

## **“Simulacrum and Performativity in Contemporary Reality Television”**

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We could say that we are living a time of post-reality TV, because since the Big-Brother-boom, there are some new hybrid formats whose main features are an extreme notion of simulacrum and new performative strategies.

As Anette Hill points out (2005, 14-24), the rise of reality TV happened by the convergence of three media production areas: the tabloid journalism, the documentary television, and the popular entertainment. Supported by these three vertexes, reality TV became very popular at the beginning of 90's, with its first wave: infotainment, with crime and emergency-based programs. The second wave was based on observational docu-soaps and life-style programmes, such as *Children's Hospitals*, *Airport*, *Vet School* and, in the life-style wing, proposals such as *Style Challenge* or *Changing Rooms*, programs where the thing that really matters is reaction, instead of action. The third wave deepened into the hybridation with two kinds of factual TV: gameshows (with landmarks such as *Survivor* and *Big Brother*) and social experiment programs (*Ibiza Uncovered*, *Wife Swap* and the recent *Secret Millionaire*). In any of the three waves, it is noteworthy that the best shares of European TV have corresponded to these formats, as Hill has studied (2007).

In this paper, I will focus on the hybridation as the main feature of contemporary factual TV and how this mixture is supported by two elements: the notions of simulacrum and performativity.

## **Why hybridation?**

The key concept for reality TV has been changing. In early days it was the word “observational”, with “An American Family” case as paradigm (Holmes and Jermyn, p. 5, Fetveit in his whole article), then docudrama, indexicality of video surveillances, moral panic, TV ecology (Corner, 2004), voyeuristic video-cameras and video-surveillances (Dovey, p. 65), some ethical and legal issues (Hill, 2005, p. 9)... But now, though there are some new approaches such as celebrity mediation, fans communities and gay politics (Holmes and Jermyn, p. 18), the key concept in contemporary factual TV is hybridation (Hill: 2007, p. 2). Nowadays, factual TV blends a lot of different concepts: the private and the public, the celebrity and the unknown person, the informative and the entertaining, the authenticity and the performance, the truth and the fake, fact and fiction and so on. As Annette Hill points out: “Factual television resists categorization. It is an umbrella category for a wide range of non-fiction programmes (...). These programmes are constantly changing, borrowing ideas from existing genres, from game-shows to soap opera. One way to make sense of this chaotic world is to categorize factual television according to broadcasting categories” (Hill: 2007, 55).

Despite everything, the biggest step of the contemporary factual TV has been its relocation within the entertainment habitat. The audience and the success of new formats have pushed reality TV out of the factual map. This explains the current moral ambiguity of the genre: it maintains the referentiality, indexicality and aesthetic modes of observational documentary, but it renounces to one of the core elements of every documentary: his ability to know the real world. As Hill explains (2007, 210): “The hybridity of many reality formats means that viewers are caught between responding to

a programme from a factual perspective, judging the representation of reality within the context of a factual genre's truth claims, and responding from an entertainment perspective, where the driving force for the programme is quite different from factuality" Now, reality TV genres migrate, mutate and cannibalize each other, and it has led the audience to lose trust in factual TV as a means of document the world.

All this rotation towards entertainment has transformed reality TV into a "no man's land", that is not factual neither fictional, neither private nor public. Contemporary reality TV is a unique and singular space ruled by its own aesthetic and referential laws.

In this space of contemporary hybrid reality TV, there are two key concepts, as we mentioned: simulacrum and performativity.

### **Firstly: the simulacrum**

The problem of realism is at the heart of the conceptual reflection about reality TV. In this environment, Baudrillard's idea of simulacrum becomes an essential point: "More real than the real, that is how real is abolished", he wrote. As Fetveit has explained, there is some kind of paradox in the reality TV: the more we lose faith in photographic images, the more reality TV we have. Perhaps, as Foucault said, we are living a change of paradigm in our truth regime. What does this mean? This implies that reality TV is a promise of contact with reality, yes, but the contact is made from a safe distance: it is a compensatory, alternative space for knowing --even feeling-- the truth.

Now that referentiality has been threatened by the saturation of images, the change of paradigm in truth regime has lead us to treat a bad-quality-image (such as

those who come from domestic video-cameras) as a privileged form of truth, indexicality and authenticity.

Even when the observational documentary is the basis for contemporary reality TV (docu-shows such as *Survivor* or *Big Brother*; docu-soaps such as *Airport* or *Vet School* can confirm it), the viewer is aware of the construction of that situation. That is the paradox, as Murray and Ouellette have indicated (Murray and Ouellette: 2004, 5): reality TV increases our appetite for authenticity, while we are conscious of its fictional construction. In fact, Reality TV is playing with two kinds of epistemological frameworks: the real and the un-real (Justin Lewis, 301):

- one notion of truth according to the semiotic structure of our immediate environment

- other one based on the complex system of meanings handled by the cultural industries for a more distant reality

This keen on simulacrum is a very postmodern issue: the reality exists more in the ways of representing than in the contents, what means that the real has become the hiper-real, a symbolic space where the degree of reality is just the degree of visibility. So, at the end, the simulacrum of reality TV doesn't allow us to differentiate between the real from the recreated.

## **Second place: performativity**

The notion of performative documentary exposed by Nichols and improved by Stella Bruzzi could be useful when we examine contemporary reality TV.

In contemporary reality TV there is a mixture of performance and naturalism. The naturalism comes from the observational techniques that are in the root of contemporary reality formats such as game-docs, docu-shows and docu-soaps; but the observational mode is surpassed with fiction techniques such as casting of characters, dramatic lines or crossing stories (Dovey, 135).

That's why, in some way, reality TV shows could be defined, following Corner, as "ordinary performance" (262). The representational emphasis is on the boundaries between the "I" and its auto-performance. Contemporary spectators are very familiar with cameras and that implies that the contestants of any factual TV show are conscious about the process of representation they are immersed in. There is an intense self-consciousness in contemporary reality TV: they are aware of cameras, they know how they are supposed to act in front of them, and their actions and conversations are driven by their desire to win the show. In one word: they are acting themselves for the audience.

But the question is not so simple. There is a tension between the "real I" and the "performative I". That boundary between the ordinary and the mediatic self emerges as the crucial element in these realities. As Su Holmes has written out, what viewers pay off is the most authentic performance. In these shows there is a constant negotiation on the status of self-authenticity: "the reflexive project of the self" coined by Anthony Giddens reaches here its most visible example because reality TV has revived the emphasis of being one-self. Even when reality TV could be defined as a "continuum of performance" (Hill: 2007, 115), every show is implicitly encouraging us to find out the "moments of truth" (Holmes: 2006, 21 y Hill: 2005, 68) within that TV-constructed-environment.

This leads us to another interesting paradox, even for the celebrity shows: within a staged program, in that unusual situation, the audience will give their votes to the one who shows up a better genuineness. That is because the postmodern spectator has got a suspicious eye: he does not believe in the referentiality of TV images anymore. As Hill has studied, a big portion of British audience, for example, does not trust the authenticity of reality TV (Hill: 2005, 57-78) because they think that the stories are exaggerated and the participants overact (64).

At the end, when spectators are questioning the authenticity of all these programs, based on the indexicality of the image and its powerful sensation of truth, we can infer that the audience is also questioning implicitly the very notion of authenticity itself.

### **Some New Formats**

Without the purpose of being exhaustive (we don't have time here for that), I will mention now some TV programs that illustrate the new ways that simulacrum and performativity in contemporary factual TV can adopt.

-*The Mole*, aired on Spain last summer as "*El Traidor*", is presented as a game-doc. But it contains a special aspect: there is a double agent hidden inside the group of participants. He has been hired by the producers to sabotage the efforts of the contestants. Therefore, in *The Mole* the notion of simulacrum is incorporated to the very regulation of the show in a way that it becomes a metafictional technique to increase the moments of truth between the rest of participants.

-*Space Cadets* (aired on Channel 4 on 2005) also went one step further. The premise of the show was to train twelve contestants in order to pick out some of them

for being space tourists. But everything was an elaborate hoax: three of the contestants were actors, they were not at Russia and there were not “space trip” at all. In this case, not only the notion of simulacrum is incorporated to the show: it is the entire show! The whole program is a fake where some contestants are used as guinea-pigs, probing their candor, their ingenuousness: just the opposite of formats such as *Big Brother*. In *Space Cadets* the performativity of ordinary participants is abolished by the fake they are immersed in.

-*The Armstrongs*, a popular TV show aired on BBC in 2006, is a good example of the mixed up world of factual TV. It borrows a lot of mockumentary techniques (emulating *The Office* style) for a “real” and ironic reality TV. Mr. and Mrs. Armstrong do really exist at Coventry and they really own a double glazing company. Here, the notion of simulacrum is not in a staged scenario, but in the presence of the cameras. Even so, it is not just a docu-soap (as *Vet School* or *Airport*), because *The Armstrongs* take into account all the memory of the viewer and propose a new kind of performance: the giddensian “project of the self” based on themselves in front of a camera. Somehow, an auto-conscious self, an auto-performance.

-*The Simple Life*. This program about Paris Hilton had the original point of exposing a double performativity. It was not merely a factual TV show (a celebrity show, more precisely) about the ordinary Paris Hilton... because she is not ordinary at all. So, *The Simple Life* played with two different levels: on the one hand, it showed us the famous Paris Hilton doing –performing– low-paying jobs; but, on the other hand, *The Simple Life* was showing us just a new performance of the well-known Paris Hilton: eccentric, exhibitionist and foolish person.

-*Above the below* was a TV event created by Rick Blaine, for Channel 4 in October of 2003. It was another detour on the notion of performativity because Blaine used his own body as material for a reality TV performance. Of course, this has to do with the postmodern hiper-visibility, where nothing can hide from the eye of the camera, not even the suffering. It is the *spectacularization* of pain, in a “scopic communion” (Imbert) arised as a new form of sociality.

-*The Biggest Looser*, a new version of *The Big Diet* that will be aired on Spain next year, also uses the body as a place for performativity. In this case, it is truth, there is an intent of being a good example for the viewers, but it is still a new way of performativity, where the body focuses all the attention of the show.

All these new formats are only a few examples of the new ways that reality TV is exploring. It is probable that, in the following years, the genre will keep on mutating and offering new proposals that will contribute to define how terms such as “authenticity”, “realism” and “truth” are being distorted and reinvented constantly.