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## Fast food and the semiotics of gastronomy

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**Abstract:** Nourishment stands apart from other physiological events: whilst we normally exercise discretion in relation to bodily functions, food consumption takes place in public. We dine, snack and nibble in front of others, and the imagery associated with food takes on the manifold of meanings—religious, cultural, historic and so forth. Gastronomic practices unite or divide people, and as such are a powerful communication tool. As the twenty-first century confrontational stance between fast food and family meal traditions intensifies, we investigate fast food’s visual imagery and its ability to attract consumers.

**Keywords:** fast food, visual imagery, semiotics of gastronomy, Peirce, Porphyry

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### *Restauration rapide et sémiotique de la gastronomie*

**Résumé:** La nutrition se distingue d’autres événements physiologiques: alors que normalement nous exerçons avec discrétion les fonctions corporelles, la consommation d’aliments a lieu en public. Nous mangeons, prenons une collation et grignotons devant les autres, et l’imaginaire associé avec la nourriture prend une multiplicité de significations - religieuses, culturelles, historiques, etc. Les pratiques gastronomiques unissent ou divisent les gens, et sont un puissant outil de communication. Alors qu’au 21<sup>ème</sup> siècle la confrontation entre le fast-food et le repas traditionnel en famille s’intensifie, nous enquêtons sur l’imaginaire visuel de la restauration rapide et sa capacité à attirer les consommateurs.

**Mots-clés:** restauration rapide, imaginaire visuel, sémiotique de la gastronomie, Peirce, Porphyre de Tyr

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### Foreword

In the phenomenon of fast food, the rich semantics of food consumption seems to be absent from the gastronomic experience: there is no shared meal with its communicative potential; the time which would be spent on food preparation is extracted from one's lived time and diverted to other practices such as work, education or entertainment; the material component of the gastronomic environment is impoverished as traditional dishes and cutlery are replaced with disposable counterparts.

Nevertheless, fast food is immensely popular. It could be said that fast food signifies the abundance and accessibility of food—the humankind's dream come true—which could be understood as a result of us exercising control over nature. Fast food, along with the car and maybe Hollywood blockbusters, has become a symbol not only of the American way of life; it marks a specific standard of civilized living, which appeals to most people. But what exactly makes hamburgers and coke, these symbols of globalization in the field of nutrition, so attractive?

Fast food appears to transcend the basic binary opposition, whereby food of one's own culture is opposed to the food of another culture. Fast food is universal and democratic. Fast food has a high calorific value and requires a minimum of time for consumption, or utilization. This type of food can be found in any society when a certain group of people, often engaged in physical labour, devalues the rich semantics of a ceremonial meal by reducing it to the value of the fuel for the body.

This paper explores the semiotics of visual imagery associated with fast food and advertising of fast food focussing on visual processes that influence the development of the contemporary gastronomic culture. We take into account Virilio's claim that nowadays a television monitor is gradually replacing the real three-dimensional space to the point that the screen is able to increase significantly the density of the transmitted images—they become like real world images. Television, Virilio observes, is no longer a means of entertainment but a means of constructing virtual reality (Virilio, 1994). We also take into account Castells's observation that today we must not talk about the origin of virtual reality, but on the formation of real virtuality (Castells, 1996). We investigate processes involved in perceivers' interpretation of visual imagery, and the effect it has on them in the context of the contemporary visual culture. We focus on large companies (such as MacDonald's) creating specific visual imagery that they offer to consumers as part of the process of constructing new meanings and interpretations in the social space and time.

Whilst investigating rational and irrational elements involved in consumers' perception of fast food images, we use Peirce's semiotic methods and Eco's further development of Peirce's semiotics that takes into account the involvement of wider cultural factors rather than merely analysing the relationship between an object, sign and interpretant taken in isolation from cultural contexts (Eco, 1976).

This article contributes to the special issue of ESSACHESS - Journal for Communication Studies developing the theme of the alimentary and gustative imaginary. We focus here on *Imaginary and the axiological* exploring links between social values, ethics and aesthetics of fast food imagery. The results—though qualitative—are based on pre-given categories based on the research literature and therefore follow a deductive rather than inductive process.

### **1. Fast food images as iconic and indexical signs**

It could be said, following Peirce's classification of signs, that food images are icons inasmuch as they resemble or imitate the signified object, displaying the same qualities as the item they represent. These are photographic, cinematic and digital representations of food items that exhibit the same shape and colour of advertised food items (an image of a burger). The understanding of what these iconic signs mean may not require any specific prior learning—iconic signs of fast food are now universally recognised.

It could also be said that, as consumers, we perceive and process these images instantly, immediately and irrationally, whereby the irrational is not “something contrary to reason, but something beyond reason ... something ... not grounded on reason” (Jung, 2015, p. 2514). According to Peirce, the process of understanding of an idea or a sign (the construction of meaning) passes through three stages of clarification—implicit familiarity, logical definition and pragmatic clarification. (Peirce, 1878). In case of fast food advertising, the mechanism of meaning creation via irrationally perceived visual imagery lacks the second essential ingredient—the stage of logical determination as we skip from the stage of basic familiarity with the image and what it denotes to an opinion (shared with other people) about its pragmatic meaning, its functionality.

By missing the logical rationalisation stage, we as consumers subjected to McDonald's and other fast food producers' advertisement, become strongly connected with the here-and-now of the given situation. Drawn towards the spatial and temporal immediacy by attractive, colourful fast food imagery, we disengage from our wider range of temporal and spatial horizons. This weakens our ability to engage critically and rationally with what we perceive. Instead, we are instantly taken to the concluding idea which is offered to us—the thought of satisfying our hunger with tasty, accessible food.

Food images are not only icons, they are also indices. Whilst some of the iconic sign's properties can be the same as its object's, an indexical sign is more loosely connected with the signified object: the index's meaning is inferred and is not automatically constructed; it needs to be learned. In case of food imagery, a burger's image indicates a wide range of phenomena beyond the burger itself. For example, McDonald's imagery points to the contemporary way of life beyond nutrition, which

is alternative to traditions and local customs, some of which may be connected with gastronomy and some may not.

The name McDonald's itself has acquired an ideological significance, as a result of a carefully fabricated mythology—understood in Cassirer's terms. For Cassirer, mythical consciousness “lacks any fixed dividing line between mere “representation” and “real” perception, between wish and fulfilment, between image and thing” (Cassirer, 1965, p. 36).

Fast food manufacturers thus create mythical images that imply an infinite number of things and ideas, whilst none of its meanings is definite and final. This is a very effective communication tool used to manipulate consumers' minds (Volkova, 1999, p. 77).

Non-discursive means of communication such as lines, colours, proportions, sounds (rather than words) increase the advertiser's ability to implement mythical images in contemporary social and cultural situations. When we perceive and accept images that bypass logical analysis, we open our minds to other ideas and beliefs that are implicitly represented by lines, colours and proportions.

The essence of McDonald's fabricated mythology consists in asserting the importance of pleasure and encouraging the pursuit of satisfaction. McDonald's advertising itself fabricates momentary desire which fast food promises to satisfy.

Visual communication practices play a vital role in this fabrication, where logical argumentation is minimal and where emotional appeal, imitated sincerity and personal sympathy are put forth in the fragmented flows of information and instantaneously delivered information. Visual images are broadcasted in a heterogeneous flow and this does not give the consumer a chance to see the whole picture but creates the effect of personal presence and involvement in the given situation.

Sohan observes that fast food tradition naturally emerged from the utopian elements of the American culture inasmuch as the latter was essentially the culture of hopeful immigrants: fast food reinforces the utopian idea of abundance and universal accessibility of food (Sohan, 2011a).

Inasmuch as fast food images are indices, they can indicate an infinite range of ideas, multiplying paths leading the consumer towards the instantaneous decision to purchase a cheeseburger or filet-o-fish.

Whilst using Peirce's terminology here, we cannot ignore the fact that Peirce provides a model of signification which explains the mechanisms of meaning construction but it is presented in a form of a capsule containing only the sign and the signified object, as if the latter interrelate and construct meaning independently from their surroundings. Eco complements the Peircean model by placing it in the context of communicative practices and stressing the need to take into account a wide range of factors affecting signification.

Eco argues that the meaning of a sign is a “cultural unit” (Eco, 1976, 72) as the meaning of every sign is culturally defined and not merely deduced from the relation between the signifier and the signified. Meaning making is always as a result of some communication, and communicative acts take place amongst numerous processes that affect people’s opinions, behaviour and attitudes. With this in mind we will survey fast food imagery’s specific features and compare them with traditional meal imagery.

## **2. Food imagery specific features: fast food versus traditional meal**

Traditional food is often amorphous and lacks a clear-cut silhouette of its own—soups, sauces, pilaf rice and stews are semi liquid or crumbly substances that take on the shape of a serving vessel. The visual imagery associated with this kind of food is fused with the images of containers holding it—plates, bowls and soup dishes. A well-cemented appearance in homemade cooking is reserved for cakes and gâteaux—festive food. Fast food, on the other hand, often contains items sufficiently solidified not to require a container: Big Mac, for example, presents itself as a free-standing, unconstrained by packaging, edible statue.

The colour palette of homemade food is generally varied but may be restricted within one culture or household because of a limited range of dishes that people regularly prepare. The colours of dishes can be vivid if ingredients include red pepper, tomatoes or beetroot but can also be dull, subtle and blurry when the dish is based on swede and aubergine or buckwheat, lentils and kidney beans. Fast food colours on the contrary are predominantly distinct and vivid, making them aesthetically appealing. Fast food imagery may be so enhanced that it dissociates the image from raw materials the food is made from to the point of merging the images of edible food items and inedible toys or decorations.

The texture of homemade food varies greatly, from liquid dishes like clear soup to tough meats, whilst fast food’s texture tends to be uniformly tender and viscous; it can be crunchy but never tough: fast food is easy to eat.

Skills are required to manage traditional food—a child must learn how to use knife and fork, and separating fish’s flesh from the bones can present a challenge to a novice. Fast food is easy to hold and bite into; it is accessible instantly, without any prior instructions, which appeals to children.

People have traditional meals in set places and set environments—a dining room, kitchen, restaurant, café. Diners are expected to adopt a certain posture as well—to sit up straight and face the table. Fast food is consumed everywhere, anywhere and in any bodily position—at work, at home, on the go.

The traditional meal is shared; it is a complex event that unites its participant and is marked by the cohesion of everything that it entails. People who come to eat together are socially interconnected either as family members, friends, or guests invit-

ed to a celebratory dinner. They act in unison, which is facilitated by the use of same dinner plates and cutlery, by eating simultaneously and (in a family setting) by sharing the same food which is dished out from the serving container.

The type of food served at the dining table often has a special symbolic meaning e.g. eating turkey on Christmas day in a British household. Also, the quality of food and crockery marks the status of the event (ordinary or festive meal) and reinforces the participants' religious belonging (Muslims avoiding pork), cultural and national belonging (Russians enjoying borsch) and social status (middle to upper class diners choosing expensive Cabernet Sauvignon).

Fast food is not shared in the same way as traditional food—people may be eating in the same place but they eat independently from one another, and even if they are connected as colleagues or friends, this connection is not reinforced by the gastronomic practice. There is no sitting around the table—it is not functionally necessary as food is not being dished out. Spatial arrangements are not as strict and limited as in the case of traditional meals, as fast food can be consumed in a variety of environments. The time of eating is not set either: there are no specific mealtimes for fast food consumption and people are not expected to eat simultaneously with others. Fast food packaging that serves as disposable tableware is primarily utilitarian and dispenses with the showiness of traditional crockery.

Whilst sharing a traditional meal, people are expected to follow complex rules of etiquette, fast food consumption reduces meal etiquette to a minimal number of practical rules such as the requirement to clean after oneself in a fast food restaurant or refrain from bringing food into shops and buses.

When we eat a traditional meal we are expected to pay attention to food, acknowledge those who prepared it and have a conversation with other diners. When we eat fast food we may completely ignore other people and food itself and do something else instead like texting on a mobile phone.

Taking part in a traditional meal is overall a more complex matter than satisfying one's hunger with a hotdog or a burger. Homemade amorphous dishes that require containers bind diners to a particular place and time, whilst fast food is portable and always available. It liberates one from having to wait for food in a particular location. Fast food restaurants make food available at the moment when it is required at the place where it is required thus promising to potentially completely eliminate the need to experience hunger.

As well as promising to free us from hunger, fast food equalises people as it entails no distinction between rich and poor food and no obligation to learn specific table manners, which would separate more cultured people from less cultured ones. Fast food is user-friendly and socially inclusive. Fast food is appealing because of its enhanced colours and flavours, because of its easily negotiable texture, because it is democratic and is consumed effortlessly and because its practicality and functionality save our time. Instead of having to plan our day around mealtimes, we can graze

as we need to (Frazao, 1999) and concentrate on other pursuits such as work, studies or leisure. Fast food imagery promises to facilitate progress, help us to use our time more efficiently and generally enhance our lives.

**Table 1.** Fast food and traditional meal: summary of key features

	<i>Fast food</i>	<i>Traditional meal</i>
<i>Shape</i>	Defined contours, free-standing figure.	Amorphous, semi liquid, takes the shape of the serving vessel.
<i>Colour</i>	Clear and vivid.	Can be subtle and indefinite.
<i>Texture</i>	Tender, viscous, crunchy. Easily consumable.	Wide range of textures.
<i>Accessibility</i>	Accessible without training.	Requires skills.
<i>Location and environment</i>	Wide range of places and situations.	Limited types of places and situations.
<i>Social context</i>	Eating space and time are staggered. People are disconnected.	People are connected in space and time; food is shared and reinforces belonging.
<i>Etiquette</i>	Few practical rules.	Complex, detailed rules.
<i>Attitude to food</i>	Minimal attention to food.	Attention paid to food and other people.

### 3. Gastronomic choice as a moral dilemma

Fast food imagery implies that the tradition of having a sit-down meal becomes an outdated and unnecessary custom as diners and family cooks are both liberated from having to observe meal times and from each other, and can engage in more varied and interesting pursuits than food preparation and endless washing up.

To test this idea, let us imagine a twenty-year-old student Alexis coming home to spend a weekend with his parents. His Mother asks him not to snack on the way because she is preparing a special dinner. He promises not to snack, looking forward to a family meal. Suddenly he sees an advertisement of McDonald's Big Mac on a digital billboard, hesitates for a moment, and enters the nearest McDonald's restaurant.

However, as Alexis sinks his teeth into a juicy burger and gulps down refreshing cola (he was so thirsty and hungry!) he begins to feel guilty. He has acted on an impulse and instantly satisfied his hunger, but he will not be able to have a meal at his parents'. He realises that he has forsaken the almost sacramental eventuality, planned and eagerly anticipated by his Mother. Remorseful, Alexis pictures his Mother spending all day in the kitchen, lovingly preparing a three course dinner, and his own actions begin to seem like a betrayal.



By choosing to eat a Big Mac rather than waiting for a family meal, did Alexis fail as a dutiful family member or did he exercise his fundamental right to eat when hungry? As he approaches his parents' home, Alexis realises that making a gastronomic choice was not a mere physiological matter (to eat now or later; to eat one type of food or another)—it was a moral choice.

An excursion into the philosophy of food would be useful here if we wanted to investigate the link between gastronomic choices, morality and visual communication practices. Unfortunately, the history of philosophy has little to offer: food related discussions can be found at the crossroads of anthropology, religion, cultural studies, economics, ecology, medicine, applied ethics and culinary studies, whilst the philosophy of food per se is an emerging field.

Nevertheless, a number of relevant philosophical discussions can be found, and in one of them King (2007) asserts the necessity of philosophically linking gastronomic choices and ethics. In his own words,

[T]he particularly moral sense of eating well begins to emerge with the recognition that eating creates relationships. These relationships can be narrow and local or of a much broader scope, but how we eat unavoidably links us to other people, animals, habitats and soils, and to our own sense of personal identity. These relationships, both to others and our own selves, are potent subjects of moral reflection. Before we can take responsibility for our eating, we must learn to perceive the relational dimension of consumption (King, 2007, p. 178).

There are philosophers who contributed to this thematic. For example, Porphyry's (c. 234 – c. 305 AD) philosophical enquiry into gastronomy (Porphyry, 1823) focuses on the importance of a dietary regimen for a person's spiritual life and investigates links between consuming particular types of food and character-building.

Food consumed in abundance is harmful to humans, Porphyry insists, since it elevates human flesh and corporeal pleasure above spirit. Appetite, leading to excessive consumption of food, inflames passions and diverts our attention away from those issues that are genuinely important. Hearty meals encourage people to serve their flesh by satisfying bodily desires whilst they should be perfecting their souls instead.

Flesh, for Porphyry, is an inferior constituent of a human being, and gastronomic practices must reflect its inferiority. One should eat just enough food to maintain the life of their body—not excessively, for pleasure. In other words, the consumption of food as a path of indulgence and pleasure is bad for humans but its negative effects can be reduced by maintaining the proper, strict dietary regimen and having the right attitude to food.

Sohan claims that Porphyry set the scene for the negative attitude to food enjoyment in Greek philosophy, which was subsequently established in the Christian tradition (Sohan, 2011b, p. 146).

Camps-Gaset & Grau (2011) develop this point by following the dynamics of the Western attitude to food. They show how this negative attitude progresses from Ancient Greek philosophers' emphasising the importance of asceticism (to the point of starvation), which supposedly increases wisdom and leads to spiritual perfection, to Christian ideology stressing the need to control one's body's passions in order to ensure one's salvation via the spiritual union with God. The authors remind the reader that in Christianity,

Men and women intending to attain perfection or divine wisdom have a special relationship towards food: they should refrain from eating certain food or on certain occasions or, more often, refrain from eating in general, that is, reduce the amount of food to what is strictly necessary and avoid all kinds of luxuries (Camps-Gaset & Grau, 2011, p. 15).

Camps-Gaset & Grau indicate that the ideal of perfection, which the contemporary Western society inherited from Christianity and Ancient Greece, contains an inherent belief that "perfection [can be] attained by individuals through despising material food, sometime to the point of starvation" (Camps-Gaset & Grau, 2011, p. 1).

In the twentieth century, Levinas capitalises on the Western negative attitude towards food and reinforces it further. Food consumption, Levinas claims, is not merely harmful to one's own spiritual development; it is essentially sinful because consuming food involves devouring another form of being (Goldstein, 2010, p. 34).

Hand notes that Levinas views "the relationship between subject and world ... in terms of nourishment and enjoyment, which are prior to theory and practice" (Hand, 1989, 37). Hand claims that in "[t]his conception of earthly enjoyment, ... forgetfulness of self is the first morality" (Hand, 1989, p. 37). Indeed, the relation of the self to food is, for Levinas, the fundamental basis of human existence and communication. However, this is not a harmonious (or potentially harmonious) interaction with another being but the violent consumption of another life form, physical incorporation of another into one's own body. This, for Levinas, is the primary interaction with the world preceding and setting the scene for other types of interactions. Communication as consumption of another is a dramatic and controversial act, laden with guilt—the sin of the ontologically inevitable annihilation of another in eating them is the trauma that accompanies other forms of communication and is inherent in our moral awareness and the general sense of responsibility for another, which can be understood as a futile attempt to redeem oneself from the sin of eating.

#### **4. Gastronomic guilt and redemption**

It is becoming clear that the fast food versus traditional food opposition has deeper cultural roots than may seem at first, as fast food's features associated with enhanced pleasure and easy access to nourishment stand against the centuries' old tradition of favouring asceticism in gastronomic practices.

The reasoning behind the value of gastronomic asceticism (if we accept it following Camps-Gaset & Grau) has changed throughout centuries but the actual tendency to link gastronomic pleasure to culpability and call for remorse and redemption remains until now. Wilk (2010) uncovers this tendency masked by the happy meal imagery of middle-class families:

In family meals the normative and the performative are very far apart—though everyone likes to think of the family table as a place of harmony and solidarity, it is often the scene for the exercise of power and authority, a place where conflict prevails. My interest in this topic was sparked by research on middle-class parents' struggles with their "picky eater" children. Besides narrating the way the dinner table became battleground with their own children, many parents also recalled their own childhood family meals as painful and difficult (Wilk, 2010, p. 428).

Indeed, we can see here the continuation of the culpability and asceticism theme. The "harmony and solidarity" at the family table is founded on the mother's self-denial as she gives much of her personal time to her family whilst preparing meals, and children acknowledging her sacrifice by the act of eating the food which they may not enjoy, i.e. by their own sacrifice. The asceticism here is not the denial of food but the denial of choice to children. They do not redeem themselves if they do not perform as cheerful and grateful eaters, and neither do "single parents, or those working two jobs" if they are unable to "provide the idealized family dinner" (Wilk, 2010, p. 433).

In the light of this discussion Alexis' gastronomic escape to McDonald's is a revolt against the deeply rooted set of cultural principles and values; a revolt against austerity. His Mother expects him to act in line with the historic negative attitude to gastronomic indulgence, encouraging self-restraint, which in Alexis' case would manifest itself as abstinence from food for the sake of a family encounter at a later time, which, albeit gastronomy-based, is nonetheless a spiritual event. Also, Alexis would be expected to eat food that he may not necessarily enjoy and pretend that he enjoys it. His sacrifice would have been an adequate response to his Mother's sacrifice of working hard in the kitchen.

If we recall Levinas' position on eating as an unavoidably sinful activity, Alexis was condemned to committing a sinful act, whether he ate at McDonald's or at the family table. Eating at the family table, however, would have been a lesser evil, as here he would have redeemed himself by superseding the individualistic, self-centred enjoyment of food in a family gastronomic encounter, whereby the act of eating would have been enveloped in the communal spirituality of familial sharing. His participation would have also helped his Mother to redeem herself from the same sin as she redeems herself via the recurring performance of tedious culinary tasks, a sacrifice made for the family's sake. Her redemption could not be complete if her food was not accepted by others as much needed nourishment.

### **5. Fast food's imagery against asceticism and gastronomic guilt**

In our discussion we addressed the ability of fast food's visual imagery to attract and engage consumers, to influence their minds and channel their gustatory behaviour. We considered some factors contributing to fast food's aesthetic and conceptual appeal and fast food's ability to compete with established gastronomic practices. Our aim was to search for epistemological undercurrents involved in fast food imagery fabrication and perception. As a result, we found claims that fast food versus traditional food opposition is underpinned by the moral conflict between the traditional Western ideal of gastronomic asceticism and those who encourage or welcome liberation from asceticism and guilt.

The development of such confrontation and the success of fast food are best illustrated by the situation where a traditional society encounters fast food for the first time and its members become instantly smitten. This actually happened when McDonald's opened its first restaurant in Moscow.

Strict asceticism and self-denial permeated all aspects of the Soviet Russia's culture including gastronomic practices. People were brought up to appreciate the human effort that went into growing and preparing food and respect food in memory of those who had been denied it in history—such as Leningrad siege victims. The Soviet Russians' relationship with food was heavily loaded with guilt and obligation of redemption. In that sense the Russians had taken on the Greek and subsequently Christian negative attitude to food creating their own version of it that dominated the upbringing of Russian children in the Soviet Union.

All Russian people were taught from early childhood the value of appreciating traditional food and learned to despise the (supposedly) corrupting American culture, which promoted self-interest and self-indulgence. However, on 31 January 1990 five thousand Muscovites gathered outside Russia's first McDonald's restaurant waiting for it to open: they came to be corrupted. On the first day of trading the McDonald's restaurant on Pushkin Square served more than 30,000 visitors setting a world record for the first working day in the history of McDonald's (RIA News, 2009).

A Russian reporter, covering the event, sceptically mentions "the limited choice of dishes, mainly sandwiches" and "familiar ingredients in an unusual Western packaging". Then the reporter interviews two people sitting at the table and asks them, "How's the food?" "The food is of the highest class!" a young man replies. Then the same man says that the prices are a bit too high but are worth the quality of food and the level of service. The astonished, happy face of the Soviet Russia's prodigal son and the entire newsreel can be viewed on YouTube—see the first two minutes: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b3deVhBU7Co>.

The reporter admits that service at McDonald's, indeed, came with a smile (a shockingly unusual practice for the Russians who until then had endured food distributors' very unfriendly approach). Gennady Hazanov (actor and celebrity) continues the news program by bitterly remarking that people queued to get into

McDonald's in the same way as others before them had queued to visit the Mausoleum in order to contemplate Lenin's embalmed body. For Hazanov, this constitutes the drastic fall of Russian people's moral standing and the betrayal of true values in favour of the pursuit of bodily indulgence and inferior pleasure.

### Conclusion

We can conclude our discussion with the assertion that making a gastronomic choice is always a moral choice because the act of consuming food necessarily has a symbolic communicative meaning. The physiological core process of food consumption, including both food items and the process of nourishing oneself or others, is unavoidably contextualised by the halo of symbolic images. Eating alone or sharing food; preparing food or buying it; serving food on fine china or eating with one's fingers—all this is symbolic. Food practices and gustatory imagery, inevitably involving cultural, ethnic, religious and many other connotations, symbolise kindness or selfishness; respect for others or lack of respect; belonging to a specific culture or worldview or refuting it and so on. We found that the fast food's dominant idea of guilt free release from various constraints appeals to consumers on the irrational level, successfully competing with the ominous outlook on nutrition offered by Levinas in *Totality and Infinity* (Levinas, 1969) whereby the interplay of hunger and satisfaction, controlling and ordering our lives on an existential level, is loaded with the traumatic awareness of the fact that nutrition involves annihilation of another being—a monstrous form of communication which, nevertheless, forms the basis of communication in general.

Goldstein observes that for Levinas eating another being is a basic form of communication (with that being) which evolves into communication as offering food to other people and consequently, all other forms of communication radiate from that (Goldstein, 2010). If this is so then fast food driven liberation from this existential guilt could be the key factor that makes fast food so attractive, because if we are excused from thinking about food at all, and can play a computer game while we are eating, then the guilt expires, because this kind of existential guilt, human and deeply meaningful, if it exists, is only possible if we reason and think.

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