



# Big and Small Screens

*Alice Giannitrapani, Francesco Mangiapane*

Food is not only what we eat, whether it is savoured or gulped down, but also what is described in novels, songs, magazines, and also obviously, by films and television programmes. Ingredients and recipes, restaurants and food issues, sociable dinners and problems that take food as a starting point from which to address debates on inter-culturality, are themes that are increasingly prevalent on both the big and the small screen. As such, it becomes of fundamental importance for us to reflect on these bonds between food and the audiovisual, to understand some of the dynamics that drive this interesting and composite part of contemporary gastromania.

## 1. FOOD ON TV

If you turn on the television at any time, day or night, you will inevitably find programmes which feature food as their undisputed protagonist, helped in no small part by the huge proliferation of **thematic** channels devoted to the subject. Gigantic cakes, chocolates of all kinds, traditional dishes, exotic recipes, but also cooks who help rescue all manner of

restaurants from the brink of failure, normal people who aspire to become great chefs, great chefs who challenge normal people in the kitchen, and even obese people who submit themselves to extremely strict diets, extravagant characters who play at stuffing themselves with excessive quantities of food, extreme travellers who try dishes that appear revolting at first sight, and battle-ready housewives demonstrating their winning formulas in the kitchen.

And yet, jumping between the talent and talk shows, between documentaries and game shows, we are struck by the fact that no matter the explosion of nonchalant kitchen antics, of spectacular flambées, and disastrous attempts at frying in front of the cameras, this is never balanced out by an action of tasting. On TV everyone cooks, but nobody eats. Or rather, they try, they pass judgement, they nibble, they pick, but they never give in to that great gastronomic pleasure of tasting, of savouring, of the slow encounter between food and the body. This is probably due to the demands of television, as here the viewer's attention must be engaged at all times, and as such the rhythm of the story becomes fundamental: long pauses or drawn-out tastings risk being flat and monotonous, tempting the viewer to turn over, and must therefore be avoided at all costs.

Instead, it is the challenges thrown down in the kitchen that win out. In first place we have *Masterchef*, but there is also *Hell's Kitchen*, *The Great British Bake Off*, and so forth. Despite this proliferation of food on television being heavily criticised by gastronomes and renowned chefs, with some describing it as 'food porn' and others highlighting how this way of staging the cook's work simplifies the long, hard slog and dedication required by those who truly want to become a competent chef, the fact remains that viewers favour this kind of television, which is accompanied by in-depth coverage on social media, the consequences of which go well beyond television programmes. It would seem, for example, that the sharp rise in enrolments in hospitality institutes over recent years can, in part, be attributed to the widespread presence of food on television.

## 1.1 HISTORY

The presence of food on television is not, in fact, a new phenomenon, but dates back to the dawn of the small screen. Here we will look at its main stages and its evolution.

### 1.1.1. The Beginning (1940s - 1960s)

TV is born and takes root in various countries according to different modalities, modalities that play a determining role in establishing a certain kind of programming and a certain way of making television. Essentially, we can locate two large models of development in television: the American model and the European one. In America, the networks are run privately, earning money through advertising investment by large companies (the commercial television model). In Europe, television channels are generally controlled by the State and financed,

for the most part, by a licence fee paid by users (the public service model). As a consequence, in commercial TV the aim is to maximise viewers (the more people watch a given programme, the more financial investment is attracted, the more the network earns), with the genre of entertainment, with its aim to amuse the viewer, becoming fundamental. With public television, the service role assigned to the small screen is of the utmost importance, aiming – according to the BBC model – to inform, entertain and educate the public.

If we look specifically at food, in commercial TV the genre of *instructional* programming takes root, in which the viewer is presented recipes they can replicate. A fundamental role is played here by the sponsors. Food products and kitchen objects are displayed during each episode and essentially dictate the rules of the programme. In the space of a few years, this genre becomes increasingly attractive, moving from simple, starkly illustrated recipes to more elaborate dishes explained by increasingly ‘television-friendly’ faces, which attempt to accompany the simple ‘illustration’ with a more captivating narration that can involve the viewers (as James Beard does in *I Love to Eat!*, from 1946).

In public service television, all programmes of this type are void of sponsorship, and the steps required to prepare the dish are accompanied by information that aims to educate viewers, concentrating, for example, on cooking methods and on more general discourses surrounding cookery and food (as Philip Harben does on the BBC with his *Cookery Lesson* from 1960). Furthermore, in European television we find food documentaries that tell the story of journeys in search of local traditions and dishes, as happens in Italy in the 1957 programme, *Viaggio nella valle del Po alla ricerca dei cibi genuini*, by Mario Soldati. The role played by this genre of programming is doubly important. It elevates the wine or food product to the level of ‘star’ worthy of becoming a part of media reality, whilst describing how unique it is, linking the discovery of local delicacies to culture and, in other ways, to tourism. The happy connection between the discourse of food and that of holidays finds fertile ground, leading to a current that, through various experiments of varying levels of success, has recently come back into fashion (for example, with *A Cook’s Tour* presented by Anthony Bourdain).

#### 1.1.2. Developments (1960s-1990s)

At this later stage, we see the European model and the American model moving closer together. In many countries that had adopted a model of public service broadcasting, the monopoly is broken and commercial television channels enter the market, taking the inspiration for their programming from the United States. While public television continues in part to make the idea of public service broadcasting its own, with the illustration of recipes that are ‘useful’ to the viewer, and in which information on food continues to be of central importance (take

*Delia Smith's Cookery Course* from 1978, where the programme's pedagogical intentions are clear, not least from the name), it is also true that the logic of competition forces even the public networks to adapt to the 'Americanisation' of private ones. Entertainment and amusement take on a greater importance, the determination to keep the viewer glued to the screen leads to the so-called 'TV flow', based on an attempt to blur the boundaries between the various programmes so as to evade the nightmare of channel hopping, made even easier by the introduction of the remote control. The American style of illustrating recipes with food sponsors in plain sight becomes widespread in Europe, marrying commercial logic with a utility component, and illustrating in each episode simple recipes within the reach of the increasingly busy modern woman now working outside the home.

At the same time, the United States, strengthened by their experience, acquire greater familiarity with the language of television, employing faces that will become real icons of the connection between food and television thanks to their on-screen presence, their mannerisms and the kinds of recipes (increasingly elaborate and international) they suggest. This is what happens with *The French Chef* by Julia Child (cfr. Cap.??). First broadcast in 1963 and continuing for a decade, the programme aimed to consolidate the most 'noble' French recipes within the American panorama. The rhythm of the tale becomes more lively, and the kitchen used is increasingly constructed specifically for the TV cameras.

With time, television genres lose their defined boundaries and all programmes begin to be filtered, a move that is most noticeable with entertainment, which is aimed precisely at entertaining and maintaining viewers. They begin to experiment with new formulas that go beyond the simple proposition of recipes. In the 1990s, for example, *Kitchen* is broadcast in Italy and Germany on MTV, in which each episode features the young presenter making a recipe with a famous guest, chatting in the meantime about their work and private life. Food therefore becomes a pretext to speak about other things, and the pressing rhythm, the attention to music, the broadcaster all begin to demonstrate how the attractive potential of culinary programming is not something solely for housewives, nor limited to morning time slots. Different genres and audiences suddenly become a possibility.

#### 1.1.3. Contemporary Outcomes (From 2000 to Today)

The new millennium brings a further development. The consolidation and spread of thematic television channels allows the concept of heterogeneous and variable programming based on various times of day and days of the week to be abandoned, instead proposing homogeneous programming that concentrates on a single theme, and that is aimed at a much less generalised\* audience, one that is increasingly niche. Entire networks dedicated to cooking allow fans to find recipes alongside documentaries, reality programmes and talk shows dedicated to food at any time.



This leads to the success of channels such as the Food Network or Good Food Channel, which offer programmes dedicated to food 24 hours a day.

It is since 2000 that a new sub-genre of entertainment has started to dominate scheduling: reality shows. These programmes aim, to some extent, to cannibalise all genres, playing on the viewer's curiosity about the private lives of everyday people. As we will see, this becomes fundamental also for culinary broadcasting. At the same time there is a proliferation of formats that can be sold with minor differences in different countries, on a television market that is increasingly global. The format defines the programme's concept, its basic rules, the set, the typical sequence followed in each episode, and so on. From *Masterchef* to *Hell's Kitchen*, through *Kitchen Nightmares* and *Bake Off*, formats abound when it comes to culinary programming too. What's more, *ready-made* formats – original programmes from various countries, either dubbed or subtitled (*Masterchef USA*, *Cake Boss*) – start to be aired globally, in such a way that international television schedules end up partially overlapping.

Finally, another contemporary trend is that in which programmes tend to develop according to the logic of the *multi platform*. There is not, therefore, simply the classic television programme, but often also an app, a Facebook page, a Twitter account dedicated to the programme. There is a logic here that is based on the convergence of numerous communication tools, ensuring that content is developed in tandem with various media: contestants can be voted off using Facebook, the app provides you with more information on the programme, with social media notifying the public in advance about the themes that will be tackled on the show, and so on. In this way, television becomes one of the intersections (often the most important) from which the programme's identity can be constructed, which is in turn promoted and publicised through various channels.

### 1.2. TV GENRES

Television genres, like those for literature and cinema, are simply ways of classifying products with the same characteristics. Talent shows, for example, are programmes characterised by challenges between competitors with different levels of competency in a certain field, be it cooking (*Masterchef*), photography (*Master of Photography*) or singing (*X Factor*). Knowing which genre a particular transmission belongs to allows the viewer to cultivate a number of expectations about it. If, for example, I know I am about to start watching a documentary, I expect it to teach me something. Genres evolve over time in response to changes in society, productivity, media and so forth. It is clear, for example, that a text we find funny today is nothing like a comic text from a few decades ago, in the way a TV series from the 2000s has very different traits to a TV series from the 1950s. Reality shows did not exist in the past

and since their arrival on our screens, much has changed, not least their articulation into various sub-genres (talent shows, those with famous contestants, those that place particular importance on emotions or *emotainment*, etc.).

The four macro-genres under which television programmes can be grouped are: information, education, fiction, entertainment. It should be pointed out that television programmes, not least to attract a wider audience, increasingly tend to blend, or to put it in a more technical way, *hybridise* different genres. *Obese: A Year to Save My Life* is, for example, a reality show but it borders on the educational. Indeed, its episodes not only show different human cases in which an excess of food has become a pathological condition, but also carry an underlying educational warning with the enormous sacrifices the protagonists are forced to undergo in order to regain their physical health.

#### 1.2.1. Information

Information is the genre that, as the name suggests, informs the public about what is happening in the world. The speaker (presenter, journalist) must by definition be credible and transfer 'knowledge' to the public. What is unique about the programmes that make up this category is that they establish a communicative pact\* based on an expectance of truth. For example, a TV news programme (one of the most representative programmes in the Information macro-genre) must, by definition, tell the truth in order to be able to call itself news. As such there is a whole series of communicative strategies for informative programmes aimed at creating an Reality-effect\*: they look to validate what they say as true. For example, the live broadcast with a correspondent in the place the news is taking place, often adds nothing to the story but does help create an effect of presence, a closeness to the facts, and therefore acts as a sort of guarantee of credibility regarding what has been said. In the same way, their serious and often impersonal tone of narration contributes to providing the news with an official air. The same can be said of the citing of sources: the inclusion of these elements in the news – be they statistics, or references to authorities and institutions – will, by themselves, help lend reliability to the text.

There are many programmes that provide news about food, some are specific (many news programmes have weekly features on food), others are programmes of generic information that sometimes dedicate the odd programme to the subject of food: for example, the reportages and investigations that discuss issues regarding food certification, counterfeiting, production and consumption processes. Generally, the tone used here is official, serious, whilst the audience's main motivation for watching it is the opportunity to broaden their own knowledge.

#### 1.2.2. Fiction

Fictional TV series are programmes based on a narration that, in perfect opposition to what happens with information, assumes

a communicative pact in which any expectation of the truth is suspended. A fiction, by definition, creates no expectation of a truthful tale, but the hope of being immersed in a (more or less credible) world organised according to its own rules.

The increasingly widespread mania for food has given rise to entire fiction series with a culinary theme: in *Feed the Beast* we hear of the vicissitudes of a chef and a sommelier who want to open a restaurant; the protagonist of *The Baker* and *The Beauty* works in a bakery; *Benvenuti a tavola* (*Gourmet Wars*) tells the tale of two family restaurants.

In other cases, food, despite not being one of the series' main themes, is a recurring theme that helps to distinguish a character's identity. So, in *Inspector Montalbano*, the inspector's investigative work can always be slowed down or suspended for a succulent *arancino*. The protagonist is a *gourmet*, a real food lover, and for him mealtimes are a priority to be focused on, nothing else matters for him in those moments. Food becomes the focus and main objective of many of his actions. Montalbano detests anyone interrupting him during his meal, preferring to eat alone and in silence in order to be able to fully savour this central moment. While for the inspector a meal means tasting slowly, progressive assimilation and a growing satisfaction on which to concentrate one's efforts, for *Dexter*, food is mere nutrition, something to eat only when it can no longer be done without. Eating for him is a hasty practice subordinate to other, more important activities: Dexter gobbles down a sandwich in his car whilst in search of a potential victim, he abandons his meal without finishing it when he receives a work phone call, he consumes quick dishes in lots of different places. Again, in *The Sopranos*, dishes function to effectively emphasise the provenance of the Italo-American mafia family around which the story revolves. Here the characters often eat strictly Italian dishes, they go to Italian restaurants, they prepare Italian food and regularly praise the cuisine of their ancestors. But most importantly, they eat all the time: the protagonist is almost uninterruptedly looking for some juice or a slice of ham, continuously opening and closing the fridge door, with a ritualistic gesture that punctuates his actions, and the rhythm of the episode.

### 1.2.3. Entertainment

Entertainment is the genre that aims to entertain its audience, to allow them to spend time watching the television in a laid-back way. Here we find very diverse kinds of programmes: from game shows (which centre on the mechanism of competition and gambling) to talk shows (centred on dialogue between guests in the studio). It is also the main genre in which we find food, particularly within that sub-genre that is reality shows, a kind of programme based on the broadcasting of pieces of 'reality' from people's lives, famous or otherwise. It must be said that this is clearly a reality created through television, one that takes place within television studios or, in any case,

with the presence of TV cameras. The viewer who likes this kind of programme is curious about and attracted to seeing how people behave in particular contexts, when faced with particular tests, and so on.

From the moment that reality shows became so popular as to become the dominant television genre, indeed the only genre on certain thematic channels (such as *Real Time*), they became specialised, taking different forms. As a result, we have talent shows (such as *Masterchef* or *Hell's Kitchen*) that are a new take on the old game shows and based on competition between people who want to display their talent. The episodes involve a series of tests and elimination rounds, the 'best' in the competition receives some sort of prize that, in our case, regards the kitchen and allows them to launch their professional career as a cook (by writing a recipe book, or running a prestigious restaurant for a season, etc.) There are then makeover programmes, those in which each episode sees a positive transformation of a person or business. This is what happens in *Kitchen Nightmares* (*Bar Rescue* follows the same formula), with a chef/presenter who visits a different restaurant in crisis every episode, observes the dynamics and helps the team to improve by proposing changes to the menu, the management of the dining area and the kitchen, and the space's aesthetics. But there is also *Obese: A Year to Save My Life* (and all the programmes like it) in which we see a physical and character transformation in the subject who has decided to get back into shape and modify their approach to food and life. Finally, we have *factual* shows based on an account of 'facts' where the episodes follow the life of people involved in some form of business. Factual culinary programming tells the stories of patissiers and confectioners trying to keep up with the demands of their clients, as with *Cake Boss* or *Il re del cioccolato*. These programmes show us the accidents that can occur and the ways in which they can be remedied, whilst inevitably allowing us to get to know certain aspects of the protagonists' private lives alongside their work.

#### 1.2.4. Culture/Education

This is the genre that embodies one of the main objectives of public television since its outset. Programmes of this kind could have risked being phased out, considered too niche and overly serious, if they had not been able to innovate, carving out their own share of the audience. Today there are numerous culinary programmes of this kind, in which, taking inspiration from the idea of public service broadcasting, the objective is to educate, instruct about and raise awareness of aspects of wine and food in both a practical and a cultural way.

The contemporary adaptation of the first cookery shows, with their tutorial formula, falls into this category. There are entire channels and a great many broadcasts centred around illustrating recipes of varying difficulty, cost and speed. This kind of programme undoubtedly has a utility component and a practical function (to teach the public to cook), but it also



contains a number of opportunities for entertainment (for example, many programmes feature guests the hosts can chat with). Recipes often follow the latest culinary trends (new cooking techniques, fashionable ingredients) or show how to utilise the kitchen in a way that meets the needs of daily life (as with quick recipes for busy women, both wives and workers, that we find in the Italian case of Benedetta Parodi and the British Nigella Lawson, who has become an icon of femininity in the kitchen). The presenting style has steadily grown less formal and more friendly, with the audience spoken to directly in a colloquial way that is both immediate and relaxed (take, for example, Jamie Oliver). From this genre we have seen the rise of true stars, cult personalities from the world of cooking (professional chefs) or simple fans who know how to inextricably link their own names to the kitchen.

There is then a whole series of programmes (whose story is linked to the origins of television) that have a predominantly documentary slant and aim to tell the story of a particular food, the life of a famous chef, or the culinary traditions of a country. These programmes have become increasingly attractive and are impressively well made, with cinematic shots and a well thought out narrative structure. The narrative often links to the theme of travel and tourism. This works in both directions: there can be documentaries that are firmly rooted in the region, which aim for the rediscovery of their country's food heritage, traditions and so forth, and those centred instead on the discovery of worlds, atmospheres and exotic, alternative cuisines that may even appear 'disgusting' to us. This is the case with *Bizarre Foods with Andrew Zimmer*, where in each episode the presenter shows us a place's typical foods, extreme foods that are, at first sight, revolting, and that often reveal themselves to be delicious: the programme's basic idea is to approach food without prejudice, attempting to understand other cultures with food as the starting point.

## FOCUS 1

### Masterchef

Masterchef is probably the best known, and most widely distributed and syndicated culinary talent show in the world. It is broadcast in a huge number of countries with numerous local variations on the format, and it has also given rise to several **spin offs** – *Celebrity Masterchef*, with famous people as contestants; *Junior Masterchef*, where the protagonists are children; *Masterchef All Stars*, a competition between the best competitors of previous editions. It is a television programme that lacks the figure of a presenter, the narration is instead provided by a voiceover. The aspiring Masterchef contestants battle one another during a series of culinary tests, the dishes are evaluated by a group of judges (food experts, chefs) who, according

to a classic mechanism of progressive elimination, decide who can stay in the competition and who must 'leave the kitchen'.

At the centre of the television studio is a large space set up as a kitchen, a store cupboard stocked with products used by contestants (the ideal place for **product placement**), a stage (where the dishes are taken to be scrutinised by the judges), and a balcony area (for the contestants who are not taking part in the competition at that moment). These are complemented by spaces outside the studio where on-location challenges take place, in which the contestants are divided into two teams to prepare a menu for a set number of people.

Each challenge has a rigid time limit, and the editing of the images, the shots, the words of encouragement used by the judges highlight a growing tension within the task that must be finished within the established deadline. When it comes to the judging, however, there is a deceleration in editing speed and music, creating a strong sense of suspense for the viewer at home.

The contestants are generally presented as very ambitious (they all say they want to become Masterchef, that they have everything it takes, that they will not be eliminated), and when they talk, they are introduced with an on screen table listing their name, age and profession. We know very little about their private lives, though we learn some of their character traits as the series develops (there is one who is always happy, one who tends to argue with the others, one who is emotional, one who is cold and detached, and so on). The contestants must demonstrate skill, creativity, and grace under pressure; they must be able to create all kinds of dishes, and be familiar with the ingredients and cooking techniques. They must have passion, but they must all be able strategists: the aspiring Masterchef who is at an advantage during the Invention test because, having won the Mystery box, they can choose the ingredient that all contestants must prepare, does not decide purely according to their own propensities and ability, but also (and perhaps most importantly) according to the weak points of those they consider their most feared adversaries. The judges are upstanding, their competence is never questioned, they use technical language and are capable of instinctively finding the dishes' strong points and shortcomings, sometimes with little more than a glance, and providing the reasons for these errors. Cooking is generally considered to be an exact science, and the dishes are the result of a combination of technique, strategy and passion. The real Masterchef is the one who is able to find equilibrium between these elements. They must be a skilled cook, know their adversaries, allow themselves to be guided by passion in the kitchen and never be overwhelmed by panic, never overdo it, never show

excessive arrogance, and never give in. It is the rhetoric of hard work, of being continuously put to the test, of falling into errors and learning to correct them without help: this, the programme tells us, is what the hard slog of being a chef is all about.

## 2. FILM AND FOOD

### 2.1. COOKING VS EATING

As we have seen, television is dominated by cookery, which is placed centre stage, dramatized in many different ways. Culinary competitions, games for prizes, quizzes, talent shows all contribute to the spectacularization of the moment in which food is prepared, with an aim to highlight the participants' *competence*\* and their familiarity with basic techniques of culinary art, which are regularly commented on by those judges called to pass judgement on the participants' work. Film, however, takes a different approach when it chooses to focus on food. Of all the complex processes surrounding food, film chooses to highlight a different moment, one that reflects the act of cooking: eating. In film it is not as important to depict the preparation of food as it is the moment when, sitting at the table, the food that has been cooked is consumed by a varying number of diners, people who have gathered together for the occasion. The aim is not, therefore, to test the cooks' technical abilities, but the ability to describe, through their food, an environment or social group, to offer a cross section of the relationships between characters, to evoke the transformative value that an unforgettable lunch or dinner can have for those eating.

## FOCUS 2

### *Le Repas de bébé*



**Fig. 1.** A scene from *Le Repas de bébé* (1895) featuring two parents with their child as they eat their breakfast in the garden of a country house.

One of the first films in the history of cinema, shot in 1895 by the Lumière brothers, takes a gastronomic scene as its subject. Here, a couple feed their young baby as they eat their breakfast.

The film, available on YouTube<sup>1</sup>, lasts just forty seconds, during which time very little happens. We see a middle aged couple sitting at a table outside – presumably in the garden of a country house – looking after a young baby. The man attempts to feed the baby, whilst the woman drinks her coffee. At a certain point, a biscuit is introduced, which the child offers the camera operator before his father gets back to feed him once more. This is extent of the film. What can we learn from this brief scene? What role does food play in it? We begin to notice that this film, which had an enormously successful first screening at Paris' *Salon indien du Grand Café*, exists midway between the private and the public. It takes a very specific family scene, made up of Auguste Lumière (who is also director of the film with his brother Louis), his wife and their child, as its subject. This setup allows us to classify the film as a kind of 'family album', the first in history to be recorded on video, nothing more than an amateur film recording a moment of intimate affection and allegedly of little interest beyond the tight family circle. However, the very fact it was publicly screened causes it to take on an entirely different role. First, it is necessary to underline how this may appear as a *marvellous* film, nothing like it had ever been seen before. Cinema and moving pictures were invented by the Lumière brothers, who were destined to leave their indelible mark upon twentieth century history. And so this private scene, banal and entirely quotidian (eating is a decidedly everyday act!), now recounted using a brand new language, becomes so interesting that it merits being presented in public. This leads the film to lose its individual dimension, recasting its characters within a more general frame in which they are no longer easily identified people (the family of Auguste Lumière) but unintentional witnesses to their own social identity. For the many spectators who, throughout the twentieth century to now, have been won over by the film, these are human types, a wealthy middle-class family at the turn of the century with their own self-assured affluence, represented by the country garden, the table and its silverware, and their clothes – casual (the father's unbuttoned shirt) yet elegant (the mother's striped dress). There are then the gender roles, for once overturned, with the father feeding the child whilst the mother drinks her coffee. There also are the tenderness evoked by these roles and the sight of the middle class family, the child's reactions and playfulness, the father's care of his own little one. Finally, we have the

---

1 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QP0oz5gEQ34>

biscuit, offered by the father once the last spoonful of food has been finished, and instantly capturing the child's attention. He isn't interested in eating it, as his father lovingly suggests, instead spontaneously attempting to offer it to the those present. Such a desire, unforeseen by the directors, involuntarily reveals a fundamental aspect of the cinematic language. The child, with its innocent gesture, points the biscuit towards the camera, seemingly offering it to his uncle. This has the (albeit momentary) effect of throwing the theatrical model on which the scene is built into chaos, breaking the 'fourth wall', the fic-



**Fig. 2.** The child offers the camera operator his biscuit, revealing the boundaries of the 'fourth wall'.

tional frontier that separates the represented space from the space of representation.

By attempting to offer his biscuit to the camera operator, the child causes the emergence of the constructive side of the cinematic text, revealing the artificial nature of the scene when presented with the illusion of reality, of which cinema at that time made itself the standard bearer.

## 2.2 FOOD AS A SIGN OF THE TIMES

It should be clear by now that, since the inception of the moving picture, eating in the company of others has been considered a social occasion worthy of being immortalised, of being brought to the big screen in order to delve into the rituals surrounding it. Food, in film as in life – and unlike what we see in television programmes on cookery –, never comes alone, instead finding its place in a close network of rela-



tionships between humans and things, food and drink. This is why it is important to pay attention to details, as, more than it might seem at first sight, they reveal social belonging and hierarchies, cultural identities and emotional relationships, connecting the individual's behaviour to broader collective scenes. In short, they constitute a pretext for reconstructing social roles and the relationships between the characters who are represented and the culture to which they belong.

Take an old film starring the Italian comic actor Totò, *Miseria e Nobiltà* (*Poverty and Nobility*, 1954). This film, adapted from a play by Neapolitan playwright Eduardo Scarpetta, is a farce set in the late 1800s. At the centre of the story are two friends, the scribe Felice Sciosciammocca and his friend Pasquale, an itinerant photographer. The two are forced, out of necessity, to live in the same apartment with their respective families, leading a life of hardship, marked by hunger. Their condition of extreme discomfort is revealed precisely by the absence of food: they literally do not have a morsel to eat. At a certain point, Pasquale decides to sell the coat he wore on his wedding day in order to scrape together enough money to buy something to eat. To do so, he packages it up and gives it to his faithful friend, Felice. This gives rise to a comic scene in which Pasquale pulls out a sumptuous list of long yearned-for foods to buy with the money from the coat: a kilo and a half of spaghetti, a nice *buatta* (tin) of tomatoes, a kilo of sausages (freshly minced), ten fresh eggs, half a kilo of mozzarella di Aversa, nuts, 2 litres of Gragnano wine and two cigars. Don Felice wastes no time in replying to such an excessive list with a joke: "Is this Napoleon's *paletot* in here? [...] This *paletot* will get me nothing but a kick in the backside!" The film's turning point arrives when a young Marquis, Eugenio Favetti, asks Pasquale to pretend to be his father, and for his friends to play other members of his family in a meeting with his fiancée's family. The fiancée is a ballerina from a humble background, the daughter of a cook who has become rich after inheriting from his employer. The two friends accept the offer and, following the tradition of the best Italian comedies, the encounter proves rife with hilarity. Just before this meeting, however, Felice and Pasquale receive a welcome surprise from another character: the brother of the Marquis's fiancée, who is in love with Pasquale's daughter. He undertakes to pay off all of Pasquale's debts and organises, in the house of the poverty-stricken protagonists, a sumptuous lunch made by a cook he has brought in especially in order to ingratiate himself. What is striking about this lunch is the clash between the elegance of the flatware used and the triviality of the food served. There is one stand-out scene in which a disproportionate quantity of pasta and sauce pours out of an elegant soup tureen. The reference to pasta – an unsurprising choice for a popular national dish precisely because it is affordable, easy to come by and prepare, and last but not least, capable to revive the hungry masses with very little – is a distinguishing feature

that allows us to recognise the *social status* of the guests despite their appearances. It is no coincidence that this dish, in its blasphemous pairing with the stylish soup tureen, unites the tastes of the newly-rich cook, the ballerina and her brother's father, and that of the cheapskates Pasquale and Felice. Faced with such abundance the pair are unable to control themselves, so much so that, in a memorable gag, their families, gathered around the table, throw themselves head first into the spaghetti, not just devouring it but also filling their pockets with handfuls of the stuff, as if to save as much as possible for later, regardless of the fact the tomato sauce would stain their clothes.



**Fig. 3.** The spaghetti scene in *Miseria e Nobiltà* (1954). Note how a simple, everyday dish like pasta, just by being served in an elegant soup tureen, highlights the vulgar and unrefined nature of the characters.

From its title we can understand that *Miseria e Nobiltà* adopts the reference to food in order to evoke a particular socio-anthropological scenario and a particular existential condition. In some ways the film is a timeless tale, bringing together universal characters, the rich and the poor, the aristocracy and the lowly, and causing them to interact in order to provoke moments of great comic effect. It is true, however, that despite being set in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, the film seems to want to sketch out a discourse of its own time. The 1950s were, for Italian film, a moment of great openness to the social realities and economic hardship of the population, whose existence had been long denied by the Fascist regime.

As a result, social issues take the foreground in a number of feature length films that have made film history. Just think of films such as *Rome, Open City* (1945) and *Bicycle Thieves* (1948), made under the banner of Neorealism, the movement driven by such excellent directors as Roberto Rossellini and Vittorio De Sica, considered pioneers of the film world. The vision shown by *Miseria e Nobiltà* allows us to recognise these same moments as a farcical cross-section, at once poetic and ironic, of the social hardship and poverty that still engulfed large swathes of the Italian population in the 1950s. Food in film functions,

as we have already seen, as a sign of the times, making itself a banner for the common experience, be it political, social or more general, at a particular historic moment. *Miseria e Nobiltà* is a good example of this.

### 2.3 COOKING AND FAMILY

However, the gastronomic dimension can also recognise more specific dynamics, regarding family or group co-habitation. Family gatherings, perhaps linked to the holidays, centre precisely on the tension between coming together and falling apart. The obligatory holidays, for example, are a moment of celebration belonging to a group or a family unit. Film often takes an interest in these kinds of gatherings, discussing them and raising, for example, the question of whether the acceptance of their ritualistic nature by those taking part is sincere or simulated. Taking part in a family meal can be a gesture of spontaneous participation or a forced choice. There are many films that view family meals as a real **object of value**, a far-off and coveted destination to be reached at all costs. The stories used in this kind of films tell the adventures embarked upon by one or more characters in order to take part in such a meal, in the name of a genuine adhesion to the values inherent in that meal. This is the case for a light-hearted film starring John Candy and Steve Martin, 'Planes, Trains and Automobiles', from 1987. The film tells the story of the hilarious adventure embarked on by Neal Page (Steve Martin), a serious, introverted advertising executive from New York who decides to go back to see his family in Chicago on Thanksgiving. Soon, however, he meets Del Griffith (played by John Candy), an eccentric shower curtain ring salesman, who inadvertently takes the taxi that Neal had ordered to take him to the airport. The two men are destined to meet once more, finding themselves on the same aeroplane. And when, by another trick of fate, the aeroplane in which they are travelling is diverted to Wichita because of a snowstorm, the film becomes a **road movie**, centred on the two protagonists' unlucky return trip to Chicago by land. It is unnecessary to point out that this journey is filled with catastrophic yet exhilarating adventures. It is, however, their arrival at their destination that marks the film's real turning point.

Once the journey has come to an end, the two unwilling travelling companions must say their goodbyes. It is only in that moment that Neal and Del, who up until that point had each been so intolerant of the other, realise their deep understanding. It is, therefore, no coincidence that Neil, having discovered that the gauche shower curtain ring salesman would have no one to spend Thanksgiving with, decides, in a touching gesture at the end of the film, to invite him to his house to spend the day with his family. Continuity with tradition has been maintained, the family unit has been completed and the values of Thanksgiving (integration and openness to alterity) have been realised.

However, there are many other films that make the most of moments of family togetherness to shine a light on the face of hypocrisy, empty rituals, the ceremonial screen that hides indifference and crisis in relationships between members of the group. One amusing example is an Italian film from 1992, *Parenti serpenti* [*Dearest Relatives, Poisonous Relations*], directed by Mario Monicelli. Once more, the occasion is provided by a family meal, this time at Christmas. Here, a couple of elderly parents gather together their children's families at their own home in order to celebrate the holidays, as tradition dictates. Right in the middle of Christmas dinner comes the announcement that the elderly couple no longer want to live on their own and ask one of their guests to take them to live with them. Of course, this decision unleashes panic on the four family units present, leading the whole family to fall apart until the decision is taken, by all the children in unison, terrified at the thought that one of their parents could move into their own house, to murder the elderly couple, dressing it up as a domestic accident. The universe Monicelli describes is utterly without hope.

#### 2.4 GOURMAND FILMS

If in the *family meals* we see on film, the emphasis is on the symbolic value of the meeting of people bound by emotional or blood ties, other films explore the question of taste itself, or rather, how what is eaten at a particular banquet manages to reconfigure the way in which a particular character or group relates to others; how it manages, in short, to reconfigure identity. According to this kind of movies, one dish can change the life of the person who prepares it thanks to the **aesthetic experience** it evokes. We have an **aesthetic experience** when something captures our attention, producing in us, in an entirely inexplicable and unexpected way, multiple emotions and states of mind. Such a sensation comes from the deviation of something – be it an artefact, a living being, or, as in our case, a particular dish – with regards to the ordinary, the norm. It is precisely the perception of this difference that changes our perspective, as if we were finding ourselves before that something for the first time. It causes us to abandon our routine, to reactivate our imagination and transform our relationship with the world, renewing our life in general. This is what happens to many characters in a new cinematic genre known as *culinary cinema*, which has, in conjunction with the rediscovered centrality that the question of food has found in our daily lives, met with great success, encouraging production houses to serve up more and more films of this kind. These films tend to tell the stories of characters who, thanks to the extraordinary experience of a lunch or dinner, are inspired to change their lives, transforming the way they eat. The protagonists in culinary films are characterised by the fact they live within a socially oppressive community context that denies any legitimacy to bodily reason, to the pleasure found in sitting

at a table and eating, in the name of the primacy of abstract thought, linked to reasons of social organisation (work, money!) or religion. In these kind of contexts, therefore, food is understood as mere fuel and never an end in itself. These are films that place at the centre of their stories characters with a strong connection to habit, characters inured to a particular way of eating to such a degree that they think it natural. If we think about it, such an attitude of attachment to our way of relating to food is more than understandable: eating is a physical necessity, we eat, we feed ourselves, even before we are born, our eating habits are rooted in our communities, they are a part of our family heritage and we can trace them back to the dawn of time, to such an extent that we do not even realise how every single act of eating is the result of a construction, that it takes on meaning thanks to our cultural identity. As a result, we can understand why these films choose to bring *outsiders* into their stories, characters that breach consolidated 'gastronomic' communities by eating (or cooking) in a different way. The simple act of exhibiting different food habits causes upset, scandalises, 'relativises' the way in which the community sees itself, confronting it with alterity and therefore, calling for a reaction. What should we do with the foreigner and their strange eating habits? *Assimilate them*, induce them to conform to the eating habits of the group into which they are asking to be welcomed? *Exclude them*, mark out a clear boundary regarding co-existence so as not to mix eating habits (you live together but eat in different ways)? *Admit them* to the group despite their eccentricity? Or *ghettoise them*, allowing them to manifest their *other* identity as long as this only occurs in a restricted, autonomous portion of shared space? Let's look at Lasse Hallström's 2000 film, *Chocolat*. It is 1959 and in the peaceful French village of Lansquenet-sur-Tannes life is lived under the sign of *tranquillité*. It is monotonous and insignificant, until a stranger arrives. Her name is Vianne, a young confectioner who decides to open a chocolate shop in the village. This immediately grabs the attention of the villagers who, thanks to the aphrodisiac and inebriating qualities of the chocolate, are led to reconsider the meaning of their lives, recognising the real value of pleasure. Such an eventuality predictably stirs up first suspicion then open hostility from the village's political authorities, wholly consumed by religious thought. These figures, particularly the mayor, try all possible ways of closing down the chocolate shop and chasing away the dangerous *outsider*, accused of having upset the social order with her food! It is only when the mayor breaks into the shop in order to set fire to it, and finds himself inquisitively tasting a little of the chocolate, that things change. The mayor is able to experience the pleasure the chocolate brings, finding himself overwhelmed by it. This leads him not only to halt his criminal activity, but to promote the integration of the foreigner Vianne into the small community at Lansquanet-sur-Tannes, welcoming her culinary message of openness towards



the pleasures of food. Vianne's integration into the village marks not only her own realisation, but a possible response to the holier-than-thou attitude, and the evolution of the entire community in this small French village.

## 2.5 TASTE AND FLAVOURSOME

The film *Babette's Feast* (1987) tells the story of another migrant heroine, Babette Hersant, a revolutionary active during the uprising in the Paris commune, who is forced to flee her country and take refuge in Denmark, on the Jutland peninsula in a small, far-flung village where the only aim is to live modestly in prayer. She finds refuge in the home of two sisters who lead the local religious community. Babette remains at their service for some 14 years. At a certain point, however, our heroine discovers she has won a large amount of money on the lottery. Shaken by this *anecdote of destiny*<sup>2</sup>, Babette asks the two sisters who have taken her in for permission to organise a French dinner in honour of their former Deacon, the sisters' defunct father, for all members of the religious community. Only later will they discover that the money she has won has been entirely spent on holding the unforgettable banquet. The eating habits of the austere Danish community had been characterised by the denial of any bodily pleasure in name of a total devotion to prayer and the divine. It is the foreigner Babette and her culinary arts (in France she was a famous chef) that bring good sense and harmony to the community, giving shape, with her famous meal, to a radically different way of understanding food: one founded on the satisfaction of the senses and conviviality. Once more, a *foreigner* manages to radically transform the way in which an entire community views food. But the film is interesting for another reason too. During the lunch, we can discern two *languages* of food in action. At Babette's table sit two distinct groups of diners: on one side is there the protestant community of the village that has gathered to commemorate the deacon, on the other, an elderly general of the Norwegian court who has returned to Jutland because of a long-standing friendship with the sisters. This general is unaware of the fact that in the kitchen is an experienced cook like Babette, and he cannot understand how such an articulate meal filled with such good taste, such as the one he has just been served, could be produced in a far-flung, rural corner of Europe, far from the splendour of the capital cities. The way in which the two groups prepare to eat is rather unusual. Faced with the magnificence of the courses that are progressively served, the general reveals himself to be astonished, and yet he makes an effort to recognise the dishes, searching for an impossible understanding with his fellow diners. He attempts to use food as a *status symbol*, making a show of his ability to distinguish and appreciate the dishes served in order to

---

<sup>2</sup> This is the title of the collection of short stories by the excellent Danish author Karen Blixen, which also includes the short story that inspired the film.

cultivate an image of himself as a cosmopolitan, high-ranking person. We can call this language, which is linked to **figurative** recognition of the dishes: the regime of tasty. Conversely, the poor members of the protestant community are unable to flaunt such a knowledge of the dishes cooked by Babette, and this is the reason why they proceed through their dinner allowing themselves to be led by a second culinary logic, bound to the world of flavours, textures and smells. These elements contrast with one another. For example, the dessert is characterised through its difference to the savoury courses. One understands how a dish can take on its own meaning at a banquet precisely because of how it articulates this contrast. It is well known, in fact, that in the serving tradition known as **service à la russe**, the savoury dishes constitute the central part of the meal, whilst the desserts follow at the end. The savoury/sweet expressive contrast thus corresponds to its precise position within the flow of courses during a meal. This reasoning, however, can also be found in the composition of a single dish. We can, for example, easily think of a dish that uses the textural contrasts of crunchy/ soft, in order to achieve particular effects of meaning: a *supplì* that fails to be crunchy on the outside and soft inside cannot be considered a good one. We will call this logic that articulates contrasts in the expressive character by placing them in relation to contrasts of content, a regime of *flavourful*. In the film these two culinary logics, the two languages of food that are usually both at work when we eat are, however, separated: on one hand, the general, as we have said, allows the dimension of *taste* to emerge in his approach to the food served during the meal, trying to use his culinary *expertise* – bound in particular to his talent for recognising the haute cuisine dishes that are gradually served – in order to socialise with other guests, trying to involve them. The members of the pious community who have been called to Babette's feast, who do not boast a knowledge comparable with that of the General, are forced to guide themselves in a different way, calling upon the profound logic that we have named the regime of *flavourful*, in order to give meaning to their experience, allowing themselves to be won over by the knowing games of contrast set in motion by Babette. It is an experience that will change their lives, causing them to reconsider their relationship with the world and others, with a view to giving more space to the reason of aesthetics and the body in their daily lives. This is the happy message that culinary cinema aims to convey, against any attempt to reduce food to a mere source of energy, indifferent to pleasure and flavour.

## FOCUS 3

*Ratatouille*

Pixar's famous film *Ratatouille*, can be read as an exemplary tale on alterity. Its story invokes the irreducible deviation between two irreconcilable universes: that of humans and that belonging to rats. When a human sees a rat they go for their gun: this is the harsh reality to which the viewer is exposed from the beginning of the film, and which is experienced by the two impossible cooks / friends: the rat Rémy and the dishwasher Linguini. In order to avoid the fate reserved for beings like him, and to be able to cook like the other cooks in Chef Gusteau's restaurant, the almost-human rat has no other option than to hide under his friend's chef's hat.

We can see how the main conflict employed by the film falls between two models of political affiliation. On the one hand we have the human world that attributes great value to descentence (though Linguini does not know how to cook, he can aspire to inherit the restaurant that belonged to his father, Chef Gusteau, on the basis of blood ties). On the other hand, we have the rat, Rémy, who despite having no pedigree to fall back on, has the talent needed to work in the kitchen. The film dramatizes the conflict between these two forms of logic, one based on descentence and the other on talent. The rat will manage to assert his right to cook, first being enrolled in Gusteau's restaurant – whose motto was, tellingly, 'anyone can cook' – and, later, by opening his own. He then makes himself be admitted to society, despite his obvious difference. Rémy's way of cooking, as an outsider, the carrier of a cultural baggage that is alternative to the dominant one, adds something to French gastronomy: the effect is one of rejuvenation, and a break with the canons of tradition.

Try and compare traditional ratatouille with the recipe used in the film (created by famous American chef Thomas Keller) to see for yourselves.