

Reality TV as Advertainment

Introduction

Reality TV, so far the dominant new genre of the twenty-first century, illustrates as it intensifies various forms of commodification found in contemporary American society. People, experiences, "reality," and even the medium of television itself are constantly being marketed in a genre whose absorption of direct and indirect forms of advertising is currently spearheading a conflation of advertising and entertainment.

We know that television programming in general conforms to the requirements of advertisers, but for decades we have become accustomed to the model of separate program and commercial break. Now that digital technology has begun to empower the viewer, advertisers are anxious for a more embedded and direct influence on popular programming. That producers are striving to meet this need is particularly evident in the genre of Reality TV, which has provided a flexible framework for multifaceted advertising techniques, some reminiscent of earlier practices. However, though Reality TV is itself an amalgam of earlier forms--such as the game show, soap opera, documentary, and amateur video programming--it capitalizes on current negotiations between what is public and viewable and what is private and closed to outside view, succeeding best when it manages to forcibly exteriorize the interior. This is accomplished by and for money.

Reality TV represents, among other things, the triumph of the market, the notion that everyone as well as everything has its price and that people will do pretty much anything for money. But it also relies on the fact that this capitulation still has the power to shock. Despite anticipations of its quick demise, the form has prevailed, mutated, and spread rapidly through Europe, America, and now more than twenty countries worldwide. Since the summer of 2000, over forty new series have been broadcast in America alone, some having lasted three or more seasons.

After briefly accounting for Reality TV's profitability and hence current proliferation, this essay examines the various forms of commercial activity associated with this new genre and its foreshadowing of what are likely to be future trends in other television programming. I begin with the genre's core brand identity, which is a special access to "reality." This leads to a discussion of voyeurism, surveillance, and pornography.¹ The comparison of Reality TV to pornography, as well as other perspectives in this essay, stems from remarks made by Jean Baudrillard who, though offering no prolonged discussion, is still one of the few major theorists to identify Reality TV's cultural significance, both in its earliest manifestations and today.² My discussion extends Baudrillard's remarks to underline the hypercommercialism at the heart of this genre. I do so by examining the various forms of advertising which are embedded in and around Reality programs and their commodification of both goods and individuals. Much of the discussion focuses on the most successful and influential American series, Survivor (CBS), though there are references to several other formats.

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Reality TV enjoys an unusual labor situation in which participants line up in their thousands in an attempt to work for free, with only a slim chance of a monetary reward. This expenditure on the producers' part amounts to only a fraction of the income which the shows generate: even Survivor's grand prize of \$1 million is what the network recoups in about one minute of advertising. Meanwhile, there is no need to pay professional writers, actors, or many other forms of support staff. Reality TV series are also fairly low-risk: the initial investment is generally modest, the production time relatively short, and the broadcast run fairly brief, so that if one formula fails not much is lost. For American producers, the trend has been to buy shows that have already proven successful in Europe: an interesting reversal of the usual direction of media exports. Like the Hollywood action film, Reality TV is an international product designed to be easily translated from one culture to another. Each format is essentially a franchise that requires little further creative development once it has been purchased.³ The genre-as-brand also helps secure profits, which is why a new series is often advertised as a Reality show with a self-consciousness not usually found in the promotion of other genres.⁴

Reality TV, which is essentially a bastardization of the documentary, signals the extent to which commercial pressure is transforming all media content into entertainment. Whether in America or Europe, serious independent documentaries can no longer find adequate financial support or, just as importantly, broadcast opportunities. Hence the birth of its advertiser-friendly offspring, Reality TV. Jonathon Murray, co-creator with Mary-Ellis Bunim of The Real World (MTV), makes this evolution plain when he

remarks that in their proto-Reality TV series: "We took the documentary form and commercialized it" (Peyser 54). Unlike a documentary, Reality TV entails fairly low production costs and, after a modest set-up budget, tends to run for a whole series. Moreover, the programs require little or no research. There is no need, on Reality TV, to provide viewers with an authoritative exposition. This, it turns out, suits many of today's viewers who appear to be uninterested in a serious investigation with any ideological or ethical import and instead favor sensational, uneditorialized, intimate action in the personal, confessional, or therapeutic mode.

But what makes the genre really attractive for producers is that it also attracts decent, even sometimes high, ratings: for example, Survivor is usually a top ten show each season.⁵ With advertising in a slump, this has become more important than ever. Hence these shows are often heavily promoted both in trailers and intertextual references in an effort to maximize audience figures. In particular, Reality TV is designed to deliver a key demographic: 18- to 34-year-olds with disposable incomes. This, the shows' ultimate product, can be crucial for an entire network; for example, it is often remarked how the demographics for Survivor and Big Brother did much to reverse the graying of CBS.⁶ But although a youthful audience has excited certain advertisers, these series also attract advertising revenue because of their multidemographic appeal and their extra-televisual, "water-cooler" buzz.

Commodifying Reality

The commodification of experience is a trend we witness today in everything from education to tourism. A major selling point of Reality TV, what advertisers used to refer to as its Unique Selling Proposition (USP),⁷ is indicated by the provocative title which suggests that this kind of programming has some special relation to a category of experience termed "reality." The excitement that this has generated suggests that reality has become a highly marketable concept, though a consideration of why this is so lies outside the scope of this essay.⁸ What we can say is that reality, however interpreted, clearly constitutes the genre's brand identity and that this genre's popularity in the era of the virtual, the digital, and the simulated is probably not coincidental. For example, Jon Dovey suggests that reality programming, broadly defined, may represent "a final efflorescence, an ultimate supernova explosion of referentiality before its slow digital degradation into virtual half-life" (64). Or at least one could claim that Reality TV offers the appearance of a strong referentiality, though of course its actual status is more complex.

The "reality" of Reality TV is usually translated as the experience of real or ordinary people (i.e. unknown non-actors) in an actual and unscripted environment. It does not require that the situation be ordinary, but that there be a particular kind of viewer access. Reality TV is, in fact, selling access as much as any particular subject matter. To declare that Reality TV is or displays reality is obviously too simplistic. But so is saying that it is all a sham. One can recognize raw or relatively unprocessed elements in Reality TV, while giving due credit to the skills of those who make the shows

appetizing in ways that most people's experience of real life is not. Producers and editors must preserve some aura of the real but also make the product entertaining, not easy when--as frequently happens-- the desire for authenticity and for ratings pull in different directions. Not only do editors constantly shape raw material into dramatic episodes, but producers can directly intervene to construct a more entertaining narrative, or so it is alleged; for example, in his expose, Peter Lance claims that the tribes' choices for "ambassadors" on Survivor I (Kelly and Greg) were overruled by producers who instead selected what they hoped would be a more dynamic couple (Jenna and Sean) (82). There is some evidence that the ratio of raw to processed will vary from country to country according to audience preference: for example, the less processed Big Brother has done better in Europe while American audiences appear to prefer the more polished Survivor. In any case, all of this is perhaps ironic. One could argue that Reality TV is seeking to exploit a diminishing resource--unmediated reality--which it is thereby helping to erase, like tourists depleting the natural beauty they come to view.

The idea of being able to watch others up close without them seeing you is something television viewers take for granted, but it was a rare experience before the introduction and mass adoption of certain technologies (the telescope was an early but scarce device). For millennia we have observed fictional drama, but to inspect--unseen--the daily existence of others, this approaches a god-like perspective. Reality TV invokes, though it does not fulfill, the fantasy of absolute vision, of having complete access to all that is hidden. The result, Baudrillard has suggested, is not sexual ecstasy but what he terms the cooler "ecstasy of communication," an ecstasy which is ultimately obscene, in that "Obscenity begins...when every-thing becomes immediately transparent, visible,

exposed in the raw and inexorable light of information and communication” (Ecstasy 21-2). The mass media have forced a reversal, which I argue is highlighted by Reality TV, whereby we no longer encounter "the obscenity of the hidden, the repressed, the obscure, but that of the visible, the all-too-visible, the more-visible-than-visible: it is the obscenity of that which no longer contains a secret and is entirely soluble in information and communication" (Ecstasy 22).⁹

Yet the ecstasy that this obscene exposure unleashes in Reality TV is not totally unrelated to sexual gratification. Certainly producers have not been slow to exploit this potential, though the amount of actual sexual content and its broadcast varies from one culture to another. That a popular genre would feature sexual content is hardly remarkable. But, more fundamentally, the basic format of Reality television is potentially sexually charged because it is, as is often noted, voyeuristic. What is less frequently noted is that it departs from classic voyeurism in that the subjects know they are being watched. The home viewer is hidden from the observed, but in a broad sense is known to be watching and is recorded at least as a rating's statistic. Nevertheless, it is still a gaze, not a two-way exchange and, as with sexual voyeurism, the experience promises viewers the thrill of seeing something intimate and taboo and doing so remotely and without accountability. A common attraction for both the peeping Tom and the TV viewer is also that they are observing people going through ordinary, unscripted actions rather than a dramatic performance.

Players may occasionally resist and try to preserve some enclaves of privacy even under extreme surveillance, but this only serves to increase the viewer's excitement. As far as TV producers and viewers are concerned, privacy is the most valuable commodity

these people have and its purchase is the *raison d'être* of the show. Hence, technology is on the side of the voyeur. If players try whispering in the dark, producers provide subtitles and infrared cameras. If players try to openly deny access, they are swiftly disciplined. Thus one distraught participant on Temptation Island (Fox) needed reminding that he was less of a person than a commodity under contract. When his relationship, the topic of the show, was under great stress, he tried to get the camera to stop filming: “this is not about the show, this is about my life,” he pleaded. To which a laconic cameraman accurately replied, “actually your life is the show” and kept on filming.¹⁰

Further, Reality TV offers the thrill not merely of voyeurism but of *mass* voyeurism. The attraction is not that of watching people going about their business without knowing they are being watched. The attraction is watching people on camera being watched by millions of others. Unlike the classic voyeur, the TV viewer is not in this sense alone even if solitary. Rather, one reason these programs attract and retain viewers is that they attract large numbers of viewers: the size of the audience itself is an attraction. All of which is good news for those who aim to make a profit.

Voyeuristic pleasure harks back to primitive fantasy but also, one could argue, to modern advertising, an overlooked progenitor of Reality TV. As Stanley Cavell observes, “Voyeurism is a retracted edge of fantasy; its requirement of privacy shows its perversity. Modern advertising is its offspring; but its condition as publicity conceals its perversity” (87). It is thanks to the public voyeurism of advertising that we have grown accustomed to mass access to intimate behavior of a particularly mundane kind. In countless scenarios every night, unseen viewers observe what is ordinarily considered private or even taboo:

actors shave their legs, discuss constipation, or choose tampons. Advertisers approach this exteriorization gradually and euphemistically, but to sell certain products some form of reference is unavoidable. This commercial pressure is one factor which prepared the way for mundane exposure on Reality TV, which excites audiences by going one step further and removing the actor's mask.

Commodifying the View

Given that participants know they are being viewed and being unmasked raises the specter of another form of display: the pornographic. That Reality TV might be akin to this highly lucrative industry occurred to Baudrillard some time before the current crop of Reality shows. Not because the content is necessarily sexually explicit, but because of a combination of intimacy and coercion seen even in prototypical formats. Citing the 1970s series An American Family, he categorized its TV-verite as “pornography because it is forced, exaggerated, just like the close-up of sexual acts in a porno film” (Ecstasy 21). Certainly, taking up this suggestion, one can see how Reality TV is in some respects more closely aligned with pornography than with a secret and unilateral voyeurism.¹¹ As with most forms of pornography, Reality TV participants knowingly and intimately display themselves--or rather images of themselves-- to a mass and invisible audience. There is a captive accessibility, but at one remove (cf. the hands-on interaction of prostitution) in an environment whose discipline and invasion mimic pornography's sadistic appeal, even flamboyantly at times. Subjects, we note, are often humiliated and

depicted in subjugation. But while Baudrillard--perhaps ironically and with typical gusto--is using the term somewhat promiscuously, I would press further and say that it is not merely the close range but the underlying transaction which brings pornography to mind. For those being viewed on Reality TV have agreed to an unusual degree of intimate exposure in the hopes of some monetary gain. As with pornography, there may be some element of exhibitionism, but most contestants remark that they are there for the money and are prepared to go to any lengths and forfeit any privacy to get it. A more naked example of the triumph of the market would be difficult to find.¹²

One lure of the unedited webcasts of Big Brother is undoubtedly the chance to see nudity and sexual play. Less mainstream producers who were quick to recognize Reality TV's pornographic potential, most likely without the benefit of Baudrillard's discussion, also launched explicitly pornographic enterprises in its wake. Sites such as Pornstar Survivor and Sex Survivor 2000 offered subscribers views of porn stars competing carnally for prize money. Videos with titles such as Erotic Survivor (2001) also went on sale. Prime time television edged into a more explicitly pornographic realm with Girl Next Door: The Search for a Playboy Centerfold, a 2-hour special on Fox (May 10, 2002) from Bunim/Murray Productions, the creators of The Real World. The same producers also signed a deal to produce the American version of Stripsearch, a Reality TV format which transforms ordinary contestants into strippers for an all-male revue. However, Reality TV's kinship with pornography is generally more muted.

As Baudrillard's remark suggests, what attracts both porn consumer and Reality TV viewer is the exaggerated viewing access. This is empowering—and, if need be, also somewhat gratifyingly perverse--particularly for those who feel increasingly subject to

ubiquitous viewing and recording devices in their own lives. Having altered our social geography so that we are more and more the seer or the seen, visual technologies are producing multiple hierarchies in everyday life: whether it be employers watching employees or a peeping "Tom" watching his female target. The computer, too, has given rise to large voyeuristic entities, governmental and commercial, which trace and sell identities as part of a largely hidden dataveillance that one could take to be the endgame of dispersed Foucauldian surveillance.¹³ Even the voluntary nature of the players' participation is not too remote from our own situation: just as they agree to surrender privacy for a possible monetary reward, so we trade privacy for economic advantage every time we use a store discount card. The final twist, however, is to transform Foucauldian surveillance into commercial entertainment.

Foucault's use of Bentham's Panopticon to illustrate the disciplinary power of surveillance is echoed in several Reality TV shows.¹⁴ It was made fully explicit in the British series, Jailbreak (Channel 5, 2000), where people were put into a prison environment and were challenged to escape despite being watched by guards and cameras. The better known Big Brother also shares with Bentham's architecture the crucial feature of confining subjects who are potentially being viewed at all times but are not sure when. In other respects, Reality TV shows counter the Foucauldian model of dispersal. In a move that more closely resembles Baudrillard's observation that Disneyland makes the rest of America appear more real, Reality shows play out the fear of being watched but in a lab setting almost allegorical in its exaggerated lines and comforting because overt and centralized, unlike the more insidious surveillance of everyday life.¹⁵ The subjects are a population set apart whose exceptional status serves to

underline the liberties enjoyed by the larger populace. So Reality TV programs are selling an exaggerated version of the viewers' own situation back to them as entertainment, diverting because displaced onto others. But these entertainments are also performing some ideological work by masking the fact that the Reality TV scenario is not all that abnormal, despite the exotic locations.

Product Placement

Turning to more explicit forms of commercial exploitation, Reality TV has already done much to deepen the symbiotic relationship between advertising and entertainment and it does so unabashedly and with a new self-consciousness. But before discussing specific examples, we first need to distinguish between two different environments, what I will refer to as the hedonistic and the Spartan. The hedonistic version of Reality TV provides luxury and plenty, though with certain restrictions: good examples are The Real World, Joe Millionaire (Fox) and Temptation Island. In contrast, the Spartan involves considerable deprivation, discipline, and restriction, as in Survivor or Big Brother.

A big threat to the contemporary advertiser is the mass use of DVRs (digital video recorders) which allow users to skip commercial breaks. Placement which permanently imprints the brand onto the program is one solution to this problem and hence is increasingly evident on TV. This is not a new technique--some product placement existed on TV as early as the 1940s-- but it has not been a significant element in television until

fairly recently. Interestingly, it was a prophetic satire of Reality TV, Peter Weir's The Truman Show (1998), which strongly projected a futuristic conflation of television show and commercial testimony. In this case product placement was necessary because the show went out live 24/7 with no commercial breaks. Today's Reality TV shows aren't so desirous of real-life replication as to forgo spot advertising. Instead they experiment with different advertising packages, as we shall see

When it comes to product placement, clearly the hedonistic variety provides plenty of opportunity, which advertisers have not been slow to purchase. For example, The Real World has been used to promote everything from Apple computers to Fruitopia. Not to mention Ikea. So serious are its producers about rewarding its advertisers that they systematically blur out logos for companies which aren't under contract, creating a more artificially selective display of brands than is generally found in real life. As for the Spartan variety, ratings demonstrate its ability to attract viewers to spot ads, but at first there would seem to be little opportunity for product placement since the main premise of a show like Survivor or Boot Camp (Fox) is a lack of goods in the environment. Nevertheless, Reality TV of this sort has been used as a vehicle for some aggressive forms of advertising, including product placement. Its success in Survivor, in particular, led the way for placement in other Reality TV formats¹⁶ and, since the Spartan context presents the most interesting challenges, this will be the focus of what follows.

Most product placement in film or television has occurred in fictional programming, where featured products support rather than jeopardize the realism of the piece (as in Jerry Seinfeld's penchant for Kellogg's cereal). This works for the advertiser as well as the producer because it normalizes and to this extent ratifies the product. The

subtlety of the insertion is also meant to diffuse viewer resistance to commercial messages. However, we do not witness this convention in Spartan Reality TV where, by necessity, the unusual and barren landscape acts as a foil. This renders product placement more overt and more active than in most other programming: overt because inevitably foregrounded and active because part of the narrative.

When, as is often the case, goods are offered as prizes or rewards there are significant advantages for the advertiser. For products do not simply appear but are actively promoted: a technique which has been taken to great lengths in the long running The Price is Right (CBS) (on the air almost continually since 1956). When defined as a prize, an object takes on an automatic added value. Moreover, in the Spartan context, the absence of other means of satisfying desire creates an exaggerated hunger in the would-be recipients and a genuine enthusiasm which advertisers don't usually find in paid testimonials. Commodity-starved contestants are almost guaranteed to drool over prizes, just as pets are kept hungry to make sure they will lap up food on TV ads. The players' desire for the object becomes a dramatic element in the narrative, which in turn keeps a hold on the audience for both placement and spot advertising.

When they are rewarded, it is not with soda but with Mountain Dew, not beer but Budweiser, not snacks but Doritos. That is, it is not the product's generic function which is being highlighted, but carefully differentiated brands, brands which are greeted by contestants as familiar and even celebrated elements of their culture.¹⁷ This is not to say that players are uninterested in the good's use value, for they certainly are and probably more than usual. They are, for instance, sufficiently hungry to want any kind of food, a fact which could deconstruct some of the hyperbolic attribution of sign values achieved

through advertising. Yet some of this aura lingers, for the players are not only enjoying nutrition but are also connecting to an absent and familiar culture when they are handed Doritos chips or a Budweiser. The latter brand, in particular, has been for so long positioned as an American icon that one wonders if its frequent presence on distant shores indicates (without regard to the advertisers' intentions) not only capitalist expansion but also the Americanization of indigenous cultures--those who are only seen here when trotted out to entertain the visitors.

Regardless of any deprivation, the underlying ethos of Reality TV, Spartan or hedonistic, is predictably capitalist: which is to say, the promotion of individual and open competition for private, usually monetary, gain. This despite the primitive or "tribal" trappings of a series like Survivor. Though you will occasionally get pious phrases from some players claiming they are not in it for any financial gain, others are more convincing when they state that they are there for the money. To that end, as in corporate life, there are strategic mergers and alliances but nothing to shake the belief that strict competition is the primary and most effective mode of behavior. It is unlikely that this is a consciously hegemonic move on the producers' part. Rather, individualistic competition is not only regarded as realistic by viewers but is also more dramatic than other forms of behavior and therefore (literally) more profitable. An individualistic, Darwinian struggle produces better drama --and therefore higher ratings and therefore more money--than, say, utopian harmony and cooperation. Spartan series draw on the powerful Western topos of Robinson Crusoe--bourgeois individual who makes good even in difficult circumstances--as well as the American Frontier values of self-reliance, courage, and know-how. It is about succeeding materially whatever the restrictions, and this makes for

a good story.

These programs are a retelling, in other words, of the (depoliticized) American dream wherein any individual can make it big—which usually translates as rich--never mind their initial circumstances. In tune with this ideology, we notice that these shows assiduously avoid raising any larger sociopolitical issues and instead focus on the personal and individual; compare this to the potential for radical explosions on other types of reality programming such as talk shows.¹⁸ As in the world of advertising, people are plucked out of their environments with little backstory, their social context being largely severed or reduced to superficial demographics, especially in American as opposed to British formats. As with most popular programming, there is a financially motivated political correctness dictated by the advertisers' desire to minimize offense. In other words, diversity too is commodified. Different categories of people are thrown together in order to attract a broad audience with matching demographics and create just enough conflict to generate drama but not enough to really question the status quo. A few public television series with more pretensions to documentary status, such as The Frontier House (PBS) or the British The 1900 House (Channel 4) have engaged with class, race, and gender positions to some extent: perhaps this is one reason why Frontier House was billed as the "thinking man's [sic] Survivor."¹⁹ But they also manage to distance and diffuse these issues by historicizing them, something Erik Barnouw identified as a standard conservative technique of American public broadcasting (150).

Whether the pitch is highbrow or lowbrow, watching contestants struggle with temporary material lack allows the audience to vicariously flirt with loss. Viewers who are thoroughly domesticated and materially comfortable can be titillated by a return to

worrying over basics like food and shelter: whereas it is doubtful that a poor sub-Saharan villager would find this entertaining. It is for loyal and hardened consumers to toy with the idea of pulling back into a faux primitivism. They may envy participants for their temporary release from email and phone calls and dream of a simpler life, without actually having to give up any modern comforts. It helps that they know the participants will return to the fold and are not arrogantly proposing a radical and permanent alternative. For these shows do not promote material lack as a healthy alternative but as something to be endured. As players complain about their lack of soap or other toiletries (a persistent theme, whether on Survivor or The Frontier House), viewers can be thankful that they do have access to these very products which the 30-second spots reassuringly offer. Living in difficult circumstances provides players with revelations about how seemingly trivial products like soap or shampoo should not be taken for granted: advertisers will hope viewers are taking note. As a coda, a ratification of the power of these products invariably occurs when the series end and previously bedraggled contestants reemerge clean and made-up, much like the classic before-and-after of advertising rhetoric.

But perhaps the biggest product these shows sell through deprivation is the medium itself. In one of the clearest indications of how artificial their situation is, several series grant players media access only as an occasional and highly prized reward. Thus, just as viewers are granted increased media access, players forfeit it. And when contestants salivate over the chance to watch a video in the boring, media-less environment of Big Brother or the harsh conditions of Survivor or Boot Camp, it presumably confirms the value of the home viewers' media access as well as providing an

interesting spectacle for us to watch. Their being banned from being viewers is part of what makes participants unusual exhibits worth observing. We--by definition TV viewers and likely habitual viewers--watch with fascination those who are forced to enter the nightmare of media-lessness.

Part of the drama on Reality TV is that when products of any kind do appear it is as if by magic, not unlike the experience of cargo cult devotees marveling at the sudden appearance of goods dropped by overhead aircraft. Occasionally, Reality TV participants struggle to make their own artifacts but then suddenly a car, a TV set, or even a can of beer magically appears, shiny and new. Drawing on Marx's early observation of industrial fetishization, Baudrillard notes in The Consumer Society how today's abundance of goods "continues to be experienced as a daily miracle, in so far as it does not appear to be something produced and extracted, something won after a historical and social effort, but something *dispensed* by a beneficent mythological agency to which we are the legitimate heirs: Technology, Progress, Growth, etc." (author's emphasis, 32)--or, in this case, the show's producers and the friendly corporations who supply these items. The contestants' situation is an exaggeration of our own as consumers. In the Australian outback or Amazonian jungle the separation between production and consumption is particularly pronounced. Hence, Baudrillard's further observation is especially germane that consumer products "present themselves as *a harnessing of power*, not as products embodying work" (author's emphasis, 32). It is not uncommon for Reality TV contestants to report that the miraculous manna they receive empowers them physically, psychologically, even spiritually.

Sometimes, however, the pleasure must be deferred as, for example, when the

prize is an automobile. This product has not only been for decades the most popular grand prize on American game shows, but its industry is also a top advertiser: the two phenomena are, of course, related. The presence of a vehicle on a Spartan program could be seen as ironic considering the participants' restricted movement. But it does resonate with a contemporary advertising scenario which displays motor vehicles in a wilderness setting: typically, an SUV perched atop a mountain. This is where the irony deepens, given that these products actually pollute such pristine environments, either through oil drilling or exhaust fumes, and that the most rugged environment most vehicles will be used for is the mall parking lot. In other words, the ads produce an almost absurd disparity between sign value and use value to augment exchange value. But something similar is happening in the show which also sells the fantasy that ordinary audience members can be outdoor adventurers. We will see later how this parallel project has actually led to co-productions between car manufacturers and television companies.

A particularly stark juxtaposition of the natural and technological occurred on Survivor II when high-tech luxuries of another sort suddenly appeared in the Australian outback (aired April 19, 2001). Weakened and half-starved contestants were allowed to sit at computer terminals and email family and friends: one male promptly proposed to his girlfriend and was accepted, an apparently spontaneous albeit grandstanding action which must have thrilled producers almost as much as the happy couple. It also illustrated the extent to which today's media substitute for physical presence, providing a form of intimacy at one remove which is a selling point of the show itself. But just as interesting was that soon after this premarital transaction, players were permitted to shop online using a Visa card, Visa being one of the show's sponsors. This activity reminds us that

more abnormal than the eating of insects is the fact that these participants have no regular opportunity to shop. The showcasing of Visa's global reach might come across as inappropriate or trivial given the participants' lack of basic sustenance (at least the Dorito's product was edible), and this risk is borne out when at least some contestants are occasionally heard to say that their experience has made them more conscious that loved ones, not goods, are most the most important things in life. However, their sentiments are inevitably undercut by the fact that they are also grimly taking part in a competition to win a large sum of money.

Made Possible By

Another approach to promoting products is outright sponsorship. This is comparatively rare in contemporary commercial television, yet some entire Reality TV series have been sponsored by one or more companies. While this represents something of a return to the practices of the 1950s when viewers enjoyed Goodyear TV Playhouse or the U.S. Steel Hour, today's sponsors also secure spot ads and product placements rather than rely solely on "trade-name publicity."²⁰ They do not generally produce the shows but are sometimes invited in soon after the format has been purchased. Since, however, there is no script for the sponsor to examine, as in the days of the sponsor's booth, some conflicts can occur. For instance, on Big Brother 3 a player's use of the sponsor's product, Miller's malt beverage Citrona, was frowned upon by her housemates: though she was pictured drinking the product, Amy's alcoholic intake was seen as

excessive and made her vulnerable as a contestant. Though it is not clear that anyone else made the connection, this criticism subverted the main thrust of Miller's campaign for the product, which was to encourage the novice drinker to drink more and stay out longer as a hedonistic rebellion from office discipline.

American Idol (Fox, 2002), one of the most successful of recent Reality series, is even more thoroughly a creature of advertising. Another British import, it was purchased by Fox primarily for its potential to attract advertising. "One of the tasks we set for ourselves was to find a reality show that was ad-friendly," acknowledged network representative Gail Berman (Battaglio). With American Idol the bet paid off and Fox succeeded in attracting two major sponsors, Coca-Cola and Ford, whose presence within the show was hard to miss.²¹ Coke is of course associated with a particular red, a hue which showed up in the backstage "red room" (not green room), the onstage couch, and several other props. The Coca-Cola logo appeared on cushions, posters, coolers, and there were segments entitled "Coca-Cola Moments." "The brand's role in the show was fun and natural," boasted David Raines, vice president of integrated communications for Coca-Cola, in what was clearly a concerted effort to fold the brand into the advertainment: (Howard). The brand, we note, now has a "role" which its promoters hope is entertaining ("fun") and integral, proper, normal ("natural"). But even more fundamentally, the whole series was actually the first step in a marketing campaign to promote new singing talent, their tours, their CDs, and other memorabilia. The audience functioned as a focus group which was being used to test potential stars and then buy (in both senses) these stars as products. Hence distinctions between program and ad, or between advertising and entertainment, collapsed on several levels.

Designer ads which link to specific programs are a rare, because expensive, way to advertise and are usually reserved for programs with huge ratings such as the Super Bowl. Yet there has also been some of this activity around Reality TV. "Nate & Brian" ads for Reebok, which ran only during the Survivor series, mimicked the show's environment and even featured two former castaways, Stacey Stillman and B.B. Andersen, in some spots. CBS further blurred the distinction between show and commercial by inviting the actors to attend the Survivor reunion episode. Ford went even further with its American Idol sponsorship by creating different designer ads for each episode, featuring current contestants in amateurish mini-dramas. The ads themselves, in other words, became a form of sponsored entertainment. Meanwhile, Coke attempted to be part of the action by interjecting a "good luck to Kelly and Justin" spot just before the climatic announcement of the winner and within 24 hours broadcast a congratulatory ad for the top performer. No longer merely a frame, the sponsor was now becoming part of the narrative.

The synergy between show and manufacturer became even deeper with a series like No Boundaries (WB, 2002) which was jointly produced by a manufacturer and a media company as a vehicle for a product, in this case another type of vehicle, the Ford Explorer. The production company (Lions Gate Entertainment) approached the manufacturer's advertising agency (J. Walter Thompson) and they agreed on mutually beneficial terms which allowed the sponsor to be involved in the early stages of production. Ford had input into casting, named the show after its own advertising campaign, and helped choose settings which would best display its product. Others have since followed suit. For example, Toyota advertised its SUV on the Reality TV series

Global Extremes: Mt. Everest - 4Runners of Adventure (OLN, 2003). Again the show's title mirrors the product, the 4Runner SUV, and the series functions as an extension of a marketing campaign which likewise features the vehicle at Mt. Everest. Even the advertising copy for the SUV reflects the target demographics and ethos of the TV show. The 4Runner, we are informed, is: "aspirational [sic], youthful, sporty and most of all, genuine."²² Exactly how an SUV can be "genuine" is not explained, but it does gel with the programming image.

Reality TV has made such an impact that it is now a recognizable style which is being imitated by straightforward advertising with no other links to the programming. For example, a 2001 Pontiac campaign was openly influenced by the new genre. Produced by Adam Cohen who also produced Road Rules (MTV), the campaign themed "Pontiac Excitement. Pass It On" was built upon real people experiencing the product: they got to drive a car for a week and were filmed enjoying it. Spots featuring ordinary non-actors were used to create authenticity, with an emphasis on spontaneous action rather than scripted description.²³

Manufactured Goods

Reality TV has also advanced the use of dual media promotion, drawing on the web as well as television. Its prominent role here can perhaps be attributed to the audience it is hoping to attract: youthful, reasonably affluent and hence likely to be net-savvy. (*Here citation for an article I published elsewhere on this subject*). For example,

some broadcasters have used the web to sell additional viewing access, a practice first brought to prominence by Big Brother when it offered 24/7 video streams on its website, first for free and then to paid subscribers. This was the first time many viewers in America and Europe watched videos online and the practice immediately resulted in different revenue streams and different degrees of viewership based on financial commitment. It also problematized the notion of "the show." However, it is more common for broadcasters to regard the web as a virtual store, and again in America Survivor has led the pack. Its producers regularly promote videos and other items on the air--still comparatively rare on network TV--but, in addition, the official website is often advertised during the series' run. This attempt to interest viewers in online shopping (also demonstrated in the Survivor outback episode above) is part of a general trend for media companies--as well as traditionally less commercialized cultural institutions such as museums--to get into the business of selling associated products directly to their audience, whether in electronic or brick and mortar stores. Websites are particularly useful in constructing viewers as fans who are, in turn, more likely to purchase merchandise. The online fan activity also helps to promote the show itself, much to the delight of the broadcasters who are happy to offer a forum for this kind of inexpensive promotion.

The merchandise on Reality TV sites are generally mass-produced items loosely based on the series, but occasionally viewers are offered actual items found on the show.²⁴ Their purchase enables viewers to reify the images seen on their screens, to truly make them real, which means that in these instances the entire show acts as an advertisement.²⁵ However, actual show items will always be a scarce resource. More

typically, the merchandise is merely evocative and, most importantly, easily commodified. In many instances, the consumption is totemistic, signaling membership of a collectivity (an ancient religious practice). For example, this is the pitch in an ad for a Survivor T-shirt which urges: "Show your loyalties to the tribe with this cool, 100% cotton 'tribe tee.'" Happily, loyalty is not only a key thematic element of the show but also something that can be easily exploited for commercial ends.

The selling of merchandise again illustrates that consumption is the contemporary form of participation, whether it be consuming the media product or its associated by-products. But sometimes the connection between the program and the merchandise is so tenuous that it becomes risible, even potentially subversive. For example, on the Survivor site there is a curious inflection of holiday and plenty in contrast to the brutal conditions of the show. The copy for a beach towel reads: "You don't have to actually be on a Polynesian Island to feel like you're on one--with this durable and eye-catching Survivor: Marquesas beach towel you'll be there in spirit. It comes in purple and blue."²⁶ Again there is the notion that one can participate--at a distance--through consumption. But on the show there weren't many shots of contestants sun-bathing on towels, of any color. Up close, this ad's amusing mix of hard and soft sell, of impressionistic evocation and sober product detail, underscores some of the potential tensions between a Spartan environment and the hedonistic display more typical of advertising, although we have also seen how often producers manage to harness this tension by making the disparity part of the drama.

Manufactured Individuals

One of the primary commercial functions of contemporary media is to create and exploit celebrity. This is certainly a conspicuous by-product of Reality TV, whose format is partly designed to satisfy the industry's almost insatiable appetite for recognizable individuals-- or brands--who can help sell media products. The genre represents a very pure, as well as inexpensive, form of celebrity production whose individual products are localized but whose basic formula works internationally. Its commodification of a seemingly infinite supply of ordinary people offers an economical method for inducing audiences to bring added value to a product which can then be profitably recycled. But the process of turning the unknown into the known, the obscure into the recognizable, is an attraction in itself. We saw the potential magic of product placement, but in fact the whole genre creates an aura of magic in that it almost instantly confers on people one of the most sought-after attributes of a mass mediated culture, which is fame. Reality TV sells participants what the media has almost exclusive power over, which is making people celebrities. Moreover, it offers this prize to those who identify themselves as ordinary and hence appears to answer the Warholian craving for mass validation for everyone. Reality TV participants, who are known precisely for being ordinary, constitute a particular category of celebrityhood which might be termed the hyper-ordinary. Their combination of the exceptional and the mundane attracts audiences who, being ordinary themselves, form intimate para-social bonds with those on screen and imagine that they too might achieve instant celebrity, or at the very least are flattered by the attention to those who resemble themselves.

Some of those who do make it onto the screen seem fixated on fame for its own

sake, while others aim to apply this fame to launch media or endorsement careers.²⁷

Contrast this with the appearance of ordinary people in other non-fictional genres such as documentaries or news programming who are generally never heard from again. While on the show, Reality TV players are in effect advertising themselves in what is simply an intensification of the self-promotion increasing numbers of us are engaged in today.

Apparently, they do not regard the presence of cameras as an unwelcome surveillance but as chance to commodify the self. Though he is not referring specifically to Reality TV, Baudrillard is also struck by this phenomenon. He muses: “Any of your acts can be instantly broadcast on any station. There was a time when we would have considered this a form of police surveillance. Today, we regard it as advertising” (The Perfect Crime 26).

Given their hunger for fame, new participants are only too happy to sign restrictive contracts designed to benefit the networks, primarily by advertising not only the Reality TV series on which they appear but also other programming. This is most effectively used in live programming where Reality TV contestants can be conveniently slotted in to boost ratings: a proven formula on, for example, CBS's The Early Show. Prior to their ejection, these newly minted micro-celebrities are kept strictly out of the limelight in order to maintain suspense, a key selling point of the Reality TV show currently being broadcast. In real time, the former players have now become viewers who can witness how they and others are being portrayed. When eventually solicited, their reaction to this portrayal generates new, parasitic content.

However, for most participants the post-show exposure is short-lived. Since there is an almost infinite supply of easily replaced individuals, producers are not particularly interested in promoting contestants as long-term celebrities. It is the novelty of those who

are ordinary and previously unknown which is of most value and this favors a quick turnover. Most players therefore become what Chris Rojek in his study of celebrity refers to as "celetoids," a form of "compressed, concentrated, attributed celebrity" which is not as durable a career as celebrity proper (20). While he was not looking specifically at Reality TV, Rojek's definition closely matches its by-products when he remarks: "celetoids are the accessories of cultures organized around mass communication and *staged authenticity*" (emphasis added, 20-21). Even more than the meagerly talented mega-stars of today, Reality TV participants are essentially famous for exposure rather than achievement, with the exception of the talent search format. On one level all participants are of course performing to some extent and are sometimes rewarded for mental or physical strength. But, win or lose, they tend to acquire celebrity status for no other reason than that they are being watched, by millions. They therefore epitomize what Daniel Boorstin defined as the modern celebrity, namely one "who is known for his well-knownness" (57), someone he also described as a "human pseudo-event" (57), though of course Reality TV celebrities would claim a greater authenticity.

The access which Reality TV grants its viewers reflects a more general trend toward self-consciousness in the manufacture of celebrity in contemporary culture. In particular, the subcategory of the talent show often provides a behind-the-scenes view of the process: perhaps the most aptly and self-consciously named show of this ilk is the Swedish Fame Factory (TV3). The unveiling of the manufacturing process does not appear to dampen the fans' enthusiasm for the final product nor make it seem less authentic. On the contrary, the popularity of these shows suggests that audiences find this exposure gratifying. One reason may be because it assures them that they are not being

duped. Commentating on the new degree of access in many areas of celebrity production, Joshua Gamson notes, "Celebrity audiences are treated to the knowledge of how they, and others, become the 'sucker born every minute'--and thus avoid becoming the sucker" (52). It is also likely that the audience's involvement--usually a key factor in these shows--creates a feeling of investment, even perhaps a sense of ownership in the new celebrity product. Hence, media consumption may be a form of production but it can also bring at least the illusion of ownership.

Conclusion

This analysis of Reality TV has demonstrated that "advertainment" is currently working in two directions, with entertainment increasingly becoming a form of advertising and advertising a form of entertainment. Certainly, the format and content of current Reality series are designed to sell everything from viewer access to access to viewers. Furthermore, there is evidence of a trajectory toward a more intermeshed product: from product placement on Survivor, to even more integral advertising in American Idol, to actual co-production in the aptly named No Boundaries. That advertising and entertainment programming are merging is hardly surprising. It is, I would argue, part of a broad cultural evolution toward attracting attention primarily, even solely, in order to sell.

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Notes

¹ Exactly how much income pornography generates is hard to determine, but current estimates run from \$1-\$15 billion per annum in the USA alone.

² Baudrillard briefly discusses the 1970s TV-verite style of An American Family in Simulations (1983) and The Ecstasy of Communication (1988) and decades later discusses the French Reality TV series Loft Story in the essay "Dust Breeding" (2001). The broad issue of how Reality TV relates to Baudrillard's model of simulation is something I address in another article.

³ The site c21media.net provides a fascinating insight into the numerous Reality formats which are being developed and sold internationally.

⁴ "With 'American Idol,' we hope we have built a brand name," said Fox Entertainment Television president Gail Berman (Battaglio).

⁵ During its 2001 run, Survivor 2 averaged a 17.4 Rating and a 27.0 Share. During its 2001-2002 run, Survivor 3 Africa averaged an 11.8 Rating and an 18.0 Share. During its 2002 run, Survivor 4 Marquesas averaged an 11.8 Rating and an 19.0 Share. During its

2002 run, Survivor 5 Thailand averaged a 12.1 Rating and a 19 Share. Information available at < <http://wishingwellarts.com/Survivor/>>.

⁶ As Ronald Grover put it: "With shows like Survivor, the Tiffany Network is slowly reaching beyond its core of older viewers."

⁷ USP is a term coined by Rosser Reeves at the Ted Bates agency in the 1940s.

⁸ *Citation for another article I have written on Reality TV's managed reality.*

⁹ A useful account here is Joel Black's The Reality Effect which looks at the twentieth century's compulsion to put everything on film and the consequent blurring of the distinction between reality and fiction.

¹⁰ The idea of being trapped in Reality TV is explored in the film, EDtv (1999).

¹¹ Pornography is here being defined as the main business of selling images or descriptions of people who have been paid to generate sexual excitement in the observer.

¹² Some contestants such as Jerri Manthey from Survivor II and Darva Conger from Who Wants to Marry a Millionaire went on to pose nude for Playboy for large sums of money.

¹³ Though he is not looking at computers, Michel Foucault describes dispersed modalities of power such as this in Discipline and Punish.

¹⁴ The Panopticon was designed by utilitarian philosopher Jeremy Bentham in 1791. First conceived as a centralized surveillance system for prisons, Bentham thought the idea could be extended to other institutions such as factories, asylums, and schools. Foucault discusses the model in Discipline and Punish.

¹⁵ "Disneyland is presented as imaginary in order to make us believe that the rest is real, when in fact all of Los Angeles and the America surrounding it are no longer real,

but of the order of the hyperreal and of simulation” (Baudrillard, Simulations 25).

¹⁶ Jon Nesvig, president of sales for Fox Broadcasting, reveals that Fox decided product placement would work in American Idol after seeing its success on Survivor. Referring to product placement on Reality TV, he concludes simply and without explanation: "It's acceptable in these shows" (Leith).

¹⁷ That heavily advertised goods can enjoy some of the same mass media attention and renown as human celebrities is a phenomenon Daniel Boorstin pointed to some years ago (221).

¹⁸ For a thoughtful account of the opportunity talk shows can provide for some forms of sociopolitical debate, albeit predominantly about the status of the marginal or abnormal, see Kevin Glynn.

¹⁹ <<http://www.pbs.org/wnet/frontierhouse/>>. April 2002. 3 June 2002. This description has since been removed.

²⁰ For a description of earlier forms of sponsorship, see Barnouw.

²¹ The Coca-Cola sponsorship may not be too surprising given that the same agent, Creative Artists Agency of Beverly Hills, handles both the show and the drinks manufacturer.

²² <<http://www.toyota.com/about/news/product/2002/09/23-1-4runner.html#top>>.

²³ Making allusions to TV shows in spot advertising is not unprecedented: recently Old Navy has imitated old favorites such as The Brady Bunch and Green Acres.

²⁴ So far actual props have usually been auctioned off for charity. Real World items were sold at http://www.mtv.com/tubescan/realworld_auction/ and Survivor props were sold on e-bay, the proceeds going to an AIDS charity.

²⁵ A very dark parody, the film Series 7 (2000), has a clever site which pretends to offer items from its mock Reality TV series, including the syringe that was used to try to kill one contestant. < <http://www.series7movie.com/>>.

²⁶ < <http://store.cbs.com/survivor4/item.php?showID=208&itemID=7786&id=souvenirs>>.

²⁷ Colleen Haskell (Survivor I) later appeared in the film, The Animal (2001), Jerri Manthey (Survivor II) appeared on the soap The Young and the Restless (May 28 2001), while Neleh Dennis (Survivor III) became a features reporter on early morning television in Salt Lake City.