

**WHO DESERVES A BREAK TODAY?
FAST FOOD, CULTURAL RITUALS, AND
WOMEN'S PLACE**



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Gender differences in culture are usually visible around food. In fast food advertising we can see some of those differences played out as fantasies of consumption. How fast food advertising mediates the real experience of taking a meal, and what that says for symbolic constructions of the body is the subject of this essay. A McDonald's commercial is a text rich in cultural information. I shall argue that McDonald's positions itself as the new Mother in a social order determined by the conditions of contemporary American culture.

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When anthropologist Mary Douglas says "Food is not feed" (1977, 7), she refers to the conjunction of the social and the culinary. Food is "a blinding fetish in our culture..." of which "our ignorance is explosively dangerous" (ibid.). Our ignorance is particularly dangerous for women, since feeding is a primary part of women's role in our culture. It is a problematic but central element of femininity, and as such plays a part in the current crisis in gender roles.

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★ INTRODUCTION

Food is also an indicator of social status, according to Douglas (1975). This paper examines a McDonald's biscuit commercial for its messages about women's social status. First I shall analyze the commercial itself, and then discuss the issues it raises from the perspectives of history, anthropology, and psychoanalytic theory. Throughout, a recurring theme is alienation.

It is a commonplace among Marxist scholars that workers are alienated from the products of their labor. I am arguing that alienation also operates in the symbolic economy, the system of ideas and values that circulate in the mass media. In regard to women and food, alienation is multiply coded. Fast food signals a double alienation of women from food (displaced as Mothers) and from our own bodies.

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Coming from a tradition in which previous generations of women were indoctrinated with the mysteries of home economics, women today confront a profound ambiguity about our gender role as we renegotiate our place in the productive sphere. As Kim Chernin argues in *The Hungry Self* (1985), this ambiguity centers on women's relationship to their mothers (and thus to food and separation). The current proliferation of eating disorders is a manifestation of this identity crisis. Corporate solutions to working women's problems, such as fast food, may momentarily alleviate time pressure. But in the long run, they do little more than that, and may compound women's identity crisis in the following way.

As media scholar Michèle Mattelart observes, "liberal media accept several different ways of conceiving women's role and image, but demand some kind of feminine specificity" (1986, 23). In food commercials, that specificity is an "eternal" feminine that defines women as primarily maternal. Definition of the feminine as essentially maternal underpins an entire edifice of female stereotypes. At base is the virgin-mother-crone (or whore) dialectic. At end is the Child Molester School of Femininity, in which the adolescent female body and mind are held up as models for all women. The pursuit of this false idol distracts women from confronting the injustices done in her name. This is mental alienation.

In the social discourse on gender roles, many voices argue for their definitions of womanhood. In the television commercial, the interests of particular social institutions converge. Those who have the most to gain from the status quo—the corporate sector, the state, the mass media—continue to argue for the "naturalness" of woman's place in the home. Women participate in the workforce outside the home, but in subordinate positions. Further, domestic labor remains "women's work," whether we do it ourselves or see that it is done. This arrangement generates huge profits for corporations and stability for the state. It also perpetuates and legitimates a mode of consciousness based on sexism. Constructions of the feminine in television commercials are used to sell more than products—they are selling cultural values.

★ **ICONOGRAPHY OF A MEAL**

I shall consider in detail one commercial that is a particularly good example of alienated labor, "Your Biscuit Makers." A twenty-one-shot, thirty-second spot, "Your Biscuit Makers" celebrates alienated labor and its social relations (lyrics and shot breakdown are in the appendix). This commercial presents biscuit-making as a labor of love, not profit.

Description of the Commercial

Three young women (two white, one black) sing and dance with rolling pins in a McDonald's restaurant. They stand in formation, salute, use the rolling pins as though they were guns. The song is in the style of the Andrews Sisters. The women dance in the spaces where customers are allowed—in front of the counter, in the "dining room." These performance shots alternate with close-up shots of biscuits in various stages of production. Biscuit production is performed by a pair of white hands and takes only four shots, three of which occur in sequence. Two white male

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customers in a pickup truck come to the drive-through (excuse me, drive-thru), where a perky, dimpled, white teenage woman proffers the bag. The older man salutes as he drives off; the woman salutes back.

This commercial masks labor with fun, alienation with social interaction. An army of women makes breakfast. We don't see the generals; the troops are well trained. Eggs marching in formation underscore the "naturalness" of this hierarchy (shot 7). Indeed, eggs are a double code for women and for nature; thus, feminine nature. Men are on their way to work; women are in their place in the kitchen. Not only is there perfect order in this universe, but because everyone is in her/his "natural" place, it is not labor they are performing, it is fun. The harridan wife with a rolling pin weapon has become three cheerful, energetic, nubile teenagers.

While the military metaphor asserts an invisible pecking order, social relations in the workplace here are celebrated as nonhierarchical. Everyone in the place is a private—that is, equal. There is racial "equality" in the makeup of the dancers. The commercial also uses the familiar "you" form of direct address. "We're making biscuits every morning at McDonald's for you." The announcer invites an implied you to "Take breakfast by the hand with a fresh biscuit sandwich," that is, to treat the biscuit as a friend, or perhaps even as a child. In the former sense, McDonald's suggests that "you" the parent solve your breakfast problems at Ronald's house.

McDonald's is a neighborly mother substitute, a friendly place where you get social satisfaction with your meal. Indeed, it is the interpersonal interactions that promise satisfaction. However, there are no interpersonal exchanges among workers. The commercial's social moments mask the alienation of worker from food, worker from consumer, worker from worker. In addition, only food and smiles are exchanged; money is conspicuously absent. McDonald's positions itself as the Mother by association. Who else performs such labor for free? Who else does "it all for you"? Who else "deserves a break today"?

There are some interesting uses of time here. The production of biscuits occurs in close-up, leaving the actual labor off-screen and foregrounding the fun and socializing. Time is of the essence in fast food. Fast service is the obvious motive, but other elements conspire to render fast food an atemporal (= universal = democratic) experience. In its ideal form, fast food is always the same, and so each burger is indistinguishable from any other. The ritualized/standardized procedure, established to minimize time, destroys time. As if to eradicate evidence of one's presence, the fast food consumer throws away empty food containers.

Fast food translates industrial modes of production to the production of food. There is social alienation between the server and the consumer—imagine complimenting the lady behind the counter for the delicious meal, or asking if you can help with the dishes. Indeed, any conversation outside the ritual exchanges ("Is this for here or to go?") would be counterproductive, for it would interfere with the promised speed of service. Industrial values such as efficiency and interchangeability determine the alienated social relations, even though the commercial works to mask alienation. Everyone in the production-consumption equation is interchangeable, except of course Ronald McDonald.

How industrial values made their way into women's education about food is the subject of the next section.

★ RATIONALIZATION OF DOMESTIC LABOR AND THE CAPITALIST MODE OF PRODUCTION

Many of the beliefs we have about food are traceable through the development of the home economics movement, as Laura Shapiro posits in *Perfection Salad: Women and Cooking at the Turn of the Century* (1986). Fast food is the fulfillment of that movement, which sought to rationalize domestic labor, just as assembly-line methods in the workplace were transforming labor. With the growth of industrialization, women were negotiating a new relation to food, setting new boundaries in the kitchen and concomitant ones in the public sphere.

The middle-class women who formed the domestic science movement took as their cause the democratization of American taste. They emphasized nutritional value/predictable results/economy and appearance in food. Quantification became the order of the day: science had given the calorie as a unit of measure; Fannie Farmer extolled the virtues of level measurement. Armed with scientific analyses of bleach, starch, and baking powder, the new ideal American homemaker was to be a critical consumer. Sanitary kitchens were to produce attractive meals loaded with protein, and working men would be grateful, invigorated, and treat their families properly.

The social formation imposed by industrial society was changing women's relation to men from one based on productive alliances to one based on economic dependence and affectional ties (Ewen 1976). Industrialization split production from reproduction, and assigned gender roles to each. Men exchanged their labor for wages. Women exchanged their bodies in reproductive labor (babies, housekeeping, social maintenance); food was a commodity to exchange in the home. In this sense women stood in the same relations to the products of their labor as did the assembly line laborer—except of course that women had no one at home maintaining them.

Urbanization, a companion to industrialization, further alienated people from their families, creating a void in cultural authority that corporations were eager to fill. Labor-saving technology required new information that grandma could not have provided. Advertising could and did serve as the teacher, in the process creating the role of the consumer "... and establishing a new function for the household in the world of mass production and mass distribution..." (Strasser 1982, 245). Home economists taught classes and wrote advice on how to consume. Industrialization's agenda wrought a new scientific approach to domestic labor.

Fast food signals the absolute acceptance of rational cooking. It is efficient, economical, sanitary (one hopes), and—above all—standard. It also signals the absolute marginalization of discourse on the relationship between food and social relations. Fast food is American taste industrialized and democratized. "Democratic" is used here in its vulgar sense, in which it refers not to egalitarianism but to sameness. Not only are hamburgers and fries standardized, but those who produce them are interchangeable parts. See for example the following recruitment flyer from the Evanston, Illinois, McDonald's:

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McDonald's pay mothers for serving breakfast and lunch. If your family doesn't need you to serve breakfast and lunch anymore [sic], we do.

Come work with us, arrange your hours to fit your schedule and earn extra money. See our manager.

The Mother in the home and the McDonald's server are interchangeable. The flyer implies that the skills women use at home are transferable to the fast food industry. By conflating the mother-at-home and the Mother-server, McDonald's buys the appearance of home cooking. The triumph of form over content is another example of alienation: the illusion masks the slippage between real mother labor of love and McDonald's employee wage labor. This Mother is also a consumer: note that the money she earns is "extra"—not enough to live on, but enough to spend, perhaps taking the family out to eat because she has worked all day and "deserves a break." Her identities as server and as consumer are interchangeable.

So far I have discussed alienation and definitions of the feminine in the text of the commercial and in the historical development of mass production. Next I shall argue for the centrality of gender difference in cultural thought at the mythic level, and finally how that positions this specific commercial within a larger discourse on women and food.



★ FOOD, CULTURE, AND GENDER DIFFERENCE

Anthropologists have noted the close relationship of a culture's food practices to the larger social context. While Mary Douglas (1975) emphasizes the symbolic connection of the body human to the body politic, Lévi-Strauss (1983) speaks to the inner workings of language and consciousness. In his analysis of South American myths about the origins of cooked food, he identifies patterns of thought in the stories tribal peoples tell to explain the universe. The myths work on structures based in symbolic oppositions. "The function of signs is, precisely, to express the one by means of the other" (Lévi-Strauss 1983, 14). About food, for instance, he notes a universal distinction between the raw and the cooked. Other basic oppositions, such as gender difference, are interwoven to form symbolic patterns that myths represent on several simultaneous levels.

One such pattern that Lévi-Strauss (1977) identifies is a subdistinction between roast food and boiled food, which invariably revolves around gender difference. The food's relation to the fire is a structuring difference—food that meets fire directly carries one load of signification, food cooked over, but not in, fire carries another. These differences in signification are further coded along gender lines. Men roast and women boil. In some cultures it is the other way around. This opposition is visible in our present-day culture, as in the traditional division of labor that assigns barbecuing to men, while women's cooking involves kitchen (indoor, domestic, private) tools that separate food from fire (boiling). The "cave man" myth obtains in associating the masculine with the outdoors (external, public) and an unmediated conjunction of fire and meat.

In American mass culture the roast:boiled distinction appears in the "Burger Wars" ad campaigns for fast food. Burger King, the second-place company in the market, argues that its hamburgers are superior to McDonald's because Burger King "flame broils" its beef. Burger King commercials emphasize the difference between

see Strauss

fire meat

the broiled and the fried. Health considerations aside, this attack is at base a gender difference argument. Symbolically, Burger King positions itself as the masculine player in the competition for fast food dollars. Already coded as masculine by virtue of its name, Burger King seeks to distinguish itself from McDonald's, and does so in the name of "masculine" cookery.

Burger King's campaign is an offensive against the already-positioned first-place McDonald's. McDonald's has achieved its dominant market position in part by constructing itself as a purveyor of social, as well as gustatory, exchange. "We do it all for you" aligns McDonald's with the self-sacrificing eternally nurturing "feminine."

Sexual difference is arbitrary and must be constantly reconstructed in social practice. Commercials are cultural storytelling about food, and their ideological significance touches the very essence of social control—the body. As dominant film practice inscribes woman's body, the male-identified feminine image stands as a sign for male dominance. In this inscription we can see the rhetoric of food as discourse on feminine specificity. No matter how "modern" the times may be, feeding the family is still woman's work. Thus, in its current incarnation, food advertising insists on an "eternal" feminine even as it counsels that women's "equality" is a reality.

Commercials code fast food restaurants as havens of nourishment, but the emphasis is not on nutrition, it is on fun. Food rituals revolve around excitement and individual identity, not sharing or interacting. What that means for the role of women is impoverishment of the food relationship. No longer a privileged one (with all problems that carries), food relations for women are emptied of sanctity but still loaded with hierarchy. This is precisely the crisis point that Kim Chernin (1985) identifies as women's present gender-role confusion.

Commercials exploit the ambiguity inherent in reformulating gender roles to account for women's necessity to participate in the workforce (like our fathers) and at the same time develop a mature female persona (like our mothers). The mass media continue to identify that mature (sexual) female with the adolescent body thereby maintaining a constant state of tension that can never be resolved. As Chernin says:

... we are in urgent need of a ceremonial form to guide us beyond what may well be the collective childhood of female identity into a new maturity of female social development. (Chernin 1985, 169)

As long as the global conditions of food production require that women perform more than their share of unpaid labor, however, it is doubtful that the mass media will provide any support for a "new maturity" for women. The mass media, and the industries whose interest they represent, must continue to insist on a female identity that is fundamentally domestic and dependent. Otherwise we might realize that our labors of love are underwriting their profits.

APPENDIX

"Your Biscuit Makers"

Lyrics
We're making biscuits at McDonald's every morning for you
we're up at dawn
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get our aprons on
we're making up the
we roll it out
put it in a pan
nobody makes biscuits
like we can
with bacon or sausage
the eggs are fresh
if you say (unclear)
ours are the best
Announcer: take bre
song: it's a good time

Notes

1. wide shot outside
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11. biscuits bake
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13. bacon flips to s
14. close up eggs
15. crack egg close
16. hands take bis
17. three-shot thro
18. two biscuits
19. hand pats one
20. older guy salut
21. girl salutes, sm

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Who Deserves a Break Today?

get our aprons on
we're making up the dough
we roll it out
put it in a pan
nobody makes biscuits
like we can
with bacon or sausage
the eggs are fresh
If you say (unclear)
ours are the best
Announcer: take breakfast by the hand with a fresh biscuit sandwich
Song: it's a good time for the great taste of McDonald's

Shots

1. wide shot outside building, sign turns on
2. three women salute
3. open biscuit close up
4. three biscuits close up
5. women spin
6. eggs in formation
7. hands pat dough close up
8. women in dining room flip rolling pins
9. hands roll dough close up
10. cut dough close up
11. biscuits bake
12. women dust hands
13. bacon flips to sausage
14. close up eggs
15. crack egg close up
16. hands take biscuits from oven
17. three-shot through guys in truck to drive-thru window
18. two biscuits
19. hand pats one biscuit
20. older guy salutes, truck drives off
21. girl salutes, smiles

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