

INTRODUCTORY NOTE: Marcel Danesi is a professor at the University of Toronto and the director of its program in semiotics and communication theory. The following passage is adapted from his 1999 book *Of Cigarettes, High Heels, and Other Interesting Things: An Introduction to Semiotics*.

FOOD AS MYTH

Mythic thinking is now largely unconscious, but it shows up nevertheless in social rituals, performances, and spectacles that are shaped by its themes. Even if we live in a culture that is based largely on rational thinking--for example, we plan our days around a series of socially fixed events, we mark time precisely, we live by the principles of science and technology--the mythic form of thinking and communicating has not disappeared from our system of everyday life. Its remnants are everywhere: we give cards with poetic, mythic messages on them, we tell nursery rhymes and fairy tales to our children, we read the horoscope daily, and so on. And, as the semiotician Roland Barthes showed, the presence of myth can be detected even in such an apparently idiotic spectacle as commercial wrestling. This spectacle is emotionally involving for many people because it represents a mythic fight between good and evil.

Barthes suggests that virtually anything that we consume or take part in communally continues to have mythic connotations that recall the kinds of beliefs that ancient people had. To grasp what he meant, consider the kinds of attitudes people show towards food. In Canada and the United States, we tend not to eat rabbits, keeping them instead as pets. Why? The reason, Barthes would no doubt suggest, is that rabbits have a mythic status in our unconscious mind--think of all the stories we tell our children with rabbits in them as heroic figures (for example, the Easter Bunny). For this reason we do not think of rabbit meat as edible in the same way as we do other kinds of animal meats that we routinely ingest, such as lamb meat, poultry meat, and especially cow meat. In North America culture, not only rabbits, but also foxes and dogs are not eaten because they resonate with mythological meanings by way of our tales, legends, and traditions.

Similarly, the act of eating in a public setting typically reflects a ritualistic structure. We do not gobble food when others are around; we do it according to an eating code. The predictable routines leading up to the eating event at a high-class restaurant, for instance, are suggestive of an intrinsic need for ritual. There is no motive for eating at such places, really, other than to engage with our eating partner or partners in an act of symbolic acknowledgement that eating is basic to our existence, both biologically and symbolically.

So, what about fast food? How does it fit in with the theme of myth? In a society where "fast living" and "the fast lane" are appropriate metaphors for the system of everyday life, everything seems indeed to be "moving too fast," leaving little time for mythic rituals. However, this is not the case. Since the middle part of the twentieth century, the fast-food industry has become a multi-billion-dollar business. Why do people go to fast-food restaurants, the semiotician would ask. Is it because of the food? Is it to be with friends and family? Is it because the food is affordable and the service fast? Is it because the atmosphere is congenial? Most people would answer these questions affirmatively. The fast-food restaurant seems to provide an opportunity to stay a while with family or friends, and most people would acknowledge that the food at a McDonald's or a Wendy's is affordable and that the service is fast and polite. Indeed, many people today probably feel more at home at a McDonald's restaurant than in their own households. This is, in fact, the semiotic key to unlocking the mythic meaning of fast-food restaurants.

Consider the case of McDonald's. As of 1973, one new McDonald's outlet was being opened every day. Today, billions of McDonald's hamburgers are sold every month. Ronald McDonald is as much a cultural icon and childhood mythological figure as is Santa Claus. The McDonald's "golden arches" logo is now one of the more recognized ones in the world. The mythology of eating has, clearly, not disappeared. It has been revamped by marketers and advertisers to meet new demands, new social realities.

The message underlying the McDonald's symbolism is one basically of puritan values: law and order, cleanliness, friendliness, hospitality, hard work, self-discipline, and family values. In a society that is on the verge of shedding its traditional puritanical heritage and value systems, McDonald's comes forward as a savior which claims to "do it all for you." Eating at McDonald's is, like any religious ceremony, imbued with ritual and symbolism. The golden arches, like the arches of ancient cities, herald a new age, one based on traditional values. By satisfying a "Big Mac attack," you are, in effect, satisfying a deep metaphorical need to eat symbolically. From the menu to the uniforms, McDonald's imposes standardization, just as do the world's organized religions. As with any ritualistic experience, the eating event at McDonald's is designed to be cathartic and redeeming.

The success of McDonald's is tied, of course, to changes in society. The socioeconomic need to have a two-person, working household led to radical changes in the traditional family structure in the late 1960s. Fewer and fewer North American families had the time to eat meals together within the household, let alone the energy to prepare elaborate dinners. In modern-day households, meals are routinely consumed in front of television sets and, given the increasing number of such sets in the house, family members may not even be in the same space at dinner. The home, ironically, has become a place where very busy people now tend to eat separately. Enter McDonald's (or Wendy's or Burger King) to the rescue! Eating out at such fast-food places--which are affordable, quick, and cheery--brings the family together, at the same table, under the same roof.

ESSAY TOPIC

Examine the assertions Danesi makes about the attitudes he says North Americans have about food and eating. Be sure to include consideration of Danesi's claim that eating at a fast-food restaurant can be seen as a religious experience. How persuasive do you find Danesi's claims? Be specific in your discussion.