

UNDER the BELLY

A de-capitalisation of the body through food

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Abstract

This research aims to explore and problematize the relation between body and food in the current neoliberal society. The media production about bodies who eat has an impact on our eating habits. Our choices concerning this primary need are connected with a binary system which creates distinctions such as male and female, control and gluttony, mastery and care. The influences of these modes of consumption fall back into our identities and gender roles.

The obsessive thoughts on food, shape, and weight of the body and the development of eating disorders, not by chance with higher rates among women than men, are also affected by the power of these representations. Using the instrument of autoethnography, I look at binge eating episodes with a political perspective. The body, moved from its marginal position, is involved in a process of recognition of its agency and capability to act against the disciplinary dieting system.

During this thesis I propose that a direct engagement with the materiality of food offers a possibility to rethink the relationship between body and food. Working in kitchens and using all the senses constitutes, on one hand, a practical way to touch, smell, taste, hear, see the matter. On the other hand, this experience offers an opportunity to subvert a system of control internalized by the body. As such, this thesis approaches the potential of practices within the kitchen to challenge the capitalist system.

Keywords: body, food, binary system, capitalism, commons

Abstract

L'obiettivo di questa ricerca di tesi è quello di esplorare e problematizzare la relazione tra corpo e cibo nella società neoliberista odierna. Analizzando la produzione mediatica dei corpi che mangiano, emerge il peso di queste immagini nel nostro approccio al cibo. Le nostre scelte riguardanti il bisogno primario di mangiare sono infatti influenzate da un sistema binario che distingue in maschile e femminile, controllo e ingordigia, dominio e cura. L'impatto di questi modelli di consumo è reale e ha ricadute sulle nostre identità e ruoli di genere.

I pensieri ossessivi intorno a cibo, forma fisica e peso e lo sviluppo dei disordini alimentari, di cui si registrano tassi più elevati nella popolazione femminile, sono influenzati da queste rappresentazioni mediatiche. Attraverso l'uso dell'autoetnografia, il tentativo è quello di guardare alla sindrome da alimentazione incontrollata in una prospettiva politica. Il corpo, abbandonata la sua posizione di marginalità, viene coinvolto in un processo di riconoscimento della sua agency e capacità di agire contro un sistema di disciplina quale quello della dieta.

La possibilità di un rapporto alternativo tra corpo e cibo si concretizza attraverso l'esperienza con la materialità del cibo stesso. Lavorando all'interno di cucine professionali ho potuto toccare, annusare, assaggiare, sentire, vedere la materialità del cibo ma al contempo sovvertire un sistema di controllo interiorizzato dal corpo. Le pratiche all'interno della cucina detengono un potenziale di sfida al sistema capitalista.

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Introduction

“I have turned my experience, and, more pointedly, my stomach and taste buds, into a research project. The genesis of this project was not, however, greed, but curiosity, a trait that may at times be fickle, but which is absolutely necessary to any cultural analysis” (Probyn 2000, 1).

I reflect myself in these words of Elizabeth Probyn. My belly is the protagonist in this thesis, what is inside it, emotions and digestion, and what is outside, a protective pillow made of fat and skin. Starting from this specific part of my body, my aim is to undertake a journey in the past until the present, looking at the relationship with the body through food.

Eating is both a primary need and a cultural practice. In this era of overabundance, wherein the Western world we do not need anymore to get food but rather to reduce food waste, food has become an even more complex element to deal with. Our system produces an immense variety of foods and of cultural messages around it, which play a fundamental role in our relationship to them.

Our concern on food is tightly linked to the body and to the position it has in the social space. My aim is to research and work on this tie, starting from the socio-economical context where we are immersed, named neoliberal system, and go cross my personal experience with eating disorders, to embrace a more broaden perspective on how to decolonize this bond in the kitchen, dealing with food.

Indeed, food is not only a reading material. Rather, as the feminist scholar Desiree Lewis writes, “the various forms of work associated with food are not only shaped by social and cultural contexts and meanings, they are also generative, actively forging connections among social beings, linking bodies to organic matter and anchoring human beings in nature” (Lewis 2016, 6). It is exactly this generative versus a destructive reading of food which will constitute the lens to apply in this analysis. The specific act of food manipulation could be generative and radical towards the capitalist system or instead destructive toward the body and in being at the service of the consumer logic. Additionally, I consider how and what we communicate through eating.

Developing this idea, I have decided to structure my thesis as follows. In the first chapter, I address the theoretical framework which I rely on. My perspective embraces capitalism as the main

inner structure of my discourse. Because of that the works of Mark Fisher (2009), British scholar, and Silvia Federici (2010, 2012), feminist academic, are reference points in this research. Indeed, they both have written about the capitalist system, its oppression, and its alternatives. From there, I have linked the ways specific bodies are depicted on the media stage in relation to food. What I would like to give is a first and clear idea of who and how appears in its relationship with food in media representations. Several scholars from media studies, critical and gender studies have shown the deep influences media have left on bodies. Then, I dedicate the second chapter to the consequences of the representations of bodies who eat. In particular, I read and analyze eating disorders, not as a destructive disease, but as a possible body reaction to a normative and violent system. The discipline over the body - a collection of proper behaviors in relation to food, gender belonging, identity, pleasure, and desire - may have the most diverse combinations and could lead to unknown ports. In the third and last chapter, I finally focus on alternatives ways to deal with the materiality of food. This practical relationship with the body through food has been possible by way of direct observation conducted in different workplaces such as professional kitchens. There, I have used a feminist perspective to look at food and its manipulation. More specifically, I consider different ways to deal with and manipulate food in the kitchen as possible practices of generative resistance, comparing my personal experiences in two restaurants and a catering service.

From a different perspective concerning the capitalist vision, I have read identity through the lens of food, deeming it as relational instead of productive and performative. Christina Ceisel, critical studies scholar, writes how “Paying attention to food as performance reveals the intricacies of our understandings of and negotiations between self and community; nostalgia and the present moment; home and away; family and individual” (Ceisel 2108, 2). Food, indeed, is an access door to relationships, to acts of care towards the others. In this regards, I quote Elspeth Probyn:

As individuals, we eat into culture, continually oscillating between primary, natural and necessary acts, as, simultaneously, we consume and ingest our identities. The mouth machine takes in, but it also spits out. While in some cases there is a direct equation between eating and being, in mundane ways we also shift the lines that connect what we eat with who we are. Rather than simply confirming who we are, eating conjoins us in a network of the edible and inedible, the human and non-human, the animate and the inanimate (Probyn 2000, 17).

This research has started with an authentic wish to dig up in my emotionally disturbed past eating habits and its current repercussions. This path has allowed me to question first of all myself, my relationship with my body and with food but at the same time it has allowed me to open up to my surroundings, recognizing bonds and connections and framed them in the capitalist backdrop. This unexpected journey, which has involved all my senses, has turned my stomach from the margins to the center of my body.

Methodology

Where do I want to place myself and in what terms? I walk on eggshells, without even knowing what I could break (Diary, 6 October 2017).

From my first step on Gender Studies soil, I struggled with the concept of positionality, even though I was completely fascinated by this notion. Moreover, a master in Gender Studies has been a fundamental step in order to write a paper or a thesis. During the lectures, as students, we struggled to find the exact line between introducing ourselves and describing our attitudes regarding a specific topic. As Donna Haraway wisely writes “location is about vulnerability” (Haraway 1988, 590). Likewise, it took a long time to arrive at the decision to focus on eating disorders, such a personal matter for me. In this case, to locate myself is fundamental and unavoidable.

The decision, or maybe it is better to define it the intuition, came during a class at Utrecht University. While I was presenting, for the umpteenth time, a draft about a possible thesis proposal, the professor suggested us to focus on a recurring thought, something that would accompany us in our everyday life. That is how I realized that the answer for me was the relationship with my body through food. Indeed, even though eating disorders are a memory, still my eating practice is intense, complex, a tool of torture and delight at the same time. To investigate the self and the vulnerability of the subject is enriching and frightening: “doing autoethnography, we give way to an intimate, intermediate space, which includes ambiguity, uncertainty and equivocality” (Ettorre 2016, 4) writes Elizabeth Ettorre, American sociologist. That is why, beyond the fear of feeling naked, or rather for this very reason, I realised that this was the key theme of my research.

How to structure this research has been through several stages, which can be synthesized in a self-analysis, a visual focus, and participant observation in new spaces, dealing with the materiality of food. The first and the constant line recognisable is the self-analysis developed as autoethnography.

Situate my knowledge

The purpose of my research project is to use autoethnography as a tool not only to locate myself but also to 'situate my knowledge'. When Haraway defines 'situated knowledges' she states that "the object of knowledge be pictured as an actor and agent, not as a screen or a ground or a resource, never finally as slave" (Haraway 1988, 592). Following this path, I have gone so far as to consider my body as an agent. Referring to the famous work of the Professor in Gender and Women's Studies Susan Bordo, "Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body" (1993), I have tried to demolish the wall between mind and body, which has foundations so deeply rooted in the history of Western thought. That is how, according to my point of view, binge-eating episodes are a specific body reaction to the normative discipline imposed on it. My body in this research wants to emerge as an agent, not as materiality to be normed. Not by chance, the river delta of the autoethnographic work has been the physical job inside a kitchen dealing with the materiality of food.

Rereading old diaries has been the main practice at the basis of the second chapter and throughout all the thesis. This analysis allows me to reread an image of myself that was imprinted on paper. I use autoethnography inserting quotations from my diaries as a starting point of my thought and to support my argument, combining them with theory and explanations. In particular, I make full use of my diaries from 2006 to 2008, a period where I have suffered from binge eating episodes. Each quotation reports a date.

The work of translation from Italian to English has yielded the deconstruction of this fixed image, apparently immutable. My diaries are the embodiment of a constant voice throughout all the research, which has allowed me to keep the thread of the narrative and to translate it to myself and to the paper. Even if identity has been supported by 'un certain regard', which apparently is always the same, this practice of self-decoding has constituted an instrument of unravelling and the possibility to rewrite myself with a different tale. My identity has been through a process of tearing apart and transformation. Several anthropologists have focused their efforts in arguing the concept of identity. Between them, I rely on the works of Francois Laplantine (2004) and Francesco Remotti (1996, 2010) who have written about the human constant effort in trying to define itself, establish a boundary and for whom anthropology is an instrument of deconstruction. There is no movement in identity where we mirror ourselves. There is no possibility of transformation, of blending, of errors,

of falls, of flaws. There is only a strong enclosure, a little hideout where to feel safe and think, terrified, about what is outside. In this regards, Laplantine writes:

No matter how you deal with it, identity is deficient. Deficient but fascinating, because it allows us to perceive to what extent change is frightening and linguistic effort discourages [...]. If therefore, identity tends to be on the side of truth and feels the need for a challenge to temporality in order to make it triumph, anthropology is committed to the reverse movement: a movement that consists in undoing identities (identities, traditions, cultures) and through this movement undoing truth, in particular the idea of a mother tongue, a center of the world (Laplantine 2004, 70-71).¹

If my first encounter with anthropology has constituted an instrument of dismantling, with the involvement in gender studies I can affirm that I have developed my capacity to be critical even towards myself. If with anthropology I learned to acknowledge the complexity of the other, it was with a gender perspective that I was able to position myself in the same space of complexity and nuances.

According to the Kenyan writer Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’O, translation is a process which opens (Thiong’O in Dotti, 2015). This research is an open process of disentanglement. Even if in my work there is only my voice, it was made possible through the countless encounters and exchanges of food of these last years. In Elizabeth Ettore’s work “Autoethnography as a Feminist Method” (2016), the political side of storytelling is taken into account because it “pushes us from notions that there is a single cultural perspective revealing an irrefutable set of truth” (Ettore 2016, 1). This is an idea present also in Haraway’s thought: “situated knowledges are about communities, not about isolated individuals” (Haraway 1988, 590). Therefore, I can state that my thesis is not only personal, rather it embraces the stories, the exchanges and the thoughts of many others. She writes again Ettore:

When telling an autoethnographic story, the story is not only mine - it is also co-owned with those in my story, sharing this borderland space. I am telling a story without borders, and yet I am an insider and an outsider - a living, embodied crossroads of words, flesh, emotions, interpretations and humanity (Ettore 2016, 6).

Moreover, I believe in the strong political commitment of gender studies and in this sense, my research is political. With that, indeed, I have tried to point out the political side of eating. This

¹ Own translation.

belief has driven me through even a more conscious path because autoethnography “opens up those spaces for enlarging our economic and political imaginary and calls for political responsiveness embedded in performativity” (Ettorre 2016, 10). What I am trying to describe is the urge to making rooms for the voice from the margins. As revealed by bell hooks, margins could be spaces of resistance and radical spaces of possibility (1989). Inhabiting the margins, in terms of having a conflictual relation with body and food, has led me to unexpected possibilities, as the ones described in the last chapter, *Inhabit the kitchen of the margins*. “When I write as autoethnographer, I see myself as active in political life as well as a member of the precariat” (Ettorre 2016, 11). Dealing with my body through food has been a way to make a political statement from what I have considered a disadvantageous position, but a position where I was able to locate myself and where I have discovered my privilege.

With the hands in the dough

Take a break, disconnect from the flow of information that invests me and the anxiety that comes with it. It's not easy. I need to do more than study. How can I do research in another way? Engage other senses. The head, as part of the body (Diary, 27 September 2018).

I need a space to play with the locals. Prolonged and permanent interaction. I don't want to live on the shores of this country, but in its heart (Diary, 10 October 2018).

My body is the cornerstone of this research. Its materiality finally has a weight which I recognize, moreover I value. Its shape and its capability to enter in contact with the other and with the world are also part of this thesis. Thus, it is a good way to reconsider my relationship with food. The possibility to give again voice to my material part, my body, has materialized in cooking, work directly with food. As Ettorre explains in her work, there is a difference between autobiography, which means telling my story and autoethnography, as a theorization of my story (Ettorre 2016). I have followed this aim, trying to theorize on my personal narration.

My ability to theorize has always gone hand in hand with a practical side, not by chance the practice of a body that I have often tried to hide, devalue, left in the shadows. Today, with this work, I revalue it and bring it to the center of the scene. I do not focus only on the bodies of others but instead especially my own body, with its will to get in touch. Working with food is, in this sense, the possibility to regain a material space, to occupy it, to make it one's own.

Rachele Borghi writes about her commitment in doing research on bodies, as a feminist geographer. Reading her notes, I mirror myself in this act of researching on bodies and recognizing that I am using my own, which is part of the research, too. Because as she writes in *Note dai margini del centro*²: "The risk is always about its position and the privilege of which it enjoys. Being aware of one's privileges means knowing where one starts from, where one *is* at the moment when the action takes place, the space in which one can act³" (Borghi 2018, 146). Her work is part of "Smagliature Digitali" (2018), a collection of essays, where the developed knowledge is considered embodied knowledge. Bodies and experiences are at the core of this publication, "giving life to a process of building embodied knowledge, in movement, that redefines the boundaries between margin and centre, challenging reassuring dichotomies of thought and practice⁴" (Cossutta et al. 2018, 10-11). In the same way, I have tried to embody my knowledge, getting my hands dirty to deal with expectations on bodies and create alternative representations of them. Taking the matter of the world in my hands, observing, smelling, recognising it and having a relationship with it, modifying it and modifying me in turn. "In order not to succumb to fear, it is necessary to find places and people to allow oneself to be contaminated, to impotent oneself through the transmission of knowledge and the creation of relationships" (Borghi 2018, 146). The relationship with my body has been challenged, again and again, dealing finally with food, in the opposite direction of the normative dieting system and calorie counting.

The different experiences within kitchens have been an opportunity for learning and I have been able to observe how much feminism is a perspective applicable in any field. Obviously, the kitchen world is not free from tensions, contradiction, exploitation, stereotypes. But it is exactly the

² Notes from the edges of the center.

³ Own translation.

⁴ Own translation.

possibility to try that has been constituted the turning point. I immersed myself in the charm of food and what this means in term of relations between different subjects.

My instrument, in this specific case and last chapter, is *participant observation*. I have had the possibility to work in three different kitchens, with similar but different roles. I can say that the kinds of tasks were different according to how space was conceived by its inhabitant. I have observed how space was regulated and how relationships were established in my regards, for instance. “Society changes only if subordinative relationships change and this can only start from the oppressed or excluded subjectivities, from the margins, from the meshes that do not hold, from the stretch marks” (Cossutta et al. 2018, 34). I have discovered how the kitchen might be considered an intense microcosm. The one in which we live is a complex society and as the feminist theorist Gloria Anzaldúa, has written, we should be suspicious of the word ‘solution’ (2009). Instead, recognizing the elements’ intricacy we can avoid a ‘consolatory thought’ (Cossutta et al. 2018, 36) and embrace the complexity, messiness, and contradiction of the space we inhabit.

Chapter 1

Framing the capitalist body

“An ironic race against the mirror” (Diary, July 2009).

What is on the table?

At the beginning of 2019, I often took the train from Amsterdam to Utrecht to attend some classes as a gender studies student. Arrived in Utrecht Central Station and accordingly to the strength of the cold, the wind and the rain, I often crossed the Hoog Catharijne Mall where I always laid my eyes on a big billboard. The image was a photograph of two youths seated at a table, a white and blond girl and a black boy. It was about a serene time, both characters seemed at ease and the woman was clearly laughing. On the table, there was some foodstuff. The man had in front of him a plate full of chips with a hamburger, while the woman had some sweet things. The whole picture was clean, white and bright and decontextualized from a specific place. Even if, I guess, all the efforts of the authors were to instil comfort with the bright colours, body and facial expressions, and the absence of specific connotations of space and time, I was annoyed every time I was looking at it. What bothered me were many stereotypes beneath this apparently innocent image. First, the fact that the female subject was eating desserts and the male one meat, potatoes and carbohydrates. This is a first assumption on how taste is declined according to gender belonging. It is indeed a general - but shared by many - supposition that girls prefer candies and boys meat and substantial food. Secondly, the picture did not give information about where the two subjects were in terms of space and time - it might be in the 80s in a café in North America or nowadays in a house in the Netherlands. Moreover, the decontextualization went further because it concerned also the cleanness of the image. The colors of the food were overexposed, plates were clean and scintillating, nothing out place, not as food coming out from the land but from an uncontaminated place as a supermarket where each product is in a sterile plastic package. Finally, the fact that the guy was the one who made the girl laughs was also inscribed in a stereotype where the male figure

has an active role and the power of speech - which makes me think about mansplaining - while the woman is the passive object who reacts to the male performance.

In this first chapter, I introduce the theoretical support to this project, looking at the broader context which surrounds us, named capitalism. In order to approach it, my reference theorist is Mark Fisher which I put into dialogue with Silvia Federici and her writings about the commons, whose thought I expand more in the last chapter. In this section, a specific focal point is on time, which will be also useful for the concept of timing inside the kitchen presents again in the last and third chapter. Here, I specifically look at the literature on media analysis and visual studies and their contribution about bodies who eat in a neoliberal setting. I believe that media representation has real effects on the the audience in terms of food consumption. Thus, the normative framing of food in a capitalist patriarchal scheme is a way to discipline bodies and gendered identities. To look at the way bodies are framed in this kind of environment I will use mostly the work of feminist scholars such as Susan Bordo (1993) , Natalie Jovanovski (2017), and Elspeth Probyn (2000) and the contribution from critical studies by Cristina Ceisel (2018).

Images in a consumer backdrop

It is like being in front of a mirror. To see oneself reflected in the eyes of others. Let yourself resound and feel how you play, what sound you have (Diary, 15 October 2012).

As with the mechanism of photography, where the image is captured on film, images we look at live in us. We flip magazines absent-mindedly, we scroll through the options on Netflix, we are impressed by a billboard while we walk in the city. Even if we do not pay much attention, all these images sneak into our mind and grow like plants from seed. I have always been fascinated by the visual power of messages because illustrations are part of our everyday life. They help us to translate the grammar of the world while they shape the way we look at it. In other words, between images we watch and we produce as subjects there is a dialogue rather than a unidirectional process. The mainstream, created by power and sustained by citizens, and people, with their possibility to

assimilate information and react to them, both are parts actively involved in the production of representations. However, even if we are active recipients of images and we have space of agency, it is undeniable how mainstream media plays a massive power on our mind through the circulation of ‘visual concepts’.

The meaning construction exercised by media audience is an aspect enlighten by Stuart Hall, famous sociologist, in his influential essay, “Encoding/Decoding” (1980). His perspective still resonates today, such as in the words of the visual culture theorist Nicholas Mirzoeff who writes: “visual culture involves the things that we see, the mental model we all have of how to see, and what we can do as a result” (Mirzoeff 2016, 10).

Interestingly, in *How to see the world*, Mirzoeff defines visual culture the relation between the visible, how we call it and what is kept out of sight (Mirzoeff 2016). What kind of viewings we daily eat and digest? How we react to them? What kind of representations are kept out of our sight? As we live in an “image-dominated network society” (Mirzoeff 2016, 12), how we see the world and how we might act in response? How we use our agency in this gaze empire? In this section, I specifically want to address how gendered food representation in popular media is an instrument of body discipline and a vehicle of messages of proper femininity and masculinity.

Gender binarism informs the logic and industrial production of our system. In this sense, feminist media criticism and practice emerge exactly to question the culture industry that shapes the misrepresentation of subjectivities and to contribute building alternatives of thought. Historically speaking, it is in the 1960s and 1970s that “popular media culture came under increasing attack as a particularly pernicious site of gender inequality” (Craig Watkins, Emerson 2000, 152). This was due to the fact that the female figure tended to be portrayed in subordinate and domestic roles compared to males, often in roles of authority, instead.

According to S. Craig Watkins, American professor expert in media and Rana A. Emerson, sociologist, even though the depiction of women has been through changes, television is the media most unlikely to be altered (Craig Watkins, Emerson 2000). It is in 1975 that Laura Mulvey published her essay *Visual Pleasures and Narrative Cinema*, where she pointed the finger to the dominance of the male gaze in cinema. In feminist film theory, this has been translated into the

analysis of the viewing experience, in which subjects are socialized to the compliance with patriarchal values. Notwithstanding this position, the active role of the female receiver has been recognized, too. Indeed, “rather than assuming that women internalized images of gender inequality and objectification, this theoretical break compelled media analysts to contemplate the creative ways women engage images of gender subordination” (Craig Watkins, Emerson 2000, 156). Feminist media criticism, instead of focusing only on the dark side, has also brought out how females use media to “cultivate personal space, negotiate the broader social issues they face, derive pleasure, and bring their own lived experiences to media consumption” (Craig Watkins, Emerson 2000, 157).

The visual experience is strictly connected to the one of pleasure. In this sense, female desire might emerge as “an expression of, but also a disturbance to male sexual paradigms” (Papenburg, Zarzycka 2013, 14). This is what has been researched from different perspectives in the publication *Carnal aesthetic*, for instance, with the aim of gather together artistic and cultural practices with the sphere of ethics and politics. This work on transgressive imagery inserts elements of rupture in the traditional representation between female image and male spectator respectively as passive object and active subject. The film theorist Shohini Chaudhuri, writing about Mulvey’s work, explains how the woman is the perfect fetish as erotic spectacle. This is what happens in the cinema screen itself: “the camera fetishistically isolates fragments of her body (face, breasts, legs) in close-ups. The use of such close-ups for the heroine stresses that, unlike the hero, she is valued above all for what her appearance connotes, for her beauty and sexual desirability” (Chaudhuri 2006, 37).

In her work, Mulvey acknowledges the erotic language of cinema. More specifically, she looks at the ways “the unconscious of patriarchal society has structured film form” (Mulvey 1975, 6). To do so, she considers the primordial wishes that cinema satisfies which is the pleasurable looking - named scopophilia - and the pleasure in being looked at. According to her, in a strongly patriarchal culture as the Western one, the binary system is at the basis of eroticism:

In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its phantasy on to the female figure which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness. Woman displayed as sexual object is the leit-motif of erotic spectacle (Mulvey 1975, 11).

The male side instead is depicted as active, the protagonist of the story, and holder of power. “He articulates the look and creates the action” (Mulvey 1975, 13). In other words, there is power in looking and who is entitled to use the gaze is predominantly male in visual narrative. The gaze is political (hooks 2003) as bell hooks, feminist scholar and social activist, reminds us. In her essay “The Oppositional Gaze: Black female Spectators”, she states how not only gender but also race politics are inscribed into mainstream cinema narrative. Once again, she recognizes the possibility to manipulate gaze even against structures of domination, using agency.

As much as gender is tied to eroticism, even food is intertwined in media representations. Again, these bonds have consequences on the audience. In 1993 John Condry, a psychologist and educator, wrote about the connection between obesity and television in the United States:

Watching television, a physical passive activity, is often accompanied by eating, and studies show a decrease in metabolic rate among television viewers, especially for children who are already obese. The foods advertised on television may stimulate eating on the part of the viewer, and food is the most commonly advertised product (Condry 1993, 262).

Furthermore, the specific union between watching and eating is something registered in eating disorder’s cases. As Craig Watkins and Emerson state “researchers at Harvard Medical School have found that the introduction of U.S. television to the island of Fiji is correlated (although not definitively linked) with a rise in eating disorders and body-image consciousness among teenage Fijian girls” (Craig Watkins, Emerson 2000, 164). From my own experience, I have noticed a specific pattern which involved both a visual and a material blowout. As a matter of fact, my binges were always solitary and above all characterized by the combination of food and television. While alone in the house, I would go to the kitchen and eat in front of the television. The guilt felt made me return to my tasks, but after sometimes I came back to the kitchen to eat and watch. In November 2006 I wrote: *My head is bombed by TV images, my stomach saturated, my body abused.* This sequence was recurring during the afternoon until it was reached an unbearable disgust against my body. *Why I mistreat myself? Why I hysterically chase myself in the rooms, stuff myself with television and food eaten out of habit?* (Diary, 14 October 2006). In these notes from my personal diaries emerges clearly the bond between the violence of the images we are subjected to and the food gendered consumption related.

In this scenario, it is essential to keep in mind what is the engine of this mechanism. The representation of sexed bodies in relation to food is widespread in any kind of media. This happens because the main goal of media follows an economic logic:

Modern television, particularly as utilized in the United States at this time, has only one purpose. That purpose is to sell things. Television is fundamentally a marketing device. Its values are the values of the marketplace; its structure and content mirror that purpose.

The task of those who program television is to capture the public's attention, and to hold it long enough to advertise a product (Condry 1993, 264).

The neoliberal system who runs the world nowadays, aware of its huge power, has created a strong bond hard to break. As Giancarlo Bosetti, Italian intellectual has written, "it is beyond dispute that there is a nexus between television and power"⁵ (Bosetti 2002, 8). This power brings us back to the complex system we are living in:

Capitalism is what is left when beliefs have collapsed at the level of ritual or symbolic elaboration, and all that is left is the consumer-spectator, trudging through the ruins and the relics. Yet this turn from belief to aesthetics, from engagement to spectatorship, is held to be one of the virtues of capitalist realism (Fisher 2009, 4-5).

The British intellectual Mark Fisher has largely analyzed in *Capitalist Realism* how the neoliberal context we live in is build up by images. This is what allows the shift of position from citizen to audience. Furthermore, the strong bond between the concepts of property and representations is an essential aspect of the consumption era we live in. We watch, we want, we buy. We learn to desire what we see in mass media advertisements and the only way to get it is with money, buying the product, whatever it is. Owning gives a specific shape and alluring status to our identity.

What Fisher identifies as a fundamental aspect of capitalism is exactly the realism to which he refers in the title. The neoliberal system has made so deep connections with the imaginary to the extent that "capitalism seamlessly occupies the horizons of the thinkable. [...] Capitalism has seeped into the very unconscious; now, the fact that capitalism has colonized the dreaming life of the population is so taken for granted that it is no longer worthy of comment" (Fisher 2009, 8-9). We are the living population more affected by that. In other words, capitalism seems the only

⁵ Own translation.

apparent scenario available for a specific target as young people from Western countries because this is often the only kind of socialization they have been in contact with. Indeed, “for most people under twenty in Europe and North America, the lack of alternatives to capitalism is no longer even an issue” (Fisher 2009, 8).

Not by chance, the feminist scholar Silvia Federici in her long commitment with the concept of the commons shows how a lifestyle based on them is mostly considered a utopia or only a possible small-scale kind of projects rather than a real alternative to massive production and consumption. The commons might be defined as the resources available to everyone, in contrast with the concept of property. Even if nowadays this could be hard to believe for a specific generation, “not only have commons existed for thousands of years, but elements of a communally based society are still around us, although they are under constant attack, as capitalist development requires the destruction of communal properties and relations” (Caffentzis, Federici 2013, 94).

Living in a world where everything has a price and being constantly subjected to images bombing, it is no surprise that on one hand “*the idea of the commons exercise such an attraction on our collective imagination*” (Federici, Caffentzis 2013, 95) but on the other it is also read as an unfeasible realization, as Fisher explains.

Time is money

Seasoning my time (Diary, 31 December 2008).

Life these days. Everything is a service, everything is trade. Whatever you want to do, you have to take out your wallet (Diary, 9 February 2009).

“Time is money” is a common proverb from the *Essays* (1597) by the British philosopher Sir Francis Bacon. This sentence, among many others, reflects the idea of time as measurable and governed by economical rules. Actually, as we intend time nowadays, taking it for granted in our routine, is the result of a historical process. The German author and philosopher Ernst Jünger, in his book *Das Sanduhrbuch* (1954), wrote about how technologies have shaped the way human beings have experienced and conceptualized time. The passage from the use of the sundial in the past and

then to the clock utilized so far has changed the way pleasure, boredom, productivity are lived and valued. Notably, the mechanical clock has brought with it the idea of controlling of time (Jünger 1994), which is strictly related to the one of economic gain. My aim here is to examine how this specific concept of time has been embedded in a capitalist and aesthetic framework, using again Mark Fisher and James Condry's contribution.

Capitalism has incorporated this idea of time in its system of production. About it, Condry made some interesting observation more specifically on television:

Television is ruled by the clock. Whatever drama or uncertainty is introduced must be resolved and satisfied by the end of the program. The products are there to be sold. Time dictates movement to another program, to other products. Television resembles schools in at least this respect. If a student becomes interested in a specific topic, if a revealing and exciting discussion begins just before the bell, there is no reprieve from the tyranny of the clock. The bell rings - it is time to change topics. Such attitudes trivialize interest and impede learning; they tell children not to become too involved in anything. Is it any wonder that teachers report that children's attention wanders, that they do not stick to anything for very long, even things they themselves choose? Neither television nor schools promote interest in topics beyond what the clock allows; this trivialized the pursuit of knowledge (Condry 1993, 265).

Parallely, Fisher observes both a lack of students' attention - "a consequence of being wired into the entertainment-control circuits of hyper mediated consumer culture" (Fisher 2009, 25), defined by him a 'pathology of late capitalism' - and a lack of political engagement by his students in the 90s. Taking a step back in his analysis, the author states that "capitalist realism has successfully installed a 'business ontology'" (Fisher 2009, 17). By that he means that everything is carried out as a business, suggesting a politicization of what has been presented as "natural" (Fisher 2009). For instance, he takes into consideration green issues, mental health - specifically stress -, and bureaucracy. Recognizing the socio-cultural structure of hysteria, Susan Bordo's work might be considered similar to the one of Fisher. In his perspective indeed, both mental health issues and bureaucracy feature in education. Talking about his students, Fisher refers to a specific condition:

Constituted not by an inability to get pleasure so much as it by an inability to do anything else *except* pursue pleasure. There is a sense that 'something is missing' - but no appreciation that this mysterious, missing enjoyment can only be accessed *beyond* the pleasure principle. In large part this is a consequence of students' ambiguous structural position, stranded between their old role as subjects of disciplinary institutions and their new status as consumers of services (Fisher 2009, 22).

I believe that this obsession and at the same time incapacity to get pleasure is mirrored in the way we relate nowadays to food. We expect to get deep pleasure from it as suggested by media messages, but we swiftly consume it because we need to be productive and to not waste time. In other words, also pleasure and food are framed in this system of production. This specific relationship comes from the capitalist environment where we are embedded and the main instrument with which we are informed about it, mass media. Indeed, we should both control ourselves in terms of what we eat and we should get pleasure from food because we are the result of a disciplinary culture based on economic rules. Not only the consumption of food but even its production fits in this complex system of demands related to the concept of time. In this relentless organization, food has to be quickly ready. Frozen foodstuff, ready meals to be reheated or cooked, and fast foods are apparently easy solutions not to lose time.

Lately, the bond between neoliberalism and time has reshaped itself. The call to slowness has regained territory and has been sold at the same table. The urge to eat organic, slow, ethically could be read both as an economic strategy or as a first try that got dirty in the fight. Undoubtedly, this has led to a distinction between high and pop culture both located in the capitalist scenario, whose purpose is to sell its concepts.

The same thrust to capitalism could be applied in the case of sex, as the scholar Elspeth Probyn shows in her *Carnal Appetites: FoodSexIdentities* (2000) where she argues that the relation between food and bodies is about power, whether on a socio-economical large-scale or an individual level. In her tracing out the possibilities of bodies in eating, the Australian academic writes “as a politics of feeding, it is clear that food and eating is as much marked by pleasure as it is by power; in fact, it gestures to the pleasure of control, the desire revealed in constraint” (Probyn 2000, 18). The forms of pleasure obtained through food and eating are often compared to sex in the media and “concomitantly, representations of sexuality are often paired with food as a way of exploring different modes of sensuality” (Probyn 2000, 6).

Again, the underlying scheme of this representation seems to me the economic one. The possibility to get pleasure from an eating experience as if it were a sexual one is appealing and therefore saleable. Buying this idea, we fall in “the remorseless meat-grinder of Capital” (Fisher

2009, 15). Following Fisher's suggestion, we need to reclaim a political agency at the level of desire, but also recognizing our personal responsibility, because capitalism "is a hyper-abstract impersonal structure *and* that it would be nothing without our co-operation" (Fisher 2009, 15). Therefore, with a politicization of the connection between food and bodies, we can be able to reframe our cravings, regain the opportunity to scan our time and can go beyond a neoliberal oppressive system, with which we collude. Following this idea of politicization, in the next paragraph, I will narrow my analysis on the depictions of bodies who eat in a gendered binary perspective.

Gendered food and body depiction

In this last section, I want to focus on the depiction reserved to bodies and their relationship with food, in its preparation, offering, and consumption. Analyzing mainstream media messages, several authors have observed how the portrayal of food and the act of eating is strongly gendered and moreover binary. Indeed, the more available visual offer is a distinction between women and men which also look at the generational aspect of care. The source of this pattern is the nuclear family, born within the industrial society. I want firstly to address this binary representation as the possible mirror in which subjects might find or lose themselves.

In the dualistic models of bodies who eat shown in Western media, we can find the male and the female side. Even though this latter could seem richer in terms of diversity, is more bowed to stereotypical portraits. Following what the Australian sociologist Natalie Jovanovski defines in her "Digesting Femininities", we can easily identify three main different types of femininity, whose stereotypes recur in Western thought. The first figure we can encounter is the woman who feeds and nourishes others, typically the male partner and the children; second, we have the temptress woman who is both tempted by libidinous food and the one tempting the other - the male figure which is mirrored in the spectator - with food; third and finally we have the portrait of the fit woman who only consumes what is considered healthy food in order to remain in shape and be successful. In her analysis, Jovanovski finds all these three different stereotypes present in the female celebrity cooks

she considers. The mainstream best-selling cookbooks examined encompass a “tension between the maternal (i.e., the traditional feeder) and the hedonistic (i.e., the contemporary eater) where body-policing narratives are expressed, an indication that the male gaze operates to colonise both women’s ability to feed others and to feed themselves” (Jovanovski 2017, 105). Here we can notice a reassertion of the male gaze concept by Mulvey, in a seamless dialogue between the cinematic language to the more popular advertising and popular cuisine world.

Even if the strong influence of Italian commercial television on teenagers has been recognized especially on how it can disseminate messages of ‘proper’ masculinity and femininity (Puccini 2009), there are others television programs intended for adults which exercise likewise their power over the public. As examined by Jovanovski about U.S. and British cooking programs, even in the Italian panorama we find great popularity and diffusion of these, dedicated to the world of food and cooking. In such cases, the distinction between professional male cook and female cook nurturer is often present, not to mention that the vast majority of these programs are intended for a female audience.

Starting from the first figuration, the idea of the woman as nurturer is connected to her capacity to generate and to be a mother. Jovanovski defines it as “the selfless, other-oriented stereotype of the traditional feeder” (Jovanovski 2017, 11). Often, this has been seen as the main and only fulfilment as a woman and it constitutes still an unbreakable view of the feminine. In this regard, Probyn writes how “the slide from mother’s milk to a cuddly idea of nurture and care is so deeply ingrained in our culture that it is not surprising that it is continually reproduced in everything from certain forms of feminism to ads for frozen dinners (which need a heavy dose of the warm and fuzzy to make them appealing)” (Probyn 2000, 39-40). In terms of the desiring body, being depicted always and only as nourishing is a denial of the self (Bordo, 1993). In her examination of popular advertisements, Bordo notices how “food is equated with maternal and wifely love throughout our culture. In nearly all commercials that feature men eating [...], there is a woman in the background (either visible or implied) who has *prepared* the food” (Bordo 1993, 122). But instead of female self-abnegation, care is equated to the offering of food. “In this way, caring is representationally «reproduced» as a quintessentially and exclusively female activity” (Bordo 1993, 125).

The mother nurturer, historically speaking, does not suit to upper social classes. Not by chance, it is a recent notion introduced in Europe because it was functional to the modern capitalist logic economy, as also Silvia Federici wrote about it. The maternity, indeed, is a historical process which has changed throughout time. It is at the end of XVIII century that, in order to deal with infant mortality, the idea of the woman looking after children starts to take shape. In Italy, it is during the Risorgimento that this idea develops, mainly in relation to the concept of modern states. Then, the mother will be glorified for her capacity to suffer and to do anything for her children. This myth will be used even during Fascism until today (D'Amelia 1997).

What lies behind the female self-denial? Interestingly, Bordo notices how the fact that women should be gratified by feeding and nourishing others (and not themselves) is a “cultural containment of female appetite” (Bordo 1993, 118). This idea is connected to another early mentioned typical portrayal of the woman who eats: the temptress, which might be considered on the opposite side of this line of representations. In other words, “the promising, pleasure-oriented stereotype of the contemporary eater” (Jovanovski 2017, 11) as defined by the feminist scholar Jovanovski as the other dominant version of ‘food femininity’. According to the fact that the woman is the one who nourishes the others, when her cravings come out they are considered shameful and dirty. This is also why they have to be lived in secret and hidden to the outside (Bordo 1993). Not by chance, one characteristic of binge eating episodes - the experience of lack of control in front of food - is that they are lived in private and they cause shame.

As observed in the previous paragraph, food could become a synonym of sex. Probyn states how “bodies are produced as intermingled through the doubled force of the sexual and the alimentary” (Probyn 2000, 63). Indeed, in Bordo’s analysis of the commercials:

Food is constructed as a sexual object, and eating is legitimated as much more than a purely nutritive activity. Rather, food is *supposed* to supply sensual delight and succor - not as a metaphorically standing for something else, but as an erotic experience in itself. Women are permitted such gratification from food only in measured doses (Bordo 1993, 112).

In tv advertising, the dangerous unleashed female desire is concentrated in female hunger and has to be subjected to control. Not by chance, the last kind of figuration we can find is the healthy woman who controls herself through dieting. The capacity to regulation aims at containing the

excess and in the meanwhile at the obtainment of a perfect body which is considered a synonym of achievement in life. As shown by fat acceptance movement and scholars analysis (Murray 2008, Pausé, Wykes, Murray 2014), indeed, being fat is often associated with failure in contemporary beauty ideals. The first of January 2006 I have written: *first of all I want to improve myself physically because I know that if I do not feel at ease it is like being chained up and not able to do many things*. In this regards, Jovanovski states how “Excess body weight came to be seen as reflecting moral or personal inadequacy, or lack of will. These associations are possible only in a culture of overabundance - that is, in a society in which those who control the production of «culture» have more than enough to eat” (Jovanovski 2017, 159). Moreover, Samantha Murray, cultural studies theorist, enlightens how diet is considered only a matter of willpower and thus a personal responsibility (Murray 2008). The 22 of September 2008, I wrote: *Rules. Rules? Or maybe is only commitment what to aim for?* In this perspective, "denying oneself food becomes the central micro-practice in the education of feminine self-restraint and containment of impulse” (Bordo 1993, 130), as in the case of dieting. In other words, as the American expert in critical cultural studies Cristina Ceisel states, the female denial of one’s cravings is read as a sign of virtue by popular culture, exactly the opposite if we compare masculinity (Ceisel 2018).

In the opposite viewpoint, the male figure is counterposed to the female one, indeed. In mainstream commercials, men are allowed to exaggerate because they are considered naturally in control, to the extent that they “are *supposed* to have hearty, even voracious, appetites” (Bordo 1993, 108). Culturally speaking, if a woman refuses food is acceptable, but a man in the same case could be considered sick. The ever-present message in advertisements addressed to male consumers is the concept of mastery, according to Bordo’s analysis. “Here, the message is almost always one of mastery and control over *others* rather than the self” (Bordo 1993, 105).

What is also at stake is the kind of food publicized. As in the case of the billboard in the Utrecht mall, men are supposed to eat more meat, carbohydrates and strong flavours as spicy food. Being healthy is framed in a different way in male case. Nourishing food is the equivalent of healthy exactly because they are able to be in control, as opposed to female consumers.

In this depiction, sex is not excluded from the frame. As Bordo writes: “we frequently also find *sexual* appetite operating as a metaphor for eating pleasure. In commercials that feature male

eaters, the men are shown in a state of wild, sensual transport over heavily frosted, rich gooey desserts. Their total lack of control is portrayed as appropriate, even adorable” (Bordo 1993, 110-111).

These images’ message we daily eat through eyes have their toll. Cultural studies have shown how television has given its contribution to the rise of a food culture in terms of global media phenomenon (Ceisel 2018). Commercial television - “a medium devoted to the promotion of consumption” (Ceisel 2018, 16) - operates in close connection to the neoliberal framework “to produce audiences that are desired consumers” (Ceisel 2018, 16).

Moreover, as Jovanovski has argued in her work, feminism and psychology have adequately addressed “the body-centric understanding of women’s surveillance over their bodies” (Jovanovski 2017, 17). Entitling a paragraph *Making food the main course*, it is at the invisibility of food gendered discourse that she refers to. Indeed, “there is relatively little attention being paid to the way food-related discourses influence women’s surveillance of, and dissatisfaction with their bodies” (Jovanovski 2017, 29). If we think about what women eat, what can we find on the table? What kind of food and cutlery? What about the quantity? How the food is presented and displayed? Who is in charge of cleaning? As we have seen, there are specific expectations about how a woman should eat and even when she talks about food. These pressures are real and have consequences on the way different subjectivities behave in their relationship with food. That is why is fundamental to identify the role of media in this specific context: “As producers of popular culture, media industries play an important role in shaping ideology under late capitalism, infusing food with meaning, reifying links in the cultural imaginary between food practices and identity markers” (Ceisel 2018, 15). In the meanwhile, we need to take into consideration our contribution as well. Because as underlined by Voski Avakian and Haber in the preface of *From Betty Crocker to Feminist Food Studies*, the question is “how the food industry constructs who does what in the kitchen, for whom, with what ingredients, and on what appliances?” (Voski Avakian, Haber 2015, VIII), but also “how in their food practices women resist oppression through racism, colonialism, and globalization”(Voski Avakian, Haber 2015, VIII), and moreover “how we may be complicit in racialized gender constructions as consumers of both food and representations of gender and food” (Voski Avakian, Haber 2015, VIII).

We may say that food representation has taken over the significance of body discipline. In mass media food has become a vehicle of messages of proper femininity and masculinity, health and care. The body-food entanglement is so complex, intertwined and ‘daily bread’ that more or less unconsciously we behave accordingly, reproducing it in an accomplice manner.

In a similar vein, in the next chapter, I want to take a step further and a more introspective looking at the development of eating disorders in the Western society. Indeed, eating disorders are deeply connected to the neoliberal system and its lifestyle. “The escalation of eating disorders into a significant social phenomenon arises at the intersection of patriarchal culture and post-industrial capitalism” (Bordo 1993, 32), writes Bordo. The aesthetic kind of values we are subjected to, such as appearance and being successful, create a consequent performance on the scene and in the public space that deserves to be put on the table.

Chapter 2

Eat what you have to

“I am insatiable and easily conditionable” (Diary, 25 October 2006).

The starting point of this section will be a depth analysis of eating disorders of which I have suffered between the end of high school and the first years of university. If I have always looked at this chapter of my life as a shameful parenthesis to get rid of, I am now able and I have the will to frame it in a more broaden context. Eating disorders are indeed a specific answer to a gendered and binary representation of food and bodies and related pressures, as discussed by many scholars (Bordo 1993, Jovanovski 2017). In other words, mainstream media images on bodies that eat influence and have power on the way we consume food in relation to our identities.

If I look at my relationship with food, I see how much it has changed and been challenged through time and space, in a constant dialogue with the body, both in its material shape and in the desired one. After have examined in the first chapter the way we learn to eat, consume food and perform identities according to media messages and in a neoliberal system, this analysis continues with a more in-depth use of autoethnography as method to draw a line between pressing representations, how they shift into internalized obsessions and the possible body reactions. In this sense, I interpret eating disorders as a possible outcome of the body to a system of control internalized by the subject. Bringing forward criticism to the clinical approach to eating disorders, I would read them as a first statement against a power over the body. “Eating, of course, is intimately involved with bodies, and in fact can question what we think we know of the body” (Probyn 2000, 3) writes Elspeth Probyn. This suggestion might be read as the possibility of the body to behave even when and where the mind is not fully aware. This is what I see in my relationship with food: an inner dialogue with my body and the bodies of others, from the individual to the context.

What are eating disorders?

The diffusion and the consequent description in medical terms of eating disorders has been registered between 1980s and 1990s in Western countries (Bordo 1993). Eating disorders are generally described as individual disease which affects all genders, but with higher rates among women than men. The last clinical official definition comes from the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5)* - the North-American classification for mental illness of 2013 used internationally - where it is estimated that they “affect several million people at any given time, most often women between the ages of 12 and 35” (DSM-5 2013).

Eating disorders are described as an illness that causes serious and profound changes in eating behavior and they are characterized by obsessive thoughts on food, shape and weight of the body. They are considered abnormal eating habits which may cause damage to health (American Psychological Association - APA 2007). The famed and criticized DSM provides this official definition: “Eating disorders are illnesses in which the people experience severe disturbances in their eating behaviors and related thoughts and emotions” (DSM-5 2013). According to this idea, these kinds of diseases are related to concepts such as vulnerability, pain, suffering, loss of control, and emotions as shame and guilt. Again, the DSM states: “In many cases, eating disorders occur together with other psychiatric disorders like anxiety, panic, obsessive compulsive disorder and alcohol and drug abuse problems” (DSM-5 2013). Causes enumerated are many, such as genetic, psychological, behavioural, and social. About their origin, we can read: “New evidence suggests that heredity may play a part in why certain people develop eating disorders, but these disorders also afflict many people who have no prior family history” (DSM-5 2013). The treatment suggested addresses both the emotional and physical symptoms of these diseases.

The interpretation of eating disorders has been medical and psychological for a long time. As feminist scholar Susan Bordo has shown, the first conceptualizations of eating disorders were enmeshed in a clinical perspective, while the social, cultural and also the gendered points of view were not much addressed. In this regard, she writes: “in the clinical literature on eating disorders, the task of description, classification, and elaboration of «pathology» has driven virtually all research” (Bordo 1993, 49). Jovanovski also underlines the minimization of the sociocultural backdrop and the focus on the individual, to the extent that the symptoms of these disorders may be reinforced (Jovanovski 2017). In her work *Unbearable Weight* from the early 90s, Susan Bordo

finally positions eating disorders culturally and historically in advanced industrial societies, suggesting a clear parallelism with hysteria, as another disease developed by women according to their specific socio-cultural position (Bordo 1993). Her commitment has been so important because as Jovanovski underlines “iconic feminist writers on women’s eating behaviour have been responsible for encouraging women to politicise their disordered eating patterns rather than perceive them as shameful, personal activities” (Jovanovski 2017, 139). As a matter of fact, it is only with the feminist and cultural paradigm in the second half of the twentieth century that “the role of culture and especially of gender as primary and productive rather than triggering or contributory” (Bordo 1993, 54) has been established. Moreover, it has been “cast into doubt the designations of anorexia and bulimia as psychopathology, emphasizing instead the learned, addictive dimension of the disorders” (Bordo 1993, 54) and this has had its contributions also in terms of “reassignment, to social causes, of factors viewed in the standard medical model as pertaining to individual dysfunction” (Bordo 1993, 54). We can say that after years of a univocal perspective, several factors and influences on eating disorders were brought out. Thus, culture has been pointed, finally.

In my personal path, influenced by the surrounding media body imaginary, I have started to concern steeper weight and body shape. This has become one of the strongest values to be pursued to the extent of developing what has been defined in medical terms ‘eating disorder’, more specifically I have suffered by ‘binge eating episodes’. The images I was exposed through to television and advertisements about body and food created this specific pattern of discipline and transgression of boundaries, control and pleasure.

The possibility of affecting both imagination and lifestyle is what Sandra Puccini, Italian anthropologist, identifies such as the power of images. In her analysis about Italian television, she writes how the adolescents of the 80s:

With their need of identification (as all generations), were instead faced with a sort of standardised and immobile aesthetic prototype (which rarely corresponded to the features that the mirror referred to each of them) and which, moreover, contrasted [...] both with reality and with other models that were proposed by the mass media, albeit in a less incisive way (Puccini 2009, 11)⁶.

⁶ Own translation.

As several scholars (Bordo, 1993, Jovanovski 2017) show in their analysis, there are specific gendered discourses on body, food and eating to which we are subjected that “reinforce body-policing cultural narratives aimed at women” (Jovanovski 2017, 1). Assuming this feminist perspective on the socio-cultural context - again in terms of food and body depictions in media messages - eating disorders emerge as a possible and extreme reaction to this exposure. It is possible to recognize and state that not only who is diagnosed with these kinds of disorders experiences a complex and conflicted relationship with the body through food, rather I dare to say that this has almost become a peculiarity of living in a body as belonging to a specific gender.

If in *Unbearable Weight* the main focus was the body, with *Digesting Femininities* by Natalie Jovanovski food discourses in the form of diet books, cookbooks and iconic feminist texts are also examined. The researcher highlights how “these seemingly conflicting texts have both marketed and offered women a smorgasbord of food femininities to choose from, and left them with the paralysing task of being a responsible, knowledgeable and empowered consumer in a cultural landscape that produces often harmful and conflicting messages” (Jovanovski 2017, 5). The confusion - which especially the youngest might experience - is related to the idea of eating healthy food, but also do not miss the opportunity of enjoyment eating together in a festive occasion. In this sense, I personally deem eating disorders as a possible answer to the different and also contradictory messages addressed to women, which combine pressures and expectations both on bodies and food. More specifically, they could be read as a reworking of messages in order to write on bodies a different tale.

A discipline over the body

As stated above, official definitions of eating disorders have their core in the medical perspective, the one which has owned for long time the power to name and describe the female body (Duden 1994) and which still has. More specifically, it is since the seventeenth century that science has made the rules on the body and on what has been called its disorders, suggesting a specific and single entry point on them. “This proprietorship has required that the body’s meanings

be utterly transparent and accessible to the qualified specialist (aided by the appropriate methodology and technology) and utterly opaque to the patient herself” (Bordo 1993, 64). Instead of being subject, bodies become objects to be inspected and studied.

The instrument of media in this discourse is fundamental in order not only to expropriate the body from its subjectivity but moreover to spread a specific discipline on it. According to media advertisements, there is a proper way to eat based on gender. Dieting is there to remind us. Therefore, to transgress this pattern is read as deviance from the norm. Naming bulimia, anorexia, binge eating, and obesity, as ‘eating disorders’ we directly taste a negative connotation of a wrong practice that has to be fixed. In a normative path, if something goes off the rails, scientists and doctors are those called to fix it.

As Bordo states:

Most women in our culture, then, are “disordered” when it comes to issues of self worth, self entitlement, self-nourishment, and comfort with their own bodies; eating disorders, far from being “bizarre” and anomalous, are utterly continuous with a dominant element of the experience of being female in this culture (Bordo 1993, 56).

The act of naming a practice is bound to the definition of an identity, in this case. When someone is named according to its gender, for instance, there are specific norms, boundaries and expectations with respect to its behavior. The same might be observed in the case of food. To be considered a proper female subject there are specific food behaviors and eating practices to be taken into account; the alternative is to be sick, outside the norm, with a disease.

At the base of this kind of disease there is our relationship with body through food. Food is actually the first and the easy way out to norm the body - as the material part of the self - and discipline it. Not by chance, diet has been read as a form of control on the body and more specifically as a clear instrument of body-policing on women. In my diaries, the recurring of the term ‘control’ is indicative, by means of the research of rules. On the 16th of June 2006 I wrote: *I look for rules with which be in control of myself to reach perfection. But does perfection exist? Could exist another me?* Continuing, on the 22nd of September, I wrote: *Rules. Rules? Or maybe it is only commitment what I have to aim at? Only some kilos of commitment and then I will be free from the chains that bound me. I can do it.*

Using Foucault's theories on power, dieting might be considered a kind of self-surveillance, a form of internalized control (Bordo 1993). The disciplinary kind of power described by the French author is typical of the Modern age and could be described as underhanded. Indeed, the fact that this power is no longer a property in the hand of a specific reigning authority but instead internalized by the subjects and shared as a dynamic network is a huge shift. In this second case, dominance could be imagined as a flow between elements in the space, able to affect time, desire and embodiment simultaneously. If applied to body images and their regulation, this concept helps to understand the degree of internalization that domination could reach in its various forms. We can read thus the patriarchal oppression as the disciplinary regime inscribed on women's body (Foucault in Bordo 1993).

This 'technology of power', as defined by Foucault, is related to the idea of 'panopticon', a prison designed in 1791 by Jeremy Bentham. The circular structure of the building allows a single man, the prison guard, to observe and control the detainees all at once. The awareness to be potentially always seen, motivates the prisoners to behave in a certain way. The idea of Bentham was applicable not only to prisons but to all kind of institutions as school, hospitals, asylums. It is interesting for me to notice how the rise of eating disorders in my experience begin at the end of high school, inside a building with the form of a panopticon. As a matter of fact, in the middle of the two-stored building, there was an enormous open space. There was not any inspection point, neither a watchman, but anyway the possibility to be always watched from the others was real. To be seen means also the possibility to appear in a certain way, and thus to be disciplined even if in a horizontal way. This is the concept of self-policing used also by Jovanovski, which is useful to enlighten how we are disciplining ourselves and each other because of this power that circulates among subjects. It is not a vertical negotiation, that is why it is less visible and perceptible (Foucault in Bordo 1993). Bordo matches the power of the gaze - internalized in self-surveillance by the subjects - with a gender perspective. More specifically, she states how femininity and masculinity are maintained individually as a result of the internalization of norms. The power of the gaze on the own self and on the other is extremely powerful (Bordo 1993), especially in this era dominated by images. This system has lead to a "politics of appearance" (Bordo 1993, XXIV) where power and pleasure coexist at the same time and space. In particular, the American scholar

explains how Foucauldian concepts on power have been fundamental in her analysis on dieting and eating disorders “as arising out of and reproducing normative feminine practices of our culture, practices which train the female body in docility and obedience to cultural demands while at the same time being experienced in terms of power and control” (Bordo 1993, XXIV). With her work, the author has claimed for a more balanced perspective and recognition of the causes of specific gendered disorders.

The aesthetic dominion summed with the learned tameness drives the subject to regulate itself, in this case with the decision to start a diet. As often happened, it is no coincidence that dieting to lose weight triggers the incidence of eating disorders, as I have personally experienced. For subjects who suffer from this disease or who are obsessed with their weight, the thought of food is a mental prison. It occupies all the space in mind, it does not set free but instead it makes you feel in chains. On May 2006 I wrote in this respect: *maybe slowly, I could establish a better relationship with food, and stop to nervously stuff myself and then want to puke. I would like to stop thinking about food constantly, to the effects that it has on me but just eat when it's time and stop being obsessed as I have done so far.* It can be observed how both the thought of food and the one of diet are constantly present in a continuous dialogue between body and mind. Diet is a regime of control on the body which is reflected in the mind. Not by chance, the mechanism of dieting and hunger attacks is a never-ending vicious circle. Some months after, in August, I reported: *food is a serious issue now, I have no doubts. [...] I move from one extreme to another... from an undressed salad to a breakfast for three days.* Being involved in this never-ending process is a condition of mental slavery. Who suffers from eating disorders feels the need to be freed from the thought of food. To this effect, disciplinary forms as diets are a system of control. I wrote on the 30th of November 2008: *fuck, it's been about four years since I raped my mind every day thinking about what I don't have to do to lose weight [...]. It is time for me to stop with these weekends stuffing me with screens and shit instead of living.* This might be linked to Deleuze and Guattari's concept of macro and micropolitics (*A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, 1980). The division between sexes read as a macropolitic by the two authors disciplines the female bodies in terms of shape and weight, that is performativity. The binge eating episode, in this case, might be read as a micropolitic act, a body gateway from a binary containment, even though apparently a self-destructive act.

Craving (for)

What comes out of rereading my personal diaries is the attempt to control through food the body, which is considered as excessive in its desire, pleasure, emotions. In the meanwhile, the sense of control is related to satisfaction and achievement in life. Not by chance, as Bordo enlightens “when the regulation of desire becomes especially problematic (as it is in advanced consumer cultures), women and their bodies will pass the greatest symbolic and material toll” (Bordo 1993, 259). *If I lose weight I could solve this mess?* I was writing on the 18th of April 2008. Reading my inner self as chaos I was trying to contain it through the discipline of the material part of myself. Jovanovski describes dieting as “a way of divorcing women from their appetites, reflecting a form of tacit disciplinary control over women’s bodies that leads to an ongoing state of self-policing behaviours and even psychopathology” (Jovanovski 2017, 33). This continuous discipline over the body is exercised in order to silenced inner cravings and to the point where the subject loses control instead of having it. But “the constant attempt to capture desire by the dramatizations of capital seems to us to be a failure” (Virgili 2018, 92) as reported in “If I was a rich girl” (2018) by the feminist philosopher. Sexed bodies, indeed, resist to discipline, to heteronormativity (Virgili 2018), and to the normative framing of food, I would add.

As deduced by many descriptions of women who have suffered from bulimia or binge eating disorders, the course of the illness is often the same: diet, hunger pangs, then a more strict diet, more intense hunger pangs, and then vomit, use of laxatives, drugs to reduce appetite or weight gain (Göckel 1994). On the 9th of February 2006, I reported: *I fight again with food. I lose control of myself and I swallow everything I find, even without feeling the taste. In these moments I scare myself but I cannot stop, in the meantime. And after, this sense of disgust toward my body comes back.*

When someone starts a diet and avoids certain types of foods to achieve the perfect image of the body, the one that has been taught, what happens to the appetite (for)? What represents the food desired but avoided? The feminist philosopher Rosi Braidotti writes how “the *topos* of woman as a sign of abnormality, and therefore of difference as a mark of inferiority, remained a constant in

Western scientific discourse” (Braidotti 2011, 79). Interestingly, the author notices how within the binary system, monsters as female subjects, are figures of “devalued difference” (Braidotti 2011, 80), in other words, they allow the maintenance of the normative system. What hides female monstrosity? According to Patricia MacCormack, expert in European horror cinema and queer theory, “female desire can create monsters that [...] offer enveloping and unfurling configurations of pleasure beyond phallogocentrism” (MacCormack 2013, 226).

If we go back to the body/food discourse, considering the practice of dieting in relation to the anorectic body, we can notice how the sense of hunger is considered a symptom of a dangerous part of the self which has to get under control. This alien side of the self has on one side the meaning of refusal for traditional female roles, and on the other fear of the archetypal association with the feminine, such as the “voracious hungers and sexual insatiability” (Bordo 1993, 154), as already seen in the first chapter.

It happens that we dismiss inner desire because it is read as inadmissible by the society, we force ourselves into perfect fake cages. We stress ourselves to the extent of being unable to say what we want and desire. In the case of eating disorders, the categorical imperative, which has the priority on all desires, is to embody the aesthetic that the society requires from us. Examining Western religious and philosophical traditions, as shown in the first chapter of this work, male and female concepts bring with them often opposite connotations. For instance, “the capacity for self-management is decisively coded as male” (Bordo 1993, 205), as we have observed in the case of the commercials concerning mastery. On the other side, what are denominated ‘bodily spontaneities’ as hunger, sexuality and emotions are typical of female behaviour and considered in need of containment (Bordo 1993). More specifically “women’s desires are but their very nature excessive, irrational, threatening to erupt and challenge the patriarchal order” (Bordo 1993, 206). This menace is interiorized by female subjects - and not only -, to the extent of forcing themselves and their inner desires in other directions, violating their own impulse. If the male subject receives a positive message of capacity of self-control and therefore he considers himself able to enjoy pleasure, the same might not be said for the female subject. The widespread self-policing practices among women are proof of the fact, and the incidence of eating disorders is also related to this mechanism.

Eating disorders as body (re)action

Eating disorders are forms of relations with food. The social and cultural context affects these relations, therefore the kind of reaction may be very diverse. The possibility to be generative in the response, in the sense of acting in a collective vision, socially-oriented, creatively, in a connective and responsible manner, constitutes the capability to impact with a constructive approach in the same relationship. The disciplinary form of power discussed by Foucault leave spaces to build alternatives, too. Looking again at Bordo's perspective on his theories, she writes how "power relations are never seamless but are always spawning new forms of culture and subjectivity, new opportunities for transformation. Where there is power [...] there is also resistance" (Bordo 1993, XXIV).

Notwithstanding a repetitive claim between feminist scholars on eating disorders as an embodied kind of protest against a regime of control, Bordo is critical in this regard. Even if she agrees on the "unconscious, inchoate and counterproductive" (Bordo 1993, 175) side of the protest, "without an effective language, voice, or politics" (Bordo 1993, 175), she states how it is a protest nonetheless. But her concern is more about the danger, the isolation and the real threat of this practice on the body itself. That is why the author distances herself from this idea, because it is not "a conscious politics nor, indeed, does it reflect any social or political understanding at all" (Bordo 1993, 158). Moreover, the effects have serious damages on the body who pursue the 'protest'.

Even if it is not the case of a fully aware rebellion, I personally recognize in eating disorders a first and strong step against a system of control and discipline on the body. The absence of choice reported in my diary on August 2006, and the perception of a body able to behave in a separated way from the mind are clues in this direction:

I have a problem that I cannot control anymore. It is starting to worry me, because if before it was a choice, it is not anymore. Now it is the loss of control of myself in front of food. Now, my body and my mouth decide to binge and eat everything is in front of me without even tasting it, but just for the sake of filling my mouth and chew. And then I look in the mirror and all I feel is disgust for myself.

The body reacts in this sense, even if the mind is not able to convey in words and translate it in political terms. Of course, it is still related to the lack of control and the bad feeling of disgust in

the end. Jovanovski connects this theory to the consumer culture and the previous concept of desire. “The social body of consumer culture in order to demonstrate how the ‘correct’ management of desire in that culture, [...] inevitably produces an unstable bulimic personality type as its norm” (Jovanovski 2017, 155-156). As also Bordo states “the axis of consumption/production is gender-overlaid [...] by the hierarchical dualism that constructs a dangerous, appetitive, bodily «female principle» in opposition to a masterful «male» will” (Bordo 1993, 211-212). In this respect, binge eating episodes are more than ever acts of rebellions against a specific disciplinary cultural system. The body - forced in a dieting daily routine - reaches the point where the rebellion takes place and eating everything is a way to embrace all has been considered untouchable. The body goes further, beyond the recognition of its own desire, willing to have all that is prohibited. As Jovanovski states, “these images of unwanted bulges and erupting stomachs [...] are a metaphor for anxiety about internal processes out of control uncontained desire, unrestrained hunger, uncontrolled impulse (Jovanovski 2017, 157). This is also what emerges in the analysis made by Murray about the fat female body which represents an offense and a danger toward the society of control (Murray 2008). This specific body threatens today's aesthetics of society. Indeed, Murray writes: “what underpins the current ‘panic’ over ‘obesity’ in contemporary Western culture is a moral anxiety about the preservation of fixed gender identities and normative female sexuality and embodiment” (Murray, 3). Another comment from a psychological perspective comes from the voice of Renate Göckel, specialized in the treatment of eating disorders:

Eating and throwing up secretly can be compared to an underground rebellion. With a difference: the rebel in politics identifies itself with its own activities and it finds fair its own actions. The woman who suffers from hunger attacks instead blames herself and she does not approve at all what she does. Only a part of her rebelling, while the other trying to adapt (Göckel 1994, 15).⁷

In interpreting eating disorders as a body-language protest, my aim is not to romanticize the issue. I am aware, as I have first-hand experienced eating disorders, of the sufferings and confusion related to this kind of event. But as Bordo states “the «practical» body is no brute biological or material entity. It, too, is a culturally mediated form; its activities are subject to interpretation and

⁷ Own translation.

description” (Bordo 1993, 181). That is why I read eating disorders as a form of reaction of the body in so far as part of the self, in contrast to the tradition of cartesian division between body and soul, mind and body, materiality and thought (Bordo, 1993). Indeed, “the intelligible body and the useful body are two arenas of the same discourse; they often mirror and support each other” (Bordo 1993, 181).

In this regard, reflecting on the opposition between the generative and the destructive aspects of eating disorders we can observe how the apparent destructive strength of these disorders may hide another side of the coin. Indeed, the incidence of eating disorders could lead the subject to destruction paving the way to a generative response. In reading binge eating episodes which I have suffered as a form of reaction to the diet discipline, the body moves forward. Furthermore, I look at this act as a starting political statement of the body. This first step needs other work on it, without any doubt, but still is a silent response of the body from a disciplinary cage it experiences.

To narrow my point of view, I look again at *The Fat Female Body* by Samantha Murray where the possibility to stop consuming and embracing this current culture is envisioned as a way to imagine and craft alternatives (Murray 2008). We are our bodies and our bodies are lands to decolonize, and where it is possible to challenge, modify, reshape new boundaries. Being aware and critical about the representations that surround us, where the way to success is depicted in terms of an idealized physical weight or shape, is the key, I claim. The perpetual self-improvement required by society about our bodies is an enclosure which distracts us from the possibility to explore and tie us to the objective of productivity, of being successful, and to avoid failure. The reaction embodied in eating disorders could address exactly this form of power, as the first draft of rebellion. In June 2006, I wrote:

Ew! I have stuffed myself for the umpteenth time. I have been swallowing food all afternoon without even recognizing the taste. The only thing that matters is to fill up and even when I am full I go on eating. And now I feel everything on the pit of the stomach which is coming up... Why? What's wrong? Why problems mistreat me in this way? I want to vomit.

From this apparent destructive act of the body, an alternative rewriting of the relationship between bodies and food could be initiated and show its generativity. Binge eating episodes were in my personal experience a deep and painful open to the political, in the search for an alternative

‘carnal aesthetic’ far from mainstream ideology. The 3rd of January 2009, I reported in my diary: *I would like to sit at a table with other people and pull out something, creativity, being human beings without the need to check our wallets.* How can we sit at the table in alternative ways? In the next part of this thesis I look at the subsequent experiences I faced, especially inside professional kitchens. Coming back to the materiality of food, I have realized how there is no division between mind and body, purity and contamination, perfection and imperfection. Cooking in the kitchen, a new scenario was shown to my senses.

Chapter 3

Inhabiting the kitchen of the margins

Where will this soft body that belongs to me end up, where will it land, in which ports, with which flavours and smells will I fill my roots, where will I feel at home? (Dairy, 29 May 2017).

Open the kitchen's door

In this era of food porn, food has become a fetish. The empire of images has profoundly changed our relationship with this fascinating everyday element, involving our body as well. That is why, at any latitude, what interests me is the way we eat, it is the relationship between bodies and food which is at the core of this research.

In this last chapter, looking at the anthropology of food, at the politics of food, and food studies, I want to focus on the intriguing connection between the practice of food manipulation and the rituals around it. Starting from my experience as an eater, I have decided to investigate how food is treated looking inside various kitchens, both home cooking and professional. I analyze how food is a material world which we can shape and play with. Moreover, what kind of meaning this practice might bring? Foods are surrounded by many collective and cultural messages to the extent that we can consider eating as a dialogue in itself. This dialogue affects our way of relating to it and the others. As Christina Ceisel, expert in critical cultural studies, states in her recent article, “food is communicative, already layered with political, social, economic, and ethnic meanings” (Ceisel 2018, 5). Food, in the end, is a material world with which we come in contact, modify, process, and finally introduce within ourselves. If food is a language, my aim is to analyse how and what we communicate through eating. I look again at the illuminating work *Carnal Appetites*, when the author writes:

I want to plunder the visceral, the gut levels revealed by that most boring and fascinating of topics: food and eating. In turn, I want to think about what bodies are and do when they eat. To

take up the terms with which I started, eating both confirms what and who we are, to ourselves and to others, and can reveal new ways of thinking about those relations. To take the most basic of facts: food goes in, and then, broken down, it comes out of the body, and every time this happens our bodies are affected. While in the usual course of things we may not dwell upon this process, that basic ingestion forces us to think of our bodies as complex assemblages connected to a wide range of other assemblages (Probyn 2000, 14).

In this last chapter, I want to reflect on the way we eat and how we deal with food in relation to our position in society. In this sense, how we eat could be considered an interesting lens to adopt in the analysis not only of different subjectivities but moreover in the way we relate to culture. Eating, we can eventually probing and challenging culture, especially from a gender perspective. Citing again Probyn “I have found that asking people to talk about their eating habits leads into the most intimate of subjects” (Probyn 2000, 20). That is the reason why the way, what and how we eat is strictly connected to identities, to how we conceive the world and how we might shape it.

As previously examined, bodies who eat are shown in specific gendered ways in the mainstream media. The projections made on them as blinding lights create shadows, expectations, performative identities. Eating disorders, to that effect, are a shadow work, this kind of work intense and feverish, sometimes as conspicuous as inconclusive. But this shadow work could be taken further. What is considered an eating disorder might enter in the kitchen and play a new role. Here, my aim is to represent the relationship between gendered body and food in a differently way, challenging the mainstream narrative. Opening the door of the kitchen and beholding the possibilities of food, I want to give it a material form in a generative way, still following Lewis’s suggestion.

A genealogy of eating and food practices

Slowly binge eating episodes disappeared from my daily routine. Then, I started to establish with food an alternative relationship. I tried to care about myself differently, eating no matter what, listening to my inner cravings and just following them, losing weight and then gaining it and trying to love my body in its new shape no matter which could be. I have mapped the new stretch marks on my skin, abandoning the policing on my body’s geography and giving freedom of movement on

my land. No boundaries, no rules, no control. I have been through different stages, looking once more for some kind of golden rule in dealing with my body by way of food and then started to be scared again of my attachment to discipline. I have searched for clues about my digestive problems, I have been diagnosed with food intolerance to wheat, the cornerstone of my binge eating episodes, as it was what I mainly ate during the blowouts in the form of cookies. I dug up with psychotherapy and theatre, putting them into dialogue. I was trying subconsciously to forget about my body and devote myself to other people's bodies. I started to work with the others, migrants and women, diving the nose into new smells and trying to mix my smell with others. I left the private room full of shame, tears and written words, swapping it with days full of exchanges, started at dawn and ended with the dark. I listened to the charming sounds of Moroccan language spoken by the solidarity group of women seeking their balance in a new country. I discovered the intense one-plate dishes from West Africa, enjoying to eat with the hands. I relied on macrobiotics, homeopathy, iridology, plantar reflexology, Western science and then I gave up everything once again. I started to enjoy again the pleasure of cooking for someone else. I have travelled unknown streets of the city, going through doors I was not even able to see before, discovering informal kitchen ran inside private houses by migrant women. I drunk litres of *chai*⁸ and chewed goat stew in Kenya while listening to Maasai tales. I ate *bukë misri*⁹ and *qofte*¹⁰ sitting on a lawn among Albanian women and discussing with them about the female position in the 'land of the eagles'. I received all sorts of meal in their houses except for *raki*¹¹, a strong alcoholic drink mainly for men in the North of the country. I came back to my paternal origins in Bologna studying Gender Studies, eating *ciccioli*¹² and *tortellini*¹³. In the Netherlands, I discovered that you can eat bread and peanut butter while

⁸ Traditional drink from Kenya, made with cow milk, tea and spices such as ginger.

⁹ Bread made with corn flour.

¹⁰ Meatballs.

¹¹ Schnapps from Balkan countries.

¹² Poor sausage of peasant origin made from pig waste.

¹³ Filled egg pasta.

cycling; while sharing intense Brazilian, Colombian, Greek cooking sessions with my queer allies in Amsterdam and sometimes craving my mother's food in Turin.

And with all these encounters I realized how food is a clot of tales, memories, emotions, forecasts which 'sit down with' the body at a table to unravel some needs and always covering and discovering something else. Often it is related to a specific place, not only in terms of geographical location but more as an inhabited house. Still, who is often in charge of the meal is identifiable as female. Silvia Federici writes:

If the house is the *oikos* on which the economy is built, then it is women, historically the house workers and house prisoners, who must take the initiative to reclaim the house as a center of collective life, one traversed by multiple people and forms of cooperation, providing safety without isolation and fixation, allowing for the sharing and circulation of community possessions, and, above all, providing the foundation for collective forms of reproduction (Federici 2010, 8).

Indeed, in my experience, I have mostly observed female presences inside the kitchen. Care work, even in the Western world, is still women's prerogative (Federici 2012). This is the consequence of the fact that the neoliberal system is not bearable in its fullest expression. Not by chance, it relies on the commons:

For years, part of the capitalist international establishment has been promoting a softer model of privatization, appealing to the principle of the commons as a remedy to the neo-liberal attempt to submit all economic relations to the dictate of the market. It is realized that, carried to an extreme, the logic of the market becomes counterproductive even from the viewpoint of capital accumulation, precluding the cooperation necessary for an efficient system of production (Caffentzis, Federici 2013, 97).

In particular, the accumulation of capital depends on labour and resources external to the market, like the female unpaid domestic work (Federici 2010). How to challenge this system? What happens when these presences occupy the kitchen and claim for a wage? If housework has been "imposed on women and transformed in a natural attribute of our female physique and personality, an internal need, an aspiration" (Federici 2012, 16), what else has happened to women's body? How this idea has been internalized and what kind of consequences does it have? If I have identified in eating disorder a first consequence and reaction of this imposition, "the problem then becomes how to bring this struggle out of the kitchen and the bedroom an into the street" (Federici 2012, 18). I consider the kitchen an exemplar space to inquire into how the relationship with food might be

challenged. As Arlene Voski Avakian and Barbara Haber have shown in their edition of *Feminist Food Studies*: “Studying the relationship between women and food can help us to understand how women reproduce, resist, and rebel against gender constructions as they are practiced and contested in various sites, as well as illuminate the contexts in which these struggles are located” (Voski Avakian, Haber 2005, 2). That is why I have decided to take a look inside the kitchen, on one hand, to confront the mainstream representation that requires women inside the house kitchen and not as professionals and, on the other hand, to be able to analyze how the practices inside this space might be considered a challenge itself to the capitalist system.

The manipulation of food in professional kitchens

Maybe I just want to change the rhythm. Doing practical things. Stop to bind only the head and make myself ill through overthinking. Practise the practice. Tirelessly. Doing something which is not important for the world but for my iridescent body (Diary, February 2019).

Wishing to write about the act of eating, I have started to work with food in professional kitchens while I was studying in the Netherlands. Working in three different places, I have been able to observe different styles of work and approaches to food. My methodology could be considered in between autoethnography and participant observation. Because, even though I declared during the job interviews and later with my colleagues that I was interested in working with food because of my thesis, the idea has taken a more clear shape during work experiences themselves. Talking with co-workers, taking notes, and comparing the experiences, a rich scenario has formed before my eyes. I was able to observe how food and its preparation is shaped according to different socio-cultural-economic approaches.

I will refer to three working experiences, in three different professional cooking environments. The first one, hereinafter H. (April-May 2019), it was a restaurant which serves Middle Eastern cuisine. I was hired as a dishwasher, hoping also to learn from cook colleagues. The second experience, started in May 2019, was in a catering service ran by three women with an

artistic background in the North of Amsterdam, B. hereinafter. The third experience was as handyman - waitress, dishwasher, kitchen assistant - in a restaurant which serves African cuisine in the centre of Amsterdam, hereinafter K. I worked there only once, in the middle of June. This third opportunity has been useful during the research process especially towards the concept of time and pressure, from the professional kitchen world to a broader capitalist society. I will use initials for the colleagues which I had the opportunity to work with, as well.

Management of space

3 April 2019

On my first day at the H. restaurant the manager explained to me how I should conduct my workstation independently and introduced me to the colleagues. I am in charge of washing dishes and if there is free time, I can learn from the cooks. I receive dishes both from the cooks and waiters. The waiters leave the plates empty or still with leftovers, according to the amount of work they have at that moment. I am in charge of collecting and eventually throw away the leftovers, then first clean dishes to insert them in the dishwashing machine. When the washing is finished, I have to dry the dishes with a cloth and store them in the appropriate places. The kitchen is open and not very big, often we run into each other. There are five cooks and four dishwashers and usually two cooks and one dishwasher for each shift.

21 May 2019

On the first day in B. catering, they taught me the basics of managing the cook's space. We start cleaning the bench, I always have a dump rug which has to be under the chopping board to make it stable. I cut different vegetables in several ways. S. has given me tips on how to hold the knife and move the hand and the wrist. I learn practicing. With E. I tried to make vegetable dumplings but there was no time to do them calmly, so I have spread egg yolks on them and sprinkled them with sesame seeds. Even if I am without experience and they have to explain me everything, I feel welcome. There is not a specific workstation for each, but we move according to the task and the space available.

How space might be occupied and shared says a lot of those who inhabit it, and that is precisely what firstly caught my attention comparing the two first working experiences. If in H. I have noticed a clear distinction of roles and therefore of the spaces granted, that is what is clearly differently managed in the catering. Indeed, the lack of specific spaces where I should be and work is related to the idea that there are no specific tasks for each one but everybody shares the same duties.

In B., I relate my presence in the kitchen as not focused on a specific role because of the way knowledge is considered. Even if my lack of experience was a given, the three women were able to dare by welcoming me into their space as a peer. Since the first job interview, they declare how they were not looking for a dishwasher because they prefer to share the same tasks and responsibilities inside the workplace.

Likewise, the colleagues in the H. restaurant, regarding my will to learn how to cook in a professional space, used to tell me that I should present myself as a cook instead of declaring that I was without experience in this field. The only way to learn is to practice, they told me. Alice Neville, food editor writes about it:

Perhaps it stems from the fact that men tend to be more confident in their abilities than women, who often doubt themselves more — the whole ‘imposter syndrome’ thing. As a food writer who’s fairly obsessed with a good brew, I have often fancied delving more into beer writing, but I’m held back by a fear I’d be sprung for not knowing what I’m on about (Neville 2018).

My lack of knowledge indeed is something that in B. they decided not to take into consideration but not because of a naive approach. As they told me thereafter, they considered having me in the kitchen as an exchange of approaches to food and to its preparation. What was relevant for them was the personal disposition towards learning. I consider their style feminist because there is no claim about knowledge and teaching, but rather an accompaniment in a continuous learning process. They prefer to introduce me to a dish giving me the freedom to manage it, as they do according to the moment, their taste, and their will. Nothing which is cooked is the same inside B. kitchen. Even if the same happens in H. restaurant the claim is to be able to have always the same safe offer for customers.

Time

13 April 2019

The dishwasher broke down today. It was strenuous to wash everything by hand, especially in terms of time. I initially noticed little confidence when I told the boss that something was not working well. Then, when it was also the fellow cooks who reported it, it was taken seriously. But beyond that, it was the rhythm of the restaurant the most difficult part. Time in the restaurant does not just follow the clock, you have to deal also with customer flows and preparation times of foods. It is a kind of contradiction which does not allow for shortcuts. The production has to be fast and organized, there is no much time and space for errors. Even when something goes wrong - as today - the rhythm of production must not be broken. The catering service requires speed and precision. Not by chance, all the cooks smoke. I am the only one which does not, and today S. told me kidding that I should start smoking if I want to take a break.

20 June 2019

S. asked me to boil some green peas, some of them 'al dente', others not. Even if I wanted to rely on the clock she told me not to do it. She explained to me that I have to taste, to rely on my senses instead of looking at the time.

No one smokes among the colleagues in B. catering. The breaks serve to discuss the organization, to manage the work, the emails, the requests, to walk the dog, to cuddle the cat, to have a coffee. We have about half an hour break for lunch when we usually eat together sitting at the table. We eat leftovers or one between us cook something quick. At the end of the service, we often share a beer altogether.

15 June 2019

Yesterday I worked in this little restaurant managed by an Ethiopian woman who has been living in the Netherlands for 20 years. At the beginning of the shift, we were only the two of us and she was preparing the food for the kitchen. She was cooking, smoking a joint and talking with me in

the meanwhile. The waitress came 30 minutes late but S. has insisted on paying the whole shift. I guess because she does not count time as we are used to.

Customer turnout has been high all night and I have been concerned about waiting time. Instead, S. was calmly cooking inside the kitchen, giving to each dish its own time to get ready, no matter how long it could take. Two men came and asked to eat in 45 minutes. She said no. Then, she added: where is your pleasure and my pleasure this way? No one enjoys anything.

Time is fundamental in the kitchen, but it might follow very different kinds of rhythm. H. is a restaurant which is linked to a specific space and time that sometimes seems to overlap because of the management of the kitchen to which is added the flow of clients. B. is a catering where different timing alternates. Some days the time in the kitchen is extended, you can experiment and take care of each course. Some other times you need to rush, but the shared responsibility makes you more aware and active participant of the mission. Space is another fundamental variable. By moving through space, you move the food in the meanwhile. Finally, I perceived a different timing in K. restaurant which seems to follow the owner's body and mind. She is not interested in the succession of minutes and to how much money they can amount to. She cares about having a good time on both sides. In this sense, she is able to escape from the logic of capitalism and profit. Instead, if B. might be considered more fluid in the way it relates to time, H. is wholly enchained in the neoliberal ticking.

Food preparation

26 April 2019

Today we have shared a meal in H. restaurant among colleagues. As a matter of fact, each worker eats alone before, during or at the end of the shift, when it is possible to take a break. Friday is the day of experimentations not that much to challenge the menu of the restaurant but to share a meal and spend some time among colleagues. It is not always possible because of the amount of work, the number of clients present in the restaurant and also depending on the will of the cooks to 'play with food'. Sometimes they are too overburdened with work and they just want to

take a break. When actions are always the same inside a little space, even if they are many and different between one and another, the kitchen becomes some kind of an assembly line where all you have to do is make the same gesture and set it in motion. That is why, I guess, there is not always the will to venture and prepare something different. Getting off the track requires mental commitment and moreover a certain serenity.

In H. restaurant the food is delicious and almost everyday customers pass by the open kitchen for a compliment. The food quality is good but there is no space for improvisation. Indeed, all the recipes are jealously guarded in a folder that every cook has to rely on. Standard is the rule, no exceptions are allowed.

I notice that not all cooks eat in the restaurant. One day I have asked two colleagues about that and they have replied that they do not like the food. It is interesting because of the fact that it is a restaurant of Middle-Eastern cuisine and both cooks are originally from this area, too. They explained to me that they are used to eat spicier and inside the restaurant most of the recipes are adapted in order to be marketable. The Dutch taste is not used to strong flavours, that is why they made them milder.

6 June 2019

The third day in B. catering. T. has asked me to do a sauce for children with tomatoes, carrots, onions, and white wine. I love the fact that whenever they are preparing they taste it and with a teaspoon they make it taste each other to listen to the other's feedback. They also involve me in that, asking me what I think, even if I am not a professional. Their way to relate to food is creative, they follow the taste pleasure and their ability to combine flavours. They experiment with tastes, they try colour combinations and warm cold contrast. They enjoy what they do.

Every day I go there is different. I never do the same thing, I always learn something new such as how to fry black tortilla. They teach me also to listen to food. Indeed, when something stops to make the noise while are you frying it, it is often ready.

Sometimes we create this 'assembly line' to make bitterballen¹⁴ or dumplings, for example. I am always the one who jams the assembly line.

¹⁴ Dutch meat-based snack, rolled into balls, breaded and and fried.

15 June 2019

The cook in K. restaurant does not have recipes, neither she changes them. Her way of cooking is part of her body knowledge. This is the food she used to cook in her home country and that is the way she prepares it. She follows her memory.

I perceived the work in H. as more solitary work. Each task is done individually, following the recipe, without sharing thoughts on it, neither perceptions. There is no involvement in the way they deal with food, they have to produce it as workers, to the extent that even eating together could be a burden to avoid sometimes. What does it mean to cook something that you do not like, that you do not even want to taste?

The B.'s approach in this sense is out of the ordinary. The shared commitment in regards to food is precious, faces the error, it includes it. All the senses are involved in the preparation process, that is the only rule. It is a common way to work, dividing responsibility. Food preparation might always change.

The last case in K. restaurant food is an ancient knowledge which is not marketable. There are no recipes to sell more or better or to challenge or experiment with new tastes. Food is a memory, is history, is a tradition. Food is the body's knowledge, you do not need to study it but doing it repeatedly you absorb the knowledge about it, as drinking a juice.

Intimacy

10 May 2019

Communication is fundamental inside the kitchen, therefore language is an ever-present element. But sometimes is just a sound, and with body and behaviors you can get even more, no matter about cultural differences. Language is used to communicate between colleagues in various ways. Some of the cooks are from Israel, others from Syria, and waiters come from all over the world. Suddenly, sometimes happens that between two of us a little island of intimacy is created, we

switch into another language and we have a bit of relief from English, also because of the open kitchen.

In H., the kitchen is an interesting observation point. There are no boundaries between the customer and the worker. People can pass by and see the work inside, how the food is processed to arrive on the plate, but also the rapid pace, the smoke, the sweat, the dirt, and the waste. In the meanwhile, the kitchen becomes a less intense space of intimacy between us as colleagues. We are in the spotlight, as in a showcase we have to perform therefore exchange thoughts and tales is not always possible.

But sometimes it is. One of my colleagues comes from Syria, and today we were talking about the refugee condition in Europe, nowadays so discussed in the news. He told me that, because of the war and various loss inside his family, unable to face depression and pain, he has started to use a lot of drugs. Talking also with other colleagues, I realized how the use of hard drugs is widespread inside professional kitchens. The heaviness of timetable, the pressing rhythm of the shifts and the free time often remaining at night are factors that lead to the use of cocaine especially, apparently the most widely used in this sector.

13 June 2019

Today I have spent some hours alone with a colleague in B., as it has happened the week before with another one. During the work, we always talk a lot. It is interesting this way of doing practical things together and in the meanwhile share thoughts about whatever. Using our hands, giving shape to materiality, barely touching each other or colliding between one move and the next. This is a lot. They are very curious about me and so do I in their regards. We told each other pieces of life and perspectives on it, on relationships and the pressures existing in Dutch and Italian society about them, our life in the past, my thesis project, their art projects, books and movies that we love, the political situation in our countries and Europe. They are direct and clear in their way to communicate. No frills, but that doesn't mean they don't appreciate.

When we are all together in the kitchen, energies are mixed and without knowing the language sometimes I feel lost, on another layer. Here, the main language is Dutch. I am the migrant, the one who broke into a local kitchen, the one who forces the group to speak in English.

Sometimes I am able to grasp meanings, even if they are not that clear. In my ear, Dutch has many unknown sounds. Sometimes they ask me sorry and they switch to English, sometimes not. Translation might be powerful and a burden in the meanwhile. You can give a new shape to your body or feeling broken and not able to show yourself as you want. But the body is always there before, during and after.

With the body we say a lot without the need to speak it out loud. The body always arrives first, in this sense language might be seen as a body's product. Language is a way to create bridges and boundaries, at the same time. Some messages travel without the need to use the tongue. This might be strongly perceived inside a kitchen, where other factors such as time, space, duties and roles play their part in this game of communication. Cooking is a body dance, a body's will to deal with other planets.

As noticed and discussed with colleagues, hard drugs are largely used in the world of kitchens. The unsustainable rhythms of production and efficiency required by the capitalist system lead to this. Not by chance, cocaine is one of the drugs which increase cognitive and motor performance.

Eating, drinking, moving, assuming drugs are also ways to experience the body, to feel it in a different way, to use all the senses and not only the mind. I believe that the use of the body is fundamental inside the kitchen and those who inhabit it want exactly to experience the whole body with different senses. That is why the possibility to make mistakes inside the kitchen, to encompass them is a way to challenge the neoliberalist request for perfection, accepting the body.

Food waste

7 April 2019

One of the waitress today told me that once she dared to tell a couple of customers that the food just ordered was a lot in terms of quantity. The couple reacted poorly to the observation and then realized at the end of the meal to have advanced a lot.

In H. the amount of food waste is a stunning aspect of the job. Daily, we produce huge garbage bags full of waste. People are used to ordering several plates, without considering their capability to eat everything. The palatability of the dishes is what drives consumption without awareness. We are not educated to be responsible about food, but just to pay and consume it. Some of the waitress save plates leftovers by clients, or pitas, the typical bread we serve that sometimes goes back to the kitchen, untouched. But still, the amount is huge.

23 June 2019

During a catering service for B. today, we created a 'plate assembly line'. Each one of us was in charge of a specific part of it. I had to put some leaves of salad on top of strangolapreti, a typical north-eastern Italian dish. Checking my task, E. told me to think big even with the salad, as if I had to build something with it. She has a background in theatrical design, indeed every time she has to plate up it seems that she is in front of a stage, trying to arrange the elements of the scene in the best possible way.

5 July 2109

Yesterday night during the service for B., S. told me that when she was working as a manager in a restaurant she always demanded the participation of all workers in cleaning dishes, even if there was one dishwasher in charge. As they told me since the first job interview that is the way they work in B., sharing tasks. They are aware of food waste, they try to eat them and share with waiters who eventually work with us, or to save and reuse them. But still, the waste is a lot.

Nowadays dishes are performance in restaurants. The plate has to be perfect when it leaves the kitchen, no drop or mark out of place is allowed. The dish is a showcase that is ready to be dismantled by its consumer. What remains is something we also have to deal with. Inside the kitchen you get your hands dirty, you have to deal with discards, then decide not to throw everything away but recover what you can is a clear choice. In the kitchen, you clean up what is left of it, which does not have to be seen. Our society asks us to be impeccable and if apparently we are, in the back we are dealing with the rest.

I would describe the workplaces observed - H. restaurant, B. catering, and K. restaurant - with different goals. H. is geared primarily toward economic gain, for this purpose the roles inside the kitchen are precisely defined and there is a clear hierarchy between them. The kitchen and the hall are managed separately. There is a continuous turnover in the restaurant due to several factors as hierarchy and pace of work. In B. catering, there are three cooks with years of professional experiences inside various restaurant kitchens, which have decided to venture working as freelancers, with the management of their own catering company. Their aim, in this case, is obviously as well economic but it also follows ethical values, which are shared between the three co-workers. There is no hierarchy between them but more a task sharing. The reason enumerated by them were many such as not wanting to work under the directions of others, abandoning the productive rhythms of food service, being able to devote oneself to one's passion which is not only that of the kitchen. Indeed, they are a visual artist, a theatre designer, a filmmaker and photographer. Welcoming me inside their studio they were doubting about my lack of experience but they decided to give me an opportunity. As previously said, they all share manual skills and developed organizational and economical ability. On a daily and practical basis, they show solidarity among each other, checking regularly their respective tasks and work. In K. kitchen I have had fewer opportunities to get a clear idea of the working dynamics. Here again, the economical goal is the driving force but there are many other cultural aspects which allow an alternative atmosphere.

Inside the kitchen, first of all there are bodies. The bodies of the women who work in B. are against expectations. They do not reflect female projections on shape and weight, on life pathways and performance. Rather, their bodies are fiercely strong and firm, they follow their cravings, they give material shape to their creativity. With their practical knowledge and sharing the commitment, they challenge a system ruled by money, aesthetics, success. They do not ask for help, they get what they want. Welcoming me inside their space of work, they even challenged it more, I guess. Their working style is generative in the sense that it creates affection and devotion, not only for them but for those with whom they collaborates, and those who taste and consume their food. Comparing the experience in H., bodies are forced to a precise shape, pace, movement. The less they introduce in

terms of novelty and creativity the better are considered. H. is based on a system which does not want to be called into question.

In B. I have noticed and experienced a certain care for. The three colleagues share an ethic which considers firstly people with their desires and requests, food with its origin and history, preparation with its timing and errors. Even though I observed tight work rhythms both in H. and B., I can add that in H. there was a certain tiredness of the workers which was not only physical but also mental, which I would relate to the lack of commitment. This is what I would define an alienated workplace, whose aim is mainly driven by capital. This kind of destructive system neither inspires passion, nor dedication. The will of the cooks to go away right after the shift and their search of alternative employments are clear signs of a system which is dominated by rules and does not leave free space of negotiation, care, imagination.

Christina Ceisel writes “While home cooking has been traditionally associated with women’s work, historically, chefs have been overwhelmingly male. As men have begun to cook at home more frequently, their interactions in the kitchen have had to be negotiated so as not to challenge their masculinity” (Ceisel 2018, 11). Thus, “the tedium of domestic work remains the domain of female hosts and home cooks, while male cooks are encouraged to think of cooking as a hobby, a means of self-improvement, or a competitive enterprise” (Ceisel 2018, 11). Then, what happens when women run the kitchen? Can women regain possession of a space, firstly considered domestic and then professional? With the female presence in professional kitchens, the idea of caring is turned around as when you cook something in a frying pan. There is the possibility to reverse a system of power, hierarchization, to mix up roles, to counteract economic time, to enhance the relationship rather than the product, to care about the commons.

Body as archive of food

The way we eat affects our bodies because we are our bodies. As Bordo has shown in her analysis, the cartesian division between mind and body has had and still has an impact on our thought as in the case of eating disorders, but the two sides are not separable in daily life (Bordo 1993). Furthermore, food “essentially dissolves most preconceived notions distinctions between

nature and culture, production and consumption, morals and markets, family and society, the individual and the collective, body and mind” (Lien in Ceisel 2018, 9). If we consider eating, we can observe how it is not a single action, rather it concentrates in itself a set of meanings mixed together.

The way we think about food, how we get it, with who we eat or if we eat alone, if we share what we have prepared or we make it in specific quantity, if we eat fasten or slow, if we listen to someone or to music or radio during the meal, if we talk while we eat or we watch tv, if we stay in silence in front of the plate, if we eat when we feel hungry or when “it is the time”, how we prepare it, if we follow a recipe or we try new combinations, if we are curious to experiment or we prefer to rely on our certainties, if we always finish the plate or we leave something in it, what we do with what remains, what we desire about food and what we really eat. There is our being in the world in the way we eat.

If in the past, following mass media representations, I was entrapped inside an individualistic way of look at myself - my body -, it is only focusing outside this cage that I found relief. I was considering my aesthetic as my ultimate performative identity. Even if in media the ruling scenario makes us believe that we can choose and achieve what we want according to our appearance, the reality is more complex and could not be shaped only by our subjectivity. Rather our identity is build up throughout relations. Personally, dealing with the materiality of food inside different kind of kitchens has constituted a further tool of inquiry into embodied relations with and through food.

When I was suffering from eating disorders, eating was a performance. By eating I was demonstrating who I was. Not by chance, I was dieting, trying to show I was in control of the situation and of my body. I was eating what the society was expecting from me as a young woman, daughter, sister, friend, student, worker, committed, responsible, able to manage her body and cravings. I was in a showcase, ready to be judged. That was what the neoliberal system taught me and, as an adolescent, I was more vulnerable to these messages. In his work Fisher cites Oliver James, with *The Selfish Capitalist*:

The Selfish Capitalist toxins that are most poisonous to well-being are the systematic encouragement of the ideas that material affluence is the key to fulfillment, that only the affluent winners and that access to the top is open to anyone willing to work hard enough,

regardless of their familial, ethnic or social background - if you do not succeed, there is only one person to blame (Oliver in Fisher 2009, 36).

After blaming myself for my inability to be successful in life in the way has been shown to me, I have started to question the capitalist requests. In this sense, challenge my way of eating was an important statement against an oppressive system. Deciding to work with food has embodied the next step of this process. “Food consumption is a site of resistance, both personally and as a means of building community” (Ceisel 2018, 13) writes Ceisel. My consumption of food has been through different stages. As shown in the previous chapter, eating disorders were an early form of reaction to the system. With the involvement in professional kitchens and by dealing with the materiality of food in an official and recognized space of production and consumption of it, I have undertaken a more conscious step in a critical direction. Moreover, taking into consideration the media and popular representations on gendered bodies - inside and outside the kitchen - is part of this critical perspective. Using Jovanovski words, food is “both a symbol of women’s subordination *and* resistance to gender stereotyping” (Jovanovski 2017, 8).

The involvement in professional kitchens as a worker has constituted a privileged point of view not only on the act of eating but to the whole landscape of food production. Indeed, our way of eating is a way to communicate according to the specific paradigm where we are embedded, which influences our daily choices. This has been analyzed in critical and cultural studies, as Ceisel explains:

Although food has always been symbolically important to the maintenance of social relations (Douglas, 1984), it has become increasingly central to communicating one’s personal identity. Neoliberalism’s emphasis on the individual, at the expense of the social, extends to the realm of individual choices. Critical/cultural studies scholars examine this shift in the conception of society, and the subsequent policing of bodies. Food studies scholars add to this work by examining how body-shaming and public health policies operate in tandem with the diet and food industries (Ceisel 2018, 11).

While eating we meet the bodies of others as well. Furthermore, through cooking I was inserted in a more intense dialogue with others, instead of disciplining and isolating myself. The resistance of my body to diet, translated in binge eating episodes was generative in this sense. Indeed, resistance is fertile. What I have considered for a long time a shameful parenthesis of my

path has turned out to be a critical ability. Which is the difference between a body on a diet whose desire for food is suffocated in order to obtain the perfect shape and weight and a body able to recognize its cravings for and which give them voice and shape? Food might be brought to the mouth, savored, chewed, digested; but it could also be desired, watched, smelled and then avoided. Food is the heritage our body processes, stores, collects in its material or imagined shape. In this sense, bodies could be considered as archives of food. Focusing on female subjects, Probyn writes: “women are hungry for other women [...] for sex, for chocolate, for politics, for remembering” (Probyn 2000, 79). Our cravings are real, they represent what is not granted to us as elements of a complex society. In this regard, dealing with the materiality of food might be considered a way to be critical, to regain inaccessible spaces. Cooking could be read as an activist practice, especially when we unlearn the preparation of food and we challenge it. Doing it in common and following our desires and cravings makes a difference and could be the key practice to realize an alternative archive of the body who eat (too much). As Diego Marchante, transfeminist activist and multimedia artist, states:

This archive is actually a body, or rather, this archive is my body. This is the archive thanks to which I grew up as a person, as a militant and as an artist. It is the story of all the references that have helped me to (de)construct myself as a transfeminist, lesbian, postporno, trans* and pirate of the genre adrift. This body-archive of mine did not appear out of anywhere, its existence would have been impossible without the recognition of the genealogy of other dissidents of gender and sexuality (Marchante 2018, 156-157).¹⁵

I imagine the body specifically as archive of food because food, as I have argued, is not only materiality but it encompasses a complexity of meaning and practice. Moreover, it involves our ability to relate. In this regard, the practice of food manipulation is also an interesting counter-action against capitalist oppression. As Federici states “while international institutions have learned to make commons functional to the market, how commons can become the foundation of a non-capitalist economy is a question still unanswered” (Federici 2010, 3). In this sense, work in a professional kitchen for a woman might be read as a repossession of a capitalist space, especially when it challenges rules of time, hierarchy, and knowledge as in the case of B. catering and K. restaurant.

¹⁵ Own translation.

As Federici enlightens, the production of ourselves as a common subject has to be intended as “a quality of relations, a principle of cooperation and responsibility to each other and to the earth, the forests, the seas, the animals” (Federici 2010, 7). This finally leads to the creation of a bond between the personal and the political, between political activism and the reproduction of everyday life (Federici 2010). This kind of embodied knowledge creates value in its daily practices. In this sense, cooking might be read as activism, as I have experience working in B. and K. kitchens. In the first work experience in H., food was read as a commodity, without any kind of implications of the relation with the others and the earth. Rather, looking at food as commons, create possibilities of relations, exchange, and commitment. With my involvement in kitchens, I have been able to observe how “food and cooking are thus an important component in the process of creating and maintaining a gendered identity” (Ceisel 2018, 10). Moreover, I argue how by buying, preparing and eating food different subjectivities can negotiate their position and challenge the system. Again, the manipulation of food can be a caring and generative act, while the management of the kitchen a common work in contrast with the destructive action of neoliberalism. Because, using again Federici words, “we need to overcome the state of irresponsibility concerning the consequences of our actions that results from the destructive ways in which the social division of labor is organized in capitalism” (Federici 2010, 6).

Following mainstream gendered representation, I have contained myself in the past. Unlearning to eat helped me in abandoning this destructive path and embrace a generative way to deal with food, my identity and therefore all my relationships. If I look at food now I do not see anymore something dangerous, which I am not allowed to eat, or which has to be eaten secretly, as happened during binge eating episodes. Eating carries no shame with it. Rather, today looking at food I can see the matter of the world, which I can relate to in a lucid way, appreciating its many facets.

Conclusions

Identity is a conceptual instrument with which human beings try to put order in the variety of their life experience. The belonging to an identity is a safe harbor where we can be sure about how to behave, which dress to put on, what to say, what to eat. Identity is a role to wear and discard but sometimes is grabbed as a weapon. Where does this ‘obsession with identity’ that terrorizes our lives come from?

A poor culture is a culture that has too few and monotonous means to face events, to imagine the future, to plan its own world. A poor culture is a culture that drastically reduces the complexity of relationships and, for fear of the future and its altering effects, takes refuge in a mere classifying order. By drastically reducing complexity, it replaces relations, intertwining, nuances, involvement, and reciprocal implications with a logic made up of divisions, separations and oppositions, a logic that is purely dichotomous: "we" and "others", identity on the one hand (A) and otherness on the other (*non-A*). The identity so much talked about today is the principle that most expresses, reflects or inspires the cultural poverty of our world¹⁶ (Remotti 2010, pg. 136).

As I have argued so far, food is strictly related to identity, so does the way we eat. Food, such a basic necessity in our daily life, part of our primary needs, is in the meanwhile soaked in culture. That is why, even our way of eating is subjected to rules, pressures, structures of meaning that affect what we bring to the mouth.

This research has brought me from the focus of eating to the one of cooking, in an attempt to put back into play responsibility in relation to the other. In this sense, identity should be useful to establish relationships, likewise cooking is an act of responsibility which allows us to care for.

The philosopher Elisa Virgili writes: “the body, especially in its sexual dimension, that is in its biological variations as male or female, must constantly relate to technology; this is an assumption that now seems obvious”¹⁷ (Virgili, 81). Following this reflection, can we intend the act of cooking as a technology? “In which ways can bodies, particularly female bodies, use technology and not be used by it?”¹⁸ (Virgili, 80).

¹⁶ Own translation.

¹⁷ Own translation.

¹⁸ Own translation.

In this journey through kitchens, I have observed food as the materiality of the world, eating as a way to enter into relations with it and cooking as a technology. The more or less ethical use we make of technology is up to us. In the framework of individual expropriation where we live today, it is not easy to remain vigilant. Indeed, at the basis of this logic that characterizes our times and spaces of daily life, Remotti identifies the pursuit of our own interests: “there is no doubt that *capitalism has been a powerful factor of cultural impoverishment in terms of social relations and social life in general*”¹⁹ (Remotti 2010, p. 139).

Coming back to Virgili’s question, I argue that, even in this greedy and consumeristic time, exit the binary logic is possible. Thus, women can use technology in an active way. Regain possessions of the professional space of the kitchen as women is an answer. Cooking together, exchanging knowledges and breaking down the rigid hierarchical boundaries, too. Preparing food according to the will, creativity and the participation of different actors is an answer. Care for the act itself instead of considering its saleability is an answer. In the end, cooking shows itself to our eyes, ears, noses, tongues and hands as a political act.

Conducting this research, I discovered my body's agency, as during binge eating episodes. That is the reason why we should not talk about our bodies as weird tenants. My body is me and I am made of matter, the same matter from which food is made of; it is what I eat every day, what builds me, fills me or bring me to starving. Looking forward, I invite further discussion in the kitchen, dealing with the materiality of the world. I call for us to continue questioning, to think with the hands and the senses, in a collective commitment.

Dealing with food allows myself to cast off the workings of the mind, to rely on my senses, there but often ignored. Having to do with food permits me to give voice to my stomach. Thanks to gender studies’ critical perspective, I was able to recognize in my own body privileged organs such as the mind, and others marginalized such as the gut, in a new geography of my body. Finally, the protagonist my belly has revealed to me unexpected scenarios. I believe this thesis is a process of decolonization of my whole shape, an ongoing process. Or maybe I better call it a process of de-capitalisation of my belly. The radical possibility of the margins envisioned by bell hooks (1989) it

¹⁹ Own translation.

is the one that I have discovered in reversing the map of my body, giving strength to the precarious position of the gut. This counteract turned out to be generative and political.

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