Beyond Language. The Semiotics of Marginal Foods

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Abstract. This paper seeks to explore, through the lens of semiotics, the narrative of "strange foods" as a constitutive element in the construction of the "other's" identity. We will examine the symbolic spaces where power structures regulate the movement of "other foods," their marginalized communal sharing, or their rhizomatic proliferation in distinctive urban areas (such as Queens). We will analyze a range of texts and images, spanning from international regulatory legislation to social media campaigns by populist parties, to reconstruct the modalities through which foods originating from external sources (immigrant foods, novel foods) are signified and regulated within the EU and US contexts. We conclude by engaging with Deleuze's (1969) exploration of the relationship between eating and speaking, illustrating the connections between linguistic practices and food consumption. Building on this idea, we will explore why discussions of the "other", the enemy frequently begin with the characterization of their language – foreign sounds – and extend to their "strange" food.

1. Introduction. "Eat as You Speak"

Within any given culture, certain foods are perceived as strange, prohibited, or tolerated. Yet, in contemporary consumer society (Codeluppi 2022), foods increasingly become 'strange' through the inversion or reconfiguration of their original narrative frameworks, often recontextualized within more dominant discursive practices: the food of "others" as viewed through the lens of "us"; the food of immigrants, which supposedly should not pass border controls; foods that are redefined as inedible; and the ways in which culinary traditions undergo metamorphosis within new socio-cultural settings.
This paper seeks to explore, through the lens of semiotics, the narrative of "strange foods" as a constitutive element in the construction and in the regulation of the "other's" identity.
Our analysis begins with the observation of a symptomatic and consistent reference to the food of "others," to what they would or would not eat, within the main populist discourses (Laclau 2005; Landowski 2016; Cervelli 2018) in both Europe and America. Particularly noteworthy is the symbolic phrase from the Trump-Harris television debate during the last U.S. elections: "In Springfield, they are eating the dogs. The people that came in, they are eating the cats. They're eating – they are eating the pets of the people that live there"[1]. Yet there are numerous other examples within popular culture, such as in Italy, where the opening of the first Chinese restaurants was stigmatized, depending on regional contexts, for allegedly leading to the slaughter of dogs, cats, rats, and even nutria[2], the latter of which

[1] www.bbc.com/news/articles/c77l28myezko. We have consulted this article, along with all subsequent web references, with the last verification conducted on April 20, 2025.

[2] A basis of reality is provided by reports surrounding the controversial Yulin Festival (www.ilmessaggero.it/primopiano/esteri/cina_carne_cane_festival_yulin-1069598.html; www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-33220235). Even moderate politicians have stumbled into controversies regarding the stereotype of Chinese people as "mouse eaters" (www.rainews.it/archivio-rainews/articoli/zaia-cinesi-mangiano-topi-vivi-ambasciata-protesta-lui-si-scusa-6630af83-073d-49b3-8e60-0f47339f672d.html).
Additional references include: www.corriere.it/animali/cards/nutria-si-puo-mangiare-cosa-c-sapere-roditore-latinos-che-ha-colonizzato-mondo/nutrie-si-possono-mangiare.shtml; www.vicenzae.org/it/lo-sapevate-che/97-vicentini-magnagati-ma-davvero#:~:text=Questa%20volta%20sono%20i%20veneziani,mangiati;

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subsequently became food in certain areas of the Po Valley, generating widespread media disgust among proponents of traditional cuisine. Even among cities within Veneto, the label "cat eaters" attributed to residents of Vicenza reflects disdain for a practice typical of famine periods, which was, in reality, widespread across much of the Po plain.

Accusations of potato consumption, beyond being the subject of Van Gogh's famous painting *The Potato Eaters* (1885), often resonate as an insult exchanged between social classes or even nations. These examples could be multiplied and traced back to distant peoples and eras (Lévi-Strauss 1964).

European Union policies (Desoucey 2010) regarding the national heritage of food and issues such as the use of insects[3] and cultured meats constitute another particularly interesting field of analysis, especially concerning the highly sensationalized criticisms posed by populist discourses. The European electoral campaign of 2024 featured an opposition between crickets and pigs, locusts and corn, laboratory flavors and authentic tastes. By 2023, the war against insects and the accompanying conspiracy theories had entered official political debate in countries like the Netherlands and Poland[4].

Consider, as well, the media attention garnered by activities related to hygienic-food controls, whether at customs or in ethnic restaurants. In Italy, the D-Max channel offers two distinct formats modeled after American and Australian programs, such as *Border Control* and *Operazione Nas*[5]. The success of the former even led to the proposal of a Northern European edition.

These television programs bring to the screen a biopolitical discourse that underpins the foundation of modern Western democracies (Foucault 1976; Deleuze 1990; Landowski 2008), including sanitary, hygienic, and food controls. The emphasis on maximum visibility and control over food – imported, exported, marketed, and served – fully belongs to the domain of modern police sciences, an expression of political liberalism and state formation[6].

Beyond the virtuous application of sanitary protocols (e.g., the ISO 4833-2:2013/Cor1:2014 protocol for microbiological food chain control and its subsequent 2017 edition[7]), the media emphasize the narration of these protocols, stripping them of bureaucratic monotony and coloring them with the lights of television, YouTube videos, and dissemination via Facebook and X (formerly Twitter).

One can also reflect on the activities of the European Food Safety Authority, which monitors animal and plant diseases, food preparation materials, and sanitary standards (EFSA 2024). The Food and Drug Administration and the U. S. Department of Agriculture regulate the American market in parallel. A thorough reading of the sections related to prohibited foods and preparation methods[8] offers a clear vision of the regulation of foreign, "other," or ethnic foods: a neutral, unremarkable language describing a systematic, bureaucratic, and pervasive approach.

Again, the focus here is not the correctness or sanitary value of these regulations but their actual comprehension by citizens, media, and politicians – i.e., non-experts.

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www.european-union.europa.eu/priorities-and-actions/actions-topic/food-safety_en;
www.ec.europa.eu/newsroom/sante/items/712990/en;
www.npr.org/2023/03/31/1167550482/how-a-conspiracy-theory-about-eating-bugs-made-its-way-to-international-politics.

[3] Regarding the sensationalism surrounding critiques of insect-based flours, see media texts such as: mediasetinfinity.mediaset.it/video/fuoridalcoro20222023/leuropa-fa-la-guerra-al-nostro-cibo-e-vuole-farci-mangiare-insetti_F312336201004C11.

[4] www.npr.org/2023/03/31/1167550482/how-a-conspiracy-theory-about-eating-bugs-made-its-way-to-international-politics. One can also observe the extensive debate on Quora: www.quora.com/Why-isnt-the-consumption-of-insects-a-popular-phenomenon-among-humans.

[5] www.dmax.it/programmi-dmax/border-control-italia;
www.dmax.it/programmi-dmax/operazione-nas;
www.dmax.it/programmi-dmax/border-security-nord-europa.

[6] In 2002, the European Parliament and the Council adopted Regulation (EC) No 178/2002 laying down the general principles and requirements of food law (General Food Law Regulation)" (www.food.ec.europa.eu/horizontal-topics/general-food-law_en).

[7] www.iso.org/standard/59509.html and https://www.iso.org/standard/63504.html.

[8] (www.ecfr.gov/current/title-21/chapter-I/subchapter-B/part-189).

In the collective reinterpretation, often fostered by certain media, "others" are depicted as those who eat insects (Giannitrapani 2017, 2018), mice, dogs, synthetic meats, and peculiar concoctions, whereas "we" are different – essentially, "the opposite" of them. Food, along with its preparation, consumption (table manners), commercialization and promotion (Ventura Bordenca, Costanzo 2024), spatial placement within the home and city (Giannitrapani 2021), as well as its temporal organization within the day and year, serves as a cornerstone of identity formation (Montanari 2004; Albala 2013; Vigarello 2013). These are mechanisms through which we manage the relationship between culture and nature, crafting our notions of both, as well as our lifestyles, comprising tastes, aversions, culinary possibilities, and dietary prohibitions (Lévi-Strauss 1968).

Thus, it logically follows that food also generates differential and relational systems, creating cultural distinctions regardless of whether we frame them as opportunities for encounter (*to knock*) or conflict (*to knock against*).

European cuisine, with its profound influence on the American culinary world, is, according to Montanari (2010), founded on the negotiation – often violent – between Roman cuisine (characterized by vegetables, bread, wine, and olive oil) and that of the Germanic (focused on pork, lard, and milk). The richness of European cuisine arise from the internal contradiction between a system aiming to culturally transform nature (Roman) and one centered on constructing a natural culture, immersed in nature (Germanic).

Germanics – those who speak a different language – are also those with a different diet. Food and language, symptomatically united, lie at the heart of processes of inclusion[9] and exclusion, acceptance and rejection of a culture, and, even more so, the representation of these dynamics.

What do food and language share? What makes "strange food" such a central reference point in post-media narratives of the "other"? How does food shape the definition of alterity and difference?

Our analysis does not focus on dietary prohibitions as internal factors within specific cultural or religious communities – in the Arab, Israeli, and Indian contexts (Bessière 2000; Aubaile, Bernard, Pasquet 2004; Bernoussi 2024), as well as in the anthropological reconstruction of so-called "wild" contexts (Douglas 1966; Lévi-Strauss 1964, 1966, 1968, 1971).

We will instead address the processes of interdiction and prescription within the dialogue between different cultural systems, demonstrating how the current Western self-narrative ultimately erases its own pluralistic origins, seeking either to neutralize genuine alterity or to project it outward (Hall 1973; Foucault 1976; Said 1978; Bhabha 1994).

We argue not only that major cultural identities are constructed around precise dietary choices (national cuisines) but also that these identities and choices are reinforced and specified through differential relationships with other identities – defined by different tastes and aversions, affirmations, and rejections (Stano 2015a, 2015b, 2018).

Globalization (Civitiello 2011) and migration intensify these links, moving the confrontation and clash between food identities from outside geopolitical borders to within the social body (Greco 2014; Boero 2019). Within this framework, immigrant food, the quintessential "strange" food scrutinized by border controls and health authorities, risk to be confined to a private dimension – or subjected to a process of re-signification.

Before arriving at these structural aspects, we will first establish the epistemological foundations of the categories and concepts underpinning our analysis.

In the first paragraph, we aim to clarify the binding yet ambiguous nature that links food to language: food as language and as a form of communication (Barthes 1961; Lévi-Strauss 1968; Fabbri 1991), language that speaks of food through media or table discourse (Mangano, Marrone 2013; Marrone 2014), but also the common physiological origin that connects eating and speaking, forming a process rich in overlaps (Deleuze 1969).

In the second paragraph, we will do so starting from Lévi-Strauss's genetic analyses of the culinary triangle (Mendel 2015), but we will demonstrate how an additional semiotic processing is necessary through the use of Greimas' semiotic square, specifically its epistemic and deontic components (Greimas,

[9] Inclusion or, maybe, appropriation: see Basso Fossali, Le Guern (2018).

Courtes 1979). This will help us identify how the "strangeness" of a food emerges within the process of food signification and how this otherness can be addressed through identity dynamics, either inclusive or prohibitive (Petrilli, Ponzio 2019).
In the final part of this work, we will apply the previously introduced semiotic square, grounded in the context of contemporary consumer society and its forms of communication, as well as the geographical displacement of certain areas linked to the preparation and commercial sharing of "strange" dishes (around train stations, ethnic neighborhoods of large cities).
In this study, our analytical focus is deliberately circumscribed to the discursive mechanisms operative within European and North American contexts. This delimitation does not arise from an ascription of ontological precedence to these regions; rather, it is predicated on the observation that they exhibit the most extensive and consequential instantiation of consumer society as a comprehensive economic-political, socio-cultural, and medial paradigm. Drawing upon the seminal contributions of several scholars (Appadurai 1996; Mbembe 2001, 2017; Mignolo 2011), we posit a gradual yet discernible diffusion of this model into ostensibly non-Western settings, including Japan, South Korea, Australia, and significantly, diverse social strata within nations undergoing rapid economic development. We conceptualize the "global West" as an ensemble of often unacknowledged and subtle processes of soft power and cultural signification emanating from the proliferation of neoliberal frameworks and the surveillance and security rationales (Foucault 1975; Deleuze, Guattari 1980) that delineate symbolic, identity-based, and economic boundaries. While the most overt and vociferous manifestations of the narratives under scrutiny are undeniably evident in the ascendant populist drift – which we consider a mature expression of the aforementioned logics – the underlying processes in play transcend mere populism. Indeed, populism represents a symptom, a superficial eruption, of a more deeply entrenched, pervasive, and collective discourse[10] – largely unconscious and non-individual – fostered by the societies of control and globalized consumption as a protective apparatus (Foucault 1976) against their intrinsically ambivalent nature: the simultaneous defense of one's own identity and the colonization and assimilation of the other's.
The imaginary (Lacan 1954) underpinning public discourses, the marketing of multiculturalism, and democratic globalization generates and disseminates a range of significations, the mechanisms of whose production and operation we seek to elucidate. Our focus on the delineated geographical perimeter undoubtedly constrains the heuristic scope of the present work; however, it affords the opportunity for a more profound investigation of the contexts characterized by the most significant migratory flows and the concomitant formation of marginalized identities and dedicated urban enclaves. It is solely for this reason that we prioritize the analysis of the presence of "strange foods" within contemporary consumer societies over other global contexts.
Often, we witness a forced privatization of the culinary traditions of immigrants, which tends to remove from public view what is now labeled as strange: a process entirely opposite to the media spectacularization of our dishes or those that have now been assimilated by them (Foner, Rath, Duyvendak, van Reekum 2014; Martiniello, Rath 2014; Hagemans, Hendriks, Rath, Zukin 2015).
Given the vastness of sociological references, this article will be limited to laying the foundations for future in-depth studies, proposing itself as a theoretical platform. For this reason, we will present some particularly interesting cases, emerging from a much broader socio-semiotic research based both on a

[10] Beyond the coterie of avowed proponents of populism – a demographic constituting a demonstrably expanding stratum within our societies – no individual would readily embrace the enunciations and semantic nexus that we shall delineate with respect to "strange food." To the contrary, a significant number will likely voice opposition, evidencing the enactment of antithetical behaviors through the active promotion of immigrant culinary traditions and their philological fidelity. Others, even those in close proximity to such stances, will engage in a nuanced interplay of dire et ne pas dire (Ducrot 1972). Our central contention is that these diverse attitudes are not spontaneous but rather the product of critical re-elaboration, representing a reactive stance vis-à-vis a semiotic substrate from which we, at best, demarcate our position. Crucially, that which stands in opposition is invariably relational to that which it negates. The Deleuzian-Guattarian concept of collective enunciation (Deleuze, Guattari 1980), subsequently elaborated and amplified by Fabbri (2020) in his analysis of discursive voices and the viral propagation of beliefs, forms the fundamental hermeneutic framework of this thesis.

series of excellent existing works in the individual fields we have referenced (Appadurai 1981; Lehrer 1991; Parasecoli 2004, 2014; Marrone, Giannitrapani 2013; Montanari 2013; Stano 2015b; Greco 2014; Danesi 2016, 2018; Leone 2018; Cavallini, Riley 2019; Ventura Bordenca 2020; Mangano 2020, 2023; Grgic, Höglund 2024)[11], and on the semiotic reading of a range of public discourses, popular narratives, websites, social media pages and groups, and TV programs.

2. Eating or Speaking?

One aspect that strengthens and complicates the discursive nature of food is the tight connection that Western culture reserves for it with language, the element that has most represented the genesis of culture in opposition to nature, humanity in opposition to animality, and also a specific culture in opposition to others. As is well known, "barbarian" was, and perhaps still is, the one who does not speak my language and produces almost ferine, unarticulated sounds.
In the various disciplines that constitute the Western episteme (particularly philosophy, sociology, anthropology, biology, and physiology), there is a symptomatic link between the dimension of language and that of food, between speaking and eating: as if eating represented both a "this side" and a "beyond" of language. Two processes that intertwine, seemingly sharing a common physiological and symbolic nature. Deleuze clearly captures this in Logique du sens (1969) when he defines language and the birth of meaning. Drawing on a psychoanalytic tradition (Abraham 1924; Klein 1928; Lacan 1966) and anthropological (Lévi-Strauss) approach that had repeatedly addressed the paradox of the oral apparatus as the unique place from which two significant and cognitive processes originate, Deleuze emphasizes that:

> A mouth that speaks, but the sound has ceased to be the noise of the body eating, pure orality to become the manifestation of a subject expressing itself […] language is made possible by what distinguishes it. What separates sounds from bodies makes sounds the elements for a language. What separates speaking from eating makes the word possible (Deleuze 1969, pp. 161, 165).

The origin of language, before the split between words and things, names and bodies (Foucault 1966), noises and articulated sounds (Deleuze 1968), the mouth is identified as the place where two dynamics overlap, both fundamental for defining the human: the mouth that speaks and the mouth that eats. This shared nature is not destined to disappear once and for all, except in analytical logical models and language theories, which, abstracting from any concreteness, end up failing to notice its constant re-emergence. Deleuze's entire work, even after his encounter with Guattari (Deleuze, Guattari 1980), continues to return to this ambivalence of language: not only is there a signification linked to the mouth that eats, but also a strong signification that connects, even blurring, the planes of alimentation and language.
By applying Deleuze's lens to Western philosophical discourse, we notice that Aristotle already observed this dual nature in a key passage from *De Anima* (II, 8, 420b 6-23). In this textual location, one of the focal points of anthropology and the relationship with the other is at stake: the difference between man and animal. The oral apparatus is both the origin of voice and thus verbal language, as well as taste, the act of eating. The tongue, teeth, larynx, and all the individual parts so thoroughly analyzed by Aristotle determine both the formation of vowels and consonants as well as the chewing and ingestion of food. The oral cavity is the organ – a point that strongly connects us to the animal – from which nourishment depends, in which choices of taste and disgust are made, leading to the creation of dietary and gastronomic styles. But, through evolution, it also becomes the place where phonemes originate and interpersonal communication takes shape. The anatomical, logical, and symbolic space is the same; the processes are two (eating and communicating).
Despite our habit of thinking of them as two culturally distinct planes, the act of eating is not an animal remnant within evolutionary ascent, but a cultural dimension that articulates itself like a language (Barthes 1961; Lévi-Strauss 1968):

[11] Sociosemiotic studies are complemented by sociological and intercultural analyses: Bessière (2000), Karaosmanoglu (2020).

> When acquiring food, consuming it, or making it consumed, modern man does not handle an object in a purely transitive manner; this food summarizes and transmits a situation, constitutes information, it is meaningful; this means that it is not simply the index of a more or less conscious set of motivations, but it is a true sign, that is, the functional unit of a communication structure (Barthes 1961, p. 49).

A structure, that is, an autonomous entity of internal dependencies (Hjelmslev 1963). Of communication, that is, related to the way in which man establishes his relationship with others, inside or outside what is deemed his social group. Nourishment is not just a primary biological necessity, but also, and above all, a system of significations that articulates a communication system, composed of fundamental units that oppose each other, much like a language: Barthes (1961) speaks of a protocol of uses, behaviors, situations, and dietary prescriptions. These units, analyzed through Jakobson's linguistic method, will be defined by Lévi-Strauss as "taste-structures": "Just as I think language, I believe the cuisine of a society can be analyzed into constituent elements that could be called 'taste-structures', which are organized according to certain structures of opposition and correlation" (Lévi-Strauss 1958, p. 103).

On the other hand, we must not forget, however, that there is not only food as language, but also languages about food: the myriad of gastronomic guides, television programs, digital blogs, the discourse of chefs and diners, photography and advertising, food-porn on social media (Pezzini 2006; Mangiapane 2014; Marrone 2014; Stano 2015c). A language that translates sensations, tastes, textures, and which, for this reason, in some way ends up betraying them: no word sums up the direct experience of the first taste, no review conveys the flavor. Something is lost, but something is also added. The discourse on food and food as discourse are two sides of the same topological structure.

Language and nourishment should not be seen as two parallel lines but as a "rhizome" that we can never fully untangle, rationalizing the presence of two abstract and autonomous processes. From this perspective, we can highlight why the definition of the other and the enemy (Eco 2011), which we address in this work, always touches these two aspects: their language, made of strange and incomprehensible sounds, but also their food traditions, disgusting and difficult to conceive.

To understand the interdiction and taboo surrounding strange food, it is certainly fundamental to consider Lévi-Strauss's analyses regarding the food triangle (1968). The heuristic value of Lévi-Strauss's analysis (1958, 1964, 1966, 1971), in our view, lies in the shift from considering food as an ontologically given entity to viewing it as the preparation of food (Mangano 2013) as a dynamic and transformative activity, which contributes to the construction of identity and collective meanings, but also to the creation of differential relationships among them. The relational difference between cultures is not only about identifying entities that are not to be eaten by one culture or another, but also about the different ways these same entities are prepared (Marrone 2014, p. 14). Lévi-Strauss (1962) emphasized that animals and natural beings are "good to think" before being "good to eat." It is not a matter of the functionalist observation (Harris 1985) of what is nutritious and what is not. It is values, symbols, and cultural meanings that generate tastes and dislikes, that encourage certain consumptions and prohibit others, that assimilate some practices and prevent others. It is not just the tastes (roasted, boiled, rotten) that generate the strangeness of a food, its interdiction. It is the relationships between these terms within everyday discursive practices (De Certeau 1980): preparing and consuming, commercializing and classifying food.

This important anthropological position still does not allow us to fully understand the interdictive and prescriptive mechanisms that distinguish foods, categorizing some under the label of strangeness (Douglas 1966). To do so, we need to highlight the generation of food meanings through the tools of narrative semiotics and socio-semiotics.

3. Methodological Parenthesis. The Deontic Dimension of the Square

Greimas's semiotic square constitutes the core of meaning generation and is based on a series of logical relationships of Aristotelian origin, now widely understood and established in the fields of semiotics (Traini 2006).

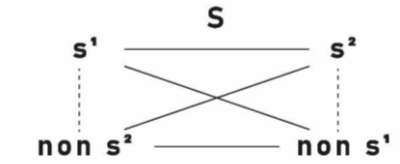

Fig. 1 – Greimas' Semiotic Square.

Less well-known, but perhaps even more important, is the intense focus Greimas dedicated to the modal, alethic, deontic, epistemic, and veridictory dimensions, which open the way for the foundation of categories such as manipulation and power, to name just a few:

> The semiotic procedure is somewhat different, since it is based first of all on a rather large number of concrete analyses which, moreover, are situated on the narrative plane, which transcend the discursive organizations of natural languages. Such studies have constantly shown the exceptional role that the modal values of wanting, having-to, being-able, and knowing – which can modalize being as well as doing– play in the semiotic organization of discourses. (Greimas, Courtes 1982, p. 194).

While aware of the reductive aspect of this choice, we prefer to focus here on the deontic, considering them most closely connected to the definition of a food as "strange". Future research will need to address this lacuna, demonstrating how epistemic categories, particularly those related to belief and the scientific foundation of discourse, operate in relation to the deontic and normative dimension.
Regarding the deontic dimension, the authors state:

> From the semiotic point of view, the deontic modal structure appears when the modal utterance which has having-to as predicate, overdetermines and governs the utterance of doing. The binary pro jection of this structure onto the semiotic square permits the formulation of the deontic modal category (*Ivi*, p. 73).

These terms, which are of great importance also within logical and philosophical-linguistic perspectives (Galvan 1991; Hilpinen 1981; Mally 1926; Gabbay, Horty, Parent 2013), acquire the following designations: prescription, prohibition, permissiveness, optionality. These categories modulate the dimension of must-do, indicating when a subject is required to do something (*having-to-do*), prohibited from doing something (*having-not-to-do*), permitted to do something without obligation (*not-having-not-to-do*), or given the option to do something, whose occurrence will not necessarily be required (*not-having-to-do*).

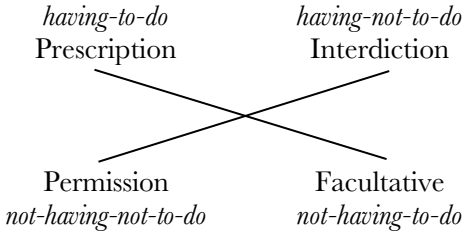

Fig. 2 – Deontic Square.

4. Mapping Food through the Semiotic Square in Consumer Society

The evolution of European gastronomic culture, as Montanari has illustrated, emerged through the delicate balancing of humanity's inherent aversion to the risks of consuming unfamiliar foods with its innate propensity for experimentation. This balance reflects a drive to control both time (seasonal products) and space (foods originating beyond the immediate vicinity). Such dynamics underpin phenomena like culinary exoticism, which has defined modern European history, the spice trade, and the integration of products from the Americas. Stano and Boutaud (2015) aptly refer to these processes as *practices of food translation*.

A visit to a supermarket chain in the USA or the UK, in Italy or elsewhere in Europe, in South Korea or Australia, exemplifies this quest to transcend time and space (Kolb 2022). The continuous availability of out-of-season or geographically distant products epitomizes this phenomenon. The emergence of "ethnic food" sections in these markets has created not only new commercial opportunities but also unprecedented forms of visual merchandising.

Beneath this dual impetus of discovery and globalization, consumer society is permeated by a latent, often unconscious, and seemingly naturalized discourse (Barthes 1957) surrounding the food of others. This is not a matter of a clear and distinct representation but rather an imaginary, a semiotic entanglement (frequently even unverbalized) of codifications and decodifications that produces the politically incorrect, largely populist and para-fascist image of "strange food".

This discourse, laden with dysphoric connotations, systematically valorizes these foods in a way that reinforces their otherness. Such narratives, with their racist undertones, represent a radical oversimplification of Western food history and its scientific dimensions, such as hygiene and preservation. Although seemingly banal, this discourse wields significant power in shaping socio-cultural representations and political decisions, extending far beyond contexts conventionally labeled as populist or racist.

Drawing on the scenarios and texts analyzed earlier, as well as extensive sociological and anthropological research, this discussion aims to uncover and analyze the semiotic square that sustains this narrative[12].

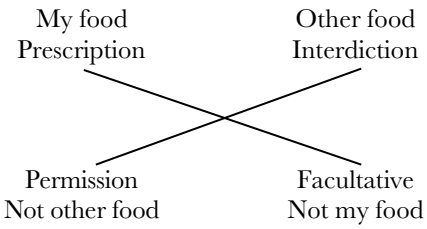

Fig. 3 – The Square of Strange Food in Consumer Society[13].

[12] We readily concede the existence of a process of identity closure even within other non-Western culinary traditions: the Chinese idea of "*goop*" (soulless cuisine) in fast food within the "*ti-yong*" (体用) thought, the food-related "*swadeshi*" in India as an ethical-political choice opposed to American cultural imperialism, the critique of American food acculturation encapsulated by the Iranian concept of "*gharbzadegi*". These latter, however, qualify as a reaction – not solely related to the Halal issue – to the culinary homogenization produced by globalization (Bryant et. al. 2013) rather than an active proposal; so much so that in Iran the "Mash Donald's" chain exists, revealing a certain fondness for hamburgers and fries (https://www.atlasobscura.com/articles/fast-food-in-iran?). Or, consider the currently prevailing fashion in China for Chinese-American cuisine with its take-away packs that never truly existed except in American television series (www.thechinaproject.com/2023/07/13/cultural-boon-or-abomination-american-chinese-food-arrives-in-beijing/). Indeed, the diffusion of Italian restaurants in China with offerings dedicated to the middle class (unlike the French, aimed at the upper class) reveals a notable dialectical sensitivity: as demonstrated by the well-known studies of DuBois (2024), Chinese culture sees the recognition and tasting, without mediation, of the food of the other as one of the most important forms of respect ("culinary respect").

[13] We prefer the terms "mine" and "other" over emic and etic, which are certainly less ethnologically problematic, to underscore how these semiotic processes produce veritable modalities of subjectivation (Guattari 1992), as argued in the Lacanian re-reading of Greimas's semiotic square (Lacan 1969).

This apparatus constitutes a heterogeneous assemblage of norms, moral evaluations, scientific and political discourses, beliefs, and commercial imperatives. As such, it is not a static or immutable entity but is subject to continuous transformations. Consequently, the empirical actors periodically at the center of debate (Halal food, novel foods, etc.) invariably operate within its structural framework, frequently acquiring novel significations and undergoing re-elaboration. As Lacan's discourse theory (1969) argues, drawing upon Greimas, each semiotic square functions as a machine that enables the movement and displacement of its constituent terms. This explains why numerous foods originally considered "other" have been progressively integrated and, conversely, why certain "native" foods recede from media prominence. This phenomenon is exemplified by particular dishes of Italian popular cuisine (tripe, offal, etc.), which, despite having a dedicated following, are often obscured by the dominant narrative surrounding "Made in Italy" and are frequently deemed unpalatable due to their textures and aromas[14].

"My food" category includes items that an individual identifies as edible and distinctly "theirs": what is prescribed by one's "maternal" cuisine as the foundation for health, growth, psycho-physical well-being, and the socialization of the meal. Such foods are culturally prescribed as essential to embodying one's identity.

However, the boundaries of this category are continually renegotiated. In Italy, for example, each province, and even each town, prescribes specific dishes that differentiate it from its neighbors – whether through variations in pasta and risotto preparation or in the emblematic cured meats of the region. Broader culinary constructs, such as "Italian," "French," "Nordic," or "American" cuisine, define key dishes and symbols that often evolve into stereotypes (Sassatelli 2007; Volli 2011; Montanari 2014).

Yet, the global trend toward transcending the borders of nation-states, propelled by supranational institutions and their imaginary constructs (e.g., European, American, or Western culture), has rendered such prescriptive frameworks increasingly ambiguous. For an Italian (a Venetian or Lombard, for instance), the prescription of pasta on workdays and risotto on festive occasions begins to expand to include hamburgers during evenings out with friends. For an American, this extension is potentially even broader, encompassing a variety of foods unified by a growing cultural assimilation that makes them "ours" – safe, normalized, and endorsed by familiar public figures. Even sushi exists in a fusion version (the California Roll) that is entirely "ours": indeed, while the consumption of authentic sushi and other dishes prepared according to their philological origins is now commonplace, this trend emerges from a conscious divergence from dominant assimilative culinary paradigms. This dimension necessitates examination through the lens of "not my" food, conceptualized as a domain for the exercise of individual dietary preferences and choices.

This category is by no means static or self-contained; indeed, no national cuisine, conceived as a monolithic entity, exists independently of the mediation of diverse regional encounters and contestations (one might recall, for instance, the pejorative label of "potato eaters"), or the skepticism exhibited by certain Western populations towards specific dishes from other Western culinary traditions (e.g., frogs, rabbit). Populist discourse tends to oversimplify these intricate dynamics, obscuring them through the imposition of seemingly stable, universalizing, and metaphysical constructs: "my" cuisine, the cuisine of the other. This discursive strategy ultimately reifies a set of virtual and latent presuppositions inherent in the overarching globalizing process of the so-called global West: namely, its purported internal homogeneity in contradistinction to the Global South, and the alleged uniformity of its semiotic systems when juxtaposed with the "other."

Drawing upon the aforementioned oversimplification, it is pertinent to observe the apparent existence of an imaginary construct designated as 'Western cuisine.' This construct subsumes principal dishes from occidental culinary traditions, alongside the incorporation of assimilated comestibles. Notwithstanding their intrinsic heterogeneity, these constituents appear to delineate a cohesive domain distinct from external culinary forms. From a French perspective, pasta or paella, while distinct, do not represent

[14] Indeed, Italian popular cuisine, with its utilization of offal and the extremities of various animals, exhibits several unforeseen similarities with certain types of ethnic food that many Italians appear to reject as repulsive. A comparable discourse would apply to the preparation of foie gras in France. The concealment of these dishes, or their production methods, within mainstream narratives of Italian cuisine presents a complicating factor for the model outlined herein, to which we will need to return in future discussions.

entirely unfamiliar fare; indeed, even a hamburger presents a readily identifiable, secure, and uncomplicated option in contrast to Mexican escamoles, South American mondongo, or Chinese bird's nest soup, for instance.

Accordingly with different authors (Appadurai 1981; Goody 1982), the Western cuisine (often opposed to "ethnic cuisine") is not merely a collection of recipes, but rather a cultural construct fostered by the globalization of consumption, the standardization of production processes, the convergence of regulatory protocols (such as sanitary and hygienic standards, caloric control), and the patterns of commercial exchange characteristic of European countries, the United States, and Canada, as well as other economies within the ambit of the global West[15]. Western cuisine is a myth[16], yet as such, it operates implicitly and conditions our gustatory preferences: it does not prescribe directly, but rather selects, codifies, and suggests. No French, Italian, or Spanish individual faces overt censure for opting otherwise and seeking out traditional ethnic restaurants; however, such a choice arises from a critical engagement with a myth and an unarticulated assumption.

In contrast, the "other food" (S2) remains unmistakably alien. I neither know it nor have tasted it; it appears unusual, perhaps even unpalatable. It is that which does not and should not belong to us, the food we do not consume and that, ideally, should remain uneaten – a food that is symbolically taboo. Denied its signifying nature, it is not even recognized as "food" by the perceiving subject (Stano 2016; Mangano 2017).

Its rejection is never merely a matter of taste; it remains repulsive to the smell and unsettling to the eye. There is no impulse to taste it; one recoils from it, regressing into a pre-recognition stage that we might call, borrowing from Freudian psychoanalysis, a "disavowal" (Lacan 1966). "I am not talking about food," asserts the populist (or the populist unaware of their own populism)[17], revealing a compulsive attachment that compels them to repeat the act of distancing themselves from this forbidden food. This dynamic, which we will return to, highlights a form of deconstruction within the semiotic dimension of reality – a retreat from the dynamic between form and substance back to amorphous matter (Hjelmslev 1963). Here, we cannot overlook the profound cinematic insight of Gilliam in *Brazil* (1985), where food is stripped of any figurative form, appearing as primordial pulp – a motif revisited by contemporary cinema in the two-part film *El Hoyo* (2019, 2024).

In this Western marginalization of rejected foods, a central role is played by the discursive mechanism Foucault (1976) identified in his studies on development of knowledge systems aimed at regulating the social body. Everything that once occupied the interstices of society – the private and unseen – must now be scrutinized, documented, and archived. Society remains secure only as long as we fully comprehend what resides within its borders, casting out anything that could endanger its continuity. Food, too, as it symbolically traverses the social body, becomes subject to regulatory operations – sometimes in the name of public health, sometimes to enforce market norms. The imagery of border control, of scanning baggage in search of forbidden foods, has even been transformed into a spectacle in various reality shows, where Western customs officers inspect the belongings of non-Western travelers. This isn't to downplay the pivotal role of prohibitions in hygiene and prevention; rather, this image[18] serves as a vehicle for a larger tendency to de-signify rejected foods, portraying them as amorphous, potentially hazardous matter before they are even considered unpalatable.

We are not referring to the concept of synthetic cuisine, the presence of which we acknowledge within many Western culinary traditions (e.g., stews, soups), but rather to a semiotic regression towards unformed, pre-linguistic, and pre-culinary matter. This is admittedly a metaphor, yet it describes the

[15] The current dispute regarding tariffs on food products, accompanied by accusations leveled by the U. S. government against European food standards, represents a significant fissure within this imaginary construct, which is presently nearing its fragmentation (www.euronews.com/my-europe/2025/04/11/trumps-wrong-european-foods-safer-than-american-says-eu-safety-chief).

[16] A reassurance marketed to tourists in food courts, metropolitan centers, and VIP airport lounges.

[17] Regarding extremist discourse, see Leone (2016, 2020, 2021).

[18] For a semiotic methodology of image analysis, the works of Dondero and Fontanille (2012) and Dondero (2020) are significant.

process of decoding that which the other (the immigrant) purportedly asks to be recognized as food. Frequently, however, this ultimately fails to be recognized as such.
The imagery or the phantasm of fusion: the psychoanalitics' fusion of gastronomic matter with gastric waste (the mouth-anus symbolic relation – Deleuze 1969), of food with organic refuse, has deep roots in popular literature and grotesque art, but also occupies a foundational place in socio-political discourse as we navigate relations with the other.
Reflecting on the semiotic square we have outlined, we cannot overlook the recursiveness of the verb "to recognize" and its derivatives. Food is subject to recognition, in the semiotic sense that Eco (1975) attributes to this concept, framing it as one of the core activities in sign production. Food undergoes a transformative process that constructs it as edible, answering a deceptively simple yet fundamental question: "Can it be eaten?". The object of recognition is shaped by the very act of recognizing, beyond which it is difficult – if not impossible – to regress. What is food before it is recognized as such?
In narrative semiotics, recognition is understood by Greimas and Courtes (1979) as a transitional category: a shift by the subject from not-knowing to knowing (as Aristotle posited), or more precisely, from erroneous knowledge to correct knowledge. It is not a transition from complete ignorance to understanding but rather a change in the modality of the subject's knowledge. This transition requires validation by the Destinant based on its own axiological values. Consequently, the axiological framework of the Destinant becomes decisive in assigning value to the recognition achieved by the Subject. The authors express this with remarkable clarity:

> Within the framework of *intersubjective* interaction, recognition is a cognitive act whereby a semiotically competent subject constructs the alterity of the 'other-subject' or *anti-subject*, while simultaneously constructing itself. In essence, the subject performs a sequence of operations: first, it attributes a structured competence to the other-subject, developed through the construction of the other's representations within its own *cognitive space* (this is the simulacrum of the *other*). Then, it identifies the structured competence of the other with a stereotypical emotional configuration […] the subject constructs its own simulacrum, adopting the modal competences of *being able-to-act* and *not-being-able-to-act*. It then identifies its own structured competence with a stereotypical emotional configuration and, after evaluating the two structured competences, constructs an other-subject distinct from itself, thereby constructing itself and establishing a modal relation – either contractual or conflictual – with the other. In the latter case, the other-subject becomes the anti-subject (Greimas, Courtes 1979, p. 186).

The simulacra of the other and of the relation with the other are representations producted by Subject's imagination. And the Other-Subject have its own simulacra:

> Only when both subjects accept the conformity of their respective simulacra can they mutually acknowledge the other, themselves, and their modal relationship. At this point, they can establish a relationship that transcends the realm of simulacra and becomes genuinely intersubjective. We propose, therefore, to name this mutual commitment that enables subjects to establish an intersubjective structure as an *assumption contract* (*Ibidem*).

The assumption contract is what remains unattained within the narrative framework under analysis: the dynamics remain confined strictly to the level of simulacra, projections, and unilateral recognition. Inside this simplified view, the subject does not fully recognize the food of the "other" as legitimate food, capable of establishing an autonomous alimentary dynamic that intersects with their own. Instead, the subject remains fixed in the position of the *Destinant*, evaluating and sanctioning based on their own axiological framework. This perspective confines the subject to engaging with a simulacral representation of the food of the "other" and the potential relationship with it. The only possibility granted to the "other" subject and their culinary culture is one of assimilation, achieving competence not only in legal and sanitary terms (through systems of authorization for food production and sale) but also – and more critically – in symbolic terms (they must "cook like us"). Any deviation from this is deemed a misinterpretation of Western cuisine, which is axiologically elevated as the sole legitimate

cuisine. Such deviations are seen as equivocal and misleading representations of true cuisine – its tastes, textures, ingredients, methods of preparation, service, consumption, and hygiene.
We can consider the recurring, more or less justified, fear of "what they put inside" that frequently emerges in discussions around the preparation of kebabs. In the Italian context, a study conducted between Cuneo and Turin led a well-known blog, Prodigus, to state: "The kebab, in its essence as a fast-preparation dish, is perceived by experts as a 'hygienically complex' food"[19]. Similarly, many articles in Anglo-Saxon[20] or French media address this issue, with the prestigious *Le Monde* even intervening to debunk the claim that the European Union has banned kebabs as fake news[21].
The narrative to which we refer is certainly not the only discursive form operating within Western contexts: at the scientific, cultural, and ethical-political levels, efforts to deconstruct stereotypes and fabrications, as well as to establish new modalities of engagement with the Other, are multiplying. Nonetheless, it remains evident that the dissemination of unfounded beliefs, laden with emotional and sensationalistic connotations, retains its influence, continuously shaping vast portions of public opinion and those discursive practices that seek to exploit them (e.g., talk shows, propaganda). The persistence of this phenomenon, resistant to the demystifications of high culture, calls for a reflection on the signification mechanisms of new media (Fazioni 2023), understood as epistemic modalities of belief production and manipulation. However, this deeper investigation must be deferred to another context.
This narrative mirrors the concerns outlined earlier in this discussion regarding anxieties over undeclared ingredients allegedly used by Chinese restaurants in place of those listed on their menus. As an illustrative example, consider a recent debate on the social platform Reddit regarding the question, "Why small Chinese restaurants are so freaking dirty?"[22].
Meanwhile, "non-other food" (-S2) refers to those items that we gradually integrate into our everyday diets. We acknowledge that it does not entirely belong to us, yet it nonetheless becomes part of a dialectic that permeates our daily lives.
This structural locus (-S2) represents the space where the boundaries of otherness are most vigorously negotiated. Here, many culinary symbols are welcomed, stripped of their exteriority, and woven into a narrative distinct from their original context. This process entails a neutralization of the value judgements tied to these foods: neither euphoric nor dysphoric, neither mine nor other. Consider, for example, foods that have become globalized, standardized, and de-regionalized: pizza, sushi and hamburgers are always ambivalent in nature. On one hand, they are "ours" (S1) when valued for their uniqueness (the myth of culinary authenticity and tradition); on the other, they become neutral (-S2) as they slip into stereotypes or succumb to "McDonaldization" (Ritzer 1993; Stazio 2021). A generic pizza, in Milan's airport as much as in central London, is essentially a "non-food," much like a shopping mall serves as a "non-place" (Augé 1992). Even here, a constant struggle over meaning unfolds – a tension between singularity and sameness, localization and globalization. Food, in this sense, becomes a site of meaning, where different codes and interpretive frameworks intersect, creating varying levels of standardized decoding (Hall 1973): food television shows, social media "bubble filters", travel narratives, and tourist guides.
There are numerous and well-documented contemporary examples of this phenomenon. Blogs such as Eater and Bon Appétit meticulously explore the Westernization of ethnic cuisines through the distortion and adaptation of original recipes. Similarly, platforms such as Food52 and Serious Eats employ the term "global cuisine" to describe a process that merges decontextualization with cultural assimilation.

[19] www.prodigus.it/articoli/food-news/kebab-sicurezza-alimentare.
[20] www.euroweeklynews.com/2024/03/30/is-kebab-safe-doctors-opinion/.
[21] www.lemonde.fr/les-decodeurs/article/2017/12/12/non-le-kebab-n-a-pas-ete-interdit-dans-l-union-europeenne_5228423_4355770.html). Undoubtedly, these rumors are also fueled by a straightforward economic analysis that tends to demonstrate how kiosks and establishments of this type are frequently situated within contexts of absolute poverty (Wilcock et al. 2004). The equation drawn between limited financial capacity and inadequate adherence to hygiene regulations is a well-documented sociological phenomenon. Conversely, it should be recalled that even McDonald's has been the subject of speculation regarding the unknown contents of its products, leading to substantial investments in communicating controlled supply chains and transparent sourcing.
[22] www.reddit.com/r/China/comments/72qpvg/why_small_chinese_restaurants_are_so_freaking/?rdt=56136.

Supermarkets, food courts, airport duty-free areas, tourist restaurants, and hotel dining establishments offering "international cuisine," as well as New York street vendors – once emblematic of local culture – are now increasingly tied to this homogenizing and neutralizing process. This phenomenon applies not only to stereotypical foods but also to "other" foods that are accepted and permitted within the Western system. The kebab[23], for instance, occupies a central place in a series of contradictory significations, varying by nation: it is alternately perceived as an incomprehensible amalgamation of meats posing health risks or as a fully normalized item, particularly in its Westernized version featuring French fries inside (Lentz 1995).
In contrast, "non-mine" food (- S1) takes on the role of our food's contradiction: It is not my usual food, the one that provides me with comfort and a sense of security. I have never tried it, though I understand that it is edible and consumable. I have read about it somewhere and seen videos featuring a well-known influencer who went to taste it. Yet it arouses curiosity. This food may be consumed, but often only within a distinctly circumscribed symbolic framework – such as that of an exotic journey or a touristic experience (Giannitrapani 2010). No one compels me to eat it, nor am I forbidden from trying it: I find myself facing an optional choice, one to which I assign little significance, as it remains an experience strictly confined to a specific spatial and temporal context.
Beyond the realm of multicultural tourism, which values brief yet intense experiences neatly confined by spatial and temporal boundaries (with the experience always framed in the past, conveyed through social media and photographs), there exists another facet of the same phenomenon: spatial limitations or those dictated by a specific calendar. Consider, for instance, ethnic neighborhoods in major cities, which we will explore shortly. Equally noteworthy are the complex negotiations within Italian school cafeterias, particularly regarding the introduction of alternatives to pork, a discussion that persisted until recent years (see the recent motion proposal by councilors Abdullahi Ahmed Abdullahi and Nadia Conticelli of the city of Turin[24]).
A study of food displays associated with the signage of large-scale retail chains, particularly focusing on the years 2010-2019 and still relevant today for certain regional chains (especially those in the North of Italy), would reveal how the integration of foreign foods is divided into two categories, as represented by the lower axis of the diagram: a range of "assimilated" foods (such as sushi, hamburgers, bacon, Italian pizza, etc.) that coexist with local options and are even prominently featured in high-visibility areas (e.g., during "Mexican Week" or "Japanese Week" promotions), and a range of "optional" foods, which are not considered essential for the Western consumer, relegated to designated aisles generically labeled as "ethnic" (Mascarello et al. 2020).

5. "Let Them Eat Bugs": Case Study Analysis

Throughout this predominantly theoretical essay, we have analyzed various situations that fall within and validate the construction of our semiotic square. Specifically, these include the dispute over the introduction of halal foods in school canteens, the analysis of the urban architecture of many metropolises concerning the displacement of ethnic shops or restaurants, and the pro and con campaign regarding "novel foods" in the EU's list of permitted foods. To provide visibility to the analytical work that forms the basis of our reasoning, we intend to offer a more in-depth application related to the third theme. The selective aspect is due to space constraints and its paradigmatic nature.
In January 2023, the European Food Safety Authority (EFSA) authorized the use of cricket flour within European food protocols, leading to a commercial agreement with specific Vietnamese companies. This decision is based on Regulation (EU) 2015/2283 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 25 November 2015. Article 3 of this regulation defines 'novel food' as: "'novel food' means any food that was not used for human consumption to a significant degree within the Union before 15 May 1997,

[23] Advisory Committee on the Microbiological Safety of Food (2004) and Panozzo et al. (2015); Meldrum et al. (2009).
[24] www.servizi.comune.torino.it/consiglio/prg/intranet/display_testi.php?doc=T-M202420466.

irrespective of the dates of accession of Member States to the Union." A novel food must fall into at least one of the categories summarized in paragraph 2 of the same article:

- Food with new sources of nutrients (e.g., algae, insects).
- Food produced using new technologies (e.g., nanomaterials).
- Traditional food from third countries.
- Ingredients derived from animal or plant cells.
- Food containing newly synthesized or genetically modified substances (excluding GMOs).

According to this definition, "novel foods" encompass products that are not part of the tradition of member states, either due to new technologies (nanomaterials, etc.) or because they are imported from third countries. From this perspective, cricket flour is considered analogous to halal meat. This, however, creates a rather ambiguous equivalence between what is novel due to genetic or engineering innovation – meaning it did not previously exist – and what is novel for the EU, i.e., what was not introduced before 1997 within the national states that now constitute the European community.

"Novel foods" is a semantically ambiguous category, as it can indicate continuity between the old and the new, or a rupture where innovation departs from what precedes it. The prevailing interpretation remains a matter of negotiation. It presupposes the existence of traditional foods, valued by chronological, geographical, and technological factors. However, it also presupposes that a food is new within a given context (the EU list) because it was previously external to or different from it.

As Eco (1979) argues, every text refers to another text, and this also holds true for regulatory texts. Here, the reference is to the paper Edible insects: Future prospects for food and feed security (FAO 2013), in which a paragraph is symptomatically titled "Why are insects not eaten in Western countries?" Drawing upon a range of authoritative studies, the cultural reason for the Western rejection of entomophagy is identified as a primarily pathetic issue: "Feelings of disgust are mostly triggered by questions such as: What is it? or Where has it been?" (*Ivi*, p. 36). Aversion and disgust maintain a proper distance from those foods so other that they are not even clearly identified as food.

These semantic implications are at the heart of the heated debate ignited by several populist parties, particularly Italian and Polish ones, for whom the openness to new foods represents not merely an inclusion but a genuine transformation of traditions and their related economies.

The multitude of micro-texts disseminated on social media and the web, now easily retrievable within the digital archives shaped by new artificial intelligence search tools, compels us to adopt a necessarily selective approach[25]. The Italian position is articulated in the statement by Minister Matteo Salvini posted[26]:

Fig. 4 – Matteo Salvini's Facebook Post.

[25] See the links, posts, and articles referenced in the introduction.

[26] www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=936083494752567&id=100050527747831&set=a.480835423610712. In this essay, we cannot dwell on the theme of the observer: Fontanille (1989).

Within the ensemble of codes at play, the bipartition of the figurative scene marks a kind of para-figurative break that juxtaposes the Italian child eating spaghetti with tomato sauce with satisfaction (from Panzani onwards, the stereotypical emblem of "Made in Italy") with an amorphous powder/feed marked with a prohibition sign and featuring a large insect. In school canteens, that is, in the place where our future is shaped, as was already the case with disputes over the elimination of pork or the introduction of halal food, as expressed in a Facebook post by Deputy Isabella Tovaglieri (www.facebook.com/IsabellaTovaglieriLega).
Maximum clarity is achieved by the "less Europe, more Italy"[27] campaign – where, in reality, Italy can be replaced by Poland, Hungary, the Netherlands, and Europe does not indicate a critique of the West but of its presumed desire for openness and cultural hybridization: "is part of a design aimed at destroying our food traditions, the excellence of the Mediterranean diet and Made in Italy" as Maria Cristina Carretta (Vice-President of the Italian Agriculture Committee) sums up[28]. Here, we clearly see the opposition between what is my food and what is other food:

Fig. 5 – "Less Europe, More Italy" Campaign.

In Poland, Donald Tusk, leader of the opposition Civic Platform (PO) party, created the slogan "worms instead of meat" or, in other variations, "Instead of chicken eat a worm": the presence of "instead" generates a regime of exclusion and a clear opposition between S1 and S2.
Ultimately, the opposition between S1 and S2 brings us back to the age-old theme of different peoples recognizing an element of the world as either food or something else. Eating something not recognized as food – as in the case of dogs and cats mentioned by Trump – and which should not, therefore, be eaten, has long distinguished the human from the bestial in anthropological tradition (Fazioni 2025): "They eat all the snakes, and lizards, and spiders, and worms, that they find upon the ground; so that, to my fancy, their bestiality is greater than that of any beast upon the face of the Earth," as noted by the physician Alvarez Chanca (1906, p. 312), a traveler alongside Columbus (Lesnik 2019).
The populist ideal would be to halt at this axis of signification, denying the existence of the rest of the square, as evidenced by the myth of the border, the wall, and the uncontaminated. Despite rhetorical efforts, the battleground immediately shifts downwards, where we find the notorious EU list in which novel foods are admitted. Once it is established that these foods have crossed the boundaries, they are no longer something external to the social body, but something internal.

[27] www.x.com/matteosalvinimi/status/1793267660572004636?lang=no.
[28] www.ansa.it/sito/notizie/economia/pmi/2023/01/04/grilli-a-tavola-fdi-vogliono-distruggere-il-made-in-italy_bcf1adb5-cb1a-4c5f-9ffe-cf039803fea8.html.

In our semiotic square, we have identified this position, oriented towards inclusion (the title of paragraph 7 of the regulation is "General conditions for inclusion of novel foods in the Union list") and adaptation (especially to the hygiene and production standards specified in subsequent paragraphs), on the axis of sub-contraries: from non-own food (-S1) to non-other food (-S2).
Let us return to European legislation, and specifically to its Section 2 entitled "Specific rules for traditional foods from third countries." Through this process of regulatory and sanitary control, "traditional foods from third countries" (S2) are transformed into "novel foods" (-S1): according to the bureaucratic language of the administrative machine, this represents something that one can experiment with, consciously include in one's diet, without being obligated to eat it. We previously termed this position "not-my food."
The interpretation given to this semiotic mechanism by the texts cited earlier significantly shifts the point of view: Novel Foods would not be -S1 but -S2 (non-other), that is, fundamentally cleared through customs, fully integrated into our diet, perhaps without this being clear and evident.
The issue between European legislation and its critics thus lies in the lower part of the square, in the definition of the category of Novel Foods. For the rest, S1 and S2 have a rather similar logical value (own vs. other, internal vs. external), which is then colored by a series of different connotative and rhetorical choices, making them seem different. Ultimately, the reference square of the EU's food control process is not radically different from that within which populist discourse moves[29]. This does not imply any moral or political judgment, as we are speaking of the level of abstract structures which, at the level of textualization, will then be inhabited by profoundly different actors. Consider the neutral tone of regulatory assertions and the strident tones of the slogans previously mentioned.
If we delve deeply into the textual archives of this dispute, we see that, beyond some social media propaganda, the core of the populist critique follows the same logical flow initiated by the EU, but interprets it differently. Consider the Question for written answer E-000130/2023 to the Commission, Article 138 of the Rules of Procedure, submitted by the Identity and Democracy Group, which asks the Commission:

> What measures does it intend to implement to clarify the production methods, origin, traceability, and safeguarding of the welfare of the domestic cricket, considering that the majority comes from non-EU countries such as Vietnam, Thailand, or China?[30]

Safety, health, traceability of a series of still completely unknown products that, moreover, come from non-EU countries such as Vietnam, Thailand, and China. The mechanism is the same; the interpretative direction changes.
The control procedures, in line with the biopolitical paradigm on which they are based, stipulate that a food coming from outside undergoes a complex process of verification and scrutiny that leads it from being totally other to being admitted to the famous EU list, that is, to becoming a "non-own" food: something that one can begin to experiment with, while continuing to visualize and regulate it as a not completely internalized product. Internalization will occur after a rather long temporal and cultural-educational span, which will lead what is today "non-own" to become "non-other." Indeed, ideally, we could imagine that through a slow and structural transformation of customs and practices, a "non-other" food becomes completely "own": consider the tomato for Italian cuisine.

[29] Lacan (1971) posits that the discourse of racism is closely connected to that of bureaucratic knowledges, which he terms the discourse of the University. From a psychoanalytic perspective, disgust for the food of the Other would represent an aversion to the way in which others experience pleasure, manifest a surplus of enjoyment (*jouissance*), and live out their bodily differences.
[30] www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/E-9-2023-000130_IT.html?.

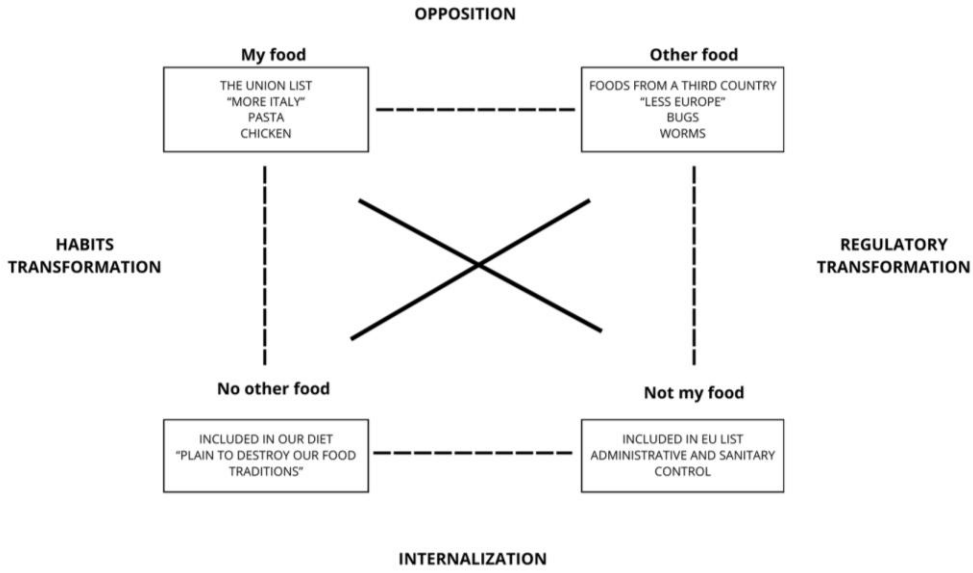

Fig. 6 – The square integrates explicit positions and populist rhetoric.

Following the clockwise order, we find a relationship of opposition, a transformation that occurs through the path of normative regulation (scientific, sanitary, production protocols), a process of gradual assimilation, and a possible (often only ideal) new transformation that mainly concerns uses and customs, the slow modification not only of knowledge but also of practices (of production, of marketing, of food preparation, of food consumption): The FAO paper analyzes these factors as the result of a long process of perceptual education (p. 142).

The oblique lines represent possible reversals, shortcuts not without consequences: from S2 to -S1 we have the reversal on which populist rhetoric is based, from S1 to -S2 we have what we could define as the exclusion of a food that previously belonged to us. Consider the use of bone marrow in various dishes of Northern Italy now labeled as an element of disgust, or the elimination of certain types of oil until yesterday massively used in confectionery products.

The populist critique, in addition to overloading the opposition/contrariety relationship, which it would like to keep rigid, denying the existence of the lower part of the square (the idea of the border and productive autarky), highlights a different path or, which remains to be decided, a completely different vision of the same path: what is other does not pass through the axis of complementarity towards the non-own but reverses (violent contradiction) into the "non-other," into the complete clearance of what was alien and different. An instantaneous assimilation, a viral and contagious infiltration that will transform tradition from within, making it unrecognizable: this applies to crickets, but equally to halal meat in school canteens.

6. "How to Make a Food 'Strange'?". The Deontic Dimension of our Food Square

Our schema exhibits a distinctly deontic modal value (see Fig. 7), which can be articulated as follows. S1 corresponds to "must do" (prescription), S2 to "must not do" (prohibition), -S2 to "must not not do" (permission), and -S1 to "must not do" (optionality). The upper side of the square denotes the domain of injunction, while the lower side represents non-injunction.

Accordingly with the previous narrative, I am prescribed to eat "my food," the food of my culture with its hygienic and sanitary prescriptions that ensure my well-being. Access to "other food," on the other hand, is unfamiliar, unregulated, and often deemed inedible – the phantasm of waste or residue.

I am not prohibited from eating, which means I am permitted to consume "non-other food". However, I am not obliged to eat "non-mine food"; tasting it remains an option, a possibility rather than an imperative.

On one hand, "other food" is seen as an amorphous, pre-semiotic substance, as illustrated in the previous pages: an indistinguishable amalgam of ingredients with an overpowering texture, odor, and taste. Not a synthetic cuisine, but a non-cuisine.
On the other hand, it is perceived as something that must not be consumed (prohibition): the dogs and cats of Trump's discourse, rats and nutria, insects as interpreters of the forbidden – a symbolic realm of the world subjected to dietary taboos and ultimate prohibitions.
At this juncture, it is worth highlighting that one of the most terrible accusations historically directed at enemies and "savage peoples" has been that of cannibalism. Whether as a response to arcane rituals or a lack of food resources, the "other" is often suspected of consuming human flesh (Volhard 1939). Through numerous fake news stories generated by the perspective of explorers – the subjects of recognition and manipulation – an emotionally charged interpretation is constructed: an absolute crime that uproots social bonds and plunges meaning into nonsense. To be a cannibal (Lévi-Strauss 2009) signifies transgressing the prohibited, breaching cultural and social norms, and descending into an amorphous, pre-communicative dimension.
What I "must not not eat" refers to what is permitted, neither prescribed nor prohibited. This is food that belongs neither strictly to an identity nor to an alterity but it is instead the product of a process that neutralizes differences. The double negation dismantles the interdiction and leads to a neutralization of strangeness, which we have identified with assimilation and which takes place within the framework of -S2 (permission).
What I "not must eat" represents what I can taste without imposition from others. The lower axis opens up this neutral zone, where the principal processes of cultural negotiation occur, and boundaries become porous, enabling continual transgressions, forms of deterritorialization, and reterritorialization (Deleuze, Guattari 1980).
Landowski (1989) describes the semiotic structures of this relationship between identity and otherness. He discusses a relationship of exclusion (S2) concerning other foods, those that in the previous case study were intended to be kept outside the boundaries: this illustrates the imaginary of border control and that of disgust or public health.
Subsequently, we observe a regime of segregation (-S1), within which other foods can circulate but must be kept under the scrutiny of institutional control: consider the media narrative of NAS (Nuclei Antisofisticazioni e Sanità) inspections and the regulatory terms to which the EU subjects novel foods. What is particularly insightful is Landowski's interpretation of this dynamic as a form of segregation, a limitation and observation of the Other: foods in the private spaces of immigrant homes, circulating silently and marginally within specific urban areas. It is sold in visibly "different" commercial establishments, consistently subjected to analytical scrutiny (such as the ongoing debates about regulations regarding Halal meat slaughter) and framed through an imaginative representation (the pungent smell that hate discourse attributes to the clothing of immigrants or ethnic food shops[31]).
Examples of this localization and confinement of "strange" food can be found in Chinatowns around the world, now subject to multicultural tourism: chicken feet, unusual cuts of pork, offal, exotic fish, lacquered and suspended animals. Similarly, African neighborhoods scattered and marginalized on the outskirts of major metropolises embody this dynamic. These are areas often considered not entirely advisable to visit: France's "Zones Urbaines Sensibles"[32], frequently exaggerated as "lieu perdu" (no-go zones); the predominantly Islamic district of Molenbeek in Brussels; Schilderswijk in The Hague; certain areas in Birmingham; and, more recently, parts of Milan (Smith 2001; Poulain 2002; Fielding, Singh 2017; Mescoli 2019; Yi 2021)[33].
Admission (-S2) corresponds to the "non-other" food – food that belongs to the processes of globalization and Westernization previously described. The acceptance of a range of foods that must progressively lose their otherness, integrating within a new culinary context until they acquire a functional resemblance to other dishes and ingredients within that context. Admission is a mechanism of

[31] El Hadad-Gauthier et al. (2022).
[32] You could find all these zones in a website by the French Government: www.sig.ville.gouv.fr/atlas/ZUS.
[33] Parzer and Astleithner (2017)

translation: a tension is evident between processes of recognition and appropriation, acceptance and hybridization. Frequently, these foods gain a certain visibility: consider the displays of all-you-can-eat sushi restaurants, fusion restaurants, and poke houses in the centers of Western metropolises. The contest between gastronomic authenticity and processes of re-semanticization unfolds precisely at this level.

There are certainly situations that seem to contradict the series of processes described so far (assimilation and flattening, interdiction and concealment, spatial-temporal limitation). Consider, for example, Queens in New York – a profoundly multi-ethnic borough where, moving further from the bridges connecting it to Manhattan, one encounters a long succession of South American, Italian, Chinese, and Middle Eastern neighborhoods. Beginning at the Junction Blvd 7 train stop, walking along the streets beneath the elevated subway, one finds one of the most extraordinary settings for analyzing "other" or ethnic foods, served from street stalls, small eateries, or directly on the sidewalks.

This environment has begun to draw the attention of bloggers[34] and those in search of the last corner of authenticity, yet it still preserves the linguistic primacy of native languages and a strong resistance to any mediation of the flavors encountered. Few tourists venture here, assimilation remains limited, and supermarkets are entirely dedicated to the "strange" foods of the local communities. The Chinese neighborhood of Flushing dismantles the stereotypes of Chinatown (Yi et al. 2020), just as, even more strikingly, the Italian areas of Ozone Park, Astoria, and Floral Park debunk the myths of Little Italy (Fortuna 2013).

Certainly, venturing off the main thoroughfares reveals dilapidated and cramped housing, but the prevailing outcome is the elevation of "other" food into the public sphere, liberating it from concealment and segregation to become a protagonist.

The strange textures of Mexican liquid shrimp cocktails, the strange fried doughs of Ecuadorians, the strange Colombian sweets, the eclectic Bangladeshi mixes, and the untranslatable tastes and aversions of Chinese products all emerge openly under the sunlight. Yet, one must ask how long this fragile equilibrium can endure, given its very process of communicative valorization, which attracts not only locals and New Yorkers but also gourmands and explorers.

7. Conclusions

At the conclusion of this analysis, we have understood how processes of signification and modalization generate the "strangeness" of others' food, leading to different modes of regulation of these strange foods. The semiotic analysis demonstrates that the definition of alimentary identities and differences is never a simple dualistic dialectic, consisting of well-defined and clearly distinct valorizations. Rather, it involves dynamic significative processes and fluid discursive practices that mutually transform and renegotiate their boundaries in each instance. A discursive and narrative structure has value only when considered in its processual nature (Floch 1995), as the result of pushes and counter-pushes, primary and secondary narrative programs, representations, and counter-representations (De Certeau 1980; Deleuze, Guattari 1980; Viveiros De Castro 2010).

Many aspects remain to be analyzed in future work, particularly concerning the epistemic dimension of belief in the representation and dissemination of narratives about strange food. Likewise, the generational aspect emerges as a factor capable of producing dynamism and change within the described framework (Ferrari et al. 2020). Or, even, the connection between food and the body, nourishment and health, with its passionate dimension (Fontanille 2006). Of this complex apparatus, we have here provided only the foundation and a set of tools useful for exploring its socio-economic, intercultural, *political, and media* dimensions in greater depth.

[34]Pars pro toto, www.grubstreet.com/article/mezban-house-bangladeshi-food-elmhurst-queens.html?utm_campaign=feed-part&utm_medium=social_acct&utm_source=chatgpt.com.

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