

## Representações culturais no *reality show* gastronômico

### Cultural representation in gastronomic reality shows

Karina Abdala<sup>1</sup>

Fernando Andacht<sup>2</sup>

**Resumo:** O artigo aborda a temática da representação cultural na mídia. O objetivo é compreender o sucesso de audiência de *MasterChef* partindo do pressuposto de que sua popularidade não pode ser explicada somente pelos aspectos gastronômicos envolvidos. Com esse objetivo, escolhemos para análise quatro programas do gênero híbrido *talent show/reality show*: a segunda temporada de *La Comanda* (2013), criada no Uruguai; a segunda de *MasterChef Argentina* (2015); as duas temporadas de *MasterChef Uruguai* (2017); e a quarta de *MasterChef Brasil* (2017). Com base numa abordagem qualitativa e comparativa, procuramos investigar as identidades coletivas de cada país conforme são construídas pela mídia. Para isso, adotamos uma metodologia sociosemiótica baseada nas noções analíticas de “imaginário social” e de gênero desses programas.

**Palavras-chave:** representação cultural; imaginário social; *MasterChef*; *reality show*; *talent show*.

*Abstract:* The article focuses on cultural representation in the media. The goal is to understand the popularity of *MasterChef*; we claim that the attraction of the program is not based exclusively on its gastronomic aspects. For this aim, we have chosen to analyze four shows of the hybrid genre of *talent show* and *reality show*: the second season of *La Comanda* 2013, created in Uruguay; the second of

1 Universidad de la República (UdelaR). Montevideo, Uruguay.  
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3077-0810>. email: karina.abdala@fic.edu.uy

2 Universidad de la República (UdelaR). Montevideo, Uruguay.  
<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3054-6090>. email: fernando.andacht@fic.edu.uy

*MasterChef Argentina 2015; two seasons of MasterChef Uruguay 2017; and the fourth season of MasterChef Brazil 2017. Through a qualitative and comparative approach, we study the collective identities of each country as they are constructed by the media. We use a socio-semiotic methodology; the analytical notions are the 'social imaginary' and the genre of the programs.*

**Keywords:** *cultural representation; social imaginary; MasterChef; reality show; talent show.*

This article aims to analyze the representations of the “social imaginary” in media. With this goal in mind, we’ve selected four entertainment TV shows broadcast in three countries – Argentina, Brazil and Uruguay –, as listed below: *MasterChef Argentina* (hereinafter referred as MCA);<sup>3</sup> *MasterChef Brasil* (MCB);<sup>4</sup> *MasterChef Uruguai* (MCU);<sup>5</sup> and *La Comanda* (LC),<sup>6</sup> produced in Uruguay. The seasons selected correspond to the last seasons broadcast in each of the countries studies prior to the creation of this article. We’ve analyzed all the episodes of the shows.

Regarding the franchise *MasterChef* (hereinafter referred as MC), the members must prepare culinary dishes in approximately 75 minutes and, in order to do that, they need to gather ingredients – that are supplied in the market organized in the set of the show – in only three minutes.

Regarding LC, the members are Gastronomy students of the University of Work of Uruguay (UTU)<sup>7</sup> and they are grouped into teams. They have the challenge to prepare five dishes corresponding to a menu for five people, among which are included the members of the jury, teachers at UTU. The main difference in relation to MC is that the participants have one day to create the menu and 30 minutes in the market to pick their ingredients.

We believe it is important to understand what are the elements that contribute for the creation of the reality show phenomenon, that currently has 20 years on TV. At the same time, it seems relevant to understand some changes that the format suffered in its maturing stage. In its beginning, the most famous show was *Big Brother*. According to Corner (2002), this format already present a hybridization, which include aspects of game show and talk show. In order to explain this combination, Corner (2002, p. 2002, p. 256) says that “Big Brother” operates their claims of reality within a completely controlled artificiality, in which

3 The second season, released in 2015, had 20 episodes.

4 The fourth season of *MasterChef* amateur, released in 2017, had 25 episodes.

5 Both seasons released in 2017, both with 17 episodes.

6 The second season, released in 2013, that had 18 episodes.

7 The Universidad de Trabajo from Uruguay is a public learning institution founded in Montevideo. It is similar to Senac in Brazil.

almost everything could be considered truth in what people do and say [...] Depending on they being there, in front of the cameras.” On his behalf, Hill (2014, p. 116) supports that the genre reality show presents as central element the drama, in a way that “this dramatic tendency established the reality show as a genre that works within a flexible framework of reality”. Currently, the format had a huge turning point with the introduction of the requirement of a specific knowledge on cuisine. Our goal is to describe the main characteristics that explain the success in audience, since there always have been shows about gastronomy, all with focus of learning how the dish is made. These traditional gastronomy shows are only watched by a restricted niche audience interested in gastronomy. It is in this sense that we’ve elaborated a socio-semiotic approach whose base is the formal analysis of experience to apply them into the selected shows.

To understand this phenomenon, we propose a hypothesis that there is other aspects, besides gastronomy, that characterize gastronomic reality shows and that can explain the viewers’ attraction to it. These elements relate to the following notions: social imaginary, *vraisemblance* and the construction of authenticity through the identity of the winner of the show.

According to Dyer, the concept of “normalcy” in society agrees with a worldview established by the system of values that dominant groups intent to point out. “This worldview is so certain for dominant groups that they make it look (as it looks to them) ‘natural’ and ‘inevitable’ – and for everyone – and, as possible, establish their hegemony” (DYER, 1984, p. 356).

The selected shows belong to the hybrid reality and talent show/ these elements of the structure “compose the recipe that mixes genuine culinary ability (talent) and the programmed and expected behavior of reality show (ANDACHT and MARQUIONI, 2016, p. 8). In these shows, there are distinctive components that point out the reality aspect as prevalent, like the judge’s attitude at the moment of communicating

their evaluation, the intermittent soliloquy of the members and the narrative about their stories.

In addition, according to Hay and Ouellette, “reality show governs less through the dissemination of ideology through the dissemination of ideology than the promulgation of participative games and lifestyle tutorials that guide, test and supposedly enhance the ability of subjects to play an active role” (HAY and OUELETTE, 2008, p. 472). With these words, the authors attempt to understand the relevance of mixing the genre of the shows.

An explanation for the popularity<sup>8</sup> of the MC franchise could be, among other reasons, that “seem to exist a trend related to culinary and gastronomy” (MARQUIONI and OLIVEIRA, 2015, p. 75). In addition, this success of audience could also be explained by the concept of social imaginary. In this sense, the gastronomy reality shows could be analyzed as media objects proper for the constituent elements of social imaginary of a community.

To understand this theoretical approach, it is necessary to explain the technical notion of “image”, that, in the semiotic theory, is characterized by the vague and fleeting presence of a “quality of feeling” (PEIRCE, CP 5.44) we evoke pleurably or with displeasure. It’s about possible qualities for the individuals belonging to a same society (ANDACHT, 1992, p. 15-17). If we take into account the triadic semiotic model of Peirce, that has as foundation the phenomenological analysis of experience in only three categories or universal values, the so-called “phaneroscopic categories” (CP 1.284),<sup>9</sup> the concept of image is associated to the universe of primarity (CP 1.534). because it involves numberless possibilities through which individuals can imagine something, even if this something is non-existent.

8 According to a Uruguayan newspaper El Observador (July 25th, 2017), the last episode of the first season (2017) of MasterChef reached 21.2 points of audience, a record in the country.

9 The quotations of C. S. Peirce’s work are made in traditional form: CP [x.xxx] referring to the volume and paragraph of the edition of The Collected Papers of Charles S. Peirce. All the translations were made by us.

In social sciences, the term social imaginary is used to establish the limits of everything that anyone can consider adequate or not (TAYLOR, 1990; CASTORIADIS, 2013). One of the purposes of the social imaginary is to “decide what is natural, the norm that rules our life, in each vital occasion” (ANDACHT, 1992, p. 157). In the phenomenological analysis, the idea of rule has a link with the category of thirdality, defined as “the value of the general dimension of experience” (CP 1.290), and, as such, is identified with laws, with the regularity of the human and cosmic universe. “The Third is the idea of such as it is being a third, the medium, between a second and its first. In other words, the representation as an element of phenomenon” (CP 5.66).

Additionally, in the analysis of the show, it is present the phenomenological category of secondity, which belongs to the order of what is concretely existent. An example could be taken from the jury composition of the MC format. In the shows we have researched, we see three chefs of different nationalities. If we take into account the classic and traditional gastronomic element of bone cuisine, this choice must be credible, which would explain, for instance, the presence of a French judge. Out of all possible nationalities (firstness), we find in the MC format a concrete fact, the factual selection of a French chef (secondness), which is usually someone that already lives in the country the show is located. But the typology and the conventional dimension of the French origin associated with the field of gastronomy refer to the social imaginary as a cultural regularity (thirdness); it’s about a non-written rule that associates France with the land where the best connoisseurs and lovers of good cuisine are.

Therefore, there are norms through which societies establish the attitudes in all fields of activity ad being acceptable or not. In the field of personal interaction, this standard refers to the concept of “idealization” (GOFFMAN, 2012, p. 49), which is about how the subject will always attempt to present oneself in front of the other the best way possible. Because of that, through a qualitative and comparative analysis of a

“glocal” television format, the article aims at studying the representation of elements of cultural identity in different countries.

### **Identity as the favorite dish in MC served in a soliloquy**

One of the central elements of the shows studied is the use of the so-called “soliloquy”. This rhetoric resource allows an access to the personal lives of the members of the show: “Regarding the emotional confession/revelation, it corresponds to what is considered the typical dramatic function of the soliloquy of showing emotions that are on the surface” (ANDACHT and MARQUIONI, 2017, p. 9). In addition to that, this resource works as a guide so that the viewer can understand the (supposedly) true meaning of the member’s attitudes, their interior life. The constant use of the soliloquy in these formats presents “the reality show as an illustration of the contemporary confessional culture in which the key attraction is the reveal of the ‘true’ emotions” (ASLAMA e PANTTI, 2006, p. 168). In summary, the main role of this dramaturgical and rhetoric resource used in a recurring manner would be the production of signs that would allow access to the ultimate reality (ASLAMA e PANTTI, 2006 p. 168).

If we return to the categories in which Peirce analyzes the experiences, one of the roles of the soliloquy is to produce in the viewer a vague sense of access to the ultimate reality of the individual. This affectionate dimension of communication would correspond to the universe of firstness.

The first element is predominant in the feeling, while it is different from the objective perception, the desire and the thinking process (CP 5.291). But as the feeling is a mere feeling of a particular kind, it is determined by only one inexplicable and hidden power; and in this extent, it is not a representation, but a material quality of a representation (CP 5.291).

Thus, this device operates as a plausible vehicle for the construction of the presentation of each participant’s identity. It forms part of the

*Representamen*, that is, the sensory dimension of the sign, what is perceptible in each participant.

The soliloquy is used regularly by the participants to show an identity. This behavior has the goal of being the winner of the show, simultaneously to the goal of being successful in the culinary tests each week. From the semiotic point of view, the construction of identity “implies a teleological harmony of ideas, and, personality-wise, it is more than the mere deliberate search for a pre-determined purpose; a teleology of development” (COLAPIETRO, 1989, p. 76 – CP 6.156). The theoretical notion of “teleology” implies an organization of actions of individuals which take into account their purpose, although this may not be conscious.

An example of that can be observed in MCB, in the beginning of the competition, on team challenges, when the participants reject the idea of having a Thai participant in their group (Yukontorn). In the fifth episode, they explain that the other participants thought Yukontorn did not have the necessary knowledge of Brazilian cuisine.

Another example may be observed in the first season of MCU, when the participant Lourdes, in her form of interacting, shows herself as someone strong and fierce. In the 12<sup>th</sup> episode, she makes her goal clear: she wants to win the competition, therefore, one of her tactics is ostensive rivalry. In addition to that, she presents herself as a rock fan and her signs indicating that reveal the characteristic of a robust and vigorous person. To a certain extent, we can make a comparison with the strong judge feared by everyone, Enrique Fogaça, the Brazilian judge in MCB, as the images 1 and 2 show. Both presences show the importance of signs that reveal their own individuality aspects of something that is more impactful and visible in someone’s personality. This semiotic effect is based in a mixture of elements associated to the firstness category – the qualities of a feeling that can be extracted for analysis (for example, the quality of power, strength or impetus – with elements associated to



the secondness category - perceptible elements (for example, having tattoos or being bald).

Image 1: Lourdes, MCU, first season, episode 1, 2017



Image 2: Enrique Fogaça, MCB, fourth season, episode 1, 2017



On the other hand, in the first season of MCU, the participant Nilson developed an identity with diverging characteristics. He always helped other participants. That became a tear of personality, an identity that was shown, unconsciously or not, but it appeared on screen and being interpreted as his way of acting daily. The apparent goal of Nilson, in this case, was showing himself the most humble he could be. This attitude can be seen in episode 16, when he said: “I don’t compete against Lourdes, I compete against myself”.

We see observe in the sequence of edits the emergency of identities that manifest through mutual opposition and that can be analyzed as representations of stereotypes associated to the imaginary of each society. For example, in the Uruguayan show, media studies allow to write that there is an imaginary that seeks the humility stereotype as an idealized identity trait, however, obviously, it does not imply that all Uruguayans are like that. According to Dyer (1984), there is a system of social stereotypes in each society that works as a type of limit of normalcy or something that is accepted as plausible or acceptable in a determined moment. “Types are instances that indicate those that live according to the rules of society (social types) and those in which rules are outlined to exclude (stereotypes). For this reason, stereotypes are also more rigid than social types” (DYER, 1984, p. 355);

In a privileged mode, in the case of the gastronomic reality shows studied here, the rhetoric strategy of soliloquy works to show and thematize the changes developed in identities through the successive editions of the show.

Although stereotypes shape the representation of identity in reality shows, the individuals can change their objectives due to the reflection or the attitudes of other participants. For this reason, for the development of identity, it is necessary the interpretation of the other (COLAPIETRO, 1989, p. 64 – CP 7.571). The tension and joy in the relationship between those aspiring to win MC are as important as their culinary competition.

Identity considered as sign:

It is essentially timely, not only it is always incomplete, but is also intrinsically unachievable: Due to the finite duration of human existence, no one can fully comprise who one is. The person is, to a certain extent, achieved in the present, and, in a much larger degree, not achieved throughout their live (COLAPIETRO, 1989, p. 76).

An example of development of identity happens in the 9th episode of MCB, when Caroline, a 31-year-old participant from Barretos, leaves. The host looks sad because Caroline makes jokes about the fear

produced by the judge. In her soliloquy, on episode 4, she highlighted that “MC is harder than physics”. In their goodbyes, participants always remember how was the relationship with the person leaving the show with the others, which outlines the centrality of the relationship and its effects in the presentation of self.

### **The vertigo of MC and the slowness of LC**

In our corpus, the most impactful aspect regarding the contrast between MC and LC is the conception of temporality: participants of the first format must face time as the most formidable challenge or obstacle, since the judges require that they show a series of culinary abilities in such a short period of time. In the market, they only have three minutes to get their ingredients, so, irremediably, it is produced a culinary-athletic competition which fills the most typical role of a reality show: overcoming obstacles with an evident stress of the participants. In the case of the second format (LC), the participants have 30 minutes to obtain ingredients in the Agrarian Market of Montevideo;<sup>10</sup> it is, therefore, an authentic ride through the headquarters of their main sponsor. Thus, the show can show the different places in a calm and detailed way.

On MCB, the time component get even more explicit: on episode 3, the judge Paola Carosella, an Argentinian chef, comments: “Time is real, it is not a joke, no one is going to stop the clock for you”. On episode 8, Abel, a 31-year-old Paraguayan contestant, is expelled because he could not plate his food in time. These examples show the obsession and angry caused by the manipulation of the time dimension on every action of the format.<sup>x</sup> It is obvious that, in other television genres that have the priority of learning how to cook, this emotional climate does not appear because it is harmful to their purpose. In MC’s case, on the contrary, the rigorous and inflexible attitude of the judge creates an effect of *vraisemblance* typical of the reality show genre – in this case, because of the use of strict and inflexible time limits. It is not

<sup>10</sup> The biggest agrarian market of Uruguay, in which there are natural products produced mainly in Uruguay. It was built in 1906 and currently is a historic monument.

fortuitous that this concept of classic rhetoric is described as an “arsenal suspect of procedures and ‘tricks’ that would make the discourse natural” (BARTHES et al., 1972, p. 14). The popularity of the show could be considered a symptom of this fundamental effect of naturalization of artificiality, which generates credibility and positive evaluation of MCs audience.

Another fundamental difference in structure between MC and LC is that the second one is divided into teams throughout the whole competition. This team work, as well as the fact that the judges are also teachers of the participants in their formation outside of the show, seem to be related with a more didactic goal than MC. An example of prevalence of the didactic goal on LC’s competition could be observed in an incident that happened when the chef’s brigade should prepare the menu for five people with a budget of 1.500 Uruguayan pesos (approximately R\$ 180,00). On episode 12, the chef’s brigade called Les Piments decided to buy candy by a superior price and, in this moment, they showed a warning sign to the viewer explaining the brigade disrespected the rules. Regardless, there wasn’t any punishment on the judges behalf. These attitudes of the judges/teachers bring LC’s format a lot closer to a talent shows with evident didactic goals and a bigger level of tolerance regarding obedience to the rules.

### **Judges and hosts**

The interventions of judges in the MC franchise also work to build the identities of their participants. As previously stated, the soliloquy fills this role, but also the judge makes a framework of roles (GOFFMAN, 2012, p. 34) developed by the participants. The role of the judges is to legitimate certain actions that are accepted by society and that can be associated with the concept of “idealization” (GOFFMAN, 2012, p. 49). Therefore, their comments work as a type of guide so that the participants can learn the legitimate way of acting on certain situations. There are certain tips given by the judges that, without a doubt, exceed the culinary field. Some advices aim to create reactions on the subjects.

This finality is part of MCs structure and is referred as one of the central components of meaning that characterize the genre reality show, the indicational signs. In the modality of communication described by Goffman in the order of human interaction: “The expressivity of the individual (and, therefore, their capability of producing impressions) seem to involve two radically different types of significative activity: the expression that offers and the expression emanated from it” (GOFFMAN, 2012, p. 16). In semiotic terms, in the expressions offered by someone, prevail the symbols. In contrast, in the expressions that emanate in a less voluntary way, in the case of body reactions, prevail the indexes.

A representative example of expressive behavior of the indicational type happened in the 19th episode of MCB, when Paola Carosella made a criticism to Alejandro. “This cake lacks humility”. The indicational element is manifested in the gesture following this criticism. In an almost identical way, on episode 12 of MCA, the judge Christophe Krywonis spoke harshly with Alejo,<sup>11</sup> and comment the following about his dish: “[The dish] can reflect your personality, superb in presentation, but it has an excess of pride”. In addition to describing the errors of the dish, these criticism work so that the viewer knows the attitude that conforms and defines the identity of each contestant. Through the lack of modesty of the participant, the judge’s response demonstrated that his gastronomic evolution, beyond his apprenticeship in gastronomy, became an apprenticeship of value. Thus, the show exhibited, along with a gradual enhancement of the participant’s dishes, the signs of a progress of identity development.

These signs distance the show from the talent show component and make it closer from the traditional or typical reality show genre, like Big Brother. In summary, through the concrete comments collected here, it gets clear the intention of the judge to establish the role of each contestant in the most spectacular way possible. It also supplies an evidence that the identity as interpretative process directed or manipulated by the

11 In episode 10, the contestant had the possibility of saving himself from elimination, but he decided to save another contestant, having a character of a hero. In the following episode, he made a comment that harmed another participant’s plating; he went, then, from hero to villain.

own format is in constant development (COLAPIETRO, 1989, p. 66; CP 5.313).

Regarding the judges on LC, the criticism is far lighter than the already mentioned comments of the judges on MCA. In LC's case, the judge always reminds the brigades that they must think about their problems as a great way to learn and that mistakes are the best way to improve as cooks. This type of criticism is completely different from some of the comments made by the judges at MCU. In the case of the comments made by the Uruguayan chef Sergio Puglia, we can see that he always uses sentences that point towards the emotional element, even melodramatic, as, for example, their constant references to the fact that these dishes bring memories of the contestant's family or his own, memories that, often, are followed by tears. Tears exemplify the signs associated to expressions that "emanate" from the body (GOFFMAN), the ones we consider as one of the most persuasive indicative evidences or signs of authenticity in the reality genre in all of its formats. In contrast, the judges at LC give rational and completely practical explanations, which makes their comments light and didactic.

According to Peirce (CP 1.530), there are three models of relationship: comparison, function and thinking. The relationship of comparison corresponds to the universe of possibility, that is, the phenomenological category of firstness. The relationship of function is presented in case of concrete and tangible facts, defined as everything that offers residence, that is manifested through the function of action and reaction, which corresponds to the secondness category. Finally, we have the relation of thinking, which correspond to the field of concepts, and, therefore, belong to the category of thirdness. We can, then, say, that the characteristics performed by the judges on LC correspond to the relation of thinking. In this format, they seek to reinforce the rules as well; it is about symbolic signs, equivalent to words, that are product of the planification of individuals in society.

In the case of MC's judges, through the fragments previously presented, we can also reinforce some aspects that exemplify the relations of

comparison, because the judge makes an analogy and a strong contrast between all the recipes prepared by a participant up until this moment of the competition. There is also the intention of making a distinction regarding the recipes prepared by other contestants. Such comparison include, inevitably, personal presentations and small self-biographic scenes. Out of these sequences of images emerge qualities that allow them to extract singular elements of personality from each participant.

It is important to highlight that the three logic relationships that Peirce distinguish are present all the time, but the structure of each format or television edition prevails one over the other. In these examples, although the judges of MC use words (= thinking) and images (= comparison), it is also clear that they constantly seek to highlight the indicative aspects of the subjects, associated to the functional aspects that, in the reality show genre, attracts people's attention. It is about "signic transparency" (ANDACHT, 2003, p. 43), according to the following definition of indicative of Peirce:

An index is a sign that refers to the object that denotes due to being really affected by that Object. As the index is affected by the object, it necessarily has a certain quality in common with the Object, and it is regarding these [qualities] that refers the object. Therefore, it involves a type of icon, although it is a peculiar type of icon, and it is not a mere resemblance with its object, even in these aspects, something that converts it into a sign, but it's the real modification by the object (CP 2.248).

Regarding the exhibition of indicative signs on MCB, on episode 10, the participant Vitor had an accident, cutting his finger with a knife. After that, he couldn't continue cooking because he needed medical assistance, but he didn't want to leave the kitchen because he remembered what happened to Abel. The high emotional tension of the narrative of that fact highlights aspects that are close to the genre reality show. When he came back to the kitchen, Vitor, in his soliloquy, said: "I felt like I was in the David and Goliath story", enhancing, thus, the dramatic atmosphere of the episode.

Another example of the reinforcement of indicative aspects appeared in the third episode of the second season of MCU, after a strong comment from Lucia Sorja, the Argentinian chef, to the dish - gnocchi, a type of pasta made with white flour - of the contestant Sandra, a 34-year-old teacher: “This looks like gorilla fingers” (Figura 3). A few moments after receiving this feedback, Sandra almost fainted, her body collapsed before the surprised look of her colleagues. The body reaction was almost instant, everything happened as if the chef’s opinion had knocked her down. A similar situation happened in the 12th episode of MCB, when Paola Carosella, Argentinian chef, said to the contestant Miriam: “This looks like when you crush a potato and some liquid gets out” (Figura 4).

Image 3: Sandra’s dish, MCU, second season, episode 3, 2017



Image 4: Miriam’s dish, MCB, fourth season, episode 12, 2017



The prevalence of the indicative aspects could even be considered an element that justifies the comparison of the MC franchise with pornography. They are audiovisual genres that emphasize the hyper-realistic



ARTIGO

experience of body elements, of an almost tangible materiality, but in both situations, there is an important absence of contact between what is seen and the physical sensations that are produced in the viewer (ANDACHT and MARQUIONI, 2016, p. 10-11). That could explain the highlight and exaltation of some of the indicative signs on the behalf of the judges when they seek to indicate to the viewer details regarding flavor, texture and smell of the food that was cooked, which are fundamental ingredients in tasting the food that are not accessible to the viewer. These indicative signs are also lead characters in the narrative climax of MC, in other words, the end of each culinary challenge. On MCB, there is a notable prominence of gestures in the moment of evaluating the dishes, since it is not uncommon to the judge to put food in the participant's mouth, in an intention to express, in a hyperbolic way, through physiologic reactions produced in the participants, the "direct" experience of food, a sensory simulation that can only be contemplated and heard by the viewer.

Regarding the hosts on the MC franchise, they also seek to highlight indicative aspects associated not only with food, but with the participants, through jokes and comments regarding other competitors. An example of that happens in team challenges, where the captains can select the members of their group and the hosts ask the reason behind that decision. The host's participation favors, thus, the highlight of the reality show aspect of the format, because, with their interventions, generate discussions among the participants, mitigating, thus, the importance of making culinary dishes and highlighting the identity aspects of the contestants.

However, in the case of LC's host, the sports journalist Gonzalo Delgado always asks the brigades an explanation of culinary terms, which produces, again, a type of discourse that privileges the didactic-symbolic component of the format. There is no doubt that the structure of the Uruguayan show LC has components that bring it closer to a talent show than a reality show. It is also interesting to think about its generic proximity with a type of didactic television show that has the role,

besides teaching how to cook, the promotion of the virtues of the public education of the gastronomic profession by the State, task accomplished by UTU.

### **Cultural aspects beyond the dish: winners**

The study of corpus leads to conclude that the winners of these shows would embody characteristics associated to positive and negative stereotypes of the countries where the shows are produced. In Alejo's case, the winner of MCA, it reveals the attitude and characteristics of an arrogant person, someone that felt too safe about his dishes, his intelligence and overall talent. In MCB's case, the winner Michele has always presented herself as a humble woman, a fighter, someone who wasn't the favorite to win MC. According to most interviews the host of MCB made, everyone believed the winner would be Deborah, her opponent in the final. Again, in the show narrative, the myth of David and Goliath appears, once Deborah had the characteristics of being a strong rival. Deborah was always very secure making her recipes and often delivered the best dish of the group, as it was the case on episode 24. However, at this same episode, the judge Enrique Fogaça said to her: "You are kind of arrogant sometimes", after hearing her explanations about her plate.

In LC's case and in the first season of MCU, the winners showed similar characteristics to Michele. The brigade of LC that triumphed was the one who showed the biggest consistency among presentation, dishes and their form of work. Nilson, a 38-year-old participant, was the first winner of MCU. He had as main virtue the humility, something that was positively commented by everyone: Nilson helped other competitors and, whenever possible, avoided the spotlight. Humility is a very appreciated quality in Uruguayan society; historically, it is known as the most characteristic virtue of "mesocracy", a type of society where it is expected to have "conditions of relative balance and high doses of social conformity" (REAL DE AZÚA, 1964, p. 38). Therefore, people who wished to belong in this community would try not to gloat their positive qualities they consider to have. But what happened with the second

season winner of MCU was a surprise for most Uruguayans: The final happened between Luciana, a teacher at Inau12 who already participated in the first season and was eliminated from the show, and Maria García, a Venezuelan doctor. The identity characteristics attributed to Luciana, “simple, sensitive, caring”,<sup>13</sup> seem to materialize the almost ideal qualities to embody, once again, the story of David and Goliath in the Uruguayan mesocratic Society.

However, the person who won was the Venezuelan doctor. This fact was widely commented by Uruguayan viewers in social networks; there was even a debate among the audience that expressed xenophobic opinions regarding the injustice of a foreigner getting the prize that “should” be to the natives and viewers that proclaimed themselves in favor of the migrant and her integration of the Uruguayan society. In Image 5, comments taken from the newspaper El Observador website exemplify this intense activity on social media, in a journalistic note describing the winner of MCU’s second season.

Image 5: Comments about the final episode of the second season of MCU on social media



Source: *El Observador*, December, 2017.

<sup>12</sup> Uruguayan Institute of Children and Youth, that helps minors offenders and takes care of homeless children (equivalent to Febem in Brazil).

<sup>13</sup> See <https://www.canal10.com.uy/luciana-a2030>.

Based on these comments, we can postulate the hypothesis that, despite her foreign origin, the Venezuelan contestant could embody the character of David and recreate, once again, this myth that is so fond to the local imaginary. She appeared as the representant of a minority in relation to the numerous Uruguayan participants.

In this case, in our research, the notion of social imaginary is associated with the concept of “glocal” (ANDACHT, 2003, p. 11), because both of the terms work to explain the cultural aspects of the local type that appear in televisual franchises, despite the format being global. Examples of cultural representation can be observed not only in personal characteristics of the winners of the show, but also in the strong connection with the gastronomy of each country where the format is produced. This is something that the judges reinforce in an evident way in the challenges. In the case of the first season of MCU, on episode 2, the participant Gonzalo, a vet student who was born in the countryside, prepared a dish with the shape of a chimarrão (mate). Therefore, we can say that the dish had an iconic-indicative relation (CP 2.256) with a chimarrão, one of the most significant objects of local tradition. In his soliloquy, he commented: “I made a simulation of a chimarrão, one of the carrot sticks, I put as a straw”.

Image 6: Gonzalo’s dish, MCU, first season, episode 2, 2017



**Huevo pasado por agua**  
sobre tostada con panceta

In addition to creating the dishes, the glocal element is also manifested in a representation of indicative predominance when the participants are taken to places known as emblematic of the Uruguayan culture to

prepare their recipes. In addition, in MCU's case, in the presentation of the show, there are posters with the word "Uruguay" written in blue, color that symbolizes the country, specially regarding football (a representation with symbolic predominance).

Regarding the notion of mesocracy, the values associated to it can also be observed in the attitude of the winning team of LC. The participants had always highlighted their belief in group work and never the group showed any indication they knew they would win. In the final episode (number 18), in their soliloquys, the members of the team (self)named Magna said: "It is great to be in the finals, I believe we deserve it"; "We arrived here with effort... A lot of it"; "Now, we have a 50/50 chance, I think we will win"; "But we can't trust that yet"; "I have more faith in my team than in myself". The testimonials, enunciated by participants of the winning team, clearly show the great value of humility, also present in the attitude of the first winner of MCU, Nilson. We can establish that the idea of not standing out is settled in the core of the socio-cultural and ideological concept of mesocracy. In LC's case, the participants of the winning team remained in an attitude of suppressing pride, any shadow of vanity, an extreme attempt of putting oneself into a measured space, a traditionally idealized middle-ground by the Uruguayan nation.

### **Final considerations**

The present study consists of a formal analysis of the chosen shows which applies the categories of Peirce's phenomenology that sustain the definition of triadic sign, in other words, icon, index and symbol, instead of a reception study of these shows. We observed that there is a representation of cultural aspects that is central for the meaning of the TV shows we've investigated. They do not only refer to the production of dishes recognized as typical from the cuisine of each country in MC's franchise. In addition, these shows operate as a true social window, in which essential components of the social imaginary of each community are shown, highlighted and legitimated.

The local gastronomic references are present every time the contestants need to prepare dishes in places recognized as emblematic for the society where the show is produced. Through different behaviors, not only culinary, these representations of the social imaginary are present, and, what is even more important for our analysis, are highlighted in the attitude of each aspiring chef.

The constitutive elements of the structure of the show, as the participant's soliloquy and the expressive behavior of the judges, work to guide the expectator, to indicate which is the most adequate way to consume this format. The semiotic behavior of the show orients the audience so that they know in detail the identities presented by the participants, more than the ingredients and the way of preparing the dishes shown on MC. The result of this rhetoric and narrative strategy is that the self of these men and women are staged and shown in a continuous development. This structure makes the gastronomic element be in the background. Instead of highlighting the elements that typify a talent show, they finally appear as predominant, the elements that define and characterize the genre reality show. Thus, the judges always try to take the participants to develop the most adequate roles in the emblematic or representative point of view regarding their original country. Guided by the script of the format, through strong comments, the judge seeks to produce immediate physical reactions in the participants. Thus, prevail the indicative signs about symbols. This strategy generates the mediatic and semiotic effect that we call "sign transpiration" (ANDACHT, 2003, p. 43). It's about inseparable signs from the participant's body that appear as evidences of authenticity and operate as an additional and fundamental "seasoning" for MC.

On the other hand, in this narrative economy, the soliloquy contributes to highlight the identity dimension. It is about a class of performance or self-enactment that unavoidably reduces the importance of the gastronomic aspect that, supposedly, is the main ingredient in MC. The soliloquy has the role of calming a problem or crisis in the development of a possible explanation, credible to the event according to the

participant, especially when there is a strong tension regarding their performance or the interaction with other participants. That makes the dramaturgical enactment work so that the individuals work constantly in the elaboration and adaptation of their performative roles.

If we go back to the triadic relations that Peirce (CP 1.530) calls comparison, function and thinking, we see that the structure of MC seeks to reinforce the relations of comparison and function. For that to happen, it is fundamental to have the behavior already described from the judges and the recurring presence of the soliloquy as a rhetoric device revealing the participant's identity in its relationship with the judges and other people in the show.

In LC's case, the relationships that prevail are the ones of "thinking", because they always seek to establish didactic laws and definitions of gastronomic elements involved so that the participants can obtain a good knowledge of the gastronomic field. This elements makes the show closer to the genre talent show.

The social imaginary is manifested in an explicit way through the characteristics of the winners of the culinary competition. For example, Nilson, the winner of the first season of MCU, embodies in a paradigmatic way the typical resident of the Uruguayan mesocracy. His actions are so close to that ideal that his behavior seem to be an authentic reincarnation of this stereotype. Mesocracy as ideal that regulates behaviors appear as a central component of the Uruguayan social imaginary, an ethical principle that seem to be very relevant to organize the values of a population. In summary, in cases where the winners are accepted by the viewers, the profile enacted by them carry identity traits that outline the prevailing stereotypes of their respective countries. We infer, therefore, that the analyzed shows fulfill the role of representing not only the signs of a gastronomy typical of each region, but also presenting certain values that are in agreement with the traditional culture of each place where the show is produced.

## References

- ANDACHT, F. *El reality show: una perspectiva analítica de la televisión*. Buenos Aires: Norma, 2003.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Signos reales del Uruguay imaginado*. Montevideo: Trilce, 1992.
- \_\_\_\_\_.; MARQUIONI, C. **Conversando com a comida: MasterChef e o solilóquio como acesso privilegiado à autenticidade**. *Famecos – Mídia, Cultura e Tecnologia*. Porto Alegre: Universidade Católica do Rio Grande do Sul, v. 24, n. 2, 2017.
- \_\_\_\_\_. Jogando com a comida: MasterChef e os recursos televisuais que tornam espetacular uma atividade ordinária. *E-compós*, v. 19, n. 2, p. 1-16, 2016.
- ASLAMA, M.; PANTTI, M. Talking alone: reality TV, emotions and authenticity. *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, v. 9, n. 2, p. 167-184, 2006.
- BARTHES, R.; GENETTE, G.; KRISTEVA, J.; METZ, C.; MORIN, V.; TODOROV, T. *Lo verosimil*. Buenos Aires: Tiempo contemporáneo, 1968.
- CASTORIADIS, C. *La institución imaginaria de la sociedad*. México: Tusquets Editores, 2013.
- COLAPIETRO, V. *Peirce's approach to the self. A semiotic perspective on human subjectivity*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989.
- CORNER, J. Performing the real. *Television & New Media*, v. 3, n. 3, p. 255-269, 2002.
- DYER, R. Stereotyping. In: \_\_\_\_\_. (Ed.). *Gays and film*. Nova York: Zoetrope, 1984. p. 353-365.
- GOFFMAN, E. *La presentación de la persona en la vida cotidiana*. Buenos Aires: Amorrortu, 2012.
- HAY, J.; OUELLETTE, L. Makeover television, governmentality and the good citizen. *Continuum: Journal of Media & Cultural Studies*, v. 22, n. 4, p. 471-484, 2008.
- HILL, A. Reality TV experiences: audiences, fact and fiction. In: OUELLETTE, L. (Ed.). *A companion to reality television*. Chichester, Reino Unido: John Wiley & Sons, 2014. p. 116-133.
- LA FINAL DE MASTERCHEF reventó los ratings con 21,2 puntos. *El Observador*, 25 jul. 2017. Disponível em: <https://www.elobservador.com.uy/nota/la-final-de-masterchef-revento-los-ratings-con-21-2-puntos-201772510240>. Acesso em: 7 mar. 2019.
- MARQUIONI, C.; OLIVEIRA, C. **Para além da competição: consumindo afetos como cultura material no programa MasterChef**. *Conexão*. Caxias do Sul: UCS, v. 15, n. 28, 2015.
- PEIRCE, C. S. *The collected papers of C. S. Peirce*. Ed. C. Hartshorne, P. Weiss e A. Burk. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1931-1958.
- REAL DE AZÚA, C. *El impulso y su freno*. Montevideo: Banda Oriental, 1964.
- TAYLOR, C. Modern social imaginaries. *Public Culture*, v. 14, n. 1, p. 91-124, 2002.



## About the authors

*Karina Abdala* - Graduated in Communication at UdelaR-FIC. Student of Masters in Human Sciences, option Anthropology, at Cuenca do Plata, UdelaR-FHUCE. She integrates the research group of the project “Identities of consumption. Imaginary and cultural lifestyles in contemporary Uruguay” (UdelaR-FIC).

*Fernando Andacht* – PhD in Philosophy at University of Bergen, Norway (1998). MA in Linguistics at Ohio University. Graduated in Languages at Facultad de Humanidades y Ciencias, Universidad de la República, Montevideo. Fullbright scholar (1991) and at the Foundation Alexander von Humboldt (1997-1998). Researcher level 2, National System of Researchers ANII/Uruguay. Professor and coordinator at the Department of Theory and Methodology, Facultad de Información & Comunicación, Universidad de la República, Montevideo. Invited professor at the Post-graduate program in Communication and Languages at Universidade Tuiuti from Paraná, Curitiba. He was a professor and researcher at Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Sul (2002-2003), at Unisinos (2004-2005), at University of Ottawa (2006-2015) and at Universidad Nacional de Córdoba (2007-).

---

Date of submission: 09/03/2019

Date of acceptance: 11/06/2019