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You are What You Eat!?: Television Cooking Shows, Consumption, and Lifestyle Practices as Adult Learning

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Abstract: A discussion of the public pedagogy of “celebrity chef” cooking shows, their promotion of consumer life-styles, and alternative cooking shows as sites of resistance to those lifestyles.

Purpose of the Study

Noam Chomsky (2003) has led an ongoing discussion about how a few multinational corporations have “manufactured the consent” of the American public for undemocratic public policies, environmentally damaging lifestyles, and oppressive cultural norms—despite the fact that such ideologically-laden actions are in sharp conflict with the interests of the majority of the population, the health of the culture, and the sustainability of the planet. In this research, we posit that one arena through which this hegemony is played out is televised cooking shows. We view these cooking shows as cultural products encoded with meanings that help shape audiences’ identities, lifestyles, and relationships to consumer culture. Our research is thus grounded in two emerging areas of study within adult education. One explores consumption as a site where adults engage in learning. Sassatelli (2007) explains that to live in a consumer society means satisfying one’s daily needs through capitalistic modes of production and consumption. That is, individuals do not produce their own goods for their own use and satisfaction of their daily needs; instead, they buy and use commodities that are mass produced, exchanged, and made available for purchase. Consumption is a complex set of social, economic, and cultural practices that are “interconnected with . . . the spread of the market economy, a developing globalization, the creation and recreation of national traditions, [and] a succession of technological and media innovations, etc.” (Sassatelli, 2007, pp. 5-6). Sassatelli argues that consumption holds strong social, political, and cultural implications. Adult education researchers focused on consumption believe that everyday moments of consumption constitute a powerful form of “public pedagogy” where adults learn what it means to be “consumers” and “citizens” (Jubas, 2008; Usher, 2008). The small but growing interest among adult educators in exploring issues of consumption (Jarvis, 2008; Jubas, 2008; Usher, 2008; Usher, Bryant, & Johnston 1997), has produced work that is beginning to help us understand how learning and education are related to the practices of consumption. Usher, Bryant, and Johnston (1997) posit that we cannot understand adult learning without understanding the role played by consumption in the lives of adults.

A large body of work within cultural studies has focused on *cultural* consumption, or how “cultural texts or artifacts are used in everyday life” (Mackay, 1997, p. 3). Cultural texts and artifacts include popular media commodities such as television, movies, and magazines. The second, closely related, area of study within adult education into which we place our work, then, is the production and consumption of mass media and popular culture as forms of “public pedagogy” that educate adult learners and help shape both their understandings of society and their own identities (Wright & Sandlin, in press). Television viewing, in particular, is an increasingly ubiquitous space of cultural consumption, as television audiences consume, decode, and make meaning of the cultural texts presented through this medium. As Storey (1996, p. 9) argues, television is “without doubt the world’s most popular leisure activity.” In this study we

examine how popular television cooking shows produce, package, commodify, and market food-related “lifestyles” for their audiences. The purpose of this study is to consider the hegemonic forces behind the growing phenomenon of television cooking-show programming which reinforce the agendas of huge multinational corporations while simultaneously undermining the health and self-image of a large percentage of the American viewing public. We also examine “alternative” cooking shows as potential sites of resistance. As Foucault (1987) insists, there can be no power structures without the possibilities for resistance.

Theoretical Framework

We draw from Du Gay, Hall, Janes, Mackay, and Negus’s (1997) notion of the “circuit of culture,” as well as from a Gramscian approach to cultural studies of consumption. The “circuit of culture” model points to five different yet inter-related universal cultural processes: representation, identity, production, consumption, and regulation. The circuit of culture model reminds us that to fully understand a cultural product, we must understand how it is represented, “what social identities are associated with it, how it is produced and consumed, and what mechanisms regulate its distribution and use” (Du Gay et al., 1997, p. 3). A Gramscian approach views consumption as a space of contestation where hegemony is played out; in this view “consumption is akin to communication, and goods are better than, for instance, prayers or stories in making visible the categories of culture . . . Routine and ritualised consumption practices train participants in the relevance and cultural content of social categories, inequalities and diversities associated with gender, race, class, and age” (Martens, 2005, p. 346).

We also draw from Usher, Bryant, and Johnston’s (1997) and Usher’s (2008) critical postmodern approach to learning through consumption. This work focuses on consumption as a “sign economy” where lifestyles and the symbolic and aesthetic meanings of groups of objects—and their impact on identity development—have become more important than any particular commodity’s use-value. Lifestyle practices involve expressive modes of learning, the creation and re-creation of identity, and the “self-referential concern with style and image” (Usher, Bryant & Johnston, 1997, p. 18). Usher, Bryant, and Johnston (1997, p. 18) explain that this ongoing re-creation of identity, with its concern with aestheticisation, creates the need for “a learning stance towards life as a means of self-expression and autonomy.” As the focus of modern life has become crafting meaningful lifestyles (through consumption), Usher (2008) posits that the desire to create these lifestyles motivates individuals to *learn* in multiple and varied ways. Given the emphasis within lifestyle practices on “novelty, fashion, taste, and style,” lifestyle practices “are practices of consumption and moreover of a consumption which is potentially unending, since as desire can never be satisfied, there is always the need for new experiences and new learning” (Usher, Bryant, and Johnston, 1997, p. 18). Much of this learning takes place outside formal institutions of education. Learning and knowledge themselves also become commodities, as individuals purchase and consume them for their own symbolic value.

Methodology

The concept of “bricolage” (Kincheloe, 2001) aptly describes methodology in cultural studies. That is, scholars using the framework of cultural studies to examine popular culture must be “pragmatic and strategic in choosing and applying different methods and practices” (Alasuutari, 1995, p. 2). Johnson et al. (2004) argue that while there are a variety of specific methods used in cultural studies, in general there are two broad approaches to methodology: what they call *readings*, which focus on understanding culture through textual means, and *meetings*, which focus on direct encounters with other humans, via ethnographic methods. We were concerned with *reading*, via critical textual analysis, the meanings of cooking shows. Connecting

with the cultural circuit mentioned above, we were concerned with all nodes of the circuit, but paid particular attention to how these shows are produced, the kinds of lifestyle representations that are encoded in the shows, and how these representations connect with particular identities. We conducted a textual analysis of two of the most-watched mainstream cooking shows: *Emeril Live* and *Rachael Ray's 30 Minute Meals*, and two "alternative" cooking shows: the *Post Punk Kitchen* and *Sam the Cooking Guy*. We viewed each show as a "case study" (Yin, 1994) but also sought to understand how these shows related to each other (intertextuality) and to explore the genre of these cooking shows generally. Data included episodes of the shows, websites sponsored by the shows, and analyses of the "product universe" surrounding the shows (cookbooks, cookware, restaurants, etc.). Analysis included qualitative ethnographic media analysis, critical media analysis, and constant comparative analysis.

Findings

Our analysis of the "celebrity chef" cooking shows is reflected in three over-arching themes. First, these shows present hosts that *intentionally create a persona of the "every-person," the common cook*. Bam! Emeril is a good-ol-boy who'll show regular folk how to "kick it up a notch." And Rachael Ray is the girl-next-door who'll show working-class wives how to regularly create gourmet feasts in 30 minutes for pennies a day, right? Wrong. With his doctorate from the Johnson and Wales University culinary program and commanding more than \$25,000 per episode (for *each* of his various shows), Emeril Lagasse pretends a "crass working-class credentialism" (Miller, 2007, p. 132) for profit. And Rachael Ray, whose television persona is the "girl-next-door" who can relate to busy working women, grew up in a wealthy family of restaurateurs. Second, the shows are actually multi-million dollar enterprises that *blur the lines between advertising and content*. The Food Network is owned by Scripps Network Interactive (70%) and the Tribune Company (30%) whose joint holdings cover a myriad of commercial products and services promoted on the shows. While 7 to 8 minutes of each 30 minute program is comprised of an average of 15 commercials, product placement within the 22 minutes or so of "content" make the educative aspect suspect. In fact, according to Ketchum (2005), the shows are simply infomercials for the hosts' product lines and the sponsors. Emeril and Rachael each have almost incomprehensibly diverse and lucrative business interests including restaurants, magazines, food, cookware, and cookbooks, to name a few. Finally, the products they sell are fully integrated into *lifestyles of consumption and consumerism*. Even with these two hosts, the range of culinary tastes is designed to appeal to all lifestyle preferences. Emeril's machismo and Rachel's coy femininity are magnified or subdued based on the intended audience for their different shows. Equally diverse are the settings, each kitchen tastefully and expensively furnished with all the latest gadgets (available on their websites). Rachael also hosts a travel/food show highlighting fine restaurants in the cities she visits. The goal is to create lifestyle shows that will appeal to the broadest possible audience base. Moreover, the shows purport to "teach" audience members to be "better" and to cultivate "more refined" tastes than they currently have. They offer the identity of "connoisseur," as they promote the appreciation of gourmet ingredients, fresh organic foods, and specialty items. The implication for viewers is that they are somehow neglecting family and friends if they cannot provide the tasteful (and superior) sensations of food and home represented on the shows. They market luxury items as basic needs for their viewers' lifestyles. Ketchum (2005, p. 217) argues that cooking shows "carefully construct a consumer fantasy world for its viewers . . . [with] explicit advice in both advertising and programming, about how the viewer can realize the commodity fantasies." She further argues that the *Food Network* (which hosts both celebrity chefs among 45 others) "encourages people to conceptualize

their desires in terms of commodities and to see social connections as bonds that are formed through the acquisition and display of goods” (p. 218). *Emeril Live*, *Emeril Green*, *The Essence of Emeril* and *Emeril Live: Fine Living* air daily. Rachael Ray’s *30 Minute Meals*, *Rachael Ray’s Tasty Travels*, *Inside Dish*, and *\$40 a Day* on the *Food Network* now compete with her hour long celebrity talk show on ABC, *The Rachael Ray Show*, winner of the 2008 Daytime Emmy for Outstanding Talk Show. Cooking, of course, features prominently, along with guests ranging from former President Bill Clinton to comedian Jeff Foxworthy. This hour-long, 5-days-a-week promotional program is filled with product placements, as well as over 15 minutes of overt advertising.

A Taste of Something Different? In addition to the celebrity chef shows, we also examined two “alternative” cooking shows. Both Sam Zien of *Sam the Cooking Guy* and Isa Chandra Moskowitz of the *Post Punk Kitchen* position themselves as “different” from the celebrity chefs on mainstream cooking shows. *Sam the Cooking Guy* features Sam Zien who claims that his inspiration came from watching TV chefs who made very complicated food that most viewers would never make at home. His show airs on the Discovery Health Channel as well as on local channels throughout the Southwest. Like the celebrity chefs, Sam positions himself as an “everyday guy,” stressing that not only is he not a *chef*, he has no formal culinary experience, having worked in the biotech industry before starting his cooking show in 2005. He wants to make cooking “casually understandable,” hence differentiating himself from the celebrity chefs. He states, “With no fancy equipment and by speaking English instead of ‘chef-speak,’ I’m sort of the everyman of television cooking.” He explains, “My goal is not to get people to go to a restaurant, my goal is for people to say ‘Hey, I can make that.’” The show is filmed in his own house, and viewers see him bumbling around his kitchen, using ingredients in his cupboard and interacting with his kids, dogs, and neighbors, “just like we all do.” He uses ingredients viewers can buy at regular grocery stores, including pre-cooked and pre-assembled ingredients. He states, “there’s no fois gras. . . no white truffle oil, no ‘Peruvian mountain-raised squab in sesame-lime-soy marinade stuffed with braised forest turnips and wild inoki mushrooms in a hand pressed plum and raspberry glaze.’ I’m just a regular guy, using regular words showing how to cook easy, great food. . . . This is a cooking show ‘for the rest of us,’ I like to say.” While Sam seems to eschew much of the focus on “connoisseurship” and lifestyle promotion featured in the celebrity chef shows, he recently began selling a cookbook, cooking appliances, knives, dinnerware, and t-shirts through his website, thecookingguy.com. This site offers prominent advertising space to Rachael Ray and also sells her cookware along with Sam’s. These goods are marketed as “Sam’s Favorites” and include items he uses on his show and his own product line. While the range and scope of items sold is smaller than those of the celebrity chefs for now, and while his “outsider” and “everyman” persona seems more genuine than the celebrity chefs, we posit that Sam’s “alternative” status is gradually being incorporated into another commodified lifestyle choice.

The *Post Punk Kitchen* is a public access television cooking show airing in New York City (and now available on the Internet) and featuring Isa Chandra Moskowitz. Isa grew up in Brooklyn, New York. As a teenager, she became involved in the anarchist movement in New York, helping to turn abandoned buildings into homes, to create community gardens, and to create news, music, and entertainment, including ‘zines (do-it-yourself magazines). Also during this time, Isa was introduced to vegetarianism, became involved with social justice groups such as *Food Not Bombs*, and began connecting food to politics and health. In 2003 she became disillusioned with the cooking shows on TV, because they lacked any connection to the politics of food, and decided to create a vegan cooking show. The *Post Punk Kitchen* embraces the punk

idea of “Do It Yourself,” or DIY, wherein “the unpolished, improvised nature of DIY projects results in something much more interesting than most overtly commercial efforts” (Moskowitz, 2005, p. xiii). Within this punk rock ethic, Isa explains, “we can create our own forms of entertainment. We don’t have to sit back idly and wait for something to happen—we can make it happen” (p. 3). The DIY ethic is also decidedly anti-corporation, as Isa explains: “The Post Punk Kitchen is a ‘Bam!’-free space for vegetarians and food-lovers everywhere that came into being in 2003, born out of frustration over the garbage that the *Food Network* was trying to feed the masses (no pun intended). We believe that the airwaves and the risotto are for the people, not for corporations trying to peddle their processed-cheese wares. And we just really, really, really could not take another second of Rachael Ray saying ‘EVOO’” (p. 174). Isa’s show is filmed in her apartment, with the help of friends and neighbors.

The *Post Punk Kitchen* explicitly rejects prepackaged food products. Isa stresses that reliance on prepackaged foods is “culinarily incorrect”—that is, she argues “great cooks depend on fresh ingredients” (p. 1). This stance is not simply about cultivating a disposition for “fine, gourmet foods.” In her cookbook *Vegan with a Vengeance*, Isa urges readers to avoid convenience foods, because relying on such foods “makes us vegans dependent on huge corporations with shady policies. It’s nicer to spend our money on locally grown vegetables and small independent businesses wherever possible” (p. 1). Avoiding such foods “will help wean you from the corporate teat while at the same time saving you money and encouraging you to support local growers” (p. xiii). Above all, Isa holds to the principle that food and politics are inextricably linked. She states, “Eating is a moral act or a political statement, depending on whom you ask. When you choose to stop eating animal products and supporting big business, you prove both statements to be correct” (p. xiv). Isa’s website, <http://www.theppk.com> offers only recipes, a forum, and advice. We posit that the *Post Punk Kitchen*’s focus on the politics and health of food, and its DIY production and distribution on public access television, constitute a resistant stance that positions this show in opposition to the celebrity chef shows and their corporate backers discussed above.

Discussion and Implications for Adult Education

Disguised as educational cooking lessons, the “celebrity chef” cooking shows promote an upper-middle-class lifestyle enhanced by the appropriation of goods and commodities. All the while, real issues surrounding the life-sustaining reality of food are ignored. These shows never mention global hunger, genetically altered food, or the recent increase in food-borne disease. Thirty years ago, instances of food-borne illness were rare in the U.S., but today, “infected food makes seventy-six million people ill each year. Five thousand die, and 325,000 are hospitalized, at a public health cost of U.S. \$10 billion” (Miller, 2007, p. 119). Moreover, between 1980 and 2000, adult obesity grew by 80%. While there are clear correlations between obesity and the prices of fresh fruit and vegetables, the “the high moralism so prevalent in the U.S. media has led to a doctrine of personal responsibility, militating against both collective identification and action” (Miller, 2007, p. 120). Meanwhile, the media offer cooking shows selling a lifestyle of “unattainable and unrealistic images of consumer bliss” (Ketchum, 2005, p. 220) while multinationals are promoting cheaper genetically-modified (GM) crops in the U.S. (crops banned in most first world countries). Monsanto produces over 90% of GM crops worldwide and Bayer Cropscience, Du Pont, Dow and Syngenta produce the rest. With no public education on the risks and potential environmental problems associated with GM foods, these “multinationals will soon run global food production, pressuring states to buy from them and excluding other forms of farming from the market” (Miller, 2007, p. 138). Celebrity chefs also fail to mention how the

U.S. is “feeding off of others in the world” (Meister, 2001, p. 165) by failing to address pressing issues in global food production such as cheap labor, human exploitation and environmental damage.

Usher (2008) raises questions about what it means for adult educators to operate within a hyperconsumer world where individuals are often engaged in expressive, aesthetic, and identity-based learning as they enact lifestyle practices. For a way out, Usher looks to the “rhizomatic” learning occurring in the new social movements that are emerging in resistance to consumerism and its myriad negative social, economic, and environmental consequences. We posit that the *Post Punk Kitchen* plays this kind of resistant role. And we argue that critical adult educators should address issues of public pedagogy surrounding *literal* consumption in the life-world—food and its use by multinationals to create all-pervasive consumer lifestyles.

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