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The Reality of Television

“Reality television” shows are not a new phenomenon; from *Candid Camera* and other prank shows in the 1950s and 1960s to dating and game shows and even professional wrestling, there has always been relatively unscripted content on television. An explosion of this sort of programming came about during the 2007-2008 TV seasons, however, when Hollywood fell under the shadow of a writer's strike and decided that it would be cheaper and easier to make television that was based in concept rather than content. This glut of reality programming has only just now begun to wane, but the ripples of it are still felt on every channel.

A chubby, spastic girl mugs for the camera after chugging energy drinks and soda, wearing a tiara and slurring what passes for speech in a barely identifiable Southern accent. Orange people have melodramatic sex with one another and fight in parking lots, big spangly earrings and purses take wing. Multiple women betray each other methodically while vying for the affections of one man of dubious character. A horrible woman, as ugly on the outside as she is within, and completely bereft of humanity, screams at dancing girls. Desperate amateur singers perform for a shot at a recording contract. People allow actors into their homes to fix their relationships, pets, interiors and children. Police officers raid the home of a sleeping and emaciated crackhead, chasing him through alleyways packed with garbage when he awakens and flees. Canadians fix homes. A wider variety of food and drink than most people will ever see in person in a lifetime is prepared and consumed. People who are only famous because of the show they're on talk about their fame on that show as the subject of the show. Naturalists, clad in animal skins and living in wooden cabins shoot at bears and moose while self-professed rednecks

on another channel show schoolchildren how to field dress ducks and frogs. Teenage pregnancy, drugs, proliferate sex, intrigue born from nothing, barely literate people with very little personality and debatable levels of sex appeal; these people fill the screens of American televisions virtually all the time. They draw big audiences, and people keep making these shows. Why?

Reality television, as a percentage of total programming, has more product placement than scripted programming or even professional sporting events, and those actually have stadiums and bowl games named for their corporate sponsors. Any time someone uses deodorant or eats cereal or talks on a phone, chances are that you just watched a not-so-subtle commercial injection into your late evening's entertainment. Scripted primary advertisements are a different story, a story with its own numbers, but when the stories are taken together, you encounter a juggernaut of advertising revenue for providers, and cheap and easy routes to get products in front of the eyes of consumers. Not to belabor this point any further – people keep making reality television because it makes them a lot of money. But you, gentle reader, already know that.

What you may not have devoted quite so much time to thinking about – because you were watching the blonde from *Facts of Life* fight snakes on an island – is why people continue to watch it. Almost to a person, people will admit that scripted programming is more entertaining, more edifying, and more addictive – it keeps them coming back for more. The characters are better, the situation more interesting, when one is allowed to create them within the realm of pure fiction – one can vicariously experience the impossible.

That vicarious experience, though, is one of the major reasons people keep tuning into reality TV. If you can't afford to eat expensive food or live in a mansion or have rich people's first world problems, then at least you can see what that might be like. You can travel to faraway places, see amazing sights. Access to the inaccessible has always been one of the great boons of television, and this one in particular is only harmful when it becomes not only the substitute for

real experience, personal experience, but replaces it entirely.

Rather than living through the participants in the programs, viewers will just as often live in spite of them, that is, taking respite in the fact that no matter how messed up you think your life is, or how bad that thing you did today was, “well, at least we're not *those* people.” Those people who everyone can make fun of, even in print media, and to whom we all get to feel superior, and who are disgusting and terrible and easily judged by us because they're not actually in the room. It is as easy to escape into judgment as it is to escape into imagination.

Ease of use is another reason many people gravitate toward reality TV; it takes effort to properly remember plot lines and characters, follow stories with a long and short dramatic arc and keep up with developments in a dramatic presentation. If you doubt my point, ask longtime followers of either *The Sopranos* or *Lost* what exactly happened on those shows, especially toward the end. By contrast, reality TV takes zero mental effort to follow – it's designed that way. The producers are going to remind you at every commercial break what just happened, and then the people on the show will discuss it to death. They will save you the effort of understanding anything at all through careful explanation, repetition, slow-motion replays, and finally, by telling you exactly how to feel about it. No effort required, so it has the potential to appeal to anyone, including the lowest common denominator in the audience, the person who wants, however briefly, not to think at all. (Not thinking also benefits the reality TV viewer in another way: even the most casual analysis will reveal the staged nature of these “real” interactions and the multiple camera angles, takes and setups involved.) This is an understandable desire sometimes, especially when times are hard, but think carefully about it: When things are bad, it's usually nice to have the friend who doesn't make you think about it AND also the one who tells you how it is and makes you come up with solutions. There's no debate about who is better for you, either. Perhaps all reality TV all the time is not a good idea.

We don't realize that anymore, though. When something's always on, always available,

and when everyone's watching it, the thing becomes, through habituation and proliferation, normalized. We think that it is normal. We think it is news, we think it should be discussed. Once something becomes accepted as normal, it becomes okay to do it, we see no harm – how could the baseline of something be harmful? By widening the norm to include the extremes on both sides, we not only become desensitized to the extremes, we come to think they, too, are normal, and in so doing, force more extremes. The result of this is that people watch the stupid television, think it's fine, lose the ability to consider this for themselves, and then are surprised when society and its requisite entertainment continues to push the envelope. This, I predict, does not end well.

As movie actors, special effects and production values continue to blend and bleed into television (as audiences demand better quality – or at least parity with filmic productions), scripted dramatic programming will only become more and more expensive, and the only way it can pay for itself is if it becomes a runaway hit – something like *Grey's Anatomy* or *The Walking Dead* or *Glee* or *Breaking Bad*. Then the subscribing dollars and / or advertising dollars make it worth the investment, and the show goes on. A good show with a long dramatic arc that nobody watches, like last season's *Alcatraz*, will get the chop, as that one did. This kind of capitalism-based popularity contest is really the only way to keep reality TV at bay. The popularity of reality TV shows is still dominant, however. On a Nielsen scale of most popular shows in the fall of 2012, 10 out of 20 are reality TV shows, and most of those are near the top.

Ancient Rome had access to scripted dramas, both Greek and Roman in origin, and they built theaters, had productions with costumes and actors and scripts and stories. The Romans also had games – competitions between social groups of people and all walks of life. They met and discussed the issues of the day in public baths and restaurants. These were all ways an ancient Roman could entertain himself. More popular than all of these, though, were the gladiatorial contests, unscripted battles at the extremes of behavior, where blood would spill, where one could vicariously experience violence and drama, and a citizen could feel superior and think

“Well, at least I'm not *that* guy.*” Romans tended to support Senators and leaders who protected their entertainment – Romans in public life who promoted and protected the gladiators always enjoyed a bump in support from the people.

Rome became decadent, corrupt, apathetic, complacent and fell. We would do well to absorb this example.

**from the Latin, “Utique ego sum non ut alio.”*