



Figure 1. Subjects and objects of reality TV

# Project Reality TV: Preshow Special

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Lynne Joyrich, Misha Kavka, and Brenda R. Weber

As television viewers, we are all accustomed to the convention of the preshow special—a lead-in to the main event, whether that’s an extravagant awards show, a big game in sports, or even a “must-see” reality program. Indeed, it is television’s project via such conventions to draw viewers into the flow and to keep them there, attuned to what’s happening on the screen and in the TV universe. In turn, it is our project as television studies scholars to analyze those screened images, this flow of and tuning in to our culture. It is our particular goal in this issue to analyze reality television, which has become such a major part of the media landscape that one might say it defines the reality of television today.

For our “Project Reality TV” introduction, we thus interrogate, but also play with, TV’s conventions and forms. One of its standard forms, of course, is the interview—a form not unique to reality TV but one that reality programming has incorporated, further certifying it as one of television’s primary means for generating not only interest but knowledge. With that goal in mind, we here bring together these forms—the framing text (whether pre- or post-) and the interview—much as they have been brought

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together on TV itself. This has been done, for example, by one of the most familiar personalities from US reality television, Andy Cohen. The former head of development for Bravo, where he presided over that cable TV network's transformation from a channel focused on "quality" drama and film to a top site for reality programming, Cohen hosts the Bravo series *Watch What Happens: Live* (2009–), which features news and celebrities from reality programs. Andy Cohen might ply his TV guests with questions about their latest escapades on their reality show . . . but what if there were an Andi Cohen, feminist media studies scholar, who could ask *her* guests—TV scholars and special issue editors Lynne Joyrich, Misha Kavka, and Brenda R. Weber—about *their* work with reality television? *Read* what happens: live!

*Andi Cohen: Why are you interested in reality television, and why should we, as readers and viewers, likewise be interested in reality television?*

Misha Kavka: I've long been interested in reality television, from both a personal and a critical perspective. Even before the arrival of *Big Brother* and *Survivor* changed televisual life as we knew it in the late 1990s, I was fascinated by American reality crime shows and British docusoaps because of their self-conscious documentary aesthetic and slow, repetitive rhythms, which broke with the conventions of scripted TV.<sup>1</sup> *Big Brother*, with its daily updates on people trapped together in a house, honed do-nothing time to an art, but it also paved the way for certain performances of the self that we now consider synonymous with reality TV. This demand to "be yourself" for the camera seems contradictory, and yet it is increasingly naturalized in our media-saturated age. Well before the spread of social media, selfies, and the Twitterverse, the reality TV camera revealed the mediated subject to be positioned somewhere between personal agency and the public gaze, between the neoliberal rhetoric of choice and the sociocultural norms and expectations that constrain such choices at every turn. In a sense, the study of reality television measures this "in-between." No matter how formulaic the format is, no matter how cognizant of the camera the participants are, a reality show is ultimately a nego-

tiation between producers and participants, scripted arcs and ad-libbed lines, social norms and individual resistances—all of which makes for very rich viewing experiences of these texts.

Lynne Joyrich: It's interesting that you mention the "in-between," Misha, because I would say that my interests lie precisely at that in-between—specifically, between reality television, television programming that is not necessarily labeled as "reality" but that nonetheless certainly engages with and impacts our "real world," and all the various, multifaceted aspects of our social and material reality. In other words, I'm interested, broadly, in how television constructs our very notion of reality and how we thus come to think about, feel toward, and live with the real in ways that are, in fact, televisual. This doesn't mean that we no longer live in a real world, as, of course, our world has always been mediated by languages and images, textual formations, and epistemological and affective dynamics. But it does mean that we need to analyze carefully and precisely how such mediations operate in today's world—which, I would argue despite some folks' claims to the contrary, is still very much dominated by TV, with television texts becoming only more accessible, more widely viewed and discussed, and more expansive around the globe in today's digitally convergent culture. And, as it has come to dominate so much of TV today, reality TV is central to that.

Brenda R. Weber: Well, my particular reasons for being interested in reality TV may have nothing at all to do with why others might find it interesting. I've always found reality TV a fascinating medium for the way it is simultaneously real and not real. Reality TV basically features actual people who serve as characters, and as Misha notes in her book *Reality TV*, "acting" often grows from casting choices.<sup>2</sup> From a narratological point of view, this juxtaposition between real and not real can allow for a whole lot of surprising information about ideology and behavior—so reality TV necessarily challenges how one might read an aesthetic text. This, too, is something I like about reality TV: it asks you to buy into a very serious premise while winking that it is all a bit of farce. Of course, I am also drawn to reality TV's portraits of gender and

sexuality, both subtle and extreme, and to its rich commentary about possibility, normalcy, and agency.

*Andi: Come on . . . does reality television really deserve a special issue of a scholarly journal?*

Brenda: I hope so, since I've now published two books on reality TV and am taking up a lot of valuable library space! Seriously, I consider reality TV—and its many transmediated spin-offs, like YouTube, Twitter, and Facebook—to be the media form of our age and thus critical for study.

Misha: I'm guilty of taking up library space myself with my fixation on reality TV, but I do believe it deserves scholarly attention. For a start, this is no fly-by-night televisual trend: reality TV has clocked at least twenty-five years of programming that is constantly developing and rejuvenating itself and that has attracted national and international audiences in countless millions. In one form or another, it has spread across the world's major as well as minor television industries, whether as inexpensive filler programming, brand programming for cable channels, revenue-generating enterprises like the *Idol* franchise, or a means for smaller countries to produce local content fronted by local faces. Reality TV not only has audience appeal (the source of which scholars have been debating for several decades), but it also has undisputed effects—both hegemonic and counterhegemonic—on the ways in which we live, behave, and fantasize. That's enough to justify a special issue, I'd say.

Lynne: Absolutely. If, as all of us are suggesting, reality television helps to constitute our very sense of the real today, then it certainly requires careful attention and critical intervention. That is, as scholars and critics, we need to continue to develop productive modes of engaging with reality TV—to consider how we as viewers already are positioned by and participate in these televisual worlds. Today's viewers are very sophisticated, and reality TV makes use of that: viewers enjoy playing with what counts as real or fantastic, ordinary or special, public or private, and acted

or acted out. Furthermore, they talk about television in complex ways, moving between psychological observations and comments on narrative tropes, references to media industries and reflections on social dynamics, and criticism of media impositions and their own surveilling judgments regarding reality “characters.” Thus, academics too need to discuss television in complex ways, making use of the discourses at our disposal to describe, deconstruct, and, I would argue, even disturb those dynamics.

*Andi: And why a feminist journal? That is, what in particular makes reality television a feminist issue or something that demands a feminist analysis—one attuned to formations of difference across gender, generation, sexuality, race, region, and class?*

Lynne: Television has always demanded a feminist analysis, given the multiple ways in which it intersects with constructions of sexual and social difference: from its historical development as a home technology (defined by and defining the sexual politics of the living room) to its economics (relying on and reinforcing operations of an image-obsessed consumer culture); from its constructions of temporality and spatiality (bridging the familial and the extrafamilial, the everyday and the eventful, the national and the transnational, “us” and “them”) and its narrative and rhetorical tropes (ordering TV’s subjects according to conventionalized patterns) to its construction of spectatorship and audience (addressing and positioning us as family members, consumers, citizens, men or women, members of various demographic categories, and so on). As I have tried to show in my work, discourses of gender are thus central to discourses on and of television. But if television makes a difference, so too do the differences within television’s universe, so it is crucial for feminist studies to tackle the specificities of reality TV just as it has tackled other televisual forms. In fact, arguably, this genre (or collection of genres) demands a feminist analysis even more than other forms of TV precisely because of reality television’s claims on reality as well as its engagement with issues so central to feminist studies: surveillance and the look; personhood and performativity; the

articulation (and blurring) of publicity and privacy; and the categorization of subjects into slots of contrast, competition, and/or cooperation. As the journal's subtitle states, *Camera Obscura* has always been committed to "feminism, culture, and media studies," so it is the perfect site for theorizing—from a feminist perspective attuned to textual, sexual, subjective, and social differences—the impact that the media phenomenon of reality television has on our culture and vice versa.

Brenda: Feminism is increasingly the go-to theory for understanding and interrogating power relations—in politics, in cultures, in texts. For me, feminist theory is critical for showing the power differentials that are part of taste cultures and material practices (as, for instance, those manifested through things like plastic surgery in makeover culture). This is one reason I have argued that reality television is itself gendered, not only because of the way it treats men or women or people of color, but because of the very degraded place it occupies as the lowest of the low on a taste hierarchy that speaks to matters of knowledge, refinement, and value—all loaded categories from the points of view of race, class, and gender. Honestly, I was in London recently, and a cab driver told me that reality TV was responsible for the mental death of an entire generation. I wasn't sure if I should be flattered to be considered a part of that brain-dead group, insulted on behalf of my object of study, or fascinated by how easy it is to hate this genre of entertainment. I chose the last.

Misha: I think we've all been in these kinds of conversations, which is all the more reason to bring a feminist perspective to reality TV. I fully agree with Brenda's point about feminist theory encompassing the interrogation of power relations and doing so from a standpoint that aims to challenge assumptions about high/low divides, not least because it's no secret who gets to occupy the high ground in terms of gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, nationality, class, and so on. Reality TV has never come within a sniff of this high ground, even at its most experimental—like, for instance, the remarkable first season of MTV's *The Real World* in 1992, which mixed people of different races, genders, and sexuali-

ties in close living quarters in a way that was difficult but instructive for both participants and viewers. Reality television has long been playing with distributions of power, consciously as well as unconsciously, in a form whose ability to channel or challenge, expose or offend the status quo comes from the fact that it is itself so devalued. One way or another, the relation between value, capital, and power is usually the main drama on display in reality TV shows, and that is of particular interest to feminist critics. Of course, this is a feminism that goes beyond concern with the situation of women to confront wider issues that are explicitly and implicitly gendered, such as obesity, addiction, sexual license, and superb grooming—to name just a few of the themes discussed in this issue.

*Andi: Yes, what are the themes of the issue? How would you describe the issue's goals and arguments, and what makes this issue unique?*

Lynne: The issue examines how the televisual project of reality TV itself projects, promotes, and produces certain ways of seeing, knowing, feeling, and being for its viewers and for our society as a whole. That is, the contributors variously consider reality television's textual and ideological formations, its industrial and affective economies, its constructions of celebrity and sociality, its ethics and epistemologies, and its implications for viewers and our culture.

Brenda: In particular, the issue explores various reality TV formats—including those dealing with health, housewives, “hot bodies,” and “hoochie mamas”—in relation to specificities of gender, sexuality, race, and class. Further, the contributors go beyond reading individual media texts to engage more broadly with important critical approaches, among them affect theory and theories of the body; theories of subjectivity and sociality; analyses of neoliberalism and consumer capitalism; theories of temporality and spatiality; and feminist, queer, and critical race theory.

Misha: This issue reflects on three main functions of reality TV: to influence, to intervene, and to generate feelings. These three



functions of course work together, but each of the articles in this issue closely investigates one of these aspects in relation to differences that make a difference: gender, sexuality, race, and class. On the influence of reality TV well beyond its own medium, two articles in the issue interrogate fame, class, and capital, with Jennifer Lynn Jones and Brenda R. Weber writing about reality mothers who have achieved transmedia celebrity and Jane Feuer tracing the development of the “quality” brand of reality TV through Bravo’s audience of “affluencers.” On the capacity and insistence of reality TV to intervene in social problems, two articles address the relationship between reality shows and the public diseases of obesity (Michael Litwack) and addiction (Hunter Hargraves). On the function of reality TV to generate and project feelings, mostly in dramatic excess, three articles discuss affect as refracted by race, ethnicity, sexuality, and gender: in my piece, I interrogate care for self and others in *Jersey Shore* (MTV, 2009–) as a site of ethics; Kristen J. Warner addresses the intersectional gender and race politics of reality-ratchet; and Pier Dominguez investigates racialized gendered excess through a queer affective lens.

*Andi: Sounds great. . . . I can’t wait to get started reading all those pieces!*

Lynne, Misha, and Brenda: We hope you enjoy them! And don’t forget: the more you read in feminist TV studies, the more interesting TV is!

## Notes

1. *Big Brother* was created in the Netherlands by Endemol in 1999 and adapted in the US by CBS in 2000. *Survivor*’s format was created by Charlie Parsons in the UK in 1994. The format first aired in Sweden as *Expedition Robinson* in 1997 and was adapted in the US by CBS in 2000.
2. Misha Kavka, *Reality TV* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012).

**Lynne Joyrich** is professor of modern culture and media at Brown University. She is the author of *Re-viewing Reception: Television, Gender, and Postmodern Culture* (Indiana University Press, 1996) and of articles on film, television, cultural studies, and gender and sexuality studies that have appeared in such journals as *Critical Inquiry*, *Cinema Journal*, *differences*, *Discourse*, *Transformative Works and Cultures*, and *Journal of Visual Culture* and in such books as *Private Screenings* (University of Minnesota Press, 1992); *Modernity and Mass Culture* (Indiana University Press, 1991); *Logics of Television* (Indiana University Press, 1990); *Inventing Film Studies* (Duke University Press, 2008); *New Media, Old Media* (Routledge, 2005); *Queer TV* (Routledge, 2009); and *Mad Men, Mad World* (Duke University Press, 2013). She has been a member of the *Camera Obscura* editorial collective since 1996.

**Misha Kavka** teaches media, film, and television at the University of Auckland. She is the author of two books on reality television, *Reality Television, Affect, and Intimacy* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2008) and *Reality TV* (Edinburgh University Press, 2012), and coeditor, with Jennifer Lawn and Mary Paul, of *Gothic NZ: The Darker Side of Kiwi Culture* (Otago University Press, 2006) and, with Elisabeth Bronfen, of *Feminist Consequences: Theory for the New Century* (Columbia University Press, 2001). She has published widely on screen cultures, gender and sexuality studies, and affect theory and currently serves on the editorial board of *MEDIANZ* as well as the advisory board of *Celebrity Studies*.

**Brenda R. Weber** is professor of gender studies and film and media studies at Indiana University. Her books include *Makeover TV: Selfhood, Citizenship, and Celebrity* (Duke University Press, 2009); *Women and Literary Celebrity in the Nineteenth Century: The Transatlantic Production of Fame and Gender* (Ashgate, 2012); and *Reality Gendervision: Sexuality and Gender on Transatlantic Reality Television* (Duke University Press, 2014). She is presently working on a monograph titled *Latter-Day Screens: Gender, Modernity, and Mediated Mormonism* to be published with Duke University Press.