

Tania Lewis: Smart Living: Lifestyle Media and Popular Expertise

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A few months ago, a good friend of mine, breathless with excitement, told me she was off to a branch of the Mayersche bookshop in Cologne to get the tattered book in her hand signed. Now this is a woman who likes to conserve her energy and as far as I know has no signed copies of anything, so naturally I asked about this author who could generate such enthusiasm: Jamie Oliver was coming to town! This book now has pride of place on her cookery bookshelf but still seems relatively unimportant compared to my own shelf of autographed SF novels by the

masters of speculative fiction. Jamie Oliver (or can we simply call him ‘Jamie’?) is what Tania Lewis, author of *Smart Living: Lifestyle Media and Popular Expertise*, would call a ‘branded celebrity expert’. Martha Stuart is her other main example of figures who “celebrate the home as a site creative productivity where one can improve oneself and one’s lifestyle through mastering the art and aesthetics of the domestic . . . representative of a politics that has seen a growing articulation and overlap between the privatised realm of taste, values, and lifestyle and public conceptions of the good citizen.” (S.137) Lewis is basically saying that all these make-over shows, lifestyle gurus and self-improvement experts are changing what we perceive to be good citizenship into something which is defined by middle-class values melded with increased consumerism, “reinforcing a fantasy of class mobility through consumerism” (S.10), promoting discourses that assume “a merger between consumer choice and behaviour and the duties and responsibilities of citizenship” (S.11) Experts seen on television, who used to be ‘talking heads’ or men in white coats, have been replaced by accessible, ‘ordinary’ men and women like you and I, who nevertheless have crucial information which we require to turn ourselves into better citizens.

Lewis’s book looks at a range of popular expertise – from makeover experts/shows on TV to lifestyle advice available on the internet. She focuses on Australian, UK and USA shows in particular but as we have so many of our own similar programs in Germany, 90% which seem to be involved with cooking and home-improvement, most of the points she makes are equally valid.

Her first chapter examines the history of advice magazines and manuals. She concludes that the rise of expertise tends to be associated with times of relative uncertainty and social fluidity and that these discourses have constructed the home as “a refuge from the pressures of modernity and work [...] and targeted women as guardians of domestic morality and good taste” (S.45), with men playing an increasing role in the culture of style “refiguring the visual of feminine and queer identity to masculine heterosexual ends.” (S.45)

Chapter 2 looks at the role of popular expertise in food culture and notes the growing emphasis on optimising one’s health for the public good. These shows portray shopping and cooking as labour-free leisure activities which assumes a rather privileged identity which doesn’t involve fighting over shopping trolleys at your local Aldi on a Saturday morning.

She next turns to the television makeover show with particular reference to *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*, a show in which five cool but obviously gay men take some aesthetically challenged hetero loser and teach him how to shop. The show can be read as “rearticulating (or appropriating) feminine lifestyle skills (via the figure of a queer expert) to an essentially middle class, masculine model of self-managing identity” (S.88) although clearly it engages with masculinity as a performed mode of identity.

I've always believed one of the reasons why there are so many reality and makeover shows is that, as well as being popular, they are relatively cheap to make compared with domestically-produced or foreign bought television drama. Chapter 4 offers the industry perspective and examines the complex relationship between production processes, the celebrity experts' influence on the shows, conceptions of audiences and TV's role of a social institution shaping the notions of good citizenship. I prefer not to watch these patronising shows because the audience is encouraged to feel smug about themselves as some barely functioning family of inept Neanderthals is transformed into productive members of society through parenting/DIY/nutritional help. In addition, our emotions are manipulated to feel their pain and triumph. However, this marks these shows as particularly interesting as they constantly breach the boundaries of serious, bourgeois 'quality television' and ratings-orientated commercial television with an emphasis on pleasure.

The next chapter discusses how young people use the internet to access healthcare. She interviewed nineteen young people between 17 and 25, roughly half of which were graduates at the University of Melbourne and the rest from the Melbourne Citymission which accommodates homeless people. I found this chapter to be unconvincing because the sample groups are too small to produce statistics, only anecdotes. She notes a growing emphasis on "healthcare and lifestyle as questions of individual consume choice" (S.115), and that the Citymission interviewees were more fatalistic about healthcare due to their inability to control many external health risks, whereas the graduates thought healthcare is, and can be, self-managed. Hardly a revelation!

Finally, we come back to Jamie and Martha. Branded celebrity experts who combine the aura of being special and having specialised knowledge, with the persona of being 'one of us'. They have become a brand in themselves allowing them to sponsor and sell consumer items from other companies but also their own branded 'signature' product lines and also be lifestyle activists e.g. Jamie Oliver's campaign to improve school food. Possibly contradictory activities.

Smart Living will be of great interest to those who are interested in the relationship between popular media and social life. It is mostly well-researched and well-written except for the chapter on internet use. It highlights the growing influence of 'experts' and 'expertise' in everyday life and reminds us of the importance of taking popular culture seriously because it reflects upon and reproduces social norms and relations.

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