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THE HYPERREALITY OF REALITY TELEVISION



Reality television, often scripted and manipulated to enhance viewer engagement, epitomizes hyperreality by blurring the lines between actual and simulated events, creating a more compelling yet less authentic viewing experience.

Reality television shows have all but taken over television viewing. They are on major television networks as well as cable television networks. People tune in to watch them as much as they tune in to watch scripted television. Most people do not know or realize that reality television is scripted, leading to it being hyperreal or simulated.



In the hyperreal spectacle of modern media, viewers don masks to transform the mundane into the extraordinary, blurring the lines between reality and crafted narratives.

"Hyperreality is a special kind of social reality in which a reality is created or simulated from models, or defined by reference to models – a reality generated from ideas. The term has implications of 'too much reality' – everything being on the surface, without mystery; 'more real than reality' – too perfect and schematic to be true, like special effects; and 'para-reality', an extra layer laid over, or instead of, reality. It is experienced as more real than the real, because of its effect of breaking down the boundary between real and imaginary. It is a 'real' without 'origin or reality', a reality to which we cannot connect" (Robinson)."

Hyperreality is a concept where the distinction between the real and the artificial is blurred, creating a new reality shaped by simulations rather than actual events. According to cultural theorists like Jean Baudrillard, hyperreality involves the generation of 'realities' 'that are more convincing than the mundane experiences of everyday life. These realities are constructed to appeal directly to viewers' emotions, offering an exaggerated sense of engagement that often overshadows genuine human experiences.

Reality shows are viewed to get a glimpse into the real lives of the people on the shows. The belief that the events randomly happen on the shows is not valid. These shows are scripted. "The first thing to realize is that the term "unscripted" is a fallacy" (Rupel). The shows do not have dialogue written out. Still, they have formats for the shows, people are cast based on their personality, and scenes are edited to get the most captivating story told. The show's storylines do not happen by chance; they are organized and arranged. The shows are often too real to be accurate. "Real people don't live their lives in carefully packaged scenes" (Rupel).

Reality television has become a dominant force in the media landscape, captivating audiences on both major networks and cable channels alike.

There are two types of "scripts" that are used on reality television shows. There is the "followed story," which is very loose and less structured, and the "planned story," which is heavily organized (Rupel). Both types of scripts fool people into believing that the reality they are seeing is real. The reality is based on the person who produces the segment when they edit the scene together. The reality seen on the shows is not just the reality of the people on the show but of the producers of the show as well.

“Followed stories” are characterized by their loose structure, allowing events to unfold naturally with minimal interference. This approach relies heavily on the participants' spontaneity, capturing their genuine reactions and interactions as they occur. On the other hand, “planned stories” are meticulously organized, with specific scenarios and outcomes crafted in advance by the producers. This type of scripting ensures that certain dramatic elements are present, guiding the narrative toward desired climaxes or confrontations. Both methods, however, contribute to a crafted version of reality that viewers perceive as genuine, highlighting the influence of producers not only on the portrayal of participants' lives but also on the overall storytelling of the show.

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Contrary to popular belief, reality TV is far from being a passive mirror of the world. It involves a high degree of planning and scripting. While these shows do not script dialogue in the traditional sense, they are structured around “followed stories” and “planned stories.” Producers cast individuals based on their potential for conflict and drama and arrange scenarios likely to elicit dramatic responses. Editors then meticulously assemble footage to craft compelling narratives, often leaving out context and continuity to heighten the emotional impact.

“Disneyland is presented as imaginary in order to make us believe that the rest is real, when in fact all of Los Angeles and the America surrounding it are no longer real, but of the order of the hyperreal and of simulation. It is no longer a question of a false representation of reality (ideology), but of concealing the fact that the real is no longer real, and thus of saving the reality principle” (Baudrillard 1965).

The statement above from Jean Baudrillard about Disneyland rings true of reality television shows but in reverse. The events or stories on the shows are presented as accurate in the hopes of making the viewing public believe that they are real, but in reality, they are hyperreal. The events and stories are simulated or arranged to generate the best storylines to receive the best ratings. The stories and events are too honest or have too much reality.

Baudrillard's concept of Disneyland as a space of hyperreality, where the imaginary is used to obscure the fact that reality itself has become a simulation, offers a provocative lens through which to view reality television. In this analysis, Disneyland is presented as a purely fantastical world, which paradoxically reinforces the illusion that the external world outside its gates is more authentic. Conversely, reality television employs a reverse strategy. Shows in this genre present their content—events, and stories—as unscripted and genuine, fostering a belief among viewers that they are witnessing true slices of life. However, this portrayal is itself a form of hyperreality. The events are often carefully orchestrated or enhanced to maximize dramatic effect and viewer engagement, blurring the lines between authentic experiences and manufactured entertainment. In essence, just as Disneyland uses fantasy to make its surroundings seem more real, reality television uses the guise of reality to mask its own artificialness, creating a world that is "too honest" or excessively real to truly reflect everyday life.

Reality shows sell the illusion of reality, but viewers see a carefully curated version of events designed to entertain and provoke reactions. The producers' manipulation of scenarios—the selection of scenes, the angles of cameras, and the editing process—creates a narrative that is far removed from any authentic reality. This narrative is further colored by the on-screen personalities' awareness of the camera, which influences their behavior and reactions.

The blending of reality and entertainment skews public understanding of important social and cultural issues and often glorifies behavior that would be unacceptable in real life.

The hyperreal nature of reality TV affects viewers' perceptions of reality in broader social contexts. It sets unrealistic expectations about relationships, success, and personal conflict. The blending of reality and entertainment skews public understanding of important social and cultural issues and often glorifies behavior that would be unacceptable in real life.

It blurs the lines between fact and fiction, creating a world that is consumed as accurate but is, in essence, a carefully constructed illusion. This changes the way we consume entertainment and affects our perception of reality itself, challenging us to discern the real amidst the spectacle. As McLaverty-Robinson describes, "Hyperreality is a special kind of social reality in which a reality is created or simulated from models, or defined by reference

to models – a reality generated from ideas." In the realm of reality TV, the real becomes indistinguishable from the simulation, thus transforming viewers' perceptions and interactions with their own social realities. The shows project a facade of reality that is 'more real than reality,' leading us to accept the orchestrated drama as a natural element of human interaction, thereby altering our expectations and behaviors in the real world.

Reality television, then, serves as a perfect example of hyperreality in action. It blurs the lines between fact and fiction, creating a world that is consumed as accurate but is, in essence, a carefully constructed illusion. This changes the way we consume entertainment and affects our perception of reality itself, challenging us to discern the real amidst the spectacle. The seemingly authentic emotions and situations presented in these shows are often nothing more than scripted encounters guided by narrative demands rather than spontaneous human interaction. This simulation of reality does not merely entertain but conditions viewers to expect life's complexities to be resolved within neatly packaged episodes, creating a skewed perception of timing and human behavior.

The effects of hyperreality extend beyond the screens, influencing everyday expectations and interactions. Viewers may come to expect the dramatic resolutions and clear-cut villains and heroes typical of reality TV in their own lives, potentially leading to disappointment and a misunderstanding of the nuanced ways in which real-world conflicts are resolved. The constant bombardment of this altered reality creates a populace that is less equipped to critically engage with genuine societal issues as the lines between genuine experience and constructed scenarios become increasingly blurred.

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Reality TV epitomizes the concept of hyperreality, where the fabricated is often perceived as more genuine than the genuine itself. This pervasive influence has tangible effects on viewers, altering perceptions and expectations in ways that resonate throughout society. Therefore, it is essential to approach such media with a critical eye, recognizing its role in shaping consumer culture and our understanding of reality itself. To counteract the impact of hyperreality, it is crucial for individuals to cultivate media literacy skills that enable a deeper understanding of how reality is represented and manipulated. As viewers, making a conscious effort to question and critically assess the authenticity of what we watch can

help safeguard our perceptions of reality, ensuring that we remain connected to the actual world around us rather than the illusion presented on screen.

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