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Spectacular Culinary Tourism: A Model in Critical Television Viewing

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Spectacular Culinary Tourism: A Model in Critical Television Viewing

Overview and Activity Rational

Early television marketers described the technology as a “window” to the world outside the home. Today, food related programming enacts this idea in new ways, offering the spectator images of unfamiliar foods, cooking styles, market spaces, and eating contexts from distant neighborhoods, countries, and cultures within the safe confines of one’s living room. Nevertheless, such televisual spectacles of so-called “culinary tourism” are not without moments of tension between pleasure and disgust, the familiar and the strange, the self and the other, the local and the global. In contrast to “in the flesh” material encounters with the so-called “exotic,” television is a medium touted for its more “vicarious” forms of pleasure (Adema, 2000). As such, television demands distinct methods of analysis. Even the celebratory consumption of new cuisines can likewise be framed and mediated in ways that tend to encourage dominant, conservative acts of decoding—interpretations in line with normative conceptions of American values (Hall, 1993). This assignment offers students a model in critical television viewing, by exploring the polysemic nature of mass-mediated “American” engagements with “Chinese” foodways.

Since the growth of food-related programming—led by the Food Network in the 1990s—television has done much to shape popular tastes and perceptions about foods and people. Travel shows are one popular television food genre, introducing audiences to food goods and cooking styles from other regions and cultures. Shows like *Bizarre Foods* with Andrew Zimmern take viewers around the world, while emphasizing the excitement and satisfaction of eating outside of familiar American frames. This practice, termed “culinary tourism,” is marked, according to Anthropologist Lucy Long, by any activity in which food is the subject, medium, vehicle or destination of tourism. While restaurants can make a dish seem alternatively more exotic or more palatable through such things as naming, environment, garnishes, plate settings, etc., television as a medium locates different foods on an axis from bland to foreign, and even from edible to inedible, through such things as narrative, framing, editing and a range of preproduction choices. Television thus spectacularizes culinary tourism in myriad distinct ways that reflect and construct not only popular American ideals about new foods, but also about the peoples—whether at home or abroad—that are represented as eaters of unfamiliar, exotic, or potentially unpleasant or dangerous foods.

This in-class assignment asks students to think critically about television genre conventions, narrative structures, setting and culinary choices, as well as the production and post-production film and editing practices, that shape not just how we understand food, but how we come to see individuals, groups, or nationalities associated with the edibles. The assignment involves two distinct programs that each display an “American” encounter with specifically “Chinese” foods. In scholarship about foodways, globalization, and mass media, there is concern that while recognition of diversity or difference on television can suggest positive challenges to systems of hegemony it can also operate as a troubling process of commodification and/or appropriation of an Other. As bell hooks reminds us, the negative side of the potentially politically empowering prospect of finding pleasure or desire in Otherness is that cultural, racial, or ethnic differences

might become, as ephemeral foodgoods, “continually commodified and offered up as new dishes to enhance the white palate – that the Other will be eaten, consumed, and forgotten” (380). The over-arching aim of this in-class activity is to enable students to identify these tensions and articulate the ways in which television structures and displays food in ways that also shape a sense of “ourselves” and of “others.” Such encounters often contain complex and often contradictory messages that provide the stuff of active, lively class discussion, while illustrating the need for clarity and consistency in written work.

This critical viewing project can be tailored to place more emphasis on either social and cultural representation or television form. I have used a version of the assignment in both an introductory lecture course on “Food in American Culture” and a senior seminar specifically on “Food Media.”

Framework for Screening and Discussion

This lesson is appropriate for a 2-3 hour seminar with the possibility for an additional essay assignment. This is not intended as a comprehensive introduction to food television—the assignment presupposes at least some previous conversations about the medium. Students are expected to prepare for class by reading the article, “Culinary Tourism” by Anthropologist Lucy Long, which sets up the terms of the conversation outside of the structures of television.

Introduction to Culinary Tourism: Why Food Related Travel Shows Matter

Long defines culinary tourism as “the *intentional, exploratory* participation in the *foodways* of an *other*. Participation, in this sense, includes the consumption, preparation, and presentation of a food item, cuisine, meal system, or eating style considered to belong to a culinary system *not one’s own*” (21). This article allows for fruitful discussion of the terms and conditions I present here in italics: What are foodways? What denotes intent? What sorts of activities might this entail? What do our own individual foodways look like and where do these come from? How is “otherness” determined in terms of food habits and beliefs?

The majority of the day’s focus, then, is to consider how mass culture reflects, reproduces, and rewrites these ideas to ask how television spectacles shape cultural beliefs about foods in unique ways. Indeed, contemporary travel shows about food spectacularize the notion of culinary tourism and make the individual encounter with difference, something you can have from your couch. In doing so, shows like Anthony Bourdain’s *No Reservations* reflect and reproduce distinctions about foods and cultures that shape the popular American understandings of: “traditional,” “authentic,” “edible,” “exotic,” “foreign,” “gross,” “other.”

Screening 1

“China,” *Anthony Bourdain: No Reservations*, Season 1, Episode 10, The Travel Channel, March 2006.

Screen the *first 10 minutes* of the show including the opening sequence and credits. Look for:
a. narrative structure of the show overall

- b. how Anthony Bourdain is characterized
- c. how we are being introduced to Beijing and Chinese food
- d. the visual and verbal descriptions of food and cooking styles

Questions for Clip One

How does the show frame Bourdain's adventure with food—what else is shown or told about China? Bourdain suggests that, in contrast to the American Cold War impressions of China, the country is no longer the “backward monolith it once was.” Is there anything about his depictions (either visual or verbal) of Chinese foodways that, instead, reinforce this negative stereotypical view of the country and its cultures? Specifically, how are pickled goods talked about, or what did you notice about the shop? If Bourdain eating duck offers us a spectacle of culinary tourism, what impressions are we given about our guide, the practice in itself, or the representation of Beijing foodways? Students should begin to note that there is a central tension evident in this clip between Chinese food as hallmark of a longstanding artful and influential cuisine, and at the same time a perpetuation of Chinese food as anachronistic and primitive foodways.

Screening 2: “China” Continued

Bourdain's show incorporates non-culinary cultural practices in addition to his adventures in food. The choices made by the show's producers about which activities to include are a valuable part of the conversation about this image of Chinese arts, cultures and peoples offered to the American viewer. However, in the interest of time, I suggest skipping a calligraphy lesson and screening minutes 15:00-20:00 of the Beijing episode, which returns specifically to local foodways.

Questions for Clip Two

What is the hallmark of a “great cuisine” according to Bourdain? What sorts of food details stood out for you in this clip? Does the spectacle emphasize instruction, appreciation, disgust, or something else—how so? How are foods that are potentially “undesirable” for a mainstream American audience presented? Consider such things as *preparations by the cook*, but also *by the camera*—is there any effort to camouflage or gloss over the sheep and cow stomachs to make these meats more palatable to the viewer/eater? Compare this display to what Roland Barthes terms the practice of “smooth coating” used by upscale magazines. In his article “Ornamental Cookery” Barthes underscores the tension between the idealized image of food and the actual lives of *Elle* magazine's working class readership for whom cooking and eating is real rather than magical. He describes the concerns and practices of ordinary people who eat to live versus the “gentile cookery” of garnishes and excess perpetuated by magazine spreads that use sauces, jellies, and glazes that tend to cover or disguise the brutality of meats, and, in doing so, tend to hide the essential natures of food goods. Barthes draws attention to an ideological meaning about social class enacted through magazine food images rendered “for the eye alone” (Barthes, 1972). Following his model, how might we understand the displays of edibles in *No Reservations*? Think about a recent trip you made to a restaurant—were there any components of that experience NOT evident in this scene? Describe the setting/space of consumption in this clip? Does this tell us anything about the anticipated clientele versus what you might experience

in a hotel restaurant that caters to tourists? How does Bourdain respond to the food/drink, and through him, how are we as viewers encouraged to think about these foods or ways of life?

Some Conclusions for *No Reservations*

To summarize, connect interpretations of the show to the potential meanings of culinary tourism more broadly—do any of these messages resonate with your reading of the show’s meaning? (Note: For a media class these interpretations might also be connected to Stuart Hall’s distinctions between Dominant, Negotiated, or Oppositional acts of decoding).

- 1) Optimistic Political Potential—culinary tourism suggests active efforts to engage difference at the level of the body. It suggests a willingness to physically connect with the cultural worlds of other peoples.
- 2) Eating the Other may in fact tell us much more about ourselves than another culture.
- 3) We can also interpret the impulse to eat difference as a colonialist or hegemonic practice. It can suggest an effort to master or appropriate another’s culinary traditions. (Another dimension of this last observation is also true of television shows in which the culture of another part of the world is made spectacle for American viewers.)

(Optional) Clip 3: Additional Viewing or Topic for Related Essay Question

Screen: Clips from “Episode 6: That’s Love, Baby! Make You Strong,” *Survivor: China*, CBS, 25 October 2007.

If time allows, this third example takes television spectacles of culinary adventures with foreign foods to the extreme. View and discuss the “gross” food challenge popularized by the reality television show *Survivor*, specifically displayed in episode 6 of *Survivor: China*. Can this example be considered food tourism—if not, why not? How do these food choices, displays, and the conventions of the genre overall compare and contrast with those of *No Reservations*? What impression does the TV viewer understand about “Chinese” food from watching this competition? What lessons about ourselves and others can be drawn from this engagement with “foreign” food?

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Videos

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Biography

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