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Paper 2

INSERT

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Michael Hirschorn writes about the criticisms and appeal of reality television.

- 1 It is interesting to note that the beginnings of reality television were not only rooted in entertainment but also in social and behavioural research. Dating back almost 70 years ago, reality television was beginning to emerge and with it, a look into how people behaved in specialised and contrived situations. During this time, reality television was actually held in high esteem, as sociologists from across America deemed *Candid Camera* as brilliant programming and described its host, Allen Funt, as an ingenious sociologist in America. Funt's hidden camera work and pranks were thought of as a valuable look into post-war society and the customs, rituals, and behaviours of modern society at the time. During this early era of the first reality television show, *Candid Camera* was seen as instructive and progressive. When *Candid Camera* was first on the air in 1948, the extent to which it was reality television was the simple fact that real people and their real reactions to inane situations were being filmed. There were no weekly, attention-seeking types of characters, nor were there real people who became household names or pseudo-celebrities. 5

- 2 As time passed, however, reality television did not remain in such high esteem. This cultural shift may be due to a few issues. Once the airwaves became saturated with this genre of programming, many viewers expressed frustration over the number of reality television shows that were on the air. A study conducted even credited viewers as stating that reality television was the most overdone genre of television. Additionally, many of the shows that gained great notoriety were shows that televised bad behaviour on the part of the participants. Shows such as *Bad Girls Club*, *Real Housewives*, and many of the dating shows often painted characters in a negative light. Physical and verbal altercations, along with intoxicated antics and hyper-sexualised men and women took over as the norm on these shows, and people began to associate these characters and behaviours with the genre itself. For as much as viewers of reality television enjoyed tuning into drama, these portrayals of "real" people helped reality television earn a negative connotation and accounted for the cultural shift from interesting sociological experiment to televised chaos. 15

- 3 Nevertheless, real people are what dominate the airwaves today. When the success of these unscripted shows combines with the fact that reality shows are far cheaper to write, produce, and film, the perfect circumstances continue to exist for these shows to take off and dominate the airwaves. Watching "real life" dramas unfold on our television screens has become to many the preferred way to view television, and the reality show juggernaut has completely taken over as the genre of choice for young viewers everywhere. Shows such as *American Idol*, *Big Brother*, and *Survivor* have run for more than 10 years. 25

- 4 These shows have also ushered in the age of viewers gaining the ability to interact digitally with them. With the prevalence of competition-based shows steadily rising, audiences gain the ability to cast their votes, dismiss characters or competitors that they do not enjoy, and even interact directly with characters via digital conversations, blogs, and social media. This interaction not only gives viewers a sense of ownership over the shows but also another level upon which they can feel connected to the shows and the characters, thus making these people and situations appear that much more "real" to them. However, when one can have a conversation with someone on television or watch the dismissal of the person that they so desperately hope would lose, the line between real life and reality television can become that much more confusing to the young viewer. 35

- 5 Still, there is no arguing with the popularity and staying power of reality television. Reality television combines the best elements of documentary film and scripted television while avoiding the problems inherent in each. Like documentary film, it explores controversial issues and provides valuable insight into the lives of others. Like scripted television, it frames each episode in an overarching narrative that tells an interesting story. But its unscripted format elicits "emotional truths" that are more moving and realistic than anything scripted television can produce, and its observations are more objective than most contemporary documentaries, which often argue for a specific viewpoint. 40

- 6 Television programmers see the genre as a cheap filler that saves them money they can use elsewhere for more worthy programming. Reality shows cost anywhere from a quarter to half as much to produce as scripted shows. Reality television is also the liveliest genre on the set right now. It has engaged hot-button cultural issues – class, sex, race – that respectable television, including the 45

august *CBS Evening News*, rarely touches. And it has addressed a visceral need for a different kind of television at a time when the Web has made more traditionally produced video seem stagey.

- 7 Reality television may be an awkward mixture of documentaries and scripted television. But this kludge also happens to have allowed reality shows to skim the best elements of scripted television and documentaries while eschewing the problems of each. Reality shows steal the story structure and pacing of scripted television, but leave behind the canned plots and characters. They have the impact of documentary reportage without the self-importance and general dismal sentiment. Where documentaries must construct their narratives from found matter, reality television can place real people in artificial surroundings designed for maximum emotional impact. 55 60
- 8 Narrative vibrancy is not the only thing that electrifies these shows. Reality television presents some of the most vital political debate in America, particularly about class and race. Fox's *Nanny 911* and ABC's *Supernanny* each offers object lessons on the hazards of parenting in an age of instant gratification and endless digital diversion. ABC's *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition* features intensely emotional tales of people who have fallen through the cracks in America – often blue-collar families ravaged by disease, health-care costs, insurance loopholes, layoffs, and so forth. In reality television, value systems are smashed into each other, like atoms in an accelerator. On ABC's *Wife Swap*, the producers find the most extreme pairings possible: an incredibly affluent family from New York paired with a low-income rural farm family; a high-tech mum who streams her family's entire lives on the internet paired with a techno-phobe mum who keeps her family far off the grid. 65 70
- 9 Scripted television is supposedly showing new ambition these days, with complex plots, dozens of recurring characters, and movie-level production values. But network prime-time television remains dominated by variants on the police procedural (*Law & Order*, *CSI*, *Criminal Minds*), in which a stock group of characters (ethnically, sexually, and generationally diverse) grapple with endless versions of the same dilemma. The episodes have all the ritual predictability of Japanese Noh theatre¹: crimes are solved, lessons are learnt, order is restored. Reality shows have leaped into this imaginative void. Discovery's *Deadliest Catch* is an oddly transfixing series about ... crab fishermen in the Bering Sea. As a straightforward documentary, *Catch* would have been worthy fodder, but the producers have made it riveting by formatting the whole season as a sporting event, with crab tallies for each of the half dozen or so boats and a race-against-the-clock urgency that, for all its contrivance, gives structure and meaning to the fishermen's efforts. 75 80
- 10 For all the snobbism in the documentary community, reality television has actually contributed to a boom in documentary filmmaking. The most successful documentaries of recent vintage have broken through in part by drawing heavily from reality television's bag of tricks, dropping the form's canonical insistence on pure observation. The resistance to reality television ultimately comes down to snobbery, usually of the generational variety. People under 30 tend to embrace this programming; they are happy to be entertained, never mind the purity of conception. In the end, any genre that provokes such howls of protest is doing something interesting. Try the crab. 85

¹Classical Japanese theatre involving music, dance and drama that has been performed since the 14th century.