Eating Insects and Italian Gastronomy

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Abstract. What happens in the culinary field when a new food appears – and with it a new taste – within a cultural system? How does the system react? What resources does it activate to make sense of and bridge the gap of difference and strangeness? We will examine the case of an ambitious attempt at major change: bringing insects to the plates of Italians. We will address these issues by dealing with specific cases of media and brand communication around the use of insect meal in the Italian market, where the consumption of foods based on crickets, locusts, larvae, is practically non-existent

1. New and Strange

In *Structure of the Fait-Divers*, Barthes (1964), analyzing the construction of journalistic news, identifies in the pursuit of the irrational, the strange, and the unexplained randomness the primary features of the textual genre of the news item ("man bites the dog", "man wins the lottery three times", "thieves caught and scared by another thief"). While defining it as a "mass art" and "bad literature", thus aesthetically degrading it, Barthes nonetheless recognizes in the journalistic production of news a fundamental historical function: that of preserving, within contemporary society, the coexistence of certainty and ambiguity, of meaning and lack of meaning, of rationality and irrationality. Each news item, in particular, through its strangeness and exceptionality, is based on a cultural scheme, on an assumed normality.

If, from an ontological perspective, the strange is such because it differs from what is normal and predictable, in semiotic terms, as also highlighted by Marrone (2001) again with reference to journalistic discourse, things work the other way around: it is the strange that presupposes the normal. It is the rupture of the scheme that, retrospectively, presupposes – often implicitly rather than explicitly, and thus more effectively – the existence of an underlying structure.

The reference to the field of journalism should not appear as unrelated to the discourse on gastronomy, as we are dealing with deep and abstract semantic processes, which are transversal to various fields and social discourses: in fashion as in politics, in journalism as in everyday life, what is strange often coincides with what is unknown, with what does not belong to the code of shared expectations, to the routine of rules that allow us to predict events. But the fact is, as Barthes emphasizes and as Marrone later also points out, that it is the rupture of the code – and especially the narration of this rupture – that reinforces the code itself. It's the typical mechanism of news-making process: creating the *faits divers*.

The normal, therefore, is not the starting point against which the strange stands in contrast, but the point of arrival, with the strange functioning as a sort of trigger.

Think of new foods – that is, when an ingredient or a dish is introduced into an established gastronomic system: the semantic trait of "novelty" – by itself arguably *unmarked* and *non*-dysphoric – often overlaps with that of "strangeness" – which is instead *marked* and, in some way, semantically charged with *dysphoric meaning*. If "new" is the basic trait, so to speak, 'strange' is its cultural polarization, the negative – or at least non-positive – axiological investment (strange can also trigger curiosity). Reactions to gastronomic novelties can be very different: rejection, denial, affirmation of tradition, food ethnocentrism, culinary sovereignty and gastro-nationalism – or, conversely, acceptance, experimentation, hybridization, openness to new encounters and transformations.

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The question we ask in this essay is precisely the following: what happens in the culinary field when a new food appears – and with it a new taste – within a cultural system? How does the system react? What resources does it activate to make sense of and bridge the gap of difference and strangeness? We will examine the case of an ambitious attempt at major change: bringing insects to the plates of Italians. We will address these issues by dealing with specific cases of media and brand communication around the use of insect meal in the Italian market, where the consumption of foods based on crickets, locusts, larvae, is practically non-existent (apart from the *cazu marzu* of the Sardinian tradition, a goat cheese colonized by the larvae of the cheese fly). The objective is to observe how food change is communicated. Our analysis on the introduction of insects at the table follows the recent work carried out in the semiotic field by Lorusso (2024) on the same topic: she worked on the cultural edibility of insects by connecting it to the concept of common sense, and the way in which in the media the main actors involved in the process (political and commercial) actually deploy adjustment strategies within cultures such as Europe that do not traditionally include insect-based dishes.
We will observe phenomena that occurred on the web around two videos, the first produced by the Barilla Foundation in 2022, and the second published shortly afterwards by a famous Neapolitan pizza maker, Gino Sorbillo. Both caused a stir by polarizing opinions and comments on the Internet and the media in general about the use of insects in cooking. We will relate these two communicative products which, although different in terms of genre and communicative purpose, are similar in the type of communicative strategies used and, above all because they pose important questions on the subject of disgust. Next, we will observe the ways in which two Italian start-ups, which produce and sell food with insect meal, communicate their products, playing with the rhetoric of tradition and the great taboo of disgust towards insects.

2. Novel Food

In 2021, the European Commission gave the green light to the production and sale of insect-based foods: meal larvae, crickets, and migratory locusts can be used to prepare foods, whether industrial (snacks, crackers, dried pasta, sauces, meat substitutes, for example) or cooked in restaurants and other places of convivial consumption. As long as the insects are dried, frozen or pulverized into flour. This is a case of *novel food*: an appellation used to refer, as defined by the European Commission, to all those foods until 1997, the year of the first European regulation on the subject, were not used "in significant quantities for human consumption"[1]. In addition to edible insects, these include, for example, on a scale of novelty from the most foreign to the most traditional ones, oil derived from *krill* (oceanic marine organisms living in very cold waters and daily food for whales, as well as a common food resource for Russia and Japan), but also the fruit of the baobab tree, widely consumed in Africa, chia seeds and quinoa, typically South American, which can now be found in any supermarket or restaurant in Europe.
The label "novel foods" include foods or raw ingredients that are commonplace in other communities or countries outside the EU: what is "novel" is therefore a matter of opinion, of course. Once consumer safety has been established, edibility verified and a series of controls and regulatory protocols passed, the novel food enters the system of foods authorized for sale on the European market. "Novel" to whom? In this case novel the European consumer's point of view.
At best, as the novelty spreads, it stabilizes and is consumed with some regularity so that it is no longer a curious or an incomprehensible introduction – when not unacceptable, as in the case of insects for the average Western consumer[2].
Even some of the most iconic dishes of the world were, at one-point, novel food. The *hamburger*, which today represents a certain type of American culture mainly related to fast-food, has had a troubled

[1] www.food.ec.europa.eu/food-safety/novel-food_en.
[2] Insects are not part of the everyday diet in most European countries: they are eaten in Norway and the Netherlands, but are not considered edible in other countries on the same continent. In Asia, Africa and Central America it is common to cook and eat insects at table or as street food. For an overview of entomophagy see Evans, Flore, Frost (2017).

history and experienced heavy suspicion: in the first decades of the 20th century, this mixture of minced meat, in use in the dive bars for German workers who had emigrated to the United States, was much disliked, considered inferior in quality to steak. The *frankfurter*, only later renamed the *hot dog*, was even considered harmful to health: a few years have passed and the two types of minced and reassembled meat, stuffed into a soft *bun*, have become emblematic of the American way of life (Cesari 2023).

In Italy, pasta was considered novel food: it combined tomato, which came from America, and long pasta, which was traditional in the Middle East, together with the Arab custom of dry pasta, which was imported to Italy in the Middle Ages[3]. Even potatoes, maize, or eggplant, largely used in European cuisines, were once something exotic. Over time, each of these new foods were absorbed into the culinary traditions of the world and redefined them in terms of identity.

In many ways, there is nothing new under the sun: the integration of new foods has always been part of human history. The hybridization and contamination of raw materials, ingredients, cooking and preservation techniques that migrate between different gastronomies is the driving force behind any cuisine. In other respects, however, it is important to remember that it is not so much the raw materials themselves (flours, sauces, vegetables, insects, krill oil or who knows what else) but *what they signify* that make their way between traditional dishes and long-standing habits. Anthropology and semiotics of food have been saying this for a long time: just as the verbal language we use to communicate, which for Lotman is a primary modelling system (1984), so is food, Marrone argues (2014, 2016, 2022).

Food has the semiotic capacity to express and shape something other than itself: values, traditions, hierarchies, powers, family roles, group membership, religious beliefs. For Lévi-Strauss (1962), what counts, in cooking and at the table, is what is *good to think*, that is, the way in which dishes and ingredients make sense as part of a way of conceiving the world, nature, and cosmos.

Hence the difference between what is *edible by nature* and what is *edible by culture*: the universe of food substances that are not toxic to humans is differently shaped, "cut out" by each culture, so that there is an *in* and an *out*, one's own and another's, an edible and an unacceptable. Like in the functioning of any other semiotic languages, *form* carves out *matter* producing *substances* (Hjelmslev 1943). This gives rise to taboos and dietary rules, more or less explicit religious prescriptions and to the consequent purification rituals[4], forms of regulating appetites and quantities[5], classification systems and dietary regimes[6].

This also applies to *likes* and *dislikes*, which, for semiotics, as Eric Landowski (2000) argues, can be explained neither exclusively as social attitudes nor as physiological reactions, but can be investigated as *sense effects*: the result of complex discursive constructions that do not only concern choices – and rejections – at the table, but the management of everyday life on an individual and collective level.

It is therefore with food substances that we always have to deal with: materials and resources that are already rich in meaning, and not materials to which meaning has yet to be given, even when it is that of strangeness and novelty.

Not only is food a language because human subjects and groups talk about something else through it (about society, traditions, politics, health, power, religion, beliefs, morality, etc.), but it also, as Marrone (2022) argues, generates *a gastronomic discourse*, composed of a coherent series of multiple textualities, which constantly exceeds its own boundaries.

Let us examine the specific process of introducing a new food item, which, when not incidental or unintentional, but carefully regulated and deliberately planned, as in the case of introducing insects into the Western diet for specific reasons, aims to bring about a strategic change, driven by political and economic factors. What are the main reasons for the green light to insect consumption? In the name of what values is this novelty proposed? The reasons are linked both to dietary and ecological issues: insects are considered a sustainable and highly nutritious food resource, compared to other food products, such as meat, which have a high environmental impact. Regulators and governments are therefore aiming to change Europeans' eating habits to protect the environment.

[3] For a historical reconstruction of Italy's most famous dish, see Montanari (2019) and Cesari (2021).

[4] Discussed, among others, by Douglas (1966) and Soler (1997).

[5] See the studies on the history of dietetics by Shapin (1998, 2003) and those on dietetics and religion by Montanari (2015), Moro and Niola (2023).

[6] On the semiotics of diet, see Ventura Bordenca (2020).

The "novel food" label, as it is currently understood in the European regulatory framework, requires the intervention of a number of actors (legal, health, political, economic), which makes the entry of a food into a new market complex and formalized, simply because it establishes a set of rules to which the production and sale of the food in question must conform. This adds other types of values to the cultural dimension of food: hygienic, nutritional, environmental, technological. So, there is no contagion between cuisines that meet and mix, but there is a top-down process, with precise intervention by the legislator.
The dominant narrative regarding the introduction of insects into the human diet today concerns the reconciliation of nutritional values and sustainability: so, on the one hand, there are environmental, ecological, dietetic, nutritional, in short scientific values, a utilitarian dimension of food; on the other hand, there are affective, existential motivations, linked to the gastronomic values of identity, terroir, traditions, and the defense of home, mother', grandmother's or nation's cuisine. Those are the ones who lead to the rejection of insects on the plate.

3. Ethnocentric Reactions

The EU's green light to the use of cricket flour (*Acheta domesticus*) has produced a storm in the Italian media (January 2023). On the Instagram account of a famous Neapolitan *pizzaiolo*, Gino Sorbillo, a video appeared in the spring of 2023 in which he is shown preparing a *margherita* pizza by adding cricket flour to the dough, and then serving it to friends and customers: they first smell it, then taste it, and finally make disgusted faces and theatrical expressions of repugnance. Some, after taking a bite of the pizza, which is darker than usual, pretend to jump, as if it were the effect of the cricket flour. The aim of Sorbillo's communicative operation is clear: with the irony with which he and his colleagues feign fascination and sincerity in trying the cricket pizza, he wants to elicit the public's complicity, that is, to gather the defenders of Italian cuisine around the fight against the new and repulsive ingredient: insects. In the following days, various food influencers, chefs, journalists and other personalities responded on social media in a very piqued manner, offended by the joke perpetrated by Sorbillo. As often happens, the discourse around that video soon split: those who defended Sorbillo and with him the whole tradition of Italian cuisine; and those who instead attacked the pizza maker of anachronism, gastronomic nationalism, meanness, ignorance on the subject of human nutrition and environmental protection and so on.
In a very similar way, the same thing had already happened, a few months earlier, with different names, timing, and communication channels, but with the common subject of edible insects. In the autumn of 2022, the Barilla Foundation[7] had produced a short video in which a Neapolitan comedian performed an ironic monologue on the subject. This clip is part of a Barilla Foundation project called "Fondazione Show", which involves comedians, actors and food influencers in short presentations on various topics of culinary interest: food waste, the Mediterranean diet, sparing use of water in the kitchen, etc. The aim of the project is the scientific popularization through testimonials from the show, treating complex topics (nutrition, sustainability, research) in a light way.
In particular, the video on insects wants to arouse curiosity, raise debate, and test the collective opinion about the topic. But as soon as it was published, the video unleashed the wrath of part of the public who railed against Barilla, accusing it of wanting to use cricket flour to make pasta. The scandal is clear: insects in the Italians' favorite dish. So, the video has been removed and is no longer available on the Barilla Foundation website. However, it is still visible on the Twitter account of the Italian politician Matteo Salvini, of the party Lega Nord, who, in response to the final question posed in the video – "And what do you think?" – promptly retweeted: "You can eat it yourselves." with a clear reference to the hypothesis of a Barilla pasta with cricket.
Actually, in the Barilla Foundation video, there is no mention of making pasta with insect flour. What does it say instead? Here is the text of the short video, played by comedian Carmine Del Grosso:

[7] The Barilla Foundation is an extension of the Barilla company: a center for research and studies on sustainable nutrition (www.fondazionebarilla.com).

> I have not yet tasted insects but they told me that ants taste like hazelnuts and beetles like whole meal bread. Oh, in combination they would be perfect for breakfast! When I learned that insects are normally consumed in 140 countries around the world, I thought 'well, surely in other cultures where it is typical, like Asia', but even here in Europe: in Holland, in Denmark for example.
> By the way, I have been there and, seeing as how they make *carbonara*, I'll give them a tip: don't use the cream in the pasta, and try putting some insects in. There are more than two thousand species. One that looks like *guanciale*[8] can be found![9]

The actor to whom the message of the video is delegated is an average Italian, not an expert, neither in cooking nor in food science, but an ordinary person who, in addition, has the trait of Napolitanism that connotes him as a man from southern Italy, with whom one usually associates traditionality in his choices at the table.
The structure of text is ambivalent, showing a certain indecision between having to *distance the Enunciator* about crickets and worms at the table ("I've never tasted them but I've been told that...") and attempting a juxtaposition through a strategy of seeking *familiarity* ("... ants would taste like hazelnuts and beetles like whole meal bread"). With a hint of irony, which by definition is a way of distancing oneself from what is said ("in combination they would be perfect for breakfast") – for Bertrand (1993), one of the figures of irony is precisely *negation.*
A coming and going that repeats itself: insects are typical of other cultures, such as those in Asia (distance), but they are used "even here in Europe" (proximity), as in Holland and Denmark. It is precisely in reference to the way the national-popular recipe par excellence, "pasta alla carbonara", is prepared in those countries that Del Grosso says: "don't use the cream in the pasta, and try putting some insects in. There are more than two thousand species. One that looks like *guanciale* can be found!". Irony is used again, this time with insects that would be better than cream, but are certainly not *guanciale*.
The Barilla Foundation video ends with this claiming information: "Insects have also become of interest in Europe as a source of high-quality, environmentally friendly protein. What do you think?". A serious, para-scientific tone, which clearly contrasts with the rest of the video.
The semantic short-circuit is clear: despite the fact that it was put into circulation by the Foundation (which is not the producing company of pasta but a research center linked to the company), the name Barilla cannot help but make one think of the most famous Italian pasta brand in the world. From there came the accusations against the company, which never actually said it intended to introduce insect flour, and the resulting chain of reposts and retweets that devoured the video, burying it under a hail of insults, misinterpretations, and clickbait headlines that are typical of careless and voracious media storm.
The ghost of cricket pasta and the joke of the hopping pizza would seem to prove that in Italy insects on the plate are entirely unspeakable – unless one wants to risk public shaming. Yet, this is not entirely true, as burger restaurants offering insect-based meals on the menu have recently begun to appear. As in the case of *Pane & Trita* in Milan, which has put the "cricket burger" on the menu, achieving great success. It is a colorful green sandwich (the effect of spirulina algae, a normal food coloring) with a legume and potato burger containing, among other things, cricket flour (1.6%), plus melted scamorza cheese, purple cabbage and American potato. A proposal that seemed succulent to many and which was proposed with much irony: that greenish bread, which does not contain cricket but evokes it in color, is clearly a hyperbolic strategy that, made by the restaurant, did not arouse the ire of anyone.
At this point, the question is: why do insects, by changing the context in which they are used, provoke different reactions? Barilla is a brand, and the pizza maker Sorbillo can also be considered as such, given his fame among Italians and tourists, and each carries with it a whole series of meanings, ideas, values linked to Italian-ness. Barilla, Sorbillo and insects, in the same sentence, provoke effects of disgust, certainly, but also a certain indignation. The burger, on the other hand, is linked to another, non-Italian, food culture of American origin. The disgust one may feel towards something may be the same, but the

[8] *Guanciale* is a salami made from pork cut from the throat of the pig.
[9] All the Italian citations, including the Matteo Salvini's one, are translated in English by the author of this article.

rules of the contexts in which it is applied (or attempted) may vary. Just as there are rules of taste, there are also rules of disgust.
Within a presupposed Italian food culture, reactions of disgust are given to insects that vary according to the discursive framework: in the universe of pasta and other foods considered as more typical, in the presence of precise Enunciators (Barilla and the like) reactions of rejection and consequent disgust are obtained; within different discursive situations, with other Enunciators (the burger restaurants), and consequent other communicative pacts, reactions of acceptance of novelty are produced. It is thus the discursive dimension that determines the gustatory value of a dish, and its positive (taste) or negative (distaste) acceptance
Just as taste is a social fact, through which we communicate ourselves and our sharing to a certain community, the same applies to the effects of disgust: we not only share what we like, but also what we dislike, and through a specific set of rejections we express our social and cultural belonging. While in other gastronomies, eating insects is a very old culinary tradition, in Italian culture it is not, but, as the example of the cricket burger shows, rejection is mitigated by the context, by what it relates to. The meaning of this strange food is, even in Italian gastronomy, more relational than we think.

4. Senses of the Future

As mentioned, there are novel foods that are gradually being adapted and domesticated in specific cultures. Think of frozen foods of the 1960s and 1970s, pre-packaged snacks, even Coke, can fall under the umbrella of "novel food". It is a well-known story that Coke was invented in the late 19th century as a digestive tonic, a kind of drug, something between what today would be a dietary supplement and an energy drink. It only became a sugary thirst-quenching drink symbolizing American-ness during the Second World War, when a communication campaign was put into place associating the drink with the American nation, with the life of soldiers engaged on the front line, while showing its compatibility with the lives and cultures with which the soldiers came into contact, such as that of southern Italy[10]. A few years later, in the 1950s and 1960s, with the aim of conquering the consumption of Italians, Coke chose to focus on the figure of the lady of the house, holder of good taste and the rules of the house, for advertisements in which one sees well-dressed ladies playing cards with friends and sipping the dark drink together with snacks in an elegant living room. During the same period, efforts began to promote beer consumption in Italy, where wine was the most widely consumed alcoholic beverage. The advertising campaign showed the golden, frothy beverage in contexts that were comprehensible to the public of the time: hence the scene of the family Sunday lunch around the roast (in which even the children took part with a glass of beer in one hand) or the farmer's table, with a checkered tablecloth, cheese, pears and a knife.
Something similar happened with the arrival of Findus' fish fingers, breaded and frozen sticks of cod. They represented a novelty for the market and for Italian culinary habits, not so much for the raw material (fish), but for the shape they took on (small parallelepipeds that no longer looked like fish) and for the fact that they were pre-cooked sticks, therefore quick to prepare in a few minutes. Advertisements from the 1970s, the period of their introduction, depicted them served on a plate with a salad of lettuce and tomato, one of the typical Italian side dishes for fish, and a few slices of lemon, which also accompanied the fried fish. The headline of the ad was "just as the 'second' must be today" referring both to a habit (the 'second' course on the Russian menu, which in Italy usually includes meat or fish) and at the same time to a change ("today").
As in the case of advertising campaigns of beer and Coke, using a pre-existing cultural grid, the meal according to the collective norm (the Italian second course) gives meaning to an entirely new product.
Not very differently, in recent years, some *veg* food brands have been selling vegetable-based "burgers", "sausages", "ragùs", "steaks", "sliced meats", "cutlets", thus recalling meat dishes in their names: here,

[10] On cultural branding, see Holt (2004).

too, one observes the application of familiar patterns, *of forms* that make the new[11] understandable and acceptable. The terms "bistecca" or "ragù" are used to express a way of eating, a type of dish, a form of consumption for a type of food such as vegetable-based food, which is in the process of becoming widespread on the Italian market.
Advertising proves to be fundamental in making sense of the new food: it proposes ways and occasions of use, inscribes values, constructs enunciators, taking inspiration from existent cultural habits, from what people expect to find on their plates.
In the case of insect-based novel foods, what values do brands bring to bear the reduction of the sense of foreignness, if any? We consider here two companies present in Italian market, *Fucibo* and *Small Giants*, which sell chips, crackers, flours and, recently, also pasta.

5. Food Functionalism

Starting with their brand names, an important difference is noted. *Fucibo* is the *crasis* of the Italian words' "future" + "food", with a direct reference to change and the future. *Small Giants*, on the other hand, speaks of the insects themselves, "little giants", but in an indirect manner and is the result of a rebranding (previously the company was called *Crické*, from the English word *crickets*). In the packaging of the Small Giants crackers (Fig. 1), drawings of humanized crickets wearing shoes and trousers appear, rendered with very colorful and cartoonish graphics, with exaggeratedly large "legs" and "arms": an ironic hyperbole that allows the insect to be portrayed but at a sufficient distance. The Fucibo packets (Fig. 2), on the other hand, do not bear any recognizable figures that could recall crickets, but a common round crisp in the center.
In any case, the naked insect does not go on the packet, contrary to what happens in packets of snacks and flours produced and sold in other countries.

Fig. 1 – Packaging and graphics *Small Giants*.

[11] For a semiotic analysis of the packaging of a corpus of vegan and vegetarian products in the Italian market see Ventura Bordenca (2022).

Fig. 2 – *Fucibo* packaging and graphics.

In both cases, the overall communication strategy of the two brands is to assign functional values to insect-based foods – that is, values fully aligned with the guidelines of relevant supranational bodies and with contemporary dietary demands – emphasizing that these are high-protein, fiber-rich foods with, above all, a low environmental impact. A *practical enhancement* that, as mentioned, is generally dominant in contemporary discourse on insects at the table, both in the Italian and European markets.

For example, *Small Giants*, which does almost entirely digital communication (web and social media), presents snacks and bars as the perfect post-workout supplement or with the appellation *superfood*, referring with this term to the way in which certain foods are now considered capable of improving physical performance, of giving particular energy, providing particular benefits despite the fact that there is no scientific evidence to support this (think of dried fruit, green tea, spirulina algae and many other ingredients, whose list is lengthened or shortened depending on the fashion of the moment – the use of the term "superfood" on product packaging was banned by the European Union in 2007). On *Small Giants*' Instagram account and in the "Manifesto" on their website, it says "Why insects?": the answer is a list of benefits for the body and for nature (Fig. 3).

Fucibo, too, uses the same valorization of edible insects, even visually comparing various types of animal sources with respect to the nutrients they contain by means of graphs. This makes insects stand out as foods that are perfectly in line with today's dietary dictates, which prefer protein to fat, and which emphasize the beneficial role of particular nutrients, such as omega-3, which insects are endowed with almost as much as fish (Fig. 4).

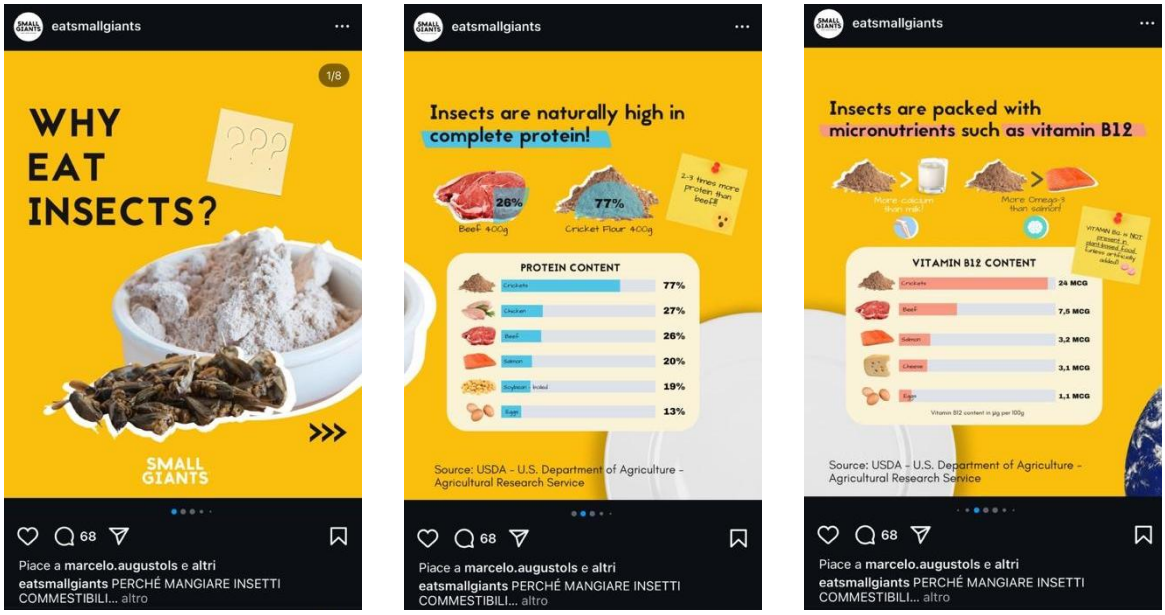

Fig. 3

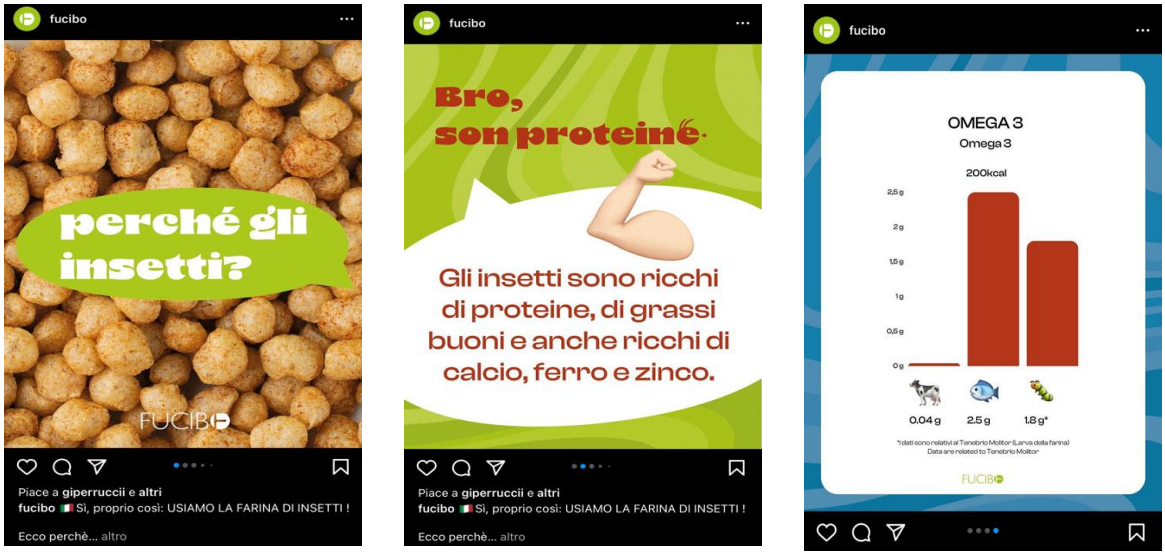

Fig. 4

From an enunciative perspective, asking the question why it is good to eat crickets and derivatives presupposes an Enunciator yet to be convinced: a subject who is delineated as someone endowed not only with a *not-knowing* but probably also with a *not-wanting*. Videos, posts, and other communicative products fielded to explain "why" it is useful to change diet and turn to insects, are means by which the brand invests value in this choice. It is therefore the narrative phase of *Manipulation*.

The functionalization of food, that is inscription of instrumental values, is not a new strategy when a brand launches a new product. The advertising era after the Second World War, both in the European and non-European markets, was characterized, for example, by the massive introduction of industrial foods (freeze-dried broths, powdered milk, bottled mineral water, canned meat, Plasmon biscuits, baby food jars) which were very frequently presented from a functional point of view: they were presented as foods with a high nutritional value or with a high capacity to give energy, strength, not only to those who consumed them, but also to the dishes in which they were used. For example, Italian advertisements for the *Star* stock cube in the 1950s showed that, unlike homemade broth, the industrial stock cube was capable of adding much more intense flavors to the dishes in which it was mixed. To make sense of the

change, it had to be placed in a service, functional logic. Even the advertisements for beer consumption in the 1960s, to which we referred earlier, claimed that beer was good for the digestion.
However, this does not mean that a new food must first pass through the value of utility and then access other, symbolic, existential values. This is the case of brands that have done the opposite: such as the above mentioned brand *Findus* with its *Sofficini* in the 1970s, pre-fried pastry pockets with a salty filling, which were immediately presented as a novelty in themselves, valorized as fun, capable of making the whole family, especially children, smile; or such as the powerful rebranding of Coca-Cola which, during the war, staked everything on the value of American-ness and conciliation with other cultures, in fact using a *utopian type of valorization* to penetrate new markets.

6. That is not a Tradition

There is another strategy deployed by Fucibo and Small Giants, with which both brands strike at the heart of Italian gastronationalism (Fino, Cecconi 2021), revealing that certain ingredients and dishes, considered typical of the Italian table, actually come from afar and were once perceived as new and strange: pasta *alla carbonara*, for example, reveals its American origin; tomatoes and potatoes are reminded that they come from America and are now fully part of the so-called Mediterranean diet. In some cases, precisely on the subject of carbonara, they play on the limits of the recipe, as in Fucibo's post in which it is said that pasta *alla carbonara* made with insect flour is still a carbonara, while with cream it is not (as is also said in the Barilla Foundation video) (Fig. 5-6).

Fig. 5

Fig. 6

In other cases, the point of view in a historical sense is revealed, highlighting how the change in perception that insects or other animals have undergone over the centuries. Of the lobster, through the use of memes, it is told that it was considered until the 18th century to be anything but a luxurious and expensive food, but rather food for slaves and a fertilizer for fields – It is also compared with the scorpion, which resembles it in appearance, as if to say that if we eat lobster, with those claws and that carapace, we see no reason why we should not enjoy other similar animals. One even begins to spread the opinion that entomophagy was a common practice in ancient Rome (Fig. 7).

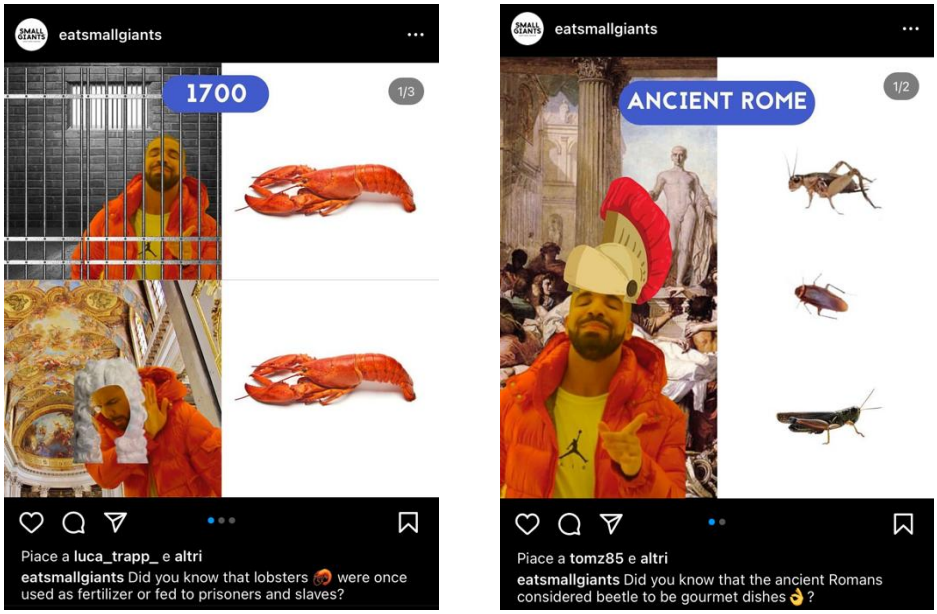

Fig. 7

This is the strategic use for communicative purposes of the so-called "invention of tradition", a process known to anthropologists and sociologists since the publication of Hobsbawn and Ranger's book (1983) in which they highlight how symbols, objects and rituals that are considered typical and proper to a community and around which it massively recognizes itself, are in reality the result of processes of collective construction carried out by various actors (media, journalists, historians, etc.). A phenomenon that in gastronomy is the norm[12] and that should not be understood, however, in the sense of generating lies (there would thus be "true" traditions and "invented" traditions) but in the sense that any construct of meaning is the result of discursive processes that interweave the gastronomic discourse with all the others that circulate in society (historical, scientific, commercial, medical ones…).

The path taken by Fucibo and Small Giants is clear: to grasp and highlight the similarities between the present and the past, to uncover references where one did not think possible, to enlighten the Enunciatee not only on the plausibly concrete benefits of insects, but above all on the very workings of gastronomy and cuisine, revealing unexpected mechanisms and challenging certainties. It is a kind of *meta-gastronomic expertise* that is relied upon to integrate insects into the Italian diet. In order to stimulate openness and curiosity, it shows how the new has always been there and that rejecting it is only a historical and situated way of seeing things.

In this direction, there are also the parody videos of Fucibo in which the prejudices against Italians at the table, known to be conservative and traditionalist, are ridiculed: very young boys at a party eat insect snacks, showing their appreciation and gesticulating a lot, while traditional Italian music plays (*C'è la luna in mezzo al mare*) and the caption says "you eat insects during an Italian party". The point of view seems to be that of an observer from outside Italian culture – It is no coincidence that much of Fucibo's social communication is in both Italian and English – to whom it shows how open young Italians are to novelty.

7. What Do Insects Taste Like?

What about taste? Apart from generic exclamations, such as "damn good", "extra-taste", "extra-good" referring to crisps and snacks, in the social media communication of the two brands one observes a kind of explicit and general reasoning about taste and disgust. For example, through reports on social media, often alongside the negative comments that some followers leave under the brands' posts ("vomitous",

[12] See the aforementioned works by Montanari (2019) and Cesari (2021, 2023) but also those by Grandi (2018).

"disgusting", "disgusting", and so on), we find the positive comments of happy consumers ("good", "I didn't expect that", "delicious"). A very pronounced and at the same time simplistic opposition that is connected to the second way in which tastes and disgusts are expressed, namely, through the rhetoric *of de gustibus non disputandum est*: "it is not good what is good, but it is good what is liked", one reads in a post by Fucibo, for example. A rhetoric that the semiotics of taste has long since abandoned, showing how tastes are instead very often discussed and commented on (Landowski, Fiorin 1997): taking a stance on one side or the other of a choice at the table is a way in which we all express our social and cultural identity.

Alongside the use of these taste stereotypes, there are two other ways in which the taste dimension appears in the communication strategy of Small Giants and Fucibo. The first is the blind tasting: people are filmed as they taste a cricket crisp without knowing what it is made of and who are first satisfied with the taste and then amazed to discover that such a good crisp contains insect flour. The second technique is the use of an elderly person as a testimonial: the video portrays an old man or lady who is asked to taste the insect snack and who eats it nodding and approving of the taste. "Not even Leone can resist Fucibo's extra Taste experience" is the caption of a Fucibo video, in which the interviewed man, a typical Italian grandfather, tastes the insect flour biscuits and says they are good, while speaking in Venetian dialect, thus also producing a real-life effect.

These are videos that appear on both brands' social media and have the overall objective of showing the fragility of cultural taboos. In the case of the blind tasting, the message is that it is only a mental barrier, a problem of preconceptions, a cultural issue that stops us from ingesting insects, because, after the tasting test, the insect meal snack turns out to be as crunchy and tasty as others. The idea, more or less explicit in the videos, is that we can separate culture (taste and distastes as the effect of symbolic taboo) and nature (taste understood as sensorial stimulation) and that we can reverse the process that leads from mental conditioning to physical rejection, so that we no longer go from culture to nature of body, but rather, from the mouth to the mind, from the body to culture. With the desired effect of changing the very cultural and learned scheme habit.

The videos starring the elderly play on the fact that, in Italian gastronomic culture, these elderly people are the holders of tradition and as such are most reluctant to change, thus making their testimony particularly valid and credible: if even for them novel food is not a problem and above all they are willing to taste it, then the sense of the new is evidently mitigated. Also, compared to the target audience of *Small Giants* and *Fucibo* who is mainly made up of young, open-minded and curious people who care about sustainability and the future of the world, those elderly figures clearly represent their grandparents, a part of the family that is particularly dear and respected in Italian family culture, but also a part of society that is tied to the past and for which the future has a very different meaning.

If, in these videos, the judgement of taste does not go beyond a generic affirmation of goodness or an exclamation of positive surprise, elsewhere, as seen, for example, for the Barilla Foundation video, an attempt is made to link the flavor of the insect flours to other known flavors in the food system: one reads therefore that they taste like hazelnuts, almonds, popcorn or dried mushrooms. In this case, an opposite use of gastronomic cultural grids is being made by the brand because, rather than attempting to break them down, they are exploited in order to reduce the sense of foreignness, by lowering them onto the insect food matter in order to endow it with some sense. A series of well-known flavors are used to give meaning and a place to foods that do not yet have any. Such dynamics, ranging from the domain of knowledge to that of sensoriality and vice versa, recall the basic functioning of gastronomic signification, consisting of the two levels identified by Marrone: the *savory* and the *tasty* (Marrone 2022).

According to Marrone, every gustatory experience takes place on two different dimensions, that which concerns the set of known flavors, of learned tastes, of traditions, of specific knowledge about products ingredients and raw materials, and which he calls the *tasty*; and that which concerns instead the strictly sensory dimension, the perception of contrasts, the purely physical tensions of tasting (hot/cold, soft/hard, dry/damp, mellow/discrete etc.), called the *flavorful*. The *tasty dimension* is "the system of meaning that is established by the sensory recognition of already known figures of the world, so that, tasting something, we are able – with varying skills depending on individual competence or contextual situations – to identify what it is thanks to our semantic and cultural scheme" (Marrone 2022, p. 105). The *flavorful dimension* is "the seat of 'sensorial reasoning' in its own, operating by means of perceptual

processes no longer linked to prior cognitive schemes but to a direct grasp of the sensory qualities inherent in gastronomic substances" (*Ibid.)*. Of course, in lived experience, the sensory perception linked to the tasty and that linked to the savory tend to continually intertwine, but what is important for us to emphasize here is *that the sense of change is given on the boundary of these two dimensions*: sometimes, already known tastes that allow for the adaptation of foreign tastes (from the tasty to the flavorful), sometimes unknown stimuli that break the cultural mold and gradually creep into the weft of new classifications (from the flavorful to the tasty). This is in fact what emerges in the communication of the two brands under consideration, which play on both the transition from *flavorful to tasty* (the blind tasting that breaks expectations) and the opposite direction from *tasty to flavorful* (application of familiar flavor grids).

8. Classifications and Out of Placeness

Some more theoretical questions arise at this point. First of all, it is useful to refer to what the anthropologist Mary Douglas (1966) said on the very rich theme of purity and danger: they derive from the breaking of social and human rules that establish what is pure and what is not, what is appropriate to a certain context and what is unsuitable. The problem, Douglas said, for example, is not the shoes themselves, which are dirty, but the shoes on the table; just as dirty becomes the plate from which we have just eaten if it remains on the table and does not go straight into the kitchen sink; or just as unsuitable is the toiletries in the living room or the dirty clothes on the bed. The sense of the unclean and the contaminated is not in the things but in the relationship between them. Then perhaps the problem is not the cricket, harmless as long as it does not end up in the places given as wrong: let it be on the floor, but not on the plate, even if pulverized into flour. Then, if it must be eaten, in burgers and snacks it can be included, but in pasta and pizza, for what they mean in Italian food culture, it generates dysphoric reactions.

It is a question of relationships between elements, which change meaning precisely according to the set of other elements with which they enter into relationship. In particular, according to Douglas, the rules of purity and contamination serve to express and maintain social order, so much so that contamination is defined as "the negative reaction against any object or idea that may confuse or contradict the classifications to which we are bound" (Douglas 1966, p. 78). Introducing insects to the table therefore means making a change that signifies another, much bigger change, a problem of relationships and classification between the elements and beings with which a certain culture organizes itself.

From this point of view, the introduction of insects into the Italian diet goes beyond the model proposed by Leach (1964) on the relationship between human space and animal flesh, in that case, Leach, questioning the taboos concerning certain animals, put forward the hypothesis that in Western culture, the prohibition to eat pets or exotic animals derived from a precise organization of human and non-human spaces, in particular in function of what is *near/far*: animals that occupy the closest anthropic space, namely the home (dogs, cats, birds) are taboo, while it is acceptable to eat the meat of animals that are in an intermediate space (such as the farm, with cows or pigs), and it becomes unacceptable to eat animals that are too far away from human space, those that live in spaces perceived as very distant (jungles and forests, for example, lions, crocodiles, kangaroos, are sources of meat that fall within the non-eatable). Marrone proposed an integration of Leach's anthropological classification with Rastier's (2001) anthropic spaces of enunciational origin and Fontanille's (2004) somatic figures:

Eating subject	***ici*** **(here/proximity)**	***là*** **(there/next)**	***Là-bas*** **(far/less distant)**	***là-bas*** **(farther/more distant)**
body	intimate space	private space	social space	public space
ingestion and expulsion movements	house	farm, yard, etc.	clearing, wood	forest
inside/outside	*not food*	*food*	*food*	*not (properly) food*
"me"/"I"	pet	farm animal	game meat	exotic, ferocious, unknown beasts
taboo = cannibalism	reprehensible edible	edible	edible	"adventurous" edible

Tab. 1 – Diagram of "spaces and distances between eaten bodies and eating body" in Marrone (2022, my translation).

But insects seem to break this general scheme of Western culture articulation of space and food because they are found everywhere: whether in the proximity of the house, inside it, or far away from it. They occupy the space of the house (*ici*), classifying themselves as non-food, as "reprehensible edible", but not because of affective proximity like for pets; at the same time, they are found in the *là-bas* as "adventurous edible" while occupying spaces close to human ones: they often settle in crevices, cracks, dark spaces, pipes, behind furniture. When they occupy the in-between space of *là* (crickets, for example), which is the space of food par excellence, they are almost absolutely forbidden to enter the domestic space. The insect, wherever it is in relation to the human body and its closest space, is, in most Western culture, an *outlier element*.

There is thus a problem of classification of insects, similar to that found in the Jewish dietary rules, in which some insects are allowed and others are not. As defined in the strict and detailed rules of Leviticus, those that crawl and swarm are forbidden because they belong neither to the air nor to the earth nor to water, and by virtue of the fact that their movement is ambiguous, unclassifiable. This ambiguity is linked to their impurity, to the impossibility of classifying them, which causes them precisely to be impure animals (Soler 1997). Hence the need for distance and the disgust at having them on your plate, in your hand, in your mouth, inside your body, as being *too close*.

A proximity to the ambiguous that is disturbing, as Kolnai (1929) suggests with regard to what he calls the *disgusting*: an excess of vitality, an excessive and confused swarming – It is by chance that he refers precisely to worms and what is rotten and decomposed – but also an unclear mixture, a viscous ambiguity[13] that is proper to biological matter, even when linked to moral dimensions (the disgust one feels at human behavior). *Disgust*, the German philosopher suggests, moreover, should be distinguished from other feelings of defense, such as fear or horror[14]. For Kolnai, disgust is instead more of a *malaise*, triggered by a *provocation* that the object of disgust exerts on the subject, who tends to turn away from it because of the danger of contagion, of an abnormal contact.

Hence the use in the European market not of whole insects but of their flours, that is their pulverized presence: pulverized insects, reduced to flour, lose the biological dimension, the moistures, the material differences, the contrasts of the substances of which they are made. The *dry* predominates over the *moist* and reduces the danger of the impurity coming from the perception of the rotten and decomposed.

[13] On viscosity as a primary disgusting experience, Sartre had emphasised precisely its ambiguous dimension, neither solid nor liquid, and above all the sticky aspect, the excessive, intrusive contact of viscous matter. Mary Douglas takes up these very considerations with regard to the meaning of contamination.

[14] On fear in the food field see Ferrieres (2002), Grandi (2023).

9. Conclusion

Returning to the initial question of how and when a new food novelty knocks on the door of a gastronomic system, it redefines the latter and itself in a relationship of difference that gives meaning to one and the other reciprocally, some concluding considerations can be made.

The first is that it is not useful to elaborate general considerations on entire systems but it is more fruitful to work on delimited discursive universes and thus on precise communicative pacts and value packages, as the case of pasta and pizza, on the one hand, and the burger, on the other, have shown. The perception of change and the extent of it, with all the reactions of rejection or acceptance, cannot be generalized but must be circumscribed to identifiable discursive phenomena and specific textual manifestations.

The second reflection concerns that dialectic we have identified in the case study of the two brands examined, between learned scheme (*tasty*) and sensorial stimuli (*flavorful*) because it seems to us to be a process that can explain the changes in taste at the table. On the one hand, the new, the unknown, tends to be constantly somaticized by assimilating it within recognizable structures; on the other hand, it also progressively leads to eroding these structures, mixing with them, transforming them, and thus gradually producing others. It is in the tension between the cultural/learned dimension (in the sense of more elaborated) and the natural/somatic dimension (in the sense of less elaborated) that processes of change are produced.

Finally, the introduction of insects into the kitchen, far from being an exclusively dietary, nutritional or sustainability phenomenon, concerns very broad issues of cultural organization, of classification of the world, we could say of *political cuisine*, meaning precisely by this term the collective, social, agentic dimension of food, which goes from the table to the social collective and vice versa.

We use the term *collective* in its strict sense, as a metalanguage for the proposal put forward by Bruno Latour (1991, 1999) regarding the functioning of politics and human society: rather than thinking of Nature and Culture, humans and non-humans as separate entities, we must rethink them *as assemblages of humans and non-humans*, networks of heterogeneous actors that expand, modify, and contract depending on the entry and exit of new and old elements into this collective. The process of entering and exiting the collective is, according to Latour, a movement through which "entities under appeal" – phenomena whose nature (scientific, political, social, spiritual) has not yet been established – ask to enter the collective, in which a series of processes and power relationships will activate and then stabilize that entity as "natural" or "cultural", "scientific" or "political", "social" or "technological", and so on, gradually constituting the extreme poles of modern thought, which is based precisely on the separation – constructed and debated – between Nature and Culture. That is, according to Latour, between *facts*, considered objective, scientific, and indisputable (but which are the result of a construction process) and *values*, which are the symbolic, political, intersubjective, and contractual dimension. In the functioning of a collective understood in this way, a common realm where there are no a priori separations, the new entities undergo a process of *consultation* which, through the questioning of the incoming entity and the attempt to constitute it as "fact", leads to the next process, that of *putting in order*, by which a new hierarchy, which sets new scales of values and finds a place for the entities that were on appeal, reorganizes the collective as a whole (Latour 1999). This has happened, to remain in the field of food, with natural wines, on which oenologists, agronomists, gastronomes have questioned, and continue to question, trying to give a place to a product that overturns the rules of production and also the aesthetic classification of wine: real entities in appeal that ask to be stabilized and institutionalized (Marrone 2016).

The insects ask to enter the collective, and questions are raised about them, shields are erected, fists are banged, curiosities are sparked, while scientific, measurable, objective explanations are sought: the new is produced and transforms in a continuous swaying between the constitution of *facts* and the emergence of *values*. The collective is not a closed assembly, but a common world by definition in expansion. Nor is it the realm of relativism where everything equates to everything else, and therefore nothing has value, but, on the contrary, it is the realm of *relationalism*[15], that is, the construction of networks of meaning, and where every possibility of change can unfold far from the positions, opposed to each other but equally dangerous, of nihilistic relativism and ethnocentric reductionism.

[15] On this term, see Marrone's article in the cultural journal *doppiozero* (18 October 2023, www.doppiozero.com/bruno-latour-contro-la-modernita) dedicated to the Bruno Latour's volume-interview *Un monde pluriel mais commun* (2003).

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