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Forthcoming, *Review of Agricultural, Food and Environmental Studies*

Book review

Tania Lewis, *Digital food: from paddock to platform*

London, Bloomsbury Publishing, 2020, 208 p.

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In her book *Digital food: from paddock to platform*, Tania Lewis examines a set of social practices that contribute to shaping the field of “digital food” at the interface between digital technologies and the world of food. On the disciplinary level, her approach lies at the crossroads between cultural studies and media studies. She focuses her analysis on consumption as a cultural practice and lifestyle, and investigates the ways in which digital technologies offer new affordances and open up new cultural practices and lifestyles.

The six chapters that make up the book present the different facets of what, for Lewis, constitutes the realm of digital food. She thus successively examines the “frenzy” of food photography on Instagram and Facebook (Ch. 1); YouTube video channels devoted to cooking and gastronomy (Ch. 2); representations of masculinity on some of these channels (Ch. 3); practices associated with meal sharing applications, a component of the sharing economy (Ch. 4); digital platforms supporting more ethical forms of consumption (Ch. 5); and activists using digital tools to garner support for political mobilisation against GMOs or in favour of a more sustainable agriculture (Ch. 6).

The areas explored are, then, very varied, and one of the book’s qualities is to show how these areas encounter the main issues identified by research into digital practices over the past twenty years: the role of digital media (as relational technologies) in constructing one’s identity; the emergence of collectives based on shared interests; the democratisation of cultural production and the continuity of forms of engagement from amateur to professional; the dynamics of attention and unequal distribution of online visibility; the complex relationships with platforms suspected of exploiting “free” user participation, etc. This reference is not always devoid of clichés or even shortcuts. For example, when the author asserts that “websites like YouTube heralded what was a dramatic shift from digital consumer as passive downloader (...) to an upload culture of creativity and prosumerism” (p. 51), she tends to underestimate the importance of creativity before YouTube (via personal websites, blogs and online magazines) and to overinterpret the importance of YouTube as a creative platform; despite the fact that a large number of online creators attempt to make a name for themselves, few persevere and succeed.

The second quality of the book is to highlight in depth how the development of digital food accompanies, encourages and reinforces a movement launched several decades ago – the development and inscription of food as a cultural practice. Food is no longer reduced to a traditionally feminine activity confined to family transmission and practised exclusively at home. A symptom of this transformation is men’s involvement in digital food practices, exemplified by YouTube channels of men cooking at home. However, behind the proliferation of forms of the expression of masculinity (heterosexual, homosexual, fatherhood, etc.) associated with these channels, it is the age-old figure of the celebrity chef that seems to be replayed, participating in the persistence of gender hierarchies on the internet. The author thus examines the gender dimension.

That said, the book has certain limitations. Firstly, concentrating on the domestic space as the sole space for the expression of consumer culture leads to an emphasis on the “arts de faire” (De Certeau et al., 1998) associated with the household and domestic cooking. In doing so, the socio-economic transformations of the professional culinary sector are largely ignored. However, the internet and digital technologies have also considerably reconfigured the field of gastronomy and more generally the food service industry by facilitating consumers’ active participation. An important culture of evaluation has developed, involving both TV shows and customer rating and review applications (Beuscart and Mellet, 2016). Online consumer reviews have led to a very marked reconfiguration of the restaurant industry by challenging traditional quality assessment methods and symbolic hierarchies (Beuscart et al., 2016). These are cultural economy topics that deserve more attention in a book that aims to cover all the dimensions of digital food. In this respect, it is noteworthy that, when looking at the sharing (or gig) economy, the author focuses her analysis on the relatively limited practice of meal sharing (involving pro-am chefs serving food in their own homes or cooking in other people’s homes), and ignoring the massive development of home food delivery with Uber Eats and Deliveroo. Obviously, the figure of a food-loving but relatively passive consumer does not interest the author, who prefers the idea that digital technology provides a new infrastructure for sociality and creativity.

Secondly, while the author intends to “examine how technologies are used and engaged with in practice” (p. 6), uses and practices occupy only a secondary place in the book. Who are these people participating online? Why – and especially how – do they engage in these activities? How do they organise their creative practice, choose their subjects and simultaneously develop gastronomic and audiovisual expertise? Who are their role models and what are their cultural references? The author did not conduct a first-hand investigation. The book thus relies on secondary sources and a brief presentation of YouTube channels to provide some answers. Moreover, the author seems less interested in describing and analysing practices than in identifying socio-typical figures. Throughout the book, there is much talk about hipsters, foodies, “gastrosexuals”, food hackers, “meatosexuals” or “dadpreneurs” (these last two neologisms are coined by the author). For Lewis, the emergence of these figures and their online visibility must be analysed as part of a “lifestyle

turn” (p. 76). With this concept, the author intends to link practices as diverse as the sharing of food photos on Instagram, celebrities (such as Jamie Oliver and his digital avatars), and more political forms of engagement relating to ethical consumption and activism – at the risk of reducing them to identity battles. But at the same time, this approach is part of a form of pop sociology consisting in identifying and naming emerging categories and socio-types that often simply mimics the self-presentation and self-marketing of celebrities or emerging figures. It is not uninteresting to try to spot trending styles, but the risk is that the book will become obsolete as soon as new trends emerge. By embracing a wide diversity of practices and cultural sub-worlds linked to digital food, Lewis’ book is an invitation to launch empirical investigations of one or other of these worlds, to explore both their cultural producers and their audiences, and to see if and how they eventually come to form collectives.

Beuscart, J. S., & Mellet, K. (2016). Shaping consumers’ online voices: Algorithmic apparatus or evaluation culture? In R. Seyfert, J. Roberge (Eds.), *Algorithmic Cultures* (pp. 88-106). London: Routledge.

Beuscart, J. S., Mellet, K., & Trespeuch, M. (2016). Reactivity without legitimacy? Online consumer reviews in the restaurant industry. *Journal of Cultural Economy*, 9(5), 458-475.

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