**“Surveillance Television”
The Ideological Power of the Fictional and Factual in Reality TV**

by

James Dean B.A.

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of
Graduate Studies and Research in partial fulfilment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts
in Film Studies

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**“Surveillance: Television” The Ideological Power of the Fictional
and Factual in Reality TV**

submitted by James Dean, B.A. Hons., (Western)
in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts.

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ABSTRACT

This thesis analyses the current manifestation of Reality Television, with a particular emphasis on the programs *Survivor* and *The Osbournes*. These programs employ a wide variety of fictional devices to create drama and recognizable narrative patterns. In this sense, these shows can be considered fictional or constructed. However, the method of production in Reality Television depends upon a vast collection of cameras and audio equipment which strongly resembles our contemporary high surveillance society. As in Reality programming, everyday citizens are finding themselves being increasingly watched by the hyper-vigilant gaze of surveillance systems. In this sense, these shows can be considered “real” or like reality. This unique combination of fictional and factual properties make Reality Television a potentially powerful ideological tool. This thesis concludes that systems of surveillance are naturalized and made desirable through the fictional devices of Reality Television.

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Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

The phenomenon of Reality Television has reached pandemic levels. All of the major networks have started to saturate their prime-time schedules with these programs that promise to deliver a tantalizing, one-of-a-kind encounter with “reality.” These programs vary from the sleazy, such as ABC’s *Are You Hot: The Search For America’s Sexiest People* (2003) where individuals subject themselves to superficial aesthetic scrutiny; the bizarre, such as the WB’s *The Surreal Life* (2003) where seven former notorious pop culture figures (participants include the likes of former child-stars Emmanuel Lewis and Corey Feldman) move in together and attempt to peacefully coexist; to the deceitful, such as FOX’s *Joe Millionaire* (2003), where a group of breezy oblivious women are led to believe that the handsome construction worker they are courting, is in fact, a millionaire.¹ Whatever the content of these programs, there is no denying the enormous impact they are having on commercial television. During the 2002-2003 television season, for the first time in television history, seven of the top twenty network primetime series were Reality programs. Half of the top ten rated programs were from the Reality category.²

Reality Television is changing the landscape of commercial television. Compared to its fictional counterparts, Reality programs are extremely inexpensive to produce as there is no need to pay high salaries to big name actors or retain the participants for more than one season. Most of the participants in Reality programming are regular people who are looking for their moment in the spotlight and are unwilling to miss such an opportunity by wrangling over contractual matters. It is the combination of the thriftiness of these programs and their potential to attract huge

audiences (and subsequently generate considerable revenue) that makes Reality television so enticing to television executives.

While the economics of Reality Television are intriguing and worthy of consideration, my interest in Reality programs lies elsewhere. However, before delving into the issues of Reality Television that interest me, it may prove helpful to discuss how my interest in this type of programming developed. As a film student, I had found that documentary film provided the most interesting theoretical discourse in the area of film studies. I was particularly interested in questions of realism, rhetorical structures and truth claims. I considered such issues as: can a camera record reality?; with so many similarities, what makes documentary film different from fictional films?; what makes a documentary untruthful?; is there such a thing as indisputable visual evidence?

After spending a fair amount of time deliberating upon these topics, I found myself to be further interested in the connection between documentary and fictional forms. Not surprisingly, I began to study docudrama and the ramifications of trying to convey some kind of truth claim about the historical world through a reconstructed fictional framework. Of course, the uses of docudrama vary greatly: from a short clip in an otherwise nonfiction documentary to an entire film that is comprised of re-enactments. Furthermore, docudrama is often employed to achieve very different ends. In Hollywood's version, docudrama is used for the purpose of entertainment, while more documentary-like films use docudrama as way of engaging the viewer in a dialogue about a particular issue or issues. From this background, a fundamental question arises: What is docudrama, a theory or a practice? Whatever the answer, the ultimate value of docudrama is that while not a strictly indexical representation, it can be considered indexical in nature as it points

back to a specific moment in history and its origins in the real world. Moreover, docudrama can be used to convey a variety of information that a purely indexical representation cannot communicate, most importantly emotion.

The conceptual questions raised by documentary and docudrama provided a background to consider Reality Television. Like documentaries, these programs depend upon the indexical qualities of the recording apparatus, but like docudrama, they are also very much dependent upon fictional tropes to attract and maintain an audience. As Bill Nichols has written, Reality Television is a compelling combination of “the raw and the cooked, evidence and story, [that] produces a spectacular oscillation between the sensational and the banal. Without the sensational contents, the stories might well dissipate into repetition and boredom. Without the reassurances of the narrative frame, the sensational might only prompt disgust and revulsion.”³ Reality Television represents a unique hybrid cross of the key characteristics of documentary and docudrama. Reality programs have immediate qualities, yet are highly mediated through the overt use of structural and narrative techniques. The question becomes: How does Reality Television manage to effectively balance these two opposed characteristics? However, before progressing further into the topic, it is necessary to stake out the historical landscape and explain what I mean when I refer to Reality Television.

Reality Television was a term that began to be applied to a specific kind of television programming in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Reality Television is generally understood as beginning in United States with NBC’s *Unsolved Mysteries* in 1987.⁴ Other programs soon followed, including FOX’s *America’s Most Wanted* (1988), CBS’s *Rescue 911* (1989), FOX’s *Cops* (1989). These programs often depict, as their titles suggest, extreme and sensational

situations (chases, rescues, criminal activity), frequently involving the intervention of emergency personnel.

Film and media scholar Richard Kilborn was the one of the first to offer a solid account of the distinguishing features of this first generation of Reality Television. Kilborn writes that any description of Reality Television should include three essential parts:

(a) the recording, ‘on the wing’, and frequently with the help of lightweight video equipment, of the events in the lives of individuals or groups, (b) the attempt to simulate such real-life events through various forms of dramatized reconstruction and (c) the incorporation of this material, in suitably edited form, into an attractively packaged television program which can be promoted on the strength of its ‘reality’ credentials.⁵

Kilborn’s definition is useful for providing an initial framework from which to consider the structure of Reality Television. Any examination of these initial Reality programs seem to confirm Kilborn’s findings. These programs are based upon powerfully affective moments, told, much like docudrama, through dramatic reconstruction, while promising the viewer the opportunity to “see it like it happened.”

However, as Reality Television has evolved, its key properties have begun to mutate. What I have termed the “second-generation” of Reality programming firmly established itself on the evening of May 31, 2000, with the debut of CBS’s *Survivor*. The unprecedented success of the program spawned an entire new generation of Reality programming, that includes CBS’s *Big Brother*, ABC’s *The Mole*, and CBS’s *The Amazing Race*. Unlike most of their predecessors, these programs are consumed with providing the viewer with a first-hand experience of witnessing events as they unfold.⁶ These programs allow the viewer to overhear the most intimate conversations and observe immediate reactions of the participants to a variety of situations. Gone

are the second-hand dramatic reconstructions, replaced by lightweight cameras and recording equipment that continually record the transpiring action. While, as Kilborn notes, for the first generation of Reality Television “the emphasis [was] on capturing the vibrancy and spontaneity of real-life events,” the second generation brought that promise to fruition by providing direct indexical access to the events in question.⁷ There has been a metamorphosis in Reality Television. Instead of simply showing “what happened,” Reality programs began to show it “as it happened.” Without question, this style of choice is in the vein of the cinema verite movement, where the camera is in the middle of the action, observing, but also by its very presence, participating in the action. Reality Television is, like cinema verite, a process driven form. Reality Television’s use of this style seems to align it with the documentary tradition from which this “reality as recorded” movement originated. Even today, the cinema verite style is strongly associated with notions of unmediated visual evidence, an association from which Reality programming attempts to profit. This belief in the sovereignty of the cinema verite camera for “catching life unaware” can be seen in countless news programs that use footage from the frontline showing “what is really going on” or hidden cameras exposing treachery and deceit. The totality of the experience is based upon the camera’s presence in and amongst the action. Or, for Reality Television, the camera’s ability to witness everything at once.

The other important change in Reality Television is in regard to “who” and “what” is shown. The first Reality programs often involved depictions of sensational, almost unbelievable situations, ranging from paranormal encounters, the rescuing of children from the jaws of death, to drug busts of cocaine kingpins. However, the second-generation of Reality programming changed from reporting on “real” events that transpired to creating situations in which the drama

of humanity could be played out and recorded by the camera. Instead of being structured around a question such as: “How does an emergency rescue team or a police force work?”; the focus has become: “What happens when a group of strangers are stranded on an island or locked in a house together?” This change is extremely important. A stage is set for the players to act out their responses. They may not be expected to respond in some sort of Pavlovian manner, but they are expected to respond or perform for the cameras. Reality Television has shifted from being exposition (how?), to experiential (what happens when?).

In addition, by and large the participants in these programs are usually normal people, not heroes, victims, survivors, or the like, as seen in the first-generation of Reality Television. These individuals are not expected to behave or act in ways that associate them with the laudable values that we expect from police or firemen. In fact, they are not exceptional in any way, other than the fact that they are on a Reality program and placed on a stage or island of opportunity. While most of today’s Reality programs are populated by unheard-of individuals, there are some programs that do use celebrity figures, most notably *The Osbournes*. However, as I will discuss in a later chapter, the Reality Television machinery naturalizes and normalizes the notion of a star persona.

Throughout this thesis, I will use Reality Television to refer to the second-generation or the current dominant type of Reality programming. In addition, while many of the current Reality programs share common key elements, each offers a slightly different and unique approach. Therefore, for the purposes of clarity, my references to Reality Television will be limited to a consideration of only two programs: *Survivor* and *The Osbournes*. I will be examining how the constructed or fictional aspects of these programs function to provide a highly entertaining and

easily consumable product. However, while containing many fictional properties, these programs can also be understood to be “real,” in the sense that they reflect our contemporary high surveillance society. In this thesis I will examine how the fundamentally opposed fictional and factual elements of these programs co-exist and the potential ramifications of this synthesis.

I have chosen *Survivor* not only because it represents a watershed moment in the evolution of Reality Television, but also because it has become one of the most consistently recognizable and watched programs in the category. My inclusion of *The Osbournes* is partly for similar reasons, as this program has significantly permeated popular culture in a way that few other Reality programs have been able to do. *Survivor* and *The Osbournes* are the only two Reality programs to ever win Emmy awards in the “best non-fiction program” category. In addition, what makes these two shows an intriguing pair is that while the participants of *Survivor* are regular people, the fundamental drive behind *The Osbournes* is to watch a celebrity. These diametrically opposed approaches have become the standards for Reality Television. There are other Reality programs that feature celebrities, and many programs that do not. However, all make an equal claim to being “real.” This contrast in participants will allow me to explore how Reality Television is able to create celebrities out of average people, and contain or minimize the “star persona” of more well-known figures. I will argue that all of the participants of Reality programs, regardless of extra-textual discourse, are depicted in a similar fashion.

Before getting too deep into these issues, it is necessary to review some of the literature on Reality Television. Unfortunately, the literature available on Reality programming is sparse and fairly limited in its scope. Moreover, the majority of the materials available are in regard to the first generation of Reality Television with very little having been written on the *Survivor* and

post-*Survivor* brand of Reality Television.

The other major difficulty with the body of work that has been written on Reality Television, is that many of the authors have assumed a very confrontational position in regard to the Reality programming. They seem to take these programs' claims of reality extremely personally. What has resulted is an excessively reductive examination of the category that has pervaded the writings from academics to entertainment reports. In a recent newspaper article, a senior minister of a large Protestant church commented on Reality Television by stating that, "My hope is there is a bottom to the bottom – that the end of these banally engineered events lies either in the boredom that comes with the short shelf life of every modern novelty or in the prospect that viewers may one day have their fill of false reality and yearn for something more authentic."⁸ Such a scathing, and perhaps short-sighted, indictment of Reality Television may not be surprising coming from a religious leader, as the racy content of some of these programs may offend certain sensibilities. However, many in the mainstream media have proclaimed similar damnations. Moreover, many academics have bared their teeth, and subsequently their biases, when discussing the phenomenon. For example, Bill Nichols writes that Reality Television is "a phrase that shows no embarrassment at its own oxymoronic ring."⁹ Joel Black also takes a condescending swipe at Reality Television writing that, "The fact that such shows are unscripted hardly makes them real."¹⁰ These comments are reflective of much of the work that has been done on Reality Television – an exasperated shout "Of course it is not real!" While both of these scholars make seminal and thoughtful contributions to the literature on Reality Television, their works are laced with a dismissive and patronizing tone. Many writers, when engaging with the phenomenon of Reality Television, seem overly antagonistic. Subsequently, much of the literature pursues what

these programs “are not,” as opposed to what “they are.”

This ultimately inhibiting form of discourse is one of the primary reasons I chose to write on Reality Television. I write not to redeem or champion the form, but simply to engage with it on neutral terms. There needs to be consideration given to what Reality Television is and how it works without the need for an absolute or perhaps outdated classification.

While a great deal of the literature on Reality Television may be infected with this polemical thinking, many important issues and concepts have been raised. From a film studies perspective, the most important piece of writing on Reality programs is Bill Nichols’ chapter “At the Limits of Reality (TV)” from his book, *Blurred Boundaries: Questions of Meaning in Contemporary Culture*. Given Nichols’ predilection for documentary film, it should not be surprising that he approaches Reality Television in regard to how it functions differently from documentary texts. He writes that the primary distinction between the two resides in Reality Television’s ability to nullify the historical world from which it came. Nichols writes:

Reality TV’s perverse kinship with traditional documentary film, network newscasting, and ethnographic film lies in its ability to absorb the referent. The digestive enzymes of reality TV (its distracting quality and spectacle, its dramatic story lines and self-perpetuation) break the referent down into palatable confections that do not represent an absent referent so much as cannibalize and assimilate it into a different type of substance. The historical world becomes reduced to a set of simulations and idle talk.¹¹

This breakdown of the referent creates a world of total simulation that continually reinscribes the viewer into the masquerade. Reality Television presents “a chronicle of contingent, futureless moments strung together in a protracted morality play that produces an entire telescope that does not so much screen us off from reality, or refer us back to it, as beam us abroad a tele-

visual simulation.” Of Nichols’ many insightful comments, this is one of his most astute. Reality Television does not present reality. It presents a simulation of reality. The simulated worlds that these programs create replace the need to contemplate the “real” world as the simulation absorbs everything. More importantly, for my work, it is a “tele-visual” simulation. That is to say, it is a simulation particular to television, completely invested in the language and mode of address of the small screen. Moreover, the television set itself plays an important role in the reception of Reality programming acting as the conduit through which these unique sights and sounds are made available to the audience. The television set becomes the window through which voyeuristic audiences peep.

While Nichols approaches Reality Television in comparison to documentary film, Joel Black examines Reality programming in relation to how the cinema has made life itself more graphic and less “real.” In particular, the documentary medium (and its Reality Television offspring) have obliterated the line between reality and fiction. Typically, he finds that the overly constructed nature of the programs ultimately undermines the promise of a “reality” experience. He writes that:

so-called ‘caught on video’ footage of reality TV is marked by its own artificial verite aesthetic (shaky camera work, static and technical glitches, time codes, and other aesthetic techniques that suggest the footage was not studio-produced) . . . [Reality TV’s] claim of realism is not achieved by stripping the imagery of all mediation to somehow reveal an unadulterated “reality” – an impossible feat. In fact, it tends to require more mediation to assert that its images are real.¹²

While Black’s observations on reality are thought-provoking, he offers very little direct commentary on Reality Television, other than disavowing its realness. His central argument that “reality itself is the issue, reality in liberal, democratic, mass-mediated societies no longer is self

evident, but constantly contested and up for grabs” is not an overly difficult one to concede.¹³ Furthermore, if reality itself is under fire, Reality Television’s authentic status may be of little importance as there is no fixed position from which authenticity or reality can be judged.

The work of Nichols and Black encapsulates the difficulty film studies scholars have dealing with Reality Television. There is a constant desire to situate Reality programming in regard to documentary film. While such a comparison is tempting and does offer some valuable insights, it fails to engage with Reality Television at face value, always referring to another “other” text, overlooking the greater context of the phenomenon. The secondary pull for film scholars is to address the phenomenon in terms of realism and the indexical value of the recorded image. However, such an issue is more a straw-man than a rich theoretical field. Very few, if any, would argue that Reality Television represents a “pure reality” or, for that matter, any kind of reality at all. Reality Television is a televisual manifestation and creation, existing only on the screen and for the screen.

These two compulsions of film studies scholars are precisely the points that I believe need to be argued against. I want to ask different questions. To that effect, I began looking at writings on Reality Television from other disciplines.

A natural place to turn for other perspectives on Reality Television was media studies where the leading voice on the topic is Jon Dovey, and in particular his book, *Freakshow: First Person Media and Factual Television*. He discusses Reality Programming as the by-product of the current moment in history. He writes, “There is the strong sense that Reality Television is the perfect televisual form for the contemporary cultural moment. In its constant restatement of a melodramatic theatre of horrors, in its insistence upon the importance of private events discussed

in public, its use of fictional techniques applied to factual forms, Reality Television has become a new crucial component of the fabric of popular culture.”¹⁴

Dovey’s quote contains a number of key themes that appear throughout his book, and, also a number of the issues that I have chosen to engage. The most important is the collapse of the sense of public and private through the use of technology. Reality Television has created the means by which the very personal and private is exposed to the leering, objectifying gaze of a mass audience. The foundation of Reality Television is built upon seeing that which cannot be normally seen, but most significantly, what we are not supposed to see.

Also important is the necessity of the use of fictional techniques to make factual forms palatable or entertaining for the audience. Dovey writes that, “Reality TV uses textual forms more commonly associated within fiction rather than factual TV, especially crime fiction.”¹⁵ The use of such recognizable forms allows the spectator to more completely invest in what is taking place on the screen. These narrative structures, Dovey writes, “push the stories selected to become far more frightening than actual crime as well as far more comforting at the level of resolution.”¹⁶ That is to say, fictional techniques infuse Reality Television with a depth and intensity that a straight factual representation could not as easily supply.

The core of this thesis is built around two extremely important issues: the breakdown of the private and the potency of the use of fictional elements. Much of the work here is trying to reconcile these two seemingly contradictory issues. In essence, I am attempting to formulate an answer to the question: Is Reality Television eliminating our very real notion of privacy through fictional means?

Dovey makes another seminal observation that enabled me to begin to consider what the

answer to this question might be. Dovey writes, “that in order to make some sense of the Reality TV phenomenon we have to look outside of the prescribed production, text, audience, formula toward the disciplines of sociology and economics before returning to think about such programs as culture.”¹⁷ Taking Dovey’s suggestion to heart, I turned to sociology, and found two inspiring articles that allowed me to arrive at a distinct and unique reading of Reality Television that would address the conceptual issues with which I had been wrestling. The first of these writings is Aaron Doyle’s “*Cops*: Television Policing as Policing Reality.”

Doyle argues that the Reality program *Cops* fosters in the audience a “law and order ideology.”¹⁸ As Doyle writes, *Cops* “encourages the viewer to identify with police, while distancing them from other characters shown. This provides protagonists for the story – but also reinforces the Us-Them dichotomy characteristic of law and order ideology.”¹⁹ The program continually positions the audience to align themselves with the police, peering over their shoulders, joining them in the ongoing battle against a large population of obviously guilty criminals.

While Doyle’s comments on ideology in Reality Television are only applicable to *Cops*, his writing inspired me to attempt to develop an ideological reading of Reality Television that would be applicable to the entire category by addressing the question of: what is Reality Television’s role in society?

The other vital observation made by Doyle relates to how Reality programming is capable of influencing society. He writes, “*Cops* does not simply influence the viewer; it also shapes practices and situations in the criminal justice system itself . . . There are numerous indications that police tailor their behaviour for the program . . . *Cops* also reshapes criminal justice by

influencing police and would-be police who are viewers.”²⁰ It is a strange and potentially alarming situation, as Reality Television is paradoxically capable of affecting reality. Doyle’s point seemingly refers back to Black’s point that, “reality itself is the issue, reality in liberal, democratic, mass-mediated societies no longer is self evident, but constantly contested and up for grabs.” However, what is most interesting about Doyle’s observations is the power a Reality program has to elicit real change or modification of behaviour. It follows that if Reality Television is an ideological tool, it could be an immensely powerful one.

The final piece of writing I wish to acknowledge is James Wong’s *Here’s Looking at You: Reality TV, Big Brother, and Foucault*. His central premise, based upon Foucault’s *Discipline and Punish*²¹, is that “linking reality TV (and the idea of Big Brother) to Foucault’s use of the Panopticon metaphor is mistaken. For Foucault, surveillance is only half of the story of the metaphor. The other half is that we are the ones who are exercising power for ourselves.”²² This premise raises some fascinating issues about the connection between surveillance and the systems of control with which we actively participate. What particularly interests me is the relation between performance and surveillance. Wong writes that “the critical point is not surveillance per se, but the goal of surveillance, which is the normalization of individuals.”²³ That is to say that surveillance elicits a particular performance from its subjects. Moreover, the same kind of performance seems to be also taking place for the participants of Reality Television in front of those cameras. Knowing that all of their actions are being recorded to be shown to a mass audience, the participants of Reality programs are continually aware of the importance of the image they are projecting.

Drawing from such a wide variety of texts, my thesis straddles the boundaries of several

different disciplines each one contributing a key idea or conception that has pushed me toward a final position. My argument will be that Reality Television is made up of two distinct and paradoxical parts. The first is that Reality programs rely heavily on fictive elements in the construction of their “reality” and the second is that these programs mimic our position of subjects and objects of surveillance. The first issue is discussed in the second chapter, through an analysis of *Survivor*. It considers how the various fictitious or constructed elements are combined to create the *Survivor* experience, laying bare the foundation upon which the entertainment value of the program is built. It is my hope that a thorough analysis will call attention to the large number of mechanisms, some explicit and others more subtle, that influence the reception of the program.

In the third chapter, I will further the discussion of the constructed nature of Reality programming by analysing *The Osbournes* as a fictional construct unique to television. In this chapter, I will examine the reflexivity of Reality Television. As it constantly refers back to itself and other kinds of television programming, Reality Television is built upon the dynamics of televisual intertextuality, borrowing elements and techniques from a variety of genres. These programs structure “reality” based on familiar and easily recognizable patterns of consumption that have been appearing on television for years.

However, while Reality Television is highly consciously constructed, paradoxically there is an element of reality that constitutes its second distinctive feature. In the fourth chapter, I explore the connection between our increasing high surveillance society and the “big brother” experience of Reality Television. Like the individuals on these programs, we are finding ourselves increasingly under the gaze of surveillance equipment, constantly being watched, tracked, and

monitored. Reality programs mimic our own constant position of being both the subject and object of electronic surveillance.

In drawing these seemingly opposed notions together the true ideological power of this type of programming is revealed. In the fifth chapter, I argue using fundamental psychoanalytic principles such as identification and voyeurism that the fictional techniques that Reality Television employs work to quell our fears about a terminal loss of privacy. As these programs are entertaining and present us with an ideal reflection of ourselves through an exaggeration of the importance of everyday activity, surveillance is made palatable, if not desirable.

Chapter 2

SURVIVOR: THE GAME OF REALITY

On the evening of May 31st, 2000, the history of television experienced a major shift. It was on that night that CBS aired the first episode of its new Reality Television program *Survivor*. The show was a big-budget knock-off of the Swedish hit *Expedition Robinson*, which left sixteen castaways stranded on a tropical island while competing for cash and prizes. The first episode of *Survivor* ranked sixth in the Nielsen rankings, with 15.5 million viewers curiously tuning in to find out what this 'new' type of program had to offer.²⁴ By the series finale on August 16th, *Survivor* had become the most popular show on television, standing atop of the Nielsen rankings for nine consecutive weeks and amazingly drew an unprecedented summer audience of more than 50 million viewers.²⁵ Only the January Super Bowl broadcast, which attracted 88 million viewers, had a larger audience that year.

Robert Thompson, director of the Center for the Study of Popular Television at Syracuse University, prophesied that, "After the summer of 2000, there will never be another day in any of our lives where there won't be some kind of this programming on television."²⁶ He was proven correct as the incredible success of *Survivor* prompted the other major networks to produce their own Reality programming in an attempt to cash in on the craze. Some of these programs were moderately successful, such as CBS's voyeuristic *Big Brother* (2000), ABC's fantasy travel game *The Mole* (2001), and NBC's game of extreme challenges *Fear Factor* (2001). However, a large majority of these programs failed to attract a regular audience, such as the military survival/endurance game *Boot Camp* (2001), *Chains of Love* (2001) a bizarre game where a

single woman is chained to four would-be suitors, and the adultery inspiring game *Temptation Island* (2001).

While many have imitated *Survivor*, no show has duplicated its phenomenal success. Today, it is still the most recognized and successful Reality program. It is a significant achievement considering the major challenges the program has had to confront over its five-year run. The demise of the show has long been predicted on the basis that the novelty of the program was wearing off. The other major potential obstacle the show faced was a post-September 11th environment in which the ultimate reality of two planes crashing into the World Trade Center towers might have made the realist claims of *Survivor*, and the like, seem dull and insignificant.²⁷ Witnessing such death and destruction live on television, presented a raw and brute reality the viewing public was not accustomed to seeing. It was not a simulation but a moment of irreversible terror.

Notwithstanding the doomsayers' chant of "the end is near," *Survivor* has continued to draw an impressive audience. The third installment of the series, *Survivor: Africa*, precariously debuted on October 11, 2001, one month after the terrorist attacks.²⁸ Despite this challenge, the average viewing audience was still a solid 23 million viewers a week. The current *Survivor*, *The Amazon*, being aired at the time of the writing of this thesis, at the midpoint has never dipped under 20 million viewers a week and is the seventh-ranked program overall for the season. In Canada, *Survivor* is by far the most watched television program, drawing an average 3.8 million viewers, way ahead of its nearest competitor *Friends*, which has been drawing around 2.75 million viewers.²⁹ The ratings windfall of the first season may never be equalled but the show still maintains a large core audience.

While other Reality Television programs have come and gone with various degrees of success, there is little doubt of *Survivor*'s staying power and its dominance in the category. In this chapter, I will closely examine the machinery of *Survivor* and illuminate how different aspects of the program function to create a highly-consumable product that has mass appeal. In exposing the construction of the program I hope to illustrate the many fictional and structural conceits that *Survivor* adopts to achieve its version of Reality Television.

At a most basic level, *Survivor* is a television game show. Sixteen 'castaways' are stranded in an exotic location and left to fend for themselves against the elements and each other. Every three days (or each episode) one participant is voted out of the game by his/her fellow competitors. This process of elimination has given rise to the popular expression, "the tribe has spoken." The last contestant, or sole survivor, is awarded one million dollars during the season's grand finale.

Like a game show, *Survivor* follows a strict template for every episode. Each show begins with a recap of last week's events, to make sure all potential viewers are given the opportunity to be in on the action. This device is similar to old matinee cowboy film serials that had a different episode or chapter each week. Many current fictional television programs, especially dramas, also rely on this technique to keep the audience informed. The body of each *Survivor* program consists of three key events: a reward challenge (often for food), an immunity challenge (for immunity from the vote), and a tribal council where the votes are cast. In between these events are interviews with contestants and selected shots of the castaways going about their daily activities.

This structure simplifies things for the viewing audience because, at one level, there are no

surprises. The action is largely fixed and missing any part of, or an entire episode, does not adversely affect the enjoyment of the program. Neil Postman recognizes this trend in popular television and writes, "Every television program must be a complete package in itself. No previous knowledge is to be required. There must not be even a hint that learning is hierarchical, that it is an edifice constructed on a foundation. The viewer must be allowed to enter at any point without prejudice."³⁰ Clearly not all television programs use this device, while a lack of previous knowledge may not impair the possible enjoyment of a sitcom like *Friends*, it would negatively affect the enjoyment of a more complex program like the political drama *The West Wing*. However, Postman's point seems particularly relevant for a program that is marketed as "Reality Television." The structure *Survivor* closely adheres to and situates closer to something like *The Price is Right*, with its repetitive "showcase showdown" structure.

Every element of *Survivor* works to propel the narrative towards a resolution or closure: the naming of the ultimate winner. The program employs a "hyper-narrative" so that the events of each episode will correspond, roughly, to the events of every other episode. This format does not challenge the audience but rather provides a framework of intelligibility with which they can easily relate. One can even argue that this "hyper-narrative" is nothing more than "scripted reality."

Structurally, perhaps *Survivor* is most similar to sporting events. Going into a football game everyone knows that the game will be divided into four fifteen-minute quarters with a half-time break in the middle or that an average baseball game will consist of nine innings. The suspense and drama of these contests resides in what is going to happen within the given context of the event. The same is true of *Survivor*. The audience tunes in to see how things will play out within the structure of the show. Everyone who watches knows generally "what" will happen.

They watch to see “how” it will happen. Or, more precisely, they watch to see what compelling sights and sounds the camera will deliver from the midst of the action. Such an experience is only possible when watching Reality Television. Nichols refers to this involvement when he states, “Reality TV elicits a pleasure built on participatory involvement in the “show” and the game of ‘show and tell’ it performs for us.”³¹ Or as John Ellis writes, “The sheer repetition of the series format enables this process to go ahead, as it provides the framework of expectancy, intelligibility and evaluation.”³² In other words, the viewer can rely on the structure of the program, if not on the conduct of the participants.

Staying with the sporting event analogy, the referee of *Survivor* is Jeff Probst, who was the host of TV’s *Rock n’ Roll Jeopardy*. He rules over the reward and immunity challenges, explaining events and enforcing penalties. In this respect his role in *Survivor* is extremely similar to his role in *Rock n’ Roll Jeopardy*. He is the game show host that “runs” the game, awards the points, and eventually declares the winner. Yet his role in *Survivor* is complemented by his duties during the ‘tribal council’ segments at the end of each episode. During these segments, Probst functions as an interviewer asking the contestants a number of questions before the votes are cast, acting as a surrogate interviewer for the audience. The questions he asks are based on contentious issues that have arisen between the contestants. For example, if earlier in the program one contestant is shown complaining about how little work others are doing around camp, without fail Probst will ask that contestant a question akin to, “What is the mood around camp?” The questions are open-ended enough that he does not call the contestant out before the other players but are succinct enough to allow the viewing audience to know what he is really asking and to observe how the player handles the situation. For a contestant, a wrong answer in front of the

other players could potentially cost him or her the game. It is a form of titillation as Probst asks those questions that we would devilishly like to ask. They are questions that attempt to “stir the pot.”

Jeff Probst has become synonymous with *Survivor* itself, acting as the “face” of the franchise. However, there is little question that the castaways themselves are the real “stars” of the show. A number of trends have emerged regarding the participants of *Survivor* which merit some comment. *Survivor* is increasingly selecting a more aesthetically pleasing cast, primarily consisting of young men and women with well-developed muscular bodies. Extremely attractive protagonists are routinely used in fictional television programs, like *Baywatch*, to capitalize upon the desires of the audience. While “beauty” is always a subjective term, a comparison between the cast of the first series and, in particular, the two most recent ones, reveals a definite shift. Rich Hatch, the notorious winner of the first installment, would seem grossly overweight compared to all the “active-lifestyle” contestants who have followed in his footsteps. It is not just a matter of waistline, there is also the issue of age. The first run of *Survivor* had three contestants over the age of sixty. Since then, there have never been more than two contestants over the age of sixty in the same series. When these observations are combined with comments made by Executive Producer Mark Burnett on CBS’s *The Early Show* before the beginning one of the most recent series, stating that *Survivor: Thailand* was his best-looking group yet and that “when you see their pictures on camera, facially . . . these people look better than any other (Survivor)” the emphasis on certain physical traits becomes apparent.³³

Given the nature of television, this trend toward beauty and youth should not be surprising. Viewers are far more likely to tune in to see youthful bodies, than an overweight

average looking middle-aged man or woman. The *Survivor* product is very much sold on sex appeal, arguably more so than on claims of “reality” or authenticity. This emphasis on sex appeal is a common trait shared by virtually all the Reality Television game show programs. Attractive contestants have become a solidified convention of Reality programming. Furthermore, even trying to imagine a show like *Survivor* with a majority of contestants who challenge the standards of beauty that have been normalized by the mass media is almost impossible. Perhaps the “real” of Reality TV is the “real-ly attractive people to look at.”

In addition to the aesthetic appeal of the contestants, another intriguing issue about the cast is the way race and social identities are incorporated into each series. Fictional programs often try to incorporate a wide variety of racial, ethnic, and social groups to reach out to widest audience possible. In the medical-drama *ER*, of the ten main characters, two are black, one is Asian, and one is gay. The most blatant example of *Survivor*’s use of highly constructed “casts” is that each series has included two black contestants, one male and the other female, and one contestant who represents the “other,” in other words one individual of either Asian, Hispanic, or South American Indian backgrounds. Upon reflection, this blatantly politically correct presentation seems extremely forced, if not insulting. While the racial and ethnic breakdown of the casting process is fairly obvious, more opaque is the recurrence of divergent social identities. It is not a coincidence that each series has had both an openly gay contestant and an extremely devout and vocal Christian, and their relationship has garnered significant screen time. This public playing out of interpersonal conflict is at very core of the *Survivor* experience. Reality Television is transgressing the privacy of belief and values.

In regard to *Survivor*’s mandate of creating conflict between two seemingly opposing

groups, the program bears a strong resemblance to the infamous “Stanford Prison Experiment” in 1971.³⁴ Like the subjects of the experiment, the *Survivor* contestants are willing participants that are sequestered and confined within a small area and forced to constantly renegotiate their relationships with those around them. Of course, the major difference between the two is that the Stanford experiment was undertaken as part of an academic study on the effects of the prison system while *Survivor* serves no purpose other than to entertain a mass audience. As a result, there is something almost sadistic about watching these individuals being pushed to emotional and physical extremes for nothing more than our enjoyment. It is spectacle for the sake of spectacle, not unlike how in ancient Rome, for the enjoyment of the masses, the gladiators would battle to the death. Yet in *Survivor*, the gladiators are not killed but banished from the community, and from the program, until the final episode. The Roman gladiators received no such second chance.

When discussing the characteristics of *Survivor*, a key consideration is how the program is filmed. As discussed in the introduction, *Survivor* depends on the aesthetics of immediacy. Cameras freely follow contestants around, no matter if they are running an obstacle course, out for a leisurely afternoon swim, or trying to hide from the game itself. In essence, the camera is continuously moving in an attempt to provide the most compelling view of each and every event. In addition to this army of hand-held cameras that constantly stalk the contestants, *Survivor* also uses helicopter shots to great effect. This footage is used to show an overhead view of various challenges, not only to show the length of a course, but to establish the competitors’ progress that would not be possible from cameras on the ground. These shots also provide stunning footage of the contestants set against the awesome natural backdrop of the various exotic locations.

The most interesting visual effect in *Survivor* in terms of the aesthetics of immediacy

results from the use of ‘night-vision’ technology. As the survivors have no access to artificial lighting, once the sun sets the situations around camp become invisible to regular cameras. To address this problem, the producers of *Survivor* decided to use digital cameras equipped with night-vision technology that results in ghostly-white surreal images of the contestants whose eyes sparkle like an animal’s eyes caught in the headlights of an approaching motor vehicle. At no point in the show is the presence of the camera more obvious and intrusive than in these shots. During these scenes there is a tangible change as the realist enterprise at the heart of the program gives way to the absolute need of showing the spectator, literally, everything. In so doing, the artifice is made blatantly visible, contrasting against the usually more naturalistic dynamics of the program.

The other major point of interest as far as the shooting style of *Survivor* is concerned, is the interview segments that are presented sporadically throughout each episode. In these segments the contestants are shown in the “talking head” style routinely used for interviews in documentary film and television. The contestants express their thoughts and feelings about the game, and more importantly, their views on their fellow competitors while safely segregated away from the prying ears of the other players. It is in these interviews that the personalities of the contestants, or the “characters,” are firmly established. Given that the nature of the game is a political battle of wits, and everything that is said and done can be potentially damaging, it is only in these moments of private reflection that the players drop their usually guarded and calculated exteriors to engage more directly with the camera.

These interviews are also important as they allow the contestants to become the narrators of the unfolding action. This is accomplished by inter-cutting the interviews with footage of

various actions, or using them as a voice-over on top of other shots. An example of this device can be found in *Survivor: Thailand*. One of contestants, Clay, reports of his team's victory:

You wanted to jump and holler and scream. But you can't, because it is the people you're living with, who you just beat. You don't want to rub it in their face, cause that can hurt you later if they're on the jury. Yet, they were sad, but trying to be happy for us. And that is what we had to tell them, 'We're all so sorry you have to go to tribal council tonight' . . . but we were so damn happy.³⁵

Before, after, and during this interview, footage of the contestants milling around the camp after the challenge is presented. The shots show the two tribes being extremely cordial to each other, in a display of harmony that seems forced, unnatural and very strange. It is only through the information provided by Clay's interview that the audience becomes aware of what is really happening between the tribes. Without the accompanying explanation, the footage itself would be difficult to comprehend. In addition, this example also illustrates how interviews are used to establish "character." In this interview, Clay is presented as a cocky brash character, certainly not sympathetic or humble. In a later interview in the same episode, when discussing the killing of a chicken, Clay makes the following statement that further inscribes his character: "I have never seen such a ceremony for killing a damn chicken in my life. There are animals put on (sic) here for us to eat. Just kill'em and eat'em. It is not that big of a deal." The comments further define Clay as a hard-hearted, perhaps even ignorant, individual. The same type of character development occurs for all the contestants. It is not so much what they do during an episode that determines their character, but what they say in the interviews. I do not mean to suggest that the various individuals on the show are simply portrayed as "good-guys" or "bad-guys." Characterization relies instead on character traits that are recurrently emphasized such as narcissism, sarcasm, deceitfulness, insincerity and intensity. Once these traits are assigned to

certain players, it becomes difficult for them to “break character.” In this respect, the contestants in *Survivor* are similar to the one-dimensional characters often seen in fictional television, especially in sitcoms, like the character of “Kramer” in *Seinfeld*.

Just as these interview segments are used to turn real people into character-types, editing is used to shape and dramatize situations and interactions. Editing in *Survivor* is a narrative tool that enhances the “reality” presented, and it functions in much the same way as classical continuity editing. Shot-reverse-shot sequences are especially useful in constructing responses making moot what the contestant is looking at “in reality.” A close examination of specific shots often leads to finding incongruities between the images, such as different light levels, contestants in an incorrect position, or even slight changes in clothing and/or appearance. Situations are manipulated to create the greatest degree of emotional effect. That is to say, *Survivor* creates events that have never existed anywhere but on the television screen. *Survivor* is consistently structured to provide the highest possible degree of drama. To do so, it becomes necessary to use editing creatively, manufacturing situations that fulfill the tenets of dramatic television. For the show to work there must be dramatic elements such as romance, suspense, intrigue, comedy and action. Elements that can only be presented, due to the technical limitations, to the audience through a masterful reworking of the raw footage.

Another key component of how *Survivor* creates drama is through the use of music. The music heightens the dramatic effect of many of the scenes, much in the same manner that a musical score creates additional emotional effect in a fiction film by creating mood. The presence of music is most notable in scenes that are intended to be humorous. The action on the screen is matched with light carefree music that clearly signals to the viewer that the scene unfolding should

be read as comical. For example, in an episode of *Survivor: Thailand* this kind of music is played while a monkey is shown sneaking into the castaways' camp and gorging itself with their precious food stores. The music heightens and adds to the enjoyment of the action. The other notable part of *Survivor* that relies heavily on the use of music is in the "tribal council" sequences that end each episode. In these scenes ominous music plays in the background as the tension builds over who will be the next contestant to depart. As the name of the ill-fated contestant is read and the tension finally eases, the music follows suit changing from suspenseful low tones to the rhythmic theme song that opens each episode.

Clearly for a commercial television program, the entertainment value it provides is of paramount importance. If viewers do not feel compelled to watch the program, or if it is not entertaining, they will change the channel and watch something else. The televisual medium, and all its programming, is intimately tied to the process of entertainment – regardless of generic classification. Neil Postman writes of television's prime directive, "Television offers a variety of subject matter, requires minimal skill to comprehend it, and is largely based on emotional gratification . . . in other words, is devoted entirely with supplying its audience with entertainment . . . No matter what is depicted or from what point of view, the overarching presumption is that it [the television program] is there for our amusement and pleasure."³⁶ Commercial television programs are designed to be easily consumed by a massive and diverse audience

For *Survivor*, as for any television program, its ability to attract and sustain viewership is the ultimate measure of the show's success. Consider that for each season of *Survivor* around 3000 hours of footage is recorded.³⁷ This footage is then edited down into 12 hour-long episodes, and a two-hour finale, for a total of 14 hours. Thus, the shooting ratio for *Survivor* is

an awesome 214 hours of footage shot, for every hour that is televised.³⁸ This is an immense cache of material from which the producers may draw. While it may be a luxury to have such a vast store of raw materials, conversely there is also the challenge of paring down the footage in such a way to make it not only intelligible but also entertaining. It is simply not enough to edit 3000 hours of raw footage into a sequential representation of the events that transpired. The program must be presented in a compelling format. That is to say, it is not enough for a Reality program like *Survivor* to show what happened: “Reality” needs to be enhanced by various techniques to make it more consumable.

Survivor has always been considered “family-friendly” and is shown in the earliest prime-time spot at 8:00 p.m.³⁹ Mark Burnett himself has said that *Survivor* must be “appropriate for children” and be “a communal experience the family can share.”⁴⁰ Accordingly, the choice of what to show, or more importantly, what not to show, falls under a considerable amount of scrutiny. In the same interview Burnett states that the cameras record the contestants doing many things which could never be included in the final program. Examples of this material would include nudity, offensive jokes or sayings, bodily functions, and extremely coarse language. However, while the majority of this material is edited out, if an event is of substantial importance it will be shown in a highly edited version.

In *Survivor: Australia*, for example, a contestant killed a wild pig in order to provide food for his tribe. The killing is depicted as the contestant running toward the animal with his knife, followed by a shot of rustling bush which the action is presumably taking place behind and lastly, a shot of another contestant’s face baring a worried, almost disgusted expression. While the soundtrack clearly indicates the pig is being slaughtered, the visuals only lead the audience to

assume what is happening. It is a way of showing what happened, without really showing it. In *Survivor: Marquesas* a similar event took place. This time a contestant was stung in the hand by a sea urchin, and the only means available to counter the toxin was to have another player urinate on the affected area. What the audience saw was a shot of a contestant starting to undo her pants, then a close-up of the afflicted player's face while he received the "treatment." Again, as with the previous example, "reality" was ironically deemed too raw and too graphic to be shown on television at 8:00 pm. By carefully editing these sequences, the sensationalism of the events remain intact, while not showing the event in such a way that would alienate the important family demographic.

The final mechanism of *Survivor* which I wish to discuss is the use of shots showing animals and natural landscapes that are inserted after a commercial break or during other transitional moments. They bear a strong resemblance to what might be seen in a nature documentary or a travelogue. This emphasis on the environment should not be surprising given Mark Burnett's assertion that, "Location has always been one of show's greatest characters."⁴¹ This imagery gives the program a real sense of place, in powerful contrast with the artifice of the game. Because these images speak for themselves, conveying a sense of awe and beauty, the simulation that is *Survivor* begins to breakdown. With this imagery the referent is not absorbed by the machinery of the program, it is re-inscribed, inducing the spectator, however briefly, to consider issues and questions about the historical world outside of the "game world."

To conclude, perhaps Canadian journalist Brian Johnson best sums up how *Survivor* has become so immensely successful, "Survivor, like any good drama, relies on clever casting, juicy scenarios, visual flair, teased suspense, a lush soundtrack – and editing that fosters a retroactive

sense of poetic justice.”⁴² In exposing the machinery that powers the *Survivor* engine, it becomes clear how the show is primarily based on the dictates of commercial television and uses the lure and excitement of “Reality Television” to attract and maintain an audience. The simple and straightforward structure of each episode makes the program easily accessible to new and old viewers alike. The contestants themselves are geared toward being aesthetically pleasing and representative of all ethnic and social groups that may be watching. These castaways are transformed into one-dimensional characters, like those of much fictional television, largely through the way in which their interview segments are edited together. The editing of all aspects of the program work to create the highest dramatic content possible, ensuring a compelling storyline and tantalizing scenes. The connections between *Survivor* and other fictional or dramatic television programming, in regard to the mechanisms and techniques they employ, are too real and concrete to ignore. However, such intense manipulations call into question what “reality,” if any at all, the show is attempting to present.

Chapter 3

THE OSBOURNES: A REAL FAMILY

With *Survivor* having firmly established its place in popular culture, television producers were eager to create similar programs that were relatively cheap to produce (compared to fictional programs with writers and actors to pay) and delivered sizeable audiences. It was not long before every major network, and the majority of the lesser ones, had at least one Reality program in their prime time schedules. Today, it is difficult to turn on the television without quickly coming across some of this sort of programming. Every new reality program offers unique and strange gimmicks to stand apart from the crowd. ESPN created a program about sports junkies trying to travel across the country without any money, while trying to complete sports related tasks.⁴³ World Wrestling Entertainment (formerly the WWF) created a program about individuals trying to earn a wrestling contract with the company.⁴⁴ NBC created *Crime and Punishment* (2002), a series which told the stories of prosecutors and their cases, using techniques similar to those of NBC's fictional program *Law and Order*.

One of the more intriguing of these post-*Survivor* programs is MTV's *The Osbournes*. The program is an inside look at the daily life of aging rock star Ozzy Osbourne and his eccentric family. In addition to Ozzy, the family consists of: wife/mother Sharon, the lynchpin that holds family together and rules over the Osbourne empire; daughter Kelly, a spoiled flighty teenager whose life primarily consists of going out with her friends; adolescent self-absorbed immature son, Jack; and an entire herd of dogs and cats.⁴⁵ The notorious history of the family, which the program uses as a backdrop, began in the early eighties when Ozzy, recently expelled out of the

legendary heavy metal band *Black Sabbath* for excessive alcohol and drug abuse, wed Sharon, the daughter of a high-powered record executive. Sharon became Ozzy's manager and transformed him into a multi-platinum solo artist. He became a "hero of disaffected youth and a pariah of civilized society, a reputation he sealed after he bit the head off a dove in a meeting with record execs and later decapitated a bat with his teeth during a concert."⁴⁶ Perhaps the most infamous Ozzy moment was in 1989, when a drunken Ozzy, after hearing voices in his head, tried to strangle Sharon.

With this rich and well-known history behind them, MTV decided that the Osbournes made the perfect test subjects for a new Reality TV experiment. The premise was to record a celebrity who did not act like one, a celebrity who had a "regular" family life that was identifiable to a vast number of viewers. The family was to be recorded going about their "normal" activities. The bickering between the children and the parents, fighting with the neighbours, taking out the garbage, discussions about drug and alcohol use are all laced together by a constant string of "bleeped-out" profanities. In addition to these "normal" activities, the family is also recorded taking part in strange and unique events, such as: Ozzy getting stoned, animals soiling the new carpets, and Ozzy on tour. It is a strange mix of the banal and the eccentric. Perhaps Matthew Gilbert best describes the program as "the post-millennial Munsters, the gothed-up Simpsons, or the bird-flipping Cleavers, take your pick."⁴⁷

The program debuted on March 5, 2002 to an audience of just over two million viewers. Ratings and hype for the program continued to build during its ten episode run, reaching a crescendo when 7.2 millions tuned in to watch the season finale. It became the highest rated show ever on MTV and the highest rated cable program of all-time. The program's success is

not only seen in ratings statistics, but also in the revenue that it generates for MTV. At the peak of the first season, “the show was raking in \$100,000 to \$150,000 per thirty-second spot, comparable to the average prime time spot on broadcast television. This season, MTV has upped the price to around \$200,000.”⁴⁸ The icing on the Osbournes’ cake came at the 2002 Emmy Awards, when the wildest family on television walked away with the Emmy for the best non-fiction program.

In this chapter, I wish to explore, as in the previous one, what techniques and structures are used in *The Osbournes* to create a dynamic and compelling rendering of reality. I will focus on how *The Osbournes*, like *Survivor*, uses numerous television practices and techniques to make the show easily identifiable to the viewing audience. In essence, *The Osbournes* is constructed out of the tracings of almost everything seen on television.

While the structure of *Survivor* is quite straightforward and easily recognizable, the same cannot be claimed of *The Osbournes*. While *Survivor* is, in many aspects, highly predictable, when tuning in to *The Osbournes*, one can never be certain of what will happen. As the program is constructed around the recorded day-to-day activities of the family over a four month period, it lacks the built-in structure of *Survivor*’s game show format. While both programs are observational in nature, *The Osbournes* episodes are entirely dependent on finding content from the raw footage, with no regard for a fixed template which each half-hour episode must follow.

It is in this sense that the editing of *The Osbournes* plays an even more important role than in *Survivor*. When literally anything can be shown, what to show and how to show it becomes vastly important. The producers of the program had to decide how to narrow down four months of raw footage into ten half-hour episodes (or five hours, including commercial breaks). Not only

that, but they had to make the material entertaining while providing the audience with a family with which they could identify and invest in emotionally.⁴⁹ The success of *The Osbournes* is profoundly tied up to the idea that the family seen on television is the same family in the absence of the camera. There is the sense that after watching a few episodes that one comes to “know” the family members. Of course, I do not mean in any literal sense, but in the same way we come to know characters on fictional television. This effect is the result of editing. The audience is shown enough moments involving each member of the family that they become like characters with predictable actions and reactions. For example, Ozzy is continually shown as being upset by the various animals the family owns that are generally very excitable and wreck havoc on his home. During a later episode, when Ozzy is seen unknowingly walking into a room that has been befouled by one of the animals, there is little doubt what his reaction will be. It is through this knowledge or understanding of the various family members that the show becomes intriguing for the audience. What makes the show so compelling for the viewer are the two primary questions: What will the Osbournes do next?; How will the Osbournes handle a given situation? These questions only have meaning for the viewer due to a relationship that has been established with these characters/family members.

While the program is edited in such a manner that there is no obvious repetitive structure, there is a loose pattern that most of the episodes follow. Basically, each episode is structured around one or two events that affect either the entire family or an individual member. For example, in an early episode, the unruly behaviour of the family’s animals prompts Sharon to bring in a pet psychic to diagnose the problem. In another episode, Ozzy and Sharon become fed-up with Kelly and Jack bringing over their friends at all hours of the night, and in a family meeting

lay down the law. In spite of the language, the luxurious accommodations and the celebrity status of the “father,” this is a familiar scene to which the television audience can readily relate.

These “storylines” are played out and resolved during the course of the episode. Events rarely carry over and bear little influence upon the following episodes. It is a process of simplification that allows the audience to see events in their entirety⁵⁰ and allows a sense of closure at the end of each broadcast.⁵¹ Also, as noted in regard to *Survivor*, it is not necessary to see every episode to “understand” what is happening on the program.

The three characteristics of *The Osbournes* that I have been discussing are individually interesting and worthy of note. The family members, while real people, come across as characters acting out scenarios for our amusement. Every week the family gets into some kind of ridiculous adventure, that is brought to a satisfactory conclusion by the end of the episode. Lastly, each episode is a self-contained unit. The storylines are not continued week to week and the viewer faces no penalty for missing one or several episodes.

The combination of these features clearly puts *The Osbournes* in the realm of the situation comedy. Every episode of the program is a self-contained humorous romp with a group of bizarre characters. James Poniewozik writes that, “The Osbournes is the oldest thing on TV since the test pattern: a nuclear family that eats meals together, shares its problems (even if every third word is bleeped) and survives wacky scenarios.”⁵² Allison Romano goes further to suggest that, “It is the family’s daily routine that makes *The Osbournes* a reality sitcom. Like Ozzy and Sharon sitting on the bathroom flooring, sifting through jewellery to wear to the White House correspondents’ dinner. Or Kelly, riding home from the MTV Movie Awards with her brother Jack, chiding him for being excited that McDonald’s is bringing back the McRib sandwich.”⁵³

While the show is based on the real events of the family, the events are always packaged in such a manner as to be humorous or entertaining. Whatever may be happening in the show, from the serious to the farcical, the situations are always held in check by the boundaries of the show. The audience is rarely asked to consider the situations from any other perspective than its immediate importance to the program. In other words, at some point it becomes very difficult to perceive of the family as being real people functioning in the real world. Like the Brady Bunch and the Simpsons, the Osbournes become a television family, only existing on the screen.

The program itself goes to a great extent to create the Osbournes in the mould of a classic television situation comedy family. One of most interesting ways this is accomplished is in the show's opening credit sequence. Each family member is introduced individually by a freeze-frame with their name. However, when it is Ozzy's turn to be introduced, in addition to his freeze frame and his name, he is given the additional credit: "as the Dad." Describing Ozzy in this manner accomplishes a number of important but perhaps subtle things. First, it aligns Ozzy with other famous television fathers, such as Jim Anderson (played by Robert Young) from *Father Knows Best* and Heathcliff Huxtable (played by Bill Cosby) from *The Cosby Show*. While Ozzy is a musical icon, the title of "the Dad" makes it clear that Ozzy's primary function in the program is to be a husband for his wife and a father for his children. In the mould of Jim Anderson and Heathcliff Huxtable, Ozzy faces the dreams, ambitions and frustrations of his family, often with hilarious results. As in these earlier family sitcoms, Ozzy is also the foil for other members of the family. At times, each member of the family becomes frustrated and annoyed at Ozzy's erratic behaviour and he becomes the focus of good natured humour, often ironically based on the notion of a generation gap.

In addition to associating Ozzy Osbourne with stereotypical father figures routinely seen on television, categorizing him as “the Dad” works to re-inscribe the notion that he is a character acting out a given role. Being a character, the audience is permitted to view Ozzy from a comfortable distance, not taking anything he says or does too seriously. Unlike the rest of the family, who are only credited by the presentation of their names, Ozzy is already known by the audience as an infamous celebrity. Of course, it is this additional baggage of celebrity status that makes the show work. The character of Ozzy Osbourne as a doting father is played against the well-known figure of Ozzy Osbourne the crazed heavy metal rocker. The program manages to make Ozzy into a humorous caricature of himself. The rest of the family does not come with any of these preestablished character traits that would influence the audience’s perception of them. In this sense, the other family members do not need additional crediting because it is the show that is creating the “character” of these individuals.

There is one further element of the opening title sequence that positions the program in the familiar territory of the situation comedy. After the introduction of each family member has been completed, every episode begins with a title screen, consisting of a title that is in some way related to the action that is about to follow. For example, the episode that featured the family feuding with the neighbours was entitled, “Won’t You Be My Neighbour.” This is also a cheeky reference on the gentle theme song that had the same title from the late Mr. Rogers children’s program. This playful use of titles can also be found in the episode that had one of Jack’s friends unexpectedly moving in with the family entitled, “No Vagrancy.”

In addition to being amusing, these titles are reminiscent of fictional television programming, comedies and drama in particular. This device is very rare in Reality Television.

To give a title to the episode, because of its linkage to fictional programming, may possibly suggest that the situations have been influenced or manipulated to fit a certain theme or motif. This device also highlights the repetitive structure of the program, with each week bringing a totally new adventure for the family. Typically, Reality programs try not to underscore the employment of such an iterative structure, as it potentially weakens the program's claim to authenticity or "reality." Also, the playful manner of the titles suggests to the viewer that the program is intended to be read as humorous entertainment, rather than as a serious no holds barred inside look at the Osbourne family.

The opening title sequence, while serving the practical purpose of introducing the program and its participants, also works to position the program in the familiar domain of the family situation comedy. This allusion continues throughout the program, evident in everything from the structure of each episode to the depiction of the characters/family members. It establishes a dynamic balance between the conceits of television comedy and the conceits of Reality Television through its combination of a canned laugh track and a hyperactive camera. This unique and stark contrast is why Tom Shales calls *The Osbournes* the "sitcom of the future."⁵⁴ The program represents the first fusion of these two disparate forms creating a new television genre: the reality sitcom.

While *The Osbournes* may represent the emergence of a new style of television, it does rely on other previously established genres. Not surprisingly, given that *The Osbournes* is produced by MTV, the other major genre that the program draws upon is the music video. Unlike other reality programs, *The Osbournes* employs music to accompany and comment on the action taking place on screen.⁵⁵ Tom Shales comments on the use of music that, "Many of the

funniest moments come about thanks to wickedly clever editing and the use of judicious music cues; when Jack clumsily falls off the pier and plops into the water, we hear an old tune called ‘Gentleman Jack, the Ladies’ Man’ on the soundtrack.”⁵⁶ Similarly, in an episode where Kelly is having a very bad day, the song “I’m Not Feeling Well Today” ironically accompanies her childish temper tantrum.

However, music in the program is used to a greater extent than simply being accompaniment for the action. With Ozzy being a successful musician, and Kelly aspiring to be one, music plays a key role in the life of the family. Episodes of *The Osbournes* have featured both Ozzy and Kelly in the process of making music videos and as well as featuring clips of their concert performances. The inclusion of this footage literally transforms the program into a music video, halting the narrative progression to revel in these moments of musical spectacle. In addition, several episodes from the first season featured behind-the-scenes footage of Ozzy’s “Ozzfest” tour, such as Ozzy heatedly discussing with Sharon proposed changes to his set list and Ozzy’s adventures on his tour bus as he rides from venue to venue. In a similar vein, the second season of the program has spent considerable time on Kelly’s budding musical career. Episodes have included Kelly practising with her band, taking part in photo shoots, and conducting telephone interviews with reporters from all over the world. This insider footage that the program provides bears a strong resemblance to what is routinely seen in music documentaries, such as the VH1 series *Behind the Music*. These moments propel the program from being a mere document about the life of the family to a behind-the-scenes expose of a rock and roll star. It is a strange moment in the program as the banal and everyday, which is at the heart of the program, is replaced with the extravagant and sensational. Instead of simply viewing Ozzy and Kelly as

“father” and “daughter,” these “rock star” sections briefly transform them into celebrity spectacles, before slipping them back into their more familiar roles.

When watching Reality Television there is always a sense of *deja vu*, a sense of familiarity and understanding that emanates from outside the program. While most television programs draw upon the fundamental, most accepted, and accessible forms of the medium, the rate at which Reality Television reappropriates various elements from television is what makes this kind of programming distinctly different. Reality Television exists as a kind of chameleon, always assuming the properties of those around it, blending into the scenery, never standing apart. In this respect Reality Television can be viewed as a kind of perfect television, an endless reflection of itself.

Chapter 4

Surveillance and Reality Television: Who is Watching Whom?

Reality Television, while proclaiming to be a new television “genre,” employs the same approaches and devices as those of many other types of television programming whether it is continuity editing techniques, standard structure, or characterization. Any viewer that is televisually literate will be able to read, understand, and potentially enjoy, any Reality Television program. While Reality Television programs continually thrust the viewer into familiar television territory, they also paradoxically force the audience to confront the means of production of these illusory landscapes. There is a balance struck between the viewer being sutured into the program, while conversely being made constantly aware of the program’s manufactured nature. In Reality programming, this awareness of the construction of these programs is due, in large part, to the role of the camera.

In every television broadcast what is “seen” is important to the success of the program. Television is a medium primarily based on sight and seeing. Without images, television is radio. Reality Television programming takes this reliance on sight to a whole new level because it is rooted in the idea of witnessing events first-hand. If something is not recorded by the cameras, it simply does not exist. For example, Osbourne biographer, Todd Gold, wrote that an episode of *The Osbournes* was to have featured the family having dinner with shock-rocker Marilyn Manson. However, with the roast in the oven, Manson called and cancelled at the last minute.⁵⁷ While this meeting was undoubtedly a significant event for the family, because there was no footage to show, it became a nonevent, failing to even be referred to in the program. Reality television

programs create “reality” from the raw materials that are available. Reality is limited to the scope and nature of the footage available.

With such a heavy onus on recording as much of the action as possible, it should not be surprising that the Reality Television camera is extremely mobile and aggressive. For Reality Television to work, the camera needs to be constantly vigilant, as any moment has the potential of being an important moment. To this end, Reality Television programs use countless cameras and microphones to see and hear all that transpires. These programs are attempting to create what documentary film theorist Dai Vaughan calls an “ideal observer,” an entity that could “watch from all directions . . . can perceive the overall pattern of the action together with minute, telltale gestures, simultaneously and with equal attention.”⁵⁸

The Reality Television cameras do seem to “catch” everything. There is rarely a moment that is not only captured on film but also recorded from many different camera angles. This approach enables the programs to use, as previously discussed, classical Hollywood editing techniques. In addition to the visuals, it is rare that the necessary audio is not recorded by the microphones.⁵⁹ When it does happen, often due to the participants trying to secretly whisper to each other, subtitles are inserted so that “we” do not miss anything.

The resulting effect of the ubiquitous presence of cameras and sound equipment is the construction of a hyper-reality that conflicts with our own experiences of the world. Hence, the notion of the “ideal observer,” as proposed by Vaughan as being the ultimate documenting apparatus, is in itself problematic. Our experience and perception of the world is vastly different from that of the theoretical “ideal observer.” We experience reality from our own unique, limited point of view. Our access to reality is not total and objective, but isolated and subjective.

Perhaps that is why the use of multiple camera angles in Reality Television rings somewhat hollow. The closer these programs become to acting like an “ideal observer” the more pronounced the artifice becomes. We simply hear and see too much! In contrast to daily life where we constantly fail to see things from the best angle and mishear or simply miss the sounds around us, the multitude of cameras and microphones, and careful editing, insure that there is rarely a bad shot or an inaudible sound in Reality Television.

Joel Black makes an interesting comparison between this kind of technological dominance and the writings of Siegfried Kracauer in *Theory of Film: The Redemption of Physical Reality*. Black writes, “More than ever, visual technologies seem intent on striving for what Kracauer called ‘the status of total record’ . . . thanks first to video and then the internet, scenes that were never seen before – from natural disasters and human atrocities to sexual intimacies and ecstasies – are now public spectacles that are instantly shown everywhere.”⁶⁰ Kracauer championed film’s photographic ability to record the visible world asserting that, “Films come into their own when they record and reveal physical reality.”⁶¹ Reality television is completely invested in this enterprise of creating a “total (photographic) record.” It is arguable that some documentaries are also caught up in the attempt to show a complete record of a given event to the spectator. However, the images of documentaries, are connected to an argument that is relevant to the world. In Reality Television, by and large, the images are just spectacles, whose only importance is that they have been recorded by the camera within the context of the program. Bill Nichols would maintain that Reality Television fails to ask “questions of magnitude.” He writes, “There are always issues of excess to be addressed, questions of magnitude that will not fit in the frame. . . There is not merely the flat announcement of something more that escapes the frame, but the

subjective experience of excess, the discovery – usually unanticipated, sudden or dialectical – of a magnitude beyond containment.”⁶² However, for Reality programs there is no excess to be worked through because nothing escapes the containment of the frame. All questions, or more importantly, all answers, exist within the frame, and accordingly, the viewer is not moved from what Nichols calls the image-world to the historical world. There is no negotiation for the spectator between the image and reality, as these programs are self-contained, and therefore their meaning is self-inscribed. In this respect, Reality programs are not part of reality, they are reality as they only refer to back to their own, albeit constructed, worlds.

The quest of constructing a “total record” in Reality Television depends on a heightened emphasis of the means of production, and in particular, the camera itself. These programs show us things we have never seen before on television, whether it is the intimate affairs of those stranded on a tropical island or life inside the Osbourne household. That is what Reality Television programs do: their success is built upon providing the viewer with the next new thrill, the next new twist in the ever increasing peep-show that is television.

Therefore, when we watch Reality programming, we do it in a different manner than when we watch any other programs on television. We primarily watch Reality programs as a visual experience, what will happen next in terms of narrative or character development are secondary attractions. We watch to see the camera sprint after a subject or quickly pan to catch an intense confrontation. Unlike most other kinds of television programming that attempt to minimize the physical presence of the camera, the Reality Television camera is completely liberated to do whatever is necessary to follow the action. This freedom is transparent to even the most novice television viewer. The fourth wall does not need to be broken down: it has already been smashed

to pieces.

The camera plays a significant role in the success of Reality Television. We watch reality programs to see what it will be possible for the camera to show us next. If it cannot show the viewer something new and exciting, there is little reason for the viewer to continue watching. While the camera is the cornerstone of the Reality Television experience, the television set also plays a fundamental role. The television is the vehicle that makes the adventure of Reality Television possible and as such has a symbiotic relationship with the camera. This co-dependency ensures that a mass audience is reached and sustained. Reality Television highlights not only the means of seeing (the camera), but also seeing itself (the television set).

One might be tempted to argue that any program on television is dependent on the television set as a medium of dissemination, yet many can be seen in countless other venues. The experience of watching dramas, comedies or sporting events on television, is fairly transferable to attending a playhouse, a comedy club, or going to the stadium. Reality Television has no such equivalent.⁶³ It is the most extreme manifestation of the collision of technology and spectacle. Just as the viewer is aware of the vital role the camera plays in creating reality programming, he/she is aware of the TV set as the only means through which this unique spectacle is made available.

Therefore, Reality Television programs use a multitude of cameras and microphones to create a complete record of their subject matter. The resulting footage is often sensational in nature depicting events or occurrences that are not usually available for public consumption except through the conduit of the television set. Simply, there are cameras everywhere, that see everything, and project the subjects of their gaze onto monitors/television sets in remote

locations. When the phenomenon of Reality Television is presented in these terms, an interesting parallel with the issue of surveillance begins to emerge. Stepping back from the television set, an examination of Reality Television's mode of operation reveals some startling similarities to our everyday life. More specifically, there are similarities with the contemporary use of cameras, microphones and security monitors to regulate the actions of the citizenry.

In this sense, social life and reality television become virtually indistinguishable. Almost everywhere we go, we fall under the camera's gaze. In retail stores, banks, libraries, airports and sports stadiums, for instance, we are not only under video surveillance, but the highly visible monitors show exactly what we look like while being recorded. William Staples writes of this kind of surveillance:

"The videocam – one of the defining features of postmodern society – projects a hyper-vigilant "gaze," randomly scanning the entire store day and night, recording every event, watching all the customers, not just the 'suspicious ones.' The cameras are also positioned to watch the vast number of employees, who must now be monitored both as 'productive' workers and as potential thieves. In this way, surveillance and discipline have become oddly democratic; everyone is watched, and no one is trusted."⁶⁴

What Staples refers to as the "hyper-vigilant gaze" of the security cameras seems a perfect description of the role of the camera in Reality programming. Anything could potentially be important, so everything must be recorded. Accordingly, cameras are placed wherever there is the possibility of "action."

The network of surveillance under which we live is extensive. Author Don DeLillo in his novel *The Names* astutely writes, "The twentieth century is on film. It's the filmed century. You have to ask yourself if there's anything about us more important than the fact we are constantly on

film, constantly watching ourselves. The whole world is on film, all the time. Spy satellites, microscopic scanners, pictures of the uterus, embryos, sex, war, assassinations, everything.”⁶⁵ More than ever, we as individuals and as a larger cultural whole, find ourselves the subject, or subjected to, the camera’s gaze.

In our culture, cameras are literally everywhere. Nowadays, it is generally accepted that whenever we leave our homes and enter the “public” world (especially in larger cities and high security areas) we are likely to have our actions monitored by some sort of surveillance system. In the name of safety and security everything is watched. The primary function of these systems is to act as a deterrent. As Reg Whitaker writes of the increasing use of surveillance equipment in New York City: “The cameras have gradually been moving into more and more places in New York, quietly extending the potential visual coverage of the city. In some cases, the installation has been deliberately publicized, as with cameras trained on Washington Square Park in Greenwich Village, the first in a series of anti-crime surveillance initiatives launched by Mayor Rudolph Giuliani and his police chief. But the cameras are not limited to the police, nor the government. Many are privately owned and operated, for various purposes, from security to TV traffic report monitors.”⁶⁶

At the Super Bowl in 2001, in Tampa Bay, fans were secretly treated to a “biometric scan” in which special video cameras connected to a security command centre digitized their faces and compared them against photographic lists of known terrorists and other potentially dangerous individuals. When this “top-secret” project was leaked to the public, there was a considerable amount of trepidation whether it was a necessary security measure or a further example of how individual privacy in being continually eroded.⁶⁷ Generally, the public’s awareness of the role of

these kinds of surveillance devices has increased, as has the public's concern over their use.

What is less obvious is the increasing use of cameras connected to computers. Through the use of "webcams" any personal computer connected to the internet can essentially become an incredibly vast surveillance system with cameras all over the world. You can watch pedestrians shuffle past the Kremlin on a cold Russian day or past the Eiffel Tower on a rainy French afternoon. Or if you prefer, you can stare out the very window in Dealey Plaza from which Lee Harvey Oswald is believed to have shot President Kennedy. According to Brian Cury, founder of the EarthCam network⁶⁸ of internet cameras, "there are more than 10,000 live cameras now transmitting continuously from points around the globe."⁶⁹

The presence of these public cameras may not be surprising, given the obvious technological extension of the surveillance systems that have been proliferating for the better part of twenty years. However, what is surprising is the prodigious use of "personal webcams." These miniature cameras, transform private spaces into public spaces by allowing internet surfers to tune in to see what is happening in an individual's bedroom, bathroom, office or any location where one of these tiny cameras can be placed. Brian Cury states that "there are probably another quarter-million people out there who are exposing their lives part-time."⁷⁰ The use of this technology signals a willing forfeiture of privacy, causing the division between public and private to crumble. There is an eclectic mix of these cameras, from the innocuous and countless cameras in homes and offices to pornographic pay cameras. Individuals have turned their entire lives into fodder for the surfing public.

The emerging trend of webcams has not been lost on Reality Television executives. The reality television series *Big Brother* has been at the forefront of "webcasting" since its premiere in

2000. Based on the Orwellian ideas of its namesake, the show traps twelve contestants in a small house that is rigged with a vast array of cameras and microphones to continually monitor their movements and actions. In addition to the television program itself, the *Big Brother* website gives viewers the opportunity to view live video streams from the house twenty-four hours-a-day, seven days-a-week.⁷¹ The viewers are able to select from various cameras and feeds so that by switching between them they are editing their own version of the program. This situation is a unique synergy of the television set and surveillance technology. The viewer can watch the program on television but also can use the internet to aid and to expand on the overall visibility or coverage of the broadcast transmission.

When this use of webcams is combined with the already extensive network of surveillance, it creates a society where the actions of all its citizens, from the mundane to the extravagant, can be watched. Just as off camera spaces are limited for individuals who appear on Reality Television programs, so it is for normal people. There are few places to hide from the unblinking eye of the camera. Our actions are constantly recorded, like those of Reality program participants, in the event (hope?) that the footage may someday prove useful.

When we are recorded by surveillance cameras we are often able to see what exactly we look like while being recorded through the strategic placement of video monitors. Children often perform in front of these monitors, mugging for the camera. It is in this awareness of our position as both “subject” and “object” before the camera that a further link to reality television is forged. The participants in reality television programs are literally always on camera. They willingly submit themselves to intense scrutiny, in exchange for appearing on television (an issue I will further explore later). Accordingly, the individuals/contestants on these programs are constantly

aware that all their actions are being recorded, and therefore they are always in the process of performing, or acting out a role for the cameras. Bill Nichols writes of this kind of performance in documentary, "We look in on and overhear social actors. This term stands for 'individuals' or 'people.' Those whom we observe are seldom trained or coaxed in their behaviour. I use 'social actor' to stress the degree which individuals represent themselves to others; this can be construed as a performance."⁷² In fact, the sole purpose for filming the individuals on Reality programs is to capture them on film, thus creating a hyper awareness of the camera's presence and the need for performance.

Notwithstanding, this awareness is a matter of perception. The participants must weigh how their actions will be interpreted, not only by other participants but more importantly by the viewers of the program. No one, even someone caught up in the hoopla of celebrity status, wants to come across as stupid, naive, or abnormal.

How these participants "come across" during these programs is vitally important. Consider the fact that during *Survivor's* "maiden run (as the Swedish series *Expedition Robinson*), the very first man to be voted out of the program expressed his dismay by hurling himself in front of a train."⁷³ During the *Survivor: The Australian Outback Reunion* program, a contestant had an emotional breakdown while being interviewed. She sobbed that the audience had not gotten to see the "real" her. In both cases the contestants were emotionally affected by how they thought they were being perceived by the audiences of the programs. In addition, I presume that they both believed they did not play their "part" correctly or to the best of their ability and that the shock of seeing themselves as other see them may have been unbearable. This issue of performance creates an intriguing point of comparison between Reality programs'

contestants and citizens. In one way, all social behaviour is a performance⁷⁴, but the omnipresence of the cameras raises it to another level. Subjected to the voyeuristic gaze of extensive surveillance networks, citizens are made aware of their position as “social actors.”

Faced with surveillance technology in our daily lives, we are expected to play the correct role of law-abiding citizens. Failure to perform this role, through unlawful or undesirable behaviour, often results in an encounter with security personnel (the audience of our performance) watching on television monitors in security control rooms. This performance is the result of the function that surveillance has played in modern societies as an instrument of power. As Wong states, for Foucault, the necessity of this pantomime is due to the fact that “modern society is a society of surveillance. Instead of displays of absolute power to control the populace as in the *ancien regime*, surveillance is the key component in the discipline of individuals in modern society. The goal of surveillance is to get individuals to discipline themselves, to regulate their own behaviour.”⁷⁵ However, the mode of surveillance in Reality Television is quite different from everyday systems of surveillance. Paradoxically it turns the citizen (audience) into the controlling agent who, like the security officer who watches us, becomes a voyeur/surveyor of the characters in the programs.

The participants of Reality Television programs and everyday citizens constantly perform in front of a multitude of cameras. While the concentration of recording equipment is much more intense in the Reality programs, the position of continually being under surveillance is potentially the same for those on television as those watching. Whether it is a contestant on *Survivor* or an individual entering a bank, both are projecting a certain identity to best achieve a certain goal: the contestant wants to be embraced by the viewing audience, and the individual in the bank wants to

avoid arousing suspicion from the bank's security staff. The fate of the contestant/citizen is based on performance. In the program, if a contestant fails to conform to the rules and nuances of the game he or she will not only be kicked out of the game, but also face the criticism or ridicule of millions of viewers. For the citizen, it takes only one person to see incriminating footage to start him/her on the road to criminal accountability, potentially ending in a jail cell.

While the comparison between Reality Television programs and the high surveillance society we have created is striking, there is one key difference that needs to be considered. On the one hand, the public never has the opportunity to see the footage recorded by surveillance cameras unless the footage is of paramount importance or interest to society. Examples of footage that was made available to the public include the horror inside Columbine High School, robberies of banks and stores, and the destructive effects of military missiles rigged with cameras. Other than in these exceptional cases, surveillance tapes are only seen by a small select group of people, if by anyone at all. For instance, it is not possible for everyone to tune into the surveillance system of a government building to see who is coming or going, nor can we watch a company's lunchroom to see who is not paying for the honour-system coffee. The tremendous extent of current surveillance systems dictates that footage be reviewed only if circumstances make it necessary. As a result, hours and hours of footage that will never be watched is recorded each day.

On the other hand, Reality Television's mode of surveillance is about capturing images purposefully to be shown to a mass audience. To achieve such a goal, Reality programs use state of the art audio and video equipment, along with highly trained operators, to produce images similar in quality to those of any other primetime program. These visuals are markedly different

from the grainy, black and white, often distorted, silent images received from surveillance cameras.

The Reality Television viewer is put in the unique position of seeing what the cameras see, clearly and without obstruction. With such an intense power of observation, Reality Television has come under frequent and zealous attacks by those who claim the programs are nothing more than a culturally acceptable form of voyeurism. These individuals argue that Reality programming entitles the audience to surreptitiously view individuals during moments of intense intimacy for the sole purpose of entertainment, and that these shows signal a breach in individual privacy, reflecting poorly not only on those who appear on them, but even more so on those who watch them. Television critic Brian Johnson, a proponent of the "Reality Television as voyeurism" argument, succinctly articulates this position when he states: "[Reality television] is the new pornography, a mainstream peepshow in which everyone gets to be an exhibitionist or a voyeur . . . Reality TV is designed to make us feel guilt about watching it. Like porn, it sells . . . that we're glimpsing a side of people we're not supposed to see. And a certain sense of shameful addiction is part of the attraction."⁷⁶

Such scathing analyses of Reality Television have become frequent in the past several years with the result that popular media reviewers have by and large dismissed the phenomenon as trite and seedy, artistically and morally bankrupt. More significantly, and because these dismissals are based upon the assumption that this type of programming is inherently voyeuristic, a potential discussion about whether Reality Television is more voyeuristic than television in general is lost. Clearly, all television watching is voyeuristic insofar as both fictional and nonfictional programs enable viewers to indulge in the pleasures of seeing without being seen, mostly for amusement.

What is interesting, from the vantage point of Reality programming, is that these programs rarely ever face criticism for being voyeuristic in nature.

What is it about Reality programming that causes it to traverse the line between being socially acceptable television and a perverted back-alley peepshow? The difference between Reality programs and programs such as television documentaries or even talk shows is often marginal at best. Like Reality Television, these programs allow the viewer to see a unique and often intimate side of various individuals, who are themselves very much performing for the camera. Perhaps the answer to this conundrum is found in the accusation itself. By accusing Reality programs of being voyeuristic in nature, the critics are conceding that these programs are in some way “real.” Or, at least they are more “real” than anything else currently on television. Otherwise, there would be no reason to bring the voyeurism charges. In light of such a volume of negative opinions, consideration must be given to why this type of programming is so open to such attacks. Why is watching Reality Television voyeurism, and watching anything else on television is not?

For the sake of argument, let us assume that Reality programming is a unique genre whose success is based on providing the audience with a titillating voyeuristic experience. If this is the case, clearly the “voyeurism” referred to here, is much different from how we usually think about voyeurism. Typically, we think of voyeurism as act of intrusion committed against an unknowing party. In this sense, there are two roles, there is a voyeur and the person being watched. Voyeurism is a form of privilege, enabling one to see that which is not intended to be seen. Steve Neale writes that, “The voyeuristic look is marked by the extent to which there is a distance between spectator and spectacle, a gulf between the seer and the seen. This structure is one

which allows the spectator a degree of power over what is seen.”⁷⁷ As Freud believed and as Neale notes, voyeurism is also a form of empowerment, “Those whom we observe become ours, hostage to our eyes.”⁷⁸ Conversely, the person being watched is unaware of the actions of the voyeur, and therefore oblivious to the breach of his/her privacy. It is only the voyeur who obtains any benefit or pleasure from this relationship.

However, the voyeuristic subjects in reality programming (the contestants or participants) are not merely the victims of a mass audience of peeping Toms. While the individuals on these programs may suffer an invasion of privacy, the violation is one they submit to willingly for the opportunity to be part of the program. Unlike normal voyeurism, these “victims” are rewarded for their participation and are constantly aware of the fact that they are being watched, thus offering the opportunity to control their presentation. James Wong writes of this phenomena that, “Being watched carries advantages, be it a financial payoff or a featured individual’s fifteen-minutes of fame.”⁷⁹ Are these voyeuristic subjects or just prostitutes for fame and fortune? Reality programs have turned privacy into a commodity, where an individual’s most private and personal moments have become exchangeable for a shot at television stardom or the possibility of winning a large sum of money, as in *Survivor*. As Brian Johnson colourfully puts it, “[Reality] Programs like *The Lofters*, *Popstars*, and *Survivor*, are creating a new class of celebrity culture, a service industry of brave souls willing to risk personal humiliation for a crack-pipe hit of disposable fame.”⁸⁰

For the participants of these programs it is a gamble whether or not their appearances will bring the kind of recognition and notoriety they sought. As previously discussed, some of the participants have had their Reality Television experiences turn into a nightmare. One man killed

himself, one woman had an emotional breakdown and countless others have been embarrassed by how they have appeared on television. For them, the price of admission to the fun house of television infamy was just too high. They exposed themselves to a national television audience in the hopes of fame and fortune, only to be left exposed, vulnerable and rejected.

However, some participants have parlayed their experiences into a windfall of riches and celebrity status. Many of the *Survivor* contestants have used the program to create additional opportunities in show business. Richard Hatch, the winner of the first *Survivor*, used his notoriety to land a book deal, host a radio program and write a newspaper column. Another contestant, Colleen Haskell, used her exposure to land a starring role in the Rob Schneider comedy *The Animal* (2001). Gervase Peterson and Jerri Manthey have both made frequent appearances on a variety of television programs. It seems that one or two contestants from each *Survivor* series have experienced some kind of success after their appearance on the program. In addition, many of the past survivors resurface with the start of each new season. Many are used in a promotional fashion by television stations, while others appear as “*Survivor* experts” in newspaper columns or on internet web sites. Yet, it should be noted that the celebrity status of the majority of the contestants is extremely short lived. Within months of their appearance on the show, most of them are completely forgotten.

To really understand the immense potential of these programs to propel the participants to superstardom, an examination of the Osbournes’ incredible rise to become cultural icons is required. Before the television series, Ozzy Osbourne was a B-list celebrity. While experiencing significant fame in the 1980s, due in part to his extreme behaviour during concerts, by the end of the twentieth century Ozzy was nothing more than a minor figure in the world of popular music.

This all changed with the debut of *The Osbournes* on March 5, 2002. On the strength of the show's record-breaking ratings, Ozzy, along with his family, became the hottest family on or off television. The rewards have been astronomical. After receiving \$200,000 for the first season, the Osbournes negotiated a \$20 million deal for two more seasons.⁸¹ In addition, the family sold the DVD/videocassettes rights to the first two seasons to Miramax for \$7 million, and inked two book deals worth \$3 million and \$4 million respectively.⁸²

Matriarch Sharon Osbourne has signed a contract to host her own television talk show, reportedly being paid in the neighbourhood of \$3 - 5-million.⁸³ Since the end of the first season, the daughter, Kelly Osbourne, has launched a pop music career. She released her first album, *Shut Up*, on December 5, 2002, the same day as *The Osbournes* second season premiered. Her music talents have been much maligned by almost everyone who has heard her music. Calgary Sun music critic Mike Bell wrote of the album, "With the exception of the embarrassing ballad, *More Than Life Itself*, the tracks are all innocuous though inoffensive in a fittingly disposable way – but that's hardly a ringing endorsement."⁸⁴ The sales of her album were so weak in the first week that it failed to make any impact on the charts. Despite her lack of musical talent or success, she has still performed on several award-type programs, such as the *MTV Music Awards* and *The American Music Awards* (which the Osbournes hosted). Clearly, if Kelly was not a member of the Osbourne family she would be unlikely to have such extraordinary opportunities. The program, *The Osbournes*, created a vehicle for Ozzy and Sharon to re-enter to public life and Kelly and Jack to become celebrities. The family sacrificed the most private and intimate space in their lives, the family home, for the chance to be watched and cherished by a vast audience. It was a gamble that has seemingly paid off, with the family reaping a treasure trove of fame and

fortune. For the family, the price of forfeiting their privacy and anonymity was justified.

Perhaps the ultimate distinction between surveillance systems and Reality Television resides in this new brand of celebrity who depends on being watched to retain his/her “star” status. As James Poniewozik writes, “Save for an Olympian few, the Julias and the Denzels, stars need to allow ever greater access, to dance a little for us to stay in our good graces . . . Reality TV has become a kind of on-air pension plan for slightly used celebrities.”⁸⁵ This on-air pension plan for slightly used celebrities is the same method regular people use to achieve celebrity status with the cumbersome handicap of never having been famous.

The participants in Reality programming, unlike the regular citizens who are confronted with surveillance systems, not only want to be watched but their identities depend on it. However, this one difference between Reality Television and our high surveillance society does not diminish the fact that the two are remarkably similar. This similarity opens the door for arguing that Reality Television does approach reality, or at the very least, has a strong connection to it. The multiple cameras, and the performances they elicit, hyperbolically mirror our own position as subjects before a variety of cameras and other surveillance equipment in our own day-to-day lives. The audience is able to identify with the individuals on these programs, whether they are celebrities or average people, because they act as surrogates for the audience, reflecting our own reality where we are always watched and always watching.

Chapter 5

THE PARADOXICAL LINK

Reality Television draws upon two conflicting sources of inspiration for the construction of its programs. Reality Television programs are completely immersed in the well-rehearsed language of television. These programs employ familiar techniques and devices with a particular emphasis on established sound and editing practices to construct meaning. In addition, these programs mimic popular television genres, such as the game show (*Survivor*) and the situation comedy (*The Osbournes*), presenting the viewer with an easily recognizable structure for interpretation. In the end, Reality Television programs can be understood as a bricolage of almost every element seen on television. While Reality Television programs are fictional or, at the very least, constructed in nature, they exhibit a feature that connects them to contemporary reality.

These programs uncannily mirror our own high-tech, high surveillance society. Like the participants in Reality Television, we are subjected to an increased surveillance from a wide variety of sources. We, like the participants in Reality programming, are finding it increasingly more difficult to find a space where we are “off-camera,” where our actions are not closely monitored. With this extensive network of surveillance, which has become one of the cornerstones of our society, the awareness that the cameras are always watching has become integral to our social experience. This awareness provides a stimulus to modify behaviour, as we feel compelled to behave in a certain fashion before the cameras. Failure to modify or regulate our behaviour can result in questioning, detention, or even imprisonment. For the individuals in Reality programs, performance is also essential, as their actions are intended to be viewed by a

mass audience. Like other television actors, they must play their part correctly to have the desired impact upon the audience.

These two seemingly incompatible features of Reality Television leave these kinds of programs in somewhat of a dilemma. Is it regular fictional/dramatic television or, is it something new and unique that reflects this particular social and cultural moment? How can the two simultaneously exist without one overriding the other? Perhaps the answer to these questions resides in examining them from the perspective of how we view and identify with subjects that appear on the (television) screen. In particular, it is useful to examine Reality Television from the perspective of how film theoreticians have dealt with the process of identification in fictional film, as it provides a rough theoretical framework from which to contrast and compare.

For film theorists who draw on psychoanalysis, such as Christian Metz, “identification with characters and narratives is based on an identification with the process of viewing itself, and ultimately with the camera which views.”⁸⁶ What allows this identification to occur is that the screen functions as a kind of metaphorical mirror. They compare the experience of watching film to Jacques Lacan’s theory about the process that drives the psychological development of children which occurs between the age of six and eighteen months. Laura Mulvey fleshes out the key concepts in Lacan’s writings on the “mirror phase” as they pertain to film studies, when she states that:

The mirror phase occurs at a time when the child’s physical ambitions outstrip his motor capacity, with the result that his recognition of himself is joyous as he imagines his mirror image to be more complete, more perfect than he experiences his own body. Recognition is thus overlaid with mis-recognition: the image recognized is conceived as the reflected body of the self, but its misrecognition as superior projects this body outside itself as an ideal ego, the alienated subject, which, re-introjected as an ego ideal, gives rise to the future generation of

identification with others.⁸⁷

The argument that Mulvey and Metz put forward is that when watching something on the screen, the viewer has a similar experience to the child in front of the metaphorical mirror. There is pleasure in looking at another as an object, over which the observer can then exert a kind of control. In addition to this scopophilic pleasure, there is also an element of narcissistic identification with the figures on the screen. As Mulvey writes, "Hence, curiosity and the wish to look intermingle with a fascination with likeness and recognition: the human face, the human body, the relationship between the human form and its surroundings, the visible presence of the person in the world."⁸⁸ Like Narcissus at the pool, we are moved by our desire for these "better selves" to blur our identities with theirs.

This process of identification is only made possible by the spectator's willingness to suspend disbelief and enter into the fiction. Murray Smith writes, "In the most influential formulation, Christian Metz, has argued that the spectator's attitude towards the filmic images is one of "disavowal;" the spectator knows that she is only watching a representation, but believes it real."⁸⁹ The spectator knows that the characters which appear on the screen are not a literal reflection of him/herself, nevertheless, the spectator enters into a relationship with the characters as if it were. This sublimation of personalities allows the spectator to relish in the seemingly more complete and ideal self reflected upon the screen.

Christian Metz writes of this mental mechanism that occurs in the spectator that, "I must both "take myself" for the character (= an imaginary procedure) so that he benefits, by analogical projection, from all the schemata of intelligibility that I have within me, and not take myself for

him (= return to the real) so that fiction can be established as such (= as symbolic): this is *seeming-real*.”⁹⁰

As Metz argues, in fictional films there is the necessity for the viewer to “not take himself” for the character. To do so keeps the spectator grounded in his/her world, and prevents him/her from entering into the fictitious world. Without this mechanism, the spectator would only be able to see his/her reflection, the ideal ego, and fail to recognize the symbolic quality of the image.

However, Reality Television is not fiction in the sense that classical Hollywood films are fictional. While Reality programming does rely on many fictional techniques, it nevertheless seems to have some connection to our daily experience that purely fictional films do not commonly provide. It exists as a schizophrenic entity, part fiction, part reality and completely ambiguous to either claim. In Reality Television the spectator does not need to create the same distance between him/herself and the characters/participants, as there is no truly fictional world to enter.⁹¹ There is no need to disavow identification, as the participants are arguably “real.” Therefore, the identification the spectator has with the participants of Reality Television is much more literal and direct. The role of the imagination is profoundly narrowed as the level of symbolic interplay is limited. The participants in Reality programs are more than just “like us,” they “are us.” Or, at least closer to us than any of the characters/participants that appear in other kinds of television programming.

Therefore for Reality Television, which is a combination of fictional and factual modes, the dynamics of the process of “disavowal” are somewhat different. While the viewer still does “take himself/herself” for the character/participant, it is in a mutated fashion when compared to the identification in fictional texts. In Reality programming, the participants become our “ideal

selves” by appearing on the screen within loose dramatic/fiction structures. Their placement within the apparatus of a Reality program demarcates them as extraordinary and important, and worthy of our attention. The identification is not so tied up in issues of control and mastery as it is in fictional modes. The participants in Reality Television are “more perfect” than us, even though they engage in the same kinds of daily activities because they appear on the magic “importance conveying” box that is the television set. It is an endless feedback loop: the participants of Reality programs are only worth watching because they are placed within the machinery of a television program. Their importance is not their own, but rather, conferred upon them by the dynamics of the program and the apparatus.

Writing on documentary film, theorist Bill Nichols discusses how the spectator’s relationship with documentary texts differs from that with fictional ones. He writes, “instead of the suspension of disbelief that could be put as ‘I know very well [that it is fictional] but all the same . . . [I will treat as if it were not],’ the observational documentary encourages belief; ‘Life is like this, isn’t it?’”⁹² While Reality Television programs are certainly not documentaries, they do share in encouraging belief in the spectator that “life is like this.” In Reality programming, this occurs not only through the everydayness of the participants and their activities, but more profoundly through the extreme surveillance measures the programs employ. As discussed in the previous chapter, the viewers and participants share the experience of always being watched and performing for the camera.

Nichols further expands on this issue writing: “We observe in documentary the everyday world of social action and photographic realism. This is clearly a view of the world, not the world as such, but it is not just any world view, as fiction might be. . . It is the obvious and natural world

of everyday life.”⁹³ This quotation illustrates how the tenuous connection between Reality programs and documentaries quickly begins to unravel. While Reality programs offer a view of the concrete world that differs from the fictitious and imaginary landscapes of fictional films/programs, the difficulty arises in that Reality Television does not present the “obvious and natural world of everyday life.” The highly artificial and contrived nature of these programs (stranding people on a tropical island or continually following around a celebrity), and the use of overtly formulaic structures and scenarios, removes them from any strict historical ground, thus leaving them in limbo between the realms of fantasy and reality. Alongside docudrama, Reality Television exists in a nether region, an interstitial space between documentary and fiction film.⁹⁴ Reality Television acts as a nexus between these disparate generic boundaries, borrowing from both, yet endorsing neither.

In Reality Television, the fictional properties work in concert with the “real” aspects of the program allowing the spectator to identify with the individuals on these programs in a unique way. We identify with the individuals on these programs, as if looking in a mirror, because the participants are also trapped in a high surveillance world. Just as we are increasingly finding ourselves in the position of being the subjects of the voyeuristic gaze of surveillance equipment, we recognize that the individuals on these programs have become subjects of our own voyeuristic impulses.

However, the difference from the looking-glass reflection resides in the fact that the normally banal activities carried out by the participants on Reality programs are infused with a greater importance. We align ourselves with them because, through the use of dramatic techniques, we see their actions and behaviours as an idealized reflection of our own. Yet, and

unlike our own actions, the actions of the participants acquire an importance that only Reality Television can provide. Because their behaviour, responses and interactions acquire meaning within the framework of the programs, their lives are infused with significance and prominence. Moreover, because the rest of us can only dream about such glory, our investment with these individuals is shaped by the idea that they are like us, only better.

What potentially complicates this process of identification in Reality programming is the presence of a celebrity. In Reality programs that use “ordinary” or unknown individuals such as *Survivor*, the direct connection between spectator and contestant is seemingly much more profound than when a celebrity, such as Ozzy Osbourne, is a participant. After all, as Ozzy is certainly not an ordinary or regular individual, the baggage of being a celebrity can hinder our total identification with him.

Notwithstanding, within the context of a Reality program, celebrities become normalized and identifiable in two pivotal ways. First and foremost, like the spectator, they are also subjected to the hyper-vigilant gaze of various cameras and surveillance equipment. Of course, celebrity status is based on visibility and most celebrities are constantly having their image recorded, whether it is in the form of a photograph or video footage. However, Reality Television’s use of such a vast multitude of cameras and microphones raises the level of media coverage to a new plateau. While celebrities are always being watched, it is only on a Reality program that they become, literally, always watched. This position of being a “constant object” of the (camera’s) gaze links the spectator and the celebrity in such a way that it nullifies, or at least diminishes, the effect of the extra-textual discourse of stardom that surrounds celebrities. The second way in which the Reality format undercuts the power and allure of the celebrity figure, resides in the way

that the celebrity is presented to the audience. When a viewer sees a celebrity on television, it is usually in a highly regulated environment, such as an award show or an interview. During these moments every celebrity is extremely media conscious, knowing that in order to retain their celebrity status they must play their role as “star” correctly. As Cary Grant once said, “Everybody wants to play Cary Grant. Even I want to be Cary Grant.”⁹⁵ To a lesser degree, most people have experienced this need to guard their behaviour anytime it is necessary to make a good impression, such as when speaking with the boss or talking to a large group of people. However, the public facade fades away when both the celebrity and the average person are in a safe environment. Self-awareness is replaced by natural behaviour and a different personality emerges.

Certainly, this is true of Ozzy Osbourne’s depiction in *The Osbournes*. In the series, the spectator is able to witness Ozzy’s actions and reactions to countless situations which demythologize his image as a celebrity. When the viewer sees Ozzy fighting with his wife, fretting over his children, frustrated with his pets or unable to work his television remote, his iconic properties are replaced by a more mundane and accessible countenance. Though Ozzy is a celebrity, the program illustrates that he still must endure the same daily frustrations and occasional rewards that the viewer experiences. The influence of the common or mundane provides the viewer with a further point of reference, in addition to being subjects of surveillance, for identifying with him.

Regardless of who the participants are, celebrities or regular folks, Reality Television allows the spectator to identify with whomever appears on these programs. The spectator recognizes and identifies with these participants as they share a state of being constantly watched

and monitored. Furthermore, it is the fictional/dramatic elements of Reality programs that infuse the action of the participants with an importance and magnitude that far exceeds the actions themselves. For the viewer the participants are an “ideal” reflection not only because they are under constant surveillance but because their actions become extremely meaningful, no matter how banal and commonplace they might be.

If the viewer does, in fact, interact with Reality Television in this manner, there are some considerable ramifications. To watch these “reality stars” going about the same activities and displaying the same behaviours and emotions as the spectator, presents the viewer with the opportunity to consider the notion that perhaps their own monotonous everyday activities are important and meaningful. Given the chance, if a camera was to follow them around, and they were the subject of the program, their lives may be seen as just as engaging and fascinating as those of the participants on Reality Television. Reality programs allow the viewers to feel better about themselves, knowing that the difference between them and “television stars” may be marginal. Therefore, for the viewer, these programs work to dull the sting of everyday life. There is no need to feel depressed about a crummy job, an overdue credit card bill, or a failing relationship with a spouse, because those are the same kinds of problems with which the people on television are struggling with, so everything cannot be that bad.

The potential power of these kinds of programs as an ideological tool is also exposed when they begin to modify how the spectator begins to associate with surveillance. Shows like *Survivor* and *The Osbournes*, in particular, may ease concerns about living in a high surveillance society. In these shows, surveillance techniques are used for the purpose of capturing titillating sights and sounds and creating an entertaining experience. The spectator faces no danger or risk

from the use of the surveillance equipment and is rewarded instead insofar as he has the chance of feasting on the voyeuristic buffet which Reality Television has to offer. When this pleasurable experience is combined with the unique opportunity for identification these shows provide, surveillance is not only normalized but desirable. In a post-September 11th environment Reality Television becomes a way of coping with the insidious threat of a total and complete loss of privacy. These programs reinforce, at least for the time being, that surveillance is not being used to interfere with our civil liberties clandestinely to gather evidence for a government investigation or trial. Disguised by the trappings of popular entertainment, Reality Television covertly operates as a potent ideological tool working to tranquillize society's apprehension of constantly being monitored.

Chapter 6

CONCLUSION

The difficulty in undertaking any study of Reality Television is the exponential rate at which the category is growing and changing. Even during the course of the writing of this thesis, many new aspects and manifestations of the Reality Television have emerged. The changes have been so fast and furious that *Survivor* and *The Osbournes*, the dominant forces in Reality Television at the outset of my research, have almost become passe, relinquishing the torch to newer programs such as FOX's *Joe Millionaire* and *American Idol* (2002). It is not that *Survivor* and *The Osbournes* are no longer popular, as both programs are still successfully drawing large audiences, it is simply that these programs have lost the media "buzz" that once accompanied them. They are no longer the programs people talk about around the water cooler. Given this quick rate of turnover, it is difficult to engage intellectually with Reality programming. With the various versions of Reality Television that are currently in circulation, it is becoming increasingly more difficult to define what exactly the term "Reality Television" refers. With the incredible success of these types of programs, the "reality" title appears more frequently suggesting a conscious strategy in the promotional material to parlay Reality programs' intense popularity into another hit program. But does this denomination mean anything?

The most recent shift in the Reality format has been towards programs that strongly resemble talent shows or beauty pageants. In *American Idol*, aspiring pop stars take to the stage competing against fellow dreamers and in front of millions of viewers, attempting to sing their way to being named "American Idol." Basically the contestants on this program are taking part in

a televised talent contest. Similarly, in ABC's *Are You Hot: The Search For America's Sexiest People*, individuals compete, based only on their appearance, to be named one of the sexiest people. Unbelievably, it is a beauty pageant that only features the swimsuit competition and does not feign to be interested in anything else. Both of these programs would fail to meet the pivotal first criteria of Richard Kilborn's original three-part description of Reality Television as "the recording 'on the wing', and frequently with the help of lightweight video equipment, of events in the lives of individuals or groups."⁹⁶ The camera work on these programs conforms to that used for any live event, such as an award show or a concert. It lacks "aesthetics of immediacy" as the action is recorded from a stationary position, always framing the image for maximum appeal. The camera does not provoke, pursue, or even try to reveal a raw reality. In these programs, the sense of the camera as a first-hand witness that constitutes the core of the aesthetics of the *Survivor* generation of Reality programming is absent. In this new manifestation of Reality Television the emphasis is more about attending a performance than about seeing that which is normally unseen. As the participants belt out their favourite tunes, or strut their stuff on the catwalk in front of a panel of judges, the audience watches, making value judgements about the success or failure of the presentation.

Are these programs examples of Reality Television? They refer to themselves as Reality programs and are often discussed as such by media reviewers. In my opinion however, these shows seem to be something different, and fall outside of what I would normally consider as Reality Television. The events they depict are too prescribed, lacking any of the spontaneity or unpredictability that has been at the heart of the *Survivor* generation of Reality programming.

It is a question, while difficult, that needs to be answered. If these kinds of programs are

going to be approached in a stringent academic fashion, then an understanding must be reached as to what can be considered to fall under the umbrella of “Reality Television.” Work needs to be done to assess whether Reality programming refers to a style of production, a structural practice, a reflection of the kind of content and participants a program may use, or a mode of reception. While the answer could be that Reality Television is all three of these things, a conceptual identity of the category needs to be further developed otherwise virtually any program could claim to be a Reality program.

Another interesting recent development in Reality Television, is the increasing role of audience participation in the programs. In shows like *American Idol* and ABC’s *I’m a Celebrity – Get Me Out of Here!* (2003), the viewing audience is ultimately deciding which contestants progress from week to week, based on a phone-in polling system. Audience participation is not new to Reality programming: for the past fifteen years *America’s Most Wanted* has been asking viewers to call-in with information about wanted criminals. However, what is different about the audience participation in these more recent programs is that the viewers are directly affecting the content. FOX, not surprisingly, has pushed this audience involvement to the extreme with the program *Married By America* (2003). In the program, two strangers will get married, without any previous meeting, based upon what the audience deems as being the best match. In essence, the audience is creating the “reality” of these programs. It is an interesting phenomenon in light of Aaron Doyle’s argument that Reality programs can change our very perception of reality itself. He writes of how the program *Cops* has influenced the behaviour of both current police officers and those who wish to become police officers.⁹⁷ If “we” the viewing audience are enabled to construct the “reality” of these programs in accordance with our individual (class, ethnic, gender)

positions, a “reality” that is then capable of modifying our perception of reality, what does that mean for reality?

While these new programs offer direct audience participation, compared to previous ones like *Survivor* and *The Osbournes* they fail to provide any sense of presence or “being there amidst the action.” Moreover, the participation that is offered can come across as very artificial, made so by the uninspired way in which these programs are filmed, and more so by the fact that individuals outside of the programs (the viewers themselves) have the ability to affect such wide sweeping change. The programs take on an air of a marionette show, rather than a unique and unscripted encounter with reality.

The role of viewer participation does seem important to the Reality Television. Kevin Robins writes, “this new televisual form is seeking to respond to the increasing desire to participate in experience, rather than observe at a distance . . . Though it still functions in terms of the old technology of television, it anticipates the new technology or virtual reality, seeking to efface the real, to displace representation, in favour of the simulation of pure presence.”⁹⁸ If as Robins suggests, Reality programming is destined to become a kind of virtual reality, further work needs to be done in regard to audience participation and Reality Television. How do we understand the current batch of programs of Reality programs that have high levels of participation but little in terms of experience as “simulations of pure presence?” Are these two different and unique kinds of participation? Is one an attempt to enhance the experience with reality, while the other is an attempt to control it?

Another emerging trend in Reality Television is the nasty and deceitful treatment of participants. Journalist Tom Maurstad has labelled these kinds of programs “humili-tainment”

observing that, “people either perform humiliating acts or are placed in humiliating situations for the purpose of eliciting guffaws or fascination from the audience.”⁹⁹ The premise of *Joe Millionaire* was to trick twenty women into thinking they were competing for the hand of a multimillionaire only to reveal in the program finale that “Joe” was actually a poor construction worker. Similarly, ABC’s new program *The Family* (2003) moves an entire family into a mansion and pits each member against the others for the chance to inherit a million dollars. What they do not know is that the servants of the mansion will be deciding on who gets the million. As the most contrived and constructed programs within the category, they beg the question: Why are these “reality” shows? They seem more like social experiments tantalizing the audience with the ability to watch as individuals on these programs come to realize that they have been lied to or otherwise duped. Is the emotional response of the participants enough to maintain the claim to the title “Reality Television?” How does identification function in these programs, as there is an imaginary or fictional aspect to these programs that is absent in most other reality programming? More importantly, with whom do we identify, the duped contestants, the insiders, or both?

Undeniably, there is a sadistic aspect to these programs. The lure of watching these programs is possibly the same compulsion that causes us to “rubber neck” as we pass traffic accidents or watch high-speed chases on television. There is an anticipation of disaster and we want to see the wreckage. Programs such as *American Idol* and *Are You Hot* also contain elements of sadistic enjoyment. In these programs the participants must appear before a panel of experts who make comments on them and their performance. What is amazing is how the contestants are treated by the panel if they are found lacking in talent or ability. Instead of just rendering a simple decision that they are not good enough to proceed in the competition, the

judges proceed to lambast the participants with the most hurtful and degrading insults. For the viewer, these moments represent a conflict of emotions. While there is empathy with the contestant who has not only had his/her dreams and self-esteem shattered but is also humiliated in front of millions of viewers, there is also the perverse enjoyment in seeing this “star” wannabe being humiliated. There is almost a sense of watching divine justice being meted out. “Mean Reality Television” is a phenomenon worth pursuing. Are these programs a way of dealing with societal frustrations? Does seeing real people hurt and humiliated somehow relieve our own fears of inadequacy in a way that fictional characters cannot? Are these programs an extension or by-product of the *Jerry Springer* style of television?

The difficulty is that while individuals, such as Kilborn and Nichols, have attempted to present reasonable definitions of Reality Television, the rate of change within the category makes any definition outdated almost as soon as it has been written. The question that never seems to go away is: What is Reality Television? Or, what is Reality Television now? In this thesis I have presented a reading of Reality Television specific to the present cultural moment. Currently, Reality programs use a bevy of fictional television techniques to establish meaning and to create the most entertaining and accessible product for the audience. While most television programs draw upon the standard, most accepted, and accessible forms of the medium, the rate at which Reality Television reappropriates various elements from fictional television is what makes this kind of programming distinctly different. Reality Television exists as a kind of chameleon, always assuming the properties of those around it, blending into the scenery, never standing apart. In this respect Reality Television can be viewed as a kind a perfect television, an endless reflection of itself.

Based upon the fictional properties, many scholars and media critics have asserted that these programs have no legitimate claim to “reality.” However, they have failed to recognize the importance of the method of production in Reality Television. The deluge of cameras and the performances they elicit, hyperbolically mirror our own position as subjects before a variety of cameras and other systems of surveillance in our own day-to-day lives. It is in this reflection that Reality Television approaches reality. The audience is able to identify with the individuals on these programs, whether they are celebrities or average people, because they act as surrogates for the audience, reflecting our own reality where we are always watched and always watching.

The combination of fictional and factual properties creates an entertaining and compelling experience for the audience that has considerable ideological power. Reality programs ease concerns about living in a high surveillance society. In these shows, surveillance techniques are used for the purpose of capturing titillating sights and sounds and creating a captivating experience. The threat of a total loss of privacy, which systems of surveillance pose, is neutralized by the voyeuristic buffet which Reality Television offers. When this pleasurable experience is combined with the unique opportunity for identification these shows provide, surveillance is not only normalized but desirable. Disguised by the trappings of popular entertainment, Reality Television diminishes society’s apprehension of constantly being monitored.

APPENDIX

REALITY TELEVISION PROGRAMS

<u>Program</u>	<u>Network</u>	<u>Date Premiered</u>
<i>Amazing Race, The</i>	CBS (Columbia Broadcasting System)	September 5, 2001
<i>American Idol</i>	FOX (20 th Century Fox Television)	June 11, 2002
<i>America's Most Wanted</i>	FOX (20 th Century Fox Television)	April 10, 1988
<i>Are You Hot?</i>	ABC (American Broadcasting Company)	February 13, 2003
<i>Bachelor, The</i>	ABC (American Broadcasting Company)	March 25, 2002
<i>Beg, Borrow, and Deal</i>	ESPN (Sports Network)	September 17, 2002
<i>Big Brother</i>	CBS (Columbia Broadcasting System)	July 5, 2000
<i>Boot Camp</i>	FOX (20 th Century Fox Television)	March 28, 2001
<i>Chains of Love</i>	UPN (United Paramount Network)	April 16, 2001
<i>Cops</i>	FOX (20 th Century Fox Television)	August 11, 1989
<i>Crime and Punishment</i>	NBC (National Broadcasting Company)	June 16, 2002
<i>Family, The</i>	ABC (American Broadcasting Company)	March 4, 2003
<i>Fear Factor</i>	NBC (National Broadcasting Company)	June 11, 2001
<i>I'm a Celebrity- Get Me Out of Here!</i>	ABC (American Broadcasting Company)	February 19, 2003
<i>Joe Millionaire</i>	FOX (20 th Century Fox Television)	January 5, 2003
<i>Married By America</i>	FOX (20 th Century Fox Television)	March 3, 2003
<i>Mole, The</i>	ABC (American Broadcasting Company)	January 9, 2001
<i>Osbornes, The</i>	MTV (Music Television)	March 5, 2002

<i>Real World, The</i>	MTV (Music Television)	May 21, 1992
<i>Rescue 911</i>	CBS (Columbia Broadcasting System)	September 5, 1989
<i>Surreal Life, The</i>	WB (Warner Brothers Television)	January 9, 2003
<i>Survivor</i>	CBS (Columbia Broadcasting System)	May 31, 2000
<i>Temptation Island</i>	FOX (20 th Century Fox Television)	January 10, 2001
<i>Tough Enough</i>	MTV (Music Television)	June 21, 2001
<i>Unsolved Mysteries</i>	NBC (National Broadcasting Company)	January 20, 1987

NOTES

Chapter 1 - Introduction

1. For a complete list of Reality programs mentioned in this thesis see Appendix.
2. Zap2it – Top 20 Network Primetime Series 2002-2003 Season.
<<http://tv.zap2it.com/news/ratings/season/030223season.html>>.
3. Bill Nichols, *Blurred Boundaries: Questions of Meaning in Contemporary Culture* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), p.45.
4. Jon Dovey, *Freakshow: First person Media and Factual Television* (Sterling: Pluto Press, 2000), p.81.
5. Richard Kilborn, "How Real Can You Get: Recent Developments in 'Reality' Television," *European Journal of Communication*. 9.4 (1994): 423.
6. It should be noted that *Cops* and later MTV's *The Real World* (1992) did not use re-enactments, but rather a direct observation style. These programs, while progenitors of the second-wave, during the initial period were in the minority compared the programs that offered dramatic re-enactments.
7. Ibid., p.424.
8. Bob Ripley, "Reality TV Drags Us Down the Gutter." *The London Free Press*. 8 February 2003. A12
9. Nichols, *Blurred Boundaries*, p.60.
10. Joel Black, *The Reality Effect: Film Culture and the Graphic Imperative* (New York: Routledge, 2002), p.18.
11. Nichols, *Blurred Boundaries*, p.52.
12. Black, p.17.
13. Ibid., p.15.
14. Dovey, p.78.
15. Ibid., p.95.
16. Ibid, p.99.

17. Ibid., p.100.
18. Aaron Doyle, "Cops: Television Policing as Policing Reality," *Entertaining Crime: Television Reality Programs*, Eds. Fishman & Cavender (New York: Aldine de Gruyter, 1998), p.95.
19. Ibid., p.100.
20. Ibid., p.110-111.
21. Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* (New York: Vintage Press, 1979).
22. James Wong, "Here's Looking at You: Reality TV, Big Brother, and Foucault." *Canadian Journal of Communication*. Vol. 26:4 (2001): 489.
23. Ibid., p.494.

Chapter 2 – Survivor: The Game of Reality

24. All rating information refers to audience share in the United States.
25. Ratings information from Marc Peyser, "Survivor Tsunami." *Newsweek*, 28 August 2000, 53 - 59.
26. Quoted in Peyser, p.56
27. For an example of this kind of argument see Aufderheide, P, "All-Too-Reality TV," *Journalism*, 3.1 (2002): 7 - 13.
28. The six installments of the series and the date premiered: *Survivor* (May 31, 2000), *Survivor: The Australian Outback* (January 28, 2001), *Survivor: Africa* (October 11, 2001), *Survivor: Marquesas* (February 28, 2002), *Survivor: Thailand* (September 19, 2002), *Survivor: The Amazon* (February 13, 2003).
29. Basem Boshra, "Love it or Hate it, Survivor is the Show We Most Watch." *The Montreal Gazette*, 3 October 2002, D7.
30. Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business*, (New York: Viking, 1985), p.147.
31. Nichols, *Blurred Boundaries*, p.49.
32. John Ellis, *Visible Fictions: Cinema, Television, Video* (Boston: Routledge and Kegan, 1982), 124.
33. Mark Burnett, interview by Julie Chen, *The Early Show* (CBS), August 15, 2002.

34. In the experiment 24 male college students were randomly divided into groups of “guards” and “prisoners,” and then played-out their roles in a mock prison under video surveillance. The experiment was designed to examine power relations in a closed, confined prison environment. The originally scheduled two week experiment was ultimately ended after only six days as the “guards” treatment of “prisoners” turned vicious and was potentially scarring for the participants. Discussed in: Craig Haney & Phillip Zimbardo, “The Past and Future of U.S. Prison Policy Twenty-Five Years After the Stanford Prison Experiment,” *American Psychologist*, 53.7 (1998): 709 - 727.
35. Episode aired on October 31, 2002.
36. Postman, p. 86 - 87.
37. Mark Burnett, radio interview by Art Bell, *Coast to Coast AM*, November 21, 2002.
38. This calculation does not take into account commercials, if a commercial-free episode would be 40-minutes in length, then the shooting ratios climbs to an eye-popping 321 hours of footage for each episode.
39. Other more adult geared Reality Television series such as *The Bachelor* or *The Osbournes* air later at 9:00pm and 10:30 pm respectively.
40. Mark Burnett, radio interview by Art Bell, *Coast to Coast AM*, November 21, 2002.
41. Mark Burnett, radio interview by Art Bell, *Coast to Coast AM*, November 21, 2002.
42. Brian Johnson, “We Like to Watch.” *Maclean’s*, 114.5 (2001): 57.

Chapter 3 – The Osbournes: A Real Family

43. The program was entitled “Beg, Borrow, and Deal.”
44. There have been three installments of the “Tough Enough” series, which is co-produced by WWE and MTV.
45. The Osbournes’ eldest child, Aimee, decided not to appear on the program and consequentially moved out of the family home for the four months during which the program was filmed.
46. Edna Gundersen, “Uncovering the Real Osbournes,” *Life*, 22 November 2002, 1E.
47. Matthew Gilbert, “The Osbournes is Back, Playing for Bleeps,” *The Boston Globe*, 26 November 2002, E1.
48. Allison Romano, “Everybody Loves The Osbournes,” *Broadcasting and Cable*, 25 November 2002, 14.

49. It is rumoured that Sharon Osbourne had finally approval on what went on the air. This begs the questions: what was not shown and why?
50. By “in their entirety,” I simply mean that the events in question have been bracketed off from other events taking place around the family to make them seem whole and intelligible.
51. In the second season, which has just begun at the writing of this chapter, a major theme of the program will undoubtedly be Sharon’s battle against colon cancer. Her illness may provide a unifying thread that will run through the entire season.
52. James Poniewozik, “Ozzy Knows Best,” *Time*, 132:19 (2002): 50.
53. Romano, p.14.
54. Tom Shales, “Make Room for Ozzy: The Modern Family Sitcom,” *The Washington Post*, 26 November 2002, C1.
55. Many Reality programs use instrumental pieces of music to establish mood, especially to create suspense and tension. However, these bits of music could not stand on their own without the visuals. They are closer to sound effects than real music. *The Osbournes* differs in that it uses actual songs with recognizable lyrics, creating something similar to a movie’s soundtrack.
56. Ibid., p.C1.

Chapter 4 – Surveillance and Reality Television: Who is Watching Who

57. Reported by: Todd Gold, *Officially Osbourne* (New York: MTV Books, 2002), p.142.
58. Dai Vaughan, *For Documentary* (Los Angeles: University of California Press), 1999, p.20.
59. This coverage is best typified in CBS’ twenty-six thousand square foot “*Big Brother*” house which was outfitted with 32 video cameras and 68 microphones.
60. Black, p.4.
61. Kracauer, p.xlix.
62. Bill Nichols, “Questions of Magnitude,” *Documentary and the Mass Media*, Ed. John Corner (London: Edward Arnold, 1986), p.109-111.
63. It is possible that Reality TV type moments could be experienced in movie theatres, such as with MTV’s film *Jackass* (2002) based on the television program of the same name. However, these types of films seem more like television programs shown on the big screen.

64. William Staples, *Everyday Surveillance: Vigilance and Visibility in Postmodern Life* (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2000), p.4.
65. Don DeLillo, *The Names* (New York: Knopf, 1982), p.179.
66. Reg Whitaker, *The End of Privacy: How Total Surveillance is Becoming a Reality* (New York: The New Press, 1999), p.82.
67. Greene, Thomas. "Feds Use Biometric Against Super Bowl Fans." *The Register*. 1 February 2001. <<http://www.theregister.co.uk/content/archive/16561.html>>.
68. EarthCam - Webcam Network. <<http://www.earthcam.com>>.
69. Sella, Marshall. "The Electronic Fishbowl." *New York Times*. 21 May 2000. <<http://www.unlv.edu/Faculty/gottschalk/fishbowl.html>>.
70. Ibid.
71. Columbia Broadcasting System – Big Brother 3 Homepage. <<http://www.cbs.com/primetime/bigbrother3>>.
72. Nichols, *Representing Reality*, p.42.
73. Sella, <<http://www.unlv.edu/Faculty/gottschalk/fishbowl.html>>.
74. Goffman, Erving, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (New York: Doubleday, 1959).
75. Wong, p.495.
76. Johnson, p.56-57.
77. Steve Neale, "Masculinity As Spectacle," *The Sexual Subject: A Screen Reader in Sexuality* (New York: Routledge, 1992), p.283.
78. Gabler, p.14.
79. Wong, p.492.
80. Johnson, p.57.
81. Armstrong, Mark. "Osbournes Score \$20 Million." 3 May 2002. <<http://www.eonline.com/News/Items/0,1,9900,00.html>>.
82. Busch, Anita. "Miramax Joins the Osbournes." *LA Times on the Web*. 27 July 2002. <<http://events.calendarlive.com/top/1,1419,L-LATimes-Search-0!ArticleDetail-67285,00.html>>.

83. D'Angelo, Joe. "Sharon Osbourne to Host TV Talk Show." 8 November 2002.
<http://www.mtv.com/news/articles/1458589/20021108/osbourne_ozzy.jhtml>.
84. Bell, Mike. "Take Your Own Advice Kelly." 17 December 2002.
<http://www.canoe.ca/JamAlbumsO/osbourne_kelly_shutup-sun.html>.
85. Poniewozik, p.51.

Chapter 5 – The Paradoxical Link

86. Dudley Andrew, *Concepts in Film Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), p.149.
87. Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," *The Sexual Subject: A Screen Reader in Sexuality* (New York: Routledge, 1992), p.25.
88. Ibid, p.25.
89. Murray Smith, *Engaging Characters: Fiction, Emotion, and the Cinema* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995) p.42.
90. Christian Metz, "The Imaginary Signifier," *Film Theory and Criticism*, Eds. Braudy & Cohen (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), p.807.
91. Unfortunately, there has been very little work done on psychoanalysis and documentary film. As a "nonfiction" form, documentary would seemingly be the antithesis of the fiction films that psychoanalysts have traditionally engaged with. Without such a reference I have attempted to sketch out a possible way psychoanalysis might deal with identification in regard to a text that is not wholly fictional.
92. Nichols, *Representing Reality*, p. 43.
93. Ibid., p.157.
94. Docudrama's relation to Reality Television is an inverse reflection. While both are making truth claims about the historical world, Reality Television emphasizes the capturing of the profilmic event, while Docudrama relies on the re-enactment.

Chapter 6 – Conclusion

95. Quoted by: Lev Grossman, "Casts from the Past," *Time*, (24 March 2003), p.63
96. Kilborn, p.423.
97. Doyle, p.110-111.

98. Kevin Robins, *Into the Image: Culture and Politics in the Field of Vision* (New York: Routledge, 1996) p.140-142.
99. Tom Maurstad, "Audience Lap Up Freak Show TV – But Why?" *The Ottawa Citizen*, 11 November 2002, C3.

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