Editorial

Reality/Television

Reality TV's impact on television programming and content has been well documented. In recent years, the persistence of reality television as a phenomenon has also been reflected in the number of popular and scholarly publications aimed at its investigation; several books, anthologies, and journal issues have been devoted to various aspects of this kind of programming that straddles the line between the factual and the fictional.[1] The topics discussed in this rich field of inquiry are as varied as the mutations of the reality genre itself. They include audience studies, governmentality, surveillance, voyeurism, digital consumption, ritual, gender, race—the list goes on.

Of the many fascinating topics and approaches to the study of reality TV, the one area that seems curiously absent is the specific examination of the national and transnational contexts of reality TV programming. The contributors to this volume hope it will help to fill this gap. Considering that so much reality TV "migrates"—whether from subgenre to subgenre or between national screens and franchises—reality television mobilizes what Christine Gledhill (2000) refers to in another context as boundary crossings and border disputes that become productive sites of cultural activity. The central path that reality TV as a genre navigates is different from its modalities, although the two are obviously related. As with any mass-mediated genre, reality TV attempts to carve out a cultural space in which to generate new audiences. But to create experiences that will satisfy, however temporarily, the appetites of these new audiences, reality television must first forge the connection between a social practice and its aesthetic mode of expression.

Each of the articles in this special issue addresses the question of the relationship between shifting audiences and expectations motivated by the recombination of the aesthetic and extra-textual dimensions of reality TV. They attempt to answer such questions as: How might national characteristics and idiosyncrasies alter the production or reception of a reality TV show? What is the impact of online reality TV fan sites and discussion boards on programming? How do transnational programs deal with regional contexts and differences? These questions are central to the reception of a big brother–style Balkan reality program *To Sam Ja* (*That's Me*) examined by Zala Volčič and Mark Andrejevic in "*That's Me*: Nationalism and Identity on Balkan Reality TV." In this article, the authors examine both sides of the show's production to discuss it as a contested form of democracy. They argue that *To Sam Ja* attempts to remedy larger economic and cultural problems by making them personal.

Like Volčič and Andrejevic's article, Boulou Ebanda de B'béri and Ruth Middlebrook's analysis of *Canadian Idol*, "The Paradox of National Identity:

Region, Nation and *Canadian Idol,"* looks to the online audience to suggest alternative forms of national identity. In both cases the authors discover, however, that online discussion groups practise nationhood via the burgeoning sense of community created within the chat sites; they tap into, replay, and deviate from the mythic forms of identity idealized by official discourses of nationalism. In both articles, the authors suggest that contributors to chat groups/sites negotiate between the offerings of television and the new-media platform to respond to the stereotyping of regional differences and as a means to express their own distinctive identities.

Doris Baltruschat's article "Reality TV Formats: The Case of *Canadian Idol"* poses the question, what happens when a reality TV program produced elsewhere shows up in a new national context? In addition to online environments created for the show, she focuses on other extra-narrative developments that affect *Canadian Idol,* such as the management of media events. The complexity of this franchise's adaptation for the Canadian context is a significant issue, especially when read in conjunction with the recent news that *Canadian Idol* will be on hiatus this season due to the current worldwide economic conditions.

How are questions of national identity represented in transnational reality formats? Derek Foster discusses the competing forms of "audience" imagined by Canada's national public broadcaster and those of private transnational producers in "Chasing the Public: The CBC and the debate over factual entertainment on Canadian airwaves." He argues that the lag time to the appearance of reality-based programming on the CBC is a result of the shifting discourse on its public service mandate. Only after this programming underwent what Foster refers to as "the CBC effect" was the mandate broadened to encompass factual entertainment. Once "branded" as Canadian reality television, this content is now deemed fit for Canadian viewers.

What kinds of reality-format star systems and notions of celebrity are produced within the different national contexts? How are issues of gender and class, race and ethnicity, multiculturalism and regionalism addressed and/or elided on reality programming in national contexts? I discuss the generic dimensions of the home improvement lifestyle program in "Home Improvement Television: *Holmes on Homes* Makes It Right," focusing on the productive tension between melodrama and documentary that creates the heroic figure of Mike Holmes in *Holmes on Homes.* How do Canadian producers deal with the issue of adaptation of reality TV formats into other dramatic series? In the article "Wild Bodies and True Lies: Carnival, Spectacle and the Curious Case of *Trailer Park Boys*," Patricia Hughes-Fuller takes us outside of reality television as such to read *Trailer Park Boys* in conjunction with its play on the reality TV genre. The show sometimes adopts and sometimes adapts conventions of the reality genre and the mockumentary. Hughes-Fuller argues that *Trailer Park Boys* deploys these genre elements in order to subvert them. The show's resulting excessive and misplaced spectacles produce a new disruptive and potentially progressive carnivalesque subject, one that defies reality television's imagined citizen as a particular kind of self-serving consumer.

In addition to these articles on reality TV, this special issue also includes articles germane to the issue of television's own particular and peculiar reality. These include Lorna Roth's path-breaking research, in "Looking at Shirley, the Ultimate Norm: Colour Balance, Image Technologies, and Cognitive Equity" on the use of Caucasian skin as a standard for colour-testing for television, embodied in the figure known in the industry as "Shirley." We also include a report from Liz Miller and Martin Allor on the the "Video Advocacy Project," a summer institute involving human rights advocates from around the world that is run by the non-profit group, Witness. A speech by Rita Shelton Deverell—scholar, activist, and television producer—titled "Who Will Inherit the Airwaves?" rounds out the issue by offering an insider's perspective on television production and policy. Finally, this issue includes Michael Dorland's tribute to Paul Attallah, who died this year. Paul contributed greatly to the journal, to the field, and to this issue. His wit, humour, and searing intellect will be missed.

Altogether, these articles, reports, and other contributions invite us to rethink the reality TV genre as well as its effects on television production in Canada and worldwide. By recasting the questions we pose of such cultural artifacts in a global cultural economy, we can ask why and by what means we define ourselves, wherever we are.

Note

1. The recent publication of *Programming Reality* (Druick & Kotsopoulos, 2008) also reflects an ongoing interest in the relationship between fiction and non-fiction production in English-Canadian television.

References

Druick, Zoë, & Kotsopoulos, Aspa. (2008). *Programming reality: Perspectives on English-Canadian television*. Waterloo, ON: Wilfrid Laurier University Press.

Gledhill, Christine. (2000). Rethinking genre. In Christine Gledhill & Linda Williams (Eds.), *Reinventing film studies* (pp. 221-243). London: Arnold.

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