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From Poe and Hitchcock to...Reality TV?

Kelsey Phelps

A thesis submitted to the faculty of
Brigham Young University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

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August 2010

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ABSTRACT

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This thesis expands the discussion of the mass appeal and sustained success of reality TV by initiating an examination of the direct connections between reality TV and cinematic and written fiction. As reality TV has firmly established itself as a successful genre of entertainment over the last two decades, scholarship has been slow to follow. The majority of existing scholarship focuses on reality TV as a descendant of the documentary and emphasizes the role of the non-professional, the average person, as the star. Reality TV's appropriation of structural elements from general fiction is acknowledged only briefly and the use of specific techniques borrowed from fiction is largely unexplored. Although reality TV is a variation of the documentary, this thesis explores reality TV's creation of its voyeuristic appeal through the appropriation of key elements that come directly from fiction. Specific techniques used to create a voyeuristic appeal in reality programs, such as the morally ambiguous character and the confession, can be traced, respectively, to the surprising sources of Alfred Hitchcock and Edgar Allan Poe. Reality TV, in appropriating these techniques from Hitchcock and Poe, has a similar formula for entertainment: the thrill of voyeurism as a sublime experience. The consistent appeal of reality TV cannot be fully understood without an awareness of its connections to these two great artists.

Keywords: Edgar Allan Poe, Alfred Hitchcock, reality TV, voyeurism, sublime.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I extend deep appreciation to my committee chair, Dennis Perry, for his help with the development of this project and for his constant support and patience throughout the drafting process. Sincere thanks to my committee members, Dennis Cutchins and Edward Cutler, for their suggestions, patience, and enthusiasm. Special thanks to my family and close friends for their encouragement and support.

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From Poe and Hitchcock to...Reality TV?

Introduction

In 2000 Clay Calvert wrote that it was “extremely rare” that MTV’s *The Real World* should have had a significant increase in ratings in its seventh year. He notes, “most long running series are beginning to experience a gradual ratings decline” by their seventh year on air (32). Calvert attributed the show’s success to its voyeuristic appeal, advocating that *The Real World*, and reality TV in general, are part of a larger cultural trend he calls “mediated voyeurism.” Rather than relying on the traditional definition of voyeurism, Calvert defines mediated voyeurism as “the consumption of revealing images of and information about others’ apparently real and unguarded lives, often yet not always for purposes of entertainment but frequently at the expense of privacy and discourse, through the means of the mass media and Internet” (2). Six years later Seth Blazer answered Calvert’s question about the longevity of reality programming, stating that the genre has been “exploding” since 2000 (380). Taking a cue from Calvert, Blazer points to the continued success of *The Real World* in 2006 and asserts that “voyeurism is an inescapable component of our society” (391). And now in early 2010, with the twenty-third season of *The Real World* currently airing and the smash hit *The Jersey Shore* back for a second season, voyeurism is thriving in society, particularly in the form of reality TV. Calvert argues that reality TV, whether or not it remains a successful genre, has helped transform the United States into what he calls us in the title of his book: a *Voyeur Nation*.

In order to better understand the widespread success of reality programming we must turn to its roots. The majority of current scholarship describes reality TV as an evolution of the documentary genre. However, this classification does not account for several key influences on the voyeuristic nature of reality programming. Although reality TV, like the documentary, is

driven by the main idea of “observing what is a mode of ‘real’ behavior,” several defining characteristics have their origin in cinematic and written fiction (Corner 44). Specific techniques used to create a voyeuristic appeal in reality programs, such as the morally ambiguous character and the confession, can be traced, respectively, to the surprising sources of Alfred Hitchcock and Edgar Allan Poe.

It is important to note that reality TV, in appropriating these techniques from Hitchcock and Poe, has a similar formula for entertainment: the thrill of voyeurism as a sublime experience. Edmund Burke defines the sublime as “the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling” (39). For Burke, this feeling is pain rather than pleasure, therefore “whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain, and danger, that is to say, whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of the sublime” (39). Decades of scholarship has firmly established Hitchcock and Poe as masters of the sublime. In discussing Poe’s influence on his own work Hitchcock stated that “very probably, it’s because I liked Edgar Allan Poe’s stories so much that I began to make suspense films...I can’t help but compare what I try to put into my films with what Poe put in his stories: a perfectly unbelievable story recounted to readers with such a *hallucinatory logic that one has the impression that this same story can happen to you tomorrow*” (Gottlieb 143; emphasis added). Sydney Gottlieb suggests that in addition to each being “experts in their genre,” Poe and Hitchcock are both “profound realists” (105). By making the story as realistic as he can, Hitchcock, like Poe, creates the suspense necessary to achieve the sublime. The thrill an audience might feel is based in the possibility of these stories happening in real life. Reality TV achieves a similar effect by placing real people in dramatic situations. The suspense of actual lover’s quarrels, substance abuse, and violence, along with the pain and danger that inevitably follows, permeates reality programming and creates the thrill of voyeurism as a sublime

experience. In this respect reality TV is consistent with Burke's concept of the sublime: "When danger or pain press too nearly, they are incapable of giving any delight, and are simply terrible; but at certain distances, and with certain modifications, they may be, and they are delightful, as we every day experience" (40). The mediated voyeurism of reality programming follows the techniques and effects perfected by Hitchcock and Poe as audiences experience the sublime as entertainment.

The "Reality" of Reality TV

Of course, the "reality" of reality TV is part of the question we must address. Although reality programming does observe modes of real behavior for its subject matter, as John Corner suggests, the audience only sees a modified version of that reality. Susan Murray and Laurie Ouellette cite a 2005 poll by Associated Press/*TV Guide* that found "25 percent of those polled said that reality shows are totally made up, and 57 percent said that they show some truth but are mostly distorted" (8). The poll also indicated that although the majority thought reality TV was made up, "they also didn't care that much" (8). While reality programs focus on average people in real situations, they are structured and edited to maintain a consistent narrative thread throughout the program. Clay Calvert cites season seven of *The Real World* as a typical example. In that season 1,894 hours of footage were reduced to eighteen half-hour episodes (30). Additionally, the majority of reality programs are filmed in advance, allowing the producers to "shape the story based on an already known outcome" (Andrejevic 159). In some cases the producers have even more direct involvement in creating drama. Cast members of *Road Rules*, MTV's spinoff of *The Real World*, told Andrejevic in telephone interviews that if drama was low the producers would cut back on the cash allowance for food to incite conflict (104). The producers control the tension and pace of the narrative to achieve the desired effect

on the audience in much the same way Hitchcock played his audience “like an organ” (Gottlieb 151). Hitchcock’s definition of drama is certainly applicable to reality TV: life with the dull spots left out (Gottlieb 205). Furthermore, this manipulation by reality program producers fits under Burke’s “certain modifications” that keep pain and danger distant enough to be delightful and entertaining for the audience as a sublime event (40).

Alfred Hitchcock and the Morally Ambiguous Character

Although some research into the relationship between reality programming and fiction and film has been done, existing scholarship has only scratched the surface. Mark Andrejevic, in analyzing the role of voyeurism in several popular reality TV programs, turns to Slavoj Žižek’s work on Alfred Hitchcock. In concluding his analysis of *Psycho*, Žižek argues that the audience assumes a voyeuristic role because the entire spectacle of the film is performed with an awareness of the audience’s presence. Rather than a detached viewer, the audience is the reason for the film: “While we perceive ourselves as external bystanders stealing a furtive glance into some majestic Mystery which is indifferent to us, we are blinded to the fact that entire spectacle of Mystery is staged *with an eye to our gaze*: to attract and fascinate our gaze” (225). Norman’s acknowledgement of the audience—by looking directly into the camera at the end of the film—is Hitchcock’s own acknowledgement of allowing the audience to watch. Although he never directly references Hitchcock or *Psycho*, Andrejevic quotes this same passage from Žižek in discussing the relationship of cast members and camera in *Temptation Island* and *The Real World* (186). Whether or not these reality programs successfully convey the authenticity of “reality,” they are produced for the entertainment of the viewer. Reality TV fulfills the same desire to *watch* that Hitchcock does with his films. Although they are different media and

different genres, they function in the same capacity. Ultimately these programs are spectacles staged for the voyeuristic pleasure of the audience.

In addressing the mass appeal of reality TV in general, and the show *Temptation Island* specifically, Andrejevic makes another reference to Žižek's observation of society: "The deepest identification which 'holds a community together' is not so much identification with the Law that regulates its 'normal' everyday circuit as identification with the specific form of transgression of the Law" (176). Andrejevic is refuting the critics who argue that the negative behavior (the dominant subject matter of reality TV) will erode society's moral fabric. He asserts that this type of behavior is not the exception but the rule of the established order of the moral code of our culture. Reality TV is not introducing negative behavior; rather it is reflecting already existing behavior on an acceptable level as a form of entertainment. Žižek illustrates this point in discussing the audience's connection to Norman in *Psycho*. For Žižek it is this "identification with transgression" that makes the viewer's passage from Marion to Norman acceptable (226). Robin Wood argues that the audience has been "carefully prepared for this shift of sympathies" as they now identify with Norman (146). Wood further reveals the depth of Hitchcock's intent for his audience to identify with Norman when he suggests that, in constructing the audience's transition from Marion to Norman, Hitchcock has used "all the resources of identification technique to make us 'become' Norman" (146).

Wood's statement takes on particular significance with reference to the famous scene of Norman looking through the peephole. The sequence of shots illustrates how the audience identifies with and "becomes" Norman. The viewers first see the peephole as Norman removes the painting. Norman approaches and the camera cuts to a side view as he leans in closer staring through the peephole. At this point William Rothman argues that by withholding Norman's view from us Hitchcock "allows us to recognize our wish for it" (289). Here the audience must

acknowledge their own voyeurism: they want to watch. Hitchcock indulges that desire with the next shot: Marion undressing. This is the pivotal moment in the film. The viewers “become” Norman when they assume his gaze. No longer passive bystanders observing a sympathetic character, they have now taken an active role, with Norman, by looking through the peephole, a role Hitchcock has forced the audience to acknowledge that they wanted to share. Although this technique does compel the audience to identify with Norman, it is consistent with the desire of the audience. Hitchcock is proceeding with his understanding of human nature, with “confidant knowledge that his audience shares with him a deep attraction to violence that exists side by side with our everyday, presumably high moral character” (Gottlieb 103). While this connection with Norman is severed when the audience discovers he is the murderer, the audience continues to watch because the sensations of fear and terror are enjoyable. The attraction is the vicarious thrill of the sublime as a form of entertainment, precisely the same appeal of reality programs.

Andrejevic’s critique differs from Žižek’s in that the action the audience watches is not murder, but the conflict of more or less average people engaging in questionable moral behavior. What Andrejevic is referring to in quoting Žižek is the suspense of the sublime. The appeal of *Psycho*, in short, is that of reality TV: vicarious indulgence in questionable behavior. The “transgression of the Law” binds viewer to characters and cast members alike. The audience does not approve of Norman’s behavior, but they want to watch his transgressions in order to experience fear while “they are certain of being in safety” (Gottlieb 143). Hitchcock believed that “people want to connect themselves with what they see on the screen” (Gottlieb 205). Wood argues that the audience can easily identify with Norman in the beginning because he is “an intensely sympathetic character, sensitive, vulnerable, trapped by his devotion to his mother,” all admirable qualities in our society (146). By possessing these qualities Norman, though fictional, represents real people and connects with the audience. Reality TV’s cast members connect with

viewers in a similar manner because they are real people. Ruthie's alcohol related actions in season eight of *The Real World* can be considered transgressions but the audience is aware that her abuse of alcohol is a real coping mechanism resulting from a difficult childhood.

What Andrejevic is missing by not acknowledging Hitchcock are the precise dimensions of the relationship between audience and character. The desire to watch is created by the relatability of the characters. An example makes this clear: the conflicts between Billy and Mandy on season one of *Temptation Island* were so appealing because they were people in a real relationship. Arguably the most memorable moment on the show was when Billy attempts to evade the cameras after watching a tape of Mandy's date: "Turn it off...this does not concern the show. This is my life" to which an off-camera voice responded, "Actually, your life *is* the show" (Andrejevic 183). As Billy's experience indicates, the line between reality and fiction is blurred when they both serve the purpose of entertainment. Reality, in functioning in the role of fiction, becomes the ultimate voyeuristic experience for the audience. Billy's and Mandy's faults certainly fall under Burke's source of the sublime as they excite pain, fear, and a pleasant exhilaration in the audience (39). Because Billy and Mandy are real people the suspense the audience feels is elevated to a sublime experience.

However, the sublime has another role in addition to entertainment; and Žižek's identification with transgression is more than a vehicle to the sublime. What Žižek is suggesting about film (and Andrejevic about reality TV) is that although this negative behavior operates primarily as entertainment, it also has a restorative function in society. By watching films like *Psycho* and programs like *Temptation Island*, *The Jersey Shore*, and *The Real World*, the transgressions of the law remind the audience of the boundary of the law. In other words, by watching someone (real or fictional) cross the line of acceptable behavior the audience, as a community, remembers where that line is and that it should not be crossed. *Psycho* is primarily

entertainment, but at the end of the film the murderer goes to jail because murder is still wrong. At the end of *Temptation Island* no infidelities have been committed and all the couples remain together; the sanctity of the relationship has been preserved. Ronnie's fighting costs him a night in jail for assault in *The Jersey Shore* because violence is not an appropriate solution. Each episode of *The Real World* begins with an invitation to watch negative behavior: "Find out what happens when people stop being polite and start getting real." What follows is a sublime experience generated from negative behavior for entertainment. However, these programs uphold a common standard of behavior as they show how each cast member suffers the consequences of their negative behavior. In season three of *The Real World* Puck's treatment of his housemates results in expulsion, and Ruthie, in season eight, goes to therapy for her abuse of alcohol. The morally ambiguous characters and cast members create a sublime experience for the audience through their conflicted natures but the audience also watches the repercussions. Although operating primarily as entertainment, the sublime does have a social role in reinforcing the behavioral line for the collective audience.

What makes the vicarious experience of the sublime possible for the audience is the morally ambiguous individual, a specialty of Hitchcock films. Terry Teachout reminds us that "Hitchcock did not care to make plot-driven films" (44). He argues that the primary function of the plots in Hitchcock's films are to "set the characters in motion" (44). John Locke expands this concept with his analysis of *Vertigo*'s plot structure. By revealing Elster's plot two-thirds of the way through the film Hitchcock "shifts the emphasis of the story from murder to character," and the film becomes a character study rather than a murder mystery (Locke 1). The audience experiences the sublime through the characters as the temporary identification with the characters' transgressions allows the viewers the vicarious thrill of pain and danger. Hitchcock

perfected the pattern for this type of “morally equivocal” character, not quite a hero and not quite a villain (Teachout 44).

Alex, the antagonist in *Notorious*, is one of Hitchcock’s most sympathetic antiheroes. Although he is categorized as the villain, his love for Alicia appears deeper and more sincere than “hero” Devlin’s through the majority of the film. According to Robin Wood, Hitchcock himself felt Alex was a more sympathetic character than Devlin “because he is the one who ‘really’ loves Alicia” (323). This is certainly evident in the different ways Alex and Devlin treat Alicia, up until the poison is administered, of course. Even so, Alex’s poisoning of Alicia is a reaction to her betrayal; she has put Alex’s life at risk and his reaction can be viewed as self-preservation. To a degree Alex is still able to invoke audience sympathy because he is a victim. Alex is trapped by his Nazi conspirators and dominated by his mother just as Alicia is by the U.S. government and Devlin. Alex’s attempt to poison Alicia is something the audience might do if found in similar circumstances, the audience has sympathy for him because Alex represents the darker nature of the audience. Through Alex’s flawed nature the audience is able to feel both the thrill of attempted murder (the audience knows the star will not really die) and the terror of the victim about to be murdered. Hitchcock’s focus on character over plot makes Alex the incarnation of the sublime, an experience enjoyed vicariously by the audience.

Following Hitchcock’s subordination of plot, the majority of reality TV programs are character-driven. Both *The Jersey Shore* and *The Real World* feature six to eight strangers placed in the same house with minimal structure and a “see what happens” approach. *Temptation Island* mixes couples with singles to test fidelity. The minimal plot in these programs focuses the attention on the cast members themselves, the suspense stemming from the conflicts sure to arise.

Similar to Alex in *Notorious*, Ronnie's behavior in season one of *The Jersey Shore* provides a sublime experience for the audience. Over the course of the season Ronnie is involved in several fistfights and even spends a night in jail after knocking someone unconscious. In Ronnie's first fight in "Boardwalk Blowups" it is clear he was not the instigator and was actively trying to avoid the conflict: "I don't want to fight you, bro." Ronnie's conflicted nature allows the audience to relate to him because he is not a paid professional following a script, but an average person who has reached the limit of his patience. The audience certainly disagrees with the violence but they want him to get away as he flees before the police arrive. Akin to Alex, who is following a script in *Notorious*, Ronnie only turns to violence as a last resort. Both character and cast member are trapped and use violence as a means of self-preservation. Alex must poison Alicia or be killed by his cohorts while Ronnie must fight a heckler looking for a physical confrontation. For both character and cast member there is no simple resolution and the audience watches as they are each punished for their "transgression of the law."

However, the sympathy the audience feels for Ronnie is overshadowed by the promise of the sublime. The audience is watching because they know Ronnie will deliver—something is going to happen. Although Ronnie's experiences involve misdemeanor assault and not murder like Alex's, the thrill is heightened because Ronnie is real. The audience is captivated by the suspense of the unpredictability of a real person facing the possibility of physical violence. The danger of a physical confrontation and the fear of getting caught by the police create sublime experiences because they are really happening. However, because they are mediated through Ronnie and through the TV set, the danger and fear remain at Burke's "certain distances" and the vicarious thrills function as entertainment.

Scottie, the protagonist in *Vertigo*, is another of Hitchcock's characters whose flaws allow the audience to access the sublime. If not a morally ambiguous character, Scottie certainly fits David Lehman's description of a Hitchcockian protagonist as a "regular guy with flaws," and he is the perfect subject for a character-driven film (35). Although Scottie's actions are not malicious or murderous in intent, they are selfish and contribute to the eventual death of Judy. His obsession with turning Judy into the lost Madeleine is disturbing. Scottie's reenactment of events at Mission San Juan Bautista with Judy is excessive but the audience can understand his need for the truth after having been deceived. Because he is basically a good person who makes some poor decisions, the audience can relate to his fallibility and feel sorry for him when things go wrong while simultaneously watching the events as a sublime experience. Robin Wood, in referring to both Scottie and Madeleine/Judy, suggests that these characters appeal to the audience because they are "entirely acceptable representatives of the human condition" (109).

The tragic events of *Vertigo* are the consequences of Scottie's self-centered indulgence of desire. In this respect Scottie is representative of the average reality TV cast member. The majority of the drama and conflict from these programs stems from the selfish behavior of cast members, acting, like Scottie, with little regard to the feelings or, in some cases, safety of others. In episode nine of season eight of *The Real World* Ruthie puts several lives at risk when she drives while intoxicated (Ruthie Risks). After being warned not to, Ruthie gets behind the wheel of the house vehicle and drives away with several drunk friends on board. The MTV film crew caught up to Ruthie and eventually got her out of the van, possibly avoiding a terrible accident (Calvert 33). Both Ruthie and Scottie put others at risk in pursuing their immediate desires. Ruthie, in her intoxicated state, ignores warnings and disregards reason in her determination to take a joy ride. Scottie's intent to have an affair similarly causes him to abandon reason in his pursuit of Madeleine. Both cast member and character risk the lives of others with their sacrifice

of logic to desire. Unfortunately for Scottie, no one steps out from behind the camera to restrain him, and the consequences are disastrous.

Ruthie's experience is reminiscent of another Hitchcock character: Alicia in *Notorious*. Likewise disregarding her own safety and the safety of those around her, Alicia takes Devlin on a drunken joy ride. As Alicia accelerates down the road Devlin's mood progresses from nervousness to fear as he calls out the building speed and has a hand ready to grab the wheel. However, Devlin makes no attempt to stop Alicia until after she is pulled over. The audience shares the suspense of the increasing speed and blind corners and continues to watch—the audience, in pursuit of the sublime, follows Alicia and Devlin until they are restrained by the police officer and Devlin assumes the wheel.

Ruthie similarly seeks the thrill, with the audience in tow, until the MTV film crew, like Devlin, finally decides to take action, restoring the law that has been broken. Her decision to get behind the wheel creates the sensation of fear in her audience as real people are in danger. The audience is eager to watch Ruthie's mistakes because the vicarious nature of their involvement transforms the sublime from real terror to an entertaining thrill. Hitchcock's analysis of his audience applies to reality TV viewers as well: they like to feel fear while in a safe place, in order to share in the sensations of the sublime.

Edgar Allan Poe and the Confession

In reality TV the voyeuristic connection between audience and cast member is solidified by the confession, a technique perfected by Edgar Allan Poe. In several of Poe's short stories the confession connects the audience with controversial characters and operates as a vehicle to the sublime. The confessions of Poe's narrators are so compelling to the audience because they are structured like real conversations. In the "Imp of the Perverse" the speaker begins his confession

of his past deeds as if responding to a question from the audience: “that...I may answer your question” (313). The reader is a willing participant, asking why the speaker is in the cell. They are the two halves of the conversation, the listener and the confessor, audience connected with the criminal. By listening the audience has “a personal relation with the narrator” (Brown 199). The narrator has taken the reader into confidence, trusted the reader with the truth, and shared the burden of the crime through knowledge. By constructing the confession as an answer to the audience’s question Poe places the obligation of listener and confidant firmly on the audience. The audience, motivated by the desire to vicariously experience the crime as entertainment, willingly accepts this obligation as a vehicle to the sublime. As the audience listens to the details of horrible acts the narrator’s confession becomes a sublime event for the audience.

The main character in “The Tell-Tale Heart” makes similar use of the confession. This direct address functions exactly like the previous story: the speaker is confessing his crime to the reader in order to explain and justify his murderous act. As the tale is recounted the speaker occasionally interrupts his narrative with asides to the reader: “You should have seen how wisely I proceeded—with what caution—with what foresight” (245). It is essential to the speaker that the audience view him as sane: “If you think me mad, you will think so no longer when I describe the wise precautions I took for the concealment of the body” (247). The language of the speaker is indicative of the reader’s relationship with him. The reader is the only one he can trust, the only one he needs to understand him and take part in his experience. The audience’s desire to read the story connects them to the speaker, and readers thus accept a share of blame through their knowledge of his crime.

Reality TV makes similar use of the confession in order to provide a sublime experience for the audience. Just as Poe structures his dialogue to heighten the experience of a seemingly real confession, reality TV controls the presentation of the confessions of real people to the

audience. In the most successful programs cast members are required to sit in front of a camera and share their views with the producers and audience. In *Big Brother* the cast members met individually with the producers in the Red Room and responded to specific questions. Cast members were encouraged to voice opinions or explore their doubts about the events in the house (Andrejevic 157). Both *The Real World* and *The Jersey Shore* have a similar format with a small room called The Confessional. Cast members are required to be in the confessional on a regular basis and encouraged to share private information with off-camera prompts such as “What will shock your friends and family?” or “What is something the housemates don’t know?” (Pollet 108). If there has been a recent argument the confessional is often used to defend or justify sides. In these TV confessions, as in Poe’s short stories, the cast members share their secrets with the audience. The audience feels the sensations of fear, danger, and the unknown that come from these disclosures of transgression and create sublime experiences.

The confessions in *The Jersey Shore* and *The Real World* follow Poe’s model in its twofold purpose of explanation and connecting with the audience. Following the structure of *The Real World*, excerpts from confessions are interspersed to provide context and explain thought processes. In “Boardwalk Blowups,” episode six of *The Jersey Shore*, Ronnie is involved in a fist fight and he narrates what is happening while the audience watches. As Ronnie sits in front of the camera with a black eye the audience is eager to watch what he has done and to hear his justification for fighting. Ronnie’s narration is consistent with his attempt to walk away from the heckler: “I didn’t want to fight the guy.” However, this statement carries a promise for the audience; Ronnie’s explanation implies that he will, indeed, fight. Audience expectations are met as the fight immediately follows and the sensation of danger increases with the sound of approaching sirens. The thrill of danger and pain are now augmented by the fear of the unknown as Ronnie flees from the police. Ronnie’s confession is essential in that it

authorizes the violence; the audience wants to watch his explanation because it heightens the suspense and leads to the sublime experience of entertaining fear.

Another incident occurs in “That’s How the Shore Goes” when Ronnie is arrested for knocking someone unconscious and spends a night in jail for misdemeanor assault. Once again his confession allows the audience to understand his behavior: “I regret that I got caught. I don’t regret hitting the kid because he had it coming.” Ronnie takes the same logical approach in his confession as Poe’s narrators. Both cast member and character are confident that their explanations will justify their actions. While Ronnie’s fights are very different from the murders in Poe’s stories, the appeal to the audience is similar, and the confession justifies negative behavior. However, this fight differs from episode six because the audience only sees the aftermath. In episode six the events leading up to the fight are caught on tape and Ronnie’s explanation is consistent with what the audience sees. In episode nine the camera arrives late and only shows a person unconscious on the sidewalk and Ronnie running away celebrating. In this instance Ronnie’s assertion “It was self-defense” is as one-sided as that of Poe’s narrators, and like Poe’s narrators, he goes to jail, if only for a night. His repeated claims of innocence while he is being arrested echo the persistent insistence of sanity by Poe’s narrators; the claim of each is undermined by its desperate repetition. Ronnie’s celebratory behavior is inconsistent with someone acting out of the necessity of self-defense. Unlike the fight in episode six, this time the audience only watches Ronnie’s confession as he details events the camera missed. The fact that the audience will never be sure if he is guilty adds the thrill of the unknown to a sublime event. Whether the audience is watching Ronnie’s explanation or reading Poe’s narrator’s account, they only have access to the retelling. By listening to the confessions, whether or not they justify the violence, the audience more deeply experiences a transgressive frame of mind that heightens an entertaining thrill.

Similar instances of the confession occur in *The Real World*. “Getting Dropped,” episode eleven of season three, centers on David “Puck” Rainy. The cast members are debating about kicking Puck out and the discussion is interspersed with excerpts from confessionals of the cast members discussing what they were feeling during the meeting. Puck, perhaps one of the most controversial cast members of the program’s twenty-three seasons, was consistently the center of contention among the house members and was eventually kicked out. When asked to be more civil and “less abrasive” during the house meeting in episode eleven he immediately responded: “It’s not gonna happen. I’m not gonna change.” During the meeting Puck maintained an aggressive attitude and was unwilling to compromise, even after Pedro blamed him for creating an “emotionally unsafe” environment.

However, in the confessional Puck took a very different tone, explaining to the camera that he felt “betrayed by them as friends.” In arguing that his friends turned on him, Puck is trying to justify his behavior. Like Poe’s narrators Puck is looking to defend his actions, through an explanation, and thus to escape punishment. Puck’s contradictory behavior echoes that of the narrator in Poe’s “The Black Cat.” The narrator calmly attempts to explain his actions, the murder of his wife and cat, as “a series of mere household events” (280). This duality of personality, murderous rage and calm reasoning, creates the madness of the narrator. Puck is similarly dysfunctional, his quick temper while interacting with his roommates contrasts sharply with his moments of composed self-pity in the confessional. Puck’s disjunctive behavior creates a sense of madness that punctuates his actions and fascinates the audience. What enthralls the audience is not the physical danger of the sublime, but the flawed nature of Puck’s emotions—the thrill of madness accessed through voyeurism. The vicarious experience of watching Puck argue with, shout at, and insult every one of his roommates and then try to justify his behavior in order to avoid getting kicked out is just far enough removed from the audience to be entertaining.

Conclusion

Much of reality TV's success lies in the use of real people to create a voyeuristic sublime experience, accomplished through the literal application of the patterns Poe and Hitchcock established with their morally ambiguous characters and the use of confession. If Hitchcock is successful because, as Wood stated, his characters are "representatives of the human condition" then reality TV is successful because the cast members *are* the human condition (109).

However, this use of real people coupled with the mediated voyeurism that permeates society has led some scholars to focus on the voyeuristic appeal of reality programming as a comparison between performer and audience. One viewer said, "I can see myself or others I know in the actions of those on television" (Andrejevic 9). Thus existing scholarship on reality TV has concluded that the fascination with negative behavior is that it serves as a sounding board for the audience's own behavior. Seth Blazer believes reality programming functions as "a seemingly real gauge for acceptable public and private behavior" (385). Murray and Ouellette suggest that reality TV "encourages viewers to test out their own notions of the real, the ordinary, and the intimate against the representation before them" (8). While these are valid and important conclusions, perhaps they are merely, as Poe suggested, "undercurrents" of meaning as they fail to acknowledge the central role of fiction and film in reality TV.

The primary purpose of reality programming is to entertain, and in accomplishing this goal reality TV has followed in the footsteps of Poe and Hitchcock. Not only does reality programming appropriate techniques perfected by these two artists, but it also uses the exploration of human nature to create a sublime experience for the entertainment of the audience. Reading the confession of Poe's murderers, watching Hitchcock's morally ambiguous characters, and looking at reality TV cast members achieves the same end: all "excite the ideas" of pain and danger and fear from "certain distances" with "certain modifications" that transform the sublime

into entertainment (Burke 39, 40). Perhaps Burke himself would experience something “analogous to terror” if he knew that something as philistine as reality TV would ever be considered a sublime experience.

In this respect, reality TV can be viewed as a continuation of Poe’s and Hitchcock’s explorations of the sublime, through the mediated experience of voyeurism. The irresistible nature of reality TV is that the cast members are different (and often baser) versions of us; in watching these programs we participate in the thrill of the sublime. We cannot fully understand the consistent appeal of reality TV without an awareness of its connections to these two great artists. If the documentary is the father of reality television then perhaps Poe and Hitchcock are the estranged uncles.

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