

# Visual Hunger

Number 1

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# Appétits visuels

Numéro 1



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## Foreword

Food has a powerful hold on us all. It is a delight for the senses—including the sense of sight, hence the title of this journal: *Visual Hunger / Appétits visuels*.

This new, peer-reviewed, bilingual, open access, scholarly journal features the scholarship of talented students.

It is also, undeniably, a labour of love.

Communications Professor Dina Salha set a lovely table—literally, as she complemented the communications and food studies theoretical knowledge she imparted with delicious pastries from local bakeries, or again organized shared meals to showcase the regional cuisines and cultures that found their way to her visual hunger seminar, awakening memories while opening doors.

Les Presses de l'Université d'Ottawa / University of Ottawa Press (PUO-UOP) were invited to take part in this communications and culinary adventure, and we were glad to oblige and to partake. We contributed time, resources, and expertise to this initiative, to support this new journal, which provides masters' students with an incredible opportunity to leverage the research and learning they accomplish in this food studies seminar—organizing a conference, but also meeting publishing professionals, learning about the publishing process and, in some cases, securing a peer-reviewed journal publication.

The students whose articles are published in the inaugural issue underwent a stringent, single-blind, peer-review process. They address a variety of contemporary issues of import to both academics and the general public.

The journal provides research and scholarly critical publishing experience to talented students, contribute to the quality of the student experience on our campus, and enhance the University of Ottawa's open access offerings.

## FOREWORD

PUO-UOP is proud to make this journal available to research libraries, college and university bookstores, and to the general public through our international networks of wholesalers and retailers.

A toast to those around the *Visual Hunger / Appétits visuels* table who have come together to celebrate food studies and advance knowledge in their own way. Enjoy!

Lara Mainville

Director

University of Ottawa Press (PUO-UOP)

## Préface

La nourriture exerce une forte emprise sur nous tous. Elle est un délice pour les sens, y compris pour la vue, d'où le titre de cette revue savante, *Visual Hunger/Appétits visuels*.

Cette nouvelle revue bilingue, évaluée par des pairs et disponible en libre accès, met de l'avant des articles signés par des étudiantes et des étudiants.

Cette revue est aussi, indéniablement, le fruit d'un travail passionné.

La professeure en communication Dina Salha a mis les petits plats dans les grands pour ses étudiantes et étudiants en études alimentaires. Elle a transmis sa passion pour les communications et la bonne chère s connaissances théoriques qu'elle leur a transmises par de délicieuses pâtisseries provenant de boulangeries locales, ou encore par des repas partagés mettant en valeur les cuisines et les cultures régionales qui ont trouvé leur place dans son séminaire sur la faim visuelle.

Les Presses de l'Université d'Ottawa / University of Ottawa Press (PUO-UOP) ont été invitées à participer à cette aventure communicative et culinaire, et notre équipe a été ravie d'y prendre part. Nous avons contribué temps, ressources et expertise à cette initiative, qui offre aux étudiants de master une incroyable occasion de tirer parti des recherches et des connaissances acquises : en organisant une conférence, en rencontrant des professionnels de l'édition, en découvrant le processus de publication et, dans certains cas, en réussissant à faire publier un article dans une revue à comité de lecture.

Les étudiantes et étudiants dont les articles sont publiés dans ce numéro ont été soumis à un processus de révision par les pairs rigoureux et à simple insu. Chacun y aborde une question d'importance tant pour les universitaires que pour le grand public.

Cette revue offre à des étudiants talentueux une riche expérience en matière de recherche et de publication scientifique, contribue à la

## PRÉFACE

qualité de l'expérience étudiante sur notre campus et enrichit l'offre en libre accès de l'Université d'Ottawa.

Les PUO-UOP sont fières de mettre cette revue à la disposition des bibliothèques de recherche, des librairies universitaires et collégiales, et du grand public par l'entremise de nos réseaux internationaux de grossistes et de détaillants, ainsi que de notre site web.

Levons notre verre aux personnes qui se sont réunies autour de la table de *Visual Hunger/Appétits visuels* pour célébrer les études alimentaires et faire progresser les connaissances à leur manière. Bon appétit!

Lara Mainville

Directrice

Les Presses de l'Université d'Ottawa (PUO-UOP)

## Introduction

### Why *Visual Hunger*?

Allow me to open with a story simmering with flavours of memory. It begins with a family photograph capturing the moment in time when food becomes the medium through which the subject is now able to reminisce on love, generosity, and the connection of generational kinship and tradition.

A black and white photo captures the celebration of my fifth birthday and as I gaze at it, it stirs my memories of taste and togetherness. I am sitting on a chair behind a large table, playfully devouring a piece of cake, looking at the photographer—a dear father figure to me—and feeling happy my mom lovingly handmade my birthday cake. Gazing at the photograph, emotions bubble as I fondly remember this day, thinking *What a wonderful gift*.

The photograph captures the enjoyment of eating the cake, my mom's labour of love, documenting a celebration at a different time and place, allowing a union of memory and experience to inform our familial rituals and values in the present. Gratefully, Mom taught me: we cook for those we love; food unites us.

Now, allow me to present another scenario, also set around a table but which is of an entirely different tone. In 2013, the American television series *Hannibal*, blurred the lines between visual culinary artistry and dark obsession, where each dish prepared by the cannibal, Dr. Hannibal Lecter, becomes a symphony of haunting beauty and terror. Food turns into an alluring spectacle that offers a sensory experience while concealing its grotesque origin. The meticulously prepared and presented dishes, on their own, were enough for me to watch the show. I remember thinking “*these dishes deserve a publication to commemorate the insatiable beauty of their plating and glorious presentation.*” In 2016, Janice Poon published *Feeding Hannibal*, a

cookbook detailing the immense work as well as behind-the-scenes sketches, providing readers with a tableau of food porn—hunted, prepared, and cooked by the monstrous masculine Hannibal.

These two stories became a catalyst for the creation of a novel graduate course entitled *Visual Hunger: Food, Desire, and Mediated Ecologies*. It explores the dynamic relationship between food, culture, identity, memory, and media. Moreover, the increasing integration of food as a main ingredient in media content and digital culture is reshaping how we think about food, food sustainability, and global food systems. The use of food for storytelling, and for supporting the rise of food influencers and celebrity chefs, as well as food channels and various cultural industries, reflects the need to engage critically with the media's exploitation—their visual hunger for food consumption as text on local and global levels.

This journal's inaugural issue covers a variety of topics across different media platforms: from *Nailed it!* to *Chef's Table*, to the Mukbang trend as well as Instagram food critics, and food journalism. The authors navigate gender representations and articulations of culture and visual ideological discourses within the complex processes of commodification and representation of food and foodways, along with the labour attached to such visual productions.

### **Acknowledgements**

This journal would not have been possible without a full line of cooks. First and foremost, thank you to my students, without whom this experience would not have been so enriching! They poured their souls and intellect into learning and sharing their stories, and their food.

Thank you to Martine Lagacé, Associate Vice-President of Research Promotion and Development, for providing much support to this project and to the amazing team at the University of Ottawa Press under the directorship of Lara Mainville. Especially Martin, Maryse, Mireille, Benoit, and Suzane, who have been cheering on

INTRODUCTION – WHY *VISUAL HUNGER*?

*Visual Hunger* since its initiation. Thank you also to then Chair of the Department of Communication, Luc Bonneville and Graduate Supervisor, May Telmissany, and to the many reviewers and colleagues. I could not have embarked on such an innovative project without the unconditional friendship and editorial skills of Teena Laurin, who, through laughter, genuine care and dedication, lifted me up when stress reigned.

And last, but not least, I thank my family for their continued love and support: Mom, Hani, Joy, Jad, and my fur baby, Victor. I am forever grateful to all my family and friends who take a seat at my table and share in my culinary craft. Food and cooking allow me to forge together simple but complex ingredients and relationships. *Sabtein, bon appétit*, enjoy!

Professor Dina Salha  
University of Ottawa  
Editor



## Introduction

### Pourquoi *Appétits visuels* ?

Permettez-moi de commencer par une histoire mijotée aux saveurs de la mémoire. Elle commence par une photographie de famille qui saisit le moment où la nourriture devient le moyen par lequel le sujet peut se remémorer l'amour, la générosité et le lien de parenté et de tradition entre les générations.

Une photo en noir et blanc montre la célébration de mon cinquième anniversaire et, lorsque je la regarde, elle ravive ma mémoire gustative et le souvenir de moments en famille. Je suis assise sur une chaise derrière une grande table, dévorant avec amusement une part de gâteau, regardant le photographe – une figure paternelle qui m'est chère – et je me sens heureuse que ma mère ait fait mon gâteau d'anniversaire avec amour. En regardant la photographie, je me souviens avec émotion de cette journée et je me dis « Quel merveilleux cadeau ». La photographie capture le plaisir de manger le gâteau, le travail de ma mère accompli avec amour, une célébration d'un autre temps et d'un autre lieu, permettant d'unir les souvenirs et l'expérience, et ainsi revivre nos rituels familiaux et commémorer nos valeurs dans l'instant présent. Avec gratitude, maman m'a appris que nous cuisinons pour ceux que nous aimons et que la nourriture nous unit.

Permettez-moi maintenant de partager une autre histoire, qui a un ton tout à fait différent. En 2013, la série télévisée américaine *Hannibal* a brouillé les frontières entre l'art culinaire visuel et l'obsession sombre, où chaque plat préparé par le cannibale, Dr Hannibal Lecter, devenait une symphonie de beauté obsédante et de terreur. La nourriture se transformait en un spectacle séduisant qui offrait des expériences sensorielles tout en dissimulant son origine grotesque. Les plats méticuleusement préparés et présentés suffisaient à eux seuls à me faire regarder l'émission. Je me souviens avoir pensé

que ces plats méritaient d'être publiés pour commémorer la beauté insatiable de leur préparation et de leur présentation glorieuse. En 2016, Janice Poon a publié *Feeding Hannibal*, un livre de cuisine détaillant l'immense travail et les croquis réalisés en coulisses, offrant au public un tableau de pornographie alimentaire – chassée, préparée et cuisinée par le monstrueux mâle Hannibal.

Ces deux histoires sont devenues un catalyseur pour la création d'un nouveau cours de troisième cycle intitulé *Appétits visuels: nourriture, désir et écologies médiatisées*. Ce cours explore la relation dynamique entre l'alimentation, la culture, l'identité, la mémoire et les médias. En outre, l'intégration croissante de la nourriture en tant qu'ingrédient principal dans les contenus médiatiques et la culture numérique modifie notre façon de penser l'alimentation, la durabilité alimentaire et les systèmes alimentaires mondiaux. L'utilisation de la nourriture pour raconter des histoires et pour soutenir la montée en puissance des influenceurs alimentaires et des chefs célèbres, ainsi que des chaînes alimentaires et de diverses industries culturelles, reflète la nécessité de s'engager de manière critique dans l'exploitation des médias, leur soif visuelle de consommation alimentaire en tant que texte à l'échelle locale et mondiale.

Les articles de ce numéro couvrent une variété de genres à travers différentes plateformes médiatiques: de *Nailed it!* à *Chef's Table*, en passant par la tendance Mukbang et les critiques gastronomiques d'Instagram, ainsi que par le journalisme alimentaire. Les autrices et les auteurs explorent les représentations de genre et les articulations de la culture et des discours idéologiques visuels dans les processus complexes de marchandisation et de représentation de la nourriture et des habitudes alimentaires, ainsi que le travail lié à ces productions visuelles.

## Remerciements

Cette revue n'aurait pas pu voir le jour sans une équipe complète de cuisiniers. Tout d'abord, merci à mes étudiants, sans qui cette

expérience n'aurait pas été aussi enrichissante! Ils se sont investis à fond dans l'apprentissage et le partage de leurs histoires, de leur nourriture et de leurs connaissances.

Merci à Martine Lagacé, vice-rectrice associée à la promotion et au développement de la recherche, pour le soutien qu'elle a apporté à ce projet, ainsi qu'à la formidable équipe des Presses de l'Université d'Ottawa, sous la direction de Lara Mainville, et en particulier Martin, Maryse, Mireille, Benoit et Suzane, qui ont encouragé *Appétits visuels* depuis son lancement. Merci également à Luc Bonneville, alors directeur du Département de communication, et à May Telmissany, directrice de thèse, ainsi qu'aux nombreux évaluateurs et collègues. Je n'aurais pas pu me lancer dans un projet aussi novateur sans l'amitié inconditionnelle et les compétences éditoriales de Teena Laurin, qui, par ses rires, son attention sincère et son dévouement, m'a remonté le moral lorsque le stress régnait.

Enfin, je remercie ma famille pour son amour et son soutien constants: Maman, Hani, Joy, Jad et mon chien Victor. Je suis à jamais reconnaissante envers toute ma famille et tous mes amis qui s'assoient à ma table et partagent mon art culinaire. La nourriture et la cuisine me permettent de réunir des ingrédients et des gens simples mais complexes. *Sabteïn, enjoy, bon appétit!*

Professeure Dina Salha  
Université d'Ottawa  
Rédactrice en chef



# *Nailed It!* Imperfection in the Age of the Curated Image

Maya Bugorski

## **Abstract**

The influence of television is central to the production and reproduction of the narratives, ideals, and values that define our culture. The competitive cooking genre replicates the cultural tenets of individual rights to life, liberty, and capital gains fuelling the illusion of the American dream. *Nailed It!* is an American competitive cooking reality television series where three amateur bakers attempt to recreate complicated baked goods and desserts to win \$10,000. However, the show's narrative is told through eccentric and joyful characters prepared to take on a challenge without the required skills. While thriving within the food television market, the program disrupts attempts to fix neoliberal ideologies in curated domestic and professional cooking representations, by incorporating production elements of competitive cooking and domestic cooking television as well as humour, instruction, and embracing imperfection. With each episode, *Nailed It!* builds a narrative that values effort and lived experience above aesthetics or capital gain and promotes a different model of success.

**Keywords:** food, television, competitive cooking, narrative approach, representation

## Résumé

L'influence de la télévision est essentielle à la production et à la reproduction des récits, des idéaux et des valeurs qui définissent notre culture. Le genre de la compétition culinaire reproduit les principes culturels des droits individuels à la vie, à la liberté et aux gains en capital, alimentant l'illusion du rêve américain. *Nailed It!* est une série télévisée américaine de télé-réalité culinaire où trois boulangers amateurs tentent de recréer des pâtisseries et des desserts compliqués pour gagner 10 000 \$. Cependant, l'émission est racontée par des personnages excentriques et joyeux, prêts à relever un défi sans avoir les compétences requises. Tout en prospérant sur le marché de la télévision culinaire, l'émission perturbe les tentatives de fixation des idéologies néolibérales dans les représentations de la cuisine domestique et professionnelle, en incorporant des éléments de production de la cuisine de compétition et de la télévision culinaire domestique, ainsi que l'humour, l'instruction et l'acceptation de l'imperfection. À chaque épisode, *Nailed It!* construit un récit qui valorise l'effort et l'expérience vécue plutôt que l'esthétique ou le gain en capital et promeut un modèle différent de réussite.

**Mots-clés :** alimentation, télévision, cuisine de compétition, approche narrative, représentation

Numerous cooking shows pit contestants against each other, whether it is professionals, skilled home cooks, or children, in a test of technique, taste, and tenacity. The contestants on these programs are not only passionate, but they have also put in the time, blood, sweat, and tears, to overcome the odds and obstacles. Whether it is building a gravity-defying dessert or mastering an exotic ingredient, contestants compete for a cash prize motivated by their dreams and ambitions. A quick online search of “competitive cooking” brings up

numerous programs and a variety of Top-10 lists on which *Nailed It!* often appears. Inspired by a meme about the culture of home bakers,<sup>1</sup> who posted the atrocious results of their attempts at highly skilled feats, *Nailed It!* turned the well-known genre of competitive cooking on its head.<sup>2</sup>

*Nailed It!* is an American competitive cooking reality television series available on the Netflix streaming platform. Three amateur bakers attempt to recreate complicated baked goods and desserts in an effort to win \$10,000. The show consists of two rounds of increasing difficulty without the elimination of any contestants. Since 2018, *Nailed It!* has been breaking down unrealistic goals and societal expectations, by building a counter-narrative that champions imperfection and destabilizing the curated image of both domestic and competitive cooking, to reclaim the joy found throughout the process.

Looking at *Nailed It!* as a case study, the show's narrative is constructed with the traditional 'perfect product' model that fits in with the competitive cooking shows centred on highly skilled contestants. However, the *Nailed It!* format does not deliver the anticipated immaculate reproduction of the showpiece. In lieu, the results resemble those likely to be found behind closed doors—typically edible, but far from perfect and perhaps not even pretty. Despite diversifying the representation of who cooks and the eventual results by providing a new voice within an American context, the program constructs and upholds its own paradox.<sup>3</sup> *Nailed It!* is a commercial success, maintaining the known structure from the competitive cooking genre

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1. Doody et al. *Nailed It!*, Season 1, episode 1.

2. Yvonne Villarreal, "Tired of Instagram-Level Perfection? Netflix's 'Nailed It!' Embraces Kitchen Disasters," *Los Angeles Times*, September 18, 2019.

3. For the purposes of this article, "America/n" encompasses the traditional and hegemonic representation of anglophone norms in the United States of America and Canada.

within the food entertainment market while manipulating the characters, to produce its own curated image. However, the unexpected results rendered by the contestants are the program's hidden gem. The show provides airtime to a new narrative built on eccentric and joyful characters prepared to take on a challenge simply for the experience. This serial representation, of relatable characters within the program, reproduces a counter-narrative to the curated image of perfection built by neoliberal values and the notions of the American dream.

### Curated Image

The influence of media, such as television, is central to the production and reproduction of meaning, narrative, and culture, through the interplay of fixed or fluid representations which define our values and form our communities.<sup>4</sup> The different images plastered across social media and traditional media are intentionally selected, organized, and displayed; it is a curated collection. The (re)production of these images creates a story that influences the way that people behave, think of themselves, and think of others. Storytelling is a very natural part of humanity and communal existence.<sup>5</sup> Through visual media, people are exchanging stories to transmit their knowledge, values, and opinions, which contribute to establishing meaning and developing culture.<sup>6</sup>

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4. Hall and Jhally, *Representation & the Media* (Northampton, MA: Media Education Foundation, 2002).

5. Lieblich et al., "A New Model for Classification of Approaches to Reading, Analysis, and Interpretations." In *Narrative Research*, London and Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, 1998) 2–20; Riessman, "Narrative Analysis." In *The Qualitative Researcher's Companion*, edited by A. Michael Huberman and Matthew Miles (London and Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, 2002) 216–217.

6. Hall, "Introduction." In *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, edited by Stuart Hall, Jessica Evans and Sean Nixon (London and Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, 1997) 1–12.

Through images, words, and other formats, meanings are assigned to any given topic, person, group of people, event, or situation. The beautiful, perfect images of the elaborate food dishes that are shared on social media and highlighted in competitive cooking programs contribute to establishing the definition of food not only in the media but also in the domestic spheres. These images are part of a system of representation, along with language, which externalizes the meanings we are making of the world and of events.<sup>7</sup> When people see that perfect cake online and then share it or, moreover, try to make it, they give value and importance to that image, its perceived meaning, and the representation that is being orchestrated. People reproduce those representations through the stories they listen to and tell, as well as their actions. Through this visual transmission and its consistent reproduction—numerous seasons of numerous televised cooking competitions—the audience is receptive to the hegemonic representation of food, elevating its value in the culture, and building the narrative about what we eat, how it looks, and who cooks it. “It is by our use of things, and what we say, think and feel about them—how we represent them—that we give them meaning.”<sup>8</sup> These curated images fall into the production–reproduction cycle, which is a form of knowledge transmission implanting expectations upon the individual and the collective. This cycle attempts to fix a static meaning to the limited range of characteristics; however, the meaning depends on what the audience makes of it. The absence of anticipated elements, in an image, can subvert the expectations the audience has of the image and influence the interpretation.<sup>9</sup> Despite the controlled manufacturing of these images and narratives, there are infinite possible meanings.

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7. Hall and Jhally, *Representation & the Media*.

8. Hall, *Representation*, 3.

9. Hall and Jhally, *Representation*.

## **Expectation**

When someone sets out to cook a meal, rarely is the objective a bland and boring meal. With the ample examples provided by cooking television, even people at home strive to reproduce fine dining experiences, quick meals, or culinary masterpieces. Whether clipped from a magazine, shared on social media, or inspired by a celebrity chef, each recipe is part of an ambition to match what was represented and captured in that image. The structure of the competitive cooking genre has a symbiotic relationship with the values and ideologies that are the foundations of much of American culture. American ideals are embedded in the structure of the programs as the competitors use their skills (an embodiment of the values of hard work and individualism) to replicate the assigned dish (a curated image) and provide a unique interpretation (individualism and liberty) all with the ambition to win a prize (capital gain).

By the 1930s, the ideals of individual rights to life, liberty, and capital gains became dominant in America and contributed to building national identity by establishing shared meaning among individuals.<sup>10</sup> This cultural narrative promotes the idea that a capitalist society provides few barriers and creates an environment where individuals have the freedom to innovate and produce according to their own needs and wants. The American dream encapsulates the pursuit of happiness in the land of opportunity founded on the values of individual rights, liberty, and equality.<sup>11</sup> People can accomplish anything from social mobility to capital success for themselves, and their successors, regardless of where they started. Spurred on by the idealism of the American dream, anything can be accomplished through perseverance and arduous work even a gravity-defying confection.

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10. David Kamp, "Rethinking the American Dream," *Vanity Fair*, April 2009; Riessman, "Narrative Analysis."

11. Kamp, "Rethinking the American Dream."

Imbued with these values, what meanings are transmitted through an effort that does not meet the mark? Recognizing the social capital attributed to popular food images through media, recipes are symbolic of communal taste and cultural values, isolating the cook as the missing link. The food is no longer the product on display, but it is the contestants who offer themselves as commodities for evaluation by the judges.<sup>12</sup> Looking at the structure of competitive cooking and food-related television programming (food television), the capitalist ethic in the content's production and marketing are clear. The narratives isolate the key values of commitment, focus, and long hours for judges and contestants who also believe that persistence and ambition will be rewarded. The programs affix neoliberal professionalism as a core value within food television.<sup>13</sup>

Furthermore, the established norms within cooking programs also reinforce a gender binary in which the feminine is related to the domestic and professionalism is tied to masculine representations.<sup>14</sup> For example, *30 Minute Meals* develops an idealistic narrative around busy schedules and multitasking, which replicates the American dream. The show creates a model persona for the female host, Rachael Ray, who effortlessly finds a balance between the professional, family, and personal demands of everyday life, seemingly unaffected by the limitations of time.<sup>15</sup> This new curated image, *30 Minute Meals*, shifted the narrative and the expectations around cooking and home life, transforming "the domestic kitchen into a

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12. Deborah Philips, "Cooking Doesn't Get Much Tougher than This': MasterChef and Competitive Cooking," *The Journal of Popular Film and Television* 44, no. 3 (2016): 169–178.

13. Philips, "Cooking Doesn't Get Much Tougher than This."

14. Alkim Kutlu, "Queering the Competitive Cooking Show: Performance on/of Netflix's *Nailed It!*" *Whatever* 4, no. 1 (2021): 521–539.

15. Elizabeth Nathanson, "As Easy as Pie: Cooking Shows, Domestic Efficiency, and Postfeminist Temporality." *Television & New Media* 10, no. 4 (2009): 311–330.

short-order restaurant.”<sup>16</sup> Food television is another platform through which enterprise, competition, and ambition dominate the narrative to reproduce the foundational American values.<sup>17</sup> However, the hegemonic neoliberal narratives around liberty, individualism, and work ethic amounting to big dreams do not produce the same results for most of us. Let’s be realistic, the result most people achieve is not the curated image; it is imperfection and is not a representation often seen. Acknowledging that *Nailed It!* thrives within a capitalist entertainment model, the show mirrors the reality that many people encounter within the systemic limitations of their society.

### **Reality**

Despite participating in the production and reproduction of the curated image, many people are unable to reach these exclusive, elusive, and exacting standards. Within minutes of starting the first-ever episode of *Nailed It!*, “First Date to Life Mate,” contestant Heather Forney’s introduction highlights the relationship between the narrative baking shows and the values and expectations they create.<sup>18</sup> There are three key phrases, which together, illustrate the effect of making meaning through curated media. First, she indicates that baking is the role of a mother saying, “it feels like a mom thing to do”;<sup>19</sup> second, she admits she consumes a lot of baking media saying, “I love watching baking shows”;<sup>20</sup> and third, she acknowledges that programs skew her understanding of the task by stating, “they make it look so easy on TV. I’m sure I’ll be able to do it just as well.”<sup>21</sup> However, the video footage that accompanies her voiceover

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16. Jacqueline Botterill, “Innovation and Derivation in Canadian Food Television Programming,” *Journal of Canadian Studies* 52, no. 2 (2015): 411.

17. Philips, “Cooking Doesn’t Get Much Tougher than This.”

18. Doody et al., 2018.

19. Doody et al., 2018, 00:56–1:00.

20. Doody et al., 2018, 1:03–1:04.

21. Doody et al., 2018, 1:05–1:08.

paints a different reality of her baking prowess. Forney's creations are less than perfect despite adhering to traditional representations of a domestic woman (wife, mother, and domestic baker) as well as exhibiting the values of the ideal woman—the woman who can do it all.

The American dream has been criticized as a product of American exceptionalism, as it does not acknowledge the hardships many Americans face.<sup>22</sup> The powerful American narrative overwhelms and discourages individuals who are not represented and reinforces existing barriers. Hegemonic representation through the curated images can stymie innovation and motivation by elevating cultural expectations beyond ambitious, up to unattainable levels. Moreover, the evolution of women's roles from homemakers to coworkers, as well as the desire for entertainment to contribute to the audience's knowledge of the cultural, environmental, and nutritional aspects of food, are part of a cultural shift from conformity to one of diversity, which is driving the evolution of food television.<sup>23</sup> The focus on individualism and capital gains within the American narrative has been criticized for fostering materialism, consumerism, and a lack of solidarity within the culture.<sup>24</sup>

The reality is that there are social determinants that play a role in influencing whether a person will be able to live up to expectations. Factors such as knowledge previously transmitted, access to goods and services as well as the time needed to learn and perfect a skill contribute to the imbalances within society. The concept of social determinants is widely discussed within the public health field, especially since 2020, and can illustrate barriers that prevent

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22. John Larson, "Perspective: The Big Problem with the American Dream," *Washington Post*, January 2020.

23. Kutlu, "Queering the Competitive Cooking Show."

24. Jason Scorza, "Global Education and the 'American Dream,'" *University World News*, May 30, 2014.

equity throughout society.<sup>25</sup> To relate it to cooking, for example, baking a basic cake requires ingredients (flour, fat, sugar, and eggs), tools (bowl, spoon, baking pan) as well as an appropriate environment (kitchen with an oven). However, baking an elaborate cake not only requires an increased volume of the basic ingredients but also requires ingredients that are less universal, such as food colouring and flavouring extracts. There are numerous social determinants that will affect a person's access to the base ingredients, let alone the specialty products required to succeed at the challenge ahead. Moreover, there are systemic issues that prevent people from attaining these dream results. This element of systemic barriers, within American culture, is evermore representative of the realities faced in everyday life. In *Nailed It!* season 1, episode 5, "Big in Japan," judge Jacques Torres acknowledges that the challenge at hand would be difficult for even a professional to accomplish within the assigned timeframe of fifty minutes.<sup>26</sup> Although contestants are provided with the materials and tools needed to complete the confection, they are not provided with training or adequate time to achieve the desired result.

The lack of time is particularly poignant in a contemporary context as neoliberal values and the pursuit of happiness through wealth continue to tip the scales when balancing the relationship between work and leisure. In "Big in Japan," contestant Michelle Wodynski has a moment of self-doubt when she questions her lack of ability to meet cultural expectations. She laments, "I passed two bar exams. [...] I handle multimillion-dollar deals and I can't even bake a freakin' cake. [...] why is it so hard."<sup>27</sup> Internalizing the curated image of the modern woman, Wodynski is mistaking her ability to carry out one complex skill, being a lawyer, as an ability to complete a complex, unrelated task, baking. Her commentary is evidence that the

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25. World Health Organization, 2022.

26. Doody et al., 2018, 13:50.

27. Doody et al., 2018, 10:18–10:30.

American narrative has imposed the expectation for her to be both professionally successful and well versed in the kitchen. Without a commercial benefit to domestic cooking, the socio-culture value of cooking skills transitions into the realm of leisure activity, which is often dismissed in favour of profit-baring activities. Even time has been commodified. The narrative of domestic cooking shows, like *30 Minute Meals*, illustrates ways to develop efficiency through an industrialized approach to cooking within the confines of a busy schedule, which prioritizes commitments to the labour force.<sup>28</sup> These programs assume that the audience already has foundational cooking skills; an assumption that *Nailed It!* proves to be false.

There exists a misguided impression that contemporary cooking shows contribute to practical knowledge transmission by sharing valuable skills—like cooking. However, the competitive cooking premise and narrative structure fail to teach and exchange knowledge between an expert and a novice.<sup>29</sup> Contestants on *Nailed It!* who are having a particularly tough time may be given an opportunity to receive assistance or sabotage an opponent with a distraction. Interestingly, unlike other competitive cooking programs, *Nailed It!* integrates an element of knowledge transmission by providing practical tips on the screen. For example, in season 1, episode 1, “First Date to Life Mate,” a pop-up appears for the audience reading “FROSTED TIP Cooking spray can work okay, but butter is always better to grease your pans.”<sup>30</sup> Knowledge transmission and learning are possible during these occurrences. The show takes advantage of the relatable situations created by the contestants, not to belittle or denigrate them, but as an opportunity to validate the experience, normalize it, and use it as a teachable moment. Learning is also facilitated through the way the show established a fish-out-of-water

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28. Nathanson, “As Easy as Pie.”

29. Kutlu, “Queering the Competitive Cooking Show.”

30. Doody et al., 2018, 17:18.

persona for host Nicole Byer to juxtapose professional chef Jacques Torres. This allows the show to insert conversations, for the audience, that identify the steps needed to complete the challenge.<sup>31</sup> This norm is established in the first episode when Byer asks Torres to provide a walk-through of how to complete the challenge step-by-step.<sup>32</sup>

Thriving within the cultural narrative and capitalist entertainment model, *Nailed It!* has managed to introduce new representations into the cultural narrative. Well-meaning and passionate contestants compete in the challenge without the expectation of a perfect reproduction. Regardless of their committed individual efforts, they will not be able to reproduce the perfect confection put before them. Although the contestants change from episode to episode, the narrative celebrates their efforts and highlights their joy and passion throughout the process. Straying from the cutthroat tone of the competitive cooking show genre, *Nailed It!* is contributing to the fracturing of the hegemonic narrative.

### **Contestants**

The show's cast—a panel of three judges evaluating the submissions of three contestants—like its general structure, fits the norms for the competitive cooking genre. For the three judges—a host, comedian Nicole Byer; a specialist, chocolatier and pastry chef Jacques Torres; and a celebrity guest, typically an entertainer or renowned food professional—*Nailed It!* does not stray from audience expectations for banter, balancing the critique of a trained eye and the fresh takes from a relatable layperson. The twist is among the contestants. In lieu of skilled, seasoned veterans of the craft, the protagonists in these stories are passionate, exuberant characters aware of their shortcomings in the kitchen. Although skilled in their own ways, each contestant comes with numerous tales about their attempts in the kitchen and

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31. Kutlu, "Queering the Competitive Cooking Show."

32. Doody et al., 2018, 4:25.

the surprising results that followed. *Nailed It!* “manages to play on the conventions of a cooking show, which allows it to create space for alternative ways of existing within the genre.”<sup>33</sup> There is no mistake that the show’s contestants put themselves in impossible situations to slay the cake dragon, but unfortunately, they are bound by reality, their capabilities, and the limitations placed upon them by the program; no fairy godmother or *deus ex machina* endings are available.

Coming from many walks of life—doctors, teachers, nurses, homemakers—the contestants on *Nailed It!* contribute to a new narrative that disrupts the hegemonic neoliberal American dream ideologies and expectations reinforced through the highly curated food media environment. In “First Date to Life Mate” each contestant has a characteristic that represents core American values without modelling the achievement.<sup>34</sup> In addition to contestant Heather Forney, who personifies domestic American values, Michael Marchesan personifies the values of enterprise and ambition as he is a small business owner with a drive to master any and each of his interests. The third contestant, Elena Timman, momentarily appears to be on the show simply because she enjoys baking, regardless of not being exceptional at it. Despite not being the best baker, she states, “I don’t give up. I’m the little train that could.”<sup>35</sup> With this attribute, Timman personifies the commitment, perseverance, and work ethic required to survive in a society motivated by neoliberal ideals. Traditional competitive cooking programs typically amp up the elements of individualism and competition supporting neoliberal ideals, where contestants with an entrepreneurial spirit recognize an opportunity for self-promotion and recognition that could help their professional ambitions.<sup>36</sup> This is not the case for participants on *Nailed It!* whose primary credential

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33. Kutlu, “Queering the Competitive Cooking Show”, 523.

34. Doody et al., 2018.

35. Doody et al., 2018, 1:47–1:50).

36. Philips, “Cooking Doesn’t Get Much Tougher than This.”

is their lack of culinary qualifications. Although Marchesan intended to dominate the kitchen in “First Date to Life Mate”, he was unable to translate his ambitions into reality.<sup>37</sup>

The *Nailed It!* contestants bring to the show a level of self-awareness. When they submit their audition, they know they are not the perfect home chef and they do not have a cooking business to advertise. They are relatable people who aspire to create coveted beautiful dishes, but who take on the endeavour knowing the result might be underwhelming or potentially inedible. The episode “The Burbank State Fair” (season 5, episode 2) illustrates how the production of the show fosters acceptance and diversity through representations beyond domestic stereotypes and accepted archetypes.<sup>38</sup> During an interview for *Insider*, host Nicole Byer elaborates on the value of diversity among the show’s contestants.<sup>39</sup> Speaking about the participation of Selma Nilla and Lagoon Bloo during the fifth season of *Nailed It!*, Byer explained, “I always get contestant bios before the show: their names, ages, pictures of them. And for those two, Selma Nilla and Lagoon Bloo, they had their real names and their pictures were out of drag. And I know that a lot of kids watch the show and I think it’s good for kids to be exposed to different types of people early in their lives.”<sup>40</sup>

*Nailed It!* has been normalizing diversity among the contestants since its first season. In season 1, episode 4, “Weird Science”, contestant Megan Swanson competes while accompanied by a sign language interpreter, Joann.<sup>41</sup> Swanson’s introductory montage iden-

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37. Doody et al., 2018.

38. Doody et al., 2021.

39. Jason Guerrasio, “Nailed It! Host Nicole Byer Admits Her Comedy Is ‘Not Kid Friendly’ and Why She Desperately Wants Beyoncé on Her Show,” *Insider*, May 13, 2021.

40. Guerrasio, “Nailed It! Host Nicole Byer Admits Her Comedy Is ‘Not Kid Friendly.’”

41. Doody et al., 2018.

tifies that she was born deaf and received cochlear implants as a child.<sup>42</sup> Moreover, the contestant has the opportunity to introduce Joann and express the value of having an interpreter join her. Swanson explains, Joann “makes me feel more comfortable because I can hear, but I can’t hear 100 percent.”<sup>43</sup> Not only does the show foster an environment in which contestants feel welcome, but it also models these values for the audience by integrating a diverse cast of contestants.

The contestants are true to themselves highlighting their personality, individuality, and personal worth beyond their ability to reproduce the culture’s food narrative. These contestants represent determination and commitment despite their circumstances and produce a narrative that elevates pleasure, joy, and exploration above capital success. Let’s recall that even *Nailed It!* is structured in a way that makes it near impossible for the contestants to accomplish the task at hand.<sup>44</sup> The show replicates the way people face systemic barriers throughout everyday life.

### **Food Television**

Competitive cooking programs are a highly curated form of food media disconnected from the knowledge transmission model of educational public television cooking shows of the 1940s.<sup>45</sup> What makes food television so popular? The media is unable to satiate physical hunger, but it feeds into how audiences articulate their own identities and find meaning through televisual representations.<sup>46</sup> Only by controlling their environment and being able to overcome an

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42. Doody et al., 2018.

43. Doody et al., 2018, 1:50–1:57.

44. Kutlu, “Queering the Competitive Cooking Show.”

45. Philips, “Cooking Doesn’t Get Much Tougher than This.”

46. Banet-Weiser et al., “PART III Cable Programs: The Platinum Age of Television? – Introduction.” In *Cable Visions: Television Beyond Broadcasting* (New York: NYU Press, 2007).

obstacle before them, can the contestants acquire their reward and capital gains. On these programs, food is the obstacle to master and dominate for success. In this regard, *Nailed It!* creates a minor narrative of chaos around food and cooking; building a power dynamic between the contestant and the environment.

When it comes to food, even some of the most common ingredients can pose a threat when not cooked correctly as episode 6 of season 1 pointed out: “FROSTED TIP To avoid salmonella, don’t eat raw cookie dough.”<sup>47</sup> Without the knowledge and experience to use the ingredients, recipes, and tools provided on *Nailed It!*, the contestants’ outcomes vary widely. Although taste is subjective, not every recipe can be saved or even swallowed. There are a handful of instances where the judges have, while apologizing profusely, spat out the food. It is a relatable experience of a recipe gone wrong. When contestant Anabell Pica left out the cake mix from her batter during the second challenge of season 1, episode 6, “In Your Face!,” host Byer joins Pica at her station to casually chat about the batter’s consistency.<sup>48</sup> As Pica reviews the recipe, she realizes that she omitted a key ingredient and still has time to fix her mistake to complete the challenge. However, unlike Pica’s mishap, there have been dishes the judges refuse to eat, for safety reasons. In a controlled environment like a television show, health and safety are taken very seriously and the production team does not hesitate to intervene when contestants stray dramatically. On *Nailed It! Holiday!* season 1, episode 3, “You Mitzvah Spot!” guest judge Sylvia Weinstock interrupts contestant Amit Yohanan during the first challenge to have her tie up her long hair.<sup>49</sup> Although these incidents add to the conflict of the storyline within the episode, it is alarming to recognize that they are innocent mistakes stemming from a lack of information and skill

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47. Doody et al., 2018, 9:44.

48. Doody et al., 2018, 18:37–19:32.

49. Doody et al., 2018, 5:54–6:18.

on the contestant's part. These individuals may not have had access to knowledge on food health and safety practices required to safely prepare a meal.

Despite food being the source of conflict during the show, the act of eating is relatively neutral, accessible, and relatable, pulling in an audience through their personal recollections and emotional connections. Whether negative or positive, the visual of food can evoke strong sentimental reactions due to its experiential and cultural value. For example, the sight of a beautiful cake may recall a celebration or special occasion. Emotion, recollection, and ubiquity are why food makes a perfect tool to engage an audience without an explanation for its presence. Food displays are transformed into a mode of expression that embodies growth and development through effort and time.<sup>50</sup> *Nailed It!* is not about food, the food is the obstacle that the characters must overcome.

However, there is an emotional and psychological connection with food. Beyond the physiological need for sustenance, skilled cooking can dramatically improve the experience of eating. Whether purchased or home-cooked, there is an immediacy to the joy and the satisfaction of having a delicious meal. The ephemeral quality of food increases its necessity to be prepared and cooked quickly, thereby creating the opportunity to demonstrate these skills to the audience—who enjoy the process vicariously. Unlike clothing, which requires the skill of sewing, meals are not reusable since ingredients will spoil and each meal can only be eaten once. Food provides comfort, as does the dominant narrative of the relatable contestants through *Nailed It!*

### **Paradox**

The efficacy with which food captivates an audience contributes to the commercial success of cooking programs. Despite telling stories

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50. Kutlu, "Queering the Competitive Cooking Show."

about relatable characters, each episode continues to reinforce the cultural paradigm of undergoing hardship in the hope of capital gain. Furthermore, like in life, their fate is determined through scrutiny by others—the judges. Regardless of whether someone achieves a perfect result, only one contestant will be named the winner by the judges based on the taste, resemblance, and appeal of their final bake. At its base, *Nailed It!* is a competition for prize money.

*Nailed It!* maintains the foundational elements of its genre and reproduces curated food images as attainable while profiting within the capitalist food entertainment market. The success of Martha Stewart demonstrated how lifestyle television programming could promote merchandise to a broad audience and become a viable, profitable business.<sup>51</sup> Food is not the only profitable subject of lifestyle programming; home renovations and fashion have also seen their share of success. When it comes to expectation-versus-reality memes, although other areas of do-it-yourself projects have had the occasional viral post or gag book, *Nailed It!* has successfully commodified and monetized the trend within the food theme. Within its first two years, the show expanded into four international productions in addition to the four seasons and three holiday specials for the flagship American program.<sup>52</sup> The program's commercial triumph exploits the success of competitive food programs, the appeal of food, and the reliability of everyday imperfections to cook up a new dish for mass consumption. Furthermore, as a Netflix production, the show is used as a commercial platform for the cross-promotion of other Netflix products. The show is a product being leveraged to improve the production company's corporate needs and increase revenue.

On competitive cooking shows, the television production elements (music, lighting, editing) are manipulated to amplify emotion

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51. Botterill, "Innovation and Derivation in Canadian Food Television Programming."

52. Kutlu, "Queering the Competitive Cooking Show."

and suspense, shifting the focus away from the food itself to close-ups of sweating contestants.<sup>53</sup> However, *Nailed It!* does not commodify its contestants through this tactic. In season 1, episode 4, “Weird Science,” these production techniques are used to dramatize the food—the music swells; the picture switches to black and white; and the camera zooms in on a too-warm cupcake as the icing and decorations slide off—and create humour through their application on an unexpected subject.<sup>54</sup> The focus of the production highlights moments that contribute to a comedy-of-errors story in lieu of building a celebrity persona. While the show’s success is not anchored in the celebrity of the permanent case, the contestants’ big personalities and unorthodox solutions in the kitchen create a hook as well. In a market saturated with curated images of the ideal type—whether food product or producer—the show takes an innovative spin to capitalize on the contrary by marketing the non-ideal type. The continuous push for innovation in television production is a reaction to the neoliberal values driving media production since the 1980s. The deregulation of media allowed for the increase of specialty platforms and specialty programs that responded to the American ideals of freedom and access to individual choice, which in the case of television, is embodied by the selection available to the individuals forming the audience: their market.<sup>55</sup>

Although displaying non-ideal characters with similar traits, such as being outspoken and unique, from episode to episode, the show has evaded creating an archetype for its contestants or a sense of tokenism. The diversity among contestants, whether it is appearance, self-identification, or the way they talk to themselves while cooking, contributes to expanding representation and moving away

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53. Philips, “Cooking Doesn’t Get Much Tougher than This.”

54. Doody et al., 2018, 9:40–10:11.

55. Botterill, “Innovation and Derivation in Canadian Food Television Programming.”

from ideal types in the domestic kitchen sphere such as traditional female roles or curated food images. However, in the professional sphere, *Nailed It!* maintains elements of gender binary through the character types selected for the hosts and judges. While the show does not portray the female host, Nicole Byer, as a domestic cook (far from it actually), the male host, Jacques Torres, does align with the masculine representation of the professional chef.<sup>56</sup> Although the contestant characters are different, part of the narrative is the same, because the producers have successfully commercialized and capitalized on their product: curated imperfection.

In addition to the successful branding and marketing of *Nailed It!*, the show has also received consistent praise from critics and awards shows. The show was first nominated for an Emmy in 2019 in the reality competition category.<sup>57</sup> In 2020, Byer became the first Black woman to receive an Emmy nomination for Outstanding Host for a Reality or Competition Series,<sup>58</sup> a category in which she received a consecutive nomination in 2021.<sup>59</sup>

*Nailed It!* exists in a paradox in which it champions realistic outcomes, encourages joy and imperfection, and embodies the absurdity of the American dream, while also striving to succeed within that existing context. The show is a highly curated brand; not only is each contestant auditioned, each episode edited, but the show also has promotional merchandise such as a cookbook and an at-home challenge. The show's narrative is a commentary and deconstruction of the same system that it is thriving within.

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56. Kutlu, "Queering the Competitive Cooking Show."

57. Villarreal, "Tired of Instagram-Level Perfection? Netflix's 'Nailed It!' Embraces Kitchen Disasters."

58. Ariana Romero, "Nicole Byer 'Begged' to Fall off the *Nailed It* Table. Now She's Nominated for an Emmy." *Refinery29.com*, August 24, 2020.

59. Carlos Aguilar, "Perfection Isn't the Goal for Nicole Byer and 'Nailed It!'" *Los Angeles Times*, August 18, 2021.

### Challenging the Status Quo

*Nailed It!* challenges the hegemonic representation of home chefs in competitive cooking shows to advance diverse narratives, including acceptance of self, imperfection, and recognition of the unattainable. The show does not reproduce the same neoliberal, capitalist narrative around proficiency, perfection, and branding typically found in competitive cooking shows. Food television programs contribute to a fixed representation by equating food quality with quality of life, which trains viewers to value the curated image, fosters panic in its absence, and allows programs to market solutions to the problems they design.<sup>60</sup> However, *Nailed It!* is “a space where mistakes happen but are not determining of anyone’s capability of doing something.”<sup>61</sup> The show’s capacity to inject diversity and fracture the hegemony of competitive cooking programs, while succeeding within the American context, is a testament to the audience’s appetite for these stories.

The contestants are not the only characters whose mistakes and follies are put on display. Through humour and strategic editing choices, *Nailed It!* also provides a sneak peek behind the curtain of the professional components as well. Whether Byer’s self-deprecating humour, a cast member being repositioned, or a clear view of someone working the camera, the show acknowledges its manufactured environment as well as the hiccups and mistakes that happen along the way.<sup>62</sup> Botterill notes integration of errors had been a production choice used in the instructional cooking programs that pioneered food television. Speed and flawless execution distinguished the professional context from the domestic context, which integrates mistakes. Focusing on the individual’s mistakes, the self-deprecating commentary from the host and personal

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60. Aguilar, “Perfection Isn’t the Goal for Nicole Byer and ‘Nailed It!’”

61. Kutlu, “Queering the Competitive Cooking Show,” 535.

62. Kutlu, “Queering the Competitive Cooking Show.”

anecdotes from all the characters blur the distinction between the public persona and the private experience.<sup>63</sup> The blend of professional and domestic spheres plays into the show's branding and is another way in which *Nailed It!* strays from the competitive cooking genre, breaking the hegemonic narrative of neoliberal professionalism. The acknowledgement of mistakes breaks down the production norms of the competitive cooking genre by integrating elements typically seen in instructional domestic cooking programs.

In lieu of a host with culinary knowledge, the show is tethered to the narration of a comedian lacking experience in food television and cooking. This production choice shifts the focus away from the professional culinary domain to weave the show with a comedic thread.<sup>64</sup> The host of *Nailed It!*, Nicole Byer, does not fit the cookie-cutter representation of the domestic feminine. In an interview for the *Los Angeles Times*, Byer acknowledges her own disinterest in baking—which has not increased over the seasons she has worked on the show—and self-identifies with the competitive nature of the program.<sup>65</sup> Her own self-awareness in interviews complements the narrative of *Nailed It!*'s brand as she seeks to model her own enjoyment of the experience. According to Byer,

We should normalize not being good at everything. [... We] all try to present that we are the crème de la crème of whatever. But honestly, it's kind of fun to not be incredible at something that you enjoy doing. [...] If you burn things in the oven sometimes, but you enjoy the process and maybe you do it with a significant other or your kids, the whole

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63. Keri Matwick and Kelsi Matwick, "Self-Deprecatory Humor on TV Cooking Shows," *Language & Communication* 56 (2017): 33–41.

64. Kutlu, "Queering the Competitive Cooking Show."

65. Aguilar, "Perfection Isn't the Goal for Nicole Byer and 'Nailed It!'"

journey is better than the product. People are missing out on just enjoying life.<sup>66</sup>

Byer is aware of her unique approach to hosting the cooking competition and hopes to influence other show hosts to shift their tone as well. Moreover, she also acknowledges the role of the show's production and editing in bolstering her appeal by maintaining a wholesome tone.<sup>67</sup> Although Nicole Byer is not a commodified celebrity chef, her public persona is a novel representation, contributing to the splintering of a hegemonic narrative presented by food television.

Correspondingly, Jacques Torres steps outside the typical competitive cooking masculine persona of the critical expert and connoisseur, in favour of knowledge transmitter for the benefit of the contestants, the audience, and perhaps even the host Nicole Byer.<sup>68</sup> This tactic is reminiscent of the instructive origins of daytime food television, which was geared towards the domestic home cook audience.<sup>69</sup> In "Weird Science," during the evaluation of the first challenge, Torres explains the importance of chilling baked goods before decorating them. During the second challenge in that episode, Byer brings attention to the contestants applying his lesson by saying Torres has "lots of teachable moments."<sup>70</sup> In response, Torres states, "I'm a teacher," voicing his interest and intention to transmit knowledge through this platform.<sup>71</sup>

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66. Aguilar, "Perfection Isn't the Goal for Nicole Byer and 'Nailed It!'"

67. Guerrasio, "'Nailed It!' Host Nicole Byer Admits Her Comedy Is 'Not Kid Friendly'."

68. Kutlu, "Queering the Competitive Cooking Show."

69. Botterill, "Innovation and Derivation in Canadian Food Television Programming"; Kutlu, "Queering the Competitive Cooking Show"; Philips, "Cooking Doesn't Get Much Tougher than This."

70. Doody et al., 2018, 23:00.

71. Doody et al., 2018, 23:03.

*Nailed It!*'s constructive criticism, focus on successful elements, and gentle teasing contrast the harsh, unforgiving tone and humiliation tactics portrayed by authoritarian judges, such as Gordon Ramsay, in traditional cooking competitions.<sup>72</sup> *Nailed It!* sets itself apart from this element of the competitive cooking genre from day one, when celebrity guest judge Sylvia Weinstock encourages each contestant during the first episode "First Date to Life Mate." First, she tells Forney, "I want to give you credit for having courage and guts to do this. Because it's something you've never done before and I think that is remarkable."<sup>73</sup> Next, Weinstock encourages Timman to practise the skill and gives her tips as well as stating that she likes Timman's attitude.<sup>74</sup> Lastly, although she appears most critical of Marchesan, she still finds elements to compliment, such as the colour of his prepared dish, stating that it looks like something she would want to eat.<sup>75</sup> During *Nailed It! Holiday!* season 1, episode 3, "You Mitzvah Spot!" Byer and Torres lament that Amit Yohanan did not take advantage of the "panic" feature, reminding her of the tools at her disposal.<sup>76</sup> By pressing the "panic" button, one of the judges would have been able to assist her for three minutes. Returning guest judge Sylvia Weinstock takes the message a step further advising the contestant, "In life, don't forget to ask for help if you can," demonstrating that the experiences on the show are transferable life lessons.<sup>77</sup>

Although the *Nailed It!* judges interact with the contestants, they do not typically hover over the contestants to scrutinize the work and add the dramatic, stressful element of surveillance as seen in other

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72. Botterill, "Innovation and Derivation in Canadian Food Television Programming"; Kutlu, "Queering the Competitive Cooking Show."

73. Doody et al., 2018, 27:06–27:16.

74. Doody et al., 2018, 28:00–28:09.

75. Doody et al., 2018, 28:29–28:32.

76. Doody et al., 2018.

77. Doody et al., 2018, 28:32–28:48.

competitive shows such as *MasterChef*—a cooking competition for amateur chefs.<sup>78</sup> In the *Nailed It!* environment, when a judge interacts with the contestant or encroaches a contestant’s assigned space, it is usually initiated by the contestants who are asking for help and instruction directly. Using a “panic” feature, contestant Marchesan gets three minutes to ask professional baker Weinstock for advice—the guest celebrity judge for the episode “First Date to Life Mate.”<sup>79</sup> There are exceptions, as the show does orchestrate opportunities for absurd and comical interventions for contestants to sabotage each other’s progress. In this same episode, “First Date to Life Mate,” the precedent is established when contestant Timman uses the “Nicole Nag” feature during which Byer invades the other two contestants’ workstations to distract and annoy them over a three-minute period.<sup>80</sup> In neither scenario do the judges take on a critical persona or use humiliation tactics as seen on traditional competitive cooking programs.

The role of comedy in the show is important as it builds up the playfulness and joy among the contestants and judges. In the first episode, a baking tip appears for the audience that is helpful and humorous, “Full cake pans = longer cooking time and one hot mess.”<sup>81</sup> The use of humour helps to defuse conflict and reduce the imposing nature of judges and criticism, as well as adding positivity.<sup>82</sup> Although there are risks to comedy as a medium, because a single joke could be interpreted as endearing and wholesome by some or pejorative by others, the levity sets *Nailed It!* apart from other competitive cooking shows. The humour of these shared failed experiences builds rapport with the audience, connecting to their own past experiences.<sup>83</sup> Whether

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78. Philips, “Cooking Doesn’t Get Much Tougher than This.”

79. Doody et al., 2018, 17:55–18:22.

80. Doody et al., 2018, 20:13–20:57.

81. Doody et al., 2018, 17:36.

82. Matwick and Matwick, “Self-Deprecatory Humor on TV Cooking Shows.”

83. Matwick and Matwick, “Self-Deprecatory Humor on TV Cooking Shows.”

through *Nailed It!* or memes on social media, the audience is relating to the content, making sense of their personal experience, and recognizing that the representations are part of a broader common experience. This use of teasing, and self-deprecating humour in particular, has been an effective tool used by solo cooking show hosts to ingratiate themselves to the audience, making them appear more typical, relatable, and ideally more likable and credible.<sup>84</sup> Byer acknowledged that the worse the contestants' results are, the better the jokes she can pull from her genuine reaction.<sup>85</sup> Used collaboratively across characters, *Nailed It!* employs use humour to resist socially imposed norms; a tactic identified by Matwick and Matwick as having been used by women, specifically, to challenge gender roles. Kutlu noted that the comedic elements of *Nailed It!* are a departure from the traditions and conventions of the food television genre, namely competitive cooking shows, which challenge traditional binary gender roles. Matwick and Matwick argue that humour engages with social expectations of morally laden and gendered behaviours allowing television personas to relate to and influence viewers. The narrative structures and persona performances by *Nailed It!*'s contestants and cast disrupt the naturalized and neutralized expectations of the competitive cooking genre.

### **Anecdote**

Respecting the ideals of the American dream, *Nailed It!* does not discourage ambition, individuality, or liberty, but it does shift the focus away from the minutia of identical replication and proficiency, to encourage everyday efforts and value imperfect results as success. In our current context, as we recover from two years dominated by physical isolation and a shift in social dynamics, the availability of narratives that promote different models of success is more important than ever. With each episode, *Nailed It!* repeats a narrative that

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84. Matwick and Matwick, "Self-Deprecatory Humor on TV Cooking Shows."

85. Aguilar, "Perfection Isn't the Goal for Nicole Byer and 'Nailed It!'"

values effort and lived experience above the aesthetic. Repetition is recognized as a significant method for teaching and learning, and television shows provide cultural transmission into the audience's private domain. Sitting at home, the audience sees contestants try something new, beyond their skill set. Yes, one contestant wins a cash prize, but more importantly, the audience witnesses that despite failing to meet the expectations of others, the contestants persevered during a stressful challenge, without a negative consequence, and experienced joy through imperfection.

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# *Chef's Table*: Serving up a Hot Plate of Cultural Identity and Resistive Narratives with a Side of Gender Normative Ideals

Stephanie Platero Martinez

## **Abstract**

*Chef's Table*, an Emmy-nominated series on Netflix, captures the sensational culinary haute cuisine creations of chefs from around the world. This article discursively and descriptively analyzes aspects of two individuals—undocumented Latin American Chef Cristina Martinez and American Southern Black Chef Mashama Bailey—within the context of food media. Technology and globalization enable the digitally based commodification of food and how food imagery appears to its audiences. This complex dialectical process has the potential to inform regional cultural identity and demonstrate progression towards racial resistive narratives, despite the inequity of airtime profiling women in the professional culinary sphere. The first episode of season 5 is the one that is mostly referred to in this article, however, some quantitative analysis was conducted on all forty-four episodes across all variations of *Chef's Table* (General, Pizza, BBQ, France) series, which revealed that only 34 percent of chefs profiled were women. This article articulates a perspective on the sacred, traditional, and regionally distinctive qualities of food, and the ways in which food has become a representative marker of identity through the cultural codes embedded in ingredients and cooking methods. Further, this article

explores the resistive actions taken by these two successful women in a culinary world dominated by men in order to contribute to the discussion on gender normative ideals in the culinary industry. Beyond the kitchen, the increasing social responsibility of chefs includes their transnational power and influence where their food media platform allows their messages to proliferate. The implications of the discussion in this article contribute to food media literature, specifically cultural identity formation, gender representation, and the articulation of resistance in these concepts.

**Keywords:** cultural identity formation, gender resistive narratives, food media, cultural codes

### Résumé

*Chef's Table*, une série nominée aux Emmy Awards sur Netflix, capture les créations culinaires sensationnelles de chefs du monde entier. Cet article analyse de manière critique les aspects discursifs et descriptifs de deux individus – la chef latino-américaine immigrée sans papiers Cristina Martinez et la chef noire du sud des États-Unis Mashama Bailey – dans le contexte des médias alimentaires. La technologie et la mondialisation permettent une marchandisation numérique de la nourriture et de la manière dont l'imagerie alimentaire apparaît au public. Ce processus dialectique complexe, avec ses spectateurs, a le potentiel d'informer l'identité culturelle régionale et démontre une progression vers des récits de résistance raciale malgré l'inégalité du temps d'antenne consacré au profil des femmes dans la sphère culinaire professionnelle. Toutefois, une brève analyse quantitative a été menée sur les 44 épisodes de toutes les variantes de la série *Chef's Table* (général, pizza, barbecue, France) afin de déterminer que seuls 34 pour cent des chefs dont le profil a été dressé

étaient des femmes. Cet article présente une perspective sur les qualités sacrées, traditionnelles et régionales de la nourriture et sur la manière dont la nourriture est devenue un marqueur représentatif de l'identité par le biais de codes culturels communicatifs d'ingrédients alimentaires et de méthodes de cuisson. En outre, cet article examine les actions de résistance entreprises par ces deux femmes qui ont réussi dans un monde culinaire dominé par les hommes et approfondit la discussion sur les idéaux normatifs en matière de genre que l'on trouve dans l'industrie culinaire. Au-delà de la cuisine, la responsabilité sociale croissante des chefs inclut leur pouvoir et leur influence transnationaux, où leur plateforme de médias alimentaires permet à leurs messages de proliférer. Les implications de la discussion dans cet article contribuent à la littérature sur les médias alimentaires, en particulier la formation de l'identité culturelle, la représentation du genre et l'articulation de la résistance dans ces concepts.

**Mots-clés :** formation de l'identité culturelle, récits de résistance au genre, médias alimentaires, codes culturels

Globalization and the commodification of food have raised the profile of the celebrity chef in mainstream media, streaming services, and social media to give birth to “foodie” culture.<sup>1</sup> This popularization of food culture has paved a way for audiences to be simultaneously entertained and to learn kitchen skills from the most revered chefs in the world by way of food media, all from the comfort of their

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1. Jörg Dürrschmidt, “Introduction: Globalization and Mediatization as Mediating Concepts,” in *Globalized Eating Cultures: Meditation and Mediatization*, ed. Jörg Dürrschmidt and York Kautt (Cham: Palgrave MacMillan, 2019) 1–29, [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-93656-7\\_1](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-93656-7_1).

homes.<sup>2</sup> *Chef's Table* is a documentary series on Netflix that profiles famous chefs from around the world, follows their journey into the culinary arts, as well as the means they use to gather ingredients from “farm to haute cuisine.”<sup>3</sup> This show quickly became admired for its cinematographic finesse, robust storytelling, and its “operatic overture”<sup>4</sup> in depicting “luxury gastronomy.”<sup>5</sup> Luxury gastronomy is luxury consumption, from the way in which food is produced, creativity is executed, and food is presented to the consumer (i.e., the art of plating).<sup>6</sup> *Chef's Table* became a mirror of the in-person haute cuisine dining experience through its visual and auditory representations. This food medium spanned outward to six seasons with three additional offshoots profiling the art of barbecuing, the culinary expertise of France, and the complexity of pizza making, each for a season, respectively. *Chef's Table* encourages its audience to engage with a documentary-style series whose aesthetic plays into the emotional connection to food.<sup>7</sup> This medium offers viewers an intimate look into the lives of these highly esteemed chefs and an opportunity

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2. Briana Cifelli et al., “A Comparative Exploration of Celebrity Chef Influence on Millennials,” *Journal of Foodservice Business Research* 23, no. 5 (2020): 449, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15378020.2020.1780188>.
  3. *Chef's Table*, directed by David Gelb, aired (online) April 26, 2015. Boardwalk Productions, 2022, Netflix Stream. <https://www.netflix.com/search?q=chefs&jbv=80007945>. For the purposes of succinctness and readability, the name *Chef's Table* will not be referred to in the notes, however, notes and footnotes are added when a specific episode is mentioned.
  4. Pedro Liberato et al., “Food Media Experience and Its Impact on Tourism Destinations: The *Chef's Table* Affair,” in *Advances in Tourism, Technology and Systems*, ed. António Abreu et al., ICOTTS 2020, Smart Innovation, Systems and Technologies, vol. 209 (Singapore: Springer, 2020), 590, [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-33-4260-6\\_50](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-33-4260-6_50).
  5. Liberato et al., 587.
  6. See note 5.
  7. Liberato et al., “Food Media Experience and Its Impact on Tourism Destinations,” 588.

to understand the barriers and hurdles they faced in their food explorations. However, this docuseries also has an underlying message to its audience, which is not so obvious: the professional culinary world is a man's world, leaving the highest rank of head or executive chef as unobtainable for women. The result of toxic masculinity and the reinforcement of gender ideals situate the authority of professional cooking for men and cooking in a domestic context for women.<sup>8</sup> Additionally, the series offers a limited showcase of the sacrifices that women must make to legitimize their authority as chefs and it does not call out the specific barriers women must overcome to have the top accolades in their careers compared to their male peers. Starting a family or maintaining their family units is simply not something supported by this industry.<sup>9</sup>

Despite the overarching male dominated narrative in the culinary industry, *Chef's Table* positions a slight progression for racialized individuals, specifically women, with two chefs in particular: Chef Mashama Bailey, from the Southern United States, who portrays Black American culture and her resistive narratives,<sup>10</sup> and Chef Cristina Martinez, who remains an undocumented immigrant in the United States and risks her personal stability to bring joy to her customers with her famous *barbacoa* tacos. This show does not question the relationship between food politics and how celebrity chefs significantly contribute to the public discourse of "social and

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8. Deborah A. Harris and Patti Giuffre, "'The Price You Pay': How Female Professional Chefs Negotiate Work and Family," *Gender Issues* 27 (2010): 27–52, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12147-010-9086-8>; Beverly (Shih-Yun) Chen et al., "Media Images and the Gendered Representation of Chefs," *Research in Hospitality Management* 10, no. 1 (July 3, 2020): 1–6, <https://doi.org/10.1080/22243534.2020.1790202>.

9. Harris and Giuffre, 35–37.

10. Julia M. Medhurst, "Cooking up Southern Black Identity in *Chef's Table's* 'Mashama Bailey,'" *Southern Communication Journal* 85, no. 4 (2020): 219–230, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1041794x.2020.1801822>.

environmental values”<sup>11</sup> in the food supply chain.<sup>12</sup> Increasingly, celebrity chefs are tied to corporate social responsibility initiatives through their brands, and their heightened fame gives them the power to influence public spaces beyond the kitchen.<sup>13</sup> Further, this show and many food media are influential to specific demographics, such as millennials, depending on the audience’s level of awareness and involvement with the celebrity chef’s extracurricular initiatives.<sup>14</sup> This article, thus, analyzes the formation of cultural identity through the visual representation of gastronomy shown in *Chef’s Table* and assesses globalization and capitalism’s role in this process. Additionally, this article unpacks the gender representation of the food industry shown in this food medium, discusses resistive narratives from two episodes, and questions the socio-political impact of the gentrification of food. Throughout this article, specific reference is made to Chef Cristina Martinez from season 5, episode 1 of the series, as this episode embraces the many concepts examined in this discussion.<sup>15</sup>

### **Food Media and Commodification in a Globalized World**

With the digital revolution, food media and celebrity chefs have influenced our day-to-day lives, for better or for worse. Capitalism

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11. Raúl Matta, “Celebrity Chefs and the Limits of Playing Politics from the Kitchen,” in Dürrschmidt and Kautt, *Globalized Eating Cultures*, 184, [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-93656-7\\_9](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-93656-7_9).

12. Sally Kitch et al., “Gendered and Racial Injustices in American Food Systems and Cultures,” *Humanities* 10, no. 2 (2021): 1–29, <https://doi.org/10.3390/h10020066>.

13. See note 11.

14. Cifelli et al., “A Comparative Exploration of Celebrity Chef Influence on Millennials,” 462.

15. *Chef’s Table*, season 5, episode 1, directed by David Gelb, featuring Cristina Martinez, aired (internet) September 28, 2018. Boardwalk Productions, 2022, Netflix Stream, <https://www.netflix.com/search?q=chefs&jbv=80007945>.

gave birth to “digital-based production and commodification,”<sup>16</sup> which food media relies heavily on to reach its local, national, and international audiences. Technological advancement in communicative practices has further evolved the interconnectedness of nations around the world and has brought the notion of the sacredness of food culture to those audiences.<sup>17</sup> No longer does an audience member have to venture across the globe to learn about or gain new perspectives on cultures—food media by way of television now offers audiences the ability to delve into the foodie cultures from Costa Rica to South Africa, to Australia and beyond. This mediatization process of globalization, that is, the intersection of “print media, audio-visual media (TV, film), and computerized media,”<sup>18</sup> has brought foodie culture into existence. However, this process of digitally based commodification and the way in which food media topics are mediatized to the audience are a complex dialectical process within society. Dürschmidt argues that globalization through media is a multilayered social communicative practice in which the term “mediatization” embodies the transformation of “cultural life through technology-driven media logic.”<sup>19</sup>

Capitalism has also distinctly influenced the interaction of consumers through the commodification of food products and gave rise to the mass production of food, which popularized distinct cultural foods. With the rise of multilateral agreements such as NAFTA, the exchange of food commodities gave mass access to food products, such as corn, which dramatically transformed the social life of the tortilla.<sup>20</sup> Food commodification has become universal knowledge

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16. See note 1.

17. David Lind and Elizabeth Barham, “The Social Life of the Tortilla: Food, Cultural Politics, and Contested Commodification,” *Agriculture and Human Values* 21, no 1 (2004): 47–60, <https://doi.org/10.1023/b:ahum.0000014018.76118.06>.

18. See note 1.

19. See note 1.

20. Lind and Barham, “The Social Life of the Tortilla,” 49.

at local levels as the very act of purchasing ingredients at the grocery store or shopping at local farmers' markets is the explicit manifestation of the market.<sup>21</sup> For Lind and Barham, food also retains "sacred qualities and provides a practical and symbolic focal point around which people assert modes of valuing."<sup>22</sup> In the episode, Chef Cristina Martinez specifically speaks about this sacred quality of food and its loss to commodification while she performs a traditional Aztec Indigenous corn ceremony—corn that she will eventually use to make her tortillas.<sup>23</sup>

The energy of the corn is totally unique. It's more special, more original. It's something that both nourishes your heart and your spirit. It makes us stronger men and women. And since the taco is made of corn, it deserves a lot of respect. Unfortunately, in the US we have genetically modified corn. There is no pure corn.<sup>24</sup>

To Chef Martinez, corn represents her ancestral origins and by maintaining the rituals and practices of the Aztec people, she articulates the sacredness of the corn tortilla and emphasizes the respect it deserves from consumers from those who prepare it for consumption. Dürschmidt argues that the commodification of food has evolved beyond the need of nourishment towards the cultivation of culture through "cuisine."<sup>25</sup> Food gentrification has created an underlying mass production system to feed the needs and demands of consumers, which results in a loss of this sacredness of food. Chef Martinez

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21. Lind and Barham, 47–49.

22. Lind and Barham, 52.

23. See note 15.

24. See note 15.

25. Dürschmidt, "Introduction: Globalization and Mediatization as Mediating Concepts," 9.

maintains that her position as a chef means she can help preserve her culture through food. In this episode,<sup>26</sup> Chef Martinez admits to illegally importing pure Indigenous corn to grow her own sacred supply for her *barbacoa* tacos.

Thus, each individual choice in the food realm has a domino effect on the environment, food supplies, and dictates who has privileged access. Appadurai states that, “deterritorialization, in general, is one of the central forces of the modern world because it brings laboring populations into the lower-class sectors and spaces of relatively wealthy societies, while sometimes creating exaggerated and intensified senses of criticism or attachment to politics in the home state.”<sup>27</sup> This multi-directional and turbulent existence of globalization and commodification is overly simplified in this series and it further veils the hard realities of food injustices towards non-unionized and, often, exploited immigrant and undocumented workers.

Such commodification undermines food’s significance as a cultural, nutritional, creative, emotional, spiritual, and deeply personal aspect of people’s lives. The corporate food economy’s perpetuation of gender and racial inequities found in wider society is another source of food injustice in the U.S. For example, gender and racial stereotypes render the low-level and poorly paid labour of women and minorities invisible, even though it is essential to commercial food preparation and production.<sup>28</sup>

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26. See note 15.

27. Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 37, <https://hdl-handle-net.proxy.bib.uottawa.ca/2027/heb06472.0001.001>.

28. Kitch et al., “Gendered and Racial Injustices in American Food Systems and Cultures,” 2.

Chef Martinez's employment as an undocumented worker begins with a quest for freedom and opportunity; freedom from an abusive relationship; opportunity to secure a position for her daughter at a private boarding school in Mexico. This episode did an excellent job of, at the very least, profiling the precarity of crossing the Mexico–United States border on foot and gave Chef Martinez the space to tell her bold story and the hardships she encountered to secure her own health and safety.<sup>29</sup> Her story embodies the challenges and barriers of no/low paid racialized labourers and reinforces the tantalizing American (national) dream in exchange for a false sense of security.

### **Culture, Identity Formation and Its Implications**

Ever-growing and evolving communicative methods and channels such as food blogs, cookbooks, cooking shows on morning television, food advertisements, and other various forms of food media provide an avenue for series like *Chef's Table* to exist in the present day. Food media is intertwined within the complexity of societal systems and plays a role in “social and cultural stratification, poverty and welfare, consumption, national identity, migration and integration, tourism, identity and othering, and gender.”<sup>30</sup> Provided its complex connection between physical (food, food ingredients, audience members) and metaphysical (culture and identity) worlds, food media must be analyzed to understand its potential influences on regional cultural identities and nationalistic identities. Through distinct cultural identifiers in food and food ingredients, culture becomes constituted as “authentic” or “exotic.”<sup>31</sup> *Chef's Table* is no different in the way in which it outlines its episodes, each distinctly discussing the narrating chef's culture, their ties to their culture, and the symbolic meaning of

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29. See note 15.

30. See note 1.

31. See note 1.

food within the context of that culture. As Dürschmidt argues, “TV chefs such as Jamie Oliver have influenced a global audience not just by the way they cook but also by how they perceive and re-present the world.”<sup>32</sup>

In shows such as *Chef’s Table*, these revered chefs portray their cultural identity through the depiction and reinforcement of visual cues and images, introducing foods and ingredients from distinct regions. According to Ayora-Diaz, food media “afford[s] the possibility for global networks that mediate relationships between people who have stayed in their region of origin and those who chose to migrate to other regions or countries in the world—networks that, in turn, support identity claims and reinforce the politics of cultural difference.”<sup>33</sup> Shows such as *Chef’s Table* contribute to constructing shared meanings and cultural identities—here, for example, Chef Martinez highlights her Mexican heritage with regional dishes from her hometown of Capulhuac. Her *barbacoa* creations are not simply street tacos, but rather her food becomes symbolic of her cultural history and traditional knowledge and practices. Recipes and their execution produce a “uniformity of flavour,” which, through the act of eating, creates a sense of belonging and community.<sup>34</sup> As Mona Nikolić argues, “Cuisines are thus important markers of identities and their construction and conservation is a central element in the formation or ‘conservation’ of a nation in the context of globalization.”<sup>35</sup> Chef Martinez conserves her cultural identity through the pit-coal cooking method she employs for

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32. See note 1.

33. Steffan Igor Ayora-Diaz, “Technological Change and Contemporary Transformations in Yucatecan Cooking,” in Dürschmidt and Kautt, *Globalized Eating Cultures*, 111, [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-93656-7\\_6](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-93656-7_6).

34. Mona Nikolić, “The Formation of a National Cuisine in Costa Rican Cookbooks and Its Impact on Regional Cuisines as Markers of Identity,” in Dürschmidt and Kautt, *Globalized Eating Cultures*, 35, [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-93656-7\\_2](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-93656-7_2).

35. Nikolić, 34.

her meat, which is a traditional Mexican technique from her hometown, Capulhuac, the *barbacoa* capital. She states,

Traditionally you make *barbacoa* in the pit. Cooking in coals is the best thing for food. The *barbacoa* is made of lamb. Marinated with orange and salt. The meat, the feet, the stomach, the entrails, and the head. There is nothing that goes to waste. The orange is needed to remove the moisture from the lamb. We use *magüey* leaves to infuse it with a bitter flavour that cannot be duplicated. You cover them, and then the magic begins. You wait eight hours. You can see how the *barbacoa* is breathing. Vapours rise, and the smell is incredible. I've been cooking *barbacoa* since I was six years old. And still, when I'm making *barbacoas*, I feel something magical. I rejoice in my heart... *Barbacoa* on the weekends is like the best thing that can happen to a Mexican... It's a very special dish that is eaten on Saturdays and Sundays. You get together with family. They clear their schedule to be together. It's an important part of life.<sup>36</sup>

This episode introduces the audience to regional specificity, which goes beyond the simple street taco so often associated with Latin American food in general.<sup>37</sup> With Chef Martinez's description, observant viewers gain newfound knowledge that this specific pit-coal cooking method is a regional delicacy from a specific city. Nikolić argues that negative assumptions can also be made in the process of uniformity and conservation, creating an opposite result, which may lose regional distinctiveness and present cultural homogeneity to the audience if not shown effectively in food media.<sup>38</sup> These negative

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36. See note 15.

37. See note 15.

38. Nikolić, "The Formation of a National Cuisine in Costa Rican Cookbooks," 35.

assumptions could lead to stereotyping and generalizations of what country represents which culture, and which culture eats which food. These “culinary and gastronomic assemblages” of culture are explicitly expressive aspects of culture: 1) through the presentation of the food and culinary procedures; and 2) materialistically, through the ingredients that result in a “culinary aesthetic.”<sup>39</sup> Combined with food media, these denote cultural identity and, as Ayora-Diaz states, “contribute to defining the meaning and aesthetic experience of a social group’s food.”<sup>40</sup> In the case of Chef Martinez, we see her intentional attempts at bridging regional distinction and preserving her Capulhuac cultural identity through the depiction of her culinary processes.

As a second-generation Latin Canadian whose family comes from El Salvador, I have witnessed how generalizations in food media contribute to degrading my cultural identity. Take for example the *quesadilla* as it has come to be known in globalized culture—a popular flour-tortilla dish stuffed with cheese and mouth-watering ingredients. Regional distinctiveness and awareness in day-to-day practice would mean understanding that the *quesadilla* does not represent the same dish for everyone in the Latine community; for *Salvadoreños*, for example, the *quesadilla* is a pound-cake-like dessert, which is traditionally eaten with coffee.

*Chef’s Table* examines relationships between chefs, food production, and cultural identity. Through food experiences, viewers are propelled to Thailand, Italy, Argentina, Sweden, Mexico, Slovenia, Brazil, France, Peru, Germany, Indonesia, Spain, South Korea, and the United States. Each chef’s story is distinct in its interpretations, perceptions, and overall cultural contextualization of the food they are cooking. The narration of the stories is personal; the articulation

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39. Ayora Diaz, “Technological Change and Contemporary Transformations in Yucatecan Cooking,” 117.

40. Ayora Diaz, 122.

of that culture is fluid depending on the chef profiled. The show does not come with a disclaimer informing the audience that the chefs do not wholly represent, nor are they elected spokespersons of the culture depicted. Rather, that critical discernment and responsibility remains in the hands of the viewers to interpret and decipher their own meanings of that culture based on the method of storytelling, the imagery of ingredients, the recipes, and the preparation. I would argue that this show encourages a permissibility of what good culture is and what bad culture is. Through its depiction of culinary assemblage,<sup>41</sup> it lets viewers perceive and interpret the images and other sensory items within their own personal contexts, risking negative generalizations and a loss of regional distinctiveness. Would a Western viewer as easily accept to cook a lamb with head, tail, and stomach in a *barbacoa* pit like Chef Martinez? This thought gives rise to the concept of “scary food”<sup>42</sup> and its touristic attraction for viewers. Gyimóthy and Mykletun argue that texture, taste, smell, ingredients, and visual cues can lead to negative generalizations that promote a distinction between what a delicacy is, what is palatable, and what is not.<sup>43</sup> “Food away from home can be amazing, fun and frightening at the same time”<sup>44</sup> and who narrates the gentrification of food is an important consideration towards cultural identity. Notably, Chef Martinez’s tacos are served the same way as in traditional markets in Capulhuac, Mexico—a matter of intentionality as she attempts to preserve her cultural heritage and sacred traditional knowledge. Here, she redefines the art of plating and takes back ownership of how her food is to be consumed.

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41. Ayora-Diaz, 117.

42. Szilvia Gyimóthy and Reidar Johan Mykletun, “Scary Food: Commodifying Culinary Heritage as Meal Adventures in Tourism,” *Journal of Vacation Marketing* 15, no. 3 (June 24, 2009): 261, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1356766709104271>.

43. Gyimóthy and Mykletun, 261–269.

44. Gyimóthy and Mykletun, 270.

This type of food media encourages audiences to see culture through a very elitist and upper-class lens. The type of food, and even the plating of food, shows culture under the allure of haute cuisine, bringing in specific types of audiences with established preferences and biases. Liberato et al. define this intentionality of the documentary strategy of *Chef's Table* as a “self-reflective approach, [which] enables a connection to the viewers’ own memories.”<sup>45</sup> Emotional appeal in filming adds emphasis to visual and auditory experiences and creates a sense of importance and meaning for the audience. In a world wrought with cultural appropriation and a bastardization of regionally distinctive culture, *Chef's Table* should pay heed to its power as a food medium. While Chef Martinez makes a concerted effort to present her traditional food; other chefs featured on the show take on different plating aesthetics, often using big plates with small amounts of food at the centre and a drizzle of sauce on the side—a form of eating that requires the use of utensils and Western-European table etiquette. This distinctive method of presenting the food also embeds meaning as to who is eating this food, and the way the food should be eaten. Chef Martinez’s *barbacoa* tacos are hand-held, messy, saucy, and hold the promise of tradition and delight for Latin people.

### **Chef’s Table and Gender Representation**

Beyond forming and asserting personal cultural identity and giving rise to thoughts about regional distinctiveness, *Chef's Table* reinforces gender-based exclusionary practices found in the organizational culture of the culinary arts. In the forty-four episodes that span across four series (BBQ, French Cuisine, Pizza, General), this Netflix series profiles twenty-nine male chefs, shining the spotlight on only fifteen

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45. Liberato et al., “Food Media Experience and Its Impact on Tourism Destinations,” 590.

women chefs.<sup>46</sup> The “she/her” and “he/him” pronouns in the episode descriptions are used as identifiers to quantitatively reflect the male and female genders for this brief analysis. This reflection is intentional as it mirrors the gender binary shown in the series. Where there was ambiguity, additional internet searches were conducted to determine if there was another pronoun used for the chef.

Within the North American context, “only 20% of chefs and head cooks were female.”<sup>47</sup> In the United Kingdom, Australia, and New Zealand, the prominent practice is that women are underrepresented in media and are depicted in highly feminine and traditional roles.<sup>48</sup> Noted by many authors, women in the food service industry are socially excluded from advancement in their chef careers; ranging from family–work life balance, decisions to bear children, lack of authority and legitimacy, and stereotypical “soft” and “non-competitive” natures.<sup>49</sup> Harris and Guiffre argue that women are disadvantaged in the culinary fields from the onset, specifically due to the gendered nature of this type of employment.<sup>50</sup> Other industries with intensive hours and demanding environments are historically gendered professions that favour men over women. These gendered professions stifle women’s choices and rights to participate in industries such as law, business, investing, medicine,<sup>51</sup> and, likely the food service industry as well. The lack of flexibility to accommodate child-care arrangements has left female chefs unable to maintain long

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46. Two women profiled in two episodes of *Chef’s Table Pizza*, for a total of six episodes. Two women profiled in two episodes of *Chef’s Table: BBQ*, for a total of four episodes. Ten women profiled in ten episodes of *Chef’s Table*, for a total of thirty episodes. One woman profiled in ten episodes of *Chef’s Table: France*, for a total of four episodes.

47. Chen et al., “Media Images and the Gendered Representation of Chefs,” 1.

48. Chen et al., 1.

49. Chen et al., 4–5; Harris and Guiffre, “The Price You Pay,” 40–44.

50. See note 8.

51. Harris and Guiffre, “The Price You Pay,” 38.

work hours and prolonged duties and responsibilities.<sup>52</sup> *Chef's Table* does not sufficiently address the underlying barriers for women in the industry nor does it investigate the negative outcomes of toxic masculinity behind the scenes in the kitchen environment. In Chef Martinez's episode,<sup>53</sup> there is slight reference made to the challenges she faced integrating into the kitchen as a professional balancing family life. The viewers understand that Chef Martinez made personal sacrifices by leaving her daughter in Mexico so she can earn more money to send back home and support her daughter's educational aspirations. Through Chef Martinez's discursive narrative, the audience learns that she climbed the kitchen ladder by working double shifts, starting at every station in the kitchen, working her way slowly up to legitimize her newfound chef skills. More important to Chef Martinez's story is the challenge of being accepted as an undocumented immigrant, which adds another set of hurdles to her journey in becoming a chef.

In general, *Chef's Table* positions the reverence of "the chef" under a similar spotlight: men are valued more as professional chefs than women, as women chefs only make up 34 percent of the featured chefs. These problematic portrayals of women reinforce negative stereotypes and can worsen the stigmas in the industry. The exclusion of women in these spaces is not due to their lack of dedication or skill, but rather "the structure of elite work in the culinary field."<sup>54</sup> The imbalance of work-family life means that some women in the industry consciously forgo bearing children to succeed and advance in their professional kitchen careers, meaning the "cultural construction of ideal workers... prevails."<sup>55</sup> This speaks to the male-dominated ideal that, since they do not have to bear

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52. Harris and Guiffre, 41–45.

53. See note 15.

54. Harris and Guiffre, "The Price You Pay," 45.

55. Harris and Guiffre, 46.

children, men are able to work arduous hours in the kitchen, on holidays, and be away from their families more often than their female counterparts. Some female chefs are quicker to adopt masculine traits, including aggressive male language and communication styles, have “manly haircut(s), have less or no facial expression and [wear] no makeup.”<sup>56</sup> Media reinforces these gendered representations and male chefs are more commonly portrayed as professional, intelligent, and technically savvy; whereas their female counterparts are portrayed as being more sexually attractive, matriarchal, and motivated by “self-satisfaction.”<sup>57</sup> In New Zealand, only 25 percent of women were featured in food media and there were significant differences in how these women were portrayed.<sup>58</sup> Male chefs were more likely to appear in commercialized kitchens or in a restaurant in chef jackets or chef uniforms, giving them legitimacy, while most women appeared in home kitchens and in regular “feminine” clothing.<sup>59</sup> Chef Martinez oscillates between wearing her chef uniform, to wearing regular clothes depending on the scene and the narration, often sporting a short hairstyle and is typically seen wearing make-up. Given the docuseries nature of this show, there may have been different overall presentation expectations for the women, including their storylines, than those presented in the study by Chen et al.<sup>60</sup> Further, Chef Martinez’s episode<sup>61</sup> delves into her relationship and familial backgrounds more so than the male chefs’ storylines, which begs the question: Was her story edited in

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56. Chen et al., “Media Images and the Gendered Representation of Chefs,” 2.

57. Chen et al., 2.

58. Chen et al., “Media Images and the Gendered Representation of Chefs,” 2020. In all, 315 images were collected and only 79 featured women. The data consisted of images of chefs published over a twenty-year period from 1998 to 2018 in New Zealand.

59. Chen et al., 4.

60. Chen et al., 1–6.

61. See note 15.

post-production to keep these more sensitive and emotional details at the forefront of her journey and was the overall story intended to be more impactful because she is a woman? Additionally, the producers interviewed Chef Martinez's husband—as if to legitimize her story arc. The other episodes with male chefs do not necessarily include an interview with their partners, thus raising another critical question: Why would Chef Martinez's storyline require this type of legitimization?

### ***Chef's Table: Socio-political Implications, Racialization, and Resistive Narratives***

Beyond possessing extraordinary culinary skills and profiling these skills through *Chef's Table*, the definition of “celebrity chef” comes with political, social, and environmental values that go beyond the kitchen and, as Matta points out, “recent scholarship suggests that food is acquiring even greater social significance.”<sup>62</sup> He states, “in this wider and competitive environment structured by and pulled between elitism and democracy and leisure and politics, chefs must define strategies to attain and maintain themselves in favorable positions.”<sup>63</sup> This may, in turn, explain why chefs are no longer viewed as just professional cooks, but rather, are symbols of change and representatives of powerful and dialectical processes within societal systems. Chefs are bridging “academic and gastronomic knowledge”<sup>64</sup> to become more familiar with the convergence of human behaviour, social science, agriculture, and food production within culinary systems. An open letter from the Basque Culinary Center states, “We dream of a future in which the chef is socially engaged, conscious of

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62. Matta, “Celebrity Chefs and the Limits of Playing Politics from the Kitchen,” 187; Cifelli et al., “A Comparative Exploration of Celebrity Chef Influence on Millennials,” 442–443.

63. Matta, 188.

64. Matta, 191.

and responsible for his or her contribution to a fair and sustainable society.”<sup>65</sup> This call to action from revolutionary chefs at esteemed conferences such as these are imploring future chefs to maintain this social consciousness at the forefront of their culinary art endeavours. Celebrity chefs may use these extensions into society as a means of engagement with specific targeted audiences, such as millennials.<sup>66</sup> Whether celebrity or not, chefs create targeted appeals to their community spheres by donating their time to local events, donating food, or creating healthy food campaigns for youth.<sup>67</sup> More and more, the definition of what constitutes a chef implies a value-driven individual who understands their role of authority and who channels their influential power towards good.

Generally, *Chef's Table* invites viewers behind the scenes of the industry through the personal narratives of the chefs they profile. While not all chefs seem to engage in socially responsible behaviour, or rather, the show does not address this, *Chef's Table* elevates both Chef Cristina Martinez's and Chef Mashama Bailey's story arcs as strong resistive narratives, contextualizing their personal stories into grander stories of advocacy.<sup>68</sup> Being an undocumented immigrant, Chef Martinez does not shy away from advocating for the rights of people in similar situations. She voices this on the show, “I'm still rooted in those [Capulhuac] customs. But it's been many years since I've been home. Immigrants know this story all too well. It's a story of family. Of separation. And this is what I would like to change.”<sup>69</sup> She also makes a point to incorporate her advocacy into her professional values. After her former managers refused to provide supportive documentation for her immigration application and being fired

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65. Matta, 195.

66. Cifelli et al., 443–445.

67. Cifelli et al., 444–447.

68. See note 10.

69. See note 15.

on the spot, Chef Martinez said, “right then, I realized that I was not accepted.”<sup>70</sup> Her husband states,

[...] it made me really angry that these chefs can just wash their hands and say, “I don’t know anything,” look the other way. You’re saying that, now that you know that she’s undocumented, now she can’t legally work at your place? But these other guys that work in your restaurant, you just don’t want to know. You don’t want to know people’s stories.<sup>71</sup>

The barriers Chef Martinez faced in being accepted meant she was ineligible to receive a green card and subsequently send money to her daughter in Mexico. “[I]n the eyes of men, we must have a paper to say who we are. But in the eyes of God, we are all equal.”<sup>72</sup> Rather than be discouraged, Chef Martinez became even more motivated to see her dream of a *barbacoa* restaurant come to life: “The road was not finished.”<sup>73</sup> As bell hooks states “assimilating into the dominant culture is perceived by most black people/people of color to be the path to success.”<sup>74</sup> Rather than assimilate and succumb to decisions outside of her control, Chef Martinez began cooking tacos and *barbacoa* out of her house, engaging in illegal and risky behaviour with her husband, privately inviting guests to consume her food so she can continue to make money for her daughter. Chef Martinez’s resistive narratives demonstrate that racialized, undocumented immigrant women have a place in the professional kitchen as well as a place in American society, regardless of what documentation they

70. See note 15.

71. See note 15.

72. See note 15.

73. See note 15.

74. bell hooks, “Everyday Resistance: Saying No to White Supremacy,” in *Writing Beyond Race: Living Theory and Practice* (New York: Routledge, 2012), 159, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203108499-17>.

require. Her “wholeness of self and identity stand as the powerful counter-hegemonic resistance.”<sup>75</sup> Viewers are asked to shake their perceptions of what undocumented immigrants look like and what they are capable of contributing to society.

Chef Martinez is open and candid with viewers and her food invokes moral engagement as to how the taco comes to be a representation of her traditional Indigenous knowledge. These representations and resistive narratives have the ability to serve as reminders of the “increasingly powerful system of mass production and socio-cultural disruption as well as the powerful worldview of the market metaphor.”<sup>76</sup> This suggests that the tortilla itself is redefined as a result of market and globalization forces, and that the “analysis of the story of the tortilla offers an historical account of the ways in which everyday food practices are connected to broader cultural assumptions about living in society.”<sup>77</sup> Chef Martinez’s resistance to genetically modified corn demonstrates her strong stance on valuing her historical and cultural positionality as a chef. Rather than encouraging exploitative actions, Chef Martinez promotes sustainability and conscious eating through her *barbacoa* tacos, resisting the narratives of commodification and food gentrification.

Similarly, Chef Bailey, profiled in episode 1 of season 6,<sup>78</sup> is a Black woman from the American South who was raised in Savannah, Georgia, and is revered for reclaiming power in the narratives of Southerners. She deconstructs what “Southern cuisine” and identity mean, breaking down her racialization through her historical context. The politics of respectable eating and how Black American

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75. hooks, 153.

76. Lind and Barham, “The Social Life of the Tortilla,” 58.

77. Lind and Barham, 58.

78. *Chef’s Table*, season 6, episode 1, directed by David Gelb, featuring Mashama Bailey, aired (internet) February 22, 2019. Boardwalk Productions, 2022, Netflix Stream. <https://www.netflix.com/search?q=chefs&jbv=80007945>.

cultural identity was shaped by white stereotypes and permissibility becomes evident.<sup>79</sup> The dilemma Chef Bailey faced was wanting to engage with her culture while contesting the rhetoric of Black food eating habits.<sup>80</sup> In her analysis of Chef Bailey's cultural collective ideals on the show, Medhurst evaluates the fishing practices of Black Americans, specifically for oysters and crabs, and how these "Black foodways" can subvert expectations of dominant narratives.<sup>81</sup> The geographic location of Chef Bailey's restaurant, The Grey, takes on a resistive narrative as a physical space that was historically ridden with discrimination and racism and governed by Jim Crow laws. Located on Martin Luther King Boulevard in a former bus station, which segregated Black and White patrons, Chef Bailey serves clients dishes that reclaim Southern cuisine and aid in "redefining social and political identity."<sup>82</sup> Food access is limited in The Grey restaurant as a result of the gentrification of Chef Bailey's food with entrées averaging thirty dollars.<sup>83</sup> As Medhurst explains, "Embracing a willingness to remember and remake white hegemonic understandings of Black-owned dining establishments in the South by recognizing the sociohistorical progress that enables The Grey to exist the way it does today in the particular space that it occupies"<sup>84</sup> takes precedence over food and class access. Taking this argument one step further means taking into consideration the way in which Chef Bailey works against the typical narratives of Black women being angry or kill-joys.<sup>85</sup> This contextualization provides The Grey's clientele with a physical space that causes intentional discomfort

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79. Medhurst, "Cooking up Southern Black Identity," 220–221.

80. Medhurst, 221–225.

81. Medhurst, 226.

82. Medhurst, 227.

83. Medhurst, 227.

84. Medhurst, 227.

85. Sara Ahmed, "Happy Objects," in *The Promise of Happiness* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2010), 21–49.

to others, promoting discussions about the meaning of the space and food in the present day versus the white-led historical rhetoric of the past. Chef Bailey's story offers Black Americans a reminder of social progress and suggests a commitment to diversity in Black foodways.<sup>86</sup>

Within this dialectical process between the viewer and food media, a new space to reconstitute social representation is created. As Martín-Barbero argues, "Cinema became the first language of the popular urban culture [...] providing an identity for the urban masses which diminished the impact of cultural conflicts and enabled them for the first time to conceive of the country in their own image."<sup>87</sup> While imperfect, *Chef's Table* offers the start of a progression towards a new depiction of media, which holds space for racialized women who are working against years of engrained cultural and gender narratives. For Martín-Barbero, television,

tends to absorb differences as much as possible ... no other medium has the potential access to such a wide variety of human experiences, countries, cultures and situations [...]. Television's mechanisms of proximity and familiarization, by capitalizing on surface similarities, end up convincing viewers that if they get close enough to a reproduction of reality, the "farthest away" in time and space is in fact no different from us.<sup>88</sup>

Resistive narratives are key to promoting a new way to move discourse forward in media but also within broader society, where their

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86. See note 10.

87. Jesús Martín-Barbero, *Communication, Culture and Hegemony: From the Media to Mediations*, trans. Elizabeth Fox and Robert A. White (London: Sage Publications, 1993), 166.

88. Martín-Barbero, 181.

resistance signifies an opposition to industrialized agriculture in post-coloniality. These narratives regain a semblance of power and control for these diasporic communities and counter hegemonic homogeneity. “When the machinery itself cannot be redesigned, at least its function can.”<sup>89</sup> The implications of deconstructing and reconstructing meanings that are shared through food media, such as *Chef’s Table*, allow us to contextualize the vast importance of visual imagery and storytelling in the social politics of cultural and gender narratives in broader society.<sup>90</sup> Similarly, as Appadurai explains, food media is “a constructed landscape of collective aspirations. The imagination has become an organized field of social practices, a form of work (in the sense of both labor and culturally organized practice), and a form of negotiation between sites of agency (individuals) and globally defined fields of possibility.”<sup>91</sup> It is in this that *Chef’s Table* offers a bit of hope in a media market minefield that is oversaturated with choices.

## Conclusion

Food justice activists themselves, who seek to create alternatives to the food insecurity of the industrialized agri-food system, may also back down from the challenging and time-consuming discussions of race and gender and the collective traumas and racialized inequities that alternative systems most need to address.<sup>92</sup>

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89. Martín-Barbero, 186.

90. Martín-Barbero, 209–211.

91. Appadurai, *Modernity at Large*, 131.

92. Kitch et al., “Gendered and Racial Injustices in American Food Systems and Cultures,” 2.

While *Chef's Table* is not classified as a food justice activist docu-series, the underlying messages invoke an emotional connectedness that propels its unknowing viewers into critical thinking beyond the presentation of haute cuisine. There is no denying that food plays a vital role in the sustenance, traditions, and expressions of culture and is, simultaneously, regarded as a “complex social practice.”<sup>93</sup> The Netflix series creates palatable imagery through its visual and auditory techniques, like that of a patron sitting in a fine-dining restaurant. *Chef's Table* does not explicitly implicate itself in the promotion of dominant narratives that professional cooking is a man's world, and that “minority communities that lack access to nutritious and/or culturally preferred foods also face race-based health disparities that become inscribed in the body in the form of diabetes, hypertension, and heart disease.”<sup>94</sup> These are important considerations in the commodification of food and food media. Questioning a male-dominated industry means consciously unpacking gender representation and understanding, the demands this industry makes of women, and the implications of choosing not to bear children or to spend time with their family. On the show, resistive narratives from Chef Cristina Martinez and Chef Mashama Bailey offer a lifeline to racialized communities and a feeling of being seen, heard, and valued.

In today's world, chefs act as agents of social change and are representatives of environmental and social values that are undeniably important to food production, food creation, and food access. The complexities of food systems must consider food media as a powerful dialectical process with its viewers. At the very least, *Chef's Table* allows audiences to start this conversation and embrace the awkwardness of speaking up about what is on our plates.

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93. See note 1.

94. Kitch et al., “Gendered and Racial Injustices in American Food Systems and Cultures,” 2.

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SERVING UP A HOT PLATE OF CULTURAL IDENTITY

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# Abject Food Content, *Mukbang*, and Online Food Media

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## **Abstract**

In the world of online video content, a subgenre of abject food media content has recently become popular. This subgenre is derived from the Korean *mukbang*, wherein a content creator consumes an opulent feast in front of a virtual crowd. This genre of abjection treats consumption as a spectacle. It focuses on the performative rejection of food and the treatment of food as a prop, which often represents an irresponsible relationship therewith. The article explores this online subgenre to suggest why it is popular and why it is a significant commentary on modern, and increasingly capitalist, social relations. It examines the work of two creators: L.A. Beast and Nikocado Avocado and demonstrates how, through their content, they embody this genre of abject food media in diverse ways. It explores how these creators construct a genre of content through an aesthetic lens. Thematically, this article speaks to what this content's success implies about media consumption, food, and life in our online world.

**Keywords:** abject, food studies, film studies, food porn, capitalism, carnivalesque

## Résumé

Dans le monde du contenu vidéo en ligne, un sous-genre est devenu populaire. Il s'agit d'une sorte de média alimentaire abject et il s'apparente au coréen *mukbang*, dans lequel un créateur de contenu consomme un festin opulent devant une foule virtuelle. Le genre abject traite la consommation comme un spectacle. Il se concentre sur le rejet performatif de la nourriture et sur le traitement de la nourriture comme un accessoire qui représente souvent une relation irresponsable avec celle-ci. L'article explore ce sous-genre en ligne et explique pourquoi il est populaire et pourquoi il constitue un commentaire significatif sur les relations sociales modernes et de plus en plus capitalistes. Il examine le travail de deux créateurs : L.A. Beast et Nikocado Avocado et démontre comment, à travers leur contenu, ils incarnent ce genre de médias alimentaires abjects de diverses manières. Cet article explore la manière dont ces créateurs construisent un genre de contenu à travers un objectif esthétique. D'un point de vue thématique, cet article aborde ce que le succès de ce contenu dit de la consommation des médias, de la nourriture et de la vie dans notre monde contemporain interconnecté.

**Mots-clés :** abject, études alimentaires, études cinématographiques, pornographie alimentaire, capitalisme, carnavalesque

A subgenre of food-based media, of ingestion and purging, based on the Korean online phenomenon of *mukbang*, has grown in popularity in recent years. It represents a form of mediated video content on social media that primarily celebrates unrestricted food consumption. The genre showcases the behaviour of eating food to excess and treats purging as a spectacle. This article explores this trend and offers suggestions as to why it is gaining exposure in contemporary online culture.

Towards this goal, this article examines two case studies of YouTube creators involved in producing food challenge videos, both of whom focus on the more traditional *mukbang* and eating challenge genres to create a unique subgenre of abject food media. These styles of video-based media use distinctive aesthetic qualities as a form of attraction. The genre revels in the qualities of abjection.

This article's objectives are twofold. First, it explores *how* these genres display abjection and disgust. It discusses how this genre attracts audiences, while serving simultaneously as a form of social commentary via the content's aesthetic. This aesthetic leverages cinematic tools used to highlight the content's display of the abject. Second, after exploring how the content does what it does, this article explains the *why*. What is the cultural significance of the genre? What does this display of the abject mean?

### Case Studies

The first case study involves Santa Monica resident Kevin Strahle, otherwise known as YouTube creator Skippy62able or L.A. Beast, a competitive eater whose content runs the gamut of that style of food media.<sup>1</sup> His challenges often involve eating a large amount of food in a short amount of time, among which were drinking a twenty-year-old Crystal Pepsi<sup>2</sup> and a gallon of spoiled milk.<sup>3</sup> The frequent outcomes of consuming these massive portions in a limited period

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1. Glenn Geher, "Understanding the L.A. Beast," *Psychology Today*, June 16, 2015, <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/darwins-subterranean-world/201506/understanding-the-la-beast>.
  2. Skippy62able, "Enjoying A 20 Year Old CRYSTAL PEPSI (WARNING: VOMIT ALERT)," YouTube, last modified February 13, 2013, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CGwibPdEOVk&ab\\_channel=skippy62able](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CGwibPdEOVk&ab_channel=skippy62able).
  3. Skippy62able, "Can A Human Drink A Gallon of Spoiled Milk w/o Vomiting into A Washing Machine? | L.A. BEAST," YouTube, last modified March 8, 2016, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IJ\\_K960dG4c&ab\\_channel=skippy62able](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IJ_K960dG4c&ab_channel=skippy62able).

result in bodily rejection of the food through vomiting or excretion. And where most creators would turn away from this display, deeming it too graphic, L.A. Beast explicitly records it. The videos do not shy away from it; in fact, it is displayed prominently as a key feature of the media. He regularly tags these videos with a “vomit alert” to warn spectators of the impending display. The warning is visible at the end of the Crystal Pepsi video.

The second case study involves YouTube star Nikocado Avocado, whose real name is Nicholas Perry.<sup>4</sup> Avocado’s YouTube career began by uploading videos of his freelance violin performances. He changed his focus when a friend tipped him to the earning potential in creating *mukbang* content.<sup>5</sup> Avocado’s attitude towards his consumptive behaviour is a notable element of his online persona. He revels in the weight gain process, irreverently taking pride in the behaviour. He posts photos of his formerly skinny self on his TikTok account, a forum where he also has a significant presence.<sup>6</sup> Avocado also monetizes his internet presence through merchandise, featuring products labelled with his signature catchphrases: “It’s just Water Weight” and “I Identify as Skinny.”<sup>7</sup> L.A. Beast’s personal branding also emphasizes his boastful approach to the dangers of his challenges. When visiting L.A. Beast’s YouTube homepage, the banner features one of his catchphrases, “I Gotta Go to the Hospital,” which

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4. Ralph Schwartz, “The Untold Truth of Nikocado Avocado,” *Mashed*, August 24, 2023, <https://www.mashed.com/410510/the-untold-truth-of-nikocado-avocado/>.

5. Melissa Matthews, “These Viral ‘Mukbang’ Stars Get Paid to Gorge on Food— at the Expense of Their Bodies,” *Men’s Health*, January 18, 2019, <https://www.menshealth.com/health/a25892411/youtube-mukbang-stars-binge-eat/>.

6. Lush Life, “Nikocado’s TikTok Is Worse Than We Imagined,” YouTube, last modified August 10, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SPLkjZL-AJo>.

7. Nikocado Avocado, “<https://itsjustwaterweight.com/>,” Nikocado Avocado, accessed December 20, 2022, <https://itsjustwaterweight.com/>.

he frequently states to emphasize his discomfort.<sup>8</sup> His T-shirts also feature a phrase he uses to psyche himself up before a challenge: “Mind Over Matter.”<sup>9</sup>

### *Mukbang*

The case studies in this essay involve twists on what has become popularized as *mukbang* content. To effectively understand abject food media, the phenomenon of *mukbang* serves as an important template. The genre is typified by a display of the host eating an elaborate meal in front of a camera. The Korean term translates to “eating broadcast” in English and began as an online trend in South Korea in 2010.<sup>10</sup> The spread of the content was mediated by its sharing on YouTube, having spread to the Western world after being first uploaded to the online platform in 2015.<sup>11</sup>

As a genre, *mukbang* spectatorship has been identified as inspiring both positive and negative elements in its viewers with its highlights concerning the process of food consumption. Among those positive assets identified is providing spectators with pleasurable sensations through the relaxing noise of chewing and swallowing, triggering, as Sofia Woo describes it, an “autonomous sensory meridian response:

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8. Skippy62able, “About,” YouTube, last modified 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/@LABEAST/about>.
  9. Myspreadshop, “L.A. Beast T-Shirts,” last modified 2022, <https://labeast.myspreadshop.com/>.
  10. Natalie Astrid, “Mukbang Culture: Where it Started and How YouTube Changed It,” *Medium*, August 19, 2021, <https://medium.com/martini-shot/mukbang-culture-2c230edd579c>.
  11. Amy McCarthy, “This Korean Food Phenomenon Is Changing the Internet,” *Eater*, April 19, 2017, <https://www.eater.com/2017/4/19/15349568/mukbang-videos-korean-youtube>, quoted in Kagan Kircaburun, Kagan, Cemil Yurdagül, Daria Kuss, Emrah Emirtekin, and Mark D. Griffiths, “Problematic Mukbang Watching and Its Relationship to Disordered Eating and Internet Addiction: A Pilot Study Among Emerging Adult Mukbang Watchers,” *International Journal of Mental Health and Addiction* 19 (May 2021): 2161.

they cause static-like, tingling sensations along the skin, and in turn trigger a sense of euphoria and relaxation.”<sup>12</sup> Interacting with a study by Hanwool Choe, Kircaburun et al. observed that “watching mukbang alleviated viewers’ real-life loneliness and social isolation by making them feel emotionally connected to other viewers and the mukbanger.”<sup>13</sup>

On the negative side, the *mukbang* trend has also been criticized for promoting potentially harmful emotional gratifications in its spectators; these gratifications could stimulate the same addictive qualities as destructive behaviours such as gambling and habitual drug use.<sup>14</sup> *Mukbang* has also been criticized for promoting behaviour in which the seemingly consequence-free activity of binge eating is acceptable, which is a potential danger to people who have bulimia.<sup>15</sup> The last critique can also be applied to abject food media, where the processes of human excretion are treated with a degree of levity, suggesting a lack of seriousness, which could likely send a negative message to anyone prone to an eating disorder.

### **Abjection and Disgust**

Abjection refers to more than just inspiring a sense of grossness; by definition, it refers to an entirely different level of repulsion, one that

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12. Sofia Woo, “Mukbang Is Changing Digital Communications,” *Anthropology News*, November 30, 2018, <https://www.anthropology-news.org/articles/mukbang-is-changing-digital-communications/>.

13. Hanwool Choe, “Eating Together Multimodally: Collaborative Eating in Mukbang, a Korean Livestream of Eating,” *Language in Society* 48, no. 2 (2019): 171–208, cited in Kircaburun et al., “Problematic Mukbang Watching,” 2161.

14. Daniel Kardefelt-Winther, “A Conceptual and Methodological Critique of Internet Addiction Research: Towards a Model of Compensatory Internet Use,” *Computers in Human Behavior* 31, no. 1 (February 2014): 351–354, cited in Kircaburun et al., “Problematic Mukbang Watching,” 2166.

15. Kircaburun et al., “Problematic Mukbang Watching,” 2166.

contains the condition of being servile, wretched, or contemptible. According to Rina Arya, abjection “both endangers and protects the individual: endangers in that it threatens the boundaries of the self (...) and protects us because we are able to expel the abject through various means.”<sup>16</sup> Conceptually, the abject represents something “defiling and disruptive of the boundaries of the ‘clean and proper,’ self-contained body.”<sup>17</sup> Julia Kristeva believes that abjection has a rebellious component because it is “not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules.”<sup>18</sup>

The content provided by Avocado and L.A. Beast are both excellent examples of Kristeva’s beliefs in the abject as a vessel of social disruption. In a world where food-centric online content is often a celebration of the beauty of the subject, this subgenre represents a disruption of that airbrushed and beautified aesthetic. Abject food media flips the paradigm—what nature tells L.A. Beast he should not ingest is what he swallows with aplomb. When logic states that basic self-preservation should tell Nikocado Avocado that kind of diet could have negative consequences, he goes after it anyway. It is a defiance of societal norms similar to MTV’s *Jackass* TV show. The pranksters engage in physically dangerous and seemingly illogical stunts that defy a sense of basic self-preservation. So, what motivates a prospective audience member to seek out a video of L.A. Beast vomiting or *Jackass*’s Steve-O hurting himself for our amusement?

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16. Rina Arya, *Abjection and Representation: An Exploration of Abjection in the Visual Arts, Film and Literature* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 2.

17. Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1982), 73, quoted in Michelle Phillipov, “Resisting Health: Extreme Food and the Culinary Abject,” *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 30, no. 5 (2013): 379.

18. Julia Kristeva, “Approaching Abjection,” from “Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection,” in *Classic Readings on Monster Theory*, ed. Asa S. Mittman and Marcus Hensel (Yorkshire: Arc Humanities Press, 2018), 69.

Disgusting videos have been revealed to operate according to their own set of gratifications. According to Rubenking (in interaction with Park et al.): “Uploading and sharing video content online involved ego involvement, with the behaviour associated with self-expression and social norms.”<sup>19</sup> Therefore, sharing graphic and disgusting content offers creators the same gratifications it offers the spectators. The same kind of rebel behaviour that inspires people to break society’s rules in media encourages the audience to seek out and share it.

The resultant sense of disgust inspired by the abject is, as Rubenking and Lang argue, “characterized by offence and/or repulsion to noxious stimuli.”<sup>20</sup> Bridget Rubenking further observes that disgust functions as an “inherently functional”<sup>21</sup> aspect of human perception, meant to dissuade us from such behaviours as not eating or procreating with a partner that could endanger us.<sup>22</sup> Disgusts can be divided into several categories “including core disgusts, animal-nature/reminder disgusts, interpersonal disgusts, and moral disgusts.”<sup>23</sup> In their analysis, Rubenking and Lang highlight a form of disgust known as “socio-moral disgust.”<sup>24</sup> Socio-moral disgusts are related to activities in society that encourage a sense of moral repulsion, such as “child abuse,

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19. Namkee Park, Younbo Jung, and Kwan M. Lee, “Intention to Upload Video Content on the Internet: The Role of Social Norms and Ego-Involvement,” *Computers in Human Behavior* 27, no. 5 (September 2011): 1996–2004, quoted in Bridget Rubenking, “Emotion, Attitudes, Norms and Sources: Exploring Sharing Intent of Disgusting Online Videos,” *Computers in Human Behavior* 96 (2019): 66.
  20. Bridget Rubenking and Annie Lang, “Captivated and Grossed Out: An Examination of Processing Core and Sociomoral Disgusts in Entertainment Media,” *Journal of Communication* 64, no. 3 (2014): 545.
  21. Bridget Rubenking, “Emotion, Attitudes, Norms and Sources: Exploring Sharing Intent of Disgusting Online Videos,” *Computers in Human Behavior* 96 (2019): 65.
  22. Rubenking, 65.
  23. Rubenking and Lang, “Captivated and Grossed Out,” 545.
  24. Rubenking and Lang, 545.

racism, betrayal, and disloyalty, and the stripping of one's dignity."<sup>25</sup> Characteristic in abject food content is that inspiration of socio-moral disgust, which runs alongside the more tangible forms of bodily disgust. The core disgusts are the most immediately tangible form of disgust that dominates abject food content. Still, one cannot dismiss the presence of socio-moral disgust, which can lurk under the surface.

The staggering weight gain of Nikocado Avocado over a brief period has worried internet onlookers and video essayists. A recent video by influential reaction YouTuber Penguinz0 was highly critical of Avocado's gluttonous behaviour. The video is provocatively titled "This Youtuber (sic) Is Slowly Killing Himself for Views."<sup>26</sup> The video editorial spoke of the creator's concern over the potentially dangerous side effects of Avocado's behaviour. Penguinz0 is far from the only YouTuber from the reaction community reacting to Avocado's content and voicing concern for his health. Commentary YouTuber SunnyV2's 2021 video, "The Tragic Transformation of Nikocado Avocado (From 155 to 352 lbs)," sits at over fifteen million views as of this writing.<sup>27</sup> Writer Corrie Narrie expresses his sense of socio-moral disgust in the scathing editorial "Eating Yourself to Death for YouTube Views." In the piece, Narrie accuses Avocado of "personify[ing] America's greed and gluttony to full effect, a nation that uses up 60% of Earth's resources yet only makes up 5% of the global population."<sup>28</sup> Narrie's disgust seems to echo the socio-moral

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25. Rubenking and Lang, 545–546.

26. Penguinz0, "This Youtuber Is Slowly Hilling Himself for Views," YouTube, last modified September 29, 2021, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ijk9a4Zyx3I&ab\\_channel=penguinz0](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ijk9a4Zyx3I&ab_channel=penguinz0).

27. SunnyV2, "The Tragic Transformation of Nikocado Avocado (From 155 to 352 lbs)," YouTube, November 18, 2021, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wJa2thBJ8Fw&ab\\_channel=SunnyV2](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wJa2thBJ8Fw&ab_channel=SunnyV2).

28. Corrie Narrie, "Eating Yourself to Death for YouTube Views," *The Daily Squib*, August 29, 2022, <https://www.dailysquib.co.uk/entertainment/47184-eating-yourself-to-death-for-youtube-fame.html>.

disgust commonly expressed over the decadence of flex culture that dominates online spaces.

### **Visual and Narrative Aesthetics of Abject Food Content**

To situate video-centric abject food media into a historical context, a visit to cinema's nascent era provides valuable insights into its aesthetic makeup. In his essay, "Living Dead: Fearful Attractions of Film," Adam Lowenstein interacts with the theories of Tom Gunning and Gunning's theoretical model of the "cinema of attractions."<sup>29</sup> Gunning's approach revolves around the spectator's relationship with early cinema's "trick films in which a cinematic manipulation (slow motion, reverse motion, substitution, multiple exposure) (which) provides the film's novelty,"<sup>30</sup> which is a staple of early cinema. In these novelty films, Gunning observes: "Its energy moves outward towards an acknowledged spectator rather than inward towards the character-based situations essential to classical narrative."<sup>31</sup> The online creator space represents a digital realization of this primitive form of cinema. The videos from these creators have a homemade, unvarnished, authentic quality to them. They rely on a certain shock value quality; the creator often addresses the spectator directly. An excellent example of this is L.A. Beast's signature introduction bumper to his videos: "Have a good day." It represents a direct acknowledgement of the spectator, as if they were friends, inviting them personally to be part of the content.

Building upon the work of Gunning, Lowenstein asserts: "If classical Hollywood style is posited as the norm, then filmmaking

29. Adam Lowenstein, "Living Dead: Fearful Attractions of Film," *Representations* 110, no. 1 (Spring 2010): 106–107.

30. Tom Gunning, "The Cinema of Attractions: Early Film, Its Spectator and the Avant-Garde," in *Early Cinema: Space, Frame, Narrative*, ed. Thomas Elsaesser (London: British Film Institute 1990), 58–59, quoted in Adam Lowenstein, "Living Dead," 106.

31. Gunning, 58–59, quoted in Lowenstein, "Living Dead," 106.

practices that deviate from it risk becoming seen as ‘primitive’ (such as early cinema) or ‘excessive’ (such as genres where spectacle often seems to trump narrative, including musicals and horror films).<sup>32</sup> The world of abject food content seems to do both. It effectively leverages the primitivism and simplicity of early cinematic style as a transgressive tool to rebel against modern narrative style. Stylistically, it is video content imbued with a punk rock sensibility, with all the filler filtered out. It replaces gloss with a primal minimalist aesthetic and a rebel mentality.

Spectacle over narrative is characteristic of online content and is even more visible in short-form TikTok content, where Avocado is also popular.<sup>33</sup> In that medium, working within limited time constraints, one must appeal to the audience via viscerally affective attractions over meticulously constructed content. Excess provides both a thematic and aesthetic lynchpin to this genre. In his profile of L.A. Beast for *Psychology Today*, Glenn Geher explicitly notes the extreme nature of L.A. Beast’s content.<sup>34</sup> He maintains that L.A. Beast “is an extreme human. He’s off the charts. He takes something that we all do all the time, eating food, and ramps it up into an all-out extreme form of entertainment.”<sup>35</sup> Extreme behaviour is a common element of this type of content.

In an attempt to understand how these videos accomplish what they do, it is helpful to engage with what Linda Williams characterizes as “body genres”<sup>36</sup> in her analysis of horror. She argues that “the perception that the body of the spectator is caught up in an almost in-voluntary mimicry of the emotion or sensation of the

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32. Lowenstein, “Living Dead,” 106.

33. @Realnikocadoavocado, “@realnikocadoavocado,” TikTok, last modified 2023, <https://www.tiktok.com/@realnikocadoavocado?lang=en>.

34. Geher, “Understanding the L.A. Beast.”

35. Geher, “Understanding the L.A. Beast.”

36. Linda Williams, “Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, and Excess,” *Film Quarterly* 44, no. 4 (Summer 1991): 3.

body on the screen.”<sup>37</sup> Similar to how an audience might startle at a dramatic sound, known as a “jump scare” when viewing a film, they inadvertently mimic a character’s fear onscreen. Williams describes these reactions of body genres as “ecstatic excesses [...] said to share a quality of uncontrollable convulsion or spasm of the body ‘beside itself’ with sexual pleasure, fear and terror, or overpowering sadness.”<sup>38</sup>

Both L. A. Beast and Nikocado Avocado leverage an awareness of the attractions of these body genres, even if they do not know it. Cinematic composition helps to emphasize the abject quality of their content. In L.A. Beast’s video “Enjoying A 20 Year Old CRYSTAL PEPSI (WARNING: VOMIT ALERT),”<sup>39</sup> the creator chugs a bottle of Crystal Pepsi, discoloured from aural mix, representing an apparent aesthetic choice on the part of the editor or creator. The construction assists in maximizing the feeling of unease and disgust in the viewer. The accentuation of the sound leverages the “almost in-voluntary mimicry of the emotion [...] on the screen,” Linda Williams referred to, that maximizes the unsettling nature of the video. In the same way that a graphic display in a horror film affects the audience, this display creates a connection between the creator onscreen and the spectator. We share his nausea with the increased volume of his bodily rejection of the expired drink.

L.A. Beast has done videos where he knowingly ingests liquids whose consistency will emphasize the wretchedness of the situation when expelled. A good example is his video entitled “Can a Human Drink A Gallon of Spoiled Milk w/o Vomiting into a Washing Machine?”<sup>40</sup> The answer to the titular question is, unsurprisingly, no. The choice of spoiled milk enhances the sense of abject repulsion

37. Williams, 3.

38. Williams, 4.

39. Skippy62able, “Enjoying A 20 Year Old CRYSTAL PEPSI.”

40. Skippy62able, “Can a Human.”

due to its visual consistency and the sheer amount guzzled in a brief period.<sup>41</sup>

Stylistically, Nikocado Avocado uses strategic camera placement to exacerbate the audience's perceived sense of disgust in both his YouTube and TikTok content. As exemplified in several YouTube clips selected by the commentary YouTuber Leon Lush, it is obvious how crucial judicious camera placement is for his content. The shots are low angle for footage where he is moving around. The footage exacerbates the bouncing and jiggling of the fat on his stomach. His weight is almost a secondary character in the content, remaining front and centre in the shot to draw the eye. He is often shirtless to emphasize it, allowing the belly fat to jiggle as he moves throughout the frame with a kinetic intensity.<sup>42</sup>

In both L.A. Beast and Avocado's content, the camera is often facing head-on, highlighting the displays of consumption. The shots are tightly framed, giving spectators a feeling of intimacy reinforcing an illusion of closeness with the creator. The abject disgust is enhanced through the mix of *mise-en-scène* and sound design. The judicious use of cinematic techniques helps to highlight the sensation of disgust using aesthetic tools and stylistic flourish.

### **Abject Food Content as Social Commentary**

In the following section of the essay, I argue that abject food content can and should be read textually as social commentary. L.A. Beast's content is replete with images of nostalgia. Quite a few of his videos centre around the ingestion and purging of food items, which have a nostalgic connection to his formative years. One video, "Rare Discontinued Soda Taste Test," is explicitly tagged with a cheeky

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41. Skippy62able, "Can a Human."

42. Lush Life, "Nikocado's TikTok."

tag reading, “Warning: Nostalgia.”<sup>43</sup> In the video, he drinks several twenty-year-old, still-sealed beverages, which are no longer produced.<sup>44</sup> Popular culture is, without a doubt, nostalgically driven in our meta-cultural landscape. Reboots and sequels dominate movie release slates. It speaks to a sense of cultural loss when mainstream cinema is not anchored by originality but by a continuous meta-loop of self-referential repetition.

The wretched aesthetic speaks to the unease of a generation whose culture is commodified with products substituted for organic cultural authenticity. The vomiting and excretion reflect a physical display of the rejection of cultural wretchedness. Kristeva, as noted previously, explains that the abject can be protective; in this case, it may be read as a physical manifestation of the collective loss of culture. It is the cultural abject that is literally vomited back at us. Ironically, or maybe just inevitably, our meta-culture even found a way to monetize this as well. In 2015, Pepsi wrote to L.A. Beast about his campaign to bring back Crystal Pepsi. The company observed, “We’ve had customers ask us to bring back their favorite products before, but never with your level of enthusiasm and humour,”<sup>45</sup> partly in reference to his vomiting video previously referred to. In our era, even literally regurgitating your product can be opportunistically spun to sell it. The drink returned for a limited run in August 2016.<sup>46</sup>

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43. Skippy62able, “Rare Discontinued Soda Taste Test (Warning: Nostalgia),” YouTube, last modified January 9, 2018, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QCp3Sw15s3c&ab\\_channel=skippy62able](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QCp3Sw15s3c&ab_channel=skippy62able).

44. Skippy62able, “Rare Discontinued Soda.”

45. Carly Ledbetter, “Crystal Pepsi Might Be Making a Comeback Thanks to One Man’s Excitement,” *HuffPost*, December 6, 2017, [https://www.huffpost.com/entry/crystal-pepsi-back-la-beast-kevin-strahle-comeback\\_n\\_7561194](https://www.huffpost.com/entry/crystal-pepsi-back-la-beast-kevin-strahle-comeback_n_7561194).

46. Stephanie Pappas, “Crystal Pepsi Returns: Uncapping the Weird History of Clear Sodas,” *Live Science*, July 11, 2016, <https://www.livescience.com/55354-crystal-pepsi-weird-history-of-clear-soda.html>.

Abject food media is found in corners of the internet beyond those of strictly video-based content. Examples can be found on the subreddit *r/shittyfoodporn*<sup>47</sup> and the Facebook page<sup>48</sup> by the same name, where contributors display decidedly unremarkable photos of meals that look anything but memorable. These are often hilariously pathetic displays of student-made meals or bad fast food (i.e., realistic everyday food). These photos represent a reaction to the glossy “food porn” aesthetics of the normative visual aesthetic that dominates food media. Erin Metz McDonnell refers to the aesthetic known as food porn as “both a voyeuristic practice and a visual aesthetic. The term can refer to the food, object-including its presentation and the production of still or video images—and to the increasingly common practice of photographing food for social network or public sharing.”<sup>49</sup> The normative visual aesthetic propagates an exaggeration of food’s aesthetic beauty. The visual aesthetic of this “Shitty Food Porn” project acts as a counterweight and reaction to this unrealistic visual aesthetic that dominates food media. Beyond its visual humour, the project is also a sly social commentary on the perverse nature of the voyeurism that typifies food porn. It reappropriates the genre using parody and satire.

I maintain that this era proves so fertile for abject food media because of the conspicuous consumption accompanying capitalism. Glenn Geher observed that “human psychology also includes specialized processes related to conspicuous consumption.”<sup>50</sup> He went on to explain that “conspicuous behaviours are used as social signals”

47. *r/shittyfoodporn*, “*r/shittyfoodporn*,” Reddit, last modified 2022, <https://www.reddit.com/r/shittyfoodporn>.

48. “Shitty Food Porn,” Facebook, last modified 2023, <https://www.facebook.com/sfporn>.

49. Erin M. McDonnell, “Food Porn: The Conspicuous Consumption of Food in the Age of Digital Reproduction,” in *Food, Media and Contemporary Culture: The Edible Image*, ed. Peri Bradley (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 340.

50. Geher, “Understanding the L.A. Beast.”

and how this conspicuous consumption serves the purpose of sending out social cues.<sup>51</sup> Geher used the example of a luxury car, which sends the implicit message that “this guy must come from money and must have lots of resources.”<sup>52</sup>

Both case studies produce content tied in with a type of performative show of comfort indicative of life in the first world. Consumption of resources for sheer hedonistic display and the purging of said resources as part of the theatre is something unique to a life of privilege. It is an entertainment form that would seem alien to those outside of privilege, where the precariousness of food would make this wastage seem even more incongruous. In relation to the wastage of food inherent in the production of *mukbang* content, Chinese state TV has commented critically against this waste practice.<sup>53</sup>

Avocado’s extreme content surrounding his weight gain highlights a sense of societal desperation indicative of life in contemporary America. Much of his content involves gorging on large platters of fast food, a signature representation of American culture. What is more American than gorging on fast food? It represents, tragically, what an authentic American diet looks like. According to the Centers for Disease Control, the prevalence of adult obesity in Americans stands at 41.9 percent as of March 2020.<sup>54</sup> Extreme obesity rates stand at 9.2 percent simultaneously, having risen from 4.7 percent as of March 2017.<sup>55</sup> The diet reflected by Avocado is representative of the unhealthy habits of American consumers.

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51. Geher, “Understanding the L.A. Beast.”

52. Geher, “Understanding the L.A. Beast.”

53. Joe Tidy, “Mukbang: Why Is China Clamping Down on Eating Influencers?,” *BBC News*, August 20, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/technology-53840167>.

54. “Adult Obesity Facts,” Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, last modified May 17, 2022, <https://www.cdc.gov/obesity/data/adult.html>.

“Adult Obesity Facts,” Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Conspicuous consumption stands in sharp contrast to the economic struggles experienced by young people. According to data from Civic Science, 24 percent of American adults have had to take on extra work to survive. The number rises to 45 percent when it comes to adults from Gen-Z.<sup>56</sup> The need for additional employment comes from the copious debt Gen-Z youth carry.<sup>57</sup> These statistics point to a generation forced to live with a lack of work–life balance and a tenuous grasp on money. Pew Research revealed that 68 percent of American and 77 percent of French and Japanese adults think their children will be worse off financially than their parents.<sup>58</sup> These circumstances highlight a world where people cannot afford to loosen their belts. There is a tangible fantasy element to abject food content, where revelry in a degree of Bacchanalian hedonistic materialism is possible. It represents a certain kind of freedom in a world that lacks it.

### **Carnavalesque Consumption and Contemporary Alienation**

The content also shows how our current cultural paradigm reflects our relationship to consumption. Deborah Lupton cites the Canadian food competition squad *Epic Meal Time* to examine food content on YouTube. The collective served as pioneers in the genre of abject food content as they gorged on decadently high-fat, high-calorie meals. In their videos, “all the food stuffs used are deliberately employed because of their cultural status as contaminating of the

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56. Andrew Gallant, “Gen Z and Millennials Taking on Extra Work to Offset Rising Costs,” *MSN*, November 14, 2022, <https://www.msn.com/en-us/money/markets/gen-z-and-millennials-taking-on-extra-work-to-offset-rising-costs/ar-AA146dwa>.

57. Gallant, “Gen Z.”

58. Juliana Kaplan, “Most Americans Believe Today’s Children Will Be Poorer than Their Parents, Pew Finds,” *Business Insider*, July 21, 2021, <https://www.businessinsider.com/most-americans-think-todays-kids-will-be-poorer-than-parents-2021-7?op=1>.

body due to their high-fat, high-sugar and highly processed qualities.”<sup>59</sup> Lupton classifies much of this competitive eating behaviour under the banner of “carnavalesque.” According to Lupton, “carnavalesque consumption is a practice that directly counters cultural boundaries about what foods are ‘good’ to eat, valuing excess and loss of control over appetite.”<sup>60</sup> This form of excessive consumption finds inspiration in the loose standards of the carnival, wherein one is expected to feast during a “periodic loosening of carnal restraint.”<sup>61</sup>

Diana Negra argues that in our current climate, we have a “prevaling industrialized, alienated, and anxious relationship to food.”<sup>62</sup> The success of *mukbang* and the spectacle of purging in abject food content speaks to our contemporary sense of alienation. It is one characterized by a loss of culture and community. As a community, traditionally, the carnival provided an outlet to explore a connection between food and communal celebration in a defined space and time; however, we are now a divided global population. The COVID-19 lockdowns of 2020 and 2021 only served to crystallize this truth.

The anxieties around food and the economy speak to an existential crisis powered by a loss of faith in the future and its potential prospects for success. Avocado and L.A. Beast’s gluttonous displays represent an embrace of the abject and a response to a generation devoid of hope. Their relationship with food and consumption reflects a generation’s anxious relationships with society and each other. Why practise restraint and live a life of balance with a future that appears so bleak? This kind of media invites us all to the virtual carnival, which we may be unable to attend in real life.

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59. Deborah Lupton, “Carnavalesque Food Videos: Excess, Gender and Affect on YouTube,” In *Digital Food Cultures*, ed. Deborah Lupton and Zeena Feldman (London: Routledge, 2020), 42.

60. Lupton, 36.

61. Lupton, 36.

62. Diane Negra, “Ethnic Food Fetishism, Whiteness, and Nostalgia in Recent Film and Television,” *Velvet Light Trap* 50 (Fall 2002): 63.

## Conclusion

Abject food content is a fascinating cultural product. The nature of its fly-on-the-wall, *cinéma vérité* style speaks to the aesthetics of our current media landscape and offers a forum for its unique form of social commentary. At first glance, what may appear to be nothing more than people drinking and eating spoiled or merely excessive amounts of food can also be analyzed as a form of outsider art that speaks to the anxieties and fears of our modern society. Geher suggests that “human behavioural extremes are useful in helping us understand basic things about who we all are.”<sup>63</sup> Exploring abject food media as a unique subgenre of online food content helps us find more ways to reflect on current times.

It is an ongoing concern that these new media celebrity creators profoundly influence young people and have a staggering worldwide reach. A reckoning of their ethical responsibilities as influencers to mould the minds of young audience members must be part of the overall social media conversation as social media matures into its new generation of content creation. The content of L.A. Beast and Nikocado Avocado taps into our fears of hyper-capitalism and the dynamics of consumption. The subgenre of digital media speaks to people, especially young people, in a media language they understand. Treating it as an object of academic and intellectual study and analysis contributes to the understanding of this generation’s social fears and anxieties.

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63. Geher, “Understanding the L.A. Beast.”

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# The Notion of Food Journalism through Social Media Influencers: Understanding and Unpacking the Overlap

Bianca Polcari

## **Abstract**

The new wave of content creation within the social media realm is forever evolving, and with that, the implications of traditional reporting are now being questioned. Through the perspectives of Guy Debord's spectacle and Mark Deuze's approach to journalism, this article offers an insight into the evolution of the food critic through social media and its implication for the food industry. The idea of social media intertwined with a critique of the food industry demonstrates a new form of spectacle by introducing the citizen journalist. By comparing two interviews, one showing the perspectives of a restaurant owner and the other those of a local Montréal influencer, this article demonstrates how the notion of the journalist is evolving. This study demonstrates the evolution of journalism within social media discourse and highlights how food critiquing and journalism are evolving through social media. It questions what it means to enter the world of journalism in the digital age; journalism is no longer what it used to be with a specific code of standards that must be respected. If anything, a new understanding of journalism now exists, and the food sector cannot evade these developments. With that, there are specific implications, such as the ethics of journalism, that are being put into question.

**Keywords:** citizen journalist, society of the spectacle, journalism, social media, influencers, food industry, restaurants, reviews

### **Résumé**

La nouvelle vague de création de contenu dans le domaine des médias sociaux ne cesse d'évoluer et, avec elle, les implications du journalisme traditionnel sont désormais remises en question. À travers les perspectives du spectacle de Guy Debord et la démarche du journalisme de Mark Deuze, cet article offre un aperçu de l'évolution de la critique gastronomique à travers les médias sociaux et de son implication sur l'industrie alimentaire. L'idée d'un lien entre les médias sociaux et la critique de l'industrie alimentaire démontre une nouvelle forme de spectacle en introduisant le journaliste citoyen. Grâce à une entrevue comparative entre le point de vue d'un propriétaire de restaurant et celui d'un influenceur local montréalais, l'idée du journaliste est en train d'évoluer. Cette étude démontre l'évolution du journalisme dans le discours des médias sociaux et souligne que la critique alimentaire et le journalisme par le biais des médias sociaux évoluent. Elle remet en question ce que signifie entrer dans le domaine du journalisme à l'ère numérique; le journalisme n'est plus ce qu'il était, avec un code spécifique de normes à respecter. Il y a maintenant une nouvelle compréhension du journalisme, et le secteur alimentaire n'est pas à l'écart de ces évolutions. Cela a des implications spécifiques, telles que l'éthique du journalisme, qui sont remises en question.

**Mots-clés:** journaliste citoyen, société du spectacle, journalisme, médias sociaux, influenceurs, industrie alimentaire, restaurants, critiques

Critiquing food is a popular profession, and food critics have long been perceived as an authority on what is good or bad to eat. However, the introduction of social media and all that it entails presents a shift in food reviewing practices. Social media has arguably led to a transformation of what it means to be a food critic in the online age, rejecting traditional rules and procedures of journalism as well as food reviews. Macro- or micro-influencers establish a level of trust through their relatability. They can either boost a restaurant's popularity or damage it with a quick post. This new wave of journalism is what Mark Deuze labels as a shift. The notion of journalism, now including the concept of the citizen journalist, is redefining what it means to use social media as a lucrative reporting tool. The new intersectionality between journalism, food criticism, the restaurant industry, and social media manifests itself in what Guy Debord defines as the "spectacle." By redefining these old ways of perceiving and reporting on the food industry to fit the new ideologies of capitalism, the influencer food critic has a more complex role than just posting images on social media. The social media foodie influencers use social media to shine the spotlight on restaurants, but also on themselves and their branding and imagery, turning their posts into influencer marketing through the embodiment of this new type of journalism and how it manifests itself within the spectacle. The application of Debord's society of the spectacle and Deuze's interpretation of journalism provides the theoretical lens that compares food journalism by social media influencers with the perspectives of an influencer and a restaurant owner. This research seeks to understand the overlap between food journalism by social media influencers and the impact this new tool is having on the restaurant industry.

## Methodology

### *Mark Deuze Beyond Journalism*

According to Deuze, a new wave of journalism emerged between 2014 and 2018, transforming the profession. Raetzsch insinuates that this change in journalism is primarily due to a change in perspectives: “Despite the very different conditions informing and enabling journalistic practices and products across these case studies, the authors [Deutsche and Witschge] here offer a systematic and inspiring analysis of what forms journalism can take, how it defends its public mandate in different ways and how journalists combine idealistic zeal with a high tolerance for precarity and insecurity.”<sup>1</sup> Deuze and Witschge suggest that journalism is revamping to fit our new modern-day discourses. What was once structured in certain ways now becomes more unruly and sporadic, not only in form but also practice: “Journalism is transitioning from a more or less coherent industry to a highly varied and diverse range of practices.”<sup>2</sup> It exists in new ways beyond traditional standards, taking on a digital scale via social media. Embracing this new change allows for traditional boundaries to expand and new perspectives and ideas of journalism to emerge.

Journalists present themselves as the voice of the public and consider themselves servants to the people, providing raw information from which they feel the public could benefit. Applying this to today’s digital realm of journalism also provides the opportunity for minority voices to take centre stage. This offers a wider range of perspectives and angles, which were likely overlooked in the past when

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1. Christoph Raetzsch, “Beyond Journalism, M. Deuze and T. Witschge (2020),” *Journal of Applied Journalism & Media Studies* 11, no. 1 (March 2022), 125, [https://doi.org/10.1386/ajms\\_00070\\_5](https://doi.org/10.1386/ajms_00070_5).
  2. Mark Deuze and Tamara Witschge, “Beyond Journalism: Theorizing the Transformation of Journalism,” *Journalism: Theory, Practice & Criticism* 19, no. 2 (February 7, 2017): 166, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1464884916688550>.

Western ideals limited who could be considered a journalist. The traditional form of journalism now needs re-establishing. Twenty-first-century journalists work in a different environment and report to a different boss: “The roles of institutions in newswork are dynamic and changing, opening our eyes to movement rather than stability, to what journalism *becomes* rather than what journalism *is*.”<sup>3</sup> Deuze and Witschge propose a new perspective in understanding this field of work as the post-industrial news-work in a post-industrial sphere: “Post-industrial newswork still tends to take place not only in the offices and on the work floors of specific institutions [...] but also at home, the atelier-style offices of editorial collectives and journalism startups, and in free Wi-Fi café environments as the landscape of urban media production.”<sup>4</sup>

Today’s journalists coincide with the wave of influencers as they mirror ideas of entrepreneurship. They reflect that their work, whether ethical or not, is designed to be a source of income. They foster a community through capitalist practices: “In this enterprising economy, entrepreneurial journalists increasingly start their own companies.”<sup>5</sup> Deuze and Witschge highlight that the shift in journalism now defies boundaries, pushing beyond what has been pre-established, and recontextualized to fit into what Guy Debord would define as the society of the spectacle.

### *Guy Debord’s Society of the Spectacle*

According to Debord, the “spectacle” manifests itself as the capitalist society in which we live. He bases his work on the everyday experience of those who do and do not benefit from capitalism. These moving parts constitute the entirety of this spectacle. When applying this to journalism and its transformation in the twenty-first century,

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3. Deuze and Witschge, 170.

4. Deuze and Witschge, 173.

5. Deuze and Witschge, 175.

this fragmentation is visible. As James Trier explains, “Debord’s analysis is based on the everyday experience of the impoverishment of life, its fragmentation into more [...] widely separated spheres, and the dis-appearance of any unitary aspect from society.”<sup>6</sup> It is through division and unity that the spectacle presents itself. Filled with contradictions and fragments, when these aspects are apparent, that is when the spectacle unfolds: “The spectacle, like modern society itself, is at once united and divided. The unity of each is based on violent divisions. But when this contradiction emerges in the spectacle, it is itself contradicted by a reversal of its meaning: the division it presents is unitary, while the unity it presents is divided.”<sup>7</sup> Influencers, within the sphere of social media, can be defined as individuals with a massive following online. They have the ability to dictate online public opinion based on their personal beliefs. The power struggle between influencers and journalism is playing out within the spectacle, as they both strive for an image of being respectable and valid sources of information. This collective image grows in this pre-established spectacle. As Debord argues, “it is the omnipresent affirmation of the choices that have already been made in the sphere of production and in the consumption implied by that production.”<sup>8</sup> The postmodern realm of social and digital media is now the new spectacle as it seeks validation and power. When introducing the idea of journalism on a digital scale, this spectacle implodes, revealing that the drive for attention, while maybe odd to outsiders, is fitting. According to Debord, “although the struggles between different powers for control of the same socio-economic

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6. James Trier, “Guy Debord’s the Society of the Spectacle,” *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy* 51, no. 1 (September 2007): 69, <https://doi.org/10.1598/jaal.51.1.7>.

7. Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, trans and ed. Ken Knabb, (self-pub., The Bureau of Public Secrets, 2014), 22, <https://files.libcom.org/files/The%20Society%20of%20the%20Spectacle%20Annotated%20Edition.pdf>.

8. Debord, 3.

system are officially presented as fundamental antagonisms, they actually reflect that system's fundamental unity, both internationally and within each nation."<sup>9</sup> Applying this to the restaurant industry, they must adapt, embracing these new forms of journalism so as not to be forgotten in a plethora of objective algorithms and constant presentation of content. They either go along with being filmed and critiqued or reject it and fall behind, being forgotten by the masses. As Debord points out, "each individual commodity fights for itself. It avoids acknowledging the others and strives to impose itself everywhere as if it were the only one in existence."<sup>10</sup> These influencers, or new wave journalists, are in a constant battle to be the very best at their craft, and food critique is the way to get there. They want to be the first to try new cuisines and restaurant reviewing is the means to that end. The spectacle of being first and being validated as an influencer goes beyond reviewing for the sake of wanting to share new restaurants, but rather it is a way to demonstrate that they are the first to have access to these places. Digital society provides the validation they seek through likes, comments, and shares.

### *Research Objectives*

By drawing from both Debord's theories and Deuze's perspectives on journalism, this discussion seeks to, through field research, better understand what this new wave of journalism means. The goal is to not only understand the implications of this new wave of journalism and its impact on the rest of the industry, but also to redefine what a food critic is and, with that, the new challenges food critics may face. By interviewing a restaurant owner and a social media influencer, the objective of this research is to come to an understanding of what the middle ground is or whether there is a possibility for an overlap. Or does the whole relationship need to be reevaluated?

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9. Debord, 22.

10. Debord, 27.

## The Food Critic and the Influencer

### *The Original Food Reviewer*

Our society's expectations of what constitutes a professional restaurant critic attributes a certain level of elegance and prestige to the role. Restaurant critics serve as the bridge between the public and the food industry. According to Kobez, "the role of the professional restaurant reviewer as cultural intermediary is to provide a description and evaluation of the experience of visiting a restaurant that, if done well, allows the audience to feel as though they have already been to the restaurant."<sup>11</sup> Therefore, while their reviews will critique the dishes they were served, they evaluate more than just the food. Given this distinction, how these reviewers carry out their reviews is also done with particular attention to rules.

There is a way to go about it that upholds the reviewer's reputation. They should visit restaurants anonymously, and there is a set of ethics that must be considered. Kobez explains:

Restaurant critics ought to remain anonymous during visits, never using real names for reservations, or drawing attention to their party to alert the restaurant that a review was in progress. The publication should pay for meals, and that if the reviewer [were] recognised and offered free meals it would represent a clear journalistic conflict of interest to accept such an offer.<sup>12</sup>

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11. Morag Kobez, "Restaurant Reviews Aren't What They Used to Be: Digital Disruption and the Transformation of the Role of the Food Critic," *Communication Research and Practice* 4, no. 3 (May 22, 2018): 265. <https://doi.org/10.1080/22041451.2018.1476797>.

12. Kobez, 265.

A framework is maintained that allows for the differentiation between public opinion and that of the professional. It is a tedious and lengthy process. This brief article is a culmination of years in the industry and knowledge of food and dining experiences, all coming together in an attempt to paint a more complete picture. Nevertheless, what happens when these traditional ideals of the food critic start to bend? With the arrival of the internet and the ability to constantly share personal anecdotes, the idea of the food critic is starting to change. The citizen journalist and the influencer are the new food critics.

*The Food Critic, Redefined*

The new food critic, redefined through social media, serves as the bridge between the consumer, brands, and restaurants within this framework. Depending on a food critic's popularity, they may hold enormous power and recognition. They can build a loyal community of individuals who "buy into" what the food critics are "selling" and even the individual themselves. As Vladi Finotto explains, "the possibility of real-time communication, of information sharing and the connection between people across the world has increased and web communities have growth in popularity."<sup>13</sup> Modern-day influencers not only sell themselves but also their brand. "Reputation is the extent to which users believe that an information provided by another member of the community is honest and that who answer cares about the other's problems."<sup>14</sup> Combining an influencer with a niche allows for more content creation and a broader audience reach.

Influencers do not need formal training or certification. Depending on time, place, and hashtags, algorithms favour specific content based on luck. With the advent of social media, influencers

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13. Vladi Finotto, "Food-Bloggers: Do They Influence Customers' Food Choices?," (master's thesis, Ca'Foscari University of Venice, 2018), 1, <http://dspace.unive.it/bitstream/handle/10579/15943/871759-1231595.pdf>.

14. Finotto, 32.

have been able to share their opinions visually and audibly. There is controversy over the notion that being an influencer is a skill.

On the one hand, some influencers become famous based on their credentials and how they use social media to promote ideas and concepts they have learned based on their life experiences. On the other hand, some influencers are famous for posting dances, rants, and opinions that can be deemed unhinged, sometimes even ignorant. The influencer can be anyone, and because of this, there are no ethics or requirements. They can therefore be categorized as citizen journalists.

This type of journalism and influencing can be characterized as citizen journalism, thus transforming what Deuze described as the shift in traditional practices. It can be noted that citizen journalism is masked behind the influencer, as, as Micha Barban Dangerfield argues, both influencer and citizen journalist perform the same actions: “Anyone can take part in the process of creating information – as the notion of participatory journalism (another term for citizen journalism) implies.”<sup>15</sup> This shift in journalism is now incorporating the readers as news reporters, and when food is added to the mix, there is a desire to provide content that influencers believe will appeal to their online community. They construct a reality from their perspectives and ideas, using personal anecdotes and opinions in their posts. Putting food into citizen journalism fosters the appeal of both a raw and relatable type of content. For Dangerfield, “personal experiences of an event reinforce their impact, with each testimony offering a new dimension.”<sup>16</sup> Followers crave honest opinions and consume what they find appealing. The social media influencer thus appeals to these desires.

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15. Micha Barban Dangerfield, “Power to the People: The Rise and Rise of Citizen Journalism,” *Tate*, accessed November 19, 2022, <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/art-terms/p/photojournalism/power-people>.

16. Dangerfield, “Power to the People.”

Influence is categorized by the number of followers an influencer has, creating either macro- or micro-influencers. There is thus this exchange between the restaurant industry and influencers, as both can benefit from engaging with one another. The combination of an entrepreneurial type of journalism with the restaurant industry creates a new type of use. Because as Deuze and Witschge argue, “the emergence of the enterprising professional in journalism is a relatively recent phenomenon, [...] following ‘a process of further commodification of a commercialized media workplace where market pressures are increasingly dominating content decisions.’”<sup>17</sup> What sets influencers apart from citizen journalists is the fact that there is profit involved. While it may seem to have started with enjoyment and wanting to share with a community, it has now been corrupted by a capitalist society. Including the restaurant industry in this discussion demonstrates how citizen journalism is progressively starting to change as well, making room for profit and shifting the notion of citizen journalism to a money-generating business.

### **Interviews**

The following two interviews were conducted with a local Montréal restaurant owner and a Montréal-based micro-influencer. Both parties requested to remain anonymous. At the time of writing this article, the influencer had about thirty-one thousand followers on Instagram and thirty-five thousand followers on TikTok. Due to technical difficulties, the interview with the restaurant owner was conducted through email, while the one with the influencer was done over the phone. Unfortunately, there was no way of recording the interview with the influencer, but she approved the account reproduced below. Through these interviews, I will try to consider whether the arguments made by Deuze are present in the modern frameworks of Debord’s concept of the spectacle.

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17. Deuze and Witschge, “Beyond Journalism,” 174.

*Interview One: The Restaurant Owner*

The following interview, undertaken by email, was conducted with a restaurant owner on November 17, 2022. The questions centred around influencers and their impact on the food industry from a restaurant owner's perspective.

Question 1: What does this restaurant specialize in?

*We specialize in Italian cuisine, but primarily pizza and pasta.*

Question 2: How long have you been in business for?

*It's been open for a bit over 30 years.*

Question 3: What are your thoughts on food critics? Do you see them often?

*I think a good food critic can have a huge impact on the success of a restaurant. Anybody could be a food critic and nowadays everybody is, it's important to check their credibility before taking their word too seriously. I think a good food critic has to enjoy food and the experience one has at a restaurant. I have seen a few critics and I think the best ones understand that everybody experiences taste differently, and that an unbiased opinion and vivid description can go a long way.*

Question 4: What are your thoughts on social media in relation to the food industry?

*I think social media is a fantastic tool for restaurants to put themselves out there and gain insight. Seeing that most people have access to these platforms means that anybody can leave a review and whether they are good or bad, they have an impact.*

Question 5: Have you seen any other businesses suffer from bad reviews from social media food bloggers?

*I have seen a few negative reviews that have made restaurants suffer. The more consistent the bad reviews, the higher chances that they're right. Some reviews are nonsense, but it's important to get ahead of them by addressing a solution if proven necessary.*

Question 6: Do you see any benefits with social media food critics?

*Most food bloggers on social media have a huge amount of followers from all over, which makes it incredibly easy to get your restaurant seen. A lot of the time it's essentially free advertising.*

Question 7: Have you used social media to promote your business?

*We use it to promote events, specials, and anything we have to offer.*

Question 8: Do you think these social media food influencers are beneficial or detrimental to the food industry?

*It can go both ways. I think most restaurants can recover from a bad review, but they can just as easily suffer tremendously. There are a lot of critics out there, you should always check their credibility and go see for yourself if you chose to.*

Question 9: How impactful is a bad and/or good review for a restaurant owner?

*If it's credible, quite impactful. It depends on the critic's range of readers/followers and how well they addressed the experience.*

Question 10: Have you collaborated with any food bloggers? Asked them to come check out the restaurant? If so, how does that work? If not, would you ever consider it?

*We have had a few leave reviews, although no extensive collaborations or promotions. Some have approached us, and some were*

*invited. A few that approached us were rejected for expecting to be treated as royalty, demanding the entire menu free of charge and treating people poorly. Some have tried to use it as a con and some had huge egos. Generally speaking, a restaurant owner wouldn't turn down the chance of practically free advertisement and meeting people. We welcome it, and we welcome good vibes.*

*Interview Two: The Influencer*

This phone call interview took place on the November 22, 2022. This interview focused on how the influencer conducts her business and her opinion on this new influencer marketing strategy.

Question 1: What made you get into social media?

*I started this account during the pandemic when I developed an eating disorder and was later diagnosed with anorexia. It was during one of my group therapy sessions that my therapist suggested that I needed to reconnect with food by posting a video on the social media platform TikTok. I was also passionate about videography and had tried to post trendy and fashion-based content on TikTok before but always felt out of place. I posted my first video on May 20, 2021, and it went viral, accumulating around 60,000 views the following day. I decided to capitalize on this sudden recognition.*

Question 2: Do you have any prior training in journalism?

*I have a formal educational background, completing my undergraduate degree at McGill University but without any prior training in journalism. However, I attribute my ability to critically approach texts and objects to my undergraduate years, when I was trained to develop this critical eye. I believe I have always had this critical approach. When throwing myself into the realm of journalism, I knew I had to put in the work to deliver accurate and factual information.*

Question 3: How do you select the places or foods you want to try? Is it at random or do you have a set list?

*How I select the locations is "on the fly," but I attribute most of where I want to eat based on my cravings and a thorough deep dive on the internet. I never ask for paid collaborations and I usually do them unpaid. Most of the restaurants I eat at are locally owned, and the fact that they are even giving me a free meal is already a lot, given that giving me free food is already a significant expense. I highlight that there is a mutual benefit when I collaborate with these mom-and-pop establishments, as it is not only a source of content for me but also a way to generate clients for these businesses. While money is essential, it is not my collaboration with small businesses that generates this income. However, the collaboration helps me grow my page, allowing more prominent companies to collaborate with me based on my local reviews.*

Question 4: What do you think makes you stand out as a food blogger compared to others in this field?

*What makes me stand out is my personality. Every food blogger is different in their niche and tactics. Because of this, I think there is enough room for everyone, and I do not shy away from inclusivity by collaborating with my peers. For me, it is not about what makes me stand out from others in this sphere because I understand that no influencer is alike, especially regarding food blogging, since personal taste also plays a role in what does and does not get published. I have had other influencers follow me and even loosely copy some of my content, but I do not see this as a threat and take it as a compliment.*

Question 5: What do you think constitutes a food critic? Do you think the term has evolved?

*The internet has evolved the meaning behind what a food critic is. Most of the food bloggers I have met want to be like Anthony*

*Bourdain, but they do not realize that Bourdain has had years of experience, and they, on the other hand, they do not have that formal training. I do recognize that I do not have a developed background in cooking and turn to cooking more as a hobby; however, my connection with food runs deep. Food has always played a significant role in my life. Growing up, I was exposed to various culinary cuisine and tastes. I attribute this to the cultural diversity in Montréal, which exposed me to various culinary dishes.*

Question 6: Would you consider yourself a food critic? Why or why not?

*I define myself as a food blogger. However, I highlight the tension between how I perceive myself and how my followers see me. While I consider myself a food blogger, when walking down any street in Montréal, I get recognized quite often and I am constantly told that I am their favourite food critic. I do not realize that I carry a certain level of fame given my micro-influencer status and, because of this, I do not recognize my rhetoric and power, seeing my page more as a place where many people can find out the best places to eat.*

Question 7: Is this a lucrative business and if so, how?

*The notion that influencers in Montréal make much money from their social media is a concept that I can quickly debunk. Social media is looked at more as a side hustle rather than a primary stream of income, given that there are just not many people in Montréal for there to be enough impact. I prefer that I can do social media full time as I currently live at home with my parents and can commit all my time to create these videos. Another part of my job is freelancing, creating videos that would benefit both me and the restaurants. When it comes to paid posts, I indicate a clause in her contract justifying that if I find that the video or the food is not good or up to her standard, the money I am paid would*

*go back to the employer to maintain my integrity and transparency on the platform. I [want to] highlight that the money I receive sometimes does not justify the amount of work I put into it, as I foot the bill for most expenses in terms of travel, editing, and time as it takes six to seven hours to edit a twenty-second video. A recurring question I debate is if I should compromise my values and integrity for a paycheck. While some of my peers tend to fudge the truth to get paid, sticking to morals and values is my priority, and I will always put that above getting a paycheck.*

Question 8: Do you feel like you have an obligation to always post a good review?

*I do feel guilty when I do not post one, and as much as I consider myself an influencer, I realize that a video could significantly impact the success of a restaurant. However, I value honesty in my work and would instead not post a lie for the sake of the business's success since this also puts my credibility into question.*

Question 9: Have you ever given a bad review and posted it? Or not?

*I have never given a bad review since I believe it is not my place to do so. I recognize that Montréal is a small city and do not feel that posting a lousy review aligns with my principles [or] the purpose of my page, which is to spread positivity. Furthermore, one lousy review can significantly and negatively affect these local businesses.*

Question 10: Do you feel a sense of responsibility in always being positive?

*I constantly have to fight the idea of wanting validation: "Every day, I choose recovery." The dialogue between me and the "always remaining positive" is not sustainable or realistic. Moreover, I realize that being raw with my followers allows them to relate to*

*me more. I understand that being perfect and happy is not faithful to me, and that is when I rely on my support system as my fallback to remind me of that.*

### *Discussion*

The idea of the citizen journalist has evolved into a business of its own, blurring the lines to become this beast. Differentiating between the two can pose a challenge and is still something new within our society. Dangerfield explains that “this sudden engagement in public matters and current affairs sometimes blurs the lines between the role of simple reporter and a righter of wrongs.”<sup>18</sup> The restaurant owner recognizes that this new wave of journalism has financial benefits not only for the influencer but also for business owners. Nevertheless, creating a clear-cut line between the two that allows them to operate within their societies is still being developed, because where there is profit there is always the opportunity for corruption. The implication of corruption in journalism is now being brought forth and is understood by both parties as they recognize that unethical collaborations can happen.

The level of possible interactions on social media is not haphazard. It is a mix of both luck and the algorithm that helps with promotion. Decorte et al. argue that “on social media, for instance, active control of media exposure is sometimes only partial, because users choose initially to engage with certain people, media or content types.”<sup>19</sup> This form of citizen journalism, which Barbie Zelizer defines as grassroots journalism, is a necessary switch for journalism’s long-term survival. Alina Ladyzhensky explains: “Looking at and

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18. Dangerfield, “Power to the People.”

19. Paulien Decorte et al., “‘Everywhere You Look, You’ll Find Food’: Emerging Adult Perspectives toward the Food Media Landscape,” *Ecology of Food and Nutrition* 61, no. 3 (October 11, 2021): 275, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03670244.2021.1982711>.

studying journalism today has become more and less important than it ever was before. It's more important because everybody's looking at journalism. It's less important because many people who are looking at journalism are really disenchanted with what they're seeing."<sup>20</sup> Enabling journalism in the digital age is vital for its survival, as it must adapt to evolving times, rather than clinging to its traditional form. Social media as a direct vessel to sustain these changes is no longer up to personal taste but is required for the profession to survive in the long-term. By using social media platforms to share food content through aesthetically appealing visuals is a powerful marketing tactic. Phutthiphansa Hanjeerapanya argues that, "to maintain the reputation of existing players on Instagram, bloggers should be noted to keep posting an attractive photo or precise and informative video content in order to build their page awareness and reputation."<sup>21</sup> There is this mutual understanding between the influencer and the restaurant owner that incorporating social media can be financially beneficial for both businesses. We see that the introduction of the social media food critic not only plays into the idea of the spectacle by providing a new type of capitalist stream, which can be profited from, but also becomes part of this new wave of journalism. Jennifer Lofgren explains, "as the [social media] community has grown, food-related media and other industries have responded with

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20. Alina Ladyzhensky, "Journalism Is Outdated: Professor Barbie Zelizer Discusses a New 'Manifesto,'" Annenberg School for Communications, University of Pennsylvania, accessed January 24, 2022, <https://www.asc.upenn.edu/news-events/news/journalism-outdated-professor-barbie-zelizer-discusses-new-manifesto>.

21. Phutthiphansa Hanjeerapanya, "The Impact of Food Bloggers on Instagram When Choosing a Restaurant in Bangkok" (independent study, Master of Science in Marketing, Faculty of Commerce and Accountancy, Thammasat University, 2018), 24, [http://ethesisarchive.library.tu.ac.th/thesis/2017/TU\\_2017\\_5902040343\\_8440\\_6895.pdf](http://ethesisarchive.library.tu.ac.th/thesis/2017/TU_2017_5902040343_8440_6895.pdf).

attempts to understand, engage with, and manage food bloggers.”<sup>22</sup> This gradual conversion of different related food media creates a new way for capitalist and journalistic ideas to take centre stage. By assuming that their opinion is just as valuable as a traditional food reviewer, food bloggers are now becoming the modern-day food reviewer. Navneet Alang points out that, “it’s a question of what the object and nature of criticism should be: a narrow slice of food that [...] demands the language of a specialist, or a shifting set of criteria that tackle both the highbrow and the everyday without insisting one is more culturally significant than the other.”<sup>23</sup> Traditional food critics may come across as elitist in their views on good food, while influencers aim to be relatable and represent the voice of the people. They offer a different perspective that is gaining well-deserved recognition. However, with this recognition comes new challenges.

Finding ethically and morally sound influencers can be challenging, as greed and corruption can sway many, especially in smaller cities where full-time social media income is scarce. The harmony between the influencer and the industry is increasingly being questioned as morals, ethics, and codes of conduct are now becoming more significant with these videos and posts. What has become apparent is that this relationship is evolving. What was once a hobby is now a lucrative business venture.

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22. Jennifer Lofgren, “Food Blogging and Food-Related Media Convergence,” *M/C Journal* 16, no. 3 (June 24, 2013), <https://doi.org/10.5204/mcj.638>.
23. Navneet Alang, “Who Gets to Be a Restaurant Critic? The Chicken Connoisseur and the Merits of Authentic Populism,” *Eater*, accessed March 2, 2017, <https://www.eater.com/2017/3/2/14780712/chicken-connoisseur-elijah-quashie-restaurant-critic>.

## **The Good, the Bad, and the Possible In-between**

### *The Good*

This mutual collaboration between influencers and restaurants can take on multiple formats, and with that comes benefits. Influencer marketing usually involves an exchange between both parties, with one providing content in exchange for a free meal. The citizen journalist can be involved in the business in different ways with the most popular being sponsored posts. These types of posts are the pinnacle of influencer marketing as they allow for a one-time transaction. Sherie Raymond explains that sponsored posts allow restaurants to “raise brand awareness, get their product in front of people while still not [committing] to a long-term relationship with an influencer.”<sup>24</sup> As stated by the restaurant owner interviewed, the collaboration is beneficial as it serves as a way of promoting their business in a city with a bustling restaurant scene. Montréal is a relatively small city compared to New York or Chicago, therefore, exposure is vital for the survival of the restaurant, which relies on customers, but also for the influencer, who benefits by publishing more content and generating more traffic to their page.

The exchange can be a series of posts in exchange for a free meal or a monetary fee, depending on the agreement between the restaurant owner and influencer. The influencer understands that their collaborations will not always be compensated in the same way. When collaborating with locally owned restaurants, the influencer I interviewed recognizes that free meals will usually be her compensation; however, in partnership with more prominent brands, monetary compensation is always the case. The compensation she receives depends on whom she works with, and she realizes that sometimes

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24. Sherie Raymond, “How Food Bloggers Could Change Your Restaurant Business,” *FSR Magazine*, November 21, 2018, <https://www.fsrmagazine.com/fsr/expert-insights/how-food-bloggers-could-change-your-restaurant-business>.

she will not have enough money to cover basic fees. That is why she treats this job as a “side hustle,” not a full-time job, as it is not sustainable.

Nevertheless, she is passionate about food, and having the opportunity to work with brands in the first place is something she would never have thought imaginable. Emilie Nunn argues that there is a new economy being put in place as a way of adapting to the new spectacle: “Social life is completely taken over by the accumulated products of the economy [...], the spectacle and social media have a clear link in that social media images are based on appearances and, often, desirable products and lifestyles.”<sup>25</sup> In this new economy, influence and persuasion can start to grow. These influencers, as opposed to the citizen journalist, have a charisma in how they carry themselves, making individuals want to consume more of them. The influencer interviewed has specific taglines she uses; she edits her videos with a particular style. How she promotes her social media pages and content is also based on her personality. Her account goes beyond food, as she is very open about her past struggles with food. She is selling places to eat and the idea that her page is a community page, which is there for people recovering from eating disorders. It is not just about promoting restaurants; it is about promoting a welcoming and encouraging personality. Her followers are drawn not only to her content but also to her as an individual. She recognizes that becoming a friend or support system to some is just as important as the success of her social media pages. The constant need to stay up to date with influencers varies for each person, but knowing what and where they eat is always in high demand. Luciana Santos Morais explains that, “a restaurant review given by an influencer has definitely more impact in the way it communicates with

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25. Emilie Nunn, “Social Media as an Extension of Guy Debord’s the Society of the Spectacle (1967),” *Journal of Arts Writing by Students* 5, no. 1 (March 1, 2019): 86, [https://doi.org/10.1386/jaws.5.1.79\\_1](https://doi.org/10.1386/jaws.5.1.79_1).

the audience. Because of the influencer expertise in the niche, they can better explain why the restaurant is the best option for a specific cuisine.”<sup>26</sup> If anything, knowing what and where the influencer is eating is heavily desired and given the influencer’s macro- or micro-level influence, accessing this information is not hard. Nunn argues, “We no longer need to be awake within our physical reality, provided that we are perceived and noticed within our abstract virtual reality: the social media platform.”<sup>27</sup> Having the opportunity to experience even a sliver of their lives and what they like is also desired because, as Raymond explains, “influencers build a bridge between brands and consumers, bringing the product closer to the audience. Especially in the food and beverage industry where the experiences matter and people want to hear from regular people just like them.”<sup>28</sup> The impact this can have on the food industry is crucial as it guides and shapes public opinion and taste.

The level of influence these citizen journalists possess is affected by three social aspects, which are intricate and dependent on each other. The first one is compliance. This is represented through subjective norms<sup>29</sup> and acts as a means to “comply with the opinions of other.”<sup>30</sup> Given the influencer’s social power and the level of recognition, persuasion and guidance come quickly and are validated by the influencer. The second that gauges collective and individual behaviour is identification, through which, as Finotto argues, individuals “feel attachment with the other members of a community and a sense of belonging to the online group.”<sup>31</sup> The influencer’s social

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26. Luciana Santos Morais, “The Impact of Influencers on Restaurants Reviews,” (master’s thesis, NOVA University Lisbon, 2021), 12, <https://run.unl.pt/bitstream/10362/136694/1/TGI0579.pdf>.

27. Nunn, “Social Media,” 86.

28. Raymond, “How Food Bloggers Could Change Your Restaurant Business.”

29. Finotto, “Food-Bloggers: Do They Influence Customers’ Food Choices?,” 39.

30. Finotto, 39.

31. Finotto, 39.

identity represents their community, and to be a part of this means to identify with what is being projected. These followers see themselves in the influencers, and when food is put into the discourse, it creates a sense that they have the same tastes and standards of what good food is. According to Nunn, “Debord sees the individual as a passive voyeur and argues against the freedoms of mass media.”<sup>32</sup> The last aspect is internalization. These followers recognize that they are being influenced and accept it.<sup>33</sup> The amount of influence these citizen journalists possess indicates how much their followers are willing to accept. The power influencers hold on the social media scale is significant, driving individuals and shifting opinions and ideas about what their audiences should and should not consume.

Collaboration allows for the growth and development of the influencer’s and the restaurant’s social media accounts. By comparing both interviews conducted, it is evident that there is a desire for collaboration as there is mutual gain to be had, the primary component being growth. Collaborating with a food-reviewing influencer benefits the restaurant by helping it reach a more targeted audience interested in dining at their establishment. Karen Cross states that “actual communities can be impacted by the different performances of connectivity that have become associated with digital food media, and the rise of the network and social media visualities with which it is associated.”<sup>34</sup> Given that the interviewed influencer promotes restaurants, provides reviews, and has a community of followers, collaborating would provide content for her and traffic for the restaurant owner.

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32. Nunn, “Social Media,” 82.

33. Finotto, “Food-Bloggers: Do They Influence Customers’ Food Choices?,” 39.

34. Karen Cross, “Visioning Food and Community through the Lens of Social Media,” in *Digital Food Cultures*, ed. Deborah Lupton and Zeena Feldman (London: Routledge, 2020), 163, <https://www-taylorfrancis-com.proxy.bib.uottawa.ca/chapters/edit/10.4324/9780429402135-15/visioning-food-community-lens-social-media-karen-cross?context=ubx&refId=ad864317-883b-46df-99bc-e587020194e9>.

The rise of social media and, in turn, social media marketing—the opportunity to be featured and reviewed on these Instagram pages—generates an incredible amount of traffic for these restaurants, because as Heather Brüdlo explains, “it distinguishes [specific restaurants] and tells audiences that [these] restaurant[s] [have] the atmosphere and food worthy of putting online and is validated by a third party!”<sup>35</sup> Using social media as a form of marketing allows for a third-party opinion to be introduced. The idea is that this is an excellent place to eat, and people should want to check it out. Using the influencer as third-party validation can help a restaurant get noticed, reinforcing the idea that this is a place everyone should be going to. This entails an organized relationship between the influencer and restaurant, implying that they have an agreement in place. If an individual shows up unannounced with no pre-discussed agreement between both parties, this could have adverse effects if the food is not up to par with the influencer’s standards. This is where the lines between the influencer and the restaurant owner start to blur and cause considerable problems. What happens when a review is not good? What happens when traditional journalism and food criticism morals, ethics, and procedures are no longer being followed by these new embellished personas of citizen journalists?

### *The Bad*

When comparing traditional journalism protocols and the new wave of journalism, especially in food reviewing, there are definite boundaries of what is and what is not permitted, and which are now based more on personal principles. Traditional food reviewers adhere to specific codes and ethics to maintain their reputation for providing morally sound and ethically driven opinions in their reporting.

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35. Heather Brüdlo, “9 Benefits of Influencer Marketing for Restaurants,” Blitz Marketing, October 21, 2021, <https://www.blitzmarketing.co/post/9-benefits-of-influencer-marketing-for-restaurants#:~:text=Because%20it%20>.

There are five core principles that these food reviewers must follow to properly establish the appropriate amount of professionalism. These include rules such as not abusing their power, recognition, respect for diversity, and transparency.<sup>36</sup> Prominent aspects that are a point of tension between both these traditional food reviews and the influencers involve immediacy, anonymity, and integrity.

The traditional food critic maintains the need to serve as the intermediary between the public and the professional world of cooking. As such, they maintain this status of “communicator” and follow a set of rules, which allows them to be as honest as possible. The first rule is anonymity. Typically remaining unknown is incredibly important when reviewing restaurants as it allows for the critics to experience the restaurant as normally as possible. Morag Kobez sums it up as follows: “Valuing reviewer anonymity originates from an identified need for distance, detachment, and integrity in making accurate and acceptable aesthetic judgments.”<sup>37</sup> In contrast to traditional food critics, modern-day influencer food critics often find it challenging to remain anonymous because their fame is built on being themselves. These individuals are the new voice of the people, and engaging in a dialogue between them and their community is essential in maintaining their image: “The expectation of two-way dialogue between critic and audience is one reason cited by participants for the move away from anonymity.”<sup>38</sup> Removing anonymity would mean the restaurant is aware that an internet celebrity is in their midst, and risk providing a service that is better than what

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36. Association of Food Journalists, “Association of Food Journalists’ Code of Ethics,” Poynter, September 8, 2021, <https://www.poynter.org/ethics-trust/2021/association-of-food-journalists-code-of-ethics/>.

37. Morag Kobez, “Restaurant Reviews Aren’t What They Used to Be’: Digital Disruption and the Transformation of the Role of the Food Critic,” *Communication Research and Practice* 4, no. 3 (May 2018): 266, <https://doi.org/10.1080/22041451.2018.1476797>.

38. Kobez, 269.

the average consumer would get: “This was seen as compromising their ability to experience a restaurant as the average diner would, and therefore their ability to carry out one of their core functions of providing audiences with accurate expectations of a dining experience.”<sup>39</sup> As seen in the interview, the influencer promotes her page through her personality, using tag lines and wordage that makes her videos identifiable to audiences that follow her. There is no longer a sense of anonymity as social media automatically identifies who the food critic is. Doing so leads to the next point of the contingent: a lack of transparency and integrity.

When it comes to food reviews, journalism has formal requirement for transparency and integrity in how food critics report and conduct themselves. Traditional food reviewers are typically expected to pay for their meals in full, not inform restaurant owners of their visit, and maintain anonymity throughout the entire dining experience. If they were to receive special treatment such as gifts or free meals, it should be disclosed in the article to demonstrate that the reviewer recognizes their privileged position and that their experience may not be the same as for a regular client. The Association of Food Journalists clearly states: “Don’t accept free meals or use gift certificates donated by the restaurant or a special-interest group. Publications should strive to budget enough money for restaurant visits.”<sup>40</sup> The very premise of integrity and transparency in the age of social media and the idea of an influential journalist are being questioned, as many of us are still trying to grasp that influencer reporting is a real profession. Influencers are often invited to restaurants based on contracts, which are never explicitly disclosed in their reviews because citizen journalism has no ground rules and ethics

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39. Koberz, 270.

40. “Association of Food Journalists: Food Critic Guidelines,” *Accountable Journalism*, published 2021, <https://accountablejournalism.org/ethics-codes/international-association-of-food-journalists-food-critic-guidelines>.

on transparency. Kobez argues that, “with the increased blurring and overlap between professional and amateur reviews comes the suggestion that less value is now placed on independent, professional reviews, [...] reviews fuelled by journalistic integrity.”<sup>41</sup> The exchange between content and a free meal now goes hand in hand. However, this does not mean that transactions are solely based on food–publicity exchanges. The point is that influencers do not feel the need nor are they required to be transparent in their posts, given that there are no fundamental rules in place. Integrity is corrupted because we do not know who is being truthful and who is being paid to tell a fictitious narrative: “The difference between professionals and bloggers—bloggers rarely pay for their meals these days. Often it’s comped by the restaurants. So they’re beholden to the restaurant for their free meal, so it’s a tricky area – it tends to mean their commentary is full of gushing praise.”<sup>42</sup> Influencers like the one interviewed are hard to come by, as she has a moral way of conducting her business, but we should not assume all influencers within the spectacle follow rules and a code of conduct. The credibility of both reviewers and journalists is compromised by influencers. Influencers may not have the qualifications to be journalists, but they can earn certifications that can improve their credibility. Despite this, they acknowledge that they cannot replace a certified food critic. As social media continues to grow, it is apparent how food critics differ from citizen journalists. Adding monetary compensation to the relationship threatens the integrity and trust between journalists and their audience.

The idea of immediacy and clickbait sets the influencer journalist apart from the traditional food critic. Social and digital demand must meet the viewers’ desires, leading to exaggeration and constant delivery of content. Our society is now used to shorter videos, and creating bite-sized content packed with information on restaurants

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41. Kobez, “Restaurant Reviews Aren’t What They Used to Be,” 270.

42. Kobez, 271.

is complex. According to the influencer interviewed, most of her followers stop viewing her videos after the ten-second mark, but this is all but common in the world of social media. Kobez explains that, “there was agreement among respondents that they had all been required to write shorter, more attention-grabbing reviews, and in some cases, media organizations had eradicated the critical element, replacing it with a recommendation-style review.”<sup>43</sup> This is a real challenge for her as her first viral video was around one minute long. Her content must now be concise enough to deliver critical points while also being visually stimulating. Beyond that point, the format in which content is delivered and the various existing social media platforms must be considered when posting this type of content. One application may be more successful than another, and these factors must be considered when showcasing one’s work. This is starkly different from traditional food reviews, which are usually five to seven hundred words, unpacking “a ‘warts and all’ commentary on not only the individual restaurant but the broader social or cultural context.”<sup>44</sup> There is a shift towards prioritizing essential information and individual preferences over providing a complete restaurant experience, further changing the role of a food critic. The traditional food critic reviews a restaurant in terms of food, dining experience, and ambience. Putting the social media influencer into food journalism now means the influencer has about twenty seconds to grab their followers’ attention. They present only the facts and what is desired. This means they may not mention anything about ambience, customer service, and other aspects that go into a full review. Back to the restaurant owner interviewed, he mentioned that involving a food journalist could be beneficial for the restaurant, providing free advertisement and exposure; however, the fact that there are no ground rules and codes of conduct can lead to manipulation,

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43. Kobez, 271.

44. Kobez, 271.

something many owners fear. It is easy to lie on social media. When someone goes up against an influencer with a considerable number of followers, it is hard to be more credible than the influencer who has a whole army of followers willing to defend them immediately.

*The Possible Intersection*

Through Deuze's interpretation of citizen journalism, the implications of social media and influencers are now the manifestation of a bond and community. Influencers create interpersonal trust, focusing on the amount of traffic their page can generate rather than on the content, which, in this case, is food. There is now the push for a commodification of personal opinion. An enticing persona convinces followers to take their words as gospel. However, as highlighted by Debord, these actors are playing a role, putting forward the new societal spectacle that is the social media environment.

Therefore, the spectacle in this new sense is the participation of citizen journalists in the social media landscape. Citizen journalism projects inclusivity and suggests that every restaurant it covers deserves attention, but this diminishes traditional journalism. Social media is becoming saturated with a constant influx of citizen journalists and influencers. What is considered as good or bad is now being questioned, based on one's experiences and ideas. Zelizer notes this new stream of journalism, explaining that digital journalism now redefines our digital landscapes and restructures what it means to be a journalist in this era: "Across time, the story of journalism's technologies has largely been told as one that is progressively instrumental to democracy, making information available to growing numbers of people from increasingly different walks of life and geographic regions."<sup>45</sup> It is an open space where others can engage

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45. Barbie Zelizer, "Why Journalism Is About More than Digital Technology," *Digital Journalism* 7, no. 3 (March 16, 2019): 346, <https://doi.org/10.1080/21670811.2019.1571932>.

with and contribute to information, either confirming or disputing it, fostering collaboration on social media. Furthermore, the notion that social media is used as a tool to promote citizen journalism also promotes the notion of voyeurism, which Debord also tackled. For Tiernan Morgan and Lauren Purje, “images influence our lives and beliefs daily; advertising manufactures new desires and aspirations. The media interprets (and reduces) the world for us with the use of simple narratives.”<sup>46</sup> Society loves images and videos published on social media that review restaurants. Social media users are unaware of the backend deals that may have happened, the ethics respected or violated, and the secret society that lives within social media. While influencers may promote the perfect life, their followers do not necessarily know that influencers are actually signing multimillion-dollar contracts or not making ends meet. While considered important in other people’s lives, these factors are not necessary within the social media spectacle as the influencers’ main goal is to produce videos and content, consume food, and get validation. To say that the influence of social media and food reviewing are entirely negative would be a pessimistic statement. Introducing a new form of journalism inevitably entails a new perception of capitalism within the image-driven spectacle. Morgan and Purje argue that, “the spectacle, which is driven by economic interest and profit, replaces lived reality with the ‘contemplation of the spectacle.’ Being is replaced by *having*, and having is replaced by *appearing*.”<sup>47</sup> The notion of food and food as a symbol of comfort and unity are unpacked and used as a shield to protect the true intent of influencers, by combining the comfort of food and the reliability influencers foster with their

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46. Tiernan Morgan and Lauren Purje, “An Illustrated Guide to Guy Debord’s ‘the Society of the Spectacle,’” *Hyperallergic*, August 10, 2016, <https://hyperallergic.com/313435/an-illustrated-guide-to-guy-debords-the-society-of-the-spectacle/>.

47. Morgan and Purje, “An Illustrated Guide.”

followers. Morgan and Purje describe, “the spectacle as capitalism’s instrument for distracting and pacifying the masses.”<sup>48</sup> It seems as though the influencer is portrayed as this villain, a beast in the social media realm; however, through the lens of Debord, one could suggest that these individuals recognized the opportunity this new extension of the spectacle provided and decided to capitalize on the opportunity. According to Nunn, “to place social media as an extension of the spectacle, the platform needs to hold within it the characteristics of the spectacle itself: consumerism, commodity fetishism, alienation.”<sup>49</sup> Coinciding with the citizen journalists, the spectacle creates an individual who promotes relatability with the community: “Virtual reality is based on perception and representation. All that is published on social media is a representation of an individual; all that is viewed of the image is based on perception.”<sup>50</sup> Therefore it seems the spectacle and this new wave of journalism have provided what we now call the “influencer.” Influencers connect with a large audience and generate income from their content creation. In the context of the restaurant industry, food serves as a means to distinguish these influencers from the crowd, setting them apart within the spectacle and appealing to audiences with a unique perspective. They are not like typical lifestyle bloggers; they have ideas, tastes, and personalities, and by putting this together with food, they can differentiate themselves from the rest.

Granted, the newness of this form of journalism allows for potential interventions such as the birth of a new form of business. Influencer marketing is now evolving into something much more significant than what it started as, which implies that the individual posting online is now a brand within itself and, therefore, must be catered to and dealt with under a different lens.

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48. Morgan and Purje, “An Illustrated Guide.”

49. Nunn, “Social Media,” 89.

50. Nunn, 85.

However, there is still a *double entendre* regarding this influence through social media. This type of journalism now brings into question the ethical concerns about what it means to be a journalist and what it means to promote food online. The idea that social media presents the most essential parts of someone's life includes what they eat and consume, and some may receive harsh criticism if they favour one food over another. The influencer and their content are constantly being judged given that their posts are now accessible to large numbers of individuals at all times. As such, their content can be over-criticized at a constant and daily rate. This brings forth the question of whether influencers, not only within the realm of the food industry but also in general, need a particular type of protection to make posting and creating an online business a mentally safe environment to explore. Social media is a spectacle, possessing a plethora of moving parts. When looking at influencers and the restaurant industry, understanding that something larger is at play can only happen when one distances oneself.

### **Conclusion**

By unpacking Deuze's theory of the citizen journalist and its manifestation in Debord's spectacle of social media, I argue we are better able to understand how being a social media food reviewer is complex and multidimensional. What seems to be happening is the ridding of traditional norms of journalism to fit our new reality and identify what it means to be a journalist in the digital age. Deuze introduces the citizen journalist into Debord's new spectacle, which is contextualized by social media. The influencer, by taking on the role of the new citizen journalist, is one of many actors within the spectacle. The argument that food reviewing is a passion is valid, but only up to a point, as food media is only used as a crutch and not the actual reason influencers started using social media. However, this does not mean that every influencer who reviews restaurants is in it for profit. As seen in the interview with the influencer, some

influencers have ethics and morals and perform their roles in a trustworthy manner. However, this raises another issue with this new wave of journalism in the spectacle: this business is not as perfect as it seems, and cracks are starting to emerge. This begs the question: could this spectacle potentially implode? Is influencer marketing the beginning of the end for the social media spectacle?

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**“[F]ood becomes the medium through which the subject is now able to reminisce on love, generosity, and the connection of generational kinship and tradition.”**

**« [L]a nourriture devient le moyen par lequel le sujet peut se remémorer l’amour, la générosité et le lien de parenté et de tradition entre les générations. »**

— Dina Salha

The growing integration of food into media content and digital culture is transforming our perceptions of food, sustainability, and global food systems. Food now serves as a powerful tool for storytelling, fueling the rise of influencers, celebrity chefs, dedicated food channels, and broader cultural industries. This pervasive media presence reflects a pressing need to critically examine the visual and narrative appetite for food—how it is consumed, represented, and commodified across both local and global contexts.

L’intégration croissante de la nourriture en tant qu’objet central des contenus médiatiques et de la culture numérique reconfigure en profondeur nos représentations de l’alimentation, de la durabilité alimentaire et des systèmes alimentaires mondiaux. Mobilisée comme vecteur discursif, la nourriture participe à la construction de récits culturels et médiatiques, tout en soutenant l’émergence d’influenceurs, de chefs médiatisés, de chaînes spécialisées et de multiples industries culturelles. Cette mise en visibilité généralisée invite à une analyse critique de l’exploitation médiatique de la nourriture – de sa mise en récit à sa consommation symbolique – tant à l’échelle locale que mondiale.



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