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..Society of the Appetite

CELEBRITY CHEFS DELIVER CONSUMERS



The article forms part of broader research that interrogates the prevalence of food in the media and the paradigm shifts generated and perpetuated by new forms of media such as food television and the internet. This work departs from previous food research by concentrating not on what is communicated about food, but *how* it is communicated. The analysis is guided in part by Guy Debord's *The Society of the Spectacle* (1967), which offers a Marxist economic analysis of an increasingly image-dominated culture. With a primary focus on celebrity chefs, this paper argues two points. First, that celebrity chefs, like Hollywood stars, are overwhelmingly media products, implying an arbitrary relationship between food and celebrity. Second, that the real product of food media is not the celebrity chef, but the consumer. Food media creates a base of consumers whose appetites are literally and figuratively kept wanting; this is the new business of food.

Keywords: celebrity chefs, media, spectacle, Debord, Marx

In this paper I want to argue two points that contribute to a larger thesis on the role and development of present-day food media.¹ While the term *food media* refers broadly to the form and content of food in the media, my specific focus here is on contemporary celebrity chefs. First, I argue that celebrity chefs, like Hollywood stars, are overwhelmingly media creations. What this implies is that there no longer exists a direct correlation between cooking skills and celebrity status. This follows from a brief history of famous chefs, including how the concept of celebrity has undergone a transformation due, in large part, to the mechanisms of new and modern media such as the internet and reality TV. The generic similarities between food-related programming and reality TV lead to an analysis of the ideological underpinnings of food media, and to my concluding argument: although celebrity chefs are one of the leading products of food media, the bona fide product is the consumer. Whereas celebrity comes and goes, in food as in Hollywood, the consumer base remains constant. Celebrity chefs, in short, create an appetite for consumption that can never be satisfied. The success of modern food media is based on perpetuating this lack.

The theoretical framework for my discussion derives in part from *The Society of the Spectacle* (1967), in which Guy Debord (1931–1994) argues that our consumption of images—what he broadly terms the spectacle— informs hegemonic power structures by distracting us from actual social and material needs. The spectacle represents for Debord what commodity fetishism represents for Karl Marx: whether we increasingly spend our time watching other people's lives through television and films, or we invest a

material object with a value beyond its practical use, we risk alienating ourselves from our basic needs. We risk, in other words, not being able to tell the difference between what we need and what we want. This difference between needs and wants was crucial for both Marx and Debord, who set themselves the intellectual task of exposing the difference between representation, how things seem, and reality, how things are. As Marx wrote to his colleague Arnold Ruge in 1843, “The reform of consciousness consists entirely in making the world aware of its own consciousness, in arousing it from its dream of itself, in explaining its own actions to it” (Marx 1974: 209). Debord would echo this sentiment more than a century later: “So long as ... necessity remains a social dream, dreaming will remain a social necessity. The spectacle is the bad dream of modern society in chains, expressing nothing more than its wish for sleep. The spectacle is the guardian of that sleep” (Debord 1995: 21).

The question of representation and reality is pertinent to any discussion of reality TV and, indeed, to questions of food in the media because of the necessarily detached sensory experience of watching food being prepared and eaten. This vicariousness² manifests itself in the ambiguity of the word “consumption”—we consume images but not food, and through our enthrallment with the spectacle—in this case, the spectacle of celebrity chefs—we are also consumed by the images. Consumption of the consumer is played out in two ways. First, by keeping us watching, and second, through food media’s sphere of influence beyond television: advertising and, more specifically, the marketing of chef-branded commodities. Following the line of the consumer as the end product of this system, the second part of my title—*Celebrity Chefs Deliver Consumers*—refers to a film by video artists Richard Serra and Carlota Fay Schoolman, *Television Delivers People* (1973). The film, little over six minutes long, features a scrolling script which declares that the product of television is the viewer:

The Product of Television, Commercial Television, is the
Audience.

Television delivers people to an advertiser.

...

In commercial broadcasting the viewer pays for the privilege of
having himself sold.

It is the consumer who is consumed.

You are the product of t.v.

You are delivered to the advertiser who is the customer.

He consumes you.

(Serra and Schoolman 1973)

Here, Serra and Schoolman consolidate a final figurative sense of the word “consumption,” that is, to waste away.³ This is where the thesis of *Television*

Delivers People meets Debord, whose spectacle gives us the illusion of choice and power but which instead, he argues, methodically strips us of intellectual nourishment and competence. Likewise, when it comes to food media, there is no physical nourishment. Indeed, there is notable irony in the fact that an analysis of food media pivots on the word “consumption” despite a conspicuous absence of any actual ingestion of food or drink.⁴

To summarize, I propose that food media in general, and celebrity chefs in particular, form part of the spectacle that was the object of Debord’s critique. I further suggest shifting focus from the object looked at—the spectacle—to the subject of the gaze—the spectator. The simple answer to the question of what creates fame is that it is the consumer. Every person who watches a food show represents a cipher in a rating; every person who buys an Emerilware⁵ knife set contributes to his wealth and success. Furthermore, with the unprecedented expansion of new media that allows for increased interactivity and participation, I believe that our focus as critics needs to be not so much on who is doing the selling, but rather on who is buying (into) it and on the ideological implications of this consumer fidelity.

To support my arguments, I consider two texts that are arguably on the margins of food media. The first is a business card for a South African chef. The second is a brief teaser for celebrity chef Rachael Ray’s new talk show, which premiered in September 2006. The fact that they are not directly related to cooking in the sense that a food-related program would be is significant. Together, these two texts illustrate the extent to which food media and culinary celebrity are *not* about food and cooking. The texts also reveal, through their respective claims, something of the tenuous relationship between representation and reality. Finally, these two texts reveal that the people behind them are primarily in the business of creating neither food nor spectacle, but an emblematic hunger; the business of food media is the absence of fulfillment.

The business card belongs to a South African chef and local celebrity who agreed to talk to a class I teach on food media at the University of Cape Town. When her husband dropped her off that morning, she started by telling me that she deliberately wore no make-up because she wanted the students to see her as she is. She repeated to the class: “Look, I’m not some TV star; I’m just me, exactly what you see.” What we saw was a woman in uniform: blue jeans and a denim chef’s jacket discreetly embroidered with her corporate logo. She also wore sandals, burgundy toenails, a touch of red on the lips, and a little mascara.

On the card that she distributed to the class are listed ten functions in no apparent order: catering; celebrity chef; culinary consultant; food demonstrations; food styling; food touring; radio/TV presenter; cooking school; recipe development; events. She told us that her cookbooks outsell the Jamies⁶ and the Nigellas⁷ on local bookshelves, meaning that she must

be very successful. She was certainly very busy; after talking to my class, she was due for a radio interview, then back to her state-of-the-art studio kitchen for a team-building exercise, followed by some evening function. The following day she had a group of tourists lined up for a class on South African food where she'd be teaching them to make samoosas⁸ wrapped as spring rolls;⁹ South African "*à la me*," she called it.

There is something very unusual about seeing the term "celebrity" on a business card, because celebrity is not typically self-appointed, nor proclaimed. To be a celebrity, you have to be celebrated by someone; popular acclaim is the historical prerequisite for celebrity. Now, however, there exist different apparatuses for producing and perpetuating celebrity. A cursory overview of the star system that emerged in Hollywood, the most obvious celebrity factory, is instructive: the Hollywood star emerged at the beginning of the twentieth century and was not the result of any effort on the movie studios' parts. On the contrary, early film studios often tried to keep actors under low profiles in order to curb demands for higher salaries. But audiences soon developed an interest in the identities of actors who reappeared in films. It was this curiosity that alerted the studios to the fact that it would be the star as much as, if not more than, the filmic experience that would draw audiences. So came publicity departments which set to work to create and market stars, a procedure which involved selling a real live persona, though commonly with fictional backgrounds and histories, and often guised as a "type": the vamp, the cowboy and so on.¹⁰

The star-system has been extensively studied and written about. Notable theorists include Christian Metz, who suggests that the apparent ease with which we obsess about stars has to do with an infantile regression to a point when our own bodies and selves appeared flawless to us, and that—specific to the big screen—the darkness of the cinema lulls us into identifying with the onscreen characters. It is this identification that creates the so-called double-edged sword of stardom: stars have to be accessible to us as much as they have to be godlike (Metz 1974).¹¹ There are two things of interest here. The first is how, in the last fifty years or so, the Hollywood concept of stardom has been so swiftly assimilated into the world of food. The second is how the star, historically, is the only product which at the point of production has its consumption guaranteed, because stardom requires recognition. While a publicity department may create a star by media-hyping a relatively unknown person (often through suggestive language: "The next big thing," "A born star," and so on), it will not work unless the public buys into it. This creates the curious situation that, on the one hand, the star is the safest of all consumer products, because with the right formula, its success is guaranteed; yet it is also the only capitalist exchange in which the consumer really is king. Without fans, there is no star. Without spectators, no spectacle. This complicity

between product and consumer is what underlines the spectacle as the guiding principle of the star-system.

The spectacle, briefly, refers to what Guy Debord perceives as the increasing dominance of images in a consumer culture. But it is also more than simply images: “The spectacle is not a collection of images; rather, it is a social relationship between people that is mediated by images” (Debord 1995: 4). Presently, however, the social relationship to which Debord refers might usefully be redefined as a *non*-social relationship, where people watch more and interact less with each other. Consumerist economies, in other words, are based on the production of individual alienation through the consumption of hegemonic images. Another important point is that Debord’s spectacle does not confine itself to the images we might typically think of as spectacular, or extraordinary. His argument is precisely that the abundance and persistence of images means that we become unable to distinguish between the fantastical—the unreal—and the ordinary. The spectacle, in short, offers a version of life which is so readily assimilated that it, in turn, *becomes* life:

It is not something *added* to the real world—not a decorative element, so to speak. On the contrary, it is the very heart of society’s real unreality. In all of its particular manifestations—news, propaganda, advertising, entertainment—the spectacle represents the dominant model of life. (Debord 1995: 6; author’s emphasis)

What is eradicated, then, is the boundary between what we see and what we experience. The spectacle is both what we look at, and the lens—the spectacles—through which we see.

The case of media celebrities is useful when thinking about the spectacle, because they are the people, or products, most obviously both marketed and consumed in some twilight zone between the real and the represented; between the person and the persona. In the words of Debord (1995: 60), stars are “spectacular representations of living human beings”. If we return to our local celebrity for a moment, we can see some of the ways that this is played out. For one thing, her presence in a university class that morning was technically outside the production process: she was not on assignment, nor would she be remunerated for being there. A friend of a friend, she had kindly agreed to address the class in an informal capacity. Yet her presence in the class that morning—the *reason* for her presence in the class that morning—was as a celebrity: a “real” person from the food media world. Hence the uniform. And, she quickly became a friend to us all, not least by promising VIP passes for an imminent food media event (to be attended by other food celebrities), and for promising some of the more eager students a chance to film a food show in her studio kitchen. So, the visit, though “friendly,” turned out to be a promotional exercise, not only for her but also

for us, her new fans. Snug under the cover of academic interest, we were all excited by the prospect of new inroads into the celebrity arena.

There is nothing remarkable about this. Access to celebrities is generally the result of privileged and/or serendipitous connections—being in the right place at the right time. Yet the experience of befriending, of coming to “know,” the person behind the persona is one of the particularities of today’s media climate, of which reality TV is a leading form.¹² In theory, reality TV works against the star-system: its star is the non-star, the “real”; the person, not the persona. It is this which gives reality TV its spectacular quality: “not something added to the real world,” to recall Debord, but “the heart of society’s real unreality.” Its product, nonetheless, is the star. Leaving aside for the moment shows which specifically showcase celebrities (*Celebrity Big Brother* and so on), it is not uncommon for people to become local celebrities after appearing on reality shows. While this is structurally similar to what happens to unknown actors who garner fame from a single performance, the important difference here is that reality TV sets itself apart from Hollywood conventions because it proposes—through as tenuous a thing as its name—to disavow its fictionality. Yet it is fictional: not only in the obvious sense that the diegetic world of reality TV is confined to a geographically and ideologically constructed space, but more importantly, in the sense of the fictions that it offers its spectators as experiences to be lived vicariously through a screen. The myth of reality is what consumers buy into when they watch reality TV, and it is this myth, I believe, which both precipitates and concentrates the spectator identification outlined by Metz.

In contrast to cinematic fiction, watching reality TV constitutes what we might call the pre-star stage, when the sword is still single-edged. Characters on a reality show appear to be normal people, like us; they are still attainable, and therefore our relationship with them is one of equivalence rather than idolatry. Yet it is in the process of identifying with these characters that their so-called reality becomes unreal. Once we consume real people’s—not actors’—experiences on television, that experience is fictionalized by the spectating self. Put otherwise, once we believe, we turn the myth into reality, and subsequently, reality into a televised story (witness a popular refrain on *Oprah*: “It was like she was talking about me”). It is this particular fictionality—played out in the consumption as well as the production of the spectacle—that provides the link between reality and food TV.

Beyond food programs that are specifically billed as reality shows, like Gordon Ramsay’s *Kitchen Nightmares*,¹³ I maintain that reality and food TV construct a similar consumer experience: when we watch shows like *Big Brother*, *Survivor* or *Temptation Island*, our position as consumers is exactly that of watching Jamie Oliver, Nigella Lawson, or even, for that matter, talking to a local food celebrity in an informal class. The framework for our spectatorship is a controlled environment—the studio, the Polynesian

island, the classroom—in which we can expect and predict nothing but reality, or the unpredictable. We may expect certain content: what tasks the Survivors will have to face; a North African feast. But we do not yet know how it will be played out; what spices go into the Moroccan tagine and how long it has to simmer for. This, after all, is the historical premise of food TV: it originates to complement the instructional medium that is the cookbook.¹⁴ It is this intimation of the real—the unpredictable—that allows us to participate in reality and food TV as empathetically, or as vicariously, as we do. Indeed, the celebrity in question has a favorite anecdote about filming a show and getting a fright at the noise of something popping in a pot. She insisted on not doing a retake; it was important for her viewers to see her as a real person.

The question of the real is interesting for what it reveals about production processes and the expectations that these engender. One preview for the BBC Food show *Safari Chef* features a montage of chef Mike Robinson stalking the bush with a rifle, then crouching over a pot on burning coals. In the accompanying voiceover, Robinson states: “You don’t hunt, you don’t eat: this is a *real* food program; none of that pre-preparing stuff.” The attempt at self-distancing signaled by Robinson’s implicit judgment of the so-called pre-preparing, or a rejection of aesthetic editing tells a lot about not only dominant modes of production but also, and more crucially I believe, about certain anxieties that attend these. In short, the constant avowals of “reality” suggest an awareness of an inherent *unreality*, and a desire to construct oneself outside of that; to concretize the self, as it were.¹⁵

Food is the easiest and most difficult of subjects. It is the one thing that we all have to engage with on the most fundamental level. It is the one thing that everyone can talk about because it remains the primary non-metaphorical signifier of consumption. To consume is to eat. Yet it is, at the same time, the most metaphorical of signifiers. To consume signals appetite, curiosity, desire; an attempt to satisfy a lack. Food can be heaven or hell, and just about everything in between. It is therefore not surprising that the preparer of food can occupy at once the basest (the slave; the housewife) and the most revered positions in society (the Michelin chef). The celebrated chef, therefore, is certainly not a new phenomenon. Marie-Antoine C  reme (1784–1833), often cited as the first celebrity chef (Kelly 2004), was one of the last great chefs in the service of the aristocracy before the French Revolution. Known as the father of *haute cuisine* (classical “high” French cooking), C  reme was famous for his elaborate confectionery and for his clientele, including King George IV of England, Czar Alexander I of Russia, and Napoleon. Likewise oft-quoted as the first celebrity chef is C  reme’s compatriot, Alexis Soyer (1809–1858). Soyer, as well, was known for his culinary (and personal) exhibitionism, but equally for his philanthropic work: he wrote cookbooks for the working classes, designed

and established soup kitchens in Ireland during the potato famine, and famously worked with Florence Nightingale in the Crimea. Beyond cooking, Soyer invented kitchen equipment and foodstuffs like Soyer's Relish, bottled by Crosse and Blackwell. In the context of media, Soyer was the first chef to consciously exploit his name as a brand, and therefore directly prefigures the celebrity chefs we know today. Yet, his fame, like C  reme's, was still directly related to his labor.¹⁶

The difference between spectacular qualities of cooking then and now lies in the characteristics of contemporary media. I keep coming back to modes of production, because this is really where the distinction manifests itself; that is, in *how* celebrities are produced—and, correspondingly, in how they are consumed. If cooking is an art, then food is unlike other artifacts. Food, for one thing, has no “original.” Original recipes, yes. Original cookbooks, yes. But food, and cooking, is an act of (re)production. Every “original” recipe followed is made unique by context, climate, chef, time and money.¹⁷ The point of food (to be eaten), and the nature of food (perishable) mean that it cannot be more than an occasion. So, are contemporary celebrity chefs famous for their food?

To answer this question, one can usefully distinguish three broad periods in the history of famous food personalities: first, what I call the pre-modern stage (from Ancient Rome to the French Revolution), during which the likes of Lucullus and Apicius and noted French royal courts were (in)famous for their lavish feasts. The apparatuses, or media, which engendered and secured their fame then would have been word of mouth, started, conceivably, by those who were privy to a first-hand experience of said feasts: not only the people who ate the food, but also the slaves who watched the eating of the food and, most likely, prepared the food. Such fame would clearly have been a signal of rank and class. Food “celebrities” in this category were generally those with the means to entertain; not necessarily those with remarkable cooking skills.

The second category includes celebrities produced by ranking systems such as the Michelin Guide. Although focused as much on the restaurant as on the food, the primary star of this system is the chef (Alain Ducasse rose to global fame not only for his three three-star restaurants, but as the world's only nine-star chef). This system of fame, though ranked by a single “expert,”¹⁸ is no less enduring than fame popularly earned. It is also noteworthy that neither of these two categories has been, according to various writers, without its anxieties. The Roman Apicius, for instance, supposedly took his life when his depleted fortune could no longer support his excessive dining habits (Versveldt 2004: 57). In 1671, the celebrated royal chef Vatel committed suicide by falling on his sword, so the story goes, when an order of fish was not delivered on time.¹⁹ A more recent suicide in the food world was that of Bernard Loiseau, believed to have killed himself

following a rumor that one of his Michelin stars was to be retracted (Chelminski 2005).

The third category, and the one that particularly interests me, is the one that I locate in contemporary media. This is somewhat less clear-cut than the first two categories because media now include print, radio, television and internet, not to mention live performances.²⁰ Ratings systems, including Michelin, also depend on a range of media and therefore form part of this category, as do magazines like the trend-predicting *Food and Wine*, which have been instrumental in fostering the cult of the celebrity chef.²¹ However, my immediate concern here is with the stars that the food media networks produce now, on an almost weekly basis, and how this happens.

For something as fundamental and as tangible as food, it is intriguing to see people asserting, time and again, that what they are doing is “real.” When, then, is food *not* real, and why is “pre-preparing” to be rejected? The anxiety, I suggest, is about performance and it is this that distinguishes food TV from the control and circumscription of cookbooks, based as they are (to some degree, at least) on weights, measures, times and temperatures. Filming a food program in the style of a cookbook does not make for good television. Viewers are generally not interested in programs which are simply about cooking, and which may showcase—as the early shows did—a studio-bound chef measuring cups of flour and sugar.²² The majority of modern shows aired on cable food channels want to be, and are, about more than food. Indeed, as Food Network’s then-president Judy Girard commented in 2000, the “more we can convince people that we’re not a cooking channel, the better. It’s become a great experience for viewers” (Umstead 2001).

The first and obvious marker of this difference is that many of these shows have eliminated cooking as labor. Broadcasting has little time for labor, and neither, therefore, does the audience. As Ina Garten, a.k.a. the *Barefoot Contessa*, repeatedly insists, “See how easy it is?” Garten’s entreaty is characteristic of a whole genre of cooking shows aimed at representing cooking as “easy” and “fun,” underlining one difference between chefs and TV cooks; cooking as a professional chef is the antithesis of easy and fun, and thus one of the distinctions that food TV often succeeds in concealing. When we do see cooking in real time, it is more often than not against the clock (*Ready Steady Cook*); a way to disavow the relationship between time and labor. Many contemporary cooking programs prioritize product over process, so when we watch Nigella Lawson cooking for her family or friends, it is Nigella’s lifestyle that emerges: a certain being-in-the-world, her success as mother, entertainer, housewife, seductress.²³ Here the food acts mainly as a prop.

Also noteworthy is the fact that today’s food networks provide an entrance through the back door to stardom, so to speak. If we accept the original premise of food TV as instructional, we can see a great shift in the last 50

years or so. The pioneers of television cooking—James Beard, Julia Child, Keith Floyd—had established themselves as food professionals before their first television appearances. The progression to media celebrity was, in this way, a “natural” one, by which I mean that a well-known name (well-known by virtue of cooking skills) moved to another medium—television—and whose established renown was the primary marketing tool of the show. Yet there are by now countless cases of food celebrities who have “made it” neither with any formal training nor with significant independent renown. In contrast to Beard, Child and Floyd, the production modes of contemporary celebrity chefs signal how priorities have changed, and it is often most expedient simply to get on TV first; fame may or may not follow (as Nicole Kidman’s character in the film *To Die For* puts it: “If you want to be famous, you have to get on TV”). Hence we have channels like BBC Food or Food Network, with almost 24 hours of food programming a day, a large portion of which are presented by previously unknown chefs (and a fair number of non-chefs), not an insignificant number of which also look good. Neither is it insignificant that many of these programs do not make it to a second season.

Our local food celebrity had no formal training either, which brings me back to the ten functions on her business card. What is of particular interest is that all the functions listed on the card besides celebrity chef—food demonstrations, classes, radio shows and so on—are already implied by the term: that is what celebrity chefs *do*. Yet, by proclaiming as much, the card reveals the currency and, equally, tenuousness of “celebrity.” It also reveals that success increasingly depends on straddling the full spectrum of media offerings. Beyond cooking, the celebrity chef, in other words, needs to publish a book (to be bought), have a website (to be accessed), star in a TV show (to be watched), and preside over a kitchen (to be patronized). There is no give without take, no action unobserved. No action unperformed.

The reciprocity between spectacle and spectator is particularly manifest in the interactivity that characterizes the present-day media climate. From blogging to appearing on reality shows, never have consumers been more active, leading French theorist Jean Baudrillard (1929–2007) to suggest that Debord’s spectacle no longer provides a relevant theoretical framework for understanding the world around us. In “Disneyworld Company” (1996), Baudrillard tells the story of how, in the early 1980s, laborers at a Swiss metallurgy plant in became Smurfmén when the plant was replaced by a themepark, Smurfland. This is the micro-version of what Baudrillard charts as the Disneyfication of the world. Specifically, the term refers to the growth of the corporation that is Disney. More generally, it refers to the social, political and psychological ramifications of the type of colonization exemplified by, but clearly not confined to, Disney. Baudrillard’s Disneyfied world is one which, he suggests, overturns Debord’s society of the spectacle, not by erasing or reversing it to any pre-spectacular society, but by turning it

ever-more inward; a cannibal that subsists on itself and feeds an ever-growing appetite by simply cloning everything in its path. To illustrate this, Baudrillard recounts the story of Disney wanting to purchase 42nd Street in New York, the so-called red-light district, in order to *leave it as it is*, but now as a Disney attraction. This represents, he argues, the integration of the real world into the imaginary, “where reality itself becomes a spectacle” (Baudrillard 2005).

In point of fact, this story is a little Baudrillardified. As chilling as the idea of prostitutes wearing Disney nametags may be, it is not quite accurate. What Disney did in 1993 was to buy the New Amsterdam Theatre which, true to the connotations of its name, was, indeed “red.” Yet Disney did not cryogenize this disrepute. Instead the establishment was closed for refurbishment and reopened in April 1997 with a new, improved, family flavor; the stage line-up since then has included *Hercules*, *The Lion King* and *Mary Poppins*. This misrepresented detail could easily work in favor of an argument about the infantilization of the world; the pandering of so-called children’s entertainment to an increasingly adult audience. But to return to Baudrillard’s specific thesis, which is that our lives have turned into—or are turning into—an interactive performance, the example of Smurfland can be consolidated by the entire genre of reality TV which has moved from simple exposure to the performance of significant life acts on screen, such as marriage, divorce and plastic surgery. Yet what is of particular interest is Baudrillard’s assumption that interactivity represents a significant departure from Debord’s spectacle. “We are no longer,” Baudrillard claimed, “in a society of the spectacle ... We are no longer alienated and passive spectators but interactive extras; we are the meek lyophilized members of this huge ‘reality show’” (Baudrillard 2005).

There is, in fact, much in common between Debord and Baudrillard: they both provide enticingly metaphorical critiques of an image-based culture. Yet where they part intellectual company is in their different views of “reality.” Baudrillard’s key terms—simulacrum, simulation, hyperreality²⁴—all suggest, as does his version of a Disneyfied world, that it is reality itself which is under threat. Once he resigns us to being “interactive extras” in a huge “reality show”, the idea is, quite simply, that we have been sucked into something *à la* Cronenberg or David Lynch where our very life narratives become entangled—mixed up—in fantasy or nightmare, whatever the case may be. It is a state of vertigo, of postmodern instability, of Smurfdom, from which, Baudrillard implies, there is no escape.

Some of Debord’s language can be equally vertiginous (“the heart of society’s real unreality”). And there is no doubt that the picture Debord paints in *The Society of the Spectacle* is a bleak one, fundamentally characterized by passivity. Nevertheless, he differs from Baudrillard in that his theory of the spectacle is essentially an economic analysis. That is not to

say that Debord was not interested in the social consequences of a consumerist economy (“the spectacle is ... a social relationship between people that is mediated by images”). But this is where his Marxist agenda is most apparent. In *Capital* (1867), Marx called the commodity a “mysterious thing” (Marx and Engels 1996: 83) because of its propensity to take on a life of its own, or, more to the point, the propensity of people to invest things with values beyond their practical function (a modern analogy would be the new phone that is a “must have,” not for its telephonic capabilities, but because everyone else has one). Marx’s concern about commodity fetishism, in short, was that it is not what you are, but what you have that determines social status and relationships. Debord (1995: 17) summarizes: “The first stage of the economy’s domination of social life brought about an evident degradation of *being into having*—human fulfillment was no longer equated with what one was but with what one possessed.” Things gain power independent of their history, including the human labor involved in their production, and, often enough, of their function.

These days there is an ever greater danger of overlooking Marx’s mystery because that mystery—the fundamental *de*-connection between use value and exchange value of an object—has now become a powerful marketing tool (consider cellphones marketed as chocolate, and toothpaste that won’t only whiten our teeth but will make us happy, healthy, energetic human beings). This is commodity fetishism literalized. Yet for Marx, both money and the commodities it buys represent nothing but “human labour in the abstract” (Marx 1996: 52). This is important because the moment we start obsessing about things to improve or reflect our social lives and statuses, we become, he argues, alienated from what he calls our true human needs. These needs are basic requirements: for community, for food, for water and shelter.

Debord applied Marx’s commodity fetishism to a culture increasingly obsessed with the visual—images as well as appearances—over the material. How, then, does Debord’s Marxist inclination separate him from Baudrillard concerning this thing called “reality”? For one thing, the central idea of the Situationist group that Debord helped to found, and which catalyzed many of his later ideas, was precisely the potential of escape from the so-called system: each of their theories, from *dérive* (drifting with the purpose of aimlessness) to *détournement* (active plagiarizing) was conceptually designed to circumvent the metaphorical Big Brother.²⁵ By the time of *The Society of the Spectacle*, however, Debord was less interested in this version of playful anarchy and took a more mature political outlook: the final chapters of his book are dedicated to the possibility of a true proletarian revolution in the sense that Marx envisaged.

Put otherwise, Debord never “gave up” on reality. Perhaps he would have, had he lived long enough to see some of the things that Baudrillard did, which

to the rest of us are now as familiar as nature, if not more so. It is true that fakeness has become so naturalized as to ironically fuel the contemporary search for the “authentic,” and the manufactured authentic has become a new best-selling commodity.²⁶ Yet the problem with Baudrillard’s theories is that they are often as bottomless as the phenomena they describe: everything turns on itself and we are left no wiser than we feel after watching Cronenberg’s *Existenz*. This is not necessarily bad; Baudrillard certainly provokes thought, and in a time where producing “dumb masses” is the easiest critique to level at “the media,” anything that stimulates actual thought must be considered an achievement. But bewilderment and confusion are not necessarily productive or progressive intellectual endeavors.

This is not to suggest, of course, that Debord was in any way optimistic about spectacular society. But his economic analysis provides a more useful tool for thinking about the specific ideological mechanisms at work in a culture that surrounds us (“us” representing the major part of the so-called developed world and, increasingly, the developing world). This culture is one in which, as Raymond Williams notes, the word *customer*, implying “some degree of regular and continuing relationship to a supplier” has given way to the more autonomous *consumer*, “a more abstract figure in a more abstract market” (Williams 1983: 79). Language, as always, is instructive. The so-called passivity of the spectacle is really limited to physical immobility. One sits still to watch a screen. One sits still at a computer to engage in even the most vigorous of virtual activities, like warfare or sex. But a spectacle is by definition interactive, because there exists no spectacle without spectators. It is the spectators who *create* the spectacle—even if they are just sitting in front of a screen. A spectacle is something to be looked at, and has existed for as long as there have been enough people to create a crowd.

Of course, the technological mechanisms in place today allow spectacles to be created without people having to be physically gathered in one place, like in the days of medieval jousting. Now it is enough to gather people’s eyes. So, while the circumstances of our realities may have changed, it is simply too far-fetched to suggest, as Baudrillard does, that reality itself has ceased to exist as a definable experience. Society changes, and change is not bad. Marx himself recognized the enormous positive potential of capitalism. What we are doing, instead, is showing off our lives more than ever, because new media such as the internet and reality TV allow us to do so. Because we then see so much more of each other’s lives, our desires (known in advertising language as “needs”) are constantly multiplying. We want what other people have because those people are parading in front of us all the time. Our coveting, moreover, does not stop at external commodities. MTV’s *I Want a Famous Face*, which features people undergoing plastic surgery to look like their favorite celebrity, provides a spectacular enactment of Serra and Schoolman’s line: “You are the product of t.v.”

At the root of all of this is want. What the spectacle creates most forcefully is not so much a new or different reality but rather a perceived absence of such. It creates a sense of imperfection. John Berger put it aptly when he wrote, in 1972, that “All publicity works upon anxiety” (Berger 1990: 142). More recently, this resonates with the suggestion that the naturalization of the word “detoxify” implies a permanent toxicity in our lives (Bowler 2005). The irony of our time is that the more shamelessly we flaunt ourselves—be it on talk shows, on blogs or makeover reality shows—the more insecure we become about what we have (ergo, what we are). The victory of the spectacle is not the thing to be looked at, but the onlookers themselves. The spectacle creates wants and desires; it creates consumers. What is astounding about the virtual society Second Life is not so much the incredible graphics, but the fact that people actually go there.

In questions of reality and counterfeit, and, certainly, in questions of consumerism, food, at least, should remind us that reality has not ceased to exist, because it is something we continue to need in a physical sense. Yet food’s enormous metaphorical potential means that the tenuous line between actual food and food media is to the great advantage of celebrity chefs, or more accurately, to the marketing of celebrity chefs. If food is involved, the task of convincing consumers that they “need” something is considerably lightened. As a concluding example, the commodification of lack is compellingly demonstrated by a teaser for Rachael Ray’s new talk show which premiered in September 2006. In terms of media profile, Ray—not a professionally trained chef—is one of the leading US celebrity chefs, repeatedly ranked in the lists of top 100 celebrities compiled annually by *Time* and *Forbes* magazines. One month after the debut of her show, Ray was voted the most liked US TV host (UPI 2006). The story of Rachael, as her fans call her,

is a quintessentially self-made American success story. Small-town girl and specialty food buyer hits upon the idea to teach “30 Minute Meal” classes as a way of moving the merchandise. The classes lead to TV appearances, which lead to cookbooks and a Food Network gig, which lead to guesting on “Oprah” and subsequent total media domination. Ray has no formal culinary training, and a brash willingness to embrace pre-washed produce and canned broth. She has boasted that she’s completely unqualified for every job she’s ever had. Unsurprisingly, she pisses a lot of people off. (Williams 2006)

The teaser is one of a series of ten twenty-nine to thirty-second spots that were aired prior to the show. In the space of twenty-nine seconds, we see Ray smiling twelve times, over fifteen shots (75 percent of the whole). During most of these fifteen shots we hear voices of other women, praising Ray. There are eleven different voices, but we see only three of the figures

who speak. Besides Ray, we see a black woman with a baby on her breast, a nine or ten-year-old child and a white woman in a chef's jacket. This covers the whole spectrum of consumers: race, youth, professional, nurturer. Each of the disembodied voices could belong to any of these women. Ray is for everyone. The voices consolidate this: "Daytime TV needs somebody who is not afraid to be different"; "I love Rachael Ray"; "she's real"; "fun"; "down to earth"; "she's special"; "she's got the magazine"; "the TV shows"; "the cookbook"; "she's like your best girlfriend"; "she is the best thing to happen to daytime TV."

What is it that makes Ray different? She explains this herself in the final shots: "Everybody wants me to keep being me and that's all I know how to do, is have a good laugh." Significantly, this is the only shot where she is *not* laughing or smiling, suggesting that this is the moment that we should take her seriously. The other nine teasers each follow a similar pattern: a moment or two of "intimacy" or "confession"—Ray in a private moment, behind the scenes, interspersed with everywoman's face and voice. Some also feature men. One spot, titled *Just Add You*, breaks the footage with bright orange screens proclaiming "No Artificial Ingredients." "Never Frozen." "100% Natural." The show—half talk, half cooking—in short, caters to all our anxieties about the artificial, in food as in life. It is an example of brilliant marketing because it sells itself in its entirety as indispensable before it is even available. Of course, its promises are those of every single new talk show—some glimpse into "reality": no artificial ingredients; fresh (never frozen); 100 percent natural. The final line of the teaser—"Everybody needs a little R&R"—also highlights that the commodity on offer is not talk, nor food, but Ray herself. In truth, we need Rachael Ray as much as we need daytime television, which is not at all. And yet, as Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer wrote in 1944, "the triumph of advertising in the culture industry is that consumers feel compelled to buy and use its products even though they see through them" (Adorno and Horkheimer 1979: 167).

Nietzsche suggested that there can be no spectators without a spectacle. This goes without saying: clearly one cannot be an onlooker if there is nothing to look at. For the phenomenon that is food media, however, the more appropriate phrase would be, as I have suggested, that there can be no spectacle without spectators. Just as there can be no star without fans, it is the gaze that constructs meaning: things gain substance by being looked at. Regardless of what we accept or reject as real, I think that the pressing question concerns our position as spectators and understanding the nature of our craving to consume. Media celebrities come and go; that, I believe, is the anxiety underlying fame. What remains is the audience and that the success of the eternal spectacle points to an ideological hunger that is never satisfied because its driving force is *lack*. The spectacle relies on deprivation,

and food TV gives substance to the saying that our eyes are often bigger than our stomachs. To conclude, if I could invite Debord for a (real) dinner, I would only venture to suggest—after I’ve fed him a suitable amount of wine, of course—that he rethink his title to read, *Society*, not of the *Spectacle*, but of the *Appetite*.²⁷ Baudrillard was right: we are certainly more (inter)active than ever. This only means that the spectacle—and the society it feeds—is stronger than ever. Celebrity chefs deliver consumers.

Notes

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- 1 PhD thesis in progress: “From Chef to Superstar: Food Media from World War 2 to the World Wide Web” (University of Cape Town).
- 2 On the subject of Food Network and vicarious consumption, see Adema (2000) and Ketchum (2005).
- 3 As Raymond Williams explains: “In almost all its early English uses, *consume* had an unfavourable sense; it meant to destroy, to use up, to waste, to exhaust. This sense is still present in “consumed by fire” and in the popular description of pulmonary phthisis as *consumption*. Early uses of *consumer*, from C16, had the same general sense of destruction or waste” (Williams 1983: 78).
- 4 As a general observation, this irony is compounded by the simultaneous rise in obesity and food media, which suggests that although we as consumers have more knowledge than ever about food and “healthy” eating, this knowledge is not manifested in our physical wellbeing. Analysis of this juxtaposition would have to take into account the demographics of spectatorship to determine whether obesity is characteristic in people who have access to and/or an interest in food TV.
- 5 Emeril Lagasse: US celebrity chef, cookbook author, restaurant owner.
- 6 Jamie Oliver: British celebrity chef, cookbook author, restaurant owner.
- 7 Nigella Lawson: British celebrity chef, cookbook author.
- 8 An Indian snack of thin pastry folded triangularly around a filling and deep-fried, *samosas* are a common South African food, particularly in Indian and Muslim communities.
- 9 A southeast Asian snack of thin pastry wrapped around a filling and deep-fried, spring rolls (egg rolls) can be found in practically every Chinese restaurant or take-out around the world.
- 10 For a history of the Hollywood star-system, see Dyer (1998, 2003) and McDonald (2001).
- 11 See, also, Laura Mulvey’s seminal “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” (1975), in which she polarizes a male gaze against the star as female object. Mulvey’s work has sparked much debate and interesting theory, including a revision by Mulvey herself (1999).
- 12 I use the term *reality TV* very broadly here: anything that showcases the “real” (including talk shows).
- 13 Awarded an Emmy in 2006 for Best Non-Scripted Entertainment, *Kitchen Nightmares* centers on Ramsay resurrecting a failing restaurant in the space of one week.
- 14 For a history and definition of food TV, see Hansen (2008).
- 15 Bill Buford, in his memoir *Heat*, provides a telling anecdote about Mario Batali: “Maybe it was more difficult being a celebrity chef than any of us understood – the expectation you felt constantly from the people around you, these strangers, your public, to be so much bigger than a normal human being. (I was put in mind of a story Mario had once told me, of the first time he’d been spotted on the street, stopped by two guys who recognized him from television, immediately falling into the “Hey, dude, wow, it’s, like, that guy from the Food thing” routine, and Mario, flattered, had thanked them courteously, and they were so

disappointed – ‘crushed’ – that he now travels with a repertoire of quick jokes so as to be, always, in character.” (Buford 2006: 158).

- 16 Soyer has no less than seven biographies dedicated to him, including Helen Morris' *Portrait of a Chef: The Life of Alexis Soyer* (Cambridge University Press, 1938); Ruth Brandon's *The People's Chef: Alexis Soyer, A Life in Seven Courses* (Walker & Company, 2005), and Ruth Cowen's *Relish: The Extraordinary Life of Alexis Soyer, Victorian Celebrity Chef* (Wiedenfeld and Nicolson, 2006).
- 17 The issue of copyrighting recipes is a current media debate. See, for instance, Wells (2006) and Buccafusco (2006).
- 18 In Joyce Carol Oates' terms, "Opinion, like the Michelin inspector, dines alone" (Oates, 2005).
- 19 Gérard Dépardieu played the lead in the 2000 film, *Vatel*.
- 20 *Jamie Oliver Live in Sydney* (September, 2006) was a spectacle of note with sound, lighting and an audience that resembled nothing less than a rock concert.
- 21 See *Food & Wine's* annual sections headed "Who Are the Next Culinary Stars?"; "*Food & Wine Magazine* Pick's America's Best New Chefs"; "The Celebrity Chefs of Tomorrow Are Revealed at *Food & Wine's* Best New Chefs Event in NYC."
- 22 There exist noteworthy exceptions to this trend, such as Delia Smith and Ken Hom, two BBC TV chefs who host shows with remarkably little camera movement and very little less emphasis on entertainment. Smith and Hom are still very popular. Whether there is a common generational denominator in their audience would be a worthwhile investigation.
- 23 See, for instance, the emphasis on Lawson's curvaciousness as it is contrasted by a highly symmetrical kitchen; the color contrast between black/white/stainless steel and her red lips; the reciprocal flirtation between subject and camera, where the chef's seductive glances are often followed by an out-of-focus shot; Lawson cast as sex-object through patterned camera pans (hands-face-breasts-food), and the inevitable closing sequences of midnight fridge-raiding in silk pyjamas and rubber gloves, and so on.
- 24 For a comprehensive annotated bibliography of Baudrillard's works, see California State University's "Welcome to the World of Jean Baudrillard," available from: <http://www.csun.edu/~hfspc002/ baud/>.
- 25 For useful histories of the Situationists, see Wollen (1993) and Hussey (2001).
- 26 See, for example, Thames Town, an "authentic British style town" (www.thamestown.com) in China, which features an exact replica of a pub and a fish and chip shop from the seaside town of Dorset, UK.
- 27 My thanks to P.R. Anderson for getting me this far.

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