



## Anthony Bourdain's MacGuffin: Dialogical Politics, the Middle East, and Cooking Shows

In 1965, Robin Wood began his study of Alfred Hitchcock by stating: “Why should we take Hitchcock seriously?” (Wood 55). This opening gambit served as a call to arms as to why popular or “low” culture was as worthy of study as high culture. Wood argued that while a majority of Hitchcock’s works were derisively labelled “thrillers,” much more was actually going on. One such subtext was what Hitchcock called the MacGuffin, a device which functioned as a means to propel his plots forward, although the MacGuffin was ultimately unimportant to the film overall – for example, the uranium in the wine bottles in *Notorious* (Hitchcock 1946) which merely serve as a narrative excuse to drive the action. In this article, I contend that over time, “cooking” and “travel” began to play the role of the MacGuffin in Anthony Bourdain’s supposedly low-culture reality television shows, allowing him to produce dialogical works outside the ideological coherence of mainstream American cable television. Because of the profound ideological imaginary that the U.S. media has created about the region and its inhabitants, I concentrate on Bourdain’s shows set in the Middle East.

With Bourdain’s death in 2018, there was significant press coverage surrounding his importance as a travel writer and television host. Yet this hagiographical writing paid scant attention to the platform in which he worked: reality television, one of the most maligned forms of mass and popular culture. Eric Hoyt notes that:

Cultural critics and highbrow couch surfers routinely deride reality (or unscripted) television. Reality TV is, the argument goes, shallow trash – a guilty pleasure at best. While shows like ‘Mad Men’ or ‘The Wire’ are lauded for their depth, they reinforce the

notion that reality TV should be viewed shallowly, or not at all. When it comes to the club of artistic, canonical works, reality television doesn’t make it past the erudite bouncers at the door. (Hoyt 47)

Yet being under the radar allowed Bourdain’s reality television, especially his later shows, to address political issues elided by more “respectable” forms of television. To this end, little attention was directed to the ways in which Bourdain transformed his shows *A Cook’s Tour* (2002-2003), *Anthony Bourdain: No Reservations* (2005-2012), and *Anthony Bourdain: Parts Unknown* (2013-2018) from cooking show travel journalism into works that challenged and offered potentially radical – in the context of American popular culture – political accounts of parts of the world that are almost always Othered as antithetical to supposed “American” values. Therefore, I offer not simply an account of the politics in a selection of his episodes, but a consideration of the fact that his examinations of places such as Lebanon, Gaza, the West Bank, Kurdistan, Libya, and Iran were all the more salient because they were either framed around profoundly apolitical networks, such as Food Network and Travel Channel, or, for the later part of his career, on CNN, which rarely offered to its audiences accounts of the Middle East that were not framed by Pax Americana, the “War on Terror,” “Muslim Extremism,” or the promotion of the policies of Netanyahu-era Israel. Because these counter-hegemonic interventions were framed within the genres of travel and cooking shows – and because Bourdain’s textual and televisual persona was that of the post-punk iconoclast with a self-conscious soupçon of Hunter S. Thompson – his shows were able to bring debates into popular culture and cultural con-

sciousness that would be censored, if not condemned, in more “respectable” forms, breaking the “flow” of these networks’ ideological cohesion. In the case of Bourdain’s CNN series *Parts Unknown*, the show provided a feedback loop, whereby American-produced images of these areas of the world were seen by their citizens for the first time in a positive, if complex, light, through the prism of global American television.

Bourdain engaged in oppositional documentary practices in *No Reservations* and *Parts Unknown*. Specifically, he made shows in the Middle East that presented images of countries with which the U.S. had a great deal of political and cultural antagonism, and he presented cultural – and geo-politics – through the dual MacGuffins of ‘food’ and ‘travel’ – in ways that other mainstream US news outlets rarely did, bringing an oppositional politics into popular mass media. As Lebanese journalist Kim Ghattas noted about Bourdain’s shows in Iran, Cuba, and her hometown of Beirut: “Americans probably learned more about the world watching his shows than any news programs” (2018).

It’s worth noting that this subversive intervention into political debate and the public sphere through low culture programming was not predetermined nor pre-ordained. Bourdain was a forty-four-year-old Journeyman chef in New York when his memoir *Kitchen Confidential: Adventures in the Culinary Underbelly* was published in 2000. In his mid-forties before the book became a surprise literary cause célèbre, he thought he would never see the rest of the world outside New York (Bourdain *Kitchen Confidential*, 6; *The Nasty Bits*, 132; *A Cook’s Tour*, 307). After being given an advance for his second book to tour the world in search of “the perfect meal” (Bourdain *A Cook’s Tour*, 5), the Food Network contacted him, asking if a film crew could come along. Dubious at first, Bourdain realized he could travel further afield and agreed. He noted: “I got the impression, I’m sure a highly subjective one, that they were really sick of their own programming. And they were looking for something a little subversive” (Salkin 345).

By his own admission, many early episodes consisted of visiting locales, eating strange food, getting drunk on camera, and leaving. However, in time he grew frustrated with Food Network, as they pressured him to set more shows in the U.S.:

Suddenly they weren’t so interested in “foreign”-based shows anymore [...] When we told them about what [Ferran] Adrià

[the head chef of elBulli, the famous Spanish molecular gastronomy restaurant] had agreed to do, they were indifferent. “Does he talk English?” and “It’s too smart for us” were both mentioned as factors in their eventual refusal to pony up for such an episode—or any episodes outside the United States, it now seemed. (Bourdain, “Selling Out” 7)

For the third season, the network wanted the show to focus far more on the US: “[Bourdain’s] barbeque episode of *A Cook’s Tour* had outrated his international shows. Texas ribs were better for the bottom line than cobra hearts, and the network wanted him to do more shows in America. [...] the network wanted less foreign content, fewer foreign accents” (Salkin 353-354). However, Bourdain wanted his next show to explore the creative process of influential Spanish chef Ferran Adrià, so he and his crew set up Zero Point Zero Productions (which would go on to produce all of Bourdain’s subsequent series), which self-financed *Decoding Ferran Adrià* (2006), then sold worldwide and becoming the pilot for *No Reservations* on Travel Network.

At first, this shift did not lead to a substantial change in the show’s ethos. That change began with “Lebanon” (2006), the second season finale of *No Reservations*, which originally set out to explore the culinary and party culture of Beirut. Until this point, Bourdain, by his own admission, was making “television about eating and drinking” (“Bourdain’s Field Notes: Beirut”), and the episode’s first ten minutes are very much in this vein. But as the bombing of Beirut airport and surrounding environs by the Israeli army begins (after Hezbollah killed three Israeli soldiers in a cross-border raid, leading to the 2006 Lebanon War), the mood changes dramatically. The reason for this shift is apparent in both the episode and Bourdain’s later written reflections, which do not sound like a “making of” account of a typical cooking and travel show:



I'm sitting, poolside, watching the airport burning [...]. There's a large black plume of smoke coming from the south of the city—just over the rise, where the most recent airstrikes have been targeting the Shiite neighborhoods and what are, presumably, Hezbollah-associated structures. [...] Woke up in our snug hotel sheets to the news we wouldn't be making television in Beirut (not the show we came to do, anyway), and that we wouldn't be getting out of here anytime soon ("Beirut" 116).

Trapped in a hotel with relative privilege, waiting to be taken out of the country by US Marines on boats, Bourdain reflects on the perhaps superficial nature of what his show originally set out to do. In post-production he and his team created an episode unlike the previous ones: it told the story of the war, the reactions of Lebanese and Lebanese-American citizens trying to get out of harm's way, and the eventual exit of Bourdain and the crew. This encounter with politics and war drastically changed the nature of his shows going forward, where food,



drink, and travel became pretexts for deeper explorations of foreign cultures so often Othered as enemies in US media, and Bourdain's leftist critique of the U.S. began to take a more central role. As Bourdain wrote in his field notes:

I came away from the experience deeply embittered, confused—and determined to make television differently than I had before. I didn't know how I was going to do it or whether my network at the time was going to allow me, but the days of happy horseshit—the uplifting sum-up at the end of every show, the reflex inclusion of a food scene in every

act—that ended right there." ("Bourdain's Field Notes: Beirut")

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In season seven, Bourdain made an episode of *No Reservations* in Kurdistan (Season 7, episode 15, 2011). Significantly, the borders he drew of Kurdistan were strikingly different than those of the US and its allies. As Ari Khalidi, a Kurdistan journalist, noted in Kurdistan24 news: "Bourdain did not show only the 'Iraqi' Kurdistan. He also dared to include the 'Turkish' Kurdistan in his show." Khalidi notes:

[...] the exhilarating happiness [my] mother expressed, less for the display of the local dish [...] and more upon seeing Mardin as Kurdistan on international TV [...] was testimony that there were people, strangers with an understanding voice from faraway lands, that cared about her people's plight. It was a validation of the sacrifices she painfully witnessed most of her life, in the form of Turkish state's harsh suppression of the Kurdish right to self-rule, identity, language, and culture. (Khalidi 2018)

The new ethos of the show explored parts of the world and geo-politics that were left outside the remit of not only travel shows, but American cable news itself. Moreover, seeing a culture represented in the global news public sphere validated 'Turkish' Kurdistan as a place that existed beyond its own locality.

Bourdain's show moved to CNN in 2013. Perhaps the episode of *Parts Unknown* that was the most contentious on CNN – and for American viewers quite unused to hearing anything from a Palestinian perspective – was the second episode of season two on Jerusalem, the West Bank, and Gaza. In his opening narration, Bourdain makes it clear that he was aware of the controversy the episode might create:

It's easily the most contentious piece of real estate in the world, and there's no hope—none—of ever talking about it without pissing somebody, if not everybody, off. By the end of this hour, I'll be seen by many as a terrorist sympathizer, a Zionist tool, a self-hating Jew, an apologist for American imperialism, an Orientalist, socialist, a fascist, CIA agent, and worse. So here goes nothing.

What is most striking about this episode is that Palestinians are placed in a better light than the settler Jews on the West Bank. This amounts to a dialogical role-reversal of how CNN continuously framed the Israeli occupation of Gaza and the West Bank. The episode starts with Bourdain visiting the Western Wall. Half-Jewish, secular, and an atheist, he feels he is masquerading as a Jew. The episode then foregrounds how closely various groups live together in Jerusalem, touring the city with Israeli-born chef and author Yotam Ottolenghi, who points out that falafel is as much a Palestinian dish as it is an Israeli one. This becomes a metaphor for the episode, as food appropriation becomes cultural and geopolitical appropriation. Bourdain then heads to the West Bank where one of his drivers translates some graffiti, or “price-tagging,” on a house near the settlements which states: “death to the Arabs.” Bourdain then meets with a settler living in Ma’ale Levona, to have dinner with a winemaker and amateur cook. Food is the MacGuffin here, as little is said about the homemade cuisine (other than pointing out the pomegranate on the salmon). Discussion turns toward the tagging, and one settler says “Bad people did it ... apparently kids.” Bourdain asks them if they could find out who did it, and they admit they probably could. He then asks why the tag has not been painted over. Uncomfortably, the cook’s friend answers: “I don’t know. Good question. Maybe we should. You’re right.” The visit and the sequence end with a cut at the end of quote. Bourdain moves on to Ramallah and interviews West Bank Palestinian women racers called the Speed Sisters, undercutting the image of Arab women as screaming martyrs to violence and religious patriarchy. Significant-

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ly, when Bourdain interviews Palestinian activist Laila El-Haddad, author of *The Gaza Kitchen: A Palestinian Culinary Journey* (2016), she notes when some men raise their voices over dinner: “they’re not angry; it’s just the way we talk,” again undercutting the image perpetuated in the West – and by CNN – that Palestinians are always angry and irrational.

Bourdain noted in an interview a year after the episode was shot: “Palestinians in particular seemed delighted that someone – anyone – would care to depict them eating and cooking and doing normal, everyday things



– you know, like people do. They are so used to camera crews coming in to just get the usual shots of rock throwing kids and crying women” (Little 2014). The episode ends with an interview with Natan Galkowicz, a Brazilian-Jewish restaurateur and owner of Mides, a Brazilian Restaurant in Western Negev, whose business is seven miles from the wall between Israel and Gaza. His daughter was killed by a Hamas mortar. He betrays no anger, lamenting the deaths on both sides, and expresses his hope for good people to come together. He argues that everyday Palestinians and Israelis are “fed up” with the quagmire, and that Jews and Palestinians, the rich and the poor, must talk. He describes both the settlers that Bourdain met and the Palestinians in Gaza as “nice people.” However, unlike the settlers earlier in the episode, Galkowicz can put himself, despite his loss, in the position of the other, a recurring theme in Bourdain’s works after Lebanon.

Both during the episode and after, Bourdain offers no answers to the problems facing the Palestinians and the Israelis, but does offer the critique: “It’s impossible to see Gaza, for instance, the camps, the West Bank and not find yourself reeling with the ugliness of it all” (Little 2014). He goes on to note the reception his work had in Palestine:



The reaction from the Arab and Palestinian community was overwhelmingly positive—which I found both flattering and dismaying. I say dismaying because I did so little. I showed so little. It seems innocuous. But it was apparently a hell of a lot more than what they are used to seeing on Western television. For some, unfortunately, depicting Palestinians as anything other than terrorists is proof positive that you have an agenda, that you have bought in to some sinister propaganda guidelines issuing from some evil central command in charge of interfacing with Western com/symp dupes. (Little 2014)

He went on to develop this media critique further in his acceptance speech for a “Voices of Courage and Conscience” award from the US Muslim Public Affairs Council in 2014: “It is a measure I guess of how twisted and shallow our depiction of a people is that these images come as a shock to so many. The world has visited many terrible things on the Palestinian people, none more shameful than robbing them of their basic humanity. People are not statistics” (Muslim Public Affairs Council, 2014).

This show’s shift in focus not only often downplayed food, but also engaged in political discourse very much outside the dominant travel paradigm of reducing geopolitical conflict to human drama. In season four of *Parts Unknown*, Bourdain went to Iran and did not simply show the country as misunderstood by the West (indeed, as he notes at the end of the show, two of his interviewees, Washington Post reporter Jason Rezaian and his wife Yeganeh Salehi were detained on July 22, 2014, six weeks after he and the crew left); instead his voice-over states the conflicting and polyvocal messages he received while in Tehran:

Total strangers thrilled to encounter Americans, just underneath the inevitable “Death to America” mural. The gulf between perception and reality, between government policy and what you see on the street and encounter in people’s homes, in restaurants – everywhere—it’s just incredible. It’s easier to think of Iran as a monolith – in an uncomplicated, ideological way. More comfortable, too. Life ain’t that simple. It IS complicated. And filled with nuance worth exploring. (“Iran” *Parts Unknown*)

Bourdain’s approach, then, evolved from cooking, travelling, and drinking into something more complex. *Parts Unknown* not only engaged in a form of coalitional politics, it also broke what Raymond Williams has described as television’s “flow:”

In all developed broadcasting systems the characteristic organization, and therefore the characteristic experience, is one of sequence or flow. This phenomenon, of planned flow, is then perhaps the defining characteristic of broadcasting, simultaneously as a technology and as a cultural form. (86)

Bourdain’s shows ruptured the overall ideological and narrative coherence of CNN in particular. He did so by not adopting the position of an all-knowing, Western patriarch to the Other; indeed his shows in the Middle East undercut this trope repeatedly. Moreover, the series recognized the possibility of what Mikhail Bakhtin called “dialogism” and what, in a similar manner, John Fiske has described as a function of meaning-making in television: “The reader produces meanings that derive from the intersection of his/her social history with the social forces structured into the text. The moment of reading is when the discourses of the reader meet the discourses of the text. When these discourses bear different interests reading becomes a reconciliation of this conflict” (Fiske 82-83). The ruse of dialogism allowed Bourdain’s shows to avoid the ethnographic and orientaling gaze so often at the heart of travel documentaries by asking viewers to begin to reconcile the conflict, with Bourdain as a questioning narrator and avatar. This dialogism stretched beyond Bourdain’s episodes in the Middle East. As Jacqui Kong notes on Bourdain’s *No Reservation* episodes in Vietnam and Laos:

[...] Bourdain's self-reflexivity and honesty presents to viewers a reality which is much more accurate than a performance of authenticity praised and exoticized by the food colonizer for its purity and frozenness in an anachronistic display of staged difference and 'Otherness'. [...] Neither does Bourdain treat his role as that of the traveler who elucidates the Other to his viewers, speaking for the Other as though he is a figure of authority. (Kong 48)

These politics allowed for not only counter-hegemonic accounts of political systems that ran counter to Pax Americana, but for local accounts to challenge dominant media and mediated representations of the Other.

Bourdain's dialogism functioned in part because he was working in a supposedly "low culture" form. Like others who are not traditional journalists but are championed as trusted sources of news – such as Jon Stewart on *The Daily Show* (1999-2015) – Bourdain continuously disavowed the journalistic label, seeking to keep himself and his work contextualized within low culture, allowing him a much greater degree of freedom in covering issues that he thought mattered. This raises salient issues about the important function low culture can play as a dialogical act of subverting the flow of television, the role of reportage, and the need to produce interstitial televisual texts that break the narrative coherence of dominant ideologies. Moreover, it demonstrates that Bourdain's MacGuffin-riddled travel shows were about something much more political than eating and drinking.

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