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Barefoot (Contessa) in the Kitchen

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Barefoot (Contessa) in the Kitchen

Overview and Rationale

It is well known that popular culture represents and perpetuates the gender inequities that exist in our culture. Food media are no exception (Swenson, 2013). In fact, food media use gendered cultural norms to sell audiences their products (the shows, the cookbooks, the advertisements during the shows, etc.). In other words, food media commodify gender by selling audiences what they already understand to be true about gender as a way to increase profit (Forbes, 2013).

Food media, and food television in particular, offer sites to examine the cultural struggles of gender. Both food and gender are intensely personal, social, and culturally specific phenomena (Barthes, 2013/1961). Further, television shapes the way we understand culture (Fiske, 2010). According to Cramer (2011):

As a manifestation of culture, food is one of the most potent media for conveying meanings related to identity, ethnicity, nationhood, gender, class, sexuality and religion – in short, all those aspects of social, political and relational life that convey who and what we are and what matters to us. (p. 317)

Food media promote gender inequities that devalue the work of women and perpetuate the long held belief that a woman's place is in the home; food media reiterate the public/private and active/passive divide between men (public/active) and women (private/passive) (Collins, 2010). In particular, cooking shows promote women's work as a form of emotional labor, wherein the work is meant to please others and make them feel comfortable or secure, while at the same time the work is largely undervalued because it is not "serious" work (Hochschild, 1979). Cooking shows on television relegate women to the home, cooking for her family or invited guests; in contrast, such shows elevate men as chefs within the public sphere (Forbes, 2013; Swenson, 2013).

From Giada De Laurentiis (*Everyday Italian*) to Demaris Phillips (*Southern at Heart*) women's cooking shows, and the women who host them, present women as carefree home cooks, working to serve the people they love. Conversely, men's cooking shows exhibit high-powered male chefs in stressful situations, working to expand their business. Women cook amidst familial time constraints (if any), from traditional recipes, and always with a budget in mind; men cook under the pressure of a fast paced kitchen, with refined educations and well-trained palates, and always with business savvy (Forbes, 2013). As such, the female chefs (read: cooks) on television are devalued (lower ratings and less celebrity status – as compared to their male peers), while the male chefs are highly valued. The resulting situation keeps women in an inferior, less powerful situation than their male counterparts, thus maintaining and perpetuating gender inequality via male superiority (Swenson, 2013).

In order to help alleviate the sexism inherent to food media, students must first recognize its existence. The purpose of this assignment is to unearth the sexism of food media by highlighting the differences between the construction of male and female chefs on television cooking shows. This assignment asks students to look at the power differentials, and the resulting gender inequities, between the male and female dichotomies of public/private, business/family, and status/servility on cooking shows. By engaging in a critical analysis of two hit cooking shows

(one male host and one female host), students will first see, then examine, and finally articulate the sexist nature of our current food media. The assignment combines reading the necessary food literature, examining media texts, and then writing a critical media analysis of the media texts in a Talking Points-style essay.

Necessary Readings

1. Understanding Television and Media Culture
 - a. Barthes (2013)
 - b. Cramer (2011)
 - c. Fiske (2010) – Chapters 1 and/or Chapters 10&11
2. Food Media as Gendered
 - a. Collins (2010)
 - b. Forbes (2013)
 - c. Hochschild (1970)
 - d. Swenson (2013)

Talking Points Essay

Talking Point essays are paragraphs written under brief headers—the talking point. Using a Talking Points style essay, allows for an organized compare/contrast approach through point-by-point analysis. A point-by-point analysis is a direct comparison of one topic with another topic. Using the guide below, students will select the point-by-point items they wish to use for their compare/contrast talking points. This will help students to keep their analysis and their understanding of food media focused and clear.

LESSON PLAN

Assignment Title *Barefoot (Contessa) in the Kitchen*

Lesson or Topics Covered

How do questions of gender and sexuality emerge and how do they manifest in food media? How do food media operate as sites of cultural struggle over competing competencies, values, tastes, and business imperatives? How are gender stereotypes perpetuated and commodified in food media?

Assignment Objectives

- To examine and articulate the sexist nature of our current food media
- To identify moments of gender inequality through comparing/contrasting two cooking shows
- To recognize themes and/or constructs regarding media-generated gender roles in food media
- To articulate gender stereotypes perpetuated by food media
- To interpret how audience-centered episodes commodify or commercialize ideas about gendered performance
- To understand how food media use gender as a commodity to sell not only food media themselves, but also food media products

Brief Description

Compare two episodes of cooking shows from the list provided. Choose one show from the list of female chefs and one show from the list of male chefs. While viewing the shows, be aware of the differences and similarities in the construction of gender roles and stereotypes of both gendered and cultural performances. Generate a Critical Analysis Media Comparison in a Talking Points-style essay as directed in the Detailed Assignment Description.

Examples of gendered shows – although not an exhaustive list.

Female Audience Centered Programs	Male Audience Centered Programs
Ina Garten: <i>Barefoot Contessa</i>	Robert Irvine: <i>Restaurant Express</i>
Ree Drummond: <i>The Pioneer Woman</i>	Duff Goldman: <i>Ace of Cakes</i>
Marcela Valladolid: <i>Mexican Made Easy</i>	Alton Brown: <i>Cutthroat Kitchen</i>
Giada De Laurentiis: <i>Everyday Italian</i>	Bobby Flay: <i>Food Nation</i>
Nigella Lawson: <i>Forever Summer</i>	Mario Batali: <i>Iron Chef America</i>

Time Line

This assignment is to be completed over the course of 1-2 weeks, depending on the level of the course and the students. Students will first need to read: Barthes (2013), Cramer (2011), and Fiske (2010) to understand the way media, food, and food media shape our culture. Next, the students will read Collins (2010), Forbes (2013), Hochschild (1970), and Swenson (2013) to understand the specifics of gender, in particular how gender is shaped by media, gender differentials in media and society, how food media reiterates many gendered cultural norms, and how gender can be commodified. Completing the readings may take upwards of one week of class time. The actual assignment can be done over a weekend or spanning across 2-3 class periods.

Detailed Assignment Description

In a Talking Points-style essay, provide a critical media analysis comparison of the two episodes that you have chosen. A Talking Points essay is an essay that is written with divisions by main points/prompts that are clearly explained in short essay answers.

For every main point that arises, write it down in your notes. After completing the viewing of the two episodes you have chosen, go back to these talking points and write your paragraphs out using the readings to support your claims. The purpose of using this format is to give you a quick and easy way of staying on track as you address the power differentials. The informal structure of the Talking Point essay allows students to focus their attention on the details of difference while also providing space for discussion in the classroom and the potential for a deeper analysis.

After choosing the shows to analyze, you may view the specific episodes during scheduled airtime or on Hulu, Netflix, foodnetwork.com, or another provider as long as the episode is relatively current. While viewing, consider the following in your critical analysis:

1. Thinking in terms of initial reactions, what do you notice? When did you notice it? What is happening in the episode that made you take notice? Are there points at which you reacted negatively/positively while you watched it?
2. Are the titles of the shows themselves problematic in any way, from a gender or cultural perspectives? If so, how?
3. Record any thoughts that are relevant topics for class discussions and thoughts related to readings from the class *as you watched the episode*. Provide examples of commodification of gender that illicit potential affects generated by viewing audiences. This is critical, because rather than going back and simply overlaying what we have read and discussed in class onto the episode, you are beginning the primary work of this project, which is putting the episodes you have chosen into direct conversation with the texts we've read.
4. In the readings, what theoretical concepts from the texts are represented in the episodes you chose to watch? How are these concepts used in your point-by-point comparison to develop your Talking Points style essay?
5. You are now ready to write your analysis. Take a moment and review your notes (I will ask you to staple these to the back of your paper). Your reactions will reveal the point-by-point compare/contrast that you need to explore for your Talking Points essay. The same issues that arise for you in watching the episodes may be the same issues that arise for you in the texts that we read. Identify and synthesize the talking points that you create from both your readings and the episodes that you watch. Create a single Talking Points essay that compares and contrasts your findings. Bring in additional readings when needed to support your claims. **Do NOT summarize the episodes you watched.** You may reference specific scenes for the purpose of your analysis. However, only include a synopsis of the episode's key ideas as they relate to our course and this assignment.

Use the point-by-point outline below for compare/contrast. Use this outline to also develop your Talking Point essay.

Talking Point (what is revealed/shown within the text):

Paragraph 1

- Idea 1 from topic/show 1:
-

- Idea 1 from topic/show 2:
-

Paragraph 2

- Idea 2 from topic/show 1:
-

- Idea 2 from topic/show 2:
-

Paragraph 3

- Idea 3 from topic/show 1:
-

- Idea 3 from topic/show 2:
-

Conclusion:

The advantages of using a point-by-point analysis are that each set of points stays close together making for easier development of the Talking Points style essay, your essay stays on topic and is clearly organized, and you avoid summarizing what you have watched and read (which is not how you do an analysis), rather you demonstrate an understanding of what you have watched in read through critical thinking.

Assessment: The rubric is as follows:

A. You have clearly watched the episodes: 5%

B. You identify/discuss main points and relate to authors discussed in class: 10%

C. Introduction: Total of 20%

1. **Episode Synopsis: 10%**

- i. Offers a synopsis of the episode's key ideas and their importance for the topic of gender, culture and communication.
- ii. Does NOT summarize.

2. **Thesis: 10%**

- i. Tells your reader what you have chosen to say about the work.
- ii. Tells your reader the specific ideas you are putting into conversation with the episodes and why.

D. Talking Points: 30%

1. Follows the structure you laid out in your introduction: **5%**
2. Offers a brief but thoughtful summation of the key ideas from each of the compared episodes. **5%**
3. Links main points from the readings to specific moments in the episodes. **10%**
4. Indicates thoughtful, critical engagement with both episodes and texts. **10%**

E. Conclusion 15%

1. Offers a brief review of your analysis **5%**
2. Provides further thoughtful reflections—either personal or analytical. These will be things that occur to you that were not included in your discussion. Are there questions that remain with you? This section need only be a couple of sentences. **10%**

F. Grammar and Syntax: 20%

1. **Grammar—10%:** Follow grammatical conventions please. Even though this is a Talking Points essay, there should be no run-on sentences, comma splices, passive voice or tense shifts.
2. **Syntax—10%:** Watch for syntactical issues beyond the grammatical basics. How are your sentences structured? Read your paper aloud. Does it make sense when you hear it? Aim for clarity.

Bibliography (Reading List for class)

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Biographies

Rachel E. Silverman (Ph.D., University of South Florida) is an Assistant Professor of Communication in the Department of Humanities and Social Science at Embry Riddle Aeronautical University. Dr. Silverman’s research focuses on the intersection of Jewish and LGBT identities in popular culture, women’s health, and social justice pedagogy.

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