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Clips to be shown: *Bachelorette* 'fantasy dates' – 2 minutes.
The Real World/New York 'Confessional with Rachel' – 2 minutes.

The 'Me' Genre: Confessional-Reflexivity in Reality Television

Today reality programming is embodied in both the big four networks' flagship programming – *Survivor* (CBS), *The Bachelor* (ABC), *Fear Factor* (NBC) and *Joe Millionaire* (FOX) – and much of cable's niche programming – *Trading Spaces* (TLC), *The Anna Nicole Show* (E!), *Sorority/Fraternity Life* (MTV), et cetera. Reality television has come to alter the way the televisual field does business.[1] In the following discussion, I will focus specifically on the significance of the genre's productive adherence to, what I will call, *confessional-reflexivity*: secluded moments in which the casts' opinions and insights are solicited by the producers which then function as mechanisms that drive the program's narrative by embedding dialogue of a 'profound' nature throughout the text.

The reality television genre is dynamic and multi-dimensional in both its production attributes and audience composition. In order to collapse it for the purposes of this analysis, I will look at two specific reality programs that, when set next to each other, form the rough parameters of the genre: ABC's *The Bachelorette* and MTV's *The Real World*. *The Bachlorette* with its competitively structured narrative style – a group of men contends for the romantic admiration of a single woman over a period of 'fantasy'

[1] In a recent *New York Times* article, "Reality TV Alters the Way TV Does Business" (25 January 2003), Bill Carter reports that "[the] success of shows like "American Idol," "The Bachelorette" on ABC and "Joe Millionaire" on Fox are so impressive that numerous executives [say] they [are] now ready to embrace plans for a radical restructuring of the network business, which previously had been talked about only as dimly possible, long-term adjustments.

dates – distinguishes it as *teleological*. It is, in other words, programming that is driven by a linear narrative in which the participants must achieve a set goal. Meanwhile, *The Real World's* lack of any prefabricated telos – seven 'strangers' are picked to live in a house only to be observed being 'real' – marks it as *documentary*. It is a type of programming that adopts the less linear, more observational, technique of the documentary.

These two programs exemplify, within their opposing narrative formats, the place confessional-reflexivity holds within the reality television genre. Regardless of production technique, and audience, the emphasis placed on the self, by way of personal insights made by the cast, epitomizes a crucial aspect of the spirit of the reality television genre. In this way, confessional-reflexivity is the commonality that unites the genre under a stylistic canvas supported by the minutia of personal spectacle. That being said, these moments are also instances of confessional-reflexivity functioning to engage the viewer in virtual environments by elevating the ordinary to a spot of narrative privilege. Thus, what this sort of television programming stresses, even in situations that are teleological, is a type of real affected by the personal. That is, whatever activity the cast may be engaged, it is most often filtered through conversation that is reflective, insightful and often emotional. Authenticity is framed in types of 'ME' moments produced through introspective articulation. It is my contention that this sociality, moments of confessional-reflexivity which act to authenticate the text by showing real people engaged in a search for their identity, is ultimately a manifestation of type of virtual labor for both its participants and its attendees.

The Bachelorette

The Bachelorette is a spin off of ABC's very popular reality program, *The Bachelor*. *The Bachelorette* takes a single person – in the last season it was Trista, a Caucasian female in her late twenties – and has twenty five single men vie for her admiration, and ultimately her hand in marriage. The show is broken up into daytime activities, evening activities and 'the rose ceremony.' In the day, the mise-en-scéne is casual and adventurous: jeans and swimsuits adorn the cast as they play by the pool or participate in other outdoorsy activities – such as day trips to the Napa Valley, river rafting and rides in hot-air balloons. During the evenings, the mise-en-scéne's aesthetic resembles that of a debutante ball, with an abundance of formal evening attire, Champagne drinking and moonlit moments on balconies. *The Bachelorette's* overall aesthetic is, thus, similar to a vacation brochure. That is, its depiction of San Diego, where the program is filmed, as well its portrayals of chivalry and decadence, creates a type of middle class dating fantasy.

It is in this atmosphere that the previously viewed moments of confessional-reflexivity transpired. These moments of meta-dialogue, which make up the majority of what is said on *The Bachelorette*, are either in the form of conversation between cast members or alone with the producers in front of the camera. Regardless of which, these two different settings were spliced together to create a running narrative for the viewer. So that when watching *The Bachelorette*, or almost any reality program, it is hard to figure out the context in which each cast member is talking. As a consequence, it is often the case that a cast member will be interviewed about something that transpired earlier in

the day that did not initially get a verbal response. The interview is then embedded as a voiceover at the time of the incident, creating a type of omniscient narrative.

In all three fantasy dates confessional-reflexivity works to both drive the teleological structure of the program – the selection of a mate for Trista – as well as continually substantiate the program's theme – the search for love. That being said, these moments from *The Bachelorette* are examples of confessional-reflexivity functioning to engage the viewer in virtual environments by elevating the ordinary within the narrative. This is, for the most part, the primary activity that takes place between cast members, or what we are shown of them anyway. It is Trista's moral dilemma over the fact that she has "traditional values in terms of getting engaged," while also being "open to whatever life holds for [her] because [she knows] who [she is] as a person" that is an attempt, by her, to define her identity – as is Rob's assertion that he is "looking for the girl who won't fall for the slick guy."

The Real World

In the case of the second text, *The Real World*, the narrative is less structured but nonetheless employs the same production techniques to establish a type of youth-centric fantasyland postmodern in design. MTV, on its website, describes *The Real World* using the monologue that opens the show, "[this] is the true story of seven strangers, picked to live in a house to find out what happens when people stop being polite and start getting real. **The Real World" (**The Real World)**!** The 'house' in which the participants of *The Real World* live is the primary set for shooting. Despite the other environments in which the cast from *The Real World* are filmed, the house, as alluded to in the opening

monologue, is the orienting point for the show's aesthetic and therefore embodies in its physicality the essence of the program's narrative. The location for each *Real World* house is set in an exclusive urban area. These have included: New York City (Soho), Venice, Calif., San Francisco, London, Miami, Boston, Seattle, Honolulu, New Orleans, Chicago, and Las Vegas. The house's architecture and decoration is different with each new season. Regardless, the different houses all share the same basic make up: overly decorated, ostentatiously expensive and filled with brand name commodities; wares that are at no point comprised of the appropriately dated furniture (rare antiques), for example, that would fill the antebellum mansion from the New Orleans season – instead these houses are gutted and packed with pseudo-aged lamps from Restoration Hardware and the eye-grabbing primary color schemes of Ikea. It is in this environment that moments like the one previously viewed, transpire. Instances where the cast, in this case Rachel, are given a space in which to flesh out their identities as people – to be, as Rachel puts it, "confused" and to work at, in her words, "finding [herself]."

Programming of relevance

Todd Cunningham, MTV's senior vice president of Strategy and Planning, talking about reality programming explains:

> [basically], it's principally to make our programming relevant. That, we believe, is the first turnstile that we must adhere to at all times – that anything that we do has to be relevant to the viewer. So many times we hear so many young people complain, and many adults as well, that they watch TV or they interact with any medium and they think, "What does

> this have to do with me?" We believe that . . . we're able to bring that to life on air, be it through *The Real World* or things like that. We understand the kinds of products that they're actually using. We're able to actually translate that on air in terms of set design, in terms of subjects that people talk about, the issues they're grappling with as well. (Cunningham)

This notion of 'relevance' is about, in so many words, connecting with audiences. In this light, the production of reality programming – Cunningham cites *The Real World*, but any reality program would be appropriate in this context – is about closing the space between viewer and text – between the everyday and the virtual. Jean Baudrillard's discussion, in *Simulations*, of America's first reality television program, *The Loud Family*, as being an example of the end of the panoptic system, speaks to this relationship between viewer and text:

> [no] longer is there any imperative to submit to the model, or to the gaze. 'YOU are the model!' 'YOU are the majority!' Such is the slope of a hyperrealist sociality, where the real is confused with the model…Such is the later stage of development of the social relation, our own, which is no longer one of persuasion (the classical age of propaganda, ideology, publicity, etc.) but one of dissuasion or deterrence: 'You are new, you are the social, the event is you, you are involved, you can use your voice, etc. (53)

In other words, the inclination toward the self – the 'ME' aspect that unites reality programs – is symptomatic of the foucoultian gaze. Whether or not Baudrillard assertion is entirely correct, his appraisal of the panoptic relationship experienced by the cast, and

more importantly, the audience that attends to reality television, is significant. In his scenario the subject is no longer concerned with the panoptic tower as such, but has now, instead, come to internalize the gaze, confuse the model with themselves – the virtual with the real. The manifestation of this sociality is, in the case of these types of programs, what makes them 'relevant.' What is so appealing about this programming, then, is their focus on us as the stuff of the real. It is, therefore, not surprising that when the viewer is found asking 'what does this have to do with me?' The producers of these programs answer, everything: you are, in fact, the text – you are, in fact, relevant.

What is identified as 'relevant,' then, as the 'ME' in reality television, concerns the contemporary individual's desire to identify with a virtual referent – and in so doing, participate in a type of self-actualizing toil. That is, through moments of confessional-reflexivity, the cast is reinforcing their role on the show by explaining themselves and their actions repeatedly. The viewers, in attending to such a text, are participating in this endeavor of explaining the world that we see around us. In the case of *The Real World*, it is the experience of finding one's self while living in an urban local full of brand name commodities. In the case of a program like *The Bachelorette*, it is about coming to terms with how you, as an individual, approach romance within a type of pre-packaged romantic fantasyland. Regardless of which text one chooses to attend to, confessional-reflexivity naturalizes the virtuality of these environments by engaging its participants in a type of articulated labor of identification.

Conclusion: sociality of the virtual

The speed with which this programming has come to encompass the televisual sphere is a testament to both the format's economic viability and its capacity to entertain.

A connection can be made, then, between this historical moment, where we find ourselves engaged with texts purporting to be showing us the 'real,' and moments of identity searching. Baudrillard[2] posits it as a space in time where we "are not longer brutally removed from daily life to be delivered up to machines" (134). But rather, "[work] (in the form of leisure as well) invades all life as fundamental repression, as control, as a permanent job in specified times and places…" (134). Whether it is in the form of work or play, our attempts at understanding ourselves in this moment is a type of labor. We have, in this way, internalized our relationship with artifice and are, as a result, prone to the production of self-actualizing dialogue in accordance with our own panoptic sensibility of that internalization.

The uniting factor in reality television is this sociality. The popularity of this type of television programming should be equated with this characteristic as it engages its audiences with their own virtuality. In the case of the teleological text, *The Bachelorette*, a common mythology of romance and chivalry – many men competing for the hand of one 'lady' – is commodified and sensationalized to the point of ridiculousness. While the documentary reality program, *The Real World*, is steeped in the mythology that surrounds youth and urbanity. Regardless, they both present, in their use of real people, a type of interactive appreciation of artifice. In these instances of popular culture we are allowed to take part in the hyperreal by being shown virtual texts that incorporate within their production our laborious search for ourselves in our time.

[2] CF. Baudrillard "Symbolic Exchange and Death."

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