

“TONIGHT’S SECRET INGREDIENT IS...”: IRON CHEF AMERICA AS MEDIA RITUAL

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Abstract: The Food Network program Iron Chef America creates a media ritual space in which public displays of virtuosity and the engendering of parasocial relationships combine to present both the media ritual itself (the cooking competition) and the media ritual it engenders (the viewing of and parasocial interaction with the cooking competition). These rituals though separate and distinct are inextricably tied together. Couched in the ritual tropes and memes of sporting events, Iron Chef America is an attempt to mediate mundane activity by transforming it into competitive action. As a result, the program ritualises the ‘deep play’ aspect of cooking as spectator sport, and in the process, reinforces the ritual structures of American society, celebrating the triumph of skill, determination, and hard work so valued in contemporary USA.

INTRODUCTION

Allez cuisine!

The familiar rallying cry of the Chairman’s nephew rings out across my living room, where an odd assortment of characters has gathered. My college buddy Dale watches with an intense disdain for reality television in general and this program in particular. My wife flips through a magazine, watching only sporadically, because “only the last five minutes are any good.” I watch intently, my note pad and pen in hand, as if any of the notes I take will be of any use later. The cats could care less what the secret theme ingredient of the night is; they are content to snuggle up together on the blanket covering my wife’s feet. This is not a first-time occurrence in my living room. This cast of characters assembles every Sunday night to watch (or pretend not to watch, or to watch begrudgingly) this media event. The viewing and subsequent deconstruction of *Iron Chef America* is our ritual.

Iron Chef America is based on the format of the sensational Japanese cooking program *Iron Chef* and airs on the Food Network in the United States. Although it is ostensibly a network which broadcasts informational and instructional programming, Cheri Ketchum (2005) argues that Food Network’s programming creates an “intricate web of discourses that sustain consumer culture as viewers are told their dreams should be realised through the acquisition and use

of particular goods” (p. 217). In this paper I argue that *Iron Chef America* provides a contrary example to Ketchum’s reading of Food Network’s programming. *Iron Chef America* runs counter to the discourse of consumer culture since the goods and the skill of their use are outside of the bounds of plausibility for the viewing audience. *Iron Chef America* is therefore more ritualistic than the programming surrounding it on Food Network, since the main thrust of the show is competition and the public display of virtuosity, which leads to the creation of a ritual space in which the audience combines with the host, judges and competitors to engage in this media ritual.

In this respect, I argue that *Iron Chef America* functions more like a sporting event than a cooking show, or any other form of reality television. However, *Iron Chef America* also relies upon methods not employed by most sporting events, chiefly the cultivation of what Donald Horton and R. Richard Wohl term ‘parasociality’, in order to hook viewers and keep them coming back each week for a new competition. Coupling Horton and Wohl’s theory of parasocial interaction with Burke’s rhetorical theories of identification and Couldry’s theories of media ritual and deep play, this article examines a media ritual with a peculiar duality; there exists both the ritual itself (the cooking competition) and the ritual it engenders (the viewing of and parasocial interaction with the cooking competition) that are separate and distinct, yet inextricably tied together. First I explain parasocial interaction and its relationship to reality television through Kenneth Burke’s theory of identification. Next, I explore media rituals in general, and the specific rituals *Iron Chef America* represents. Finally I connect *Iron Chef America* to the larger American ritual framework through ‘deep play’ and discuss the specific hegemonic structures the program reinforces. In the process, I illustrate the manner in which this uniquely Japanese television sensation has been distinctively Americanised.

IRON CHEF AMERICA

Iron Chef America is a relatively young production, although it is based upon a Japanese program with a long and fascinating history. *Ryôri No Tetsujin* (translated as “Iron Men of Cookery”) began airing on FujiTV in 1993 in Japan.¹ Waller and Waller (1995) describe the birth of *Ryôri No Tetsujin*:

Nihon Telework brain trust’s chief producer, Toshihiko Matsuo, confesses he got the idea watching his son playing a video game. “Yeah, I thought of a cooking show with a computer-game format. . . . Something like ‘Dragon Quest.’ A self-indulgent king who wants to taste all the world’s cooking delights. He keeps ‘iron chefs’ in the basement and they’ll take on challenges of other chefs. He’ll invite his gourmet friends over to taste and sit in as judges! That was it!” It was, and is.

(Waller and Waller, 1995)

The program began as a 30-minute broadcast; later, after 23 episodes and a steadily increasing viewership, the show was extended to an hour.² Over the course of six years, *Ryôri No Tetsujin* aired over 300 episodes, finally wrapping up in September of 1999.³ *Ryôri No Tetsujin* had seven Iron Chefs over the course of six years; three specialising in Japanese cuisine, two in French cuisine, and one each in Chinese cuisine and Italian cuisine. The vast majority of episodes were taped with only three Iron Chefs: Chen Kenichi (Iron Chef Chinese), Rokusaburo Michiba (Iron Chef Japanese), and the legendary Hiroyuki Sakai (Iron Chef French). Sakai and Michiba were nearly unbeatable; Sakai’s record was 70-15-1 (an 81% win percentage) while Michiba racked up an astounding 32-5-1 record (84% of his matches ended in victory).

The format of *Ryôri No Tetsujin* was similar to that of any other competitive enterprise:

a host, the eccentric and ostentatious Chairman Takeshi Kaga, would invite a challenger into his elaborate Kitchen Stadium. The challenger would select one of the Iron Chefs to compete against. Chairman Kaga would give the history and background of both the competitor and the Iron Chef, then introduce the most important element of the battle: the secret ingredient. Each chef would have to prepare up to five dishes in 60 minutes, using the theme ingredient in each dish. Then a panel of judges ranging from culinary experts and food critics to popular actresses and government officials would sit down, taste all of the dishes, and give a score to each of the two combatants. The scores would be tallied, and one chef would be declared the winner.

In 2001, the American network UPN attempted to reproduce Iron Chef for a US audience. Dubbed *Iron Chef USA*, the new program was an abysmal failure which aired only two episodes before being cancelled. While William Shatner was received well as the host, the program lacked the aura of credibility and mastery of the original (as well as lacking its campy charm) and failed.

Food Network made a second attempt to revive the series in 2004, airing *The Battle of the Masters*. This time, they invited Iron Chefs Sakai and Morimoto to compete, and installed three of the network's most popular stars as Iron Chefs: Bobby Flay, Mario Batali and Wolfgang Puck. The four episodes of *The Battle of the Masters* were successful and the program was launched as a full series in 2005. However, instead of Wolfgang Puck, *Iron Chef America* cast Masaharu Morimoto, Iron Chef Japanese of *Ryôri No Tetsujin*, as the third Iron Chef. Iron Chef American Bobby Flay, Iron Chef Italian Mario Batali, and Iron Chef Japanese Masaharu Morimoto were joined by a fourth, Iron Chef Greek Cat Cora, the first female Iron Chef in any incarnation of the program. Much later, Iron Chef Mediterranean Michael Symon was added via the program *The Next Iron Chef*.

Iron Chef America retains all of the logistics and scoring mechanisms of the original, although the secret theme ingredients are, on the whole, decidedly tamer than those found on *Ryôri No Tetsujin*⁴. Also unlike the original, two of the four judges are normally professional food critics (only one was mandatory on *Ryôri No Tetsujin*). Also unlike the original, the challenger and Iron Chef are given a short list of possible theme ingredients beforehand, of which one is selected at the time of competition.

PARASOCIAL INTERACTION

When Donald Horton and R. Richard Wohl published their widely cited paper on "Mass Communication and Parasocial Interaction" in 1956, their focus was on early television 'personalities' such as talk show hosts and game show announcers. According to Horton and Wohl:

One of the striking characteristics of the new mass media – radio, television, and the movies – is that they give the illusion of face-to-face relationship with the performer. The conditions of response to the performer are analogous to those in a primary group. The most remote and illustrious men are met *as if they* were in the circle of one's peers; the same is true of a character in a story who comes to life in these media in an especially vivid and arresting way. We propose to call this seeming face-to-face relationship between spectator and performer a *parasocial relationship*.

(1956, p. 215)

The creation of this illusory face-to-face relationship with the competitors (in this case the Iron Chef and the challenger) is one of the elements that distinguish *Iron Chef America* from other sporting/competitive enterprises. While certain personalities do emerge (for example,

on the football field or basketball court) the majority of players are not individually identified, focused on, and presented to the audience in the intimate way that *Iron Chef America* develops.

To say that reality television has been on a steady rise is a drastic understatement. Reality television can be manufactured cheaply and relatively quickly, which makes it an ideal programming choice, both economically and parasocially. Horton and Wohl could not possibly have imagined the explosion of reality television throughout the 1990s and 2000s which would herald the advent of a new breed of 'personality': the reality television contestant. While the parasocial relationship between competitor and audience member appears to be a two-way street, as Horton and Wohl (1956) state, it is not:

The more the performer seems to adjust his performance to the supposed response of the audience, the more the audience tends to make the response anticipated. This simulacrum of conversational give and take may be called *parasocial interaction*.

(Horton and Wohl 1956, p. 215)

This is not an instance of merely 'playing to the camera'. The performer must anticipate not only the response of the judges and the studio audience, but must also carefully craft a persona for the audience at home. Kenneth Burke (1969) sums this process up by stating that, "in identification lies the source of dedications and enslavements, in fact of cooperation" (p. xiv).

Although not all 'conversations' or give-and-take between audience and persona may be classified as 'identification' the rhetorical process of identification is in truth, the very basis of parasocial interaction and the formation of parasocial relationships. Burke (1969) offers that:

A is not identical with his colleague, B. But insofar as their interests are joined, A is *identified* with B. Or he may *identify himself* with B even when their interests are not joined, if he assumes that they are, or is persuaded to believe so.

(Burke 1969, p. 20)

If we assume that A is an audience member and B is a competitor (either challenger or *Iron Chef*), clearly their interests are not joined. The viewer will not share in the challenger's success; the viewer will not have a job in the challenger's kitchen, or a stake in the increased flow into the challenger's restaurant, or even taste the food that the challenger is presenting. Therefore, the challenger (B) must persuade the viewer (A) that their interests are joined. In other words "two persons may be identified in terms of some principle they share in common, an 'identification' that does not deny their distinctness" (Burke 1969, p. 21).

Emphasis is placed on the hard work, determination and passion of the challenger, which are values it is assumed viewers share. These common principles ("everyone wants to be the best at his/her profession," and "If I work hard, I could participate in a competition in my field too.") join the viewer (A) with the competitor (B). Thus A is identified with B, not through real common interest, but by being persuaded that common interests exist, however vicarious they may be.

This common interest can manifest itself in a variety of similarities, attractions or identifications (see Anderson and de Mancillas, 1978; Rubin and McHugh, 1987). However, the principle of identification in a sporting/competitive enterprise like *Iron Chef America* works specifically because the viewer (A) and the competitor (B) are *not* the same. As Burke (1969) writes, "Identification is affirmed with earnestness precisely because there is division. Identification is compensatory to division. If men were not apart from one another, there would

be no need for the rhetorician to proclaim their unity.” (Burke 1969, p. 22). We will return to this principle later in this article.

Parasocial interaction requires identification, predominantly, but does not require much else on the part of the viewer. Burke (1969) states:

In being identified with B, A is ‘substantially one’ with a person other than himself. Yet at the same time, he remains unique, an individual locus of motives. Thus he is both joined and separate, at once a distinct substance and consubstantial with another.

(Burke 1969, p. 21)

The responsibility for maintaining this consubstantiation lies solely with B. The viewer cannot intensify the relationship on his or her own; it is also not a partnership. There is no negotiation involved. Only the celebrity/star/competitor (or at least the producers, directors and editors controlling the manner in which the celebrity/star/competitor is presented) can control the manner in which the relationship develops. Horton and Wohl (1956) echo that:

Parasocial relations may be governed by little or no sense of obligation, effort, or responsibility on the part of the spectator ... the interaction, characteristically, is one-sided, non dialectical, controlled by the performer, and not susceptible to mutual development.

(Horton and Wohl 1956, pp. 215)

The point being that the parasocial relationship cultivated by *Iron Chef America* is a large part of what distinguishes the program from other competitive enterprises/sporting events, and the maintenance of that relationship and subsequent interaction is largely audience-driven. It is this principle which the media ritual *Iron Chef America* represents.

MEDIA RITUALS

In the introduction to this paper, I referred to the weekly watching and deconstruction of *Iron Chef America* by my friends and family as our ‘ritual.’ There are three elements to this statement. Firstly there is the repetitive aspect of the claim. To state that we get together weekly to perform the same set of actions is to imply the expression of habitual behavior. Secondly there is the fact that the actions in which we participate weekly take place in the same manner with very little variation. I sit in the same place on the couch every week, my wife always has a magazine, Dale always drinks the same brand of beer, and so forth. These actions take place without having to be discussed; they have been repeated within the group so many times that they are now expectations. Thirdly there is the question of *meaning*. Supposedly we are all in the living room of my home to watch *Iron Chef America* and to discuss the manner in which the competition has transpired, how the secret ingredient was utilised and so forth. However, there is what Nick Couldry (2003) refers to as a “transcendent value” (p.3) to the weekly undertaking of this ritual; this gathering is an expression of *family*. Our weekly gathering means something, and that meaning has very little to do with the activity itself. In this way, the weekly watching of *Iron Chef America* is, in my home, a highly ritualised behavior. But is it a ‘media ritual’?

Couldry (2003) defines a ‘media ritual’ as “any action organised around key media-related categories and boundaries, whose performance reinforces, indeed helps legitimate, the underlying ‘value’ expressed in the idea that the media is our access point to our social centre” (p. 2). In other words, a media ritual is any action taken by an individual which strengthens the notion that the media are what hold our society together. Following this line of argument, since *Iron Chef America* is the vehicle for bringing together this group of people in an outward expression of the ideology of family, the viewing is in fact a media ritual. It places the television

at the center of social interaction.

But 'media ritual' also refers "to the whole range of situations where media themselves 'stand in,' or appear to 'stand in,' for something wider, something linked to the fundamental organisational level on which we are, or imagine ourselves to be, *connected* as members of a society" (Couldry, 2003, p. 4). That is to say that although our weekly viewing party is a media ritual, the very program *Iron Chef America* is, in and of itself, a media ritual. In this case, the 'something wider' which is 'linking to the fundamental organisational level on which we are connected as members of society' is competition. This competition, in turn, reinforces specific hegemonic structures through the ritualisation of the mundane activity of cooking.

COMPETITION, SOCIETY VALUES, AND THE ICA RITUAL

Iron Chef America is first and foremost a competition. While the competition certainly appears to be amiable on most occasions, the agonistic nature⁵ is still omnipresent; the goal in participating is to beat the other chef, with the differential determined via the scoring process. In turn, the audience takes the rightful place of the spectator as fan; the performative aspect of the ritual is in the conventionalised habituation that conforms to the show's format. Habituation in this instance refers to the process by which an individual becomes accustomed to certain predictable events through repeated exposure to a stimulus. In this case, the habituation is of two varieties. First, there is the habitual exposure to public acts of virtuosity⁶ which engenders a parasocial relationship with the performers. Parasocial interaction in reality television, and in competitive reality in particular, normally requires the viewer to engage in the previously described Burkean process of identification with the competitor. However, as noted earlier, in the case of *Iron Chef America* the parasocial relationship is developed through precisely the opposite. Skill, mastery and expert knowledge render the Iron Chefs (and their challengers) as virtuosos. The audience member will never have the skill or experience or know-how of the Iron Chef, and this is made clear at every turn. Gavin McNett (2000) offers:

Iron Chef is Formula One racing: There's a certain architectonic quality about it that fascinates you because you can't even imagine doing it at home. As with Formula One, you can't always tell what you're watching, but you can be confident that the competition is taking place at levels far beyond those that you can perceive. "He's throwing out the apricot sauce!" the *Iron Chef* commentator exclaims, as the crowd bursts into a stunned roar. "The foie gras! He's heading for the foie gras!" Whatever he's doing with that crême brulée, you know you'd better stay the hell out of his way.

(McNett, 2000)

Fortunately there is a high priest of this ritual – Alton Brown. Brown is a food scientist and the host of the popular Food Network program *Good Eats*. He also serves as the play-by-play commentator during the *Iron Chef America* competitions. Amiable and knowledgeable, Brown often provides insights into the performance of the chefs, as well as *bon mots* about the ingredients being used or the dishes being created. It is understood that the viewing audience will not be able to experience the ritual on their own; the high priest not only navigates, but inculcates parasocial interaction by pointing out and describing the acts of virtuosity as they occur. He is the essential bridge between the two simultaneously occurring rituals.

Iron Chef America connects parasocially to the audience through its particular 'ritual frame'. Couldry (2001) defines a 'ritual frame' as "a cognitive, imaginative and practical space through which everyone can access simultaneously the things that mark off the 'social' – what is shared by everyone" (p. 158). In the case of *Iron Chef America*, as stated earlier, one ritual frame

is competition. Although not everyone has participated in an intense culinary battle against the most brilliant chefs in the world, everyone can connect to a time where he or she had to directly vie with another person for a single reward. Any individual can conceptualise the competitive scenario, and can imagine the feelings involved. It is one of the most basic of ritual frames; life is a competitive business and people can always relate to struggle. A second, equally basic, ritual frame in play in *Iron Chef America* is the work of cooking. Both cooking and eating are highly ritualised activities across societies and cultures (de Certeau, 1998). Everyone can relate to the business of eating; everyone can remember or imagine an amazing meal he or she has eaten in the past. The ritual framework of *Iron Chef America* is solid and easily interpreted.

The rituality of the proceedings is only enhanced by the visual and auditory composition of the televisual space. The ominous, thundering music underscores the gravity of the competition, while the entrance of the challenger, shrouded in an intense backlight so that only the silhouette of the approaching contender can be seen, is a visual *aide memoire* of the Promethean activity about to take place. The contestant emerges from the bright light of the outside world to the darkness of Kitchen Stadium to do battle with the uncompromising prowess of these culinary titans. The Iron Chefs themselves rise from the depths of Kitchen Stadium in a cloud of smoke, to the sound of a knife being sharpened. With arms folded over the chest or hands on the hips, each is a picture of defiant confidence. But the ritual does not hit its stride until the most important element of the clash is revealed. On a golden pedestal, in a billowy haze of steam and smoke, the secret ingredient rises up out of the floor and is presented with such flourish and reverence by the Chairman, one would think the secret ingredient on any given night might be enriched uranium or the Shroud of Turin. Visually and aurally, the entire show is given an extra air of rituality, as though the competition was a matter of life and death, or the battle for the chefs' immortal souls.

It would be imprudent to assume that the ritual of *Iron Chef America* functions in the same way as other rituals within American society, or even within American television. Gudelunas (2002) points out that:

Television has not only affected and modified those rituals that consciously or unconsciously anticipate extensive media coverage but also taken over some dimension of traditional ritual to become the source of much of the symbolic imagery and shared values in our culture. From this perspective, television can be at times both highly ritualistic and a type of ritual medium itself for the culture.

(Gudelunas 2002, p. 109)

Iron Chef America is not only a *media* ritual, but more importantly, a *mediated* ritual. The mediated ritual exists in a variety of contexts, particularly in the United States. Whether it is formed around tragedy (King 2007), politics (Brewin 2008), entertainment (Haastrup 2008), or sport (Olsen 2003), the mediated ritual (i.e. the ritual that not only physically separates the performer(s) from the audience, but is created specifically for the audience) has become commonplace in American society. Unlike many other types of media rituals, *Iron Chef America* is not simply the transmission of an event – presumably, nobody staged O.J. Simpson's white Bronco ride, or the publicly televised explosion of the space shuttle *Challenger*, or the outcome of Super Bowl XLII. Competitive cooking as a ritual is constructed entirely for the television, as it exists outside the normative bounds of tradition (cooking in the home). It has only the sporting event as a pre-existing model. Cooking is an intimate activity when performed in the home, or an industrial activity when undertaken in a restaurant. It does not necessarily lend itself to direct head-to-head competition. For example, although restaurant chefs strive to be the best (achieving a five-star rating, procuring employment at an upper crust establishment etc.),

this is primarily indirect competition. Rarely are head chefs in the same room with each other, pressed by a time limit and forced to use specific ingredients. Even if this peculiar situation were to occur, it is doubtful that it would be televised. The television itself becomes an integral part of the ritual, and the viewing of the program becomes a ritual in and of itself. As Eastman and Riggs (1994) state, "Rituals arise from contradictions between television's immediacy and its mediation of an event, in other words, its distancing of a participatory event" (p. 257). The ritual of *Iron Chef America* is a construct. Food Network, and, by extension, the physical entity of the television set, not only presents the ritual (the sporting event of competitive cooking), but also has become its own ritual differentiated from the ritual it was attempting to mediate (cooking). *Iron Chef America*, therefore, is both a cooking show and more than a cooking show.

The three rituals (the competition, the television and the viewing of the competition) are held apart by *ritual boundaries* which compartmentalise the rituals in very important ways. Couldry (2001) writes:

Specific to this sense of ritual performance is a sense of a ritual *boundary*, embodied in the set and the basis of its ritual status. The boundary in question is that between the world in which visitors usually operate (the 'ordinary world') and the world the set inhabits, the 'media world.'

(p.165)

A definitive ritual boundary exists between the audience and the cooking competition. The Iron Chefs are of course 'real' people, but even more so than most celebrities, as all four of the Iron Chefs own prominent US restaurants. One can quite probably meet these Iron Chefs in real life, go to their restaurants and eat their food. However, this is not the same experience as *Iron Chef America*. The ritual boundary prevents you from having that experience in the 'ordinary world' As mentioned before, eating is not the same ritual – one probably will not experience the ultra-expensive ingredients (Japanese Kobe beef or black caviar or shaved truffle), or the rare (big-eyed tuna or giant lobster), or the just plain bizarre (goat or ostrich). Even if it's a common ingredient, one probably won't ever consume a meal prepared personally by the chef with the kind of on-the-spot innovations and creativity that the cooking competition requires. The ritual boundary ensures an entirely different experience.

IRON CHEF AMERICA AS DEEP PLAY

If *Iron Chef America* is more sporting event than cooking program, it stands to reason that there is a clear division between the recreational form of the activity and the competitive form. That is to say that although there may be some instructional merit to the proceedings, it is generally assumed the viewing public will not be able to perform at the same level of expertise as the competitors. Like any other sporting competition, there is a big difference between playing for example, recreation-league flag football on the weekend and playing wide receiver for the Indianapolis Colts. However, the operative condition in both circumstances is *play* – it is the quality and level of play that is in question. Couldry (2003) offers that, where play is concerned in conjunction with media:

Television 'deepens the play', where 'play', following Victor Turner, has the serious sense of a process, framed apart from the normal flow of everyday life, in which society can reflect upon itself. Serious play is, in one respect, the successor to, not an example of, rituals based in organised religion, but in a broader sense, such play –and the media events that focus it – still constitutes ritual, but in another register.

(p. 283)

Play is an integral part of American society; recreation is a ritual all unto itself. But beyond that, play also helps society reinforce the qualities it values through the systematic rewarding of competitive victory. Each competitive exercise, while couched in the language of play, is essentially what Goffman refers to as a *character contest* in which the participants must not only triumph, but do so while demonstrating the characteristics esteemed by society. Susan Birrell (1981) relates:

Goffman distinguishes four motifs around which character contests in North America might revolve: courage, gameness, integrity and composure. From Goffman's definitions one can immediately perceive their ready applicability to sport.

Courage: the capacity to envisage immediate danger and yet proceed with the course of action that brings the danger on

Gameness: the capacity to stick to a line of activity and to continue to pour all effort into it regardless of set-backs, pain or fatigue

Integrity: the propensity to resist temptation in situations where there would be much profit and some impunity in departing momentarily from moral standards

Composure: self-control, self-possession or poise

(Birrell, 1982, p. 365)

Competitors in public displays of play, such as televised sporting events or *Iron Chef America*, are expected to demonstrate at least one of these motifs. If a competitor does not exhibit at least one of the motifs, or worse, displays characteristics in opposition to the accepted motifs, the result is sharply negative. For example, the practice of point shaving⁷ is illegal (an affront to integrity). On a much more minor scale, if one has seen it, it is difficult to forget Iron Chef Masaharo Morimoto's utter disgust and offense at Bobby Flay's outburst of triumphant jubilation during their historic battle on *Ryôri No Tetsujin*. Flay climbed onto his countertop and stood on his own cutting board, which Iron Chef Morimoto considered the height of classlessness and insult (the spectacle of a lack of composure). The program's visual construction along the tropes and symbols of a sporting event lends an air of authenticity to the demonstration of character values. As Mark Gallagher (2004) states:

The program constructs the act of cooking not only as an art and as a form of service but also as a test of strength, speed, endurance and mental dexterity (and to a less visible extent, management, as each chef must efficiently direct a team of cooking assistants). The representation of the kitchen as the stage for physical and strategic trials links the program to Western competitive values promoted in sports, business and other forums.

(p. 182)

Birrell (1981) states that "sport has ritual significance when character based on valued social attributes is demonstrated. In such situations, the athlete is an exemplary figure who embodies the moral values of the community and thus serves as a symbol of those values" (p. 373). This is echoed by Meyers, who states:

Campbell ... characterises the *monomythic* hero in ritual and literature as one who "ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man". Might he not as well be describing an athlete and the athletic contest—"the quest for the gold"? The conflict or *agon* that is the basis of drama and much literature finds expression

in the 'agony' of sport.

(p. 342)

There is a connection between the embodiment of the community's moral values and the public demonstration of virtuosity, in that skill is an offshoot of composure. The self-control of the perfect jump shot, the poise of the clutch field goal, or the self-possession of Iron Chef Masaharo Morimoto's amazingly precise knife work, all reinforce dominant hegemonic codes of how a hero 'should' behave. However, competitive public events perform an alternate, dual hegemonic function. As Stijn Reijnders, Gerard Rooijackers and Liesbet van Zoonen (2005) offer:

Events of this type have been popular over the years because they possess an important ritual significance. They stimulate social harmony, on the one hand by cultivating a strong sense of belonging to a group and on the other by introducing a ranking into that sense of belonging.

(p. 5)

So, while there is the denotative demonstration of heroism and prized cultural characteristics on the surface, underneath and simultaneously, there is the connotative message that the competitor is special, one of us but not one of us. It is the very foundation of 'celebrity' as a social construct. It is important to note that the competitor may not even be cognizant of his or her role in the perpetuation of cultural norms. As Birrell (1981) reminds us:

Through the idealization of performance ... individuals are not attempting in a deceitful way to claim values for themselves that they do not in fact possess. They are attempting to demonstrate through their selves the ideal role characteristics valued by society. Through their behavior, they are reaffirming significant values of the moral order.

(p. 360)

The ritual of competition also fulfils the need for societies to create dual-role hegemonic structures which, on the one hand, honor and fortify the status quo and bring people together as a collective, and on the other, remind people that the virtuoso is not really a part of that collective. The virtuoso is a hero, one among a cavalcade since time immemorial. As Meyers so eloquently points out:

The universal action of play relates to the triumph in the contest and the agony of losing, a veritable metaphor for death. During the fall, winter, spring and summer solstices we attend matches, or turn on the television to watch the struggles between the combatants dressed in their colorful uniforms reenacting the ritual patterns of thousands of years, the conflict between the old and the new, the strong and the weak, for mastery.

(p. 341)

IRON CHEF AMERICA(N)

In 1962, Steele and Redding characterised several defining, foundational principles of American life: Puritan and pioneer morality, the value of the individual, achievement and success, change and progress, ethical equality, effort and optimism, and efficiency, practicality and pragmatism among them (Steele & Redding 1962). In some respect, *Iron Chef America* replicates and reinforces each of these foundational principles on a weekly basis. The idea of Puritan and pioneer morality, that the world is divided into those who play fair and those who do not (Steele & Redding 1962, p. 85), is central to the competition. No chef, not even the Iron Chef, is given any advantage: the kitchens are identical, both competitors find out at the same time about the secret ingredient

and so on, in order to keep the competition equitable and fair – a ‘real’ American doesn’t cheat. The value of the individual – that success is an individual-level event (Steele & Redding 1962, p. 86) – is of course primary in the Kitchen Stadium; each competitor has a team of assistants, but they exist only in service to the individual competing, and receive none of the credit for a winning effort – a ‘real’ American wins for him/herself.

The value of achievement and success – that what one already has is not as important as what one is capable of acquiring next (Steele & Redding 1962, p. 86) – is also a key element in *Iron Chef America*. Each competitor, both the Iron Chef and the challenger, is already accomplished within his/her profession, but the opportunity to win and prove oneself to be better than another within that profession is enough to drive a ‘real’ American to compete. This also falls in line with the value of change and progress; that human abilities can be improved and the best is yet to come (Steele & Redding 1962, p. 86). Through this ritualised competition, both the Iron Chef and the challenger are becoming better at their respective crafts, as steel sharpens steel – once again something that all ‘real’ Americans value.

Ethical equality, that all people have an equal right to compete, regardless of age, race, gender, and so forth (Steele & Redding 1962, p. 87), is much more prevalent in *Iron Chef America* than it ever was in *Ryôri No Tetsujin*. The inclusion of Iron Chef Cat Cora is symbolic of the ‘real’ American value of equal access (as dubious a claim as that can be when examined societally). Cat Cora (because she is a woman competing in a ‘man’s field’) also symbolises the American ideal of effort and optimism – that every ‘real’ American can find success through hard work, striving, and refusing to give up (Steele & Redding 1962, p. 87). Finally, *Iron Chef America* reinforces the idea of efficiency, practicality and pragmatism (solving problems as they arise) weekly. It is in fact the central theme of the program, and ‘real’ Americans are nothing if not problem solvers.

These hegemonic structures are essential to the ritualised deep play functions of *Iron Chef America*. *Iron Chef America* conforms to the ritual structures of United States society, and celebrates Steele and Redding’s contemporary American values.

CONCLUSION

Iron Chef America exists both as media ritual and as the center point of a distinct mediated ritual. There is a clear ritual boundary between the two, which is bridged by the all-knowing host/high priest of the event. The mediated ritual, the viewing of the program, may follow traditional definitions of ritual in terms of repetition, faithfulness in convention and practice, and in the formation of meaning. It combines the tropes and structures of sporting events with the integral and endemic parasocial relationships and interactions of reality television to create a product which is neither wholly sport nor wholly traditional reality program. The media ritual itself is a complicated amalgamation of competition, play and public virtuosity. The character and quality of play at work in the competition reinforces societal values, rewards those who demonstrate societally-esteemed virtues.

Iron Chef America, through its structure, host and participants, attempts to generalise (through deep play) specifically American concepts of ‘what it means’ to compete, to be ‘the best’, and to display virtuosity. Ultimately, this is the greatest success of *Iron Chef America* – the skillful marriage of parasocial interaction with deep play in order to directly reinforce the hegemonic, traditional values of American society. Not every person in America can throw a football or sink a three-pointer or hit a 90 m.p.h. curve ball, but every individual can enter the kitchen and prepare a meal. In utilising this everyday activity as the vehicle for competitive action, the program engenders identification and parasocial interaction at a level a traditional

sporting event cannot match. This makes this particular media/mediated ritual an extremely successful vehicle for nurturing conformation to traditional American values.

ENDNOTES

1. <http://www.bhatt.id.au/blog/ryori-no-tetsujin-aka-iron-chef-sbs-tv/>

2. <http://www.bhatt.id.au/blog/ryori-no-tetsujin-aka-iron-chef-sbs-tv/>

3. <http://www.bhatt.id.au/blog/ryori-no-tetsujin-aka-iron-chef-sbs-tv/>

4. *Ryôri No Tetsujin* once included Chinese 100-year-old egg as a secret ingredient; other notable theme ingredients include lotus root, suckling pig, pigeon, scorpion fish and snapping turtle. *Iron Chef America* rarely features anything more exotic than snails, rabbit, or buffalo – uncommon, but not nearly as unusual.

5. In *Ilium*, author Dan Simmons writes, “The agon is simply the comparison of all like things, one to the other ... and the judgment of those things as equal to, greater than, or lesser than. All things in the universe take part in the dynamic of agon ... one must be able to compare men – or women – and that is why we need to know our fathers. Our mothers. Our history. Our stories.” (Simmons 2003, p. 468) Agon is part of the very fabric of competition.

6. Hannah Arendt (1963) defines a ‘public act of virtuosity’ as “an excellence we attribute to the performing arts ... where the accomplishment lies in the performance itself and not in an end product which outlasts the activity that brought it into existence and becomes independent of it” (Arendt 1963, p. 153).

7. Point shaving is the act of deliberately not scoring points in a sporting event in order to affect who wins bets against a point spread. A player who is point shaving might intentionally miss shots or cause turnovers in order to keep the score within a particular margin. It most commonly occurs in basketball, but can be found in other sports contests as well.

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