



February 2001

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### Reality Television: How Much is Too Much Reality?



Reality television, a sensational world-wide phenomenon in 2000, is back with a vengeance in 2001. In the television business, success means that we have to endure the "here come the clones" syndrome. From daytime talk shows to "amazing" home videos, reality television is everywhere. Last year it was *Survivor 1* and *Big Brother*. Now we can look forward to programs such as *Survivor 2*, *The Mole*, *Temptation Island*, *Manhunt* and *Popstars*, a multi-week series that chronicles the behind-the-scenes auditions for a female pop band.

The reality television craze raises many issues about media constructions, network competition and contemporary reality. It is a perfect topic to explore with a media class and to launch seminars and heated debates. The appeal of these shows has many layers, beginning with the voyeuristic pleasures of audiences who assume they are watching only partially scripted drama. We are made to relish or wince at the scheming, bargaining antics of the participants in these weird, often titillating, contrived human lab experiments. Using *Survivor 1* as a successful case study, we would have to include another appealing element: there is usually someone we can identify with. In *Survivor 1*, if you didn't like Greta, then maybe you preferred sweet little Colleen; if you were aghast at the scheming manipulative Richard Hatch, well, there was always that gritty, sour conservative Rudi and so on.

- Ask students: What reality television shows have you watched? Which ones did you enjoy the most? Which ones did you dislike? Account for the appeal of the most successful of these shows.



- On the Internet, use one or more search engines to conduct a search for "reality television." Open up the leading Web sites associated with these shows. There is a great deal of gossip and inside information on these Web sites. Discuss some examples.
  - How this information contributes to the enjoyment of the fans?
  - What does this information tell us today about the cultural significance of Internet chat groups and Web sites run by fans?
- Because these shows are relatively cheap to produce – small fees paid to the participants and big bucks to the winner – money can be directed to production values. These shows depend on many roving cameras and many skilled editors who will pick the best scenes: ones with provocative arguments, sexual suggestiveness, scheming cliques, and unintended humour.
  - Select a scene from a show such as *Survivor* and list all the contributions of the production team which must make sense of the story and make it enjoyable. You will want to include the following: the opening teaser, the use of music, and the variety of editing techniques.
  - If there is a host or person involved in describing the forthcoming challenges, how much of a role is this person given in shaping the "spontaneous" events to subsequently occur?
- Editing is crucial in many of the reality television programs, especially the use of parallel editing or cross cutting, as we go from one group to another. (Consult available classroom film textbooks for explanations of these cinematic terms.) For this purpose, you should look at one complete show and analyze every scene in terms of how it was edited and its contribution to subsequent scenes.
- The shows are filmed and winners and losers are sworn to secrecy about the outcomes of contests, e.g. who gets voted off the island, but participants appear on talk shows and do interviews with the press.
  - What role do these appearances play in our understanding and enjoyment of the shows?
  - Are there any negative aspects to these performances?
  - How does the celebrity-making machinery in popular culture – e.g. PR agents, magazines like *People* and the scandal tabloids – extend the meanings for audiences of reality television?
- Sociology professor Mark Fishman notes that "these shows take delight in the misfortunes of others. It's a guilty pleasure. You feel you shouldn't be watching." The morality of many of these shows is often questionable, but as *Survivor* host Jeff Probst puts it "You see the worst in people, but you do see the best in people, too." Discuss these observations. Under what circumstances do you think the producers have pushed the moral envelope too far?
- If you were to be selected for one of these shows, explain the role(s) you would like to play. What strategies would you use to survive effectively in these artificial environments?
- In groups, write a proposal for a new reality television series. What ethical standards would your group agree to? How would you keep people interested in the unfolding story?
- You might want to propose a parody of one of the hot new reality television shows. (For ideas, watch late night talk shows such as Jay Leno on *The Tonight Show*, *Saturday Night Live* and *The Daily Show* with Jon Stewart.)
- Stage a forum on the topic "The future of reality television."



## Recent Teachable Moments

### Calendar Carping

#### Adbusters calendar "Days of Resistance" 2001

Cost: \$15.00

The new Adbusters calendar is, as its title proclaims, all about an activist agenda. In the introduction, we are given a mini manifesto. "We call ourselves culture jammers. We are a loose global network of artists, activists, writers, environmentalists, ecological economists, media literacy teachers, green entrepreneurs, reborn lefties, ecofeminists, downshiffters, high school shit disturbers, campus rabble rousers, dropouts, incorrigibles, poets and philosophers... Our aim is to topple existing power structures and forge major adjustments to the way we live in the 21st century."



So here we have David and Goliath for the new millennium. I admire Adbusters' moxy. Their numerous clever ad parodies, most famously the "Absolut Vodka" series, have been used in hundreds of media classrooms. (In the new calendar, the one I like is the portrait for January which shows a young couple at a Coke machine with a surprised look on their face as they see their own images represented in the painting on the machine as gleaming, happy Coke consumers.) There has been some payoff in Adbusters' culture jamming practices, e.g. WTO protests and the battle in Seattle last spring.

That said, I agree with Toronto culture critic Naomi Klein's assessment: "The magazine is capable of lacerating wit, but its attacks on nicotine and alcohol and fast food joints can be repetitive and obvious." The totally negative attitude to the media, the "tube head" portraits and campaign for "TV Turnoff Week," convey the notion that the media are inherently bad for you and audiences are presumed to be cultural dupes, helpless pawns of negative messages. At times these endeavours simply support a protectionist position. While Adbusters' discourse is politically rather naive, there is boundless energy here and a wacky sense of fun.

How do your students feel about Adbusters' causes and tactics? (For students who are unfamiliar with Adbusters, bring in back-issues of *Adbusters* magazine or have them visit their Web site at <http://www.adbusters.org>.)

#### Suggested Readings:

Buckingham, David. *The Making of Citizens: Young People, News and Politics*. Routledge, 2000.

Hazen, Don and Julia Winokur. *We the Media: A Citizen's Guide to Fighting for Media Democracy*. The New Press, New York, 1997.

Klein, Naomi. *No Logo: Taking Aim at the Brand Bullies*. Alfred Knopf Canada, 2000.

Lasn, Kalle. *Culture Jam: The Uncooling of America*. (Lasn, the founder of *Adbusters* Magazine explores the why and how of doing oppositional critiques of corporate culture.)

Moore, Michael. *Downsize This: Random Threats from an Unarmed American*. Harper, 1997.

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#### Canadian Tire calendar 2001: The end of political correctness?



Usually large corporations are careful about the image they project through their advertising, their press releases and any freebies such as calendars. It was therefore a shock to see the kind of representation shown in Canadian Tire's calendar for 2001.



Barry's Bulletin, February 2001  
© Media Awareness Network

While some may believe that multiculturalism in Canada has been pushed to the extreme (the PC police will get you if you don't present a balanced view of the representation of gender, race and ethnicity) this edition was an example of pathetic tokenism. The calendar is a 12-month celebration of all-white kids who are swimming, tobogganing, running and playing baseball, with exception of one portrait showing a black kid in the foreground playing with his white buddies. Media classes may want to file some strong complaints. Start with the local Canadian Tire manager to the president at head office.

E-mail: [feedback@cantire](mailto:feedback@cantire). Maybe next year the images will change.

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### Open Mike with Mike Bullard: Comedy Canadian style?



In the world of big time comedy, Canada does not have to take a back seat. Not only have we exported such mega-star winners as Jim Carrey and John Candy and other members of the SCTV cast, Lorne Michaels (*Saturday Night Live*) and Dave Foley of *Kids in the Hall* (one of my former students, incidentally), but Canadians had editorial control of the influential *National Lampoon* magazine for many years. And Canadians are all aware of the popular, home grown *Air Farce*, *This Hour has 22 minutes* and the annual festival *Juste pour Rire*. Add to this short list *Open Mike with Mike Bullard*. Now in its fourth season, Bullard has gained a loyal following, especially among young people who love his irreverent wit. As well as giving us some laughs, the show has done a great deal to showcase Canadian talent. Open Mike can be seen on the Comedy Network and on CTV (check local listing for dates and times). For an interesting media experience if you are in or near Toronto, be sure to get free tickets to the 6.30 PM tapings by phoning 416- 934-4737 or through the Web site [www.open-mike.com](http://www.open-mike.com).

Your pop culture assignment:

- Explain the appeal of the show and Mike's audience routines. Check out the Web site for a cross section of stand-up routines.
- How is Open Mike similar to American programs like *Late Night* and the *Tonight Show*? How does it differ?
- To what extent could this show succeed in the United States? Here is a short excerpt from Bullard's book *Open Mike: Little Thoughts from a Big Head*. (Seal Books, 1999.)

Signs you might be Canadian:

- You don't feel the urge to purchase maple syrup at the airport
- You've plugged a car in overnight
- You know the names of every breakfast cereal and Vachon's Cake in both English and French.
- You can't name five Canadian prime ministers but you know the first name of everyone related to Wayne Gretsky.



## Mad Magazine makes George W. memorably mad



What, me president?

In recent years, *The Nation*, an articulate, left-leaning magazine, has been creating some great spoof covers. The latest one is of George W. Bush who is made to resemble the famed Alfred E. Newman of *Mad Magazine* fame. A previous issue showed a kind of a black generic musician/athlete with his mouth grotesquely transformed into the Nike swoosh.

To download the recent spoof go to [www.thenation.com](http://www.thenation.com).

- Ask students to make political statements of their own by creating their own parodies of Canadian politicians or celebrities that use popular culture as a frame of reference. (Would this particular cartoon work as well if viewers had never seen Alfred E. Newman or *Mad Magazine*?)

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## Media Clips

### ***Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon: Teachers pursue meaning, myth and symbolism***

*Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* could win the Oscar as Best Picture even though the box office has been meagre (after all, there are English subtitles). And I suspect that in spite of critical plaudits, teens will stay away from it unless they've heard about the spectacular ballet style duels. For teachers who love to work with dense symbolism, this lyrically romantic and visually stunning film offers a treasure-trove. Peter Howell, a film critic with the *Toronto Star*, did an elaborate decoding of this film using such sources as *Cirlot's Dictionary of Symbolism* and his extensive knowledge of the symbolic representations which pervade eastern thought. (January 5, 2001)



Highlights of his article: Howell notes that beneath the surface of an adventure of good and evil and a romance, lies a religious allegory -- a quest for God, the universal All. The jumping, flying and leaping seen in the film are all symbols of the search for heavenly ascension. Filmmaker Ang Lee in his production notes asserts: "The essence of Chinese philosophy in martial arts as in all types of philosophies, is to seek harmony and try to reduce conflicts. The dragon is a diabolical guardian of evil. Concerning the character named Jade Fox, Taoists believe jade is the symbol of perfection, guaranteeing immortality." The fox represents the contradiction of human nature: the animal is smart and cunning, but also devious and reckless.

Often linked with symbolism is the use of myth to structure and enrich stories. A new book has arrived which will help teachers apply this rich resource to popular culture. Elizabeth Hirschman: *Heroes, Monsters, and Messiahs: Movies and Television Shows as the Mythology of American Culture*. (Andrews McMeel Publishing, 2000.) Given that the majority of media teachers also teach English, this eminently readable book should help to fill a pedagogical gap, courtesy of Joseph Campbell, Carl Jung and Levi Strauss. Using 50 films and 20 television shows, Hirschman does her mythic analysis with such films as *Gone with the Wind*, *The Sound of Music*, *The Godfather*, *Star Wars*, *E.T.*, *Rain Man*, *The Lion King* and *Titanic*. Television shows include *Dick Van Dyke*, *All in the Family*, *Dallas*, *M.A.S.H.*, *The Cosby Show*, *Home Improvement*, *Friends* and *Seinfeld*.



## Deconstructing Film Critics on Television

Pop culture acceptance of film criticism began in the 1970's, with Roger Ebert's and Gene Siskel's popular PBS television show *Sneak Previews*, where they reviewed current film releases. They were such a success that they took their movie review show to a major network. The famous "thumbs up" and "thumbs down" ratings system are now part of our movie review landscape. Ed Roper, a columnist of the Chicago Sun Times, has replaced Gene Siskel, Roger's long time sparring partner who died last year. *Ebert and Roper at the Movies*, (Sundays on CTV) is useful for film buffs even though it is chock full of commercials. New critic Roper debates too much like an irate school boy in a silly snit. Ebert's encyclopedic knowledge and middle of the road position, however, is a helpful base for determining whether you are going to like a new film. Less electrifying but more thoughtful is *Flick* a new weekly program on the Life Channel in Canada. The program is conveniently repeated several times (check local listings). Two critics, Brent Banbury (former CBC -TV anchor) and Anita Herczeg (a documentary filmmaker) debate the merits of four new films per show. The Web site [www.lifenetwork.ca/flick/](http://www.lifenetwork.ca/flick/) is obviously lean compared with the Internet movie data base [www.imdb.com](http://www.imdb.com), but contains some good interviews with stars and directors and highlights of the two critics in dialogue.

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## Upcoming Events

### 3rd World Summit on Media for Children

Thessalonike, Greece March 23-26, 2001

The 3rd World Summit on media for children brings together professionals from all five continents. This major event introduces an audio-visual policy encouraging media literacy in order to create media awareness world-wide and demonstrates the emerging relationship of children's television and the new media.

For online registration form go to <http://www.3rd-ws.org>

E-Mail [summit@cmd.gr](mailto:summit@cmd.gr)

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## The Final Word

**"The media culture is so dialectically preoccupied – with good or bad, up or down, heroes and villains – that they forget to select for a mitigating wisdom that is much more complicated, that tolerates and understands undertow. There is almost no manifestation in our media culture that respects that. Jazz does."**

- *Globe & Mail*, January 4, 2001 interview with Ken Burns, famed documentary filmmaker and director of recent television/video series on Jazz.

**"I only wear crop tops because other clothes would make me sweat when I dance."**

- Britney Spears

**"You know it's going to hell when the best rapper out there is a white guy and the best golfer is a black guy."**

- Basketball star Charles Barkley

Thanks this month to colleague Derek Boles for his suggestions.

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