous examples that highlight the significance of the preparation process itself, emphasizing the importance of dedicating time, care, and attention to the “ritual” and techniques of preparation that transcend technical

rationality/functionality and transfigure into practices of self-care, care for others, and care for things.

In Italy, homemade pasta is regarded as a cherished art and tradition. Kneading the flour and water, rolling out the dough, and cutting the pasta require time, patience, and skill. This practice accentuates the care and attention to the process, where the act of preparing pasta becomes a form of meditation and a connection with the food itself.

In Argentina, the traditional barbecue known as “asado” surpasses mere meat cooking. Argentinians devote time and attention to fire preparation, selecting the cuts of meat, and taking care of the cooking process. Asado becomes a social and ritualistic experience where the act of cooking and sharing food becomes a celebration of Argentine culture and culinary artistry.

In Morocco, the preparation of *couscous* is an art that demands time and attention. Semolina is steamed and meticulously worked to separate the grains, achieving a light and fluffy texture. *Couscous* is then seasoned with various ingredients such as meat, vegetables, and spices, creating a dish rich in flavor and tradition. The preparation of *couscous* in Morocco signifies the importance of dedicating time and care to the creation of a meal and preserving culinary traditions passed down through generations.

In the Maori culture of New Zealand, the *hāngi* ceremony involves a traditional method of earth oven cooking. Food is prepared in a large underground oven heated with hot stones, resulting in slow and aromatic cooking. This process necessitates time, planning, and the collaboration of the entire group, creating a culinary experience that goes far beyond the mere act of cooking. *Hāngi* represents a deep connection to the land, tradition, and the significance of sharing food as a moment of celebration and unity in Maori culture.

Arthur Schopenhauer, at the beginning of what he considered his fundamental work, stated, «*The world is my representation*» (Schopenhauer, 1819). By “my representation” he does not assert the world’s exhaustion in the subject’s reality but primarily refers to “my cognition”. However, every properly human cognition of the world is always also a representation of a world or, rather, from a world (in the sense of provenance, generation). Every cognition derives, though not deterministically, from a cultural universe. The world does not impose itself on the subject as givenness; it is the result of cultural mediation (Berger & Luckmann, 1969).

“*Man is what he eats*” is not limited to the narrow confines of organic exchange theory, nor is it merely a biochemical phenomenon. Rather, it encompasses a profound symbolic dimension. Furthermore, it is evident that the representational dimension is not restricted to the food object itself but extends to the techniques of its preparation and consumption, sometimes even

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independent of the food's objective characteristics. Often, the symbolic and ritual aspects of food preparation and consumption hold more signification power than the communicative function of the food itself. Thus, their representation and meaning intersect with the act of choosing what to eat or not to eat.

While the notion of choice introduces the dimension of freedom, it also navigates treacherous terrain, intertwining with the broader question of the *real freedom* of the subject in a mass-individualized society. The Frankfurt School³, Gunther Anders (1956) and, more recently, Zygmunt Bauman (2001) have eloquently explored this topic. Pierre Bourdieu (1979) has argued that individual tastes are often illusory outcomes of genuine subject choices and frequently underlie subtle mechanisms of constraint and non-choice shaped by social context and position. Tastes reproduce culture, and individuals incorporate them (often literally, in terms of transforming their own bodies). They are powerful mechanisms for manifesting and reinforcing ethical and aesthetic values and power dynamics.

Acts of categorization and representations are fundamental elements of the social construction of attitudes and behaviours related to food. They are essential for the perpetration of symbolic violence, which functions to sustain collective existence in many ways. The choice of one's food is also a mode of self-assertion for the individual because the choice of what to eat or not to eat is an identity-based decision, a choice of what to be and/or what not to be. In the current era of progressive de-subjectification and a crisis of presence⁴, exercising the choice of what to eat/be is an attempt to reclaim meaning. However, this endeavour is significantly influenced by market-driven conditioning, which often disguises itself as free choice.

The issue of food identity explodes today not only as a purely identity-related matter but also encompasses critical dimensions such as sustainability (both individual and collective), distributive justice, social equity, public health, and ethics.

The subject yearns for choice, yet this choice is inherently illusory and complex. It is not easy to determine the extent to which choice is genuine and whether there are still gaps, margins, and interstices of "authentic" will and freedom. The subject is inevitably suspended, torn, perhaps, between the choice of being and the experience of being acted upon, between self-assertion and nullification. And food, with its essential physiological nature and rich symbolism, is inevitably suspended, torn, perhaps, between will and representation.

«*The word is my representation*», as Schopenhauer proclaimed, points to the fact that every human cognition is always mediated by culture. The

³ Notably, reference should be made to: Adorno & Horkheimer (1947) and Marcuse (1955).

⁴ On this theme also see Pagano (2011, 99-104).

representation of the world is not a simple reflection of objective reality, but rather a complex interplay between the individual and the cultural framework in which they are situated.

The “man is what he eats” extends far beyond the realm of mere biological processes. It encompasses a profound symbolic dimension, where the representation and meaning of food play a significant role. The representational dimension extends to the techniques of food preparation and consumption, often holding more power and significance than the food itself. The act of choosing what to eat or not to eat becomes an act of self-assertion and a means of constructing individual and collective identities. However, the concept of choice and freedom in relation to food is fraught with complexities, as it intersects with broader questions of societal influence and constraints.

By critically examining the interplay between food, culture, and identity, we can gain a deeper understanding of the multifaceted nature of human existence and the intricate relationship between individuals and their food choices. This expanded perspective allows us to recognize the power dynamics, social structures, and cultural influences that shape our relationship with food. As Barthes (1961) eloquently posited, food is not merely about sustenance, but a system of communication, a body of images, a protocol of usages, situations, and behaviours.

Foodways are deeply enmeshed with a community’s identity, acting as a mirror that reflects its history, traditions, societal stratification, and spiritual leanings. The broader societal forces – power, economics, politics, and beyond – become discernible through the lens of foodways.

These foodways serve as a rich tapestry of communication, narrating tales about ourselves and our communities, codifying and transmitting cultural norms, values, and identities. The offering of specific foods during distinct occasions, the *modus operandi* of food preparation, its presentation, and the rituals enveloping its consumption can all communicate crucial cultural narratives.

However, it is of paramount importance to underscore the dynamic and evolving nature of these foodways. Influenced by globalization, migration, and technological advancement, foodways are in a state of constant flux. As societies intermingle, foodways coalesce, adapt, and transform, leading to the genesis of *hybrid identities*, a phenomenon discussed extensively by Appadurai (1996, 2013)⁵. This underscores the fluidity of cultural identity and food’s pivotal role in its ongoing negotiation and redefinition.

⁵ *Hybrid identities*, according to Appadurai, arise from the fusion and interaction of cultural elements sourced from diverse origins. These elements may encompass language, religion, cuisine, fashion, traditions, values, and behavioural patterns. Hybrid identities can serve as a means for individuals to negotiate and navigate the various cultural influences encountered in our globalized world. Appadurai challenges traditional conceptions of identity as fixed and

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Concurrently, the choice of food metamorphoses into a political act – a form of resistance or compliance to societal norms and expectations. The choice to adopt a vegan or vegetarian lifestyle, for instance, could be interpreted as a defiance against dominant foodways that prioritize meat consumption, as Singer (1975) points out in his seminal work. Alternatively, the choice to consume traditional foods can serve as a bastion of cultural preservation and resistance against homogenizing global influences.

It is also incumbent upon us to reflect upon the systemic inequities that pervade our food systems. Access to food is far from universal, and is influenced by myriad factors such as socioeconomic status, race, and geography. The construct of “*food deserts*”⁶ is a stark manifestation of how systemic injustices can shape food choices and health outcomes, an issue highlighted by Beaulac, Kristjansson and Cummins (2009).

In conclusion, the dissection of food, culture, and identity extends far beyond personal gastronomic predilections. It is an exploration of power, tradition, resistance, identity negotiation, and societal structures. It is a reflection of our individual and collective identities, and how we interact with the world that surrounds us. By examining our relationship with food, we can unpick the intricate web of cultural, social, and political dynamics that shape our existence.

homogeneous entities, emphasizing the significance of recognizing and appreciating the complexity of both individual and collective identities. Hybrid identities can be regarded as a creative response to the challenges and opportunities of globalization, providing a pathway to embrace and reinterpret diverse cultural influences in order to construct novel forms of identity that reflect contemporary experiences and contexts.

⁶ The concept of “*food deserts*” is a topic of significant concern in the fields of public health, urban planning, and social justice. The term “food desert” is used to describe areas where access to affordable, nutritious food is limited, particularly for individuals without vehicles. These areas are often characterized by a prevalence of fast-food outlets and convenience stores, with fewer supermarkets or grocery stores providing fresh produce. In their systematic review titled “*A Systematic Review of Food Deserts, 1966-2007*”, Beaulac-Kristjansson-Cummins (2009) explore the evidence related to *food deserts*. They conducted an in-depth examination of studies from developed countries to assess the existence of a *food-desertification* process and its potential impact on the residents of these areas. Their review suggests that *food deserts* do exist, especially in urban areas. These *food deserts* tend to be inhabited by lower-income residents, and this contributes to health disparities in these communities. For instance, people living in *food deserts* may have a lower quality diet or suffer from higher rates of obesity and other diet-related conditions, such as diabetes and heart disease. The authors highlight the complexities of the issue. They note that while proximity to food retailers is an important factor, it is not the only one. Factors such as food prices, individual income, personal food preferences, and knowledge about nutrition also play crucial roles in determining dietary choices and health outcomes.

3. Eating as an Experience of Being-Singular and Being-Shared: Representation and Plurality

The interconnectedness does not arise solely from the mere amalgamation of individual elements, but rather serves as the foundation for their existence. The constituent elements are not innately given entities, but instead represent ephemeral manifestations subject to perpetual transformation within the fabric of interconnectedness itself. While it is commonly assumed that the individual elements serve as the wellspring of interconnection, establishing the bonds among them, the veracity lies in the fact that interconnectedness pre-exists the very elements entwined within it, akin to an imperceptible tapestry permeating the fabric of the universe.

Interconnectedness does not emerge as a fortuitous aggregation of discrete elements, but rather stands as an antecedent reality that imbues shape and significance to the entire spectrum of existence. It is as if an intrinsic order, an underlying network of relationships, engenders the emergence of the elements themselves. Consequently, the elements are not isolated entities, but rather mutable and transient expressions of the interconnectedness that sustains them.

Such a perspective beckons us to transcend the superficiality of appearances and comprehend that the essence of reality resides in the interplay of relationships and interdependence. Each phenomenon, every living being, and all events represent inseparable nodes intricately intertwined within an expansive web of connections that predated their very emergence.

When we come to grasp that interconnectedness is inherent to our existence, a profound sense of humility and reverence toward the surrounding world envelops us. We are called upon to recognize that our actions and choices reverberate throughout the very tapestry of interconnection, influencing every other element to which we are linked.

In this context, the individual cannot subsist in isolation, but rather serves as a vital node within a complex network of relationships. Every action, thought, and emotion propagates through the interconnectivity, engendering effects that extend far beyond the confines of the individual.

Acknowledging that interconnectedness predates the interconnected elements impels us to contemplate the entire system and adopt a broader perspective that encompasses the grand tapestry. It prompts us to conceive in terms of interdependence rather than separation, and to consider the ramifications of our actions upon the global fabric of interconnection.

In these terms, emptiness pertains to existence in its temporal dimension, thus, the past, present, and future are not “autonomous” but mutually co-produced: all events are not “confined” within a particular temporal dimension but rather nodes within an endless spatiotemporal fabric. The notion of the

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“emptiness of permanence” does not simply indicate a condition of transience nor does it precisely equate to Heraclitus’ notion of “everything flows”. Instead, paradoxically, it consists of the eternity of events and beings, not in the sense of their eternal duration (in a more external and sensory way), but in the sense that they can only be dispersed through an infinite network of spatiotemporal interconnections, where the reality of each element lies not in its “passage” but in its “diffusion” across the past, present, and future, before, during, and after its occurrence.

In the Japanese worldview, the notions of ephemerality and infinity coexist harmoniously, not just as theoretical constructs, but as the essence of experiential reality. Zen encourages experiencing the void in practical, day-to-day contexts rather than through metaphysical contemplation. The traditional tea ceremony stands as a poignant embodiment of this experiential engagement with the void. The emphasis is on the processes of creation and consumption, rather than on the end product, where the technique embodies symbolism and representation more than the resulting artifact.

The *sukiya* (tea room) is an epitome of void, both materially and conceptually, where equilibrium is achieved through the principle of *less is more*⁷. It is minimalist in its decor, furnished only with items necessary for the ceremony. The aesthetic of the room, with its *tatami* mats, unadorned walls, and the lone decoration in the *tokonoma* alcove, is not just a sight to behold but a model for existential aspirations. It seeks to guide the participant’s mind towards the void, from which the tea ceremony emanates and within which it unfolds. The near-silence that swathes the ritual is punctuated by the sound of water boiling in the iron kettle. The auditory experience, much like the visual one, is a delicate balance between sound and silence, with an inclination towards the latter.

The faint sound of the boiling water, often overlooked in the cacophony of daily life, takes centre stage in the solemn ambiance of the tea ceremony. As Pasqualotto explicates (2004, p. 83), the soft sounds emanating from the kettle amidst the silence mirror the subtle shifts in a tranquil mind, or inversely, these quiet stirrings in consciousness can be seen as spiritual echoes of the kettle’s sounds. A harmony is thus established between the ambient rhythm and the participants’ inner time.

The ceremony is then imbued with the slow, deliberate gestures of the tea master and their apprentice. The apprentice’s actions, deliberately slower than the master’s, signify more than just inexperience. Their movements are still bound by the internal-external dialectic, a pragmatic interplay between thought and action. The master, on the other hand, through a deeper immersion into the void, becomes one with their actions. They embody the gesture, as natural and

⁷ Note how “*sukiya*” is the Western transliteration of Japanese ideograms “数奇屋”, which translate to “*abode of emptiness*”.

unobserved as snowfall or a river's flow. The technique transcends its original form in the void, and it's within these movements that the preparation process's independent semantics reside.

The preparation gestures are not purely functional but evolve into something greater, possessing their own inner purpose. They break away from their functional origins to stand as an end in themselves. This metamorphosis also carries ethical implications, as the perfection of the gestures serves as a model for everyday life. Thus, the tea ceremony, resonating with Zen meditative practices, aims to discipline its participants, influencing other aspects of their lives.

The notion of emptiness is intricately woven into every facet of the tea ceremony, extending to the attributes of the ceramic vessels utilized for tea consumption. These bowls are intentionally designed with surface inconsistencies, indentations, and minute fissures, creating a panorama of "disruptive discontinuity". This representation of the void is not only visually apparent but can also be discerned through the touch of one's fingertips and lips. Additionally, the tea bowls and the instruments used in the tea preparation process bear the mark of time, embodying the concept of *sabi* (寂)⁸.

The tea ceremony is a profound illustration of the symbolic superiority of the process over the product, of technique as a means of representation. Nevertheless, the landscape of Japanese culinary practices offers numerous instances of this concept. It is a familiar scene in Japanese eateries for the chef to cook in the patrons' presence, utilizing a portion of the counter where the meals are consumed as a makeshift kitchen. The acts of preparation and consumption occur concurrently, cohabitating and intertwining in time and space. Paralleling the tea ceremony, the culinary techniques become a form of aesthetic sustenance that precedes, coincides with, and complements the physical nourishment. Here again, these movements exceed their utilitarian purposes and assume an independent representational capability. The inaccessible alchemical mystery of the Western culinary workshop is supplanted by a public, magical-ritualistic performance by the chef-priest, which transcends the demonstration of their culinary precision and purity. Instead, the act takes on inherent meaning, akin to modern performance art forms.

It is particularly evident in Japanese culture that the significance related to representation, in terms of action rather than the food object itself, is not

⁸ This Japanese term encapsulates the notion of temporal imprints on objects, the vestiges of existence, a sedimentation of memory that stirs emotions through its evocation of melancholic beauty and the inescapability of time passage. Imperfections, fractures, chipped edges, and wear signs (within acceptable bounds) add value to the object as they bear witness to its life journey and point to the ephemeral nature of reality, the pervasive emptiness that permeates every entity and moment.

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confined to the practices of food preparation but also extends to the tools and gestures involved in the consumption of food, starting with the use of chopsticks. Clearly, there is a convergence and complementarity between such practice and the way food is prepared. As Roland Barthes noted in his masterful work on Japan – *L’empire des signes* (1970) – Japanese dishes are already cut into small pieces during preparation to be easily grasped by chopsticks, but the reverse is also true: chopsticks exist because the food is cut into tiny pieces. The same logic and form underlie both the food (the material) and the behaviours (and tools) of its manipulation: harmony. Japanese cuisine is divided, devoid of centrality, constantly decentralized in a harmonious chaos devoid of solidity, lacking a permanent centre to reach and conquer. The absence of centrality is twofold: it concerns the division of matter itself (the absence of a physical centre in the dish) as well as a “hierarchy” void (the absence of a “main course”). In contrast to Westerners, for whom eating implies an ordering rationality (first course, second course, side dish, etc.), the Japanese have a fluid relationship with the different dishes of a meal, often served simultaneously. The table tray becomes a palette for creating, little by little, what one eats, «drawing here a handful of beans, there a scoop of rice, there a touch of seasoning, and there again a sip of soup, following a free alternation in the manner of a (Japanese) graph» (Barthes, 1970, 16). On the table, the food is never anything more than a collection of fragments, in which none appears privileged by an order of ingestion; eating does not mean adhering to a menu (a sequence of dishes) but rather selecting colours, one after another, with the gentle touch of chopsticks, guided by a sort of inspiration.

This decentralized matter that is food is never violated or torn by the chopsticks; it is lifted, moved, with a precision and gentle firmness reminiscent of maternal care, testifying to an absolute respect for that which we nourish ourselves with.

Eating is much more than mere incorporation. While it is evident that humans do not live to eat, it is equally clear that eating is not solely about sustenance. Eating extends beyond the chemistry of nutrition and the aesthetics of taste; it involves an excess that catalyses the transition from necessity to desire (Cf. Lévinas, 1961, 130), with a force unknown in other human experiences, except perhaps in the erotic realm, where the dimension of necessity is infinitely less potent than in the realm of food. «Eating is not incorporation but rather opening the body to that which is ingested (...) There is never incorporation, only exits, twists, cavities or spillages, crossings, compensations. Susceptibility to ‘being into’ is a metaphysical chimera» (Nancy, 2009, 100).

Food consumption (a complex phenomenon of which food itself is only a part) as representation also means that there is never an “I” who eats; it is

always a plurality, a plurality not as a sum of bodies, knowledge, individual worlds, and destinies, but as a “primary regime” where everything – especially the food – symbolizes something (Cf. Nancy, 2011, 73), where everything is condemned to signify something, to *represent*.

Eating transcends the “I” and the “other,” existing within the dimension of proper human and social being, that of being singular-plural. The rationality of food holds a privileged perspective on this panorama of social being, but it is evident that the discourse that has unfolded thus far has led us into a broader and foundational domain. As Franco Riva has written, *«Eating is directed outward, always among others and with others. This is why eating is, from the very beginning, speaking and thinking... it is always, immediately, among us, in proximity, me and you, us and others. Traces of the outside, precisely. Eating is not the experience of an ‘I’ that exists prior and for itself, with the world and others at its unquestionable disposal. Traces, because even on the mouth, which remains a mouth, food, animal, there appears the beginning of a response, of a responsibility that begins to live at the very moment when it seems to be only about survival»* (Riva, 2015, 194), existing in the same moment when it seems to be solely about existence. *«Eating is not the experience of an ‘I’ that exists prior and for itself»* – true, indeed – but also, especially after Heidegger, obvious. Yet, potentially misleading. The point is that no experience can be the experience of an “I” that exists prior to or separately from others, no matter how much it may isolate itself physically. Jean-Luc Nancy, in a text that, unfortunately, has not received adequate attention from sociological circles (especially in Italy), has explained that the singular being does not pre-exist its singular plurality (Nancy, 1996, 55). *«To be singular-plural means: the essence of being is, and is solely, a co-essence; but a co-essence, or the being-with – the being-with-many – also designates the essence of the co- or, more precisely, the co- (the cum) itself in the position or guise of essence... One could even say that if being is being-with, in being-with, ‘with’ constitutes being, and is not added to being»* (Ibid., 56).

This “with” is something other than being physically together in a place; it is not something we share but rather something we are. More precisely, we are not “with” but rather “we with”: we exist because and inasmuch as we are with. Hence, only the plural should be used to indicate being, no longer “is” and no longer “I am”: *«being can only be said as ‘we are’: ‘the truth of ego sum is a nos sumus»* (Ibid., 59). *«In me, there is more than myself... We live in the surpassing, but not in the sense of going beyond ourselves. We are surpassing, movement-toward»* (Riva, 2015, 281).

We are more than what we are or are not at any given time. We are condemned to be more than what we may wish to be or not be. Here, “more” does not signify addition but, positively or negatively, in its entirety, a difference.

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The act of eating encompasses far-reaching implications that extend beyond the individual or the mere consumption of food. It operates within the realm of human and social existence, where the interplay between the singular and the plural takes centre stage. The *rationality of food* provides a unique perspective on the social fabric, revealing the intricate relationships between ourselves, others, and the world. Eating embodies an act of being-with, transcending the boundaries of individuality and embracing the collective experience. It is a complex interweaving of sustenance, desire, and the profound significance of shared nourishment.

4. Discussion and conclusions

Building upon the conceptual framework delineated thus far, the act of eating invites a deeper exploration as an existential phenomenon (Fischler, 1988). As we partake in the ritual of dining, our engagement extends beyond the immediate sustenance before us, encompassing the tapestry of histories, narratives, and lives embedded within each morsel. The sustenance we consume stands as an eloquent testament to a constellation of human endeavour, the fecundity of nature, and the inexorable march of time. Each act of consumption, in essence, represents a form of communion—a shared experience that intertwines us with the world in a profoundly intimate manner (Counihan and Van Esterik, 1997).

Moreover, eating transcends mere passivity; it emerges as a dynamic interchange between the consumer and the consumed (Beardsworth and Keil, 1997). This exchange bears the marks of a dialogue, a reciprocal sculpting whereby both eater and eaten indelibly imprint upon one another. Our identities are moulded by the food we ingest, even as we simultaneously sculpt the food through our individual predilections, culinary practices, and cultural and personal associations. Consequently, in the act of eating, we are co-participants in an ongoing process of creation, ceaselessly negotiating and redefining our identities, relationships, and realities.

The interplay between the singular and the plural extends its tendrils into every facet of our existence, far beyond the act of eating. As we are ‘we with’ within the context of eating, so too are we ‘we with’ within our relationships, our communities, and our engagements with the natural world. This heightened awareness of our inherent interconnectedness, of our shared ontology, serves to catalyse a more profound sense of empathy, responsibility, and stewardship.

In this context, the act of eating can be construed as a microcosm of the human condition: an intricate interplay of necessity and desire, individuality and community, being and becoming. It operates as a mirror, reflecting the

tapestry of our shared humanity, a potent reminder of our collective enmeshment in the intricate fabric of life, perpetually weaving and being woven into existence. Embracing this understanding, we can approach each meal, and indeed each moment, with an enhanced sense of reverence, gratitude, and interconnectedness.

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