


BOOK REVIEW

Pasta, Pizza and Propaganda: A Political History of Italian Food TV

by Francesco Buscemi, Bristol and Chicago, Intellect, 2022, ix + 170 pp., £85 (hardback), ISBN 9781789384062

Giovanni Ciofalo 

Sapienza University of Rome, Rome, Italy

Email: giovanni.ciofalo@uniroma1.it

(Received 30 November 2023; accepted 30 November 2023)

The Italian cultural industry has many unique elements. Even from an ‘archaeological’ perspective, which refers to the periods before the definition of cultural industry by Adorno and Horkheimer in 1947, each sector has distinct features, such as cinema, television, radio and comics. Moreover, the industry’s peculiarities have led several authors to refer to it as an ‘Italian case’.

Francesco Buscemi’s book is fascinating as it attempts to align and implement this interpretative strand by adopting a multidisciplinary approach that hybridises fields including food studies, media studies and political studies. Buscemi tries to reconstruct Italian food’s political, social and cultural history by analysing its forms of television representation. This approach helps to clarify the role that food plays in Italian culture and what it represents in terms of Italian culture, including its constantly mediated political and ideological perspectives. The central interpretative hypothesis of the volume relies on the existence of a deep and often overlooked relationship between food, politics and television. Thus, these three cultural elements are interdependent and can influence each other. Moreover, when represented on television, they can project a stereotypical image of ‘Italian-ness’ and everydayness based on the culinary performances of famous chefs, writers, intellectuals and politicians. These representations have contributed to the crystallisation of Italian food through the TV screen and its gradual inclusion in the collective imagination. At the same time, these representations have also redefined the concept of food beyond the TV screen, depending on their cultural, social and even political relevance.

From a methodological point of view, it is worth noting that Buscemi uses Pierre Bourdieu’s approach to explore the interaction, communication and cultural creation between television and political power. The text also provides a valuable reading of the influence that Italian politics has had on the broader cultural industry, with particular attention paid to Italian television, seen as a mirror and a shaper of society and culture from its inception in 1954 to the present day. In this perspective, we can see politicisation as a twofold process which can potentially affect both the TV medium and the food content it showcases. The first aspect relates to the editorial choices, characters, formats and objects that make up the *television context*, all of which are shaped by political viewpoints. Similarly, the second aspect regards food as a *television text*, which represents more

than just traditional recipes and flavours but can also convey ideological and dominant positions.

Buscemi's analysis of evolving television programmes over the years is intriguing, particularly when examining the first Italian programmes focused on food and the culinary arts produced and broadcast between 1954 and 1970. One noteworthy programme is 'Viaggio nella Valle del Po', created by writer Mario Soldati, which was the first food and wine report broadcast on Italian public television. The programme showcased Italy's various culinary traditions and excellence, aiming to redefine the meaning of food both socially and culturally. This *sacred food* represented a (*culinary*) *capital* of the Italian national identity deeply rooted in traditional, popular and symbolic Catholic values. This capital strived to resist modernisation, emphasising the intrinsic value of nature, and expressing the meaning of a vanishing way of life, like the differences between country and city life. Interestingly, television rediscovered and preserved this sacred food during the clash between premodern Italy and modern Italy, which was beginning to experience more radical modernisation. The government of the 1950s (which also played a fundamental role in the industrialisation process of Italian culture) ultimately pursued this modernisation.

The analysis of other decades is also highly interesting, such as the 1980s. With the increase in modernisation and consumerism, food underwent a transformation leading to new television representations. Buscemi highlights the work of Wilma De Angelis, a former Italian singer and presenter who popularised a 'new' television cuisine during that decade. De Angelis broke away from RAI's pedagogical approach and anticipated some of the approaches to food TV that would come later. Her food-focused programmes and columns depicted food within the walls of a city apartment, offering a glimpse into the lifestyle of a new, wealthier and less political society that values wellbeing, tranquillity and leisure. This significant sociopolitical and culinary evolution reflects the core values of the widespread search for leisure that characterised that decade.

This cultural analysis process delves into other political, television and culinary eras, ranging from the time of Berlusconi to the present day. It identifies emerging trends, closely examines new formats, and evaluates the contributions of new protagonists in the representation and redefinition of food.

In conclusion, the book aims to provide a comprehensive theoretical and interpretive framework for the representation of food on television, extending beyond the food TV genre. As Buscemi highlights, the representation of food on television produces a type of *soft power* which encompasses popular traditions, cultural practices, ideological views, and even economic and production logic. This is why TV-mediated food has political significance and has the potential to exert forms of influence (a sort of 'propaganda') on its viewers.