

What's real about Reality TV?

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Some TV critics claim that this year is the beginning of the end for Reality TV. The huge success of the very smart and sharp-edged *Desperate Housewives* is supposed to mark a return to scripted and professionally acted drama/comedy. This is a good moment, then, to take stock of the Reality TV phenomenon.

Reality TV is a genre that combines elements of talk show, game show, vulgar pseudo-anthropology and pro wrestling. It traces the actions of non-actors placed in various situations facing set challenges. The success of *Survivor* played a big role in launching the genre in North America. It was popular enough to make "voted off the island" a part of our everyday language.

There has been quite a range to the Reality TV shows. There have been the truly hideous shows like *Who's Your Daddy*, in which an adopted person tries to identify a biological parent through a game show format. There have been hilarious ones like *Married by America* that show how meaningless and commercialized the wedding industry is. There are gross-out shows like *Fear Factor* and roommate shows like *Big Brother* and the pseudo-anthropology of *Survivor*. They tend to share a format of starting out with a bunch of contestants and narrowing it down to one winner, who takes home a big wad of cash.

The success of Reality TV was driven first by commercial considerations. What makes these shows popular to producers is in part the same process of restructuring to drive up profits that we are seeing in all kinds of workplaces. It involves the use of new technologies and work reorganization to deskill the workforce and tap into cheaper labour sources. Reality TV is very cheap to make, requiring fewer writers and actors than traditional programming while making use of limited sets and fixed cameras for at least some of the action. It is a big profit centre for the networks, which are facing increased competition in the digital age.

But the success of Reality TV also tells us interesting things about North American culture at the present time. To start with, there is not a lot of reality on television right now. It can be argued that Reality TV is more realistic than the news on American networks these days, where CNN refers to the insurgents resisting American occupation in Fallujah as "anti-Iraqi forces." Who are the foreign fighters there anyhow? The parameters of debate in the mainstream American media and political institutions are now so narrow that the only place for even moderate political interchange is documentary films, books and the Jon Stewart fake-news show.

Everyone knows that Reality TV is not actually about reality. But it does give us some sense of the fantasies about reality that occupy North American culture today. Reality TV tells us something about what it is like to live in a neo-liberal world marked by cutbacks, layoffs, plant closures, contracting out and privatization. This is a world where social policy and management strategies are geared to producing increasing insecurity for working people and those who are not employed.

Reality TV represents a world of insecurity, where most people end up as losers. It is a hyper-competitive world where people are forced to battle one another to the end. Many of these shows encourage conspiracy and devious alliances that must necessarily be broken for ultimate victory. It is a social darwinist world, where existence is a struggle and only the few survive and thrive.

It also represents a world where everything is a commodity aimed for sale on the market and everybody has their price. People will do anything for money on these shows, swing from high heights, eat live bugs, marry the twit if required, manipulate, lie, backstab - it's just like the world of corporate management, except for the eating bugs part.

The money on these shows is not nickel and dime stuff, though. There is a big prize for the one winner at the end of the whole thing - the one who eats the bugs, marries the bachelor, survives the votes, identifies the straight guy or wins the race around the world. That prize represents the only imaginable deliverance from our everyday lot of hard work and insecurity, the slim chance of winning the big one - the lottery, the card game, the slot machine, the pot of gold at the end of the series. Reality TV presents a world where it is not reasonable to hope for anything better than this, and where it often feels futile to organize and fight for improvement. Instead, the idea of a better life becomes a fantasy constructed around competition and a big jackpot money shot to finish the whole thing.

I must confess that even though I watch a lot of junky television, I find most Reality TV hard to stomach. It might sound horribly sanctimonious, but I see in these shows a representation of how ugly this neo-liberal world is, and I find it hard to laugh as people shove worms down their throat until they puke on the small chance they will win the big fortune and be delivered from the everyday reality of toil and precariousness.

But there is something else about them. The appetite for these shows is driven not only by the need for escape fantasies in the era of Bush and Martin, but also by a craving for seeing "real" people portrayed in culture. So much television is about the rich, the famous, the doctors, the lawyers and the cops. Reality TV offers a bit of a break from that, showing ordinary (or extraordinary) working people facing up to big challenges and being creative, funny, goofy, smart or dumb. It suggests that maybe there is an appetite for something other than the lives of the wealthy on television. The demonstration of an appetite for something closer to our own stories may be the hopeful aspect of Reality TV.

P.S.

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