

MEDIA FOOD NARRATIVES AND POSTMILLENNIAL CULTURE

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This paper intends to summarise how meaning of food is constructed in contemporary media discourses and to justify why the present-day media food narratives can be characterised as the typical examples of postmillennial cultural production.

In the academia of humanities and arts the last decade has been marked by a continuing discussion about the end of postmodern times and the rise of new era. Cultural studies in particular has experienced the need to consider the end of postmodernism and its replacement by a new emerging cultural paradigm. As it was the case of postmodernism, new umbrella term *metamodernism* coined by Vermeulen and Akker [Vermeulen and Akker 2010] applies not only to the study of literature but can be characterised as a complex cultural movement exemplified by cases in technology, media, architecture, art and literature. Many cultural studies academics even today cannot agree on answers to elementary questions of when postmodernism began and what its first works were in individual fields. The same questions are posed about the culture of these times: What labels should be used to name it? When and where can the first examples be found? What criteria can be defined for the new cultural trends?

Numerous terms have already been circulated in the recent academic publications: post-postmodernism, altermodernism, digimodernism, performatism, hypermodernity, automodernity, post-digital, post-humanism, etc. All concepts try to embrace the new trends in individual spheres of culture. Those focusing on economy and its relationship with cultural production, e.g. Nealon [Nealon 2012] deal with issues of changing modes and forms of capitalism. Another group of authors concentrates on new digital technologies and their impact on elements of culture [Kirby 2009, Lipovetsky 2005, Samuels 2010]. Consumerism appears as a key notion in their texts while Baurriaud's [Baurriaud 2009] term 'altermodern' argues by new anti-commercial trends. The position of a reader/listener/viewer is in the centre of attention of both Eshelman [Eshelman 2008] and Gans [Gans 2000] when they discuss performatism and victimary discourses respectively. Sensibility is the crucial concept for the above mentioned all-embracing name of *metamodernism*.

Already in the last decade of the 20th century food and food related elements became the main concern of all media. The book market has since flourished also thanks to the productions of cookbooks and food memoirs. Newspapers not only contain food related articles but also carry regular food supplements. The magazine scene has been enriched by dozens of new magazines on food, not to mention food ads and food commercials in both print and broadcast media. All public and commercial television channels worship celebrity chefs in their cooking shows and from morning television to late evening broadcast hours audiences can choose from reality genres with cooking and food content if they did not choose one of the food channels broadcasting non-stop.

Food is related to private (e.g. domestic food preparation and consumption, eating in) as well as public spheres (e.g. food production, food selling in grocery stores, on the market, consumption of food on public, eating out). Food preparation involves power relations in a given food culture, addressing home, family, and gender identities. If private sphere is connected with eating in, home-cooked meals and personal touch then public sphere is associated with eating out, anonymous and industrial preparation of food in impersonal restaurants and bars. While the former is characterised as predominantly feminine (female are major home food producers in most of the countries), the latter is mostly masculine. Gender but also class, ethnicity, nationality, religion and other identities are frequently discussed identities related to food. All these cultural and social factors are constructed into media food narratives.

In the second decade of the 21st century consumers use all old and new media in their search for narratives of imagination. Old and new media provide them with images of lifestyle that they want to acquire. They direct the consumers to what they should eat, drink and do to be 'in' or to eat safely. One can agree that food performs various functions in media narratives. Concerns about body image, body shape, weight, related to eating and dieting are present in most mediated images addressing predominantly but not exclusively women of all age categories. Consequently, women feel a discrepancy between what they look like and what they want to look like. The negative feelings about their bodies and appearances prompt them to more active consumer behaviour.

But even with all new media on the scene, television is still identified by scholars and obviously by audiences as well as the medium that fulfils its narrative function best, as a super-narrator. Cheri Ketchum discusses the role of television as a principal food narrator focusing on non-fiction programming of the Food Network and arguing that television has a history of broadcasting stories that welcome viewers to engage in fantasy [Ketchum 2005, p. 217]. But it is not only this particular cable channel that is able to produce and enhance food narratives that build the fantasy food world for the consumer who watches cooking shows. The viewer - consumer is exposed to the idea that their dreams can be realized through the process of consumption of these food fantasies on all public and commercial channels.

Other media and food researches also agree that television nowadays plays an important role in mediating food. Television food narratives are varied in genres that range from secondary, background presence of a chef who cooks his favourite meal while the presenters are occupied by other reports and activities typical for the morning television and only occasionally stop in the kitchen corner to comment on the progress, through commercials on food and related commodities, through game shows, cooking contests involving professional chefs, celebrities or vox-pops, cookery shows to documentary series on food.

Television cookery shows represent one of the most visible leisure programming genre on television at present although the boom of television cookery belongs to the 1990s. During more than the two decades cookery shows have not only invaded daytime slots but they occupy relatively large proportion of prime-time of both public service and commercial channels (not to forget the food channels mentioned above).

All above mentioned food elements in media serve as typical examples of the postmillennial era that is represented by the death of the author and the birth of the consumer. Kirby in his explanation of the end of post-modernism [Kirby 2009] argues that navigating through the internet while looking for a new recipe, voting for a contestant in cooking contest, traveling to Australia with someone interested in local cuisine in the docu reality TV genre are examples of ephemeral, non-reproducible products of both old and new media all constructed by the consumerism. The postmodern powerless individual - listener or viewer changes into digimodern listener or viewer who invent, direct or directly participates in the creation of the media product – blog about food, Wikipedia entry, voting for a winner of the chef competition, etc. He continues claiming that this more intense engagement with the cultural process in reality TV and Internet gives an individual sense or illusion of his/her managing, controlling, making the product itself. Former spectacular function of television is marginal now and what is central is active, busy, and contributing individual.

Another feature that places food narratives into the postmillennial category is their banal, naïve often primitive content. Topics discussed, conclusions drawn, simplifications, generalisations, choice of participants, etc. For this postmodern narratives may seem elitist, intelligent, creative while the postmillennial cultural products can be described as violent, rude, pornographic, conformist, meaningless, brainless, trivial – consumerist.

One may claim that food narratives in various media discourses encourage consumers – readers, listeners, viewers, to buy food related products – ingredients, kitchen equipment, or other media products, for instance cookbooks. There is hardly ever mention of serious aspects related to food (effects on people's health, country's economy, and environment) which is typical for lifestyle programming that include features of general interest magazines and television programming. Topics that focus on household matters – home improvement, housekeeping, gardening, care for pets, but also enhancement of body – health, beauty, fitness fit the category of conformist, trivial, i.e. consumerist character of the postmillennial media food narratives.

Literature

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Summary

The paper discusses the importance, status and the construction of food narratives in present-day media discourses. It uses the approach of the latest cultural studies theories embraced by the term 'metamodernism'. It tries to argue that various food narratives in both old and new media discourses can be marked as leaving postmodern tendencies and thus representing the newly established trends in post-postmodern consumer culture characterised by postmillennial sensibility.