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FOOD JOKES – A FORM AND CONTENT ANALYSIS

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Abstract: The present study focuses on food humour, mainly on food jokes, searching for their relevance in the context of today developing society. Therefore our paperwork focuses on the themes the food jokes are constructed on, denouncing thus their ethic purposes, beyond the aesthetic finalities jokes deal with. Even jokes about food develop a certain type of discourse and express the contemporary individual's inner need of self-knowledge, identity, safety and authenticity.

Keywords: national identity, aesthetics, fast food, slow food, eating out/ eating in, ethics

The texts of food jokes, as veritable extracts of popular culture, denounce more than playful modalities of arousing buoyancy. They may actually represent good descriptors of a society at a certain moment in its history, mostly because the reasons someone laughs at a certain humorous fact/ text belong to one's own social, familial, political identity. Jokes generally refer to the majority of the cliché that characterise an époque. In our case, the jokes centred on food/ eating habits / culinary traditions are much more successful in emphasizing some of the most important cultural aspects recent researchers are interested in. Moreover, nowadays food studies have attracted much attention, especially because, as Brian Stross mentions, "Studying foodways is an excellent way to take a first measure of a society."[1] Consequently, food jokes should peculiarly be taken into consideration because they may offer a pertinent radiography of what our present world generally concerns of.

In one of his famous studies on food, Roland Barthes asserts that "advertising talks about food in three directions: national history, gender and health"[2]. The three major directions might be also visible inside the register belonging to food jokes as long as both humour and food may communicate something essential about our present. Nützenadel and Trentmann describe it as such: "Food serves as a lightning-rod for all sorts of anxieties and disquiet about the human condition in late modernity, about the speed of life (fast food/ slow food), the dominance of science ('Frankenfoods'), a loss of 'authenticity' and diminishing connection with nature (industrial versus organic foods), the invasion of the local by the global (McDonaldization), and physiological and mental stress and disease (obesity and bulimia).[3] This assertion enumerates some of the aspects we want to focus on in the last part of the present study.

Firstly, some of the food jokes reflect modern people's struggle for authenticity and clearly defined identity. The effects of globalization are seen even in the way people make

[1]Brian Stross, *Developing Pedagogies for the Anthropology of Food* in Candice Lowe Swift and Richard Wilk (eds.), Teaching Food and Culture, California: Left Coast Press, Inc./ Walnut Creek, 2015, p. 172
[2] Roland Barthes *Toward a Psychosociology of Contemporary Food Consumption* in Carole Counihan and Penny van Esterik (eds.) *Food and Culture. A reader*, New York, UK: Routledge, 2013, p. 27
[3] Nützenadel and Trentmann, *Introduction: Mapping Food and Globalization* in Alexander Nützenadel and Frank Trentmann (eds.) *Food and Globalization Consumption, Markets and Politics in the Modern World*, Oxford, NY: Berg, 2008, p. 2

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jokes about food. Ethnic cuisines are more and more important because people all over the world, who confront themselves with the standardisation of eating habits created by fast food restaurants and industrial food, look for their national or even individual specificity: "Food carries moral geographies that set it apart from most other goods that circulated through networks of trade. ...Foodstuffs, by contrast, raise sensitive questions of authenticity: is it 'genuine' German beer, or not; are these 'real' English strawberries or not; is it 'authentic' Italian coffee or not."[4]

The quest for authenticity in such a pluralist image one intends to proliferate about the world is spotted through the self-irony of the following syllogistic joke:

1. *Japanese eat very little fat and suffer fewer heart attacks than us.*
2. *Mexicans eat a lot of fat and suffer fewer heart attacks than us.*
3. *Chinese drink very little red wine and suffer fewer heart attacks than us.*
4. *Italians drink excessive amounts of red wine and suffer fewer heart attacks than us.*
5. *Germans drink beer and eat lots of sausages and fats and suffer fewer heart attacks than us.*

Conclusion: Eat and drink what you like. Speaking English is apparently what kills you. (http://foodanddrinkhumor.freeservers.com/about.html)

The joke talks about much more aspects than just national identity. In the first place, it comes up the problem of the national diet and what is totally British among the English foodways. Globalization has created confusion and sometimes people might be puzzled when questioned about a specific national dish. The majority confuses the cliché with the truth about their ethnic cuisine. It is the case of the British who define as specific dish the fish and chips meal: "The receptiveness of British food to influences from abroad, influences which may lead us to ask how far such food may be considered to be authentically British."[5] In the same way, Richard Wilk[6] emphasizes the struggle for defining one's authenticity through the eating and cooking habits. For these purposes, the researcher refers mainly to the postcolonial period in America and the creolization of food. At first, the colonists had a sense of superiority towards local culinary habits and they kept alive many of their European cooking traditions. Still, later on, creolised middle classes started to combine European and local cuisines beyond any other hierarchy. Consequently, such jokes as the following one, speak about more than just humorous facts:

"An American businessman goes to Japan on a business trip, but he hates Japanese food, so he asks the concierge at his hotel if there's any place around where he can get American food. The concierge tells him he's in luck; there's a pizza place that just opened, and they deliver. The concierge gives the businessman the phone number, and he goes back to his room and orders a pizza. Thirty minutes later, the delivery guy shows up to the door with the pizza. The businessman takes the pizza, and starts sneezing uncontrollably. He asks the delivery man, "What the heck did you put on this pizza?" The delivery man bows deeply and says, "We put on the pizza what you ordered, pepper only."
http://www.jokes4us.com/miscellaneousjokes/foodjokes/pizzajokes.html

An Italian food *i.e.* pizza, considered American and asked for in Japan – this is a perfect example of some of the globalisation consequences. Actually, American national

[4] *Ibidem*, p. 13
[5] Ashley, Bob, Hollows, Joanne, Jones, Steve, Taylor, Ben *Food and Cultural Studies* New York, London: Routledge, 2004, p. 80
[6] Richard Wilk *Taste of Home: The Cultural and Economic Significance of European Food Exports to the Coloniesin* Alexander Nützenadel and Frank Trentmann (eds.) *Food and Globalization Consumption, Markets and Politics in the Modern World*, Oxford, NY: Berg, 2008, p. 102

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history (one of the main themes food studies refer to) had recognised pizza as a national dish. Bonnie M. Miller talks about this particular historical journey namely *The Americanization of Italian pizza*. This process started between 1880 and 1920 when Southern Italian emigrants came to United States. Till the late 1940s and 1950s, pizza belonged almost exclusively to the Italian-American kitchens. After that," typical recipe changed to suit the American palate: less garlic, oregano instead of basil, larger pie sizes, and greater quantities of meat-based toppings."[7] Surprisingly, President Dwight D. Eisenhower had the final word regarding the national identity of pizza when he declared pizza's independence in 1953 stating that he had tasted better pizza in New York than he had ever had in Naples, Italy.[8] This is the peculiar case of pizza, but the humour regarding the pluralist cuisine suggests contemporary man's awareness and query regarding the cultural mingling he is disposed to laugh at.

Not always these diverse culinary approaches and possibilities cause fear or hesitation. Sometimes, the interest for new food, different from the national one, becomes an occasion to show off. Peoples' interest for otherness is visible in their disposition to taste the different: the Indian food, the Chinese Food, the Mexican Food and so on, culinary tradition accessible today to most of the world diners. The exotic, the different plays the aesthetic role of a fine accessory: *Two girls: "A tray of sushi, please." / Waiter: "To eat or to post photos of on Instagram?"* Social networks are abundant in such pictures of what people eat, cook, and decorate, giving them a sense of value. The problematic moves from ethics to aesthetics, from conscience to the celebration of senses: "The major questions are no longer, 'Is it true?' 'Is it false?' Instead we more often ask, 'How does it look?' 'How does it feel?'"[9]. Food means more than nurture; it means art, image, a code, a discourse about identity.

Not only the American or the European toy with Oriental cuisine, but also the Chinese are being seduced by American food and restaurants, especially by fast food and fast food restaurants. During his fieldwork in 1994, in Beijing, exploring the Chinese people's preference for fast food restaurants, Yungxiang Yan wrote that: "According to an early report on KFC, customers did not go to KFC to eat the chicken but to enjoy "eating" (consuming) the culture associated with KFC."[10]They did not necessarily prefer the food but the calm, family friendly atmosphere, the large windows, the clean, illuminated space and the efficaciously organised way of procuring food. This type of restaurants has been very successful in the past decades because they respond to the today's general rush and urge for effectiveness but also the need to entertain and socialize. From this point of view, Roland Barthes is right to assert that "food, in short, will lose in substance and gain in function" because "society will arrange the signifying system of its food around two major focal points: on the one hand, activity (and no longer work), and on the other hand, leisure (no longer celebration)".[11] In this respect, there are a large number of food jokes dedicated to restaurant atmosphere or to fast food.

Restaurant jokes usually engage two types of characters: the waiter and the client and discuss the typical restaurant manners: *A customer was bothering the waiter in a restaurant. First, he asked that the air conditioning be turned up because he was too hot, then he asked it*

[7] Bonnie M. Miller, *The evolution of a fast food phenomenon: the case of American pizza* in Carol Helstosky (ed.) *The Routledge History of Food*, New York, London: Routledge, 2015, p. 254
[8] *Ibidem*, p. 256
[9] Collins, Kathleen *Cooking Class: the Rise of the "Foodie" and The Role of Mass Media* in Carol Helstosky (ed.) *The Routledge History of Food*, New York, London: Routledge, 2015, p.279
[10] Yungxiang Yan *Of Hamburger and Social Space: Consuming McDonald's in Beijing in* in Carole Counihan and Penny van Esterik (eds.) *Food and Culture. A reader*, New York, UK: Routledge, 2013, p. 450
[11] Roland Barthes, *op.cit.*, p. 29).

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be turned down cause he was too cold, and so on for about half an hour. Surprisingly, the waiter was very patient; he walked back and forth and never once got angry. So finally, a second customer asked him why he didn't throw out the pest. "Oh, I really don't care or mind," said the waiter with a smile. "We don't even have an air conditioner." **(**http://www.ahajokes.com/foo004.html). Food studies often focus on peoples' choice to eat out or at their home. Both options have major importance for anthropologists, psychologists and sociologists. Eating out signifies "a departure from run-of-the-mill, everyday experience"[12] but also comfort and relax. The customer in the joke feels not only the privileges, but also the disadvantages of getting out of the house for a meal. On one hand, the moody diner may freely ask the waiter to modify the temperature of air conditioning, supposing that any restaurant (as respectable public place) should have one at any customer's disposal. This attitude reflects our customer's belief that the client is sovereign. On the other hand, the disadvantage consists of the fact that the client cannot control totally the atmosphere, as long as the waiter plays the submissive role and firmly keeps alive the customer's illusions. The waiter accepts calmly the situation because restaurants are not just about food, but also about atmosphere, entertainment: "When we follow the rules of eating out we are in effect role-playing, and the roles have been fixed in advance for us to slot into. We then engage in the complex ritual or performance which eating out in sophisticated western cultures has become.[13]

While eating out means getting out of the daily rush, the eating in, at home, generally refers to family, responsibility and chores. Gender studies have focused also on the women's role in providing meals for the whole family. Lately, women who cook daily for their family have understood this aspect as a necessity but also have tried to improve their way of preparing food (TV programs, food blogs help them). Most women are and feel responsible in this respect. That is why, mothers and housewives, as main characters, populate most of the food jokes. The following three jokes are very suggestive:

(a) *"My Mother taught me how to become an adult..."If you don't eat your vegetables, you'll never grow up" http://www.ahajokes.com/foo004.html*

(b) *An elderly couple were killed in an accident and found themselves being given a tour of heaven by Saint Peter. "Here is your ocean side condo; over there are the tennis courts, swimming pool, and two golf courses. If you need any refreshments, just stop by any of the many bars located throughout the area." "Heck, Gloria," the old man hissed when Saint Peter walked off, "we could have been here ten years ago if you hadn't heard about all that stupid oat bran, wheat germ, and low-fat diets!"* http://www.ahajokes.com/foo019.html

(c) "*A lady was picking through the frozen turkeys at the grocery store, but couldn't find one big enough for her family. She asked a stock boy, "Do these turkeys get any bigger?" The stock boy replied, "No ma'am, they're dead."'* http://www.ahajokes.com/foo004.html

These funny jokes bring to our attention several aspects and problems contemporary people are facing with: the pleasure of eating and the restraints, the healthy and the unhealthy food, the fast food and the organic food. Margaret Mead has noticed that today people eat too much, they overeat (the "all you can eat" restaurants meet these people half way), and, generally, this tendency is associated with depression, punishment or reward. „Most Americans find themselves in the ambiguous situation of having to fight what they enjoy— of

[12] Ashley, Bob, Hollows, Joanne, Jones, Steve, Taylor, Ben, *op.cit*., p. 146
[13] *Ibidem*, p. 147

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feasting and then guiltily fasting in order to be "good."[14] The (a) joke and the (b) joke reflect this type of attitude towards food and eating. The two jokes, having the mother who advises her son to eat healthy and, respectively, the elderly couple who tried to be "good" by eating cereals and low-fat food, satirise the excessive care for what we eat and also the restraints people accept to impose themselves in matters of eating. Children are rewarded with food; anxious teenagers do not eat enough or eat too much, causing bulimic or anorexic disorders. The third joke reflects the contemporary man's need/greed for more, for bigger, but also the usual women's natural fear that there is not enough food for the whole family. More than that, the last joke makes fun, but also, through this, penalizes the unnatural hormonal growth of chicken or, even more, the exaggerate filling of the chicken meat with water (actually a post-mortem growth). This frightful scenario with appetence for black humour represents, actually, the result of a more feared nowadays matter: artificial food.

Industrialised food, fast food and junk food have become more and more alarming, especially because of the great number of obese persons. For this epidemic obesity, this rapid ways of producing and conserving food are considered responsible. In the last decades, the developments in preserving, mechanisation, retailing (and wholesaling) and transport have taken industrialised food at another level.[15] The way we feed explains the nature of our lifestyle. Fast food restaurants, for example, and the fast food products embody the today search for maximum efficiency inside a busy schedule. Fast food is cheap and tasteless and implies poor nourishment, but it represents a compromise that somewhat pleases the nowadays consumer: "it is a business model that privileges efficiency, conformity, mobility, and convenience over quality, artistry, and consumer comfort".[16]

Jokes about fast food are as funny as judgemental: *Q: Why do they call it Fast Food?/ A: Because if you don't eat it really fast, you might actually taste it.*
(http://www.jokes4us.com/miscellaneousjokes/foodjokes/miscellaneousfoodjokes.html)
A friend and I were standing in line at a fast-food restaurant, waiting to place our order. There was a big sign posted. "No bills larger than $20 will be accepted." The woman in front of us, pointing to the sign, remarked, "Believe me, if I had a bill larger than $20, I wouldn't be eating here." **(**http://www.ahajokes.com/foo004.html)

The latter joke discusses not only about the quality of fast food and its low costs, but also about the middle social classes with medium income, social categories that consume such food. There could be a large discussion about different styles of eating in terms of bourgeois' taste and working class tendencies. What worth to be mentioned is that by means of jokes people are made aware of nowadays industrial and fast food risks, as in the following common but funny joke about chemicals considered to be defined as "*noxious substances from which modern foods are made."* Another aspect that concerns the researchers refers to the way pupils are fed in schools. School lunch in United Kingdom has preoccupied especially Jamie Oliver, and his campaign for a healthy food at school is already enough famous. The following joke expresses this particular concern relating the nowadays school lunch: *"What kind of pie do you call this?" asked one schoolboy indignantly. "What's it taste of?" asked the cook. "Glue!" "Then it's apple pie, the plum pie tastes of soap."*
(http://www.jokes4us.com/miscellaneousjokes/foodjokes/applejokes.html)

[14] Margaret Mead, *Why Do We Overeat?* in Carole Counihan and Penny van Esterik (eds.) *Food and Culture. A reader*, New York, UK: Routledge, 2013, p. 20
[15] Jack Goody, *Industrial Food: Towards the Development of a World Cuisine* in Carole Counihan and Penny van Esterik (eds.) *Food and Culture. A reader*, New York, UK: Routledge, 2013, p.72
[16] Bonnie M. Miller, *op.cit.*, p. 249

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Nevertheless there have been reactions that tried to alert everyone about the possible risks regarding fast food. The Slow Food movement represented a counterattack to this comfortable but unhealthy way of eating. In 1987, a group of Italian writers and journalists published in *Gambero Rosso* supplement of *Il Manifesto* a manifesto 'we are enslaved by speed and have all succumbed to the same insidious virus: Fast Life, which disrupts our habits, pervades the privacy of our homes and forces us to eat Fast Foods'.[17] Nowadays, vegetarianism, organic food, raw food, farm products are the main topics of peoples' discussions about what to eat and what they should not. There are a multitude of alternatives for eating healthy, still the adherents and the militants of this way of eating might be considered naive. The following joke is enough relevant: *Q: How many vegans does it take to change a light bulb?/ A: None. Everybody knows they can't change anything.* (http://www.jokes4us.com/dirtyjokes/vegetarianjokes.html). Raw food jokes, vegan jokes are not less numerous. People can laugh and make fun of about almost any aspect of their lives.

Conclusively, food jokes may represent an endless resource for a pertinent analysis of nowadays society mirrored with sincerity and without being spared. Beyond the aesthetic purposes of both humour and food, the food jokes are partially built also on ethic criteria. They deal with the ethics of food, nurturing, cooking because they do not just mediate for creating a cheerful mood, but they also reflect the anxieties that grind down our world and our times. Jokes therapeutically make us confront these anxieties with smiles and laughter.

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