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You Are What You Eat. Television narratives between hedonism and self-control

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Abstract

Television programming has experienced a recent influx of shows which focus on food and diet. The discursive forms employed by the media converge on an axis of hedonism/self-control: on the one hand, the increased construction of a culture of desire and fantasy relating to the consumption of food (Food Porn), on the other a neo-liberal discourse on the privatization of the individual's responsibility towards their own body and health by virtue of media spectacularization of self-empowerment and self-governance.

Key words: Food Porn, Cooking show, Eating Disorder.

Introduction

An unprecedented abundance of cooking programmes, recipe shows and cooking competitions, as well as reality TV shows which employ formulaic lifestyle and makeover formats to foreground issues of body management and excess fat, are currently being broadcast.

This article will explore how the hedonism/self-control polarity surrounding food consumption manifests itself in different discursive formats and impacts upon individuals and their practices. Within the current context of television production, indeed, the construction and perpetuation of desires and fantasies relating to food consumption is increasing while, simultaneously, a normative discourse on self-management through body control is continuously being reinforced. The challenge is clearly complex, and is exacerbated by less obvious ulterior contradictions: these conflicts are occurring in a context in which a greater degree of choice corresponds to an enhanced perception of the risks associated with eating practices, resulting in that which Pollan has termed the omnivore's dilemma (2008) within which, despite the decline in traditional knowledge surrounding food (Fischler, 1990/92) the individual must nevertheless prove himself to be a competent consumer. It therefore seems appropriate to consider the significance of the production of expert knowledge surrounding food – be it of a medical, aesthetic, health, commercial or hedonistic nature (Sassatelli, 2004) – which occurs in television media, and seek within these discursive categories a reproposal of devices of order and discipline. Beginning, therefore, from the premise that food “determines the way in which an individual is perceived within our culture” (Curtin, Heldke, 1992), this article will consider the meanings that the media attribute to eating practices as styles of consumption and factors of distinction. Food is, in fact, a “symbolic tool par excellence” of cultural interpretation (Lupton, 1996/99) which contributes to defining class, geographical, cultural, gender, life stage and religious boundaries, but then it is important to ask oneself about the impact that food globalization can produce – brought about by the increased availability of food but also by the colonization of certain international culinary television formats - on the practices and alimentary styles of people.

If food and eating are loaded with significance, this is no less the case for the partial or total abstention from it; the last section of this article will therefore interrogate the media spectacularization of anorexia as a forum for representing self-discipline and self-control.

An analysis of the television production around food was conducted through ethnography of the media (Boni 2004) between August 2012 and August 2013. In particular the mainstream channels *RAI 1* and *La7* and the satellite and digital terrestrial channels of *Real Time*, *Lei* and *Cielo* were systematically viewed and the channels *Foxlife*, *National Geographic* and *Discovery Channel* in a more episodic and

focused way. The objective of analysis were the cooking shows but also the factual, reality and makeover formats. If, as we shall see, cooking transmissions have a consolidated history in the Italian television panorama, the so-called “factual” are programmes that have only entered recently into television programming. With the term factual one means all of that in TV that is not fiction (Hill 2007 as cited in Innocenti, Perrotta, 2013: 11), that contains truthful representations of reality and that supplies knowledge of the world. It is also an umbrella term that includes makeover and lifestyle, both formats that have a narrative based formulation on reality (a more widespread notion than factual), that turn to all the circles and interests of society exploring their features with a diagnostic eye, trying to supply knowledge and advice, thereby realizing that need of the contemporary individual, characteristic of the society of uncertainty, of another look that corroborates new identities, confirms the correct behaviours and strengthens self-control (Innocenti, Perrotta 2013).

1. Alimentary modernity and the construction of taste in television

Already by the end of the nineties, Bauman had highlighted the fact that cookbooks and diet manuals consistently topped the best-seller lists (1999). He offered this as evidence of the phenomenon which he was in the process of defining, and which would go on to become one of the cardinal points of his theory: the search for reconciliation between contradicting impulses emerging on a macro, cultural level and their impact upon the individual.

In the same period that Bauman was elaborating his theory, Susan Bordo (1993/97) reflected on the origins of this contradiction, basing her discourse on the concept of a double bind¹. She asserts that the preoccupation with the internal management of the body (or rather the management of desires) results from the presence of destabilising factors in that which she calls the “macro-regulation of desire” in the system known as the social body, and that food and diet are key indicators of these inconsistencies. The origins of this contradiction can be traced to the peculiar historical construction of “consumer passion” which precludes any propensity towards balance, moderation, rationality and prudence; in this context, the slender body assumes a particularly powerful symbolic value as it serves as a code for a perfectly-controlled self which is perfectly in order despite the inherent incompatibility of this with the consumer culture. The system's fundamental contradiction - the ideal of slenderness on the one hand and the impulse to consume on the other - finds expression, therefore, in our bodies and, in this sense, bulimia might be considered a typical construction of modern society: a method to load on to the body (of the individual) those oppositions which can no longer be resolved through recourse to social referents capable of articulating its terms and expressing its inherent conflicts. These theoretical references have for years facilitated research into food behaviour disorders and into the proliferation of certain eating styles and habits (Cavanna, Stagi, 2009).

When a wide range of foodstuffs becomes accessible to the majority of people, eating habits become an indispensable tool for constructing and projecting a self-image (Lupton, 1996/99: 212); this occurs, however, within a context in which certain rules do not apply and, as Bauman has discussed at length, the possibility of choice is enhanced on the one hand, while on the other fewer tools exist to aid in the selection process: this is why freedom becomes such a burden on individual responsibility. Interesting in this sense is Fischler's concept of *gastro-anomie* (1979 and 1990), an effective play on words which seeks to highlight the fact that the modern consumer is not only no longer equipped with a refined knowledge of food practices, but is also subjected to a series of salutary, identity-based, hedonistic and aesthetic indicators which are often mutually contradictory. Alimentary modernity is in fact defined by three interconnected phenomena: the overabundance of food, the reduction of social control of the group and of shared eating practices - which has resulted in the consumer bearing an ever more individual burden of choice - and the proliferation of discourses on food which results in a “cacophonous and contradictory constellation or mosaic of criteria governing alimentary choice” (Sassatelli, 2004: 9). The existence of a gastronomic modernity, devoid of rules and simultaneously subject to tremendous contradictory injunctions gives rise, therefore, to a state of confusion and anxiety for the food consumer (Meglio, 2012).

¹ Gregory Bateson's well-known concept.

In light of this, it is no surprise that food discourses abound on television (Guigoni, 2009), offering advice on how to cook it, serve it or select it; the level on which these discourses operate, however, as well as their function, differ wildly in accordance with the discursive categories to which they belong, though they all respond to some food-related issue.

On traditional Italian channels, for example, for a few years now cooking transmissions have abounded characterized by the fact that they are conducted by female figures who are little experienced and not at all authoritative in the kitchen. The best known is *La prova del cuoco* (RAI 1) conducted by Antonella Clerici a woman who embodies a model of traditional femininity: her soft and curvy forms and her seductive but at the same time awkward ways produce a totally reassuring image of femininity. The other figure of success, in a certain sense antagonist, is Benedetta Parodi (*I menu di Benedetta*, LA7) who, dressed and made up like a “career” woman, seems to be catapulted into the kitchen between one appointment and another. The message of her transmission is that anyone can manage to cook, even with little time and little ability, using shortcuts and tricks such as semi-prepared foodstuffs or simple but striking recipes. The tall and slim conductor, who moves around the kitchen on high heels and without ruffling herself, who in the end tastes but who would never eat a whole portion of what she has cooked, still speaks to us of a woman whose task is however to prepare and not to taste the food and who, above all, despite her numerous appointments must show herself to be the perfect woman around the house. For this aspect, nevertheless, the conductor entrusts herself to an expert, usually of male gender, who teaches her how to make up the centrepieces for the table and how to seat the guests and how to choose combinations of crockery and tablecloths, as also of wines. This is not surprising since historically the idea that taste at table - the high, elitist and therefore authoritative taste - is a prerogative more of men than of women. If we run back over the history of Italian television broadcasting, the true gourmet, the gentleman of taste, has always been a man; it is not possible to forget with this in mind, Luigi Veronelli who with his famous transmission *A tavola alle 7* (*Second channel*, 1974-1976) brought the idea of taste and culinary culture to the Italian collective imagination. Besides, it appears interesting to underline the meaning that the placing alongside this cultured and refined character of the more popular Ave Ninchi for a certain period had; she was given the role of showing another simpler and more traditional idea of cooking. According to Goody (1982) the interaction between social classes can favour consensus on gastronomic norms exactly while technological development, producing a great entity and difference of food, stimulates the interest of the society for matters of food culture. Through these interdependent and necessary processes the social basis for the formation of national cooking can be created. In this direction were also the performances of Aldo Fabrizi and Ugo Tognazzi (well known actors who were often cooks on television), but also that poetic and intellectual path that led Mario Soldati on a *Viaggio lungo la valle del Po. Alla ricerca dei cibi genuini* [A travel along the Po valley. In search of genuine food] (1957, national network). This might well be considered the forerunner of the numerous transmissions that for quite some years have been dealing with tracking local tastes and flavours down, of best exploiting denominations, of defending and promoting territorial boundaries (Meglio, 2012), answering the need to oppose the centrifugal pushes of globalization and McDonaldization (Ritzer 1996/97) and redefining the features of an authenticity really built in reaction to global homology (Stagi, 2013). After all Bourdieu (1979/83) showed us how the distinction really happens in the construction of the distance from the tastes of others, rather in recognizing as disgusting the food of the “others from us”, where in fact the boundary between “them and us” is strengthened by the different alimentary habits². *Orrori da gustare* (*Bizarre Foods*, *Discovery Channel*) is a trip around the world to discover the most disgusting foods, that in reality would have the anthropological function of showing the relativity of taste and what we consider edible³, but that instead produces and strengthens a deep disgust for what “the others” eat. But also *Cambio Cuoco* [Exchange Cook] (*Lei TV*), ends up reproducing this idea of distance: in the first editions it did this by underlining the differences in the traditions between Italian regions, more recently introducing the meeting of cultures produced by mixed couples, bearable only when the hybridization of cultures determines a revisiting of traditional recipes, but not when it breaks

² On the symbolic boundary of ethnic food cf. Colombo, Navarini, Semi (2008).

³ Lévi-Strauss was one of the first to show in his studies how the way we sit at table and the cooking of food, which may apparently seem random, in reality are a means of knowledge of a culture and how in cooking the mental structures of a society can be revealed. Lévi-Strauss (1964 and 1971).

the rules consolidated in “our” taste and “our” habits. In this transmission, set at the time of Sunday lunch, two women exchange kitchens, traditional recipes and families: the resistance that the family members pose to the intruder is a measure of the so-called domestic intimacy, since in all the societies the sharing of food is a constitutive part of the networks of kinship and friendship and, for this, one is accustomed to affirming that: “the quantity of those invited to share the food is an accurate measure both of the degree of friendship and of close kinship” (Lupton, 1996/99).

Food is one of the most meaningful symbolic elements for a cultural type reading of society; as Mary Douglas has shown us, alimentary categories codify and therefore structure social events (1975); indeed, sharing of food introduces people in the same community, it makes them members of the same food culture and for this reason food is instrumental in highlighting the differences between cultures and strengthening the identity of a group; therefore it appears evident that in moments of strong cultural and social change discourses proliferate on food and on alimentary knowledge that operate on the redefinition of symbolic boundaries.

Incorporating foodstuffs also means making them become part of our intimate substance; therefore feeding is the field of desire, of appetite, of pleasure, but also of diffidence, of uncertainty, and of anxiety (Lupton, 1996/99). It is in this sense that the paradox of the omnivore is individualized: on the one hand the need to vary, to diversify and to innovate the diet, on the other the imperative to be cautious because every unknown food is a potential danger (Fischler 1990/92: 279).

It is not a case therefore that transmissions that explain what we eat and why have multiplied, such as *Tutta la verità sul cibo* [The truth about food], (*National Geographic*) or that work on our anxiety with regard to dangerous food. In this type one can include *Cucine da incubo* (*Ramsay's Kitchen Nightmares, Real Time*) where the famous chef Gordon Ramsay⁴, with the excuse of helping the owners to reorganize an activity on the brink of failure, shows us the backstage of restaurants in which expired foodstuffs and scant cleaning are the least horrific elements of which he comes to knowledge, contributing to helping to nurture the idea of being submitted to constant risks, above all when our alimentary sources cannot be checked. Therefore it must not surprise us that, in this sort of scenario, disturbances of eating behaviour that have something to do with the perception of alimentary risks grow; orthorexia is an example of this and is a form of obsession for healthy eating that brings the subject to want to constantly check the sources and to progressively limit the food ingested (Stagi 2008).

Indeed, if the transmissions that concern food on the generalist channels have remained rather defined and recognizable in their structure and in their targeting, on the channels of digital terrestrial, instead, cooking programmes are often characterized by a certain hybridism of genre, there are for example few cooking shows that correspond to a single definition and narrative means; these formats can contemporaneously be talent shows, realities or makeovers; the same conductors who often pass from one format to another, can play different roles in the same show. In general, as recent literature has shown, it is now difficult to distinguish television genres (Grignaffini 2012), if the format is a productive category with relatively rigid boundaries, which regard original products subjects to copyright, exported and sold with a licence, the type is “the product of a negotiation between text and audience activated by the expectations of the spectator” (Innocenti, 2013). The genre works for the television viewer as an informer who supplies the potential end user with details about the product that he is about to consume and in this sense is useful above all for publicity that needs to know the characteristics of the target and the audience to be able to exploit its potentialities (Perrotta, 2013).

2. Pleasure and control

Though commercial interests may be seen to significantly influence television scheduling, given that most television sponsors pertain to the food sector, it is nevertheless the case that, according to Ketchum (2005), this phenomenon is neither simple nor conclusive. The discussion of food on television certainly contributes to the creation of consumptive desire, nevertheless this rarely occurs in the form of direct advertising; during the shows, in fact, the references are not explicit (if anything reference is made to contextual elements such as the studio set-up or the tools used). The more direct advertising occurs rather on the websites and blogs to which the viewers are directed to download

⁴ The Italian version has recently been introduced with the chef Antonino Cannavacciuolo (*Faxlife*).

recipes and chat with the chefs. Most importantly, however, these programmes attempt to present models of fantasy lifestyles connected to food. The discourses surrounding food offer the possibility of pleasure by presenting viewers with the fantasy of an intimate connection and the promise of satisfaction through consumption (Ketchum, 2005).

Adema (2000) and Meister (2000 as cited in Ketchum, 2005) have considered the pleasure that results from watching others cook in a “democratic and egalitarian space” and suggest that all food programming follows the same principle: food is the key to, and a symbol of, living a “good life” (Ketchum, 2005: 220-21). For Ketchum, instead, it is anticipation which is central to the pleasure of food programmes; he asserts that modern people consider “it to be a happy hiatus between desire and consummation” (2005: 222). What is crucial to understand about modern consumer subjectivity is not the material act of shopping or purchasing, but the “imaginative pleasure-seeking” that results from what he calls “mentalistic hedonism” (Campbell, as cited in Ketchum, 2005: 231). The food format fits nicely into this consumption-oriented world, promising the pleasure of either fantasy or actual sensual delights in both their programmes and advertisements. “This offered the pleasure of anticipation and a vicarious intimacy and/or sensual experience” (Ketchum, 2005: 231). Part of this interest in food programming is linked to a heightened focus on aesthetics, which has been identified as a feature of modern consumer societies. Attention to aesthetics has made people aware of themselves and the physical world around them as potential sensual experiences and objects of beauty (Ketchum, 2005: 232). Some authors have summarized this aestheticization and sublimation of pleasure in the concept of “Food Porn”. The origin of this concept is attributed by McBride to Bachtin who defined Food Porn as that which “offers fantasy to those who cannot afford to cook such meals” (1957, as cited in McBride, 2010: 38). This essay ascribes the recent use of the term to Michael Jacobson who presented an opposition of healthy and unhealthy foods – “Right Stuff” and “Food Porn” – and explains that “he coined the term to connote a food that was so sensationally out of bounds of what a food should be that it deserved to be considered pornographic”. Food porn generally evokes the unattainable: as with sex porn, we enjoy watching what we ourselves presumably cannot do (McBride, 2010: 38).

The proliferation of baking shows is undoubtedly linked to this aspect: sumptuous sweets, cakes which constitute works of art, spaces in which food becomes an aesthetic exercise. There are many foreign shows of this sort dubbed on Italian digital terrestrial channels; the most famous of these is *Boss delle torte* (*Cake Boss*, *Real Time*), but *La Fabbrica del Cioccolato* [The Chocolate Factory] (*Real Time*) and *La Guerra delle Torte* (*Cupcake Wars*, *Real Time*) are also noteworthy. The success of these shows has resulted in the production of numerous Italian versions of these formats, including *In cucina con Renato* [In the kitchen with Renato] (*Real Time*) and *Il Re del cioccolato* [The King of chocolate] (*Real Time*). These formats are structured around the preparation of a particular dessert commissioned for a special event; most often – though not always – it is a wedding which provides participants with the excuse to construct an edible masterpiece which would not be out of place in a museum: the ingredients used in these creations, meanwhile – which are invariably subordinate to the aesthetic value – inevitably include absurd quantities of fats and sugar. It is precisely these aesthetic and calorific excesses which fuel the “mentalistic hedonism” discussed above: the voyeuristic pleasure of Food Porn legitimized by the notion that there exist certain situations in which normal controlled behaviour and moderation can be set aside.

In these shows – as in many others which foreground pleasure and the more playful dimension of food – the protagonists, chefs and expert pastry chefs are usually male, a detail which, as we shall demonstrate in the next section, has been widely discussed in Anglo-American literature on this topic.

3. Men and women who cook

Studies on the division of roles in cooking shows (Ketchum, 2004; Ray 2007; Corcoram, 2008) have placed the contexts in which men and women are seen to cook along a series of axes, because, as Adema has highlighted: “this is part of food television’s ambiguity: it sends mixed messages, blurring gender and spatial boundaries while simultaneously reinforcing traditional roles and expectations” (2000: 119). First is the nourishment/pleasure axis: women who cook on TV usually project a reassuring femininity associated with a caring role; for men, conversely, the preparation of food is linked to pleasure, and associated with special occasions. The language used further reinforces these

boundaries: the frequent reference by female cooks to their families (“my husband likes this recipe”, “my children enjoy it...”) is an example of this, whereas colourful expressions, exclamations and metaphors associated with pleasure and enjoyment are typically masculine (Ketchum, 2004). This difference is also reflected in the environment in which the two groups are seen to cook: females are typically portrayed in domestic settings, while males are filmed in shiny studios with an audience to whom the chef-presenter regularly winks (Corcoram, 2008). This dichotomy is even more manifest along the private/public axis: whereas women who cook are tied to the role of homemaker, men are often depicted outdoors, in search of exotic and horrific tastes (*Orrori da gustare (Bizarre Food, Discovery Channel-Travel & Living)*), seeking out and challenging popular traditional street food vendors (*Unti e bisunti* [Lard and grease], *DMAX*) or engaging in endurance tests which focus on the quantity of food consumed (*Men vs Food, National Geographic Channel/DMAX*). The latter concept, that of the challenge, represents a further important element of distinction between females and males in the context of food: women prepare it, men look at it and judge it and are permitted to consume it excessively and experience excessive pleasure because “men are supposed to have hearty, even voracious, appetites. It is the mark of the manly to eat spontaneously and expansively” (Bordo, 1993/97: 108). Men who enter the cooking world must seek to distance themselves as much as possible from female models as, Adema explains, their “display kitchen is the set on which a certain kind of masculinity is performed, almost as a caricature, precisely because the turf is recognizably feminine, in terms of both the kitchen and the cooking show” (2000: 119).

Women are likely to be associated with comfort food and home cooking. Even if women did most of the preparation, they were considered “cooks” not “chefs” as if their expertise was intuitive instead of learned (Corcoram, 2008). As Adler explains, “professionalism puts the male in a different light, his capabilities are assumed to be great, especially if he works under the name ‘chef’” (Adler, 1981: 46). This argument emphasizes that, while men can be cooks and still retain their masculinity, it must be within a certain scale. Either they can remain in the realm of solely festive cooking for the family, or they must become the complete opposite – a head chef with skill (Corcoran, 2008)

In the Italian versions of these formats on satellite or terrestrial television, as in the examples discussed above, the authority in the kitchen is always male⁵. In the Italian version of *MasterChef (Sky)* - the cooking competition for aspiring cooks - the jury is composed exclusively of men; the harshness with which the judges treat the contestants is so excessive that it has become the subject of parody. According to Ketchum, in fact, the chef must embody certain characteristics of that which Connell (1995) defines as the hegemonic male: audacity, charisma, arrogance (Ketchum, 2004: 24). Some protagonists of these shows are, indeed, considered to be, and presented as, super macho: Gordon Ramsay, for instance, yells and roars in every episode – insulting the poor unfortunates with whom he is working – and embodies the concept of authority associated with the status of male chef⁶. Italian television features a number of male protagonists – authoritative and attractive to varying degrees – who, as chefs, become judges of, or themselves participate in, culinary competitions; examples include Simone Rugiati, the presenter of *Cuochi e Fiamme* [Chefs and Flames,] (*La7/Lei TV*) who went on to become a famous reality television personality, the now famous Alessandro Borghese who epitomises the metrosexual male, and Chef Rubio, an ex Rugby champion, who travels around challenging street-food legends.

Studies that have dealt with the relationship between food and gender in television programmes argue that it is extremely important how the context in which “doing gender” and in which the division of roles is represented and reinforced (Cairns, Johnston Baumann, 2010). For example, the aforementioned transmission *I Menu di Benedetta* [Benedetta’s menu] (*La7*) has an evening version in which the protagonist has to cook dinner in a few minutes, thus representing the incompatibility between the times for care and working times for women (Nathanson, 2009). However, not for all authors is the gender division between Food-Work and Food-Leisure so defined. Nigella Lawson, famous all over the world for her cookbooks, now in Italy with her transmission *In cucina con Nigella* (*Nigella Kitchen, Real Time*), is considered the representative par excellence of Food Porn (famous are

⁵ With the exception of some figures such as Laura Ravaioli, the historic and charismatic protagonist of the *Gambero Rosso*

⁶ In December 2012, *GQ* magazine dedicated a cover to Carlo Cracco (one of the judges of Italian *Masterchef*) entitled “sex food & rock'n roll” in which he was depicted – dressed and arrogant – in the arms of a nude model who was holding a large fish.

her expressions of pleasure when tasting a food she has prepared). Discussed for years as part of the debate on post-feminism, having staged a woman once again “angel of the hearth” (Hollows, 2003) she, however, states that “My recipes are designed to turn you into a true queen of the house, capable of preparing delicacies in an instant, without stress, without any effort, just the pleasure of turning on the oven”. On the other hand, a study of Canadian men with significant household cooking responsibilities showed that the gender division between Food-Work and Food-Play is more complex and articulated and most importantly it is intersected by other variables, first and foremost by social position (Szabo, 2013). Indeed, the other well known cook of the digital television landscape (as Nigella looks more like the lady of the house than a chef) is called Csaba della Zorza and in her transmission (at first on *Alive TV* now *Real Time*), as well as teaching the art of receiving and etiquette at the dinner table, cooks dishes that manage to combine and hybridize different culinary traditions together, showing the upper middle-class expertise of being able to move with equilibrium between tradition and innovation, between local and global.

Even in *Cortesie per gli Ospiti* [Kindnesses for guests] (*Real Time*) – a transmission in which two challengers, helped by an assistant, must demonstrate that they are capable of not only cooking, but also of suitably accommodating their guests⁷ - the most interesting aspect is the reaffirmation of bourgeois power in culturally defining what is appropriate and what is not. The winners (male or female) are generally middle-class or upper middle class, the undisputed holders of taste (with some rare exceptions for gay people and artists, the only ones allowed to enter the competition), while the challengers are people of diverse social position who, in trying to compete, demonstrate that they do not have the appropriate cultural capital. The gaffes and mistakes of the latter, highlighted in moments of fake backstage by the jury, show that, despite these efforts, it is impossible for those who do not belong to a certain cultural elite to have access to the right codes⁸ and to move competently through the symbolic boundaries.

4. War on fat

An interesting figure in the Italian context is Marco Bianchi, upon whom the title of researcher-chef is conferred because of his dual qualifications as expert nutritionist and cook. In *Tesoro salviamo i ragazzini* [Honey let's save the kids] (*Foxlife*) the researcher-chef enters the homes of obese children to help their families and solve their problems. The structure of this show is reminiscent of many makeover or lifestyle programmes: the expert goes into the family home, observes the parenting errors and sets a number of objectives. The parents are told (or reminded) that it is their responsibility to “change their children’s future”: a future which is currently overshadowed by health risks associated with bad dietary habits. The discursive style of this programme is similar to that of many others of this genre; the moment of transition from food to health issues is, however, particularly reminiscent of *Il cibo ti fa bella* (*You are what you eat*, *Real Time*). In this format too, following an inspection of the protagonist’s home and habits, the individual is brought to a room (located in a clinic), made to undress, and is then confronted with the damage that their bad behaviour is doing to their bodies. Their biological age – usually at least ten years greater than their actual age – is then revealed. At this point the protagonist usually cries, because they are being reprimanded not only for the crime of being overweight, but also for damaging and degrading their bodies, thus demonstrating a lack of control and responsibility in their self-management. Following this moment of humiliation, the road to redemption, towards a new lifestyle, is mapped out. Typically – despite their initial good intentions and enthusiasm – the protagonist has a moment of weakness midway through their journey. This is because, as the narrator

⁷ Simmel’s essay on the sociology of the meal that analyzes precepts about eating and drinking, “that do not concern the inessential aspect of food as material, but that of the *form* in which it is consumed” is one of the first works that deals with food as a social fact (cited in Sassatelli 2004), moreover, for Elias too, the cultural rites linked with the assumption of food, with being together around a banquet and with the rules of behaviour that table companions learn throughout their lives, the etiquette of behaviours at table is one of the main interest of the study of civilization, Elias (1939-66).

⁸ In contemporary societies the symbolic domain uses cultural differences to sanction and legitimise social inequalities; it is thus that practices of symbolic *distinction* are traced in food, in clothes, in home furnishings and in lifestyles in which a subterranean logic of inclusion and exclusion is concealed. This is a logic that is channelled through *taste*, a sort of incorporation of the social structure that classifies perception of the social world and that defines the objects of aesthetic pleasure, Bourdieu (1979/83) cf. also Meglio (2012).

explains, their bad habits are by now so deeply entrenched that laziness and lack of discipline could yet defeat them; it is at this point that a team of experts intervene to help the protagonist to remotivate themselves and achieve ultimate redemption. This is followed by the formulaic closing scene in which a mirror is produced to reveal the protagonist's new self: slimmer, well-groomed and well-dressed. This is met by applause from family and friends who, like a jury, approve the transformation/redemption.

A prominent form of these programmes is what Moseley (2000) calls "makeover television", which is "a term applied to shows in which members of the public are beneficiaries of some expert advice or treatment" (Giles, 2002: 606). Generally, lifestyle and makeover programmes have an entertainment element in them, largely through the chronological narrative which produces a storytelling theme in each programme, encouraging viewers to watch and see the transformation of the self" (Smith, 2010).

Lifestyle and makeover programmes are part of the so-called reality television genre⁹. Ouellette and Hay (2008) argue that reality TV functions as a cultural technology or resource that "cultivates" good citizenship through self-governance: "reality TV shows us how to conduct and 'empower' ourselves as enterprising citizen" because "the citizen is now conceived as an individual whose most pressing obligation to society to empower her or himself privately" (Ouellette, Hay, 2008: 2-3). Although these programmes often focus on individuals' crises and concerns, they rarely address the social inequalities of socio-economic status. TV Interventions and Makeover TV programmes offer interventions for those who are "outside the norm" or in need of self-improvement. A common thread throughout a range of programmes is the need to exercise self-discipline and self-management. Show participants' problems are depicted as resulting from personal error or fault rather than economic or social problems because lifestyle television supports a neo-liberal ideology that privatizes social services and emphasizes individual responsibility.

The rhetoric of responsibility for oneself is, in fact, common to many formats of this kind: consider, for example, *Adolescenti XXL* [Adolescents XXL] (*Real Time*) or *Teenager in crisi di peso* [Teenagers in weight crisis] (*MTV*) which reproduce these concepts and place an emphasis on self-determination which is reinforced in the promotional slogans. These shows adhere to the same narrative structure described above: the initial failure foregrounded by framing devices and editing, the suffering necessary to achieve redemption, the moment of weakness which emphasises the extent to which the individual is prone to such vices and the final victory, with the inevitable comparison of before and after pictures (Stagi, 2010). It is particularly significant that adolescents are chosen as protagonists: this is the category most at risk of eating disorders (for example, Gordon, 1990; Onnis, 2000), but teenagers also represent the most potential and have the greatest responsibility to construct and determine their future, something which they often do symbolically through working on their bodies (for example, Le Breton, 2005).

The attraction of these programmes probably lies in the shock effect produced by the sight of such excess; perhaps even more compelling, however, is the experience of tracking another human's battle with themselves, a characteristic of the postmodern world which considers the achievement of a slim body and control over oneself as a victory.

The Biggest Loser is one of the most popular programmes of its kind; it has been hugely successful in the United States and a number of seasons have been broadcast in Italy (*Cielo*). This show features obese people competing with each other to lose weight: the person who loses the most wins an enormous sum of money. Aside from the more negative effects that displays of extreme weight loss can produce for members of the audience who assume that the practices engaged in are correct and therefore imitate them (for example Blaszkievicz, 2009), it should be noted that, in this programme as in others of this kind, attention is focused exclusively on individual responsibility; obesity is never depicted as a social or cultural problem the origins of which may be traced to genetic or environmental problems, rather it is portrayed exclusively as a personal failure (Sender and Sullivan, 2008: 582)¹⁰.

⁹ In makeover programmes in comparison to lifestyle ones, the process of transformation to which the participant is submitted and of which the spectator becomes witness is more accentuated; that is the makeover gender is able to narrativize "the power of transformation" and to make it "the spectacle of the reveal" (Dover, Hill, 2007, cited in Perrotta 2013).

¹⁰ Michelle Obama has declared that it is her favourite show as she believes it contributes to motivating people towards good eating and healthy habits, an issue which she is particularly committed to; for this reason she has hosted participants of the show in the White House.

These results are troublesome because they clearly show that not only is the media successfully perpetuating negative stereotypes of obesity, but the audience is not engaging actively with the content and opposing these messages. “This individual willpower and failure is linked to personal responsibility, which is similarly achieved in *The Biggest Loser* through its personal narratives. The programme’s contestants are forced to tell ‘their’ story, providing personal reasons for their weight problems” (Blaszkiwicz, 2009: 32).

5. The spectacularization of anorexia

As well as so-called lifestyle and makeover programmes, increasingly more shows are being produced which foreground Eating Disorders and food obsessions in various ways (*Il cibo è il mio nemico* [Food is my enemy], *Lei TV*, *Ossessioni alimentari* [Eating obsessions], *Lei TV*); these programmes feature individuals who have pathological relationships with nourishment: from eating disorders such as anorexia and bulimia to addictions to consuming certain substances like plastic, glass or detergents. These shows, like others discussed above, generally create a medical context in order to construct the figure of the patient, thus distancing the sufferer from the person acting as expert. The person suffering from an eating disorder is made to undress, or is dressed in pyjamas or a tracksuit, while the person treating them is depicted in a shirt or suit to signify their role (Riva, 2012). This process of “medicalization” is an important device which serves to set the scene for the inferiorization and infantilization of the participant and to attribute power and expert knowledge to the person treating them. The concept of expert knowledge is also fundamental to talk shows and investigative programmes on eating disorders; in these contexts the presenter or interviewer combines the opinions of experts with interjections by members of the public, with the degree of reflexivity surrounding the circulation of information on medicalization typical of the modern age (Smith, 2010). The references to expert knowledge, in the context of the individual’s story, as well as the language used by the person conducting the interview, further reinforces this sense of “infantilization”.

Certainly, the process to which those suffering from obesity and binge eating are subjected is significantly more infantilizing than that experienced by those suffering from anorexia. A number of authors (Malson and Ussher 1996 as cited in Allen, 2008) have suggested that anorexic women are subjected to a process of “romantic victimization” built upon expectations and characteristics associated with the construction of a feminine identity as synonymous with fragility and dependence. The emaciated, weak body testifies to the degree of suffering which the anorexic person is able to endure, and evinces self-control both in terms of instincts and desires. It “constructs the feminine position of a beautiful, thin, heroine, who will, after some trials and tribulations, be rewarded with the attentions . . . of her prince” (Allen, 2008: 590); in this context her prince is the doctor or the psychologist who will heal her.

If, on the one hand the anorexic figure can evoke the concept of traditional femininity, on the other it also conjures up notions of a docile body, enslaved by self-discipline and self-control; it is for this reason that its spectacularization is so seductive and reassuring. A thin body speaks of a perfectly managed and healthy self, which becomes synonymous not only with morality but also with normality (Crawford 1994, as cited in Allen, 2008). The appeal of the anorexic subject position is based on its polar position within the fat–thin hierarchy, which is structured in part by the “new public health system” whose “disciplinary apparatuses [have] hierarchized the 'good' and the 'bad' subjects in relation to one another” (Foucault, 1979: 181, as cited in Vaz and Bruno, 2003: 277). The disciplinary success relies on the subjects internalizing this fat–thin hierarchy, and perceiving and evaluating their moral worth in relation to where their body ranks them. “Neo-liberal ideology situates the responsibility for health and body size in the hands of the individual; eliminating the role of the individual’s social context” (Allen, 2008: 595).

Conclusions

The Minnesota Study is the most important piece of research into the effects of dietary calorie restriction and weight loss on people of a normal size. The study, carried out by the University of Minnesota between the 19th November 1944 and 20th December 1945 (Keys et al. 1950, as cited in

Dalle Grave, 2012), was conceived of to evaluate the physiological and psychological effects of a severe and prolonged restriction of dietary calories. Of the 100 men who volunteered, 36 were selected on the basis of their high levels of physical and psychological health and their evident motivation (Keys et al. 1950, as cited in Dalle Grave, 2012). Though notable variations were recorded with regard to individual responses, all of the men who participated underwent dramatic physical, psychological and social transformations. For some eating behaviour researchers (for example, Dalle Grave, 2012) this study represented a fundamental step towards understanding eating behaviour disorders, particularly as it demonstrated that some obsessive behaviours associated with sufferers of eating disorders are the consequence of dietary restrictions and are not previously existent cognitive characteristics.

In the context of this concluding section, this study is of particular importance as it demonstrates that “normal” people who are subjected to rigid dietary restrictions – that is to the mental state of an anorexic – develop pathological behaviours with regard to food and their bodies.

The behavioural effects recorded among the participants included: eating rituals (eating very slowly, cutting food into small pieces, mixing foods in a bizarre way, ingesting boiling hot food), reading cookery books and collecting recipes, increasing their intake of coffee, tea, spices, chewing gum and water, bulimic episodes and increased levels of physical exercise to avoid the reduction of calorie content in the diet. In 2003-2004, 18 of the 36 participants were still alive and were interviewed by researchers from The Johns Hopkins School of Medicine in Baltimore (Kalm and Semba 2005, as cited in Dalle Grave, 2012). The participants - who at the time of the interview were more than eighty years of age - spoke passionately about the experience and provided a more comprehensive picture of the experiment. The interviewees declared that, in the central phase of the experiment, food became an obsession for all participants and that in the rehabilitation phase many had moments of excessive eating, some became obese, and three went on to become famous cooks (Dalle Grave, 2012).

Those who work in the field of eating disorders are acutely aware of the recurrence of these behaviours in people who are impacted by them. Those who suffer from eating disorders are obsessed with the thought of food: they collect recipes, have extensive nutritional knowledge, and are often exceptional cooks. Their relationship with food is absolutely pornographic: they nourish themselves with visual images and aesthetic constructions of food that they will never eat. Kati Morton, an expert on Eating Disorders who has become very well known for her effective prevention campaigns on YouTube¹¹, uses the previously discussed premise of Food Porn to explain the allure of cooking programmes for those with Eating Disorders: baking shows, cooking shows and cooking competitions can all be defined as Food Porn. She also introduces another interesting concept, that of “Eating Disorder Porn”: this category encompasses all shows that foreground diets, weight loss and body makeovers. *Biggest Loser* (Sky), *Supersize Vs. Superthin* (Real Time) and *You are What you Eat* (Real Time) are all examples of Eating Disorder Porn. Those who suffer from Eating Disorders spend hours on end watching Food and Eating Disorder Porn because, as Morton explains, these shows feed the disorder, they serve to stimulate and reinforce the “mentalist hedonism”. It is, at this point, worth considering why Eating Disorder and Food Porn serve the same functions for those who do not suffer from Eating Disorders¹².

The conceptualisation of anorexia as metaphor for an era (Tyler, Wilkinson, 2007) is by now well-established: Giddens defined it as the “pathology of reflexive self-control in late modernity” (1991) while Turner spoke of Eating Disorders as manifestations of a “somatic society” replete with cultural contradiction (1996). Less scholarly attention has, perhaps, been paid to the extent to which Eating Disorders penetrate many and various strata of society and culture and represent the tip of the iceberg of with regard to behaviours which are, by now, prolific throughout the population. This should not come as a surprise as such behaviours represent the extremification – the sometimes caricatural aspect – of practices which are diffuse on a social level. As has been comprehensively discussed by a number of authors - drawing on the concepts of ‘civilization’ (Elias, 1978) or self-discipline (Foucault, 1977, 1979) - “maintaining bodily self-control and subjective integrity is dependent upon the successful management of abjection” (Kristeva, 1982 as cited in Tyler, Wilkinson, 2007: 541). In this respect,

¹¹ <http://www.youtube.com/user/KatiMorton>

¹²The reference to the category of DSMIV in this sense is provocative. For the ways in which diagnostic criteria and 'psy' disciplines discursively construct the anorexic position and contribute to the definition of self as an ill or normal person, see Allen, 2008

Hughes (2000) has noted how, as Western societies have become more and more body conscious, the moral, healthy subject has been increasingly linked to the individual entrepreneur who cares for him or herself: this is what Hughes (2000: 17) terms “vigilant body”. If we accept Turner’s “earlier contention that we are urged to govern ourselves through bodily self-discipline and the maintenance of embodied boundaries, this modern (rationalized) body is governed according to a ‘doctrine of obligation’: we are required to continually re-invest in our individual bodily capital while at the same time maintaining our bodies as discrete, closed and controlled entities” (1996: XIX as cited in Tyler ,Wilkinson, 2007: 542). If, as has been stated above, the anorexic body represents the docile body - self-disciplined, controlled par excellence - it is no surprise that it has become the ideal model. The matter, however, does not end here: anorexia has, in fact, over the last few years become “a discourse” in the Foucaultian sense of the concept, penetrating various cultural strata as a discursive practice; in this sense the work of Tyler and Wilkinson - which demonstrates how anorexia is becoming a basic concept for new forms of organisational culture - is exemplary and illuminating. If we were to apply a Foucaultian framework to that which has been analysed in this article, it could be viewed as a collection of discursive practices which contribute to the construction and establishment of a social order. Indeed, as has been demonstrated, discourses surrounding food contribute to reinforcing the hierarchical distinctions between the masculine and the feminine, between the caregiver and the cared-for, between those who manage food and those who succumb to it.

The “freak shows” (shows which put excess and bizarre situations on display) reinforce the representation and perception of the boundary between normal and pathological: the sight of, and repulsion towards, the notion of “excess” positions the eating disorder sufferer as “other”, while simultaneously contributing to the romanticization of disciplinary discourses surrounding diet and the slender body (Bordo, 1993/97). The reality TV formats are technologies of the self which contribute to constructing the neo-liberal concept of the individual’s responsibility for his/her destiny. Programmes of lifestyle on alimentary choices and also cooking shows reassure consumers that know they have to show that they are competent in a context where the increased possibility of choice is also accompanied by a decrease of ancient knowledge. Some cooking transmissions then, especially those of pastry confectionery, can also have a pornographic function for those who, subscribing to the ideal of the slim body and a dietary regime, can only fantasize about pleasure and desire or who, as a study by Phillipov (2012)¹³ has demonstrated, may succumb to a moment of weakness – a bulimic crisis – when faced with the foodstuffs regarded as forbidden. In the context of the contradictory nature and dissonance of messages which simultaneously promote control and consumption, anorexic or bulimic behaviours, or control or fatalism, may develop¹⁴.

I would like to conclude by reiterating that it is society that fosters the behaviours and behavioural effects characteristic of eating disorders (Stagi, 2002) and, once more, I maintain that it is the duty of the sociologist to discuss this issue (Stagi, 2008) until, as Foucault or Bourdieu would say, the individual can develop coping mechanisms, or more effective responses, to deal with the role which society imposes on them.

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¹³ Drawing on data from various research projects, this work demonstrates that when shows such as *MasterChef* are broadcast, the consumption of certain products used in the programme increase considerably.

¹⁴ Phillipov's article draws on the data of a study on risk perception which shows that 27% of all respondents felt that because health advice seemed to be ever changing, the best approach is to 'ignore it all and eat what you want' (2012).

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