

# “Reality television” and the American reality that produces it

Noah Page  
31 March 2005

It is tempting to suggest that large portions of American television programming have reached such an advanced state of decay that subjecting them to serious analysis, or even satire, is invariably to encounter the law of diminishing returns.

Consider the NBC program “Fear Factor.” The show requires contestants to “compete” in outrageous stunts that are either dangerous, nauseating or—what producers surely regard as the ideal scenario for “must-see TV”—both. Among the features at the show’s web site are transcripts of interviews with the contestants about the stunts they’ve completed. The following is an excerpt from a discussion about one program in which a woman guides a blindfolded teammate to a small hole in a transparent wall so they could transfer leeches into each other’s mouths.

*Fear Factor: Amber, what was it like dunking your head in the leeches?*

*Amber: It was definitely slimy and it wasn’t very pleasant. It didn’t smell very good in there either. That smell alone made me want to gag. It was the most disgusting thing I think I’ve ever smelt. The leeches were really slimy and you could feel them moving around all in your mouth, it felt like you had a big loogie in your mouth. It was definitely horrible.*

*Fear Factor: Were they clinging on to the inside of your mouth? Were they biting, were they sucking at all?*

*Amber: The leeches definitely suctioned onto your tongue and the sides of your mouth. It was difficult to get them to come out of your mouth once they had attached themselves. When I was trying to pass them off to Tabitha the little boogers really didn’t want to come out.*

As grist for television entertainment, public degradation has come a long way since Chuck Barris’s “The Gong Show,” much less Alan Funt’s “Candid Camera.” Confronted with “reality TV” today, difficult questions arise. One is struck by the sense that everyone involved is in new, uncharted territory, having crossed many lines already.

It would be evasive, however, merely to argue that this is all beyond the pale and turn away in disgust. “Reality” TV, for all its obvious “unreality,” exists. Such programming constitutes a social and cultural phenomenon that is the result of deliberate choices by individuals responding to objective conditions and impulses. It simply is not possible or responsible to dismiss it all as wholly irrational. Only naiveté would compel one to think that the entertainment industry could inflict this rubbish on the population without consequences.

At the end of the day, attention must be paid. One must face reality and ask, “Why?”

It is worth recalling the first analysis of this subject published by the *World Socialist Web Site* in February 2000 on the occasion of the season finale of “Who Wants to Marry a Multi-Millionaire?”

That show featured a multi-millionaire choosing a bride from 50 women, who—as is apparently obligatory in such spectacles—appeared in swimsuits and answered banal questions. WSWS Arts Editor David Walsh, writing about the incident two weeks later, observed that “American network television [had] unquestionably descended to a new

low point.” He went on to say:

*“Anyone who expects the television and entertainment industry, dominated by a handful of giant conglomerates, to reform itself because of the outcry over ‘Who Wants to Marry a Multi-Millionaire?’ is deluding him or herself. There may be a sense, even in its boardrooms that Fox went too far this time, but that will pass. The program attracted 22.8 million viewers during its final half-hour. In the end, that number will speak louder than any outraged columnist. New low points are guaranteed.”*

To be sure, an easy call. At the time, new programs were already in the works. Since then, the networks have been busy. Reality TV, while showing signs of strain, has defied obituaries written by culture critics and remains a growth industry. As with all manifestations of social and cultural life, there is value—in fact, there is a vital *need*—to simply look at what is, even if answers to the questions that inevitably arise seem, at first, elusive.

An informal survey of television listings shows that in the United States, some 150 of these “reality” television programs have either been produced or are now in production. (In Britain, the *Independent* reported on December 26 that 176 reality shows are in the pipeline for 2005.) Predictably, some shows have become popular and developed loyal followings. A few croaked upon stumbling out of the starting gate. Still others—“The Osbournes” and “The Anna Nicole Smith Show”—have run their course.

In purely economic terms, the explosion of American reality television is bound up with the pursuit of profit. The sharp increase in the number of shows in 2001 was propelled, in part, by fear among network executives that the Writers Guild of America (WGA) would go on strike in May of that year. CBS’s “Survivor” had already been a ratings hit, so new “reality” shows were an attractive prospect: unionized writers and actors could be kept to a minimum.

During the 1999-2000 season, prior to the 2001 contract negotiations, reality television accounted for about 250 hours of 4,100 hours of prime time shows by the six broadcast networks, according to the WGA. During the 2002-2003 television season, that figure doubled. Although figures for the current season haven’t been tabulated, the WGA estimates it will top 700 hours of reality TV.

In December, three reality series that remain on the “A” list broadcast their season finales. Billionaire Donald Trump, who never misses an opportunity to cultivate an image of arrogance, excess and greed in such a manner as to produce *more* profit for himself, picked his second “Apprentice” in a bloated three-hour spectacle on NBC. On UPN, another woman was selected by a panel of judges as “America’s Next Top Model.” The FOX network wrapped up another season of “The Swan,” a grotesque show in which women unhappy with their physical appearance volunteer as “ugly ducklings” eligible to be transformed—thanks to diet, exercise, new fashion choices, makeup, “counseling,” liposuction and multiple cosmetic surgeries—before viewers into a “beautiful” human

being.

Within the reality television genre itself, new strains and amalgamations have emerged. As networks strive to out-do each other, the growing number of programs guarantees, within limited parameters, variety.

It is impossible in this space to subject even a few shows to exhaustive analysis. Nevertheless, specific themes emerge, and it is worth highlighting details from just a few programs to get a sense of the whole picture.

There is the game show model, in which the uniquely American brand of individualist ideology and notions of Social Darwinism—"survival of the fittest"—are first stripped to a superficial level and then exaggerated in preposterous scenarios.

The contestants typically are eliminated one by one, either by each other, a panel of judges (in the case of "The Apprentice," a single judge) or viewers who are invited to participate in a telephone poll. Invariably, certain players emerge as "villains" and "underdogs." The "dramatic" point of each week's episode, it seems, is not to see who wins, but who will *lose*, be "fired" or "voted off the island."

A second model is the "Big Brother"-type show in which people's lives, in whole or in part, are played out on television—in most cases, it should be said, in scenarios that are anything but real. The template for this sort of program is MTV's "The Real World," which first aired in 1992 and now in its 15th season. In that show, seven strangers are filmed living in a house together in an American city. The footage is edited to into a series of 30-minute shows.

The premise is intriguing. The conception that observing the social life of human beings has value is a valid one, even if for no other reason than that it is interesting. In the hands of someone with a profound and serious grasp of social life as the product of the historical process, this isn't necessarily a lost cause. But these issues are *not* grasped, and seriousness is not a part of the equation. The point is to manufacture, capture and broadcast for entertainment purposes trivialities, "quirkiness," and awkwardness.

In virtually all programs, superficiality and minutiae reign.

Consider the season finale of "America's Next Top Model," broadcast in December. No single shot in the 60-minute program lasts more than five or six seconds before editing or camera movement gives us a different image, or view. (Are the producers concerned that pausing for even 10 or 15 seconds would render the lack of anything substantive happening too obvious?) Three women, all young and attractive, are in the running to be selected the "top model" by a panel of judges, including Tyra Banks, a "supermodel" herself and the show's producer.

In one segment, the women are photographed on a "Zen rock" in a shallow pool. (A "Zen" rock, as opposed to an ordinary rock? What's this all about? A subtle implication that beneath all this glamour and superficiality, deeper and more noble spiritual impulses are at work? Who believes this?) The viewer is treated to endless, rapid-fire shots of makeup being applied, visages being admired in mirrors, pictures being snapped, and judges offering opinions: "Amanda just *gets* it," marvels a photography director. "She feels it inside of herself." "I think your skin is, like, amazing in this picture." Fashion stylist and judge Nole Marin, summing up—inadvertently, perhaps—the program's ideological premise, gazes upon a photograph and announces, "This is the girl every girl in America wants to know and wants to be." A bold declaration.

The competitors, too, remark on their own experience: "Looking at this picture makes me happier." "It's always so intense, and it's going to get more intense." As she prepares for a Japanese fashion show, the eventual winner, Eva, a 19-year-old student and self-described tomboy from Los Angeles, finds herself overwhelmed by the intensity: "This is like everything I've ever dreamt of," she declares. "Getting my hair done, getting my makeup done. It's like...graduation!"

In the end, Eva wins and delivers a tearful acceptance speech. "I am

now a Cover Girl," she says. "This little tomboy who has never been beautiful, now I'm America's Next Top Model. I get to represent all the little girls everywhere that feel the way I feel. Watch out world...here comes Eva!"

The world will have to wait. In a sense, Eva is now the property of Procter & Gamble, the Cincinnati, Ohio-based conglomerate that manufactures and markets personal care products in more than 160 countries. The parent company of Cover Girl Cosmetics, the corporation is presided over by 57-year-old Alan G. Lafley, who also is a director on the boards of General Electric and General Motors Corp. and has a total compensation package of \$15.5 million.

The program is a tangle of contradictions. For all the self-important talk by judges about how the nuances of each contestant's personality and self-image determine their exterior beauty, these women are, in fact, being groomed for work that *suffocates* personality and individualism. Who among average TV viewers that happen across a fashion program while flipping channels could even identify *one* of the hundreds of women who are seen exhibiting garish and expensive designer clothing at such high-end events, marching up and down the runway like zombies?

With her \$100,000 Cover Girl modeling contract, Eva has joined the ranks of a profession in which select few achieve "super" status and the accompanying wealth. The rest work in anonymity, in harsh conditions and for little pay. Among those who have made it into the top tier of models is Janice Dickinson, one of the show's judges. Her memoir addresses the realities of the modeling industry: Botox, drugs, plastic surgery, obsessive dieting and exercise. The title? *Everything About Me is Fake...And I'm Perfect*. Watch out, Eva. Here comes the *real* world.

Trump's show, meanwhile, offers more of the same. From a field of young, good-looking men and women, Trump eliminates one contestant after another after putting everyone through a series of tasks and exercises intended to test their leadership skills and overall chutzpah. Each episode's climatic "firing" of the person Trump regards as the weak link in his chain of human guinea pigs takes place in a corporate boardroom set designed to look like an ominous, mahogany-lined star chamber. Jabbing his fingertips at the next contestant intended to walk the plank, Trump scowls and barks contemptuously, "You're fired!"

The final episode of the most recent season lowered the show's built-in silliness to new depths. The program was three hours of tedium. Contestants from previous seasons of "The Apprentice" returned to reminisce about old times. Corporate and military figures in the studio audiences were interviewed about the merits of each of the two finalists—Jennifer Massey, a 30-year-old San Francisco attorney, and Kelly Perdew, a 37-year-old software engineer and West Point graduate with experience as an Army intelligence officer. The music group O'Jays was brought in for a live performance in New York City's Lincoln Center of their 1973 tune that serves as the show's theme song, "For the Love of Money." Trump "fired" Massey and hired Perdew, who opted to help his new employer manage construction of a 17-building apartment complex in Manhattan for the wealthy. "When finished," Trump boasted, "Trump Place will be the crown jewel of modern living and urban planning. New York City will be very, very proud."

Finally, one cannot ignore "American Idol," a "star-search" type music show that is in the middle of its fourth season on FOX. The program, which has been held up by defenders as a more wholesome, innocent brand of popular kitsch, raises serious questions about artistic talent and celebrity.

The title alone is curious. An "idol," after all, generally refers to an image used as an object of worship. The winner of the show, selected by viewers nationwide based on purely subjective criteria, is a young musician who is awarded with a recording contract, a national tour and all the media ballyhoo that traditionally accompanies such affairs. In other words, a fresh new human component is briefly added to a music

company's profit center, thanks to a corporate-run popularity contest.

In what sense is such an individual an "idol"?

The question may be answered by noting the word's meaning: "One that is adored, often blindly or excessively," or "something visible, but without substance." Which begs a more crucial line of inquiry: What purpose does *this* serve? What interest does billionaire Rupert Murdoch, owner of the FOX network, have in cultivating an audience of millions that blindly adores something that is without substance? There comes a point where the aspect of "bread and circuses" could not be more obvious.

The term—"panem et circenses"—was coined by the Roman satiric poet Juvenal in the first century to characterize the mindless pursuits of the populace, thus clearing a path for the Roman Emperor Domitian's despotic excesses. In the present context, one cannot discount the ruling elite's consciousness of the social role played by television to distract attention from worsening social conditions at home and a disastrous, bloody war in Iraq.

Moreover, in a country where political and ideological confusion coexists with vast social polarization, it is hardly astonishing that people can be found who will commit seriously undignified acts in the hope of obtaining substantial sums of money and others who will sit at home and live vicariously through these contrived "real-life" dramas.

Surveying the landscape of "reality TV" is enough to make one yearn for the "vast wasteland" of American television famously described by Newton Minow more than 40 years ago. Minow was an attorney appointed by President John F. Kennedy as chairman of the Federal Communications Commission. It is worth recalling the speech that popularized the phrase "vast wasteland." Minnow made his remarks at a meeting of the National Association of Broadcasters in 1961. Here's an excerpt:

*"...[W]hen television is bad, nothing is worse. I invite you to sit down in front of your television set when your station goes on the air and stay there without a book a magazine, newspaper, profit and loss sheet or rating book to distract you, and keep your eyes glued to that set until the station signs off. I can assure you that you will observe a vast wasteland. You will see a procession of game shows, violence, audience participation shows, formula comedies about totally unbelievable families, blood and thunder, mayhem, violence, sadism, murder, western badmen, western good men, private eyes, gangsters, more violence, and cartoons. And endlessly, commercials—many screaming, cajoling and offending.... Is there one person in this room who claims that broadcasting can't do better?"*

Charting with precision the cultural signs of social decay is tricky business. It is problematic, too, to imply that networks have abandoned the more enlightened and noble principles of a "golden age" from long ago. Television, after all, has always been privately owned and controlled, governed by the drive for profit.

Nevertheless, it is possible to make some measure from the point of the "wasteland" described by Minow in 1961 to what millions of people watch today for entertainment.

One year before Minow blasted the state of American television, roughly two dozen made-for-TV films were broadcast. Many were based on theatrical works—serious plays, written for the stage by serious artists: Federico Garcia Lorca, Sean O'Casey, Shakespeare, August Strindberg and Henrik Ibsen, to name a few. In November 1960, CBS produced and broadcast Eugene O'Neill's "The Iceman Cometh," starring Jason Robards and Robert Redford and directed by Sidney Lumet.

The point is not to bash television. The same medium that now broadcasts images of people eating "road kill," clawing their way into Trump's corporate empire and risking surgical disfigurement for cash is the same that, even within the last 20 years, offered programs such as Volker Schlöndorff's 1985 production of Arthur Miller's "Death of a Salesman," the late astronomer Carl Sagan's engrossing "Cosmos" series,

and documentarian Ken Burns's program in 1990 on the American Civil War.

One must distinguish, too, between the exploitative and artificial material that constitutes virtually *any* "reality" television program today and those cases in which artists and journalists have used television—the medium's inherent problems and limitations notwithstanding—to examine in a serious way social life. Michael Apted's "Up" series comes to mind. Here we have a remarkable experiment in *real* reality TV: interviewing a group of 7-year-old British children and revisiting them at 7-year intervals. Apted's films have since been seen in theaters, but the series originated on British television in the 1960s.

The executives and producers who inflict reality television on the American public are a different breed entirely. If the rapid-fire editing one sees in so many of these shows prominently flags the absence of any substantive content, it's because the people making them don't have anything to say. It isn't necessary to romanticize American television and film of the postwar era to simply acknowledge that it emerged from a culture in which men and women had been shaped by extraordinary and profound contact with *life*: the Depression, World War II and European fascism, the Cold War, racism, and so forth. Even what might be termed the popular culture that emerged from this period suggested individuals who were at least grappling with serious problems faced by the whole of society.

What, on the other hand, are the obsessions of the current bunch? Career, not for the sake of doing work that benefits real people, but for the sake of *itself*, and for the "entertainment" value of achieving it, by any means necessary, at the expense of others. Career and status, monetary awards, the best fashion, attractive mates, remodeled homes, surgically altered faces and bodies, fame for fame's sake, etc.

What reality television provides us, in relatively undiluted form, is the phenomenon of a tiny and wealthy minority *consciously embracing* this debased conception of humanity and cynically exploiting it for their own financial ends in such a way that pays political dividends for the ruling elite.

Broadly speaking, these programs are a mechanism for constructing and celebrating, for a mass audience, a precise conception of what it means to live in modern society. Or rather, *the* idea that the Murdochs of the world hope people will embrace and accept. It hardly comes as a surprise that Tony Snow, the former speechwriter for former President George Bush and a right-wing cheerleader for the government who now is gainfully employed by FOX, has embraced "American Idol" on his weekday radio show.

As giddy as Snow can be in defending (or, to be more exact, denying) the imperatives of imperialism, the themes and messages conveyed on corporate television, for those who manufacture them, are serious and non-negotiable. First of all, none of the horrific violence, hunger, poverty and real social malaise that one finds in the world exists. Or, if it does, it is not so serious that time cannot be taken to enjoy the spectacle of some unknowing and untalented individual being gleefully eviscerated by "American Idol" producer and judge Simon Cowell. Or Tammy Faye Bakker living with a porn star.

Vital, too, is the lie that we live in a country where fame, fortune or some variation of the "American dream" is just one contest away. Everybody can play, and anyone can win a beauty pageant or a talent show, be the last one on the island or the corporate shill who gets to help Donald Trump build a "crown jewel of modern living" in New York City, etc. Keep hope alive!

Such programming, it should be said, would not be possible without the tabloidization of American television that emerged, not coincidentally, alongside Reaganism. It probably also would not be so easily realized without mainstream news outlets having plowed the ground with their obsessive and constant attention to the salacious components—at the

exclusion, it must be said, of the deeper, political ones—of the Monica Lewinsky debacle.

This mass exercise in human degradation is precisely the sort of thing Aldous Huxley might have conceived had he lived to witness Reaganism and collaborated with Ionesco. The lies and illusions inexorably bound up with the bread and circuses of the twenty-first century American Empire cannot prevail. Ultimately, reality will intrude.



To contact the WSWS and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](http://wsws.org/contact)**