

Book reviews

Fabio Parasecoli, *Bite Me* (Berg, New York and Oxford: 2008), 168 pp.

Bite Me reads like a thick, richly seasoned soup. The more you dig into it, the more you taste the ingredients and the flavor of their connections. Fabio Parasecoli courageously approaches the seemingly trivial connections between popular culture and food. He challenges the reader to digest a sophisticated and multi-layered theoretical framework and then applies this framework to analyze food, consumption and popular culture. Parasecoli argues that "...food plays such an important role in human life that it emerges in many aspects of our culture, as well as in those apparently less connected with it" (p. 147). Thus, Parasecoli aims to advance interdisciplinary food studies by developing a conceptual framework that can be used to analyze overt and apparent aspects of food in various arenas of human experience. The social and political research, which stretches from Plato through Thomas Hobbes to contemporary thinkers such as Stephen Duncombe, is extensive, and the examples used by the author come from diverse venues of local and global pop culture. The main idea is to show that the appearance of food and its meanings in pop culture is representative of hegemonic rules and practices, and, at the same time, it is also the place where such values are assessed, often negated and alternative systems of values and being are contemplated.

In the introductory chapter, Parasecoli presents his theoretical framework. The basic theoretical tool is semiotics, the study of signs and symbols in human communications. In semiotics, a "sign" is composed of a physical "signifier," such as an image, and what is "signified," i.e., the meanings attached to the signifier within a given context (pp. 7–8). Accordingly, popular images of food are physical bearers of cultural meanings. In the next theoretical step, Parasecoli employs a version of Antonio Gramsci's sociopolitical view whereby popular images, meanings and practices are tools by which the powerful hegemonic class dominates and regulates society (pp. 9–10). Pop culture is the arena where hegemony can be observed, and popular images of food and digestion practices bolster political interests. Parasecoli also makes wide use of Lacan's view that human identity is formed through our evolving perceptions of our own images, through others' projections of our image within a local system of meanings and symbols, and through our ongoing interaction with the "Real"—all that cannot be directly perceived and/or is not regulated and interpreted by our system of symbols (pp. 88–95).

This expansive effort to employ high-level theories in analyzing the relationship between food and pop culture is exciting, but it comes with a price. The theoretical discussion requires a certain level of familiarity with philosophy,

psychology and political theory, which some readers may not be familiar with. Moreover, Parasecoli's presentation of a condensed and high-level theoretical basis gives rise to some ambiguities and theoretical inconsistencies. For example, semiotics assumes that signs are representations of some process of meaning and practice formation. The popularity of rap music, for instance, is presumed to be the outcome of wide familiarity and acceptance of the life experience of African Americans and the meanings of this experience for blacks and other listeners. Yet, in the music industry, as in most other arenas, popular signs may not be such innocent expressions of generally accepted practices and meaning, but rather the result of political and economic influence. Indeed, Parasecoli mentions this problem in passing in Chapter 4, when he speaks of race and ethnicity. While exploring the connection between popular images of black female flesh and food, the author states,

Yet this phenomenon does not happen in a void, but within the field of the mass media industry, run mostly by non-blacks. [In] commodifying minorities, even when giving them a certain freedom, mainstream culture can find new and direct ways to reaffirm its power (p. 112).

Expanding the effects of this tainting element might have taken the discussion off course, and that may be why Parasecoli did not discuss it extensively. Nonetheless, the possibility of such manipulation of semiotic elements conflicts with the assumptions made by semiotics and with some of the interpretations of and applications to food studies offered by Parasecoli.

Theoretical glitches, nevertheless, do not take much from Parasecoli's meticulous investigations of the various arenas where pop culture interacts with food and consumption—places where Parasecoli's analysis brings to light fascinating interpretations of meanings. In Chapter 1, Parasecoli "naturalizes" the relationship between pop culture and food by exploring the brain. Building on empirical data related to memory, cognitive psychology and neurology, the author attempts to show that mind and body are connected through the mental motivations of consumption and the physical consumption and digestion of food. While enlisting popular images of food and digestion in the currently very popular vampires movies (Chapter 2), Parasecoli moves into the psychology of humans and our fears of being consumed in ways similar to our consumption of other animals. Food consumption, according to psychoanalysts such as Freud and Lacan, is at the core of human development from birth to death. It is the basis of our initial contact with others; it is fundamental to expressions that evolve into language; and it shapes the communicative space between adults. A further discussion of the role and meaning of food in Sci-Fi movies, in Chapter 3, enables the author to expose the ways in which food and eating connect us with possible alternative realities, and the ways in which Sci-Fi movies provide us with a critique of current cultural conditions.

The discussion of dieting in Chapter 4 aims to show that food science can replace ancient myths and psychological explanations related to human fears with heavy reliance on empirical facts in gaining control over our bodies and environment. When it comes to discussing race and ethnicity (Chapter 5), Parasecoli almost exclusively focuses on “Edible Black Bodies” in African American pop culture, where dominant images such as black women’s flesh (especially “booty”), “mammies,” “divas,” “gangsters” and “black men in drag” bear intricate historical, social and economic meanings. To complete the journey, in Chapter 6, Parasecoli presents us with an analysis of the interaction between local and global images of food as they are presented in national and international tourism. In fact, Parasecoli suggests that the Western dominance of the tourism industry amounts to a modern version of colonialism (p. 143).

Employing a multi-layered analysis in an interdisciplinary research of human studies is well justifiable because of the complexity of human experience. But sometimes, even if the net is spread wide, some features of human experience slip through the holes. From the perspective of masculinities studies, Parasecoli’s examination of the relationships between food, popular culture and masculinities is somewhat lacking. In Chapter 4, Parasecoli incorporates discussions about feminism (e.g., pp. 25, 26, 45, 64), traditional masculinity (e.g., p. 28), gay men (e.g., p. 30) and sexuality (e.g., pp. 70, 107), but only briefly explores heterosexual mainstream masculinity in his discussion of the Atkins diet (p. 88). Even there, the larger context is the current domination of the male “bulging muscle” ideal image as the result of the popularization of body building magazines and the current mainstreaming of gay culture (pp. 97–99). Most of the discussion about men occurs in Chapter 5, “Jam, Juice and Strange Fruits,” where “edible black bodies” are discussed. Inasmuch as these discussions are important, they leave a large portion of men—heterosexual mainstream men—outside the scope of Parasecoli’s discussion. Some would say that general discourse is always about white, middle class, hegemonic masculinity, such that there is no need for further discussion about heterosexual mainstream men. This is problematic because it identifies hegemonic masculinity with all masculinities and men in positions of power with all heterosexual men. The interrogation of the connection between pop culture and food would have been more complete if it also focused on how this large, yet very silent group of heterosexual men negotiate their relationships with food in pop culture. Admittedly, this lack of group-specific discussion is not exclusive to Parasecoli; it is even typical of most gender studies programs and publications. But this dubious comfort merely suggests that Parasecoli joins the crowd rather than making a breakthrough in this book.

In sum, Parasecoli presents an exciting, challenging and thorough research of the relationships between food and pop culture. Although the book may be somewhat theoretically challenging to undergraduate students, it should be required reading for graduate students of food studies, anthropology and other related areas. For those who would read the book for pleasure or personal enrichment, the investment is much recommended, as we rarely meet such a fascinating exploration

of theory and fact related to what turns out to be far from a trivial topic. At the end, Parasecoli also presents a political agenda embodied in The Slow Food Movement of northern Italy, where

The core idea refers to people's daily experience, in particular the relaxed enjoyment of food in good company, with all those connotations of authenticity, nostalgia and cultural heritage that stubbornly insist on being part of who we are, as hard as we try to debunk them (p. 151).

No doubt, reading this book provides essential tools to further this wonderful ideal.

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