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**Representations of Wealth and Class in Reality TV: Analyzing *Selling Sunset*, *Bling Empire*, and *The Real Housewives of Beverly Hills***

By the time that Netflix dropped Selling Sunset in 2019 and Bling Empire in 2021, they were stepping into a reality TV world in which The Real Housewives of Beverly Hills (RHOBH) had been defining the terms on Bravo since the early 2000s. At face value, the three shows are in distinct quarters of the genre: Selling Sunset is about luxury real estate agents in Los Angeles, Bling Empire is about a group of Asian-American socialites, and RHOBH is about the lives of wealthy women in Beverly Hills. However, in spite of the format variations, they have a similar narrative format, which is wealth as performance and wealth as the self. These shows were being broadcasted in overlapping years, with Selling Sunset being bingeable on Netflix, Bling Empire with its two season run that lasted just a short time, and RHOBH with its weekly programming on Bravo. The overlap is important as it places them in the same cultural moment, where viewers may binge a Netflix glamour show on a Friday night and tune in to Bravo-style wealth-and-drama formula during the week. The fact that two of them are Netflix productions and one is Bravo-based also points out to the fact that the luxury and elite lifestyles portrayal is not limited to a specific network or style, but is a cross-platform phenomenon in the reality television. I have chosen these three shows because they all deal with the same theme extreme wealth and the lives of the ultra-rich but they do it in different ways transactional (Selling Sunset), cultural (Bling Empire), and performative (RHOBH). The side-by-side viewing of the two shows shows how reality TV applies a mixture of glamorization, humanization, and criticism to make wealth aspirational yet accessible to people who may not be able to live that life at all.

The glamour of the high-end real estate is not possible to separate in Selling Sunset without the drama of the cast of realtors. Episode 3 of Season 1 is one of the most dramatic episodes of the show: the million-dollar engagement party of Christine Quinn includes a black swan centerpiece, live music, and the amount of luxury decor that could be compared to a movie set in Hollywood. Marketed as a true celebration of love, it is as well an advertisement of a lifestyle that most of the viewers cannot afford. This combination of milestone and conspicuous consumption is precisely what Carr et al. refer to in their discussion of how television legitimizes inherited or unearned wealth: programmes that construct wealth as family money but present it as natural and deserving, supporting meritocratic ideas (Carr et al. 4). Although Christine is positioned as a “hard-working” realtor at The Oppenheim Group, there is no secret that her fiancee being a tech mogul contributes to her lifestyle. This twofold framing gives the audience the opportunity to simultaneously marvel at her hustle and justify her privilege, despite the fact that the level of her wealth is obviously not the result of real estate commissions alone. The show maintains the myth of meritocracy by intertwining the relationship between work and personal relationships and the importance of social connections and marriage in obtaining a luxury lifestyle.

Bling Empire adopts another yet similar direction by combining affluence and cultural identity. The first episode of Season 1 presents Anna Shay, who is nonchalantly telling that she is not working because she does not have to, since she is the heiress of the empire of defense contracting owned by her father. In another scene, when one of her fellow actors refers to her as the real Crazy Rich Asian, she dismisses it as a joke, which is an indication of her understanding that she is privileged but does not want to be too serious about it. This is in line with Tarkiainen who notes that reality TV tends to package wealth as something that a person deserves by portraying wealthy people as morally upright or personally likable (Tarkiainen 3). Anna is depicted as very generous, e.g. when she spends a lot of money on gifts to her friends, to ensure that her privilege can be acceptable. Bling Empire also employs the use of Kevin Kreider, a model of humble background, to serve as the entry point to the audience. Initially, Kevin is the down-to-earth outsider who is appalled by the luxury of a private jet and having a million-dollar wardrobe. However, towards the end of the season, he is consumed by the luxury way of life of the group, proving Jahng right since heavy consumers of such media tend to think that wealth and material goods are easily accessible to them (Jahng 322). By doing so, Bling Empire not only recognizes the divide between the ultra-rich and regular viewers, but bridges it with a character arc that implies that upward mobility is only a question of being in the right circles.

In the meantime, The Real Housewives of Beverly Hills is working within a long-established reality TV formula in which money is the set upon which drama between people is played out. Since its premiere in 2010, RHOBH has shown off mansions, designer wardrobes, and luxury vacations, but it is the drama between its cast members that keep the show in the spotlight. A good example is Season 5, the episode titled Dinner Party from Hell… Part Two, in which a catered dinner party in an opulent house descends into a night of yelling, recriminations, and wine being spilled. According to Barton and Davis, reality TV has evolved to be about the marginalized groups as a warning rather than a means of empowerment (Barton and Davis 197). Although the cast of RHOBH is hardly marginalized economically, the same reasoning is applied: the wealth of the women is presented in the most obvious way possible, yet their conflicts with each other and their emotional instability beg the question whether such privilege can be anything but unstable and unhappy. This envy and schadenfreude is the key to the attraction of RHOBH. The audience is not only made to desire the diamonds and dresses but also made to feel better when the rich cannot handle their personal lives with style.

The common denominator between the three shows is that they are a very delicate balance between glamorizing and criticizing. They all portray wealth as something desirable, be it the shiny houses of Selling Sunset, the cultural extravagance of Bling Empire or the luxury-laden social gatherings of RHOBH but they also make the wealthy human by showing them in moments of vulnerability, conflict or self-deprecation. The notion of unintentional privilege presented by Carr et al. can be found in all three: the casual mention of the wealth of her fiance by Christine, the inherited wealth Anna portrays as a peculiarity, and the downplaying of wealth by the cast members of RHOBH by emphasizing their hard work as reality TV stars or business owners (Carr et al. 6). A new dimension is given to the study of authenticity by Allen and Mendick, who note that the young viewers are more inclined to accept that personality that is both aspirational and relatable, and will not accept those who are too authentic in a way that makes them seem rather privileged (Allen and Mendick 465). This is why Bling Empire focuses the outsider perspective on Kevin, why RHOBH has a long history of bringing on new “Housewives” with more middle-class backgrounds, and why Selling Sunset has dedicated so much of its time to the divorce storyline of Chrishell Stause, these are all emotional moments that help the audience associate with the cast members as human beings and not just as objects of wealth.

The psychological impact on the audience is great. The use of cultivation theory by Jahng reveals that when people watch reality TVs about the rich, they can be led to think that being rich is more prevalent than it actually is and that it can be easily achieved (Jahng 320). This is enhanced by parasocial relationships where viewers have a personal connection with the cast members. Viewers may support Chrishell in Selling Sunset following her public breakup or Kevin in Bling Empire as he goes on a dating spree, or even choose sides in the constant drama of RHOBH. These emotional investments make the shows not just a passive form of entertainment, but active places where the viewer can project themselves into a situation they would like to be in, such as closing a million-dollar deal, going to a fancy party or dealing with Beverly Hills social politics.

The comparison of these three shows also shows the pliability of reality TV in crafting the story of wealth. Selling Sunset is transactional, and it connects wealth to professional achievement in the real estate business and makes high-value property sales the source and the indicator of wealth. Bling Empire is both cultural and family-based, with wealth being presented as an element of heritage and identity and the addition of interpersonal drama. RHOBH is performative, and it relies on the wealth as the background to the theatrical conflict that is usually more important than the material objects themselves. Such differences are important since they demonstrate the way in which the same resource, money, can be transformed into various story engines, depending on the intended engagement of the audience. However, in each of the three, privilege is always re-contextualized as deserved, earned, or at least justified by personal charm, which also fits Carr et al. argument that such representations perpetuate the myth of meritocracy (Carr et al. 6).

Ultimately, Selling Sunset, Bling Empire and RHOBH are not mere entertainment, but cultural texts that mediate how we think about class, privilege and aspiration. They provide the audience with a heady combination of desire and judgment, prompting us to fantasize about a life that we, in fact, can never truly afford, and also providing us with grounds to criticize it. It is this push-pull that draws viewers back, the fantasy of being a part of the world on screen, and the pleasure of being able to judge it, as well, as an outsider. Placing these shows within the context of their common cultural moment, analyzing their methods of storytelling, and relating them to larger trends in the depiction of wealth on reality television, it becomes apparent that they are not merely presenting luxury. They are defining how the audiences visualize social mobility, privilege, and the personal and social price of living on top.

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