

Can you see yourself living here?

Structures of desire in recent British lifestyle television

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NECSUS 1 (2):55–76

DOI: 10.5117/NECSUS2012.2.ZBOR

Keywords: British, cooking, food, lifestyle, property, renovation, television

As part of her ‘attempt to establish the specificity of contemporary [lifestyle] programmes’ on British television, Charlotte Brunsdon identifies ‘a changing grammar of the close-up’² as an important element of what she argues is a tendency for these programmes to offer melodrama rather than realism.³ Brunsdon argues that in the preceding ‘hobby’ genre, close-ups are ‘governed by the logic of exposition’⁴ and instruction. However, in more recent programmes, ‘[i]nstead of focusing on operations, the camera focuses on reactions: the climax of *Ground Force* [BBC, 1998–2005] is the close-up on the face of the garden owner, not the garden.’⁵ These close-up ‘reveals’ are a key part of the ‘after’ phase of the ‘before and after’⁶ identified by Rachel Moseley as a constitutive trope of makeover television – a prominent subspecies of contemporary lifestyle programming.

The present account is intended to supplement Brunsdon’s and Moseley’s focus on details of presentation and temporal organisation in recent lifestyle programming on British television. More specifically, it seeks to outline some of the central and recurring ways in which lifestyle programmes present certain things as being (often, visually) desirable or undesirable; also, the difficulty that many of its subspecies have in representing leisure *time*, as opposed to the appearance of being a leisured individual. I discuss both of these topics in relation to the television programme *Relocation*, *Relocation* (Channel 4, 2004–present).

At the centre of what follows, then (in terms of order and of emphasis), is an exploration of what I will term the ‘property-search programme’, exemplified by the long-running and successful *Relocation, Relocation*, presented by Kirstie Allsopp and Phil Spencer. Unlike home makeover programmes

such as *Changing Rooms* (BBC, 1996-2004) or *60 Minute Makeover* (ITV, 2004-present), property-search programmes have received *relatively* little attention in the now quite-sizeable literature on lifestyle and makeover programming. An article by David Clifford Giles examines the ‘less than flattering’⁷ subject positions property-makeover and property-search programmes create for their participants, echoing Brunsdon’s argument when he notes that ‘lifestyle programming is more about educating the audience in judgments of taste than disseminating skills and knowledge’.⁸ Ruth McElroy also utilises discourses surrounding lifestyle in her analyses of British – and more specifically Welsh – property programmes, focusing principally on the question of how ‘property TV function[s] as the making and remaking of nation’.⁹

Most relevant to my own work is Nuria Lorenzo-Dus’ article, which focuses upon the acts of persuasion contained within British property-makeover and property-search programmes. Lorenzo-Dus employs detailed and sophisticated discourse analysis of short extracts to demonstrate how viewers are ‘persuaded as to the attractiveness of the lifestyles promoted by the programmes’.¹⁰ Although Lorenzo-Dus and I both combine analyses of the verbal and visual components of these programmes and of how they seek to persuade the audience of the desirability of some things and the undesirability of others, I would suggest that my approach is weighted further towards the visual than hers (and whereas ‘persuasion’ is the focal term in her account, ‘desire’ holds the equivalent place in mine). Our methodologies, our corpuses, and the types of details we explore overlap, but only partly.

There are several factors that may explain why property-search programmes tend to be at the edges rather than at the centre of discussions of contemporary lifestyle and makeover television. They cannot – unlike the property-makeover and gardening programmes described by Brunsdon – be seen as descendants of the earlier ‘hobby’ genre. Although some ‘before and after’ organisation and melodramatic revelation are used, these features do not structure property-search programmes to the extent that they do makeover programmes. Although issues of taste, and therefore class, are present in these programmes, they are so in a different and perhaps more subtle way than programmes where participants are confronted with aesthetic decisions enacted upon their property by others, or harangued about their appearance or lifestyle by the likes of fashion advisors Trinny Woodall and Susannah Constantine, dietician Gillian McKeith, or the ‘Personal Overhaul Device’ of *Snog, Marry, Avoid?* (BBC, 2008-present).

Although property-search programmes are my principal focus, my intention is also to use this programme type to present a more wide-ranging account of lifestyle programming and its methods of structuring desire and representing time. The section below in which the property-search genre is examined is preceded by a discussion of ‘bad details’ and ‘good details’ in lifestyle programming in general – that is, the ways in which close-ups of human body parts, objects, or surfaces are used to elicit attraction or repulsion. It is followed by a discussion of the different modes of temporal organisation that exist within different species of lifestyle television. In this way, I seek to supplement an exploration of the rhetorical content of property-search programmes in particular with a broader consideration of some predominant tropes and tendencies of lifestyle programming in general. I will be arguing, in line with several other scholars (whose work will be referred to below), that the visual details and the temporal organisation of lifestyle programming often conspire to encourage its audience to (want to) treat their homes and their selves as sites of display and indices of conspicuous consumption and leisure, and that the casualty of this process is often the possibility of representing pleasurable leisure time-without-display spent in one’s own home.

The empirical focus and the academic literature referred to in this study are almost exclusively British. This does not constitute a peculiarity of my article – it is true in turn of much of the academic literature I draw upon, and can be explained by my focus (and theirs) upon detailed matters of textual organisation and of cultural context. Furthermore, my particular focus upon property-search programmes further justifies a primarily British frame of reference. As we shall see below, many of the rhetorical tropes of British property-search programmes are inseparable from the evolution of land usage and the types and ages of property that give the British property market its particular character. All of this is not to say that what follows has no relevance to other national contexts of lifestyle, lifestyle television, or property sale. As the foundational work of scholars such as David Chaney¹¹ and Anthony Giddens¹² demonstrates, ‘lifestyle’ is a concept that explains changes in modes of social organisation that have occurred across large sections of the globe. Also, as authors such as Frances Bonner (who ranges across British and Australian ‘ordinary television’¹³) and anthologies such as *Makeover Television: Realities Remodelled*¹⁴ (which combines discussions by British, North American, and Australian scholars of television) attest, the conceptual frameworks that are useful in understanding these texts are not nationally-bound. However, given that I am seeking to refine existing arguments within what is by now a relatively well-established niche of

literature – that is, given that my attention is characterised by depth rather than breadth – my aims are usually best served by other sources which deal with the British context.

Bad details and good details

Bringing together Brunsdon's focus on close-ups and Moseley's upon 'before and after' can help us to notice that the process of before and after in makeover programmes is often represented synechdochically through a series of close-ups of details. Before television makeovers, we tend to see 'bad' details; afterwards, these have been replaced by 'good' details.

In makeovers for houses and persons alike, bad details betoken neglect – that is, insufficient care. The self-explanatorily-titled *How Clean is Your House?* (Channel 4, 2003-2009) displays endless close-ups and extreme close-ups of matter out of place: cooking surfaces coated in grease, piles of unwashed clothing on carpets, thick layers of dust on shelves, insects swarming over surfaces. Property makeover programmes, current examples of which include *DIYSOS: The Big Build* (BBC, 2010-present) and *Phil Spencer: Secret Agent* (Channel 4, 2011-present), tend in their pre-makeover phase to display close-ups of undesirable details, usually extreme in the case of the former (exposed wires, unplastered walls) and cosmetic in the case of the latter (threadbare carpets, damaged paintwork). In all the above cases, the programmes feel designed to evoke a visceral reaction (particularly in the case of *How Clean is Your House?*) through the use of textural detail. The use of close-ups vividly renders the surface properties of the details displayed, and in all cases these are not what the viewer would probably want them to be – they are rough, or sticky, and so on.¹⁵ *You Are What You Eat* (Channel 4, 2004-2007) and other programmes about diet linger in their visual flow over proscribed foodstuffs and over the folds and proportions of the bodies that result from their consumption. Programmes such as *10 Years Younger* (Channel 4, 2004-present) focus in the pre-makeover phase on details such as yellowed teeth, wrinkles, or body fat. Fashion makeover programmes, such as those hosted by Gok Wan or Trinny and Susannah, explore in detail and through close-ups participants' body shapes, grooming, wardrobes, and accessories.

The tie-in book for Trinny and Susannah's series *What Not To Wear* (BBC, 2001-2007) exemplifies with particular clarity the use of 'bad detail'. The book is organised as a series of makeovers. One part of the 'before' section of each makeover is a two-page spread titled 'How you look', featuring one

of the duo dressed in a manner that is presented as dowdy, outmoded, or in some other way undesirable. In the first such spread, a slumped and loose-jawed Trinny looks at the reader, shopping bags in one hand and dog lead in the other. A line points from her hair to a caption which asserts that '[y]our hair's lack of maintenance reflects your own lack of love for yourself.' Similarly, at the bottom of the page, the diagnosis reads '[y]our lack of socks and tired shoes emphasise how little you care about your feet, and therefore about yourself.'¹⁶ 'Bad details' can also be the result not only of insufficient care but also of consumption that is presented as excessive and/or inappropriate. Neglect and excess are inseparable in *You Are What You Eat* and similar programmes. Fashion programmes often go both ways. One very clear-cut example of a programme that displays excessive and inappropriate consumption leading to bad details is *Snog, Marry, Avoid*, in which a 'make-under' is offered to programme participants whose ostentatious fashion choices and grooming habits are deemed beyond the pale.

If 'bad details' are symptoms of a failure to care sufficiently for oneself or about what others might think – a double dereliction of duty for the self-regulating neo-liberal subject, as Palmer has persuasively argued in relation to lifestyle programming¹⁷ – then 'good details' demonstrate the opposite: that one loves oneself, wants others to know this, and possesses the time and the money to make this manifest. Sometimes such demonstrations are achieved via nothing more than the purchase of a commodity. 'Show that you have respect for yourself', Trinny and Susannah entreat us in the 'after' photo spread that answers the one discussed above, 'and carry a decent handbag.'¹⁸ Trinny and Susannah's other suggestions – such as a 'dramatic new [hair]style', which, as they acknowledge, 'will need maintenance'¹⁹ – require more sustained investments of money and of time free from the demands of work, home, and dependants.

If the relationship of the camera to 'bad' details is akin to that of a penetrating, unflinching gaze mercilessly exposing ugliness, its relationship to 'good' details is more reminiscent (in its deployment of the aestheticising possibilities of lighting and focus) to the photography of advertising and modelling. This is perhaps most obvious in the case in food programming and still photography of food. To use just one example, the opening credits to Nigel Slater's 1998 series *Real Food* (Channel 4) show, amongst other close-ups, coarse grains of sea salt landing on golden roast potatoes and thin chocolate shaving spirals landing on top of a cake. As with 'bad' details the emphasis is upon texture, but now the intention is not to inspire disgust but to rouse desire. In the advice about food photography that is repetitively

reproduced in trade journals, the synaesthetic ambitions of the genre are made explicit. One article advises:

[f]ood images need texture...to help the viewer get an idea of the 'mouth feel' of a product. Whipped cream needs to look soft with a very fine texture; a granola bar should give the illusion of crunch with a rough texture. Backlight casts a shadow in front of the food, which makes the food look like it is moving toward the viewer as if to say 'eat me, eat me'.²⁰

The *Real Food* credits described above also take advantage of the *moving* image's capacity to reveal the physical properties of objects by showing how they move through the air, react upon collision with other objects, and so on.

Perhaps somewhat more surprisingly, similar aestheticising tendencies are also to be found in the 'good' details on display in property programmes.²¹ When a programme wishes to connote desirability in its visual flow (often to the accompaniment of approving comments by the presenter and a relaxed, synthesised background beat), there are a few forms of visual abstraction it will tend to employ. The fifth episode of the second series of *Phil Spencer: Secret Agent*²² can furnish us with an example. The programme's format is that Phil Spencer (familiar from the preceding programmes *Location, Location, Location* and *Relocation, Relocation*) visits houses that have been languishing unsold on the UK market for some time and delivers advice to the owners (owner-occupiers in all episodes I have seen) about the changes (usually cosmetic) they might make in the hope of securing a sale. In the episode in question, Phil, in a recurring element in the format, visits a nearby property for sale in a similar price range. The pastel palette of its interior and the general impression of brightness already make this property fashionable and desirable according to one prevailing regime of taste. The programme's visual style works hard to create and emphasise desirability. One mode of semi-abstraction employed is to cut to shots that are blurry at first but then come into focus, as though the property is emerging from a dream. Sometimes this focussing is accompanied by a pan or tilt, and/or emphasises sources of exterior light which appear as large, bright patches that shrink and sharpen as focus is achieved (in an episode of *Relocation, Relocation*, Phil Spencer's co-presenter Kirstie Allsopp tells the house-hunters that '[d]ecor is very personal, but light *isn't*').

The camera also lingers lovingly on reflective surfaces. In the kitchen, an unexceptional row of glass jars that reflects light from a window is aestheticised as the camera racks focus so that first the jars to the rear and then the ones to the front are sharp and detailed. This visual trope is

repeated, even more oddly, in a shot which begins focused upon a brass door handle in the foreground, before racking to pull into focus a chrome heated towel rail in the bathroom beyond. This attention to and, in fact, *creation of* visual detail is excessive by several measures. However, we can begin to get a handle on it by placing it alongside the instances of textural close-ups in makeover television referred to above. The emphasis upon smooth, clean, hard surfaces which reflect the light are an inversion of the surfaces rendered unpleasing to sight and touch by dirt or damp, decay or neglect.

One further facet of the deployment and discussion of detail in property programmes is the notion that, when it comes to selling property, self-effacement is good – that, to some extent, no detail is good detail. One of the participants in the episode of *Phil Spencer: Secret Agent* described above ventures that one of his rooms has ‘maybe too much personality’, a suggestion that Phil enthusiastically jumps upon before delivering a bit of property-selling pragmatism: ‘[u]nfortunately, magnolia, and blandness [pause]: nobody walks in and goes, “oh! I don’t like that!”²³ The thinking behind such a pronouncement is also what lies behind the dogma – repeated ad nauseum in *Phil Spencer: Secret Agent* and other programmes about selling property – which states that every room should possess a clear and immediately discernible function. One of Phil’s most frequent complaints upon entering a room that contains, say, both a dining table and a desk with a computer, is that it is ‘confusing’. In an episode from the first series²⁴ we are told that ‘spelling out how every room will be used’ is a means of ‘help[ing] prospective buyers visualise how they will live in it’. In the same episode, an estate agent tells Phil: ‘[w]hat we’re seeing now is buyers want a lifestyle, and where they can see a children’s room, they can see a room for them, they can see a formal dining room, they can start to envisage dinner parties...’ Walls painted in a neutral shade like magnolia are seen as a route to one description of a property interior that echoes through property programmes: the desirable designation ‘blank canvas’ – that is, a property free from the kinds of ‘bad’ details that, to use another piece of estate agent terminology, potential buyers might ‘snag’ upon, and which might not sit well with their fantasies of living there.

Structures of desire in property-search programmes

A typical episode of *Relocation, Relocation* will show an attempt to find and purchase two properties. Almost invariably, the potential buyers are

a couple; occasionally, they are a same-sex couple, and on one occasion a mother and a daughter are the programme subjects. Sometimes, only one property is being sought. Quite frequently, the search will be for a home and a set of business premises. In the programme's third series, for example, the Smalley family move to the Lake District and set up a business selling hot tubs. Other programme participants seek leisure industry premises: pubs, guest houses, bed and breakfasts, and so on. By far the most common type of property search involves the attempt to purchase one countryside (or, less frequently, seaside) property and one city centre property. The former will tend to be termed a 'family home', 'dream home', 'forever home', or 'country retreat'; the latter will tend to be termed a 'crash pad' if the property is near the workplace of one member of the couple and/or an 'investment property' if the intention is to buy a city centre property to let it out to tenants and in the hope that its location will mean it increases in value. Episode 14 of the first series is one example of this most common type of property search.²⁵ The Veal family – a married couple (Dawn and Simon) and three young children – are trying to sell their house in Surrey and acquire a family home in Devon and a one-bedroom property in Maidenhead. The episode begins with the presenters telling the viewer:

[w]ith a few smart moves you can swap your old home in the city for two new ones. A family home in the country, and a flat in the city, to use during a working week.

The question of who is included in the normative 'you' of a broadcast address is always an interesting one. In this case, the 'fantasy' dimension of the invitation might involve the viewer imagining what could be possible if they sold their house; it might involve the viewer imagining that their house is as valuable as the ones depicted on the programme; or, it might go as far as them imagining that they actually have a house to sell.

In keeping with the programme's format, we are first introduced to the episode's participants and their property and lifestyle. We learn of their current sources of dissatisfaction and of their aspirations and requirements. Although Kirstie's words at the beginning refer to an 'old home in the *city*', it swiftly becomes clear that in this episode, as in many others, the place being escaped is the suburbs. A summary montage accompanied by voiceover shows Simon rising early and beginning his long commute to work, whilst Dawn oversees the school day routine for the children, culminating in a 'school run' that involves a bicycle ride along a road that we are told is busy. On the wall of the kitchen is a photograph of Simon rock-climbing. 'But

rock climbing and horse riding aren't exactly on tap in Surrey', Kirstie tells us in a voiceover, before Phil takes over: '[i]n Devon, [the Veals are] hoping to indulge their taste for the great outdoors, and live an idyllic rural life.' Further emphasising the contrast, Kirstie tells us that '[o]ur mission is to rid the Veals of their suburban routine.' Simon himself, when asked by Phil what the move is 'all about', responds in the following manner: '[i]t's about moving away from the suburbs and going to the country, and it's getting back to an ideal that I've got fixed in my mind of the way that I want to live and the way I want my children to live.'

'The suburb', Judy Attfield notes, 'originally derived from the impetus to separate the dwelling from the workplace, locating it in healthy surroundings, with a garden and plenty of fresh air but with easy access to the city by means of modern transport networks.'²⁶ However, alongside their longstanding connotations of blandness, uniformity, and pretension, suburbs now often (as in the episode of *Relocation, Relocation* under discussion, and many others) represent neither an escape from the city nor the benefits of living in one. The air is no longer so fresh and the transport networks are overstretched. They are too busy to constitute an escape but too residential to possess a buzz. Attfield also describes the suburb as 'a staging post, if only in theory, on the way to acquiring a country residence'.²⁷ *Relocation, Relocation* shows such acquisition becoming a reality for the happy few.

A large proportion of each episode is taken up by viewings of various properties for sale. Often, the participants are present; sometimes, Kirstie and/or Phil view properties 'alone' – that is, with no one else in front of the camera. Frequently, we see shots of the house's rooms without anyone visible in them, an important point to which I shall return.

During the course of property viewings, 'good' and 'bad' details are often foregrounded. The first property shown to Dawn and Simon 'retains some original features' but 'has been partly renovated'. As we see and hear, it is the latter fact that proves problematic. The camera, towards the end of its survey, lingers for a moment, panning down a length of copper piping that stands proud of a wall that has not been skimmed or painted. Standing outside and reflecting upon what they have seen, the couple deliver a damning verdict:

Dawn: They've destroyed the essence of this house in what they've tried to achieve. We can see *through* that.

Simon: I actually find it quite upsetting. It's so unsympathetically done, it's actually upsetting me. It makes me angry. It might be strong to say that I hate it, but that is awful.

By contrast, in the next house viewed, it is the good details that take centre stage. 'This house is so *packed* with original features that you barely know where to start', Kirstie tells them as they walk through the door. She continues by pointing out a mechanism built into the wall for making clotted cream: '[y]ou put two copper urns in there, fire under there, leave it seven hours, and then you've got your Devon clotted cream.' How the participants (or we) are meant to feel about the fact that there is a telephone socket at the base of the feature, a telephone wire inside it, and a mock brass telephone on top of it, is unclear.

Potential homes are rejected by participants on *Relocation, Relocation* for a range of reasons. This often occurs on the basis of location. Sometimes layout is a problem, with participants reporting that they would not be able to configure their lives around the existing architecture of the property. However, the type of reason given to buy or not to buy that I want to focus upon is the type expressed by the Veals' negative reactions to the conversion they deem unsympathetic, and their positive reactions to more 'characterful' preservations and conversions. Whilst it is immediately understandable that the absence of a layout that suits the prospective buyers' requirements might constitute a barrier to the good life, it requires more analysis to discover why, in the minds of many of the participants on *Relocation, Relocation*, the absence of features such as exposed wooden beams or an original fireplace appear to fall into the same category. In order to temper the sting of what follows, I think it is worth acknowledging that I am not standing entirely outside and looking in upon the attitudes that I intuit, and my purpose is not to condemn utterly that which I try to describe. My perspective lies somewhere between sympathy and detachment – but more towards the latter, critical end of that spectrum.

When 'period properties' and 'original features' are fetishised by property programmes, estate agents, would-be purchasers, and onlookers, it seems to me that several factors are in play in proportions that will vary from case to case. Features like the clotted cream alcove appeal because of their rustic quaintness. They constitute a little bit of history in one's own dwelling – a material link to and reminder of a time when things were done differently, as well as good talking points for visitors (to return for a moment to the telephone and its socket that have been superimposed, as it were: rustic fantasies are of course accompanied by the modern conveniences of

telephony, running hot and cold water, and so on). More broadly: houses, unlike many other commodities, tend to be 'second hand' – at least, unless one builds one's own house,²⁸ or is the first occupier of a 'new-build'. There is, perhaps, something reassuring about being surrounded by a collection of bricks and mortar (or other materials) whose existence pre-dates one's own and which has stood the test of time. Of course, period properties and original features are also a source of distinction for their owners. As is the case with the antiques that will often furnish them, the relative scarcity and the finite supply of such properties, more of which cannot, by definition, be made (although the line demarcating 'antique' and 'period' will of course move forwards), make them valuable.²⁹ A 'period property' is to a utilitarian suburban semi (or even urban 'crash pad') what a unique product is to a mass-produced one. Trinny and Susannah's handbags and haircuts can supply another analogy: like a haircut, a property is not a one-off purchase, but must also be maintained; a well-maintained home, particularly one with features that have been maintained over an extremely long period, bespeaks yet further reserves of capital.

In the paragraph above we began with the pleasures of history (albeit of a particular and probably limited sort) and ended with the pleasures of ownership. The particular pleasures of the kind of property ownership frequently depicted in *Relocation Relocation* can be historically and culturally contextualised further via reference to the concept of leisure.

The life of horse riding and rock climbing envisaged by the Veals overlaps partly rather than wholly with the pursuits of the (English) country gentlemen, but it is nevertheless a fantasy of a life of leisure. One very compelling way of characterising the aim of makeover advice is to describe it as a range of attempts to cultivate the air and appearance of a leisured individual. Transforming oneself from a downtrodden, plastic-bag and dog-laden drudge to a straight-backed, fashionable woman about town declares, 'look at my posture, my complexion, my clothes and my hair, and you will not see the traces upon them of menial labour. In fact, I have the time (and the money) to maintain my features.'

If the household is a site and a hub for leisure then it also becomes a site of display. The estate agent quoted above makes reference to the prospect of dinner parties. The dinner party is a particular form of hosting. It implies that one's hospitality, culinary skills, and home will be put on *display* for guests. Thus, even when the types of potential buyers who envisage dinner parties come to possess and inhabit a house, display (for themselves and others) will continue to be important. The ghost of Thorstein Veblen can be detected in this perceptive description by Tony Chapman of show homes

(that is, unoccupied furnished houses open for viewings to help sell similar properties nearby), a description which would, intriguingly, stand in many of its details with respect to the ‘ideal’ strived for by many homeowners in their actual residences (especially when they are entertaining guests):

[s]how homes project images of a leisurely lifestyle. The houses are generally free of the detritus of day-to-day living.... Kitchens are fancifully tidy and well provided for in terms of ‘labour-saving’ appliances, giving the impression that this is a place of leisure rather than work.³⁰

Of course, one expects a property for sale to look clean and tidy, and for any current inhabitants to partially suspend the business of living in its rooms – that is, to prioritise display over comfort and going-on-ness (at least for the duration of viewings). Watching and listening to *Relocation*, *Relocation* though, one can be left with the impression that the *natural and ideal* state of rooms in a home (and not just a home for sale) is to be unoccupied, clean, and tidy, awaiting the appraisal of the consuming gaze. During the course of the various viewings in each episode, in addition to the presenters’ and participants’ tours, the viewer is given lingering shots of the property’s rooms in which no living being is on screen, and which replicate in superior form the photographs in estate agents’ brochures, with the added benefit that a slow pan (a near ubiquitous feature of these shots) can offer a ‘panoramic’ view of a room and give a good impression of its dimensions.

At one point, the Veals’ property search takes them to a ‘former Sunday school’. Shortly after they have entered the property, Kirstie advises Dawn and Simon as follows:

[w]hen you look around this house, note how clutter-free it is. If you want to live in this way, in an open plan environment like this, decluttering, boringly, is the name of the game.

When the group return for a second viewing, Kirstie does acknowledge in voiceover the possibility that ‘this dream house compromises their dream lifestyle’. Nevertheless, her comment about decluttering demonstrates that in some cases, a property and, more pointedly, its construction as a desirable object of display (and displayed ownership) will not so much enable as *dictate* a lifestyle for its inhabitants.³¹ Despite all their talk of seeking out not only properties but also lifestyles for their participants, the content of these lifestyles remains rather intangible, referred to rather than represented.

What becomes of time on television?: Nigella and the pleasures of doing cooking

Insofar as the aim of the above is to critique certain aspects of property-search programmes, the substance of that critique is twofold. Much of my description and analysis concern what we might term *spatial* matters: a collection of tendencies and tropes together imply that the purpose of houses is to be looked at whilst they are clean and unoccupied. Inseparable from these features is the matter of *temporal* representation. Empty space also means empty time: a 'space freed from eventhood' (a phrase I shall return to), with the only 'before' or 'after' provided by movements of the lens, not activity in front of it. We see summaries of the lives the participants wish to 'escape' from – usually, the suburban routine rendered in the visual equivalent of verbal summary ('I get up early, jump in the shower...'). During the house hunt, the participants cast themselves into an imagined future. On the occasions where past participants are re-visited, we see and hear further summaries of their new lifestyles. It could hardly be otherwise, the reader might reasonably interject. These programmes do not purport to offer the kind of temporal flow or attention I seem to be demanding, so it is unreasonable to accuse them of failing to provide it. This is an important point. However, these programmes *are* in the business of offering *fantasies* to their viewers, and I submit that the way in which the programme *structures* those fantasies leaves out the crucial ingredient of imagining what it feels like to spend time occupying one's home, rather than taking the view of an outsider looking in. I hope to further clarify the substance – and the scope – of my critique in the conclusion. However, before that I want to offer a pertinent televisual point of contrast to the modes of spatial and temporal representation that I have claimed to characterise the property-search programme. This stems less from a desire to end on a positive note than from a wish to complicate and reveal the limits of my own argument and to be as scrupulous as the space available will allow.

The genre that I want to focus on is food programming; more specifically, the examples of that genre that include the ingredient termed 'cook-ed' by Niki Strange – that is, programmes focusing on 'instruction through cookery demonstration'.³² In some ways, these programmes are a good fit with contemporary discourses surrounding lifestyle television, because just as an estate agent will sell a lifestyle as well as a house, most cookery programmes will 'sell' a lifestyle as well as a recipe, with the lifestyle typically embodied in the 'personality' ingredient identified by Strange as often accompanying the 'cook-ed' ingredient. However, cook-ed programmes

elude (at least to some extent) Brunsdon's model of historical change in British lifestyle television. This is because instruction and display coexist more readily in relation to food than in relation to, say, DIY, gardening, or sewing. The process of cooking a meal or other recipe is also more amenable to being captured within the time constraints of factual entertainment programming in something closer to real time than other lifestyle pursuits. It is these features that make 'cook-ed' particularly useful to my argument.

In her magisterial article about Nigella Lawson, postfeminism, and cooking, Joanne Hollows demonstrates that Nigella's publications and programmes respond to the felt experience of time scarcity:

some studies suggest that the contemporary middle classes' experience of time may...involve scheduling 'quality time' which is outside of both paid labour and the less pleasant aspects of unpaid domestic labour ... when time is a scarce commodity for the new middle classes, it is the excessive expenditure of time on baking a loaf or making bagels that offers one source of pleasure.³³

On television, time spent cooking is not only *referred to* – as it is in the rhetorical appeals of Lawson's writing referred to by Hollows and, more banally, in any recipe's instructions to its reader to, say, knead dough or place meat in the oven for a specified amount of time – but also *enacted*. Of course, certain passages of time are strategically elided. However – and this is the crucial thing that distinguishes cook-ed and its handling of time from other lifestyle programmes – what is elided is generally *not* human labour (and skill), but rather those passages where machines take over (most frequently, when the food goes into the oven). Admittedly, this itself fails to do justice to that aspect of experience identified as typical to the temporal experience of, in particular, the domestic housewife: waiting.

In much lifestyle television, as we have noted, instruction and process are compressed, crowded out, and/or elided in favour of surface display and melodramatic revelation. In cook-ed programmes, including those presented by Nigella, something different happens. As Hollows has noted, in Nigella's television series, recipes are 'interspersed with images of the Nigella lifestyle: dropping off and picking up the kids, shopping for food',³⁴ and so on. Time slows down when Nigella cooks. 'Doing cooking' is not crowded out by 'displaying lifestyle'. We do not quite get real time recipes, but we do get step-by-step demonstration.

However, 'step-by-step demonstration' makes Nigella's presentation sound more formal than it is. Like celebrity chef Jamie Oliver, Nigella

embraces informality in her cooking method and in her mode of address. Whereas the camera tends to be positioned in front of Jamie Oliver, with a work surface separating the two (and, implicitly, presenter and viewer), it is alongside Nigella. In Jamie's presence, cooking is pleasurable, but it is still a *task*, and the viewer is figured in Jamie's address as a tutee. In Nigella's presence, although there remains the awareness and the possibility that viewers will need to be told certain things if they are going to reproduce this recipe themselves, there is also the sense that we are overhearing or accompanying Nigella as she goes about her pleasurable lifestyle.

Hollows has also drawn out the fact that 'Nigella's television shows and books are ... laced with a range of popular and high cultural references that position her as a cultural omnivore'.³⁵ In the recently broadcast series *Nigella Kitchen* (BBC, 2010), during a recipe for 'Slut Spaghetti', Nigella treats the viewer to a discursive etymology of the dish's name (in a way that, in line with Hollows' discussion of Nigella and postfeminism, offers the viewer a range of more or less transgressive female positions that they might entertain) as she sets about assembling it, before returning to bed, from whence she came, to eat it. Again, the viewer is not positioned as an aspirant home economist, as they would be in the presence of Delia Smith, but as a person interested in aesthetic and cultural matters.

Clearly, Nigella does not offer us an escape from issues of class or taste; one reason that I can argue that in her programmes displaying lifestyle does not crowd out doing cooking is that she brings the two together. Nigella is one of the latest instances of the process (which seems to require persistent repetition and updating) whereby 'food planning and preparation [is given] the status of a leisure activity for the upper and middle classes, establishing it as a mode of display and self-improvement',³⁶ a process that Nicola Humble dates back in Britain at least as far as the years between the First and Second World Wars.

It is hard to deny that comparing making mayonnaise with reading Henry James³⁷ can be seen as an enactment of distinction. However, there is the danger of emphasising distinction at the expense of enactment. That is – the value and the pleasures that are to be gained from reading Henry James and making mayonnaise are not reducible to basking in one's own comparative superiority whilst doing so. For my rhetorical purposes it is fortunate that Henry James is one of the masters of capturing the movement of consciousness in an aesthetic experience.³⁸ The exhilaration of reading James is that the reader is often simultaneously pushed in two directions: the immersion in that movement of consciousness that James' level of detail affords, and the detachment that results from being aware that one

is reading a painstaking construction of that movement. It is a mode of engagement that is particular, though not exclusive, to aesthetic activity, which we might term reflexive absorption. One is simultaneously caught up in the process of what one is doing but also standing outside, as it were, observing and reflecting upon the process.

Perhaps to aestheticise food in this way is problematic in itself – an example of the decadence whereby bourgeois consumption makes a meal out of a necessary bodily process. I am not oblivious to the fact that it is via a very particular route that food programming in general and Nigella in particular have come to appear as solutions to the problems posed, to my eyes, by property-search programmes. There are arguments to be had about food cultures, shopping habits, and sustainability that I cannot address here, and there is one about class and taste that I am only engaging with in a particular way. To return to an issue that bears directly upon an earlier phase of my argument: I imagine that most English speakers with more than a passing interest in food will be familiar with the term ‘gastro-porn’,³⁹ which makes a link (often disapproving) between the appeals of food photography, books, and programming on the one hand and pornography on the other. Another term, of more recent coinage, is ‘property porn’ – of which *Relocation, Relocation* would certainly be classed as an example. I am no expert on pornography or its study, but to remain at the level of popular discourse, it seems to me that the point of the comparison when it is intended negatively is one or more of the following:

1. food or property programmes are substitutes for real experience;
2. they foster unrealistic expectations in relation to the culinary or house-owning lives of viewers, thus ultimately leading to disappointment when fantasies become realities;
3. they foster an inordinate and unhealthy interest in food preparation and consumption or property ownership or speculation;
4. they turn what ought to be an embodied experience into a detached spectacle.

I see #1 as more of a problem in the case of ‘real’ pornography, where matters of human intimacy are at stake, than in the case of the other two. I see #2 as more of a problem in the case of property programming than food programming (I would tentatively suggest that whereas property programmes may well foster dissatisfaction, food programming is as likely to enhance one’s enjoyment of food than detract from it, because when one eats one will in part be enjoying the glamour of the remembered representation – and I don’t think there is anything too pernicious about that). #3 will be addressed

briefly in the conclusion. #4 is the closest fit with the overall thrust of this article's argument.

In her discussion of lifestyle programming, Brunsdon expresses a desire to make distinctions between better and worse programmes within a genre;⁴⁰ I too find myself wishing to make a distinction here. Yes, property and food programmes both fetishise surfaces using loving close-ups and tricks of focus and lighting. However, property programmes tend to offer hard, unyielding surfaces, bouncing light, and implicitly forbidding touch. Food programmes offer synaesthesia and the anticipation of smell, taste, and texture. Property and food programmes both encourage 'insideness' and 'outsideness' – but whereas in the former the experience offered contains a large streak of what we might term 'alienation' ('I want to live in that house, but I want it to continue to not look too lived in'), in the latter, what is offered can include, or at least point towards, something I have termed 'reflexive absorption'.

Conclusion: Putting people and their time back in places

In a recent article in *Screen*, Helen Wheatley has explored the visual appeal and construction of programmes such as *Coast* (BBC, 2005-present), referred to by one of their producers as 'landscape porn'.⁴¹ Drawing upon a line of argument advanced by Martin Lefebvre in relation to film and by Norbert Wolf in relation to painting – and which stretches back to Raymond Williams's observations in *The Country and the City* (1973) – and beyond, Wheatley observes that these programmes often give us "space freed from eventhood" [in Lefebvre's terms], as opposed to land as setting'.⁴² Wheatley quotes Wolf's assertion that

[p]eople to whom nature appears in the form of landscape no longer live unthinkingly in nature. They are alienated from it, and can feel one with nature only through the mediation of aesthetics.⁴³

One of my tentative arguments above is that, perhaps even more alarmingly, property-search programmes are a symptom and perhaps a contributing factor to a partial alienation of our selves from our domestic environments; we risk aestheticising them in our habits and our perspective, and thus risk adopting the position of an outsider looking into our own homes.

It is possible to approach a link between the discourses of landscape and alienation and those of lifestyle using a further concept, *cosmopolitanism*,

and a recent article by Bronislaw Szersynski and John Urry. Szersynski and Urry argue that a 'shift to a cosmopolitan relationship with place means that humans increasingly inhabit their world only at a distance'.⁴⁴ The authors report on research conducted using two focus groups in 1999: the first, 'professional residents' of a 'small affluent rural village' who possessed relatively high 'mobil[ity]' in terms of distance and frequency of travel, in their history of residence as well as in work and leisure; the second, 'mothers in their 30s from "under-employed" families living in social housing' in 'a medium-sized, inland ex-mining village'.⁴⁵ One research finding was that the former group, unlike the latter, 'talked about landscape character in ways similar to those adopted by the Countryside Commission and other official bodies', and '[w]hen asked to imagine a photograph they might take of the area, ... chose characteristically "scenic" images'.⁴⁶ This fits with the observations of Wheatley and others above. Another research finding, which is pertinent to an understanding of programmes like *Coast* and *Relocation, Relocation*, is that

[t]he professional group seemed almost 'naturally' to employ a cartographic perspective. In a map-drawing exercise they conceived of West Cumbria as a continuous two-dimensional surface that had various characteristics that came and went as one moved about it. The women in the ex-mining village, by contrast, seemed to conceive of the area in terms of radial excursions away from the village to other places, especially other villages and towns.⁴⁷

Relocation, Relocation, in more recent series, will occasionally employ the 'Google Earth' aesthetic of dropping precipitously through the clouds down to a single rooftop. It very frequently represents relocations using simplified maps of British regions. This cosmopolitan way of thinking space is of a piece with the typical habitus of the programme's participants.

Where does this leave us? There is always the danger that analysis will – through the detailed and magnifying attention it affords artefacts that constitute only a small fraction of the worlds of even their most enthusiastic viewers – make its object appear more important (and usually, more pernicious in its effects) than it is. What we can at least say is that property and food programmes offer certain pleasures, and in doing so they encourage us to become – at least for the time that we spend with them – certain 'kinds of desirers', to use a phrase of Wayne C Booth's.⁴⁸ Property and food programmes, like most forms of media, are at once symptoms of social trends given a particular shape by the perceived demands of broadcasting,

and texts that offer those who receive them ways of understanding their lives: aspirations and fantasies, scripts and a vocabulary.

Broadcasting is one of the principal media for the representation of everyday life, but the particular manifestation of that impulse that is factual entertainment or 'lifestyle programming' dictates that *things must keep moving*. Clearly, the aim to represent the everyday and the imperative to keep moving come into conflict. As Brunsdon reminds us, 'life with the boring bits left in can be a bit of a shock',⁴⁹ particularly for the contemporary television viewer.

What *do* British people spend most of their everyday lives doing? Helen Powell, in her article 'Time, Television, and the Decline of DIY' (whose discussion of time scarcity complements Hollows' in relation to Nigella Lawson), cites research from the Office for National Statistics, which reports that 'the three main activities carried out by people in Great Britain in 2005 were sleeping, working and watching TV and video/DVDs'.⁵⁰ We are working at a very general level here, but these data offer proof, if proof were needed, that much everyday life is not necessarily very televisual – particularly the bits that involve watching TV! It is not, necessarily, that working or watching TV are 'the boring bits' for the people engaged in those activities, but rather that, to the untrained eye at least, there might not be much of interest to see or to watch. Reading Henry James is a magnificent experience but watching someone read Henry James is quite a boring one, which is to say that some of the most rewarding ways of spending time in one's own home involve performing activities that result in absorption, reflexive or otherwise, during which one is not imagining, internalising, inviting, or fearing the gaze of an appraising eye.

Acknowledgements

Thank you to Giorgia Aiello, Peter Blanchflower, Amy Davis, Greg de Cuir Jr, Pete Falconer, Nicola Humble, John Osborne, and Louise Zborowski for various kinds of assistance during the writing of this article. Thanks also to students of the past three years in the seminar 'Television, Radio and the Everyday' for their comments upon, thoughts about, and reactions to a variety of lifestyle and makeover programming.

Notes

1. Brunson 2003, p. 6.
2. Ibid, p. 10.
3. For another historical argument about a different television genre, which traces a shift from realism to melodrama, see Geraghty 2006.
4. Brunson et al 2001, p. 55.
5. Brunson 2003, p. 11.
6. Moseley 2000, p. 303.
7. Giles 2002, p. 603.
8. Ibid., p. 607.
9. McElroy 2008, p. 49.
10. Lorenzo-Dus 2006, p. 757.
11. Chaney 2001.
12. Giddens 1991.
13. Bonner 2003.
14. Heller 2007.
15. A useful discussion of the implications and the possibilities of visually representing different kinds of textures is offered by Djonov & Van Leeuwen 2011.
16. Woodall & Constantine 2005, p. 15.
17. Palmer 2008, pp. 6-9.
18. Woodall & Constantine 2005, p. 21.
19. Ibid., p. 22.
20. Wadley 2008, p. 22.
21. I have closely observed this tendency in *DIY SOS: The Big Build, Phil Spencer: Secret Agent and Relocation, Relocation*. On the basis of more informal viewing I believe it to be much more widely applicable.
22. Available via YouTube: <http://www.youtu.be/FSH8HPfnM88> (accessed on 14 November 2012).
23. For an example of a potential buyer who does react rather vociferously to magnolia, see Lorenzo-Dus 2006, pp. 753-757.
24. Available via YouTube: <http://www.youtu.be/6F6NyS1m9AY> (accessed on 14 November 2012).
25. Available via YouTube: <http://www.youtu.be/FHx9GMHFyCg> (accessed on 14 November 2012).
26. Attfield 2000, p. 189.
27. Ibid.
28. A type of project followed in, for example, Channel 4's long running series *Grand Designs* (1999-present), a fascinating instance of a sub-genre that I do not have space here to examine.
29. Cf. Cloke & Thrift 1990, p. 175.
30. Chapman 1999, p. 45.
31. See Miller 2010, pp. 91-92 for an interesting discussion of this topic. See also Chapman 1999, pp. 55-56.
32. Strange 1998, p. 301.
33. Hollows 2003, pp. 191-192.
34. Ibid., p. 182.
35. Ibid.
36. Humble 2005, p. 73.
37. Lawson 1999, p. 13. Quoted in Hollows 2003, p. 182.
38. See, among others, Lodge 2002, pp. 200-233 and *passim*.
39. For an early use of the term, see Cockburn 1977.

40. Brunsdon 2003, p. 18.
41. Wheatley 2011, p. 244.
42. *Ibid.*, p. 235.
43. *Ibid.*, p. 240.
44. Szersynski & Urry 2006, p. 113.
45. *Ibid.*, p. 124.
46. *Ibid.*
47. *Ibid.*, p. 125.
48. Booth 1988, pp. 201-206.
49. Brunsdon 2004, p. 124.
50. Powell 2009, p. 93.

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