

The End of Table Manners: The *Grand Bouffe* of Mukbang

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Abstract: The paper outlines a first overview of *mukbang* as a media phenomenon in a semiotic perspective. Mukbang (lit. “eating broadcast”) emerged in early 2010s South Korea as a form of livestreamed consumption of food aimed at contrasting loneliness and the orthorexic norms prevailing in the country. Ever since it has evolved into a global digital genre that fuses spectacle, intimacy, and excess: performers eat a lot, for a lot of time, more than often in a ravenous fashion which may prove as captivating as it is repellent (e.g. they magnify chewing and ingestion noises and lavishly dirty themselves). Now a burgeoning trend, with millions and millions of videos published on platforms such as YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok, it remains relatively underexamined in academic discourse. Existing scholarship has interpreted it variously: as food porn, as autobiographical narrative, and as a ritualized and sadomasochistic performance. Audience motivations seem to span the gastronomic, social, sexual, and escapist, while its practical consequences would range from fostering a sense of community to exacerbating eating disorders. Mukbang can be contextualized within broader cultural frameworks including gastromania (the contemporary obsession for food), competitive eating, and viral challenges, and it parallels ASMR videos in its hypnotic use of amplified sensory stimuli, prominently sound. Figures like controversial youtuber Nikocado Avocado exemplify mukbang’s theatrical self-performance, turning the body into a battleground in a performative economy reminiscent of the historical freak show.

1. Introduction. “I just Eat Food on my Webcam”

The opening scene of *Wilfred*, the American adaptation of the eponymous Australian TV series, introduces Ryan (Elijah Wood), a disillusioned young lawyer who, having hit rock bottom, attempts suicide by swallowing a cocktail of pills and collapsing into bed. Much to his surprise, he wakes up the next morning still alive. As he staggers around his house in a daze, Jenna (Fiona Gubelmann) – the neighbour he will eventually fall for – rings the doorbell and asks if he can watch her dog, named Wilfred, while she’s away. Ryan reluctantly agrees, only to discover that he sees Wilfred not as a regular dog, but as a man in a dog suit (portrayed by Jason Gann, who also created and starred in the original series). In season three, episode five, titled *Shame* (aired July 2013), Ryan, seeking to supplement his income, takes in another problematic Xennial, Anne (Kristen Schaal). Unsure whether she can pay rent, he knocks on her door to inquire about her finances. Anne reassures him by explaining she has recently launched a “small Internet business”: people *pay to watch her eat*. “So, you’re, like, a food critic?” Ryan asks, intrigued. “No”, Anne replies. “I just eat food on my webcam. [...] I’m not naïve – I realize that most of my clients are... you know... men. But I love being my own boss. Basically, you get paid a shitload of money to eat three meals a day. And the second I get a creepy vibe from someone, I ban them”. As they talk, Anne is actually live-streaming for a man with a noticeably sleazy demeanour, who impatiently urges her to “put some more of that dijonnaise on the sandwich”. To someone unaware of the phenomenon known as mukbang, the scene might appear as a kind of actualized conceptual experiment – a visualization of what one might call gastronomic pornography.



2. Mukbang as Video Content in the Contemporary Digital Platform Ecology

A quick YouTube search for “mukbang” returns series of videos similar to the following: an extreme close-up of an East Asian woman with porcelain skin, noisily devouring a bowl of richly seasoned noodles topped with fried eggs¹. *Mukbang*, derived from the Korean 먹방 (*mŏk pang*), a blend of *meokneun* (eating) and *bangsong* (broadcasting), refers to a live stream where individuals, known as broadcasting jockeys (commonly shortened as BJs), film themselves preparing and consuming large quantities of food, often in an extravagant and frenzied fashion. Such streams remain available as videos (vodcasts) and are frequently reshared in edited, condensed formats. Leveraging dedicated platforms and apps, mukbang has evolved into an interactive experience: viewers may pay for access to exclusive content or commission specific gestures or actions involving food. Performers monetize through digital advertising, viewers fees, and sponsorships. The first mukbang is credited to a so-called “solitary eater” – described in such a fashion in every available chronicle – who began streaming on South Korea’s AfreecaTV (now SOOP) in 2009. Initially a distinctly South Korean cultural phenomenon, arising as a counterpoint to the rigidly orthorexic lifestyle historically dominant in the country, mukbang quickly went global. In 2016, Twitch introduced a “social eating” category to accommodate this rising genre, initially fuelled by YouTube’s reach. By August 2025, Instagram hosts an estimated 5-10 million mukbang videos and TikTok, where growth has been exponential, accounted for 30-60 billion views in the genre. In fact, the rise of short-form video platforms has transformed mukbang; while originally dominated by live streams, today’s content is increasingly pre-recorded, edited, and often accelerated via timelapse. These changes shift the focus to consumption alone (to the detriment of food preparation and cooking; in other words, pure Performance wins against Competence), reducing the creator’s role as streamer and emphasizing the phase and act of ingestion. Genre variations have proliferated – such as the “parking lot” subgenre, featuring performances set inside parked vehicles – highlighting both the format’s structural uniformity and creators’ pursuit of a distinct authorial voice. Parodies and experimental offshoots abound. Contemporary examples from TikTok may illustrate this variety: @wallywhatthe (active since 2024) posts rapid-fire marathons, like attempting to drink 100 litres of Monster using a fork, in timelapse, whose authenticity is debated; @official.mrhungry does not simply eat, rather *wallows* in food, most memorably appearing covered in Nutella in an October 2024 viral clip²; @baderalsafar (active since 2019) seems to be on the verge of picacism, as he eats whole fruits, crustaceans with shells, or edible simulations of inedible objects; @bittermukbang (since 2020) crafts bizarre “junk food rolls” featuring candies wrapped around fillings like pesto or Simmenthal, introduced with a signature pitch-shifted voice; Marilena Sansone, an Italian living in the U.S. and active on Instagram since 2021 as @dieta_carnedryaged, represents the niche of raw carnivorous mukbang, consuming only dry-aged meat and fruit.

3. A Neglected Object of Inquiry: Essential Scholarly References

Mukbang stands as a prominent cultural phenomenon, frequently discussed in journalistic media and so-called grey literature but, despite its visibility, remains notably understudied. From a sociosemiotic perspective, it offers rich terrain for reflection and analysis. Philosopher Davide Sisto (2020), reflecting on the traditional format of YouTube livestreams, characterizes mukbang as “interesting” and “bizarre”. He interprets it as an alternative mode of autobiographical storytelling, different from Facebook’s static audiovisual narratives. According to Sisto, creators may use mukbang as a framework to grapple with

¹ I am describing here, as a prototypical video, a YouTube short entitled *Black Bean Noodles With Fried Eggs & Kimchi* (www.youtube.com/shorts/qsNRLAn9tF0), uploaded by @NoodleNationTalks on July 19, 2024, starring the South Korean performer @Fumeyamyam. As of August 2025, the video has garnered over three and a half million views. Active on YouTube since January 2019, Fumeyamyam has produced around 1,000 videos and currently boasts 5.87 million subscribers.

² www.tiktok.com/@official.mrhungry/video/7427162278694341919.



eating disorders. In her monograph on Hallyu (the Korean Wave), South Korean Anglicist Hyesu Park (2021) dedicates only a brief concluding chapter to mukbang. There, she frames it as an audiovisual genre and deems it “uncommon, absurd, and even disturbing”. A more problematizing approach comes from psychologist Kagan Kircaburun (2020) and his research group, whose empirical study synthesizes findings from eleven academic papers and 20 articles from British media outlets. This small corpus underscores the heterogeneous motivations underlying mukbang viewership, including social, sexual, gastronomic, and entertainment-driven factors, as well as what has been described as a “compensatory escapist strategy” – a desire to withdraw from reality. With respect to the effects of mukbang consumption on viewers, the sample outlines an ambivalent scenario in which positive outcomes (such as a reduction in feelings of loneliness and social isolation, and the creation of virtual communities) coexist with negative repercussions (such as changes in dietary preferences, the erosion of table etiquette, the onset of eating disorders, and addictive behaviours). The article emphasizes this fundamental ambiguity by concluding that “Even though individuals have been watching mukbang for over a decade, very little is known about this behaviour” (p. 1209). Media scholar Giulia Raciti (2019) situates mukbang within the broader framework of food porn³ and aligns it with anthropological rituals such as the *potlatch* first studied by Franz Boas (a ritual characteristic of the indigenous tribes of the northwestern region of North America, in which valuable goods are exchanged and destroyed) and philosophical constructs like Georges Bataille’s *dépense* (denoting exhaustive and gratuitous dissipation, in opposition to any rational principle of utility and productivity). Raciti introduces compelling hermeneutic perspectives: she talks about “sensational immediacy”, “rhetorics of exaggeration”, and a “baroque aesthetic of performance” (citing semiotician Francesco Mangiapane). She posits a “gastronomic scopophilia” that revives the “cannibalistic greed” described by Bataille and Jean-Paul Sartre. Mukbang, she suggests, has cinematic antecedents, from Andy Warhol’s *Eat* (1963) and *Burger* (1982), to Marco Ferreri’s *La grande bouffe* (1973). She also highlights what semioticians would define as the enunciative apparatus of the genre – direct camera addresses, exposed microphones and keyboards, zoom-ins on food textures and chewing – which renders mukbang a self-reflexive spectacle, simultaneously *showing* and *commenting on* the very act of showing. Both Raciti and semiotician Bruno Surace (2022) point to a sadistic dimension; for the latter scholar, playful consumption verges into punishment. Their analyses reveal multiple axes of sadomasochism, which I comment on and integrate as follows: the mukbanger enacts violence on food (e.g. the consumption of alive sea food), and upon themselves through gruelling eating feats that require proper physical training; the viewer, particularly when paying or issuing requests, plays the role of tormentor; yet that same viewer may also derive masochistic pleasure from sustained exposure to this kind of spectacle.

4. Between the Socially Shared Food Craze and the Ecstasy of Bodily Stimuli

Framing mukbang within the broader landscape of gastromania – conceptualized by Gianfranco Marrone (2014) as a cultural fixation on food – is both appropriate and revealing. A decade after Marrone introduced this notion, we now face a totalizing and self-referential media culture in which food is a strategic anchor for content creators of all kinds. Today, food videos are never just about food and, vice versa, videos about anything else cannot fail to include food to a certain extent; let us think to the phenomenon of “celebrities interviewed while eating spicy food”, a trend premiered in 2015 by the format *Hot Ones* launched by youtuber Sean Evans. Like many cult phenomena that later merge into mainstream trends, mukbang displays peculiar features. While Marrone’s analysis of *Masterchef* emphasized how food was indeed verbalized and aestheticized but rarely consumed, mukbang occupies the opposite pole of the gastronomic spectrum: here, food is ravenously bitten, chewed, sucked, and swallowed – often smeared across hands, lips, and faces – in the broader framework of a culture that has thoroughly internalized food porn and junk food excess (Marino 2021). Mukbang’s origin in East Asian media contexts is crucial. Unlike the Western aversion to eating sounds, Eastern traditions often

³ Contrasting perspectives can be found in the pivotal study by Koreanologist Antonetta Lucia Bruno (2017).



celebrate and amplify them. This sonic emphasis links mukbang closely with ASMR (acronym for Autonomous Sensory Meridian Response), a pseudoscientific term coined in 2010 by Facebook user Jennifer Allen to describe a pleasurable tingling triggered by soft stimuli. Mukbang performances engage this sensory logic (“sensationalism” originally referred to a late Romantic literary strategy that aimed at stimulating the senses and the thymic components that would be associated with them): blowing, slurping, chewing, and swallowing are exaggerated into immersive, often overwhelming experiences. ASMR has since evolved into a vast, synesthetic macro-genre that aestheticizes – and occasionally eroticizes – the banal. While some ASMR content is mute (as are some mukbangs), others feature hyperreal sound design – whispers, clicks, taps – that function as material *phoné* (as Raciti puts it) and provoke strong responses, even discomfort (as Surace notes in the case of misophonia sufferers)⁴. ASMR, like mukbang, has become a meta-genre capable of infusing any narrative form: government propaganda, such as the February 19, 2025 video on migrant deportations posted by the official Twitter/X account of the White House, now employs ASMR aesthetics: slow-motion shots and close-mic audio of metallic restraints create an eerie sensory immersion. Mukbang is often framed as a subgenre of ASMR. I contend they are parallel expressions of the same cultural logic built upon the modes of sensationalism, exposition, and exaggeration. In mukbang, food is consumed to extremes – quantitatively, performatively, and emotionally – fusing self-exploitation and agonism: so that excess becomes a form of spectacle. It must be noted that the strategy of perpetual escalation – doing more, louder, bigger – is precisely what propelled Mr. Beast (real name Jimmy Donaldson) to become the world’s most-subscribed and wealthiest youtuber. ASMR videos elevate everyday gestures – like unwrapping packages, engaging in makeup routines, cleaning dirty objects – into hypnotic displays. Both mukbang and ASMR hinge on proximity: the camera zooms ever closer, the soundscape grows more textured, all to trigger physiological or emotional reactions – hunger, revulsion, calm, or suspense. They leave viewers breathless, asking: how far can this go? Both craft scenarios of artificiality and arbitrariness, as their pleasure is vicarious, their intimacy engineered: I am watching things I could never otherwise witness, let alone experience or carry out myself. They often resemble in-flesh thought experiments: what if a hydraulic press crushed a hammer? What if a molten iron ball met ice? What if one tried to eat ten kilos of ramen? ASMR and mukbang show us, and let us hear, the answers. And these are not passive recordings of spontaneous events, they are performances designed for mediation, staged to become spectacle. In this respect, mukbang seem to extend the legacy of erotically or pornographically charged food art (let us think of Mereth Oppenheim’s *Spring Feast*, 1959, or Salvador Dalí’s *Gala’s Dinners*, 1973) into the digital era.

5. Archeologizing and Contextualizing Mukbang: Challenge, Addiction, and Sexualization

A significant number of viral social challenges – and the digital lore that surrounds them – centre on the act of consuming hazardous or taboo foods. Ingesting such items becomes a symbolic trophy, a mark of recognition and notoriety. From the Saltine Challenge (1996), which involved eating six dry crackers in under a minute and reportedly originated in American football circles, to the infamous Cinnamon Challenge (2005) and the spurious Tide Pod Challenge (2018), these spectacles mark a shift toward an embodied, masculinized form of digital bravado – early signals of what would later be termed the manosphere (see Monti 2025). As a matter of fact, mukbang’s agonistic dimension finds precedent in the tradition of competitive eating, epitomized by events like Nathan’s Hot Dog Eating Contest in New York, which dates back to 1972. Practitioners seek to consume the greatest volume of food in the shortest time possible. American Matt Stoney (b. 1992), a competitive eater since 2011, famously devoured a McDonald’s Happy Meal in 15 seconds and 103 tacos in eight minutes. But the toll is not just physical: Japanese pioneer Takeru Kobayashi (b. 1978), profiled in Netflix’s documentary *Hack Your Health: The Secrets of Your Gut* (2024), declared his retirement with the words “I no longer feel hunger”. The residue

⁴ In ASMR, the signifier – typically composed of semantically neutral, affectless sounds – often overrides the signified, approaching a pseudolinguistic dimension. For more on the intersection of mukbang and ASMR, see Kard (2022).



– splashes, stains, and bodily emissions – left in the wake of these feats, paired with the amplified chewing and gulping, constitutes a visceral, almost defiant vulgarity. In premodern societies, defecation was communal and eating private (Corbin 1982); today, only food athletes are allowed to display such unbridled messiness in public. Both mukbang and competitive eating share a component that philosopher Paul Virilio defined dromological, a logic of speed intrinsically tied to violence and spectacle. There are indeed exceptions that prove the rule. One such case is Omar Palermo (1979–2021), known as Youtubo anche io, whose brief yet distinctive presence in the Italian mukbang scene during 2018–2019 offered a more humane and counter-discursive alternative to the genre’s typically sensationalist extremes; his videos exemplified a placid style of mukbang fully compatible with conventional table manners. Both mukbang and competitive eating participate in a broader culture of hyperphagia. Binge eating was formally recognized in DSM-III (1987) as a diagnostic feature of bulimia, and mukbang’s pathological undertones have prompted governmental action in recent years; in 2018, South Korea issued regulations targeting food waste, addiction risk, and obesity associated with mukbang content. Beyond pathology lies a darker fixation: the obsessive attention to the body – more precisely, and undoubtedly, the *female* body – of the performer. Often fetishized, sexualized, and racialized, these bodies serve as sites of voyeuristic projection. A representative case among the countless is youtuber @lonelymizzang, active since 2020 (with 1.5 million followers and hundreds of videos produced), who combines mukbang with the typical East Asian idol aesthetics. This entanglement of food, femininity, sonic intimacy, and eroticism is not coincidental. It emerges, ironically or otherwise, from feminist genealogies. In her seminal performance *Semiotics of the Kitchen* (1975), Martha Rosler anticipates ASMR by transforming domestic sounds into critiques of gendered labour, as noted by artist and aestheticist Camilia Kard (2022). Similarly, Chantal Akerman’s *Jeanne Dielman* (1975) – described by ethnomusicologist Joshua Hudelson (2020) as the first ASMR film – employs a careful soundscape of minor domestic noises to expose the muted, passive oppression of its female protagonist.

6. Conclusion. The Body as a Performative Canvas

The themes of display, excess, and sensationalism outlined above naturally culminate in an emblematic case study framed through a concept which finds its roots in circus performance and the commodification of non-normative bodies once labelled as “sideshow attractions”: the freak – a monstrous figure, a cultural archetype, and a still-potent expressive and commercial strategy in the digital age of social media and online celebrity (Brilli 2018). Nicholas Perry, born in 1992 in Ukraine and adopted by American parents, is a proudly gay former vegan turned outspoken anti-vegan, with a background as a semi-professional violinist. Known online as Nikocado Avocado, he has become a major YouTube personality. While his channel began in 2013 (with the earliest available video dated September 1, 2016), he has since uploaded over 700 videos, amassing more than 908 million views and 4.5 million subscribers. Having embraced mukbang in 2016, Perry swiftly became both a leading figure and, eventually, a cautionary tale: live-streaming his dramatic weight gain, he disclosed in a 2019 “Men’s Health” interview that his lifestyle had caused serious health issues, including reduced libido, erectile dysfunction, and fractured ribs from binge-eating-induced coughing. He would use a mobility scooter, being legally recognized as disabled due to obesity. Perry, who engages in a turbulent relationship with his husband Orlin Home (real name Rodrigo Gonzales), is renowned for his theatrical flair, ranting, and meltdowns (quarrels, tears, and outbursts in the wake of exhausting and increasingly exaggerated eating sessions), and has faced multiple allegations of harassment and stalking from other internet personalities. Following a brief hiatus, Perry reemerged on September 6, 2024, with a video titled *Two Steps Ahead*. Disguised in a panda costume and speaking in a deep, unsettling voice, he claimed to be perpetually ahead of his audience. Unmasking himself, he revealed he had lost 110 kilograms over two years through a radical personal transformation – all while continuing to upload pre-recorded content. In the same video, Perry – who has since undergone several plastic surgeries, each meticulously documented via social media – declares his mukbang career to have been the “greatest social experiment” of his life. He claims to have exposed the audience’s obsession with online content and their inability to distinguish



between the performer and the persona: “While you mocked me, I was always in control”. Following the reveal, he resumes his signature performance – consuming a tabletop entirely covered with noodles dressed in dark sauce, sesame seeds, and scallions – finishing in fifteen minutes. Within 48 hours, the video went viral, garnering 26 million views. From May to June 2025, Nikocado Avocado toured the United States to meet his fans, in a production styled with the spectacle of a rockstar tour. It is not inconceivable that, one day, he may be recognized alongside avant-garde performance artists who turned their body into the very work of art, such as Vito Acconci, ORLAN, Marina Abramović, and Genesis Breyer P-Orridge.



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