



Considering America from Inside and Out

**A San José/Ostrava Dialogue
Sharing Perspectives**



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3.2. American Reality TV: A Genre's Evolution from *Schadenfreude* to Parody

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Introduction

Television is unquestionably one of the most powerful mediators involved in the reflection and shaping of American society. According to the A. C. Nielsen Company, as the 21st century dawned, the average American was watching more than four hours of television every day, a television was on in the average American home for 6 hours 47 minutes each day, two thirds of all American homes had three or more television sets, and two thirds of Americans regularly watched television while eating dinner (Herr). Most Americans now living cannot remember a time before television, and have grown up with television as the main source of entertainment and information in their lives.

Different genres have risen and fallen in popularity in television over the years, just as different genres have risen and fallen in popularity in literature or film. Early television, for instance, drawing upon the familiarity of vaudeville and the transferal of a recognized radio programming format, saw a popularity in variety and musical shows, such as *Ted Mack's Original Amateur Hour*, *Calvacade of Stars*, or *Toast of the Town*, which later morphed into the long enduring Sunday night staple that introduced both Elvis Presley and the Beatles to national audiences, *The Ed Sullivan Show*. In the 1950s, westerns were not only a lucrative category in the film industry, they dominated television programming. The genre hit its peak on television in 1959, with 26 different western shows airing on prime time that year, including *Gunsmoke*, *Rawhide*, and *Bonanza* ("Television Westerns") Sit-coms—another carryover from radio that audiences would readily recognize—emerged as an American television staple early on, with *I Love Lucy* being the program that first brought CBS-Television finances out of the red and into the black column in 1953, the episode covering the birth of Little Ricky attracting twice as large a viewing audience in January 1953 as the inauguration of Dwight D. Eisenhower as President of the United States would draw the next day (Halberstam, 199-200).¹ Lucy helped establish the predominance of the sit-com as a format, and considering the broad span of more than one half century of television's existence, the sit-com is probably the most enduring and influential of all television genres when considered from a historical perspective. For many of us, the families we have idealized and adored in sit-coms we have grown up with have shaped our perceptions of what family life could or should be like in our daily existence (Friend 115).

However, the popularity of the sit-com genre has dropped significantly in recent years. What has replaced it? Certainly medical investigation shows

(such as all the *CSIs*) or dramedies (comedy/drama hour-long serial blends such as *Desperate Housewives*) have gained impressive followings, and their recurring successes in the weekly ratings races suggest they meet important needs and desires of their respective audiences. The Popular Culture Formula, the cornerstone of the study of popular culture as taught in academic analysis, reminds us that “the popularity of a given cultural element (object, person, or event) is directly proportional to the degree to which that element is reflective of audience belief and values. The *greater* the popularity of the cultural element—in an era and/or over time—the *more* reflective of the zeitgeist this element is likely to be” (Nachbar and Lause 5). To better understand American society as it has been evolving in the 21st century, we need to better understand the television genre that has had the greatest impact and influence in the last decade. That would be the type of programming we have come to refer to as “reality TV.”

Origins of Reality TV

Television programs that ostensibly try to show us real slices of life, to capture and convey actual experiences of other people going about their business, have been around since the inception of the medium itself. Many historians of the form credit the first reality TV show to Allen Funt, who introduced *Candid Camera* as early as 1948, adapting a format he had used previously on the radio (Forman). Other programs regularly cited for their seminal influence on the shaping of the genre as it emerged at the end of the 20th century are *COPS*, a FOX program debuting in 1989 that introduced the idea of holding a hand cam and following policemen around as they encountered criminals during a regular work day, and *The Real World*, an MTV program debuting in 1992 that put seven strangers together in a new living environment, gave them the “confessional” option of privately sharing their honest opinions of each other, and videotaped all interactions that occurred (Brenton and Cohen, 38-39). *COPS* and *The Real World* were big successes, and were harbingers of a “reality” programming push to come.

Another big influence contributing to the subsequent rise of reality television was the upsurge in popularity for the talk show genre in the 1990s. In 1986, modeling her show on the pioneering work in talk show outreach done by Phil Donahue in the previous decade, Oprah Winfrey began her rise to acclaim. Her success in getting guests to bare their emotions and her willingness to tackle controversial topics such as rape, racism, and homophobia, led to high ratings and an outpouring of imitators. One such program, *The Jerry Springer Show*, debuted in 1991, and in that final decade of the 20th century, perhaps best conveyed a shift occurring in what talk show guests were willing to reveal about themselves on camera, what audiences unabashedly wished to see guests go through, and what sort of topics were considered appropriate for examination.

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Over time the show became increasingly more vulgar, the interactions between guests more violent, and the topics more tawdry—and the ratings soared. However, by the turn of the millennium, *The Jerry Springer Show*'s outrageousness had become stale and predictable, and those looking for voyeuristic excitement could find it in the new hit reality TV show based on some European antecedents, *Survivor*. By the time Richard Hatch won the first *Survivor* series in America in 2000, with 51 million watching, the reality TV genre had established itself as a formidable force in American culture.

Another aspect that made reality television so attractive to producers is its comparatively low production costs. There is no need to hire actors, and should the show become a hit, there is no issue with a star demanding a sizeable raise before filming begins for the next season.

Reality TV is actually an ironic name for the genre. From its very beginning all the productions have been highly manipulated, edited, processed, and packaged for viewer consumption. To emphasize its connection to "reality," CBS began offering 24/7 cam coverage of the participants housed in its reality TV show *Big Brother* broadcast on the web in 2000, encouraging viewers to constantly check in on the participants. Such a direct observation helps cut out the middleman in the selection and presentation of the content. CBS continues to offer such a viewing option with the current (seventh) incarnation of the program, *Big Brother All Stars* (2006), but it should be noted this pay-to-view enticement has never drawn more than a small fraction of the regular audience. Indeed, CBS's offering of *Big Brother* teaches all kinds of lessons (by sometimes painful experience) on what to avoid or edit out to keep reality programming palatable, let alone exciting. No surprise if you think about it—tape then transcribe any actual conversation by random people you follow on the street, including all the stutters, stammers, and non sequiturs: great literature it will not make. Reality 24/7 is not what viewers crave, and increasingly it is clearly not what reality TV will be offering. Those now trying out for spots on *The Real World* have grown up watching the program, and whether they can articulate the format or not, they sell themselves in the videotapes they submit as conforming to some of the range of limited stereotype roles they see offered on the show, such as "the frat boy, the sheltered religious girl, the down-to-earth black guy, [and] the attractive gay person" (Dehnart). Always aware of the production aspects of their daily experience, once picked as a cast member, media savvy reality show participants come to perform for the camera in such a way that they hope will best get them airtime and their slice of immortality.

Reality TV and Globalization: Modernity vs. the Distinctively American

The fascination with reality television is not peculiar to the United States, it is part of a larger shift in entertainment genres occurring in industrialized

countries throughout the world as technological and communications advances coupled with the burgeoning economic and political influence of multinational corporations have created a complex intersticing of cultural systems that is often referred to as globalization. After a brief review of what globalization entails, and a suggestion that it not be constantly reduced to a misguided perception as the simple international expansion of American cultural products, we can sum up some of the more intriguing attributes of reality TV programming as demonstrating aspects of modernity—a shared phenomenon occurring across many contemporary societies throughout the world—while others demonstrate qualities and traditions that can be seen as distinctively or quintessentially American.

George Ritzer received quite a bit of media attention when he first presented his argument identifying what he calls ‘McDonaldization’—“the process by which the principles of the fast-food restaurant are coming to dominate more and more sectors of American society as well as the rest of the world” (Lechter qtd. in Ritzer 1). He saw McDonaldization as being one of three main forces contributing to globalization, and identified the other two as capitalism and Americanization (Ritzer 162). Thomas Friedman’s 2005 best seller *The World Is Flat: A Brief History of the Twenty-first Century* takes up the same argument, but adds the caveat that the United States is falling behind in preparing a work force that will be intellectually, economically, and technologically competitive in the “Brave New World” being created by globalization.

More recently, William H. Marling has written a persuasive response to these books that warns readers to be wary of reductionism when dealing with the complex force of globalization and trying to assess its impact on the wide range of diverse cultures throughout the world. He begins with the example of deconstructing a visit to a Burger King in Nishinomiya, Japan, to illustrate “how completely foreign the foreign remains,” and points out convincingly that for many young people in Japan, McDonalds is—and always has been—a Japanese company (W. Marling 1-3). In his section entitled “American Television and the Rise of Local Programming,” although the focus is on the multicultural spread of the Latin American *telenovela* rather than reality television, his review of how varied viewer response is to television narratives across different societies, even between countries as seemingly culturally close as Belgium and France, suggests great caution should be taken before presuming the way a reality show is interpreted in one society might be the way it is interpreted in another (W. Marling, 39-51). Anecdotally, my own experience in watching episodes of *Big Brother* (USA), *Big Brother* (UK), and *Big Brother* (Czech Republic) certainly confirms this perspective—I found the differences to be very illuminating, and the behaviors and attitudes in the foreign versions confused me more than once.

Modernity's Contributions to Reality TV

Marling argues that in evaluating influences, it is useful "to disentangle American culture from modernity in general, for there is a large element of the latter in globalization" (vii). When considering the impact of modernity as revealed in reality TV, some themes do emerge across many different societies. These include accommodating and even championing a culture of surveillance, appropriating the techniques of interrogation to control the contestants, and nurturing apolitical passivity on the part of the audience.

In his thoughtful study, Mark Andrejevic points out that reality TV "helps to reposition the portrayal of surveillance and highlight its advantages not to the watchers but to the watched" (95). He goes further to suggest this public relations campaign prepares the audience for a shift to an online economy which relies upon information obtained about them "through sophisticated interactive communication technologies" (95). Those who have grown up watching programs like *The Real World* and *Big Brother* do not have the issues and concerns about privacy that an earlier generation might well have raised; they also are quite accustomed to the cameras all around—whether they be monitoring and recording shoppers at the 7-11, customers trying on clothes in a dressing room, families parking their cars in front of a mall, or businessmen racing through a red light. And with cameras now accessible on cell phones, the possibility that one might be in some unknown watcher's viewfinder at any given moment in any public place is not that far fetched. The need for heightened security following September 11 only accelerated this adaptive process that was already occurring. Indeed, the original meaning of "Big Brother" as a negative allusion to an aspect of George Orwell's novel *1984* is nowadays lost on an increasing number of viewers of the television program bearing the same name.

In their 2003 book *Shooting People: Adventures in Reality TV*, Brenton and Cohen, working in the United Kingdom, explain how interrogation techniques used by military intelligence become regular models for handling reality show contestant applicants and participants. They also evaluate the regular use of psychologists and psychotherapists by producers who are eager to get the most exciting and tension producing mix of contestants in each show. The implications of this well established process are not lost on all the fans, either. On reality TV fan websites for *Big Brother*, for instance, in condescendingly summarizing the behaviors and interactions of house guests on the current *Big Brother All Stars* (US), bloggers often refer to participants as "the hamsters" and give their sites such names as "Dingo's Hamster Watch" and "Silly Hamsters.com."

Beyond interrogation, some reality TV shows certainly help instill a numbing with respect to torture. Participants seem to gladly acquiesce to increasingly vile servings for consumption on programs such as *Survivor* and

Fear Factor if it means they might emerge victorious—and even on *Big Brother* (US), which traditionally used to punish house guests by putting them on diets limited to peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, in the 2006 season the participants are being forced to eat “slop,” they are being encouraged to force other candidates to suffer in various ways (such as sleep on cots or go without any hot water for a week) as a requirement to garner individual points, and one house guest—coincidentally the lone African American woman present—has already endured 24 hours of solitary confinement as part of the game. Paddy Chayefsky’s brilliant satire on the machinations and motivations of corporate programming and the manipulation of the evening news, *Network* (1976) and Arnold Schwarzenegger’s 1987 film *The Running Man*—based on a 1982 book penned by Stephen King, which envisions a reality TV show based on hunting down and killing a person, certainly do not seem so unlikely today as they did when they were first created. “In the most basic way, popular culture rationalizes torture as necessary to preserve not just US national security, but law, authority and agency in general; it is a fantasy of absolute power” (Kim 37).²

Brenton and Cohen also make the point that reality TV contributes to a cult of celebrity and a focus on the trivial that engenders apolitical passivity on the part of viewers. They make a case for this not as a particularly American phenomenon, but as an element associated with the spread of modernity. This could well be because modernity is closely connected to the rise of consumer culture wherever it takes hold. Certainly, celebrity participation has become a logical and vital component of many reality television programs. MTV pioneered creating new reality series utilizing celebrities made famous by participation in previous reality TV series on the network when it first brought together the casts and formats of *The Real World* and its second venture into reality TV, *Road Rules* (which debuted in 1995), to compete in *The Real World: Road Rules All Stars* in 1998. This would later evolve into *The Real World/Road Rules Challenge*, an ongoing competition reality TV series that gives the reality TV cast graduates of *The Real World* and *Road Rules* the opportunity to come back into the viewers’ lives again and again and again (and again).

American cable television channel VH1 has clearly carved out a niche market for itself in promoting has-been celebrities on such reality TV programs as *The Surreal Life* or *Celebrity Fit Club*, trumpeting its focus as “Celebreality” since December of 2004 (“Celebreality”). This is an attractive opportunity for the unknown, the barely known, and the almost forgotten to get precious airtime and attempt to revitalize their careers, and those most provocative or popular with the audience stand a chance of working out a deal with VH1 for a subsequent spin-off reality TV series, as has been the case with *Strange Love*, *My Fair Brady*, or *The Flavor of Love*. Bravo has also recognized the viability of such a marketing strategy, with its *Battle of the Network Reality Stars* which first aired in 2005.

Most viewers seduced by the appeal of "Celebreality" do not consider these so called celebrities to be outstanding role models worthy of emulation—they are still viewed as "hamsters" like the participants on *Big Brother*—but with modernity's replacement of the hero with the celebrity as the individual deserving of our careful attention, the VH1 reality TV program casts, with their obvious insecurities, inadequacies, and outrageous antics, can make even the most milquetoast viewers feel better about themselves. And they are a beguiling diversion. Obsessing over Flavor Flav's melodramatic romantic relationship with the statuesque Brigitte Nielsen, recoiling at Mini-Me's drunken episode urinating upon himself in the corner, or enduring Janice Dickerson's irate ravings as she waves a knife and screams out for more attention, the targeted American viewers probably do not have the energy or inclination later to invest time in studying implications of political shifts in the ruling of the Supreme Court; evaluating the historical, political, and geographic issues contributing to unrest in the Middle East; or questioning the foreign policy decisions of the current administration.

Distinctively American Attributes of Reality TV

Polls have indicated that viewership of reality TV cuts across all demographic lines. However, the numbers seem to lean toward the younger members of society, and those who describe themselves as more adventurous and say they lead active lives. "Forty-five percent of all Americans watch reality television programs. Of those, 27 percent consider themselves die-hard fans, watching as many episodes as possible" (Gardyn 190). Seventy percent of those aged 18 to 24 watch reality TV, and 44 percent of them prefer watching real people more than scripted characters when viewing television. Although those aged 18-24 are the most likely to tune in, the largest part of the reality TV audience is those aged 35 to 49, who account for 29 percent of the total audience. Women account for 64 percent of the die-hard viewers, while men slightly outnumber women in the category self-described as "occasional viewers." Fifty-eight percent of the American reality TV viewers make under \$50,000 a year, and while the South accounts for 39% of the total audience, the other 61% is fairly evenly divided across the Northeast, North Central, and Western regions (Gardyn 190-191).

A strong commitment to individualism is a much touted component of American culture. However, this has a darker side, a tendency toward self-absorption or selfishness, a lack of empathy or concern for those whose lives and experiences are different from our own. A corollary of individualism taken to the extreme is a breakdown in common courtesy. In a 2002 opinion poll conducted by the research firm Public Agenda, a whopping 70% of those Americans interviewed complained of the disappearance of basic good manners in public life as demonstrated by rising road rage on the highways and loud use

of cell phones in all shared spaces as if the users were in private (K. Marling). In daily life, it would seem, American people have gradually grown ruder or nastier to each other, and the adults polled indicated they thought the bad influence of television was a factor here. American Studies scholar Karal Ann Marling, writing for *The New York Times*, concurred. As she summed it up, "nasty television produces nasty audiences" (1). There is strong evidence that reality TV in the United States not only reflects but nurtures a mean spirited *Schadenfreude*, finding pleasure in observing the misfortune of others. This, too, had its antecedents in the talk show programming of the 1990s, with the evolving format of *The Jerry Springer Show* over the decade demonstrating an ongoing lessening of civility, a rise in levels and outbreaks of violence, and a growing contempt of the audience for the guests they watched not to better understand but to castigate and look down on. Similarly, as the genre of reality TV has continued to evolve in the United States during the 21st century, *Schadenfreude* has been on the rise.

Marling is not the only cultural critic to note the increasing popularity of this perspective. The Tony Award winner for Best Musical in 2004 was the breakout hit *Avenue Q*, a puppet-filled show for twenty and thirty something college graduates who grew up on Sesame Street but were ready to take a caustic appraisal of the struggles of life for Americans of their generation. Some song titles from the show that aptly convey this sensibility include "What Do You Do with a B.A. in English?," "It Sucks To Be Me," and "The Internet is for Porn." The second act includes a charming number that defines, delineates, and unabashedly revels in the pervasive spread of "*Schadenfreude*" as a means of finding solace in America today. The lyrics include

Watching a vegetarian being told she just ate chicken
Or watching a frat boy realize just what he put his dick in!
Being on an elevator when somebody shouts 'Hold the door!'
"No!" *Schadenfreude*! "Fuck you lady, that's what stairs are for!"
Ooh. How about . . . straight A students getting Bs?
Exes getting STDs!
Waking doormen from their naps!
Watching tourists reading maps!
Football players getting tackled!
CEOs getting shackled!
Watching actors never reach the ending of their Oscar speech!
Schadenfreude! *Schadenfreude*!

(Robert Lopez and Jeff Marx)

Examples of the progressive rise of *Schadenfreude* as an offering of American reality TV can be traced by any casual observers of the genre over the past decade. One clear and quick example might be made by a cursory review of the sorts of reality dating shows that have been aired and how they have changed over time. Syndicated *Blind Date* debuted in 1999 and used animated

overlays and cartoon balloons to add humorous and often derisive commentary or thoughts on the part of the participants throughout the date. Syndicated *Elimidate* followed in 2001, giving contestants the chance to whittle down the number of suitors on a group date from four to three to two to one winner, often with the finalists competing in a hot tub.

An instructor at UCLA conducted a survey of why his students watched reality dating shows, and their top response was “because it’s fun to watch other people get rejected” (Samuels 201). MTV quickly developed more programming to serve this niche. *Dismissed* debuted in 2001; here the contestant dates two suitors at the same time, plays them off against each other, then ultimately tells one “you are dismissed.” When NBC offered *Meet My Folks* in 2003, with three suitors spending a weekend with their intended’s parents, usually culminating in a lie detector session held in the garage and overseen by the dad, MTV did them one better with *Date My Mom* beginning in 2004. The title says it all—the young men pick their partners based on the vibe they get while dating the three contestants’ mothers. MTV also began offering *Room Raiders* in 2003, which playfully uses surveillance techniques to allow contestants to rummage through the bedroom drawers, closets, and dirty laundry of three unprepared suitors—who are abruptly stolen away and held hostage, watching the entire process via videocam from the back of a van, waiting for the ultimate date choice to be made based on the range of suggestive evidence. More recently, *Next*, which debuted in 2004, has sped up the rejection process experience for the viewers. A bus with five hopefuls follows the contestant around on a series of dates, and as soon the contestant tires or disapproves of a suitor, he or she simply says “Next.” A provocative twist here is the ultimate suitor chosen always has the option to dump the contestant, take some money, and go back and join the party on the bus. Everyone gets a chance at humiliation on this show, and it packs in a lot of opportunities for name calling, trash talking, and self-promoting for each participant getting airtime.³

Schadenfreude can also be found in the voting off or elimination ceremonies that are worked into many reality TV shows. Francine Prose has suggested reality TV teaches that “surface beauty (preferably in concert with a strong manipulative instinct, a cunning ability to play the game, and vast quantities of money) is all that counts” (59). She draws connections between the cruelty and sadism she sees on such programs, coupled with the focus on material gain for the self obtained often through lying or misrepresentation, and the *modus operandi* of the current political administration in Washington. She worries about a generation growing up on such programming, unable to distinguish between reality and reality TV, “because what matters is not what’s on television but the ghostly afterimage that lingers in our minds and clouds our vision after we turn off the television” (64).

A more benign but distinctly American attribute of reality TV is its incorporation of two threads that have been at the core of American popular

culture since it first developed in the 19th century. In *The Arts of Deception: Playing with Fraud in the Age of Barnum* James W. Cook discusses three great nonliterary cultural currents that emerged in America in the 19th century as mass audiences first developed thanks to the many facets of the industrial revolution: the minstrel show, melodrama, and what he calls “artful deception,” the performances and representations championed by P. T. Barnum and others—audiences flocked to check these out, often adamant that they were fake or humbug, but drawn in to assess the blurring of “reality” and “manipulated imagery” themselves (Cook 13).

Cook makes a thorough and convincing argument for the profound significance of “artful deception” in 19th century popular entertainment. Reality TV deploys artful deception at several levels. The belief that what the viewer is watching is “real,” as opposed to something that is edited, organized, and manipulated to present a particular vantage, is a basic type of deception. Many viewers engage in accepting the “reality” of many reality TV shows the way they might accept the “reality” of a professional wrestling match, and I would argue that it is not coincidental that professional wrestling, which also blends melodrama and artful deception, flourished as an art form at the same time talk shows were coming into vogue, cultivating audiences that would later find important needs filled by emergent reality TV. Many reality TV shows require participants to lie to their colleagues or loved ones, and then to fret about it in confessional tapings later. In the lingo of reality TV producers, one important element is “the reveal”—an essential truth concealed from unwitting contestants (hamsters). For instance, on *Joe Millionaire*, the reveal was that Joe actually had no money. On *Average Joe*, the reveal was the suitors were not average, they were bottom of the barrel picks for dating. On *Boy Meets Boy*, the reveal was the contestant thought he was choosing a romantic partner from a range of other men that were gay like himself, but several were straight men just pretending, and if they could fool him they might win a lot of money. On *Punk'd* or *Girls Behaving Badly*, in the tradition of *Candid Camera*, the entire scenario is always revealed to be a set-up, after the participant has been sufficiently humiliated and fooled.

Reality TV Parodies

Some reality TV shows are a grand hoax in themselves. *The Joe Schmo Show*, which aired in 2003, was a fictitious reality TV show that poked fun at the conventions, activities, and stereotypical characters on other such programs. Everyone was in on the joke, except for the poor fellow who did not know everyone around him was acting and he was trapped in his own little version of the *Truman Show*—until it all was revealed after he struggled on and endured countless tribulations to become the winning contestant in the final episode.

Fox followed this with two other such parody programs during the 2004-2005 season, *My Big Fat Obnoxious Fiance* and *My Big Fat Obnoxious Boss*.

John Cawelti, a leader in the development of genre literature and film analysis, taught that when a genre form becomes so well established that consumers readily recognize and understand its conventions, range of characters, and thematic messages, parody, or burlesque, becomes possible. Many genre theorists concur: parody is part of the life cycle of any genre. The cultural work created as parody, what Cawelti refers to as "the burlesque proper," can only succeed as parody if the genre is thoroughly familiar, a revered and recognized cultural form of expression in the current society (569-570).

One art form where burlesque and parody thrive would certainly be the world of cartoons. Animation offers opportunities and advantages for social commentary or critique that real life forms cannot match, as hyperbole and excessive violence are far more acceptable in cartoon presentations. It is not surprising that even as the situation comedy has waned in numbers and influence in the past decade, the number of animated sit-coms burlesquing that genre on American television has continued to expand, and these programs often satirize other forms of entertainment or current social and political concerns. The topics those programs have tackled have become increasingly more mature and risqué over time as well. *The Simpsons* pioneered the form, beginning as shorts on *The Tracey Ullman Show* in 1987 and starting its own incredibly (still running!) career in 1989. *South Park* continually pushed the envelope since its inception in 1997, and the production and dissemination of adult oriented satirical animated programs has accelerated in the United States as the spirit of Schadenfreude has gained influence. It was only a matter of time, then, until an animated program parodying reality TV activities and conventions appeared. Comedy Central debuted such a show, *Drawn Together*, in 2004.

Drawn Together is actually a rather complex overlay of several different types of parody at once. For the eight characters picked to live in the house (think *Real World* or *Surreal Life*) each represents a stereotype or archetype from the world of animation—such as a DC Superman type character, a Spongebob kiddy show type character, a Disney's Sleeping Beauty type character, or a Pokemon type character. Each also simultaneously represents a stereotypical houseguest in the reality show confined living format, such as the token gay, the bitch, the frat boy partier, or the spoiled rich girl. The episodic structure, as is usually the case with these half hour adult animated programs, actually follows the formula of a sit-com more than a reality show. Cameo appearances offer opportunities for regular satirizing of the broad range of recognizable cartoon characters, and the show often lampoons film or television clichés. However, particularly in the first season, there are still plenty of episodes on *Drawn Together* that center around the houseguests participating in the sorts of activities appropriate to various identifiable reality TV shows.

The programs specifically satirized include *The Apprentice*, *Average Joe*, *Bachelorette*, *Big Brother*, *Extreme Makeover*, *For Love of Money*, *Joe Millionaire*, *The Joe Schmo Show*, *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*, *Real World*, *Supernanny*, *Surreal Life*, *Survivor*, and *Trading Places* ("Drawn Together").

Conclusion

Reality TV is a powerful and significant force in American entertainment, meeting important needs for its viewers and reinforcing a range of cultural values and practices. It supports the ongoing thrusts of modernity and globalization in both obvious and more subtle ways. Although its fans tend to describe themselves as active, outgoing, and adventurous, this programming promotes materialism rather than altruism, passivity rather than democratic civic engagement, and selfishness rather than commitment to the larger community. Some critics predicted it as a flash in the pan, and suggested reality TV's rapid rise to popularity at the beginning of the new century would play the genre out through over-saturation of the market within a few years. As a few seasoned reality shows began to drop in the ratings in 2005, some said the genre had already peaked and begun its decline. However, in the last week of July 2006, seven out of the top twenty shows airing on network television were still reality TV shows ("The Chart"). The 2006 finale of *Flavor of Love* drew the highest rating ever in the history of the VH1 network, UPN's top ranking show for 2006 remained *America's Next Top Model*, and some of the fifth season competitions on *American Idol* drew more viewers than the Winter Olympics or the NBA playoffs being shown on other networks at the same time ("Reality Television"). Also, although some feared there would be no residual marketing for reality programming, consumers seem perfectly willing to buy DVD editions of their favorite reality shows, to be able to watch them again at their leisure whenever they desire. These indicators suggest this genre will be around for quite some time to come, and as it continues to evolve, its influence and significance will deserve the careful and thoughtful attention not only of serious students of American culture, but of all scholars interested in the expanding and overlapping forces of modernity and globalization.

Notes

¹ Seemingly frivolous programming continues to be more appealing to Americans than serious government concerns. On December 18, 2003, for example, Paris Hilton cavorting in a kissing booth in Arkansas on Fox outdrew Diane Sawyer interviewing President Bush on ABC (after Saddam Hussein had just been captured) by 800,000 viewers. See Prose 64.

² Kim's primary focus is upon torture as depicted in crime dramas and spy thrillers, but his admonition and its implications, especially for a country that is

currently the sole remaining superpower on the planet, deserve careful reflection.

³ In earlier work, I have noted MTV's historically progressive stand in accepting homosexuality and breaking down barriers for gay representations in television. It is worthwhile to note that on all three of these dating reality shows discussed here that it has premiered since 2003, it has routinely and nonchalantly included some representative gay segments, and accepted gay teens just as openly as it does straights.

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