Teaching Media Quarterly
ISSN: 2573-0126
Volume 7, Issue 3, 2019: Teaching with Reality Television
pubs.lib.umn.edu/tmq

Emotional Spectacle and Reality Television: Constructing the Authentic

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Overview

This lesson was designed to fit within a larger course examining the relationship between spectacle and television. Certain televised/television events—Olympic opening ceremonies or *Game of Thrones* premieres—are casually regarded as spectacles, but these events are treated as unusual or exceptional. Helen Wheatley argues, however, that "the spectacular—an aesthetic category which has been so thoroughly and interestingly worked on and through in film studies—has been frequently ignored in television scholarship…television has *always* had moments, programmes and genres which can be identified as spectacular, and has always incorporated visual pleasure into its schedules" (2016, 4-5).

In the first module of the course, students read different theoretical positions on the "spectacle," including an introduction to concepts such as Bakhtin's carnivalesque, Dayan and Katz's media events, MacAloon's taxonomy of festival, spectacle, ritual, and games, and Debord's *Society of the Spectacle*. The second module of the course examines how the various definitions of spectacle play out within different case studies: aesthetic, technological, emotional, catastrophic/disaster, and political/national. These categories are not mutually exclusive nor comprehensive of all the potential ways to explore spectacle within television, but they encompass a broad range of television programming. Each of the different units highlights a specific genre or format, while also affirming that these spectacular categories can be located across genres and formats. Thus, 'aesthetic spectacle' focuses on primetime, scripted entertainment, but also made-for-TV media events such as live concerts. 'Political/national spectacle' features televised speeches such as inaugurations and the State of the Union, but also major sporting events such as the Super Bowl and the World Cup. By screening an episode of *The Bachelor*, 'emotional spectacle' emphasizes 'reality television.' It also puts this genre in conversation with others such as game shows, interview programs, and news reporting.

Examining reality television through emotional spectacle links media industry studies with discourses of race, gender, and class. The majority of the theory about spectacle highlights excessive visuality as its core aspect, and the two prior categories, aesthetic and technological,

align with this definition. Emotional spectacle broadens the discussion to consider how other senses, particularly sound, contribute to the creation of a spectacle. It also challenges students to differentiate emotional spectacle (the content mediated by the screen) from emotional effects (the experience of the viewing audience).

Rationale

Episode 12 of season 22 of *The Bachelor* (2002-Present) brought something new to this aging franchise. The climactic event, the ritual final rose elimination ceremony, ends with Bachelor Arie Luyendyk Jr. proposing to Becca Kufrin. Instead of immediately following this event with the traditional "After the Rose" reunion episode to celebrate the loving pair, this finale has a twist; a few months after the season wrapped, Arie decides to call off the engagement because he cannot stop thinking about Lauren, the runner-up that he eliminated. The episode continues by filming the break-up. For a franchise that traffics in glamour, wealth, and romantic fantasy, this moment strips the glossiness from its production. No music, no candles, no ball gowns.

Along with *The Bachelor* crew, Arie meets Becca in a Los Angeles apartment. He asks, "How do I start this conversation?" and a shot that begins with the couple together on a sofa, sharing the frame, splits into two. One camera centers on Arie, and the other focuses on Becca. For approximately twenty-five minutes (without commercials), occasionally interrupted by host Chris Harrison's narration in front of a studio audience, we watch this couple end. The exuberant joy of the rose ceremony becomes heartache and grief in one episode of television. When she reaches her limit for talking about the situation, Becca gets up from the couch to go into a bathroom. Closing the door to the camera, we watch footage of a still hallway, accompanied by her sobbing. Arie's camera temporarily blacks out before resuming footage with Arie sighing outdoors. He then forces the conversation to continue.

"We're all watching this very emotional scene together, unedited, in real time. I know everybody is just aghast here. To say this is trending and blowing up social media right now is a gross understatement," Harrison adds. This commentary highlights the spectacular draw of this and other reality television. It is not aesthetic sophistication or narrative novelty that sustains this genre; it is the spectacle of human emotion, put on display and commodified.

Becca's televised heartbreak didn't end her quest for love—her loss meant she was upcycled to star in Season 14 of *The Bachelorette* (2003-Present) and to begin the emotional journey anew.

In the first module of the course, students discuss multifaceted definitions of spectacle including but not limited to

- A sensuous character and strong element of play (Bakhtin, 1984, 7)
- "an exaggeration of the pleasure of looking" (Fiske, 2008, 117)
- "The spectacle is not a collection of images, but a social relation among people, mediated by images" (Debord, 1977, Thesis 4)

- "The spectacle which inverts the real is in fact produced. Lived reality is materially invaded by the contemplation of the spectacle while simultaneously absorbing the spectacular order, giving it positive cohesiveness. Objective reality is present on both sides. Every notion fixed this way has no other basis than its passage into the opposite: reality rises up within the spectacle, and the spectacle is real." (Debord, 1977, Thesis 8)
- A primacy to the visual sensory and symbolic codes and visual material that have "a certain size and grandeur" (MacAloon, 1984, 243)
- An institutionalized separation of "actors and audiences, performers and spectators" (MacAloon, 1984, 243)
- "a set of techniques for the management of bodies, the management attention" (Crary, 1989, 105)

Cumulatively, these explanations outline relationships between the spectacle and the bodily sensorium, particularly sight; between performers and spectators; between image and reality; and between spectacle and its social context.

The primary learning objective of the course is for students to understand and challenge these definitions of spectacle as they apply to television content. A secondary learning objective is to expose students to multiple sites of research for the media object "television" and multiple theoretical lenses. Thus, readings variously highlight textual analysis, industrial/production studies, audience reception, and sociohistorical contexts, and each unit includes both historical and contemporary examples. For example, the unit on 'catastrophic spectacle' integrates the footage of the 1986 Challenger explosion with the role that the still-relatively-new 24-hour CNN played in covering that explosion (Doane, 2006); the transition of the narrative framing of the 2001 9/11 attack on the World Trade Center from modalities of the spontaneous and real to the styling of a Hollywood disaster film narrative (King, 2005); and the way in which coverage of Hurricane Katrina adopted critical race and Marxist theoretical positions to expose the failures of the George W. Bush Administration (Kellner, 2007). Two of the key readings (listed below) situate the featured *Bachelor* episode historically: Gray provides a brief history of dating shows on television and Ellis traces the learned-performance of emotions from early game shows such as *Double Your Money* (1955-1968) to modern reality television and political performance. Finally, Dubrofsky anchors an analysis of *The Bachelor* in feminist media studies and offers a direct model for students to analyze the episode they watched.

Critical Themes and Questions

- Within reality TV (competition shows, life style shows, etc.) what emotions are most prevalent and who expresses them? How might individuals police or perform their own expressions of emotions due to different intersectional identities and stereotypes? (Theme: Social Construction of Identity and Performance)
- What does "authentic" or "sincere" mean in an emotional context? What does authentic or sincere emotion look like on television? In other media? How might

members of production crews (producers, editors) use emotional moments to construct specific narratives? How do audiences differentiate between the sincere and the scripted? (Theme: Authenticity and Reality)

- What emotions does television make most salient? What are the qualities of television that make those emotions particularly visible? How do other types of media—such as film, music, photography, gifs, emoji—make those same or different emotions apparent? (Theme: Visibility)
- What role does surveillance play in the construction of reality television? Is that surveillance internal, external, or both? How does that contribute to the presentation of emotions? (Theme: Surveillance)
- The majority of theoretical definitions of spectacle emphasize visuality and sight. Episode 12 of Season 22 of *The Bachelor* includes a denial of sight during what is arguably the most heightened emotional moment. How might this be a spectacle even without that sight? What role do other senses, such as the aural, contribute to a spectacle? (Theme: Dynamics of Spectacle)

General Timeline

This unit was originally designed as one week of a 7-week, 6-hours-per-week intensive seminar course. Screenings, readings, and activities can be adapted to fit other schedules and formats with the 'Critical themes and questions' as primary drivers. Episode 12 of Season 22 of *The Bachelor* is the main screening for the week and should be seen prior to the unit's start. By assigning a screening, instructors can account for modern fragmented viewing culture and ensure a mutual reference point for all students. This episode is available for streaming by purchase on Amazon as of May 2019. Depending on screening time flexibility, this episode could productively be paired with full screenings or clips from:

- *UnREAL* (2015-2018) to emphasize production contexts and the constructed nature of reality TV
- *Rock of Love with Bret Michaels* (2007-2009), a VH1 dating show featuring Bret Michaels, to emphasize the representation of gender, class, and emotion on a dating reality show
- *Flavor of Love* (2006-2008), a VH1 dating show featuring rapper Flavor Flav, to emphasize the representation of gender, race, and emotion on a dating reality show
- *Boy Meets Boy* (2003) or *Finding Prince Charming* (2016), dating shows from FOX and LOGO respectively, that featured male suitors for a male bachelor
- An episode of an international version of *The Bachelor* or *The Bachelorette*, which has been produced in over 25 countries. This contrast (or lack of it) would emphasize the ideologically normative values embedded in the format, but also potentially how that format can be localized to account for cultural specificity

Whereas the Gray and Dubrofsky readings emphasize the performance of emotions by women, *The Washington Post* article, "Men are crying on TV like never before," complicates the lesson by introducing performances of masculinity. The final key reading, "On Tragedy TV" offers a transition from 'emotional spectacle' to 'catastrophic spectacle' and reemphasizes the differences between the content and how that content makes us feel.

Detailed Lesson Plan

Key Readings for the Week

- Ellis, John. "The Performance on Television of Sincerely Felt Emotions." *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 625, no. 1 (January 9, 2009): 103-115, DOI: 10.1177/0002716209339267
- Gray, Jonathan. 2008. "Cinderella Burps: Gender, Performativity, and the Dating Show." In *Reality TV: Remaking Television Culture 2nd Ed*, edited by Susan Murray and Laurie Ouellette, 260-277. New York, NY: New York University Press
- Dubrofsky, Rachel E. "Fallen Women in Reality TV." *Feminist Media Studies* 9 no. 3 (2009): 353-368, DOI: 10.1080/14680770903068324
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Lecture Notes on Key Readings

Cinderella Burps: Gender, Performativity, and the Dating Show

Gray describes the range of dating television shows, from the one-off episode to serialized competition dating. With this range comes the complexity of viewer investment in these romantic narratives, from finding pleasure in the humorous-but-unhappy ending to identification with contestants and buying into hegemonic coupledom as the happiest conclusion. He combines readings of scenes and specific participants in these programs with user comments on the site *Television Without Pity* to interrogate the performance and rejection of gender norms and how the overtly constructed 'reality' within this genre contributes to a carnivalesque and voyeuristic spectacle.

The Bachelor/Bachelorette franchise has been the most successful of these dating shows. This program is structured around an eligible single of one gender surrounded by suitors of the opposite gender who are potential romantic partners. These suitors are eliminated throughout

the seasons until only one remains. Particularly on shows such as *The Bachelor*, the editing of those programs ties the contestant women's (girls') aspirations and identities to this romantic ritual with the emotional culmination of each episode a rose ceremony, "resulting in a 10-minute showpiece full of, first expectant and, then, joyous or crushed reaction shots" (Gray 264). These women appear simultaneously as desperate and grasping. At the same time, their personal agency is reduced. These programs also enact the voyeuristic male gaze as the women's bodies are objectified and treated as spectacles to be evaluated and criticized by other contestants, the program itself through visual pop-ups, and the viewing audience.

However, play and the disruption of established orders, key elements of the carnivalesque, combined with self-aware gender performance serve to dissipate somewhat the overbearing fairy-tale dynamics. Gray highlights shows produced by MTV and VH1 such as *Next*, *Flavor of Love*, and *Parental Control*, shows produced at the media margins rather than the center, as spaces for "flipping or flouting gender roles" and "challenging the heteronormativity of romance elsewhere in the dating show genre" (Sender 209, Gray 267, Gray 269). Additionally, the dialogic, discursive nature of the program allows for different audience reading positions: criticizing the women along with the dominant position, but also cheering for underdogs, embracing transgressive unruliness, or rejecting the legitimacy of the romance narrative altogether.

The Performance on Television of Sincerely Felt Emotions

Ellis argues that one of the many social roles television has played has been to give visibility and prominence to the emotional by showing aspects of politicians, celebrities, and ordinary citizens that were previously unseen. However, what is made visible is a performance of an emotion that is recognized by the viewer and can be distinct from the sincere experience of that emotion. When emotions are 'incorrectly' performed, they are criticized as "inadequately sincere" (Ellis 104). Ellis traces this learned performance of emotion through three phases: the development of performance styles for nonprofessionals; more complex performances of emotions especially in TV fictions; and the heightened centrality of sincerity as judged by viewing audiences.

In analyzing a 1955 version of the game show *Double Your Money*, Ellis points to the ways in which Hughie Green, the host of the show, guides the contestants into the desired conversational tone and physical placement for the camera. How to perform the appropriate superficial intimacy for both camera and studio audience was not intuitive to contestants and was instead a performative style to be learned. However, "the eruption of sincerity was disconcerting" during this phase of stylistic development, and an interview program such as *Face to Face* received criticism for intruding on what was believed to be personal and private (Ellis 106). The second phase of emotional performance occurs in scripted television as open, serialized narratives with longer story arcs become sites for character development and

imperfect characters. Long running series in both primetime and daytime developed a "lexicon of emotions and their expression" resulting in "the development of a general cultural knowledge of the performance of emotions" (Ellis, 109). Reality television draws from that lexicon but shifts the responsibility of performing those emotions in the hands of ordinary people. Ellis notes, "Reality TV is based on a paradox. Its situations are unreal or artificial, yet reality is what we seek from them: the reality of the individuals involved" (110). Reality TV invites viewers to speculate about the performances of those on screen: sincere or scheming? Trustworthy or evasive? Reality TV also invites debate and social negotiation over the moral, ethical, or general 'acceptability' of the filmed behavior—and the limits of that acceptability.

Finally, television exposes the intersection between politics and representation. Modern democracies function on the election of trusted individuals or a slate of policies. For Ellis, television skewed the balance between those principles to emphasize the role of the individual. Sustained trust is based on a performance of sincerity, and the undermining of that performance through media exposure leads to disillusionment and civic cynicism.

Fallen Women in Reality Television

In "Fallen Women in Reality TV: A pornography of emotion," Dubrofsky analyzes the formula of *The Bachelor* and the three-episode arc of contestant Christi from season two. She concludes that although the show is positioned as a romance narrative, "the story is about failed love" (Dubrofsky 355). The bachelor's quest for a viable partner is marked by a succession of contestants who gradually reveal their unsuitability. Emotional excess is one way in which an initially viable contestant signals this unsuitability. Drawing from Grindstaff, Dubrofsky equates this overpowering outpouring of emotion to the hard-core "money shot" of pornography with equivalent loss of bodily control. It is not the showing of emotion that makes the contestant unsuitable, but that the emotional performance transgresses into the spectacular. As in pornography, the money shot is gendered, but on *The Bachelor* as of 2009 it is also raced because, unlike on other reality television shows, "women of color are never cast as viable romantic partners (unless they are 'whitened')" (Dubrofsky 356).

The Bachelor shares formal production details, such as use of music and close-up, along with industrial characteristics, such as mainly female casts and female audiences, with melodrama, another genre that trades in heightened emotions. Along with pornography, both reality television and melodrama reinforce a modality and discourse of "realness" through the visualization of lost bodily control, "crying, anger, having an orgasm" (Dubrofsky 360). However, in pornography the money shot is a display of male power and potency, whereas the femininized, emotional money shot in romantic reality television inscribes the enactor as unstable, inappropriate, and dangerous.

"Men are crying on TV like never before" and "On Tragedy TV, A Cycle of Mass Shootings Without End"

The Gray and Dubrofsky readings focus on the ways in which romance reality television shows negotiate gender expectations. Shows such as *The Bachelor* require the women contestants to perform an appropriate amount of an emotion, while the featured man is the recipient/target of those emotions. Even in the gender-swapped version, *The Bachelorette*, the men talk about their emotions rather than perform them. "Men are crying on TV like never before" prompts a discussion about shifting forms of hegemonic masculinity and about television spaces where men can exhibit emotions. The article gives the examples of politicians crying publicly as well as scripted television, but the class can be invited to consider sports successes and failures as well.

"On Tragedy TV, A Cycle of Mass Shootings Without End" connects Ellis's discussion of authenticity and emotion with news coverage of tragedies such as events of mass gun violence. The class can be invited to consider if *The Bachelor* episode featuring the break-up is a tragedy and the different emotions involved in smaller scale personal events as compared to larger scale social events. Additionally, this example invites the class to consider what does tragedy look like as opposed to how does a tragic event make the audience feel.

The instructor should contextualize the content of this reading before assigning it, making students aware that it is about gun violence.

Optional Additional Readings

Overviews of Reality Television

- Hill, Annette. 2015. "Introduction: Reality TV" in *Reality TV*. New York, NY: Routledge
- Turner, Graeme. 2010. "Reality TV and the Construction of Cultural Identities" in *Ordinary People and the Media: The Demotic Turn*. Los Angeles, CA: SAGE
- Andrejevic, Mark. 2015. "Reality Television" in *The SAGE Handbook of Television Studies*, edited by Manual Alvarado, Milly Buonanno, Herman Gray, and Toby Miller, 297-314. Los Angeles, CA: SAGE

Television Audiences and Emotion

- Sender, Katherine. 2012. "Feeling Real: Empirical Truth and Emotional Authenticity," in *The Makeover: Reality Television and Reflexive Audiences*, 105-135. New York, NY: New York University Press

Television Production and Emotion

- Grindstaff, Laura. 2002. “Talk as Show (a Show of Emotions),” in *The Money Shot: Trash, Class, and the Making of TV Talk Shows*, 114-147. Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press

Class Activities

Think-Ink-Pair-Share (10-15 minutes)

This activity can be used to start the first class immediately after *The Bachelor* screening. The instructor should pose these questions:

- In the episode of *The Bachelor*, what was Becca feeling? What was Arie feeling?
- Can you identify specific moments that show those feelings?
- What did you as an audience member feel watching this episode?
- Was this a spectacle? If so, in what way? If not, why not?

Students are given 1-2 minutes to think about their answers to these questions. They then briefly write down their answers (2-3 minutes). With a partner or in small groups, the students discuss their responses (4-5 minutes). The instructor should encourage the groups to pay attention to similarities in responses as well as places where the group members disagree. Finally, the small groups will share their most notable points of agreement or disagreement with the class as a whole (4-5 minutes). Some students may be inspired to answer the second question by going to the video and locating a specific moment. If so, use this impulse to discuss the formal production characteristics of reality television in general and this episode specifically.

This discussion is followed by a lecture drawing out the key arguments from the assigned readings.

Identifying Emotions in Case Studies

Introduce the students to Paul Ekman and Wallace Friesen’s theory of six discrete basic emotions: anger, sadness, fear, surprise, happiness, and disgust (1971). Instructors can acknowledge that there are competing theories about ‘basic’ or ‘core’ emotions, or even if emotions should be treated as discrete at all. However, Ekman and Friesen’s study of the universality of emotions is based on facial expressions, which aptly aligns with the way in which television, particularly reality TV, uses facial close-ups as part of formal storytelling. This theory also contributed to Pixar’s *Inside Out*, a film that students may be familiar with.

Depending on time and class size, students can complete this activity alone or in groups. The instructor writes each of these six emotions on slips of paper (one emotion to each slip) and

drops them into a bag/hat. There should be enough slips for each student/group to draw one, so there will be duplicates.

Each student draws a slip. They then identify a 1-minute (or less) scripted television clip that demonstrates that emotion and a 1-minute (or less) reality television clip that demonstrates that emotion. Searching for these clips will take at least 10 minutes of class time, and so could also be a take-home assignment.

Students should be prepared to show their two clips and explain why they chose them. This explanation should encompass the differences between the scripted content and the reality television as well as the specific characteristics that contribute to the emotion as a sincere/insincere spectacle.

Because these are clips that have been selected by the students, rather than prescreened, remind students to appropriately give content warnings for any material that might be upsetting or disturbing. This may be particularly applicable to students who receive "sadness," "fear," and "anger."

The instructor can end the activity with a discussion asking students to name additional emotions. Writing these emotions on the board will hopefully develop a much longer list of emotions than the basic six. This list can be used to discuss the challenge of authentically performing emotions that may not be as physically visible such as confusion, boredom, guilt, or wonder.

Sight, Sound, and Spectacle in Reality TV

As mentioned in the Overview, the previous two units, aesthetic spectacle and technological spectacle, reinforce an alignment of spectacle with sight. Because reality television presents an opportunity for television studios and channels to fill time with lower costs, often the production values are less sophisticated than more costly genres. Even within the screened episode of *The Bachelor*, this relationship between budget and visuals can be seen in the divide between the first half of the episode and the second half. However, this episode also invites consideration of the role sound plays in the construction of emotion and spectacle even when sight is denied.

Either using the clips students provided in the previous activity or providing additional ones, the students assume the role of 'sound designer' for that show. The students then pair their emotional reality television clip with different musical scores. The class should then discuss how the different pairings reinforce or undermine the authenticity of the emotional performance.

Some options for emotional charged reality clips include:

The Real Housewives of New Jersey: Teresa Giudice flips a table while yelling at Danielle Staub: https://www.bravotv.com/the-real-housewives-of-new-jersey/season-1/videos/prostitution-whore

Keeping Up with the Kardashians: Kim and Kourtney Kardashian argue about a photoshoot: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=urzF5LjN5kY

MasterChef: Christine Hà has her apple pie judged by Gordon Ramsay (Season 3, Episode 5) https://www.hulu.com/series/masterchef-45d67197-5346-4adb-9d90-6ed2d7b7bd85

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